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The Nazi  
Officer's Wife

**Edith H. Beer**



# **The Nazi Officer's Wife**

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**How One Jewish Woman Survived the Holocaust**

**Edith Hahn Beer with Susan Dworkin**



**HARPER PERENNIAL**



# Dedication

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*In loving memory of my mother, Klothilde Hahn*



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# Preface

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THE STORY THAT follows here was purposely buried for a long time. Like many people who survived a great calamity in which so many others lost their lives, I did not discuss my life as a “U-boat,” a fugitive from the Gestapo living under a false identity beneath the surface of society in Nazi Germany, but preferred to forget as much as possible and not to burden younger generations with sad memories. It was my daughter, Angela, who urged me to tell the story, to leave a written record, to let the world know.

In 1997, I decided to sell at auction my archive of wartime letters, pictures, and documents. The archive was bought at Sotheby’s in London by two longtime friends and dedicated philanthropists of Jewish history—Drew Lewis and Dalck Feith. Their intention was to donate it to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and there it resides today. I am enormously grateful to them for their generosity and concern. The papers in that archive have helped to trigger many memories. I am grateful to my collaborator, Susan Dworkin, for her sympathy and understanding in helping me to express them.

Many thanks to Nina Sasportas of Cologne, whose detailed research has enabled us to augment my recollections, and to Elizabeth LeVangia Uppenbrink of New York, who translated all the documents and letters into accessible and idiomatic English. Many thanks as well to Nicholas Kolarik; to Robert Levine; to Suzanne Braun Levine; to our editor, Colin Dickerman, and his associate, Karen Murphy; and to our publisher, Rob Weisbach—all treasured critics and comrades who have contributed gifts of spirit, energy, and wisdom.

Finally, this book owes everything to Angela Schlüter, my daughter, for it was the loving spirit of her inquiry, her need to know, her search for the strange, miraculous past, that inspired me to tell the story at last.

—EDITH HAHN BEER  
NETANYA, ISRAEL



*The Small Voice from Then*

**A**FTER A WHILE, there were no more onions. My coworkers among the Red Cross nurses at the Städtische Krankenhaus in Brandenburg said it was because the Führer needed the onions to make poison gas with which to conquer our enemies. But I think by then—it was May 1943—many citizens of the Third Reich would have gladly forgone the pleasure of gassing the enemy if they could only taste an onion.

At that time, I was working in the ward for the foreign workers and prisoners of war. I would make tea for all the patients and wheel it around on a little trolley, trying to smile and give them a cheery “*Guten Tag.*”

One day when I brought the teacups back to the kitchen to wash, I interrupted one of the senior nurses slicing an onion. She was the wife of an officer and came from Hamburg. I believe her name was Hilde. She told me the onion was for her own lunch. Her eyes searched my face to see if I knew that she was lying.

I made my gaze vacant and smiled my silly little fool’s smile and went about washing up the teacups as though I had absolutely no idea that this nurse had bought her onion on the black market especially to serve to a critically injured Russian prisoner, to give him a taste he longed for in his last days. Either thing—buying the onion or befriending the Russian—could have sent her to prison.

Like most Germans who defied Hitler’s laws, the nurse from Hamburg was a rare exception. More typically, the staff of our hospital stole the food meant for the foreign patients and took it home to their families or ate it themselves. You must understand, these nurses were not well-educated women from progressive homes for whom caring for the sick was a sacred calling. They were very often young farm girls from East Prussia, fated for lifelong backbreaking labor in the fields and barns, and nursing was one of the few acceptable ways by which they could escape. They had been raised in the Nazi era on Nazi propaganda. They truly believed that, as Nordic “Aryans,” they were members of a superior race. They felt that these Russians, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Belgians, and Poles who came into our clinic had been placed on earth to labor for them. To steal a plate of soup from such lowly creatures seemed not a sin but a perfectly legitimate activity.

I think we must have had more than ten thousand foreign prisoners in Brandenburg, working in the Opel automobile factory, the Arado airplane factory, and other factories. Most of those whom we saw in the hospital had been injured in industrial accidents. While building the economy of the Reich they would mangle their hands in metal presses, burn themselves in flaming forges, splash themselves with corrosive chemicals. They were a slave population, conquered and helpless; transported away from their parents, wives, and children; longing for home. I did not dare to look into their faces for fear of seeing myself—my own terror, my own loneliness.

In our cottage hospital, each service was housed in a separate building. We on the nursing staff ate in one building, did laundry in another, attended to orthopedic cases in another and infectious diseases in yet another. The foreign prisoners were rigorously separated from German patients, no matter what was wrong with them. We heard that one time, a whole building was allocated to foreigners suffering from typhus, a disease that comes from contaminated water. How they had contracted such a disease in our beautiful historic city—which had inspired immortal concertos, where the water was clean and the food was carefully rationed and inspected by our government—was impossible for simple girls like us to comprehend. Many of my coworkers assumed that the foreigners had brought it on themselves, because of their filthy personal habits. These nurses managed not to admit to themselves that the disease came from the unspeakable conditions under which the slave laborers were forced to live.

You must understand that I was not really a nurse but rather a nurse's aide, trained only for menial tasks. I fed the patients who could not feed themselves and dusted the night tables. I washed the bedpans. My first day on the job, I washed twenty-seven bedpans—in the sink, as though they were dinner dishes. I washed the rubber gloves. These were not to be discarded like the thin white gloves you see today. Ours were heavy, durable, reusable. I had to powder their insides. Sometimes I prepared a black salve and applied it to a bandage and made compresses to relieve the pain of rheumatism. And that was about it. I could not do anything more medical than that.

Once I was asked to assist at a blood transfusion. They were siphoning blood from one patient into a bowl, then suctioning the blood from the bowl and into the veins of another patient. I was supposed to stir the blood, to keep it from coagulating. I became nauseated and ran from the room. They said to themselves: "Well, Grete is just a silly little Viennese youngster with almost no education, the next thing to a cleaning woman—how much can be expected from her? Let her feed the foreigners who have chopped off their fingers in the machines."

I prayed that no one would die on my watch. Heaven must have heard me, because the prisoners waited for my shift to be over, and *then* they died.

I tried to be nice to them; I tried to speak French to the Frenchman to assuage their homesickness. Perhaps I smiled too brightly, because one August morning my head nurse told me that I had been observed to be too friendly with the foreigners, so I was being transferred to the maternity service.

You see, there were informers everywhere. That was why the nurse who was preparing the forbidden onion for her Russian patient had been so frightened of me, even me, Margarethe, called "Grete" for short. An uneducated twenty-year-old nurse's aide from Austria. Even *I* could conceivably be working for the Gestapo or the SS.

IN THE EARLY fall of 1943, shortly after my transfer to the maternity service, an important industrialist arrived in an ambulance, which had brought him all the way from Berlin. This man had suffered a stroke. He needed peace and quiet and uninterrupted therapy. The Allies had been bombing Berlin since January, so it seemed to his family and friends that he would recover more speedily in Brandenburg, where no bombs were falling and the hospital staff was not beset with emergencies and he could count on more personal attention. Perhaps because I was the youngest and least skilled, and not badly needed elsewhere, I was taken away from the babies and assigned to care for him.

It was not very pleasant work. He had become partly paralyzed, and he had to be led to the bathroom, hand-fed every morsel, bathed and turned constantly; and his flaccid, powerless body had to be massaged.

I did not say much about my new patient to Werner, my fiancé, because I believed it might trigger his ambition, and that he would begin to press for the advantages we could gain from my close association with such an important personage. Werner was always on the lookout for advantage. Experience had taught him that advancement in the Reich occurred not because of talent and ability but because of connections: friends in high places, powerful relatives. Werner himself was a painter, imaginative and quite talented. Before the Nazi regime, his gifts had brought him nothing but joblessness and homelessness; he had slept in the forest under the rain. But then better times came. He joined the Nazi Party and became a supervisor of the paint department at the Arado Aircraft factory, in charge of many foreign workers. Soon he would be an officer in the Wehrmacht and my devoted husband. But he didn't relax—not yet, not Werner. He was always looking for something extra, a

angle, a way to climb upward to a spot where he would finally receive the rewards he felt he deserved. ~~A restless and impulsive man, he dreamed of success. If I told him everything about my important patient, he might dream too much. So I told him just enough, no more.~~

When my patient received flowers from Albert Speer, the Minister for Armaments and War Production, himself, I understood why the other nurses had been so eager to give me this job. It was risky to take care of high-ranking party members. A dropped bedpan, a spilled glass of water, could get you into serious trouble. What if I turned this patient too quickly, washed him too roughly, fed him soup that was too hot, too cold, too salty? And—oh, my God—what if he had another stroke? What if he *died* while I was the one taking care of him?

Quaking at the thought of so many possibilities for doing something wrong, I tried with all my strength to get every single thing just right. So of course the industrialist thought I was wonderful.

“You are an excellent worker, Nurse Margarethe,” he said as I was bathing him. “You must have considerable experience for one so young.”

“Oh, no, sir,” I said in my smallest voice. “I have only just come from school. I do only what they taught me.”

“And you have never taken care of a stroke patient before ...”

“No, sir.”

“Amazing.”

Every day he recovered a little more motion and his voice became less slurred. He must have been encouraged by his own recovery, for his spirits were high.

“Tell me, Nurse Margarethe,” he said as I was massaging his feet, “what do people here in Brandenburg think about the war?”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir.”

“But you must have heard something.... I am interested in public opinion. What do people think about the meat ration?”

“It is quite satisfactory.”

“What do they think about the news from Italy?”

Should I admit that I knew about the Allied landings? Did I dare? Did I dare *not*? “We all believe that the British will be defeated in the end, sir.”

“Do you know anyone whose boyfriend is fighting on the Eastern front? What do the men write in their letters home?”

“Oh, the men don’t write about the fighting, sir, because they don’t like to worry us, and also they fear that they might give away some important detail and the enemy might capture the mail and read it and their comrades might be endangered.”

“Have you heard that the Russians are cannibals? Have you heard that they eat their young?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And do you believe that?”

I took a chance. “Some people do, sir. But I think that if the Russians ate their babies, there would not be so many Russians as there apparently are.”

He laughed. He had warm, humorous eyes and a gentle manner. He even reminded me a little of my grandfather, whom I had cared for years before when he suffered a stroke ... so long ago, in another life. I began to relax with the important industrialist and let down my guard a little.

“What could the Führer do to make his people happy, Nurse? What do you think?”

“My fiancé says that the Führer loves Germany like a wife, and that is why he has no will for himself, and that he would do anything he could to make us happy. So if you could speak to him, sir

perhaps you could tell the Führer that we would be very very happy if he would send us some onions.

~~This amused him very much. "You are good medicine for me, Margarethe. You are plainspoken and kindhearted, the true soul of German womanhood. Tell me, is your fiancé fighting at the front?"~~

~~"Not yet, sir. He has special skills, so he is working to prepare aircraft for the Luftwaffe."~~

~~"Ah, very good, very good," he said. "My sons are also fine young men; they are doing very well these days." He showed me a picture of his tall handsome sons in their uniforms. They had risen high in the Nazi Party and become important men. He was very proud of them.~~

~~"It's easy to be a cardinal," I said, "when your cousin is the pope."~~

~~He stopped bragging and took a long, hard look at me. "I see you are not such a simple girl," I said. "I see you are a very clever woman. Where were you educated?"~~

~~My stomach tightened. My throat went dry.~~

~~"That is something my grandma always said," I said, turning him over to wash his back. "An old saying in our family."~~

~~"When I return to Berlin, I would like you to come with me as my private nurse. I shall speak to your superiors."~~

~~"Oh, I would love that, sir, but my fiancé and I are planning to be married soon, and so you see, I could not leave Brandenburg—it would not be possible! But thank you, sir! Thank you! I am honored! Most honored!"~~

~~My shift ended. I bade him good night and walked, trembling and unsteady, out of his room. My face was wet with perspiration. I told the coworker who arrived to replace me that this was because exercising my patient's heavy limbs was such hard work. But in truth it was because I had almost revealed my disguise. The smallest indication of sophisticated wit—a literary reference or historical knowledge no ordinary Austrian girl could hope to have—was, for me, like a circumcision, a complete giveaway.~~

~~As I walked home to the Arado apartment complex on the east end of town where Werner and I lived, I admonished myself for the millionth time to be more careful and hide every sign of intellect. I tried to keep my gaze vacant, my mouth shut.~~

IN OCTOBER 1943, the other members of the Red Cross nursing contingent gave me a great honor. The municipality of Brandenburg was planning a rally, and each group of workers had to send a representative. For one reason or another, none of the senior nurses could attend; I suspect that they didn't feel like celebrating because they had heard how badly Germany's forces were faring in Russia, North Africa, and Italy (although how they would have heard that I cannot imagine, since German radio did not fully report it and everybody knew that to listen to Radio Moscow, the BBC, the Voice of America, or Beromünster of Switzerland was a criminal act akin to treason). I was selected to represent our workers' group at the rally.

Werner was very proud of me. I can imagine him bragging to his colleagues at Arado, "No wonder they chose my Grete! She's a true patriot of the Fatherland!" He had a good sense of humor. My Werner, a real flair for life's little ironies.

I dressed carefully for the big day. I wore my Red Cross nurse's uniform. My plain brown hair was combed in a simple natural style, no barrettes, curls, or pomade. I wore no makeup and no jewelry except a thin little gold ring with the tiniest diamond chip, a gift from my father on my sixteen birthday. I was a small girl, not much more than five feet, and I had a lovely figure in those days. However, I kept it covered with baggy white stockings and a shapeless pinafore. It was not a time



when a person like me wanted to look especially attractive in public. Nice, yes; neat, yes. But more important, plain. Nothing to draw attention.

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The rally turned out to be quite different from those to which we had grown accustomed. There were no stirring drums or strident marches, no beautiful young people in uniforms waving flags. The rally had a purpose, and that was to overcome the defeatist mood which had begun to fall over Germany since the debacle at Stalingrad the past winter. Heinrich Himmler had been appointed Minister of the Interior in August with this mandate: "Renew German faith in the Victory!" Speaking after speaker exhorted us to work harder and harder to support our valiant fighting men, because if we lost the war, the terrible poverty which most Germans recalled from the days before the Nazi era would return and we would all lose our jobs. If we had grown tired of our evening *Eintopf*, the one-dish meal that Joseph Goebbels had proclaimed the proper self-sacrificing fare for a nation engaged in "total war," we should remind ourselves that after the Victory, we would feast like kings on real coffee and golden bread made with white flour and whole eggs. We were told that we should do everything in our power to keep up productivity in the workplace, and turn in anybody we suspected of being disloyal, especially people who were listening to enemy radio and the "grossly exaggerated news of German defeats in North Africa and Italy.

"My God," I thought. "They are worried."

The Nazi "masters of the world" were beginning to quake and waver. I felt giddy, a little breathless. An old song began to sing itself inside my head.

*Shhh*, I thought. *It's too soon to sing. Shhh.*

That night, when Werner and I tuned in to the BBC, I prayed that the news about German military misfortune would mean an early end to the war and, for me, release from the prison of my pretense.

But I did not dare share my hopes, even with Werner. I kept my elation secret, my voice soft, my persona unobtrusive. Invisibility. Silence. These were the habits that I wore when I lived as white survivors of the Holocaust now call a U-boat, a Jewish fugitive from the Nazi death machine, hiding right in the heart of the Third Reich.

For a while, in later years, when I was married to Fred Beer and living safely in England, I cast off those wartime habits. But now that Fred is gone and I am old and cannot control the impact of my memories, I put them on again. I sit here as I sit with you today in my favorite café on the square in the city of Netanya by the sea in the land of Israel, and an acquaintance stops to chat and says, "So tell us, *Giveret* Beer, what was it like then, during the war, living with a Nazi Party member inside Germany, pretending to be an Aryan, concealing your true identity, always fearing exposure?" My answer in a little voice that is dazed by its own ignorance, "Oh, but I do not know. I think I do not remember this anymore." My gaze wanders and loses focus; my voice turns dreamy, halting, soft. It is my voice from those days in Brandenburg, when I was a twenty-nine-year-old Jewish law student on the Gestapo's "Wanted" list, pretending to be an ignorant twenty-one-year-old nurse's aide.

You must forgive me when you hear this small voice from then fading and faltering. You must remind me: "Edith! Speak up! Tell the story."

It has been more than half a century.

I suppose it is time.



*The Hahns of Vienna*

**WHEN I WAS** a schoolgirl in Vienna, it seemed to me the whole world had come to my city to sit in the sunny cafés and enjoy coffee and cake and matchless conversation. I walked from school past the opera house, the beautiful Josefsplatz, and the Michaelerplatz. I played in the Volksgarten and the Burggarten. I saw dignified ladies with rakish hats and silk stockings; gentlemen with walking sticks and golden watch chains; rustic workmen from all the provinces of the bygone Hapsburg empire plastering and painting our fancy facades with their thick blunt skilled hands. The stores burst with exotic fruits and crystal and silk. Inventions sprang up in my path.

One day, I squirmed into a crowd and found myself looking into a store window where a uniformed parlor maid was demonstrating something called a “Hoover.” She scattered dirt on the floor, turned on her machine, and like magic whisked the dirt away. I squeaked with delight and raced off to tell my schoolmates.

When I was ten years old, I joined a long line before the offices of a magazine called *Die Bühne* “The Stage.” Soon I was sitting at a table before a large brown box. A nice lady put earphones on my head. The box came to life. A voice. A song. Radio.

I raced to my father’s restaurant to tell my family. My sister Mimi, only a year younger than I, could not have cared less. The baby—little Johanna, called Hansi—was too young to understand. And Mama and Papa were too busy to listen. But I knew I had heard something special, the force of the future, a god-to-be. Remember that radio was brand-new in 1924. Imagine what a power it represented, and how helpless people were to resist its messages.

I bubbled to Professor Spitzer of the Technical University, my favorite customer among the regulars: “The person who speaks can be very far away, Professor! But his voice flies through the air like a bird! Soon we will be able to hear the voices of people from everywhere!”

Eagerly I read the newspapers and magazines that Papa kept for his customers. What most interested me were the law columns, with cases, arguments, and problems to make your head spin. I raced around our “waltz city,” forever searching for someone to talk to about what I had read and seen.

School was my delight. There were only girls in my class; Papa did not believe in coeducation. Unlike my sisters, I loved to study and never found it difficult.

We were taught that the French were our archenemies, that the Italians were traitors, that Austria had lost the First World War only because of a “stab in the back”—but I must tell you, we were never sure who had done the stabbing. Often, the teachers would ask me what language we spoke at home. This was a not-so-subtle way of discovering if we spoke Yiddish (which we didn’t) and were therefore Jewish (which we were).

They wanted to know, you see. They were afraid that with our typical Austrian faces, we might be able to pass. They didn’t want to be fooled. Even then, in the 1920s, they wanted to be able to tell who was a Jew.

One day Professor Spitzer asked my father what he intended for my future education. Papa said I would finish grammar school and then be apprenticed as a dressmaker, as my mother had been.

“But you have here a very bright girl, my dear Herr Hahn,” the professor said. “You must send her to high school, perhaps even to university.”

Father laughed. If I had been a boy, he would have beggared himself to educate me. As I was a girl, he had never even considered it. However, since the distinguished professor had raised the question, Papa decided to discuss it with my mother.

MY FATHER, LEOPOLD Hahn, had a beautiful black mustache, curly black hair, and a humorous outgoing personality well suited for a restaurateur. He was the youngest of six brothers, so by the time he was ready for his education, the family's money had run out. Therefore, he studied to be a waiter. I know it is hard to believe, but in that time and place, a waiter's training took several years. People liked Papa. They trusted him, told him their stories. He was an inspired listener. That was his gift.

He was much more worldly and sophisticated than he ever expected us to be. He had worked on the Riviera and in the Czechoslovakian spas of Carlsbad and Marienbad, and had experienced some wild nights. He fought with the Austro-Hungarian Army in the First World War. He was wounded and then captured; but he escaped and returned to us. The wound to his shoulder caused a loss of motion in his arm. He could not shave himself.

The restaurant, at Kohlmarkt in Vienna's busy center, was my father's life. It had a long, burnished bar and a dining room in back. His customers came every day for years. Papa knew what they wanted to eat before they ordered. He stocked their favorite newspapers. He provided them with service and comfort, a little world of dependabilities.

We lived in a two-bedroom apartment in what was actually an old converted palace at Number 2 Argentinierstrasse in Vienna's Fourth District. Our landlord, from the Hapsburg-Lothringen Company, came from royal stock. Since Mama worked side by side with Papa in the restaurant, seven days a week, we girls took our meals there. The household help did the cleaning and took care of us when we were little.

My mother, Klothilde, was pretty, short, buxom, attractive but not coquettish. She kept her long hair completely black. She had a patient, bemused air; forgave people their stupidities; sighed often; knew when to hold her peace.

I lavished all my affection on Hansi, my baby sister, seven years younger than I. To me, she looked like a cherub from one of our baroque cathedrals, with chubby pink cheeks, delicious flesh, and bouncing curls. My sister Mimi I disliked. The feeling was mutual. She had weak eyes, thick glasses, a sour personality—mean-spirited, jealous of everybody. Mama, intimidated by Mimi's unhappiness, gave her whatever she wanted, assuming that I, the "carefree one," could fend for myself. Since Mimi could make no friends, and I was popular, like my father, I had to share my friends with her and take her everywhere with me.

Papa took care of us all and shielded us from knowledge of the world's seamy side. He made our decisions, saved for our dowries. In good times, if he was feeling a bit flush, he would stop at an auction house on his way home from work and buy my mother some jewelry as a surprise—a gold chain, amber earrings. He would lean on one of our leather chairs waiting for her to open the package, cherishing her excitement, anticipating her embrace. He adored my mother. They never fought. I mean it: they *never* fought. In the evening, she did her sewing and he read his paper and we did our homework and we had what the Israelis call *shalom bait*, peace in the home.

I THINK MY father knew how to be Jewish, but he did not teach us. He must have thought we would absorb it with our mother's milk.

We were sent to the *Judengottesdienst*, the children's service at the synagogue on Saturday afternoons. The maid was supposed to take us. But she was a Catholic, like most Austrians, and she feared the synagogue; and my mother—a working woman, dependent on her help—feared the maid. So we went infrequently and learned almost nothing. However, one song from that time stayed in my head.

One day the Temple will be rebuilt  
And the Jews will return to Jerusalem.  
So it is written in the Holy Book.  
So it is written. Hallelujah!

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In addition to the theme of faith—*Shema Yisrael. Adonai eloheynu. Adonai echod*—this baby son about the Temple was all I knew of Jewish prayer and practice.

Too bad I didn't know more.

Thank God I knew that much.

Father's restaurant closed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. (Like our home, it did not serve pork or shellfish, but otherwise it was not kosher at all.) On these high holidays, we went to synagogue mostly to meet our relatives. Mama and Papa were distantly related; each came from a family named Hahn. Between Mama's two sisters, and her brother, and Father's six brothers and three sisters, there were more than thirty Hahn cousins in Vienna. You could always find some Hahn or other at the third café in the Prater. Each branch of the family observed the Jewish religion differently. For example, Aunt Gisela Kirschenbaum—one of Papa's sisters, who also ran a restaurant—opened her place to the poor for a free seder on Passover. Mama's brother Richard, an outright nonbeliever, married a stylish furniture heiress from Topolcany, near Bratislava. Her name was Roszi. She had been raised Orthodox, and she couldn't stand the Hahns' assimilated ways, so she always went home to Czechoslovakia for the holidays.

Sometimes my parents startled me with an outburst of Jewish consciousness. For example, I once ate a blood sausage sandwich at a friend's house. "Absolutely delicious!" I reported to Mama. She literally gagged. Her sincere horror astounded me. On another occasion—just for the sake of conversation—I asked my father if I could marry a Christian. With black eyes blazing, he answered, "No, Edith. I could not bear that. It would kill me. The answer is no."

Papa felt that Jews had to be better than everybody else. He expected our report cards to be better, our social consciousness to be more highly developed. He expected us to have finer manners, cleaner clothes, immaculate moral standards.

I didn't think about it at the time, but of course now I realize that my father's insistence that we Jews must be better was based on our country's firm belief that we were not as good.

MY MOTHER'S PARENTS owned a gray stucco bungalow in Stockerau, a pretty little town north of Vienna. We went there on weekends and for holidays and birthdays. That was where my closest cousin Jultschi lived.

When Jultschi was nine years old, her mother (Mama's sister Elvira) dropped her off at Grandmother's house, went home, and killed herself.

Jultschi's father stayed on in Vienna. But Jultschi—traumatized by her past, always needfully and easily intimidated—remained with our grandparents, who raised her as though she were their own child.

A soft, large, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl with full, deeply sculpted lips, Jultschi had a big heart and—unlike my sister Mimi—a great sense of humor. She played the piano, badly but well enough for our tone-deaf clan, and we made up operas to her good-natured banging. While I, the "intellectual," was discovering a passion for gothic novels full of mystery and desire, Jultschi was

becoming addicted to movies and swing music.

~~Grandmother Hahn—a short, fat, strong woman and a strict disciplinarian—would assign~~ housework and then go off to the market, and of course we would not do what she asked but would instead spend the entire afternoon playing. As soon as we caught a glimpse of her coming back down the road, we would dive into the house through the open windows and get to work, so that she would find us dusting and sweeping like proper children. I am sure we never fooled her for one minute.

Grandmother seemed always to be busy adding to the richness of the world, knitting delicate lace doilies or teaching Jultschi how to bake *Stollen* or tending to her hens and geese, her dog (named Mohrli), and her hundreds of potted plants. She had every sort of cactus. She would notify Mama in advance: “Klothilde! The cactus will bloom on Sunday. Bring the children to see.” And we would stand in the yard at Stockerau, admiring the hardy desert flowers as they struggled to survive in our cold country.

Grandfather Hahn, a shopkeeper, sold sewing machines and bicycles and served as the agent for Puch motorbikes. Grandmother worked alongside him in the store on Sunday, the big shopping day for the local farmers, who would come from church, meet at the pub, have an early drink, and do the marketing for the week. They all knew my grandparents. Stockerau officials would always invite the Hahns to sit with them at carnival time, to watch as each guild gave its program.

On Grandfather’s birthday, our task was to copy a poem out of Mama’s *Wunschbuch* and then recite it in Grandfather’s honor. I remember him sitting like a rotund little king listening to our pretentious recitations, his eyes glistening with pride. I remember his hug.

Near my grandparents’ house was a tributary of the Danube, where Jultschi and I loved to go swimming. To reach the water, you had to cross a high wooden bridge. One day, when I was seven, I got up before anyone else, ran down to the bridge, slipped, and went flying down and down and down into the water. I bobbed to the surface, howling and hysterical. A young man leaped in and saved me.

After that, I was terrified of heights. I did not ski in the Alps. I did not climb to the top of the towering buildings and hang socialist banners from the dome. I tried to stay close to the ground.

IN 1928, WHEN inflation was so high in Austria that a customer’s lunch would double in price while he ate it, Papa decided to sell the restaurant.

Luckily, he soon found work with the Kokisch family, who had employed him on the Riviera. They had now opened a new hotel in Badgastein, an Alpine resort famous for its medicinal hot springs. Papa managed the hotel’s restaurant.

The Hotel Bristol nestled among green meadows, beneath snowy mountains, where springs and healing waters percolated up into marble spas. Wealthy families would walk along the garden pathways, feeding the fat squirrels, murmuring their conversations in a mannerly hush. Some rich girl whose parents thought she had a little talent was always playing the piano or singing at an afternoon concert in the gazebo. We visited Papa there every summer—a heavenly life.

As the only kosher hotel in that area, the Bristol attracted Jewish guests from everywhere. The Ochs family, who owned the *New York Times*, came there; and so did Sigmund Freud and the writer Sholem Asch. One day a tall blond man, wearing lederhosen and a Tirolean hat with a chamois-hair brush, came in for lunch. Papa thought surely he had come to the wrong place. But then the man took off his hat, put on a *yarmulke*, and stood up to make a *bruchka*.

“I guess even the Jews can’t always tell who the Jews are,” Papa remarked with a laugh.

For the first time in Badgastein, we met rabbis from Poland, religious men with beautiful long

beards who walked slowly through the halls of the hotel, their hands clasped behind their backs. The  
filled me with a sense of mystery and peace. I believe that one of them saved my life.

I was sixteen, unwise and self-indulgent. I stayed too long in one of the baths and developed  
chill and a fever. My mother put me to bed, made me tea with honey, and put compresses on my bro  
and wrists. As night fell, one of the Polish rabbis knocked on our door. He could not reach the *shul*  
time for the evening prayers, he said, and asked if he could say them in our house. Of course Man  
welcomed him. When he had finished his prayers, she asked if he would say a blessing for her si  
daughter.

He came to my bedside, leaned over me, and patted my hand. His face radiated warmth and goo  
nature. He said something in Hebrew, a language I never expected to know. Then he left. And I g  
well.

In later years, at moments when I thought I was going to die, I remembered that man an  
comforted myself with the thought that his blessing would protect me.

Of course there were some things about working in this paradise that weren't so wonderful, b  
they were part of life then, and to be truthful, we accepted them. For example, kosher slaughtering w  
not allowed in the province where the hotel was situated. So the *schoichet* had to slaughter the meat  
the next province and then transport it to the Bristol. To take another example, our grandparent  
generation usually lived in Vienna's outlying towns—Floritzdorf, Stockerau. It was not until ou  
parents reached maturity that Jews were permitted to reside in Vienna proper.

So you see, we had all the burdens of being Jewish in an anti-Semitic country, but none of th  
strengths—the Torah learning, the prayers, the welded community. We spoke no Yiddish or Hebrew  
We had no deep faith in God. We were not Polish Chasidim or Lithuanian yeshiva scholars. We wer  
not bold free Americans—remember that. And there were no Israelis then, no soldiers in the desert, n  
“nation like other nations.” Hold that in your mind as I tell you this story.

What we mostly had was intellect and style. Our city was the sophisticated “Queen of th  
Danube,” “Red Vienna,” with social welfare and workers' housing, where geniuses like Freud an  
Herzl and Mahler whirled in the ferment of their ideas: psychoanalysis, Zionism, socialism, reform  
renewal—throwing off lights for the whole world to see by.

In that respect, at least—that “light unto the nations” part—my assimilated Vienna Jews were  
Jewish as anybody.



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