

Mrs. Fischl, Reel 1. Where were you born, Mrs. Fischl?

I was born in Vienna, Austria.

In which year?

1898.

What did your father do for a living?

My father had a little factory and sad to say, for coffins.

So he was the owner of the factory, was he?

He was the owner of the factory.

How many people did he employ?

I wouldn't really quite know, about 20 or 25. It was a small business.

Were you Jewish by religion?

Yes, we were Jewish by religion, but neither Orthodox nor really religious. We did not keep to Jewish religious habits. We were Austrian liberated Jews at the time of the Emperor Franz Joseph.

But were you believers or were you atheists?

We were not atheists, no. We were believers. But being brought up in Catholic schools with very little religious tuition there, we didn't know very much about the Jewish religion.

Where were you educated?

I was educated in an elementary school in Vienna and then went to a secondary school that was called the lyceum, where we did not have Latin and Greek, like in a gymnasium, but we had a lot of English and French, mathematics and science, and quite a lot of very good art, drawing and painting.

How old were you when you finished your education?

I was 17. I took a sort of matriculation and passed with very good marks, especially the English, because we spoke English at home. I had English nursery governesses. I had quite a lot of drawing lessons privately and enjoyed handicrafts. My father took me to museums. I was well-educated in arts and crafts, let's say that.

So you knew English, but--

I knew English better than German, really, at the time, because I started when I was two. We had a New Zealand governess, an English-speaking governess. We spoke English at home at meals.

I always found that writing essays in English was easier for me than in German because the syntax, it was easier for me, the shorter language than the very floral language in German. So English was really-- we were quite bilingual, the whole family, my brothers as well.

What do you consider to be your mother tongue?

German.

What was life like for you in Austria before the Nazis took over?

Well, don't forget I married to Prague when I was 24. So I lost the being at home in Vienna. I went as Prague in Czechoslovakia had-- oh, had changed greatly since after the First World War, when Czechoslovakia was taken away from the Austrian empire and was a country, a republic. It was quite different than living in the old monarchy of Austria, brought up in an Austrian school as a monarchist, more or less until after the First World War.

How did life in Czechoslovakia differ from Austria for you?

Very much so, because I married a fairly wealthy industrialist. I could not speak Czech, but the people in Prague spoke German and Czech. One ought to have spoken Czech.

I, of course, spoke German at home, because my husband also had been brought up in the German language, although he had been born in Prague and grew up in Prague. Because during Bohemia belonging to the Austrian empire, people spoke German and had German schools and Czech schools. He went to German schools. So we talked German at home in Prague.

But there was a great split between the Czech and German population, between the Gentile and Jewish population, which at first I could not really understand and then resented all the 20 years I lived in Prague. That you belonged to either German-Jewish society or German-Gentile society or Czech-Jewish society or Czech-Gentile society. Which to me, coming from Vienna, was terrible.

You're talking in terms of social mixing now, are you?

Yes. But that has nothing to do with my later life. That was just that I resented that because it disturbed life. It made one feel disgusted that such things should happen.

So if you wanted to mix socially with somebody from another section, was it not possible?

It was possible. It was possible. But there were remarks. And it was difficult. I had no possibility to meeting or mixing with Czech people of my life, of my standard, or as friends. The Czech people I mixed with were teachers or salespeople. I personally had no social contact with Czech people.

Did non-Jewish people discriminate against Jews?

Yes. But that was, of course, also in Vienna. Only it depended, again, who your friends were and with what people you mixed whether you felt it or not. There were very many people who felt anti-Semitism in Vienna, whereas I personally had no experience with that until I tried to enter the Royal Academy for Arts and I was told, after the head of the Academy had seen my drawings, that he would suggest I become Catholic.

Then I would have had more chances to enter the Academy because they had a numerus clausus. They only were allowed so many Jews. As they only took in 20 new students a year, it would be better to be Catholic. Then I would have a chance to be taken into the school of the Royal Academy.

But you refused to change?

I refused to do it. I went to another branch of the Academy where they did not ask these questions and stayed at that school for one year only because then I married and had to give up this schooling. Which always hurt me, because I would have loved to finish my training in painting and drawing and perhaps sculpture.

Was anti-Semitism worse in Vienna or in Prague?

I think I knew more about it in Prague because the split of belonging to the Jewish-German society and the country being smaller, the society smaller. And through my marriage being in a wealthier social class, I knew more about it than in Vienna, where I had hardly any connection. I had nothing to do with this question at all.

Were there any specific experiences in Prague that you can recollect which indicated anti-Semitism?

Not for me personally, no. Because as I told you, I belonged to this Jewish-German class and hardly mixed with anybody else. I had German-Gentile friends who were not anti-Semitic and came to me and we came to them. But I had very little outside experience. I lived a very secluded and comfortable life.

Did your husband consider himself to be a Czechoslovak or a German?

A Czechoslovak of German nationality, which afterwards was a great difficulty when I came back from concentration camp. I did not get the right traveling paper to come out because of having voted German in a count. In the year 1933, everybody had to fill in forms and to say where one was born and what nationality one belonged to. And as I was born in Vienna and spoke German, I had to put German and so did my husband.

But very many people put Jewish, which we did not. Now people who had written Jewish, they were then not discriminated against after coming back from concentration camp. Whereas people who had put German were discriminated by the Czechs.

At the time of this census in 1933, did you think that this was some kind of loyalty test for you?

No, nothing at all, no. Just you got a form where it said, what is your mother language. There I put German and so did my husband, and that was why they counted us as German.

Did you suffer any discrimination for saying you were German before the war?

Nothing till Hitler came, no discrimination at all, no, no.

What was your reaction and that of your husband when Hitler came to power in Germany?

Well, I was a Cassandra. I always saw what was coming or felt what was coming. Where my husband, who was beginning to have a cancer growth coming, which we did not know of at the time, he was not a strong-minded at the time as I was. I wanted to get out in time.

He said that he belongs to Czechoslovakia. He has lived there all his life. And nothing will happen in Czechoslovakia. Why should Hitler take Czechs?

I said at the time, and I will always remember that because people laughed at me, I said Hitler will think the Czechs are just a flea, and they'll just squeeze the flea off, out. Who are Czechs compared to Hitler Germany? This is exactly what happened.

Did many people agree with you?

Yes. People went off in time, and went off. But my husband would not at the time. So we remained there. In the year 1939, we managed to send our children to England with a children's transport, which was organized by Quakers.

Consequently, they were saved. My brother-in-law was here in England. I had relatives here. My children went to school here, and they grew up here, whereas my husband and I remained in Prague.

Consequently, then, we were sent off to Theresienstadt first, where he died. I went on to Auschwitz and Oederan and back to Theresienstadt, and from there, back to Prague for six months before I got the visa to come here and join my children here.

Did you or your husband have any interest in politics before the war?

No, never, never. We followed what was going on, but I never had any interest. And my husband, who was running a very large alcohol business and was vice president of the alcohol monopoly in Prague, kept out of politics completely.

Can you remember the Munich crisis?

Yes.

What do you remember of it personally?

Well, personally, just misery and fear. We could not quite believe what was going on. But I don't think I remember anything I could tell you about that. It all came as a blow. Consequently, I tried, I even got the permission from my husband to prepare furniture and lift vans to take our property out to England, which then just did not come off anymore.

But he, as I told you before, had a cancer operation in-- when was it-- in May or June, in summer 1939, after my children were out already. Consequently, he was a very sick man.

Do you recollect any anti-British or anti-French feeling during the Munich crisis manifesting itself?

Not that I remember anything, no. You mean of the Czech people?

Yes.

No, I don't really know. Probably they thought they were let down by the French, but I don't remember any special incidents.

Do you recollect the Germans entering Czechoslovakia in March 1939?

Yes. We tried to get out and even managed to get into a train to get away, my children and nephew and my husband and myself. We were in a train going up north towards England.

But at the Czech frontier, between Czechoslovakia and Germany, Saxonia, we were turned out and put into a station, into a room at the station and were not exactly maltreated but yelled at by the German soldiers and told to keep quiet for hours. We were not used to this by then, yet, to be treated like that. So I was very much afraid and so were the children.

And by and by, we were forced to go back to a train. We even had our luggage back again. We were brought back to Prague and stayed then with the children until '39, a whole year longer in our house in Prague before I could get my children out to England.

When was it that you made this attempt to get out by train?

That was in March '39. I mixed up some dates here, I think. In March '39, when the Germans came into Czechoslovakia. From then on, I tried to manage to get the children out to England and found out about those transports, where over 300 children at a time, there were lots of transports, one after another.

My children were to have left in May already, but my son had mumps, started mumps. So they had to postpone. They went out on the last transport, which was, I don't quite know, the end of June '39. After that then, in autumn then, my husband had this operation.

How did German occupation affect your life at first?

It affected us very quickly, because we had to leave our house. At first, we stayed in our house. Then, after my husband's operation, we came back to the house.

A fortnight later, German officers came and said they are going to occupy, take away this house because they need it for a German high officer. The whole district where we lived was going to be occupied only by German high officials. He gave me a fortnight to find new accommodation.

My husband was in bed after this very great operation. During that fortnight, I managed to find a flat and arrange the removal. Then we lived for a while in a very beautiful flat, which had been vacant because people had gone off in time.

From there, we then had to leave that flat, too. Then we had to live together with a young nephew of mine in one room, in a Jewish flat where all the occupants-- there were three rooms. In one, you had an elderly couple.

In one room, there was my husband, my little nephew, and I, and in the third room there was an old mother with her daughter. We all shared a kitchen and the bathroom. We are not allowed to have a telephone.

I don't know how you would call him. It was called the Treuhand. That was somebody who had taken over, a guardian who had taken over my husband's business and who turned out to be a very great help for us. A German Nazi in a high position who had not only a great sense of humor, but he was an enormously honest and kind man. I have to thank him for a lot of things.

He helped me to the end, when he couldn't help anymore. He himself was put into prison then by the Germans. After the war, when I came back to Prague from Theresienstadt, he came to me again and had told me how he had been in prison and asked me whether I could not manage to get him a job in our Austrian firm. So you understand, there was a great help and friendship between this man in a black shirt, he belonged to the SS top Nazi department and helped where he could.

Was he a sincere Nazi?

I cannot tell you that. I once asked him how is it possible that you do these things. His answer was don't ask unpleasant questions.

What he really thought or did not think, I do not know. He helped us have a telephone in our flat. Because he said he will always have to be in touch with my husband as he cannot run the firm properly without my husband's help. That was the reason why we had a telephone right to the end, till we got off. I had to go off to Theresienstadt, thanks to him.

Did the Nazis start to impose restrictions on Jews straight away?

Yes. They came by and by, I cannot tell you, one after another. They came. By and by, you were not allowed to have radios. You were not allowed to have electric irons.

They took away, and they managed to force us to bring these luxuries to the Jewish community house on a Saturday, or on a Jewish high holiday. This was one of the spiteful things. They always managed to do it on a Jewish holy day that you had to deliver up things.

You were only allowed to buy food or go to shops between 3:00 and 5:00 in the afternoon. So the good foodstuffs were gone. You were not allowed to buy.

You got sort of quotas. Jews were not allowed meat, or not allowed chickens, or whatever. I can't tell you the details anymore. They were sordid and unpleasant. But one got used to it and one expected it and one got on with it.

How did the Germans behave personally as an occupying force?

I can only answer for myself. They only came once to our little room in that flat because they were asking my husband

questions about the Yugoslav business. My husband's business had branch. The main was in Prague, and then we had a branch in Austria and one in Yugoslavia. They were trying to get information about the money in Yugoslavia.

There were two men who came. One discussed it with my husband while I was in the kitchen. The other one looked through all the files in our room, all the letters and everything.

But they were not polite, but not offensive. They took my husband along, then. I thought that would be the end, but he came back after an hour and said they had even asked him to sit down and not to stand all the time. They had been quite polite. He had to tell them about--

Mrs. Fischl, Reel 2.

Well, my husband did not know very much about Yugoslavia. But he had to tell them whatever he knew. It was run by a manager, but he could give them, answer all their questions.

What was the reaction of the Czechoslovak people towards the German occupation from your personal observation? Did they conform, or did they resist, or what?

They resisted. But now I'm perhaps going to say something nasty. The Czechs are not very courageous. So very many didn't really help the Germans, but they didn't make any obstacles. They were quite pleased, very many were quite pleased with the Germans.

Why should they be pleased?

Well, they helped very often to get rid of Jewish Germans. They tried to be able to live with the Germans. Of course, they hated them. My son's friends, afterwards, told me what a horrible time they had had.

While I was in Prague with my husband, before we went to Theresienstadt, I knew very little about what Czechs did towards the Germans or against the Germans, because we were not allowed out very much. Whenever we were out, we had the Jewish star already. We had to wear the Jewish star.

We were not allowed to use a tram. We had to walk everywhere. The car, of course, was taken away. So one had very little chance of meeting people.

We had very good friends who came to visit us. Our friends were of mixed marriages. There was either the husband Jewish and the wife German, Gentile, or vice versa.

They came to visit us. But at 8 o'clock, they had to be back like we. Nobody on the street any more after 8:00 who had any connection with Jews.

So life was restricted. You had to be careful about whatever you did. Shopping was difficult.

But I, at the time, had a job at home. I had learned to make paper flowers. It sounds horrible, but they were beautiful.

Every petal was painted. They looked like real. Through various friends and connections, I got a lot of work and earned a little money like that. It was quite interesting.

Through friends, we met a Viennese lady who ran the top Nazi shop in Prague, The Amber Shop, the amber from Königsberg, that is. You know what I'm talking about?

The city on the Baltic?

That's right. The Baltic, where the Junkers used to be, the German Junkers. Now there was a lot of amber. This lady from Austria was a great and famous potter, and she used that amber to beautify pottery with silver and gold.

She got the best shop on the best street in Prague and had to have a beautiful showcase for amber, for various amber jewelry and her pottery with amber. She visited me once, through friends, and saw me make those paper flowers for the beautiful townhouse of aristocracy and thought that is just what she wants for her showcase and her window.

And when I said how can you make put Jewish flowers into the KÄ¶nigsberg, Nazi windows? So she said I am allocated so and so many marks to buy fresh flowers every day for my window. It's nobody's business what I do with that money. And I want your flowers.

So for many, many months, my flowers were in the Nazi window, which I found quite interesting and amusing. She paid very nicely. She came to visit us regularly, and we were great friends.

At this time, how did you think the war was going to end? Did you think that the Nazis might win?

Yes. Yes, I did. Because we knew very little. I mean, the papers were censored. The beginning looked very much for the Germans.

Besides, later on in Oederan-- Auschwitz, of course not-- but in Oederan, I knew nothing what was going on. Sometimes I got a German newspaper swindled into the camp by the German workers. Then I could translate it and find out what the Germans wanted people to know. So when I came here, I knew nothing about the Normandy or anything like that.

Were you ever arrested?

No. I was never arrested, nor was my husband except that he was taken away for answering questions for this hour.

When was it that you were taken away to Theresienstadt?

I believe we were taken away end of August or beginning of September '42. The Jewish community sent out papers and very many of our friends had gone before us. And the community had arranged for people to help one another for packing. I had baked breads or biscuits or cakes and had helped packing for various people I was sent to during the month before that.

So it never came as a surprise. One was prepared. I had prepared clothes and cups and saucers, plastic things, aluminum things. Because I had listened to other people, and so I was prepared for it and was not really startled or horrified. We knew it was coming.

So we packed up. Friends came to help me pack our things. We were allowed 50 kilo each. They packed all very neatly, shoes in one case and the clothes in the other, and whatever you took with you in the third case. When they left at a quarter to 8, because they had to be at home at 8:00, I undid everything and repacked and divided everything properly, shoes and clothes and food and whatever we thought we needed in each case.

That was a good thing, because cases were stolen. When you arrived in Theresienstadt. You only got part of your luggage and not the whole.

Stolen by whom?

Stolen by the government and the Czech guards who helped, because this property was then distributed amongst people who had nothing at all, who came from Vienna, from Yugoslavia, from other places, where the Germans had taken away everything. So that went into a communal storeroom, and that was then distributed amongst other people. I cannot blame them, but I was glad that I didn't only get shoes and no clothes or clothes and no shoes. So that we all, my young nephew, who was 12 at the time, and my husband and I, we had everything we really needed.

You say you expected it. But the information you got about Theresienstadt before you went, was it by rumor or by

official notification?

By official notification two days before we left. It was quite official, and it was organized by the Jewish community headquarters in Prague. We had transport. We were taken to the fair building, where the fairs were, the big business fairs.

There were big tents and marquees. And there we stayed for one night, I think. Yes, I think it was one night.

Then we were transported to Theresienstadt in cattle trucks on the train, but with seats in it. That was the first, really, most disturbing experience. Because one lady got mad and one was scared.

It was dark. You sat there. We didn't know what was going to happen.

So that was the first real scare one had. Some people just broke up. Couldn't take it.

But well, we did. My little nephew was with us. When we got out in this railway station, at the time, Theresienstadt did not have a railway station. You got out at a place called [NON-ENGLISH].

From there, you had to walk about half an hour to the Theresienstadt camp. We were not allowed to walk, for instance, we were not allowed to walk on the footpath. You had to walk on the road.

My husband's firm had quite a lot of employees there already in Theresienstadt who were in higher positions because they had been brought out on earlier transports. There was one of them who had been the director in one of the Czech factories, who was what they used to call the police. the police had uniforms with a lot of yellow or gold braid and caps with stars, golden stars. it looked like a musical, like, quite idiotic for what they really were doing.

They had to keep the Jews in order on the streets in Theresienstadt. They conducted these tours. You were not allowed to walk on the street to your work without being guarded. You only walked in a crocodile with guards in the beginning. Later on, this was stopped. But at the time we came to Theresienstadt, I could, for instance, not go to the joinery. I made coffins. I had to cut the wood on a saw and then nail the coffins.

But I was not allowed to walk on my own to that joinery or carpentry. I had to join a crocodile, which was taken there by either a lady, a police lady or a policeman so that we did not escape on the street. I don't know where we could have escaped to, but that was how it was done in the beginning. I worked there for 100 days. That what they called the [NON-ENGLISH], the 100 days.

Then, because of my training for painting and drawing, and my little diploma of the art class I had taken with me, I was put into the art and craft department of Theresienstadt, which is a very astonishing chapter of Theresienstadt. Because there, one painted and made art and little art boxes, lampshades with flowers or figures. You had to design it, and then prepare it.

I myself soon managed to be a designer. I made the design of bunches of flowers, or of children playing with flowers, all very sweetie, sweetie. I had two young girls who copied them onto vellum, first vellum paper, and by and by, less good paper. Another one then made a lampshade or a box of it. They were various departments. But my work was designing, making the designs for all sorts of boxes, sizes, and table mats, and so on.

This particular work was for the Germans who ran this camp. Because they sold these articles. I don't know where they were. They were taken to Prague, and from there they were distributed. And more I do not know about that.

But later on, one had to also work for the German department there who ran the camp. The camp had a Jewish government under the thumbs of the German administration. I myself had never anything to do with the Germans except when they came to watch us paint.

Especially the second, his name was Rahm. He was an Austrian stable boy, I was told. I don't know anything about him



personally except that he spoke the Austrian dialect and that he asked me what I had painted before and how much money I got for my paintings. And that he stood behind me watching me paint miniatures, which I have here still, with a shepherd dog or an Alsatian standing next to him and a pistol hanging at his waist. So it wasn't a very easy way, but one gets used to everything, and you just went on painting and answering his questions.

But this particular work was well looked at by the Germans. And consequently, through this, that I was able to work in this department, I saved my husband and my mother and my little nephew to be sent off to Auschwitz, because I was allowed to save my family as long as I worked there. But after my husband's death, and the Russians coming nearer, and the war getting less happy for the Germans, they tried to have less inhabitants in Theresienstadt. So they sent away a lot of people.

My particular work was not appreciated at the time. So I was sent away then, a few months after my husband died. My little nephew was sent in the last transport, three days after I left. We never heard of him again.

My mother remained in Theresienstadt. When I returned from Auschwitz and Oederan, I met her there again.

Do you know the date that you left Theresienstadt?

It was in July '45.

So you were in Theresienstadt-- I left Theresienstadt for Auschwitz in October '44.

So you were there approximately two years?

Yes.

Were you paid for this work?

In the beginning, nothing at all. And then we were paid with Theresienstadt money, which, of course, was completely useless outside. But with that money, we could, for instance, buy a little food or old socks which they had taken away from other people.

They opened up shops in Theresienstadt to make it look beautiful for the Swedish Red Cross. And for a few months, we were paid. I still have that money here. I lent them to the museum for that exhibition.

With that money, we were allocated either a tin of sardines or a pair of pants, or whatever we needed most urgently. The whole thing was absolutely perverted, silly, ridiculous. One just could only laugh, either cry or laugh. There's nothing else we could do at the time. I personally laughed, because I found-- make the best of it.

Did you see any visits by the Red Cross?

Yes, I saw that one with the visit by the Red Cross. Not only did I see that, but belonging to that art department, the head of that department was a Dutch, great artist called Jo Spier, who was a marvelous draftsman and a very good organizer. And he had to make a prospectus, like the travel agency prospectuses now.

He made lithographies of 12, as far as I remember, of the various aspects in Theresienstadt, the bakery, the schools, the hospital, the gardens, what have you, 12. And I belonged to a set of painters who had to make-- they were black and white prints, lithographs. I had to paint all the skies, one after another, for I don't know how many of these books came into.

I think GÃ¼nther Adler has one still. I had to paint all the light blue skies to make it look happy. I usually painted a lot of flowers, which the Germans liked because they were happy.

So I had my work. I enjoyed my work. I enjoyed the people with whom I shared my work. They were all artists or

teachers.

They were very musical. There was a lot of whistling and singing while we painted. The atmosphere was very, very good and friendly in those particular rooms where I worked. So this helped me perhaps never to be bitter, or to be able to take it because I had good work and good friends there.

My husband became very ill. His health deteriorated rapidly because of the food. He had had the cancer of the thyroid. He ought to have had protein and various drugs which, of course, he could not get.

So he became thinner and thinner. And then he had ileus. His bowels knotted. He was operated on and died a month after the operation of blood poisoning which, of course, was quite natural because the hospital was not really clean.

The chap, Mr. Rahm, who came with the dog to watch me paint, he also went to the operating theater with the dog and watched operations. So you can imagine that it was not very sterile. Consequently, very many people died after operations. My husband died a month or three weeks after the operation of what they called malnutrition.

He was buried, cremated in Theresienstadt. Then the ashes were put into cartons and they were then put into the ramparts of the old, beautiful fortress of Theresienstadt, which was a work of art, the fortress. It was built 1700 and so on by the Emperor Joseph, built by Italian builders and architects.

And the five big barracks where we lived partly, they were very beautiful. It had lovely big courtyards and pillars and loggias. They were very beautiful to look at, so was the church.

And the main buildings, where the generals used to live as long as it was a fortress, and then for a while, our painting department was housed in one of those beautiful houses, yellow and green, like the old Habsburgs had in all their palais. Theresienstadt itself had a very good climate and was a nice place if you were not in forced labor with so many people pressed together in dormitories and in rooms in three-tiered beds and bunks and with the dreadful food. As the place itself was rather pleasant and beautiful, with nice surroundings.

How dreadful was the food?

Well, the food was mainly soups with bits of meat or potatoes or one dumpling or something. It wasn't sufficient. In the morning, you had coffee made of the pips of pears and apples. You got bread and you got marge, slices of marge for the whole week.

At lunch, you queued at various kitchens. You got either soup with a bit of meat or vegetable, or a dumpling with a sauce. And in the evening, you got, again, some coffee or some soup. And that was what you got.

You had to divide your bread and see how you got on. Of course, sometimes one did get a present, a parcel from Prague. And then you could have a little more.