

## Janet de Santos

My mother Elisabeth Fink was born in Vienna on 21 July 1909 – although the German authorities in occupied Guernsey record her date of birth as 1899. Her brother Johan Fink was born in Vienna in May 1911. Their parents were Samuel Fink, born in Vienna in 1882, and Fanny Grosz, born 1893, whose place of birth is recorded variously as Poland or Czechoslovakia. My Christian name was chosen in memory of my maternal grandmother Jeanette Grosz.

The family lived in an apartment near the Vienna Opera house and music played a big part in their life. My uncle known as Hans played the violin and my mother known as Liesl played the piano and sang. My grandfather had stables in Vienna and was a horse dealer, while my grandmother travelled extensively in Europe dealing in antique paintings and carpets, often accompanied by her son Hans.

They were part of a large Jewish community in Vienna, 200,000 of whom fled the Nazis or died in concentration camps when the Germans annexed Austria on March 13, 1938. My grandfather died in Buchenwald. My grandmother escaped to Prague, moved to Brussels and subsequently went by sea to São Paulo, Brazil where she died aged 51 in 1944. Her son Hans joined the volunteer Czech army in Prague and managed to reach England in 1942 with the remnants of the Czech army and was stationed in Warwickshire.

My mother Liesl came to Guernsey on October 23, 1937. A friend of my mother August Spitz (Gusti) had arrived in September 1937 and they were joined by a third Viennese Jew Teresa Steiner in 1939. I have various photos of my



mother and Gusti at this period and also a photo which appears to have been sent to her brother from Guernsey in 1939. I have learnt from David Le Cheminant, a retired Guernsey vet, that my mother worked for his parents Norman and Ethel Le Cheminant, owners of a toy shop in St Peter Port, at their bungalow in Cobo and was still with them when he was evacuated from the island with Elizabeth College.

My father's family were well-known in the Cobo area. My grandfather Henry Thomas Duquemin was a grower and exporter of tomatoes and flowers, while my grandmother

had also established a business at Cobo Post Office which included, in addition to the post office, a general stores, milk round, tearoom and shooting range. Their eldest son Harry, my father was the postmaster and general manager. My father had been left a widower when his first wife tragically died at an early age, and I am told by relatives that the Duquemin family were delighted when he met and married my mother. The marriage took place on February 12, 1940 at St Sampson's Church. I have a somewhat tattered photocopy of the report of the event which appeared in the local paper. My father's sister and brother-in-law ran an hotel at Les Pieux, Cobo and it was here that the reception took place. Gusti Spitz was chief bridesmaid and other Austrian friends were invited and appear in various photos. In addition, according to the press report, my mother's own mother had been informed of the wedding because she managed to send flowers from Belgium.

My parents began their married life living at Cobo Post Office which had a pleasant residential wing, with lovely views towards Grandes Rocques from the first floor rooms. However, by the summer of 1940, Guernsey had ceased to be the safe haven to which the Austrian women had fled. The UK decided not to defend the islands against the Germans who had by now reached the French channel coast and on June 29, 1940 the German occupation began.

In October 1940 Jews were required to register with the Guernsey Police and as a result in November 1940 names of five foreign women were passed to the German authorities – my mother being one of them. Having witnessed at first-hand discrimination against the Jewish population in Germany and Austria during the 1930s, the Austrian Jews would have had no illusions about the significance of this act – even if some Guernsey people in places of authority appeared somewhat cavalier with regard to the probable consequences of the information

provided by them. Nevertheless, the next eighteen months or so appear to have passed with a certain degree of normality. My father continued to run the Post Office and my mother became pregnant. Germans were billeted at Les Pieux Hotel, but according to my cousin who was a teenager at the time, the first soldiers there were mainly well-educated English speakers who behaved well. Later in the occupation, my aunt and uncle were less fortunate with their 'guests'.

I was born in July 1941 at the Castel Hospital where both Gusti Spitz and Teresa Steiner worked. Gusti was a very frequent visitor to Cobo and was very well-liked by all the Duquemin clan there. By March 1942, however, a curfew of 8pm-6am had been imposed on the Jews and they had to remain at their current addresses. Non-compliance would result in a fine, imprisonment or internment in a camp for Jews. Shortly after, in April 1942, my parents were visited by Gusti and Teresa. The two women had been told that they were being deported with immediate effect and were apparently absolutely terrified. My father often spoke with great sadness of this last visit when he lent Gusti a suitcase – fearing no doubt that this farewell might be a final one. As indeed it was. Both women were to die in Auschwitz.

It is assumed that my mother avoided deportation at this stage because she had British nationality through marriage. However, the event underlined the precariousness of her position. In May 1942 there is a German reference to my father being the husband of a Jew and the owner of a shop. This is followed in June by the order that Jews are to wear the Star of David. In August 1942 Jews are banned from places of public entertainment and may shop only between 3-4pm.

In September 1942 came the first mass deportation to Germany of non-island-born persons. My mother was not included in this group but a German letter dated January

5th, 1943 indicates that the deportation of Jews was now in sight. Notices for departure were in fact issued on February 3rd, 1943. Those involved were listed as Jews, leading freemasons, officers, public figures, wealthy individuals, Sarkese and undesirables. My father always joked that he must have belonged to the final group. My father had actually appealed by letter against the deportation order. But to no avail – friends of his have, however, told me that he could have remained in Guernsey, but very much in character, he opted to go as a family group.

The original departure date advised was February 9th, but my parents and I actually left the island on February 12th. I was told later that we travelled in a force ten gale in the hold of a filthy coal ship. The only luggage allowed was what one could carry. Packing for three people, including a baby of eighteen months must have been difficult! My mother was terribly ill and for the rest of her life found it very difficult to board a ship, even in the calmest of harbours. Once we arrived in St Malo, we were put on a train and remained locked in for several hours despite local air raids. Apparently, I ended up in my carrycot under the carriage seat for protection.

It must have been a terrible blow for my parents when they were split up. I am sure that the hope had been that as a family unit we would have been sent to the CI family camp at Biberach. In the event, my father was sent to Laufen in Germany, the camp for single men and my mother and I were sent to Compiègne in France. I have read Nellie Le Feuvre's account of her time in Compiègne and it certainly matches the impression of dirt and degradation given me by my mother. While there, much to my mother's horror, I became infested with lice and had to have all my hair cut off. The worst aspect of Compiègne, however, was the fact that my mother was appointed barrack leader – possibly because she was bilingual in German and English. This meant that she was very much in the spotlight where the Germans were concerned. Her

papers identified her as Jewish and in the next-door camp people were being loaded onto transport and taken off to concentration camps. As a result, it must have come as an enormous relief when we left Compiègne in June 1943 and were transported to Biberach. My father, in his turn, was transferred to Biberach in August 1943.

By the time we all arrived in Biberach, camp conditions there were reasonably comfortable, especially when compared to Compiègne. Even more important, I am sure, was the fact that we were a family unit again, which must have been a great help to my mother and the whole point of my father opting not to stay behind in Guernsey. Although in the same camp, men lived separately from the women and children and my mother and I shared a room with Mrs Bertram Bartlett and her son Robin, who had also been transferred from Compiègne. My father helped in the camp kitchens – principally peeling potatoes! Although only three years old, I was allowed to attend the infant school and had many other children to play with. I am sure that life was not as carefree for my parents, but finally, on April 23, 1945, the camp was liberated by the Free French. Four weeks later we were taken to a US airforce base and flown by Dakota to Hendon in the UK. Once we had been processed, we went to Paignton in Devon where my grandmother's brother, Albert Guilbert, had settled after his retirement from the navy.

I am not sure how long we stayed in Paignton, but we were definitely back living at Cobo Post Office in December 1945, when my mother's brother travelled from England to stay with us for Christmas. They had last seen one another in Austria in 1937 and in the intervening period had lost both their parents and nearly all of their immediate family. To my knowledge only three family members survived the German occupation of Europe – two were allowed to settle in America after their liberation from concentration camps and one settled in Brussels.

My uncle settled in Warwickshire and achieved British nationality in 1948. Over time he was able to establish his own business and in the immediate postwar years was greatly helped by the cooperation and assistance of the many Jewish refugees in the UK. There was virtually a Jewish colony of displaced persons in one street of Leamington Spa where he lived.

My mother, on the other hand, continued to live in the totally non-Jewish environment of Guernsey. She no longer had her friend Gusti and now knew that her family was gone and her old life in Vienna had been obliterated forever. She visited Vienna only once in the postwar years and never wanted to go again. She was even reluctant to play the piano any more – although she was very gifted.

Even when her brother bought her a piano as a gift, it was difficult to persuade her to play.

Gradually, however, she settled back into family life in Guernsey. Her cooking became part of local folklore – especially her *apfelstrudel* and *wiener schnitzel*. She also became something of an entrepreneur, setting up a very successful guest house on the coast road at Cobo.

She finally left the island when my father died in 1970 and bought an apartment in Spain, where I was then living. When I returned to the UK to help my uncle with his businesses in Warwickshire, my mother also decided to come back to the UK and, as a result, her final years were spent in Leamington Spa.