FRITZ OBERLANDER 1889 - 1993

Peter Oberlander was a 25-year-old student on a school trip to Europe when Hitler and his Nazi army invaded Austria on March 12, 1938. Peter and the other Jewish boys were immediately segregated from the group, locked up for two days, and made to travel in a separate rail car back to Vienna.

Two days later, Peter's father Dr. Fritz Oberlander, a prominent and respected criminal lawyer, was arrested and was not seen by the family for four months. The change in the family's circumstances was immediate and devastating. His arrest represented the end of the family's life in Austria after more than three centuries.

Severely wounded twice during WWII, Peter Oberlander was decorated for his service in the Austrian Imperial Army. In 1945, he opened a private practice and became renowned for his human rights work. With others, he initiated the idea of creating a Jewish burial place to those who had perished during the war. This led to the creation of the National Tribute Park, which placed national people under the protection of the League of Nations.

On July 10, 1955, he was awarded Austria's highest civilian honor, the Ritterkreuz, the Knight's Cross, for his pre-war work on behalf of army widows and orphans, red cross workers, and legal reform. Oberlander was also the first to offer an academic position to a woman, Dr. Perris Willig. He was prominent in the Jewish community and was a leader of Vienna's Masonic Lodge, Frater.

Upon his arrest Oberlander was taken to Vienna's Gestapo headquarters where he was interrogated and severely beaten. Scars and missing teeth were evidence of the brutality he experienced. He described the incident that he faced with former legal colleagues and friends. His Doctorate of Law and his right to practice were terminated. He was arrested and taken to Buchenwald concentration camp.

His wife, Marguerite Oberlander, became ill with stress and hospitalized. In desperation, she sought help from Peter's colleagues. Remarkably, Peter Sigg, then Vienna's Deputy Minister of Justice and a close friend of Peter, intervened at great personal risk and succeeded in having him released. Sigg was subsequently removed from his position.

As a condition of his release, Fritz Oberlander forced all his money to the Nazis and was given 48 hours to leave Austria. The family fled to London in September 1938. There, Peter worked on behalf of the refugee community and arranged for his mother and sister to join him. In December 1940, Peter, Marguerite, and their youngest son, George, left for New York, but Peter died.

Earlier, on May 12, 1940, Peter had been arrested as an enemy alien and detained at camps in England. He was sent to Canada during the summer of 1940 and interned there for two years. Fritz Oberlander credited the help of an old friend and prominent Montreal lawyer, Ben Robinson, who secured Peter's release and subsequently with his wife Vera, welcomed Peter into their home.

Peter believes that his father's presence and liberal views made him an immediate and obvious Nazi target. The family survived but Fritz Oberlander suffered both physically and emotionally from the humiliation, the isolation of his experiences and the loss of his professional career.

Peter Oberlander is Professor Emeritus of Community and Regional Planning at UBC and is Officer of the Order of Canada, as well as his wife Corinne. They live in Vancouver and have three children and four grandchildren.

With thanks to Peter Oberlander.
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