



Provisional identification card
for civilian internee of Buchenwald.

Provisorische Identifikationskarte für Buchenwälder Zivilinterne.

Current number **2713** Internee number **30529**
Identifikations-Nr. *Interne-Nr.*

Family name **WEINBERG**

Christian name **Felix Jifl**

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W. Weinberg
Ordnungskomitee
Ordnungskomitee
Buchenwald, am **21. April 1945**

BOY 30529

A Memoir

'A sensitive, witty, intelligent – and ultimately,
extremely moving – memoir'
RICHARD ZIMLER, author of *The Warsaw Anagrams*

FELIX WEINBERG

BOY 30529

A Memoir

FELIX WEINBERG



In memory of my wonderful mother, my little brother and all the other unforgettable members of my family who perished under degrading and squalid conditions in Nazi camps.

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Foreword by Suzanne Bardgett

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Back in the mid 1990s, our small team of researchers at the Imperial War Museum were accumulating what they could for the Holocaust Exhibition then being planned for Millennium Year. It was a busy and rather anxious time. We were trying – with some difficulty – to amass a collection of artefacts for the showcases, and each time a researcher came back from a visit to a survivor with a relic of the concentration camps, it seemed that a further piece of our exhibition was in place.

I remember a particularly unusual item – a battered leather jacket – arriving in the project office. Its donor, Professor Felix Weinberg, described it as ‘on permanent, if unauthorised, loan from one of the defunct Buchenwald guards’.

The ‘liberated’ SS jacket duly went into the Holocaust exhibition, and in due course I met Felix Weinberg and his wife, Jill. I realised that our donor, who had grown up in Czechoslovakia, was an eminent professor of physics at Imperial College London and briefly wondered how he had managed to make that long journey – from child survivor of a series of concentration camps to esteemed professor of science. Professor Weinberg mentioned to me that he had worn the SS guard’s jacket for many years when riding his motorbike in London, and I remember thinking this showed an admirable defiant attitude to his past captivity.

Several years later – in 2011 – Felix Weinberg got in touch again. He had decided that he owed it to his family to write an account of his early life, and wondered whether I would like to read it. I did so and was struck by several things: firstly, Felix has extraordinary powers of recollection – being able to transport the reader into his teenage mind, where a spirit of scientific enquiry was already taking root. This ability to resurrect his boyhood enthusiasm for how things work, overlaid with the wisdom of his later years, and considerable self-awareness, makes it an especially engaging and original read.

Secondly, it is clear just how much Felix Weinberg’s eventual survival of Terezín, Auschwitz, Birkenau, Blechhammer, Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald camps owes to the ‘cocooning’ of his early years. A father who loved playing with his two boys and a mother with an instinctive ability to bring fun into her children’s lives – these were the wellspring from which Felix would draw during his two-and-a-half-year captivity. To dream of his past life – enriched by doting grandparents, journeys by paddle-steamer on the Elbe and trips by horse-drawn sleigh – only to wake up in the stench and misery of the concentration camp barracks was excruciating. But it was these memories – together with the chance inner reserves that came from having a father who was a fitness and nutrition fanatic – which enabled the young Felix to survive.

Hunger, ill treatment and finally the trauma of Allied bombing left Felix ‘half-alive’ at the end of the war. His closing chapters lay bare aspects of the liberation of the camps I had not heard about – the ‘Wild-West interregnum’ before the arrival of proper relief organisations saw child survivors blowing themselves up with weapons taken from the arsenal abandoned by the Nazis. The almost apocalyptic scenes Felix witnessed at this point, and their tragic aftermath, stayed with him forever.

To revisit the past in this way cannot have been easy. All those who care about the proper documenting of this horrendous era must be grateful to Felix Weinberg for giving us this insightful and ultimately uplifting account.

Suzanne Bardgett, Head of Research

Acknowledgements

This chronicle would never have seen the light of day but for the influence of a number of good friends. First and foremost it was Bea Green – herself a ‘Kindertransportee’, who arrived in the UK before the war and is something of an activist in keeping the memory of those events alive – who insisted that I owed it to my children and grandchildren to record this history, no matter how harrowing, because they ‘had the right to know’. Next, a number of friends and colleagues who asked to see what I had written urged me to share it with a wider readership because, to my utter astonishment, they thought it a ‘good read’. Amongst them I am indebted to Drs James Lawton, Darren Tymens, Ivan Vince, professors Charmian Brinson, Rafael and Deniz Kandiyoti and, in particular, three other camp survivors with rather different histories: Peter Frank, Otto Jakubovic, and his wife Angela, as well as Frank Bright. Some of my friends were also most helpful in drawing my attention to omissions and slip-ups, and I can only hope, considering how ancient some of us have become, that I have now succeeded in rectifying most of them.

I am deeply grateful to Suzanne Bardgett not only for writing such a moving foreword but also for providing the one and only opportunity for the ‘Czech boys’ of my narrative and their descendants and families to meet (some thirty-five in all) at the Imperial War Museum in September 2005. Suzanne arranged the screening of a film of the children climbing into bombers for the flight to England in the autumn of 1945, arranged afternoon tea, and gave us the opportunity to see her magnificent work keeping the memories of our World War II experiences in public view.

Regarding the battered leather jacket which she mentions and which now graces her display: if there were a prize for the world’s ugliest garment, I would back it as a leading contender. I do not think it was ever designed to be worn on the outside; my guess is it was originally intended to be worn under the Luftwaffe uniform by flight crews operating at high altitudes in order to keep them warm. The main body was stitched together from a large number of small squares of fleece, with the sickly off-white-wash leather facing outward. The sleeves were knitted and loosely attached at the shoulders. The design spoke of a nation poor in material resources but well endowed with slave labour. What made it such a valuable prize, first for a Buchenwald guard and then for me – to the point that I brought it on the Lancaster Bomber for the flight to England – was that it was uncommonly warm, and certainly the warmest undergarment I ever owned. Perhaps I ought to mention that the Buchenwald guard raised no objections to my taking it, as he was dead at the time, possibly due to an earlier visit by some of my fellow prisoners.

Before exposing the jacket to public view on my motorcycle, I made a questionable improvement to its dead sheep exterior appearance by dyeing the leather, using a deep-brown suede shoe dye. That is how it appears today. My children remember me washing the car in it – perhaps because of the embarrassment it caused them. I am sure that, at the time of presenting it to the IWM, nothing was further from my mind than writing up my wartime experiences. Still, it was the first time it came to me that some apparently totally useless things might be worth preserving for posterity rather than ending up in a ragbag, so perhaps a seed had been sown.

Felix Weinberg
16 September 2011

A difficult decision

The Fellows' Room at the Royal Society looks out on the Mall and the rows of beautiful trees lining the edge of St James's Park between Buckingham Palace and Admiralty Arch. I have again misjudged public transport and arrived far too early for a meeting, so I decide I might as well sit in a room with a view, plush chairs, coffee, and internet access. I keep meaning to work here more often. On this occasion I have, unusually, some spare time to think and I have a most difficult decision to make. Having tried for the last sixty-five years to forget and erase from my memory my teenage experiences in Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps, I am now being persuaded that I owe it to my family and others to write them up.

The subject was hardly ever mentioned within the family. That was due largely to Jill, my beloved wife, who devotedly looked after me and our three sons, until she died in January 2006, two years after our Golden Wedding Anniversary. She had probably herself been traumatised by my behaviour during nightmares in the early days and clearly resolved to protect the children from dwelling on the subject. The story that daddy had such a bad memory that he had to have his telephone number tattooed on his forearm had a short lifetime but it set a pattern. I would, in fact, not have minded talking about what happened but found it convenient to go along with this state of affairs, for a different reason: I did not want to define myself as being 'a camp survivor'.

I am left wondering if I can find the time, in view of all my other commitments, for what must be the most painful and harrowing undertaking for me. Yet it does seem right that my children should learn more about the wonderful grandmother and other close family members they never knew. I am eighty-two years old. If I do not start now, it will not be done.

It occurs to me that this building is haunted by some of the ghosts that prey on my mind and are looking over my shoulder as I try to decide. Until 1938 at least part of this great edifice was the German Embassy. I have an uneasy feeling that I may well be sitting in the very same place when seventy years earlier, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Britain, took part in hatching the plans that would destroy millions of lives, including those of my nearest and dearest.

On 16 October 1946, Ribbentrop was the first Nazi politician to be hanged following the Nuremberg trials. That was to be expected; it seemed right and just to me. What was absolutely not to be expected was that I had survived and was already in England at the time. That happened by way of a succession of near miracles, which I have set down in the following pages.

PART I

Childhood

The Golden Years

There is an early photograph in my possession of my parents' wedding – Victor Weinberg, twenty-nine, bachelor of Aussig, to Nelly Maria Altschul, twenty-four, spinster of Prague. The date is chalked on the synagogue door in ornate script. I was born on 2 April 1928, exactly nine months after that date as befitted our well-regulated family life. They named me Felix Georg, yet no one ever called me George. When I arrived in England, seventeen years later, I had rejected all things German and gave my middle name as Jiří, the Czech for George. There was no going back after I had published some papers and books under the initials F. J.

That is how it came about that I now have a middle name that my nearest and dearest are quite unable to pronounce.

I had a very happy childhood. It came to an end too soon and too abruptly, thanks to Adolf Hitler, but I believe it is the early years that count. They furnish the mind with a cocoon of security and contentment into which it can withdraw in times of hardship. That is why the children of dysfunctional families never stand a chance, in my view. My cocoon was well equipped with cosy memories and certainties of having been much loved and cherished.

My recollections of childhood are very much affected by having had to move frequently from one home to another. During the first years of my life, my father, an industrial chemist, had a factory of his own in a small place near Aussig (Ústí nad Labem in Czech) called Türmitz (Trmice). What little I know about it is influenced by impressions largely gleaned from looking at old photographs. Most prominently, there were two large Alsatian guard dogs. In fact, my first memory is of two large slobbering dogs' muzzles, overflowing with very large teeth, peering into my pram. Just a single flashback; I suppose that the expectation of imminently being about to be eaten would leave a lasting impression at a very early age.

I also remember my nanny in a sort of nurse's outfit pushing me in my pram. A quite likely alternative is that, knowing what my pram and she actually looked like from photographs, my mind manufactured the memory. My first coherent recollections, however, date from the time after we had moved into my 'proper home', a large house which overlooked the big cobbled market square in the centre of Aussig. The house was owned by my grandfather, I believe, who lived in a flat above our house with his divorced daughter, Else, my father's older sister. We were on the third floor. There was a lift and there were the rails left over from what must have been a little railway through the arch on the ground floor of the house, which led to the yard and the office of my grandfather who had a business in agricultural produce.

Every Saturday was market day and the whole square was covered in stalls with umbrellas. Even

Saturday also my grandfather went to the market and bought a pigeon for my dinner.

I remember the layout of our flat as a long corridor with rooms leading off it. The bedrooms were the back end, with a balcony overlooking the yard where my grandfather had his office. Beyond the yard was a beer garden under spreading chestnut trees. During summer nights, when we slept with windows open, the loud output of an oompah band from the inn was my nightly lullaby. At the other end of the corridor were two adjacent elegant rooms overlooking the square. A grand piano stood in one, and I was allowed to practise on it, usually with my mother. The other was full of painting, fragile china and other *objets d'art* and was out of bounds, except when used for entertaining guests on festive occasions.

At right angles to the long corridor were other rooms accessed from a central lounge. On one side was a room where my mother did her etching. That also contained a large wind-up gramophone, just like the HMV trademark, minus the dog. On the opposite side there was the kitchen and pantry – the domain of Marie, our cook. Marie had two handicaps: a huge goitre and the fact she was an unmarried mother. Of these, the latter was the greater affliction. That part of Bohemia must have been an iodine deficient area, as goitres were not that uncommon. Iodised salt came in much later. Having a child out of wedlock, on the other hand, was a terrible stigma in those days, and Marie was eternally grateful to my father for employing her full-time and allowing her time off to be with little Rolli (a diminutive for Roland) on Sundays and, occasionally, to bring him to our home. I suspect that she would not have been able to keep him otherwise.

The view from the kitchen window was to the centre of the flats, not accessible from our floor. There was a glass-covered top of an old lift shaft, which terrified me because of the story of a man falling to his death through the glass. The most exciting event that happened in that kitchen occurred when my mother started a fire, which actually required the attention of the fire brigade. She was melting wax for her etching. It overheated and caught fire. My mother, who evidently had very little scientific background, then tried to put it out by pouring water over the burning pan, which converted it into a flame-thrower and caused the conflagration to spread to the rest of the kitchen. The arrival of the firemen in their theatrical helmets clearly made a lasting impression on me.

Several memories centre on my bedroom: the earliest is of biting my mother's nose hard enough to make it bleed. That beautiful, loveable nose was right in front of my face as she was dressing me, so I took a bite, out of pure affection. I am afraid I got a slap, though it was chiefly self-defence and shock on her part. I could not have explained that it was pure love on mine.

A more serious incident involved my bedside lamp, which had a metal lampshade with a very sharp edge. We had just come back from holiday and I was very tired. There was a heavy thunderstorm that night and I had a nightmare. I dreamed about something that led up to an explosion involving a bright flash of light and a loud bang. I leapt up, still hearing the roll of thunder, and cut my eyelid on the sharp lampshade; I carry the scar to this day. I remember my parents rushing in, and how horrified my mother was to see me with blood streaming from my eye down my cheek, thinking that I had lost an eye. It proved to me that dreams happen instantaneously, since it took only the moment of the lightning flash and thunder for my brain to make up the whole story of my nightmare.



My mother and her loveable nose

During the holidays we used to visit my mother's parents in Prague. These were major expeditions as I recollect, with all the staff involved in packing trunks at least a week in advance. We stayed for a week or a fortnight during Christmas holidays, except for my father who had to return to work. A taxi took us to the station, which was, in fact, only a short walk away. Distances in general seem to have shrunk since those days; I was totally amazed when I revisited, after the war, to discover that Prague could scarcely be more than seventy miles from Aussig and we did the journey by bus in about two hours. Perhaps one needs to scale dimensions according to one's height.

Prague itself was my first big city and is, in my opinion, still the most beautiful in central Europe. My grandparents' flat was in a large house (an embassy, last time I looked) facing a park, just round the corner from the main square (Wenceslas). I had never before seen neon advertisements that moved. I remember a multicoloured one of a grenadier firing a cannon, the shell from which exploded after a trajectory so long it extended the length of the square, the blast revealing a tin of a well-known brand of polish. There was a famous fish restaurant (Ryba – it was still there after the war) with a big show window that was a giant aquarium.

These visits to my grandparents were pure magic. Their flat was palatial and ornate, full of paintings, valuable art objects and Victorian knick-knacks. My grandmother was very beautiful and bedecked with jewellery. My grandfather had enough leisure and money to indulge in a great variety of hobbies. He built radios at a time when that was quite unusual. He had a movie camera and projector and gave performances of early movies and cartoons such as *Felix the Cat*. In winter we had snowball fights in the park just outside the front door. The flat boasted what must have been one of the earliest refrigerators, operated by a small gas flame. In the toilet there was an electric fire, which came on automatically when the light was turned on. It was an enchanted castle to me.



On the balcony of my grandparents' flat with my brother, pretending to read a borrowed newspaper through borrowed glasses.

When I was three and a bit, I ceased to be the centre of attention in the household because my little brother was born. My father with his Germanic background must have been responsible for my brother being named Hans Gerhard, straight out of the *Nibelungen*. The strict translation of Hans is Hans (which is how his name now appears in archival documents) but he was called Jan in Czech and was called him Jeníček, which is the diminutive. He was a dear little baby and there were other compensations for my being dethroned. The family policy was to have a Christmas tree with presents underneath every December for the first four years of a child's life before changing over to Chanukah (that was about the limit of our religious observance). My brother brought me a three-year extension of Christmases.



With my grandparents in the garden of their summer retreat in a suburb of Prague

I believe that he had a new nurse and about the same time I acquired a *Fräulein* – or rather a *Slečna* – a very charming young Czech lady with a brand new teacher's diploma. (*Slečna* = 'miss', but somehow neither 'nanny', 'governess' nor 'au pair' quite fits the bill.) I am not sure she even spoke German. I suspect that the idea was to make me speak Czech most of the time, in preparation for school. We were bilingual (my parents also spoke French and English; my knowledge of English was

confined to one phrase: 'Not in front of the children!', generally said rather loudly and associated with parental arguments). In 1932, when the citizens of the Sudeten had to choose, my parents opted for Czech nationality though my father's Czech was never perfect.

I ought perhaps to stress that under Masaryk, the first President and founder of Czechoslovakia – an enlightened statesman, sociologist and philosopher – the country was a true democracy. He died when I was seven and was replaced by Beneš, a lesser but equally decent man. I regard it as a great tragedy that this benevolent regime existed for just twenty years. Yet I was fortunate in that my childhood coincided with the second half of that enlightened period, which was written out of history by the Cold War Communist regime.

Aussig was quite a large town, perhaps the third largest in Bohemia, with 44,000 inhabitants those days. Although it was industrialised, it was surrounded by the most beautiful countryside. The River Elbe, bordered by vineyards (*weinbergs!*) and ruins of castles on crags, dominate the memories of my idyllic childhood. It's where I learned to swim and where we spent summer weekends cruising in paddle steamers to a succession of small resorts. Each of them had an inn by a landing stage and each café specialised in some particular kind of dessert. Our family, friends and relatives would settle down to coffee and the local speciality cakes, while my father went for a long walk and, when I got a little older, he dragged me along.

Talking of being dragged along reminds me of a painful episode when I got caught on a fishing line by one of the many anglers along the river. I saw the fishing line snaking through the grass, so I picked it up in blissful ignorance of the walking angler dragging it behind him at one end and the hook at the other. The inevitable consequence was that the angler found that he had hooked, by his finger, a loudly yelling little boy who was running behind him as fast as his short fat legs would carry him. I remember the episode mainly because my mother found the scene so irresistibly funny that, instead of rushing to my rescue, she was convulsed with laughter, whereupon I called her a 'silly cow' – which was not met with the sympathetic understanding the circumstances merited, in my view.



Big brother, little brother on holiday

In winter we went skiing. I had my first short skis at the age of four. The nearest makeshift slopes were only as far as the terminus of the tram that passed our house, at a place called Telnitz. A

weekends we were allowed to put our skis on the tram and I believe that it was only about half an hour's ride from our home. Sometimes we went for cross-country expeditions further afield, staying overnight in ski chalets in the mountains. I loved the forests covered in deep snow. The only problem was that my father was an excellent and totally fearless skier, neither of which attributes could truthfully be applied to the rest of the family. His expectation that we would keep up with him used to cause me some anxiety.

At Eastertime we went to a ski hut/hotel at the Keilberg. That involved a train journey followed by a long ride in a horse-drawn sleigh. The luggage went into the back and I was allowed to sit next to the driver with a blanket across my knees. The horse was also covered by a blanket and suffered from flatulence. I was greatly intrigued by its passing wind, not least because it could be perceived by three senses; apart from the two obvious ones, the farts were also visible as little clouds of steam.



With *Slečna* at the Keilberg ski resort

Whenever going on holiday involved an early morning start, my mother used to wake us children with a special song she composed for the purpose, just to enhance our sense of excitement. It worked so well that, although my excitement caused me to wake much earlier, I pretended to be asleep in anticipation of her creeping through the door.

My mother was very talented. As a young girl, she had been sent to finishing schools in England and Switzerland, spoke five languages, and spent her spare time playing the piano (and teaching me to play – both the piano and the harmonica) and producing beautiful etchings on glass and metal objects. I believe that she rebelled against her privileged and affluent upbringing by developing strong socialist leanings. That affected me mainly in the books she gave me to read. She was active in WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organisation), which had the left-wing policies of the early kibbutzim at its heart. The greatest benefit to me when I was little was the pure joy of participating in her tea parties for lots of Jewish ladies and, in particular, the shopping expeditions beforehand. The shopkeepers always offered samples to taste and my expert opinion on various salamis, cheeses etcetera was clearly in great demand. (I am still addicted to salamis, anchovy pâté and other constituents of my mother's nibbles.) The only downside was having to play with the children of my mother's acquaintances. To the best of my recollection, none of them had sons; all I can remember

having to be polite to lots of really obnoxious little girls who wanted to play their games, their way, much preferred being included in my mother's excursions with her friends to exclusive gourmet coffee houses. I didn't share in coffee and gossip but I did in tasting the cakes; marzipan 'potatoes' in particular left a lasting impression

Clearly, my mother did not live by my father's dictum (one of many) that one should stop eating when food tastes the best. If my father taught me iron self-discipline, I learned from my mother that applying that to cutting out treats would be overdoing things – a point of view that I was, and am still, all too ready to adopt. She did diet, intermittently. What mattered to the family was that she was wonderfully imaginative and loved us deeply – a love she often expressed by writing us poems and children's books which she illustrated with beautiful watercolours.

My father's provincial upbringing and background did not match my mother's Prague-patrician milieu. He, on the other hand, was the first graduate in the family and established our family's academic leaning. Indeed he was forever arranging additional classes for me. One outlandish behaviour of his bonnet concerned my having to learn to write German Gothic script. So I had a teacher who came in the evenings to teach me. I still cannot get my head around that. It might have turned out to be useful had the Third Reich indeed lasted a thousand years – as Hitler so spectacularly overestimated – but hardly to a nice Jewish boy!

To understand my father better, it is necessary to know something about his early years. His mother died when he was a child. He had an older brother who, in due course, inherited his father's business and ruined it, and an older sister, Else, of whom more later. So, when he turned seventeen, his father bought him a horse (called Betty) and he volunteered to join the Austro-Hungarian mounted artillery in Czechoslovakia, of course, did not exist before the Great War, but was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father liked to talk about his military exploits and kept his service revolver, a medal and a piece of shrapnel extracted from his buttock hidden in a green shoebox in the top drawer of his wardrobe. That piece of shrapnel prevented him from completing his chemistry degree since, at the crucial time, he could not stand for his practical exams. He made a complete recovery, however, and appeared to be quite proud of the additional aperture in his bottom. The lack of a degree did not seem to affect his career as a chemist or his activism as a health fanatic.

I probably shouldn't cavil at being force-fed all those vitamins and minerals which may have helped me to survive the next war, but I am still under the influence of some of his dicta to this day. I suspect the fact I have stumpy teeth may not be unrelated to being instructed to chew each mouthful thirty-two times. Dabbling in food chemistry convinced my father that something distasteful could be made more palatable by adding some attractive flavour, no matter how incompatible. The memory of his emulsions of cod liver oil with raspberry juice still makes me shudder. He was also very keen on me doing physical exercises. We had rings, interchangeable with a horizontal bar, hanging from the nursery door lintel. For a period I acquired a personal trainer to do press-ups and other calisthenics with me. He was a giant of a man, very affable, and we soon worked out that what we, both of us, liked to do best was for him to gallop around the flat, carrying me on his shoulders. When my father discovered this, it was the (unlamented) end of my career as a gymnast.

If I did not get closer to my father in my childhood, it was mainly because he was never there during the week. His work involved him travelling far and wide with samples of chemicals. When he returned late on Friday nights and my mother got tired of waiting for him in bed, she generally found him asleep in the bath with the newspaper floating on the, by then stone-cold, water. Yet he influenced my life in many ways for which I shall always be thankful. Aside from all the minerals, vitamins and yes, even the kohlrabi and grated raw carrots with lemon juice, which probably helped me survive the

camps, there were the outings. Every weekend and often during holidays we travelled to beautiful nature spots. He taught me to love nature. I had stacks of books on birds, plants, trees and even creepy-crawly under the sun, together with equipment for collecting and studying them. My father was, and remained to the end of his life, a decent, upright, principled man.

And so to primary school, at the age of six. The bad news was that I had lost my lovely *Sleena*. The good news was that, to my utter amazement, she turned up as my class teacher. I had to stand when she entered the classroom – that was a weird turn of events. There was a, to me, painful gulf between us now, but she was an excellent teacher. In domestic science she taught us – boys as well as girls – how to sew on buttons and darn socks among other useful skills. In that way she also contributed to my survival in Buchenwald ten years later. The fact that I excelled in most subjects complicated the issue of not being regarded as teacher's pet (though I doubt that any of the other pupils were aware of our previous association). Fortunately I managed to be bottom of the class in singing (accused of 'growling') and, more particularly, in handwriting. We used penholders with steel nibs, which we dipped into inkwells that were periodically refilled by the school janitor. Those naughty boys were forever experimenting with the revolting smells that could be produced by stuffing food residues into inkwells and leaving them to decay there. The consequent lumps in the ink were the cause of my downfall – that's my excuse, anyway, for covering my work in more spectacular inkblots than anyone else ever managed to achieve.

I could attend my primary school for three years only and I have the happiest memories of it. I cried in my first days there when I was told that it was closed at weekends. It was a short walk just round the corner from our house. In winter I would walk through streets covered in thick snow and I remember with nostalgia the warm classroom with its hissing gas lamps providing cosy yellow illumination.

Now there is a big car park where my school used to be. The school was next door to a beautiful monastery, which, under the Communist regime, was used as a furniture store. I believe that the Communists did more to destroy the beauty of my hometown than the Germans ever did. They had more time, after all. They did away with our lovely cobbled square and built ugly buildings all over it.

Dark Clouds

We had, in the Sudeten, our own home-grown mini-Hitler in the form of Konrad Henlein, leader of the SDP (Sudetendeutsche Partei). Our rooms overlooking the central square had a grandstand view of his podium and the brown-shirt rallies from my earliest days. Although they did not have swastikas, they had flags and red armbands bearing a white disk as background to some black insignia not unlike a swastika, and they marched up and down the streets shouting aggressive slogans, which made us feel very threatened. I do not know whether that was a factor in our moving house again; in retrospect it does not seem like a propitious time for my parents to have bought a new villa. Although Henlein exuded menace, I believe even then I sensed something gruesomely ludicrous in their goose-stepping in jackboots, not to mention his appeal to Hitler that he needed protection from the Czechs for his band of thugs.

What I found quite hilarious, many years later, relates to Henlein's problems with his origins, his view of his outspoken policy against mixed marriages – which in this instance concerned the Slav Untermensch, never mind Jews. To his discomfiture, his mother's father was Czech. He solved the problem by changing his still-living mother's name from Dvořáček to Dworatschek, which may look more German but is as near as one can get to the Czech in pronunciation. Grotesquely, that was sufficient to support his career, in due course, as a high Nazi official.

But I am running far ahead of my narrative. We probably had to move anyway because my first school offered only two years of primary education and I suppose I needed to be within walking distance of a larger school. My parents bought a beautiful new villa in Kleische (Klíše), which was in the suburbs of Aussig, a long way from my childhood home by the picturesque main square in the centre. It was called Villa Rose, in Luizina Street. So the move to the new villa was the third complete transformation of my life by the age of ten.

My parents must have been involved in designing features of the house, if not the house itself. There was a veranda topped by a terrace on which my father had showers installed. I think his idea was that we would do our exercises in the fresh air and then have a healthy, presumably cold, shower. In the middle of the garden was a weeping willow, which enfolded a summerhouse, in the middle of which was a round table surrounded by a circular bench. The tree trunk grew through a hole in the centre of the table. It took me a little while to work out that the table must have been built around the tree, as it would have been difficult to direct the tree to grow through the hole. The effect was very pleasing because the branches hung all the way to the ground so that, when the weeping willow was in leaf, one could not actually see the summerhouse and had to part the branches to reveal it and to find its entrance.

I saw the exterior of the villa again half a century later, after the war and the demise of the Iron Curtain, on a brief visit with my wife and it had hardly changed. Someone had added a garage and the latest owner did not open the door when we rang the bell. I would have loved just to look inside, but perhaps they were out, or perhaps they were suspicious of strange characters standing outside, comparing their house with an ancient photograph.

In spite of the beautiful house, its surroundings, and the proximity of my favourite swimming pool, our move to Klíše was the beginning of a very unhappy time. First, my maternal grandparents died. My grandfather had had a stroke a year or so earlier, which completely paralysed him. He was in a wheelchair and could communicate only by blinking. I was told that all he ever asked for was that, only someone would wheel him to the lift door, he thought he would find the strength to throw himself down the lift shaft.

Next, my grandmother had to go into hospital. I think she must have had a hysterectomy or something similar, not to be detailed in front of the children. The day she was due to return home while my mother was looking forward to travelling to Prague to collect her, she had a pulmonary embolism which proved fatal.

So I lost my beloved grandparents and my sole reason to visit Prague. At the same time, my little brother developed a nervous complaint of some kind. He spoke of pains all over his body. He had a phobia about electrical equipment giving him shocks. I think he must have had a real electric shock at some stage and that precipitated some anxiety condition in his mind. That may not have been unconnected to the threat of war, which started a lot earlier in the Sudeten, because we were in the front line of the Hitler menace. I still have a bad conscience, because, at the age of nine and ten, all the preparation for war excited me and I told my brother things that may well have aggravated his fears. His panic attacks were intermittent and unpredictable and his screaming in terror horrified me. I have always been overwhelmed by pity for people who act irrationally; I have often had to be stopped from approaching drunks in the street.

On top of all that, I hated and feared my new school. Our class teacher was a young man who had just come out of the army and was some kind of sadist. Every school day started with the ceremony of his beating the children who had not handed in their homework or were guilty of some other made-up misdemeanour. He called out a list of names, had them bend over a desk and beat them in front of the class with something like a slipper. It actually never happened to me – I continued to do very well – but I was terrified that it might. Previously I had always loved going to school; this was the first time I understood why most children do not.

The other aspect I did not like about that school was that there were children from really poor homes, who were actually hungry. I had not known about not having enough to eat. I suppose that the school must have been established in what used to be an underprivileged area, until recently built up with luxury villas brought in an influx of professional Czech parents. My mother always used to provide me with elevenses, as did others of our background, and poor children used to beg for a bit of bread or a piece of my apple, which I found quite harrowing. I do not think I ever learned anything there, nor made any friends.

I developed an interesting defence mechanism when things got on top of me at school: abdominal pains, which required me to be excused to go home at once. That may not have been unconnected to the stress, not to mention a diet rich in the detested kohlrabi. I could hardly have been described as a sickly child, but my winter colds generally led to bronchitis. The reason, I now believe, is that I had a radical tonsillectomy at the age of four.

I should have mentioned that operation earlier, when I listed my earliest memories, because

clearly recall the feeling of suffocation associated with ether anaesthesia, when what looked like a large shower head was clamped over my face. In those days my parents favoured surgical removal of any body parts that might cause problems in later life; I was lucky to escape with my appendix and teeth intact. The hospital was in Prague and my mother shared the ward with me. The German word for tonsils is synonymous with 'almonds'. I do not know what my mother imagined they would look like but she asked to keep them as souvenirs. When they were brought to her, pickled in formalin, my mother passed out, so I have never seen my tonsils. But I digress.

I loved being a bit ill because I had such a lovely time in bed. Out came all my stacks of children's comics and favourite books. Sometimes prolonging this happy state needed a little help. In those days the two standard methods of 'ridding the body of toxins' were enemas for anything below the belt and sweating it out for ailments higher up. The latter was achieved with the aid of an aspirin plus hot tea and lots of blankets. As the standard diagnostic was temperature taken under the armpit with a clinical thermometer for ten, generally unsupervised, minutes, the availability of hot tea provided an easy method of preventing my temperature from reverting to its healthy 36.6°C too early. The tea was far hotter, of course, so the skill lay in shaking the mercury down, after a quick immersion, to what would constitute a credible rate of recovery from my illness. Unfortunately, I blew it irreversibly when, on one occasion, the tea was so hot, or the immersion time so long, that I was unable to see the top of the mercury. My mother, after some initial trauma, refused to believe I was at death's door and thereafter supervised the thermometry.

The next major upheaval in my life, in the fateful summer of 1938, coincided with what was to be the most exciting holiday ever, not least because it was to be abroad and I was to see the sea for the first time. Our previous holidays were always spent in the mountains and the countryside. The way it went was that my father would go ahead and book some picturesque farmhouse somewhere in the mountains and we would move in for the summer. My father would go back to work and visit on an occasional basis, perhaps at weekends, or for a week's break. He always arranged everything in advance so my mother never had to lift a finger. That, incidentally, may well have been a factor in the ultimate tragedy that destroyed our family.

Belgium was the destination of our first foreign holiday as a family. My parents had tried to go abroad without us just once before (it may have been to Dubrovnik). We were sent to a bracing children's holiday camp, and I think I was supposed to keep an eye on my brother; something I was never very good at, I am afraid.



Little brother getting a lift from father during a stiff climb in the Šumava mountains.

It turned into a disaster. All the children took lunch at long trestle tables out in the open. This was some distance from our dormitories, out on a steep meadow, set in beautiful mountain scenery. My brother always had been a slow eater and was being shouted at by the other children, who were keen to get going on whatever outing was planned for that afternoon. He executed a spectacular somersault when running downhill towards us and fell heavily. When he did not stop crying all that afternoon and all night, our caretakers eventually decided that perhaps he wasn't just making a fuss. Poor little Jeroněk was loaded onto a small wooden cart and bumped over rutted country roads, screaming with pain all the way, to the nearest hospital, where a broken collarbone was diagnosed and set in plaster.

Our parents returned on overnight trains. My father, who had suffered a broken collarbone during the war, immediately decided that the plaster was wrongly positioned. After our return to Aussig, following an X-ray, the bone had to be re-broken and reset. The only positive outcome of this sad episode was that our parents never again went on holiday without us.

So this time we were all to go abroad and I was going to see the sea. In the days before long distance air travel, Czech children generally never saw, and could barely imagine, an expanse of water so big that one could not see the other side. My mother, who was brilliant at working up a state of happy excitement in us children, kept preparing me for the enormous impression of first clapping eyes on such an incredible sight. It was also to be our longest journey ever by train, and we would even sleep on board. It did, of course, involve crossing Germany. I can only suppose it was planned so long in advance that the political situation at the time of departure could not have been foreseen. I would like to think that the possible opportunity of not coming back had crossed my parents' mind but subsequent actions showed no sign of such foresight.

By that time Germany was already in upheaval and, although I was not really aware of the political problems, or of any danger posed by Nazi anti-Semitism, it was obvious the trains were full of German soldiers, this being the summer prior to Hitler's invasion of the Sudeten. It was clear also that my parents were anxious to maintain a low profile. Overnight, they gave up their seats and stood in the corridor to allow us children to sleep stretched out on the train benches. The circumstance that we appeared considerably more Aryan than Hitler or any of his gang was an obvious asset. My little brother

in particular, with his straw-blond hair and blue eyes looked the epitome of a Hitler Youth and tended to benefit from much unsolicited head-patting.

What has always puzzled me about the Nazi idealisation of Nordic looks and race is the appearance of their own pantheon of leaders. It is not just Hitler's swarthy Chaplinesque appearance and gesture; it is the whole Nazi leader Valhalla – the five-foot-four club-footed Goebbels, the jelly-bellied Reichsmarschall Goering. However did they get away with portraying themselves as exemplars of Aryan perfection without being laughed off the stage? Hitler survived assassination attempts, but being laughed at would have done for him politically and would have saved Europe from catastrophe. It has been said that Germans have no sense of humour but I have seen them roaring with laughter, people falling over. Why was this not in the same category? (I learned much later that the pebble-glassed Heinrich Himmler, the extermination camps' supremo, was in charge of racial purity issues as a result of his earlier obsession with breeding white chickens during his unsuccessful attempt to make a living as a poultry farmer. The most inventive of satirists could not have come up with that one. It would be hilarious were it not for the millions of lives lost.)

The place my father booked in Belgium was part farm, part pension, behind sand dunes in a small resort called Wenduine, somewhere between Oostende and Blankenberge. I believe the reason for his choice was chiefly its renowned cuisine. The ladies there came from a family who used to cook for the Empress Maria Theresa and we were the only guests at the time. I will try not to dwell on food again, but that was the first time in my life I tasted West European white bread; I had never even seen shrimps or prawns before. My stomach has always had a long memory and the delicacies encountered in Belgium, such as tomatoes stuffed with crevettes and homemade mayonnaise and crevette vol-au-vents, became something I tried particularly hard to avoid remembering during the subsequent hungry war years.

The house we stayed at was on the seaward edge of marshy farmland and cattle pasture. Then there was the coastal road, extensive dunes and the beach. Between the dunes and the beach ran a little yellow tram, all the way between Oostende and Blankenberge, stopping at all the small villages in between. It might be difficult to convey to a London commuter how much pleasure may be derived from public transport. The tramline wound around the dunes, providing occasional vistas of the sea and our fellow passengers often included live chickens on the way to market.

My first sight of the sea actually happened at Blankenberge, quite a sizeable seaside resort and port. Each of the streets ending in a T-junction at the beach promenade had a big hump in it much higher than I was tall. My mother made us close our eyes just before the hump and open them on its apex; then we took in the view all at once. And there was the sea: vast, endless, stretching to the horizon, merging with it in some weathers. The first impression was like a hammer blow. The masts of ships approaching over the horizon were indeed visible long before the rest hove into view, so that the improbable story of the world being round was not just something you learned at school.

Belgium was the best holiday of my life. I swam in the sea, I learned to ride a bicycle on the promenade at Oostende, I went on a sea-going boat for the first time ever (I was left in charge of my brother, as my mother was so seasick that she locked herself in the toilet for most of the journey, due to the frantic hammering on the door). I learned to fly a kite and got a box kite of my own. It was a wonderful, unforgettable time all round.

Several memories stick in my mind. One was that there were terrifying thunderstorms at night almost every night. The other was that we were plagued by mosquitoes. Every evening my brother and I were rubbed down with an insect repellent called Antimoustique, which had a very distinctive smell. On the very rare occasions I have come across that odour since, it immediately recalled that Belgium.

holiday. Another novelty that sticks in my mind was being taken to a Belgian hairdresser who, without asking, combed some kind of glue-like fixative into my hair. When I got home I was surprised to find that touching my hair felt like touching a gramophone record. It was like a solid helmet. Combing was totally impossible but also quite unnecessary. That advantage wore off after a few days, however. Once forcibly lifted, any tuft stuck up like an antenna.

Of our many excursions, perhaps the most memorable was to the big harbour of Zeebrugge when a huge liner of the White Star line was berthed and held an open day for the public. It was like a luxurious floating fairy tale city, with palatial dining rooms, rows of shops and a swimming pool. It left an impression which still resonates with me seventy years later.

What I did not realise at the time was that the end of my childhood was rapidly approaching. We children were excited to see Belgian planes overhead practising aerobatics and towing and machine-gunning aerial targets all day long. In retrospect I recollect that the string-bag biplanes looked like World War I fighters and would stand no chance against the modern Luftwaffe monoplanes. The signs of the approaching war – the black hole that would swallow us – were all around. I suppose the first intimations of the end of my childhood came when I realised that my mother was worried to death and, even though I did not understand the details, I felt her fear and black despair.

Hitler was about to annex the Sudeten, with the acquiescence of the West, and my father was not with us. He had gone back and was somewhere in Czechoslovakia. There was not only all our possessions, but also his father and sister Else, to be moved to what he then thought was safety, Prague. So our holiday at Wenduine ended. I do not know whether my mother ran out of money but first we moved to a flat in Blankenberge, which still felt like part of a seaside holiday, and then we moved to Brussels, presumably to await the return of my father. My mother spent a lot of time on the telephone. My brother and I played in a large department store across the street, going up and down the escalators much of the day. That was the first department store we had ever seen and it occupied what passed for a skyscraper in those days, so there was any number of escalators for two small boys.

By that time it seemed out of the question that my father could travel across Germany by train to join us, but somehow he managed to get on an aeroplane. I believe the only airline flying the route from Brussels to Prague was Sabena and eventually my father flew into Brussels with return air tickets for us.

Here is another little episode that has stayed with me: at the time there were stories in the papers about a man being killed by walking into a rotating propeller of a stationary plane at the airport. When, after a long time of waiting, my father phoned to say he had landed and was coming to collect us, my mother was greatly relieved. After all the disappointments she had, I must have been concerned that she should not raise her hopes prematurely, so I said to her: 'Well, the only thing that can go wrong now is that he will walk into a propeller.' I got a very funny look from my mother. I suppose I remember that because it is a typical example of my always imagining the worst-case scenario, as a protective mechanism, and then feeling guilty for sharing it.

So my first experience of flying was in a Sabena eleven-seater corrugated metal Junkers tri-motor, the first precursor of modern airliners. They were not pressurised and flew through the weather at low altitude. We probably flew close to its ceiling height because war was imminent and no-one was sure the Germans would not shoot down planes crossing their territory. I was terrified because we were being bumped up and down. I was sitting opposite the cabin altimeter and whenever we sank through a turbulence air hole for what seemed like a mile I was amazed that it registered no more than a quiver of the needle. So we landed in Prague.

Just to set the chronology straight, Hitler annexed the Sudeten in early October 1938. I had to stay

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