

Precarious Survival

Everyday Life of “Mixed Families” During the Nazi regime in Vienna

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The Nazi take-over in Austria in March of 1938 radically changed the lives of the Jewish population¹ and intermarried families. While anti-Jewish measures had progressed in Germany over the course of five years, they were implemented in Austria overnight. The euphoric welcoming of Nazi troops by wide segments of the annexed Austrian population went hand in hand with the sudden emergence of violence against Jews, most distinctly documented in photos of so-called *Reibpartien* (“cleaning squads”) – Jews kneeling on the ground and forced to scrub pro-Austrian slogans written in oil paint from the streets of Vienna, while being surrounded by gleeful onlookers. The violence of the *Anschluss* pogrom was a uniquely Austrian phenomenon: Not until the November Pogrom did the persecution in the Germany reach the levels of violence seen in Austria.

Nuremberg Laws

The enactment of the Nuremberg Laws on September 15, 1935 categorized people based on the number of Jewish grandparents and the individual’s religion. These laws immediately affected intermarried families, who were of particular offense to the Nazi regime, as they betrayed the concept of a clear separation between a German *Volksgemeinschaft* of “Aryans” and the *Reich’s* Jewish population. While the Nuremberg Laws were a first attempt to define this group, questions about how to categorize and treat “mixed marriages” and their families continued to challenge National Socialist ideology and created discord among bureaucrats and policymakers. Efforts to introduce legal measures to dissolve “mixed marriages” were, however, met with caution by party leaders. Nevertheless, local Nazi authorities repeatedly put pressure on non-Jews to leave their Jewish spouses and get a divorce.

The enactment of the Nuremberg Laws affected intermarried families in different ways. While many members of intermarried families belonged to Christian denominations and were only defined as

¹ In this paper, the term “Jewish population” will be applied to all people considered Jewish by Nazi racial laws, who, regardless of their professed religious affiliation, faced persecution by the National Socialist regime.

Jewish according to the Nazi racial laws, non-Jewish spouses, who had converted to Judaism on the occasion of their marriage could now claim “Aryan” descent in order to protect their Jewish family members. According to the *First Supplementary Decree of the Reich Citizenship Law*, issued on November 14, 1935, descendants of “mixed marriages” were either defined as *Mischlinge of the first degree* or as *Geltungsjuden*, depending on their religious denomination. Individuals with a Jewish and a non-Jewish parent who were baptized or without denomination were classified as *Mischlinge*.² They were neither considered “Aryan” nor Jewish and literally personified the status of being “in-between,” which often had a strong impact on their identity. Lisa Heilig, born 1920, reflected in an interview her ambivalent situation during that time not without cynicism:

“I was 18 years old then, and when I walked through the city, I saw the benches with the inscription “Only Aryans“. Then I thought to myself: “Which side of myself can now sit down here, the left or the right one?”³

Younger generations of *Mischlinge*, baptized soon after birth and socialized in a non-Jewish environment, were often unaware of their Jewish roots. Liselotte Kürt, born 1925 in Vienna, was the favored student of her German teacher, an outspoken National Socialist, because of her dark-blond braids. She nearly was recruited to an illegal Nazi student organization by some of her older schoolmates and only declined after her father’s outraged reaction. Only the day after the *Anschluss* she was informed about his Jewish family origins and came to understand his agitation during the previous night, when he had stayed up late, smoking an entire package of strong French cigarettes.⁴ After the Nazi take-over in March of 1938, *Mischlinge* were overnight considered *non-Aryans* and experienced discrimination in their education and professional lives.

Children of intermarried families, who were registered with the Jewish community at the time of the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935, were considered *Geltungsjuden* and treated

² The term *Mischlinge* in this paper is used for “*Mischlinge of the first degree*” with two Jewish grandparents. The Nazi-regime classified individuals with one Jewish grandparent as “*Mischlinge of the second degree (quarter-Jews)*,” who experienced less persecution.

³ Heilig is the maiden name of the interviewee, who preferred to have her last name anonymized. Lisa D., in: Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (DÖW), Jüdische Schicksale, 321.

⁴ Liselotte Cech (née Kürt), Interview by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on 14 June 2013 in Vienna.

as “de facto Jews.” They often also came from families in which religion had played only a minor role up until the *Anschluss*. Martin Vogel, born 1922, described his family in an interview:

*“See, we were a downright secular family. We celebrated the Christian holidays, which meant Christmas, otherwise we didn’t celebrate anything. And from the Jewish side we kept the high holiday, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And as I said before, we were absolutely secular. We didn’t have any connection, neither in one nor in the other direction. I only know that my dear mother went to church from time to time. [...] She was, as mentioned before, in possession of [...] the “Ariernachweis“ (Aryan certificate). And this proved to save the lives of my father and me.”*⁵

Sometimes the religious denomination of a *half-Jewish* child was purely coincidental. In the case of Susanne Metschl, her parents decided before her birth that the child should have the father’s Catholic religion if it would be a boy or the mother’s Jewish religion in the case of a girl.⁶ This practice was far from unusual in “mixed families,” however bearing grave consequences for the fate of their children during the Nazi regime. After the *Anschluss*, *Geltungsjuden* were subjected to the same discriminatory regulations as the general Jewish population. The fact that the regime ultimately had to revert to religion in order to consolidate racial categorizations illustrates the inherent paradoxes of National Socialist race ideology.

Criminalization of Intimacy

The *Decree for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor* of the Nuremberg Laws constituted an intrusion into the private lives of individuals. “Half-Jewish” descendants of intermarriages were particularly targeted with a number of marriage stipulations regarding their most personal decisions, which became objectives of state control. *Geltungsjuden*, subjected to anti-Jewish legislation, were prohibited from having sexual relationships with non-Jews. Since the Nazi-takeover in Austria took place practically overnight, many were caught off guard by these regulations that suddenly defined some of their relationships as illegal. In spite of the danger of denunciation, many of

⁵ Martin Vogel, Interview by Michaela Raggam-Blesch, Dieter J. Hecht, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel and Albert Lichtblau on 21 February 2012 in Vienna. Translation from German by the author.

⁶ Susanne Bassler, Interview by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on 20 February 2013 in Vienna.

them continued their relationships in secret. *Mischlinge of the first degree* were only allowed to marry other “half-Jews.” Marriages with Jewish partners were not banned, but resulted in a classification as Jewish, which eventually led to their inclusion in the deportation measures. While marriages between *Mischlinge of the first degree* and non-Jews were officially not forbidden, they nevertheless required special authorization, which was hardly ever granted. Consequently, many “half-Jewish” members of intermarried families were prohibited from having “legal” relationships for the duration of the Nazi regime.

“Privileged Mixed Marriages” and “Non-Privileged Mixed Marriages”

In the wake of November pogrom and the surge of anti-Jewish legislation, the Nazi authorities decided to provide privileged treatment to certain intermarriages in order not to provoke objections from non-Jewish relatives. Privilege was based on the specific gender constellation of the married couple and the religious denomination of their children and exempted privileged families from some of the anti-Jewish laws and taxes.

“Mixed families” with a male non-Jewish spouse (head of the household) were considered “privileged.” Families of *Mischlinge* were “privileged” as well, regardless of whether the mother or father was “Aryan.” At the same time, all families with children raised in the Jewish faith (*Geltungsjuden*) were considered “non-privileged.” Regardless of “privilege,” families with Jewish husbands and fathers were usually deprived of their livelihoods within a short time after the Nazi takeover, which led to a shift in traditional gender roles, since non-Jewish wives had to take on the role of the breadwinner. During the course of the war, the severity of persecution between families with or without “privilege” differed significantly: “Privileged” intermarried families received the same food ration cards as the general non-Jewish population and were, for the most part, permitted to remain in their apartments. However, fear of denunciation was wide-spread, since people in the house could demand the removal of their Jewish neighbors at any time. “Non-privileged” families, on the other hand, were subjected to a similar treatment as the general Jewish population, including gradual exclusion from food rations and eviction from their homes, often with very little notice. In addition, starting with the edict of September 1941, Jewish spouses of “non-privileged” families, along with

their children, had to wear the yellow star on their clothing, thus publicly identifying them as Jews and making them vulnerable to assaults in the public. While being exposed to the same anti-Jewish legislation, Jewish members of “non-privileged” families were usually exempt from deportations as long as the “mixed marriage” remained intact.

Friends, Neighbors and Strangers: Interactions of “Mixed Families” with their Jewish and Non-Jewish Environment

The *Anschluss* disrupted social relationships between Jews and non-Jews overnight. Lotte Freiburger, the daughter of an intermarried family, whose best friends were non-Jews, remembers distinctly how these girls suddenly made a point of ignoring her. Due to her membership in the Jewish community, she was defined *Geltungsjüdin*. She was therefore immediately expelled from high school and banned from any form of higher schooling.⁷

Mischlinge like Gerhard Baader, however, were still able to attend high school until 1942. In his case, this privilege had a distinct disadvantage, because he was known as the only “non-Aryan” in his class and had to endure daily discrimination. After his expulsion, he started to work as an unskilled laborer at a construction site, where he finally experienced acceptance and solidarity among his co-workers.⁸

Occasionally *Mischlinge* also came to join the National Socialist Youth Organization due to their inconclusive “racial status“. Vera Kalousek, born in 1932, was obliged to join the local *Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM)* in her neighborhood during her school years. After half a year of regular group meetings she was invited to an official ceremony, where the girls were going to receive the black ties of the official BDM uniform. During this ceremony, however, Vera was officially declared “unworthy“ of receiving the BDM tie in the presence of an audience due to her “non-Aryan” racial status.⁹ In the case of Kurt Glattauer, his short membership in the “Hitler youth” prevented the “Aryanization” of his parents’ apartment. Kurt, who was baptized, lived together with his Jewish father Moritz and his Jewish step-mother Elsa Glattauer. After his 11th birthday in 1940, he joined the “Hitler youth” together with his classmates. When SA men one evening stormed the apartment in

⁷ Lotte Freiburger, Interview by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on 30 April 2009 and 26 January 2017 in Vienna.

⁸ Gerhard Baader, Interview by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on 2 July 2012 in Vienna.

⁹ Vera Rollig (née Kalousek), Interview by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on 10 September 2007 in Vienna.

order to evict the Jewish family, they were surprised by the presence of the “Hitler youth” boy in his uniform and left without harming the family. Shortly thereafter, however, Kurt was excluded from the organization.¹⁰ People defined as *Mischlinge* frequently experienced discrimination and exclusion from society as soon as the “taint of their descent” was discovered.

Ostracism also occurred within family circles. Some intermarried families faced reservations from their own relatives even before the war. After the Nazi takeover, they had to cope with the fact that non-Jewish relatives became party members and active combatants of the German Army, while their Jewish relatives were deported one by one. Walter Eckstein moved with his mother to his Catholic grandparents, after his Jewish father had been deported as a Polish citizen to Buchenwald in September of 1939, where he was murdered soon thereafter. Walter, who was classified *Geltungsjuden*, had to deal with the resentment of his anti-Semitic maternal grandfather, a Sudeten German, which built up after the death of his youngest son – Walter Eckstein’s uncle – as a member of the *Wehrmacht*.¹¹

The restrictive Nazi laws, heavily regulating Jewish daily life, occasionally also led to absurd situations for members of “mixed marriages” and their families. During a walk in the inner city, Lotte Freiburger and her non-Jewish mother passed the famous Demel pastry shop. Lotte longingly glanced at the display of cakes, but was with her yellow star forbidden to buy and eat them since an edict had passed in February of 1942. Her mother Mimi recognized her craving and went in to buy a cake. When she handed the package to her daughter, she was apprehended by a Gestapo man, who had watched the scene and reprimanded her for forbidden “friendly relationships” towards Jews in public. After finding out the Jewish girl was in fact her daughter, he was taken aback and disappeared.¹² In December of 1943, Mimi Freiburger was apprehended another time for accompanying her Jewish husband Moritz, who – as the Jewish spouse of a “non-privileged mixed marriage” – was drafted to a forced labor assignment to shovel snow in the very early morning hours in front of the city court. Worried about her husband, who was physically challenged from his military service during World War One, she insisted on going with him. The presence of an “Aryan” woman accompanying her Jewish spouse

¹⁰ Interview with Kurt Glattauer by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on 8 April 2013 in Vienna.

¹¹ Interview with Walter Eckstein by Michaela Raggam-Blesch on April 16, 2013 in Vienna.

¹² Freiburger, Interview, 2009; Freiburger, Interview, 2017.

marked by the yellow star enraged one of the guards. He had her arrested, but she was released after a few hours.

For “mixed marriages” and their families, the relationships with their neighbors were crucial, since they shaped their daily lives. The family of Oskar Baader had been evicted from their apartment in one of the popular communal buildings already in December of 1938 – prior to the introduction of privilege and in spite of the fact that the apartment was leased in his name. He already had been discharged as a high school teacher because of his Jewish wife immediately after the *Anschluss*. The family found an apartment in the second district. With the start of deportations in 1941, they were closely confronted with the fate of their Jewish neighbors, who lived in crammed apartments and were being deported one by one. Their son Gerhard was often woken up at night by the sound of boots on the stairs and the shouting that occurred as their neighbors were taken away.¹³ In addition, the daughter of their concierge, Leopoldine Frassl, closely monitored the remaining Jewish residents in the house. Through the hallway, she watched every move from behind the kitchen window of the Baader family. Cecilia Baader had a health damaging forced labour employment packing poisonous substances and was able to get the permission of her supervisor to only work part-time. She therefore had to be careful not to be seen by Frassl during the day and had to avoid entering the kitchen until the evening hours, since a denunciation could have led to her deportation for an alleged “unwillingness to work.” A neighbour in the house, Otto Lauterbach, who was also protected through his marriage to a Catholic woman, was less fortunate. Leopoldine Frassl denounced him for listening to foreign radio stations – a major violation of Nazi laws – and “illegally wearing a traditional Austrian suit (*Trachtenanzug*),” which was forbidden to Jews by anti-Jewish legislation. Lauterbach was arrested by the Gestapo in December of 1943 and deported to Auschwitz. He survived and Leopoldine Frassl was put on trial after the war.¹⁴

There were, however, also acts of kindness and support among people in the neighborhood and throughout the city. Sometimes these were small gestures such as a bowl of potatoes anonymously deposited at the doorstep or a package with a much-desired bologna sandwich that Lotte Freiberger

¹³ Baader, Interview, 2012.

¹⁴ Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (DÖW), Geheime Staatspolizei, Tagesbericht 3 (7–9 December 1943), AR 84795; Oberösterreichisches Landesarchiv, LG Linz, Vg 8 Vr 6477/47.

was given secretly by a stranger, who was riding the tramway together with her to work.¹⁵

It was not only food that “mixed marriages” and their families were deprived of, but also normal caring human relationships with non-Jews which were rare and all the more meaningful if they occurred, since “Aryans” were not allowed to have “friendly relationships” towards Jews in the public according to an edict from 24 October 1941. In this context, the case of Hilde Deimel is worth mentioning. Hilde was the best friend of Vilma Kühnberg, born 1928, who lived with her Jewish father and Catholic mother in a working-class neighborhood in the second district. After the *Anschluss*, Hilde not only broke off the friendship, but also started calling her names in public. On the day of Vilma’s 12th birthday in 1940, Hilde Deimel suddenly appeared at her doorstep and wholeheartedly apologized for her behavior. From that day on they resumed their friendship and Hilde visited her friend every day in spite of the existing restrictions.

“From that day onwards, she [Hilde] came every day to visit us, which wasn’t that easy: On the first floor she had to watch out for the Vanitscheks, on our floor for the family of the SA man Lattenmeier. Their kitchen window led to the hallway and they could see everyone, who called on us. As an “Aryan” it was strictly forbidden for Hilde to associate with Jews. She found a way by simply crouching along the hallway to our apartment. Thereby she wasn’t visible from the kitchen window of the SA man. Fortunately, she was never caught. She took the risk only to be with us. And she came every day.”¹⁶

While acts of kindness or support are mentioned in autobiographical accounts and interviews, they are nevertheless presented as an exception in an environment that had suddenly turned hostile. The traumatic experiences following the *Anschluss* to Nazi Germany in March 1938 and the humiliation and the sudden loss of rights that followed were too deeply imprinted. Overnight, neighbors and friends had turned against them, and denunciation continued to be a constant threat.

Precarious protection – The Crucial Role of the “Aryan” Parent or Spouse

Existing marriages between Jews and non-Jews, as well as the presence of their “half-Jewish” children, presented a permanent threat to the “racial” integrity of the Nazi regime. In conjunction with

¹⁵ Freiberger, Interview, 2009; Freiberger, Interview, 2017.

¹⁶ Vilma Neuwirth, Glockengasse, 76-77.

the so-called Final Solution, this “unsolved problem” played an important role in the discussions during the infamous Wannsee Conference in January 1942 and its follow-up meetings in March and October of the same year. Internal differences within the Nazi party and concerns that “Aryan” family members would cause public unrest ultimately spared this group from the full force of the radical measures applied to the general Jewish population, even if plans for the ultimate inclusion of “half-Jews” and Jewish partners of “mixed marriages” in the Final Solution were never abandoned.

In the course of the mass deportations between February 1941 and October 1942, the majority of the Austrian Jewish population was deported from Vienna. Jewish spouses of “mixed marriages” as well as their children were generally exempted from these transports, as long as the marriage remained intact. If it was dissolved due to divorce or the death of the “Aryan” spouse, this protection usually ended, unless there were children classified as *Mischlinge*.

With the start of deportations to Theresienstadt in June 1942, deportation guidelines also included *Geltungsjuden* coming of age in these transports, if they no longer shared the same household with their non-Jewish parent. In the context of Austria, the same seemed to have been applied to Jewish spouses of “mixed marriages,” who also lost their protection if they no longer lived together with their “Aryan” partners. Non-Jewish spouses of “non-privileged mixed marriages,” who could no longer endure the conditions in the crowded Jewish collective apartments (*Sammelwohnungen*), thereby often unknowingly endangered their Jewish spouses, if they moved out. In other cases, Jewish spouses tried to protect their “Aryan” partners from an eviction of their home. Leopold Deman and his Catholic wife Maria were terrorized by a couple in the neighborhood, Josef and Maria Ernst, who had set their minds on taking over their apartment and denounced them with the Nazi authorities. In order to spare his wife from eviction, Leopold Deman finally gave in and moved into a *Sammelwohnung* in Josefinengasse 1 in the second district. In April 1942, after a roundup of that apartment, he was deported to Włodawa, where he was murdered.¹⁷

Lotte Freiberger turned 19 in the summer of 1942, at the peak of the mass deportations from Vienna. Around this time, she was summoned for deportation for the first time. When the SS came to pick her

¹⁷ Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, Database of Austrian Shoah Victims and Gestapo Victims (DBSHOAH): <http://www.doew.at/personensuche> (22 March 2022).

up in the family apartment, she was ready to jump out of the window and was only prevented from doing so by her father. They came back on two more occasions, always unannounced. Each time Lotte was told to pack, while the SS had her papers checked, and each time she ended up being excluded from the transport – after hours of nerve-wracking uncertainty. While Lotte Freiburger was ultimately able to remain in Vienna because she shared the same household with her non-Jewish mother, she nevertheless was made aware of the very fragile nature of her protection.¹⁸

Since deportation guidelines were never published, as they were considered “*Geheime Reichssache*,” members of “mixed marriages” and their families did not officially learn about the key factors of their safeguarding. Instead, they were left to their own intuition on how to uphold their protection.

During the last years of the war and after the deportation of the majority of the Jewish population, the remaining Jews came under increased scrutiny, and even minor “offenses” could lead to imprisonment and deportation. In the fall of 1943, the Gestapo arrested eighteen-year-old Friedrich Braun, classified as *Geltungsjude* for his “absence from work.” He was deported to Auschwitz, where he was murdered in January of 1944.¹⁹ Even things like going to the cinema could be fatal, since it was forbidden to Jews, so one could only enter if he/she removed the yellow star, which itself was a major offense. In 1943, the 21-year-old Katharina Fischer was arrested for “disregarding the mandatory labeling” – failing to wear the yellow star she was obliged to display as a *Geltungsjüdin*. She was deported to Auschwitz and killed in December of that year.²⁰

Consequently, this led to a criminalization of normal, daily activities, since survival strategies, such as getting extra food from the black market to supplement the meager food rations, were dangerous. This can be seen in the increased number of arrests quoted in the Gestapo daily reports during the final years of the war.

Regardless of the dangers involved, some of the remaining Jews, particularly younger persons, continued to take off the yellow star. Apart from the motivation to enjoy brief moments of “normal

¹⁸ Freiburger, Interview, 2009; Freiburger, Interview, 2017.

¹⁹ DBSHOAH: <http://www.doew.at/personensuche> (22 March 2022).

²⁰ DBSHOAH: <http://www.doew.at/personensuche> (22 March 2022).

life,” this was also an act of self-assertion and agency. Judith Hahn,²¹ born 1929, survived in Vienna with her “Aryan” mother. In an interview she described her motivation as a teenager to take off the yellow star:

“If one talks about this today, this all sounds downright silly, because actually we were taking a risk for nothing, which we did not realize then. We did it. And maybe it also contributed to the fact: We felt stronger, if we did not show fear or if we were carefree. One was able to endure it better.”²²

In the autumn of 1944, even “privileged families” were increasingly affected by the radicalization of the Nazi regime. Male *Mischlinge* as well as “Aryan” spouses of “mixed marriages,” who both were considered “unworthy” of military service, were drafted for forced labor deployment in the Organisation Todt (OT). There are indications that this was intended to disrupt “mixed families” and to impair the protection by “Aryan” spouses in order to facilitate future deportations.

Survival was not guaranteed until the very end. In January 1945, only months before the end of the war, the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) finally issued an edict ordering the deportation of *Geltungsjuden* and Jewish spouses of “mixed marriages” to Theresienstadt. While in Germany about 1,900 persons were deported from a number of cities by the end of February, local Nazi officials in Vienna cancelled the transport planned for 26 February 1945 because of the approaching front.

With the liberation of Vienna by the Red Army on 12 April 1945, about 5,512 Austrians classified as Jewish had survived Nazi persecution. An additional approximately 1,000 people had managed to survive in hiding. Considering that the Viennese Jewish community had been one of the largest in central Europe—167,249 members before the Nazi takeover in 1938—only a very small number managed to survive in Vienna under precarious conditions.

²¹ Name changed by request of her descendants.

²² USC Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive (VHA), Interview Code 38836, 25 November 1997 in Vienna. Translation from the original German by the author.

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