

Interviewee: Herta Honig

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Interviewer: Alejandra Stekel

Herta Honig de Stern was born on June 24, 1921, in Vienna, Austria. She had an older brother, Lucienne. Her childhood was happy. Family was assimilated. Kashruth was observed at home only as a sign of respect to the grandmother. Brother had his Bar Mitzvah for the same reason. Family only went to synagogue for the High Holidays, and celebrated Passover at home. Mother was one of four sisters. Father, Ignatz, was an orphan. Father had a two-story imported fabric store in the center of the city. (Anecdote: Mrs. Baron de Rothschild was one of his clients. After buying something, Ignatz offered to have it sent home. The lady said: "no, give it to me in your store's bag, this way I can do publicity for you when I walk in the street"!

Schooling: At first, Herta went to a public school; then to a private one. (In Vienna there were no good schools for girls.) Religion was taught according to the students' beliefs. The Jews had to attend religion classes twice as much as the other religions. She was very good in Math. She considered it a gift to be good in Math and therefore had to share the gift with others. She tutored another student, the daughter of the secretary of Alfred Nobel. In praise of that school. Father had a business downtown. Herta was picked up from school every day by a father's employee, and taken home by car. Since her parents had many friends who were actors, Herta began frequenting the theatre and the opera at a very young age. She had not a nanny but a "mademoiselle" with whom she had to speak in French. At school, the students studied Latin.

At the beginning of the Nazi period, the children still went to school. If they were not wearing a swastika they immediately were sent to do some menial work. Herta had to clean the writings on the street. (It was during the plebiscite whether Austrians wanted the annexation to Germany or not. Propaganda was done through slogan painted in the streets.) Herta was given some acid to erase the writings, but often no rags or water.

When things became difficult, the parents sent her brother away. He was first because he was 18, and of military age. Herta followed. The many documents needed to leave Austria were cumbersome to obtain, and they expired within a month. Herta was sent to an aunt in Czechoslovakia. Schooling was a problem as she did not know the language. Finally, she was sent to the British Institute, where many of the students were adults. (She was about 15.) She was there for 3 months, and managed to master the language.

The day before the Anschluss, Herta damaged her Achilles tendon during a ski lesson. While she was being fitted with a cast, Nazism installed itself. Swastika flags were everywhere. The flags had been forbidden before and, when going home on the bus mother and daughter commented on their appearance, when another passenger said: "be quiet. They are here already". Father's store was taken

away. Neither Herta nor Lucienne were in Austria on Kristalnacht. Their parents were. Father was taken prisoner for a couple of nights. They were taken to a rental hall.

Parents then left for Czechoslovakia to Herta's uncle's home. (Uncle had business deals with England.) When the Nazis showed up to take the home away for one of their higher-ups, the chauffeur saved Herta's family. They were given three days to leave.

Leaving Czechoslovakia. Herta's younger aunt, who later perished in a concentration camp, used to go to a hair salon. Sitting next to another lady, the latter engaged the aunt in conversation. "You are a Jew, right?" The aunt said yes. She was the secretary of the Chilean consul in Czechoslovakia. She offered the family a visa in exchange for jewelry. (She said that a ring was not jewelry, but a bracelet with sapphires and diamonds was.) Mother had brought some jewels with her. They gave the woman 4 pieces in exchange of 4 visas. They were scheduled to go to Prague to meet the consul. He extended the visas but, they learned later, they were only tourist visas good for 3 months! (The first attempt to get a visa had involved an affidavit sent to the family by the diamond mogul in S. Africa De Boers. In a letter he invited the family to go to him. The visa was denied, and the consul kept De Boers letter!) While in Chile, the family managed to negotiate the correct visas.

Arrival in Chile on a British ship, two days before the beginning of the war. Arrival just before Rosh Hashanah. Herta was soon married and had a child before she was 19.