

Erika Mandler Testimony Transcript

My name is Erika Mandler. I was born in Vienna, Austria on July the 22nd 1922. My maiden name was Erika Raab. My family and my brother, Kurt, who is nine years older than I am, lived in a very lovely spacious apartment in a four story apartment house on the Nickelgasse number one in the second district of Vienna. Our apartment was on the second floor – door number seven. I had a wonderful, very, very extremely happy childhood. My family – my, the household of my parents – was strictly Orthodox Kosher. We belonged to one of the most Orthodox synagogues in the second district of Vienna. It was called the Schiff Shul – it was located in the Schiffgasse – or Schiff Street – and my parents were members of this synagogue and I remember going with my mother, and we sat up on the balcony –mother and I - and my father and my brother were downstairs.

We had a very strict kosher household. My family – uncles and aunts and cousins – were a very close knit family. We all lived in walking distance. It was lovely. On Friday night – I shall never forget, Friday night was a very, very special night in our household because mother prepared a very festive *Erev Shabbas* meal. And my grandmother, who by that time already was a widow, and my aunt who was single lady – she lived with my grandmother. They came over to our house every Friday night for dinner. And it was an evening I shall never forget. A very special memory in my mind always will be my grandmother's birthday because it fell on the third night of Hanukkah. And it was very, very special because all the family – uncles and aunts and cousins - gathered at her house and you can imagine it was quite a group. The third light of Hanukkah was lit and then we all had presents for grandmother and flowers and the children had to memorize little poems and each one of us went and told our little poem and handed grandmother flowers and that was a very special event in our family.

As a child, I one of my hobbies was ice skating. I was not a figure skater, but I loved going to skate. And in Vienna we had a skating rink right in the neighborhood and I could just come home from school and change my clothes and go skating for one or two hours and I went at least three or four times a week. And that was where I met my friends in wintertime. And it was great fun. I went to grade school and what you call here junior high school to a school - believe it or not the building is still standing - and the name of the school is Sperrschule. It was located in the Sperrgasse in Vienna. It was about – oh, I would say – a ten, to fifteen minute walk for me. By that time, my brother, who was nine years older was already in the gymnasium, he always wanted to go into medicine. So he started in medical school but I didn't really wanted to go on to the *gymnasium*.

As I a child, I was always interested in needle and thread. And for some reason, I wanted to do something with my hands and so we decided that I would go rather to trade school and learn a profession – a trade - that I could do and enjoy. And so I ended up going to a two-year trade school which was called *Kriegsheim* and they taught regular subjects like you get in any

other school. But the main emphasis was on sewing. And that's where I got my basic training in sewing. I do want to tell you about the friends as a child. I had a group of really incredible boys and girls as friends when I grew up.

My parents, although being very Orthodox and religious, they were very tolerant and very broadminded and they never objected that I would have non-Jewish friends. And so they didn't mind they didn't objected to me going even to, I remember, going to midnight mass Christmas Eve. Because they felt, well, that's part of education - worldly education. And then, I remember that so well. And I also remember helping my non-Jewish friends decorate Christmas trees. And that was fun. And then in turn for Passover, my mother made matzo balls by the hundreds of dozens and we gave to all of our non-Jewish friends plates of matzo balls with instructions of how to cook them. And so it really was a very liberal and wonderful childhood for me and those first fifteen years of my life in Vienna where the most wonderful any child can have.

Hitler took over in Germany in 1933. And in 1934 my mother's youngest brother and his family fled from Germany. He and his family lived in Berlin and he had a shoe factory and he was already persecuted and he felt that the time has come to just get out. And they came to Vienna just with their shirts on their backs. And that was really the first time, as a child, that I realized that antisemitism exists and something terrible is brewing somewhere. And so, this uncle and his wife and two children came and my family helped them to get back on their feet and begin a new life so to speak. But then at the end, he perished with all the other family during the Holocaust.

Well, then time went on and then I remember that dreadful Friday of March the 11th 1938 – a night I shall never forget. My father and brother came home from shul – from the synagogue - and Friday night dinner was served and my grandmother didn't come that Friday night because we all had an inkling something was brewing. Something, I mean, after all, we read the newspapers. We knew what was coming. But, and I must tell you, in our household on Friday night or *Shabbas*, the radio was never played. But that night the radio was turned on because we needed to know what was coming. And, sure enough, we heard the speech of the then president of the country of Austria, Dr. Kurt Von Schushnick, where he told the country that he is surrendering Austria to Hitler and the Germans. He does not want to shed any Austrian blood, therefore, he is surrendering. And when we heard that, my mother was just horrified. She, the first thing and I remember this so well, she said, "This is the end for us. This is the beginning of the end." And, of course, that was a terrible situation.

No one knew what to do next – where do we go from here. And it was unbelievable. You cannot imagine the instant change in people. It seemed like the Austrians were ready for it. It seemed like the Austrian, the policemen even had their banner in their pockets to put on their arm with the big swastika. It seemed like that they knew what was coming – way ahead of time.

And not only that, but it hurt me as a child so terribly how my non-Jewish friends immediately were told that they couldn't play with me, they couldn't call me and how they turned against me.

Things were so bad that, for instance, my brother, that was already studying at the university medical school, could not go to the university to pick up his papers, because Jews were not permitted to enter the building. I couldn't go and play in my beloved park, which was just fifteen/ twenty minutes from my house, because there was a big sign on the entrance posted, "Dogs and Jews are not permitted." Benches in the park had painted overnight – this all happened overnight – they had signs painted on the bench, "Not for Jews." The *Hitler Jugend* began their horrible persecutions and terrible things just overnight it came. Well, they stopped Jewish men, for instance, with beards and either cut their beards off or in some instances, they took a match and burned the beard. And no one came to the rescue. People were just standing and watching. But no one would come and help and stop these youngsters.

Then I remember the instances where the *Hitler Jugend*, or the Nazis right away, would paint signs on the street, on the sidewalk, and then the next morning they would catch Jewish people and have them just come and would bend down and have to scrub it off. They had buckets with water and no matter how you were dressed and they asked the Jewish people to clean the sidewalk. You see. And, of course, the next thing was that all the Jewish stores were marked with the Star of David and windows were broken and so it was a devastating, immediate, overnight experience.

The next day the Germans were marching in. It was all so as if they were waiting at the border and couldn't wait to get in and take over Austria. That was the day of the Anschluss, the famous Anschluss. Of course, for us it was we had to make a decision. Now what is to be done. My parents had a legal passport and could prove that they would go to Czechoslovakia to open their business, you see, and but then the question came at the time it was a hard time to get a visa. You could get your visa if you could prove that you are coming back, because Czechoslovakia, at that time didn't want any more Jews either, you see. So, my parents told them, "Well, we are coming back because our children are here." See? So they did get the visa and they my parents left for Czechoslovakia and my brother and I stayed in Vienna, and our apartment was closed up and we moved to my grandmother's house, and I could finish my school. But then, my brother, he kept listening to the news, and of course, we all did – and listened and realized the development and it wasn't getting any better. And we realized that things were turning were getting rather bad too in Czechoslovakia. And Czechoslovakia was mobilizing in September and getting sort of something is going to happen there and we realized that if we don't try to get to our parents, we may never have another chance.

Of course, there was no way for us to go legally. So my brother, immediately, checked out the possibility of a way of crossing the border, illegally. Of course, I didn't know anything about it. He didn't tell me anything but he made the contacts. And he found out that it is possible. Of course, with money, anything was possible. And he found out that there was a way

we could cross the Austrian border into Czechoslovakia, if we can manage to get 400 German marks. And I don't know where he got it, but he got the money. And we arrived at eleven o'clock at night and we made our way to the house of my cousins, where my parents were and we rang the doorbell and my parents had no idea we were coming and you can imagine it was absolutely crying, tearing, welcome. And it was a wonderful, wonderful reunion because they never dreamt that they would see us alive again. So in that we ended up then staying then in Trenčín with my parents.

My mother started doing a little bit of cooking for people, my brother, who he already knew perfectly English, gave private lessons in English. And I found a job at a tailor, but I was only fifteen at that time.

March '42. You see we were already noticing changing – changes. And we saw – the persecution became already very noticeable in Czechoslovakia. And Czechoslovakia had three camps where they held Jews. And Novaky was close to where we lived. It was in northern Czechoslovakia.

March of '42, my parents, my brother and I were taken to Novaky, which was a camp – they called it a holding camp for Jews. It was sort of a working camp, you see. The camp was guarded and held by the Slovaks, compared with any of the other concentration camps in Poland and Germany, it was, paradise, I would say, compared to them. First of all, we could stay together. They didn't separate men and women. That was one plus. And then the four of us – my parents, my brother and I, could stay in one room. The barracks were divided in rooms and it was very small but we had four bunks – they weren't beds, they were bunks. And we brought you see we brought our own suitcases with stuff, so we had our own things. But there were no bathrooms, no showers, no bathtubs of any sort and we bathed ourselves in a small, in a basin right in our room. We had to carry water. And then we had communal bathrooms – like latrines, you know – open. And then there was one kitchen, which supplied food for us – three meals a day, and we went with our little pots and got our food and everyone had the same.

And so that was actually and then everyone who could work was stationed at a certain place where they could work, you see. And my brother, then, did get permission to help with at the infirmary with the doctors, and he was very happy about it. And I met my future husband, Dr. George Mandler, who actually came to Novaky six months before I did. So he was already established so to speak, and he had the privileges to go down into the village once a week to buy supplies. So that was really nice in a way. So you could get information and you got you learned what's going on in the outside world, you see. And so time passed and we all lived, of course, not knowing what tomorrow brings and until September 1943, and again the High Holidays approached and the camp commander received orders from Germany that they need – they want – three hundred Jews. You see, this camp was a holding camp and from there they so to speak shipped Jews into Auschwitz, which at that point we – the inmates - really didn't know where we were going but our leaders knew it and of course the commander did.

So anyway, in September of '43, everyone was told – all 1,600 inmates were told to stand outside in report and the commander came and he said, “If I read your name, whoever is called, is to step forward.” And we didn’t know what would happen. So, he called the names and all of a sudden we hear, “Simon Raab, Henrietta Raab, Kurt Raab, Erika.” And we stepped forward and those people had to pack their bag and were ready to be taken down by trucks to the railroad station. And, of course, we were horrified. We knew we were going somewhere. We had an inkling – that that they called it resettling, but we knew it would be something worse than that. So by that time, Dr. Mandler and I already had been in love and we felt very close and he stepped forward and he told the commander he said, “If this woman goes, I go.” And the commander said, “Now you can’t go. I need you. You are a doctor and you know we need you here.” And he said, “I don’t care. I love her and if she goes, I don’t want to live. I am going.” So he said, “All right, she can stay.” And they pulled me out. And after everyone it was sort of settled down and everyone packed their – you know - belongings, and ready to go and it was just awful, you know - to think that my parents are going to leave and my brother – and I just couldn’t bear it and I went to George and I said, “Now, I can’t live knowing that my parents are going and I’m sure that they go to certain death and please, I just don’t want to live this way.” And he said, “Well, don’t worry, I’ll do my best to get them out too.”

My husband’s brother – you see the camp had a group of Jewish leadership also. They in turn, performed the duties and gave orders from the orders they received from the Slovak guards. And my husband’s brother was sort of the leader of it. And so to make a long story short, my husband – later husband – told his brother and begged him if he could please help to get these two old people out and my brother. And they did get rescued. But they were already in the train – in the cattle train – and the commander came down and called the three names and my brother and my parents – but the tragedy of the story was – they had to fulfill you see three hundred people – so four other people had to go in our place.

We stayed then in Novaky until, life went on, and by that time the Jewish commanders had a way of listening to the radio and of course, they listened to BBC and we were informed as to the world situation and preparation for war and everything.

So I do remember my husband telling me then that they received a letter in 1943, from the Warsaw when the Warsaw uprising began in the ghetto, you see, and they knew about Novaky, about the concentration of Jews and they sent a letter to us asking for help and asking if we could send weapons - guns to help them. Of course, we couldn’t and we didn’t but we it sort of gave us again the knowledge of what is going to happen and the annihilation of all the Jews of Poland and what is facing us if we won’t be liberated in the meantime.

August the 6th 1944 all of a sudden the gates of the camp were opened. Nobody told us anything. You see the Germans had come had marched closer to the Czech borders and the Slovaks could not hold us any longer. So they just opened the gates and so to speak told us, “You are free – go but you are on your own - whatever you can do.” And the commander had

two or three trucks backed up into the camp to get young Jewish men in the trucks who wanted to join the army and fight. And my husband was one of them who wanted to join because he was an officer before and he wanted to fight in the Czechoslovak army. And so he left on the truck but he told me he will be back to help me save my parents. And he came back after a few days and we took my parents – my two old parents - and my brother went with us. And we drove them up into a small village and again, I can't tell you the name of the village - it was right under the mountains and tried to save my parents in a farmer's house. It happened to be the very last house of the village right under the mountains, and asked the farmer if he would save those two old people for us. And my husband had money, and he gave him some money and he said, "Please save those people for us." And I stayed with my parents.

And my husband said now – of course we were not legally married but we were in love and we knew we would get married the first chance we would have in liberation. And my husband said, "Now, I am going to be with the army and I'll send for you as soon as I can." And I stayed with my parents. And a month later he sent a soldier to fetch me and this soldier took me to the town of Harmanec, where the Slovak national uprising was started. We stayed in Harmanec for until about October, 1944 when the German SS – it wasn't just German Army – it was the worst – the German SS stormed in and took over and the Slovaks could not hold the border anymore and it was the middle of the night and they woke us up and said, "Everybody run for your life."

And Harmanec was a town located in the valley and one side of the mountain were the Germans and we had to run up the other side of the mountains and we grabbed our knapsack and we got our shoes on and in the middle of the night and we ran up the mountain - just everyone – the soldiers, the officers and I -because the only place we had to go to survive was go into the mountains. There was another couple who sort of clung to us and they went with us. And my husband and this other man started taking small pine trees down – cutting pine trees down and chopped the branches off the trees and then they dug a hole into the side of the mountain and lined the walls and floors of this hole with tree trunks, so we wouldn't touch the dirt, you see – and we used the branches as mattresses.

Anyway, time went on and then we found out that the Germans came closer and we needed to go deeper into the mountains. As time went on, all four of us became infested with lice – we had head lice and body lice. And there was nothing we could do - we had no change of clothes, I had no toothbrush - I had absolutely nothing. And the food situation was very, very bad.

After we were in the third bunker, we of course we heard shooting. We heard grenades and we knew the partisans were in the mountains – we knew it. But the question was - how do we get to them. Because we knew we had to get out - we had to make contact. And it just so happened one day - the partisans knew also that we were there - and not just we – but there were many people there hiding. There were Slovaks hiding, you see. And they sent the Russian

soldiers out to contact all these people and asked us would we go with them. Immediately we, of course, agreed. And we joined the partisans. Now this was March 1945.

Now you must know, I was seven months pregnant but that was fine. And all we had – or all I had was clothes I had on myself - the two sweaters. I had no gloves but I remember pulling my sleeves over my hands and tried to be warm. And high snow – I mean deep snow. And he told us - this commander told us that we would in order to get to freedom and get to the other side of the mountain, we would have to march over the Ďumbier Mountain, which is the highest mountain in Slovakia in order to get to the eastern side of Czechoslovakia, which was already occupied, and liberated, liberated I'm sorry, by the Russians, you see. And it would take about five days. So we marched day and night as much as we could. We made it across the mountain and we were liberated. In May of 1945 I gave birth to a little girl and it was a very joyous occasion, of course, and unfortunately, the child had malformations and no wonder through what all I had to go through and the little girl only lived for two days.

After that it was very – we you cannot imagine the turmoil. You couldn't get a train – nothing worked because the moving of soldiers, you see, and everything was confused and our only thought was we wanted to go to carry on and find our parents. So after I recovered, we decided to go back to close to Novaky where we had hidden our parents hoping to find them. And my brother happened to be there – it was just luckily – it was just a coincidence and of course, unfortunately, when we came there the farmer told us, “What you came to get, I can't give you. Unfortunately, your parents were – well, what happened one of the other farmers in town found out about this man hiding two old people and he told.

And it was just the end the very end of 1944, the Germans came with a truck and took my parents and my mother - the farmer told us - my parents were on their hands and knees and begged for their life but they didn't have any mercy and took them and my mother starved to death at Ravensbrück camp and my father died in Buchenwald.

So then we tried to make our way back into the center of Czechoslovakia. And my husband – he went to the health department in Prague and just told them, “I'm a physician. I'm available. Where do you need me?” So they said, “Yes, we need a specialist in Laich Moritz.” So we took the train to Laich Moritz in August of 1945.

And my brother-in-law went back to Prague. He was a chemist and he got his old job back and he lived in Prague and he told us right in 1945, “Now you should register with the American Embassy because the situation – okay we are free but the situation is not going to stay this way. The Communists are definitely going to take over.” And my husband wouldn't believe it. And so my brother-in-law registered with the American Embassy right away and their number was 25 and 26. You see, Czechoslovakia had the quota system with the United States and you had to wait till your quota came. And they would only allow four hundred people to immigrate to the United States a year. So I'm telling you this because when my brother-in-law

told my husband to register, he said, “Well, I’ll think about it a day or two.” And that day or two cost us four years of waiting.

My brother-in-law left for New York the end of 1945. We came on the Queen Mary. I’ll never forget when we came into New York, December 17th of 1949. We arrived at the harbor of New York City and George and I were the last people to get off the ship. And my family and my husband’s family thought that we probably didn’t make it because everyone else came down but us. But we were standing at the railing looking at the Statue of Liberty – we were free! It was incredible!

Source: Erika Mandler video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/mandlererika/>