

Different lessons

In the London *Times*, 12th March, 1988 (50th anniversary of the Anschluss by which Nazi Germany incorporated Austria into the Reich), Gita Sereny wrote:

At 7.50 p.m. on Friday, 11th March 1938, Austria ceased to exist. At 9:30 p.m. Elfie, my best friend . . . phoned me. Could I meet her at the Johann Strauss staute in the park, she whispered? “Why are you whispering?”, I asked her – idiotically, as I would find out. “Come,” she said and hung up.

While I waited for Elfie in the deserted Stadtpark, I heard . . . that sound for the first time: that rhythmic shout of many voices, and then those words I had never heard before and couldn’t quite make out from that distance: “*Deutschland erwache! Juda verrecke!*” (“Germany awake! Jewry perish!”).

When Elfie arrived, we found ourselves standing stiffly in the dark, listening. Then she said, “My father –” and stopped.

“What’s the matter with your father?” I asked.

“He is a Nazi,” she said, her voice tight. “They told me tonight. He’s been an ‘illegal’ for years.” She cried. “He said I was never to speak to anybody at the school who was a Jew, and that anyway,” her voice sounded dead, “the whole place will be ‘disinfected’ from top to bottom. What shall I do?” she sobbed.

Two days later, Elfie and I walked around Vienna all day. On the Graben, one of Vienna’s loveliest streets, near my home, we came upon a scene of fear. Guarded by men in brown uniform with swastika armbands – with a large group of Viennese citizens watching, many of them laughing – a dozen middle-aged people, men and women, were on their knees, scrubbing the pavement with toothbrushes. In horror, I recognised one of the cleaners as Dr Berggrün, our paediatrician who had saved my life when I had diphtheria as a four-year-old. He saw me start towards one of the men in brown; he shook his head and mouthed “No,” while continuing to work his toothbrush. I asked the soldier what they were doing; were they mad?

“How dare you,” he shouted, “Are you a Jew?”

“No, and how dare *you?*” I said, and told him that one of the men they were humiliating was a great doctor, a saver of lives.

“Is this what you call our liberation?” Elfie called out to all of them. She was a stunningly beautiful child, but her voice was already trained for singing, as clear as a bell. Within two minutes, the crowd had dispersed, the guards had gone, the “street cleaners” had got up and gone away.

“Never do that again,” Dr Berggrün said to us, sternly. “It is very dangerous for you”. They gassed him in Sobibor in 1943.

Jews drew from the events of the Holocaust different lessons.

Some said

“This must never be allowed to happen to people again”.

Others said

“This must never be allowed to happen to Jews again”.