



Peter Fleischl

Peter Berdach, later known as Peter Fleischl

Peter Fleischl was born in August 1926 in Vienna. In August 1938 he fled with his mother and his adoptive father first to Italy and then to Switzerland, where they could obtain an immigrant visa for New Zealand.



I was born on the 5th August 1926, son of Karl Berdach and Hilda Berdach, formerly Barber. My parents were still in their teens and the marriage didn't last and they divorced in 1928.

For the first ten years I lived with my father and his parents, Hugo and Toni Berdach in their large house at Saarplatz 3 in the 19th district of Vienna. My father, born in Vienna in 1906, was a legal student and acquired his doctorate in 1936, my grandfather, also born in Vienna in 1872, son of musicians, became a successful businessman connected earlier with the import of tobacco and later in the manufacture of casings for sausages as well as acquiring four properties in Andrassy-Straße in Döbling [1].

The family were secular Jews, cultured, multilingual and the house was a family home in which my father's older sister and her family and his younger brother also lived. It was a happy harmonious household. And for me a happy childhood with three slightly younger cousins also in the house, a large garden and Saarpark just across the road. I attended primary school at Silbergasse 6 which was razed during the war and my first year at the Realschule [2] while living with my father.

After this, in 1936 it was decided that I should move to my mother's home at Gersthofer Straße 131, a lovely old house with a large garden acquired by my grandparents Arnold and Rosa Barber before the First World War. My mother eventually studied Medicine whilst my grandfather, born in Leipzig in 1879, the youngest of three boys whose family moved to Vienna when he was four years old, did his military service and apprenticed as a builder and served in the First World War as officer on the Russian front, largely in and around Przemyśl. He was eventually recognized as Stadtbaumeister [3] and became well known in Vienna specializing mainly in renovations. My uncle, my mother's younger brother, became an architect and worked with my grandfather. This family were also secular Jews. I attended the Realgymnasium [4] in the Schottengasse for one year.

Throughout all this time up till the "Anschluss" [5] I was not particularly conscious of anti-Semitism, although my friends were largely Jewish and this separation was more or less the norm at the time.

The situation altered radically after the "Anschluss" on the 13th March 1938. My school became a school for Jewish children only and I clearly remember the headmaster addressing us telling that he personally did not approve of this separation because of religion, a very brave statement by him.

The news on the radio and newspapers became full of anti-Semitic statements, the "Stürmer" [6] was displayed in many prominent places and quite soon after the "Anschluss" horrible events took place, such as Jewish people made to scrub the streets on their knees, like a young couple who owned a chemist's shop along the road, with jeering crowds being amused by such vulgarities.

Local SA hoodlums came to our home to confiscate any valuables and a Verwalter [7], an unsuccessful builder, was installed in my grandfather's business and soon after, in early May 1938, my grandfather was deported to Dachau. My father was also taken in by the SS, but as he was lame due to poliomyelitis, he was released being told "you are no use to us". Both my parents could no longer pursue their careers, my father as lawyer, my mother as student of Medicine, three months short of her graduation.

My mother and I escaped on a train to Italy on the 26th August 1938, my father had re-married after the "Anschluss" to his long-time friend and left for the United States at the end of 1938.

My mother and I were joined by her long-time partner, Mario Fleischl, a psychoanalyst who had studied under Anna Freud [8]. We left Italy after

two weeks with a 3-week visa to Switzerland where in fact we stayed for nine months until we were able to emigrate to New Zealand. During the time in Switzerland, my mother was accepted by the Medical School in Lausanne and obtained her MD degree. My mother and Mario Fleischl married in London in June 1939 and in the following year, with my father's consent, Mario Fleischl became my adoptive father.

New Zealand was a very hard country to obtain an immigrant visa and by chance I had become friends with a young English boy in Geneva who on one occasion nearly drowned in the lake where I being a strong swimmer was able to pull him to safety. His very distinguished mother happened to be there and later helped us to get the necessary documentation to be able to get to New Zealand where we arrived three weeks before the outbreak of the war.

Living in New Zealand was like paradise. I loved my schooling and did well. My mother had to pursue the final three years of the Medical course to re-qualify and my stepfather worked 16 hours a day to support us and after three years we moved from Dunedin to Wellington where my parents pursued their respective careers, contributing a great deal in their professional fields, whilst I followed my mother's footsteps and graduated in Medicine in 1948 at the age of 22, later specializing in Internal Medicine, studying abroad for higher qualifications, marrying and having five children and living in Napier, a delightful seaside city in the North Island of New Zealand. In 1980 and 1981 I spent three months each time working for the New Zealand Red Cross in a refugee camp in Malaysia and in 1983 as all my family had grown up and I had become a widower, I spent the next eight years again working for refugees in Southeast Asia and Russia with the International Organization for Migration.

On my return at the age of 65 I continued to work as a specialist internist until I turned 80 and I now have the joy of watching the progress of my six children, eleven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

I have returned to Vienna on several occasions as have all my children and some of my grandchildren, the last time at the invitation of the Jewish Welcome Service two years ago which was a very moving occasion for me.

The ultimate fate of my grandparents was a very sad one. Hugo and Toni Berdach had to leave their home and move into a Jewish apartment in Türkenstraße from where they were deported to Theresienstadt in 1942. My grandfather died there two weeks after arrival and my grandmother was deported to Auschwitz six months later and gassed within hours of arriving there.

My Barber grandfather was released from Dachau in 1939 on condition of leaving Vienna within two weeks, and with his wife they migrated to Palestine where my grandmother's sister had been a pioneer migrant since 1906. My grandfather was a broken man and died in 1949, his wife died two months later. His older brother Bernard and his wife Olga and son Heinz did not manage to escape and were all killed in concentration camps as were almost all of my father Karl's wife, Paula Schlesinger's family.

In December 2014 Peter Fleischl died in New Zealand.

[1] Name of the 19th district of Vienna.

[2] A type of secondary school.

[3] Municipal master builder.

[4] Another type of secondary school.

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

[6] "Der Stürmer" ("The Stormer" or "The Attacker"), a strongly anti-Semitic Nazi weekly paper.

[7] Administrator.

[8] Anna Freud (1895–1982), daughter of Sigmund and Martha Freud, famous psychoanalyst in the field of child psychology.