

My Journey to Freedom

By Evelyn Banko

My name is Evelyn Banko. I was born in Vienna, Austria on January 21, 1936. This is my family history and our experience as Austrian Jews during the Holocaust.

My father, Josef Diamant was born on September 26, 1900, in Vienna, Austria. He had an older sister Hilda, and a large extended family who lived in Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. My father was an excellent student and graduated from university with an engineering degree. After college, he spent a few years working as an engineer before opening up a business where he imported car parts.

My mother, Frieda (nicknamed Fritzi) Vielgut was born on August 17, 1904, in Vienna, Austria. Like my father, she had just one sibling, a younger brother named Max. She too had a large extended family- with over 20 aunts and uncles living in Austria and Hungary. She met my father when she was 12 years old and he was 16. They were married years later, on February 6th, 1927, when they were both in their twenties. Their two families combined meant our family gatherings were huge! My mother was especially close with three of her cousins. They were her best friends. While my father worked, my mother enjoyed spending her days in Viennese coffee houses with her cousins and other friends.

In 1933, Hitler rose to power in Germany, and began implementing laws that took away opportunities and rights from Jews. Since Austria borders Germany, Austrian Jews heard about the discriminatory laws in Germany. Then, five years later, on March 12, 1938, Nazi Germany invaded Austria. I was just shy of two years old. The very next day Austria was incorporated into Germany and officially under Nazi control. All of the anti-Jewish laws that had been passed in Germany since 1933 immediately became laws in Austria. The lives of Austrian Jews changed drastically overnight.

Mobs of teenagers roamed the streets looking for anyone they thought looked Jewish to attack. Jews were rounded up and forced to do things meant to humiliate them. My father, for example, was forced to get down on his hands and knees and scrub the streets and other graffiti that Nazis had painted on buildings. Neighbors who had always been friendly to our family would now cross the street to avoid us—just because we were Jewish.

The new laws in Nazi-controlled Austria meant that Jews could no longer own businesses. My father, like most Jews in his position, tried to liquidate or dissolve his business by selling everything. This put Jewish business owners in a desperate position, and allowed non-Jewish Austrians to take advantage of the situation. Jewish-owned businesses were often sold for much less money than they were worth.

With each passing day, living as a Jew in Austria became more dangerous.

Many Jews, including my family, were trying to leave Austria or Germany during this time for places like the United States, England or South America. This was not an easy thing to do. Many countries had quotas limiting the number of Jewish refugees they would allow in, and the process to apply was complicated. For example, to be considered for immigration to the United States, you needed thirteen different documents. Some of the things included were a passport, visa, and an affidavit of support from an American citizen. An affidavit of support is a letter in which an American citizen agrees to take on the financial responsibility of an immigrant. Many people in the United States were still recovering from the Great Depression, so very few families could afford to sponsor refugee families. We also did not have any immediate family in the United States that could help us.

Before my family could secure permission to emigrate to another country, my father got disturbing news. He was stopped on his way to work by a Nazi SS Officer who knew him. The officer told him he was going to be arrested that night by the Nazis. My father called his lawyer for advice. He was told that we could go to Latvia on a tourist visa, as though we were going on vacation. Our family quickly made travel arrangements, and in August 1938, we left Vienna for Riga, Latvia. I would not return to Austria until the Summer of 1982.

We lived in limbo in Riga for two years on our tourist visa. During this time, the Second World War started and the Nazis invaded and occupied many countries to the south and west of Germany. This caused many other Jewish people to also seek refuge and safety. Fortunately, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) provided relief and support to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. My family was part of the estimated 250,000 people HIAS helped to escape. While in Riga, HIAS arranged for two families to help house and feed us. Since my father could no longer work as an engineer, he and my mother designed and sold belts and purses to try and make a living.

The entire time we were in Riga, my parents were working tirelessly to find a way for us to emigrate to the United States. Yet, they still made time for us to try to live normally as a family. We spent time with some extended family who were also in Riga, we went on vacation to the beach, and my mother took me to see the children's ballet.

As the war raged on, we lived with constant anxiety that the Nazis would invade Latvia too.

Our American Consul advised my parents that if the Nazis invaded, we should just carry a small suitcase and take refuge in the American Consulate. Instead, the Soviet Union occupied Latvia and made it part of the Soviet Union (Russia) in August 1940. It was at this time that we finally secured an affidavit of support from an American citizen in New York. Even with the affidavit, our departure from Riga was delayed three times because of travel complications caused by the war.

We were informed that people with visas were being allowed to travel across Russia and Siberia through China and into Japan. From Japan we would then travel to North America by boat. This journey would take several weeks, and we would have to make many stops. In order to get permission to make the trip, we needed a Japanese visa. The closest Japanese consulate was located in Berlin, Germany. Therefore, our passports had to be sent to Germany before they could be renewed. The German Consul stamped a large

pink “J” for Jew on the travel pass before it was sent back. My father had to adopt the middle name of Israel on his passport and my mother and I were forced to add the middle name of Sara. We waited anxiously to get our passports back with the visa. They finally came and the Russian Consul in Riga decided to have a special train leave on August 9, 1940, with the American Consul and all the people who had American visas. We left Riga at four o’clock in the afternoon and arrived in Moscow, Russia the next day.

After a few days we boarded the train and left Moscow. As we got onto the train, my dad recognized a man he had met in Riga. He was sitting with his wife and his daughter. My family sat across from them and that is how I met my lifelong friend, Alice.

We were on the train for six days and seven nights. There was nothing to do and the food was miserable. The last three days, we were given only canned food with a lot of salty red caviar and a little bottled water. It was dirty and dusty and we couldn’t even wash our hands because there was no water on the train except that which we had to drink.

When we arrived at the border between Russia and Manchuria, we had to get off the train and walk across a “no man’s land,”— an area of about 500 yards between the borders of the two countries—carrying all of our luggage. A man from HIAS greeted us on the Manchurian side and took our group of twenty-four refugees to a gymnasium. We stayed there for two and a half days. There were no beds, only mats on the floor and wooden blocks for our heads, but it was very clean.

Then we boarded another train—the Manchoukou Express, which took us to Harbin, a larger city with a train depot. When we arrived, everyone was wearing masks because there was a cholera and typhoid epidemic. Rather than staying this night we boarded another train and traveled for several days until we reached Kobe, Japan.

While in Kobe, we stayed in a house with other Jewish refugees. There were 24 of us staying together as we waited to continue our journey. Each day, my father went out to pick up money from the organization helping us. We purchased groceries with this money and we all cooked and ate together. During our stay, one woman’s visa expired which meant she could not continue traveling with us. Now there were only 23 of us.

We had to stay in Kobe until September 7, 1940, when we would board a ship for the last leg of our trip to America.

On September 7, 1940, we left Kobe on the steamship Hikawa Maru and started our journey to North America. I was four and a half years old. Soon after we left, we got into a terrible storm, a typhoon, and had to take refuge in a bay near Yokohama. We stayed in Yokohama for three days until the storm passed and it was safe to travel again. Once it did, we were finally on our way to Seattle.

I was very seasick on the journey, all I could manage to eat was bowls of rice. After about 15 days, we made our first stop in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Because Canada was an ally of England during the Second World War, anyone with a German passport had to remain on the ship during the stop. My family had German passports so we had to stay behind while those with passports from other countries were allowed to leave to go into the city of Vancouver. As soon as we became United States citizens in 1946, we went back to Vancouver, B.C. on vacation for our chance to see it, and to visit some of my parents' distant relatives from Vienna.

After our stop in Canada, we were finally on our way to the United States. We arrived in Seattle, Washington, on September 23, 1940. My family was put up in a hotel room while it was decided what should be done with us. Seattle had reached its quota of Jewish refugees and we could not stay. We were told we could go to Portland, Oregon, or San Francisco, California, instead.

The little girl I had befriended on the train, Alice was in the same predicament with her family. Our parents had become close friends, just like Alice and I had, over the course of this long journey. Our two families decided to stay together wherever we decided to live—Portland or San Francisco. That way, despite knowing no one in the United States, we would have at least one friend. Our two families decided to move to Portland because it was a smaller city and they hoped there would be better chances of finding work there. Our parents also liked the mountains around Portland, because it reminded them of their home in Austria.

My mother's skills as a seamstress landed her a job immediately after arriving in Portland. She was hired by Hirsch Weiss (later White Stag), a clothing manufacturing company to sew piece work. This meant that she sewed the same pieces of clothing over and over and was paid by how many of them she could sew in a day. My father took care of me during the day while my mother worked. Then when my mother came home he went to work as a night janitor.

When we arrived in the United States, I was sick with whooping cough, a highly contagious respiratory disease, and was not allowed to leave our home or play with other children. Within a few weeks, I was better and was so excited to be able to play with the children across the street that I had seen from my window. However, when I finally got to go outside, they could not understand me! I only spoke German and I could not understand them because they spoke English.

Soon after, I began going to preschool. There I could learn English and play with more kids my age.

My father then got a job working at a gas station to learn a trade. In January 1941, he was hired by Texaco to be in charge of a service station on the corner of SE 17th and Holgate. There were already two other stations there so it was a struggle at first. However, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the factories near my father's business started working three shifts a day. My father worked 10-12 hours each day to meet the heightened demand for gas, and was able to save enough money to put a down payment on a house near the station.

While my parents and I had escaped, the rest of our family—my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—were still in Europe. My parents were not yet American citizens and could not write their own affidavits of support to bring them to the United States. They tried to get others to sponsor them, but were unsuccessful. In 1942, my grandparents on both sides were deported to concentration camps where they died. There were few survivors in my family. After the war, my parents reached out to the Red Cross hoping to find information about their family members. They later received letters from the Red Cross notifying them of their deaths.

My family suffered great personal loss in the Holocaust. We were uprooted from our home, forced to sell our business, and lost loved ones. In the 1970s, my parents applied for reparations for what was stolen from us. We received payment from the claims conference monthly, and I continue to receive a small amount of aid through organizations that support survivors. These small payments help survivors but are nowhere near the losses we suffered.

In 1946, my parents and I became American citizens. In order to become citizens, my parents had to pass a citizenship test. I was only in the fifth grade at the time, but I helped my parents study and they passed on their first try. I went on to graduate from Cleveland High School and then the University of Oregon where I earned my Bachelor's degree in Education. I got my Masters in Teaching from Lewis and Clark University, and had a rewarding career working in schools for 33 years. I married and had two children, a son and a daughter. I now have two grandchildren, a granddaughter and a grandson.

I began telling my life history after I was invited to speak at a local viewing of a traveling exhibition on Anne Frank in 1992. That was the first time I had ever spoken publicly about my experiences. This was the catalyst for me becoming a member of the OJMCHÉ Speaker's Bureau, and I now regularly speak to students and other groups about my life.

In my retirement, I enjoy traveling and I love my water aerobics class that I attend several times a week. I have a 14 year old rescue dog named Wrigley, who I love to take on regular walks. I am always busy with my friends and family, going out and enjoying quality time with them. ■