

Grete Kalmar (nee Goldberger) was born in Maehrisch Ostrau in Czechoslovakia on 30 March 30 1909 to Viennese parents who were visiting relatives at the time. She grew up with her brother Hans and sister Elsa in Vienna where she had a very happy life until the advent of Hitler in 1938. With her family Grete came to Australia in 1939 where they started up an electrical appliance and repairs business similar to their business in Austria. Grete says she was the only woman electrical engineer in Perth at the time. Unfortunately she left her fiance behind in Vienna, which he left to spend the war years in Haiti, the West Indies. It was eight years before they were to meet again in New York, USA. Grete and Paul lived very happily for the next thirty years in the USA. After the death of her husband, Grete returned to live with her family and friends in Perth, where she now resides.

I feel as though I have lived my life in two different worlds. I grew up in Vienna where I lived with my parents and brother and sister, although through an accident of birth I was born in Czechoslovakia while my parents were there on a visit.

My father had served in the Austrian army during World War I for two years on the Italian front. He was the only survivor of his battalion because he had been sent away to an army hospital with appendicitis. He didn't return to the front as he was needed as an engineer working on weapons and munitions machinery.

We lived in an apartment in the Prater, the second district of Vienna. Our flat was small, but it was always full of people. Although we were traditional Jews we were a family very assimilated to the Viennese way

of life, even to the two-hour luncheon, the main meal of the day. We only attended the synagogue for festivals, weddings, barmitzvahs and other special occasions.

I was six years of age when I started school in the first grade. After five years primary school I was at *burgerschule* for three years and then I went to commercial college for two years. I had two years of English studies and three years of French. Once or twice a week I attended religious classes which were compulsory.

I left school in 1925 and started working in my father's electrical repair business. I used to go collecting unpaid bills from customers. I was something of an actress. If they wouldn't pay me I would cry and wouldn't leave, so often they felt sorry for me and paid up. One of my girlfriends in Vienna who worked for the International Grain Trade Company of Vienna got married and begged me to take her job for six weeks, so she would get an extended honeymoon. I agreed and met my future husband, who was the secretary of the company there.

I had a happy life in Vienna. I was always at the theatre and the opera. I was crazy about movies and actors, and collecting the autographs of actors was a hobby of mine. When we left Vienna we left dresses behind rather than our collection of programs of movies and theatre. My sister Elsa still has a thousand of them.

On a sunny day in 1938 there was a knock on our front door and there stood a man, none of our family had seen before. He declared "I am your cousin from Perth, Western Australia." We found out that his mother and our grandmother, whom we never knew because my mother was two years old when she lost her real mother, were sisters. We had no idea that we had relatives in Australia. He must have been a godsend because a few months later when Hitler came to Vienna and everybody was looking for an escape we wrote to him and he sent five permits - for my parents, my brother Hans, my sister Else and myself. He was Max Adler of a well-known family in Perth and Melbourne. Max was one of thirteen brothers of whom he and his brothers Sam and Herman lived in Perth. The rest were all in Melbourne where even a street was named after them. Adlers Cafeteria in Hay Street was run by the three brothers. Between Perth and Melbourne the Adler brothers had saved forty-two people from Hitler's Europe. When the permits came we told no one. We were even scared of the next door neighbours, even of family and couldn't trust anyone.

There were only a few Jewish families in our apartment block. We were an honest, hardworking and very respected family. Mother was particularly well liked and it was because of her that we were not taken by the Nazis. Three times the Nazis came past our door, we could always hear the heavy boots. Each time people were taken, some the police released and some never came back. Our Czech butcher was in fact an 'illegal Nazi' and it was he, no longer illegal after the *Anschluss* who, because of his respect for mother, said our family must not be touched. He protected us. We learnt that not every Christian was anti-semitic.

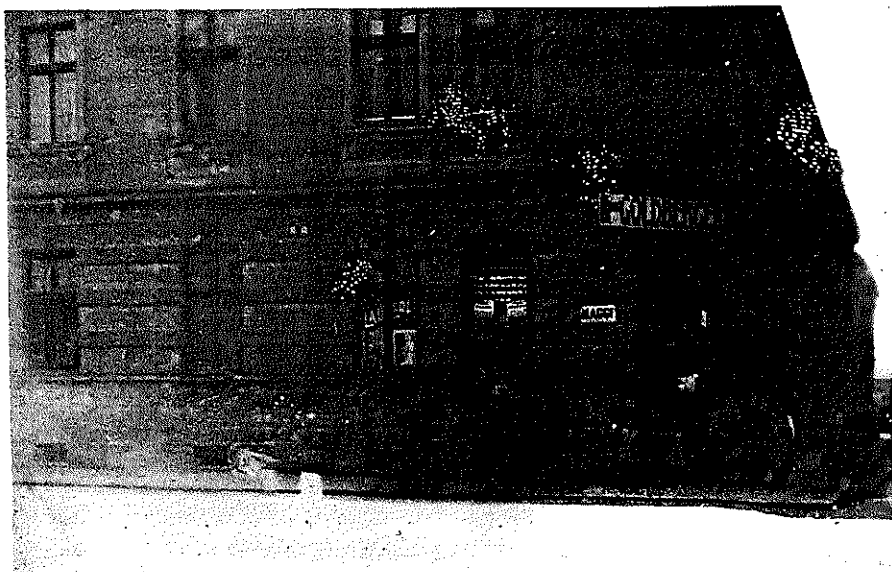
With the permits in my hands I contacted almost daily all the neutral shipping companies since we did not want to travel with a German or Italian ship. I wanted to feel free already on our way over. One day the Dutch consul called me - he had five berths on the luxury Dutch liner *Christian Huygens*. I immediately said "I'll take them" without having a shilling in my pocket. Now I had to start thinking how to get the money for the tickets. When Hitler came to Vienna he confiscated all bank accounts and put a seal on every electrical motor or appliance in my father's shop. If even one could not be accounted for we could all have been sent to Dachau.

My father and brother were both electrical and mechanical engineers and we were running a repair service and manufacturing business for the trades people only. Most of our customers were not Jewish, but continued to give us work for a living. I took heart and went to one of our best customers, a large distributor of our manufactured items like electrical heating pads and elements of any electrical appliances like irons, toasters, etc, and said "Don't you think we soon will have a war and would you not like to have some money abroad?" He agreed, took me to the back of his store, pulled out banknotes from his trouser pockets and handed them over to me without counting them. He relied on me to tell him how much he had given me, he knew I would not cheat him for a penny. We always had the reputation of being reliable. I did not dare go home with the money, but went straight to the Dutch consul and paid for the tickets, afraid that I could have been intercepted by some Nazi with the money on me. No need to say that we repaid double the borrowed money after the war.

Migration was not easy. Before we left Vienna I learned to make hats. My sister Elsa was already a milliner. I was the only one of the family who thought I knew English. When we arrived Elsa and I got a job

*I was born in Hálinská Ostrava
Cze.*

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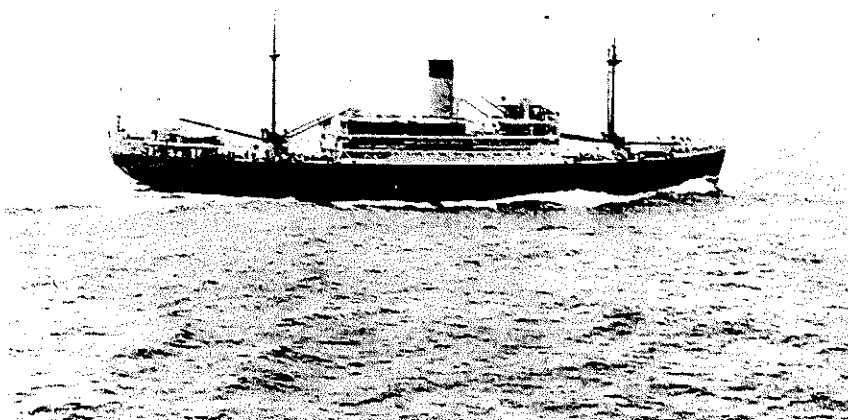
The house in Czechoslovakia where Greta was born.

with a wholesale manufacturer of hats. Mr Davidson thought that I would translate and my sister would show me what to do. It did not work out. When I could not stretch the raw hat I asked for a dish of hot water - I have always been inventive - dipped the hat in, stretched it and ruined it. The whole staff were standing around me to 'learn' how hats are made in Vienna. My sister started to cry. That was the end of the job. My sister who really knew her trade got a job with a top Perth milliner, Ethel Bowden. She later opened a successful boutique, Vienna Modes, which she had for thirty-five years. Twice a year she had her well-known fashion parades for various charities.

My father, brother and myself started our old trade, electrical engineering and manufacturing. We got a room from the Adlers above their cafeteria in Hay Street and I went to the wholesale people in the electrical business, like Atkins, Carlyles, Thompsons, Batemans, Boans, and others for work. We had sent ahead some raw materials and tools. With some new restrictions every day in Vienna we began sending cases with machinery and tools dismantled to make them look worthless, as well as forwarding our clothes ahead to Genoa. It came to twenty cases but being five passengers on the ship there was nothing to pay for accompanied goods.

When our ship left Genoa and on our way to Australia I had very mixed feelings. In one way I enjoyed the journey. It was fantastic on the ship and the Dutch people were marvellous. In another way I felt anxious, wondering most of the time what the future would hold. I had left my fiancée Paul in Vienna and was unsure when I would see him again. When the ship's captain told us war was to be declared, I telegraphed Paul to "Leave Vienna as you are, for Sweden" because I knew that not all Viennese listened to the BBC radio.

It took six weeks to reach Fremantle and the start of a new life. I cried a lot when I first came here because there were so many difficulties. Our first home in Perth was in Farleigh Flats, in Parliament Place; they are no longer standing. Mother was afraid to be left alone in the house, although she was really very brave in setting up a new home and battling daily with little or no English with the butcher, the baker, the milkman and greengrocer. For instance, in German a butcher is a *fleischer* and meat is *fleisch*. When he called she would say in translation "No butch today" and he would understand. I remember another



The ship that brought Greta to Australia, M.V. Gorgon.

instance of crossed accents and vowels. She might say to someone in a nice way "You are always smelling", but of course it was "You are always smiling". So there could be some difficult moments.

My father could speak little or no English, but he could read the paper and use the dictionary with difficulty. I remember one time during a blackout father pushed aside our curtain to look out. The next day the police came and I had to talk fast to explain how my father didn't understand the regulations. The police were very nice and accepted what I said.

We earned a living from the beginning and it didn't take us long to repay our £50 guarantee to Mr Adler. We were never hungry although I remember seeing beautiful looking apples in a shop soon after we arrived and not buying them because I couldn't spare the money.

I'll never forget my first customer, Mr O T Abrahams, who had a refrigeration shop in Hay Street. I went in there and he showed me two five-horsepower burned-out motors that needed rewinding. My brain started to think: How can I get these up to our workshop? Along came a milkman with a horsedrawn cart. I stopped him and asked whether he wanted to make two shillings. He looked at me suspiciously asking "What do I have to do for it?" I said, "Come with me to that store, pick up two motors and bring them to our place in Hay Street." He agreed to do so and we fixed them up to look like new. The news spread and General Motors, General Electrical, Atkins, Carlyles, Electrolux along with many others gave us work.

When the war came it was hard to get raw material. We even had to manufacture our own screws sometimes on a lathe we had since acquired. We had many a young Australian boy given a good future by apprenticing him to a good trade. We were declared 'Essential Workers' by the Australian government and were able to keep many tradespeople afloat despite the shortage of raw material. When the American ships came to save the West, we helped them with their war-damaged instruments to enable them to continue.

In the beginning the trade union representatives came and threatened us saying that we could not work without a licence and somebody would have to sit for an exam to obtain one. My father and brother could not make it for language reasons, so I offered to sit. Luckily it was in writing only. Of the fifteen questions required I answered fourteen

correctly. I had heard all the expressions since my childhood and was always a little daring. The fifteenth question was the word *resuscitation*. I had to admit never having heard that word before. When the meaning was explained to me, I brought them two certificates the next day, signed by the King of England - one was for 'First Aid' and one for 'Home Nursing', two courses that I had passed in case they needed me during the war. So they gave me a licence immediately and Gerald's Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Works was allowed to stay in business! The quality of our work spread fast and when the authorities realised that it was just a language barrier and my father Rudolf and brother Hans knew what they were doing they too were issued with a licence.

We eventually moved to a house in Beaufort Street on the corner of Third Avenue. We had made friends, some of whom we knew from Vienna. I remember the excitement when we met Carly Meister at the home of Doris Solomon, who held English classes for refugees in her home.

We used to have musical evenings and put on amateur theatricals. But my father was very unsociable, isolated by language. I especially recall one day we were having a theatrical afternoon. It was a very hot day and we had all the blinds down to make it cooler. Our invited friends were supposed to arrive at two o'clock. It was three o'clock and nobody had come. So I opened one blind and saw that my father had turned on all the sprinklers around the house and our guests were standing around the house but nobody could come in.

I still remember my first trip to Mandurah where I saw prawn and lobster fishing for the first time. People were very friendly and helpful. There was a Mr Moran, manager of Atkins Ltd, one of our customers, who had invited me for a weekend to Mandurah. His wife was a well known pianist, she accompanied the Australian singer Dame Nellie Melba on her concert tours. On another occasion we were invited to a Guy Fawkes Day at the home of our newly acquired friend Ken Murdoch. During the day he was an engineer, but he was also a musician who had his own band. There were so many fireworks in his garden, it scared the daylight out of us and I came home with stockings full of runs because of it.

Standing in our Workshop:
from left to right
Hans, Greta, Elsa, Papa Rudolf



In the workshop. Standing L-R brother Gerald, sisters Elsa and Greta.



In the workshop. Standing L-R brother Gerald, sisters Elsa and Greta.

As soon as I could I made an application for a permit for my fiance Paul to come to Australia. Although I had seen Senator Fraser who had been very kind and helpful I couldn't get it, and so eight years passed before we were re-united. I even approached the prime minister. Because we had one employee in our business I had joined the Employers Federation and in time the secretary of the federation, Mr Otto, became a friend. He told me that Prime Minister Curtin was coming to Perth and that I should get an appointment to see him. I did so. The interview was at the Commonwealth Bank Building in Forrest Place. The elevator I was in became stuck and I was locked in for over an hour. I couldn't stop crying. Eventually the lift was released and I was taken to see John Curtin. I was armed with a personal guarantee from Esor Masel and recommendations from other respected business people. The prime minister refused to grant a visa. The Commonwealth investigator, a Mr Adams, who checked us out, obviously didn't like Jews or wanted any more here. Curtin said "I've got nothing against you or your fiance, but you must remember he is an Austrian and an enemy alien. If I do something for you I will have to give help to others too."

Paul had left Sweden in a locked train travelling through Russia. From there he caught a boat to Haiti in the West Indies where he had a cousin who operated a Viennese coffee house. Paul stayed there for five years helping his cousin until after the war, although he never received a permit to work there for anyone other than the Jewish Welfare Organisation.

We were reconciled after the war. I was able to get an American permit through the friendliness of the United States consul here at the time. He was married to a Perth girl and I had been able to get an iron for her when such things were almost impossible to acquire. I got my American visa because of the fact that I had been born in Czechoslovakia. The Czech quota for the United States was largely unapplied for since by then Czechoslovakia was under the domination of Russia. He arranged my visa within two weeks.

I was reunited with Paul in New York, after his brother George who was already there and was art director for *Life* and *Time* magazine, got immigration permits for him and me. We had a very nice life in New York. The city offers so much. A friend of ours once a member of the Vienna Philharmonic had a job at the Metropolitan Opera as an advance programmer and his wife was one of my best friends. Through

him I got into every dress rehearsal at the Met. I was sitting in on rehearsals with Placido Domingo, Pavarotti, Slezak, Sutherland and other great opera singers.

I have no regrets about not living in Vienna. I could never live there now. I was content to live in America. In a sense it was better because it was not like being a foreigner in Australia in those early years. Here I was always aware of my accent and we were pressured all the time to speak only English. In the United States people talk however loudly and in any language they like. I never felt like a foreigner there. As a woman I couldn't be employed in the electrical trade and to earn extra money I used to paint shower curtains, compacts, lipsticks, and the like, it was piece work.

Later I became a designer and the sales manager for a costume jewellery firm, Robert Originals. I met many world famous designers including Pierre Cardin, Lagerfeld, Gucci, Christian Dior, Yves St Laurent and others through this work. We used to manufacture their designs.

My husband, who had worked for the International Grain Trade Company of Vienna, took up a similar position in a similar company in New York. They were importers and exporters. He had a doctorate in economics and was treasurer of his company.

I have many hobbies including china painting, pottery, oil painting and water colour painting. I collect and press Australian wildflowers placing them into pictures and greeting cards.

While my parents were still alive we came to Perth for a visit every three years, and in the intervening years my brother with his wife or my sister and her husband came to visit me in New York or we met in Europe. We kept a close family relationship.

In summer 1977 my brother, his wife and one daughter with her two little children met with Paul and myself in Scotland. Paul had a stroke in Oban, Scotland. I went back alone to New York but my family pleaded with me to come back to Perth. I am happy I did. I met up with many old friends and made many new ones. It is a friendly city with many warm-hearted people and that one needs in life, well at least I do.