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A Jewish Girl in Nazi Austria: Growing up in a Lovely Small Town that Suddenly Became Hell. Memoirs of Nina HOLTON (born Poliborska)

Taped recording (11 double sided tapes), converted to 13 CDs (Approx. 14-15 hours), in the English language

Nina Holton's detailed account of her childhood and teenage years in Baden, Austria has two parts, divided by the Anschluss, in March 1938.

In the first part Nina Holton describes her family, the town Baden, her neighborhood, the schools, she attended, her friends, and all aspects of her everyday life.

She was born in a Polish Orthodox family, in the village Szydlowiec, close to Radom, Poland. Her parents had an arranged marriage. Her father was a young and penniless Talmudic scholar who, in 1923, married the daughter of the well-to-do local merchant, seven years his senior. They had no civilian, only a religious wedding because the father was afraid of the military draft. Shortly after the wedding, he fled from Poland to Austria to escape the draft. He found employment in a hotel catering to Jewish guests in Bad Gastein, where he worked as cantor and supervised the food. Offseason, he worked in the same capacity in San Remo, Italy. His wife followed him to Bad Gastein. In 1925, before Nina was born, her parents rented a small apartment in Baden. Baden was an elegant, leafy spa town, famous for its sulphur springs. It was just about an hour by tram from Vienna. The neighborhood of Dammgasse 26, where Nina's parents settled, was very modest. Several other Jewish families lived and the landlord was a Jewish factory owner. Baden had a sizable Jewish population, but the majority was, as everywhere in Austria, assimilated. Nina's two sisters, Frieda and Lisa were also born in Baden, in 1930 and 1935. Nina loved Baden, especially the many parks and the music in the afternoons. The strong emotional attachment to her town is perceptible throughout her narrative.

Religion defined Nina's family life. The father, although he was absent a lot, was determined to provide a traditional Orthodox Jewish education for his children. He "feared modern things" and assimilation, saw the outside world as a hostile environment. He had no other expectation for his girls than to get married and preserve the old Polish way of life. Although he recognized Nina's intellectual potential – she had good grades in school and was an avid reader – he not only refused to send her to private school instead of the local public schools, but also denied her private lessons in music and languages. Frugality played a part, too. The mother agreed with the father regarding education and assimilation, and although they were affectionate and caring parents, they closed avenues of learning for their children. As Nina points out, in contrast to her parents, assimilated Jews were eager to give the best education to their children and sent them to private schools that paved the way for higher learning. Nina remembered visiting her mother's family in Szydlowiec when she was 10 years old and had the feeling that she had gone back in time. Language -- the lack of German knowledge-- was also an isolating factor for Nina's family. Her father's German was not good, but adequate, while her mother spoke very little German. Nina tried to teach her parents by speaking only German with them. Taboos at home made Nina ever more curious about the outside world, but she learned to keep it to herself and satisfy her curiosity and thirst for learning in many ways. This resulted in minor conflicts with her parents, but without feeling alienated from or hostile toward her parents. She grew closer to her mother in her early teenage years, when she realized that her mother was struggling after the birth of her second sister. Nina became a support for her mother in the household and in raising the two younger siblings.

Their way of life changed all of a sudden in 1938. Prior to that year, Hitler's name came up more and more often. Her father read the newspaper and seemed to be worried about Hitler. March 11, 1938 was Sabbath, "the best day of the week" for Nina. Her mother always cooked the traditional Sabbath meal, they prayed, and her father, who had a wonderful voice, sang. On March 11, they did the same. While they were celebrating, they missed the news about the Anschluss. On March 12, they woke up to huge commotion on the streets: jubilant people, many of them in Nazi party uniforms, bands playing, SA and SS presence as the day progressed. They heard that Hitler had marched into Vienna.

When they looked around, they already saw leaflets with “*Juden ‘raus!*,” and “*Juden verrecke, Hitler erwecke!*” (Out with the Jews! Death to Jews, Hitler awake!) Jewish stores were marked. Her parents knew that they had to get out of Austria. Their situation was complicated by the stateless status of her father and the fact that the parents had no civil wedding and the children were therefore under their mother’s name. Nina’s mother had relatives in the U.S., but they were not inclined to help. Other distant relatives, a communist family in Roxbury, MA, promised an affidavit for her father. He went to the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, where the lines were hopelessly long, but someone, who reconsidered, offered his place in line to him. Thus he signed up for an U.S. visa.

Every day brought bad news. In school, she had to sit separately; in the back of the classroom, and the teachers and classmates ignored her presence. They excluded her from sports and school activities. Hitler’s picture was hung in the classroom instead of Jesus’. Neighbors started making derogatory remarks about Jews.

Jews began learning English – she, too – and participated in learning practical skills. Nina’s mother and she signed up for hat making. Barber and hairdressing courses were very popular.

Summer 1938 was the last one she spent with her friends. Her best friend left with a *Kindertransport* for England. Everyone’s parents worked full time to get to safety somehow. Rumors of arrests and disappearances of Jewish people increased the pressure to get out of Austria.

After Hitler occupied the Sudetenland in October, Baden changed even more. Huge flags with the swastika were flying all over the town, the SS was marching and intimidating Jews. Suddenly, rumors of the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald began circulating. In October, the following sign appeared in Baden’s public parks: “*Juden und Hunden ist der Eintritt verboten!*” (Jews and dogs are forbidden!) Her parents did not dare to celebrate Succoth that year. Her father went to the U.S. Embassy and discovered that he was close to the top of the list. Then, *Kristallnacht* arrived in Baden. The crowd smashed Jewish stores and dragged Jewish men, among them Nina’s father, out of their homes

to the main square and forced them to wash the square on their hands and knees. They were kicked and beaten. Trucks arrived and collected the Jews. Most of them were dumped out along the river, but some were taken to prisons in Vienna, and from Vienna to concentration camps. That night Nina noticed SA men approaching the street where they lived. She alerted her father and hid him in a shed. The SA came for him and threatened the family, and then again early next morning, when they arrested him.

In her father's absence, Nina became her father's advocate and took official matters into her own hands. She regularly traveled to Vienna. Through the *Kultusgemeinde*, she found out that her father was in prison in Vienna. She also found a lawyer, who advised her what papers to get on her father's behalf to obtain the U.S. visa and be released from prison. Nina found U.S. Embassy personnel to be indifferent and hostile, not interested in the plight of the Jews. She had to fill out endless paperwork. As she put it, she "grew up overnight." She was fourteen.

At the end of the year, the affidavit from the U.S. arrived for Nina's father and the U.S. Embassy certified that he would soon get the U.S. visa. That assurance brought her father out of prison by the end of January 1939. Her parents married in a civil ceremony, which enabled the father to send an affidavit for his wife and children once in the U.S. He left in February 1939.

Shortly thereafter, two young men attacked Nina close to her home. Her mother decided to leave "her beloved Baden." They rented a room in Vienna, in the 2nd district, which was predominantly Jewish and waited for the affidavit from the father. She learned some beautician's skills. She was very happy because her mother decided to spend her savings on new clothes for them all, since they were not allowed to take money out of Austria.

In May, the affidavits arrived. The sponsors were the same people who helped her the father. At the end of July, the family received their U.S. visas. After some complications, they purchased their tickets for an Italian ship from Genoa for September 1, 1939.

On their way to Italy, they were searched and harassed by German guards at every station. Nina was very excited about being in Italy. She summarized the situation as follows: “We left Inferno and we were entering Paradiso.”

The last hurdle was that the war broke on the very day, September 1, when they were supposed to leave Italy. Italian authorities closed the harbor and everyone had to leave the ship. The family had no money, no accommodation, food, etc. The Genoa Jewish Committee took care of them for about two weeks. Then they were allowed to leave but they had to buy new tickets. Her father somehow scraped together the money for them, and finally, they managed to leave. At dawn on September 23, Nina spotted the Statue of Liberty from the deck of the ship.

Nina emphasizes how lucky they were. Many of the people they knew in Baden were murdered in Auschwitz. Her mother’s family perished.

Later in life, she returned many times to Austria, once to Baden, but she didn’t find her old neighborhood.

Nina Holton’s recording is of literary quality. She has an elegant and, at the same time, very precise way of speaking.

The first part of her recollections is interspersed with lots of singing: Polish songs that she learned from her mother, Hebrew songs that her father sang, and popular songs that she liked in her early teenage years.