

REWRITING AN ARCHIVE.

CURRICULUM VITAE OF LEOPOLD KLEIN

Ramesch Daha

A little over a month after the capitulation of the Nazi régime, my step-grandfather, Leopold Klein, then age 22, wrote his short biography as follows:

I was born on the 20.9.1923 in Vienna as the son of a sheet metal worker's helper. Until 13 March 1938 my life was completely normal. My father was the branch helper in the main branch of Julius Meinl A.G. – because of the prevailing unemployment at the time he could not find a job in the area in which he was qualified. My mother, who was a qualified seamstress contributed to the household finances by working at home. My parents and I led a very harmonious family life. At the time, probably because of my age, I was not the slightest bit interested in politics. We went through a series of political changes that happened under more or less bloody circumstances. My father, who was concerned to bring me up in a strict way, decided that the lesson he should learn was to keep out of political events because the colours changed with such rapidity that there was no way one could just go quietly about one's own business. One always had to be prepared to be swept away in the flood created by the next upheaval. That was my father's opinion and I had nothing to say against it. So we led the more or less quiet life that an average working family might lead. Then came the brown invasion of the 13 March, 1938: how much suffering and tears have gone down as the history of that day! All of a sudden the quiet life was over for us.

After 14 years of service and honest, hard work for the House of Meinl my father, an Israelite by birth, was sacked. Not only that, after the Kristallnacht events on the 10 November (the assassination of Rath in Paris) and even though he had been baptised in 1921, (my mother is an Aryan) he was taken to Dachau because of being a Jew by birth. After long imprisonment there – two and a half years – he was taken to Buchenwald and six months later to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück near Fürstenberg where, on the 17 August 1942, death put an end to his four years of dreadful agony.

As a first degree mixed blood I was also removed from my apprentice position as sales trainee and then worked in a Jewish fabric shop until it was forced to close. Finally, in some hidden office of the Meinl concern I was able to complete my business training in a reasonably tolerable way. Unfortunately some upper-level Nazi found that my face didn't fit and proposed me for the Organisation Todt. However, my physical condition was not up to such demands, I had to cope with the results of a bad accident with a lift that almost cost me a foot. But the employment office did finally find me a worthy job as a labourer in the locomotive factory in Floridsdorf where, as encouragement, I lived through the heaviest of the air raids.

My mother earned a relatively meagre living as a seamstress.

These events gave my life a sharp change of direction. My life was pulled into politics against my will. My father, a foe of all politics, languished in a concentration camp - and for what? Perhaps for his lifelong work simply putting bread on the table for his family? No. Just because he had Jewish forebears. A person not only had to account for his own deeds and actions but was to be responsible for the parents who begat him. This is what made me pay attention. It opened my eyes to the wishes and sufferings of humanity. The events of the war followed. I followed the course of military campaigns feverishly. The

Wien, den 14. Juni 1945

Etwas mehr als einen Monat nach der Kapitulation des Nazi-Regimes schrieb mein Stief-Großvater Leopold Klein, damals 22 Jahre alt, seine Kurzbiographie wie folgt:

Leopold Klein
Wien XVII.
Hernalserrhauptstr. 193/7

Lebenslauf

Ich wurde am 20. 9. 1923 in Wien als Sohn eines Spenglergehilfen geboren. Bis zum 13. März 1938 verlief mein Leben in normalen Bahnen. Mein Vater war Filialdiener in der Hausfiliale der Julius Meinl A.G., er konnte infolge der damals bedingten Arbeitslosigkeit in seinem erlernten Beruf keine Stellung finden. Meine Mutter die gelernte Schneiderin war, trug durch ihre Arbeit an der finanziellen Ausgestaltung des Haushalts bei. Meine Eltern und ich führten das denkbar beste harmonische Familienleben. An Politik hatte ich zu dieser Zeit vielleicht auch auf Grund meines Alters, nicht das geringste Interesse. Wir erlebten eine Reihe von politischen Umwälzungen die sich unter mehr oder weniger blutigen Symptomen vollzogen. Mein Vater der auf die straffe Durchführung meiner Erziehung bedacht war, zog aus diesen Ereignissen für sich die Lehre, sich aus den politischen Ereignissen herauszuhalten, ~~sein um keinen Preis~~ denn die Farben wechselten in rascher Folge und man konnte auf keinen Fall in Ruhe seiner Arbeit nachgehen, man musste immer wieder gewärtig sein beim nächsten Umsturz mit Hinuntergepöbelt zu werden. Das war die Meinung meines Vaters und ich hatte den nichts entgegenzusetzen! Wir führten so gewissermaßen ein ruhiges Leben, dass so dem Durchschnitt einer Arbeiterfamilie entsprach. Dann kam in unserm Land die braune Invasion – 13. März 1938 – Wieviel Leid und Tränen gehen wohl unter diesem Stichtag in die Geschichte ein.

Mit der Rahe für uns war es schlagartig vorbei. Mein Vater der von Geburt Israelit war, wurde nach 14jähriger fleissiger, ehrlicher Tätigkeit im Hause Meinl, entlassen und nicht genug dessen, er wurde trotzdem er im Jahre 1921 getauft war (Meine Mutter ist Arierin) anlässlich der 10. Novemberaktion (Attentat auf Rath in Paris) nur deswegen weil er von Geburt Jude war nach Dachau gebracht. Nach 1jähriger Haft in diesem Lager kam er auf 2 1/2 Jahre nach Buchenwald von dort wieder auf ein halbes Jahr nach Ravensbrück bei Fürstenberg ins Konzentrationslager, wo ihn am 17. August 1942 nach 4 Jahren furchtbarer Qualen der Tod erlöste.

Ich selbst als Mischling I. Gr. wurde ebenfalls von meinem Lehrposten als Verkaufspraktikant entlassen, kam dann in ein jüdisches Stoffgeschäft bis dieses dann auch zusperran musste. Endlich konnte ich dann in irgend einem versteckten ~~einmal~~ Büro des Meinl-Konzerns meine kaufmännische Schulung leidlich beenden. Leider war ich irgend einem Obernazi auf die Dauer nicht sympatisch und ich wurde für die Org. Todt vorgeschlagen. Leider entsprach meine körperliche Konstitution nicht diesen Anforderungen ich hatte an den Folgen eines schweren Aufzugsunfalles, der mich beinahe ^{ein} Fuss gekostet hätte zu leiden. Aber das Arbeitsamt fand ~~mir~~ dann doch endlich für mich eine würdige Beschäftigung, und zwar in die Lokomotivfabrik nach ^{(die schwersten Luftangriffe.}

Meine Mutter verdingte sich ebenfalls ~~wasent~~ als Näherin ziemlich kärglich

Diese Ereignisse gaben meinem Leben impulsiv eine Wendung. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ ² ¹ ~~meine Aufmerksamkeit wurde auf die Politik hingelenkt~~ wurde. Mein Leben wurde ungewollt in die Politik hineingezogen. Mein Vater der ein Feind jeglicher Politik war schmachtete im Konzentrationslager – für was? Vielleicht für sein arbeitsreiches Leben das nur der Sorge um das tägliche Brot seiner Familie galt! Mein weil seine Ahnen Juden waren! Der Mensch ~~und~~ muss nicht mehr Rechenschaft ablegen für

German news and normal Prussian propaganda clichés were no longer enough, did not satisfy my curiosity. Sadly, at the time I just had a self-built radio set that only had local reception. For weeks I considered how to solve the problem. Finally I got an idea: I did not smoke and so didn't need cigarettes. I could use these systematically in exchange for bicycle parts until, after what seemed to be an endless task, I managed to assemble two complete bicycles. My talent for handwork ensured they were professionally assembled and through an ad in a newspaper I was able to exchange them for my long-for radio with foreign station reception.

Now my political hunger was to be fed. I followed political and military events in great detail not, as you might think, only from the foreign news sources but also by listening to the top Nazis. That allowed me to form an objective picture of the political and military situation. In the factory where I worked I also has the opportunity of listening to foreign radio stations along with other workers who were on air raid duty with me. This gave me insight into the worries and woes, wishes and hopes of humanity. Even today, without giving it much thought, I can sketch the path which the peoples of the earth will have to take in order to be able work together peacefully and to put an end to these organised pogroms, persecutions and suppression once and for all. It is not acceptable for the world to be terrorised by a few political megalomaniacs and exposed to destruction for the sake of securing a golden future for just a few tens of thousands.

That was my life until the collapse of the fascist armies which had fought for such an ill-conceived cause, liberated by the longingly anticipated—not just by me—Red Army in Vienna. And now, on with the reconstruction.

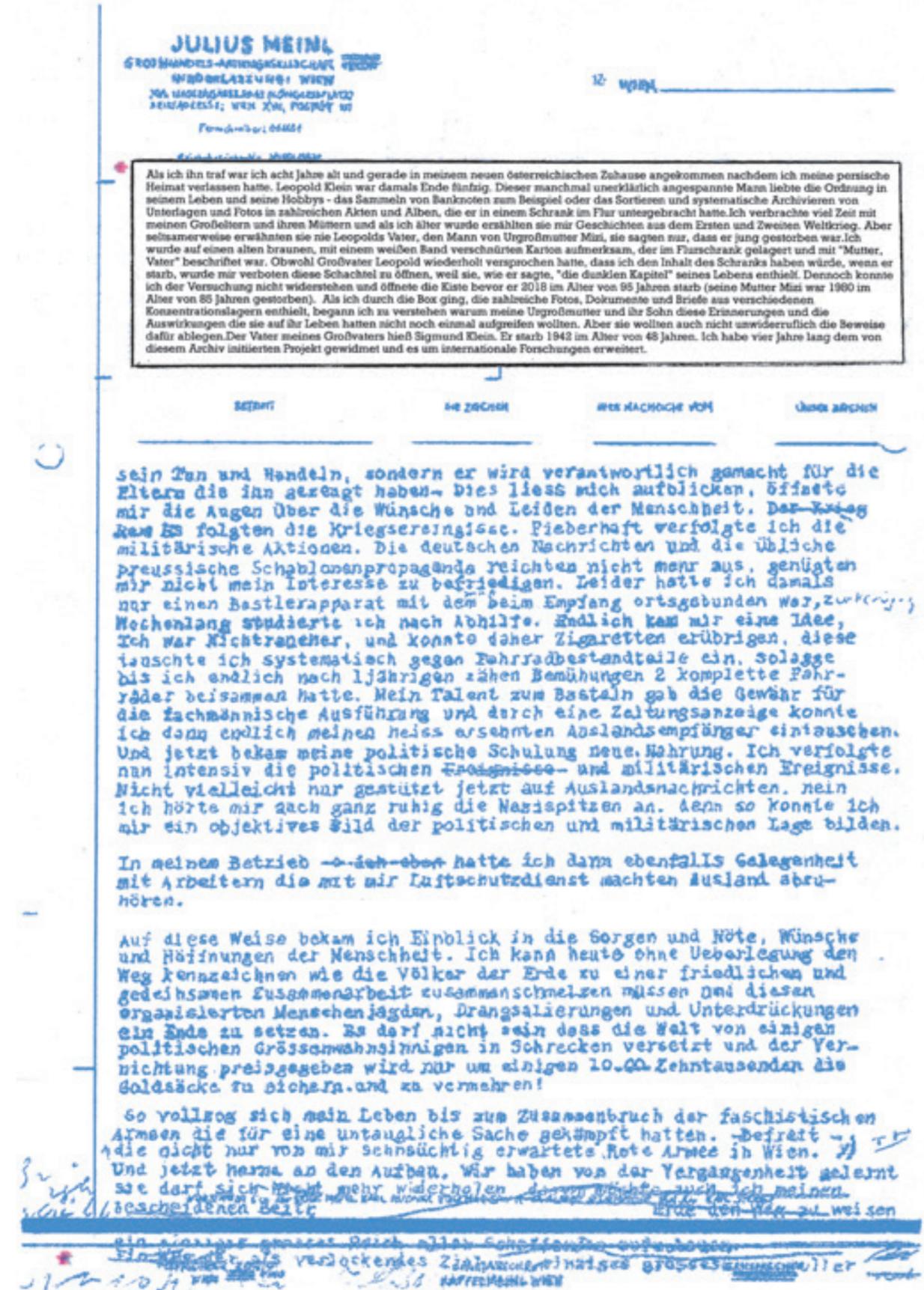
We have learned from the past and it must not be allowed to repeat itself.

When I met him I was eight and had just arrived in my new Austrian home having had to leave my Persian homeland and he was in his late fifties. This sometimes inexplicably irascible man liked order in his life and his hobbies—collecting banknotes, for example—involved sorting and systematically archiving them in numerous files and albums which were housed in a cupboard in the hallway.

I spent a great deal of time with my grandparents and their mothers and as I grew older they told me stories of both the First and Second World Wars. But strangely they never mentioned Leopold's father, great-grandmother Mizi's husband other than to say he had died young.

I became aware of an old brown cardboard box sealed with white tape that was stored in the hall cupboard and labelled "mother, father". Although Grandfather Leopold had repeatedly promised that I was to have the contents of the cupboard when he died, I was prohibited from opening that box because it contained, as he said, "the dark chapters" of his life. Nevertheless, I was not able to resist the temptation and actually opened the box before he died in 2018 at the age of 95 (his mother, Mizi, had died at the age of 85 in 1980). Going through the box, which contained numerous photographs, documents and letters sent from various concentration camps, I began to understand why my great-grandmother and her son did not want to revisit those memories and the effect that it had on their lives. But neither did they want to irrevocably discard their evidence.

The father of my grandfather was named Sigmund Klein. He died in 1942 at the age of 48. I have devoted four years to the project that this archive instigated, expanding it with international research.



Leopold Klein : Curriculum Vitae / 2019, blueprint collage on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm.