

Ernest Wulkan

2/13/1922

Born in St. Polten, Austria, a picturesque town with many well kept parks located about 40 miles from Vienna. It also had a sizeable Jewish community with a beautiful synagogue. In our house three families lived—my grandfather and uncles and aunts. Each lived on a separate floor. Grandfather and one uncle's family was very religious and had a kosher household, but not our family.

2/14/1927

My father, Feodor Wulkan (b. 10/10/1882 in St. Polten, d. 12/14/27) passed away. Mother, Cacelia Grohman Wulkan, (b. 11/21/1894 in Mahrtsch Nueustadt, d. 2/26/36) then had to take charge of the grocery store that we owned. She had a manager and two apprentices. The grocery store (Kolonialwaren) specialized in selling to customers mostly in the outlying areas—both wholesale and retail. I remember fondly before I was ten years old walking with my grandfather to the neighboring open market and his particular interest in the fresh greens. He still managed the many stairs pretty well and went on frequent walks with me.

1928

I entered elementary school (Volkshule) in St. Polten.

1932

I started high school (Hauptshule) in Modling, near Vienna. This was a boarding school. My mother chose a good education for me with a business orientation. After school activities included soccer, track and field, and swimming. Also, we took side trips to points of interest like castles and museums. I received violin lessons and soon joined the school orchestra. It had a very good instructor and conductor. We played many performances after the school year was over and at holidays like Christmas. We also played to the public in a Kurpark (resort) and once recorded a performance broadcast over Radio Wien. One member of our violin section, Peter Schidlof, immigrated to England and became the co-founder of the well known Amadeus Quartet. This quartet played all over the world. I met him again after a performance of the Amadeus Quartet at the Los Angeles Music Center in the 1970's.

1932

Grandfather passes away. By this time I heard that he was born in the town of Oswiecim, Poland, a name that I would later come to know as "Auschwitz."

1935

My Bar Mitzvah was celebrated in a temple in Modling. Mother and Aunt Adele attended.

2/26/36

Lost my mother. I was picked up by cousin Rudl to come home for the funeral. Rudl Seidler was the

husband of my cousin, Nelly. Many friends, relatives, and customers paid their respects to a brave and strong woman who kept this family store going largely through her own hard work and energy. Uncle Ludwig and Aunt Auguste (Nelly's parents) provided a very good and comfortable home for me. Uncle Ludwig was appointed my guardian (Vormund). Because I was a minor, the court ordered a liquidation of mother's business. The proceeds were deposited into a bank account for me.

3/13/38

German troops march into Austria. Quickly, many restrictions for Jews are implemented. We were no longer allowed to go to movies, theaters, museums, concerts, etc. Our physical education class now included pre-military drills: marching, the use of rifles, and first aid training. Some teachers displayed Nazi Party membership badges from before the Nazi takeover (Anschluss). Jews were not allowed to attend school. I was told not to return for my final two years. By now, thousands of men were picked up and sent to concentration camps to force quicker immigration of Jews. Many people were searching for a country to escape to. There were long lines at foreign consulates and public offices—so much paperwork to complete, so many obstacles to overcome, and so few countries willing to let us in.

11/9/1938

The effects of German occupation intensify. Organized attacks on Jewish-owned stores occur throughout Austria. Store windows were smashed—one of ours also was smeared with paint that said , “Jews out” “Death to Jews” (“Juden Raus, Judah verrecke”) Heavy fines were collected from the Jewish population based on the pretense of an incident in Paris that involved the killing of a consulate official. All stores and businesses were “aryanized”—taken over and confiscated by the Nazis. Bank accounts were blocked and Jews were only permitted make small withdrawals as minimal living expense allotments. The Jewish community advised young people to train in alternative professions. I was sent, along with two friends, to learn metal work and welding with an old master locksmith in Vienna.

1939

The city of St. Polten issues an expulsion order which expels all Jews and forces them to relocate to a specific district in Vienna. Most of my relatives found living quarters in the 2 Bezirk (district), Vienna. Telephones, radios and phonographs were already confiscated. Public transportation for Jews was restricted to certain hours of the day. I still used my bicycle for awhile to get around; then it too was collected by the authorities.

1940

Food stamps (Lebensmittelkarten) were marked with a “J” and cut in half for Jews. Purchases could be

made only during two hours in the afternoon. We had to adopt the first name Israel (for all men) and Sarah (for all women). Park benches were marked, “not for Jews” (“nicht for Juden”). Cousins Rudl and his brother were released from KZ Dachau and KZ Buchenwald based on their sworn statements that they would leave Germany within a certain time frame. Rudl’s wife, Nelly (Wulkan) Seidler, like many other partners was feverishly writing letters to any relative that would be willing to provide that prized affidavit. She was standing in line for days to get all of the documents ready. Both of them were successful. Cousin Jenny (Korner) Gross settled in England and Cousin Nelly and Rudl settled in the United States. Cousin Nelly had a 6 year old child to take care of, and I was glad to oversee the packing of furniture and household goods, the loading of them into a “lift” so they could be trucked to an Italian harbor to be shipped to the United States. Later I learned they never got that lift. I was also writing at least six different letters to relatives of my aunt and uncle for us. Only after my arrival in the United States after the War did I learn that there was an affidavit waiting for me to pick up at the consulate. But by then it was already too late for me—I was on the way to a different place. Both cousins made it safely out of Germany, taking probably the last passenger ship that sailed from Genoa before the port was closed to Jews.

9/14/1940

Zwangsarbeits Lager in Doppl (Forced labor camp located in Doppl). I received a summons to report to a forced labor camp (Arbeitslager) located in Doppl together with many mostly younger men. Instructions were given regarding how much clothing to bring in our backpacks. It turned out to be located near Linz. First the roll call (Apell): SS Oberscharfuhrer Weisl and two other guards introduced themselves with much shouting and insults. We were now 55 inmates—people from all walks of life including a doctor, dentist, restaurant chef, barber, and history professor.

We were soon introduced to hard physical labor which most of us were not used to. It was also accompanied with much abuse. Some people were dispatched to work in a nearby factory in long shifts; most other assignments consisted mostly of chicanery with SS guards creating useless tasks for us, driving us on. They were always ready to pick on the weakest with some beating. One Sunday crew was made to dig big holes, carry large rocks from nearby and bury them, cover and then tamp it down, uncover the rocks and take them to the far side of the camp, dig the hole again, put rocks into it, and cover everything up again. Another Sunday crew including me was sent to the railroad station to unload a dozen coal cars. This time we had two extra guards from the station, apparently Volksdeutsche (German nationals/people of German origin) from the Ukraine. By afternoon, our guards seemed to be drunk. It took

us well into the night until the coal had been unloaded in one big pile, and then we were allowed to march back to the labor camp.

I often worked at cutting trees with factory employees, pulling logs down to a clearing, then loading the 20 foot logs on sleds that were pulled by oxen to the factory to be unloaded by a big crew, often in winter, sometimes in heavy snow.

We had a little free time. There we were forming a “Kwutzah”, a Zionist group dedicated to talk and discuss the dream to go to Palestine. Under the leadership of two former youth leaders in Vienna, Aaron Mencer and Tasso. We exchanged different ideas and made good friends. After many months I was able to get a job in the factory workshop as a repairman and also doing occasional welding. The factory produced cardboard boxes for chocolates and wafers by using our slave labor, together with local workers both male and female. The process was from trees to logs, stripped of bark, cut into smaller pieces, crushed to pulp and turned into sheets of cardboard, dried, then made into boxes in stages—for chocolate and wafers (Mannerschnitten) for the Viennese firm Joseph Manner. By fall of 1942, most of the camp was liquidated and we were sent back to Vienna.

10/9/1942

Transport to Theresienstadt, KZ and Ghetto. No. IV/13-290. After a two days train journey, with frequent delays, we arrived. Had to march about two miles to the entrance of what looked like an old fortress with high walls around. Our guards were Czech gendarmes and some SS men. We were led to a Kaserne (large barracks)—no bunks and no furniture and we were told by a Jewish Blockältester (elder of the barracks) that we will get straw sacks soon. We were all crowded into one large room with little privacy. We soon became acquainted with ghetto life and restrictions. Very long lines for an ersatz (not real) coffee in the morning. Then work details were announced. The first job was not a pleasant one, but six of us chaluzim (comrades) volunteered for the next two weeks to go to a certain barracks and pick up the deceased each day using an old open hearse that we would wheel to the Totenkammer (morgue). Then there were many other assignments. Conditions generally improved a little. After a year separate houses and rooms were provided for children and young people. Aaron Mencer, with some negotiations was able to bring all people from Lager Doppl (the labor camp in Doppl) to Theresienstadt, rather than being sent by transport to the “east”. He was also instrumental in getting us separate quarters.

Since more transports arrived, the Jewish Council of Elders (Ältestenrat) found it necessary to ask the SS commander for permission to expand the drinking

water system which had been designed by a Czech engineer. The request was approved, and I got a job as an installer, laying pipes in the streets and connecting them to each house yard. Late evenings we still found time to for meetings and exchange of ideas with Czech youth groups.

10/1943

A transport of young children from Bialystok, after the ghetto was liquidated, when asked to go to the shower refused the request. Almost all started to cry without stopping for days. Aaron Mencer and some nurses were called in to calm the children, but they had little success. Two weeks later, the order was given to put the children on a transport. Aaron Mencer and some of the nurses felt it was their duty to be with the children and they volunteered to go with the transport. Only after the war did we learn that there had been a proposal of an exchange, but Eichmann decided against it and the transport was sent to Auschwitz.

10/9/1944

KZ Auschwitz/Birkenau. About 160 men, many of our chevaram (comrades) included, we were crowded into cattle cars—95 men per car, no water, only a bucket for a toilet, room only to stand—going into the unknown. Two more days, slow travel, by night the train stops—cars being unlocked. Then immediately we hear shouting, “raus, raus ihr faule Klotze, raus” (out, out, you lazy clods, out). We jumped down, saw

SS men with whips going up and down the track, extreme bright lights, many people with what appeared to be striped pajamas running back and forth. Now we hear commands from the SS, "Gepack im Wagon lassen, schnell antreten in 5 er Reihen, schnell ihr verfluchten Hunde, schnell mal los" (Leave baggage in the car, quick, form rows of 5, quick you damned dogs, make it quick. One of the men in pajamas who seemed to collect the few belongings we had brought with us was asked what happens to the luggage. He answered careful not to be heard in what sounded like German but was really Yiddish "Geppack geweien" (baggage is in the past). We understood that was the last we would see of our luggage. This reception, it was a shock, what a nightmare, and what still is to come? We started marching, blazing searchlights everywhere; we saw an ominous high wire fence and a watch tower not too far from us, constant urging calls to keep up. We came close to a large gate, were told to line up in one row, command to a desk, several SS men, and one officer in shiny boots pointing people mostly to one side, looking us over carefully, asking how old they are and then pointing the other way. Now, inside, we received our tattoo number—mine was B-11814—then our hair was cut, we were stripped of our clothing, sent to the shower building, sprayed with antiseptic and given a pajama, cap and wooden shoes. Now all new inmates were herded to the Apellplatz (the square where roll-calls were conducted), standing for hours being counted by

Kapos, then re-counted by the head Kapo, and counted again, correct or not. Lots of shouting and swearing by SS men to make us acquainted with a concentration camp. The first night most of us ended up in a large barrack with no bunks, we slept on concrete floors close together to keep warm. In six days we got better barracks and noticed the Kapo had his own room with a boy to serve him. Work details were cleaning, raking yards, and then running up and down in formation. We were bullied and shouted at.

10/15/1944

KZ Gleiwitz I. After about 7 days or so a couple of higher ranking SS men came to the square and asked if there were any professional welders and metalworkers among us. Approximately 20 inmates, myself included, stepped forward, were issued clean pajamas and taken by truck to another concentration camp. We were marched out of the camp with a column of about 100 other inmates to the factory—all of us under guard. We were put to work repairing damaged cattle and flatcars in 12 hour shifts for "Deutsche Reichsbahn Ausbesserungs Werke" (German National Railway Repair Shop). Considering that winter was coming soon, it was a pretty good choice to be working indoors, even though there were some SS guards and factory security personnel around. My welding and repair jobs were always accepted, harassment came only after the shifts inside the camp. We thought one night that it must have been Christmas when we were left standing on

the Apellplatz at night—lots of snow on the ground. The SS men seemed to have been drinking a lot. They made us lie down in rows on the snowy ground and commanded us to start rolling to one side of the yard. Searchlights were on; some of us noticed a couple of barrels standing there. Now the order was given to roll back again. Suddenly the SS men were shouting, gesticulating, and behaving odd. They picked up some of the men, it was two and they dragged them over to those barrels and put them in. To our horror, we saw water splashing out. The SS men were not speaking very clearly anymore—they said it was punishment for not rolling in line and sabotaging the exercise. After everyone was ordered to stand up, the unfortunates were pulled out again after a few minutes. They were allowed to stay in camp the next day, but I heard from someone who was close to them that they were shook up and sick for quite awhile afterwards.

1/27/1945 (apx.)—Death March--we did not go to the factory anymore. We were given one more piece of bread and marched out of the gate with most guards. It was snowing heavily. The camp commander was picked up by a military vehicle. The camp was now abandoned. We marched for hours and hours in rows of five, guards driving us on to stay in formation. The days were gray and foggy, it was cold. Overnight for a few hours we were led to an empty shed or farmhouse. We were told to walk faster; some could not do so anymore, falling behind. Hours and days of

walking, I heard shots sometimes left, then from the right. Coming through a village once in awhile, no one paid attention to us, a tired gang of thousands, just a few remaining villagers. Many of them are also planning to leave, mostly towards the west. Still marching on, the feet not always ready to go, but on we must. So many of us are exhausted, shots are fired again, bodies falling to the side, on we march. Was it 10 or 11 days?

We are approaching another KZ, and we are slowly driven in by our guards with sticks into half empty barracks, overcrowded, hungry, but protected from another approaching storm needed a little rest, but not yet. Not everyone was inside the barracks yet, when suddenly from the watchtower machine gun fire was directed first at the men outside, then at the barracks. Many of us saw the danger, so quickly we started to put straw mattresses toward the wall, where shots seemed to be coming from. Our barrack seemed to be holding up alright, but we saw another one starting to go up in flames. It must have been many minutes that passed. The shooting stopped and it was quiet. We still waited for awhile, and then we realized that our tormentors had left.

2/6/1945-2/8/1945

F r e e a t l a s t ! Convinced that the guards had fled, we raided the storage barrack to get food and water and to find some first aid for some of our wounded comrades. Two days passed and Russian

troops entered the camp, astonished to find survivors after seeing the destruction and the dead in the yard. They started to question us as to who we were, where we were from, warned us not to move into the area where fighting was still going on. They quickly saw to our wounded and took away the dead. We were able to talk to a couple of the Russians; they told us to get clothing and whatever we need from some of the empty houses in nearby villages. Then the Russian troops moved on. We were finally liberated. Most of us stayed together for awhile to recover somewhat. Those who originally came from Eastern European countries thought they could find some of their family either in their hometown or other larger communities that were already liberated. After much discussion, a bunch of us decided to stay together and look for a larger town to get some information. All travel was difficult. No regular train or bus transportation was available and most roads were closed for troop movements or clogged with refugees with their backpacks, bundles, little wagons proceeding in one direction, or the other.

Again, moving mostly on foot, slowly over the countryside, seeing and getting acquainted with how much damage the war has made so far. We reached the city of Krakow, saw part of it in ruins, but found a Jewish center where many of us were received with much joy, food, and "frehlichkeit", and were asked to stay for awhile. They did not have any direct information or knowledge about what happened to our

loved ones, not much hope to find anybody. So five like-minded and adventurous chevaram, longing for a place to live in peace, decided for aliyah by travelling east to Romania to reach the sea. We did not make much progress, got an occasional short ride with a freight train, interrupted by damaged tracks, a farmer took us on his ancient wagon for awhile, using one horse to pull, almost too tired to go anywhere, mostly a lot of walking. We were now more frequently stopped by military patrols and the NKWD (Russian secret police). Since we had no documents our number on our arm was usually enough to convince them that we could go on to search for our relatives.

In this way we got as far as Tarnow where we were stopped again and taken to their headquarters. Here the official listened to us when we told our story, then apparently an officer appeared and took us to another room. He identified himself as a fellow Jew, spoke mostly in Yiddish, said he understood our situation, and with well meaning words told us not to continue any further because from here on this will shortly become a zone under Russian control. With this disclosure we had no choice but to turn around and give up our dream for now. With similar interruptions, slow going, we had contact with some people in other towns looking for loved ones or trying to find their old home. One man told us he found his home, but a Polish neighbor now living in it, not willing to move out. He decided not to stay there. By this time we had come to the conclusion that it would be best to

get to Theresienstadt to get advice, since the war and the fighting according to some newspaper reports we had picked up, had finally come to an end--Germany defeated. It took us until June to get there.

June 1945

We heard that when the Red Army came to Terezin (Theresienstadt) by May, they declared a two week quarantine while medical staff helped to combat a spotted fever epidemic. Then, the International Red Cross took over. The small population slowly recovered. Many people were now trying to go home. Not much of an administration was left. Hardly anyone could give us an idea of what had happened to the loved ones we were looking for.

Prague--One of our friends from Prague suggested we should come with him and look up the Jewish community service there. Some of us did that but we got no encouraging news there. They advised us that in Bavaria (Germany) there were several "displaced persons (DP) camps" (opening up and we should wait for any possible legal immigration that could be possible for us. However, some of us originally from Austria opted first to go back to Vienna for any information.

Vienna--practically all of our relatives and friends or acquaintances had been deported somewhere to the east, or to a certain ghetto or KZ. Needless to say,

none of us wanted to ever live here and settle down here again. We looked around a little longer. I was able to find our former maid in a small apartment. She told me that she was bombed out from another place, but she had no news from our families.

July 1945

D.P Camp Deggendorf—Now we were ready to leave and go to Deggendorf, a displaced persons camp, hoping to find some German speaking survivors. We registered and got accommodations for 4 or 6 boys—separate quarters—ah, because there were also girls, women and couples here. It was fairly comfortable; we received meals and were encouraged to help out with various chores. I looked into the garage facility and was told they needed some drivers. After receiving a driving course given by Army Corps/the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), I received a license for trucks, jeeps, etc. There was no mail service available yet, but I could send a telegram to my cousin's address in the United States which I still remembered. I received an answer soon and they were delighted that I was well. They soon sent me a letter through the army, assured me they would try to get an affidavit for me, and urged me to register at the American consulate as soon as one opened. One did open in Munich, so I went there.

My job was to drive army trucks and to pick up supplies of all kinds from other cities and to deliver

them to the camp. But we had plenty of free time to look around for companionship. There were some dance lessons advertised one day which I attended. Got to dance with two lovely sisters, the three of us were only beginners, but I enjoyed myself especially with one partner to stumble around in beginner steps—she introduced herself as Lotte. Immediately I was attracted to her and we met soon again every day. I enjoyed being with her tremendously. Soon it was clear to me that there were no others who would get my love. We enjoyed each other, we talked together, we laughed together, but never forgetting our past experiences and losses. We belonged together. Within a short time I received documents from the American consulate and a passenger ticket (paid by my cousin) for the Marine Flasher for June 6, 1946.

After some unforgettable months and carefree time, I had to prepare to leave. We were telling each other the best years of our life together are still ahead of us: “With this I have to leave you behind for now, until we see each other in this new country”. We kissed and said goodbye, but we hoped not for too long. I arrived in New York, took a train to Santa Monica, California where my cousin and family now lived. I was greeted with much affection and joy. Soon I was getting acquainted with the beautiful surroundings and the informal way of everyday living. Got a job with a Douglas contractor building furniture for two fancy presidential planes. Many months passed. I was

always waiting for another letter from my loved one. We were writing each other constantly, waiting anxiously for the time we would see each other again. Many months passed. Then the news came that President Truman approved the immigration of more displaced persons to the United States. My Lotte got her documents to travel and arrived here on April 27, 1947. We got ourselves a room rented to us by an elderly woman; no apartments of any kind were yet available at this time. Finally my loved one was with me again, looking more lovely and fetching than ever before. We went to the Santa Monica County building to get married the next day.

May 7, 1947

Wedding—Within a few days, our gracious landlady had a surprise for us: with her woman's organization she would arrange a real wedding for us with the local Rabbi in Ocean Park. What a beautiful affair it was, in the meeting room of their club, tastefully and festively decorated—we had a traditional ceremony under the chuppah that was performed by Rabbi Horowitz with all of the blessings, tremendous cheers, and good wishes from the enormous crowd that was in attendance. After the ceremony a big feast awaited us, with so many delicacies that we had not seen for a lifetime. A big pile of gifts were presented to us. Two photographers from local newspapers were also busy taking pictures of this happy event. The presence of my cousin, with one of her friends made the

celebration so meaningful. We both wanted to have a family and are blessed with two wonderful sons.

Postscript:

As written by Ernest Wulkan in July 2009.

Uncle Ludwig and Aunt Auguste, and Uncle Julius and Aunt Adele were put on a transport to Kielce and Minsk in 1941. Non-returned.

Ernest and his wife Lotte live in West Los Angeles, CA, in the home they bought in 1955. They are active, enjoy reading books and magazines, and are in good health. Ernest celebrated his 87th birthday in February and Lotte celebrated her 85th birthday in May. Their two sons were present for the celebration.