

## Martha Blend - A Child Alone

When, in 1938, the Germans invaded Austria, my parents knew that as Jews, we were in for a hard time. They had read about Hitler's harassment of the Jews of Germany in the newspaper, but had thought – wrongly – that he wouldn't invade our country. As an eight-year-old child I had already picked up vibes of fear when the grown-ups mentioned names like 'Hitler', 'Gestapo' (the Nazi secret police), 'SS' (Hitler's Storm Troopers) and 'Dachau' (a notorious concentration camp). I also became aware of the vicious propaganda put out against the Jews in the newspapers and on the radio, as Hitler used us as scapegoats for all the problems of the world. My parents, realising our danger, tried to emigrate to another country, but all the countries that could have taken us in only allowed a trickle of refugees to enter, and it would have been years before our turn came. I have described what life was like for me as a Jewish child in Austria, and what happened later, in a book called *A Child Alone*. Here is an extract from it:

Now in the street, wherever you went, there were uniformed men in brown or black shirts with swastika armbands stepping out aggressively in their jackboots. Every week we were importuned by people shaking their collection boxes in our faces for this or that Nazi cause. Army lorries packed with fierce looking blackshirts sent out threatening signals as they swept past. At other times the snarl would turn into a smile: the lorries would be laden with gifts to the Austrian people from a beneficent Führer. A burly SS-man would stand astride the tailboard smirking ingratiatingly as he held out bananas for the taking. I knew instinctively that these goodies were not intended for me and kept my hands tightly clenched as I crept away from the happy throng.

On my way home, I wondered how it was that neighbours who had until recently been friendly now kept their distance, and acquaintances who a short while ago had trumpeted their devotion to Austria now seemed comfortable with the new order. One day I could hardly believe my ears: from the flat below came the unmistakable sounds of *Heute haben wir Deutschland* – today we have Germany, tomorrow the world – the proud boast of the Nazi Party. My friend Karl was thumping out the tune on his piano with gusto...

About this time a measure was introduced which affected me personally: a decree that Jewish children were not fit to be educated with Aryan children and must be taught in separate classes. Up to now my beloved teacher had regarded me as a prize pupil, always ready to throw herself into any activity with enthusiasm. How did this square with the official view? I knew I hadn't changed, so this blanket condemnation was all the harder to bear. Suddenly I was cut off from the place which had been a safe haven, the teacher I loved and the children I had known, among them my friend Grete. I now had to enter the school building by a different door and found myself in a different classroom with a new

teacher who was said to be Jewish. She was nice enough, but no substitute for my beloved Leopoldine Hanner. For the first time I was in a class with boys as well as girls. There was an air of impermanence about this arrangement – everybody was trying to get somewhere else – Switzerland, France, Sweden – anywhere out of the clutches of the Nazis. Our teacher, Fräulein Steckler, went through the motions of teaching us, but I don't remember learning much in that class, though I still have the exercise book I used. It contains little more than the words of the Lorelei song.

In the autumn of 1938 a young Jewish man named Grynszpan, after he had heard that his parents had been horribly ill-treated by the Germans, shot a German diplomat called Von Rath. The revenge that followed, known as *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass) was out of all proportion to the crime. In every town in Germany and Austria synagogues were burned, shops owned by Jews smashed up and looted, homes broken into. Worst of all, thousands of Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps like Buchenwald and Dachau. My father was one of those arrested and I can never forget the sound of the Nazi jackboots stomping up our stairs and battering on the door. My mother's pleas were ignored as he was taken away, an unarmed man with no power to resist the heavily-armed SS guards.

He was released that time after some weeks of detention. In their now desperate search for a safe place to go to, my parents heard of an organisation called the *Kindertransport* that had been set up to allow unaccompanied Jewish children from Germany and Austria to come to England as temporary refugees. When our GP told my parents of a couple he was in touch with in England who were willing to foster a child, they put me down on the list of children, as the prospects for their own immigration were poor.

When my parents broke this news to me, I was devastated: an only child who had never been away from home, to travel to a strange country and to strange people with a different language! It seemed more than my now nine year old self could be expected to cope with. But gradually, as the harassment by the Nazis grew worse, I realised that I had no choice but to go. I have described my departure for England in my book:

It was now June and a letter arrived, giving the date of my departure for England: we were to assemble at a Viennese railway station late on the night of 20 June. We were to bring a small suitcase packed with our belongings, and there were to be no emotional farewells. Jews, it seemed, were not even to be allowed the luxury of expressing their grief at parting from their loved ones.

Preparations for the journey now began in earnest. My mother found a small attaché case which in due course was packed with a few belongings: some underwear, a skirt and blouse, a dress and my most treasured possessions – the blonde doll that had been a present from my aunt in Belgium, some pictures of my parents, my autograph book and some of my favourite reading books such as the *Arabian Nights* in German, printed in Gothic script. (I have it still.) My mother bought me an air-cushion to put under my head to sleep on, as the journey was likely to be a long one. Each stage of these preparations seemed like another little death, but by then I was too numb and shocked to put up any serious resistance.

My father was apparently still in the same police prison in Vienna, and the day before I was due to leave my mother took me to see him. We waited in a small office and eventually my father was brought in, flanked by two guards. He looked sad and unshaven, very different from the debonair man I had known as a little child. I don't remember much of what he said to me. What could he say? And what could I do? Scream, curse at this outrage? Throw my arms around him and refuse to leave? I did none of those things. He embraced me tenderly and wished me a safe journey. Then I saw my mother press some money into his hand as she kissed him goodbye before he was led away. That was my last sight of my father.

I lived through the next day as though in a trance – nothing seemed real any more. My case was packed, I said goodbye to my aunt and cousins and promised to write to them. My mother made me some ham sandwiches – a strange choice considering the Jewish taboo against pig meat. I expect by then she had given up on the Jewish God and no longer thought it worth appeasing him. Or perhaps she had simply decided this was a practical way to stave off hunger on the journey.

That evening, my mother took me to the station. When we arrived, there were already large numbers of children and their parents there. I was surprised to see, despite our strict orders not to be emotional, a mother and daughter with their arms round each other's necks, both crying bitterly. But my mother and I kept to the rules: not a tear was shed. Suddenly, before the expected time, the great doors at the end of the waiting room were swung back to reveal a platform with a train ready to be boarded. I embraced my mother for the last time. Then with a light suitcase, a heavy heart and a silly red hat that kept flopping into my face, I climbed into a compartment. It had several children of varying ages in it. Wearily I found a seat. Suddenly there was an outcry and a rush to the windows. Parents had been told that they must on no account follow their children on to the platform, but some, disobeying orders, had surged out of the waiting room and on to the platform. Their children, spotting them joyfully, were able to wave a last goodbye. I scanned the sea of faces anxiously, hoping to have a last glimpse of my mother, but she wasn't there.

The train took us through Germany along the river Rhine and into Holland. There we boarded a ship bound for Harwich on the English east coast, and then another train to Liverpool Street station, London, where we waited in a big room till our names were called out and we met the person who was to look after us. In my case it was my foster mother who took me to her home in Bow in east London.

The day after I arrived in England, waking up in a strange bed in an unfamiliar room made me feel very homesick. However, when you're young it's hard to be miserable all the time and my foster mother did her best to comfort me. I had learned a little English before leaving Austria, but not enough to fully grasp what people were saying, and this led to some funny misunderstandings:

Two days after my arrival, my foster mother decided I needed to be with children of my own age. Never one to let the grass grow under her feet, she marched me up to the

houses of two neighbours and, in obedience to her command, two girls trooped out to play with me in the street. We played bouncing games against the air raid shelter that was already in place at the top of the street; then more ball games on the pavement (there was no traffic in side streets apart from the occasional horse and cart, so playing was safe). Then one of the girls produced a skipping rope and we had a few turns at this. There was little I could say to them, so we smiled and nodded at each other.

Finally one of them asked: 'Are you tired?'

I had no idea what this meant, so I must have looked blank. Now there followed a series of mimes: they let their heads droop and closed their eyes and put their hands to the side of their heads. Thinking that this was like the game of 'statues' I had played in Vienna, I imitated everything they did and was surprised by their look of exasperation. In the end one of the girls took me to her mother who said to me in Yiddish (a German dialect): 'Di bist mid?'

Light dawned and I replied: 'Ja, ich bin müde' (Yes, I'm tired) much to everyone's relief.

Later that year came the order for all London schoolchildren to be evacuated to the country, as war was imminent and London was sure to be a target for German bombers. My foster mother evacuated herself and me to Paignton in Devon. After we had settled in, I was enrolled in the local primary school, and again I describe what happened next:

The local primary school was housed in a bright modern building in the shape of a square. Along three of its sides were classrooms, and inside the square ran a corridor supported by pillars. This was open on one side to the prevailing winds and weather, since it was considered healthy for the children to have plenty of fresh Devon air in all seasons. In the middle of the building was a grassy space, and at the top end of it were the hall and the headmistress's room, into which we were shown by the school secretary.

The headmistress was a tall, formidable-looking lady. Sensing trouble, she cast a wary eye over me. After this inspection she handed me a piece of paper and a pencil and commanded: 'Write "I like living in Paignton!"'

I was not sure that I did, but thought I had better do as I was asked. By now my English was improved and I was able to write the sentence out correctly, taking particular care with the spelling of 'Paignton'. The headmistress noted my effort with some surprise. She had evidently been told that the new pupil had little or no English. 'That's very good!' she said. This must have prompted her to put me in a class with children of my own age.

In the weeks to come lessons floated by me in a fog of incomprehension. I was absorbing words and phrases, but contributing nothing myself. One day when the fog cleared a little, I heard the teacher say:

'Today we're going to learn about area. Now does anyone know what I mean by that?'

This rang an immediate bell with me, for hadn't I heard the grown-ups at home repeatedly saying: 'Must have an aerial – no good without an aerial'?

Triumphantly, I put up my hand. The teacher, a tall, red-haired Welshman, flushed with pleasure at this unexpected intervention from the foreign pupil.

'Yes, Martha,' he smiled encouragingly, 'what do we mean by area?'

'It's for wireless', I replied eagerly.

And the class fell about laughing.

I came to England as a nine year old child, but when the war ended, I was fifteen. I had had no word from my parents for five years and was dreading the discovery of what had happened to them. Rumours about the fate of the Jews in Europe did not make me feel optimistic. Soon I learned the sad fact that my parents, along with grandmothers, aunts, uncles and cousins, all had shared the fate of the millions of Jews who were exterminated in Hitler's concentration camps and gas chambers.

There was nothing to go back to Austria for, so I made my home in this country and have lived in England ever since as a naturalised British citizen. After I had gone to school and university, I spent 25 years as a teacher of (strangely enough) English, my second language. Since my retirement I have written the book about my experiences. I have also told my story to the pupils of many schools: not for its own sake, but to show how hate propaganda can lead to terrible consequences of murder and mayhem. That is a lesson we dare not forget today.

Martha's story is told in full in *A Child Alone* (Valentine Mitchell, London, 1995).

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