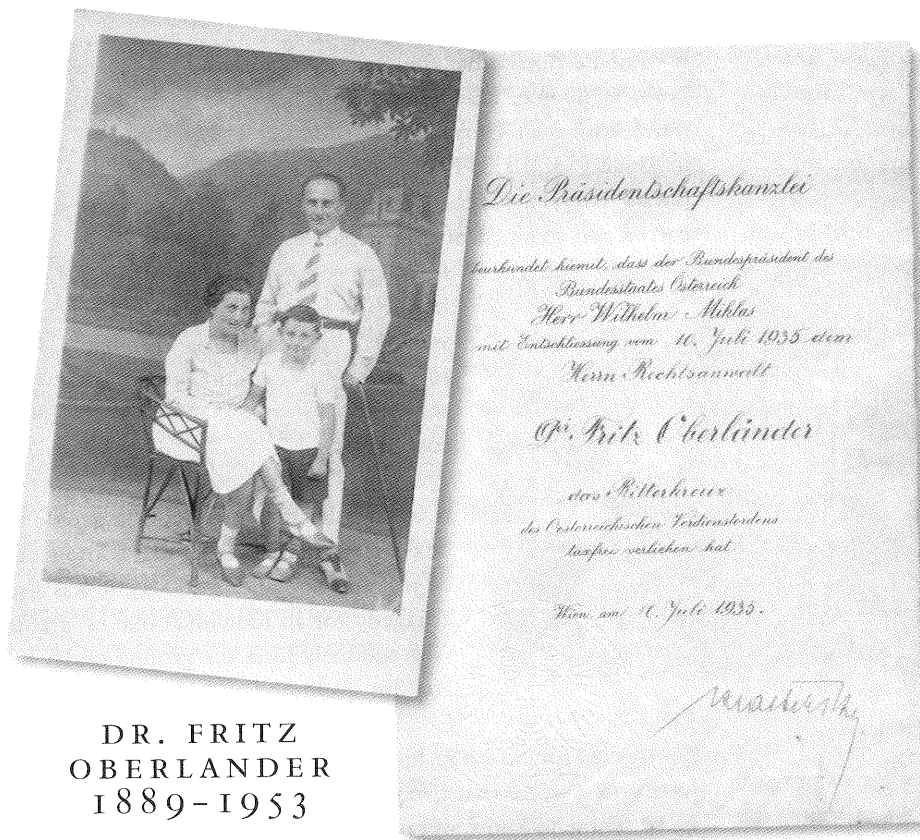


# LAWYERS WITHOUT RIGHTS — VANCOUVER STORIES

BY FRIEDA MILLER



DR. FRITZ  
OBERLANDER  
1889-1953

Peter Oberlander was a 15-year-old student, away on a school ski trip, when Hitler entered Austria on April 11, 1938. Peter and the other Jewish boys were immediately segregated from the group, locked up for two days and made to travel in a separate rail car back to Vienna. Two days later, Peter's father Dr. Fritz Oberlander, a prominent and respected criminal lawyer, was arrested and was not seen by the family for 4 months. The change to the family's circumstances was immediate and devastating. His arrest represented the end of the family's life in Austria after more than 3 centuries.

Severely wounded twice during WWI, Fritz Oberlander was decorated for his service in the Austrian Imperial army. In 1919, he opened a private practice and became recognized for his human rights work. With others, he initiated the idea of issuing identity papers to those who had become stateless after the war. This led to the creation of the historic Nansen Pass, which placed stateless people under the protection of the League of Nations. Oberlander was also the first to offer an articling position to a woman, Dr. Frieda Willig. He was prominent in the Jewish community and rose to Master of Vienna's Masonic Lodge, Plato.

On July 10, 1935 he was awarded Austria's highest civilian honour, *das Ritterkreuz*, the Knight's Cross of Austria for his *pro bono* work on behalf of army widows and orphans seeking pensions and legal redress.

Upon his arrest Oberlander was taken to Vienna's Gestapo headquarters where he was interrogated and severely beaten.

Scars and missing teeth were evidence of the brutality he experienced. Some of the interrogators that he faced were his former legal colleagues and friends. His Doctorate of Law and *das Ritterkreuz* were abrogated. His law office was ransacked and other Jewish staff members arrested. He was jailed and then taken to Mauthausen to build the camp.

Fritz's wife, Margaret Oberlander, became ill with stress and hospitalized. In desperation, she sought help from Fritz's colleagues. Remarkably, Peter Sippl, then Vienna's Deputy Minister of Justice and a close friend of Fritz's, intervened at great personal risk and succeeded in having him released. Sippl was subsequently removed from his position.

As a condition of his release, Fritz Oberlander forfeited all his assets to the Nazis and was given 48 hours to leave Austria. The family fled to London in September 1938. In December 1940, Fritz, Margaret and their younger son George left for New York, but

without Peter, who had been arrested as an enemy alien and detained at camps in England.

Peter was sent to Canada during the summer of 1940 and interned there for two years. Fritz Oberlander enlisted the help of an old friend and prominent Montreal lawyer, Ben Robinson, who secured Peter's release and subsequently with his wife Tony, welcomed Peter into their home.

Fritz Oberlander's prominence and liberal views made him an immediate and obvious Nazi target. Although the family survived, Oberlander suffered both physically and emotionally from the humiliation, brutality, the injustice of his experiences and the loss of his professional career.

Peter Oberlander is Professor Emeritus of Community and Regional Planning, at UBC and an Officer of the Order of Canada, as is his wife Cornelia. They live in Vancouver and have three children and four grandchildren.

With thanks to Peter Oberlander.

## IMAGES

Fritz Oberlander with his wife Margaret and son Peter age 7, Baden bei Wien, Austria, 1930.

Austria's highest civilian honour *das Ritterkreuz*, the Knight's Cross of Austria, was awarded to Fritz Oberlander in 1935 and revoked in 1938 after the Nazis entered Vienna.