

The Courage to Walk to Safety

Trude walked with her chaperone to the gymnasium for her fitness class in Vienna, Austria. It was a crisp afternoon in March 1938. Trude was fifteen and tired of her parents' constant supervision.

"I don't see why I can't even go to school without a chaperone!" she said, holding her bag with her gym clothes tightly. The street was unusually busy, and Trude's chaperone hurried them past small gatherings of people passionately discussing politics.

"They worry. You're their only child, Trude. They just want what is best," the chaperone said.

As they began to cross the street, Trude noticed various political flags waving off balconies. All the usual political parties were represented, but Trude didn't care for listening to adults argue about politics. She had friends to meet and dances to plan for—including the one the next weekend.

"So many people out today!" Trude said as they reached the door of the gym.

Her chaperone ushered her inside with a glance behind them. Trude slipped off to the locker room to change and join her friends.

An hour later with class over, Trude and her chaperone stepped onto the street in shock.

"What's happening?" Trude asked, overwhelmed by the sea of red flags with swastikas on them. None of the other political flags they'd seen walking in were still on display.

"Hush. Don't stare. Let's get home," her chaperone said, ducking her head and swiftly leading them down the street, careful to keep close to the buildings. Smoke plumed into the blue sky across the city.

"What's burning?" Trude asked.

Her chaperone didn't answer, but they picked up their pace. Every policeman they passed had an arm band with a swastika on it.

At home, her father was stacking papers, their passports in hand. Trude's mother was sitting in her favorite chair, kneading a handkerchief.

"But we can't leave! Our business is here, our friends! Our synagogue! Trude's school," she ges-

tered at Trude.

"What's happened, Papa?" Trude asked.

Hitler. He's marched into Austria. They are burning our churches, our businesses. He's calling for a referendum to create a united Austria and Nazi Germany. Get washed up for dinner." He dismissed her and went back to persuading her mother to leave.

Trude turned to her chaperone. "Why would we have to leave?"

"Hitler hates the Jewish people."

"But why? We haven't hurt anyone," she said.

The chaperone guided her back to her room. "He's blaming the recession on Jews and other outsiders, and he's preying on people's fears."

"But this is the modern age. Surely people won't believe him!" Trude couldn't imagine packing up her beautiful room and leaving like her father wanted.

Her chaperone touched her shoulder. "It's hard to understand hate. Listen to your parents, Trude. You've always been their light and you will have the courage to face this."

Trude's Life Changes

Her parents continued to argue over dinner and through the night. Her mother was adamant they could not leave. But the news was bleak: Jewish businesses had been vandalized. Books burned. Neighbors said that people had gone missing.



Vienna Boys' Choir welcomes Hitler, 1938 (photo ushmm.org)

The next morning, an officer knocked on their door with his rifle demanding the keys to their family's car. Despite his frustration and anger, her father handed them over.

Trude went to school, but she found many attitudes toward her and her Jewish classmates had changed. Her teachers no longer called on her in class.

Within a week, they had fewer people to help them at home and in their business due to the restrictions put in place. Every day it seemed there were more rules for Trude and her family, including where they could go and what they could own. Trude had to leave her school and she continued her studies at home as best she could.

One day, a man arrived and demanded that they move.

"You have six hours to get out. This house isn't yours anymore."

Trude knew it was hopeless to resist. The Nazis arrested anyone who defied their orders or had them beaten or sometimes killed. Her father immediately set out to find a place to live while Trude and her mother packed as much as they could.

"This is not right," Trude said, pulling pictures from the wall and clothes from drawers.

Six hours later, Trude bid goodbye to her childhood home and tried to remain cheerful for her parents in the new building where they'd found a small apartment. It was in a district full of other displaced Jews, crowded and loud. But they were together as a family, and her father still had a business open.

One day though, her father sensed a change. "It's getting more and more dangerous. I'm going to take a few things down to the store to lock them up." He loaded some camera equipment and other items in a bag, kissed them goodbye, and walked out.

But within five minutes he was back. "They say I've been arrested."

Trude's mother clutched him. "How did you get away?"

"I knew the men. I asked to bring you the keys to the business. I don't have much time."

He handed her the keys and the bag he'd been carrying and began pulling on extra layers of clothes. It was early November and already bitter cold.

Trude's mother hid the bag he'd been carrying.

"We cannot let him go," her mother said to Trude, stepping out into the hallway. She rang the doorbell of a neighbor down the hall.

"Please, will you hide my husband? Just until we can get him out of the building tonight?" Trude's mother begged the neighbor.

The woman agreed, and Trude's father hid deep in one of her closets. When the police arrived at the apartment to see what was keeping him, Trude's mother acted surprised.

"You've arrested him? We haven't seen him since he left earlier today." The police searched the apartment and set off down the hallway to check with the neighbors. They detained a few others for questioning, but no one gave away her father's location.

While the police had been searching the rest of their building, Trude's mother had been putting on her coat and calling a friend.

"Something's happened. We need to hide for a time," she told Trude. "Go order a taxi downstairs."

Trude did what her mother asked, and when the car arrived, they gave the cab driver the address, sneaked Trude's father into the floorboard of the back seat where they covered him, and drove to her father's place of business.

The city seemed to be in chaos—fires, people running in the street, glass shattering.

"What's happened?" Trude whispered.

"Jewish kid killed the diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris," the cab driver answered.

"But what does that have to do with us?" Trude asked.

"The Germans gave the Nazis twenty-four hours," the cab driver answered, his eyes not leaving the road.

"To do what?" Trude asked her mother.

"To try to destroy us," her mother said, urging the driver on.

When they arrived at the store, Trude's family ran inside, pulling the iron shutters down and locking the door behind them.

They huddled together, grateful to be alive. All night they heard the sirens and the breaking of glass, praying they'd be safe. Voices came and went outside, and at one point, they heard someone rattling

the shutters outside the store. But no one broke in.

Trude passed an uneasy night curled up near her mother. Her parents didn't sleep.

As morning broke, the sounds of activity outside the store died down. Still they waited. When it was quiet, Trude called a friend who said to wait a little longer.

Late in the afternoon, the phone rang. Trude picked up without saying a word.

"Trude, it's me. It's over," the young woman said. Trude breathed a sigh of relief.

"We can go home," she told her parents, hanging up the phone.

They hailed a car and drove back to their apartment, aghast at the reports of utter destruction around the city, that November night of terror, called Kristallnacht.

By January, Gestapo were actively seeking her father, and her mother finally agreed that it was time to escape Vienna.

Trude and her father worked out a secret language they could use on the telephone without detection, so that once he got to safety, he could let them know.

"You have to keep your head," he told Trude. "We'll be together again, but you must be brave."

The girl who had once not been allowed to cross the street alone would now be left to help lead her mother out of Nazi-occupied Austria.



Synagogue in Vienna, the only one not destroyed on Kristallnacht (photo ushmm.org)

The Journey Out of Austria

The day her father left, Trude hugged him fiercely, unsure if she would ever see him again. She kept herself busy by cleaning their rooms, packing a travel bag, and checking for their passports and other paperwork.

Two days later, the phone rang and Trude immediately recognized the code she'd created with her father. He was safe in Belgium!

He and the man he'd traveled with had boarded a train bound for Belgium, and during the ride, they paid a waiter to hide them under a table when it stopped at the border. Their suitcases were found and the train searched, but no one found the two men.

At Rotterdam, they'd disembarked and stretched their legs along with the other passengers, but instead of getting back on the train, they found a kosher sign in a storefront and begged for help.

The owner of the shop had gotten them papers and smuggled them to safety in Antwerp where they could get passage out of Europe.

"This is what you and your mother will do, too," he said. "Trude, you must help your mother. Get her safely out of Austria. Meet me here."

"I will, Papa."

Trude and her mother made plans and packed their small bags, sending a few final items on to family in Poland.

The rail station was bustling with people. Trude and her mother linked arms, staying together while they waited and boarded their train. Once it left the station, they went in search of the waiter and found him in a compartment with eight other people.

Trude signaled to him, ordering a coffee, and then lowered her voice. "You helped my father by letting him hide beneath your table. My mother and I are here, and we have twice the fee my father paid you."

"I'll get your coffee," he said aloud. Under his breath though, he whispered, "I cannot help you. I'm being watched."

Trude took the coffee, her heart beating fast. Without the waiter's help, she knew they would have to disembark at the border, since they did not have a visa or paperwork to leave the country. They were on their own.

At the border, they got off the train and found

their way to a small hotel where the owners allowed Jewish refugees to stay under the eaves to get out of the cold. Trude asked the others how they might get to her father in Belgium. A small group was going to try to reach the border on foot that very night.

"Mother, we have to try to make our way out through the woods," Trude said. They bundled up and began to make their way through the forest under the cover of night. The first night, they walked briskly, hopeful they could make it without being caught.

"Halt!" an officer with a dog stopped them. They detained the men and sent the women in the group back.

Trude and her mother hid again in the eaves of the hotel, resting and each night they would try to cross the border again. For five weeks, they walked out into the woods each night, desperate to get past the border guard. And for five weeks, they were caught and sent back.

Finally, one day Trude called her father to let him know they'd been sent back again, and that her mother was feverish and ill. Her father had a new plan.

"I found a man in the Gestapo who is willing to drive you partway. I have paid him. All you have to do is get to the pick up point." He described the place where the car would meet them.

Trude wanted to object with her mother so ill, but this seemed their best chance. She bundled up her mother in all the clothes she had, wrapped an extra scarf around her neck and head, and they set off into the woods.

The car was waiting where her father said it would be, and it drove them to Belgium where they were reunited with her father.

"I knew you could do it," her father said, hugging her to him. "I knew we would be together again."

It still took them months to get papers to come to the United States, but they were together and the worst for their family was over. Trude and her mother had walked to safety and escaped at last.

Trude eventually made her way to New York where her soon-to-be husband Max Heller would come to see her. When they married in 1940, they moved to Greenville, South Carolina where they made a new life in a vibrant community. Her husband Max became mayor of Greenville, and she spent her life in service to her family and community to educate the next generation about the Holocaust.

Trude's enduring message: "I always told my children to be kind to your fellow man. Don't call names and be ugly to each other, because that was how it began in Vienna. Over time, that hatred and resentment grows, and it becomes easier and easier to treat people poorly who are different than you. Treat others the way you would like to be treated."

Ms. Heller passed away on May 11, 2021. Her legacy continues to resonate with South Carolinians even today.

Sources:

Heller, Trude. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1991.

Rosengarten, Dale, and Sandra Lee K. Rosenblum. 1997. "Jewish Heritage Collection: Oral history interview with Max Heller and Trude Schönthal Heller - Lowcountry Digital Library Catalog Search." The Lowcountry Digital Library. <https://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/lcdl/catalog/lcdl:11839>.

Trude Heller

Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before you read:

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

Questions to think about as you read:

1. How did Trude's parents react differently to the news that Hitler had marched into Austria, forcing a referendum (or vote)?
2. In what ways did Trude's life change after Austria joined Nazi Germany?
3. What obstacles did Trude and her mother face trying to leave Austria?
4. Where did Trude and her husband eventually settle and raise their family?
5. While Trude's immediate family did not suffer first-hand through the death camps, they experienced great loss and injustice before leaving Austria. Why is it important to read first-person accounts like Trude's to understand and learn from history? What will you remember from her story?

Final reflection:

1. What will you remember most from this survivor's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?