A Return

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As we collectively mark the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War, I have a very personal perspective on the events of the day. My grandparents and parents lived in Galicia, the eastern outer reach of the Austro-Hungarian Empire bordering Russia (later part of Poland, now the Ukraine). In the furious battles between Russian and Austro-German forces in that area, Russian hatred for Jews was so manifest that in February-March of 1915 the Jews of Galicia were being expelled on military orders, even though this fouled military logistics.

John Reed, the American journalist portrayed by Warren Beatty in the film "Reds," described the destruction of Galician towns and villages even where there was no active fighting:

(Villages ruined,) black with fire -- especially those where Jews had lived. They bore marks of wanton pillage -- for there had been no battle here -- doors beaten in, windows torn out, and lying all about the wreckage of mean furniture, rent clothing.

My Hirschhorn and Fischer families' villages, Podwoloczyska and Trembowla, lay smack on the Russian border, and a short distance from the Austrian garrison town of Tarnopol. Train travel was virtually impossible, as all such transport was put in the service of war logistics.

The family flights took place by ox carts, heading for Vienna and safety. Uncle Theodor Hirschhorn, then only 4, recalled sitting on top of a mattress, a scene commonly captured in old newsreels. My Aunt Regina Fischer said their ox was half-blind and lame. The likeliest route to avoid the fighting would have been to the south, across Hungary, some 550 miles to

Vienna, a trip that lasted two weeks.

The families arrived in Vienna with little money, no language, dressed in old-country Jewish clothing, with nine children between them.

The Fischers ended up in the district of Leopoldstadt near the Danube River, which held the slums of Vienna, the Jewish quarter being known as Mazzesinsel, "Matzo Island." Sigmund Freud's family lived nearby. Leopoldstadt was the site of the original Jewish enclave dating from the 1600s, and became the final ghetto when Nazis forced all Viennese Jews to crowd into that district.

The Hirschhorns settled in the somewhat more middle-class part. My great-grandmother, Adele Hirschhorn, also made it to Vienna.

The families adapted to the political hothouse that was Vienna between the wars. My Fischer grandfather brought his beard down to a modern size, and the elders wore clothing appropriate to a great city. My mother and father attended gymnasium, the state-run education equivalent to junior high school. Aunt Regi attended the University of Vienna, earning a doctorate in history. This made her the first in the family to achieve a higher degree, remarkable as the school was a hotbed of anti-Semitism and, as well, given that the Fischers could have used another pair of working hands. My mother studied accountancy and attended a lecture by Sigmund Freud. My father led a Labour- Zionist youth group where he met my mother. They enjoyed the cultural events and museums, went on hikes in the mountains and skied.

Both families had suffered greatly during the war under food rationing and near- famine. They lacked money even for essentials. Uncle Morris Fischer remembered wearing wooden shoes because leather was too costly. Grandfather Leib Fischer sold coal door-to-door from a sack he carried on his back. Nathan Hirschhorn was a law clerk, but died of tuberculosis in 1921, leaving grandmother Leonora, a skilled seamstress, to raise five children from her earnings. Shortly after the war, some of the children were evacuated to stay with farm families

in Holland or Switzerland and gain back the weight they had lost.

The 1920s brought hyper-inflation. Leonora was able to sell her clothes-making business for a good sum, but agreed to take payments in installments over three years. While in the first year she was able to buy a suite of furniture, she could just outfit the children in the second year, and to buy a loaf of bread in the third as the value of her income disappeared. As a result of the economic chaos and pressure from the Nazi regime next door, fascism and anti-Semitism were on the rise. It was time to leave, but many waited too long.

I was born in Vienna in June 1938, just three months after the Nazis invaded Austria, declaring it to be "unified" with Germany. My parents and I, along with several aunts and uncles, had to flee to safety in England or the USA just in the nick of time. The grandparents, however, were left behind, unable to get visas to any Western country.

I just recently returned to Vienna, after 76 years, and found a friendly reception from the people there. The Jewish Community's archives directed me to the Central Cemetery where I located the graves of two grandfathers, my great-grandmother and an infant sister. By Jewish tradition I said the Kaddish, the prayer of mourning, and laid stones on the graves.

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