Finding Edith: Surviving the Holocaust in Plain Sight

Edith Mayer Cord

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“Edith Cord’s masterfully crafted portrayal of surviving the Nazis through flight and hiding, as well as the rich and fulfilling life she created in the decades after, serves as an extraordinary example of an individual’s will to overcome. In a broader sense, Finding Edith also depicts the arc of the refugee experience during the Holocaust and presents a case study of the immense difficulties and trials of hiding under such circumstances. Cord’s honest rendering shares a deeply human story, illuminating human flaws and human strengths, and sheds light on the particular texture of the female experience.”

—Elizabeth Anthony, Historian, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

“Finding Edith is a painful book to read—and it should be. In great detail and with unequaled precision, Edith Mayer Cord describes her experience hiding in German-occupied and German-Allied so-called Vichy France as a young girl, and her unrelenting efforts to both get an education and avoid capture. One marvels at her discipline and the courage born of necessity. One also is horrified by the many who exploited her dire situation and impressed by the few who came to her aid. She is brutally honest about her relationship with her difficult mother, who was shattered by the loss of her husband and her son, and by her conditions of dire poverty. One cannot fail to be impressed by the journey that Edith traveled to find herself and create a productive life after so much suffering. I know of few books as candid in explaining the price that was paid for survival.”

—Michael Berenbaum, Professor of Jewish Studies, Director of the Sigi Ziering Institute, American Jewish University
“Through the interweaving story—the odyssey—of the author’s and her family's personal experiences, readers learn about the events, the ascent of anti-Semitism that culminated in the death camps, the mass killings of what was termed the Final Solution. There is also mention of some little-known historical information, such as that Italian fascists laid claim to what is now Ethiopia; that Hitler admired Genghis Khan; and the events of the Evian Conference and the Wannsee Conference. Readers learn of the resourcefulness of the author’s parents in the face of life-threatening situations, as well as the lessons learned through the experiences of a child and young person during the Holocaust. These lessons Edith Cord carried into her remarkable adult life—survival of painful events and personal losses; assimilation is not enough to grant you safety; resourcefulness and adaptability are the most valuable tools; acquire skills to be able to support yourself; be active on behalf of civil rights and democracy. It is indeed an odyssey of personal growth.”

—Stefanie Seltzer, President, World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Descendants
Finding Edith
Surviving the Holocaust in Plain Sight
Edith Mayer Cord
This book is dedicated to the memory of my beloved father, S. J. Mayer, deported to Auschwitz on convoy 31 from Drancy, France, on September 11, 1942, at age 54, and to the memory of my wonderful brother, Kurt Mayer, deported to Auschwitz on convoy 26 from Drancy, France, on August 31, 1942, at the age of 19. May their memory be for a blessing.
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Preface

After twenty-five years I finally worked up the courage to read the last letters from my father and brother written just before their deportation to Auschwitz. While reading them I was reliving their agony, despair, and loneliness as they were about to be mercilessly murdered. And for what? This unspeakable suffering endured by those who were so brutally killed, dying alone far from witnesses, was caused by the blind visceral hatred that is anti-Semitism.

Sometimes I feel as though I have packed several lifetimes into this one. I recall my own hardships, pain, and despair as an adolescent hiding in plain sight to escape persecution and death in Western Europe. This book is about my odyssey, my struggle to rise out of poverty, to get an education, to transcend hatred, and to come to terms with many traumatic experiences. The circumstances of my life in those days were harsh. The prolonged attacks on my sense of self were relentless and came from many sources. The profound loneliness and despair of those years was so painful that I choose to tell my story as succinctly as I possibly can. I share my story with the hope that we will learn from this terrible past, that we will have men and women with the courage to stand up for our freedom, and that we will not allow ourselves to be silenced by political correctness, indiscriminate terror, or cowed into submission by nuclear, chemical, or cyber threats. We must speak up for our freedom by using words that heal, that enhance our best and noblest understanding of life—for everything starts with ideas.

Ideas work their way across centuries: from the Bible’s teachings of the Ten Commandments, individual responsibility and redemption, to the concept of democracy in ancient Greece, to the message of Jesus about accountability, love, and forgiveness, to the Enlightenment, with its recognition of man’s intrinsic equality before God and the right to worship in freedom. We are the spiritual heirs of previous generations, and these precious ideas and hard-won insights must be passed on to younger
generations. Like a thread, both good and bad ideas weave their way into our consciousness. It is up to us to filter them through our moral compass in order to keep the good ones while discarding the bad ones. It is an unending task. Totalitarianism in all its guises, whether it goes by the name of Nazism, Fascism, Communism, or some other fanaticism hiding behind a religious or political ideology, leads to the same results: a ruthless determination to achieve power by all means. We have little or no control over what life dishes out, but we do have control over how we deal with it. I am sharing my story with the hope of inspiring people. They have a choice; they too can work to build a better life for themselves and a better world for all.

Acknowledgments

This book took shape thanks to the invaluable help of my assistant and friend, Gabrielle DeMers, whose constructive feedback and technical skills helped to make the book what it is. My daughters, Emily and Louise, have always provided support as well as valuable feedback during the writing phase. I also wish to thank my lifelong friend Leon (Wodowski) Vermont (1929–2019) for his constant encouragement to put my thoughts in writing. Finally, I want to express my thanks to the editorial board of Purdue University Press—especially to Katherine Purple—for their suggestions and technical support during the publication phase of my book.

While I wrote every word in this book, putting it all together is the result of a collective effort, and I am deeply grateful to all those who have helped me along the way.

Edith Mayer Cord
Columbia, Maryland
2019
Beginnings

1. VIENNA, AUSTRIA

My Childhood and Early Memories

As a child, I wanted to be like everyone else. As an adolescent, I yearned for schooling. As a young adult, I just wanted to lead a normal life. In old age, I hoped that the terrible lessons of the Holocaust would be learned and that anti-Semitism would be a thing of the past.

I've come a long way since my childhood in Vienna, where I was born. My parents came from the eastern fringe of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire. Until 1914 both of my parents were living with their families in Czernowitz, then part of the Empire, near the Russian border. Czernowitz had been the capital of the Duchy of Bukovina, annexed as a crown land by the Austrian Empire after the upheavals of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. German was the official language, and my parents and their siblings went to German-language schools. My mother told me that the local population spoke Ruthenian. The city was a major transportation hub and a prosperous commercial center. My mother often talked about the lovely river Prut. Newer buildings reflected the Austrian influence of the Jugendstil or art nouveau. After World War I, the province of Bukovina with its capital of Czernowitz became part of an independent Romania. The region was annexed by the Soviet Union after World War II. Today, Czernowitz is part of southern Ukraine.

Shortly after World War I broke out, both families fled to Vienna to escape the advancing Russian troops. My mother, born in 1903, was twelve years old. Her three older brothers were drafted and served in the Austrian army as officers. Karl, the youngest, was killed in 1916 in Italy, a loss from which neither my grandmother, Rosa, nor my mother ever recovered.

My maternal grandfather, Josef Buchholz, was a sophisticated and handsome man with dark eyes and a stylish goatee. Though he had his rabbinical ordination, he never used the title of rabbi. He made his living as a wholesale food merchant, trading sardines by the wagonload, grain
by the ton, chocolate and other foodstuffs by the box and barrel. Later, I learned that Jews had lived as merchants in Czernowitz for centuries. Before World War I the Jewish population numbered about 30,000 or one-third of the total population in town. It was a prosperous community judging by the imposing Moorish revival synagogue (now destroyed) and by what is now the Palace of Culture, originally built to serve as the Jewish National House. The rest of the population was made up of Germans, Poles, Romanians, Ukrainians, and more, all living together under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. After World War II, members of those different ethnic groups were chased out by the Soviets, with Germans sent to Germany, Poles to Poland, and so forth until only Ukrainians remained.

My mother’s family had servants and their standard of living was high. German was spoken at home and all the children attended German-language schools and universities. My grandfather was a highly respected member of the community and the family had what is called yiches, Yiddish for ancestry, family status, and prestige.

I suspect the standard of living in my father’s family was more modest. My father was the oldest of eight. He was born in 1888 in Horodenka, a small town close to Czernowitz, also within the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father was named Schmil Juda, but everyone called him Adolf, a popular name at the time. When my father was one year old, his family moved to Lemberg, now Lviv. When my father was twelve years old, his family moved to Czernowitz where my paternal grandfather opened a clothing store that my mother’s family patronized.

Papa’s father, Josef Mayer, had a limited command of German. When still a boy, he tried to teach himself the alphabet, but he was caught by my great-grandfather who ripped up the book saying, “Du wirst dech shmat-ten!” (“[If you learn German] you will convert!”). But my grandfather was literate in Hebrew and read the Yiddish newspaper while his written German remained weak. He made amends for what his father had done to him by ensuring that Papa received an excellent secular education. In addition to the required eight years of schooling, my father went to a business academy for four years. As a result, Papa had an excellent command of German and a solid general education. At home, the family spoke mostly Yiddish.

Papa was on the short side with a round face, blue-gray eyes with glasses, very white skin, a high forehead, and thinning blond, straight
hair. He was clean-shaven, except for a little, stylish, closely trimmed moustache. As the oldest, Papa often commented that he did not want to have so many children for then they raise themselves. He was very close to his father, which led to resentment among the other siblings (something I learned recently from my Uncle Michael’s grandson, Ilan).

When the war ended, Mama’s situation in Vienna became precarious. Her father decided to go back to Czernowitz, which had become part of Romania, to see whether anything was left of the family estate. He took his middle son Leon with him and in 1920, while there, my grandfather died of a heart attack. Leon chose to stay in Czernowitz and married a woman named Klara. They had three children: Josef, Rosa, and Karl. In 1918, Mama was left in Vienna with her mother and her oldest brother, Rudolf, who was thirteen years her senior and in his early thirties. They were still living in the same apartment they had occupied during the war. It was on the fifth floor of a nice building in the first district—Werdertorgasse number 17—near the corner of Franz Josef Kai and the Danube Canal.

Vienna was the capital of the once sprawling, multilingual Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was reduced to its German-speaking part after the war. This was the result of President Wilson’s Principle of Nationalities, according to which each ethnic group was to have an independent country of its own. That resulted in the dismemberment of the old Empire, leaving in its place small, independent political entities that were not economically viable. This void contributed to the economic weakness and eventual collapse of Central Europe, a decline that opened the way for the totalitarian regimes that followed.

After World War I there were approximately 200,000 Jews living in Vienna, about ten percent of the total population. My family lived in the first district in the heart of Vienna, an area dominated by the soaring Stefansdom (St. Stephen Cathedral) and surrounded by the Ringstrasse where once the city’s walls had stood. Now the Ringstrasse was dotted with imposing buildings including the Parliament, the university, the Hofburg (royal palace), two famous museums, the graceful opera house, the Rathaus (city hall) with its gothic spires, the Stadtpark (city park) and its romantic monument of Johann Strauss Jr., all reflecting the city’s neoclassical architecture with imposing columns and statues on top of public buildings. The Jews living in the first district were more assimilated than those living in the second district, which had been given to Jews by King Leopold and was known as the Leopoldstadt. In the heart of the first district was the
Judenplatz, the center of the old Jewish Ghetto. When I was five years old, Mama told me that was where they burned Jews in the Middle Ages. And so from early on, I was aware that we were a persecuted minority.

While it is true that Jews were discriminated against and persecuted throughout the Middle Ages and later, the actual burning was done in another location. Both in Vienna and throughout Austria, there had been a series of pogroms over the centuries. These persecutions had some economic motivations, but sadly, they were also the result of the Church’s teachings. My reaction to Mama’s comment? “I’m glad they don’t do that anymore.” Little could I know what the future would bring.

When her family moved to Vienna, Mama was sent to a Pensionnat, a private girls’ school, until she was sixteen. In 1919, Grandmother Rosa died of the Spanish flu in the epidemic that killed millions, leaving Mama orphaned and destitute. She had a bourgeois education, knew how to play the piano, spoke some French, and could embroider beautifully, but she had neither marketable skills nor money. The expensive life insurance policy my grandfather had bought to protect her was paid, but the money was worthless because of the inflation raging in Austria. From my mother’s sad experience, I learned the importance of acquiring skills to support myself.

Mama’s brother Rudolf, together with her legal guardian whose name I never learned, focused on finding Mama a husband. The story she told me was that a Shiddech (match) was arranged with an older man who had money. They got engaged, but the engagement was broken by the groom. To compensate my mother, he gave her a substantial sum of money as a quit claim. As a result, Mama boasted that she was a rich girl.

My parents met in Vienna after the war at a party given in honor of one of Papa’s sisters on the eve of her wedding. Mama was just seventeen years old. Papa was thirty-two and was being pressured by his family to
take a wife. I don’t think there was great passion on either side. Mama said only that she liked him, which was very different from the teenage crush she had on a distant cousin, according to the stories she told me. My father was obviously ready to marry and would often joke that he had searched for her with great care. My mother came from a good family, and that must have settled the match.

After Grandmother Rosa died, Mama continued to live in the apartment with Rudolf, but when he got engaged, he wanted the apartment to himself. Right after my parents’ engagement, Rudolf locked Mama out of the apartment. The story I got from my mother was that she was forced to spend the night sitting with Papa on a park bench. Papa took Rudolf to court, which did not improve
family relations, and in the end, the two couples were forced to share the apartment. Needless to say, it was not a harmonious relationship.

My parents were married November 6, 1921; Mama was eighteen and Papa was thirty-three. According to Mama, after they were married, Papa visited his parents every night, leaving her alone. She interpreted this as the result of his excessive devotion to his father. Initially I accepted Mama’s view of things, but now I wonder if Papa was happy with his young wife. He was fifteen years her senior, a sophisticated and elegant dandy. Mama was an inexperienced young girl with a limited education and a sheltered upbringing. I also suspect that, at least initially, my parents may have quarreled because, again according to Mama, Papa said, “Do you want to quarrel like your parents did?” By the time I was old enough to understand, I never heard my parents quarrel or even raise their voices to each other. When once asked about my parents in school, I remember saying that they got along like two turtle doves. On March 10, 1923, a year and a half after their marriage, my brother Kurt (Mordechai) was born. I came along in 1928, on June 15, and yes, we all still lived in that same place.
Our apartment was in a very nice building in the newer section of the first district. By modern standards, the apartment had its limitations. There was a cold water faucet on the landing that served all the apartments on the floor. Inside there was a long hallway. To the left was a toilet used by both families. On the right was a door that led to two rooms occupied by Uncle Rudolf and his wife, later joined by their daughter Alice, nicknamed Lizzy. Mama liked Lizzy, she said, because Lizzy looked like her. Straight down the hall was another door leading to two more rooms occupied by my parents and eventually Kurt and me. Our windows opened onto an inner courtyard, kitty-corner to my uncle’s windows, so the families could hear everything going on in the other’s living quarters. The families never spoke to each other. As a child, I was well aware of the animosity between the families since their mutual dislike and contempt permeated the atmosphere.

When Mama got engaged to Papa, she’d given him her dowry and, according to her, he’d spent it all setting up his father in business. She resented that. In addition, Mama’s relationship with Papa’s family was a disaster. She despised all of them and had nothing good
to say about any of them, with the exception of my father’s sister Anna who died in childbirth soon after my parents’ wedding. As for the rest of the family, almost all were very well-off while my family was not. The fact remains that we never socialized with my paternal aunts, uncles, or cousins or got invited to birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, and other life events. Our only contact was through my grandparents or when Mama needed something. Once when we visited an uncle’s store, one of my aunts greeted us with, “What brings you here?” Mama took offense and never let it go. So when Mama kept telling me that I looked like Papa’s sisters, it was not meant as a compliment and I knew it.

Several years after I was born, Papa took his seventy-year-old parents to city hall to marry them under Austrian law. They had been married according to Jewish law but never got a license because under Austrian law, Jews were required to obtain expensive marriage licenses as the government wanted to keep the size of its Jewish population down. Therefore in the eyes of Austria, all their children were illegitimate and had their mother’s name. After the civil ceremony, my father changed our name from Halpern to Mayer. Papa’s youngest brother, Oskar, also changed his name to Mayer, but Michael remained a Halpern as did his children.

Papa’s concern was always to do things by the book and to adhere to the rule of law. As a former resident of the lost eastern provinces of the Empire, he could choose between Austria and Romania. He proudly chose

![Image of Edith's paternal grandparents in Karlsbad, 1925](attachment:image1.jpg)
to acquire Austrian citizenship. This was despite the fact that, for reasons only the Austrians in their infinite wisdom could fathom, Papa spent the war years in an Austrian detention camp as an enemy alien. Why Mama’s brothers served in the Austrian army and Papa did not remains a mystery.

Edith’s Austrian citizenship certificate dated August 9, 1934. It pictured the Rathaus. It was issued after Papa’s parents married under Austrian law and reflects the name change from Halpern to Mayer. Edith was six years old and it bears her signature.
Aside from their poverty, my parents had a solid marriage. Papa always treated Mama with respect, lifting his hat whenever he saw her coming down the street. In their marital relations, they observed Jewish law, which meant the monthly trip to the *mikvah* (ritual bath). I had no idea what that meant, and even when I was old enough to learn about it, Mama never taught me a thing and kept me ignorant. I never saw my parents argue. They talked a lot. Papa always filled her in on his business dealings. Mama would sit and listen attentively, usually with some sewing or knitting in her hands. Their conversations dealt with the political situation in Austria and Germany. Financial problems were a frequent topic, and Mama always pushed some idea or other for making money. When my parents did not want us to understand, they switched to Yiddish.

For Mama's birthdays, Papa often bought her a book, which he would read aloud to her while she did her handiwork. Occasionally, for a special treat, they took us to the Yiddish theatre. I was as young as five or six and would usually fall asleep during the first act. When I could stay awake for the second act, I felt proud of myself. I still remember Molly Picon in *Yidl mit dem Fiedl* (The Little Jew with his Fiddle). Papa did not like to go to the movies, so Mama went without him, dragging me along, or she went alone on Sundays while Papa spent the day with my brother and me.

When I was little, Papa still owned a clothing store for men and boys on the Kaiserstrasse, a busy commercial street leading to a suburban railroad station. I remember going there as a little girl. Papa would give me a new *Janker*, one of those grey Tyrolean jackets with green lapels, whenever I outgrew the old one. I also remember getting a trench coat that was too big for me, but I grew into it. After the war, that railroad station was not used as much and eventually it was shut down. This meant less pedestrian traffic and less business for all the merchants. The Depression did not help either. Papa was forced to close his store, but refused to declare bankruptcy and insisted on paying off all his debts. My parents had a small metal lockbox where they kept their cash, and every so often Mama took out some money to buy food until it was all gone. I wore hand-me-downs from my cousins, and I remember standing on a chair crying when I was two or three because my mother had me try on scratchy woolen sweaters from my cousins.

On Saturday afternoons, we often visited my paternal grandparents. They would put peanuts on the large dining room table for us to munch and served us tea with lemon and sugar in glasses set in silver holders. The
children sat around the table while the grownups talked in another room. I often played a board game with my cousin Erich Katz, who was my age.

Mama's friends were Finny Seider, younger sister of our next-door neighbor Frau Genia, and Dora Klapholz. As young girls they had been inseparable and were called Das Drei Mäderlhaus after a Viennese operetta about three girlfriends. When I was little, she had two other girlfriends whom she visited often. One was Frau Krochmal, whose daughter was one year older than I. We were playmates until she became sick with what may have been cystic fibrosis and died. And so I lost my only playmate. Mama's other friend was a married woman with older children. She lived with her brother, a furrier, in the Leopoldstadt.

Mama loved to talk and when she ran into her friends on the street, I would stand next to her, bored, anxious to leave, often tugging at her coat. I dreaded meeting Frau Dreif, one acquaintance who would pinch me hard on the cheek. She probably thought she was being cute or nice, but she hurt me, and I often wondered why Mama did not protect me from those pinches after I complained about them. One day Frau Dreif was heading in our direction, so I asked Mama to tell her not to pinch me. Mama did, but not without apologizing profusely.

When I was about three, Mama had surgery for an ectopic pregnancy, and I was sent to my paternal grandparents for six weeks. My grandfather was blinded as a result of a streetcar accident just before I was born, and while I stayed with them, I would sit on a low stool next to him and act as his eyes. I would take him by the hand, lead him wherever he wanted to go, and open doors for him, or I would bring him a blanket to put on his knees to chase away the chills. Although I was very little, his blindness made a big impression on me and I tried to help.

My grandmother told my parents that I was no trouble, except that I was a very slow eater. Since chubby babies were considered healthy in those days, they stuffed me with lots of hot cereal. My only defense was to eat very slowly. They treated me well and gave me a doll, but there were no children for me to play with, and I don't recall going out.

Before I was old enough to go to school, Mama would take me shopping to the Karmelitermarkt in the second district. When it snowed, Mama took the sled and pulled me along, storing the groceries between my legs on the way home. In the fall we would walk through the Kaipark, the park along the Danube Canal. I was allowed to gather horse chestnuts to take home. I made holes in them to string them up and make a chain.
Occasionally when the weather was nice on a Saturday afternoon, Mama would take me to the park as a special treat. In the center of the park there was a circle of gravel and grass, called a Rondo, with benches all around. There was no playground equipment for children. I could jump rope or play with my diabolo—an hourglass-shaped rubber spool that spun on a string connected to two sticks. When it gathered speed, I would toss it in the air and catch it on the string like Chinese jugglers do. It took some practice and I became very good at it.

There were always children in the park, but I did not know them because I went there so rarely. I was too shy to speak to them or join in their play, so I mostly remained an outsider and watched. One incident stands out in my mind. I must have been four and was at the park with Mama on one of our rare outings. The other children were playing a game, something like musical chairs but using trees. They sang a silly nursery rhyme “Vater, Vater, Leih mir d’Scher, wo ist leer?” (“Father, father, lend me your scissors, where is it empty?”). You had to leave your tree and get to another one before you were tagged. I was so happy to be included in the game that, when nature called, I refused to leave for fear of losing my place. I ended up wetting my pants, a most embarrassing situation.

Papa was the bright spot in my life. He was charming—playful, funny, and outgoing. He was a master storyteller and I often told him that he was in the wrong profession: he should have been a poet instead of a businessman. Little did I realize that poets too have a tough time making a living. He played the violin by ear and when he came back from his business trips to Italy, he would play Italian songs for us. He also loved to play cards, and he taught us many games including blackjack.

Papa had a tuning fork that he would strike against a hard object, then put to my ear so that I could listen to it hum. Music was an important part of his life and he passed that love on to me. We had a radio that played Viennese waltzes, arias from operettas, Hungarian music, pieces by Brahms and Liszt, and other popular classical music. When Papa came home at the end of the day and the radio was not on, he would exclaim, “How can you live without music?” and turn on the radio. When Papa’s taxes were unpaid, the tax collector would come to the apartment to collect the only thing left of value—the radio. Our other valuables, like the silver candlesticks, were already in the pawn shop. Whenever some money came in, Papa would run to retrieve the radio.
I loved to sing and loved music as much as Papa did, but there was no money for music lessons. I knew my cousins were taking dance lessons because they showed us photographs of themselves in ballerina dresses. I wanted to be a ballerina and dance, too. I also pined for a scooter, but it remained an unfulfilled wish like so many others. In wintertime, I remember standing at the fence enclosing the ice skating rink with my face pressed against the cold metal, watching longingly as skaters twirled to the tune of the “Skaters’ Waltz.”

Mostly I dreamed of owning my very own teddy bear. Whenever we went to visit Frau Genia next door, I was allowed to play with their brown teddy bear and was sad when I had to go home and leave it behind because I secretly hoped she would let me keep it. When I was seven years old, I got sick with a sore throat and high fever. Mama could not take me out and she did not like to leave me alone, so she asked me to stay in bed while she went shopping. When she came back, she gave me a big box. My eyes popped wide open when I found a teddy bear with golden yellow hair, stuffed with straw. It had a black nose and glass eyes. I kept that teddy bear throughout my years on the run.

Papa was a heavy smoker and had three nicotine poisoning attacks. We knew smoking was bad for him, so after the first attack, Kurt and I would encourage him to throw away his half-smoked cigarettes. After cutting down initially, he resumed his habit and had another bout of nicotine poisoning. Kurt and I badgered him not to smoke, but to no avail until the third episode when he became very ill. I vividly recall the scene. We were all standing around his bed with the doctor who pleaded with him to stop smoking, “Mr. Mayer, you have a wife and young children . . .” After that episode, Papa quit cold turkey. Kurt and I
never smoked because we witnessed our father’s struggle with nicotine addiction.

We vied for Papa’s attention and he would often play with each one of us in turn. During the first six years of my life, I spent a lot of time with him. He taught me games—cards, checkers, and chess. He told me stories: I had a choice between grandfather stories, Sherlock Holmes stories—he was a Sherlock Holmes fan—and Bible stories. Much of my knowledge of the Bible came from his bedtime stories.

Judaism was an important part of our lives. Papa was very observant, putting on tallis and t’fillin (prayer shawl and phylacteries) every morning. My parents kept a kosher home and observed Shabbat and holidays. Every Friday night, the table was set with a white tablecloth and candles, even when the fare was meager. Mama usually managed to buy a carp for Shabbat. We would go down to the Danube Canal and pick out a fish from the holding tank. The fishwife would kill it with a blow to the head, then remove the scales and clean out the insides, and Mama would cook it. Chicken was a rare treat reserved for holidays.

In spite of the importance my parents attached to religion, my religious education was mediocre, in sharp contrast to my brother who started learning Hebrew at the age of four. My parents hired a tutor for me, Mr. Ringel, who was even poorer than we were and who taught me the Hebrew alphabet. The Bible story that he delighted in telling me over and over was the story of Adam and Eve, and how Eve was the one who had tempted Adam to disobey God. Needless to say, I did not learn much, nor did the story he chose paint women in a favorable light.

Kurt and I attended the Seitenstettentempel, the main synagogue on the Seitenstettengasse, where there was a one-hour youth service on Saturday afternoons. (The temple, now called the Stadttempel, was the only one out of the more than eighty temples and synagogues in Vienna that survived the Nazi onslaught.) Papa went to a little shul in the Judengasse where he would spend Friday nights,
Saturday mornings, and often Saturday afternoons until Shabbat was over with the havdalah ceremony. Many times I would meet him there in the afternoon and stay with him until havdalah. The men would fuss over me and my big eyes.

On Sundays Papa usually took us to the museums of art or natural history. Sometimes we went to the park around the castle of Schönbrunn and the Gloriette. I guess Mama never went along because it was her day off and she loved going to the movies. I think that for her, the movies were an escape. When she could spare a schilling she would take me with her. I saw some of Rudolf Valentino’s silent films and Ben Hur. She told me I should know the classics. I also saw new films, but I confess the kissing scenes bored me no end. As a special treat on birthdays, Papa would take us to the Prater, the big Viennese amusement park, though we couldn’t afford the rides. I have a picture of him with me sitting on a papier-mâché horse, taken by a photographer. The photo is inscribed by my father to his little daughter on her sixth birthday, and I look happy.

In wintertime, cold was a constant companion. Viennese winters were harsh, with lots of snow crackling under foot as the sidewalks were never cleared but only sprinkled with ashes. The apartment, too, was always cold. We had a floor-to-ceiling green tile oven in the wall between the two rooms and Mama had to build a fire every morning. During the night, the fire would die out and by morning, the apartment was freezing until Mama built a fresh fire. I would sit on my little stool freezing, with my hands in my pockets and shoulders hunched, waiting for the apartment to warm up. There were no snowsuits for children back then and we could not afford leggings, so I wore thin cotton stockings and hand-me-down shoes with holes in the bottom. Since we did not have enough money to re-sole the shoes, Mama would stuff
newspaper into the shoes every morning, but it would get wet in rainy and snowy weather, so I often sat in school with cold, wet feet.

When I was four years old, Mama sent me to a Montessori kindergarten. I caught everybody’s germs and my colds were severe. My mother always treated them with warm milk, butter, and honey—a concoction I hated—and gave me inhalations that I also hated. In preschool I was painfully shy because I was unused to being with other children and I could not stand up for myself. Because of that, coupled with my frequent absences, Mama took me out of school.

The following year she signed me up again. I was five years old, but still had trouble standing up for myself, so they placed me with the four-year-olds. I remember the school very well. It was a stimulating environment where I was allowed to do things that were forbidden at home, like using scissors. I learned to tie the laces of the ankle boots my mother insisted I wear to “strengthen my ankles,” or so she said. Of course, the opposite was true and as I grew older, I often twisted my ankles. School was a world apart. I loved the small furniture, custom fit for me. I got along well with the children and related well to the teachers. I frequently volunteered to help serve lunch. The volunteers had to eat first and finish their spinach, so I ate my spinach. Then I was allowed to push the serving cart while a teacher ladled out the soup and served the food. My report card said that I was very sensitive.

For first grade, I went to the public school in the Börsegasse, which was not far from where we lived. Mama always walked me to school and picked me up because she was afraid gypsies might snatch me. While Austria had many gypsies who were known to steal money or small items, my mother’s fears were groundless because they did not steal children. By the time I was in third grade, most children went to school by themselves, but Mama insisted on being my chaperone. By then I was chafing at the bit and wanted to be like the other children—independent enough to walk to school on my own.

There were about thirty girls in my classroom. The children came from all social classes and there were a few Jewish girls from wealthy families, but I did not socialize with them. I was keenly aware that they were always well-dressed and hung out with each other. Two children shared a desk, which was fixed to the floor. When we weren’t writing, we had to sit up straight with our arms crossed or with our hands folded on top of the desk.

Despite my social isolation, I did very well. The grading system went by numbers: four was the lowest grade equivalent to an F, and one was the
equivalent of an A. I rated an occasional two in gym, sewing, or drawing, and earned ones in all my academic subjects. “Lauter Einser wie die Soldaten” (“All ones lined up like soldiers”) my grandmother commented when she saw my report card. My parents never praised me for my academic accomplishments. Perhaps they took them for granted or maybe they thought I would get a swelled head. One teacher wrote that I had “quicksilver in my backside,” because I had trouble sitting still in class. Even so, I always had a one in conduct.

The students were divided into three sections: A, B, and C. Section A was for the best students and C for the weakest. Classes went from 9 a.m. to noon Monday through Saturday, and we were given an hour of homework daily. Because of our family’s religious observance, the compromise approved by the school was that I would go to class on Saturdays, but would not write.

My teachers were older women and they ran a no-nonsense classroom. We learned a lot. With only three years in elementary school under my belt, I was able to read and write German fluently and without mistakes. I practiced my penmanship and covered pages with each letter of the alphabet, learning print as well as Latin script. We also studied Fraktur or Gothic script that was heavily used at the time. I had memorized the multiplication table and mastered long divisions. (To this day, I count in German.) The only time Papa helped me with homework was when I had to memorize the alphabet in first grade and later the multiplication table. Otherwise, I was on my own.
Report card for second grade. The report card indicates not only grades, but also religion—Jewish (mosaisch)—and six absences from class. Vienna, 1936.
We learned about Austrian history and the Great War. While in Vienna, I read *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain in German translation. The story fascinated me, but I skipped over the lengthy and boring descriptions of pageantry, and didn't understand his biting social commentary until much later. I read *Altneuland* (Old New Land) by Theodore Herzl about his dream of a Jewish state. I skipped over the theoretical passages where he described his vision of a Jewish state; I was more interested in the romantic and human part of the story. One of his ideas that stayed with me was that women were working outside of the home. I also read *Das Volk des Ghetto* (The People of the Ghetto), a compilation of stories with mystical overtones. I read *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and tried *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but could not finish it because it was so sad and made me cry. Of course I read most of Grimm's fairy tales where the good are always rewarded and the bad punished. Early on I learned to admire Schiller and, of course, Goethe. Two poems by Schiller stood out. One, celebrating the virtue of work, was about the forging of a bell called “*Die Glocke*.” The other was “*Die Bürgschaft*,” a powerful poem about friendship and loyalty. Another book I found enchanting and exotic was *A Thousand and One Nights*. I had few books, so I read my favorites as many as eight times.

When I was four, Papa's father died and Papa decided to try a wholesale business after he closed the store on the Kaiserstrasse. A year later, we moved to an apartment that became available in my grandmother's building on Seitenstettengasse number 5. It was a large railroad apartment, with three rooms and a kitchen, which had running water but no heat. There was a toilet in the apartment, but without heat, going to the bathroom in the winter was a painful experience. I always dreaded it and would put it off as long as I could. There was no hallway either. On the day of the move, Kurt and I ran around the apartment in circles, pushing my doll carriage. I was five years old, Kurt was ten. The apartment had lots of potential. I remember one weekend when Mama, still in her nightgown, walked around and discussed with Papa various plans to improve the apartment. As I watched them, I vividly recall thinking that these were pipe dreams that would never come true, because I was well aware that we did not have the money to make such improvements.
Papa installed shelves and a phone in the largest room and bought dry goods to sell, but somehow the business did not take off. My Uncle Michael had a successful clothing store; so did the two Katz brothers who had married Papa’s sisters, Bertha and Dora. Their stores were on one of the major shopping streets, the Mariahilferstrasse. His youngest brother, Oskar, also had a successful store, but no one in the family did business with Papa. It must have been humiliating for him, and I heard Papa complain about it to Mama.

The fact remains that, although Papa could not make a living in Vienna, he didn’t leave the city as long as his parents were alive. When our financial situation deteriorated, the wealthier siblings paid for our groceries, perhaps because their mother ordered them to do so. Whatever their motivation, they supported us or we would have starved. They never gave us money, but Mama charged food in a dairy store and they paid for it. While I did not go to bed hungry, my diet was lopsided—it lacked meat, fruits, and vegetables, and consisted mostly of hot cereal, bread, butter, milk, and eggs. I developed eczema on the back of my knees, which was diagnosed as a vitamin deficiency. After that, Mama always made an effort to feed me the proverbial apple a day.

There were few family outings. During the summer months we rarely visited the Stadion, a large park with swimming pools, even though summers in Vienna could be oppressively hot. I vaguely remember a couple of excursions to the Kahlenberg just outside of Vienna and to Schönbrunn and the Belvedere, but those trips may have been taken with Papa, not as a family.

We went on vacation twice during the nine years I spent in Vienna. The first time was after Kurt’s appendectomy, when he was ten and I was five. He needed fresh air to help him recover during a protracted convalescence. We rented a room at a working farm and Kurt had a wonderful time. The farmer let him climb on the horse-drawn cart and hold the
reins. There were farm animals and constant activity. I saw a chicken being killed when the farmer twisted its neck and then, to my amazement, I saw the chicken run around with his head dangling. The image stayed with me and convinced me that killing an animal according to Jewish law was more merciful. Kurt fell in love with the place, and later while we were in hiding, he said he would go to Canada when the war was over and become a farmer. He said farmers never go hungry.

Our second vacation was a year later. I had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, and my parents were advised to take me out of the city to heal in the fresh air. We went to the Burgenland, a rural area not far from Vienna, where my parents rented a cottage near a stream. For many years, I would draw pictures of that little house. Though there was not much to do in that place, it was a welcome change from oppressively hot and dusty Vienna. We often hiked up a steep path lined with blackberry bushes to the nearby village. Kurt would gather berries and once, while leaning too far to get to the riper berries, he fell into the bushes, was scratched by the thorns, and got up covered with blood. Once in the village, Mama ordered a glass of Schnapps—to the innkeeper’s surprise—which she used to disinfect my brother’s wounds. Later the innkeeper came over to tell us he didn’t think Mama was going to drink it.

These two vacations were paid for by relatives. When Kurt had to recuperate, Mama went to her wealthy cousin, Anna Freudenheim, our Tante Anna, to ask her for the money. I don’t know who paid for the second vacation. Tante Anna was my mother’s first cousin on her mother’s side. She was married to Adolf (who later changed his name to Alfred) Freudenheim. He was an executive, possibly even the CEO of the Montanunion, the Austrian affiliate of Standard Oil. They had no children. He had a sister, Klara
Wachstein, who was divorced. Klara had lost her older child, a boy, to meningitis. She had a daughter, Paula. Klara and Paula lived with the Freudenheims, who treated the little girl as if she were their own. Paula married an engineer from Warsaw and they moved to Poland. Both were killed in the Holocaust.

I loved visiting Tante Anna. She lived on the Schwarzenbergplatz in a spacious apartment with nine or ten rooms. There was a Herrenzimmer, a library with dark paneling, to which the men could withdraw to smoke their cigars, drink brandy, and discuss business and politics. There was also a formal drawing room or salon, and a sitting room where we stayed whenever we visited. The place was comfortable and cozy, and especially nice and warm in winter. Kurt and I were always served a tasty snack and then we played with Paula while the grown-ups talked. I thought Paula had such interesting games at her house, especially compared to our home where we only had chess, checkers, and cards. Paula was older than I, and I admired her tremendously. She seemed to have everything I could only dream of: a comfortable home, nice clothes, good food, dance lessons, horseback riding lessons, and vacations. I thought she was very pretty with her dark eyes, black wavy hair, sensitive features, and tall, slender figure. She was always nice to us.

The only bad thing about these visits was in the wintertime when we had to take the long, freezing walk home through the Stadtpark, past the Johann Strauss Jr. monument. Streetcars were just too expensive for us. How I remember those walks! When I was little, Papa carried me. After the age of four, he said that I was too heavy and I had to walk. On rare occasions when Tante Anna visited us in the Werdertorgasse, she would always bring me a bar of chocolate. She was a tall, stately woman, always dressed in good taste, with rounded, attractive features. As a kid, I was struck by her long legs covered with silk stockings.
In Vienna, housework for Mama was a full-time job. We had no maid and Mama had to do all the laundry by hand. She also had to shop for food daily because there was no place to keep it fresh—we had no refrigeration. On top of that, water had to be carried into the apartment from the landing. Caring for a family of four was hard work.

My parents were strict disciplinarians and demanded respect from Kurt and me. We were required to address them in the third person, as if they were royalty. We also used “Küss die Hand” (kiss the hand) as our greeting to them, and I had to curtsy to my grandmother. My parents wanted us to believe that they knew everything and that they were perfect. I recall how shocked I was when I later realized how far from perfect they were. Their attitude toward child-rearing prevented Kurt and me from developing our own judgment and street smarts. Mama’s idea of discipline was harsh corporal punishment. She would pull down my panties and spank my bare bottom. Since that hurt her hand, she began hitting me with a wicker rug beater. When I got older, she would slap me across the face. I hated that and recall clearly that I could not wait to grow up so that she could not beat me up anymore.

Kurt and I often squabbled when I was little, but when he became a teenager, we had less interaction. He had a life of his own and I spent all my free time with Mama. Looking back, I would say that Mama did not encourage much interaction between us. It seemed as though everything had to go through her, as if she were the center and we were the spokes of a wheel. Perhaps it was her way of retaining control over both of us. In fact, I would say that my parents wanted to retain control over us, no matter how old we were.
Kurt was generally as obedient as I was, but sometime around his bar mitzvah there was trouble. After four years of elementary school, Kurt was enrolled in the Realgymnasium, an academically oriented middle school. He took Latin and needed a tutor who maintained that Kurt was capable of doing the work on his own, but someone needed to stay with him while he was doing it. But something was awry. I was vaguely aware that my parents sought professional help. The counselor recommended that Kurt spend time with people his own age. With our parents’ approval, he joined the Betar, a Zionist youth organization founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky. He went to meetings, made lots of friends, and in the summer, he went to a camp in the Salzkammergut on the Wolfgangsee. He came back bubbly, happy, full of stories, and singing the camp’s songs. It was one of the happiest experiences of his life.

To make that vacation possible, Mama went to Tante Anna and begged for money. Fritzi, Frau Genia’s daughter who was a year older than Kurt, was allowed to join him in the summer camp. While there, Kurt fell in love with an athletic-looking young girl in pigtails. After the summer, he kept in touch with the friends he had made in the camp.
Though Papa often threatened to spank my brother—he never touched me—I only remember one episode in Italy where he gave Kurt a beating; it may have been because Kurt did not want to go to services on Saturday morning. I was not in the room, but I remember being very uncomfortable. As for Mama, she always yelled at Kurt and me and frequently used sarcasm. She blamed me for everything. One Mother’s Day, when I was seven years old, I promised myself to do everything I could to please her, but by 10 a.m. she was already yelling at me.

She knew she had a problem, but instead of doing something about it, she’d say, “I’m nervous. That’s how I am.” She didn’t consider her lack of self-control to be a shortcoming and never tried self-improvement. But she never yelled at Papa, and she was on her best behavior when he was around. Only Kurt and I were her victims. Once Kurt was big enough and strong enough to stop her when she started hitting, he grabbed her arms near the wrist and held them away from his body. Of course that made her even angrier.

As a result of this, plus the Germanic emphasis on obedience and our strict religious upbringing, I was cowed into submission and very shy. When Papa was away, every letter he sent ordered me to obey Mama. Things didn’t get better as I got older, which made it hard for me to become a whole person with a modicum of self-confidence. I know my mother used
to brag about me behind my back, but to me she was always critical and our relationship remained painful.

Mama also told me I was an accident. That did not bother me because I think I was a wanted accident. That may sound like an oxymoron, but although my parents did not feel they could afford another child, they were emotionally ready to have one. Anyway, there I was and Papa seemed very happy to have a little girl. He was a loving and entertaining companion, and I have warm memories of my early childhood with him.

Mama took care of us, but she never played with us. When my father was away I would ask her to tell me a story. Her answer was always, “I don’t know any stories.” She tried to treat Kurt and me equally. If she bought me something nice to eat, einen Leckerbissen, she would bring Kurt something too. One thing I disliked intensely, though, was getting Kurt’s used school supplies. I never had the pleasure of experiencing the feel of a brand new eraser or of a new pencil. I often dreamt that I had a new eraser, so once I decided that I would keep my fist closed in the hopes of finding that new eraser in my hand. Of course when I woke up I found an empty palm.

Despite her conscious attempts at equal treatment, it was clear to me that she favored my brother. He was her firstborn, a boy, and, most important, she said he looked like her side of the family. The truth was that I did not look like her. I looked more like my father, but this was something she could not bring herself to say. She praised Kurt for being a good eater, and denigrated me for eating little.

Perhaps her behavior was the result of her own childhood traumas. When my grandmother was pregnant with Mama, she was very unhappy about it. My grandmother already had three sons and she did not want another child. She even told Mama she tried to cause a miscarriage by hitting herself in the abdomen, but it didn’t work. Since Mama was a girl, my grandfather was very pleased and my grandmother reconciled herself. The only picture I have of Mama as a child was taken when she was six years old, soon after recovering from typhoid fever. She looks scrawny and pale as she stands next to her mother, a tall, overweight, elegantly dressed matron. Mama’s large brown eyes look straight at the camera and she is not smiling.

Mama said that her brothers abused her and called her das Traskobjekt or punching bag. As a result, she never allowed Kurt to hit me, though she more than made up for that herself. Her brother Karl was the only
I was six years old when Papa's mother died. Papa decided to leave Vienna to seek his fortune. Mr. Hirschkrohn manufactured leather jackets and raincoats in Vienna and agreed to fund Papa's expenses as his representative in Italy. And so Papa left for Italy, even though he couldn't speak Italian. He was gone for weeks and months at a time. When traveling in Italy, he continued to eat kosher food by sticking to dairy restaurants called latterias and he always carried his tallis and t'fillin with him in his briefcase.

When he came back to Vienna, he spent more time with his supplier than he did with us. The family saw very little of him during those years, and we still had little money. To make ends meet, Mama rented out two of our three rooms. Two ladies inhabited the large room in the front and an ultra-Orthodox young couple lived in the back room off the kitchen. We kept the middle room for ourselves, which meant we had to walk through the room rented to the two women in order to get to ours. To
avoid disturbing them, we stayed in our room as much as possible, and in
the evenings we felt like prisoners in our own home. Mama used the rent
money to buy produce and occasionally hamburger meat, chicken, or carp.

By 1936, Papa was becoming successful, and we were all unhappy
about the long separations. My parents decided to move to Genoa the
following year. They decided to wait for Kurt to finish his fourth and final
year at the Realgymnasium. That year would also give my mother time
to close out the apartment. Mama had time to sell off the furniture, store
some things with friends, and get the family ready for the big move.

The other major motivation for leaving Vienna came from politics. My
parents had been watching the rise of Nazism in Germany and in Austria
with much anxiety. They were well aware of the vicious anti-Semitism of
the two Nazi newspapers, Der Völkischer Beobachter (The People’s Observer)
and Der Stürmer (The Storm Trooper). They were aware of the concentra-
tion camps and of the 1935 Nuremberg laws depriving Germany’s Jewish
citizens of their basic rights. They
expressed dismay when Cardinal
Pacelli, who later became Pope
Pius XII, signed the Concordat in
1933 with Hitler. This made the
Vatican the first state to recognize
Hitler and gave him legitimacy
and prestige. There was much
Nazi agitation in Austria as well.
I remember the assassination of
Chancellor Dollfuss in 1934, and
how shocked I was that he was
forced to bleed to death because
the four Nazi guards posted at his
bedside would not let a doctor near
him to provide life-saving care.

Looking back, I don’t know
why we didn’t leave Austria sooner.
Perhaps my father would not leave
while his parents were alive. To this
day I cannot understand the con-
trast between my parents’ political
sophistication and their naïveté.

Fritzi (left) and Frau Genia
(right) in the Kaipark near the
Danube Canal, Vienna, 1937.
They were well-informed. In addition to reading Austrian newspapers, they read Swiss papers—Die Basler Nachrichten, Die Neue Zürcher Zeitung, and, more regularly, Die Weltwoche. But what did Papa focus on? His Austrian citizenship! And I remember how happy he was when we finally got those papers.

I don’t recall saying goodbye to family or friends except for Frau Genia, her daughter, Fritzi, and her old father, Mr. Seider. Papa came to Vienna to pick us up. Most of our stuff was shipped ahead, and we carried just a few suitcases to the station. This was my first major travel adventure, and I still remember the train ride across the Brenner Pass. I was singing a song I had learned in school:

\begin{verbatim}
Nun ade, du mein lieb’ Heimatland,
Lieb’ Heimatland, ade.
Es geht nun fort zum fremden Strand,
Lieb’ Heimatland, ade [. . .]
Vom moos’gen Stein [und grünem Gras,]
Da grüß’ ich dich zum letzten Mal
Lieb’ Heimatland, ade.
\end{verbatim}

Goodbye my sweet homeland,
Sweet homeland, goodbye.
Now it’s off to a foreign land,
Sweet homeland, goodbye . . .
From moss-covered stone and green grass
I greet you for the last time
Dear homeland, goodbye.

I was not sad. Papa was with us and I felt we were going forward to a better life. Little did I know that this saved my life. Six months later, Hitler marched into Vienna.

I was nine years old.

What did I retain from these early years in Vienna? Our poverty was a constant source of deprivation, misery, and humiliation. During my adolescence, after many years of abject poverty, always depending on charity,
it occurred to me one day that I didn’t have to be poor. I could get a job. That was like a revelation. I hated to depend on others. There is a Yiddish expression that says “a poor man is like a dead man, whichever way you put him, that’s how he has to stay.” So that was poverty. It did not allow for any choices.

From my early childhood, I retained an emotional affinity for traditional Judaism. My parents did not care for the medieval dress of the Hasidim with their beards and long sideburns, but they were not comfortable with Reform Judaism either with its organ music and other features that imitated Protestant services. They wanted to be modern while preserving their traditions. Thanks to my exposure to Yiddish theater, my father’s Bible stories, my own reading, and the warmth of our Friday nights and of our seders, I developed emotional ties to Judaism and Jewish culture. At the same time, I was aware that my parents lived mostly in the company of other Jews. Although we lived in a Catholic country, our social contacts with non-Jews, while pleasant, remained limited and superficial. I was also raised with the idea that Judaism was superior to Christianity, because Christian myths and practices were so contrary to common sense. The behavior of Christians with their ceaseless persecution of Jews throughout the centuries only seemed to confirm my parents’ opinion.

What else has remained from those years? From my father, I learned to have absolute integrity in business dealings, to immediately pay earned wages to a worker, to show modesty in behavior and dress, to avoid vulgarities in speech, and to only have suitable dinner conversations. I also learned to admire the arts and artists, scientists and writers, to emulate people of achievement, and to respect my elders. Above all, I learned to love books and learning.
About the Author

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1928, Edith Mayer Cord fled from country to country because of religious persecution. Separated from her family, Cord managed to survive the Holocaust in hiding. After the war, she focused on catching up on her education before coming to the United States. Cord worked as a college professor of French and German before becoming a securities broker, financial adviser, and certified financial planner. She is married, with three children and seven grandchildren. She currently lives in Columbia, Maryland.