

Egon Gartenberg's letter to his children.

September 1967.

Dear Children:

It seems that you know very little about your father. As a matter of fact, one of you did not know how I met your mother. The fault may be mine. Mother therefore suggested that I tell you about myself and about the events which so strangely affected and changed my life.

After graduating from the Vienna Academy of Commerce and The Austrian State Academy of Music, I worked in several office and selling jobs until my father bought into a hardware wholesale business and asked me to join him in the business. My father had always been a tough disciplinarian and working for him for several years was no picnic. But I learned the business and went "on the road" for the firm until he sold the business because of difficulties with his partner.

Then I became a salesman for the firm in which Mr. Hirschler was a partner. I presume you do remember Mr. Hirschler who visited us several times from Baltimore. He has died in the meantime.

While I was travelling for that firm the thunder and lightning struck - Hitler and his army marched into Austria; the fate of the Jews was sealed. Jewish firms were confiscated by "Aryans", there were wholesale arrests and people simply vanished over night never to be heard from again. Terror stalked the streets because if you were a Jew you had no rights, no flag, no court protected you any longer. It was unsafe to stay at home because one never knew when a midnight arrest would be arranged by someone with whom one had a quarrel years ago and who now took revenge under the guise of patriotism.

For days I roamed the streets because one was safest among crowds, and only occasionally went home. Finally, since I had a bad case of boils, I was permitted to enter a hospital where I hid for two weeks. When I was released and returned to my district in Vienna, all my friends had vanished.

Hitler triumphantly marched into Vienna. That was in March 1938. By sheer accident I saw him. It was as exciting as it was terrifying. I was visiting a friend across town when my car was halted by the throngs lining the street. I got out and joined the crowd. And suddenly, among the roar of the multitude he rolled into Vienna, standing in the front of the car, long black leather coat and all, unsailing, every inch the conqueror, giving the Nazi salute. And in the cars behind him, Goering, Goebbels and other dignitaries smiling, waving gesticulating.

My only brother Albert (Bertl) was the first one to get out. As a matter of fact, he WAS out at the time because he was a salesman for a Viennese house in lady's ready-to-wear and his territory was Holland. He is one of the reasons why I am alive today.

It was much more difficult for me and for our parents to leave. Our parents in particular had savings, pension rights, insurance etc. The most important thing was to have a piece of paper that would state that you intended

to leave the country. Being without a job, I helped the Jewish Agency in Vienna and from them acquired papers for myself and my parents saying that we intended to emigrate to Abyssinia (of all places).

Finally in August 1938 I was able to acquire a visa to Finland and prepared to leave. There was that moment at the western railroad station in Vienna when I, without knowing it yet, saw my parents for the last time. My friends had come to the station (except those who were jailed or had vanished) and we said goodbye as I elegantly departed in a sleeping car compartment. We were allowed to take goods with us but no money. Thus it came about that I travelled for the first time in my life in a sleeping car, had bought the finest of clothes, shoes and luggage, a typewriter and - an accordeon. The money I could not spend I left with my parents. And as I travelled into the night westward I felt that my youth had ended.

Already in Berlin, where I had gone to take a plane to Finland, I knew that Finland had closed its borders to refugees. But another rumor had it that Sweden was still open and I bought an airline ticket to Stockholm. Upon arrival I passed the immigration desk, and went to the Jewish agency which found me lodging (together with three other young men) and gave me meal tickets to last me for a week. But only three days later the immigration people woke us up, made us pack and escorted us to jail. We got a good meal, including dark sweet beer and then the ferry carried us back to Stettin in Germany.

Surprisingly -- the Jewish community there had an understanding with the Nazi authorities that transient Jews would not be jailed as long as the Jewish community took care of them and got them out. Thus it happened that I received a railroad ticket into Czechoslovakia and entered that country via an insignificant border checkpoint which had no experience with refugees and gave me no trouble.

Prague was a beautiful city (so was Stockholm). There the situation was a different one. The Czechs were well aware of the German menace because shortly after Hitler marched into Vienna he began screaming that the German population of the Sudenland (part of Czechoslovakia) were being oppressed. Prague immediately registered me as a "political refugee" and my stay was assured.

But disquieting news came from my brother in Holland. "Get out" he wrote urgently "we know more over here. Hitler is sure to occupy Czechoslovakia". Thus after a few months stay, I converted what money I had left into a check on a bank in Holland and crossed Europe from East to West. On the German-Dutch border came the terrifying examination of my papers by SS men (the black-clad Hitler Klite storm troopers). Although my passport clearly stated that I was permitted to return to Germany I was informed in no uncertain terms that return would mean arrest (the sinister meaning behind the word "arrest" was unmistakable).

But ten minutes further the Dutch border police refused me entry. They KNEW what my passport did not say. They did not honor my check, demanded that I show my cash and since I had all my money in that Prague check, I found myself an hour later before the same SS guards who had warned me never to return again.

There was no time for hand-wringing or prayer. As the two SS officers silently barred my way in no-man's land I was close to the end of my rope. On the other end, I had only my life to lose and I felt that was worth saving. So I began to talk. "I did not come back by my own free will, nor do I intend to stay here". "Please give me 24 hours. By then I will either be in Holland or back in Vienna." Miraculously they granted me those 24 hours. I wired Vienna for some money and I wired my brother in Holland. And by nightfall my brother and a family he had befriended got me into Holland on a temporary permit.

They were lovely people. But one cannot impose on them too long. Besides I was not allowed ~~to~~ look for work. Therefore after a few weeks we moved to Amsterdam. In Eindhoven also life had become unpleasant because the town is close to the German border and the police chief wanted no part of a refugee. In Amsterdam the Jewish quarter gave me refuge (my brother, on a yearly working visa was free to come and go) and the Jewish Agency again looked after me.

Then one day a finger tapped on my shoulder: "Are you a citizen" a dutch voice asked me. I turned around and looked at a man who had "plain clothes man" written all over him. As I stared at him, he asked again. When I did not answer he knew all he wanted to know. Gently he took me by the arm and asked where I lived. As we walked the streets Jews like myself only looked at me and then looked away and vanished because they KNEW. I was asked to pack, escorted to the railroad station and put on a train to the German border, courtesy of the Dutch government.

But they made one mistake; they didn't send anybody with me. As soon as I made reasonable sure that I was not being followed, I decided to get off. The next station read "Helmond". It said nothing to me; a sleepy small town; I got off, left my two suit cases (all my belongings) at the station and looked for a Jew. I found the head of the local Jewry who got me in touch with the rabbi. Together they got me a place to stay with a German family who had immigrated into Holland years ago. They also talked to the local police chief who simply ignored my presence.

I stayed in Helmond several months, interrupted only by occasional and dangerous trips into Amsterdam to find a way to get away because my "silent" stay in Helmond could not go on forever. Finally I received the news from the Jewish agency that my stay in a colony of Holland would be possible and my brother and I prepared to go across the Atlantic to the Dutch colony of Curacao.

At that time we received the news that my father had been arrested in Vienna. Since there was no charge against him (except that he was a Jew) he was released and at that time, over the long-distance phone I heard my father's and mother's voice for the last time. Fate would have it that my brother stayed behind because he was ^{free} to move and could help our parents into Holland. Then the fateful day, when I also said goodbye to my brother. And from the railing of the SS "Simon Bolivar" I saw my brother for the last time.

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Already during the crossing I knew that the information given me in Amsterdam had been incorrect. I would NOT be able to stay in the Dutch West Indies because the same laws applied to the colonies. The ten-day crossing was a mixed joy. Until we reached the open sea I was as sick as a dog. The ship was an old vessel and my cabin was below the water line. As the ship rolled in the heavy seas of the English Channel all I could think of between wretchings was: "Ye gads, if that round glass in the porthole breaks I'll drown like a rat".

The porthole held but my stomach did not. The only way I could keep "alive" was in horizontal position. When the dinner bell rang I would dash into the dining room, pile a few sandwiches on a plate and stumble back to my berth to eat. As long as I stayed horizontal I was alright.

But finally the sea calmed, the sun shone and the crossing was beautiful. We visited the Portuguese island of Madeira, crossed the peaceful Atlantic stopped at beautiful exotic island of Trinidad and in Venezuela where we took a side-trip up to the capital of Caracas, then a sleepy South-American city.

The peace was shattered with the arrival at Oranjestad, the capital of Curacao. The fight for time began again. Knowing in advance that I would not be given permanent or long-term residence, I declared that I wished to stay only until I would proceed to Santo Domingo. The Jewish community received me, put me up and gave me spending money and began inquiries concerning future possibilities. There I also was a bit lucky. I met the governor's wife who turned out to have been a Viennese with whom I had played cards in Vienna.

Let me make a comment here which, by now, must be rather obvious. Jews are wonderful people. Wherever you go they welcome you and help you. They do not ask where you came from, who you are. They help or try to help and ask nothing in return. To help a fellow Jew is reward enough. That is why I have always given to United Jewish Appeal in America, even when I was so poor that I could not give more than \$1.00.

The Jewish community meanwhile had found out that there might be a possibility of employment on Aruba, the neighbouring island. Since time was running out for me in Curacao I packed up and flew to Aruba. Somehow I was lucky again. The immigration check was miraculously lax and I got through. Standard Oil of New Jersey has one of its biggest refineries on Aruba. They bring the oil in their own flat tankers from Maracaibo in Venezuela, refine it in Aruba (far removed from S. American revolutions) and export it throughout the world.

They gave me a job as typist. I was working. I lived on a cot in a ramshackle native hut with cockroaches and centipedes a foot long, the mosquitos feasted on European blood, I shared the hut with a colored native, his white wife and two children who at night were separated from me only by a cheap curtain but ... I was working. But not for long.

After six weeks the Standard Oil personnel office informed me with regret that they had to let me go because I had no work permit and my stay in the Dutch West Indies had been terminated. They were willing to testify that I had a job with them and that my work had been satisfactory. The Jewish community rallied to sign a petition on my behalf. But the local authorities informed me that the only way to get anywhere was to fly to Curacao and talk to the immigration authorities.

I did just that and came back with a 3-months extension which seemed like an eternity. Twice more I had to fly to Curacao for extensions, each ~~day~~ time, after arguing a whole day, I was granted a stay. In the meantime I had given two piano recitals in Aruba and also accompanied a very fine soprano in a recital. Since the proceeds of these concerts went to the Dutch Red Cross I had a very good reputation.

In the meantime I received the good news that my brother had brought my parents into Holland. I had been promoted to secretary, had moved into a decent dwelling together with a charming Frenchman from Guadeloupe who worked in the same office.

Then the crash that shook the world to its foundations. Hitler invaded Poland and England and France declared war on Germany. For me the disaster had a blessing. As soon as Hitler invaded Holland I could not be deported any longer to a country with whom Holland was at war and my stay was prolonged indefinitely. But for my family it was a disaster. While I desperately tried to get any kind of exit visa for them, the invading German forces took them into custody. My brother was transported back to Austria, my parents transported into Poland. My brother died in the concentrations camp of Mauthausen, my parents in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Long before I had ever known where the island of Aruba was, as a matter of fact, during the first weeks of Hitler's invasion of Austria, I had gone to the United States Embassy and had registered my name for a quota number which was needed for immigration and for which one had to wait sometimes years.

On Aruba my foreman had introduced me to some of his friends all of whom liked classical music and we met occasionally to play chamber music, have a beer, play cards or just talk and argue. There I once met a woman who, after hearing my story, promised to help me into the United States. Well, many had promised but none had been able to do so. But lo and behold, a few months later a wire, directed to her, was delivered to me because she was on vacation and my name was mentioned it.

In that wire a Mr. Morrie Ryskind of Hollywood offered to help me and asked for all personal details. Unfortunately he only signed the wire "Morrie" and it took me a week before I could trace his name back to the United States. To make a long story short, two months later he sent me that precious affidavit without which one could not immigrate at that time. Luckily, in the meantime my quota number in Vienna had become active. Only two weeks before the consul in Curacao would make out the visa and was free to enter the United States - the promised land.

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Then, one night, at 2 o'clock in the morning, a knock on the door. "Police, open up." "Mr. Gartenberg, the Germans have invaded Holland; we are at war with Germany, we have to take you into custody."

You see, when Germany invaded Austria, my Austrian passport had to be exchanged for a German passport. Thus, as a German citizen (according to my passport) I had to be taken into custody although my sentiments were well known. We were allowed only to pack a small suit case and were brought aboard a Dutch tanker in whose hold we spent the night. In the morning we were transported to a third Dutch Island, Bonaire, where a school house had been made into a prisoner-of-war camp.

While the others lounged around, bemoaned their fate or complained, I began to write letters; to the governor of Curacao, of Aruba, of Bonaire. After all, I had an excellent reputation but most important, I had a visa for the United States. And that was my argument: "Why feed me when I can go to the U.S."

To everybody's surprise, after two weeks the order came to release me and I was escorted back to Aruba to pack and then flown to Curacao, the only prisoner-of-war there to be released while the hostilities were going on. Since my boat, a nutshell freighter by the name of "Astrea" was not to leave for another two weeks I was allowed to go free (in war time!) only had to report once every day to the local police. And again my Jewish friends were not ashamed to invite me and be seen with me.

Finally the day for departure arrived. There was only one hitch. British war ships were patrolling the Caribbean and if the "Astrea" was intercepted anybody with a German passport would be taken off and taken into British custody. Again the Dutch authorities were generous and wrote into my passport that I was a refugee on my way to the States. You should see my passports, they most interesting documents.

Finally, in August 1940, on a sunny late afternoon, I beheld the skyline of New York. My Odyssey seemed ended. But an hour later the American immigration officer informed me that the immigration number given me by the Consul in Curacao was incorrect and that I could not land. Instead I transferred to Ellis Island for a hearing. I felt like the world was kicking me around like a soccer ball.

Who would help me in this land where nobody knew me? The Jews, who else? An hour after I arrived a counsel from HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society) presented himself, conferred with me and promised to represent me at the hearing. The meeting was disastrous. After inspecting my papers the presiding officer pronounced that due to incorrect documents I was to be transported back to Curacao. But, he added, I could appeal the verdict if I so desired. I did so desire and the HIAS man whispered "Don't worry, go eat your lunch, I'm taking over from here."

Ellis Island was pleasant. A huge assembly hall, showers, comfortable beds, all the newspapers in twelve languages one wished to read, but it was a jail of sorts, nonetheless, with locked doors, and guards clicked counters when we walked to and from the dining room. That dining room had one wonderful feature - a kosher table. The food there was so superior that many wanted to eat there.

And then the great day arrived, when I was FREE in this land. And there I stood one bright morning with my meager belongings on a bustling street of New York, in a city, in a country, in which I knew nobody. Well, almost nobody. The son of a jeweler friend of mine from Curacao was studying optometry in Brooklyn. He had visited me in Ellis Island and we first moved into the fashionable St. George Hotel in Brooklyn. When it proved too rich for our blood we rented an apartment on 79th Street and Broadway where I stayed for about three months.

I was in a somewhat better position than most immigrants. Knowing or rather hoping that I would reach the United States sometime, I had always converted my savings in Aruba from Dutch Guilders into American Dollars. Thus, even in times of war, the money could not be withheld from me since it was foreign currency. Consequently I arrived in New York with a large wardrobe of tropical suits which were good for nothing and \$ 500.00 which, in those days, was a small fortune.

But despite a beautiful letter of recommendation to the home office of Standard Oil of New Jersey at 30 Rockefeller Plaza I could not find a job in New York. American citizens had to have preference because America was just extricating itself from the depression and unemployment was still high. By the way, on the radio in Ellis, I got my first taste of American politics when I heard thousands of people shout "We Want Willkie".

Seeing no hope of a job in New York I looked for help and went, of course, to the Association of Jewish Women. They were willing to help me under one condition: Get out of New York. Sure, where do you want me to go? So it happened that I landed my first job in this country in Syracuse, N.Y. as a stock clerk in an automotive wholesale house at \$ 20.00 a week. Although a lunch then cost only .25¢ and a hair cut the same, it was still very little because food, rent, clothing etc. had to be bought. And Syracuse was c-o-l-d in winter.

I learned the trade, used my acquired knowledge from Standard Oil to design a stock control system for the firm which was written up in trade magazines and did the same thing for the Syracuse Bus Co. After two years I moved on to Albany, N.Y where I improved my position and from there to a dirty railroad town in Pennsylvania - Altoona. In both Albany and Altoona I worked still in the automotive parts business. As always and everywhere I was interested in things Jewish and one day I was invited to give a speech to the local Junior Hadassah and there, in front of me, sat a lovely young lady whose name, I found out a bit later, was Belle Berman.

We inevitably met, I was invited to dinner and proposed four weeks later only to get a charming NO. I proposed again, and again, and again..... In the meantime I had been offered a position in Detroit which offered a great salary improvement for me. I accepted it and left Altoona. But the correspondence went on and I proposed again, and again, and again. Until the great day when she said YES.

Shortly thereafter her father approached me and suggested that I join him in the jewelry business. His son was in the Navy and his watchmaker in the army. His daughter Belle was his mainstay in the business and if she would leave also to live in Detroit he would have no help at all and would have to sell the business.

We decided to join Mr. Berman in the jewelry business but I stipulated that we would spend the first few weeks of our married life in our own apartment in Detroit before moving to Altoona.

When uncle Arnold returned from the service we went on a 2000 mile trip to find a location in which to settle and open a store of our own. We finally settled in a lovely town in Pennsylvania, Chambersburg. The rest is history.

In closing I wish to stress two points. When I came to this country in 1940 a wave of refugees from Europe had preceded me. Their tales of woe, of persecution, of loss of property had been heard a thousand times over and Americans were hardened towards their declamation of misfortune. I never stressed these facts, never appealed to the pity of my new country men, particularly since I could point out that I came from the West Indies and from a job with Standard Oil. Once here, I saw no sense in looking back. I wanted to be a part of this country as quickly as possible. Immediately I applied for citizenship in the United States and five years later, with Mr. Berman at my side, I became a citizen of this country.

Secondly -- Your mother and I worked hard and we deserve what we own. When we came to Chambersburg, we lived happily in one hotel room and when we moved to our first apartment, all we had to move, aside from our suit cases, was a cardboard clothes closet. Mother washed our dust cloths by hand and worked in the store until the day before the birth of our first child. We had no vacation for seven years.

But, looking back, I have no regrets. Our marriage was the happiness we can only wish to all those who get married. We have achieved moderate success in business and now new vistas are opening for me as a teacher and author. And, above all, we have three children of whom we are proud.

Love

Love
Dad

