

MY GRANDPARENT'S STOLPERSTEINE IN AUSTRIA

by Charlotte Lang

Among the first Stolpersteine (Stumbling Stones) in Austria were those laid at a ceremony in Modling, near Vienna, on 14 August 2006 to honour the memory of my maternal grandparents Adolf and Rosa Kohn and my uncle, Norbert Kohn who were deported and murdered by the Nazis in the Holocaust.

Stolpersteine, which are brass capped with an inscription, were the idea of German artist Gunter Demnig and many had already been laid in Germany. My grandfather, who was Secretary of the Shul in Modling, lived with his family at Enzersdorferstrasse 44 and these three Stolpersteine were laid in the pavement outside his home so their names will not be forgotten by all who pass by.

Almost 70 years previously in March 1938 German troops and the SS had crossed the border into Austria and Hitler announced the Anschluss (Annexation) of Austria into the German Reich. There were great celebrations in all of Austria and many Jews were arrested, their property was seized and they were deprived of their civil rights. Nazi rule was now established in Austria through propaganda, terror and enticements.

I was born in Vienna before the war. My father was in business as a Pferdehandler (Horse dealer) in Wolkersdorf, a village north of Vienna where we lived in a comfortable house with adjoining stables. He supplied the local farmers with horses but after the Anschluss they turned against him. He was arrested and imprisoned and we had to give up our home and the business. My mother and I went to stay with her parents in Modling but worse was to come on the night of 9 November 1938, known as Kristallnacht (Crystal Night). Like many other Shuls, my Grandfather's Shul was burned down that night and I clearly remember the Nazis in their jackboots kicking down the door of my grandparent's house and arresting two of my uncles, Siegfried Kohn and Ernst Kohn, who were sent to Dachau Concentration Camp. After six months and with some help from their family they managed to obtain papers allowing them to go to Shanghai in China.

The Jews were now forced by the Nazis to live in cramped conditions in Vienna and we had to move several times. I well remember my father coming back from his imprisonment with his head shaven and looking terrible. The conditions were so severe there that many of the men died.

I probably would have suffered the same fate as my grandparents and my uncle but for the foresight of my father who placed a small advertisement in "The Times" on 27 October 1938 which said:

Reliable young couple, wife capable housekeeper, husband expert in handling and breeding horses, farmer, can drive car, seek posts. Siegfried Diamant, Heinestrasse 5/22, Vienna 2.

Luckily a farmer in the West of England answered this advertisement and sponsored my parents and myself. So it was that in May 1939 as a very small child I had to leave Vienna for England and say goodbye to my grandparents and to my uncle, never to see them again. We had to leave all our possessions behind and life was not easy in England, but at least we were alive.

Meanwhile can you imagine what life was like for my grandparents and my Uncle Norbert who had to live in Vienna from 1939, unable to leave but not knowing what fate awaited them. I have some priceless testimony in the form of letters and postcards which they sent from Vienna to my Uncle Siegfried and Uncle Ernst in Shanghai, although not all their letters got through. They speak of their despair and lack of power over their destiny. For example in her letter dated 13 April 1941 my grandmother writing to Siegfried and Ernst said:

My very dear children

We are very sorry to hear again and again that you are without mail from us. You will sympathise with us and realise how worried we are but we must leave everything in God's hands. Father went today to the Kultusgemeinde (Jewish Community Office) in connection with the coming Holy Days (Pesach). There is little hope we will be able to observe them. We have to abide in God's will.

Greetings and thousands of kisses

Your loving Mother.

These letters and postcards started in October 1939 and finished in August 1941 when the end was near. As inscribed on the Stolpersteine my Uncle Norbert was deported in 1941 to Opole in Poland and was subsequently murdered. My grandparents were deported in 1942 to Theresienstadt and from there were sent to Treblinka where they were also murdered.

In spite of all that happened to my family and myself in the Holocaust I kept my Jewish faith and in 1962 I married David Lang and we had two sons, Michael and Paul, who were both Barmitzvah and married at Golders Green Shul. Now we have three grandsons and the

eldest, Jamie, was Barmitzvah at Barnet Shul in April 2006. So, in spite of the Nazi atrocities, it proves Hitler did not succeed in his evil intention of destroying the Jewish people.