

Lotte Stein

Wartime experience: Fled to England

I was born on October 3, 1921 in Vienna, Austria. My father was Maximilian Pfeffer; my mother's name was Martha. Her maiden name was Schick. My father's family came from Galizien, a part of Poland, which belonged to the Austrian Hungarian Empire. My mother's family came from a small town in Moravia, a region of the Empire, which after WW I became the State of Czechoslovakia. Both of my parents were born in Vienna and considered themselves assimilated Jews.

When I was seven-year-old and asked my father what my religion was, he answered, "You are Jewish, but forget about it". I could not forget that I was different from most of the people around me. They were called Christians, went to Church and believed in Jesus Christ. My father loved photography and was fascinated with the beautiful altars and paintings found in many old churches in the Austrian countryside. I too was intrigued and touched by the mysterious feelings I experienced within the darkness of these sacred spaces. I loved the smell of incense, the light of the candles and the sound of the organ. I wanted so badly to be part of the ritual performed there, wanted to kneel to a god, which appeared loving and kind, but was not mine.

Who was my God? Why was I not taken to a Jewish place of worship, so that I could be part of a community, which prayed for peace, and forgiveness of my sins? The one person who could have introduced me to my heritage was my mother. Yet she had been ailing ever since I remembered her, and died when I was seven years old. My older sister and I were raised by servants, women who came from the country, had almost no education but were simple and loving Christians. It was only natural that we were able to forget our heritage and tradition. Many years later I realized that my family had lived a lie and that deep within me I had always felt a yearning to belong to some community which would accept me as who I truly was. My life had become a journey of searching and finding the essence of myself.

When Hitler entered Austria in March of 1938, I was confronted with the fact that I was Jewish, whether I liked it or not. To this day I am amazed to think how easy it had been to brainwash us children. For twenty-six years I had believed that the Hasidic, the orthodox Polish Jew, was dirty, smelly and distrustful. He spoke a strange German, not the proper language I was taught to speak. I had been given to understand that there were two types of Jews: *those* Jews with their strange customs, and *we*, who blended into the Viennese culture and considered ourselves Austrians.

After 1938 we could no longer hide behind the phony life we had created for ourselves. Now we too were considered as one of *those* Jews and felt exposed and vulnerable. We never believed the rumors coming out of Germany and were sure that these kinds of atrocities could never happen to us; after all, we were Austrians. It did happen to us. Slowly we were robbed of everything we owned including our pride and identity as assimilated Jews.

The very day after the Anschluss, I had to move to the back of my class and after a few months was forbidden to attend school altogether. Slowly, bit-by-bit, the world around us grew smaller and smaller. We were no longer allowed to use public transportation – our car had been confiscated during the night Hitler marched into Austria. Jews were forbidden to enter restaurants, coffee shops or sit on benches in the park. We were in constant fear of being picked up and sent to concentration camps. Indeed, we were very lucky to have lasted one whole year under Hitler's occupation and were able to leave before the conditions in Vienna grew worse. I am sad to say that my grandmother and an aunt and uncle of mine were no longer able to leave Austria and died in different camps.

My father, my sister and I survived the war years in London where we were considered enemy aliens and undesirable subjects. The anti-Semitic feelings of the English hurt me very much. I wanted to fight Hitler and join the war efforts, yet was not trusted with my contribution to the war effort. The realization that we had lost everything and were totally dependent upon refugee organizations was very painful. My sister worked as a domestic with an Austrian family who had been more fortunate than us having been able to bring money into exile. Later on she became a dressmaker. My father who had owned a bicycle factory in Vienna, was now forced to earn a living as a watch repairman, something that he had been doing as a hobby in former times. I was placed into a factory, making ladies leather handbags. I learned the trade and befriended my co-workers. Even though I came from an upper middle-class home I enjoyed the working-class people I met.

I left England for America in 1946, as soon as it was possible to get passage on a boat. I could not see my life continuing as a factory worker. On the other hand, I could not relate to the middle or upper middle class. I found them stiff and unemotional, cold and boring. Soon after arriving in Los Angeles, a friend of mine took me to a delicatessen in a Jewish district for lunch. As I sat there and marveled about the abundance of food and the wonderful pastries, I had the sudden insight that I was amongst Jews and that it was OK to be Jewish.

In 1950 I got married to a young doctor, Jewish, yet not a practicing Jew. We lived the good life of the fifties, starting our family and settling down in the San Fernando Valley, a suburb of Los Angeles. I led the life of the traditional patriarchal wife and mother, taking care of every possible need my husband and our two daughters had.

I felt much more at home in the American multi-cultural society. I felt drawn to the Jewish community and slowly found my way back to my heritage. After both daughters were old enough to drive themselves to school and to other activities, I started to volunteer for the National Council of Jewish Women. In 1971, I entered Junior College, to catch up on my studies which I had to give up in 1938. I am proud to say that I earned a master degree in Counseling Psychology and received my license as a Family Therapist in 1982. I practiced until 1994, when my husband retired and we moved to Northern California in order to be closer to our children. Sadly to say, my husband passed away in 1996. It is very painful to lose a partner after forty-six years of sharing a life together. I am grateful to have my children and grandchildren nearby to support me in my struggle to live by myself.

The older I am getting, the more important it has become for me to own and to celebrate my Jewishness. Am I not also a wandering Jew, as my forefathers and theirs had been for thousands of years? Today I am conscious of being a Jew, my parents and their parents were Jews. How I wished they had told me some of their stories, taught me their customs and introduced me to their rituals. I am able to bring my love for music, art, history and philosophy to my children and grandchildren. Yet I cannot bring any of the Jewish traditions. Even though , my two daughters did not marry Jews, they and their children are proud of their heritage.