

My Grandparents - A Family Memory of War, Conscience, and Legacy

I am the last of my family.

There is no one else left who remembers my grandparents not as photographs, not as names in a record, but as people. When I die, the memory of who they were, the quiet courage they lived by, and the grief they carried will vanish unless I write it down. This is a personal story, but it is not only personal. It touches on the violence of the twentieth century, on what it meant to survive a totalitarian regime without surrendering one's conscience, and on the fragile line between complicity and resistance that so many ordinary people had to walk.

This is about my grandparents: my grandmother, who lived through the bombings of Vienna and the unimaginable loss of her children, and my grandfather, a skilled metal-worker who found small, dangerous ways to defy the Nazi regime from within a war factory. I write this because their story deserves to live. And I write this because their lives shape how I understand justice, memory, and moral clarity in the present.

My Grandmother: Survival Beneath the Bombs

My grandmother was born in 1921 and lived through the Second World War in the eastern districts of Vienna. Like many civilians, she followed the instructions of the authorities. When the air raid sirens sounded, she took her children and rushed into the basement that had been designated as the building's air-raid shelter.

These shelters were often nothing more than repurposed cellars—damp, crowded, and poorly ventilated. They were known as *Luftschutzkeller*, "air protection cellars," but there was very little protection to be found in them. The air was thick and stale, the lights unreliable, and blackout rules meant that even a crack of light could bring suspicion or danger. During the raids, those basements were full of people, of silence heavy with fear, and of the quiet waiting for the ceiling to either hold or fall.

One night, the basement did not hold.

The shelter my grandmother was in took a direct or near-direct hit. The building above collapsed. The blast, the debris, the force of war broke through their refuge. My grandmother was pulled from the wreckage alive, but terribly injured. Part of her skull had been shattered and had to be removed. Surgeons replaced the missing bone with a metal plate. For the rest of her life, you could feel the edge of that plate beneath her scalp. She sometimes said the pain worsened in cold weather or before storms—a dull ache, a reminder that war had not left her untouched.

But the greater wound was not physical.

Her first two children died that night. Both gone in a flash of falling brick and fire. Like so many women of that generation, she was forced to continue. To bury, to grieve, to survive without the space to fall apart. She carried that grief with her through the hunger and chaos of postwar Vienna.

And still, she started again.

In 1950, she gave birth to my mother—healthy, alive, a child born into the ruins of a city that was beginning to rebuild itself. It is impossible to overstate the courage that must have taken. Her body, fractured but functional. Her heart, still capable of hope.

Yet she was never free of what had happened. She never once took the subway in her entire life. The thought of being underground, in a confined space she could not control, was unbearable. And still, she forced herself to use the basement storage locker in her apartment building. A small, defiant act: returning to a place like the one that had nearly killed her, not because she wanted to, but because life required it.

She lived with pain and memory and silence. But she lived.

My Grandfather: Lathe Work, Conscience, and Brass

My grandfather was born in 1912 and came of age in a very different Vienna. In the inter-war years, he played semi-professional soccer and worked with metals. He became a **Dreher**, a lathe operator, someone who shapes and machines metal with precision. It was a skill that, unknowingly, would save him.

When Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938, conformity became survival. Membership in the Nazi Party was encouraged, then expected, then demanded. My grandfather never joined. He paid the price for that in limited opportunities, increased scrutiny, and the risk of being seen as disloyal. But he stood firm.

When war came, so did conscription. Most men his age were sent to the front. My grandfather avoided the Wehrmacht not by hiding, but by using his hands. His skills were in demand in the war industries, and he was sent to work in the arms production sector. He became part of the machinery of war, not as a soldier, but as a metalworker.

He worked for **Saurer Werke**, a major industrial company based in Simmering, the eastern district of Vienna. During the war, Saurer became deeply involved in military production: truck engines, heavy vehicles, and the parts that kept the Nazi war machine moving. The plant was large, sprawling, and tightly integrated into the regime's needs. It also used **forced labor** extensively—workers from occupied countries, prisoners, and others pressed into service under brutal conditions.

My grandfather used what little space he had to resist.

From the factory kitchen or galley, he would take leftovers—food that was meant for disposal or for regular workers—and pass it to the forced laborers. A crust of bread, a few potatoes. It sounds like so little. But it was not little. In a regime that criminalized compassion and where betrayal could come from a colleague, even small acts of kindness were dangerous. Had he been reported, he might have lost his job or much more.

He chose to take that risk.

And there is another detail, one that has only recently come into focus for me. My grandfather worked with brass. I know this because he brought home vases he had made. And because, as a wedding gift to my grandmother, he created a small work of art: a **brass ship with three palm trees**, delicately shaped from foil and wire. It was intricate, beautiful, and made from the same materials he worked with in the factory.

This leads to a striking possibility.

The Nazi regime had a *fetish* for medals, decorations, and symbolic artifacts. Insignia, badges, swastika pins, iron crosses—these objects were churned out in vast quantities to reward obedience, glorify violence, and enforce hierarchy. Many of them were made of brass or similar alloys. If my grandfather was working in a branch of the factory specializing in fine metalwork, as seems likely, he may have been involved in **the production of these very symbols of the regime**.

If true, it is a cruel irony. That a man who never joined the Party, who shared food with forced laborers, and who rejected the ideology of the state may have used his skill to produce the regime's medals. That same skill, in his hands, also produced a wedding gift for the woman he loved. A ship. Palm trees. Peace.

Resistance in a Dictatorship of Ritual

Even at home, the pressure to conform was relentless.

When my grandparents married, the regime gave them a "gift": a free copy of *Mein Kampf*. This was standard practice at the time. A symbolic gesture to link every marriage, every family, to Hitler's ideology. My grandmother took a red pencil and **scratched out the swastika** on the cover. She didn't throw the book away—she kept it. Not out of reverence, but as a witness. A relic of intrusion. A reminder of what had been forced on them.

They were also expected to listen to Hitler's speeches on the radio. The Nazis had mass-produced cheap receivers—**Volksempfänger**, the "people's receiver"—to saturate the population with propaganda. Local officials, called **Blockwarte**, monitored compliance. If your radio wasn't on, if you failed to listen, if your blackout curtains let out a sliver of light, you might be reported.

My grandparents found ways around it.

They **bribed** the Blockwart with small favors. They **claimed the radio was broken** or that the signal was lost. Sometimes, they simply sat in silence and pretended not to be home.

Other times, knowing they were being monitored, they would play the speeches **at full volume** so that the entire building could hear them—a performance, not of loyalty, but of survival.

Their resistance was quiet. Tactical. They did not oppose the regime openly. That would have been suicide. But in their own ways, they refused.

What This Means for Me

I did not grow up with a legacy of guilt. My grandparents were not members of the SS. They were not ideologues. They were not perpetrators. They were ordinary people under extraordinary pressure, and they tried, with quiet courage, to hold onto their humanity.

This matters to me now because I see how the past is used to shape the present.

In parts of Europe, especially in Germany and Austria, the burden of history has led some political leaders to offer **unquestioning support** to the state of Israel, even when it commits grave abuses against Palestinians. The logic, though often unstated, is clear: because we were guilty then, we must never criticize now. Because Jews were victims of our atrocities, we must support the Jewish state unconditionally.

But this logic is flawed. **Two wrongs do not make a right.**

The suffering of Jews in the Holocaust does not justify the suffering of Palestinians today. The guilt of European states should not be paid for by another displaced people. The crimes of the past cannot be redeemed by ignoring the crimes of the present.

My grandparents did not commit those crimes. They lived under dictatorship but tried to stay decent. My grandfather used his hands to shape brass into tokens of compassion, even as the factory used him to shape brass into tokens of power. My grandmother scratched out a swastika in red pencil. Their example gives me strength to speak clearly.

I do not feel compelled to atone for sins my family did not commit. I feel compelled to honor the values they lived by: compassion over conformity, decency over dogma, the courage to care in times when caring was dangerous.

Memory as Refusal

This is my record. My offering. My refusal to let their story disappear.

It is a story of brass and bombs. Of radios played too loudly and food shared in secret. Of a skull that carried pain for a lifetime, and a brass ship sailing through memory. Of people who did not claim to be heroes, but who refused to become monsters.

I write this so that they will not be forgotten. And I write it to remind myself, and anyone who reads this, that justice must be universal. That memory must be honest. That compassion must never be conditional.

Even in darkness, a small act of kindness can be a kind of light. This is what my grandparents taught me.

And this is why I remember.