ESCAPE FROM VIENNA

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In March of 1938 the Germans occupied Austria, and normal life for the 180,000 Jews of Vienna came to a sudden end. My father lost his business within a few days, and I had to leave high school when conditions there became unbearable. We all realized then that we had to leave Austria, but there was literally no place to go. Some attempts were made by our relatives overseas to get us out, but without success.

In September 1939 the war broke out, and about this time I received an affidavit through my cousin in the US. Since this country was neutral at the time it was still possible to go there. However before my turn at the US consulate I received a postcard from the Kultusgemeinde (Jewish community) advising me to report with 50 kg of luggage for transportation to occupied Poland.

My parents and I felt that this had to be avoided at all costs and we desperately tried to find a way out. We discovered that various Zionist organizations and others were planning to send an "i1legal" transport to Palestine. This was being done with the full knowledge of the German authorities and after my father paid a certain sum of money to one of the Zionist organizations I was able to complete all the formalities and left on December 24, 1939 for Pressburg (Bratislava) where the transport was to be assembled.

In Pressburg there were two transit camps, one with about 350 Jews from Czechoslovakia, the other with an equal number from Vienna. The plan was to sail down the Danube to Rumania and from there try to reach Palestine. The winter of 1939-40 was very severe however and the Danube froze. As a result we were forced to stay in Pressburg and wait for the spring and eventually in September of 1940 we were finally able to depart.

During this time Jewish organizations were able to make arrangements with the Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft (Danube Steamship Company) so that a total of over 3500 Jews from Central Europe were to sail down the Danube on four steamers. Two of these sailed from Vienna with 1800 people, my parents among them. The other two sailed from Pressburg (Bratislava) with over 1700 people, some from the Pressburg camps, 600 from Danzig and other places. It took us about a week to reach the Danube delta and on arrival in Tulcea we were immediately transferred to three Greek ships. The *Atlantic*, the *Pacific* and the *Milos.*

At this time I was able to transfer from the *Pacific* to the *Atlantic* where my parents were located. The *Atlantic* was an old wreck of about 1400 tons with over 1800 people on board. There were about 1060 on the *Pacific* and about 700 on the *Milos.*

Conditions on the *Atlantic* were terrible to put it mildly. The overcrowding was so severe that the ship sometimes began to list to one side; the "Hagana" of which I was a member had to drive people to the other side to counteract this. There was little food and the sanitary facilities

were extremely primitive. During the voyage many people became ill, several died and were buried at sea.

The *Atlantic* sailed from Tulcea on October 7, 1940 while the *Pacific* and the *Milos* had left a few days earlier. We arrived next day in Istambul where we received bread and water. After passing through the Dardanelles we stopped in Mythilene and several other Greek islands, where the local authorities supplied us with bread and water. On October 16 we arrived at Heraklion on the island of Crete and at this time ran out of coal, were unable to continue further and our ship remained anchored in the port surrounded by harbor police.

On October 28, 1940 Italy declared war on Greece and there were daily air raid alarms but no attacks. Eventually, with the help of the Greek Jewish community, we were able to obtain coal and we left Heraklion on November 8. The *Atlantic* had a Greek captain and crew and was flying the Panama flag. During the first night out of Crete, the captain somehow managed to squander most of the coal and there were even rumors that some of the coal had been thrown over board. At this time the captain refused to continue in an easterly direction and stated that he wanted to return to Greek territory. Our transport committee decided to arrest him and continue the journey.

This was done but within a day we ran out of coal, the ship came to a halt and the distress flag was hoisted, since the ship had no radio. It was now decided to strip the ship of all available wood for fuel. The decks, masts, interior partitions, and even furnishings were thrown into the furnace and in this fashion we continued for a day or two. When next morning we sighted land in the distance, we had finally run out of fuel and the engine stopped for good. It turned out that we had reached Cyprus in allied territory.

After a few hours a tugboat approached and towed our ship into Limassol. British police came on board and after we were supplied with coal a British captain, crew and military escort, we set sail for the "promised land". Next morning with the sunrise we saw Mount Carmel, we sang the "Hatikva" and we knew that we had finally made it. I am quite sure that this was a moment which no one who was on board would ever forget.

When we arrived in Haifa harbor, we were told by the British police that, because of overcrowding in the refugee camps, we would be temporarily accommodated on board a large French passenger liner, the *Patria* which was at this time anchored in Haifa harbor. The people from the *Pacific* and *Milos* who had arrived earlier were already on board, and transshipment to the *Patria* started immediately.

After only a few people had been transferred by barge to the *Patria* there was an explosion, the *Patria* capsized, sank and over 250 people drowned. As we found out later, the British had planned to deport us all on this ship, and the Palestinian Jewish underground had tried to prevent this with unforeseen results.

After this disaster we were sent to Atlit camp near Haifa, but the British had not given up the plan to deport us; it was only postponed. Those who were actually on the *Patria* and had been rescued were to be allowed to remain in Palestine. The rest however, that is to say most of the

passengers of the *Atlantic*, were to be deported to the island of Mauritius. One morning, two weeks later, we were told to get ready for embarkation after breakfast. However, we had gotten wind of this terrible scheme and decided to do what we could to frustrate it.

Nobody packed, people refused to leave their huts and remained lying naked on their beds. The British assembled a large force of police and military, and after initial resistance and some brutality they were able to force the people into trucks and transport them to Haifa port.

Two Dutch ships were waiting for us there and shortly after we had been deposited on board the ships sailed. We were, of course, angry, frustrated, and depressed; after all we had been through, we were to be deported to some remote Island. It was a bitter time. After an uneventful voyage through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean we arrived at Port Louis in Mauritius. The colonial authorities had prepared an old prison that was to be used as the men' s

camp. The women' s camp, consisting of corrugated metal huts, was nearby. Immediately after our arrival there was an outbreak of typhoid fever and about 50 people died within a month. My mother had typhoid fever and malaria at the same time and nearly died.

After a while camp life settled into a certain routine. Each man had a cell in one of the two prison blocks. The cell doors were not locked, but nobody was allowed to leave the camp except under escort. After about six months married women were allowed to visit the men' s camp during daylight hours. In the afternoons, all detainees could meet in an open area near the camp.

The camp regime was not brutal and it absolutely could not be compared to the Nazi concentration camps; but still the food was insufficient, and the worst aspect was the remoteness of the place and the insistence of the British that we would never be allowed to enter Palestine.

The detainees established a closely knit community with two synagogues, a school, a theater group, a library, soccer and volley ball teams, and various workshops. I was working in the carpenter shop, since I had started to learn this trade after the Anschluss and I decided to continue this profession in the camp. Lectures, concerts and theater performances were organized and one could take courses in English, Hebrew, Jewish history, and many other subjects.

About 200 young men volunteered for the various allied armies. I joined

The Jewish Brigade Group, which was part of the British army, and left Mauritius at the beginning of 1945. After the end of hostilities all the refugees were eventually allowed to enter Palestine or had the choice of returning to their lands of origin. The vast majority chose Palestine and in August of 1945 the remaining 1300 persons, my parents among them, left Mauritius on the *Franconia*; 128 remained behind in the Jewish cemetery on the island.

Together with the other 55 volunteers, I arrived in April 1945 at the Jewish Brigade Group Depot and Training Center in the Suez Canal zone. By that time the war in Europe was winding down and after a few months of basic training we joined the Brigade Group, which was then stationed

in Holland. I was assigned to a transport company and our main task was to send as many Holocaust survivors as possible to Palestine, unofficially and illegally, of course.

My parents were living in Kirjat Haim near Haifa, and it was very difficult for my father to make a living. I decided to apply for a compassionate home posting which was granted, and I spent the rest of my army career in a British field bakery near Haifa. In October of 1946 I was discharged from the army, and since I had learned the trade of cabinetmaker in the camp in Mauritius, this is what I did for the next few years.

The political situation in Palestine was steadily deteriorating and by the end of 1947 there was virtual civil war between the Jews and Arabs. At about this time I joined the Hagana, the Jewish "official" underground army, and did some guard duty in our neighborhood, but since I was an "only son" I was not called up full time.

This changed on May 14, 1948, when all deferments were canceled and so on May 15 I left for a military camp at Tel Litwinski, not far from Tel Aviv, where I was assigned to the engineering Corps. We completed a month-long course in mine laying, mine dismantling, building bridges, etc., and went immediately into action. With the Alexandroni Brigade our unit participated in many "actions" at the central front, later in the northern Negev in the fighting near the so-called Faluja pocket, and in the Beersheba area.

I was discharged from the Israeli army sometime in 1949, and returned to my job as a cabinetmaker. Several of my best friends had been killed in the war and I was quite depressed at the time. My parents, who were totally dependent on me, wanted to join the rest of our family in Canada, where my father had been promised a job in my uncle's factory. And so in May 1951 we left for Canada where I have been living since then.