

Betsy Touriel-Kapner family journey
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Betsy Touriel-Kapner

Family journey out of Austria during WWII

Austria (grace):

While living in Vienna, with WWII approaching Betsy's grandfather was arrested when trying to get a friend out of jail. Betsys mom and grandmother were then living alone in Vienna, one of their neighbors had a son who worked with the secret police, he would warn the Jews when the police were coming. With these warnings Betsys mother and grandmother would be hidden by the dentist in one of his closets. As more Jews were disappearing, Betsy's grandmother knew they had to get out of Europe, she risked her life, went to the Nazis and bribed them to release Betsy's grandfather. Nazis agreed and he was ordered to leave immediately, and was sent to a refugee camp in Austria. While waiting for the news of his release, her grandmother got 3 visas to go to Bolivia. Betsys grandmother knew she couldn't leave Austria without her husband so as a precaution she put her daughter (Betsys mother) on the kindertransport. As she got home she learned news of her husband's releases. Immediately she sent her cousin Heinz to retrieve her daughter from the train. And just like that Betsy's grandmother and mother were on their

journey to Bolivia. While in communication by letter with their grandfather he once said "Don't lose your nerve now this will and must work."

Bolivia + Chile (stella):

Betsy's grandparents and mothers were able to escape to Bolivia. When her Grandfather was in the concentration camp, Betsy's Grandmother packed up all her nice jewelry and went to the Nazi head-quarters. She was somehow able to bribe them to release her husband, under one condition- that they leave Austria immediately. Her Grandmother was then able to get travel visas for their entire family from Vienna to Bolivia. This was very lucky because most countries had closed off their borders to Jewish refugees. However, she started to fear that her husband would not be released from his concentration camp. Out of fear, she put Betsy's mother on the KinderTransport, in hopes that she would have a better future. Once she got home from the train station, she heard in a letter that her husband was going to be released. She immediately freaked out, since she had just put her daughter on the KinderTransport. Miraculously, she was able to get her daughter home safely through some of her connections. Once their family was safely reunited, they embarked on their journey to Bolivia.

First they took a plane all the way from Vienna to Chile. After arriving in Chile, they took a two day train ride to Bolivia. The train was filled with Jewish refugees. Many people on the train got sick due to the high altitudes. After two long days, Betsy's Grandma, Grandpa, and Mother finally arrived at their new home. The three of them lived together in a one room apartment. There was a bathroom down the hallway that they shared with 20 other people. They couldn't even leave their apartment complex due to civil unrest in Bolivia. After three weeks, the street violence had stopped and it was finally safe for them to leave the apartment. They went to retrieve their belongings, only to find that everything was stolen by the Nazis. All they had left was the clothes they were wearing and the few things they were able to bring on the train with them.

Even though their life was so hard, Betsy's Grandfather was able to find a job at a local mine. This mine belonged to Moritz Hochschild. Moritz Hochschild is known as the Bolivian Shindler. He was one of the wealthiest and most powerful miners in the world, and had lots of political power. He convinced the Bolivian president to open their borders to Jewish refugees. He saved between 10 and 20 thousands of Jews during the Holocaust by facilitating their legal admission to Bolivia. Three of the people he saved were Betsy's grandparents and her mother. Betsy's Grandfather worked his way up to become the vice president of one of the biggest mines in Bolivia. Once again, her family was very successful and wealthy. Betsy's mother grew up in La Paz, where she attended boarding school. She went to college in South America, and played college basketball.

Seattle + Tacoma (brooke):

Betsy knew that her mom, Gerda, and grandparents Gielsa and Friedrich, were reluctant survivors, someone who survived the holocaust but never shared their story. She grew up never

really hearing about her family's story during the holocaust. When Betsy's mother passed away suddenly in 2017 and her father passed in 2019, she took on learning more about her family's history. She went through safety deposit boxes and found old family documents and letters written by her grandparents while her grandfather was in one of the concentration camps.

After Betsy came back from college she decided to ask her mother about their family's story. In 1954 Gerda decided she wanted to visit America to see her relatives. During her mom's visit, she was set up on a double date where she actually ended up marrying the other man on the date and that was how Gerda and Gabe met. They got married in the Seattle courthouse, Gerda moved back to La Paz to get a permanent American Visa and the two were then married at Ezra Bessaroth, a synagogue still in operation today in Seattle. All within the year of 1954, Gerda and Gabe got married, moved to Tacoma, and started their family. Their oldest son Morry was born in 1956, Betsy was born in 1959, and their youngest son was born eight years later. All three of the siblings graduated from the University of Washington, and Betsy has two children both college graduates.

Over the years that Betsy has worked with the speakers bureau sharing her family's story, she has found a great appreciation for her grandparents and the events that they went through. During the Q and A section of our interview, Betsy shared some of her oldest memories of her grandparents including when they would come to visit once a year. One word that really stood when Betsy was telling the stories was resilience. Her grandparents were always happy and supportive no matter what they had gone through.