

MEMOIRS OF HERBERT MAX
As told to Eva Zelig

My parents, Emil and Hermine Max, were born in Austria. They lived in a small town called Andau where I was born in 1927. I was their only child. My parents had a large general store that also catered to the Hungarian trade and agricultural communities in the region. After kindergarten, I was sent to another town, Kobersdorf, to attend a Jewish elementary school. I lived there with other family members till the Nazis annexed Austria.

When the Nazi regime took over the country, within 3 or 5 days the Gestapo closed Jewish businesses and sealed their doors. However, we were not allowed to leave the store until the so-called new owner arrived from Germany. Some of the local nazis were disappointed that they got nothing. The Gestapo made its own rules for each case.

Between March 13 and November 10, 1938, Jews were ordered to leave for Vienna. I traveled there with my relatives where I met up with my parents. Many men were taken away; some were taken to the police station where they were beaten and killed, some were sent to Siberia, and most were taken to Dachau, the concentration camp. Jewish men and women were forced to get down on their hands and knees to clean the streets of Vienna with scrubbing brushes. One of my mother's brothers was imprisoned in Dachau but was released thanks to a Chinese visa. A brother-in-law was taken to Siberia where he perished. His wife, Regina, my mother's beloved and unforgettable sister, and youngest son were taken to Poland where they were murdered. Regina's two older sons were rescued and via a children's transport were taken to Israel. One of them, Shmuel Givon, became a top commander in the Israeli army.

We escaped Austria by plane to Italy, pretending we were tourists. My father's brother lived there in Merano, where he had a beautiful apartment. We hoped to settle in Italy but the country's dictator, Benito Mussolini, made a pact with Adolf Hitler and our luck changed. Time to move. We traveled by train to Switzerland. It was not difficult to enter that country at the time, but once there, my father had to report to the police every week. He was always warned that we better depart or risk being sent to the German border. After almost a year of living in Switzerland we could no longer work or stay there.

My father and many others canvassed foreign embassies and consulates. He came upon the consul of Ecuador, who was a very nice person. I recall that his name was Zorer and he spoke semi-fluent German. We learned that his family had a large hardware store in Guayaquil. He told us he could only give us an agricultural visa, which meant we could only work in farming in Ecuador--no other work was allowed.

My parents managed to obtain tickets to travel by ship to Ecuador. We went by train to Paris, then to Bordeaux, where we took a train to a small town called La Rochelle La Falaise. There we boarded a ship from the British Cunard line called "Reina del Pacífico." It was very crowded on board. The men were separated from the women. I shared a cabin with my father and another man. My mother shared a cabin with several women. We traveled in the lowest class--probably third class. Most of the passengers were Jewish refugees heading for Bolivia. Very few on board were going to Ecuador.

The crossing lasted about eight days. The ship stopped in Colón, Panama, also for a day in Havana, Cuba. Our luggage stickers read Salinas, and that's where we landed in Ecuador. My parents and I knew very little about Ecuador at the time. It was quite an experience arriving in Salinas as there was no port, no pier. We had to descend from the ship on rope ladders into small boats that took us to shore. On the outskirts of town was a tiny building to process arriving passengers. Our first impression of Salinas was not great. It was a small fishing village. I remember we bought some bananas there, which cost a lot by Ecuadorian standards.

From Salinas we traveled to Guayaquil in the autocarril--a sort of tram. I remembered that on board was a wealthy Swiss family. They were not Jewish. They had sold their belongings and arrived in Ecuador with two sons and daughters and two Saint Bernard dogs. The autocarril conductor stopped several times to inform us they ran out of gasoline and needed money. Most of the money was provided by the Swiss family. They had owned a huge farm in Switzerland and the owner had an evangelical vision that what they should do was travel to Ecuador.

Eventually we arrived in Guayaquil and were surrounded by a huge crowd. Everyone wanted to grab something. Somehow we made it to downtown Guayaquil and landed at a hotel called Astoria on the main street, Avenida 9 de Octubre. We later moved to a room in a small boarding house on Calle Boyacá, where my mother was able to cook. I started to attend a German school run by Mr. List who came from Germany, was not Jewish and was an anti-fascist. We had been in Guayaquil about ten weeks when we learned about Ambato, where we went. The two reasons why we left Guayaquil were the climate and bugs, and the fact that in Ambato there was a Shochet, a Jewish ritual slaughterer. He found an apartment for us there. All the refugees tried to help each other. Later, I also tried to help people find apartments and interpreted for the new arrivals

The trip to Ambato was very long as we had to cross the Guayas River at dawn to reach Durán where the trains departed for the Sierra, the Andes highlands. We left very early in the morning and arrived in Ambato at 6 PM. We were impressed by "la nariz del diablo"--"The Devil's Nose"--a hair-raising trip on the rocky slopes of the Andes. For an hour the train climbed the mountains zigzagging up and down the steep ravines. We

were pleased that Ambato, with some 35,000 inhabitants, looked like a city. We saw very poor Indian villages surrounding the town. Most of the people in town had light complexions as they were of Spanish descent; some had indigenous ancestry. When I returned to visit in 1988—after having moved to the U.S.—the population had tripled and I noticed that people's complexions were predominantly dark.

Ambato was a pleasant town but we could not stay there-- we had to make a living in agriculture as stipulated in our visa. My parents found two partners with whom they rented a large farm in Píllaro, a town about 17 kilometers from Ambato. Things went from bad to worse. One of the partners quit right away; [the other had other businesses on his own in Píllaro. At the farm conditions were primitive— we had no electricity.](#) We were told a building was being constructed, supposedly to house us, that would be finished in two months, but that never happened. We rented a newly-built quinta, a garden residence some distance away, which also had no electricity. I attended the town's school and was the only foreign and Jewish student. One teacher, who was a very nice person, liked me and I liked him, but, sadly, he died while I was there. We were left without a teacher. Sometimes someone would show up to teach.

Since my parents had rented the farm they had to work very hard all day long. We remained at the farm for about two and a half years, between 1939 and 1941. We cultivated potatoes and corn, had cows and lots of chickens. But harvests were poor and we hardly had any money. A big problem was that the water we used that came from the mountains, was continually diverted by other farmers before it reached our farm. Also, some of our cows and chickens got sick. To add to our woes, thieves broke into the quinta where we lived. We had no luck at all. My parents were very unhappy.

A cattle dealer, whose name was Susskind, had a butcher shop in Ambato and came to the Sunday cattle market in Píllaro. I became his interpreter as he didn't speak Spanish. I was not pleased doing that job but had to spend all Sunday morning at the market.

We returned to Ambato and started a new business: a kosher restaurant. Not many were interested in such a restaurant so we had a hard time. We had to sell some of the things we brought from Austria, among them my father's nice pocket watch and my mother's diamond ring. With great hardship we managed to bring two silver candelabra from Europe, which we sold. The buyer was the owner of the largest textile and fabric store in Ambato, [Juan H. Darquea](#). The candelabra were displayed in the store window with a sign that said they were not for sale. My uncle, who emigrated from Italy to the United States and lived in Hartford, Connecticut, helped us from time to time. On a few occasions he would send us three hundred dollars, which was a big help.

I came up with the idea of selling bread to supplement our income. We were acquainted with Paul Kohn who came from Austria and owned the bakery Panaderia Moderna. I started delivering the bakery's bread from house to house along Avenida Miraflores. I would deliver white bread in the morning and dark bread in the afternoon. At first my mother was concerned that I would have to get up at five in the morning then go to school at eight. But I managed to do both jobs and go to school.

Eventually, my parents bought a business that sold mainly Ecuadorian liquor and beer. We also sold cigarettes. Sales were slow but soon after, Shell Oil began to explore for oil in the Oriente, the subtropical rainforest some 100 kilometers from Ambato. Most of the families of Shell Oil employees lived in Ambato. Fortunately for us, the company's foreign employees started placing orders at our store. That saved us. My father decided to start selling liquor imported from Scotland and wine from Chile, bread, candy, and American cigarettes. I was in charge of placing orders but soon after moved to Quito.

By the time of my Bar Mitzvah, Ambato's Jewish community numbered between 80 and 90 families. Very few arrived before the Nazis took power. The largest group came during the Nazi period. The third group came after the war; among them were concentration camp survivors. Ambato's Jewish community established a Jewish cemetery. Years later I learned that by the 1980s the cemetery no longer existed. They had exhumed about nine bodies, transported them to Quito and reburied them in Quito's Jewish cemetery.

It was a different way of life. There were great class differences in Ecuador then. Upper class women did not carry anything in the street. There were public "cargadores"—poor barefoot Indians who carried heavy loads for everyone for little pay. They would stand on street corners or at the markets waiting for work.

I still remember some of the members of the community, many of whom lived on Avenida Miraflores. At the end of Avenida Miraflores were Mr. and Mrs. Gumpel, who came from Germany. They had two daughters and a son. Next, the Bernsteins, who had a daughter. The Brillings, who came from Germany, had two daughters. They later emigrated to the United States. There was Mr. Susskind who had a son and a daughter. Another couple, the Horns had two sons. There was Mr. Misch who was single and did not associate with anyone.

Among the first arrivals to Ambato was José Rotman, from Romania. He started life in Ecuador as a peddler. The handsome and popular José Reinsburg also came in the early days. He arrived in Ecuador with a raincoat and no money yet became a millionaire. He started a silk factory and imported the machinery from Switzerland. He went back to Hungary/Romania where he married a very pretty, religious woman. He

brought her to Ambato as well as her parents by the name of Grosz, their two sons and another daughter. Since they were religious they brought along a Shochet. José also brought his mother and a young woman, Roszi, whom we called Roszinka. Chaim (Jaime) Kipperman came alone from Bessarabia in 1936. He met Roszi in Ambato and they got married. They had two children, Jacobo and Anita. Eventually Anita and her parents moved to Toronto and Jacobo to New York City.

The Goldbergs probably came from Lithuania or Latvia. There was Mr. Pruski, who came from Russia or the Ukraine. He was Mr. Goldberg's business partner in a small textile store. Mr. Pruski had several sons. They called themselves Prutchi. Two of them later had a fabric store in Guayaquil. They moved from Guayaquil to Quito where they opened a store. The youngest son of Mr. Pruski remained in Europe and survived the Holocaust. He married after the war ended and came to Ambato with his wife. There they started a store but moved to Canada. My wife and I visited them once in Montreal.

Max Durlacher and his family came from France. They moved to Quito and then to Mexico. A couple by the name of Feibush came from Germany early on with Mrs. Feibush's mother. They had a fabric store in partnership with Juan Abrahamson, who came from Germany. Eventually Mr. and Mrs. Feibush moved to the U.S. and lived in San Francisco.

William and Regina Weissfisch and their baby, George, arrived from Bratislava, Czechoslovakia in 1939. They came with her sisters, Ella and Jenny, and Jenny's husband. Ella later married José Rotman. William and Regina had two more children in Ambato, Eva and Harry. Mr. Weissfisch brought his sister, Erna Schwarz, her husband, Oscar, and son, Egon from Bolivia, where they first found refuge. For some time the two families managed a shirt factory in Ambato. Later, they moved to Cuenca where they ran a restaurant. Ultimately, everyone emigrated to the U.S.

A couple from Hungary, the Klermans, who had two daughters, also emigrated to the United States. Mr. and Mrs. Pinthus had owned a large department store in Berlin. He was Jewish but his wife wasn't. They had a son and a daughter. She married a member of an upper class Ecuadorian family.

My friend, Werner Horn, had a butcher shop. When we were kids, he and I were the only Jewish boys at school. The local kids hurled antisemitic insults at us and we got into fistfights. Werner, who was huge, fought back most of the kids.

The Hotel Bélgica was one of several hotels on Avenida Miraflores that was managed by Jews. Villa Hilda, the most luxurious hotel in the city, was managed by a couple, the Friedlanders. The husband had been a lawyer in Czechoslovakia.

When I visited Ambato in 1988 I met with the Friedmans, the only Jews left in the city. He came from Romania with nothing and ended up owning a large flour mill. His wife was the sister of David Rub, my religious mentor in Ambato, who was also the Shochet. He moved to the U.S. and married the niece of a famous rabbi who was the head of the Satmar Hassidim. David's cousin was Joseph Herman "Joe" Pasternak, the Hungarian-born Hollywood film producer.

The Jews of Ambato formed a very close community. We tried to help each other any way we could. We also had close relations with the large Middle Eastern community. Many Jews socialized and played cards with them. They were mostly of Lebanese, Syrian, and Jordanian descent, and most owned businesses. Some of them were critical of Ecuadorians. In Quito, a Romanian family built a large company called Bios that manufactured candy. We distributed their product in our store and sold large quantities to the Middle Eastern families who bought candy for many social and festive occasions.

My father spoke fluent Spanish and used to greet people of high society using the word "Don"—such as Don Emilio or Don José. I remember that German propaganda was pervasive then. Most people had short wave radios and listened regularly to Radio Berlin. The German embassy in Quito distributed printed material from Nazi Germany. Eventually, the BBC started broadcasting from London in Spanish, and later, the Voice of America.

When I moved to Quito I trained with a very capable and arrogant Czech engineer, Aladar Horvath. I did all kinds of chores. I quit once but he wrote me a letter asking me to return under better working conditions. We built and sold radio transmitters to Shell Oil. Later on, he installed radio transmitters throughout Ecuador. The first radio transmitter was Radio Cuenca whose young Jewish owner died in a car accident.

In Quito I had a close group of friends: Moselio Schaechter, Egon Schwarz, Federico Adler, and Herbert Freund. We all had different ideas but great ambition and desire for learning. We loved to read and study. We had different views about religion but got along very well.

Eventually I grew dissatisfied with my job. I had other ambitions. There was a professor at the university who had been renowned at the universities of Vienna and Budapest. Professor Ivan Döri, who was half Jewish, arrived in Ecuador with his son but without his wife. He had another son in England. The son who lived with him was not interested in his father's activities and worked for the Ecuadorian government. But I wanted to study and was eager to learn. I knew my parents would support me, so I approached the professor at a coffee bar and spoke to him in German. I told him I wanted to study with him. He asked, "What do you know?" My answer was, "Nothing."

He told me to visit him that same evening. I did and ended up studying mathematics and physics with him. Not only was he my personal professor but he became a friend and gave me hope that I could become a scientist. We never discussed religion. When he died he had a Christian burial. At the time of his death I had been in Quito for four years. I quit my job with Aladar Horvath and went back to Ambato where I was needed in my parents' business.

In addition to taking care of deliveries to the Shell Oil outpost in the rainforest, I bought some radios that I repaired and sold. I had the cabinetry made locally. I also repaired cameras and instruments. There was a gift shop in Ambato named Kahn, owned by Herbert Kahn. He was eager to help me display some of my radios in his shop window to help me sell them, for which he got a commission.

On August 5, 1949 on a Friday afternoon at 2:10, Ambato was hit by a major earthquake. The city was largely destroyed. I was at the store, typing a letter to Vienna about the sale of our properties in Austria that had been confiscated by the Nazis and eventually returned to us. I wanted to post the letter by 2 PM. Unexpectedly, Kamil Kohn and his family—who formerly lived in Ambato and now lived in Quito—came to visit, delaying my visit to the post office. Lucky for me because the post office building was hard hit and eight people perished there. The house where we lived was built with massive stones and after the earthquake I found a large one lodged diagonally on my bed. No members of the Jewish community were hurt or died.

At the time of the earthquake, my mother was with me at the store and my father was across the street visiting the store of our friends, the Kipperman family. Their store was in a new building that was not damaged but our store was, so we had to close it for about three months. During that time we moved around from Quito, to Guayaquil, to Salinas, returning frequently to Ambato. We had no place to stay in Ambato and didn't know if we could open the store again as the town's economy had suffered greatly. Eventually, it became clear that we could run our business there again. We found another apartment and stayed.

We made decent money at the store yet moved to the United States. I was the driving force. Long before, while still in Austria we had applied for an American visa in Vienna. However, because of the U.S. quota system applicants had to wait for visas. The Austrian quota only allowed a small number to emigrate each year. In 1938 it was practically impossible to emigrate to the U.S. Years later, in Ecuador, our turn arrived at the U.S. consulate. We asked ourselves if we should take advantage of the quota now that we were no longer refugees. We were told that if we didn't take advantage of the quota we would lose the chance to emigrate to the U.S. One problem was that if I went to the U.S. there was a good chance I would be drafted into military service because of the Korean war. Meantime, my father came to the U.S. to visit my uncle in Hartford

before the quota expired. He saw that opportunities for him were very limited and returned to Ecuador. My uncle had a big store where he sold fur coats. The rent took all the profits so he was not doing well. My father loaned him money.

When I picked up my father in Quito on his return, he said he wanted to visit the wine importer from Chile. He placed an order for thirty cases of top Chilean brandy. I realized we were not going to the U.S. The U.S. vice consul had asked me privately what were we going to do there and did not encourage us to emigrate. I told him I didn't want to lose the opportunity as I wanted to study. I made up my mind to go even though I might be drafted into the army. My mother said that if I wanted to go, we would all go. We sold the business to one of our loyal employees for very little money, and departed Ecuador September, 1951.

The move to the U.S. was very hard for my parents. He found a job carrying crates in a supermarket. Eventually he got a low level job at the Royal typewriter factory. My mother did menial work in a hotel. They were not happy and even considered returning to Austria, but remained in the U.S. because of me.

I immediately planned to apply for employment at the Pratt and Whitney aircraft factory in East Hartford--one of the largest manufacturers of airplane engines in the world. I went there with my uncle and passed the technical interview but was not hired because I was not a U.S. citizen. It was hard to find a job as there was a recession and high unemployment. I saw an ad for electrical assemblers, applied, and was hired. They took me to the police station and fingerprinted me with unsavory characters. That was part of the conditions for employment. The company employed 400 people.

Fortunately, they assigned me a seat to do low tech assemblies. On the way to my desk I had to pass by the research lab. I started to talk to the head engineer, the instruments supervisor, and other people at the lab. I told them I could do that work but they said they didn't need anyone. In a short while they did need someone on an emergency basis. That was my entrance. I was now in the lab and became the spare wheel. All of a sudden I felt respected. I was happy. They hired a consulting engineer for a few days to figure out a problem in the product, an electrical device. I found the cause of the problem so they no longer needed the consulting engineer.

I received a letter from the draft board informing me that my "friends and neighbors request that you be at the Hartford railroad station at 6 a.m. for a free trip to New Haven." On arrival there, they gave us a physical examination and IQ tests. We were evaluated for military service. Soon after, I received a 1-A classification. A couple of weeks later we were taken to Fort Devens in Massachusetts, where we were given a series of aptitude tests. I excelled in math and physical sciences. I was assigned to the signal corps. We were shipped to Georgia. Instead of sixteen weeks of basic army

training, I got eight weeks. I was assigned to radio repair. Then I saw a notice that if one were to volunteer and qualify for advanced technology one could apply and would undergo high tech training in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. I volunteered immediately and qualified for the training program, which lasted nine-months. Now, I was not too far from Hartford, where my parents lived. After graduation I was assigned to do highly classified work at Fort Hanford in Washington state. I joined the team and became team leader. However, they came to realize that I was not supposed to be there, as I was not a citizen and lacked high security clearance.

I was transferred to another high tech special station in the Seattle area. Again they concluded that I required a high degree of clearance so I was sent to another installation. Eventually I was discharged and enrolled at the University of Hartford, where besides being a student I was a paid assistant instructor. After graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in physical sciences and linguistics I became a high school and college chemistry teacher. I got grants to continue studying chemistry, physics, and nuclear science in the summer months at about nine different universities throughout the U.S. I had 258 credits, more than required for a PhD, but did not get a PhD because I took courses in different places. One of the programs also enabled me to work some summers at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, D.C.

We had bought a beautiful six-family house in Hartford and were able to supplement our income from apartment rentals. However, the neighborhood changed--the good tenants moved out and new tenants often did not pay rent. After my mother passed away, my father received a pension. He sold the house for the same price he bought it.

I met my wife in 1961 thanks to my parents. I had been granted a fellowship at the National Bureau of Standards while taking courses at the university in Washington, D.C. My parents visited me there and we planned to travel together back to Hartford. Before departing we went sightseeing and visited the White House. My father said we should also to visit a Jewish museum. We arrived at the museum late in the afternoon and were allowed to look around briefly. My mother struck up a conversation with a young, pretty woman who was in charge of exhibit design at the museum. My mother asked her if she was single and she said she was. My mother suggested I call her, which I did. We corresponded and I visited her in Washington. Eventually we got married and lived in Hartford. We had four children: Miriam, Joseph, Rachel, and Naomi. My wife died at age sixty-eight after being on dialysis and having her leg amputated because of infectious rheumatoid arthritis.

My return trip to Ecuador in 1988 was a moving, emotional experience. I've always been an Ecuadorian loyalist and if someone spoke badly about Ecuador I would vigorously defend the country. We had to escape Europe, find refuge somewhere, and Ecuador welcomed us when other countries would not let us in. We had a tough time

at the farm but eventually had a better life. To this day, I feel a great attachment to Ecuador.