

Paul Back

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Vienna

Austria

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Interviewer: Tanja Eckstein

Paul Back just turned 76 years old and I admire his zest for life, his curiosity about everything that interests him, which is really a wide spectrum.

He loves the music from various people, countries, and continents, is interested in politics and history as much as he is in art and architecture, venerates the old and the modern, travels to large cities with as much passion as to smaller regions, loves sitting in coffee houses and chatting, watching films, and meeting people.

Sometime you can get the creeps when he tells you about the distances he covers in a day: twice a day he travels from Floridsdorf [21st district], where he lives with his wife Jutta, into the city center and back; even a much younger person would be reluctant to do this.

Paul Back works several hours once a week in the Austrian Resistance documentation archive. It was a pleasure to interview him.

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My Family History

My mother's side of the family comes from Zalozce [today Ukraine], a small town in Galicia located on the outskirts of the Habsburg Monarchy, close to the better-known cities of Kolomea and Brody. I know next to nothing about my great-grandparents. But it's likely that the parents of my grandmother, Pessie Feder, who was born on 16 September 1872 to Leib and Dobrisch Muehlgrom, were also from Zalozce, where many Jews had lived back then. It's possible I could have learned more, if only I had been interested early enough. But now it's a little late. I only know about my grandparents.

My grandfather's name was Salomon Feder. He died of the Spanish flu in Vienna in 1918. I never met him but there is a family photo from Zalozce, and I know a few stories about him. He wasn't a strictly religious person, but he was traditional and always wore a kippah [religious head covering],



but no peyos [sidelocks].

From family stories I know that he spoke multiple languages, and, although he was an orphan – or maybe because of that – traveled a lot in his youth. He was, for example, in the Holy Land, Palestine.

My grandfather was a watchmaker by trade, but my grandparents owned a bookshop where you could also purchase school and stationary supplies. He was a man of great esteem in Zalozce. He was the village's district representative and directed the public health insurance company. The pastor and the teacher were frequent guests at my grandparent's, and they played cards together.

My grandmother gave birth to fifteen children, ten of whom lived. I don't know what the five children died of. It was probably due to the hygienic conditions back then. All the children were raised traditionally. I don't think they had a particularly destitute life, but I don't think you can get rich with so many children.

My Aunt Lea, the eldest of the siblings, was born in 1896. Interestingly, the name of the midwife is also on my Aunt Lea's birth certificate; her name was Sabine Feder. I was assured that there was absolutely no familial relation to the midwife; but I doubt this. My aunts Regina and Rosa, my Uncle Izchak, my mother, Maria – her Jewish name was Miriam – and my uncles Simon, Hermann, and Leon were all born in Zalozce.

There weren't just Jews and Poles living in Galicia, but also many Ukrainians, who they called Ruthenians. It was a real mixture of people. My mother could speak a little Polish and also knew a few Ruthenian songs.

She and her sisters went to a general school. They spoke German at home, but it was definitely German with Yiddish expressions. German language and culture stood in the foreground. It is characteristic of many Jews in Poland or Galicia not trapped in the Orthodox milieu that they tended to be close to German or Austrian culture.

As a result, my family didn't have any great difficulties when they moved to Vienna later. You could hear that some of my uncles and aunts weren't born in Vienna, but with the younger ones, like my mother, I don't think you could pick out anything.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Jewish life changed in that region. The war was devastating, both personally and for the area as a whole. The theatre of war changed a few times. The Russian troops would advance, and then it was the Cossacks, and at another time it would be the Austro-Hungarian Army.

It went back and forth until my family fled in 1916. My grandfather, Salomon, had a sister in Vienna. Her name was Mina Blaustein. She lived at Obere Donau-Strasse 9 and had two children, Irma and Eduard. I can't remember Mina's husband at all. But I know that Irma and Eduard fled to South America after the German invasion of Austria.

In 1916 my grandparents and their eight children left their home and, in 1917, arrived in Vienna. During the escape in 1916, which lasted a year, my Aunt Klara was born. My Aunt Berta was then born in Vienna in 1918. It was very difficult in Vienna with so many children; they were actually

penniless.

My grandparent's apartment was in a block of flats in the 20th district, at Perinet-Gasse 2. Perinet-Gasse is a very short street; two buildings stand on the right side of the street and two buildings stand on the left side, which leads to Gauss-Platz and Augarten Park. That was my grandmother's first and last accommodation. However, in the final days before her deportation she lived in the 2nd district at Holland-Strasse 12.

The building on Perinet-Gasse was built at the end of the 19th century, so it was maybe 20 years old when my grandparents moved in with their nine children. Many apartments back then were one-room apartments. That apartment had a room, a kitchen, and a small room without sanitary facilities. The water and toilet were in the hall. It's possible that they were supported by charity organizations. There were organizations in Vienna that helped people through the worst.

My grandfather died of the Spanish flu in 1918, one year after their arrival in Vienna. He was a victim of this epidemic, which killed around 40 million people worldwide in 1918 and 1919.

The older children, Lea and my mother, who were born at the turn of the century, were almost grown-up and soon left home, married and started their own families. They didn't live far from their mother. There were still six children at home and so the family scraped by. The children started working as soon as they could and supported their mother.

My grandmother tried to maintain a traditional household after grandfather's death. That wasn't always easy, because it was hard to keep it up, given the physical conditions in such a small apartment with so many children. She tried to keep milk and meat products separate, even though that wasn't easy, as they needed to use the separate dishes and cutlery. She wasn't able to keep the household one hundred percent kosher, but pork never came into the house!

She celebrated Shabbat. She lit candles and there was always challah – Shabbat bread – on the table. It also smelled different, but it was a very special smell. The apartment was scrubbed and made to shine – something she kept up all those years.

Once a year on the High Holidays, on Rosh Hashanah [Jewish New Year] and Yom Kippur [Jewish day of atonement; most important Jewish holiday], my grandmother went to the temple on Klucky-Gasse, but otherwise didn't go to services. My mother's older siblings also lived traditionally, the young ones not so much. My mother Miriam was exactly in the middle.

The younger ones didn't say anything against religion, since they had a lot of respect for their mother – but they couldn't make much of it anymore. For example, the older siblings fasted with my grandmother on Yom Kippur. The younger siblings, who no longer lived traditionally, gathered in the small room and ate secretly. I saw it myself and know that grandmother knew as well, but generously looked the other way.

My grandmother remained alone after grandfather's death, even though she wasn't old when he died. She also had no opportunities to find another partner. It might have been different in a small town, since there surely would have been some sort of Shadchan, a matchmaker, who would have found a husband for my grandmother. In order to feed her children, my grandmother sewed entrails for sausages on the sewing machine. Plastic wasn't around yet.

Lea – or Lona, as they called her later – my mother’s eldest sister, soon married a young man, Heinrich Seliger, who worked for the Jewish Community and was responsible for the temple in Waehring, in the 18th district. They had a son, Friedrich, who they called Fritz, and lived in Ottakring [16th district] in a nice middle-class building and lived peaceably with the other residents. They lived very traditionally with a strict kosher household and were involved with Jewish institutions. The family jokingly called Lona the rebbezin [the rabbi’s wife].

The cantor of the Jewish community was always coming and going from their place. The neighbors accepted it and they got along well with one another. Fritz fled to Palestine in 1938 and joined the British Army. My Uncle Heinrich worked for the social division starting in 1938 and, starting in late 1941, sent parcels to people who were deported to Theresienstadt.

They survived the Nazi years in Vienna, but needed to be in hiding for a while. After the war, my mother’s sister Lona immigrated to Israel where Fritz was living. Her husband Heinrich remained in Vienna for a year and then followed them.

Lona ran a small restaurant in the village of Zikhron Ya’akov. That was a large village. Today it’s a town. After the death of her husband, who never felt at home in Israel, she lived in a small house on the property of a distant relative in Pardes Hanna, and had a nice life there. She died in 1978.

My Aunt Regina married Mr. Leser Tocker. They lived very close to my grandmother in a small apartment near the Brigittenau Bridge. They had two children: Friedrich, who they called Fredi and who goes by Shlomo in Israel, and Kurt, the younger son. Fredi went to the Jewish Chajes School in the 20th district, on Staudinger-Gasse. They lived under very modest conditions. Leser Tocker worked with his brothers, who had a leatherwear shop on Gauss-Platz. He wasn’t an associate; instead he remained his brother’s employee the whole time.

I sometimes went with my Aunt Regina and her children on summer holiday near Klosterneuburg. We stayed on a farm with a beautiful garden. Sometimes even Fritz, my Aunt Lea’s son, was there. Last year I was there with Fred, who’s now called Shlomo. That was a lovely reminder.

In 1939 Aunt Regina and her family fled illegally down the Danube River to Palestine. There they also lived in Zikhron Ya’akov. Leser found work in a wine cellar. He worked for many years in this wine cellar. Aunt Regina worked as a chef in a large guesthouse. Their sons still live in Israel. They were in Vienna not too long ago to trace their family. The older son was recently invited by the city of Vienna.

In the 1920s my Aunt Rosa met an American tourist named Morris Vogel. He was half-blind and came to Vienna for treatment. In 1930 or 1931 she moved with him to the United States. He wasn’t actually capable of regular work and I don’t know how he made his living in the United States. Aunt Rosa was very energetic. She did numerous jobs, she was also a very funny person and never lost her sense-of-humor and wit, despite her difficult life. When she had to, she also sung professionally at weddings.

There was a place in New York State where Jews went on their summer holidays. She performed in hotels there, singing or telling jokes. That’s how she eked out a living. After the war she often came to visit us in Israel. Her son Norman was a dental technician and musician, and was in a band for many years. Now he lives in Miami. I don’t know him; he’s not in touch with anyone in the family.

Uncle Izchak was a trained watchmaker and had a small shop in Vienna on Kaiser-Strasse with watches and jewelry. He lived with wife Zilli, née Tuerkisch, in the 9th district. They had a daughter, Ruth, who's my age. In 1939 they fled to Australia. At first they lived in the country and Izu worked as a farmhand. Then they went to Sydney and Uncle opened a small shop with watches, jewelry, and electric appliances. When my Uncle Simon arrived in Sydney they worked in the shop together. I met Ruth in Australia, but she never came back to Vienna. She had a son and a daughter, Graham and Robyn. Robyn studied medicine and was often in Vienna for conferences. Now she works in complementary medicine.

My Uncle Simon was a trained electrician and had a radio and electronics shop in Vienna. He had no children. He and his non-Jewish wife Kitty were able to flee to Shanghai. When the Japanese bombed Shanghai he was injured by a piece of shrapnel. After the war he went to Australia. He and Kitty got divorced after the war and she went to Melbourne. He got remarried and then worked with Izu in this shop for jewelry and electric appliances. Now he's over 90 years old and lives in a small house with his second wife near Sydney. They don't have much contact with the rest of the family.

My Uncle Hermann was born 20 October 1906. He was a goldsmith. In the 1930s he married Toni, who was born 30 March 1910. I can't remember the wedding any more, but I have a wedding photo. I can't remember any wedding celebrations within the family. They took an illegal transport to Israel and went along the Danube in the direction of the Danube estuary. The ship got stuck in Yugoslavia and they were murdered. In 1940 we received another postcard from Uncle Hermann and Aunt Toni, where they wrote,

"My dears! We received your letter and read it with great delight. Currently we are in the fortunate position to be able to announce that we are already on the first day on the way to you. With God's help and a little luck we hope to be there in a few weeks. If the Lord God would help our relatives out of hell, we would be perfectly happy. What is Pauli doing and why hasn't Maxl [Paul Back's stepfather Max] written about it? I will get the answer myself. If you want, Maxl, you can look around for a job for me. Regards and kisses to you all, from your Hermann. I'm very anxious and have travel nerves, greetings and kisses, your Toni."

My Uncle Leon – he was called Lonek – was a ceramicist. He worked at the well-known company Goldscheider, a ceramic and porcelain manufacturer in Vienna. The Goldscheiders were a Jewish family. They fled to the USA after the German invasion of Austria, and founded another company there. Descendants of this family still live in the USA today. Lonek fled to Sweden after the Anschluss. There he owned a model foundry for sculptors. He was also artistically engaged and made his own models, but his main occupation was model casting.

He married Elfi Wachsmann, the granddaughter of the Austrian operetta composer Leo Fall. They didn't have any children. Uncle Leon was a very fun-loving, happy, and funny man, and his wife is still mourning him. Every year in May she comes to Vienna for a few days to eat asparagus [traditional seasonal dish] or for honors for her grandfather.

My Aunt Klara was born in 1916. She worked in a tailors shop and lived with my grandmother. In 1938 she married Karl Hillebrand with the intention of going with him to Palestine to live on a kibbutz. She was a Zionist and active in Hashomer Hatzair. Klara went with Karl to Palestine, lived on a kibbutz, and in 1940 or 1941 had a daughter, Ofira, but they didn't stay together. Klara and

Karl got divorced and she moved to Zikhron Ya'akov where my Aunt Tedina and later my Aunt Lona were living. She lived there with her daughter and met her eventual husband, Arpad Green.

Uncle Arpad was an electrician. He was from Bruenn and was a hardworking man and always complained about the "Society of Farmers," which is what he called the founding fathers of the place, who had come to Palestine in the 19th century from Romania. They were terrible cheapskates and always owed him money, so that he practically had to work for them for free.

In 1956 the family left Israel and went to Australia, where his daughters Josefa and Nitza were born. Arpad worked as an electrician in a shipyard. Klara first worked in a tailors shop, then she became a housewife. Today they both live in a old age home in Sydney. Ofira is married to Peter Singer from Vienna. They had a small textile print shop where they manufactured labels for clothes. Those are those little tags that say what the article of clothing is made from and how to wash it.

They have two children. Josefa is married to John, who worked for Australian television. They have a son, Alexander. Josefa and John are writing a book about China's sacred mountains. They were in Vienna in the 70s. Nitza is married to Max Siano from Romania. He is self-employed in the fashion industry and Nitza works for the Bank Clerk Union. They have no children. They visited Vienna in the 80s.

My youngest aunt is Berta. She married Fred Steiner before fleeing the Nazis. I don't know anything more about him. They fled to France together and from France made it to the USA. He was immediately drafted into the US Army and after the war they moved to California. They converted to Christianity. I think to the Anglican Church.

Her husband left her and she remained alone with two children, Susan and Robert. Then she worked as a doctor's receptionist for many years and saw the family through as best she could. She got remarried to a American named Nanke and then later got divorced again. Berta's son Robert was a baker and died a few years ago in a motorcycle accident in the USA.

Today Aunt Berta lives with her daughter Susan in London. Susan worked in a church mission in South Africa for many years. When she went to London and began working as a journalist, she was already sick. She suffers from a very rare illness. There were years where she could only lie in bed. She developed a muscle weakness during the illness. Despite that she has continued working as a journalist and writes for an ecclesial newspaper. Both were in Vienna a few times; Berta was invited by the Jewish Welcome Service.

My mother Miriam was born in Zalozce in March 1902. Later she made herself out to be younger. I don't remember why she did that, but I do believe 1902 is the correct year.

My mother's family and friends called her Miriandl or Mali. I don't know why, since her name isn't Amalie. But she was Mali anyway. She married my father Leo Hochbaum, a bank clerk, on 10 March 1926 in the 18th district, on Schopenhauer-Gasse. Leo Hochbaum was born on 31 March 1903 in Bielitz [Today Bielsko-Biala in Poland]. His father's name was Salomon Hochbaum and his mother was called Ester. She was born Marek.

After they were married they moved to an apartment in Erdberg, that's in Vienna's 3rd district.

• My Childhood

I was born on 10 July 1926.

My mother was a very fun-loving person. She had friends and acquaintances and frequently went out. I assume she met my father at some party. The area we lived in was mostly working class. Workers and artisans lived there; Jews as well, but few. Strangely, save one photo of my father, I have almost no memories of him. I also have no memories of his family.

My father had a sister in Poland; her name was Selma. She was never in Vienna, at least not during my time, and no one kept in touch as far as I know. I can only remember that an uncle was mentioned. I met him once; he worked for the federal railway. His name was Uncle Julius and he lived in Vienna. I think he was my father's uncle.

My father was a calm and sensible person, but he was a gambler. He spent little time at home or with his family. Maybe he cared about his family, I don't know. It was no accident that, in 1936, my mother got divorced from him after ten years of marriage. After we left Austria I never heard from him again and couldn't find out where he was murdered.

My family probably went to the opera frequently, since my mother loved operas and operettas and knew many arias by heart.

My mother had a fairly large group of friends. It was a very diverse group of people, including the Jewish Back family living in the building next door. The family was from Slovakia, from Nitra. But Max Back, who became a good friend of my mother's, was born in Vienna on 03 December 1905. She went out with him often and his sisters would look after me. Slowly he took on the role of my father. He was often at our place and went out with us. I thus had a very sheltered life, despite my parents' divorce.

That was the time of the construction boom. New buildings were being built nearby. Just around the corner a large block of council flats was built - the Rabenhof - which was renovated just a few years ago. My future father, Max Back, had three sisters, Hermine, Marie - who was called Mizzi - and Hertha, as well as a brother, Arpad.

Hermine was an office worker at the Schenker transport company in Vienna and married Siegfried Samuel. Siegfried was a public servant, first in Vienna and then later in Haifa. They were Zionists and went to Palestine in the early 1930s where they had a daughter, Naomi. Hermine never came back to Vienna and died in the early 1970s.

Herta married a non-Jewish officer and lived with him in Salzburg, where he was stationed. In 1938 he divorced her. She survived the concentration camp Ebensee. In a Displaced Persons Camp she met a Greek Jew from Thessaloniki - a pastry chef who had lost his whole family - and immigrated to Haifa with him. Her husband died very early and afterwards she married a man from Vienna, Fritz Weiner. Herta died in the early 1980s, but returned once to Vienna before that.

Mizzi Back stayed in Vienna with her mother, Regina Back. Both were deported and murdered in 1942. I never met the brother, Arpad Back, who was born in 1909. He didn't live and home and nobody spoke of him. I do know that he was murdered during an attempt to flee to Palestine along

the Danube.

We moved a few times in Vienna and I attended grammar school on Stroh-Gasse, in the 3rd district. There must have been several Jewish students in my class, but I can only recall one name: a boy called Menasse. I can't remember any anti-Semitism during this time. I wasn't especially bad in school, but I didn't really like going.

I wasn't a street kid, but a real family kid. There were many possibilities for amusement in the neighborhood. There were restaurants and guesthouses with popular events, and I'd take my mother along whenever I could. My mother's siblings and their families always stayed in touch. We often met up and went on excursions in the area outside of Vienna, especially to the Vienna Woods.

Almost all of my playmates were part of the family: Fredi – Kurti was still too little – Ruthi, and Fritzl. We often visited our relatives. Some, like Aunt Lea, Aunt Rosa, Aunt Regina, and Uncle Izu were strictly kosher. Some were less strict. My mother wasn't kosher at all. She didn't care.

The Civil War in 1934 was a dramatic event, although I wasn't really aware of it at the time. Our friend, Max Back, was with the Vienna Police until 1934 and also in the Schutzbund [paramilitary organization]. Max Back was very stressed during the Civil War. He even needed lay low for a while and eventually lost his job. You could hear fighting everywhere, even people from our circle of friends were involved.

Like many others in 1934, Max Back became unemployed but found work with the Zionist organization Hechalutz. He would go with groups of young people to the surrounding countryside outside Vienna and mentor those preparing for aliyah [Jewish immigration to Palestine] to Palestine. They called these courses hachshara [preparing for life in Palestine/Israel] and they were a requirement for agricultural work in Palestine, whether in a kibbutz or in other areas. Max Back's work helped us get a travel visa for Palestine later.

My mother rented a tiny parfumery in the 2nd district on Lilienbrunn-Gasse, where I often went after school. There was a small salesroom where I always sat around. I went to school on Spel-Gasse back then. The parfumery wasn't doing very well, apparently, since my mother gave it up after a while and started working for the Goldscheider ceramics and porcelain manufacturers, where her brother Leon had been working. She stayed there until the Nazi invasion.

After my father moved out of the apartment, my mother and I moved to my grandmother's on Perinet-Gasse. Besides my grandmother, three of my mother's siblings lived in the small apartment – Aunt Berta, Aunt Klara, and Uncle Leon.

I was ten years old when I started attending the Unterberger High School on Unterberger-Gasse in the 20th district, near Augarten park. There were a lot of Jewish students in my class, but I can only recall the name Kaplan. I played soccer at school and once a week I went to the Vindobona Cinema on Wallenstein-Strasse and watched wild west films and such things.

Otherwise I was with my family. I wasn't in any youth organizations. Instead there were family gatherings. My mother's friend Mizzi had a garden plot where she spent a lot of time, and my mother often took me to Mizzi's.

My mother stayed in touch with Max Beck. I rarely saw my father, until all trace of him disappeared. It's very unfortunate, but you can't project onto the past what you know today.

My grandmother was the center of the family. She had a lot to deal with and always had her hands full. It was probably her difficult life that made her tough. She wasn't very affectionate and couldn't play favorites. She didn't reveal her emotions. She was a very rough person, which made an impression, since she couldn't otherwise have been assertive with so many children.

We lived there and were very happy, despite the cramped living conditions. The religious and non-religious aunts and uncles got along. You just didn't bring up religion and so put it aside. We lived peacefully with each other at my grandmother's until the Nazi invasion.

• During the War

On 12 March 1938 I saw airplanes black out the sky, a whole host of airplanes, real squadrons.

First off, the Nazis wanted to demonstrate their power and secondly, they actually had things to transport make themselves at home. You began seeing people in uniform and boys in Hitler Youth shirts walking around. They were Austrians – the Germans weren't in Vienna yet. They didn't come directly to Vienna, since they were initially delayed by people cheering them on along the way. The Wehrmacht curried favor with the Viennese by offering food – with a field kitchen on Heldenplatz.

My grandmother's apartment became a sort of family news center. The family was following the situation and, at first, didn't panic. They became restless only much later, when the sanctions against the Jews were proclaimed, or when actions began, like street sweeps, harassment, and verbal abuse. You began hearing of people being kicked, or attacked, or that someone was taken away. But people were still deluding themselves. People knew it was bad, but didn't know how bad it would get.

One of the few sanctions that got under my skin, because I was directly affected by it, were the signs on park benches that were written with "only for Ayrans" or "not for Jews." I often went for walks with my mother or with my cousins and we used those parks and played there. And all of a sudden we weren't allowed to sit on the benches any more.

I was very impressed by the uniforms. Even as a child – even before the Nazis came – I would run to the Ministry of War on Stubenring because once a week there was a changing of the guard there with taps. I really liked the marching music. It was a bit threatening when the Germans marched in, but the uniformed soldiers came through with a band, which I found very impressive. I really liked it and ran after them enthusiastically.

They had to discontinue the Hachshara courses. Max Back was then given other work within the Jewish Community and even he was attacked and beaten one day. I think that happened on Seitenstetten-Gasse in front of the temple. Back then there were young people who really enjoyed going on rampages. There were prayer houses just around the corner from my grandmother's apartment – I didn't know that there had been serious attacks there. The Hitler Youth and League of German Girls (BDM) had been bustling about in the area.

There were changes at school. New teachers came. A Sudeten-German – actually the only Nazi I can remember – taught geography and made it no secret that he was a Nazi. Not that he attacked us or went after us personally, he just didn't hide his ideology. He immediately hung up the new maps. But there were also other teachers! Our math teacher always comforted us and said that this horror wouldn't last long. That was Mr. Rotter – later he disappeared. But we also disappeared – we were separated from the remaining students and had to go to so-called “Israelite Classes.”

There is a book today about those classes at the school on Unterberger-Gasse. My name is also included – I could see my credentials. These days there are very engaged teachers that address this era and even assist with exhibits. At my school you can see an impressive exhibit about the Jewish students there during the Nazi era. They invited all the former students from all over the world – the ones they could still find!

First there were these “Israelite Classes” and then they were suddenly gone and there were “Jew Schools.” Jewish students were concentrated in very few schools. I went to one of those schools for a time. I didn't learn anything there, since, in our minds, we were already gone, and could only think about getting away. Those who could, tried to get out of Austria.

People knew they couldn't stay – they already knew this after the first arrests. Then you would keep hearing: “So and so was arrested and so and so was arrested and beaten,” and you heard the word “concentration camp”! If you could, you left the country. So of course no one was thinking about studying, grades, and report cards at school anymore.

There were then two weddings in our family. Aunt Klara married Hillebrand and shortly thereafter fled with him Palestine, to Eretz Israel. Aunt Berta married Steiner. Both made their way to France illegally, were caught at some point, then went back to France again, and from there fled to America.

We needed a certificate for Palestine. This sort of terminology began appearing all of a sudden. For example, if you wanted to go to America, you didn't need a visa, but rather an affidavit. Terms were showing up that you never heard before. These affidavits were guarantees to the state that the person fleeing was financially secure.

Some person needed to deposit a certain sum of money or else prove that they would account for the immigrant. Getting these papers was very time-consuming and thus the reason why many older or less mobile people were unable to flee. They said to the younger people, “Go in the meantime, we'll come afterwards.”

By that point they couldn't! Everything hinged upon this affidavit, death or life! We had a radio, since the family was very musical. But listening made us more depressed – because of the victory announcements or the grandiose speeches from the Germans.

My mother didn't see any other option for us but emigration and so attended a retraining course for hairdressing. There were many of these kinds of courses set up especially to train people in careers that would help them find work in a new country. Though she never ended up practicing the trade.

One 27 June 1938, my mother married Max Back in the rabbinate on Seitenstetten-Gasse. Some time later – because of Max’s work for the Jewish Community – we received certificates of entry for Palestine.

Aunt Klara and Aunt Berta were already gone. I don’t know if Uncle Lonek was already gone; its possible he was just about to leave. He was able to get to Sweden. After my mother got married we moved for a few months into an apartment not too far away – Wallenstein-Platz I think. My newly wed mother probably wanted to be alone with Max Back.

In March 1939 we could leave once and for all. The last days in Vienna were very unpleasant, very menacing. Many Jews had things taken from them – though not us, since we didn’t have anything to take. I repressed all of that and didn’t speak of it again. My parents probably talked about it when they were with Yekkes [Term in Israel for German Jews] or others from Vienna in Israel.

My grandmother was supposed to go the USA. Aunt Rosa, who was living there, was supposed to take care of it. That didn’t work out. Looking back on it, if we had properly understood the situation, more would have been done to help grandmother.

The British Mandate in Palestine didn’t want to mess with the Arab world any loner. There was the so-called “White Paper,” which was enacted in the 1930s. Due to pressure from Arab organizations, entry to Palestine was very restricted for Jews and there were great difficulties.

Soon after we left for Palestine it was no longer possible to get there legally. Back then there was the “Aliyah Aleph” – legal entry into Palestine – and “Aliyah Bet” – the illegal way, which was very dangerous. There were organizations that organized this.

Those immigrating to Palestine from Vienna or Austria left legally or half-legally with toleration from authorities that got a piece of the pie. There were organizations that were set up by the Nazi authorities and they pocketed a lot of money this way. But seen from the English side, these transports were illegal.

We left from Vienna Suedbahnhof station and traveled through Southern Italy to Bari. It was a wonderful journey. The new smells and impressions: it was an adventure for me, just like the new uniforms in Vienna were an adventure. In Bari we boarded a troop transporter that was taking Italian soldiers to Abyssinia – today Ethiopia – and wasn’t built for civilians, but touched at the harbor in Haifa.

The ship was overcrowded with refugees and we were placed in bunks in the ship’s hold. We traveled for a few days – it was very cramped, so enjoying the voyage was out of the question. There was an Italian crew on board that was very nice to us. I was ill for most of the boat trip. But I also ate on board. There was Italian food: spaghetti, rice, and a lot of tomatoes – that was all new for us back then. The days of the popular Wiener schnitzel were over!

The only real port in Palestine was Haifa. Earlier there had been the port in Jaffa, but not for passenger ships. From the ship we went first to a transit camp; it was called Machane Olim, new emigrants’ camp. It was a British Army camp and part of it was the Machane Olim. We were taken there from the harbor.

We rode on a truck and beside us were oranges being transported to packinghouses – harvest must have still been in full swing. A smell, indelible, that was my first impression! It was March – so the most beautiful time of the year. All these new smells had started in Italy, but they were much stronger here.

We were housed in barracks in the camp, but not for long. Hermine Samuel, Max Back's younger sister who had immigrated to Palestine in the early 1930s, tracked us down and, with all her experience, was able to help us. She arranged a small apartment for us that we could afford. I don't know where we got the money.

Today there are many kinds of fruits and vegetables in Israel that weren't around back then. But there was always a large quantity of oranges available that weren't sold by the piece or kilo, but rather by the sack. That was really the cheapest way. The kitchen was a simple kitchen. We had chickens and so we had eggs, and my father, Max Back, also had rabbits. But I can't remember ever having eaten a rabbit.

Since my parents didn't know how things would turn out, I had the opportunity to live with farmers in a village for a while. The village was a moshav [A type of cooperative agricultural community] called Nahalal. It was arranged in a circle, with a large water container and a tower in the center. They kept guard in the tower.

Many people who became prominent figures in Israel lived here, like the family of Moshe Dayan. The old-established farmers were primarily Russians. There was also a group of young people from Vienna who belonged together and had their own life there. They were older than I was – sometimes I was with them because I didn't have a relationship with the family of the farmer I was living with. I had to work a lot, which was a new experience for me. All in all it was very good – you gather new perspectives and learn to do something with your hands.

There was also a small, very modest synagogue there. I prepared for my Bar Mitzvah there – there were even religious people there that helped me out and stood by my side. My mother came for my Bar Mitzvah and brought a sweet treat for me. I stayed a few months in the moshav and then went back to Haifa.

A lot of people got work with the British Military back then. Later I was also working for the military. My father got work as a tailor with the British naval installation, as he was a trained tailor. He didn't earn very much, but it more or less sufficed. Later he became an auxiliary police officer for the English. This troop was deployed to protect Jewish settlements and worked officially with Jewish self-defense groups before the state of Israel was founded. The uniforms originated from the time of Turkish rule and were worn by Arabs as well as Jews.

We moved into another apartment up on the mountain in a suburb of Haifa called Neve Sha'an. The apartment was in a very interesting building that no longer exists. It belonged to an Arab who built it in the style of the homes of rich Arabs, the large landowners or Effendis. It had a central hall with small rooms that branched off of it.

No one lived in the hall, but one family occupied each of the small surrounding rooms. It was like a huge shared apartment. Besides the room that was part of the main house, we also had a kitchen and toilet; there was also water.

I slept in the kitchen. Our neighbors were Germans, a Pole, and a Rumanian. I went to an elementary school until I was fifteen – I had to first learn the language. I was the only new arrival in my class, but the children and teacher made it easy for me, so that I was able to learn well. Vienna was gone and forgotten. I was overtaken by so many new impressions – a new language, new smells, everything was new.

My parents often went dancing. There was a small square in our neighborhood where they put on records once or twice a week. People met there and danced. They danced to hits from England that, back then, were modern. But they also danced the tango. The English also came to enjoy themselves. We kids always looked on with curiosity.

In those days the men mainly wore khaki clothes – short pants, long pants, shirts – everything was made of khaki fabric. It didn't necessarily have anything to do with the military; it was just very common. The community was entirely oriented towards the kibbutz movement. The kibbutz was the ethical paradigm, which also manifested itself in the clothing.

But the war also came to Palestine. Italian airplanes made it to Haifa and were shot down there. You could sense the war somehow. General Rommel was relatively close by.

After school I worked for some time for an electrician, a Yekke. The Yekkes busied themselves with stamp collecting. He spent hours with his stamp buddies. It was very strange. There were a lot of those types, especially among the Yekkes! They probably cultivated these hobbies back in Germany as well. They were also big concertgoers.

I worked for some years in the British Army in an automobile workshop. That later became my career. There I came into contact with people who agreed with me politically, since even as a child I had read a lot of books, like Jack London and Maxim Gorki. Figures you'd find in these books suddenly appeared at my place of work. I became a very politically conscious person and a member of the communist youth movement in Israel, the Brit Hanoar ha Kommunisti. My parents weren't all too delighted, but that didn't stop me.

• After the War

In 1945/46 there was already a movement for the founding of an independent Israeli state. It started with actions and demonstrations for free immigration. There was a lot of pressure after the war once the scale of the destruction became known and many Jews wanted to get into the country, but were sent back because the English wanted to limit free immigration.

There was already a state within a state with Jewish institutions – they called it “Medina baderech,” which when translated means “a state becoming.” But people wanted a completely autonomous Jewish state. When the English knew that their days were numbered, they began acting wilder and wilder with arrests, shootings, and house searches.

By the time the state of Israel was founded I was already with the ghost army, as we were already mobilized and organized even before there was a state and army. When the state was founded in 1948 we were already in the middle of war. The Arab population was not too delighted, but they had a lot of trouble getting themselves organized.

I had contact with Arabs because I was working from 1946-48 for an oil company that had workshops in Haifa. There were Arabs working there as well. I was in the workers' council with Arab colleagues. There were some that followed the propaganda calls from the Arab leadership and fled in May 1948, after the state of Israel was founded.

Many fled helter-skelter. We arrived in apartments where there was still warm food sitting on the table. The ones who fled and never returned are still refugees to this day. Or else they are no longer refugees, but still talk about their hometown of Haifa. Good, I can understand that people dwell in childhood dreams, in memories. It was a tragedy – and that what the Arabs call it as well: a catastrophe. I don't know what Israel would have looked like if they had all stayed.

We didn't know anything about my grandmother who had stayed in Vienna. We only learned about her fate after the war. She was thrown out of the apartment where she had spent 20 years of her life. Then she lived in one of these collective apartments in Vienna's 2nd district and from there she was deported: first to Theresienstadt and then to Treblinka, where she was murdered.

I can't remember ever having spoken about going back to Austria. Maybe people talked about how life in Vienna was, that they went to the Prater, or about what they saw or who they met. Those were stories and anecdotes about a past life in Vienna.

Among many immigrants there was a great language barrier between parents and children. Even my parents could only speak very basic Hebrew, and couldn't even use it properly. They primarily moved around in circles with their linguistic options – within a group of friends made up of people who spoke German. They stewed in their own juices throughout the years. It was somewhat better through me, but not by much, because I could speak German and so spoke to them in German.

But through my brother, Yoram, who was born 27 January 1940, their vocabulary became richer. But of course they held onto the German language, exchanged German literature and German newspapers. They even held onto Austrian cuisine. My mother cooked rissoles, fried schnitzel – even from camel meat – and made pancakes and dumplings.

My father Max Back died of angina in 1957. He smoked a lot and his life wasn't easy.

After military service I began working in a bookstore in Haifa. They sold, among other things, Soviet literature, an area that had always interested me. I worked in the bookstore for fifteen years. Between 1963 and 1966 – always for about half the year – I was in the GDR [German Democratic Republic – East Germany].

I spent a total of a year and half there and met my wife in Berlin. At the time the Israeli Communist Party had sent me there for a training course. That was the first time in decades that I was in Europe. Vienna was just a pale memory for me.

When I was there I never hid the fact that I was Jew from Israel, but I also never paraded it around. Whoever wanted to know, could find out! I wasn't the only one from Israel in the GDR, there were quite a few of us and we saw things as they were in the GDR and didn't want to sugarcoat anything. I didn't implicitly approve of everything in the GDR, but it was a time of relative openness; there were critical tendencies. In 1966 I even worked a good half a year in a Russian bookstore: "The International Book." The bookstore was in the center of East Berlin, near

the former West Berlin border crossing Checkpoint Charlie. Customers came into the shop who were interested in Russian books and LPs.

My wife Jutta and I were married in East Berlin, in Koepenick City Hall. Then we had to wait a year until she could come with me to Israel. Jutta came in August 1967. My mother had already passed away in early March 1967 and was never able to meet my wife.

Jutta came to Israel in 1967 as the Six Day War had come to an end, but at a time when the state of war still prevailed. She arrived to the airport in full darkness. I was still with the military, so the husband of a work colleague picked her up from the airport.

We settled in, she met the relatives, integrated herself, learned the language. In 1968 I distanced myself from my earlier political movement to a significant degree. There were national and international reasons for this: The Soviet Union's position toward Israel in 1967 during the war, as well as the Soviet Union's position toward efforts in Czechoslovakia to lead a more liberal and democratic life. This, along with many other reasons, moved me, as well as many others, to bid farewell to the Communist movement.

A war-like situation continued after the Six Day War. There was the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt, which lasted for years and touched every citizen, as everyone had to do their auxiliary service in the army each year. In 1973 Egypt attempted to storm the Suez Canal and Sinai Peninsula, along with recapturing the Gaza Strip. This "Yom Kippur War" took the whole country by complete surprise.

People couldn't grasp that the Israeli secret service and the military in particular had totally failed. It concerned me, because I was riled up by the outbreak of war, particularly during the peaceful atmosphere of Yom Kippur, and said to my wife, "Now listen to me, I am old, and I'd like this war to be my last war in Israel."

In 1975 I had the possibility to get work, a possibility I saw through contact with a bookstore in Vienna.

It honestly wasn't easy for us. I left behind my childhood, my youth, a good part of my life, as well as my brother Yoram, family and friends. It wasn't easy for Jutta either. She was in Israel for eight years and had become fond of it. She had found her bearings, felt at home. We weren't leaving for economic reasons either.

I didn't get Austrian citizenship automatically. The fact that I had been born in Vienna didn't automatically help me obtain citizenship. It's established that back then, in 1938, the state of Austria was no longer, so people didn't have to take responsibility. There was probably the right of domicile, but I didn't have that.

There was a certificate of family origin from my father, meaning from Back, but I wasn't his natural son. But for five years I was able to live well without Austrian citizenship and, when I did receive citizenship in 1980, this chapter came to a close.

I have never regretted going to Vienna. Unfortunately developments in Israel confirmed my assumptions. Here in Austria I see myself as a person who needs to take a stand, whether on

antidemocratic measures, or on dangerous developments like right-wing radicalism or neo-Nazism. I don't just have opinions on these matters – I have also been an active participant in the struggle.

My son Robert was born on 8 July 1977. He attended the school of tourism and enjoys visiting relatives in Israel. We are close with my brother Yoram and his family. Yoram is a technician at the famous Technion in Haifa. He paints, dives, and makes art with metal. Lately he's taken a greater interest in family history.

He visits us in Vienna at least once or twice a year. He has three children. Mor works in food service in Tel Aviv. The daughter, Merav, works in an office, and the youngest, Avidan, studies psychology. My wife and I still have our apartment in Haifa and we go to Israel once a year. But I am very critical of the developments in the country. But Israel is, and remains, my home.