

Interview with Laura Cohn, conducted on May 7, 1997

Summary

Part 1 of 3

Laura Cohn, née Schwarz, was born in Graz, Austria, on March 27, 1924. Her father, Joachim Schwarz, and her mother, Therese, married in Graz in 1919. Her parents were originally from Galicia. They moved to Graz after World War I. Her father spoke Yiddish, Polish, and German. At home, the family spoke German. The parents lived on the Mariahilfer Strasse 11, in 8020 Graz, from where they ran a thriving goods store. A Christian woman worked for the family and helped with the household. Cohn's family was very close-knit with uncles and aunts living nearby. Her maternal uncle ran a fruit and vegetables wholesale company on the Monscheingasse. It was located inside a big building, and two large trucks drove throughout the town, delivering orders to customers in Graz. Her other uncle, Elias Berger, owned and lived in the same house as the Cohn family. On the first floor, he ran a textile company. Before moving to the Mariahilfer Strasse, Cohn's family lived in the house that belonged to her father's sister on the Marschallgasse 22, Graz.

Her aunt's husband, David Fleissig, also ran a goods store out of his home, which was standard at those times. Moritz Schwartz, another paternal uncle, lived in the Willandgasse, Graz, with two sons, Jacky and Robert. He worked as a sales representative for David Fleissig. Then there was her mother's sister, nee Gärtler, who also lived in Graz. They had five children: Klara, Salli, Lara, Berta, and Adi. On Fridays, Cohn went to the nearby main temple, and on Saturday afternoons, to a prayer service in a smaller adjacent temple. Most of the Jewish people in Graz were not necessarily orthodox; however, they knew that they were Jewish and kept traditions. The entire family used to get together often, celebrating holidays together, and the children would spend hours playing together. From 1930 to 1934, Cohn went to a Jewish grammar school. Her favorite subjects were music and sports. There were about 25 children in her class. During the summers, she used to go to a summer camp in Graz that was run by her first and third-grade teachers. Only Jewish children attended the camp; some came as far as Vienna, Berlin, and Hungary. There were about 30 children at a time.

One of her cousins, Berthold Fleissig, who studied medicine, together with some of his colleagues, organized a youth club that focused on revisionist Zionism. Most of the youth attending this club were already older; they were university students. Cohn, as a direct relative of Berthold Fleissig, was permitted to join this club. The campers gathered for *Sichot (Talks or Teachings)* and learned about Zionism, Theodor Herzl, and Palestine; this was meant in preparation for a future life in an Israeli Kibbutz. The teachers, or the camp counselors, worked pro-bono. Most of all, though, socializing and having fun together was its biggest attraction. They often met behind the Synagogue to play sports and to go to the nearby swimming pool. After the Annexation in 1938, the youth club was dissolved. At the end of October of the same year, Berthold Fleissig organized the first illegal transport for 20 or 30 Jewish residents of Graz and Vienna. All they could take along was one backpack. In Vienna, Fleissig was joined by Dr. Perl, who arranged for a ship that would take the refugees down to Palestine. The transport later received the name "Perl Transport."

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Cohn visited the Gymnasium (academic high school) in Graz. There were two other Jewish students in her class. The teachers were kind to them; although, there was one teacher who once basked in delight when reading a poem to the entire class in which a Jew had committed a crime. Cohn felt this to be directed at her and the other Jewish classmates. The other non-Jewish peers whose families were well off would generally not want to interact with Cohn. During religion class, the Jewish students did not have to participate. They had a free period instead. On Saturdays, Cohn attended a Jewish school, and in the afternoons, a youth prayer service that was organized by the main Synagogue.

Cohn's family was one of the few in town who owned a radio. In the year of the Annexation, in 1938, their Jewish neighbors visited the Cohns to listen to the reporting. No one seemed to be worried. The adults argued that Italy would not permit for Germany to take over Austria. After the Annexation, Cohn was allowed to finish the school year. In April following Kristallnacht, the SS showed up and raided their apartment and took the Cohn and her brother to a nearby rathskeller to be interrogated about possible political affiliations. Her parents were visiting an uncle at that time and were not home. At around midnight, they were allowed to go back home. Arriving at the house, a neighbor warned them, saying that they (SS) were there again. When her parents returned home, the SS arrested her father, charging him of smuggling currency, which was not true. Her mother insisted on going with her husband to the police station. The SS, who were German, kept Cohn's parents for five days. Her father's business, and all of the other Jewish business, were immediately confiscated by the Nazis after the Annexation. Their belongings were looted.

The people in Graz knew that by the end of the year, the town was supposed to be Judenrein (free of Jews). Consequently, the Jewish town's people tried to get out of Graz as quickly as possible. Cohn's brother, Bertel, and another friend organized the first illegal transport. Cohn and her parents were in possession of a visa to Shanghai, China. China was the only country for which they were to get a visa.

Cohn's aunt, who was living with them at the time, was gout-ridden, and the Jewish Religious Community in Graz recommended for her to go to a retirement home in Vienna. The family decided in favor, and Cohn accompanied her aunt to the retirement home in Vienna. Cohn learned later that in 1942 her aunt was put on a transport to Theresienstadt and died one month after her arrival.

Cohn's paternal uncle, Moritz Schwartz, died in Graz one year before the Annexation. He left a wife and two children, Jackie of 13 years, and Obertel of 9 years. Jackie was able to immigrate to Israel. Because the mother did not want Obertel to be part of the Kindertransport that was being organized, she remained with him in Vienna. Later, Cohn learned that she too was transported to Theresienstadt and on to Auschwitz. She never heard back from her.

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One day, in the middle of a night in November, the SS knocked at Cohn's family and asked them to get dressed immediately and out of the house. They ripped everything apart, opened all of the drawers, and threw everything onto the floor. Cohn doesn't remember being scared. The Cohns and their neighbors assembled on the hallway's first floor. They were ordered to get into a truck that was standing in front of the house. Some other Jews were already sitting inside. They were driven to the Volksgartenstrasse, where Dr. Strassmann lived. Strassmann was Jewish, and his wife Christian. The SS went inside and beat onto him. The Cohns were able to hear the screams and the shouts coming from Strassmann's house. They heard how the SS called him a race defiler and a pig and pushed him into the truck. The truck drove to the Synagogue that was in ablaze. For about 15 minutes, they were to "enjoy the sight." The truck then drove on to the outskirts of Graz to a grassy area by the river Mur. Everyone was to exit the truck assemble in a row with their back to the Mur. Although they thought that they would be getting gunned down, no one cried or begged for their life. Then, the SS ordered everyone to run away in whichever direction they chose other than going back to Graz. The Cohns heeded the order and started walking in the direction of Yugoslavia. Their path crossed with many other Jews who were on their way out of Graz. One of them was the vice president of the Jewish religious community in Graz, Karl Schwarz, and his son, Jakob. When the Cohns stopped at a guest house to fetch something for breakfast, the innkeeper called the Gestapo immediately. One guest, who was sitting at a table, looked at the Cohns and said that they could go home. This man's name was Stern, a neighbor of the Cohns. Everyone else on the way to Yugoslavia was taken to Dachau.

While taking her aunt to the retirement home in Vienna, Cohn visited the Palestine office, where she applied for exit papers. After two weeks, right after Kristallnacht in 1939, she received a youth certificate allowing her to travel to Palestine. Cohn left Graz in April 1939, taking the train to Trieste (Italy), and then with a ship, the Italian owned Galilea, to Palestine. She arrived five days later at night in Tel Aviv; everyone burned their passports so as the English would not be able to check them. Everything was very well organized. Other passengers were many young people from Germany and Vienna. Her parents were on the following illegal transport in June that arrived in Haifa.

The first illegal transport that left Graz was ten days before Kristallnacht.

Listening daily to the BBC news, the Cohns stayed informed about happenings at home in Vienna. No one could have imagined what was happening in Europe during the war years. Only after the war, in 1947/48, the people learned about the horrors.

In Tel Aviv, Cohn was not able to continue school. The school was too expensive, and she was needed at home. Her father made some money by peddling from door to door. Her brother of 18 years earned some money selling bread. Cohn began an apprenticeship as a dressmaker. After her father and mother died, Cohn and her husband, her brother Jakob and his wife immigrated in 1961 to the United States. Economic circumstances guided the decision to leave Israel.