

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Paul Back
Remembers the Anschluss, March 1938

On 12th March 1938, I saw airplanes, a lot of airplanes, entire formations of airplanes that clouded the sky.

First of all, the Nazis wanted to demonstrate their power, and, second, they really had to transport things in order to do what they had come to do. You could already see people in uniforms and youths in HJ-shirts [2]. Those were Austrians; the Germans had not yet arrived in Vienna. You see, they didn't come straight to Vienna, as they were stopped by cheering crowds on their way here. At first the Wehrmacht [3] curried favor with the Viennese with food - with field kitchens at Heldenplatz.

My grandmother's apartment became kind of a family news center. The whole family constantly followed the events, and at first there was no panic. Only much later did they get anxious, when measures against Jews were announced and actions such as street washing, molestation and verbal abuse commenced. We heard of people being kicked, attacked or taken away, but at the time people were probably still deluding themselves. We knew that the situation was serious, but we didn't know how serious it was yet to become.

One of the few measures that really got under my skin were the signs on park benches reading 'Only for Aryans' and 'Not for Jews.' I had often gone for walks with my mother or my cousins and we used to go to the parks and play there. And now, all of a sudden, we were not allowed to sit on the park benches any more.

I was impressed by uniforms, and even before the Nazis, when I was a child, I used to run to the war ministry at Stubenring because once a week there was a changing of the guard with the playing of taps there. I liked this march music and really enjoyed it.

When the Germans marched in, it was a bit scary, but there were people in uniform, moving around with a military band, and that highly impressed me; I liked it and loved to run along behind them.

The Hachshara courses had to be cancelled. Max Back [the interviewee's stepfather] was then working somewhere else in the Jewish community, and one day he was also attacked and beaten. I think that happened in front of the synagogue on Seitenstettengasse. Back then there were plenty of people who enjoyed wreaking havoc. Around the corner from my grandmother's apartment there were prayer houses, but I don't know that there were any serious attacks. However, the neighborhood was buzzing with Hitler Youth and BDM groups.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Julius Chaimowicz
Remembers 1938 Events in Vienna, Austria

In 1938 looting of Jewish stores was very common. Our apartment was on the fourth floor. We had bars in front of the window; either my father or my grandfather had put them up so that we [children] would be able to look out but not fall out of the windows. We saw the Jewish grocery store being looted. The goods were simply thrown out of the window....

...My father was a very charitable man and during the period when he was working as a salesman, at Christmas, he always gave poor families stockings as a gift because the new collection had already arrived by then. On his way to one such family, two young guys approached him and one of them pointed at my father and said, 'That's a Jew!' They beat him and kicked him in the stomach. When he came home, my mother said, 'You have to get out of here.' To which my father replied, 'I won't go without you!' And so it was decided that we would all go. We were waiting for our passports, which took about one or two months. In the meantime my parents cleared the apartment and afterwards we traveled to Paris as tourists. Everyone was allowed to take along 20 marks.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Gerda Feldsberg
Remembers 1938 Events in Vienna, Austria

My parents often went to the theater, the opera and concerts. My dad, however, always fell asleep. Everything would have been fine, if Adolf [Hitler] hadn't arrived! In Porzellangasse there was a candy store with five steps leading up to it, and every day after school I bought some sweets there. One day, like every other, I went in there, put my schilling on the counter and took some candy. But the shop assistant just threw me out. I thought she was joking, or that maybe she thought I didn't want to pay, so I went back in and said to her, 'I have money!' Whereupon she took me to the door and pushed me down the steps. When I returned to Vienna for the first time after the war, I met her by accident and she told me that it wasn't her fault, that she had to do it.

I had a wheelbarrow and a doll carriage and my mother always took me to Votivpark. There I played with other children in the sand-box, while the mothers sat together, chatting. I remember one day – it was in 1938 – when I wanted to play in the sand-box as usual. All of a sudden some boys pounced on me, and within an instant the parents had arrived as well. They wanted to beat me and drag me out of the sand-box. My mother, who had been sitting on a bench, jumped up, grabbed me and ran away with me. I was very surprised at my mother because I thought she should tell these people that they weren't allowed to do this to me.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Sophie Hirn
Remembers Kristallnacht in Vienna, Austria

During Kristallnacht, eight men forced their way into our apartment. I was alone with my grandmother; my mother only came home later. They smashed all the glasses, all the mirrors – simply everything. I stayed with my aunt Hulda and Leopold [her son] for a few days until most of the broken glass had been swept up.

Like all Jewish children I had to go to a Jewish school [after the Nazis invaded Austria]. The school I went to was situated in Castellezgasse. There was no real mood for learning there, and fewer and fewer pupils attended; one girl moved to Palestine, while others immigrated elsewhere. We talked a lot about immigration among ourselves as well as with our teachers. In that period, I had very intense religious classes and was thus introduced for the first time to Jewish tradition, which was made very accessible to us at school; we also celebrated the Jewish holidays. We learned a lot about Purim and I was impressed by the story of Esther and Haman. At Purim 1938 I wrote a very long poem. At home we started – under my influence – to live a traditional Jewish life. My grandmother was familiar with the traditions and so we also celebrated seder, but only once, and lit the candles at Chanukkah.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Heinz Klein
Remembers Events of 1938 in Graz, Austria

My father's practice, in which I had always worked, was Aryanized in May 1938. Thus my father lost his livelihood and I lost my job. On 10th November 1938, I was arrested and deported to Dachau [Germany]. After about six months they released me and I fled to Palestine from Vienna on an illegal transport.

My parents were turned out of their apartment in Graz and had to move to Vienna. My father worked at the Jewish community there and was responsible for Jewish emigration. He was in charge of the provincial department, and so he organized an illegal transport of circa 240-250 Jews from Graz, who fled to Palestine and actually also made it there. After my father realized that the situation was also getting dangerous for him and my mother, they escaped to Palestine on an illegal transport, too. That must have been in 1940. They could only take along a few small things, and many of these were lost in subsequent moves.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Gertrude Kritzer
Remembers Vienna, Austria in 1938

I had been to Vienna twice before the German invasion, but the memories of Vienna that I've kept are those from fall 1938: I witnessed this horror myself. Although I've lived in Vienna for almost fifty years now, I can still clearly see it in my mind's eye: I was walking home from the Schiffschul [7] with my dad. At Karmelitermarkt [a market-place] my Hebrew teacher - whose course I had attended twice before it was forbidden - sat on a chair that had been put on top of a table. This man was an epileptic and the men in uniform had picked him out on purpose. They cut off his beard with scissors and blood ran down his face, while they were taking pictures, probably for the Stürmer [anti-Semitic newspaper], and were yelling: 'Make the ear like this, after all they don't have small ears!' They probably enlarged the ears [on the photo] and then he was presented as an ugly Jew in the Stürmer. Once you've seen something like that, you never forget it!

In fall 1938, all the Jewish stores were already closed. After the war I never wanted to live in the 2nd district. Later, I regretted it because today, when I am in the 2nd district on a Friday, or any other day for that matter, I see so many pious Jews and I like that. However, my memories of the 2nd district are dreadful. What I saw there at Karmelitermarkt was horrifying. You cannot even imagine!

When they came to our apartment to pick up my dad on 10th November 1938, after the Pogrom night, my mother gave them everything so they wouldn't take him away with them. 'Leave my husband here, leave my husband here, don't take him away,' my mom cried, but to no avail. I think my parents had quite a lot of securities. She gave those to them and they also pulled her wedding ring off her finger and took her earrings. Nonetheless, they took my dad with them and abused him. He returned ten days later. His previously black hair had turned as white as snow.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Paul Rone
Remembers Kristallnacht in Vienna, Austria

During Kristallnacht, my father and I were arrested in our apartment and immediately taken away. We heard that the SA-men wreaked havoc in our apartment afterwards, but the new owner put a stop to the destruction because he wanted our things. He kicked out my mother. She left the apartment with two suitcases and went to the Markstein family at Brigittenauer Lände.

My father and I were locked up in the school on Karajangasse, where I had attended grammar school. In the evening they assigned us letters: A, B, C, D. My father was 'D' and I was 'A.' We could have easily swapped. 'D' stood for Dachau, but we didn't know that. Nothing would have happened to me if we had stood the other way round because they were still letting people go if they were under 17, and I wasn't 17 yet.

Of course our store had been Aryanized, and my mother immediately made efforts to find a way for us to escape. We would have probably fled to Shanghai because she sent my father a photo for his passport or for a visa for Shanghai to the Dachau concentration camp. If he had had a visa, he would have been released. He signed the photo and sent it back. On 23rd or 24th December 1938, if I remember correctly, some prisoners tried to escape from Dachau. A prolonged roll call followed until they had captured the escapees. It was cold and my father contracted pneumonia. He died as a result of it on 2nd January 1939. We received notification from the concentration camp, saying that my father had died and asking whether we wanted to bury him in Vienna. We did want to bury my father in Vienna and his body was returned to us in a zinc coffin. We had to pay for its transport to Vienna. We buried my father at the Central Cemetery in his brother Josef's grave. I still clearly remember the funeral.

Centropa Kristallnacht Readings
Wilhelm Steiner
Remembers the Day After Kristallnacht in Vienna, Austria

The day after Kristallnacht a provisional administrator for the store arrived. This provisional administrator was Viennese and a thief. There were thieves everywhere, official and unofficial ones. This administrator took all the money he could find; he simply put everything into his own pocket. This triggered a discussion and I protested loudly, after all I couldn't assess what was really going on. I told him, 'You're a pig. You're stealing everything here, how can you know what will happen in two years' time? How do you know? And who knows, things may change.' Whereupon this provisional administrator, this thief locked the store from the inside and called the police. He claimed that I had insulted the 'Führer.'

Viennese policemen arrived, arrested me and took me to the police station. The detective superintendent said to me, 'Tell me, boy, are you out of your mind? How can you say something like that?' I denied everything and asked him, 'Would you be so kind as to call my parents and tell them that my bicycle is in front of the store?' He actually did it. From the station I was taken to the Gestapo where I was interrogated by this young fellow, a typical Viennese. He said to me, 'What for God's sake do you think you are doing?' To which I replied, 'But I didn't say anything, I said nothing at all. He was stealing everything there and he probably didn't like the idea that I saw it. And so he had me arrested.'