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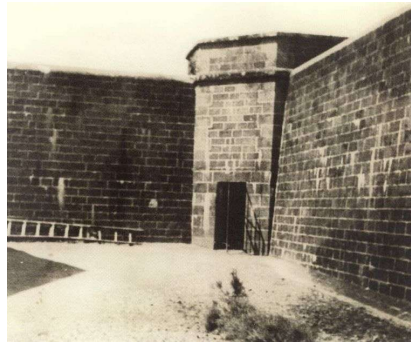


Chava Guez

The Voyage

Chava Guez and her family lived in Vienna. In 1940 they fled by sea to Palestine. The British mandatory government prohibited the immigration and they were deported to Mauritius where they were detained in a camp until the war was over. Today, Chava Guez lives in Israel.

At the end of the day, the time has come to write about the voyage and about all the trials and tribulations endured. This is the sequence of events, as I remember them.



The First Exile

First there was the time when we had to leave Vienna. I cannot think of another name to give to this long voyage, a voyage which to date has not ended. Because it is with much pain that I remember my parents, who had to follow uncharted routes and fell ill, their world lost forever, the sorrow for my family lost in the Holocaust, many of them unbeknownst to me, the regret for a life which is no more – for loves lost and many other nameless things, for which the pain of loss endures and death does not release.

Down the Danube

At the embankment in Vienna there is the steamer Schönbrunn. This is quite close to the center of the city. I only realized how close when visiting again at the beginning of the third millennium, when memories surfaced with all their force.

Close to our departure, there comes my uncle Leopold running towards us with a salami sausage to give to us as provision for the road. He had a black moustache, and I thought to myself, how shall I remember this uncle of mine. On board there was a man with just such a moustache and I thought to myself that whenever I shall look at him I shall recall my Uncle Poldi. Our fellow passengers, after close inspection by the black-booted SS, are seated on deck watching as more and more people come aboard.

A Near Betrayal

At this point I almost betrayed my poor parents. That is, an inexplicable desire seized me to tell the SS about the few trinkets my mother had hidden in a toothpaste tube. It was strictly forbidden (verboten!) to take with you golden or any other items of value. Luckily, we were urged to move on. In the other event, it might well have come to pass that this tale would never have been told.

Finally – Departure

Now, on deck I watch the commotion and I am eager for the steamer to sail. Sitting still can be a bore! A whistle, the boat shudders and here we go, down the Danube. At last! Time has stopped, I must have fallen asleep. This short sail has come to an end and here we are in Romania, and the port of Tulcea where the boat chartered by the Haganah [1] – the Atlantic – is waiting for us to take us to the Promised Land.

Farewell Europe

People are pushing and shoving and my father is carrying me aboard. We even manage to obtain a cabin for ourselves. Of course those who shove most manage to get into the cabin. In those days I still believed that my father could do everything and here, for the first time, I notice that those who shove the hardest manage to take over what little space there is in this cabin. The people who enter now put their little baby on the top bunk and – what horror – through the open porthole a wave sweeps the poor little child out into the high sea. I shall never forget the poor mother's screams.

Then it seems that time has stopped. The ship rolls and again I must have fallen asleep. Upon awakening there is the open space and the grey sea. I cannot remember discomfort, hunger or cold. All I remember is my poor mother who had by then fallen very ill. There is no one to look after the two of us. My father is with the men. Can't tell where all those men are. Luckily, a wise lady is travelling with us, and she had brought along some dehydrated alcohol which is useful for boiling the sea water and makes the droplets drinkable. This is aunt Elsa who was married to an Austrian aristocrat, who was a member of the town council. Of course, now all this has been left behind and life is not as glorious. Whenever father manages to come and see us he boils the sea water and wets mother's lips. Luckily she did not partake of the rotten food and thus was saved. Exhausted, in every possible way, but alive.

The journey is getting more and more tedious. There seems to be no end in sight. Sometimes a glimpse of land. Infrequently, a boat dares to come close. Once [...] there was even a small parcel of food from Mama's relatives conveyed to us by a boat which dared approach. Whenever a port comes into sight, we are warned to stay off. However, one must not abandon hope.

On deck the shrouded dead bodies are piling up. A lantern sways to and fro. They died from typhoid, from hunger, from God knows what, but mainly from heartbreak and despair. I am not afraid. Just waiting for them to be dropped overboard in the dark of night, the noise of the splash when they hit the water and then everything is quiet again. Until tomorrow. There are the storms at sea when the ship threatens to crash and sink into the deep high waves. The crew shouts "all to starboard", and then again everybody rushes in the other direction. There is nothing I want and there is nothing to be had. There is only the eternal expanse of water and sky. Hardly any food left. Maybe the occasional mouldy biscuit which my father soaked in liquid. There is a vague memory of people engulfed in talliths [2]. I always believed they had some stuff to nibble on secretly, otherwise it is hardly credible that they would spend all that time with their faces hidden in those talliths. Can't remember people. Just gazing at moving legs.

Who is a Jew?

With our fellow travellers there was a rabbi. One of the women, even in these miserable conditions, was about to give birth. She had a son. Since nobody knew whether we would survive for another day she asked this rabbi to circumcise the child. She feared the child would die as a heathen. She was non-Jewish, married to a Jew. The rabbi refused to circumcise the baby. I do not have personal recollection of this. It is what my mother told me later, I do, however, remember the commotion on the boat. This made me very sad, the beastliness of it all. The persecuted persecuting. More suffering for nothing. Many years later I told this story to the chief rabbi of the South African community, who came to welcome us when we visited the island of Mauritius at the turn of the century. He said nothing. One wonders. To conclude, when we finally go to the island the woman and child were whisked away by our captors. This I saw and remember distinctly. Pity.

Intercepted

We sail on trying to reach shores of the Promised Land. To land there without being caught by the British and drifting around the Mediterranean for many weeks – all this burnt up the little fuel there was and also that purchased from funds raised by the exiles. The day came when all the wood on board, such as wooden partitions, chairs, tables had to be used for firewood to fuel the ship. But this also came to nothing. Every little scarp of wood was devoured and there we were. Drifting again.

At long last we were intercepted by the British and towed into Haifa bay. What joy. The Promised Land at last! But this was not to be. Father was so happy that he traded a golden lighter for just one orange from one of the boats which came along the ship. An orange, just for the mere price of a golden lighter. After all, even Croesus could not eat any of his gold.

Disembarking on wobbly legs, all hopes soon to be crushed. After all, our interception was not meant to let us stay in the Holy Land. Again, only now – that is the beginning of the third millennium – we found out that all the British aimed at was to dispose of us to the best of their interests. From documents found in British archives it appears that they would also have considered sending us back to where we came from. However, there were other voices. To this day the then Jewish Leadership disowned us, even though Aliyah Bet [3] was instrumental in helping our escape. For the time being, it was decided to deport us all to the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

The Vanishing Shores

Again, we are to start on yet another voyage. Didn't we try to reach the Promised Land like thieves in the night, without the proper immigration papers. No matter that we were about to be exterminated. After all, papers are papers. In Haifa bay, I see the *Patria*. Mother is rushing father along. Quick, mother urges father, we shall be late. And then, what an amazing sight: The boat hoists itself out of the water – and before I can say a word it falls apart into a thousand fragments back into the sea. There goes the *Patria*. In those days there was of course no TV and I'd never heard of films of adventure. But never since have I seen such a sight. Later on I learned that the Haganah had brought this feat about and caused the *Patria* to explode so as to delay our deportation. Many lives were lost, but perhaps in the long run it was lucky for those who did not drown and were allowed on shore to stay, as set out by Naval Law, I think. More than 200 persons lost their lives.

More unhappiness: My parents and I and more than 1,000 illegals were interned at Atlit [4] to await deportation on another ship. In the meantime father was sent to prison at Acre [5] for his activities with the Haganah. Another couple of weeks and two ships were sent to ferry us to the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. For how long? And precisely where is this place? Very few people even knew how to find it on the map. Then, nobody knew about this destination. The interned refugees at Atlit thought that by undressing, the British would pity us and let us be. This was pitiful indeed. All the naked persons, including men, women and children – well, perhaps children didn't need to undress – were carted on lorries and off to the port of Haifa. The *Johan de Witt* was there to take us away, across the seas and regardless of the World War and all the sadness and pain of loss and carnage of battle. Here I am on the *Johan de Witt*. Mother is here – too ill to respond. Is father on this boat, or on the other? We shall soon see.

Down the Suez

The *Johan de Witt* is a regular ocean liner, very clean, and the sailors are Chinese. Sitting in my usual corner on deck, one of them holds out a red apple. Of course I did want this apple. Hadn't seen one for a very long time. Perhaps I desired the apple more than the one Eve offered Adam. But having been raised never to accept anything from strangers – I say "no, thank you." This is contrary to my deepest desire to devour this beautiful apple. But no, it cannot be. There and then I vowed to eat nothing but apples at some happier future time.

It is an enchanted time sailing down the Suez – on both sides yellow sands gleaming in the heat of day with an endless reflection of sunshine. The air is clear and transparent and my love for the desert is born, lasting to this very day. On and on we sail, pretty soon to enter the waters of the Indian Ocean – the most beautiful of them all. The sea is blue-green and dolphins jump around the ship. There is no hunger or storm or hardship. During the long, hot, starry nights, people sleep on deck.

Yet another voyage is about to end. At long last, out of the misty dawn I see the blue shores of this island in the sun. The ship throws anchor far from shore and boats come to fetch us. Getting into the boats proves to be somewhat tricky. The high waves beat onto the ship's hull and sea sprays foams around. Eventually all is well. Here we are in the boats sailing towards the shore.

Ashore, immediate departure for Beau Bassin [6] which will be our prison-home for the next five years. A drive and then tall black walls, tower above and there stands the Indian fellow with a white turban holding the key. Or did I dream this about the Indian fellow, the key? Perhaps I did, but it still is engraved upon my memory as if it actually happened. After all, who knows, it just might have.

The Women's Camp

Immediately upon arrival, the women and men were sent into separate camps. The men imprisoned in the two Napoleonic black basalt structures which served as prisons even before we came. The women were lodged in corrugated metal barracks – where the heat and close proximity were more than intolerable. Boys up to the age of ten were allowed to stay with their mothers, as were of course the girls of all ages. Fifty women to a barrack – just think of it. All the disputes and unpleasantness that this would cause for many a year to come.

The Children

There was also a short episode of a German family imprisoned just across the women's camp, in a separate hut. Those were Christian Germans – "aliens" as the British would have it, who had lived on the island before the war. Their little Helga would from time to time approach the fence where I and a few other little children could chat with her. She had a most lovely doll that could say "Mama". After a while we were not allowed to come near those people. I don't think they missed us much. Perhaps little Helga did, as she had no other friends, I wonder what became of them.

In particular, I remember two children out of the many in our barrack. In all, fifty women and children, who had to manage to the best of their ability. Food was brought from a central kitchen in large containers and distributed by rota. There was the matter of the size on one's allocation of bread. This was measured by the centimetre and distributed strictly by equal size. As for myself, I was never hungry so I can't say if all this was justly meted out. There were few women who even managed to bake cakes on spirit cookers and made excellent pies from all the abundant tropical fruit growing all over the island, such as bananas, mango, papaya and so on.

Suzy's cot was next to mine. This is the very Suzy whom I met after all those years when we all went to Mauritius for a reunion. Suzy was the daughter of our teacher, the much feared Mrs. Keshner. She taught the lower grades at the camp school run on a voluntary basis by the exiles. Some people had experience in teaching. Suzy being our teacher's child, did not make her very popular. Suzy's grandmother kept a beady eye on us. A trio. Suzy was my age. We were put to bed quite early. There wasn't much to do anyway. To keep ourselves amused we would chat and play before finally falling asleep. One of the games I was fond of was "the game of number". I said to Suzy, "name the very highest number", and then I would add just one. This could go on forever, as there is no end to numbers, although now at the university I was told that indeed there is. Grandmother kept an eye (and ear) on us. Couldn't be helped. She probably could have written quite a few stories in her own right. Eventually, Suzy did.

Then there was the poor little mongoloid boy – Uri. His mother loved him dearly. Bathed and clothed him daily very carefully, showering a thousand kisses upon his little head. Poor Mrs. Gross and her Uri. She was a very nice plump person and always wore an apron. She would also talk endlessly with her poor little boy and tell him many stories. Fat little blond Uri with his slanted blue eyes, did he understand any of it?

Last but not least, and most important to me of them all, there was Robby. Robby was small and slightly built and had brownish skin with brown eyes and black hair. His mother must have been a very elegant person and she gave herself some trouble with her clothes. She was quite jittery, no wonder, and would raise her voice at the slightest provocation. They came from Czechoslovakia. Somebody had taught me the word "*botvora*" [7] – meaning "goat". I said to Robby, "when next your mother slaps you why don't you compliment her with *botvora*." Before long he got his deserts and Robby came up with *botvora*. There was such shouting and slapping around – something I remember to this very day. Can't say I was sorry. I know I loved him very much. Indeed there is a photo where all the kindergarten and schoolchildren are lined up, and there I am right next to Robby. How delightful. Here I am, smallish with a white *Masche* [8] in my hair, the fashion of the day, a real big one, and Robby standing at my right.

We must not forget little Heinz, now deceased. Little Heinz and his family came from the outskirts of Vienna where they had a farm, and even after all the starvation, little Heinz was still plump and heavy going. He also suffered from a malady known as disturbance of balance. Whenever we visited the men's camp, Heinz would call to his father "*Popsch, komm ober*", meaning in good Viennese that his father should come round and help him negotiate the stairs. All those steep stairs leading to the men's cells, they actually seemed to be hanging over a chasm. It would be quite easy to lose one's hold. On visiting day we would be allowed to play there and even sit with our fathers at the long tables in the corridors.

A Priceless Egg – Sunny Side Up

Father would save his allocation of egg for me to eat when I came on visitors day. He would cook it over a small spirit flame in his narrow cell. This was a very crowded cell with a folding bunk and a small skylight high up. When I saw it again on our reunion trip to the island, I realized what my poor father must have suffered in this crowded and narrow prison. There would be the fried egg, sunny side up – all for me alone. How I relished eating this morsel – first the "white" and then the yolk – best for last ... Then a game of hide and seek with little Heinzl. How lovely.

After the war, Heinzl's family asked to be repatriated to Austria. All the other exiles thought this rather shameful and many insults were hurled at the poor people. It is only after many years that I realized that this voyage to the Holy Land was for many a matter of default. I heard that his family returned to Vienna to reclaim their property which was in Russian sector. I even met Heinzl's family on one of my visits to Vienna in the late eighties of last century, and stayed with them overnight. They had an adopted daughter – and this was complicated. I think she did not identify with their being Jewish. They lived in a very lower middle class tenement and I can imagine that the little girl was not popular with her friends because of this. Be that as it may: Heinzl found employment with the Bank of America in Vienna. He died suddenly in the late eighties, after I had visited. I wrote to his widow but she never replied. As it is, I am grateful for their hospitality.

The Pepper Tree

Roaming by myself around the camp, I came across a pepperbush, close to the wall. A very small one. I nourished and watered it for many days and was happy to see the fruit of my labours bud. However, what a shame, what a heartache – one day when coming to visit "my" bush there were quite a few Negroes around having great fun eating all the peppers. They just chased me off. I think this little episode sort of finished my gardening career. It is easy to plant and nourish – more difficult to enjoy the fruit. If ever.

The Children's Tea Party

Happier days must also be remembered. I never much liked parties, to my mother's chagrin. Nor did I like to participate in theatricals. There was the Purim show in which I was supposed to participate disguised as a cook with a tall white hat. I got my cue wrong and marched on stage long after everybody was already stationed at their appointed spots. Imagine the laughs I got, no doubt spoiling the show. At Hanukkah and other fetes they would put up kindergarten and school shows. I was not blessed with a pleasant singing voice, nor can I repeat a musical tune. However, I thought that I would like to sing *Ma'oz Tzur* [9] with the other children. Teacher said I just could not, as my singing would cause the children to be "out of tune". I came back to my mother crying and when she heard what the matter was, off she marched to see teacher (none other than the dreaded Mrs. Keshner). Mother said, "are all these children La Scala [10] graduates?", and when Mrs. K. looked as astonished as she possibly could – mother said "well, this child of mine is also no La Scala graduate – so she might as well sing along with all the others." Mrs. K. said that I could sit with the children, but only pretend to be singing, since if I would truly sing, this would put them all out of tune.

I really did dread all this – perhaps today they would call in a "child psychologist". I just had to make the best of it. After all, everything was meant to be fun and games. Then there were the parties we children were invited to at the camp's British Governor's residence. This personage, who also had children of his own, seemed to all of us a sort of semi-God. His invitation to tea and games was not to be ignored. He would most graciously ask us children to his home, which in those days seemed to me a mansion. (When I saw this "mansion" on our reunion trip to the island, I realized it was not such a palace after all, just a medium sized villa). Well, there we were all dressed up in our very best attires with this white band in our hair. Mine was rather pitiful as I always had this very straight and silky hair, which would not hold a thing. Tea and milk were served in tin mugs. And then all those games. Good God, the games. All supposed to be "fair play" and "let the best man win". Exerting oneself, running around. Competing for everything. Prizes to be won! I shirked all of it as much as I possible could. Never aimed to get a prize. Never liked to be crowded in.

Dr. Lavapier, the camp's physician, also would ask the children to his home. Here, too, mother would cajole me endlessly to go along and have some fun. After all the children would be on their way, I would say "OK, I too would like to go." Then mother and I would chase the departing convoy and I would join in the nick of time. His tea parties were rather lovely. No games. No competitions. Just soft drinks (perhaps also cookies?) set out in the tropical foliage of his little house – not too long a drive from camp.

It is with gratitude that I recall these outings. There were kind people who tried to afford us children some semblance of normality.

Best Friends

Ditta and little Eva – better known as Evchen – have a warm spot in my heart to this very day. With those two I played with dolls made from match sticks which we used to dress up, and tie across so that they should have feet and hands and the matchboxes were their beds. With these improvised toys we would play for hours on end and for us they were most beautiful artifacts and none could surpass them. Ditta I met again on the journey of reunion to the island towards the end of last century. Together, we all visited the graveyard where those who did not survive are buried. It is a most beautiful site with a seaview and lots of green around. The chief rabbi came out from Johannesburg to be with us and say *Kaddish* [11], I stood at Ditta's side by her father's grave. Indeed, I do remember him. He looked very much like my own father. They were of the same generation with the hairstyle of the early forties and the clothes cut so that you easily could identify them as "out of Vienna". It was a sad moment. Ditta's mother remarried and had a little girl on the island called Ma'ayan which in those days was a most original name – it means "the fountain". We really did need the optimism of finding a source of strength. I should mention that it is only because of by the kindness of Ditta that my sister and I came to the reunion in Vienna early this century. She met my sister and told her about it being organized. Anyway, I am very happy to have joined both trips. The past cannot be altered nor improved upon, or anything. Little Evchen was very excited when we met in Ramat Gan at another reunion later in the autumn, after all those many years. We have regular telephone conversations.

Other People – Black and White

Black was a lethargic figure. He was the gardener at the camp. Good humored, with lots of time for resting in the shade. Was there a garden then? I do not remember. There was just Black. Toothless smiling. Nothing excited him very much – and of course not we children who would call out to him "Black, Black". He probably thought we were worse off than he. After all we were imprisoned and he could come and go at will.

Speaking of "Black", I shall now recount the story of the little gold chain and locket which grandmother gave me in Vienna before her death. I was hospitalized on the island for a severe case of strep throat and when my parents came to see me they noticed that the trinket was missing. Such a fuss, and how embarrassing. They did something of which I am ashamed even today. They asked me to identify the thief. How could I? I must have directed an accusing look at one of the black assistant nurses. The qualified nurses were white. To my childish mind merely being white immediately guaranteed their innocence. Even today I cannot bring myself to forgive myself for this injustice. Whoever took this little trinket – his need was greater than mine. But a child cannot possibly grasp this. Only in later years do I think of this frequently. After all, this little Shield of David given to me by grandma in Vienna was of no other great value than sentimental. Where is it today, has it been melted down, or does it adorn a black throat, or a white one? What does it matter ...

The School

The school was run by the exiles and the children were of all ages. I already mentioned Mrs. Keshner, our next-bed neighbour. Mr. Panzer was director. A handsome man. He was tall and dark. Mr. Goldschmidt – known as Goldshi – was the master of Geography and Mrs. Keshner was in charge of my class. She was very strict. Never gave an inch and religiously upheld the German principles of order and cleanliness, not to mention the requirements for sticking to the letter of the law, diligence and also preparing one's homework regularly. We did not have any copybooks. We had slates and crayons which would make a rasping noise on the slates, but still we were admonished to adhere to straight lines. The few bits of paper available were saved for very special occasions, such as writing poems or when pursuing the German tradition of greeting one's parents on the New Year and promising to be good. Always. I don't remember any books. Perhaps the teachers had a few. During a question time at geography I asked "Goldshi" how come it be true that the sun being bigger than our planet, this very sun does not obliterate the entire firmament? He looked at me very severely and asked, "Is your father bigger than you?" I had to admit. Then he said: "Well, does he obliterate the entire firmament?" I could not say he did (although in those days I thought he was my entire world). "Any more questions?" That settled questions forever. Mrs. Keshner had a somewhat cruel streak. Mornings, she would line us up for inspection – clothes, nails, shoes, etc. At one of these "inspections" she said to one of the children: "If I pushed you against the wall you'd get stuck onto it with your dirty clothes." My heart sank for the poor child. In this 21st century this matter would have caused some consternation. In those days child abuse was the common procedure. Mocking a child in class was supposed to improve its performance. Speaking for myself alone, this stern and uncompromising approach did me a lot of good as it fortified me for the many future trials and unkind blows to one's ego. Our language was German. Subjects taught included English, Mathematics and History. I was fortunate to be afforded extra private tuition in Hebrew, paid for by my poor parents with their little wherewithal, to prepare me for our future life which expected to resume in our own country. The Hebrew teacher was a small gentle woman – in fact a Rebbetzen [12] – who would read some passages from the Bible in the Ashkenazi intonation. In short, our European tuition was well meant and was intended to equip us soundly for future learning.

Many a time my mother would try to help me with Mathematics, which for both of us was a most exasperating experience. My mind would blank out when faced with the many mathematical possibilities, such as adding and subtracting, not to mention when it would be necessary to fill in the unknown quantity. She would try to show me how to calculate with bananas, buttons and other accessories, which would confuse me more than ever. However, I did love her recounting the history of the Habsburgs and their many loves, feuds and the splendor of their palaces. There were also the Grimm Brothers, the German folk legends, Anderson's tales, and I could never get enough of stories of any kind. Mother would have to recount and recount, precisely in the manner once told. Any deviation would bring on a storm of tears. All these heroes had such wonderful lives. They were handsome and the ladies most beautiful and accomplished. How wonderful it was to absorb myself in this world of magic – I who was sunk in twilight and in the daily battle of mere survival. What did I care about addition and subtracting when there was all this magic in this world. All my days were filled with anxiety and fear of tomorrow which would bring more sorrow and bouts of malaria for poor mother. She was hospitalized more often and time dragged on endlessly and I was left to my own devices. To dream my days into charmed gardens with giants and the most exquisite things one's heart could desire.

The close quarters and the unknown brought more and more disquiet to the inmates and, of course, there was a lot of bickering about matters of negligible importance. Some pretty nasty remarks were passed about the distribution of food, clothes sent by the kindness of the Jews of Johannesburg, not to mention other small matters, such as priority, seniority and so on.

The People of the Book

From time to time, our brethren in Johannesburg would send us all sorts of goodies, such as clothes, books, etc. One day, there arrived a consignment of books. I was overjoyed. Books. A book! How lovely, I shall be able to read for myself. Off I rushed to the hut where the crated books were distributed. I could not wait for my turn. My eyes roved over the piles and piles – perhaps there were not that many – of books. Which one of them will be mine? I already felt all warm inside just waiting for the comfort and consolation which my very own book would give. There were so many covers, so many colours ... Finally my turn came. I stretched out my hand with all this stored expectation – Ah, said the woman – "no, you do not deserve a book. You are not a Jewish child." Here I stand, expelled from the city of my birth – and now, again, chased away. The terrible shame, the heartache. What possibly could she mean by this? How come I do not belong to this bunch of exiles with whom I underwent all these trials? Who am I then? Even today I recall the sharp pain. I did not beg. Beneath one's dignity ... Mother saw my bitter tears and she too was dejected. Immediately, she went to see our Viennese friend, the very gracious Mrs. Pretsch von Lerchenhorst – a Jewish lady who was married to a member of the town council of the city of Vienna. Yes – a goy [13]! This kind woman opened her suitcase and, lo and behold, books! Glorious books. She let me pick two. Such happiness. I can safely say that this was one of the few happy days in my life. [...]

Families

During our first few years on the island, visiting the men's camp was rarely allowed, I think in the beginning once a month and then every fortnight. On one such "visiting day" mother decided to go and see father without me. She also sewed a lovely white dress with embroidery for

herself for this occasion. I cannot begin recounting the fearful jealousy which overwhelmed me. I was terribly disappointed and had quite a fit, screaming and kicking when she left. This was when I got a heavy beating, including some with a belt from mother. For this purpose she took me behind another barrack. She couldn't have gone very far, but still... Of course this hurt me profoundly – and I remember it with much pain, I had to stay with the others in our barrack, which was never a nice place to be. I do not remember her coming back and or what happened when she did. This incident was a cause for my keeping my distance from mother – something I harboured until her dying day (and mine), and suspected that a mother's love is perhaps not unconditional. Possibly this "punishment" was the accepted educational thing in those days. Children had to know their place and to be with the grown-ups was a matter at their pleasure.

Escape (almost)

One day, perhaps just another long day of tedium with no particular matter of interest, an idea crossed my mind. A serious and almost plausible idea, in those days I did not read books of adventure and had not made the acquaintance of Tarzan and other heroic tales. I also never saw a film nor did I have any knowledge of "action sequences". I might have heard about something called the cinema, but even this is not certain. Well, the big idea was to escape from camp. The meaning of freedom or imprisonment did not mean anything to me. Just escape meant that I would see a great many new things, perhaps such as those I saw on the rare occasions when we were allowed a few hours in the town of Curepipe, when my uncle in New York sent a few dollars and we could go out for a meal or buy tennis shoes.

Walking around the camp, I noticed that the fence was low in a spot just a short walking distance away. On one side there was the high black basalt wall bordering the men's camp on a few feet from there, the wall was really low and seemed to me that scaling it would not be too difficult. I proposed this venture to a few girls and they also thought it a good idea. I had no idea on how to proceed, if we should proceed. I asked the girls to bring a little something on the "trip". Everything seemed OK, even small bits of cloth, dolls and other treasures proposed by my small friends. I did not think of food. This item never seemed to me to be of paramount importance. After school and the midday meal, that seemed a good time as any. For the most part, the mothers would rest in the barracks during these hot and steamy hours, and anyway nobody paid much attention to us as a rule. After all, where could we go? At the edge of the camp, where the wall was low, there were a couple of deserted huts not used for any purpose and to that end we knew our way. For safety, I suggested we wait until sunset to scale the low wall. I do not know how long we stayed in that spot, but after a while one of the girls said she was hungry and would like to leave. It did not take very long for the other to follow her example. In the end only I and another child stayed and she too went away. Here I was, all by myself. Out of the five, there was only me and I thought that it was quite pointless to venture out along. I was also a little afraid of what lurked behind that wall. In short, the entire adventure came to nothing as I too returned to our barrack and nobody was any the wiser. Nobody ever knew about this failed attempt at freedom.

Bewitched

With the Austrian exiles there was a musician – a handsome and very nice fellow. From time to time he was allowed by the camp authorities to go downtown and play – I think it was the violin. On one such outing he disappeared. I was wondering – in as much as a child can wonder – where he had disappeared. Then I overheard this conversation by the grownups telling how one of the Creoles had fallen in love with him. He did not reciprocate so the only thing to do was to "bewitch" the poor fellow. It appears that she had given him something to drink and then he died. I was so sorry as I did rather like him. What can be said but that love conquers all ...

My Baby Sister

My baby sister was born on a stormy night when the cyclone blew all over the island. My parents dearly coveted a son. There was even a name – after my maternal grandfather. For weeks and weeks there was a lot of talk and of how everything would be very wonderful when this little brother of mine would be born. Indeed, I was very happy. At long last I shall have a companion, somebody I could fully trust and who would be my ally at all times. With the passage of time, there finally came the day when I was woken up to be told that a little sister has been born. What was there to do but tell them to come again when my true brother will be born. In the end I had to accept the fact of my sister's existence.

A couple of weeks before my sister was born, my mother was hospitalized and my father and I would go there at least twice a week. It was a very nice little two-story hospital, set amidst a lot of greenery and with all those luscious tropical plants, it was a pleasure to sit outside and drink tea in the afternoon. Now that the Allies were winning, regulations became much more lax and the scent of freedom was in the air. Well then, on the day my sister was born, holding unto my father's hand, we went to the second floor and there she was. A little tiny thing all wrapped in cotton wool, slightly bluish, all complete with nails and hair. I was very excited, even though I was quite ready to believe that the little boy born to the woman in the next room was actually my true brother exchanged at birth.

On our way back to camp, quite a fearful cyclone storm blew up. A cyclone is a most awesome phenomenon, one of nature's true manifestations of power and beauty. There was this storm, blowing everything hither and thither, felling trees and a fearsome howling of wind all around. We had to hold unto walls and rocks on our way, so as not to perish. Slowly, we returned to camp.

The beauty of the day after the cyclone is a day of glory to remember. Everything is quiet and a soft wind is blowing off the ocean. All is clean and just a few ripples in the puddles of water all around. Debris of tin roofs and logs strewn on the ground are all that is left of the storm. The colour of the ocean is dark green and blue and one cannot get enough of gazing at it all. The cyclone and my sister's birth are very much associated as two very major events.

The year was 1944 and WW II came to a close. This was reflected in the attitude to us, as everybody realized that very soon we shall be on our way to freedom. The road to the Promised Land seemed open and no possible obstacle could stop us. Now that our family was enlarged we also were allowed lodging in a "private" barrack, where my father could join us often. This new place seemed to me most luxurious although it contained very little beyond the bare necessities. Next to us there were other families with new babies. It was a great pleasure for me to ferry my baby sister around in a carriage improved by our next door neighbour. This carriage was put together from a wooden crate on which wheels were mounted. It was well draped with lots of blankets but would make a terrific noise when pushed.

A Birthday

A year went by in no time at all, and here is my sister and it is her first birthday. I thought it was a time to celebrate, so I begged around for presents. I put up a small table and covered it with an embroidered cloth and loaded it with the "offerings" as quickly as I could gather them. There was an assortment of small cups, a variety of improvised toys and a few other bits and pieces. No matter. It was her birthday and I pointed these little things out to her. She gurgled with delight ...

Removal of Tonsils and Epidemic

Many were the times when I suffered from sore throat, and it was decided to remove tonsils. This little surgery was performed in a hospital. The whole operation was very much to my liking, as it was an opportunity to be spoilt and looked after. As I expected, the hospital was very well appointed and I admired the nurses and matron in particular with her starched head dress and neat manners. The procedure was to make the patient count on the operating table, and by his count becoming feebler and feebler they would know if the anaesthetic had worked. I refused to cooperate, mainly because of this backless shirt I had to wear, an apparel which was most embarrassing. Even so, when I woke up – without tonsils – I was already in a ward with a black nurse asleep under the bed. They even brought me some ice to suck, which was quite delightful.

This was shortly before we were allowed our freedom once again. Just at this time there was a heavy polio epidemic, which in those days was very terrible indeed. Dr. Salk [14] had not yet produced his magic serum and whoever caught this disease was lucky to survive and most became invalids for life. After having removed my tonsils, a young girl was hospitalized in the bed right next to me. She vomited all night and at dawn was removed to a separate ward. She died shortly after and was buried in the small Jewish cemetery on the island, where all the people who did not survive the hardships are buried. [...] There are so many names of friends of my parents. [...] May they rest in peace. It has been such a long time. Even now tears come to me when it all comes back to me.

The Road to the Promised Land

The days grew longer and it was August once again. The grown ups spoke of freedom, release, of Eretz Israel and the future. All I could think of was the present.

Again, we were allowed to visit Curepipe. I went with father. The days of empire were not yet at a close. There were the whites and blacks all bent on their way. Many shops with Chinese owners, who sat most stoically at the entrance to their little "caves" of merchandise. In those stores one could find almost anything, all was in a jumble, but trust the fellow. In no time at all he would dig up your heart's desire. In particular, I remember how I wanted a pair of tennis shoes, but none of those the Chinaman could find pleased me. I had a particular shape in mind which was not in his store. Still, in the end I did get a pair. Not perfect but adequate. The height of pleasure was the Indian restaurant where we would eat such delicious chops, the taste of which lingers in my mouth and the likes of which I have never tasted since.

Looking back – there never seemed to be a rainy day. It was all sunshine, the Indian Ocean, and to my childish mind, not sorrow or deprivation.

Freedom? ... Here is the Franconia anchored in Port Louis [15] waiting for us to board and sail up the Suez once again. The Franconia was the ship that brought Churchill to the conference with Stalin at Yalta [16]. I did not know it all at that time, but much later.

But then am I not the wandering Jew? Am I truly of this land? Vienna is the place my mother remembered on her dying day and part of it is engraved upon my heart.

Chava Guez describes her memories of her last days in Vienna in another text in the form of a fictional diary. This fictional diary was already published in: Renate S. Meissner on behalf of the National Fund (Ed.): Lives Remembered. Life Stories of Victims of National Socialism. Vienna, 2010, pages 125-129.

The fictional diary of Chava Guez.

[1] Jewish paramilitary underground organization during the British Mandate of Palestine, protecting Jewish settlements and, among other things, organizing illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine.

[2] Jewish prayer shawl (tallit).

[3] Name for the illegal Jewish immigration to the British Mandate of Palestine in the years 1934–1948, when official immigration was restricted by the British authorities.

[4] Atlit detainee camp: British detention camp south of Haifa, established to prevent Jewish refugees from entering Palestine.

[5] The citadel of the city of Acre, north of Haifa, was used by the British as a prison for Jewish underground movement activists.

[6] Today Beau Bassin/Rose Hill: second largest city in Mauritius.

[7] Czech for vulg. bitch.

[8] German for hair ribbon, bow.

[9] Jewish liturgical poem, traditionally sung on the holiday of Hanukkah.

[10] Teatro alla Scala: famous opera house in Milan, Italy.

[11] Important and central Jewish prayer.

[12] Title used for a (orthodox) rabbi's wife (Rebbitzin).

[13] Yiddish for non-Jew.

[14] Dr. Jones Edward Salk (1914–1995), American medical researcher and virologist, developed a vaccine against polio in the 1950's.

[15] Capital of Mauritius.

[16] At the Yalta or Crimea Conference in February 1945, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin discussed Europe's post-war reorganization.