

My Autobiography by Herbert Weiss  
with help from Chris McKeever  
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America has been my home for nearly 68 years now; in America I was educated, married and raised my daughter, had a career as an engineer and enjoyed visiting and photographing sights and scenery of this land. This was not the life I imagined for myself when I was growing up in Vienna, Austria, where I was born July 23, 1920.....in another place and time. This is the story of that place, that time and the events that brought me to America.

My father, Armin, was born in Vienna in 1896, the eldest (and I believe the brightest) of three sons. His two brothers were Siegfried and Georg. Before the First World War my father owned a factory where they made embroidered doilies and other decorative items. It was not a business that was in his family; he must have been very bright to be able to find a way to own his own factory at such a young age. When he joined the army, he sold the factory and went off to war.

In 1918, my father returned to Vienna, and needing employment, he found jobs as a bookkeeper and eventually as a salesman of life insurance. I don't think he really liked this work; I think he would have preferred being the manufacturer, the boss. He was a "boss-like" person. He was never as well off financially as he had been when he owned the factory. If he had been able to keep his factory, I think he would have been very successful. As it was, he did not earn enough to give us luxuries; we led a very frugal life.



Armin Weiss

At home my father was a kind and loving gentleman; though I really saw very little of him since he was working long hours. There was a young boy living in our building, Walter Feistritz, the son of the janitor. Walter struggled with his school work; and my father took it upon himself to tutor him. He was very strict with Walter; I remember him yelling at him: "You stupid boy!" But he never did this to me; he was a very kind father. He may have treated his employees this way, but I was not around at that time.

My mother, Hedwig Bloch, came from Dux, Bohemia, then part of Austria. Following World War I and the breakup of the Austro Hungarian Empire, Bohemia was split off and is now part of the Czech Republic. She and my father had met during the war when he was in the town of Dux and she was working in the store owned by her family, a kind of general store.

Heddy, as her brothers called her, was one of seven brothers and sisters. Her brother, Max, was considered "good for nothing"; and what do you do with a "good for nothing"?, you send him to America. I believe he was a young boy, maybe 14 or 15, when he went to America. Someone may have come to Bohemia and offered to take him to America, put him to work, something like that.



Hedwig Bloch Weiss



Herbert and Rene in 1924

All throughout my childhood we lived in an apartment in the third district of Vienna; at Rect Bahngasse 12. Our apartment was adequately sized with a kitchen, living room, dining room, bathroom, and one bedroom. I slept either in my parents' bedroom or a cot in dining room, which was folded up during the day. There was also a small room for the housekeeper who worked for our family.

My closest friends were my two first cousins; Siegfried's daughter, Rene (almost exactly my age) and Georg's son, Peter (about two years older). I saw Peter often as we lived within walking distance of one another. Rene lived further away; we had to use a streetcar or subway to get there.

I also had two playmates that lived in our apartment building: Walter (the janitor's son whom my father tutored) and Lise Cyganek. We just talked and spent time together and sometimes my mother took us to the city park.

After four years at the nearby elementary school in Strohgassee, Walter and I went to different schools. Not expecting to go on to the university, Walter went to the "burger schule". I studied hard and was a serious student intending to pursue a university degree. At the time, there was a law referred to as "numerus clausus" which mandated that Jewish students could go to university only to study medicine; so it was expected that I would study to become a doctor and I looked forward to that. To prepare to go on to the university I went to the Real gymnasium in the Stubenbastei for eight years. This school was not in the district where I lived, but in the first district.

I was a fairly good student in the subjects of Latin and Mathematics; I was a mediocre student in French and my cousin, Franzi Schapira helped me with that language.

A relative of my father's, Aunt Kathe Bondy, offered to teach me English when I was a child. She was instructing another person who lived in our apartment building, so she proposed teaching me as well. I liked her; she was a nice person, so I agreed to the lessons. I didn't realize at the time this skill would prove to be very important in my future. I worked one on one with her. It was very much like a formal class; she taught me reading, conversation, and writing, and by the time I left Austria, I knew English quite well.



Herbert as a boy in Vienna

I walked to school, but when we needed to travel a longer distance, we rode the subway or streetcar. There were mountains surrounding Vienna; we could take a streetcar to the end of the line and be in the mountains. As a family we went to the opera, the theater, sometimes camping and often visited one of Vienna's great parks. The Prata or Stadt Park where there was an amusement park and summer concerts.

My parents were not that religious, but I attended worship services at the synagogue on Saturdays. In Austria religion was part of the school curriculum. Two or three times a week, there was separate religious instruction for Jews, Protestants, and Catholics. Since it was covered in school, I did not have instruction at the Synagogue.

I liked to watch the games at the ice hockey rink near my home, but I wasn't much interested in playing sports myself. When I was about 16, I was skiing and broke my leg in a fall. The doctor used a metal plate to repair

the break, he explained that he had served in the army during World War I and that was how he had done it then. This resulted in my being ineligible to serve in the army once I came to America; and I still have swelling in my leg.



Herbert & Peter with friends  
Herbert 2nd from L, Peter 2nd from R

As a fairly young boy I joined the Boy Scouts, together with my cousin, Peter, partly under the leadership of Hans Schapira, Franzi's brother. We went to several summer camps; Litschau and Fernsee. We had a meeting once a week; played games, talked, did some charitable projects. We learned camping skills such as building campfires and how to tie knots. In 1937 I was advanced to be an assistant group leader of the scout troupe.

There was a violin in my family and it was expected that I would learn to play it, but I had no interest in studying the violin.

My mother's family was still in Czechoslovakia; one summer I was able to visit my aunts and uncles and their families in Prag, Teplitz, and Karlsbad.

One summer when I was about 14, I was invited to visit a Hungarian family to help their children learn to speak German. Renee was invited to a different family and we set out together on the train. We were met at the railway station and given bicycles to ride to our host families' homes; since I didn't know how to ride a bicycle I had to learn fast.

Then came the various political events in Austria: the failed revolution by the workers' party, the assassination of Chancellor Dollfuss and eventually the ultimatum to Chancellor Schuschnik and the German Anschluss on March 12, 1938.

On this date, when the Nazi's marched into Vienna and Austria became part of Germany, life changed dramatically for me and my family. There was no resistance to the Anschluss; "in fact many Austrians were in favor of the Nazi regime and troops were met by crowds cheering, waving Nazi flags and tossing flowers. But in Vienna there were about 200,000 Jews who were now under threat of being deported to concentration camps, murdered or forced into exile."<sup>1</sup>

Now there were Nazi soldiers in the streets. When I went out I had to wear a "J" pinned to my clothing to identify myself as a Jew. There were threats in the newspapers; we heard of people being taken to concentration camps and my father and his brothers lost their jobs. This happened almost right away. Their employers just told them, "We don't want you anymore."

Fortunately for us, our janitor, Mr. Feistritzer, when questioned by the Nazis, denied that there were any Jews living in our apartment building. His son and my friend, Walter, had joined youth organization of the Nazi Party, which of course ended our friendship. Before I left Vienna, Walter, died of a disease which should have been easily treated. He had diphtheria or some similar disease, but since most all of the physicians in Vienna were Jewish and began to leave Austria when the Nazi's invaded, Walter was not able to get the treatment he needed and he died.

I, myself, was caught once by the soldiers. I was walking to visit my cousin in a different district; I was by

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from an article in Wikipedia: Anschluss, "German Troops March into Austria"

myself and I was caught. Fortunately, nothing much happened. The Nazi soldiers carried wooden sticks, but they did not hit me. I was scared and just did what they told me to do; they had me do some pushups and other exercises. Later I learned that others caught like this had been sent to concentration camps.

My dream of becoming a doctor was lost when the Anschluss took place. I was in my last year of high school preparing to enter the university. But in April of that year I was moved to another school. Because I was a Jew, I could no longer attend school with non Jews and so moved to a school in the second district, where mainly Jewish people were living. I was able to finish the year and to graduate, but it had become obvious that we needed to leave Austria.

My cousin, Peter, and one of our fellow boy scouts, Paul Brunner, escaped by crossing the German-Belgian border into Belgium where they were assisted by the scouts and housed in a camp in Merxplas.

My parents and I had been sending letters to many countries seeking refuge. Most countries required a financial security, which my parents did not have. We tried Palestine, but they could not accept us; they already had so many refugees pouring in. Only America was able to offer us a home.

In order to obtain visas to immigrate to America, we had to have sponsors; persons who could sign an affidavit to make assurance that we were not likely to become a burden on the government. Uncle Max<sup>2</sup>, my mother's "good for nothing" brother, was living in New York by this time and he worked for Mr. Brunswick (of the Brunswick Recording Company) He was able to get Mr. Brunswick to sign an affidavit for us.

Another of my mother's brothers, Hugo, lived in Karlsbad, Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic). Karlsbad is known for its healing waters and is a famous spa resort, popular with the rich and famous. My uncle rented apartments to visitors to the spas and that is how he met Jules Bache (a German born American banker, art collector and philanthropist). Mr. Bache was willing to write an affidavit for me.<sup>3</sup>

With the necessary sponsors obtained, we were accepted to immigrate to America and the next step was to wait for the visas to be processed. There was a quota system, and only so many people from a given country would be granted visas each year. The length of the waiting time depended on where you were born. The Polish quota was empty so it was relatively easy for Polish people to get to America. For us as Austrians it would take about a year.

I graduated from high school in 1938, but did not leave Vienna until May 1939. During that time, I could not work or go to school. I went to visit my cousin, wrote letters seeking asylum; there was not much else to do.

My parents stayed in Vienna while waiting for their visas, but I had the opportunity to leave Austria for a refugee camp in England. The Kitchener Camp, run by the Council for German Jewry, was a former British army camp in the town of Richborough in Kent, England.

So with tears in my eyes, I left my parents at the Westbahnhof (West railway



Herbert

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<sup>2</sup> I recall visiting Uncle Max once or twice, but I did not get to know him really well. He lived perhaps in or near Long Island. We were living in the Boston area at the time and came by train to visit him.

<sup>3</sup> Although I would have liked to, I never met my sponsors, Mr. Brunswick and Jules Bache. Once I went to Mr. Bache's office, but I was not able to meet him. For some reason the secretary did not allow me to see him, or perhaps he was not in the office at the time.

station) and traveled by train to Brussels, Belgium. I stayed there for a short time with a relative, waiting for a visa to enter England. I had never been away from home before.....except on camping trips with the Boy Scouts. I was scared and also worried about my parents who still lived under Nazi occupation in Vienna, waiting until they could immigrate to America.

When I was finally able to go to England I crossed the English Channel on the ferry, landing at Dover. From there I was taken to the Kitchener Camp. I lived in a hut which housed about 20 young men in bunks. In all there were about 1000 young men in the camp. This was my first contact with people who had been released from concentration camps and our first knowledge of the terrible life they were forced to lead.

At Kitchener Camp we were fairly free, but everyone had a job; I helped building more huts for future refugees and for that I was paid about sixpence a week. It wasn't much, but enough to buy "tea and crumpets" when, several times a week, we walked to the nearby village of Sandwich for an outing.

Since I was able to speak English, I was also asked to be a tour guide for visitors who came to see the camp; and usually I got tips. The English people were kind and friendly to us.

The supervisors of the camp were two brothers with the name of Mays. They taught us what they thought were useful things for our future lives in America or other foreign countries. One of the things they taught us was a song (obviously the words changed slightly maybe due to their attitudes toward Americans): "John Brown's body has a pimple on his nose".

There were also English classes in the camp. Since I already knew English, I was able to be a sort of teacher's assistant, helping other students when they needed help.

As Europe became engulfed in the war with Germany, the camp at Merxplas was emptied of refugees who were then sent to the Kitchener Camp. Among others, my cousin, Peter, and one of his cousins, Walter Fuerst, were sent to our camp and we all volunteered to work with the kitchen and the distribution of food in the dining hall; all for sixpence a week. We took several trips together; on one we borrowed bicycles and went to Canterbury. Another time we took the train to London to visit our cousin, Rene. She had found a job in London; it was her way of getting out of Vienna.

I wasn't able to see or talk with my parents while I was at Kitchener Camp, but we did write letters. I knew when they were leaving for America. They got their visas before I did. My mother was born in Bohemia, and apparently this made it quicker for them than if they had applied under my father's birthplace (and mine), Austria. They had been in America perhaps a year before I came.

In March of 1940 we began to see the rockets from the battle of Dunkirk and the decision was made to evacuate the Kitchener Camp. At that time, Peter, myself, and several other occupants of the camp had received our visas to the United States. The camp was transported to the Isle of Mann, except the lucky few of us with visas and tickets for the ship, who stayed behind in Liverpool to wait for the ship. For lack of better accommodations we were housed in the police prison where we stayed for a few days. The food there was even worse there than at the Kitchener Camp.



Then, dirty and unshaven, we boarded the ship and soon mixed with the other passengers. Our ship traveled in a convoy with another passenger ship as well as a cruiser to protect us from the prevailing German submarines. Rumors had it that the ship carried the gold of Holland.

Many of the passengers became seasick. I didn't until one day when I forgot to shave and went back to my cabin at a lower floor. Looking into the mirror while the ship shook from end to end, I became sick myself.

We landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the cargoes were unloaded, and then went on the St. Lawrence River to Montreal. After a night's stay at a hotel, we went by Greyhound bus to New York. So, contrary to the experience of most immigrants, who saw the Statue of Liberty upon their arrival in America, I never saw that statue until many years later.

My parents had meanwhile arrived in this country in December 1939 and found a position as a "couple" in Connecticut; my father as a butler and my mother as a cook. Peter's parents lived in Washington Heights, New York, and Peter moved in with them while I rented a room owned by their landlords' relatives two city blocks from them.

After a short visit with my parents, Peter and I found jobs in Long Island City at the Murida Hotel; he in the bakery and I as a pot washer. Our salaries were \$30 per month plus room and board. My English started improving a bit, although I remember a situation where one of the waitresses was up on a ladder to take some dishes down from the cupboards and said to me: "Herbert, will you give me a hand?" Obviously that was an idiom I didn't understand and I proceeded to hold her hand full of dishes.

On our off hours we went to the beach where we met a Mrs. Wertheimer from Vienna and her two daughters, Eva and Linda, for nice social contacts.

At the end of the summer I found employment at a zipper factory and later on as an elevator operator, for the minimum wage of 30 cents an hour. I don't recall exactly about Peter, but he found employment in another state.

My father's brother, Siegfried (Renee's father), was living in Boston and promised my father employment if he would move there. I suspect now that what he had in mind was to work for him, selling insurance. We all moved to Boston, Massachusetts, renting an apartment in the same building as Renee's parents. Renee lived there too.

Unfortunately, almost immediately after our move, my father was diagnosed with tuberculosis and had to go to a sanatorium near Worcester, Mass. My mother and I depended on other relatives of the patients for rides to the place, although I frequently took a bus to get there. My father lived at the sanatorium for two years before he died.

Of my mother's six siblings in Czechoslovakia, only one sister and her family survived the Nazi invasion. One of my cousins had immigrated to England, but after realizing that she had left some jewelry behind, came back to Prag and was never heard from again.



Renee in 1945

This country, meanwhile, was at war with Japan and Germany; but I was released from my duties, partly due to the metal brackets in my leg and partly to take care of my mother. She had a small job taking care of some children in a family. My cousin Renee and her fiancée, Egon, joined the American armed forces.

I got a job in a factory making band aids and mothballs. Eventually, Peter worked there too, until he also joined the American army. I found other employment in a factory making oil filters. All the time I had hoped to be able to study engineering in night school, but the Massachusetts



Peter in 1944

colleges and universities didn't have engineering degree programs in their night schools.

A Jewish committee advised me to study the two year course at the Lowell Institute School, MIT's night school. After graduation I was hired at MIT to help build high-voltage x-ray generators, one of which had been installed at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and another one I helped install at the Oncologic Hospital in Philadelphia (today's Fox-Chase). The director of the High Voltage Lab was Dr. Trump, the grandfather of Donald Trump. I worked for one of his assistants, Bob Trout and I didn't have much connection with Dr. Trump, but he was a nice person to talk to.



The staff at MIT High Voltage Laboratory  
Bob Cloud 2nd from L, Dr. Trump 3rd from L, Herbert 2nd from R

I had a hobby, doing photography<sup>4</sup> and I belonged to a camera club in Boston, where I used their facilities. The club planned to spend the 4th of July weekend at Rangeley Lakes, Maine, and I decided to go along. In those days of black and white photography, retouching was an important skill and Louise Milonthaler, a professional retoucher, decided to join the group to meet photographers for business reasons. She invited her friend, Gertrude Braunstein to come along. Gert and I met, dated and eventually decided to get married on the folio wing on Independence Day 1952. We honeymooned on Nantucket Island. We purchased a house in Natick, MA and bought the minimum of furniture, all we could afford.

I had enjoyed my work at MIT, I liked the people there; but I was stuck and had no opportunity to advance so I eventually looked for an opportunity to move on. I accepted an offer to work for Raytheon, which at the time hired engineers without degrees to work on their radar systems. I started work at the same time as the technician Dennis Piccard, who became a good friend of mine and who eventually became Raytheon's CEO.

About four years after our marriage, Gert delivered Ellen, our pride and joy.

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<sup>4</sup> Still my main hobby is photography. I have changed cameras several times and also participated in various photography shows. Some of my photos have won prizes and I am trying to improve my photos, using my computer and other means. Several of my photos adorn the walls of my apartment.

General Electric Company in Utica, New York promised me that Syracuse University would give me a degree if I studied there at night. I accepted the job and my family and I moved to Utica. In a little over two years I received a Master's degree in engineering. We had taken my mother along with us, but after a while she needed nursing home care and we had to put her in one of Utica's homes, where she lived for many years until she died.

Utica was not a bad place to live, although the weather at times turned pretty ugly; we once experienced a snowfall of 30 inches in one day. We bought camping equipment and spent many of our vacations in the Adirondacks, on Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Maine. Ellen, who was three when we came to Utica, became an avid camper. We became friendly with our neighbors and Ellen made friends with their children, especially with Christine Cole.

After 7 years I was transferred to General Electric in Valley Forge to work on their manned orbital program, MOL, which was unfortunately cancelled by the government. Eventually I found work at Western Union in Mahwah, NJ and RCA, in Moorestown, NJ, where I stayed until retirement. At the time of my retirement RCA had been made a subsidiary of General Electric, so I am really retired from General Electric and my pension is being paid for by that company.

Of course every time we moved, Ellen had to change schools and she eventually graduated in Oakland, NJ, just before we moved to Marlton, NJ for my RCA job. I had been living in the Southern part of New Jersey for a year, just coming home on weekends. I don't recall Ellen's high school graduation. I was told that I had to stay home and wait for the movers.

Ellen graduated from Franklin and Marshall University and eventually received a PhD in biology from the University of Tennessee. She is a scientist at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where she and her husband, Shoji, work in the same biology laboratory.

After Gert was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, we moved into another one-story house in Mount Laurel, the Holiday Village, a retirement community. Unfortunately, after a few years Gert's health deteriorated so that she had to move into a nursing home, where she eventually died after several rather unpleasant years for both of us and her family.

After several years of living by myself at the Holiday Village, I moved to a condominium apartment in Cherry Hill, where a friend of mine, Ruth Lewis, owned another apartment. We planned many entertainments and trips together and belonged to several groups. We joined the Bnai Brith group (I had belonged to Bnai Brith when I lived in Mount Laurel and was active as vice president) and Ruth and I participated in many of their sponsored events and trips. Together we also enjoyed cruises to Alaska, the Mediterranean (when we visited Greece and Rome, including the Vatican), and the Caribbean.





The alumni.....Herbert on right

In 1998 Ruth accompanied me on a trip to Vienna on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of my high school graduation; this was the school I went to before

the "anschluss". There were only a few of my fellow classmates there, most of them still living in Austria. I was the only one there who had had to flee my home country. There were speeches made; we were welcomed by the current students at the school; it was very special time for me.



Current students listen as the alumni share memories



#12 Rechte Bahn Gasse

I was in Vienna for only a few days. The city did not seem much changed, but it was not my city anymore. Ruth and I visited the Stadt Park and found the apartment building which had been my home. There is still a Feistritzer (Walter's family) living in the building.



Feistritzer in the building