

# FROM HONOUR & PROMINENCE TO BRUTALITY & INJUSTICE

## FRITZ OBERLANDER 1889 – 1953

Peter Oberlander was a 15-year-old student on a school ski trip when Hitler and his troops entered 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 to 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 WWI, Fritz Oberlander was decorated for his service in the Austrian Imperial Army. In 1919, he opened a private practice and became recognized for his human rights work. With others, he initiated the idea of issuing identity papers to those who had become stateless after the war. This led to the creation of the historic Nansen Pass, which placed stateless people under the protection of the League of Nations.

On July 10, 1935 he was awarded Austria's highest civilian honour, das Ritterkreuz, the Knight's Cross, for his pro bono work on behalf of army widows and orphans seeking pensions and legal redress. Oberlander was also the first to offer an articling position to a woman, Dr. Frieda Willig. He was prominent in the Jewish community and rose to Master of Vienna's Masonic Lodge, Plato.

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. Some of the interrogators that he faced were his former legal colleagues and friends. His Doctorate of Laws and das Ritterkreuz were abrogated. His law office was ransacked and other Jewish staff members arrested. He was jailed and then taken to build Mauthausen concentration camp.

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

As a condition of his release, Fritz Oberlander forfeited all his assets to the Nazis and was given 48 hours to leave Austria. The family fled to London in September 1938. There, Fritz worked on behalf of the refugee community and arranged for his mother and sister to join him. In December 1940, Fritz, Margaret and their younger son George left for New York, but without Peter.

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 enlisted the help of an old friend and prominent Montreal lawyer, Ben Robinson, who secured Peter's release and subsequently with his wife Tony, welcomed Peter into their home.

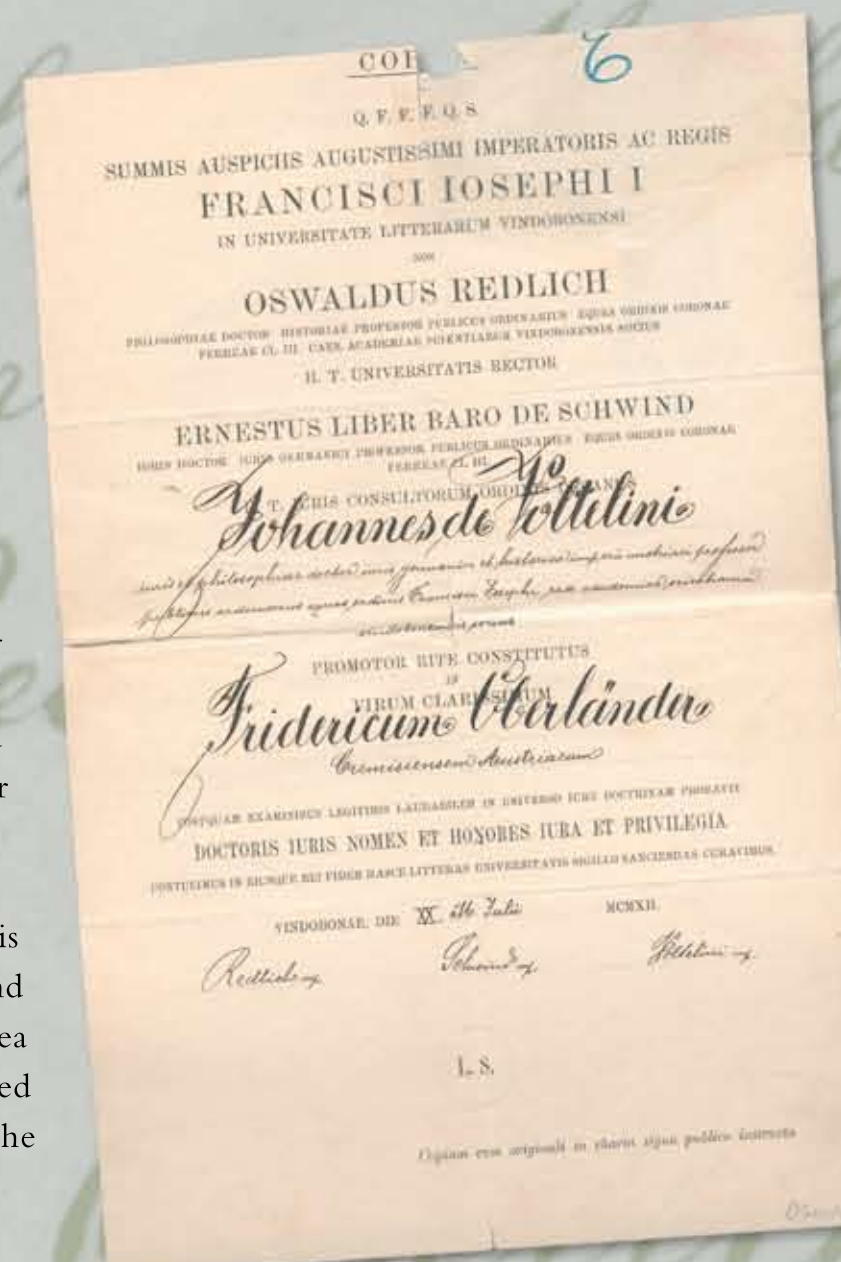
Peter believes that his father's prominence and liberal views made him an immediate and obvious Nazi target. The family survived but Fritz Oberlander suffered both physically and emotionally from the humiliation, brutality, the injustice of his experiences and the loss of his professional career.

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

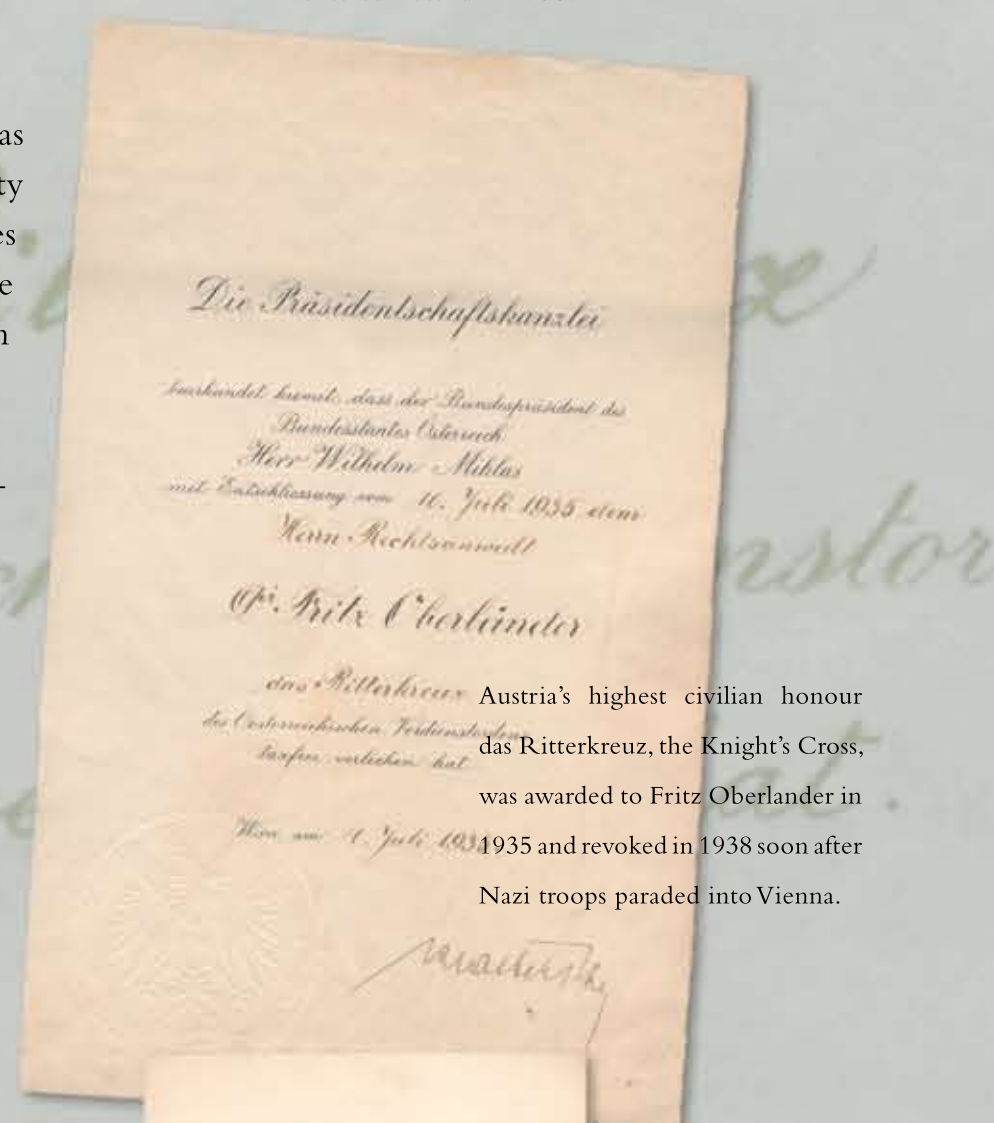
With thanks to Peter Oberlander.  
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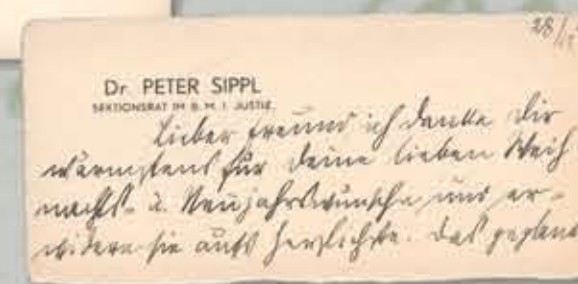
Fritz Oberlander with his wife Margaret and son Peter age 7, Baden bei Wien, Austria, 1930.



Fritz Oberlander's Doctorate of Laws and Political Science, University of Vienna, 1912. The degree was revoked by the university soon after the Nazis entered Austria in 1938.



Fritz Oberlander's business card, Vienna, 1922.



Note from Deputy Minister of Justice Peter Sippl thanking Fritz Oberlander for his Christmas greetings, 28 December 1934. Sippl helped arrange for Oberlander's release from Mauthausen in 1938.