

Alan Peters

Wartime Experience: Sent to England on a Kindertransport

I was born on December 17, 1923 in Vienna, Austria the only child of Adolf and Margarete Pfeffer. I was named Ernst. We lived in a small simple flat in Vienna's 9th district. In the depression era there were few automobiles, we did not know anyone who owned one, so it was a quiet street of working-class apartment houses built in the 1880's. The High School I attended, named after Franz Schubert, who came from this district, was just around the corner.

In March 1938 when the German Army marched into Vienna followed a couple of days later by a motorcade led by Hitler in his limousine, I was 14, a very impressionable age, and in ninth grade. My life and that of my family and friends changed dramatically.

Within six weeks of the annexation of Austria all Jewish students were expelled from the schools they were attending and given the option to transfer to newly created segregated Jewish schools. Since compulsory school attendance did not extend beyond eighth grade, I elected not to transfer.

My father had his own business as a cabinetmaker where I began to work in April as an apprentice in an unofficial capacity, since the craft guilds immediately excluded Jews from the formal apprenticeship programs.

About a month later the Gestapo arrested my father along with 5,000 other Jews from all walks of life in Vienna, who were sent to Dachau concentration camp. Much later we learned that this action was organized by Adolf Eichmann, later notorious for his part in organizing transportation to the death camps. The purpose at the time was to spread fear so as to encourage and accelerate Jewish emigration from Austria.

My father and his group of prisoners were transferred from Dachau to the Buchenwald concentration camp in September 1938 and news from him was infrequent and limited to a very few words on a postcard. I continued to work at our business under the direction of my mother until the morning after the Kristallnacht on November 9th, 1938. At six o'clock that morning an SS officer accompanied by a civilian appeared at our apartment door, demanded the keys to the business and offered to "buy" it for a token sum. They did us no physical harm, but my working career had come to an abrupt end.

I joined the rest of my friends in their effort to emigrate. Due to the absence of my father, my family had taken no such steps up to that time, but the events of Kristallnacht generated a new sense of urgency among all of us. There had been an unspoken agreement between my mother and myself, that I would not actually leave until we were reunited with my father. So while all my friends aggressively pursued the long and complicated procedures to emigrate either to Palestine and to England, I did nothing. None of us had any connections to the United States, so that was not an option.

The British Government agreed to shelter 10,000 children from Germany, Austria and later Czechoslovakia and in May 1939 after my mother urged me to leave and not wait for my father, I was selected to travel to England with a so-call Kindertransport, leaving my mother behind. Miraculously my father was released from Buchenwald two days prior to my departure on the condition that he leave the country within 30 days. He arrived with his head shaved, looking gaunt and scared and the family was very briefly reunited. I could now leave with the knowledge that my mother would not be left alone. Actually my father was forced to leave without her and went to Milan, Italy, being allowed to take one suitcase, his wedding ring and 10 German marks. The war broke out in September 1939, with my mother still in Vienna and my father in Milan. She was able to join him some months later; both were totally destitute but at least together. Italy joined their German ally in declaring war on France and Britain in June 1940, but my parents were lucky to be able to board the last ship from Trieste to Haifa, Palestine and so in effect save their lives.

I was fortunate to be sponsored by an English family extremely sensitive to my plight, who made few demands on me and were anxious not to assume the role of parents. They made it possible for me to attend university. After I graduated from Manchester University with a degree in engineering, I volunteered to join the British Army, where I was recommended for officer training. I served in Europe and was eventually reunited with my parents who after spending the war years in Palestine, returned to Vienna in 1947. While still serving in the British Army, I was instrumental in getting my father's business returned to him and he resumed his work as if he had never been away.

When I returned to civilian life in 1947, I worked in England for two years, emigrated to Montreal, Canada and then to the United States where I have now lived for over 40 years. While in Canada I married a Canadian and we have a son born in 1955 and a daughter born in 1957. Both are married and they have blessed us with four grandchildren.

After my marriage, I visited my parents frequently along with my wife Diana and our children Mark and Julia,. My father died in 1958 and only saw his grandson when Mark was 2 years old. My mother died in 1973 and was able to enjoy her grandchildren much longer.