

My Maiden Aunts – By Anneke Deutsch

I'm half Jewish. Of course many Jews will tell you there's no such thing. Halachic law is clear. You're only Jewish if you were born to a Jewish mother.

I'm about the same age now as my aunts were when they were deported or "evacuated" as the NAZIS euphemistically called the mass, cattle train shipping of Jews to certain death in the east. The carefully preserved index card of the GESTAPO¹ records in the Jewish Community Centre in Vienna said simply that Luise and Bernhard (my older aunt and her father - my 81 year old grandfather) were deported to Opatow in Poland on 12 March 1941. My father, safe in Australia in the 1940's, while trying to save enough to get them out, continued to remember his missing family. He had their birthdays in his diary. Luise turned 47 on the day they rounded her up. I can only imagine the cold fear, the terror she would have experienced. Did my elderly grandfather survive the freezing air in the open train at the end of that European winter? I hope they died quickly and not a gnawing death of starvation and typhoid in the concentration camp.

What happened to my other aunt, Else? She was 39. She was my father's youngest and favorite sister. I know she was forced into the Viennese ghetto with her sister and their father in 1939. Their birthplace, the picturesque little Austrian town of Steyr was proudly "Juden Frei!" (cleansed of Jews) by then. An American war correspondent² describes Vienna at this time as "an orgy of sadism". The anti Jewish laws that had been introduced in Germany over the previous five years came into effect in Austria over just six months.

The other half of me is Dutch, Indonesian, with a bit of French and English. I'm atheist. I was raised without religion. I cannot accept a patriarchal Jewish law that dictates that I must not claim my Jewish roots. It is as much my cultural heritage as is my mother's mix of race and nationality. Its value is heightened by the cruel way in which my Jewish relatives were systematically murdered. I should have known my aunts. They should have lived to a grand old age. I should be able to answer the doctor's questions about family history of breast cancer.

I'm alive and healthy and lesbian and I carry Jewish blood and memory of what has been done to try and exterminate us. My existence, and that of the many others who are the children of those who escaped and survived the holocaust, is testimony to Adolf Hitler's ultimate failure.

Being half Jewish seems similar to being bi-sexual rather than a pedigreed dyke. I'm not Jewish enough to fit in the Jewish community, but nor am I from a totally Christian background. Rejecting kosher ways and laws and

¹ GESTAPO = Geheime Staatspoizei, or Secret State Police. These German police were responsible for implementing the NAZI reign of terror.

² William S. Shirer, in Ganglmair, S. "Resistance and Persecution in Austria 1938-1945" 1988

identifying as a secular Jew is different from never being raised with these laws; not knowing about the customs that my aunts followed. Did they keep a kosher kitchen before they were confined to the ghetto? Did they go to the synagogue only on Yom Kippur, like my father? What did they look like? Would I have been able to see my eyes in theirs? What made them laugh? Why weren't they married? I wish I could have known and loved my maiden aunts.

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