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Gerda Bursztyn

We came to Bolivia in 1940

Gerda Bursztyn was born in Vienna on 9th November 1931. She had to flee to France with her parents in spring 1939 due to her Jewish origins. Once there, they received assistance from a French family but then Gerda and her mother got separated from her father and were detained in various camps. In April 1940, the family left France together on a ship bound for South America. After arriving in Bolivia, Gerda's father had to work in a mine. The heavy labor and high altitude had a terrible effect on his health and he died in 1944 at the age of just 48. Gerda Bursztyn still lives in Bolivia today.



My parents and I left Vienna in April 1939 and stayed in France until April 1940. In France we first lived in the small village Adini (Épinal/Vosges [1]), protected by a French family named Pescheur. When the Germans crossed the French frontier [2] we had to move, as far as I was told (I was only seven years old). Under protection of Baron Rothschild [3] we moved to Argenteuil (near Paris) [4]. There women and children were separated from men. Father was sent to a camp (Camp du Martinet [5]) and mother and I stayed in Argenteuil, closed in a building on Rothschild's property. We could only go out with a special permission.

After our papers to Bolivia came through (father had two brothers living in Bolivia) in March 1940 we moved: Mother and me to Paris to finalize our papers for our trip to Bolivia (April 1940); my father stayed in the camp until we boarded our ship in Marseille. Father only came to Paris for a couple of days to sign papers and then returned to the camp. In Marseille, father was at a soldiers quartier until he boarded the ship. Mother and I visited him there, this I remember.

We came to Bolivia in 1940, and my father worked on a mine for one year and a half. I lost one school year in France and another one in Bolivia where I stayed with my parents at the mining center where father worked. After one year, when I was ten years old, my parents sent me on boarding school in order not to lose any more school.

[1] Épinal is the capital of the French Département (county) Vosges in Northeastern France.

[2] At the beginning of June 1940 the German Wehrmacht attacked France. By 14th June 1940 it had occupied Paris.

[3] The Rothschild family is a well-known Jewish banking dynasty, originating from the 18th century.

[4] Town situated north-west of Paris.

[5] An internment camp in the Western French Département Martinet.