

A Mother's Courage Defied the Nazis

by Robert Swain

On the bleak day of March 13, 1938, Hitler entered Vienna at the head of motorized units of the German army, thus announcing the official takeover of Austria by the Third Reich. There were then 118,000 Jews in the historic city; by the end of World War II there was hardly any left in the Austrian capital.

Nelly Myers (nee Rattner) and her (family would have perished under the sadistic Nazis had it not been for the courage and indomitable faith of her deaf mother, Hilda Rattner, a sewing machine operator. Other members of the family were Nelly's hearing grandmother; Nelly's deaf sister, Lilly, and a deaf uncle, Richard Wiener.

At the unnerving sight of Hitler's goons swinging bully clubs, the mother was most determined to take her family out of Austria. She hastened to do so after Nelly, then nine years old, was expelled from the local oral school for the deaf for the "crime" of being a non-Aryan. They even prowled around her bedroom while she was in bed, badly frightened. As time passed, Nelly and her mother were heart-broken at the arrest of as many relatives and Jewish friends, none to be seen again. Among the vanished was Nelly's divorced father, also deaf, a tailor of fine men's clothes. He was grabbed with other deaf men found congregating on the street. He died in the gas chambers at the horrifying Minsk camp in Poland.

Nelly, who remained at home for nearly two years, was taught in secret by a brave teacher. The teacher implored the mother to flee with her family as soon as possible. As much as she desperately wanted to escape, the mother lacked the money to travel. But she pinned her hopes on obtaining exit visas from the U.S. Embassy because of the fact she had a hearing brother residing in New York City. She made several trips to the embassy. where she was given the brushoff because she wanted visas for four deaf people. "Can you find work and support yourself in New York?" she was repeatedly asked by the skeptical embassy people. Yet she was so persistent that the embassy advised her that before serious consideration could be given to the visas, she had to get an affidavit of her brother's U.S. citizenship as well as his promise in writing that he would assist her and the family after they arrived in New York. Indeed a big hurdle, when the chances for flight were fading fast. Undaunted, she took her problem to the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society in Vienna. She was told "Well try to see what we can do, although we can't make any promises."

Meanwhile, Nelly's mother went through the daily nightmare to keep her family from starving because Jews were forbidden to go to the grocery store and food markets Relying on her wits, she managed to buy stale vegetables and meat leftovers from kind souls. The superintendent of Nelly's apartment house risked arrest by smuggling some food to the hungry family.

Each day brought the unexpected. For instance, the mother was forced to take a Jewish couple with a young son into her small, three-room apartment. They were among the Jews being brought to Vienna from outlying areas and later shipped on cattle cars to concentration camps.

Nelly saw the persecution against the Jews. Such memories still haunt her'. Stores and businesses owned by Jews were plundered and destroyed. A temple next door to Nelly's apartment house was burned. Nelly cried at seeing aged Jewish men forced to walk with signs crudely lettered "Ich bin Jude." She was sickened that Jewish teenage girls were prodded by hard-blows to drink the urine of the storm troopers on the street. Older women were abused and their eyeglasses shattered to pieces. Nelly dared not go to her favorite park because all the benches were painted "Juden Verboten." One day she was surrounded by a gang of Hitler Youth. They snarled at her "You--a Jew!" She was too terrified to say anything and received a stinging slap across her face.

Never losing hope, Nelly's mother prayed for a miracle The miracle occurred when NIAS, at last, sent her the signed affidavit and the prized visas and the steamship tickets for New York, which were secured through the efforts of the Jewish Federation of Philanthropies of New York. She had already gotten passports from sympathetic Austrian government personnel. She still has her passport stamped with the swastika.

The mother ordered the family to pack only the clothes needed and to get ready to take the next available train for then-neutral Italy. Nelly's grandmother begged to visit her husband's grave for a final goodbye. "NO!" the mother retorted. She explained it was fatal to remain in Vienna another day. The streets were crowded with trucks picking up Jews. On the train before the Italian border was reached, hard-faced Gestapo agents went through the cars, inspecting I.D. papers. Nelly's mother froze when they came to her. She was thoroughly searched and subjected to the indignity of having her mouth pried open to see if she had gold crowns on her teeth and whether she had anything of value concealed under her tongue.

At the seaport of Genoa, Italy, the family waited anxiously for a week before they could be sure of boarding a New York-bound ship. They feared they might be stranded because of wild rumors that Italy was bound to enter the war on Germany's side any day. Luckily, Italy didn't take the plunge until one month later after

France fell. In May 1940 the family sailed on the S.S. Rex, the last Italian boat to leave Italy before Mussolini kicked his unprepared nation into the horrors of World War II.

In New York harbor, the family was taken to Ellis Island where they languished for five months. Nelly's mother thought they might be deported due to their deafness. The mother's hearing brother in New York contacted Mrs. Tanya Nash, a social worker with the New York Jewish Society for the Deaf (now NYSD). She did what she could to help. Finally, the federal district court in New York City issued a release order on the condition that the mother post a \$2,500 bond so the family wouldn't become public charges because of deafness. Mrs. Nash got a loan from the Jewish Federation of Philanthropies. The mother succeeded in obtaining a seamstress's job and paid off the debt within five years. Mrs. Nash found an apartment for the family in the Bronx. Of her stay on Ellis Island, Nelly had fun playing on its extensive grounds and admiring the New York skyline. A book lover, she went regularly to the island's library and taught herself English. Her mother and deaf uncle also made use of their enforced leisure by making dresses for Nelly and Lilly. Other emigrants saw this activity and asked the mother and uncle to do some mending and to make new clothes for them. This resulted in petty cash for the family.

With the financial aid of Simon Osserman, grandfather of James Stern, Nelly and Lilly entered the Lexington School for the Deaf.

More than 40 years later, Nelly, a divorcee, and her mother, Hilda Rattner, now 80, are still most thankful to be American citizens. They can't help expressing their deepest gratitude to Mrs. Tanya Nash for coming to their rescue. Nelly and her mother have separate apartments at the Tanya Towers in Manhattan, which, incidentally, is named after their benefactress.

What happened to the rest of the family? Lilly resides in Maryland and has four grown children. The grandmother later moved to Israel where she died. The deaf uncle has been dead for several years. Nelly is justly proud of her two hearing children. Daughter, Linda, recently received a Ph.D. from the Harvard School of Business Administration and is in management with a large pharmaceutical manufacturing concern in New Jersey. Son, Randall, who lives on the West Coast, is attending the University of California at Berkeley for a master's degree in social work. He is an interpreter for the deaf and assists them in the area of job placement.

"America is the greatest country in the world!" Nelly, Lilly and their mother never tire of repeating.

Author's note: Nelly checked the facts with her mother. Not only did her mother read the story; but she experienced a tremendous spiritual rejuvenation, and declared that her family was worth all the pain and sacrifice she went through.