Karl F. Urbach

Photographed with his wife Lilly

Wartime Experience: Camp survivor

March 11, 1938 was a pivotal event for me when the German Army marched into Austria and the Nazis took over. I had been born in Vienna on November 9th, 1917 and at the time of the Anschluss was a medical student in my third year at the University of Vienna. As a Jew I could not even retrieve my books from my locker at the University after the Nazis took control.

While in Germany the repression and persecution of the Jews had gradually increased after Hitler came to power in 1933, it was immediate and severe after the takeover of Austria. The only hope was to leave. This was immensely difficult, because few countries accepted Jewish refugees and the Nazis, even though they wanted to be rid of their Jewish citizens, made it as hard as possible to obtain the papers necessary for emigration: passport, tax clearance, etc., etc.. I Spent the whole summer standing in line at the various offices to obtain these papers.

My only brother, Otto R. Urbach, had gone to the United States three years earlier and through him I was issued a U.S. visa in early November of 1939. I had almost all necessary papers in order and a ship's ticket to leave via Holland on Christmas eve and arrive in New York on New Year's eve where two American friends would be there to meet me.

However, on the day after the Kristallnacht I was arrested by the Gestapo in front of the Jewish emigration office where I had gone to obtain another required document. I sensed that something was wrong because there was not the customary line of people waiting. I turned to get away quickly but a man in civilian clothes came up to me and asked what I wanted. I replied that I had come for some papers. "Well" he said, "just walk in and get what you want". It was too late to get away with a bunch of obvious Gestapos standing around. I went to the door and opened it and there, lined up on each side of the stairs, were a row of beefy looking big storm troopers in full field uniform and steel helmets.

The first one grabbed me by my coat and shouted, "So we got you." He socked me with his fists, then the others started in. One slap after another, kicks in my back. I did not feel anything because the shock was too great. They threw me up and down the stairs and it seemed great fun for them. At last they pushed me into a little room. About 20 people were there already. Men, women, and children with fear on their faces. Some were crying.

After a long time a Gestapo official asked all the women' and children and boys under 16 to come with him. They were allowed to leave. The rest of us were loaded on trucks. In the rear sat a storm trooper with his pistol ready who said: "Now you keep quiet and don't move. If you make any trouble I'll shoot but it does not matter because we are going to shoot you anyhow."

The truck took us to a well-known prison which was a school before the Anschluss. We stayed there 5 days. During the first 2 days one truckload after another arrived with people with torn clothes and bloody faces. There was not even room enough to sit on the floor. Occasionally the Gestapo held "inspection" in the middle of the night.

After five days they loaded us again like cattle into trucks and took us to the big city prison. There a physician in storm trooper uniform asked me just one question: "Healthy?" When I said "yes," another storm trooper kicked me into the next room where a high Gestapo official sat behind a huge desk like God himself. He asked me what steps I had taken to leave Germany. When I showed him my papers and my ship's ticket I felt certain that I would be free within the next few minutes. "That's fine" he said, "you have lots of time" and put a big red "D" on my paper. "D" he said to the waiting storm trooper. Again, a kick and I was in the corridor forced to stand with my face to the wall as usual.

A voice behind me said: "Do you know where you are going?" When I said "no" I was told: "well my friend, Dachau." I could not believe it. I would not believe it. It was so impossible. Dachau! This word meant murder, slaughter, hell. I believed it in the evening when my train, consisting of 15 cattle wagons, each loaded with.80 prisoners, left Vienna's West station.. There was no place to sit or lie down, nor was there water, light or air. And so we rattled for 12 hours to Dachau.

Next morning when the train stopped we tumbled out of the wagons into the reality of Dachau: heavy fog, sand, barbed wire and storm troopers with bayoneted guns, ready to shoot. Life in Dachau was one of calculated brutality and uncertainty. People died but it was not yet an extermination camp. The "final solution" policy came later. There was cruelty, cold, hunger. Standing at attention for hours in the winter mud and snow while roll call was taken. In December it became horribly cold and we, dressed in nothing warmer than striped pajamas, had to keep marching and stood for hours at rollcall.

I was young and healthy and survived and was released after ten weeks through the intercession of a half-Jewish cousin with the proviso that I had to be out of Germany within 30 days and the threat to be returned to Dachau if I did not meet this deadline. My Austrian passport and many of my exit papers had expired and now I had to get new ones and stand in line for them again. Fortunately, people in the lines, who saw my shorn head and knew the tell-tale sign of the concentration camp and that I had to get out of the country in a hurry, often let me go ahead.

I left for Holland on the 29th day and arrived in New York six months before World War II started.

My father, Dr. Maximilian Urbach, who had died in 1919, had been the youngest of 13 siblings who had families in all parts of the old Hapsburg empire. My mother, Alice Mayer Urbach, who had been able to leave for England in late spring of 1938, was also part of a large family. About 90% of all these relatives perished.

I went to Oregon where I had American friends who took me in, got me my first job in a small rural hospital, and were supportive in every way. I discovered a small college in the small town in which I worked and studied there in my spare time while learning to become an American. After a year I went to Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and graduated two years later. Summers I worked in the Forest Service, in canneries, lumber mills, and on construction of housing for shipyard workers in Vancouver, Washington.

In the summer of 1942 I graduated with a degree in Chemistry and expected to be drafted into the US Army but instead was appointed as a graduate assistant and graduate student in the Chemistry department of the Dental School of Northwestern University in Chicago. This was deemed an essential occupation which allowed me to continue with my studies. After I received my doctorate in chemistry in 1946 I was offered an instructorship in the pharmacology department of Northwestern University Medical School. This enabled me to study medicine part time.

I received my M.D. degree in 1950 and interned at the Public Health Service Hospital in Staten Island, N.Y. I liked my year there so well that I spent the next 30 years in the Hospital Division of the US Public Health Service - the last 10 years of my career as the director of the San Francisco hospital.

I married, had children and am now happily retired and have three fine grandchildren. I had rare luck to escape and live a normal life. I have never been able to forget, however, all the relatives who perished and all those millions I never knew and I shall think of them and remember as long as I live.