“What happened...” and how can we make sense of it?

The individuals we have just heard about have indeed had remarkable lives. Some of their experience was rooted in what happened to them—things over which they had no control, but some of it surely involved their own choices, their willingness and their ability to make decisions, to perceive and seize opportunities.

Where we came from and when it happened influenced much of what happened to us. By when it happened I mean the years of the great depression, the rise of fascism and the War and by the where I mean not only Austria in the 1930s, but also our families and our schools. Where we landed similarly has had a major impact on who and what we became. I shall argue that all of the factors involved have made us unique individuals and produced our unique lives, in spite of all we share. That seems pretty much common sense and makes no claim to originality. And yet in studies that attempt to speak of large groups of individuals, the common features stand out and the individuals are lost from sight.

The Holocaust historian Walter Laqueur identified what he called the “Generation Exodus” (2001): Jews born between 1914 and 1928 in what became Nazi Germany, who managed not only to survive but also to escape. They—we—were old enough to remember their lives before Hitler and young enough to begin new lives elsewhere. “That elsewhere” seems to have covered the world beyond the frontiers of Nazi-occupied Europe. In our specific cases, it involved three Latin American countries and the U.S., on the one hand, and on my own case, Switzerland and the US, with a time in Palestine that doesn’t quite fit into the time sequence that concerns us here. For the large number of people Laqueur considers in his book the areas of refuge included, in addition to the obvious—the U.S. and Palestine most prominently—also large parts of the British Empire, the Soviet Union, even Japan. In Haiti, in 1947, I met some Jews from Germany and Austria who had
found refuge there. Others, who had been in Haiti for a time, had moved on. Few people these days, I believe, are aware of the great range of the dispersal of the Jews of Europe. I recall the puzzlement, some 30 years ago, of some of my colleagues when they learned that one of our graduate students had relatives both in the UK and in Latin America.

While Laqueur’s study makes an interesting contribution, it doesn’t speak directly to our concerns. He and his staff read hundreds of published and unpublished memoirs and interviewed a great many people. They attempt to come up with generalizations, but have no statistics that might back them up. They do argue however, that this cohort has been unusually successful, making significant contributions to their adopted countries: In the U.S., two Secretaries of State, diplomats in several countries, an honorary African chief, scientists and Nobel Prize winners, and so forth. The members of this cohort succeeded, suggests Laqueur, “perhaps because they had to start from scratch, because there was no helping hand, no money, no connections, no safety net. For them, it was a question of swimming or sinking.” (2001:xiii).

Of course, without statistics we cannot know whether the prominent people who are singled out, are exceptional, towering above a mass of “average” people, or whether the cohort as whole did well—however that may be defined. If the definition involves money and significant careers, then this seems to focus on the lives of men rather than on those of women as well. That aside, I rather question the alleged causes for the success of this cohort: I note that in this country we came into the labor market after the War in a period of remarkable economic expansion. Immigrant men were drafted into the armed forces during the war and then could take advantage of the G. I. Bill. This enabled people like Kissinger, who provides a publisher’s blurb for Laqueur’s book, an opportunity at higher education and all that followed from that. The G.I. Bill led to an enormous increase in college enrollments, providing jobs for newly minted Ph.D.s
and ABDs. An American education made it a great deal easier, in this expanding market, for us to get jobs, compared to the situation of our foreign educated parents. It should also be noted that those of us who lived in New York City among some other places, college education was free for students with good high school grades. That made a huge difference to the lives of many of us.

Again, without statistical evidence, I have the impression that another factor has been at work in who was saved and who was lost, in who succeeded and who did not. That factor may have had to do with the schools we attended, with the skills and ethos we acquired, with what our parents expected of us and we expected of ourselves. The great Jewish tradition that values learning played its role here. Our parents’ level of education and social and economic class, their awareness of the ways of the world, of economics and politics plays into all of this. But of course, we mustn’t omit luck and chance.

On the other hand, for the generations of adults, migration often meant declassing and difficulties in adjustment. For their children it could mean regaining middle class status in a different system of class and prestige.

But to return to Laqueur’s work once more: Because the cohort he studies encompasses people from different countries, it is of limited use for the present discussion. The book’s emphasis is on Germany but there was a great difference between the situation of the Jews of Germany (and elsewhere) and those of Austria. And this is the case, to a large extent, because of the unique history of Austria, both before and after the 1st Word War. This is of course obvious to those of you who are historians, but never the less it bears repeating. Austria’s uniqueness had important implications for us. Its defeat in World War I broke up an ancient multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious Empire. Jews were dispersed through out its diverse regions. Jews had lived for a long time in the various parts of that empire.
After 1918, what was called Austria (or Deutsch-Österreich) was a small, unindustrialized country with, as its capital a modern industrialized metropolis of two million people. Professor Schwarz (1992), in his autobiography, refers to Vienna as a “Wasserkopf,” a hypertrophied, hydrocephalic head on a puny body. Now Jews were concentrated in Vienna. Those who had stayed in their home communities were now living in a number of different countries.

At the end of World War II Margaret Mead led a research project entitled Studies of Culture at a Distance. It involved Eastern Europe, among other areas of the world. In connection with this project she once remarked that in this part of the world, the house and tree stood still but the country in which they were located kept moving. Or, if you will, the ground kept moving under their feet. For example: My mother was born in a region of the Empire known as Galicia. After the war, it was in Poland. It is now in Western Ukraine. My father was also born in Galicia, but in the city of Krakow, which is still in Poland.

One of my uncles, the husband of one of my father’s sisters, who was also living in Vienna, was born in Bukovina, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the war it was Romania, now it too, is part of Ukraine. These places of birth and their identification after World War I, had implications not only for the personal experience of the people involved, but grave consequences for their attempts to emigrate to the United States. The granting of American visas was closely tied to a quota system based on country of birth. The Polish quota was oversubscribed, the Romanian more so, with the waiting time for a visa measured in years.

The implication for me and the likes of me was that children who were born in Vienna were able to obtain American visas often long before their parents could. Some of my class mates came to New York, to be with relatives they had never known who were able to take then in. Whether their parents might be able to come was not always certain. In one case, a father was picked up on the
street, by the police seeking to arrest their quota of Jews, and sent to Dachau. That was not yet a death
camp, but a bad place, just the same, as Bruno Bettelheim described in writing of his stay there. My
friend’s father got out and the parents were able to join their children in New York. The story of
another class mate was not that happy—her parents perished.

The quota was only one element in the visa application process. The would-be immigrant also
needed an affidavit of support from an individual or an agency, but not the promise of a job.
Universities and Hollywood studios could provide exceptions. One also needed a police certificate and
medical exam: no trachoma, no tuberculosis, no insanity, no polio. In 1940 the Alien Registration Act
was passed and once the US entered the war, people with German passports, such as my parents and
myself, became Enemy Aliens. This, in spite of the fact that we already had our First Papers, meaning
that we were on the path to citizenship. One of the provisions of the act was a prohibition against
owning a short wave radio.

The American quota system favored “desirable” over “undesirable” populations, that is, it
attempted to increase or maintain the percentage in the population of those of North and Western
European ancestry versus those from Southern and Eastern Europe. It also has to be remembered that
the great international Depression was not finished and unemployment was high. It was therefore
important not to bring in people who might become dependant on government aid or might compete
with American workers.

Getting a visa was one thing, getting the papers that made it possible to leave was another, but I
won’t go into that, except to say that no money could be taken out and people who had what were
judged to be substantial funds, had to pay a special tax for fleeing the Reich. That, however, was not
our case.
This, roughly, describes the process involved in seeking to leave Nazi occupied Austria in 1938 for the likes of us. It is clear from my few comments here that there could be and there was indeed, specific variation among individual cases: where were you born? Where were your parents born? Did you have relatives in another country? Did your parents know how to contact them and were they able to help? Were your parents willing to let you go if that was an option, before they could leave? What was the family’s financial situation? So much for leaving. What about the conditions of obtain entry into another country? Britain took no immigrants but it did accept household servants. New Zealand took no one.

Although we were considered to be “refugees” once we were here, in contrast to the present day situation, there was at that time no such official category. That came only later, based on agreements by various national and international agencies. Most of those who came from Nazi Germany or occupied Europe between 1933 and 1945 came with immigration visas. There was no official assumption—or visa category—that the U.S. might be temporary place of refuge, that people, might want to go back to where they had come from once the danger had passed. And, indeed, in the case of Austrian Jews, that number turned out to be quite small.

Where you went and how you left would make a substantial difference in your future life. That goes without saying. And so it follows that belonging to a cohort of young Jews in Vienna of 1938 does not offer much of a basis for generalizations. We need to know more, but we do not have the evidence.

As I already have suggested, my own admittedly limited research and personal experience convinces me that, in spite of all potential generalizations, each story of the many that make up the whole is unique and special, depending on a list of variables too numerous to count. Let me give a personal example, a point that I note is apparently too unexpected for
people to hear: Like many Jews in Vienna in the 1930s, my parents were acutely aware of the prevailing anti-semitism. My father had an interest in Zionism, but only an interest. When Hitler came to power, and the first anti-Jewish boycott occurred in Germany in the spring of 1933, my father had the foresight to see that the Nazis would come to power in Austria next. He went to Palestine. The British Mandate limited immigration but that could be managed. After some months in Tel-Aviv, my father found life there difficult, but concluded that everything would work out if my mother and I would join him. By November, we did just that. My mother, a physician, found work in a clinic and I went to school. Things, however, did not improve. By the spring of 1934, Hitler had not come to Austria and my father decided to go back. Again, my mother and I followed, arriving in Vienna in September. For me, that meant that I had not taken the required Gymnasium entrance exam at the end of 4th grade. The only such university-preparatory school that would take me was the Chajes-Gymnasium, the only such Jewish schooling Vienna, and also the only co-educational school. Three years and a half years later, in March of 1938, Hitler did come, as my father had predicted. We emigrated again. This time, first to Switzerland, where we awaited our American visas, and then, in October of 1939, to the United States. It is this “abnormal,” sequence, that is, one that does not follow an apparently expected order, that a couple of people have tried to “straighten out,” to normalize.

If I stress individual uniqueness, I mean by this both a unique history and a unique memory. Here I may quote Susan Sontag: in Regarding the Pain of Others she writes:

All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and
this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.

A moment ago I warned against generalizations. And yet, I now want to propose a generalization of my own, a very obvious one, I think. Here I draw on the writings of a psychoanalyst and child analyst, Erik H. Erikson, who studied in Vienna with Anna Freud. In his influential 1950 volume *Childhood and Society* he proposed a universal scheme of human development. In each of eight stages of life, the individual faces developmental tasks, each involving both dangers and opportunities. What these dangers and opportunities are will depend both on the individual’s previous development and the social and historical contexts in which they are experienced. Adolescence is the stage at which personal and social identity is formed. In a stable environment, under perhaps ideal conditions, the process of development may proceed fairly smoothly. For those of us, however, who experienced “exodus,” in whatever form, and all that was connected with it, adolescence was associated with a hiatus, a break, a disruption of an ordinary life, a negation of what was expected and perhaps planned for.

I suggest that the events of the Anschluß, including the weeks that led up to it, initiated a critical period, that did not end until a secure settlement was achieved elsewhere. Much happened in that preliminary period, the winter of 1938. On my 14\textsuperscript{th} birthday, that February, I had a small party. Afterwards, when I walked several of my friends to the street car station on Mariahilferstraße, a band of teenage boys was marching and chanting *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer* (One people, one country, one leader). They, and we, didn’t have to wait long. When they got their wish, they chanted *Wir danken unsern Führer* (we thank our leader).
For those of us who were able to leave, it generally took several years to achieve what I am calling “a secure settlement.” For young men in the US and a number of other countries, the intermediary period often meant military service. Some of my classmates, who had escaped to Palestine, served in the British Army, at various locations, including Egypt and the Persian Gulf. Among those who came to America, I remember two who served in the Pacific, others in Europe. The anthropologist Eric Wolf, a fellow Viennese, who was my college classmate in New York, served with American ski troops in Italy and Germany. For all of us it took a period of time, of variable length depending on the circumstances, before a clear path emerged. Perhaps even that did not happen for all.

The resulting identities, however that word is defined, were greatly affected by this crisis, by this break. For all there was the encounter with different languages, with different ways of life, with different foods, patterns of interpersonal relationships, in sum, different cultures. Typically children learned the language and manners of their new environment more quickly and easily than their parents. One little boy, the child of family friends, after attending school for a day or two in New York, came home with the announcement that he was no longer Hans but Bruce. His parents accepted this change with some surprise. More importantly, the consequence of the differences between parents and children not only in the extent of their exposure to American culture and its relatively easy acceptance by children and young people was one that was familiar to other immigrant groups: the children, more at ease and more knowledgeable than the parents in their new setting, began to act as linguistic and cultural translators for their parents. That is, parents who were losing class status and professional status, were also losing family authority, never to regain it.
At Queens College I took a class in American Minorities. In those days—the 1940s—the category included various immigrant groups, e.g., Italians, Poles and so on. The class was taught by the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker. We were to write a paper on one particular minority group, but, she said, surveying this class of New Yorkers, not your own—every one here belongs to a minority. I wrote about Italian immigrants, about whom I had known nothing. It was probably the most useful thing I did in college: I learned that what I had perceived to be problems of my own recent immigrant group, had been experienced by other immigrants before us. Our situation wasn’t entirely due to being refugees, German-speaking Jews, etc., but familiar to others before us. This course was, I am sure, influential in my wanting to be an anthropologist. When I talked to Professor Powdermaker about this, she encouraged me by pointing out that there were few jobs in anthropology, even fewer for women and Jews. She herself, in spite of these conditions had made the choice, and if I was aware of the obstacles, I could, too.

At this point some people like to play with counterfactuals: what if…A friend, after visiting Vienna in the 1980s, said she imagine me there, as if I had gone on to live there and become an anthropologist. That fantasy startled me. I had never wondered about what would have happened if…if no Hitler, if no war,…On the large scale, historians make such speculations, but how could it possibly have turned out otherwise? Perhaps it’s just that I lack imagination.

The “crisis” as I have called it, with its need to give up much that was familiar and to acquire much that was new to us, my be seen as crisis of acculturation, both in practical and in psychological terms. It also involved, if not for all, surely for many, a question of trust. By this I mean that the relationship between a resident or citizen and a country and its government is based a contractual one: the individual gives allegiance, the government gives protection.
This reflection was brought to mind, in writing this by long a forgotten song we learned in the early grades—it went something like this:

Ich hab’ mich ergeben,
mit Herz und mit Hand
Du Land voll Lieb und Leben,
mein schönes Vaterland.

I have given myself
With heart and hand
Thou land full of love and life,
My beautiful fatherland.

What, then, had happened to this reciprocal relationship of love? Rejection made love turned into anger. For some in the older generation, such as my father, the disappointment was intense, and his attachment to his new country the stronger.

But to return to the original question: what did happen to us and the likes of us?

In the summer of 1938 my parents and I were able to go to Switzerland to await our American visas, which, my parents had been led to believe would come in the space of three months. They thought I might spend my time better in school with other young people rather than to be waiting idly with them in Zürich. On the basis of information from a class-mate’s mother, I was enrolled in a boarding school in the French speaking area, not far from Lausanne. The Institut Dr. Ascher in Bex-les-Bains was a highly Orthodox Jewish school. Although my parents were entirely secular, they felt that after our recent experiences in Vienna
a Jewish environment would be a good choice. As it turned out, I spent a year there. I did learn French. Later, in New York, I attended a Julia Richman High School—a girls’ school, with 8000 students. At first, a bewildering experience. There were a number of refugee students, who were given special classes in English. Among them was a French girl who was the grand-niece of Alfred Dreyfuss and also my friend Hanne Weill, the niece of the composer. Those high school years, 1939-41, were still years of the depression in New York, and our guidance counselor discouraged us from going to college because jobs for college educated people were so few. Happily, the school psychologist disagreed. In college, as I just said, I discovered anthropology. It seemed a perfect fit for me—it gave me the concept of culture and the attitude of distanced observation, which has served me well.

New York, in the war years, was host to a remarkable array of people. We were encouraged to attend free lectures by Erich From, Karen Horney, Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others. Needing a few more credit hours to graduate I took a class with Lévi-Strauss, at the New School of Social Research. He was then working on his monumental book on Kinship. At The New School I also saw, among others, plays put on by Erwin Pascator. In an essay in his collection The View From Afar, Lévi-Strauss reminisced about his years in New York. The volume is dedicated to the linguist Roman Jacobson, who became both his friend and a strong influence on him.

Later, in graduate school, at Northwestern I encountered two lasting influences in the persons of A. I. Hallowell and Melville J. Herskovits. They differed widely in the things they studied and how they did it, but what I learned from both of them has stood me in good stead. The fact that I knew French decided Professor Herskovits to send me to Haiti, with the
consequence that I got interested in matters of trance and spirit possession. In Haiti, also, I met my husband.

As I noted earlier, the G. I. Bill led to a radical expansion of university enrollment—bringing OSU from 20,000 students in 1949 to eventually 55,000. And that meant jobs for the likes of us, among other aspiring academics. The war and the occupation of Japan meant that. For Winter Quarter of 1949, a replacement was required for John Bennett, the resident anthropologist at OSU, since he was leaving to joining the social science research team working there. I came for six months and after 60 years I am still here.

No, in an imagined/imaginary life in Vienna, I would never have been an anthropologist. That career choice and career are entirely the product of my American experience, building on what had happened before.