

Erika Padan Freeman, born Erika Polesiuk on 1 July 1927 in Vienna, is 94 years old this year, and will celebrate her 95th birthday on 1 July 2022.

Erika Padan Freeman lived in Vienna's 2nd district with her family, in Ausstellungsstrasse. In 1938, with the "Anschluss", the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany, the Nazis forced Erika and her family to move to a group apartment for Jews in Engerthstraße. She was no longer permitted to attend the secondary school she had been going to. An excellent student, she was able to attend a secondary school near Augarten, the only one that was still open to Jewish children.

"From one day to the next, we were no longer allowed to take the tram. I remember the Jewish theatre at Nestroyplatz. One night, all actors were on stage and announced together that that would be their last performance. They were no longer allowed to perform. I was no longer allowed to go to school, and as the only one, I was moved to the public secondary school for Jewish children, the Chajes school near Augarten. Once, an SS soldier saw me standing on the sidewalk, picked me up and said, 'This is what a German girl looks like.' I had blonde pigtails and blue eyes. From that day on, I was often asked to accompany Jewish friends of my mother's through the city when they had to pick up a visa someplace. I was told that I was basically a little blonde guardian angel who helped them not get arrested off the streets. I am very touched by this."

In 1938, Erika Freeman's father had to flee to Prague. He was a social democrat and foreign minister in the social democrats' shadow cabinet. In Prague, he was arrested by the Nazis and deported to Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. Rachel Grau, Erika's mother, saw to it that her daughter was able to emigrate to the US at the age of 12. Erika's mother was deported to Poland. She was able to get away and returned to Vienna, where she hid from the Nazis in the underground as a so-called "submarine". She died on 12 March 1945 during the shelling of Philipphof, shortly before the end of World War II. Rachel Grau's life inspired the short story by literature Nobel prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, which was turned into the movie "Yentl the Yeshkive Boy" with Barbra Streisand.

Erika (Polesciuk) Freeman arrived in New York aboard the "SS Westerland" on 12 March 1940 and found shelter with her relatives in the US.

Erika Freeman's father was detained at the Small Fortress in Theresienstadt Concentration Camp, where political prisoners were incarcerated. He was very lucky as he was rescued by a Swedish diplomat who came to the camp to extract Swedish citizens and take them home. Erika's father had blonde hair and blue eyes. Erika believed for a long time that her father had died at Theresienstadt.

In 1946 on the day of Yom Kippur, her father met her uncle by chance in New York and learned that his daughter had survived the Nazi terror.

Erika studied at Columbia University and would become a highly regarded psychoanalyst. In her dissertation, she analysed the position of family in the Israeli Kibbutz system, a work that was highly recommended by anthropologist Margaret Mead.

She was married to artist Paul Freeman, who died in 1980.

Erika translated her maiden name into Hebrew and is calling herself Erika Padan Freeman today.

As a victim of the brutal racism within the Nazi regime, Erika is taking a decisive and optimistic stand for a “Never again”.

Over the last few years, she has been reconnecting with her old home of Austria; she’s been working tirelessly as a contemporary witness against oblivion.

When in Vienna, Erika usually stays at Hotel Imperial. To her, this is a kind of “revenge on Hitler”, who always called the Imperial his “Vienna residence”.

Sources:

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