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Lydia Pais Rey

... the Germans were following us ...

Lydia Pais Rey was born in Vienna on 29th October 1934. At the age of four she and the whole family had to leave everything behind.



I have the same story as my two cousins, Judith Morhange, two years old, and Mary Pais, four years old. Our family left Vienna after the "Anschluss" [1] in 1938. I was four years old. My parents and the entire family had always lived in Vienna. My address was Grinzing Allee 14.

Due to the Nazi laws we all had to leave Austria, losing the majority of our possessions and my grandfather's factory. They lost everything and we have never been compensated.

Our first stop in exile was Paris, where the nine of us were obliged to share the accommodation – two brothers married to two sisters, three children and my mother's parents. My father's mother died in Theresienstadt.

Upon the arrival of the Germans in Paris we took flight, leaving for Pacy-sur-Eure, a little village in Normandy. We no longer had any money.

The Germans were following us, so we fled once more to Pau, a town in the southwest of France – the "unoccupied zone" [2] – but when there we unfortunately encountered the Gestapo, who carried out frequent raids against the Jews. We were easy to recognize because of our poor French.

In order to survive, my father and uncle were obliged to earn money. On an old bicycle, my father began to sell "guts" from the slaughterhouse to the butchers' shops. And so the two brothers started their business again.

We had to hide for the duration of the war. Much of the time we slept under beds and in cellars. We only survived thanks to all the people who took huge risks to save us. My grandparents were caught and placed in an internment camp in Cordes, a little village far away from us. [3] We were then given the opportunity to stay with a brother of my father in New York. We did not go because of my grandparents – we were later able to obtain their release.

My parents survived the war, but my paternal grandmother died in Theresienstadt. They had lived in Vienna since their youth and hardly ever spoke to me about the war, their escapes, their suffering, their lack of money and the problems of foreign language. All that I know is that they were forced to sell all of their possessions for ridiculous prices; their houses, jewellery etc. all disappeared. My grandfather's business was also seized without compensation.

We returned to Paris in 1949 where, after a trial, we had been able to regain our apartment, as it had been requisitioned by the French police. I went to school in the Lycée Molière with my two cousins. My cousin Mary became a well-known biology teacher at the CNRS in Orsay. Judith got married and has three children.

My life was uneventful until 1960. I met a man who taught me graphic design and advertising. In 1968, I set up my own advertising agency, which I continued until I retired at the age of 60 in 1994. I married Michael Rey, ingénieur centralien in 1969. We are now separated. I never returned to Vienna.

In December 2003, I discovered – thanks to your research department – an unknown cousin, who we lost at the beginning of the war, living in Belgium. Her parents were killed in Auschwitz.

[1] The "Anschluss" refers to the annexation of Austria and its integration into the German Reich on March 13, 1938.

[2] In June 1940, after surrendering to the German Reich, France was divided into an occupied northern and an unoccupied southern zone, the southern one being governed by Marshal Philippe Pétain and his "Vichy regime". Vichy France wilfully collaborated with the Germans, especially regarding the persecution of the Jews in France.

[3] Cordes-sur-Ciel, French village in the Region of Midi-Pyrénées.