Attachment

Extracts from Lucia Heilman story for a group work:

1st group

12 March German troops marched into Austria. I was eight years old and, as far as I remember, went by myself to Helden-Platz, since there was an event there. And as I reached the vicinity of Helden-Platz I couldn’t go any further – there were so many people on the Ring Road and on the side streets. And I stood there and heard the yells, the roaring, and this cry, “Heil, Heil, Heil…” and I knew that I didn’t belong there. I found these cries and this atmosphere very threatening, immensely threatening. I stood there for a while, listened, and saw people climbing trees so they could get a better look. And the cries didn’t stop. Then I left under the force of the threat I was sensing, and came home completely distraught.

A short time later the director of the school came into the class and said that the Jewish children had to leave the class. Then we took our schoolbags, put away our pencil cases and notebooks, and left the class. That felt like a terrible humiliation. Exclusion from the classroom, an expulsion, for reasons incomprehensible to me. I share that with all children that have been kicked out of school. This humiliation accompanied us as children and up to the present day.

From that point forward we Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend school like other children. They set up special classes and schools for us. One of those schools was on Börse-Gasse, where I went. But there were only lessons “of a sort” there, since we didn’t have any qualified teachers. After school we always liked going to Schlick Park. I wanted to keep going to the park, since children play in parks after all. I remember we went from our school on Börse-Gasse to Schlick Park, and on all the benches it was written, “Only for Aryans.” The effort they put into writing that on every bench, “Only for Aryans.” Jewish children weren’t actually allowed to enter the park any more. So then we played in the streets nearby. There were of course Christian children there as well. I was nine, ten years old at the time and the Christian boys made a sport of chasing the Jewish girls, throwing them down and hitting them. So I was often afraid of even going out on the street, because I was afraid the boys would attack me. It was easier before the stars, since the boys couldn’t easily recognize the Jewish children yet. But then, when all the Children had to wear a star, it was dangerous. Sometimes I go to schools as a contemporary witness and once a student asked me, “Why did you wear the star, why didn’t you hide it?” This showed me that people today couldn’t imagine the fear that we had. I would have never dared leave the house without the star, out of fear that the janitor or someone else who knew I had to wear a Star of David would see me and report me immediately. We would have been sent to prison immediately. We never thought of doing something like that – not wearing or hiding the star – out of fear.

2nd group

Reinhold had a small apartment near Hietzing [Vienna’s 13thdistrict] where he lived, and a workshop at Mollard-Gasse 85a. 85a isn’t an apartment building, but is rather, to this day, an industrial building. In the large house there are five floors where there are only workshops: for wood, a violinmaker had his workshop there, and for metal. I remember one workshop where they made enamel products. Reinhold had a metal shop and was very artistic in that he made very lovely metal objects. He made things out of brass, copper, and silver. The silver objects were very expensive, even the dust from filing was expensive and would be gathered up. He shaped them with hammers; he had different shaped hammers he used make art. The base was soldered. I learned how to solder and was then “the solderer.” He made vases in all shapes and sizes, beautiful copper objects, fruit bowls and ashtrays. He even made bracelets. The objects were mainly ordered, meaning that customers would come and say, I need ten vases in this or that size. His workshop was also a kind of gallery space where all of his beautiful arts-and-crafts objects could be seen. Reinhold also studied with the renowned architect and designer Josef Hoffmann at the arts college. He was very talented. His buyers were the Wiener Werkstätte – before the 1932 bankruptcy – and businesses. Even private customers bought objects from him. Later he couldn’t get any more copper sheet, since they needed it for armaments. He then worked with sheet aluminum. (----)

I told my story for the first time in 1994 to the Israeli photographer Alisa Douer for the film, “He who saves a single life, saves the entire world,” a verse from the Talmud. Even my husband barely said anything about his story to our daughters. We didn’t have time to tell – school, our work, our travels… My daughters knew that Reinhold had hid my mother and me. They knew Reinhold, since we were always friends with him, but they didn’t know exactly. And in 1994 they were already grown up. I found talking about this time in 1994 was very, very difficult. I couldn’t talk for more than 20 minutes before feeling like I was going to suffocate. I was choking. Alisa understood that of course, and would always say: I’ll come back tomorrow.

3rd group

…Mother and I worked with him, and the more we worked, the more objects he could produce and sell and, with this money, provide us with food. Back then he had connections to a grocery store, which always sold him expensive products under the counter. We always had bread. We were in the workshop during the day, and when someone rang, we crept into the shed very quickly. Reinhold was something like my father for those four years. Difficult times naturally bind people together. He did everything to help me; he played, for example, board games with me and borrowed books for me. He taught me a lot, but I didn’t have the talent for artistic copy. But I welded and hammered and prepared objects and he shaped them. It was a blessing that I had something to do. Over the course of those years mother never went outside, but I was a child. It’s a lot more difficult to keep a child in a workshop, because the need to move is greater. You can’t run in a workshop, you can do athletic exercises, but you can’t run. When my mother and Reinhold saw that I couldn’t stand it anymore and that I’d go crazy if they didn’t let me out, then they would let me out. That was very dangerous, since a child must be in school. But no one ever asked me. I ran as far as Grinzig. I ran up the Cobenzl [a 492m-tall hill in Vienna’s 19thdistrict], ran down through the Vienna Woods, everything on the double. I can remember three or four times in four years. I didn’t have any orientation problems or fear. Strangely enough, I am a person with little fear, even today. I almost like to describe it as careless. I was afraid in the workshop when the doorbell would ring. Even today I still find it unpleasant when the doorbell rings. This is a matter of a short moment, but it has stayed with me. Otherwise I’m rather fearless.

4th group

The conditions were chaotic; no one paid you any mind. A sort of kitchen had been set up in order to give the homeless people something to eat. I remember the soup, which tasted so good. When we were in the stairwell we saw that the steps hadn’t been damaged. When we got upstairs we couldn’t see where the workshop had been, since the debris from the roof lay on the fourth floor, burnt and crumbled. Then Reinhold located where the workshop had been and we began to look. The floor was still there; otherwise everything was full of debris. We needed to push the rubble away with our hands. And then we really did find the hammers, but without handles, since they’d been burned by phosphorus bombs, which burn everything to ash. The metal parts were still intact. We squatted down and looked for anything of use in the wet debris – the firemen had fought the flames. Suddenly my mother found a prayer book. As we had begun to hide, she had brought various things to Reinhold’s including four of my grandfather’s prayer books for the Jewish holidays. She had hidden the prayer books deep down. My mother was horrified –if a fireman had found them, it doesn’t bear contemplating! I have one of them, it was actually in good condition save for the edges and the cover, which were charred. I don’t know how they survived. A wonder!

We didn’t know where to go. We put all the salvaged things in a corner and went back to the house in Hütteldorf. It was fairly high up, on Wolfersberg, and had a large window. I stood there and watched Vienna burning. And I was really happy that Vienna was burning. I felt like Nero. Nero had set fire to Rome. I was Nero and Vienna was burning.

Even my things were all burnt. I still had teddy bears at Reinhold’s; everything was burnt. I was 15 then – already 3 years in hiding.

5th group

There was a large oven in the shop on Gumpendorfer Strasse, and it also had a basement section for wood and coal. First Reinhold heated up the oven so that we could warm up a little, then we took a look at the basement section, and that’s where we sat in the dark, since the place had a large display window meaning we couldn’t stay there. And once the heating supplies became limited, Reinhold collected lumber on Gumpendorfer Strasse. There had also been a rain of bombs on Gumpendorfer Strasse and many houses were destroyed, so wood was lying in the street. The wood made the oven very hot. We needed to sit in the basement, but when it got too cold for us we went upstairs to warm up. This time from November 1944 until April 1945 was very, very hard for me. I became depressed and unresponsive, so that my mother was frightened for me. This time was so difficult for me that I didn’t speak anymore. The dark cellar, the cold, nothing to do but sit very, very still in the basement, since other people were coming into the cellar. That was unbearable for me

On 13 April Reinhold came and collected us. He saw Russian soldiers. We left our hiding place very carefully and full of fear and saw Russian soldiers marching down Gumpendorfer Strasse. Thousands…madness… yes, thousands!

It’s a feeling you can’t describe, how the Russians came and I was finally freed. An incredibly exhilarating feeling! I was happy, I was blessed, I could finally run where I wanted, and I could sit on every park bench.

6th group

…New, since the school had to dismiss the old Nazi director. My mother talked the whole time. I had gone to primary school for four years and then nothing. The director suggested that they register me with my age group for the first months, and then we’ll see. If it didn’t work, they could always put me in a lower lever. So I arrived to the 4th high school class. The director said there were also a lot of teachers that would be glad to give after-school help and that we should take some of these teachers for math and English, since those were subjects you needed to learn from the start.

So I went to school. Alone the feeling of being able to go to school was unbelievable; I didn’t walk, I hopped. I received tutoring, particularly in math. I woke up every morning between 4:30 and 5, sometimes it was freezing in the apartment since there were problems with heating after the war, and studied intensively and concertedly. After studying I was so hungry that I absorbed everything like a sponge. I didn’t have to study so much for the regular lessons, because I could do it automatically, I memorized everything. It was very hard the first year, especially in math and English. But the teachers forgave me for that, since they saw how much effort I put in. By the third year I was already one of the best.

I was exotic at school – the only Jew. There were still Nazi instructors that tried to treat me unfairly, but at least the children were all the nicer to me for it. They compensated for the unfair treatment with exceptional friendliness. I never had issues with the children; they liked me from the very start. I was well integrated into the class. I was tasked with erasing the board and loved it. No one wanted to do that, but that was the definition of school for me. I sat in the second row the whole time. The best pupil sat next to me – a very nice girl. Orthography was difficult for me, since that’s something you learn over the years. When we wrote essays I was always done very quickly and she improved my spelling under the table. I always went home to study after school. That’s how it was until the end. And my mother always supported me. She paid for all the tutors and did everything so that I could learn. No one asked about my story and I didn’t say anything. That chapter was closed, suppressed, behind me. I studied day and night and finished my exams at the age of 18.

Extracts from the interview with Lucia Heilman.

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