

THE JEWS OF NAZI VIENNA, 1938-1945

Rescue and Destruction

ILANA FRITZ OFFENBERGER



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Palgrave Studies in the History of Genocide
ISBN 978-3-319-49357-2 ISBN 978-3-319-49358-9 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49358-9>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017935028

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Cover Image: © Suzanne J. Offenberger

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For the Jews of Vienna

*Those who got out,
And those who were trapped behind*

Your struggle to resist Nazi oppression will not be forgotten



Berta (Monias) and Heinrich Offenberger, Vienna, 1909
(Credit: Fred and Helena Altstadt, Argentina)

PREFACE

“Now I see the IKG completely different. What they have done for the Jews of Vienna with efficiency, bravery and endless resilience, in the face of a deadly foe, is a miracle.”

(Dr. Nikolaus Mayer, Vienna, September 2015)

Edith Kurzweil fled Vienna on a *Kindertransport* in 1938. She was one of approximately 200,000 Austrian Jews who fell victim to the sudden terror of Nazism unleashed after Anschluss and 136,000 to escape from the Nazi web before the genocide began. Fortuitous circumstance spared Edith from murder but did not shield her from the scars of family division and permanent separation. Nor did her escape guarantee any security for the future. While Kurzweil managed to “get out” of Vienna, Vienna never left her. She managed to flee from Europe and to escape the Holocaust, but too many of her loved ones and members of the community from which she came, did not. After the war, Kurzweil did not go home to Vienna, for Vienna was no longer home to her. The Nazis had destroyed that possibility.

Edith Kurzweil’s experience as a Viennese émigré mirrors thousands of others who managed to escape from the Greater German Reich during the Nazi period, but not without terrible loss. Seven decades later, still suffering from the absence of *Heimat* and looking to resolve unanswered questions about her past, Kurzweil began to analyze correspondence between her mother in New York and grandmother in Vienna from April 1940 through November 1941.¹ In 2004, she published a work entitled,

Nazi Laws and Jewish Lives: Letters from Vienna, in which she described the individual experience of her Viennese Jewish family while simultaneously indexing the German decrees imposed against them under the Nazi occupation. In the introduction to her work, Kurzweil noted that, to her surprise and dismay, comprehensive detailed research on the Jewish community of Vienna during the Nazi period has not yet been done. “Upon translating and decoding some of these shriveled transparent pages,” she wrote, “it struck me that in spite of all the letters and memoirs that have been published, of the histories and theses, the theoretical and scholarly debates, the transcripts or trials and testimonies, the confessions and denials by perpetrators, the thoughtful exhibitions in Holocaust museums ... no one has documented the incremental effect of specific decrees aimed to dehumanize the Jews who remained in the Nazis’ realm; and how their everyday lives were being transformed and traumatized”.² Edith Kurzweil was spot on: there is no work that tells the history of Vienna’s Jews during the Nazi period. Her insistence on furthering the scholarship of this field is evident through her study which is a highly significant contribution. Yet her observation echoes the loss shared by thousands of other Viennese émigrés and their families whose history has yet to be told, in its entirety. While Marion Kaplan has unpacked the history of the German Jews and analyzed their daily lives in her seminal work, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* and Doron Rabinovici has analyzed the leadership of the Jewish Community of Vienna in his work, *Instanzen der Ohnmacht*, no one has documented “the increasingly throttling grip in which the Nazi authorities held every Viennese Jew who had not yet managed to escape,”³ nor offered a comprehensive analysis of the short- and long-term effects of Nazism on the Jewish community of Vienna at large.

The Jews of Nazi Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction is the work Kurzweil envisioned. This book explores the daily life of Jews in Nazi Vienna before, during, and after the Anschluss of March 1938 up through the mass deportations of 1942 and the disintegration of the community that followed. By examining the histories of numerous ordinary Viennese Jews (and their families) and placing them into a chronological narrative of life in Vienna under Nazi occupation, it unpacks the simultaneous rescue and destruction of this community, step by step. Like Kaplan’s analysis of daily life for German Jews under Nazism, this work reveals the social death from which Austrian Jews suffered prior to, during, and after the genocide.

Representations of the Holocaust, in history, literature, art, and memorials, tend to focus on the genocidal period—the death camps, gas chambers, and mass murders. Yet as we are well aware, the destruction of Jewish communities, Jewish families, and Jewish individual lives did not begin in the death camps; it ended there. As Marion Kaplan so carefully documented in her work on German Jewish responses to Nazism between 1933 and 1939, Jews suffered from social death years before the Nazi's drew up the final solution. So too, in Vienna, did they suffer from this social death. Today, a visitor in Vienna may stumble upon artist Alfred Hrdlicka's "dedication to the street washing Jew" while walking through the city's first district or making a visit to the popular Albertina museum.⁴ Hrdlicka's memorial, like Kaplan's literary analysis, draws our attention to the attacks on Jewish life that occurred years prior to the Final Solution. The sculpture reminds viewers of the inhumanity and injustice that took over in the public squares and busy streets of Vienna in March 1938; of a time when neighbors turned a blind eye to the suffering of their neighbors, and the social contract between Vienna's Jews and their government shattered. Like Hrdlinka's artistic composition and Kaplan's careful study of German Jewry, this work spotlights the early years of the Nazi occupation in Vienna, begging its readers to scrutinize the causes and effects of hatred and question its possible outcomes.

Who were the Jews of Vienna in March 1938 and what types of lives did they lead prior to German occupation? How did they view the Nazi rise to power in Germany? Did they perceive a lingering threat of an Austrian/German union? If so, why did so few leave between the years 1933 and 1938? Astute observers such as the contemporary British statesman Norman Bentwich suggested that more Jews *should* have left Austria before Anschluss. Bentwich noted that Austrian Jews "lived in the shadow of Nazi violence ... the writing was on the wall for all to see."⁵ Yet did they understand the looming German threat, with its implications for their families and community? We learn that they did not; nobody did. Even after the invasion, some experienced denial and/or disbelief. "Well perhaps we were expecting it to happen," Viennese émigré Edith Lowenstein later reflected on those early days in March 1938, "But expecting something to happen does not really mean being prepared to believe it when it does."⁶

Vienna's Jews divided themselves along cultural, religious, and political lines throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some identified themselves as Jewish Nationalists, others as Liberals or

Socialists; some held professions in industry while others practiced law or medicine; and the degree of their religious observance ranged from Jewish Orthodoxy to complete assimilation and/or conversion to Catholicism. Still, each member of this community contributed to the dynamic atmosphere that defined Vienna—around the world—at the turn of the century and in the three decades thereafter. They were all a part of building Vienna’s legacy and all experienced its abrupt end in 1938 when the country lost its independence and the Germans took over. Survivor testimony (memoirs as well as contemporary documentation) reveal that as a community and as individuals, in March 1938, Vienna’s Jews experienced a state of shock and denial, an urgency to make life-altering decisions, and had very few options.

Fear and devastation followed the German takeover and would soon result in a common mindset among Vienna’s Jews and the necessary unification of the community. For eight long weeks following the weekend of Anschluss, Vienna’s Jews were harassed and terrorized on a public and private basis, with nowhere to turn. Life as they knew it fell apart during this period. They were outlaws overnight. Friends abandoned them and law no longer applied. The German/Austrian perpetrators would force their Viennese Jewish victims to cooperate at the threat of physical abuse, arrest, and/or imprisonment. Jews were expected to implement the boycott of their own enterprises in public—as had been attempted in Germany already some years earlier, in April 1933. The aim of the Nazi’s terror was two-part: to disenfranchise and dehumanize Jews. How would Vienna’s Jews respond? Their thoughts ranged from hope and denial to extreme despair and helplessness, their actions from staying put to unprepared flight to suicide. The high number of family suicides in the spring of 1938 among wealthy Jews who had the option to take flight, reflects the extremity of the situation: the isolation they felt and the fear they held for the future.

Cooperation with the enemy soon surfaced as the most practical solution to escape the madness of the Anschluss Pogrom. By May 1938 the fear from the past eight weeks had united the majority of Vienna’s Jews in a common quest to escape from Nazism, no matter how high the cost. Individual members of the community, selected by the Nazi authorities to organize the Jewish community under their auspices, would soon learn that the cost of escape was almost too much to bear: full cooperation of the entire community with the Nazi regime. But they bravely accepted the challenge. As of May 18, 1938 the Jewish Community of Vienna (IKG)

was reopened under the Nazi administration, marking the start of institutionalized cooperation and collaboration between the Nazi regime and Vienna's Jews. Adolf Eichmann, a second lieutenant in the German SS military unit (Waffen SS-Untersturmführer), proposed a new operation to facilitate Jewish emigration *en masse* and set out to implement this system from the top down, requiring strict obedience for success. The system required the assistance of foreign aid committees, individual wealthy Jews within the Viennese Jewish community, and total cooperation from everyone else. While less than 2,000 Jews emigrated from Austria before Anschluss, and Jews took varied actions during the weeks of Anschluss pogrom, just days after the reopening of the IKG 25,000 Jews had applied for emigration on behalf of themselves (and their families). It was an immediate success for the Nazi administration in Vienna. A fully operational system for mass emigration was underway just months after Anschluss. Fear had rallied Vienna's Jews behind a common goal and encouraged them to fully support the IKG which was helping to enable their escape. What was the central role and work of the IKG, including its structure, institutions, leaders, employees, volunteers, and members? How did they begin to facilitate flight? Contemporary community records describe the initial steps of this process and reveal a close relationship between the IKG, its members, and the Nazi party starting in May 1938. A simultaneous action was taking place, yet the two parties involved had a very different objective: the IKG strove to develop a rescue operation for the Jewish community of Vienna to save people's lives; the Nazis in Austria sought to bring resolution to the question of what to do with the Jews in the Greater German Reich and thus instructed Vienna's Jewish community to organize its own expulsion at its own expense.

While the terror of the Anschluss pogrom soon persuaded Vienna's Jews that it was necessary to cooperate with the Germans and follow an organized emigration procedure, a few still hoped and believed they lived in a society where a basic rule of law still applied and/or that Hitler might not last. This was a false construct. The German decree from May 24, 1938 called for the immediate capture of "criminal" and "asocial" Jews, igniting a wave of over 1,800 arrests throughout the city of Vienna in a matter of weeks. Thus, in June 1938, Nazi persecution of Jews in Vienna intensified yet again, but this time started on a private and individual basis. The decree targeted innocent men and summoned them to spontaneous arrest, questioning, holding, transfer, and deportation to the concentration camp Dachau, outside of Munich, Germany. In contrast to the public

display of violence that ignited during the Anschluss pogrom, these arrests were acts of terror camouflaged by decency and deception. *The Jews of Nazi Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction* presents details from both contemporary reports and memoirs that expose a cruel and secretive process. “We are only taking him to the local police station,” Edith Lowenstein recalled hearing the policeman say as he came to fetch her father. “Get on with it—pack his pajamas and toilet stuff ... We are terribly sorry, there is nothing we can do. Orders from above.”⁷ The analysis presented thus begins to demonstrate not only how, when, where, and why these men were arrested, but why physical revolt did not emerge as a Jewish response to Nazism even in its earliest stages, before the war began. Contemporary reports inform us that from the very moment at which the Germans removed these men from their homes, they set out to keep them calm and hopeful, yet break them down physically and spiritually, and assume full power over them. “Dachau is a place where we will teach your father to work and become a useful member of society,” Edith recalled hearing after she learned that father had been sent to the camp.⁸ As the Germans removed these men from their families and the greater community, they left behind a terrible scar on the community. At the outset of these random arrests, the Nazis had already attained an initial goal: cooperation and obedience had been established; retraining courses were overflowing; the emigration system was well underway: Vienna’s Jews were looking toward a future for their families outside Austria. The first wave of arrests helped to move the process along even more efficiently: Vienna’s Jews appeared more vulnerable and proved even more willing to cooperate with their German oppressors for the chance to leave. Women (young and old) bravely entered Gestapo headquarters in the Hotel Metropole on Morzinplatz looking for ways to get their loved ones out of the concentration camp. No cost seemed too high. Sexual advances and financial bribes were easily considered.⁹

Emigration may have been the agreed solution to the misery of Vienna’s Jews, but it was nevertheless an extremely difficult process, one that proved impossible for many. Emigration required patience, diligence, and cooperation, as well the ability to make difficult decisions and take extreme risks under unfamiliar circumstances. Having assumed its role as the central life-line for Viennese Jews, the IKG as an institution worked with great determination to promote emigration for all. Still, there were no guarantees, and often individuals were given a chance to leave, but at the last minute there was a problem: for example, a family member

fell ill and only one ship ticket could be filled instead of two. Thus, individuals faced the agonizing dilemma of leaving loved ones and relatives behind. Would the separation be only temporary? Or permanent? To this life-altering question, neither the IKG nor any other person nor entity had a certain answer. Some, still took the leap. They seized the opportunity to emigrate, fled the Nazi web, and prayed to reunite with their family members after the war's end. Most left Vienna determined to facilitate emigration possibilities for their family once they had reached a safe haven. All too often this was not how the trajectory played out. Rather, some family members escaped; others were left behind—and trapped. This is the tragic history of Vienna's Jewish community and the defining aspect of its experience during the Holocaust period: permanent family separation. The few Jewish families who escaped from Vienna intact present a rare exception.

Why some got out and others were caught in the Nazi web is another question that has burdened many Viennese Jewish refugees and their descendants to this day.¹⁰ Ruth Kluger, for example, seven-years-old at the time of the Nazi takeover, remained trapped in Vienna in 1941. Why? The cause can be traced back to many possible turning points, among them the moment when her mother declined the opportunity to send Ruth alone to England on a *Kindertransport*. She believed that a mother and daughter should not be separated and faced what historian Larry Langer has described as a “choiceless choice.” So, if her mother in fact held her back from this escape route, how did Ruth flee Nazi-Vienna to tell her story? She did not flee; she survived. The polar opposite of Edith Kurzweil who boarded the train to England in 1938 and who fell among the 136,000 who emigrated, Ruth and her mother belong to the very small minority that did not manage to escape, but managed to survive the “final solution.” Their history and experience is equally important to our understanding of the Viennese Jewish community during this time. Both Ruth and her mother lived in Vienna until late 1942, at which point the IKG summoned them to report at the local school for resettlement in the East and the Nazis deported them to the concentration camp/ghetto Theresienstadt outside of Prague. From Theresienstadt (Terezin) they were later transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. Because of luck they survived this extended horror and managed, eventually, to immigrate to the USA in 1947. In her memoir, Ruth, now an eighty-four-year-old Professor Emerita of German Studies at the University of California, Irvine, expresses the ongoing trauma of the Holocaust and her longing for closure. She questions why her family was unable to make it out of Vienna before they were deported.

Explaining daily life during the mass exodus, this work begins to detangle the many knotty questions Ruth Kluger and others continue to ponder, concerning the emigration/immigration process. It identifies the many factors that could delay plans for flight, or hold applicants back for good: quotas, visas, affidavits, passports, tax-clearance certificates. On the other hand, it credits the people and institutions that helped to make the emigration operation run so successfully that it dispatched an amazing figure of over two-thirds of the community to fifty-two countries around the world between 1938 and 1941. It notes the important role played by the foreign aid committees, supporting the Jewish community's emigration endeavors and social welfare system. And still, despite recognizing the IKG's grand success enabling the flight of over 136,000 individuals, the mass expulsion stands as a period marked by desperation, turmoil, and disappointment. The IKG poured its energy into the emigration operation, offering total cooperation to the Germans, but still could not guarantee escape and survival for all of its members. The price of rescue was all too often at the cost of family separation: the theme that continues to loom large.

The question of Jewish resistance to Nazism is an important theme to address in any scholarly work on the Holocaust. Through this work, we quickly learn that Vienna's Jews never stood by passively during the reign of Nazi occupation. From the first to the last days of Nazi oppression, people resisted. Jews resisted persecution and expropriation, resisted dehumanization and deportation, and above all resisted the destruction of their families and community. While most were caught inescapably in the Nazi trap, we see that some acts of resistance had a positive outcome. These success stories, few and far between, have fallen through the cracks of history, overshadowed by an inaccurate image of Jews reacting passively and "walking like sheep to the slaughter." *The Jews of Nazi Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction* washes away that image. It documents the resilience of the Jews; their struggle to survive on a daily basis—to preserve their dignity and to save their loved ones—and it illuminates previously unrecognized or unacknowledged acts of resistance, persistence, and rescue. For example, despite the November Pogrom of 1938 and the new wave of terror which it ushered in, Vienna's Jews continued to press emigration forward. Individuals' efforts together with the IKG enabled the escape of another 70,000 persons from Nazi Vienna after the infamous "Night of Broken Glass" and this included the remarkable release and emigration of five of every seven men deported from Vienna to Dachau and Buchenwald.

At the same time, resilience did not always prove fruitful. Some turning points were simply too hard to adapt to and left many Jews hopeless—and penniless—thus putting more stress on the IKG. The aftermath of the November Pogrom posed serious challenges to the organized emigration effort due to the permanent destruction it left behind. Vienna's Jews may have been shocked by the terror of the pogrom (the physical destruction of property, the burning of synagogues, the arrests and deportations) but they were more devastated by the results of this destruction which destroyed some people's chances for escape. Looking at various Viennese Jewish families and how they experienced this period, it is all too evident that the physical damage to Jewish property posed financial challenges upon individuals and the community causing people's emigration plans to fall apart. Addressing the plight of Vienna's wealthiest Jews, we see that in fact they were not so lucky to have assets and property at this time. Their losses, during and after the pogrom affected not only their immediate families, but the entire ailing community.

Until flight became virtually impossible, until the Germans prohibited emigration from the Reich and foreign aid committees cut off funding, the IKG kept focused on the rescue operation. But the privilege to run this operation was never free, and over time the price to save just one life became more and more expensive and risky. During the first six months of 1941, the price of one Jew's emigration abroad was the cost of another's resettlement to Poland. In the early spring months of 1941, the Germans instructed the IKG to run both the emigration and resettlement processes simultaneously. How and why did the IKG continue to carry out their work for the Nazi administration with precision and efficiency? New evidence from the records kept by the IKG during this period reveals their determination to sustain and enable the rescue operation for as long as possible. Even one person's dispatch to safety was enough to keep the IKG offices in constant cooperation with the Nazi enemy and deter any thoughts of resisting orders at the communal level.

The role of the IKG transitioned from rescue to destruction (from emigration to deportation) in the fall of 1941. How, when, where, and why, did the deportation process begin in Vienna? And what role did Jews play in this process? Not knowing what the future held and continuing to hope for the best, the IKG helped the Germans to transport Jews to ghettos in the east in February and March 1941: few of these people would ever return to Vienna or survive the Holocaust. So why did IKG workers agree to participate in resettlement to an unknown destination? This study argues that

their ability to aid in this process was made possible by the false hope that they held—perhaps the same hope they kept in the years prior to Anschluss and in the initial period thereafter—as well as the routine of cooperation and collaboration, already set in motion years prior.

Taking for example, the German decree of September 1, 1941—which demanded that all Jews in the Greater German Reich over the age of six wear the yellow Star of David on their clothing—and unpacking this law, step by step, through contemporary IKG reports, memoirs, and newspapers, we start to see this antisemitic legislation from a new and introspective angle. Breaking down the process of distributing the Jewish star, scrutinizing and analyzing the role of both the community and individuals in following these new German orders, we realize just how obedient the IKG and ordinary Jews were, and how full of false hope! The Star was an order from Berlin that applied to the Jews of Greater Germany. In Vienna, the IKG had to distribute the star to approximately 44,000 people and had just three days to do so. In the hope that emigration and rescue would carry on if they continued to cooperate, they did as they were told. But rescue would not continue; as we now know, it was just about to come to an end.

As of October 1941, the Germans prohibited Jewish emigration from Greater Germany. The Nazi administration in Vienna informed the leaders of the IKG that no further emigration trains would roll. However, their service was not over; the Nazis ordered them to help organize deportation trains. At this moment, the Jews of Vienna entered what was perhaps the most horrifying phase in their years of cooperation and obedience with the Germans. What was daily life like for Jews who remained in Vienna in 1941 and 1942? How did they experience the impoverishment of their community, the steadily increasing restrictions and humiliations, the isolation, and the severed communication with their relatives and loved ones abroad? How did people react and respond when they were summoned for “resettlement”? Who was deported from Vienna, when, and to where? Who was involved in the structuring of the deportation process and who carried it out?

In his close study of the IKG, Historian Doron Rabinovici explains the period of deportation in Vienna, laying bare all the cruel details of the process. We can now use this study to examine the deportations within the broader context of the Holocaust in Vienna and examine both the responses of IKG workers and the ordinary community members simultaneously. This work demonstrates how the Nazis transformed the IKG

from an institution that promoted the emigration and rescue of 136,000 Viennese Jews into an entity that was obliged—at the risk of their own lives—to organize the deportation of some 45,000 others beginning in 1941. How did the IKG view its involvement in this process and how can we best identify, understand, and define their role in the history of the genocide? *The Jews of Nazi-Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction* argues that they had no choice other than to cooperate and that they should not be judged by their part in the Nazi’s final attempt to destroy their community. Some Jews tried to hide, some tried to prolong or delay the deportation, some tried to resist: in the end, all were deported without regard to their rank or status or years of service to the IKG. All Jews, including the IKG workers and leaders were deported in the end. By 1943 the IKG as an institution was dissolved and all that remained of the pre-Anschluss Jewish population was a small minority of *Mischlinge* and select members of the community in protected mixed-marriages.

Austria’s liberation in 1945 did not heal the preceding trauma. Few of Vienna’s Jews returned to the city to reclaim their *Heimat*; it no longer remained. The vibrant Jewish community of pre-Anschluss Vienna vanished over the seven years of Nazi occupation. Historian Gunter Bischoff put it best: “The entrepreneurs who left Austria after the Anschluss, the wealth and investment capital lost and often squandered, the innovative potential displaced to all corners of the world, the research capacity of some of the best minds removed from Austrian universities and laboratories, the artistic talent willfully chased away to New York and Hollywood, London and Jerusalem, could never be replaced.”¹¹ New evidence reveals that the destruction of the family unit was equally detrimental to the future of this community. The high hopes of those who escaped or survived perished in 1945 with the confirmation that the Nazis had murdered their relatives and loved ones in the ghettos, camps, and annihilation sites of the “final solution.” Preserving the family unit was a near impossibility during the years of Nazi occupation. Family division began in 1938, continued through the war, and persisted long after. The scars of permanent separation never healed, but sealed the complete destruction of the Jewish community of Vienna.

The Jews of Nazi-Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction at last depicts this particular community’s experience under Nazism from beginning to end. It reveals the brutal and often devastating challenges they faced daily and explains the position in which the IKG leaders found themselves, as well as the rest of the community, its workers and members, during the years of Nazi

terror: 1938–1945. Finally, a new picture of this community emerges, as we begin to experience the ongoing struggle in which they were engaged—for years—to overcome the extreme odds against them. We see their heroic efforts to rescue one another and to survive the Nazi engineered Holocaust. Thus we are introduced, for the first time, to a resilient group of people who put up a bold, perseverant, and honorable fight against an insurmountable enemy.

NOTES

1. Edith Kurzweil, *Nazi Laws and Jewish Lives: Letters from Vienna* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 2–3. Edith’s mother Mimi Weisz escaped in April 1940 from Genoa; her grandmother Malvina Fischer was trapped and deported to Lodz in 1941.
2. Kurzweil, *Nazi Laws and Jewish Lives*:2.
3. Ibid.
4. The sculpture was erected in 1999 as part of Hrdlicka’s larger design, “Against War and Fascism.” See James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 110.
5. Norman Bentwich, historian and witness, scrutinized the situation facing Austrian Jewry in the 1930s. See Norman Bentwich, “The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Austria 1938–1942,” in Josef Frankel ed., *The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History and Destruction* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1967), 467.
6. Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), Memoir Collection (ME1092), *Survival*, Edith Loewenstein, 2.
7. Ibid.: 8.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.: 15.
10. Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive, A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001), 49.
11. Guenter Bischoff, “Austria’s Loss—America’s Gain: Finis Austriae—The ‘Anschluss’ and the Expulsion/Migration of Jewish Austrians to the U.S.” in *Relationships/Beziehungsgeschichten: Austria and the United States in the Twentieth Century* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2014) 230.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In October 1998, on a school trip to Vienna with Salzburg College, I discovered the “aryanization” papers of my great-grandfather Heinrich Offenberger’s apartment house in Wien 3., Fasangasse 20. While the other students were exploring the sites of the former emperor Franz Joseph’s grand city, I sat in the Austrian State Archives looking through a large manila folder filled with documents signed by my great-grandfather and covered with red swastika stamps. At that time, I did not know that one day I would have the great fortune to research, write, and teach my own courses at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth on the history of Vienna’s Jews under Nazi oppression. It was then that this journey began and there are many people and institutions that supported my important work along the way.

The Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University, the first program in the USA to offer a PhD in Holocaust and Genocide Studies sponsored me through five years of graduate study and scientific research. In particular, I would like to extend thanks to David and Lorna Strassler, the Rose Family, Marc and Cathy Lasry, the Crown family, and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany for the opportunities gained through their financial support. To Dr. Debórah Dwork, Rose professor of Holocaust history and founder of the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, I gratefully recognize the opportunity to study under your tutelage. Your unwavering belief in me and my scholarly pursuit is the backbone of this publication.

To produce a complete and accurate depiction of Jewish life in Nazi Vienna, my study depended upon numerous archival collections. The first-person accounts recorded by the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles were invaluable to my research. In Vienna, I conducted research at the National Bibliothek, the Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes, and the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv. I was fortunate to receive assistance from Hubert Steiner and Christian Kucsera at the Archiv der Republic, and from Ingo Zechner, Lothar Hoebbling, and Susanne Belovari in the Archives of the Jewish Community in Vienna. My exploration of the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps and their archives were no less important to my research and understanding. Doron Rabinovici, I thank for sharing valuable advice and knowledge. Roland Engel, your camaraderie during my early research pursuits in Vienna, brought this project to life.

An exceptional team of historians, researchers, educators, librarians, and archivists, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC enabled my work over the years. I am honored to have received an invitation to spend nine months as a visiting scholar at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, a fellowship that made it possible for me to investigate the archives of the Jewish Community of Vienna (IKG), upon which much of this work is based. I acknowledge and thank Anatol Steck, whose hard work helped to bring the IKG archive to the USHMM. I would also like to mention Christine Brown, who selected me for my first internship at the Holocaust Museum in 2001 and became one of my closest friends; Megan Lewis, whose research expertise guided me through the archives and beyond; and Michlean Amir, whom I met in the Museum's resource center in 2006 to discover that she was a long-lost family member. Michlean, your guidance, love, and support has been my northstar and a lifeline to my grandfather's memory.

The Jews of Vienna who escaped, the legacy they left behind, and their children who chose to carry it forward, also share in this publication. The relationships I formed through letters, emails, telephone calls, coffee meetings, lunches (at *Sette*), lectures, and conferences, provided reinforcement that this project needed to be done. For the archival materials, letters, documents, and photographs, I thank, Jacques Hasten, Charles Stein, Ella Carroll, Erna Winter, Gertrude Silberstern, Alix Kowler, Lucie Benedict, Walter and Paul Schatzberg, Tom Weiss, Max Furst, and the late Dr. George Wellwarth and Dr. Eric Nash. I would also like to thank the second and third generation, Dr. Lisa Gruenberg, Joanna Saper, Ted

Shealy, and my cousins in Vienna, Bibi, Xandi, Niki, and Kathi, and in Prague, Peter, Jidka, Miki and Zuzana. It was an honor for me to learn about your (our) families and to incorporate their personal stories into this history. George Czuzcka, you know this project would not have been the same without you and all that you have done for me. Kopf Hoch!

To the careful readers of the manuscript, Dr. Tatyana Macaulay, Dr. Walter Schatzberg and Dr. Thomas Kuhne of Clark University; Dr. Tom Weiss of MIT, Dr. Martin Dean of the USHMM, and Dr. Evan Bukey from University of Arkansas, I owe great thanks for offering invaluable insight and suggestions for improvement.

My parents, Max and Suzy, both teachers, have always understood and stressed the value of education; I thank them for having the courage to let me go on this journey. My older sister Dahlia, her husband Craig, and their two children Riley and Henry, have brought to life the very essence of what this book is about: family. I am grateful to all my extended family and friends who make an accomplishment like this worthwhile at the end of the day. Finally, I must recognize the three persons without whom there would be no manuscript: my Omi, Ida, for introducing me to the splendor of Vienna; my grandmother Helly, for inspiring me to always think critically; and my grandfather Fritz, for choosing to carry on.

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NOTE TO THE READER

All translations by the author unless otherwise specified.

From the Opera to the Streets



Fig. 1.1 Chaos at the University of Vienna, 1931: Austrian Police outside the main entrance: an antisemitic sign reads: “No Jews Allowed!” (Credit: Austrian National Library, ÖNB)

A QUESTION OF PREEMPTIVE FLIGHT

Of a total 191,458 Jews living in Austria in 1934—one year after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany—only 1,739 emigrated in the four-year period leading up to Anschluss: the Nazi seizure of power on March 11, 1938.¹ This tiny figure has long stirred much questioning and debate and it merits careful exploration and analysis. Austria’s Jewish population throughout the first decades of the twentieth century averaged approximately two hundred thousand in a country of close to seven million inhabitants. While this figure reflects what might seem to be a rather small and insignificant minority, it was in fact quite the opposite. What distinguished the Jews of Austria from Jewish populations in other European countries, such as Germany, in the 1920s and 1930s, was that the Jews of Austria were almost all concentrated within one part of country: the capital city. Close to 90% of all Austrian Jewry lived in Vienna. During the first four decades of the twentieth century, the Jewish minority comprised an outstanding 8.5–10% of the total city population.²

Jews had settled in Vienna starting in the late nineteenth century, when the city was home to the esteemed emperor Franz Joseph and the center of his enormous monarchy, over fifty-million-strong. Discovering both a safe haven and a chance for new opportunity, Jews began to plant roots in this city, building up a community organization of their own (the IKG) and trying to assimilate within the local one. Over the decades they developed a love for their Emperor and a love for Austria. When the Emperor granted the Jews their own civil rights in 1867, Austria became more than a brief place of refuge, and more than a temporary residency, it became what many believed would be a permanent home. The Jews felt protected.³ As emancipated subjects they served their emperor proudly and invested whatever they had into this land. Through research it becomes evident that this deep bond to a falsely conceived Austrian *Heimat* (homeland) was precisely what weakened Jewish families, the Jewish Community, and individual Jews in the early stages of Nazism before it officially crossed the Austrian border. Between 1933 and 1938, Jews might have emigrated legally, with their families, belongings, and heads still held high, instead they looked on in shock and disbelief.

Austria’s Jews witnessed the growth of National Socialism in Germany; Hitler’s invitation to power in 1933; and an attempted Nazi takeover of Austria in 1934. They watched as the new Nazi dictatorship ostracized and persecuted Jews just across the border in neighboring Germany—from the first boycott of Jewish stores in April 1933 to the declaration

of the Nuremberg laws in 1935. How did these events impact them? Did they fear for their own safety? Did they consider it could be necessary to take flight? Did they anticipate the looming threat of Nazism? Or did they view the ensuing terror as a distant problem that would not reach inside the walls of Austria? According to Valerie A., an Austrian Jew in her early-twenties when the Nazis took over Germany: “We knew what was going on there [in Germany], but we were dumbfounded. We said that could never happen in Austria! All those proud Austrians! Oh Austria, the country of love and music and fun. That could not happen to Austria!”⁴ Was this response singular and unique to this individual? Does her voice represent the exception or the majority? According to the research of historian Bruce Pauley her thoughts reflect a general consensus of the Jewish community at large. Pauley documents that the Jewish *Stimmung*⁵ in Vienna throughout the 1930s was that the Nazi regime in Germany was little more than a passing phenomenon.⁶ His research has shown that during these critical years (1933–1938), reports from Viennese-Jewish newspapers such as *Die Wahrheit* (The Truth) did not encourage Jews to consider their escape from Austria, but rather reminded them that they had survived every historical crisis in the past and they should remain calm. Pauley explains that Viennese Jews were drawing off past experience and living as they were accustomed. He notes that for decades they had lived among constant antisemitic agitation, yet “accompanied by next to nothing in the way of concrete anti-Semitic legislation.”⁷ In other words, antisemitism was ever-present, but something one got used to: it was part of Jewish life.

The Jews of Vienna were not naïve, nor were they ignorant or passive, in the face of the looming Nazi threat. Rather, they were filled with hope and a false sense of security. Austria’s Jews felt protected—particularly the men who had fought for the imperial army in World War I. For the veterans of World War I, although the days of Franz Josef and his grand empire had come to an end in 1918, they were persuaded that the Austrian government, which they had served faithfully, would come to their aid. They encouraged their families and friends not to be afraid. “My parents were not panicking about the situation,” Max Weiss recalled, “primarily because Father and Grandfather had been in the Austrian army.”⁸ When relatives phoned Karl Langer and warned him to leave Austria, he said, “‘Why? I haven’t done anything. I was an officer! I have medals!’”⁹ His daughter Marion recalled him as “very optimistic, thinking: ‘It will pass.’”¹⁰ Curt Klein-Bernard shared a similar memory of his father Bela, who served four years of the war on the Russian front: “Father was hopeful, always said