

Tom Luke  
Max Livni  
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Eva Rocek  
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# **Room 127**

Youth Home Q708, Theresienstadt

**Gymnázium Plzeň  
o.s. HUMR**

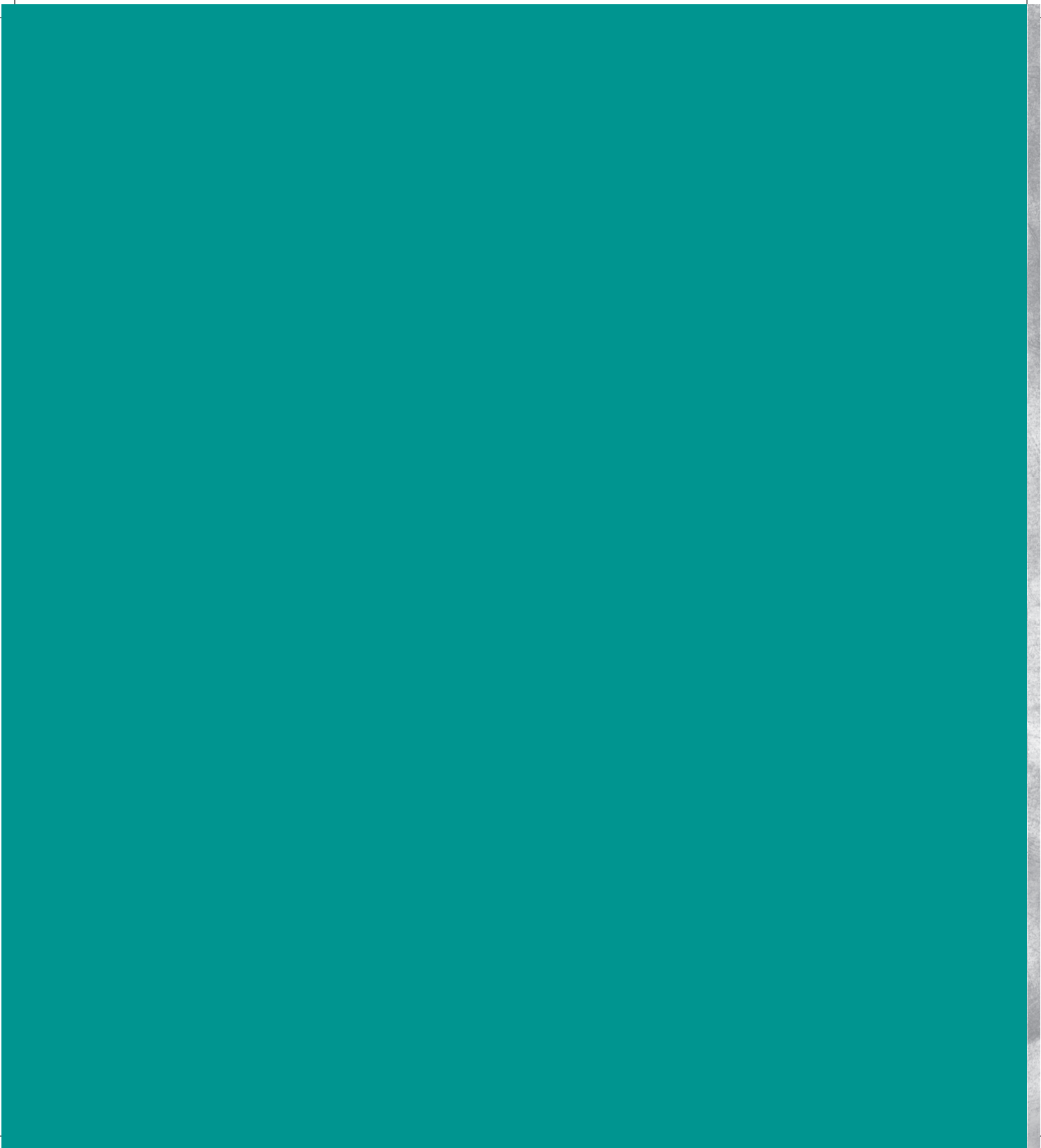
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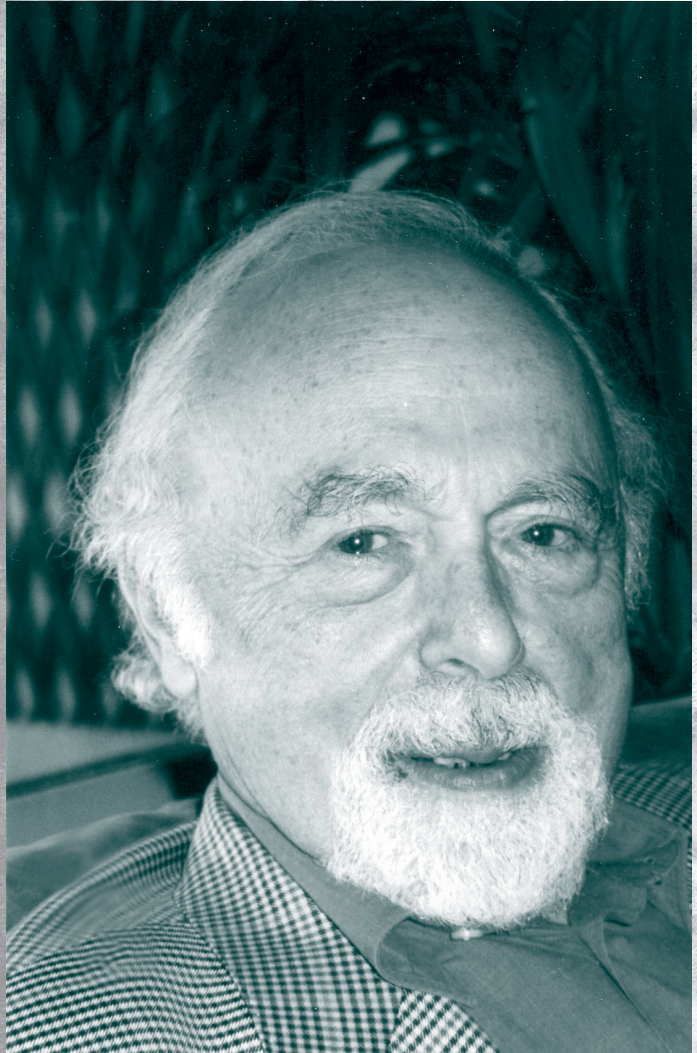


**Some former inmates of Theresienstadt room 127 survived the Holocaust. They were young, tremendously lucky and, at the critical moment, encountered self-sacrificing human beings who virtually extricated them from the clutches of death. However, they lost their families and, just a few years after the war, they stood face to face with another calamity – Communist dictatorship.**

**This book is an attempt to capture the reminiscences of four of the former inmates of room 127.**



**TOM LUKE**



The text about Tom Luke is mainly based on articles written by him for Czech and English language publications, his notes and conversations with him. The impulse to assemble this text was given by Monika S.

*“When I first met Tom, he was more than halfway through a long career in the United Nations, working for developing countries and then for refugees. Slight of build, good-looking, meticulous about his work, with a quirky sense of humour, he did not strike me as someone who had endured unimaginable horrors. But one day I saw him in his shirtsleeves, the indelible number of concentration camp inmates tattooed on his arm. Gradually – for Tom is a reticent man – I pieced together his story.”*

**Shashi Thatoor, United Nations Under-Secretary General, writing in the International Herald Tribune on 24 February 2005.**

Permit me to introduce myself to the reader: I am told that I am Jewish even though I am not sure what is meant by this designation. I am confused. Yet, I admit to this distinction without torture, so as to spare the reader the trouble of digging in dusty archives. A “theoretician” on the subject of race (are Jews a race?) may be able to help at this juncture. As to myself, I would have simply liked to be an ordinary person without a label. My forebears had my paternal grandfather’s name officially changed from Lowenbach to one more neutral. I have an official paper to that effect. But in the mind of some I will, henceforth and forever, continue bearing a Judeo-German name. I am baptised, I have a proper certificate even to that effect, yet my environment does not see me as a Christian but as a “baptised Jew.” The fact that I feel no religious affiliation is not admitted as an option. I don’t believe in a personalized God and his chosen people, his guidance, his reward, his punishment; in this context I would even hesitate to theorize on man’s place in the world. I am not a citizen of the state of Israel; I subscribe to some and reject other acts of this and of other democratic countries. However, as a Jew, I am held responsible notably for Israel’s (mis)deeds. I am not circumcised, so how will you identify me if I were to appear before you in Adam’s garb. The skullcap slips off my bald patch, it refuses to stay put. Pleasantries aside, I surmise that with the passage of time certain Jews acquire the characteristics of the particular people among whom they live.

Whence the persisting urge to brand and compartmentalize people according to race, religion, nationality, rather than by human quality? Should I again stitch a yellow Star of David onto my coat so as to be easily identifiable? Unfortunately,

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I cannot sew. I wanted to merge with my environment... How shall I explain to well meaning people that I wished to prevent my children from being herded into gas chambers? Nor anybody's children, for that matter. Almost without warning, unobtrusively, certain governments, movements, a proliferating creed, again preach the extermination of Jews. Already today, while a handful of eyewitnesses are still alive, demagogues claim that the very existence of Nazi gas chambers is a "myth." But let us be equitable; exceptional persons and even entire nations resist this trend.

Grandfather Julius, my father's father, who died before I was born, came to the township of H in North/Eastern Bohemia as a young man. He worked as an assistant in a store with textiles. When he saved the required sum he left his job and, together with his cousin Hirsch, purchased a weaving loom. When their accumulated funds sufficed, they bought a second loom, then a third. Later they procured a factory building. As far as I know, my grandfather never took out a mortgage or a bank loan. As the plant expanded the cousins came to the conclusion that it wouldn't be appropriate for respectable industrialists to own one factory together, so they founded a second textile mill and each owned one. Thus, unwittingly, my grandfather contributed to the industrialization of the region.

Grandfather Julius presumably felt that he couldn't afford to indulge in useless pleasures. During his "time off," limited to a few hours on Sundays, he played cards in the local tavern, ate pork with sauerkraut and dumplings, smoked cigars and drank beer. At that time, under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the government was situated in Vienna. Whenever grandfather needed to attend to administrative matters in the capital, he took an overnight train, arrived in Vienna in the morning, settled his business during the day, journeyed back home to H again overnight and, upon arrival, went straight to work. He died from overexertion and an unhealthy life-style when my father was barely twenty years old. Grandfather's wife Ernestine (Arnoštka), born Beran, i.e. my father's mother and my grandmother, originated from the region of Koeniggratz (Hradec Králové) in Eastern Bohemia, where her protestant forebears had espoused the Jewish religion rather than be forced to convert to Catholicism. Grandmother lived in our family house as a result of which I saw her every day. She did not attend church or synagogue. (Neither did my father.) I recall that my sister and I teased grandmother a lot and gave her trouble.

Certain sons of the owners of weaving and spinning mills in our district were not suited for entrepreneurship and so they harvested scorn and contempt from the older generation. For example Walter Hirsch, one of the sons of my grandfathers' cousin and onetime partner, was a painter. The young man manifested no interest in managing the factory, he criss-crossed the countryside on a motorcycle, and painted. An accident, and the resulting months in hospital, did not change his predilection. When the political situation began to smell badly he ran off to England and continued to paint. His brother Robert, a psychiatrist, moved to Prague; his

days, eventually, ended in a furnace. Egon Hostovský, resided across the road from us. (My mother, who lived in Southern Moravia, was related to the Hostovský family. She used to visit them on holidays, and this is how she met my father.) Egon spent his time writing novels instead of looking after the family company. He left the country just in time and later settled in New York.

In accordance with regulations imposed by the occupying powers, I was racially unqualified to receive formal education and was unceremoniously kicked out of high school when I was about fourteen. At school I had been a flop in chemistry, history, music, but I had scored good grades in geometry, physics, geography and living languages. Latin was my worst subject of all. In fact I flunked my mid-term exams in Latin which reminds me of the following story. Our Latin teacher called in my mother. Mummy was a highly cultured person. This particular teacher was a fat bull – dear gentle quadruped, kindly forgive the simile – fat spilling over his belt which (the belt) unsuccessfully attempted to hold his slipping trousers in position. Thus states the Latin teacher: “you know, Mrs. L., I have two Jews in class, Pick and your chap, so I decided to let one of them move on and, it so happens, my decision fell upon Pick.” (My classmate Pick did not survive the Holocaust.) However, let me mention in this context that active anti-Semitism was a less frequent occurrence in the Czech lands than in many other countries.

My father Frederick (Bedřich) and his brother Henry inherited the family factory following my grandfather’s death. In the early thirties, during the economic recession in Europe, and a particularly severe slump in the textile industry, they managed to convert the mill to the manufacture of cords for automobile tyres and conveyor belts for mines. The production of cloth for gloves was a by-product. The following text is an extract from the register of aryanized property. (Property forcibly transferred without compensation from Jews to Aryans. The purchase price was “agreed to” by the original owners under coercion and the funds – if any – were deposited by the acquirers in a special account administered by the Nazi authorities.)

#### **Tom in first grade of secondary school in Náchod**



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**Extract  
from  
register**

*Aryan person or company accepting credit for the acquisition (of Jewish property):*

**Groh, Josef Walter**

*Date of authorization:*

**11.10.1941**

*Level of credit (in 000 K):*

**2000**

*Purchase price (in 000 K):*

**4500**

*Credit to be refunded in years:*

**10**

*Nature of guaranty of credit for the acquisition of Jewish property:*

**Real estate, manufacturing company**

*Analysis of credit:*

**Founding new business**

*Level of interest:*

**7%**

*Purpose of credit:*

**Purchase of Jewish company (its component) to be converted into an Aryan establishment**

*Characteristics of aryanized property:*

*Name of company:*

**Julius Lowenbach  
Mechanical weaving mill**

*Address:*

**Hronov**

*Field of company activity:*

**Textile industry**

*Original Jewish owners:*

**Lowenbach Friedrich  
and Lowenbach Heinrich**

*Short history of aryanized company, description of aryanized property:*

**There was considerable interest in the “aryanization” of this mechanical mill. The Lowenbach company was founded in 1895. It was situated near the Hronov railway station. Originally it manufactured linen weave, but gradually it converted to the processing of cotton. At the end of the nineteen-thirties the mill was powered by a 140 Hp steam engine; it was equipped with 92 modern American weaving looms and it employed 220 workers. The Aryans who acquired the factory obtained large orders from the Wehrmacht (Hitler’s army). Richard Wittich, an Aryan, owner of a textile mill in Dedov, became Groh’s partner.**

Particulars about the Aryans who acquired the property

Age: **22**

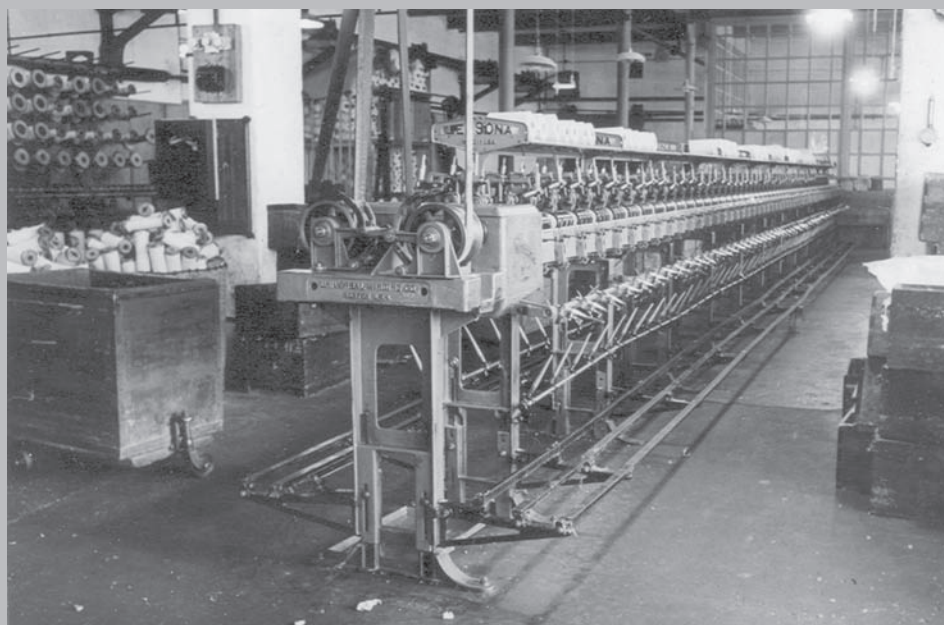
Professional and political characteristics: **Josef Walter Groh studied mechanical engineering at the technological institute in Brno. After the occupation of Bohemia/Moravia by Germany, he interrupted his studies and volunteered for the Navy. However, he was drafted into the air-force, completed military training and became commander of an aircraft. His plane crashed; Groh suffered injuries to his cervical spine. Despite of this he volunteered again for active duty. One of Groh's other main qualifications for acquiring Jewish property was the fact that he had declared his ethnicity as German even though he resided in a purely Czech environment. Furthermore, he was a member of DAF (Deutsche Arbeiter Front). As a partner for acquiring the Lowenbach company Groh chose the wealthy industrialist Richard Wittich (owner of the Sofienthaler weaving mills), a member of the SDP (Sudeten Deutsche Partei) and NSDAP (National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei). The latter's factory, employed 60 persons and supplied exclusively the Wehrmacht (German army).**

Loyalty to the regime: **Service in the air-force**

Original social status: **Not clear**

Social status after aryанизation: **Higher class – capitalists**

Residence before 1.10.1938: **Czech lands**



photograph of Lowenbach's factory

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An ever-increasing number of us, former inmates of Nazi death-camps, feel compelled to immortalise our experiences. The pressing reason may be an awareness of dwindling time left to us on this planet and the need to capture what remains of fading memories. Do the images of my mother, my little sister, and of the others, correspond to real persons, or is my imagination tinted by the fading paper of a few photographs? An eternity has passed since I last heard their voices, felt their caresses.

Recollections of persons who survived the Holocaust are as diverse as their authors. As to these pages, they are not meant to be a systematic account in chronological order. They are scattered shreds littering a tired memory.

Murder has been a frequent instrument of power in the history of mankind. In this, the Nazis did not differ from their predecessors or their successors. But the methodical, industrialized extermination was, after all, unique; hence we, who were the selected target of Nazi persecution, have the moral duty not to pass over in silence our experiences and the human degradation that we witnessed. This obligation is not meant to contribute to the cessation of mass murder once and for all – that hope has proved unrealistic. Our testimony is merely an endeavour not to let posterity conveniently forget. We owe it to our dead, and to the other victims of tyranny, past, present and future, in the various corners of the world. While victims are still dying by the myriads, in comfortable conference chambers respectable ladies and gentlemen discuss as to whether the term *genocide* should be attributed to any one particular situation.

When in May 1945, contrary to all expectations, I was still alive, I thought the Nazi rage had been the climax of people's murderous instinct. I was naively convinced that man had finally been cured of ingrained hatred of those different from himself, and that a period of tolerance had begun – at least for my lifetime. After an interval of more than half a century, I have now reached a more realistic conclusion: given the opportunity, people continue to murder in the name of god, leader, nation, party, race. It is a matter of power of man over man.

In a few years, eyewitness testimony about the Holocaust will grind to a halt. Historians of good will may then try to reconstruct, piece by piece, the inconceivable picture from the past. Mostly, however, film producers, scribes, and various pseudo-scientists are (and will be) presenting us to the public according to their notions and without our consent. One well-known writer who spent the Second World War out of Nazi reach had the audacity to tell me, without blushing, that only an unaffected author (meaning himself) is capable of serious writing about the Holocaust, whereas those who, dread in their souls, stood in front of the exterminator and, by a mere statistical quirk, provisionally moved on, were not qualified to express themselves "objectively." In many cheap tales our lives are demeaned, our

experiences watered down, so as not to offend the sensibilities of audiences. The presentations are adapted to the demand of the marketplace. Death is romanticized, while there is nothing romantic about hunger, frost, disease, torture and gas chambers. Sensitive souls cannot face reality.

Why did I keep silent while my memory was still fresh? Perhaps to integrate into “normal” society instead of being placed in psychiatric institutions. Once out of hospital I went back to school, even though, by then, I had little in common with my teachers and classmates; nevertheless, some were very supportive. As to the survivors from Central and Eastern Europe, before we could recover from the Nazi shock a new calamity arose, namely the imposition of communist dictatorship and the need to choose between collaboration, a different form of persecution, and emigration. Having opted for the latter despite my failing health, I had to muster all my energies to secure a bare livelihood.

To galvanize the Germans and other sympathizing Europeans into imposing a “new world order” which, ultimately, required a gigantic war effort, the Nazis needed to find a common object of prejudice and hatred. As often under autocratic rule, Jews (gypsies, homosexuals, psychiatric patients and other undesirables) were the ideal target. But, as asked earlier in this text, who is a Jew? The craftsmen drafting the infamous Nuremberg laws astutely elaborated their own criteria to suit their requirements. Is the reader sure that he can distinguish a Jewish from an Aryan Frenchman in the subway of Paris or a Bosnian Muslim from an Orthodox Serb or from a Christian Croat in the streets of Manhattan?

Racism of any hue, including anti-Semitism, has always nauseated me. A fanatical orthodox Jew is as objectionable to me as any other fanatic. I appreciate Kafka, Mahler, Chagall, but also Camus, Sibelius and Munch. So I am resorting to the designation “we” (Jews) to facilitate the reader’s labours; but let the reader decide for himself to which category of humanity “we” belong. After all, others determined the criteria by which we were earmarked for extermination.

The few of us who still can bear witness have in common that we had been predestined for extermination and that we have survived nevertheless. Even though our environment may brand us with a tattoo, a yellow star or whatever other insignia, we remain individuals, each distinct from the other. Our experiences at the time of Nazism have marked each of us differently, if only because some of us could immediately upon survival speak about the Holocaust without psychological barriers, whereas others “forgot” and their repressed memories are surfacing only now. Also, the themes from the past that preoccupy us, which we consider important, intimate or personal, differ from one person to another.

The fundamental crime that confronts us, though devised and directed from within the German nation, was more or less actively supported by various European peoples. It was not exclusively Germans who donned SS uniforms. True, not all

TL Europeans were equally enthusiastic, but most turned a blind eye. Some Europeans “merely” collaborated. In accordance with the customary picture under totalitarian regimes, only exceptional individuals among the subjugated peoples (and among the Germans themselves) mustered the will to resist.

Our final deportation was preceded by a relentlessly tightening noose. Successively, we were forbidden to step over the border of our municipality, leave our residence after 8 pm, attend school, associate with Aryans, be employed, own or ride a bicycle, own or listen to a radio, own a variety of objects, etc. etc. These facts are generally known, they have been described at length by other survivors, so I will abstain from going into detail. The prohibitions led some Jews to place valuables into the care of gentiles in the belief that, eventually, they would be restored. Indeed, there were guardians of Jewish objects who did return them on the rare occasions when the owners survived. But the gullibility of the doomed reminds me of the following anecdote. In the days of the collapse of the Third Reich two gentlemen meet in a pub. One enquires about the well-being of the other. The latter, aggrieved, complains: your merriment does not surprise me, but I have heard that my Jew has survived and is returning.

Before deportation more than sixty Jews lived in the small township of my childhood. Seven survived the Holocaust and of these five have meanwhile died. That township, in the Centre of Europe, used to be my home, my only home. When the Nazis hounded us to the slaughter, our township – like the overwhelming majority of others – watched.

With the spread of Nazism peculiar horizons loomed before my adolescent mind. Former creeds and certainties were shattered. It was no longer possible spontaneously to respect mayors, priests, teachers, judges and a range of elected and appointed dignitaries just because of their positions. They had to earn our esteem. Some had substituted “heil” for “good morning” in adulation of the Führer; later, after the collapse of the Third Reich, these same personages became diligent members of the Communist Party.

After expulsion from school I plunged into the imaginary world of literature and the study of foreign languages. That must have been my escape from the immediate. I experienced my first platonic loves. One girl, now a respectable grandmother and I are pals to the present. Another girl in our small town, whom I never dared to address and admired from a distance, produced unwittingly the most naïve reaction in me: I covered the yellow star on my jacket whenever I saw her in the street. (By mere coincidence, many years later, after the Holocaust, I saw her in a tram in Prague on the day of my escape from Communist Czechoslovakia. I was too shy to talk to her even then and so she never learned about my admiration.)

My father's brother Henry was the first in our family to be arrested by the Nazis for some resistance activity. In my child's eyes he was a hero. Having survived years of Nazi prisons and concentration camps he was killed at the very end of the war during an Allied aerial bombardment.

My friend HB and I discussed the possibility of escaping occupied Europe on a particular Christmas Eve on the assumption that the German guards at the Swiss border would be less vigilant. It never occurred to us that even had this fantastic exploit succeeded, neutral Switzerland would have sent us straight back. This fact of life was confirmed by the sentencing and punishment of the Swiss border police chief Paul Grueninger for assisting Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. (Upon repeated insistence Grueninger's posthumous rehabilitation was finally granted more than half a century later.) As for HB and me, our plan remained a quirk of fifteen years old boys. Why had our parents not left while there was still time? Not wishing to abandon their parents? Out of fear of exchanging a "comfortable" existence for the unknown? Because the disaster waiting round the corner was unimaginable?

I still feel the affectionate atmosphere in our home. I recall our apartment, the family at the dining table, games with my little sister, my mother taking care of us when we were sick. But what did I talk about with my mother? What gave her grief or pleasure? What preoccupied her? Was she happy? I conjure up my grandparents' (mother's parents) farm where we spent summer holidays – forests, fields, village children. I recall my grandparents' image, their love and generosity, but what could I say if I were to describe them? And my mother's sister and her beautiful daughter are suspended in the limbo of my mind. All are still choking in gas chambers and my anger cannot be extinguished.

At first my parents, my sister and I were deported to Theresienstadt (Terezín) in 1942. Initially, I was accommodated in various dormitories for boys and, in the end, in room 127. I worked in a vegetable garden. My parents were assigned to separate premises, my sister Eva could stay with my mother. The four of us were able to meet almost every evening, if only for a few minutes, at my mother's quarters where we ate our food rations in one another's company. Sometimes I contributed to these family "feasts" with a tomato or cucumber stolen from the vegetable garden; my mother never took any for herself. Once, as I was returning from our family meeting after evening curfew to room 127, two SS men caught me and I experienced the bliss of my first Nazi flogging.

My mother worked in a production plant that protected her and my sister from transportation East. Yet, when the door of the railway cattle wagon slammed shut behind my father and me and the train left Theresienstadt for an unknown destination, my mother volunteered for the subsequent transport, taking my sister along. I have not seen them since.

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Our period in Theresienstadt had a special significance for the young which did not apply to adults, certainly not to the generation of our parents. Intense, vibrant relationships and friendships were born there; also enmities typical of adolescents. Concerts and theatre performances were staged in attics. In our room of twelve boys, on the initiative of Jan (Honza) Roček, whom we spontaneously respected, literary evenings were organized, of course subject to the availability of (stolen) books. When I got an eye infection the boys took turns reading to me Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. One of the boys, HB, who was much handier than I, constructed a private corner for the two of us under the ceiling of our room. As movement inside the camp before curfew was relatively free, delightful young girls (at that age every girl is delightful) came to visit. Relations between boys and girls were very romantic. We must have felt that time was running out. Needless to ask: what became of those girls?

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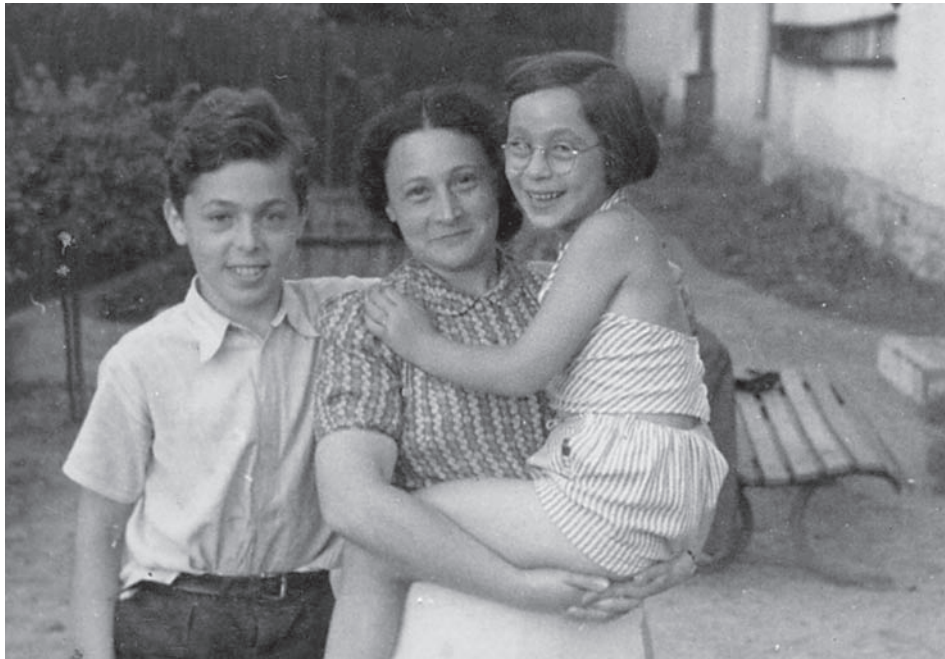
Honza Roček worked in a laboratory where he had access to a typewriter. Once he produced leaflets criticizing a member of the Theresienstadt Jewish administration; we divided the leaflets among us and glued them to salient camp buildings. Honza was eventually traced as the author of the leaflets and briefly detained, but he did not betray the rest of us.

Talented artists and scientists passed through Theresienstadt. We sought them out enthusiastically. They became our teachers in the larger sense of the word, without the restrictions and limitations of formal schools. Discussions were endless. We held on tightly to the immediate present; there was no future.

The orientation of the boys in our room could be described as secular/liberal. The boys in the room next to ours were Zionists, but they never attempted to influence others. There were few religious fanatics in Theresienstadt; at least I was not aware of them. I made the acquaintance of a young man who tried, over several months, to recruit me to the communist youth movement. He taught me Marxism-Leninism, he spoke in glowing terms of the Soviet paradise. He attempted, unsuccessfully, to convince me that the end justifies the means, that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. That young man survived the Holocaust; we met again decades later, when both our heads were grey. He was a sensitive and artistic person, a stage director in his paradise, until the communist apparatus squeezed him. I did not ask how many people he had been obliged to denounce.

Thanks to our rich and varied experiences in Theresienstadt, our youthful souls had, in general, not been traumatised there, despite the relative hardship. Yet, possibly the unspoken, subconscious awareness that this was merely a station on the way to a final destination, intensified our relations, thoughts, activities, loves. We aged in a matter of weeks and months.

Several acquaintances, mainly older persons, died in Theresienstadt. So did my grandmother Ernestine. She vegetated in difficult conditions and passed away prematurely, but nevertheless naturally. I accompanied my father when he went to take leave of his mother. This was my first occasion of confronting death, but by no means the last.



**photographs of Tom's mother Louise,  
Eva and Tom, Tom, Eva and their mother**

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Meeting now former kids from Theresienstadt, decades after the fall of Nazism, in other continents and after the disintegration of the Soviet empire, may produce a sense of complicity and understanding. Yet, in other cases the bond might have snapped. The protagonists had not only aged but have become commonplace. Some of us are affected by mammon, prejudice and indifference to other people and the world. Such disenchanting encounters are sobering. But does experience change the basic character of the individual? After all, encountering anyone who has both the ability to distinguish right from wrong and the courage to stand up is exhilarating, regardless of a common past experience.

After the war I learnt that a Jewish prisoner who had escaped from Auschwitz-Birkenau (a virtually impossible feat), risking his life in a string of the most hazardous exploits, sneaked into Theresienstadt and warned the Jewish elders about the extermination awaiting persons deported East. Not only did our representatives fail to pass on the information, they actually compelled the uncomfortable messenger to clear out of Theresienstadt. Had we then refused to board the trains, a considerably larger proportion of us might have been saved.

The journey of several days and nights from Theresienstadt into the unknown in sealed cattle vans heralded nothing good. They had crammed us, some hundred men and one bucket which obviously could not suffice, into each wagon. No-one could lie down, some sat, most stood. The skylight was situated just under the roof, so that on every attempt to empty the bucket part of the content spilled back into the wagon. The travellers quarrelled, prayed, comforted each other or kept silent. My father did not speak. The space smelled of sweat and excrement. Our train was often shunted to side tracks as military, passenger and freight trains had priority. Occasionally one could read the names of stations through the skylight. We were slowly shifted through German territory, then Polish. No-one had ever heard the name of the last railway station: Auschwitz. Another few kilometres followed, the train halted and the wagon's steel door rumbled open. It was night in Birkenau.

The ghastly scene could have been invented only by god's creatures. Or was it a nightmare? The platform was surrounded by the SS with sub-machine-guns. Some SS-men held savage hounds on leashes. Peculiar individuals in striped garments wielding clubs rushed up and down the ramp. Inhuman howls emanated from their throats: Out of your Pullmans! Line up! Bags stay behind! Faster, faster! Blows rained upon us. Horror engulfed me.

The ramp was illuminated by floodlights. Under the supervision of the SS, the striped creatures, sadism personified, cudgelled us into line and soon we were advancing towards a group of stylish SS uniforms. In the forefront of the group, an elegant SS officer, master over life and death, gracefully pointed left or right as we, one by one, each representing his own universe in a line of thousands, briefly stood before him.

In front of me in the advancing line was my father, and in front of him three acquaintances from our home district: a doctor, a lawyer and an industrialist. I am no longer able to say whether at that moment I had instinctively grasped the situation, or whether, in an attack of humanity, one of the men in striped togs approached me and, between blows with his club, whispered the magic formula for remaining alive a while longer. And so, I impressed upon my father that we were perfectly healthy, that he was a lathe operator and I a gardener; also, we raised my age and reduced his.

As we came closer to the dapper SS officer I noted that sometimes he did not honour with a single word the person trembling in front of him and merely pointed with a flick of his hand to one side or the other, whereas at other times he posed the fateful questions: health, age, profession. When the turn of our three acquaintances came all answered truthfully. They were sent to one side. My father replied according to our agreement, whereupon he was sent to the other side. Then my turn came. I slipped through my first “selection,” not fully aware of that instant’s portent. The procedure unfolded with admirable efficiency.

When, years later, I saw the photograph of this master over death and provisional life, I did not recognize him. He had a slightly moronic smile, in the street you would not turn to look back at him, not even spit in disgust: it could have been anybody.

Soon I was to become only too familiar with the term “selection,” which dominated in the limited vocabulary of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Having learned the meaning of this expression and the consequence of the procedure, my state of mind before any subsequent selection is beyond description and beyond the grasp of any normal person. Kindly, gracious, playful god!

After our welcome in Birkenau, after the first selection, we were again lined up and hounded between rows of barbed wire. The smell of burnt flesh rolled over the land. On the horizon flames flared from smokestacks. And the unceasing wild howls emanating from the throats of the faceless striped togs: faster, faster. What was the hurry? In a multipurpose low building we were instructed to strip. We were permitted to keep our boots. I hope that my father did not feel humiliated by standing naked in front of me. Blows and punches rained on us, but in our condition physical pain had no effect. They shaved us with blunt razors from head to toe. We were showered, deloused (even though at that stage we had no lice) and allotted prisoner’s garb. I asked a kapo – dignitaries were easy to recognize, they were well fed, well clad, with distinctive insignia on their sleeves – whatever became of those who had been sent to the other side of the ramp. He pointed to a stack belching fire and smoke and replied: “Within a week you, too, will fly through the chimney.” Then he stole my boots, the last apparel from a world lost in the distant past.

We were compressed about one thousand per barracks. Should you visit Birkenau and see one of the typical barracks still standing, you will not understand how all those people could fit in. Our sleeping arrangements consisted of three-storey bunks, with straw mattresses crawling with lice and bugs. Inside the barracks ruled

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block chiefs and their henchmen who had the same rights over the lives of prisoners as kapos outside. They, too, welcomed us with a roar, which was the dignitaries' usual manner of communication with rank-and-file camp inmates. With obvious satisfaction they reaffirmed that very soon, within a few days, we would fly through the chimney. They explained the barracks' rules, punishment for every transgression, which the objects of the exercise survived or not, according to their physical condition. A variety of exactions and retributions, up to murder on the spot, were all within the dignitaries' authority.

In the universe of concentration camps prisoners suffered from diarrhoea. One often did not manage to reach the latrines in time. They and their users were smeared with excrement. When you smelled, your neighbours would not let you back into the bunk, while the dignitaries would not let you stand or sit around aimlessly.

Whenever an SS guard turned up we stood to attention, riveted to the ground, motionless, cap in hand, at the mercy of his whim. A ritual performed countless times a day or night. Clam up, don't feel, don't think, don't let the existence of selections, gas chambers, crematoria, syringes, heaps of cadavers gathered daily behind each barracks, penetrate your consciousness. But, engulfed by the real world, fear and horror could not be tamed.

As one of the generalized methods of tormenting us, daily roll-calls lasting hours at day-break and at dusk, summer and winter, took place on grounds named *Appellplatz* where kapos and the SS counted prisoners *ad nauseam* until the weak passed out. If one didn't stand motionless, one was punished. One was always punished. Life consisted of endless punishment.

The simplest way for a prisoner of terminating his hopeless existence was to throw himself against the wires. Then he got electrocuted or a bullet or both without further ado. Some did. But suicide was against regulations – taking life was the prerogative of the masters. Considering that, according to the laws, certain death was to end our sojourn in Nazi installations, it is peculiar how few prisoners took their fate into their own hands. As to myself, I was never tempted by the wires.

I doubt that one could venture a generally valid affirmation that solidarity predominated in our relationships. Perhaps among the closest. One spoke about rations of stale bread, the density of the liquid called "soup," a stolen spoon, when to remove the dead neighbour from the bunk and toss him on the heap behind the block. Mostly one kept silent.

Birkenau was divided into sub-camps by barbed wire; the whole world of Birkenau was, of course, encircled by high-voltage wire with watch-towers situated at key positions manned by SS gunners. The Führer rid his Reich of Jews and unemployment.

I don't recall how long I stayed in Birkenau. It seems like an eternity, it might have been a fateful 24 hours. From the moment we left Theresienstadt the rank-and-file prisoners no longer communicated.

Various activities corresponding to the creative imagination of our masters and the ideology and purpose of the Reich were devised. Dominant among them was the disposal of human beings in gas chambers and crematoria operated by prisoners, under SS supervision, of course. Before these were fully functional and, in so far as they could not keep pace with arrivals, mass graves were dug beyond the camp's confines. Gold teeth had to be extracted, garments sorted and other "work" contributing to the Aryan war effort performed. The SS had unlimited power over everybody, the dignitaries over us, the dregs. Members of the super-race in SS uniforms, including medical doctors, watched through spy-holes Jewish children choke on gas. Theatre, no entrance fee required. Kapos, block-chiefs, scribes and other particularly talented prisoners tortured and murdered not only under constraint but out of zeal and for their own entertainment. This activity did not seem to cause them mental or emotional torment. I understand that women SS guards and dignitaries reigning over female camp inmates did not show a shred more compassion than their male counterparts. The hierarchy and functional efficacy of the camp universe was impeccable. The majority of dignitaries were not Jews. Some were. In fairness, however, it must be said that there were also human beings among the dignitaries.

Permanent physical scars permitting, I have blotted out the past for most of my active adult life. But now, in my consciousness and in my dreams, I return quite often to the olden times. I seem to remember that I managed to avoid "punishment" reasonably effectively and, even if blows hit home, I was not really scared of the individual killer and his characteristic manifestation of sadism. But the whole universe, human nature, has engendered permanent, inexorable terror in the soul. One of the most devastating aspects was loneliness, the knowledge that the human being is indifferent to the suffering and distress of others. Murder as an instrument of power reappears in various corners of the planet: then, as today and tomorrow. Only the declared ideology of mechanical systematic extermination was specific to Nazism. Or is it?

Statistics of the annihilated can be compiled, the mechanics of extermination described. One lectures, writes, produces films, organizes seminars about the Holocaust. But who has grasped and expressed the state of mind and soul of the child, the parent, of the human being who, without prior warning, faces the gate of the gas chamber and crematorium? Or the state of mind of those who are suddenly aware that their loved ones are no longer, not anywhere, not even in a cemetery, and fear grips them because they know that, according to the prevailing merciless logic, the same fate awaits them? It is, probably, normal that the task of capturing and conveying the sensation of absolute horror is subconsciously avoided as, in any case, it would be unrealizable.

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According to existing documents, allied governments knew about systematic mass extermination. Also certain churches, the Red Cross, selected circles in occupied Europe, and even particular Jewish representatives – all those who wanted to know, could. They all share a degree of responsibility. A few years ago I said to a member of one Western diplomatic service: “On aerial photographs of Auschwitz-Birkenau taken by Allied planes, the lethal installations were clearly identifiable. Why weren’t they bombed, or at least the rails leading to them?” “How could we,” the diplomat replied, “during such air raids prisoners would have been killed.” Regardless of the unwitting irony of this reply, I fear the truth lies elsewhere.

Prisoners were occasionally called to fall into line outside of routine periods. Groups would be selected allegedly for transfers to concentration camps situated in the vicinity of industrial complexes. Birkenau was an extermination facility, the most catastrophic hell that only man and his creator had been able to devise. Even though the object of transfers was slave labour, every ordinary inmate wanted to leave. But would the chosen group leave Birkenau, or this world? One could not know the answer in advance, the authorities confused the prisoners quite deliberately, so that when gas was the destination, the chosen would take off in regulation order.

Unscheduled, we were called to line up. Several SS-officers and German civilians were present. They announced that eighty metal workers were needed. The whole constellation presaged that perhaps, this time, no ruse was involved. Despite the generally valid rule never to volunteer, suddenly the grounds were full of metal workers. They chose seventy-nine prisoners. When my turn came I received the go-ahead to join the selected group. I was the eightieth and last. Our new detachment was separated from the others. My father stayed behind.

What followed is beyond comprehension. My father approached the Germans, told them his son had been chosen, that he himself was a lathe operator and that he would like to work as such. The customary consequence of such impertinence would have been a major thrashing, a bullet, or my exclusion from the selected detachment. None of these occurred. A passing vagary of the masters’ brains. Without a word, my father was sent to join the eighty, now eighty-one, metal workers. Identity numbers were tattooed into our forearms, which signified that death had been temporarily averted. Our group comprised some men and boys from Theresienstadt. Under the surveillance of armed SS we were marched off. Repeated checks, then the last gate. We had no notion where we were being led, but with every step Birkenau was receding. We marched only a few kilometres to concentration camp Auschwitz I. Here, too, executions were practised, there was also a gas chamber, but only one, only one crematorium. So-called medical experimentation on living people was performed here. There was a brothel for gentlemen. Here, too, the SS, kapos, barracks chiefs and all the other dignitaries reigned supreme. Here, too, we

snapped to attention whenever a master passed. Morning and evening, we stood for hours on the *Appellplatz* (assembly grounds) to be counted. And yet, all being relative, compared to the absolute evil of Birkenau whose clutches we had (temporarily?) escaped, the notorious concentration camp Auschwitz was preferable. By that time my mother and little sister had arrived in Birkenau, and been sent to the fatal side directly from the ramp. I did not know it then. But even had the knowledge of their gassing leaked through to me, in order to continue my pitiful existence, I would have had to keep this information at bay.

Our group was accommodated in a two-story brick barracks. In contrast to Birkenau, latrines were situated inside the barracks and each had a washroom. Our barracks chief was a German political prisoner, a decent person. I had the top bunk to myself – a luxury. My father slept below me. His proximity provided me with emotional support; it may have contributed morally, even if not physically, to my enduring the Birkenau-Auschwitz period. In turn, I hope and trust that my presence extended his life from day to day.

The intense anti-Semitism prevalent in Eastern (and to an extent in Central) Europe continued unabated in the face of the common Austro-German Nazi enemy. I was told by a Jewish Polish friend that when she was eleven years old, German-speaking troopers broke into her home in Warsaw and shot her mother in front of her. She and her father managed to escape from the apartment. They joined Polish partisans. However, it went against the grain of some of them to have Jews in their midst. My friend's father was denounced and executed, while she escaped again, this time from Polish partisans. At present she lives behind drawn curtains and does not go out among people.

Jews can be eradicated, but the anti-Semitic virus cannot. Anti-Semitism can thrive even without Jews. Auschwitz is now a museum in memory of the martyred. On the occasion of my visit a few years ago I asked a Polish guide, an employee of the museum, whether Jews had been among the detainees. She said she didn't know. It seems that knowledge of the extermination of Jews is gradually being recognized in Poland. So the tourist guides in Auschwitz have, perhaps, brushed up on this subject.

While Jan (Honza) Roček was the spontaneously recognized leading personality among the boys of room 127 in Theresienstadt, Peter E. held a similar position among us “metalworkers” in our barracks at Auschwitz. The homogeneity of our group of largely Czech Jews provided a sort of bulwark against the brutality characteristic of certain rank-and-file East European prisoners. Their notorious harassment and pestering of Jews was facilitated in camps by the marking on our garb of ethnic origin, nationality and reason for incarceration and the fact that Jews were generally in a considerably worse physical condition than others. Unlike that

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of the more unfortunate, my own experience with this phenomenon was rather anecdotal: I was several times violently beaten up in the latrine and washroom when I failed to notice (and give way in time) the arrival of a group of Ukrainian prisoners of war who had appropriated priority rights for the use of these installations. Generalizations about the anti-Semitic scourge among the non-Jewish prisoners would, of course, not be valid; moreover, some undertook heroic feats to help people in need.

Our detachment was set to work in a munitions factory situated within marching distance of Auschwitz camp. Armed SS men guarded us marching to and from the workplace and on the factory floor, while production was supervised by civilian German foremen. My father operated a milling cutter; he could sit at his job. I was assigned to a lathe. As long as our strength allowed us to be useful to the Reich, we were in no immediate danger. The time left to each individual was determined by dwindling weight and muscle-power. When the number of minutes allotted to the daily use of factory latrines was exceeded, the SS guard supervising latrine activity – a profession worthy of the unsoiled race – depending on the whim of the moment, either caned the culprit or turned the water hose on him. In winter the march back to camp in wet rags could be fatal. The German foreman of our hall, on the other hand, occasionally dropped unfinished cigarette-ends knowing that they would be picked up. A young orthodox Polish Jew, the cleaner of our hall, once denounced me to the foreman for not meeting production targets. (Is there further proof required that Jews are like anyone else: good, bad and indifferent?) The informer was rewarded by being detailed to my lathe, whereas I was given a broom with the instruction to sweep. Yet, the foreman did not hand me over to the SS, and thus I stayed in the heated hall under a roof.

As time passed most of us weakened. On the occasion of one march back to camp I collapsed by the wayside. The SS guards who accompanied us on our daily itineraries unceremoniously finished off prisoners who had reached the end of their tether. Peter, marching in my detachment and noticing what was about to happen, grabbed me, and forced me to get up and march on before the guards intervened. The entire scene took a few seconds. I wonder whether Peter remembers this episode.

My father visibly deteriorated and lost willpower to keep going. When he could no longer work, he was not permitted to stay in our barracks as rations were being distributed there to active slaves only. He was placed in the infirmary – a misnomer, since inmates of the infirmary were provided neither with care nor with food. When the infirmary became overcrowded, the sick who stubbornly resisted the course of nature itself, were periodically disposed of by various means, including the transfer to neighbouring Birkenau. I found my father a few days after he had been taken away. Our group, possibly under the authority of Peter, did not object to saving a slice of bread and a few spoonfuls of soup from our common daily rations which I carried in the evenings to my father.

In January 1945 Soviet guns approached within earshot. Chaos broke out. The SS organized the evacuation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. But evidence of the crime was to be eliminated. Gas chambers and crematoria had been blown up. All who were too weak to march had to be killed, including inmates of the infirmary. However, the SS execution squads failed to achieve this objective with the usual thoroughness only because it seemed that the Russians were just over the horizon; hence the heroes had taken to their heels.

After the final eclipse of the once all-powerful masters, a considerable proportion of the random shadowy figures still breathing in Auschwitz-Birkenau, couldn't make it back to life. A few did. Other than that, the Nazis left behind bones, cinders, ashes and smoke hanging over the country, representing millions of human beings.

In reality, it took more endless days before the first Soviet patrols, scouting the terrain, ventured into the abandoned site. The Soviets tried, *a posteriori*, to glorify the liberation of Auschwitz; they staged the filming of a camp full of "prisoners," enthusiastically cheering the heroic Red Army. I should have thought that, instead of typical propaganda, it would have been more honourable to recognize that liberation came too late and, anyway, that it was only a by-product as Auschwitz happened to lie on the way to the heart of Germany. (This entire period, including the interregnum between the fleeing Nazis and the arrival of the Red Army, has been described by one of its witnesses, Primo Levy.)

Among those still breathing in the infirmary of Auschwitz was my father. He recovered. At the end of the war he returned to our home town. He waited in vain for my mother and sister. He experienced a grudging welcome and the reluctance of the local authorities to facilitate his reintegration and, in particular, to let him (and me) move back into our family house. He left after the consolidation of communist power and emigrated to Australia in 1949. He lived in Sydney until his ninetieth year, by no means destitute, nevertheless very modestly yet, finally, in a free democratic country.



**photograph of Tom's  
father Frederick**

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In the aforementioned confusion, I was directed into the crowd being lined up for the evacuation of Auschwitz. I had no idea what had happened to my father. In the melee I sighted Peter and suggested to him that we hide, believing that our chances of survival would be better than on the march to an unknown destination. He wasn't hot on the idea. Anyway, within moments I lost him and other friends in the reigning confusion. I thought of hiding by myself. Yet, to change one's destiny would have required not only imagination, but also a tremendous amount of energy and courage. My energy was in short supply and rapidly fading; I may not have had the courage. Endless days of what is now referred to as a "death-march," the most gruesome of them all, began for me. Around me there was not one friend, not one acquaintance, only strange figures trailing along. In all my life I had never been as desperately abandoned.

Engulfed by a wave of loneliness in an endless procession of figures alternately dragging one foot forward, then the other, I was subjected to a constant struggle for a strategic place in the sea of bodies. For those who fell back or were expelled from the centre of the moving throng to the periphery, it was only a matter of time before, totally exhausted, they stopped to rest or sat on the snow covered side of the road. Then, all that remained was the inevitable bullet from the SS gun. In the end we were not even worthy of the liberating bullet, ammunition was being saved; the trained SS men who did not let us out of sight, shattered the skull of any resting creature with one swing of the butt of their weapons. The white roads and paths of the Polish plains were adorned with objects reminiscent of human bodies. Sometimes the snow was stained with fresh, sometimes dried, blood.

In January 1945 the average SS-men did not need to be endowed with excessive perspicacity to figure out that their house was collapsing. When they were later stripped of their uniforms, the overwhelming bulk of them were nothing but riffraff, society's excrement. Nevertheless, whatever satisfaction they got from shattering the skulls of the most miserable among the defenceless, one would assume that man's bloodthirstiness could be satisfied, or even saturated to the point of nausea. And that even the SS-man's instinct of self-preservation would outweigh his killer lust, that he would leave to their fate the dying figures on the roadside, and that he would seek his own way out of this unreal scene. Mistake. *Homo sapiens* in uniform, in a position of power, intoxicated by "higher" ideals, presumably functions according to laws specific to him.

Exhausted we dragged on. Figures collapsed upon the frozen, snow-covered earth. The SS hounded us through the countryside, often changing direction, forward and back again, seeking to elude the ubiquitous partisans whose projectiles whistled above our heads. Occasionally we had to fall to the ground or crowd the ditches, master next to slave. When the partisan's onslaught seemed to subside and the way forward seemed clear, we moved on. The masters ate, the prisoners pulled field-kitchens for them. Whereas terror had embraced me in Birkenau and a

flickering hope of survival in Auschwitz, I was now overcome by numb oblivion: I don't recall feeling frost, hunger or fear. I cannot identify my neighbours next to whom I dragged on, stood still or sank into slumber. I don't remember having spoken to anyone on this death march. In desperation some prisoners attempted to escape; none succeeded. Once we spent the night in an abandoned farmhouse. We got a ration of bread and warm liquid. This splendour reawakened in me the idea of hiding; the hay in the barn beckoned. Just as well I refrained, because in the morning the SS and kapos forked through the hay.

After a few days and nights we stumbled on a railway track. I don't remember whether a freight train had been waiting for us or whether we were obliged to wait longer in frost and snow. Either way, the SS organizational talent eventually conjured up open freight wagons coupled to a locomotive upon which the human cargo was loaded. We were compressed on the platform of each wagon, huddling together. Armed SS guards took up positions on the train so as to keep the transport under strict control. Soon we were covered by falling snow.

The train moved, stopped and moved again. More days and nights of exposure to the elements. One couldn't tell who was still breathing and who had frozen to death. One didn't feel one's hands and feet. I was drifting into semi-consciousness. God's wrath for all, but the SS guards continued to eat and drink, while the prisoner dignitaries from Auschwitz-Birkenau, warmly clad, were protected by layers of fat. Among the motionless, snow-covered mass, were the future chronicler Erich Kulka (who subsequently recorded for posterity the story of the messenger bringing uncomfortable news of the gas chambers to the elders in Theresienstadt) and his son. When the train halted on a side track in Ostrava, father and son, prompted by incomprehensible willpower, lifted themselves off the frozen surface, slid to the ground, and disappeared into the night. (Both survived the Holocaust.)

The train moved on. End station on the shores of the Danube in hospitable Austria. Those of us who, after the moral and physical devastation experienced in the preceding months and years, had enough life left to rise from the heaps of bodies on the open freight wagons, were herded through the Mauthausen township to the concentration camp of the same name. It was January 1945. Had I needed further demonstration of the average Austrian's character of the Nazi period, I got it in that serene town when we dragged through its streets. Its inhabitants, women, old men and children (men were busy serving *Fuehrer und Volk*) lined the streets and stared at the show. Suddenly a woman emerged from the crowd holding a bucket of water and, as I reached out, she overturned the bucket and spilled the water at my feet. The crowd laughed.

When we passed the gates of this particularly refined facility – Mauthausen had remained the last Nazi torture and mass-murder concentration camp until liberation by the American army in May 1945 – I foundered. I was of no further use to the Reich and, therefore, to be disposed of without delay.

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Learned speeches, articles, books, analyses and films about the Holocaust abound, but I have not encountered a faithful rendering of the state of mind of the condemned. Like other extermination facilities, Mauthausen was directed by the SS and operated by kapos, barracks chiefs and scribes. But here, a number of prisoner dignitaries had been incarcerated for political causes, and some of those risked their lives to outwit the logic of the Holocaust.

Once inside the camp we were wedged into a narrow space between a wall and a building comprising a shooting range, a gas chamber, a crematorium, and various other execution implements and facilities. When I sank there to the ground, I expected not to rise again. It seemed obvious that my end had come. The overcrowded space demanded efficient liquidation methods. I couldn't walk. A camp hoodlum of minor rank grabbed me by the feet and pulled me along. Where to? The objective of this exercise must have been clear to me. I remained conscious even though my head was bumping on the frozen earth. Unexpectedly, a camp dignitary walked past. In the red triangle fastened to his jacket I made out a "T", designating a Czech political prisoner. His sleeve was adorned with the insignia of a ranking scribe. In desperation I called out to him, an impertinence normally not advisable, but I had nothing to lose. He ordered the hoodlum to halt. He exchanged a few words with me and enquired if I was related to Dr. Jan Lowenbach from Prague. He ordered the hoodlum to pick me up and to carry me carefully. Then he promised to "send me someone." I learnt subsequently that this dignitary was Professor Vratislav Bušek from Charles University in Prague, one of the leading members of the non-communist resistance movement.

I landed in a section of Mauthausen called *Russenlager* (a misnomer), consisting of some eight or ten barracks, I believe, whose inmates, since they were incapable of slave labour, were earmarked for speedy liquidation. There were no latrines and no water in the barracks. I found myself in a bunk beside a youth whom I had known in Auschwitz. As he was unable to collect his rations he had not eaten or drunk for several days, his rations having been confiscated by the barracks-chief and his assistants: criminals in pre-camp life. My friend from Auschwitz informed me that barracks inmates were dying by the hundred of disease and starvation, the dignitaries were torturing and killing at will and, in order to expedite the process, the SS were carrying out periodic "selections." My friend stopped breathing during the night and in the morning he was tossed on the heap of corpses that was regularly carted away. That morning my toes were cut off ("amputated" would be a misleading terminology). Sepsis and gangrene set in. In accordance with the prevailing method my "rations," which I had been unable to collect, were not delivered to me. By now I could no longer move, though I was still conscious. My guardian angel, whom professor Bušek had indeed sent, found me in this condition several days later. His name was Otto Nesvadba. Before his arrest by the German occupying power for political activity, Otto was a school teacher in Moravia.

Otto was an old-timer among political prisoners who, having withstood initial torture, eventually became a camp dignitary. He belonged to Bušek's group, which had among its primary objectives to save a few of those still capable of survival. At the sight of me Otto pondered and hesitantly mused: "Shall I try?" As a first step he told one of the assistants who was entrusted with food distribution, to deliver my rations regularly. The barracks chief was advised that from then on I was under Otto's protection.

The following day Otto returned with water, some food and a blanket. Despite his long working hours and other chores, his calls became regular. He shared his own special rations with me, halting my physical degradation, while his human presence was balm to my soul. He told me about his children living in a Moravian village, about other political prisoners, about the communist cell planning a post-war usurpation of power in Prague but refusing to participate in the effort to help those in greatest need and, last but not least, about the approaching Allied armies (the underground had access to secret radio receivers). He listened patiently to my own tales of woe. I was no longer hopelessly abandoned. Nor was I lying between virtually motionless bodies in their and my own excrements, but on the edge of the bunk, where Otto sometimes washed me. I was never again subjected to the whims of criminal dignitaries among the prisoners.

By mid-March, despite all the care and encouragement, I was again slipping away. My legs were swelling, gangrene had set in and my general condition rapidly worsened. The SS were not satisfied by the hundreds of dead carted away every morning from my section. By then the overall space under Nazi control had been inexorably contracting and they must have felt that the remnants of proof of their unprecedented crime had to be removed. Thus, as the frequency of "selections" carried out by the SS in each barracks increased, Otto knew that I must avoid them at all cost. In his function of chief scribe, Busek had an overview of the schedule of these lethal visits. So Otto was forewarned. The detachment of SS proceeded from barracks to barracks to designate the prisoners to be instantly disposed off. When they approached, Otto carried me out through the back door and into one of the barracks where the selection had been completed. At the risk of his life he repeated this performance during every raid.

Otto was at a loss what to do about the gangrene in my legs. The principal surgeon at the camp hospital (reserved for the master class) was a Czech political prisoner, professor Josef Podlaha. Otto sounded me out with great tact whether I would be ready to sacrifice my legs for the chance of staying alive. Against all regulations he carried me to the operating theatre. But Dr. Podlaha decided at a glance that I would not survive an amputation. Soon steps were heard. Otto left the operating theatre just in time before an SS man entered. I learnt subsequently that "operating" was this SS man's (Dr. Aribert Heim) favourite pastime; none of his "patients" ever survived. I followed the discussion that ensued between him and Dr. Podlaha with

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acute trepidation. Podlaha succeeded in convincing the SS-man (miracles happened even in concentration camps) that he needed to prepare me for a major amputation of both legs the following day. As soon as the SS-man, visibly satisfied, left the operating room, Podlaha rapidly made a few incisions to facilitate the discharge of pus; then Otto returned to pick me up and carry me away. The following day Podlaha reported to the SS man that I had died during the night.

Otto brought me to an unfamiliar barracks and laid me down on a bunk all to myself. My neighbours were also Otto's wards who owed him their lives. They were in better condition and somewhat older than I. A relatively gentle atmosphere reigned in this barracks. The chief and his assistants did not murder or torture; they did not even yell at the inmates. Rations, though meagre, were actually distributed. I had heard that there was a barracks in the camp whose chief was linked to the resistance. This seemed to be it.

I found out much later that Podlaha had told Otto that my chances were virtually nil. However, if Otto wished to insist, he was to obtain, by whatever means, sulphadiazine and fresh fruit which, however, were not available in the camp, not even to dignitaries. Certain other medication, disinfectants and bandages Podlaha provided himself. In spring, when a ray of sun appeared, Otto came rushing and carried me outside to expose me to the sun; then he stayed to keep watch so that no approaching SS could see me. One day he turned up with a box of sulphonamides and some fruit. He never told me how he got them, but I suspect that he stole them, at enormous risk, from SS quarters.

Once when Otto carried me out into the sun, I managed to sit upright. By then, Allied squadrons were bombing military/industrial installations in our immediate vicinity. The rumblings and explosions were music to my ears. In those days Bušek, at one sweep, saved a group of perhaps two hundred prisoners by marching them right off the execution grounds back to their barracks. The SS, who had ordered the execution, did not intervene. Morale in Mauthausen had changed. An SS-man carried out daily inspections in the barracks. At the beginning of May 1945 he was clearly trying to be affable with the inmates – a most unnatural occurrence. One day he didn't turn up. Judging by the commotion outside, something quite extraordinary was going on.

I am unable to resist tears welling up in my eyes whenever I recall the following image: all of a sudden the door squeaks open and, I can no longer affirm whether in the crack first appears a boot, a helmet or the barrel of a sub-machine gun. Eventually the door is wide open and in it stands a black American soldier. He steps cautiously inside and, in amazement, examines the premises and its inhabitants. He leaves quietly. He is the first free man I had seen in six years. So then be a racist!

Of course, people like Otto, Bušek and Podlaha never succumbed to brutality and remained inwardly free despite their prison garb.

Otto completed the task he had set himself and still in May, before returning to his family, he delivered me to a proper hospital in Bohemia. The authorities of Czechoslovakia recognized his merits and promoted him to school inspector. On one of his tours of duty, two years after returning from hell, Otto Nesvadba died in an automobile accident caused by a drunken driver.

Professor Bušek was sentenced to death by the Communists in Prague soon after they seized power in 1948. He fled to the West, helped across the border by his university students, where he died years later at a ripe old age. During one of our periodic meetings in New York, Bušek revealed to me that the resistance group in Mauthausen had attempted to persuade Otto to leave me to my fate and concentrate his energies on more promising cases. But Otto considered saving me as an act of resistance against the dictatorship, a personal challenge and, in the end, a personal victory. To those who are disturbed that we, the dwindling fraction, survived the Holocaust and who speculate why and how, I would like to say: we survived *in extremis*, and some of us thanks to human beings like Otto Nesvadba.

**Below is a photograph of the Certificate of Honour awarded in memoriam in 2002 to Otto Nesvadba**



**photograph of Tom [left] with Otto [centre] some time after the war. On the right is one of the young men whom Otto had also rescued.**

*“Do you feel satisfaction that you have had the better of the Nazis by surviving?”*

*“The one who had the better of them was Otto Nesvadba, who saved me; but with regard to my family the Nazis attained much of their objective anyway. However, I do feel modest satisfaction from having eluded the Bolshevik terror.”*

#### **Discussion in 2006**

A tale about people's justice: before the virtuous broom attempted to sweep our township clean, over sixty Jews had lived there. After the sweep seven returned, what impertinence. Two of them, a haggard father and his good-for-nothing son assumed that they would be able to move back into their family house. But in the absence of the Yids, barber D, an old timer of the township who had ardently saluted the arrival of the Nazis – grasping on which side the bread was buttered – had moved into the house. When the township was liberated by the brotherly Red army the barber had a problem. He solved it by abandoning the Nazis and joining the Communists. Thus, when those two Yids, father and son, the latter crawling like a mangy dog -- he wouldn't stand upright and walk like all respectable comrades -- requested the ruling of a higher authority, the local National Committee laughed into their faces. But in their kindness and people's justice the Committee assigned them two rooms in a communal building with one toilet, one washroom and a kitchen for everybody. This house had fallen to the “jurisdiction” of city hall as its former Jewish owners did not have the impudence of surviving the Holocaust. It was cold in that abode in late autumn 1945, but then again, the good-for-nothing son sauntered about hospitals most of the time and so he did not need any heating for the stretches that he had spent with his father. Never mind fever, pleurisy, tuberculosis, inflammation of the kidneys and all the rest of it. The father, still the naïve sap, applied to the National Action Committee for an allocation of coal. The Committee, principled as ever and according to law, replied that coal is distributed exclusively to the poor. If one had searched for a more destitute pair (than this father and son) in that township, one would have failed.

Bedřich Löwenbach  
Hronov, č. 240.

Hronov, dne 19. I. 1945.

TL

P.T.

Místní národní výbor

H r o n o v

Jelikož jsem neobdržel dosud ani na přiděl,  
ani jako repatriant, ani od Národního výboru žádné uhlí,  
a ve své domácnosti také vůbec žádné nemám, prosím o při-  
dělení Vám možného množství.

Má žádost je tím naléhavější, že můj syn je  
nemocný a je nucen býti ve studeném bytě.

S veškerou úctou:

# Místní národní výbor

v Hronově

Telefon 14 a 137

V Hronově dne 25. 10. 1945.

Č. j. 85-155/8-45

Věc: Uhlí.

Pan  
Bedřich Löwenbach,  
Hronov 240.

K Vašemu přípisu ze dne 19.X.1945 sděluji, že místní národní výbor nemůže Vám v žádném případě vyhověti, ježto není oprávněn přidělovati někomu uhlí.

Uhlí uskladněné v Radnici jest připraveno pro celou budovu radniční a v nejkrajnějším případě pro chudé občany /nemocné/ v Hronově.



Předseda MNV.:

V. s.

**Here is the exchange of correspondence between the parties concerned on the subject of coal.**

**p. 109** (Frederick L.)

To: the Local National Committee

*As I have not received any allocation of coal from the National Committee in my capacity of "returnee" and as I have none from any other source, I would appreciate receiving whatever quantity you may be able to spare. My request is the more urgent as my son is ill and lives in unheated premises. Yours respectfully,*

**p. 110** (The Local National Committee)

Action No. 85-155/8-45

To: FL

*In reply to your note of 19.X.1945 I am informing you that the Local National Committee will under no circumstances meet your request as it is not habilitated to allocate coal. The coal in storage at the Town Hall is earmarked for the heating of our premises and in extreme cases for impoverished (ill) citizens of our community. Signed: Chairman, Local National Committee.*

In that township lived a poet by the name of Joska Teru who, whenever he spotted a Jew in the street, broke into a song: Smelly Jew/stinking chap/ran around to have a crap/behind the house/in the house/the roof fell in and killed the louse. But, to the extent possible, let me paint a fair picture; not everyone in that township was on the level of the local Committee chairman and of the local poet. In the house where we were assigned accommodation and refused heating, lived among a number of other persons also a young office employee by the name of Truda Verlikova and this lady shared with Daddy and me her own allocation of coal and groceries. Also, one member of the “town Committee” and his wife, presumably ashamed of the decision of his colleagues, regularly visited and brought us meals. Other citizens of our township followed. Generally, in the years between the end of the war and the Communist putsch in 1948, the balance of forces between the extreme left and the liberal democrats shifted in favour of the latter. I no longer recall whether it was the decision of the Local National Committee or of the district court, but the fact remains that in 1946 barber D got his marching orders and my father and I were permitted to move back into our family house.

**Following his return from concentration camps Tom underwent extensive medical treatments. He suffered from tuberculosis, nephritis, he had constant difficulties with digestion. Tom endured surgery of his feet to improve his walking. He spent some time in a sanatorium for patients with tuberculosis in the Tatra Mountains. With the help of his Czech language and literature teacher, Václav Novák, he completed high school, thus enabling him to enrol for university studies.**

**In 1946 Tom continued the cure of his tuberculosis in Switzerland. After a few months he persuaded his physician to let him study at the university in Geneva. He agreed not to choose a physically strenuous subject. He enrolled at the Interpreter School within the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences. In December 1947 Tom travelled to Czechoslovakia to spend Christmas with his father. But once in Czechoslovakia he had to be hospitalized again with a renewed attack of acute nephritis and for further surgery to his feet. That was how the “Victorious (Bolshevik 1948) February” caught up with him in Czechoslovakia.**

TL

My feeling of revulsion towards the communist totalitarian regime was not the result of a rational decision nor a reaction to any official edict that I had received (see below), though not framed. To observe the screaming blood-thirsty hordes marching down the central square in Prague following the Communist takeover of the national government sufficed to make up my mind. Indeed, my disgust was so visceral that a friend who met me in the street exhorted me: "Chum, you've got to get out of here fast, your thoughts are far too clearly written all over your face."

**p. 113** *Ruling*

*(From the local Action Committee to Tomas Luk)*

*The Local electoral Commission in Hronov decided on 26.4.1948 according to the law governing elections to the National Assembly to permanently disenfranchise you because the Action Committee of the National Front had eliminated you from public and political life. Signed: B. Vlček, chairman*

**p. 114** *Court ruling. Action No. Cd 837/55 Nt 24/54*

*The People's Court in Náchod ruled at its closed session of 11.1.1955 against Frederick Luk, born 17.1.1897, last residing in Hronov No.239, who seems to be at present outside the territory of Czechoslovakia as follows:*

*All possessions of the afore-mentioned Frederick Luk, former industrialist at H No.239, secured by decision of the prosecutor in Náchod of 28.8.1952 action number Pt 300/52-5 becomes the property of the state according to § 287 a/tr.r.*

*Justification:*

*Frederick Luk fled in all probability in summer 1948 beyond the borders of the ČSR in the western direction. Frederick Luk's daughter lives in the USA, later his son TL, born 6.6.1926, illegally crossed the border of the ČSR..*

*In the light of these circumstances the district prosecutor decided by the ruling of 28.8.1952 Pt.300/52-5, that all possessions of Frederick Luk are herewith secured according to § 283 and following tr.r.*

*The district prosecutor in Náchod proposed on 20,12,1954 that proceedings should be initiated according to § 287 a/ tr.r., which stipulates, in case the accused fled abroad, that the secured possessions become the property of the state.*

*The court, after weighing all circumstances of the case, concluded that in this case regulation § 287 a/tr.r. applies. Consequently it was decided that the secured possessions of Fredrick Luk are forfeited for the benefit of the state.*

*An appeal against this decision is not admissible /§ 31 para 2 tr.r./-*

*In Náchod on 11.1.1955*

*People's Court in Náchod*

*Signed: JUDr. Karel Havránek*

*For correctness of implementation signed: Nováková*

*This ruling became legally valid on 11.1.1955*

V ý m ě r .

Místní volební komise v Hronově se usnesla dne 26. 4. 1948  
 podle zákona o volbě do Národního shromáždění vyznačiti u Vaše-  
 ho zápisu ve stálých voličských seznamech poznámku překážky vý-  
 konu práva volebního

- a./ poněvadž jste byl odsouzen pro .....  
 .....  
 b./ poněvadž jste byl akčním výborem Národní fronty vyřazen z ve-  
 řejného a politického života  
 c./ poněvadž bylo proti Vám zahájeno trestní řízení - revise  
 trestního řízení pro .....  
 .....  
 a veřejný zájem vyžaduje, aby poznámka byla vyznačena.

Toto rozhodnutí je konečné.

Dokud poznámka překážky výkonu práva volebního nebude vymazá-  
 na, nesmíte vykonati volební právo / hlasovati / a nesmí Vám býti  
 vydán voličský průkaz.



předseda místní volební komise

Pan /í/ Tomáš L u k, student  
 .....  
 v Hronově čp. 239

*B. Vlček*

TL

## U s n e s e n í .

Lidový soud v Náchodě usnesl se na neveřejném zasedání dne 11.1.1955 ve věci proti

Bedřichu L u k o v i /Löwenbachovi/

nar.dne 17.1.1897, posledně bytem Hronov čp. 239, který jest t.č. zřejmě mimo území ČSR

t a k t o :

Veškerý majetek shora jmenovaného Bedřicha Luka /Löwenbacha/ býv.tov. v Hronově čp.239, zajištěný usnesením okr. prokurátora v Náchodě ze dne 28.8.1952 č.j. Pt 300/52-5 připadá podle § 287 a/ tr.ř. státu.

O d ů v o d n ě n í :

Bedřich Luk - Löwenbach se vší pravděpodobností uprchl v létě 1948 za hranice ČSR směrem na západ. Dcera Bedřicha Luka Löwenbacha žije v USA, později i jeho syn Tomáš Luk - Löwenbach , nar. 6.6.1926 překročil ilegálně hranice z ČSR.

Vzhledem k těmto okolnostem rozhodl okr.prokurátor svým usnesením z 28.8.1952 Pt.300/52-5, že veškerý majetek Bedřicha Luka /Löwenbacha/ se zajišťuje podle § 283 a násl.tr.ř.

Okr.prokurátor v Náchodě navrhl dne 20.12.1954, aby bylo provedeno řízení dle § 287 a/ tr.ř., který stanoví, jestliže obviněný uprchl do ciziny, rozhodne soud na návrh prokurátora, že zajištěný majetek připadá státu.

Soud po uvážení všech okolností případu shledal, že jest zde na místě, aby se užilo ustanovení § 287 a/tr.ř. Bylo tedy rozhodnuto, že zajištěný majetek Bedřicha Luka /Löwenbacha/ propadá státu.

Poučení o stížnosti:Proti tomuto usnesení není přípustná stížnost / § 31 odst. 2 tr.ř./-

V Náchodě dne 11.1.1955  
L.S.  
Lidový soud  
v Náchodě

JUDr. Karel Havránek  
Za správnost vyhotovení  
řídící kancel. oddělení:  
Nováková, v.r.

Toto rozhodnutí nabylo právní moci dne  
11.1.1955  
Lidový soud v Náchodě dne 1.9.1955.  
Nováková, v.r.

In conjunction with the peoples' justice as exemplified by the above document I cannot refrain from pointing out that my father's one and only daughter Eva, my little sister, unfortunately did not live in the USA, as the communist court would have it, but in a gas chamber in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**Tom's first attempted escape did not succeed. The person who had agreed to guide him across the border to Austria turned out to be a police informer. Tom was arrested in March 1948 in Breclava.**

The smuggler whom the prison commander decided to place into my cell for good company, was a cheerful fellow. He chided me: "You buffalo, had you asked me, I could have had a break from smuggling and you could have been over the border." From B, which is situated right at the border, they transferred me to the prison in UH and from there, after some time, under the guard of two armed policemen, to Hradec Králové (Koeniggratz). This armed escort seemed funny then and, even now, in retrospect. Once at regional police headquarters at HK, I was conditionally released for the period of the proceedings of my trial with the proviso that I will report to the police twice a week. In the weeks that followed and between my obligatory periodic calls at the police station, I travelled to Prague where I tried to arrange a renewed attempt to escape. In Prague I slept at friends' Honza and Eva R whom I knew from Theresienstadt and Peter E whom I knew from Auschwitz. Honza R remembers: "Once we walked up the staircase of our building in Krakovská street and down came a good looking girl. Knowing Tom's interests I said – look, how attractive. Whereupon he responded in the most unusual manner: girls don't interest me at the moment; the only thing that interests me is how to clear out of this Bolshevik paradise." I escaped from Communist Czechoslovakia on 6 June 1948 with the help of false travel documents. My father followed a few weeks later. My father lacked the drive to leave Czechoslovakia even though they had persecuted him. But when the police pressed him with the question where I had disappeared to, he decided to go. We reunited in Switzerland and from there we jointly emigrated to Australia. We sailed on a migrant ship, over a hundred below deck; I was sea-sick for days on end. In Australia I didn't pursue my studies. I earned my living first as a manual labourer, then as an office clerk. I took temporary jobs during holidays and occasionally night shifts, to improve the quality of my existence. However, life in Sydney was not unpleasant: I enjoyed the company of young women, I profited from the availability of books, films, theatre and on Sundays I took advantage of an easy access to ocean beaches. After a few years I bought a second-hand car. And, last but not least, I was unspeakably fortunate for someone of my background, to have my father with me in Sydney.

TL

Tom's father made a modest living in Australia, first as a travelling salesman. He toured the Australian outback and called on outlying farms where he offered various goods, mainly garments, for sale. A few times he took along his son. However, Tom demonstrated a remarkable lack of business acumen: he never managed to sell a single piece of goods. Tom got his first regular job in a company with two owners and one labourer – him. The company manufactured sun-glasses. Tom's function consisted of fitting lenses into plastic frames once the frames softened, having been immersed into boiling water. In the course of this operation Tom often burned his fingers. His weekly wages were Aust. £ 6½. He travelled to work by ferry across the harbour and walked the rest of the way to save. For dinner he usually bought fish and chips wrapped in newspapers. After the summer season interest in sun-glasses slackened and so the proprietors of the pot with boiling water fired Tom. This proved a blessing since, within a few days, he found a job with the City Gas Company for double the salary. It also proved a blessing for the two "industrialists" as both eventually became rich and all three remained friends to the present day. Had Tom not been a restless fellow he would, probably, have made a career in the Australian gas light industry.

When the antipodes asked the standard question whether I liked Australia, I truthfully replied "I do, but it is far." Uncomprehending, they said: far from where? Sydney is certainly one of the most attractive and congenial big cities I know, but I must have felt the call of distant lands, the call of the world, even though, objectively, I had all I needed.

Tom set himself a target of saving one thousand Australian Pounds with the objective that, when this target was reached, he would return to Geneva to complete his studies. Having obtained a diploma from Geneva University, he thought he would go back to Australia (and to his father) via the USA, where he had never been. In New York he lived, alternately, with his aunt Vera Lowenbach-Feldman and the novelist Egon Hostovský, a distant relative. After discussing his future options with George Nehněvajs, an old friend from refugee times and now lecturer at Columbia University, Tom applied for a post-graduate course at Yale University (Southeast Asia Studies). A scholarship relieved him of financial worries. After graduation from Yale he thought, naively, that the Australian

**diplomatic service might be interested in recruiting him. As this did not happen, he returned to Geneva, this time to the Graduate Institute of International Studies where, after a few weeks, he received a fellowship of Swiss Fr.500 per month, a rare privilege at that time. Moreover, he lived for free at the students' home, merely for distributing meals at table and performing telephone duty twice a week. He had great fun with Honza Kraus, originally from Prague, who had served during World War II in the Czech unit of the British army and now held a post at the United Nations in Geneva. Once, while intently chatting with his friend on the phone, someone unobtrusively slipped a bar of chocolate into his hand.**

I have no vices, I don't drink, don't smoke, don't take drugs, only chocolate I cannot resist.

**Aviva, an Israeli student of psychology, who sweetened Tom's life with chocolate, also lived at the students' home. They have been together over forty years. Incidentally, the story of Aviva's family is noteworthy. Before the war her father was a banker in Berlin. When the Nazis took over in Germany, Aviva's family moved to Poland. A few days following the invasion of Poland by the German army in 1939 the entire family travelled illegally in an ambulance to Trieste and, from there, by boat to Palestine. On its return journey the boat was torpedoed by a German submarine and sunk.**

More than ever interested in international affairs, I filled in innumerable application forms and knocked at the doors of various UN organizations in New York, Paris, Rome and Geneva. Eventually, I was recruited by Jean Heidler, a Frenchman of Czech origin, at UNHCR (the United Nations High Commission for Refugees). Suddenly, I was a capitalist. I rented a tiny apartment and bought a new car. To get a professional job in the United Nations system was difficult at that time, but once inside it gave one an advantage when applying for other posts in the system. And so, after three years with UNHCR, I transferred to UNDP (United Nations Development Programme, the organization financing and administering assistance to developing countries; the fact that certain of these countries do not develop is another question.) I left splendid Geneva, voluntarily, as a result of some inscrutable idealism, for a mission of three years in Laos. Malaria and communist rebels had a feast in Laos at that time, but the country, in fact the entire region, was fascinating anyway. In 1962 Aviva and I got married at the Australian embassy in Bangkok, whereupon she joined me. We both remember with pleasure our Laotian experience, work was interesting, though not quite satisfying in view of the prevailing corruption. I was

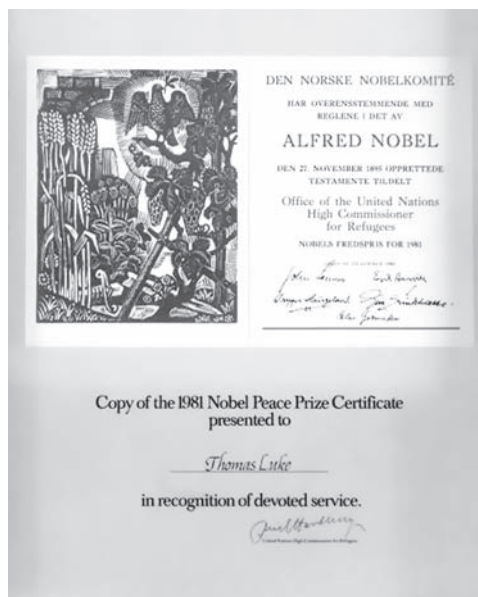
TL

responsible for UN assistance projects whereas Aviva helped establish libraries in various Lao towns financed from American programmes. When the three years were over, I was transferred to UNDP in Senegal. Our daughter Eva was born at that time. When Eva was six weeks old Aviva and the baby joined me: I picked them up at the airport in Dakar. As Aviva handed over the basket with the baby, and before looking into my daughter's eyes, I unwrapped her feet and counted her toes. Contrary to me she had all ten. The name Eva was chosen in memory of my sister, but to the present the whole family calls her "Dudly," inspired by the Czech saying *she sleeps like a Dudek (hoopoe)*.

Whereas the UNDP representative in Laos was in charge of projects in one country only, the UNDP office in Dakar was responsible for projects and programmes in a vast region of West Africa comprising Senegal, Mauritania, The Gambia, Sierra Leone and the Senegal River basin. Life in Dakar was very comfortable, in the city there was no malaria, my boss was a decent fellow (a Frenchman), work was satisfying... well, no complaints. Yet, allegedly, restlessness is one of my characteristics and so, when after two years I received an offer of a post at UNDP Headquarters in New York, I eagerly accepted. New York is the most fascinating city and UN headquarters the most fascinating work environment. Considering my regional experience I was assigned to the Africa Division. As a result I undertook frequent missions to that continent. Aviva worked as a psychologist at Columbia University. Our son Eric was born in New York.

**After a few years came a new offer of a post from UHNCR in Geneva. Aviva and Tom agreed that for their children it will be preferable to grow up in peaceful Geneva rather than in the jungles of New York. (Their children, subsequently, were not so sure.) Tom refused, with regret, an offer of an immediate promotion if he stayed at UNDP Headquarters. Branded a West Africa "specialist," Tom started as chief of the corresponding section at UNHCR, but was soon promoted to head of programme planning of material assistance to refugees in general. In this function he visited and criss-crossed over twenty African and twelve Asian countries. As he says, he shook hands with kings and lepers, and in both cases he washed his hands carefully after this procedure. In the last years of his career at the United Nations, Tom was Deputy Director of the Division of External Affairs and Secretary of the UNHCR Executive Committee. This function involved, *inter alia*, relations with the media, voluntary agencies and governments. Paul Hartling, former prime minister of Denmark, an exceptional personality, was at that time High Commissioner for Refugees.**

**The 1981 Nobel Peace Prize was bestowed upon UNHCR primarily for assistance to refugees in Southeast Asia“**



### **UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)**

The Office of the High Commissioner was created by the United Nations General Assembly in 1950. Under the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugee, these are considered to be persons who left their country of origin on the grounds of justified fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or belonging to a particular social group and who cannot or do not wish to return home. As a humanitarian and non-political organization UNHCR has two basic and mutually linked objectives: to provide refugees with legal protection and to assist them begin a new life under normal conditions.

At present UNHCR is one of the principal humanitarian organizations in the world, employing 5,000 collaborators and assisting 22.3 million persons of 120 origins. In over half a century of its activity the organization assisted some 50 million persons and has been awarded twice the Nobel Peace Prize.

TL

**When Tom retired in the mid-eighties he wasn't ready for comfortable home slippers and a rocking chair. His restless mind downright clamoured for an activity at least as – and, preferably more – satisfying than working for the United Nations. Supporting and promoting anti-communist resistance movements seemed made to measure.**

At that time the Czechoslovak consulate in Switzerland wouldn't give me a visa. At the consulate in Vienna I got it within minutes. Fortunately, the internet was not yet in operation... In Prague, when visiting Anna Lorencová, a former inmate of Theresienstadt, I had the opportunity to read one of the first issues of "Lidové Noviny," a *samizdat* and principal organ of the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia. The reader will presumably not recall that LN used to be the most prestigious daily in pre-war Czechoslovakia, but he will easily understand that its rebirth was the expression of the will of courageous individuals refusing to submit to dictatorship. I had a gut feeling that this was a cause worthy of attention. Anna introduced me to JD (a former journalist and later minister) who was co-chairing the editorial board of the paper. The very first evening of our introduction, we walked through the streets and parks of Prague (police listening devices do not keep pace with two men walking), and we agreed on a formula of co-operation. Before I left Prague JD took me to the next meeting of the inner circle of dissidents. (With time I established close friendships with a few and, until this day, I regularly meet Jan Ruml, for example. Also Michal Klima, former General Manager of LN who claims that, thanks to them, I learned to beg.)

Back on the Western side of the Iron Curtin I sought all kind of assistance and support for the *samizdat* and the dissidents congregating around it. I must have spent at least twelve hours daily and undertaken frequent travel seeking financial contributions, technical support and intervention with the Czech authorities in favour of imprisoned dissidents. I tried to enlist first individuals and gradually relevant voluntary agencies, non-governmental institutions such as universities and journalistic organizations. Let me mention in passing that deep understanding was demonstrated in the United Kingdom and the United States, by certain international press associations and individual persons; curiously, potential French sources did not contribute. I maintained contact with Czech dissidents during periodic visits and by means of public telephones. The last prearranged meeting with a group of dissidents, including Rita Klímová among others, took place in November 1989 in a village at the border between Slovakia and Hungary; simultaneously, the Velvet Revolution broke out in Prague and Lidové Noviny became the leading daily of free Czechoslovakia with Jiří Ruml as its Chief Editor. (As to the institutions and individuals who participated in this common effort, I cannot even begin to list them all in these pages, but I would like to mention one special person: Rony Koven.)

**Extract from the archives of the Federal Ministry of the Interior for the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia about the activities of the internal opponents before 28.October (22.September) 1988**

*“The Samizdat Lidové Noviny is managed by an editorial board composed of: Jiří RUMML, Václav HAVEL, Petr PITHART, Ladislav HEJDÁNEK, František ŠAMALÍK, Jiří DIENSTBIER, Zdeněk URBÁNEK, Josef ZVĚŘINA – all from Prague, Miroslav KUSÝ from Bratislava and Alena BERNÁŠKOVÁ from Brno (later, replacing her, Jan ŠABATA from Brno). This organ determines the orientation of the periodical and approves individual issues for circulation. Distribution is handled by a group independent of the editorial board. Enemies of the State participate in the creation of the periodical, they work conspiratorially; only the names of members of the editorial board are published. Some authors of articles sign with their real names. In all, 70 persons have been identified who participate in the preparation of the periodical. The samizdat is framed as a monthly, presented as “independent” and by its very title it clearly intends to follow on the former “Lidové Noviny” founded at the end of the 19th Century, which in the pre-Munich republic represented the main bourgeois orientation and the policy of the Castle; a number of the then prominent, public and cultural personalities contributed to it. The content of the current issues of the samizdat is full of demagoguery, political invectives, and irony attempting to put in doubt the leading role of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia in society, attack organs of the state and, last but not least, tendentiously evaluate the current evolution in the Soviet Union.*

*The principal current interest of these inimically oriented persons engaged in the publication of Lidové Noviny is to secure legal status or, at least, to conduct a dialogue with official organs for as long as possible. Therefore, RUMML and DIENSTBIER, submitted a request, in January 1988 for the registration of their periodical, to the Federal Office for Print and Information. This act demonstrates their effort to test the situation and verify how far they can go in their anti-social activity.“*

TL

**The following text has been provided by Jiřina Šiklová, a one time dissident and at present sociology professor at Charles University in Prague.**

*...At some point in the summer 1987 Jiří Ruml told me that, with a group of friends, he would like to publish a monthly samizdat under the title Lidové Noviny which might, gradually, become a weekly or, perhaps eventually, even a daily paper. Towards that end, typewriters, Xerox machines, dye and other requisites would be needed; these would have to be smuggled in from abroad. “Someone” living in Switzerland allegedly had suggested that he would try to obtain funding for Lidové Noviny. I wanted to believe it.*

*Some time later I called on Rita Klímová at Colonel Sochor Street, where unofficial, “illegal” if you wish, Western films were being projected. There we also watched video clips which allowed us to witness, at least at a distance, discussions and speeches of “toadies of imperialism” in exile. Such activity being highly illegal, Rita was very careful as to whom she admitted to meetings at her apartment. I was surprised when I noticed an unknown person. But Rita, seeing my embarrassment, whispered into my ear: that guy is OK. I immediately recalled what Jiří Ruml had told me, and so it was indeed. Lidové Noviny was published, it became a monthly, it was duplicated in the most improbable places, and all that from contributions secured by Tom Luke. He made its circulation possible. I believe, that no-one has officially thanked him for it. So I am taking the initiative herewith, and am saying “thank you” in this way. I don’t know the details, for security reasons we never discussed details not even with each other, but I believe that if it weren’t for Tom Luke, the publication of the samizdat Lidové Noviny would not have materialized.*

*History moved on and after the collapse of the dictatorship in Prague in 1989 Tom got in touch with me again. He drew my attention to an international conference to be held in Vienna on the subject of migration which, he thought, might interest me. He obtained an invitation for me and in July 1990 I travelled to Vienna, even though I thought that the particular information to be gained would be of little interest to us. After all, nobody migrated to our country. Tom was a step ahead of us, he anticipated the overall movement of people. Without his initiative we wouldn’t have the theme of integration of foreigners and the policy of asylum as a subject at the faculty of applied sociology at Prague university, where I started lecturing in September 1990. Even our students should be grateful to him.*

*Sometimes even one’s own children are not aware of their parents’ good deeds. So once again, officially and unofficially, on behalf of myself, our friends and Rita Klímová: thank you.*

*With many friendly kisses.*

*Jiřina Šiklová*

In conclusion: I am not optimistic as regards humanity's future; prejudice, fanaticism, stupidity and hatred are rampant. Nevertheless, since the Holocaust, I personally had an interesting and satisfying life. Only my mother and sister I cannot forget.

**Tom with his wife Aviva, their children and grandchildren in 2006**

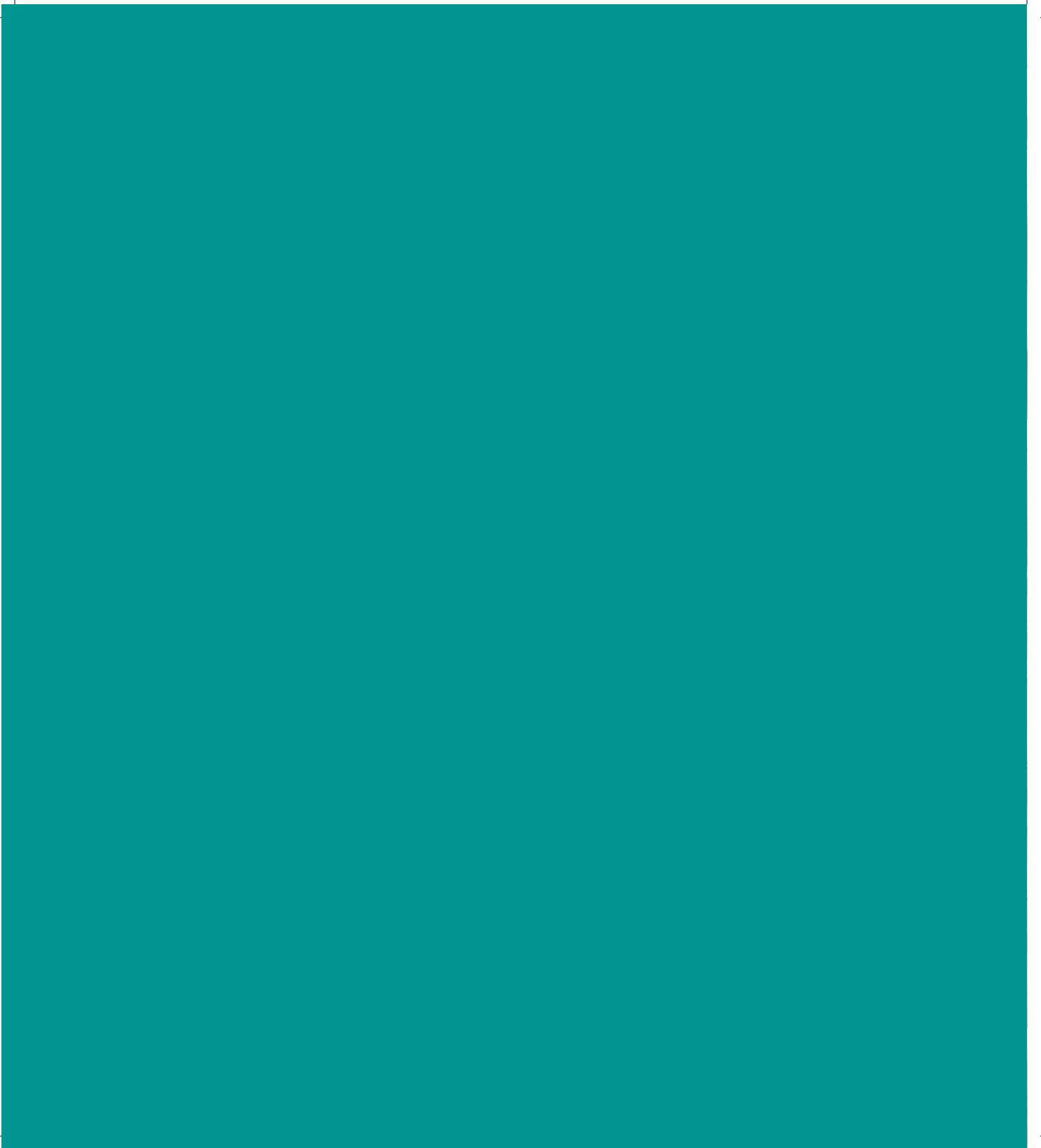


TL

# MAX LIVNI



**Max and Chava Livni, Prague, 2006.**



## 1. ROOTS

My father's family – Lieben – lived in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, for a very long time. My ancestors were called “Menaker” – the Hebrew designation of the man, who removes the un-kosher parts of beef. The name still appears in the Hebrew inscriptions on the gravestones of my grandfather and of my uncle Salomon (“Mani”) at the Jewish cemetery in Prague, Olsany. An undocumented family legend has it that our forebears were expelled from Prague with the rest of the Jews by the empress Maria Theresa (1717 – 1780) and settled in the then village Lieben. After the death of the empress, her son Josef II. allowed the Jews to return to Prague and on this occasion they received German surnames – in this case “Lieben” for the village they came from. This village, in Czech “Liben,” is today part of Prague. (Research at the former Jewish cemetery in Liben is not possible, since it was destroyed during the Communist regime).

The family was strictly orthodox and in my childhood one of the very few such religious Jewish families in Prague. The existing family tree bears as the first documented date the birth year of the grandfather of my grandmother Yeshayahu Jeteles – 1810.

My grandfather Gabriel Lieben, who died before I was born, manufactured gloves.

My mother, nee Gruenbaum, came from a similarly religious family from the vicinity of Schwabach – Fuerth – Nuernberg in Bavaria, Germany. The existing family tree begins in 1783, but there is a tradition going back to 1635 and a further one, according to which the family descended from the bible commentator Rashi (1040 – 1105) from Troyes in France.

My grandfather Abraham Gruenbaum had a gold-leaf manufacture. He was one of the founders of “Agudat Israel” and active in many other areas of Jewish communal life. In this connection, he visited Palestine at least twice. During his last trip in 1921 he became seriously ill, was treated at the “Shaare Tsedek” hospital in Jerusalem by the famous Dr. Wallach and by the well-known Schwester Selma. My grandfather was one of the founders of this hospital. He died and was buried on the Mount of Olives. His descendants found his grave in 1967 after the 6-day war. Two

ML generations later, children of my brother Abraham (named after this grandfather) – great-grandchildren of our grandfather – were born in this same hospital, attended by the same physician and the same nurse, and then a great-great-grandson, too!

Both pairs of my future grandparents, who were not acquainted, were sometime in 1918 in the spa of Marienbad. A marriage broker learned that the Prague family had an unmarried son and those from Nuernberg a single daughter and connected the two families. Dr. Eugen Lieben, then aged 32, married on November 22, 1918 Hannchen (“Hansi”) Gruenbaum. They made their home in Prague.

My parents had three sons: Artur – Abraham, born 1922, Rudolf (“Rudi”) – Gabriel, born 1924 and me, Max – Mordechai, born 1926. According to Jewish tradition, my brothers got in addition to German names also the Hebrew ones of our late grandfathers. I got the Hebrew name from the hero of the Purim holiday, celebrated in that year a week after I was born.

## 2. CHILDHOOD

My whole wider Prague family lived in the Old Town – my grandmother Ernestine (Tina), nee Jeiteles, her three sons, her daughter and their families, in all 12 grandchildren of my grandparents. Then there were two brothers of my grandmother and seven cousins living in Prague and their families. It was quite a large clan, totaling in the time of my childhood some 50 persons. All of them lived at a walking distance of at most 10 minutes from each other – the reason being of course, to be able to walk on Shabbat and holidays to synagogue. “Synagogue” is in this case too bombastic a word: the family had a private prayer room, called the “Lieben-Shul” where in addition to members of the Lieben and Jeiteles families only a very few “outsiders” prayed. The prayer room was located in an apartment in the building of the “Hevra Kadisha” (the Jewish Burial Society) at Josefovská Street, called earlier and now again Wide Street (Siroká ulice). In two rooms of the same apartment a single brother of my grandmother, Dr. Berthold Jeiteles lived.

So most relatives (mainly the males) met twice daily at prayers. Saturday noon the daughter and the three daughters-in-law visited grandmother together with the children. She lived in an old house, called “Three Feathers,” at the corner of Dlouhá and Týnská streets. (There is a colorful sign with three Feathers over the entrance to the house, even today). In the winter we were offered minced meat loaf (which I did not like), in summer strawberry cake. Later the men and older cousins came, who in the meantime had a study session in the prayer room, to collect their families.

Our Prague grandmother was an impressive lady, evoking respect wherever she went. She always wore elegant, but old-fashioned clothes, her head covered by an embroidered dark hat, called “Kapotthuetchen.” (I knew only one other woman with such a hat). One anecdote about her: one day a new maid came. Grandmother asked her what her name was, the answer was “Rosa.” Grandmother said: “I will call you Anna – I cannot get used to another name, I always call my maids Anna!”

As usual in those days, I was born at home. This house – at the other corner of Dlouhá and Týnská Street was also quite old. To reach the toilet you had to cross

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an open veranda, freezing cold in winter. Originally there was only one tap with a cast iron sink in the kitchen, for bathing water was heated in large pots on the hearth, a wooden trough was put on two stools in the kitchen and everybody bathed there, one after the other. One of my first memories, it was probably about 1932, is the installation of a bathtub with a coal-burning boiler in a recess of my parent's bedroom. The recess was curtained off, there were blue plums printed on the cloth.

There was gas for cooking and lighting, supplied through pipes from the municipal gas works. In the center of the ceiling of each room, a pipe hung with a gas lamp at its end, which had to be lighted toward evening and gave quite strong light. Also in the beginning of the thirties, I remember that we got electricity. Plaited white wires were fixed on porcelain isolators, nailed to the walls. The turning switches and the lamp sockets were also made of porcelain – there was no plastic yet. The first lamps had graphite wires inside, not metal, and burned out very often.

Street lighting was also by gas. I remember a man with a long rod going through the streets in the evening, which, aided by the rod, opened at each lamp a small tap and lighted the gas. In the morning he came again and closed the taps. Later on the lamps were remotely lit and extinguished and there were no gasmen any more.

In those times two languages were used in Prague, the majority of the population were Czechs, a minority Germans. In this respect the Jews were divided – there were such who knew only Czech and others of German culture. Our family belonged to the latter category. Though we knew some Czech – the maid, the janitor and the personnel in many shops spoke Czech only, but the language we used most was generally German, books and newspaper (“Prager Tagblatt”), too. My father was a classicist and taught Greek, Latin and philosophy at the Deutsches Staatsrealgymnasium at Stephansgasse, Prague II. During all her years in Prague my mother had learned but a few words in Czech, just what was necessary for the daily life.

In addition to teaching Father was also active in historical research and published various papers. He also did much in the framework of the Jewish community, culturally and in connection with welfare services. He helped many Jews, mainly those who had fled from Eastern Europe to Prague. Later there were those, who had escaped the Nazis in Germany and Austria. He usually came home from school for dinner at noon, then he read the newspaper and afterwards he received his “patients,” some of which had waited for him quite a long time. They talked with him and got his advice, sometimes money or meal tickets for the Jewish Soup Kitchen or other help.

According to the testimony of many of his pupils he was an excellent and popular teacher. One illustration from his teaching career follows. One of his students in a matriculation class asked him: “You have by now taught us for years the best and most beautiful of human culture, ideas and ideals. Do you believe that you have achieved anything?” And his answer: I have been teaching some 25 years, every year

on the average three classes and in each class, say, 30 students. That would be a total of 2250. Now let's assume that half of them did not even listen to what I was speaking about – that leaves some 1100. Let's say that one-half of these forgot everything after one month, of the remainder again one half forgot everything after a year and from the rest again one half forgot everything after ten years. There remain more than one hundred of my students, who retained something of the high ideals I wanted to give to them. So I have multiplied myself by a hundred – surely not a small achievement!”

My mother had studied at a so-called “Higher School for Girls” and during WWI also at a course for nurses. She actually worked as such at a military hospital. In Prague she “only” worked at home – shopping, cooking, laundering, cleaning, knitting, embroidering – and she was the one who assumed responsibility for the daily details of our education, home work etc. Through her quiet and steady work she created the environment in our family, which enabled father to pursue his activities. Up to the Nazi era there was a live-in maid and when we children were still small, a nanny.

We children grew up in both languages, but German was the language we knew better and it was also the teaching language of most of my school years. In addition, since about age three we learned Hebrew reading and writing with a rabbi (in Ashkenazi pronunciation, for use in religious ritual – we did not speak Hebrew as a living language). Later we also learned the so-called “Rashi-script,” needed for the study of Talmud commentaries. We also studied, in parallel to regular school attendance, a daily hour of bible, Talmud and other Jewish subjects.

Until the actual dissolution of Czechoslovakia in Munich in autumn of 1938 we used to go every year during the summer for a few weeks vacation in the country. It happened like this: A van stopped in front of our house, crates, suitcases, baskets with pots, pans, other kitchen utensils and some foodstuff were loaded – since we obviously could not use non-kosher house-ware because of ritual restrictions. My mother sat beside the driver, the maid and we children on top of the baggage. We traveled to a village some 20 – 30 km from Prague, where we rented a farmer's house, who in the meantime lived with his family in a barn on the farm. Father in summer usually stood in for the school principal and came only on weekends. For us city children it was naturally always a happening – a brook, frogs, goats and all kinds of other new experiences of country life. For mother it must have been quite strenuous – she had to cook and manage there too, under much less comfortable conditions than in Prague.

I spent my first 4 school years at the Deutsche Volksschule, Masna Street. My most vivid recollections from there are two: the one of the Catholic priest, who taught

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religion to Catholic children and dispensed pictures of saints, also to us, religious Jewish children, for whom because of our previous conditioning these pictures were an abomination. I disposed of them secretly as fast as possible. The second recollection concerns the German-language actors, who visited our school quite often and recited classical poems and ballads – “Die Buergschaft,” “Der Ring des Polykrates,” “Der Taucher” and many, many more. The family council decreed that at least one of the family has to know correct Czech and so I was sent for the school year 1936-37 to the Czech-language fifth grade of the Jewish elementary school at Jachymova Street. My knowledge of Czech increased indeed, but in all other subjects I was quite weak – usually I hardly understood what it was all about. But this Zionist school influenced my worldview considerably.

Than two more years in German, at the Nikolander Realschule. While there, in autumn of 1938 the Sudeten areas of Czechoslovakia were occupied by the Germans according to the Munich treaty, Slovakia left and became a Fascist vassal state of Germany. Finally on March 15, 1939, the Nazis, who declared this area as “Protektorat Boehmen und Maehren,” occupied Bohemia and Moravia. At this time we began to feel the growing anti-Semitism, until then latent below the surface – now it was fomented both by German Nazis and Czech Fascists.

### 3. UNDER THE NAZI REGIME IN PRAGUE

In June 1939 Jewish students were forbidden to attend public schools. The following school year I was again at the Jewish school, by now in the eighth grade. Again I did not learn much, but gained friends who were not religious and so I was slowly attracted to a Zionist-Socialist youth movement – the “Maccabi Hatzair.” After this school year Jewish children were not allowed in any school anymore – at the ripe age of 14 I ended my formal education. My father, like all Jewish teachers, was forced into premature retirement.

In the meantime much had happened around me. My mother’s entire family succeeded to escape in time from Germany – to the USA, England and Palestine. (Some of them went through Prague and so we were continually informed about developments in Germany). In Prague there were also some who made it. But from my Prague grandmother’s descendents it was only my brother Artur – Abraham, who emigrated in March 1939, two weeks after the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. My father decided – against the standpoint of his siblings – to send my brother to Palestine. He traveled by train on the Pessah holiday after my father sought the advice of the Dayan, the religious judge, as to the permissibility of traveling under these circumstances. Abraham is the only one of my grandmother’s grandchildren – in addition to me – who survived the Holocaust.

After the Nazi occupation my father was arrested, he apparently appeared on a “blacklist” because of his public activities. After a few weeks he returned home, emaciated and lice-infested. We children were not told about his time in prison. Among others Adolf Eichmann was one of his interrogators.

Our uncle “Mani” (my father’s brother), a physician who had published papers on experiments proving that ritual slaughter is not less human than the slaughtering used by Gentiles, was arrested too. He was sent to the concentration camp Dachau, after about a year his wife got a message from there that he died on March 20, 1942, “from enteritis” and was cremated. “The ashes may be obtained at the Prague Gestapo offices against payment...” This was done and so this uncle of mine is the only member of the family with a grave and a tombstone. As we well know today, not his ashes are buried there.

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My father also pondered emigration. After many unsuccessful attempts to get a visa to all kinds of countries, finally my mother's siblings in England sent us a "permit," bearing the names of my parents, my brother Rudi and mine, including an invitation by an English university, promising a teaching position for my father. My parents hesitated for a long time – there was my grandmother, then aged 75, all his siblings and their families who had no way to emigrate, there was the retirement plan, paid for many years, all the possessions, thousands of books... Nobody dreamt about the Holocaust at that point in time and nobody foresaw, what the Germans planned for the Jews in the following years. Then, on September 1, 1939, WWII started and emigration stopped entirely.

For a time Jewish children studied illegally. Since it was forbidden to meet in larger groups, three or four of us met at an apartment and studied various subjects, partly tutored by Jewish teachers. The Jewish community organized this, father took part in this framework as a pedagogical adviser. That did not last long either. From the end of 1941 transports started leaving Prague, children went away and slowly the study groups dispersed. At this time I was an active member of the above mentioned youth movement without my parent's knowledge, who would have forbidden it. We met wherever possible: there were sports grounds of the Jewish club "Hagibor" in Strasnice, where the meeting of Jewish youth, camouflaged as games, was still possible for a time. My brother Rudi was also in the "Maccabi Hatzair," as a youth leader. For a time we were still allowed trips to the suburbs and near villages, finally we met – and also played – at the famous old Jewish cemetery.

We were always encouraged to read. Now it became more than just entertainment or pastime. We read everything we could lay our hands on and then we discussed it at our meetings – novels, philosophy and whatnot. Since schools were forbidden to us, my father got me an apprenticeship with a (Gentile) electrician. In the beginning he felt strange, to be seen with his son in work-clothes – it did not fit his status as an academic. But later he got used to it and felt even proud. That did not last long either – after a few months Jews were forbidden to be apprentices. Then the Jewish community organized re-training courses and for a few months I learned there electrical engineering. For a time I worked at a workshop of the Jewish community, where backpacks and bags were made from blankets and other available material, for people sent on transport.

In the meantime the Jewish youth movements, cooperating with the Jewish community, organized the so-called "aid service." Boys and girls visited the people summoned for transport and helped them with the preparations. Often these were elderly and sick people, who were not even able to decide, which of their belongings to pack in the hand luggage allowed by the Nazis – is it more important to take the family photographs or would another warm dress be more important? We young people with our down-to-earth views could often help. And on the day when they had to report we came and helped them to carry their bags.

Later, when mail from acquaintances, relatives and friends from ghettos in Poland and also from Theresienstadt began to arrive, we had addresses. We, still

in Prague, collected food and other items important for survival, sometimes bought on the black market and sent parcels. Some of these even arrived (we received a few written confirmations), most did not.

Father at that time worked for the Jewish community in one of the storerooms, where by Nazi orders possessions of deported Jews were stored – and then distributed to Germans. His job was in the book warehouse where he had to assemble, on the orders of an architect, for example 3.5 meters of red-bound books, destined for the living room of a Nazi VIP – the content of the books was not important. These warehouses were located in former synagogues, fitness halls and other Jewish institutions.

During all this time the Germans published successively all the by now well-known decrees, laws and restrictions. All property was registered, bank accounts closed, radio sets had to be surrendered, then gold and other valuables, sewing machines, cameras, bicycles, skis, woolen clothing, furs and an endless list of other items taken by the Nazis from Jews. Only in the old part of the town Jews were allowed to reside, at least two persons per room and since we had always lived in this area and our apartment was “too large,” we had to let a room. It was forbidden to enter public establishments like restaurants, cafes (except a Jewish one), cinemas, theatres, museums, parks etc., also the newer parts of the town. For the use of public transportation one had to have a special permit and even then one had to stand on the rear platform of the second tramway car. In shops there were special hours for Jews, afternoon, when – because of the war economy – almost no goods were left.

Finally came the yellow Jewish star, which had to be sewn on the outer garment at the left side. This obviously completed the social, economic and cultural isolation of the Jews.

Our Czech neighbors behaved in various ways – there were anti-Semitic collaborators who welcomed the Nazi measures. There were others who helped or at least tried to help. The majority was “neutral” – they had their own worries and restrictions and their empathy did not include Jews.

We corresponded regularly twice weekly with my brother Artur, until the war broke out, then more sporadically through relatives in neutral countries who forwarded the letters. Finally, up to our transport to ghetto Theresienstadt there were only a few lines every few months, transmitted through the International Red Cross. He saved our letters from these times – because of the censor they contain only family news and a few “encoded” general news.

As mentioned before, since the end of 1941 transports were leaving Prague. The first ones went directly to Poland, later ones to ghetto Theresienstadt. From there most were further deported to Poland, but in the beginning we did not know that. Since father and partly also mother were working for the Jewish community, we remained in Prague longer than all our relatives and most other Jews.

#### 4. GHETTO THERESIENSTADT

The townlet of Theresienstadt (in Czech Terezin) was founded at the end of the 18th century as a fortified town, it is located about 60 km north of Prague. Nearby is the so-called “Small Fortress.” The Nazis chose this place for the concentration of the Jews – walls and moats surround it, which makes for easy guarding.

As one of the first of our family our grandmother, father’s mother, was deported there. She died in the ghetto aged 78 in August 1942 from disease, hunger and heartbreak. Then all the rest followed and finally we, too, were brought there on July 8, 1943. I was then 17 years old. We were ordered to report with hand luggage only at a collection point in Prague – the wooden barracks of the former “Radio Fair.” There were straw mattresses on the floor, quite a shock for us, who had lived until then in their apartments. After one day we were brought by train to the ghetto. Immediately after our arrival we four were separated – father was in a barracks for men, mother in one for women, Rudi and I lived each in a different so-called youth home. There were rooms about three by four meters with 3-tiered wooden pallets with straw mattresses. I lived with 11 boys of my age in such a room. The youth homes were set up by the Jewish ghetto administration with the aim of keeping the youth in a better environment than among the grown-ups. We had to work, of course. For a time I was in a carpentry, for a short time an electrician, on and off in the vegetable plots and for the longest time at the transport of building materials. The latter must be explained: the sole vehicles inside the ghetto were funeral coaches, brought to Theresienstadt from the liquidated communities all over Europe. There were no horses, but ten to twelve men pushed the coaches manually. On these vehicles everything was transported in the ghetto – old people, small children, bread, building material, corpses...

In the summer of 1943 I was employed at the building of wooden barracks outside the ghetto walls. We did not know their purpose, which caused many rumors. Until one evening – while a curfew was imposed on the ghetto, as always when new transports arrived – a large group of children was brought to the barracks. A rumor had it that they were destined for an exchange in Switzerland. From the

ghetto voluntary teachers and nurses were mobilized, who lived with the children in total isolation. Some of these volunteers were my friends and acquaintances. In spite of the strict quarantine we got news from them, some sounding very strange. The children had come from the Polish town of Bialystok and were in bad physical condition. When they were brought to the public showers in the ghetto they refused to enter and repeated again and again the word “gas, gas...!” Their attendants finally convinced them that these are indeed showers – and not gas chambers, as the children thought, apparently from the experiences in Poland. After a time the children and the personnel were deported. (After the war I learned that this transport went to Auschwitz for annihilation – and not to Switzerland).

After 2 or 3 months in the ghetto my brother and I decided to create better living conditions for our parents. We found an entrance to a cellar, full of refuse and stones, which we cleared after work hours, using a loaned wheelbarrow and a shovel. Then we “schleussed” (the ghetto slang word for stealing) wood, from which we built a window, a door, two beds and a small table. A few weeks later the “private apartment” (the room) was ready. Retroactively we even got a building permit and our parents moved in. Rudi and I visited them almost daily after work, to drink “Ersatz” coffee with them. Other relatives also came sometimes, it became sort of a family center in the ghetto. One of my cousins even celebrated his engagement there.

Being workers, Rudi and I got bigger food rations than our parents, sometimes we managed to “organize” additional food and so we could help them a bit.

Moreover, each of us was in the framework of the youth movement in a commune, where additional food was distributed to the members. Especially sick members were helped with bread, sugar etc. from the common provisions.

I want to add that during the whole time in the ghetto father ate only kosher food – he did not touch meat and the little, which was distributed, he exchanged for bread or other food. He did not try to influence us boys, maybe he accepted that we had to eat whatever was available because of the hard physical work. But maybe he suspected that we both were not religious any more, though we tried to keep it secret from the parents.

Life in Terezin was ruled by a single word: transports. Unceasingly transports were arriving from various countries and unceasingly transports were leaving, “to the East” as we knew. There were no reliable news sources, only rumors. Most of the ghetto prisoners did not know a thing about the “final solution” – the extermination camps in Poland and other places, killer commandos etc. The rumors had it that life “in the East” was very hard, with hunger, diseases and hard work, but that was all we knew. The Nazis succeeded for a long time to hide the truth. A telling illustration of our naivete and ignorance is the following: we had a code with comrades from the youth movement leaving on transport, enabling them to inform us about conditions there, so as to bypass the German censor. One day we got a postcard from a friend, who had left Theresienstadt with a transport – in German block letters, with

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a maximum of 25 words as was the rule. As sender's address it said "Work camp Birkenau" – we had never heard of this place before. And our friend Rudi Rosen wrote about innocuous matters like "I am with friends, we work..." and signed "Rudi Namut." Namut means in Hebrew (which many of us had learned in preparation for Palestine) "we will die." I remember sitting with a group of friends in an attic, studying the postcard and analyzing it. Our consensus: conditions in "Birkenau" are evidently very hard, possibly Rudi R. is sick and depressed and these are the reasons for the pessimistic encoded signature. A short time later another postcard from him arrived, again from Birkenau. In this card he slanted certain letters in the opposite direction than the rest. These letters spelled out the German word "Gastod" (death by gas). We tried again to decode the meaning and came to the conclusion that Rudi R. works in a plant for poisonous gases and through work accidents people die from poison gas. None of us could think of gas chambers, where masses of people were being killed systematically... (Note: Rudi Rosen survived).

Life in Theresienstadt was very hard, even measured against the quite low standard of living during the last years in Prague. There was vermin – fleas, bedbugs and exceedingly bad hygienic conditions. But there were differences: the worst off were old people without families. They got very small food rations and had no way to get hold of additional food. They, naturally, also suffered from all kinds of diseases and life in general – they lacked the stamina to stand in line, to barter and so on. Not to speak of their social isolation! This section of ghetto prisoners had also the highest mortality rate, they were much hungrier than the rest. Younger, healthy people of working age had it better. The best situated were naturally those, who worked with food – cooks, bakers, transporters of potatoes and other foodstuff and also agricultural workers. Somewhere in the middle were artisans, who could sell their know-how for food.

We, members of the Zionist youth movements, (illegal according to the Nazi laws) organized after working hours all kinds of activities, to make the most of our free time even under ghetto conditions. There were Hebrew lessons, much reading and discussions and some sport and competitions. One of the very positive activities was the action "Yad Tomehet" (Supporting Hand): Usually two young people together visited old and sick prisoners to help them – to clean, to air bedclothes and to provide various services, sometimes even "only" to sit and talk to them.

In 1944 I, too, was one of the many employed by the Nazis at the so-called "Beautification Project." To counter rumors in the West and in the neutral countries regarding the treatment of Jews by the Germans, the ghetto was "beautified." Houses were whitewashed, the population density was lowered (through deportations to the East), playgrounds, a coffeehouse, a bank, shops etc. were erected. A delegation of the International Red Cross visited the ghetto and its members were indeed fooled by this "Potemkin" ghetto. None of the ghetto inmates who talked with members of the delegation dared to tell the truth – one could not know which of the visitors was an SS-man in civilian clothes – or a Swiss or a Swede.

There was a rich cultural life in the ghetto – lectures, performances, concerts etc. Our father also lectured. I personally did not take part in many such activities; I believe that I did not find the time for it. I had a girl friend with which I spent much time – walking while discussing books, Zionism, Socialism, the youth movement, kibbutz and thousands of other subjects. In spite of the inhuman conditions – we were young, boys and girls fell in love, there was humor and even hunger and misery were subjects for jokes.

But finally the vast majority of us were deported. My brother Rudi and I were in the first of 10 transports in autumn 1944, sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. We left Terezin on September 28, in cattle cars – about 2500 men and boys (of these about 370 survived). The wagons were locked, only two small barred windows were near the ceiling. SS-guards sat in the brakeman cabin of each car. Sometimes we heard shooting – the SS-men shot at prisoners who had somehow managed to escape from the train. Since I was one of the more slender prisoners in our car, I was lifted a few times on the shoulders of others to look out the windows. When I saw the name of a train station, a town or other signs, somebody among us always knew the place. So we followed our route on a mental map – first north, then east in the direction of Silesia. The train stopped often, we had only little food brought from the ghetto, no water.

## 5. AUSCHWITZ – BIRKENAU

After 3 days the train stopped finally, it was evening. The doors were opened and from outside orders were shouted at us: “Get out everybody, fast, fast, leave all luggage in the wagon, you will get it later!” The picture in front of our eyes was like a nightmare: in the background we saw four huge smokestacks, emitting flames and dense reeking smoke, nearer to us were long rows of low huts, even nearer a double barbed wire fence, whose wires were mounted on porcelain isolators, evidently electrified. At regular intervals in the fence there were watchtowers with armed guards, reflectors were panning in all directions. The fence itself was illuminated. In front of the fence was a chain of armed SS-men, some with leashed dogs. And then there was a row of men in striped uniforms, shouting at us in broken German. Until then we had never seen prison garb, we wore still our own clothes from home. Some, who did not jump fast enough from the wagons, were beaten with sticks. Then we stood along the rail line, between the train and the striped prisoners and were urged to go ahead. Successively we were crowded into one line, in front of us was a dais with a few SS-men and above them strong lights. Talking was forbidden.

Suddenly one of the striped prisoners approached me – I did not recognize him – and whispered (in German) into my ear: “Pretend to be older!” In front of me were only about ten people. I thought fast – if the prisoner, unknown to me, gave me this advice in spite of the risk, it must be important! When I got to the platform I saw in front of me a very good- looking SS-officer (later I learned that it was the infamous physician Dr. Mengele) in an elegant uniform and highly polished boots. One of the other SS-men at his side asked me: “How old?” I tried to stand straight and tall and answered loudly in a military fashion: “21.” (I was 18 and quite small and of slight build). “Healthy?” was the next question and I said: “Yes Sir.” Mengele directed me with a flick of the gloves he held in his hand to his right side, where a group of others already stood. My brother followed me. Others were sent to the opposite direction – we did not know the difference. When there were about 30 prisoners in our group we were led away between the fences, escorted by two SS-guards. After some 150 meters we were ordered to stop. “If you have any valuables – watches, rings, money etc., hand them over now, otherwise they will be taken from you later by force” said

one of the guards. My brother and I did not have anything, but others surrendered their possessions. This was evidently a small private business of the SS-men. One of us new prisoners dared to ask, where our friends, sent to the other side, were headed. “They are going to a camp for easier work” was the answer. So we had survived our first “Selektion,” without knowing it.

We were led into a large room, bearing a sign “Entlausung” (Delousing). All around the walls were numbered pegs. An SS-man, standing on a dais, ordered: “You are now going to the showers. Hang all your clothes on the pegs and don’t forget the number – the clothes will be disinfected, after the shower you will find them again. Keep shoes and belts.” There comes another scene to illustrate our naivete: We were conditioned always to keep identification with us. Left in the clothes – so we thought – the paper would be damaged during disinfecting, what shall we do? I decided to ask. By then I did not yet understand the camp “etiquette” and did not fear the SS, as we did soon after. Stark naked I went to the SS-man and stood straight with my hands at the non-existing trouser seam and asked: “Shall we leave our ID in the clothes or take it to the shower?” The SS-man laughed in an odd way and said: “Leave it in the clothes.” I did an about-turn and so the identity cards stayed there. Of course – we never saw our clothes or the identity cards again.

“Old” prisoners shaved our whole body and poured a stinging disinfectant on us. We went through hot and cold showers, afterward we got underpants, mine were made of a tallith (prayer shawl) and various used clothes. Finally we were outside – moist and cold, it was already dawn. Without hair and in motley clothes we were changed so much that we at first did not recognize each other – we started to laugh.

A Kapo (camp foreman) led a group of us through the camp to one of the huts, at the entrance we stood in line. We were to be allocated to a hut or organized for work or given mess-tins, I don’t remember which. All around us everything was flat, we saw only huts, the wet muddy earth, the illuminated fence with watchtowers and the smokestacks, spewing flames and smoke, penetrating everything. The line proceeded slowly. Suddenly I saw on the muddy road between the huts a boy in prisoners garb and recognized him from afar – it was a remote cousin of ours, then about 16 years old, who was deported from Theresienstadt with his parents one year earlier. (His father, Dr. Simon Adler, was a teacher of Jewish religion in Prague. He was stout and wore spectacles. Probably he never before had worked manually. His mother was of slight build, also wearing spectacles, not an athletic type either). As the boy approached, I called out to him in a whisper (disregarding the prohibition to talk) his nickname “Wolfi.” He looked in my direction, recognized my brother and me and came over. He told us that he had a job to do as “Pipel” (camp slang for a messenger boy). We should remain in our place, he promised to return shortly. We made our way slowly to the rear of the line, so as not to reach the hut before his return. He indeed came and took us to the side for a talk. (Our Kapo permitted it – as camp functionaries they were colleagues). I asked him about his father – in

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answer he pointed a finger to one of the smokestacks and said: “He is there.” When I asked about his mother, the answer was the same. This was hard to understand. We knew that we are in Silesia and in school we had learned that there was coal and steel industry there, the smokestacks we thought to belong to this industry. “Your parents work at a steel mill?” I asked unbelievably, since I could not imagine what they could do there. “What steel mill are you talking about?” he replied, “don’t you know where we are?” – and so we heard for the first time the word “Auschwitz” and what it meant. His parents were, of course sent immediately after their arrival and the selection to the gas chamber and then cremated. That was the meaning of his answer... Suddenly we understood that our friends who arrived with us the previous evening and sent “to a camp for easier work,” were not alive any more.

Wolfi enlightened us about life and the regime in a concentration camp. He gave us one advice: to leave Auschwitz as fast as possible, nobody could survive here, there may be a chance elsewhere. The idea was not, to climb over the fences, almost nobody succeeded in that. As he explained: all the time work groups were sent out of Auschwitz to plants and other work and we should make an effort to get into such a group. (Note: Wolfi survived).

We stayed in Auschwitz-Birkenau about ten days. During this time we learned of the violent, brutal and bleak reality, the hierarchy and the whole regime of concentration camps – ghetto Theresienstadt was not in the same category. Early in the morning, in deep darkness, we were woken, had only little time to use the indescribably dirty and stinking latrines, to wash a bit at a cold-water tap and to drink some “ersatz” coffee, brought from the central kitchen. Then roll call started. We had to assemble in rows in front of our hut and were counted by the block elders and Kapos, who had to report the result to the SS. If the number did not tally – and for various reasons that was almost always the case – the counting started again and again and again. We stood for many hours freezing, wet and hungry in the cold. Many prisoners fainted from weakness. At noon we got almost inedible soup made of undefined vegetables and turnips. In the evening each prisoner got an eighth of a loaf of bread and a bit of jam, margarine or sugar.

We worked at various jobs in the camp – digging, spreading gravel etc., but sometimes we had also to do senseless and superfluous work like carrying bricks from one end of the camp to the other and back again. We were supervised by Kapos, some of them very brutal and violent, who evidently enjoyed beating us with rubber sticks or pieces of cable. All over were staggering so-called “Muselmen” – emaciated prisoners, who had given up all hope and only waited to die. There were many dead bodies, on the paths, in front of the huts and also some, who had run onto the electrically charged fences and so committed suicide. Everywhere and always was the penetrating stench from the crematoria. During this time we went through three more selections, running stark naked in front of SS-physicians who sent obviously sick or weak prisoners to the gas chambers. In between we had to drill often to lift and replace our caps to order.

Shouting through the fence I conversed with an acquaintance from Prague, Dr. Otto Heller, who was in an adjoining camp. He was a physician and the father of my girl friend. He told me that she and also his wife worked as nurses.

Every morning at roll call we tried to learn, if some work group was destined to leave Auschwitz. Finally, after some 10 days it happened: we saw that in front of the next hut each of the prisoners got a blanket, a loaf of bread and some other food – sure signs for their imminent departure. My brother and I and two friends coordinated our plans and – when we were sure that no Kapo or SS-man saw us – each of us ran over to this group. Naturally the roll call did not add up and we were counted a few more times. But in the end we were led to the railway. We entered the by now well-known cattle cars and were locked in, the train left. Again we could follow our route – through Moravia and Austria to the Munich area. The train stopped after some 3 days at a small station called “Kaufering.” Leaving the car, we saw that two prisoners had died on the way, from other cars were bodies unloaded, too.

## 6. KAUFERING

We were marched through a forest and arrived at a clearing. There was a small camp with entirely different huts from those in Auschwitz. A ditch on the ground, about one meter wide, half a meter deep and 15 or 20 meters long was covered by two slanted wooden roof plates, covered by tar-paper. At one end of this half-underground hut was a window – there the block elder had his room, separated from the rest by blankets. At the other end was a door, from which three steps led into the ditch. Each such hut housed some 50 prisoners – about 25 on each side of the ditch – on the ground, covered by sparse straw. The ditch served for walking and when sitting, the prisoners put their feet in it.

Electrically charged double barbed wire fences surrounded the camp. Nearly all “functionaries” of this quite new camp – block elders, Kapos – were “old prisoners,” who had spent years in German concentration camps.

At the first roll call after our arrival the camp elder – Arnold, a Gentile German criminal – told us that we are in Kaufering 4. There were 11 such camps, branches of the nearby Dachau main camp. Then came the usual threats regarding discipline and order etc. Starting immediately with our drill, we had to take our caps off and on for a long time, until we satisfied our “superiors.”

One of the first days artisans were asked for – I reported as an electrician, my brother as a carpenter. He stayed only for a short time with this easier job, carried out mostly under a roof, then he had to work with the majority of the prisoners at a building site.

I worked as an electrician for a longer time. Since the food rations were minimal, everybody who could tried to “earn” some additional food. For a time I “manufactured” small metal containers out of sockets of burnt-out light bulbs. I sold them for bread to “rich” prisoners, who used them to keep margarine or ersatz honey. These were distributed in the evening and so they could save them for the next day. This small racket of mine stopped after a short time – there were not enough buyers and with the steadily diminishing rations and the accordingly rising hunger theft became rampant, so everybody ate his rations on the spot.

Then I found another way to get more food. Fierce winds and storms often broke the electricity poles of the huts. In such a case we electricians were allowed to leave the camp and to fell a tree in the forest for a new mast. I made use of that: sometimes

I went, with a saw and an ax, to the SS-guard at the gate and reported: “ Prisoner 115214 to the forest to bring a pole.” This was duly noted, I went and felled a tree of a size, which I just could carry. I removed the branches and the bark and returned. “115214 back with a pole” I reported. Then I cut the tree into firewood, which I sold in the evening to block elders – who paid with bread or soup. This additional food I naturally shared with my brother and our two friends. The whole procedure was quite dangerous – if an SS-man would have caught me, severe punishment would result.

One day I was fired from my job as electrician and sent to the building site, too. Almost all prisoners of the Kaufering camps worked at the erection of huge underground halls intended for the manufacture of weapons or aircraft. We were guarded by SS-men, the work was organized by the so-called “Organisation Todt,” the contractors were two firms: Moll and Holzmann. In the beginning I worked felling trees. Tall trees were cut and the branches and the bark removed. Since I was still healthy and in good condition, I was often ordered to climb the tree before the sawing began and to tie a rope, used later to pull the tree in the desired direction. And then I had – with many others – to lift the tree on the shoulder and carry it away.

On other days I was ordered to carry iron rods or to feed the concrete mixer. The latter is a especially vivid example for the brutality we had to endure. A group of 20-30 prisoners, supervised by a Kapo and guarded by an SS-man was led to such a huge machine. Some 30 meters in front of the machine was a track with a railroad car loaded with 50-kg sacks of cement. We had to form a circle, touching the car and the mixer. Then came the order to start moving. At the car a sack was loaded on our back, which we emptied into the concrete mixer – then on again for the next load. So it went for many hours. The Kapo sat in the center of the circle and watched us: when one of us stumbled and fell, the Kapo kicked him out of the way, to assure the orderly progress of work. When too few prisoners were left, others were brought in. In the evening all had to return to the camp – the wounded, the unconscious and the dead had to be carried by the others. The number of prisoners returning from work had to tally with the number of those, who had left in the morning.

Only a very few prisoners could endure these conditions for a longer time. After a time I was lucky: because of the dark winter weather reflectors illuminated the entire building site. Once the lights near the concrete mixer went out. The supervisor from the Organisation Todt looked for an electrician and I reported. After repairing the lights I didn't have to return to my former work and stayed on as an electrician at the building site.

In the first days of December 1944 my brother Rudi fell ill and could not work anymore. After some 3 days I returned from work and the “Stubenaelteste” Dr. Hanus Kafka, a physician from Prague and our friend, told me that he believed that my brother had galloping consumption and had not much time left. He died that same evening without regaining consciousness. That was on the second evening of Hanukkah. One of our cousins, Leo, died without an evident disease when he learned

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that at the selection in Auschwitz his older brother Felix volunteered to go with their parents. By now Leo knew of course that all three were killed in the gas chambers. He blamed himself and reported sick, stopped eating and working and only prayed...

At that time more and more prisoners fell ill. In addition to the constant weakness, hunger, dysentery and many other diseases typhoid fever broke out. Lice spread the epidemic, under the circumstances one could not get rid of them. The death rate rose daily. The block elders reported the deaths only a day or two later so as to get the bread and soup rations for the dead prisoners, too. Then the bodies were laid in front of the huts, from where they were collected every morning by the “death commando,” dragged away and buried in mass graves outside the camp. For a time I, too, worked in this detail.

Kaufering 4 became a quarantine camp, nobody went to work anymore. All sick prisoners from the other 10 Kaufering camps who were not able to work came to us. Among them were some of our friends e.g. Zeev Sheck and his brother, who died after a few days. As far as possible I helped the newcomers, but there was not much I could do.

In March 1945 it became clear that the Germans will be defeated very soon – we prisoners knew that we had to make every effort to hold on, to survive. There were daily new rumors about the nearing frontline, we saw the seemingly unending flights of allied planes, destroying Munich, not far from our camp. The almost finished underground halls built by us were totally destroyed, too.

I contracted typhoid fever and recovered somehow. On April 24, a roll call was held, we were told that the Dachau main camp was already in the hands of the International Red Cross, which was to take charge of us. All those able to walk would be marched there, the remainder should stay in the huts and would be brought there by train. We already heard the approaching artillery and so the story sounded plausible. But after our experience travelling with the SS, Dr. Kafka and I decided to risk the march, my bad condition notwithstanding. Maybe there would be a chance to escape in the forest, should the SS want to kill us, as we feared.

## 7. DEATH MARCH AND LIBERATION

We started to walk, supporting one another. In the beginning those who could not go on were beaten, later we heard shots – stragglers were being killed. In the evenings we were led off the road into a field or a meadow, where we spent the night in melting snow and water. We did not get any food, we had the snow to drink... Before leaving the camp I had “organized” a few potatoes, which I carried in an improvised knapsack, hanging on my shoulder by a piece of electrical wire. The first evening I put this treasure under my head and wound the wire around the neck. Throughout the night I made sure that the wire – and the potatoes – were still there. When I woke in the morning I saw that someone had succeeded to steal all the potatoes from under my head without removing the wire. In the following days I could only chew grass stalks, protruding from the snow, or suck pebbles, it gave the illusion of eating.

Six days later we arrived at the gate of the Dachau main camp, but there was no Red Cross to be seen. The SS used this bluff to keep us docile during the march. After a long wait it became clear that they would not let us in, they said that the camp was full. We had to march on until we arrived at a small camp called Allach. There we fell totally exhausted into a hut, on top of the bodies of prisoners, who had come earlier. In the morning we saw through gaps in the walls that the guards had left the watchtowers – the SS-men had fled. There were shots very near to us. My friend H. Kafka and I feared the panic in the hut should it be hit and decided to find cover outside. The only deeper place was the latrine, so we submerged ourselves there up to our necks – shells were flying over our heads in all directions. Evidently we were in the midst of the frontline – from one side the Germans were shooting, from the other (as we learned later) the Americans. After a time the shooting abated and then we saw an olive-colored tank approaching along the forest. Since the German tanks were gray we knew that these were our liberators. To describe my thoughts and feelings at this moment is impossible. “I am free, I have survived, the Nazis are gone...” was mixed with the memory of all those who did not live to see liberation. It was May 1. 1945.

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After the first US army front units came a medical one, composed almost entirely of black soldiers. We were disinfected, showered, examined by physicians and given new clean clothes (from SS stores). For a few days I was in an American field hospital, until I recovered some strength. In the meantime various groups of liberated prisoners started to organize according to their countries of origin and lists were made of who wants to get to which country. Naturally I wanted to go as soon as possible to then Palestine, but first I had to return to Prague. Though I knew the fate of almost all my relatives and of many of my friends from the youth movement, I hoped that some had survived and the natural meeting point was Prague. So I traveled with many, most of them Gentile, former prisoners in a convoy of American trucks of the Czechoslovak army to Plzen, where I arrived on May 25, 1945. From there I went with a goods train to Prague – the railroad did not function yet regularly.

## 8. BACK IN PRAGUE

Of all my relatives I found only a brother of my grandmother, aged 73, Dr. Berthold Jeiteles. As a well-known scholar he was protected from transports to the East and survived in ghetto Terezin. He refused to acknowledge the fact that so many of his family and acquaintances were dead. “After WWI, too, people returned after years from Russian captivity – all our relatives live somewhere and will come back” he said. (After many efforts he succeeded to join his niece in the USA and lived out his life there.)

Of dozens of members of the families Lieben and Jeiteles (my grandmother’s family), with whom I grew up in Prague, only three survived in Europe – great-uncle Berl Jeiteles, the daughter-in-law of a cousin of my father and I. Three emigrated in time, before the Holocaust – my brother and two sons of another cousin of my father.

In these first days of liberty I was interested mainly in finding out who of my relatives and friends had survived – and in food. Not only the physical, but also the psychological hunger after all these years was enormous. It went so far that I often ate a full meal at a restaurant and afterwards I said to the waiter: “The whole thing once again, please.” And when I was invited for a meal – there were some, who had returned earlier and already had an apartment – I ate beforehand at a restaurant so as not to arrive too hungry and to consume too much, in these times nobody had too much food.

For the first two or three weeks I lived with the Lauschers. Mrs. Lauscher was my teacher for a year and also knew my parents well. She was lucky – she stayed with her husband and their little daughter at ghetto Theresienstadt until liberation.

In June of 1945, when I was still quite emaciated, I met a gentile who had known my parents, Premysl Pitter. Risking his life he had visited Jewish families (before the deportations) and helped them with food and otherwise. (Later I learned that he hid Jewish children in two children’s homes he managed. But the parents of the children reclaimed them before their deportation – they did not want to be separated from them). In May and June 1945 P. Pitter seized four formerly German

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castles in Bohemia and opened rest homes for Jewish children from the liberated ghetto Theresienstadt. He suggested for me to lead a group of children there and at the same time recover myself. I accepted and stayed there for a few weeks. Then differences of opinion developed between the other (Gentile) educators and me: they pulled in the direction of Czech patriotism, I toward Zionism and Palestine. I saw that I could not have my way and left. (Later, in autumn 1945, Pitter housed in these homes children of Gentile “Sudeten” German families, before these were deported with their families to Germany. Many Czechs were hostile to Pitter because of this humanitarian attitude).

Then I worked for a time at a small workshop for the manufacture of electrical control panels in Prague and lived together with my friend Karel Sussmann, who had returned from the camps, too, at an apartment, which we rented together with Hanka Heller and her daughter. Hanka was the widow of Dr. Otto Heller, whom I had last met in Auschwitz – he did not survive. At this time emissaries from the Zionist youth movements from Palestine started to be active. Their task was to reactivate the movements in Europe and to convince the remaining youth and children to immigrate to Palestine. In Slovakia many more Jewish children and youth had survived than in the Czech lands and that’s why the youth movements reorganized there much faster and more intensively. I was persuaded to become the manager of a youth and children’s home in Bratislava (Pressburg), a so-called Middle Hakhsharah (“Mi-Ha” in short) of my movement, the Maccabi Hatzair. It was started in the summer of 1945, when the first children came. There was already a manageress, Chavah, with whom I was to cooperate. So, in February of 1946, I traveled to Slovakia.

## 9. SLOVAKIA

The Mi-Ha was located in a villa, which had belonged to Jews. There was also a small garden. The furniture consisted of iron beds, the blankets, bed-linen etc. were US army surplus, donated by relief organizations. The food situation at that time was not yet very good, but nobody went hungry. Here, too, various organizations helped. The children were of different ages – there were some aged six or seven up to youngsters of 16 or 17. The two of us, Chavah and I cared for all the children's need – health, culture, schooling and much more. Some of the children came to the Mi-Ha after hiding in forests and monasteries or from concentration camps and were very neglected. We had to explain to them, why one should not steal and that there was no need to hide a piece of bread under the pillow – because after this meal there will be more... And we also taught them, from the geography of Palestine through the Hebrew language to Jewish history. None of us two had the least training for such educational work. But because both of us were still very young and had lived through the previous years under similar circumstances to those of our wards, we were able to speak their language. During our time there some of the children immigrated to Palestine and others came...

A short time after my arrival in Bratislava we two fell in love and married. Naturally we wanted to go as fast as possible to Palestine, to a kibbutz, but the movement had nobody to take our place and so we stayed on and on. After about one year in Bratislava I was sent to manage another Mi-Ha in Zilina and we met only sporadically. Later Chavah came there, too.

In 1947 the responsibility for the two homes was transferred to other members of the movement and we two worked at its national center in Bratislava. In this activity I had to travel throughout Czechoslovakia – after WWII there were two or three Jewish children in one town, four or maybe twelve in another. And we wanted to reach as many of them as possible and to convince them to immigrate to the newly founded State of Israel.

In February 1948 a son was born to us, Eli. And finally, finally in April 1949 we were allowed to leave Czechoslovakia for good.

## 10. ISRAEL

On May 5, we arrived by boat in Haifa. Before that we had corresponded with Kibbutz Kfar Hamaccabi near Haifa, where we were headed. A member of the kibbutz, Tsvi Batscha, whom we knew from Czechoslovakia where he was an emissary of the movement, fetched us from the port and we went by bus to the kibbutz. The first surprise in Israel was the green vegetation all over – in our imagination it was much more of a desert. Later, when we traveled to the South, we saw the desert too, of course. Our nearest friends and Chavah's sister, who had come before us, welcomed us with all the love and friendship – but the members of the kibbutz did not show much enthusiasm. Though we had long ago announced our arrival, no living quarters were ready for us and for the first two weeks we lived – with our one year old baby – in a wooden furniture container, which was fitted with a window and a door. The permanent inhabitants of this container were on vacation. Then we were allocated a room in a wooden hut. Neither our child, nor children of other newcomers had places in the children's homes – so they stayed, under very primitive conditions, with the parents. Then we found that none of the women who worked in the children's homes wanted to work with these newcomer's children. Finally, a room was fitted as an improvised nursery. There Chavah cared for three small children, without the least experience or training.

I worked in various branches of the kibbutz economy – as a builder, carpenter, electrician, sometimes in the cowshed, the vineyards or carp ponds. Generally I was happy with this life – but Chavah had it much harder. Not physically, we were used to such hardships and ready for them. But the cultural and communal life we had expected was, in this kibbutz, disappointing. And the care for the children was on a much lower level than what we were led to believe.

When we arrived Chavah was pregnant. The woman charged by the kibbutz with keeping in contact with the newcomers, reacted to this fact with the remark: "That's bad!" – not very encouraging for a young idealist. In November 1949 our daughter Nurit was born. With time Chavah's discontentment with the atmosphere in Kfar Hamaccabi and especially with childcare grew and for a whole year we discussed the question, if to leave the kibbutz. In the end I gave in – I saw that Chavah would be forever unhappy there. In autumn of 1951 we left Kfar Hamaccabi and moved to Kiriat Tivon.

The beginning was economically hard. We had only the clothes and some books we had brought from Czechoslovakia and four iron beds the kibbutz got for new immigrants, which we could take with us. In 1953 a poliomyelitis epidemic raged in Israel (that was before the Salk vaccine) and our son Eli contracted the disease. After a very hard time, which he spent mostly in a so-called iron lung at a Haifa hospital, where Chavah sat with him almost continuously, we placed him in a home for the rehabilitation of handicapped children. But the disease had destroyed his lungs. He died in December 1953.

In November 1954 our second daughter Liora was born. At that time Chavah studied ceramics and works in this profession since then, creating and teaching.

For ten years I worked as an engineer in woodworking factories and also designing wooden toys at a factory located in Kibbutz Alonim near Kiriat Tivon. The place closed and I found a job in a precision mechanics workshop. After 8 years I found more interesting work as mechanical designer at a newly founded plant for physical and medical instruments and machines. Reaching the age of 65, the usual age for retirement of men in Israel, I was asked if I wanted to go on. I agreed and since then I work 5-6 hours daily.

Both our daughters married after their military service – today we have one grandson and two granddaughters after their service and two granddaughters still in high school.

Kiriat Tivon, March 2000

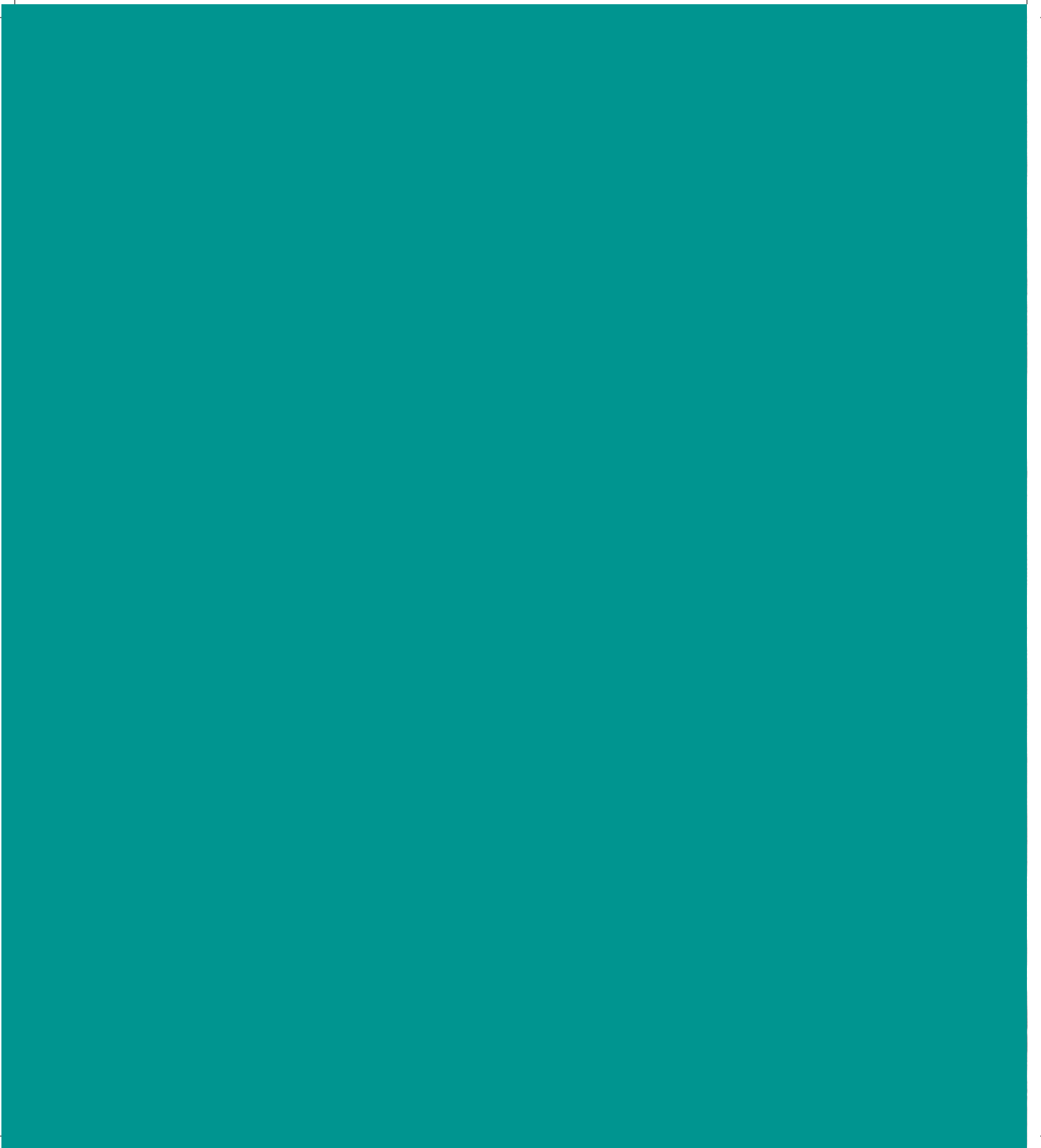
Max M. Livni (Lieben)



# CHAVA LIVNI



**Max and Chava Livni, Prague, 2006.**



**September 29th 1944**

This is the end... it is night, we stand beside the Danube, a few people guarded by Hlinka guards. Silence – the water is black, only the moon shines like silver on the water. This is the moment of leave-taking – I am 18 years old and say good-bye to life, because I know: this is the end. I would like to scream, to resist – but it is so hopeless.

They are starting to round us up – a long line of people with bags and backpacks walking through the sleeping city, till we get to the building of the UZ (the Jewish Central Office). I swallow my tears; I don't want to cry, to be weak.

All kinds of thoughts cross my mind – I think of all the friends who went two years before us and I know they are not alive any more. I think of the friends who live with forged papers or in hiding, perhaps they will have a chance... How little we knew 2 years ago – and then later, when we began to get some news and information – the months of trying to save some of us.

Is it possible, that I am the same girl who grew up protected and loved – walks with the “Fraulein,” playing with my cousin Liese, discovering books together, Karin Michaelis, Erich Kaestner... The Protestant school with my beloved teacher Edith, friends, walks in the old town, mostly with our father, who loved the old houses and yards. Or trips in the vicinity. Everything was so secure as if it would last forever... I do not really remember at what point it ended. In the German high school where half of the class were Jews the atmosphere slowly changed – then one morning a group of “Hitler youth” stood at the gate and asked everybody: “Jewish?.” No Jews were let in and then the director came out and spoke to us – he declared that what happened is contrary to his convictions and he is resigning as of this moment.

One year in a Slovak school – I understood no Slovak and was terribly unhappy there. But then I joined the Zionist Youth Movement – and that was a “second home” for me. My parents did not approve of that – they still held to their humanistic beliefs and did not see that nationality or religion is important. The only important thing in their eyes was to be a good human being. Till the start of anti-Jewish laws I never knew who of my parent's friends were Jews, nobody ever thought it was worth mentioning....

Another year in a Jewish school – but most of the time I spent in the Youth Movement. In 1939 the three brothers of my mother and their families were baptized – they hoped it would help. They tried to convince my mother to join them – my father insisted to talk this over with me first, as I was already 13 and “old enough to decide for myself.” It is hard to explain – I grew up almost without religion – but this I could not do. Later I heard from my father, that he too decided not to do it – eventually the idea was dropped in our family.

At age 14 there was no more school. One “Jewish law” after the other was proclaimed. We had to hand over gold, silver, furs, radios and so on... My father was retired from the bank. Of course we had to put on the yellow star, were not allowed to be in public parks, cinemas, theaters. But we were young and managed even then to enjoy life. We used to meet in a cemetery, taught ourselves in small groups – invented the “registka,” a kind of card file with cross references mainly for historical and geographical facts. And always there were books – and long talks about these and debates...

In the meantime we had to leave our flat which was “too large” for 4 persons and went to live with grandmother, who lived also in a flat too big for a single person.

The Zionist Youth Movement organized groups for retraining, mostly for work in agriculture. We worked first in vineyards, then in a big vegetable garden (which had belonged to our uncle and he functioned there also as instructor). A few Hachsharot (groups for retraining, living together in a commune) were established – also for younger people. Each of these groups planned to go to Palestine together. Many from my group went to Cadca – a small town near the Polish border. I wanted very much to join them, but it took several weeks till my parents agreed to it – I finally went to Cadca in autumn 1941.

### **Cadca.**

There are no coherent recollections – just months of hard work, intense living, learning Hebrew, friendship – talks into the night... And always there was Motke our Madrich (youth leader) whom all of us adored. Packages from home – shared by all, Friday evenings, everybody in white shirts, after we had cleaned the whole house, singing and music... And then it suddenly ended. The rumors about transports for work in the East were realized: everybody over age 16 had to go. Three of the girls were too young (among them I) and had to go home. A few of our group, who at that day were away, were spared from the transport, but the rest of the group went... We came home, very, very sad, that we had to part. We had no idea, what the future held for our friends – we thought that the worst that could happen is very hard work, perhaps also hunger – but together we would have borne it. It was months later that we knew, that they were brought to Treblinka and died there.

Some time before that the “Working Group” was established. An underground group, working officially in the framework of the Jewish Council and trying to save, what could be saved. Our father, who was head of Finances in the Jewish Council, also joined the Working Group. The soul of this group was Gisi Fleischmann (whom I also have to thank for convincing my parents to let me go to Cadca). It was a very mixed bunch of people: Gisi, an ardent Zionist, so was Dr. Oskar Neumann, then there were 2 Rabbis (one orthodox and one reform), assimilated Jews (like my father) – but Gisi, whose motto was “the good of the community goes before personal interests” managed to get cooperation from everybody.

In time we realized, that the first priority is to find ways and means to save as many people as possible. One group from the Youth Movement went illegally over the Hungarian border – there the situation at that time was better. Then we started to manufacture false papers, for those of us who did not look too Jewish and to search for places of hiding for others. All of this was not easy – to live as an “Aryan” one had to have food ration cards, but we found people who helped us in spite of the danger they faced. There was a policeman who supplied us with ration cards and occasionally also with bread, there was Katica, a washerwoman who rented out beds to workers and was ready to take people without papers for a few days. That was for many people who had fled from Poland the first station. My friend Aviva and I found Jewish families where we worked as baby sitters (that included daily laundry for two babies – of course done by hand). This way we earned some money and could send food parcels to our friends who were in work camps.

At some time during this year we too were taken to a concentration point at the town hall, to be sent on a transport – but at the last moment we were let out – my father being head of the Finance Department. Then we lived already also with the Fleischhacker family (their villa was occupied by a big shot German). When they came to take us my aunt boiled all the eggs we had at home – for days afterwards all of us ate hard-boiled eggs...

In autumn 1942 the transports stopped – naturally no one knew for how long. But each day was a gift, each day that went by without again hearing, that someone of our friends was taken... Now we had some more time to organize ourselves. We had to leave my grandmother’s flat. She went to Nitra, where my cousin’s husband Micky Orovan was a doctor at the local hospital and took her in as a patient. The rest of us – the Fleischhacker family and ours went to live in a flat on the Danube bank – my uncle had an “exception” (he went to the same school as the Catholic priest Tiso who was the head of the Slovak Autonomous Republic) – and we were allowed to live on this street, which was generally out of bounds for Jews.

Jews had to be at home at 6 p.m. – but we had an evening entertainment: to look out the window at the ships passing – noting how long it took them to return etc. I envied the children who lived with their families on the barges.

In the Youth Movement we created a complicated chain of contact. We could not meet in groups – three people at the most. So one of the three always belonged to another threesome... From that time also is the photograph of Aviva, Sonja and me sitting at a table with Shabbat candles. Our social life took place mostly in the kitchen – with an old hand-operated phonograph and a few records we played to exhaustion again and again...

My memories of this time are very confused – just a few episodes. Outings, where everybody traveled separately by tram to the end station and we met at some outlying point and had a few hours together. Refugees from Poland for whom we found hiding places and ways to send them on to Hungary. Josef Korniansky who tried to teach me Yiddish. Hajka with whom I sat for days to translate her diary. The event, when Aviva and I went through the old town and somebody from a barred window spoke to us – the house was a prison and he had been caught as a Communist. We brought him some food and later, when he was in another prison we brought him parcels there, too.

Mariska – a Christian girl who was a good friend and went several times to Hungary, contacting there our friends and transferring money. Some of our friends who had left for Hungary had their parents still in Bratislava and we used to visit them and help, if necessary. Others joined the partisans (which was not always easy, they were not very friendly to Jews).

In spring 1944 2 Slovak Jews managed to escape from Auschwitz (in the meantime the story is known). The report they gave with exact drawings of the gas chambers and crematories was a shock. Though much of it we sensed before – the devious planning to the last detail and the scope of the annihilation were hard to digest... And now it became very clear, that we would not see again anybody who had gone with a transport...

In summer 1944 the partisans organized an uprising. Liese and her parents went some time before that to join her married sister in Banska Bystrica. The uprising brought with it the German occupation – and with it the renewed danger of transports. There were feverish attempts to avoid this danger. We had a hiding place in a nearby village in the cellar of the house of a maid of our neighbors – together with a few other people. We went there and stayed – I cannot remember how long. Late at night we could get out for a while and breathe... Then one day my father got the news, that all is clear and there are negotiations with the Germans. He decided, that he had to take part – and we did not want to separate. All of us returned... and this was the night, they came to take us...

*Parts of a diary and letters that were never sent...  
which I left with Aviva for safekeeping and she  
managed to save most of them:*

**April 12, 1942**

Motke is no more, is no more forever! Such strange words, what do they mean?  
Motke went away... never again...

One after the other went – it is happening so fast – how to bear it? How to bear  
the “never again”? How to be strong, how not to break apart?  
I feel as if all of you were dead – just I am still here – can it be true?

**April 29, 1942**

It hurts so much – not to be able to do anything, to help...

**May 27, 1942**

Now I know what it means to be a Jew! Now I live it with all the pain and  
suffering.

**June 6, 1942**

Now Shuli went too – day before yesterday they took her. It is strange – there is  
no more pain, perhaps I cannot feel any more? I am just numb and tired...

Cars, cars with people. Wagons crammed with people... so many of us went  
– everything is falling apart, breaks down – nothing to do and I am so terribly tired.  
A vase with flowers stands on the table – and you all are “there.” And I sit here by  
myself...

**June 7, 1942**

3 days of transports. We work, make packages, hundreds of packages – the  
hands move all the time, all the time the same rhythm – just don’t think! One-two,  
one-two – close the package put it on the side – the next one. But the pain is with me  
all the time and all of you who went away – your eyes... so many eyes...

**June 10, 1942**

Motke, we can write to you. Oh God, I am so glad! But what can a written word  
on a small piece of paper say? But if you get it, you will know that we think of you all  
the time – please, please be strong! Perhaps one day we shall meet again?

**June 11, 1942**

We have some news of where our boys and Motke are. We try to write – and hope that they get it...

**July 7, 1942**

No, I cannot imagine this – not Motke! That they shoot you and pour lime on you??! No, no, no!!!

**July 20, 1942**

Tomorrow I will be 16. Such a strange feeling – so different from every other birthday. Till this moment I did not even remember – now I am just sad. Will I live on my 17th birthday? We work hard to find ways to survive – if we had only one small sign from those who went... Everything is so gray – Motke and you all – be strong, be hard like stone – just deep, deep inside leave a bit of feeling!

**August 6, 1942**

There is again a possibility of aliyah. It seems like a fata morgana. And to think of you all (“you go on aliyah and us they will shoot in the Ukraine”) – that is so hard. It is even hard to know, that we continue living here – everyday lives, day after day.

**August 8, 1942**

I would like so much to throw away everything that is so black and heavy. Just to be able to forget for a few moments, to be without a care... No, I do not want even to remember, to think back – it hurts too much. The past is done with, forever. Just to forget for a while – to laugh, to enjoy – what an impossible dream...

**August 22, 1942**

Motke, yesterday I was with you – just for a while. I thought so much of you and then I saw you – lying on a cot in a hut – and you looked at me and I thought: “do you know, that it is Friday evening? Do you remember us too? (when I came 2 years later to Birkenau I saw the same hut – to the last detail – as in the dream).

It is 11 o'clock at night. They danced and had music and I could not stand it – I stood by the window and looked out on the Danube. It is so beautiful – the water and the moon and the air is so smooth – and finally I could cry – and cry...

**September 22, 1942**

Motke – today half a year ago you wrote to us – after they took the boys. I still see you in my mind on the last day in Cadca – you stood in the door and looked after us, so sad... When will there be an end to the waiting?

**October 12, 1942**

It is not nice, that I have not written for such a long time. Yesterday we had again a way to send letters – perhaps a better one. If you would only get it!! We wait and wait and there is no sign from you...

**November 11, 1942**

I dreamed: all of us sat around a long table and somebody distributed apples. Beautiful red apples. But there were not enough for everybody – so whoever got one, had to share. But nobody did. I got an apple too and started to cut it to pieces – I cut and cut – the apple did not diminish. Every time I gave a piece away, there was a new piece...

**December 17, 1942**

Motke, I have to know if you are still alive! It is awful not to know where to send my thoughts – and all the news we get... I tried to think of the thousands who die – what right have I to be anxious about individuals? But can one stop it?

There are no words – there is no help. I cannot write any more – there is no sense in it. I cannot hope any more – I just wait and wait and am afraid of the day when there will be nothing to wait for any more. Such emptiness...

**January 25, 1943**

Motke, again they speak about aliyah. This time it seems a real possibility – but how can I leave? How can I bear to be so far away? Do you remember – once you said, that after many, many years we will meet an old man with a long beard on the road – and we will be young...

The thought, that you could come back and not one of your “children” waits for you...

**March 21, 1943**

Motke – I read your last letter again, for the thousandth time – how is it possible that a year has passed? And no one knows if one of the boys lives...

**December 12, 1943**

I have not written for a long time – I just did not have the strength for it. These last days I sat with Hayka and translated her diary and lived through it all: how her group hid in the ghetto and finally managed to escape.

Today I know, that my friends who went with a transport are not alive any more. In the long hours at night, when I cannot sleep I just ask: “how???” How much did you suffer – what unspeakable tortures you had to suffer?

Is it possible, that there are places in this world where people live normal lives? How can they? And if I should survive – how can I ever live a normal life? Of one thing I am sure – as long as I live I will not forget!

*Here the diary ends – I do not know if some pages were lost, or perhaps I stopped writing.*

*A short time after the liberation – in Mauthausen and back in Bratislava:*

**Summer 1945. To my father** ( not all who died are gone...)

I don't know if I will be able to find the words for all I want to say. I know you are not alive – I am not trying to deceive myself. No, I want to bear it – to have the strength. Because that is, what you would expect from me – to start building my life anew... But even so I cannot think about you as dead – you gave me so much and all of this is alive in me! You will always be with me and I will always ask: “what would you do in my place?” But you left me very lonely. It took so much just to stay alive – not to give up – now there is just a big void...

I will try to write about what happened after the night they took us and we stood on the bank of the Danube. They herd us together with other groups like ours and we march through the dark and silent town to the offices of the Jewish Council.

We sit in a dark room – cramped, everybody on his luggage. I cry softly – I don't want anybody to hear me – but I am 18 years old and my life is going to end before I started living... Why must I bury all my dreams? Why, why?

But I can't allow myself to be weak – I bite my knuckles, stifle my sobs. So many went before me – I can bear it, too!!

The morning comes finally – gray and cold and wet. An endless line of people going to the train station. And then we stand – and wait – people crying, shouting... Now I am quiet, I have to help my parents, have to be on their side. To flee?? Where? There is no hope...

We arrive in the Sered camp. Again chaos and shouting – a hut where people lay all over the floor, their suitcases and packages under their heads. We hear that Gisi Fleischmann went with a special transport to Auschwitz and that Oskar Neumann is in Sered too.

...I don't remember how long we stayed in Sered – probably just a few days...

Again the wagon – again a cattle wagon. There is hardly room enough to sit. Somehow I have the feeling that I am not really here – just looking from the outside. On my lap I hold little Mindel – she is 8 years old and has 4 or 5 siblings. She is asleep – her head with silky blond hair on my arm – poor child, why has she to die? Opposite me sit my parents – I smile at them and I think: “they will never have grandchildren – and I shall never hold my own child like this...”

Don't think! Just don't think!

The train rides on – where? It does not matter – wherever it goes it will be to our death.

And then he is beside me – a warm hand holding mine – full of strength. It is dark, I cannot see him, only hear his voice: “you are a brave girl” He keeps holding my hand and I let him ... his hand is so kind. I do not know his name – I cannot see his face, but he talks to me quietly. And inside me is peace! I feel all the terror around us – but I want to dream, forget where I am – dream of happiness. It is as if we were all by ourselves – his voice caressing me. And we speak of everything – of the death that waits for us... He kisses me – my eyes, my mouth and I kiss him too... Tomorrow we will not live anymore – that is all we have left – just a few moments...

The train rides on....

Suddenly it stops – cries, shooting – somebody jumped from the train – could he save himself? No one knows the answer.

And then we arrive – they open the carriages, shouting, beating and the order: men on this side! I cannot talk – I stand between him and my father, hold their hands... one more moment... my parents kiss, they are so strong! And he kisses me for the last time – promise to be strong! My father hugs me – somebody pulls me away – just his words stay with me “I lived my life – but you had everything still in the future...”

I cannot speak, I cannot cry. I have to be strong – for my mother, for Agi...

The voice asks: “able to work? Go on..” A hand pushes us on – mother where are you? We are not allowed to stop, to look back – we only hear her crying in despair: “My children, my children!” – If I would get to be 100 years old I will not forget ...

Go on, keep it all inside – deep, deep inside. Be hard as a stone, just a little while longer and then you won't be anymore! The night is dark only the strong lights of the searchlights pierce the fog and blind... Barbed wire fences, mud, huts – unreal forms of people in striped prisoners garb – Auschwitz! So that is how it looks!

A long line of trucks – we cannot see into them. Shouts “to the side” – I do not know what the cars mean – just an idea – Then the showers: I am sure, this is the end. We have to strip off all clothes – I hold Agi’s hand. A photo fell out of a pocket – Avi, Puffi and I sitting on a bench and laughing. I hurt so much – be well, all my loved ones – for me there is nothing more.

They cut our hair – I sit naked and my hair on my knees. The girl that goes now with a razor over my head is here since 1942 – she knew Mela and tells me about her death... I am numb, can’t take in anything more. The shower – and what comes out is water – not gas!!! We live! We get some rags, wooden clogs – it does not matter. Agi found a kerchief in a pocket, goes to return it “hide it, you goose.” They herd us into a hut – people lying crowded together on cots – like sardines. The light is shut off – in the dark we climb somewhere, try to lie down, half-sitting – somebody lies across my legs – never mind. We keep holding hands – only to stay together – and close the eyes and forget...

Coarse shouts wake us: “roll call, roll call – everybody out!” These are Jewish girls shouting at us – in good warm clothes, boots and beating us with clubs. They beat us – “faster, faster!” – I don’t get it – I knew so much about Auschwitz – but that our girls can behave like this...

It is still dark, only a red glow in the sky. It is 4 o’clock in the morning, cold and rainy. The block-elder counts us like merchandise – after her trail the “Stubovky.” What is this smell? Impossible to define: lime, corpses, fire – Auschwitz.

We stand for hours – finally the order to disperse. The whole body is stiff, aches – but never mind! Only stop thinking – don’t think!! Back to the hut – now in the daylight I see it: the bunks, the long brick stove in the center – I have seen this before, I know this – it is my dream! The dream where I saw Motke! How is that possible?

We huddle in the bunks – slowly we recognize people – without hair they look different. Agi cries and cries – I try to quiet her down – empty words... I myself don’t believe them! People talk, try to orient themselves, to find a glimmer of hope – to ignore the hopelessness, the bleakness... We get soup – an unspeakable brew full of twigs and stones. But I force myself and Agi to eat it – I know that is the only way to stay alive.

A terrible scene: suddenly a woman falls on her knees in front of me and thanks me for having saved her daughter. I had brought her false “Aryan” papers -“you saved her and did not manage to save yourself!”

Somebody from the men's camp is looking for me – some kind of workman, they can get around the various camps. News from father – I dare not believe. Can he stand it? Is there a little bit of hope that we shall meet again?? If I could pray, I would pray for strength – for him, for me...

The fifth day in Auschwitz. Evening, it is already dark – suddenly: detonations. Again and again – now we are sure – it is anti-aircraft cannon! Shouts from outside: “Put the lights out!” – on and on, like an echo. Perhaps there is after all a small possibility to survive – not to go to our death? We hold hands – we hope – there is no fear. What have we to lose? – Then a morning, like every other morning here. Nothing happened. Again “coffee” (a brown tasteless watery brew) and be counted and the horrible latrines and the soup... The “Musel-women,” hardly able to put one foot before the other, looking like skeletons. Auschwitz! And always the smoke stacks – smoking and the red glow... And then curfew – Agi almost faints – I half-carry her to the door, there maybe some fresh air will enter through a crack. Roll call again – standing around – disinfection – we receive summer clothes and out we go into the ice-cold night and pouring rain – finally we end up in a hut. No light, no blankets, just shouts and beatings, nobody knows what is going on. We are not allowed to leave the room, at last a pail is brought into the midst of the hut and 1000 women may relieve themselves, one after the other. It is horrible, but they cannot demean me. As long as I am alive nothing can humiliate me – what there is deep inside me stays with me, whatever they do to me!

Next day again: all out! Without clothes we stand in the rain for hours. Now I am sure, this is the “selection,” after that there is only the gas... I am glad – at last the torture comes to an end.

Once more the thoughts go out to all those I am not going to ever see again – my mother who has all this behind her. My father – maybe there is a miracle and he survives? And all the friends. We had planned our future together...

Laboriously we trudge along in the too large wooden clogs – again the showers – again – no gas! Again the girls from 1942 distribute clothes. We stand until the evening – but now it seems to be sure – they send us with a workers transport. That I also did not know – that there is an “After” after Auschwitz... At last we move – a long line, parting at a van. Again the fear – just now we had some hope and now? But it is only the distribution of some food.

And again in the train wagon – again people piled on each other – but we two stayed together... Slowly I start to think again, to hope – it is hard to grasp. We are alive and we again dare to hope...

Freiberg – I don't know how long we traveled. We arrived at an enormous factory hall, they put us up there – it is hard to believe. A real building, not huts, central heating, washrooms – you almost feel like a human being again. In our room there are girls from Eastern Slovakia and Viennese from Theresienstadt. The “camp elder” Hanka came with us from Auschwitz, so did the “room elder” – Sari, Hanka's sister. There are SS-women guards and the camp commander, an SS – Unterscharfuehrer... Some of our group – we are about 1500 women – are from Lodz, Poland, they have a “block elder” and “room elders” of their own. Work at the factory – it is producing airplanes and we work at the department for wings. In the beginning we just file and rasp pieces of aluminum sheet – standing for hours. Most of the German foremen speak in the Saxonian dialect – barely understandable for us. So the days pass – morning roll call, “coffee,” work, midday soup, work, again roll call and in the evening our daily bread ration with a bit of jam or something looking like sausage awaits us on our beds... At first there are sometimes even boiled potatoes. We are very crowded – two to a narrow cot full of bedbugs – but it is warm, we can somehow wash ourselves, though there is no soap. We are dead tired from the long hours of work, but still in the evening we are again human beings. Somebody recites a poem or talks about “once,” or fantasizes about what will be the first thing “afterwards” (usually to eat a thick slice of bread with butter... ). But always the evening ends with singing – sad, sentimental songs and the tears flow... One of the SS-women guards, a very young one, uses to come in quietly – “please don't mind me...” she sits in the corner and cries her heart out. One day we hear that she was punished and removed from our camp.

We even achieve a certain measure of protection – somebody found out that we had taken part in seances, Hanka and her sister Sarika take us to their room, to teach them. Nothing much comes out of it – but here one clutches at straws... And for us it is a short while of “luxury,” not to be in the crowded room and even to get an additional potato or two, or sometimes the kettle after the food distribution with the dregs of the soup, which we share with the other girls in our room.

Working hours are endless – during the mechanical drilling there is time to think – too much time... I am thinking of home, but is there still such a thing? Where, who? I know one thing, if only one of my friends survives, I will not be alone.

On Christmas Eve we receive a special ration and even a “bonus” – we are allowed to “buy” some celery salt. But here ends our “good time” – we have to move into huts built for us outside the town. First they march us into an open shed, where we have to fill straw mattresses. There is a snow storm, ice cold and the wind blows through our threadbare rags... My feet, in thin shoes with the soles almost gone, are like lumps of ice. The cold is cruel – worse than the hunger... The hands hurt indescribably – I can't move my fingers – somehow I fill the mattress... When we finally arrive at the factory and I slowly start to thaw, the pain is really starting... How will I go on, how can one stand the terrible cold?

And so, twice daily, our trek through the town begins – before daylight, in total darkness the way to the factory – hardly anybody on the street, just a line of freezing women, many of them with small children in their arms, waiting for milk. And our way back, again in darkness, into the ice-cold huts, where there are stoves – but they are unlit.

How I hate the snow – white and cold, wherever you look – from the window of the factory hall it stretches into infinity. Only my small tree comforts me – a solitary, leafless tree on a hillock – withstanding the storms, not breaking... and tells me, that there is still a world outside, that in spring it will grow young leaves – that hope is not dead.

For a few days I was ordered to do other work – standing on a ladder I have to polish the wing with a huge polishing disk. It costs me my last reserves of strength – though the foreman is quite humane, but I am glad to return to my old job. And the foreman there is also quite nice – for Christmas he put a small bag with sugar candy between the ribs of the wing – another time bandages, after having seen the wounds on our feet, which were not healing... He told us, that he came from Duesseldorf and had not heard from his family for weeks, only, that there were many aerial bombardments...

We also have sometimes air raid warnings – everybody except we prisoners hurries into the shelters. We are left alone – locked up, but each explosion sounds like a present to us! The most eerie show was the bombing of Dresden – wave after wave of planes – we saw the bombs falling, the flames painting the skies red and illuminating the destruction... The anti-aircraft artillery all around us – ear-splitting. One of the SS-women guards came from Dresden – she is completely broken, her parents and younger siblings are there. But for us it means, that the end is nearer again...

Sometimes we have to go to the electricians workshop, when the light bulbs we use for work burn out. That is great – there are French prisoners of war working there, they have built a radio receiver and listen to news. Somehow we communicate and get information about the nearing front line...

One day there is shouting – one of the guards caught a prisoner – it is not clear what crime she was accused of. Anyway, as punishment her hair is shorn, by her closest friend. The hair grows only very slowly – maybe because of the undernourishment – during the three months it grew hardly by 2 centimeters. Still it looks better than being totally bald.

Sometimes I look at my image in a window pane – is that really me? I was never vain – but these dead eyes, the hollow cheeks, the skeleton covered by rags, held together by a piece of string – is that me? No, I am not yet a “Muselmann,” I did

not yet give in. Though it is hard to imagine, that we will be able to hold out for much longer. Even if we do not give up, we will be liquidated sooner or later, “go up the smokestack” as they say here... But still, in spite of all, I want to live!! Am I still a woman – I feel like inside of me everything is burned out – dead. None of us menstruates (thank God) – but I often ask myself if I will ever be able to have children, even if I survive?

The soup made of turnips gets thinner every day, the bread rations get smaller too and the hunger grows... Soon it is the only thought one is able to have – to stop these gnawing hunger pangs. How is it to be sated? Not being able to finish your food? All our talks are dominated by food – each in turn “invites” the others for a meal and “cooks” the very best dishes. But to be honest – we just want ordinary bread – but enough of it...

And successively the women are also getting more and more animal-like. A quarrel between a mother and her daughter about a piece of bread – which of them needs it more? One could throw up. And near us the “room elders” – well clothed and fed. The group working outside the camp, which gets additional rations – they still look like human beings. They act as if they were another race – they recognize nobody. But there are exceptions – Mrs. Neumann who always looks after us “children, don’t let it get you down!” and Mrs. Mela, the Viennese in our room who never loses her sense of humor. The three red-haired sisters from Eastern Slovakia always taking care of each other. Deli and her sister (also from Vienna) who know by heart whole cabaret shows from ghetto Theresienstadt. And then of course Inge, with whom we are close friends. She is older than we are – was already married. Her fate is especially tragic – her husband was a gentile (she is also only half Jewish) and was drafted into the army. A short time later he was killed. Inge was sent together with her Jewish grandmother to ghetto Theresienstadt, worked there as a nurse and remarried. Shortly after that her husband was sent to the East and like many other Theresienstadt women she volunteered to join him. They were so innocent!

Sometimes we try to imagine, what is going to be “afterward.” Mainly, enough food – bread and butter!! The nicest thing would be to live on a green hill, high up, far away from all the dirt and misery, which now surround us...

I know one thing – one should never lose ones human dignity – even if they constantly demean us. Somehow it does not touch me – the slap in the face for requesting shoes, the curses and the shouting – I am like in an armor and nothing gets to me.

Every day the march through the dark town – by and by I know each stone, every corner where the wind is especially cruel – finally the wall – the factory, we made it! (The funny scene, when the SS-commander hurried us along and wanted to show us, how to get rid of the lumps of snow on our shoes while walking – and he promptly fell down on his behind. And we did not dare to laugh!). The work is hard and never-ending – but at least it is warm there.

Hard to believe – but winter has ended! Easter, we don't work, sit in the sunny yard, we washed our rags and ourselves (“you swine, again in the bathroom!”). The elderly SS-woman guard, who was retired a short time ago (rumor says because she behaved too humanely) walks along the outside of the fence and without stopping says: “Just a little bit more patience – the front line is already very near!” That gives us new strength – now it is easier to bear it all, there is hope...

The Polish barracks elder had a baby, the SS-commander is very decent about it, gets hold of milk for her – is that also a sign of the nearing end? One of our Slovak girls is also very pregnant, up to the last moment she could hide it, otherwise they would have sent her to the main camp for extermination. Now it is too late for that...

From the factory window we see treks of refugees – with carriages and carts they trudge along, their belongings on the vehicles, children in their arms or walking alongside... They look so wretched that one doesn't even feel good about it. Is that the look of the “master race”?? At night, when all is quiet, we hear the artillery – we try to guess how far away they are. Let it be soon...

Work at the factory ceases – for a few days we stay in the camp barracks, wild rumors flying around, nobody knows what is going on. And then the order: roll call and off to the railway station. “Our” baby was born just before that – now we collect jam from all the women, to give it to the baby, diluted with water. The baby is a girl, named Hanka, like the camp elder.

And again into the railway wagons – this time open ones – the now well-known scene. Crowding, stench, there is no place to relieve oneself... Mounting hunger – but the worst is the burning thirst. And the diarrhea. And on top of the suffering there is the terrible dread – will the next stop be the gas chamber? Did we hold out all these months for that?

How long ago did we start out? Days without food – and then the camp commander managed to find somewhere sugar (“that gives energy”). They are shunting our train to and fro – often we see other transports on the parallel track. One is from Buchenwald – we try to recognize people – but no, there are no such

miracles! Once they let us leave the wagons – from another train rags were thrown out – they warn us, these are from people with typhoid fever. But we don't care, each of us chooses something...

We travel along the Czech border, sometimes crossing it – it seems the tracks are often not free. We stop somewhere, above us there is a bridge and from there people throw bread into our wagons. Then we stand in a railway station – a small Czech village and a delegation from there asks to be allowed to bring us food. And then they arrive with huge kettles and baskets – and I am sitting there with a cup of coffee with milk and a piece of white bread – does that still exist? I can't stop crying – I don't know why – it is like a greeting from another world, which once existed...

We arrive at Mauthausen. A long line of staggering skeletons – hardly resembling human beings. The road is steep, up the hill – we almost cannot go on – but it has to be. Only not to stay behind – we know the fate of those who did. And we also pull along Trude, who only whimpers and does not want to go on... At last the camp and we even get some food. They lead us into a yard, it is raining, but we don't care... Night falls and we wait to be taken to the showers – are they showers or gas??? But no, it is water – warm water and even though it weakens us yet more, we feel again like human beings. In spite of the “clothes” we get – torn men's underpants and a shirt. Two days later we are taken to the “Gypsy camp” at the “Vienna ditch.” It is horrible there – almost no food, a bit of straw on the floor is our bed. The barracks are enormous – in one corner there are Ukrainian women, fighting like animals. Opposite our place are “antisocial” Germans, i.e. whores. They practice their profession here, too – in the midst of hundreds of other women. My neighbor says to me: “Cover your sister with a blanket, she must not see that!” Is it possible that things are still getting worse? Except for Trude we have lost track of all the others... But the German whore gave us a gift – probably the biggest I ever got. A book by Cronin – a real book! And we read – in the heart of the inferno, surrounded by earsplitting shouts, shrieks, quarrels. We succeed to escape – into another world, forgetting what is going on around us.

At night we again hear guns – the by now well known sound. Do we dare to hope, that this time we will not be sent on? We don't know where the front line is... Our strength fades – but now we must not give up, we have to go on!

And then a morning without SS – no guards, also no food. At first we don't grasp, what it means – are too weak, too empty to feel happiness. All these months we held out for just this moment – and now I don't feel a thing...

Finally we dare to leave our barracks – and don't believe our eyes: at the main camp is a white flag!!

In our barracks all hell breaks loose – the Ukrainian women almost kill each other – we decide on the spur of the moment to go over to the main camp! Again we drag Trude with us, she has no shoes and Agi picks up a pair in passing – they were standing near the fighting Ukrainians.

We walk the road, nobody stops us! There are no words to describe the sensation of being able to just walk... to be free. There is shooting over our heads – we continue walking, that can't hurt us! Only to get away... At a farmers house we ask for food – get a thick slice of bread with lard and sausage. What bliss to bite into such a thick piece of bread!

### **Mauthausen – May 7, 1945**

We are free – no, we cannot grasp it! Just a few days ago we were so near death – did not know if we ever will see freedom again...

As we reached the men's camp the front line had actually moved on already – the Americans left the camp in the hands of the “Underground,” which in Mauthausen was very well organized. Immediately we were mobilized to search the SS barracks for munitions. It is getting dark – we have occupied one of the SS offices. Somebody has cooked soup and we sit all together – young boys, most of them from Poland. They are total strangers, but we talk as if we knew each other for ever. About home – who lives – who survived?

### **May 8, 1945**

It is hard to write. Yesterday we “decorated” our room – we have curtains and a tablecloth – how nice to have a bit of normality!

And we showered – hot water and soap, the feeling to be rid of the whole filth... till I could hardly stand, felt very weak... And to wear clean clothes – SS uniforms.

We have a cooking stove – the French cook warned us, not to eat the American's food (mostly bacon and beans) – he toasts slices of potatoes on the stove. Somehow he managed to get opium – against the diarrhea. And he also gave me a comb – after all we have already 2 cm long hair...

In the meantime other women arrived, too. Magda met her husband by chance on the camp road. And Rozsi Dushinsky makes a fool of herself, she wants to borrow our needle: “If you lend me your needle, I'll not tell your parents, that you smoke.” We smoked indeed – the US soldiers who came to the camp cannot do enough for us. So they give us cigarettes all the time.

## ChL

One of the SS women guards was caught – in civilian clothes, with a suitcase. She was brought to the camp and one of the US soldiers just throws the suitcase over to us. It is unbelievable – underwear, shirts and a phonograph with a few records! Now we really feel like millionaires! Our room is becoming a club... But our thoughts are not here – they are with all our beloved ones – who knows, which of them is still alive? To what will we return?

One day I will be able to talk about this time – one must not forget and I do not want to forget. I will carry these 7 months of my life always in me – even into very old age... Only today, a little bit more, not to think, only to know that I am free...

### **May 16, 1945**

For the last days I was sick – I just had no strength to stand on my feet. But today I am better.

There are rumors that we are soon going home – I can hardly await it – at last, at last... But what am I saying? Is there still a “home” ??

Once we went down to the village. The path is beautiful, through the forest, even if the walking is extremely strenuous. To smell the fir trees, the moist ground – every bug, every stalk of grass is a miracle! The Danube and the mountains – the sun shines – everything wakes to new life. Only we...

In the monastery they gave us spinach and semolina dumplings – an American soldier took us to a bakery and made them give us bread. “My” Frenchman actually proposed to me, a first in my life! I should leave everything behind me and go with him straight to Paris...

### **May 18, 1945**

Somebody said, that we are leaving tomorrow – but now I hear that it was postponed.

And I am so afraid of the moment, when I will know... We are sure, that our mother will not come back, but the crazy hope, that father somehow survived, returns again and again. In the men’s camps conditions were even much worse than ours – I often thought, if he, too, has to suffer so much... If one could only pray – !

### **May 20, 1945**

Only today we left – we are in a ship on the Danube and are waiting to move. All seems unreal and dreamlike – sometimes I feel, that it is not me, that I am only a spectator...

The first days after the liberation were like in a trance – but that did not last long, one had to think of the future. And I know it more than ever – whatever awaits me, I am going to Eretz (Palestine). There is no other place on earth... How are they all able to wave the Czech flag – “speak Czech only” – is that really their homeland?

### **May 22, 1945**

My copybook is falling apart – but it has to do.

We went by ship until Tulln – there was a bombed-out bridge and we could not go on. For two days the ship stayed there – a war of nerves. On the second day Agi and I went to town, determined to somehow continue on our own. And indeed, there was a train to Vienna. We sold cigarettes and bought tickets – what a wonderful feeling! The station manager invited us for lunch and then the train arrived.

In Vienna it was a veritable odyssey. We left the train and all around us only ruins – we had no idea where we are. We wanted to get to the Eastern railway station – maybe there is a train to Bratislava – but on the way it became clear, that there is no chance of that. We talked to a bus driver – the bus was going in the right direction, but only for 20 km. A friendly young man in working clothes “adopted” us and led us into town. Somewhere an elderly couple (it was a Jewish-gentile mixed marriage) talked to us – the woman took me aside and asked – “your younger sister should not hear that” – if it is true, that they were beating us in the camp...

At last we arrived at the Russian command post – the guard (a Jew) took us immediately to the officer in charge (also a Jew), who ordered to bring a horrible dish – a kind of porridge – kasha. Even hungry as we always were, it was not easy to get this down! He sent us to the Jewish community offices, where allegedly some temporary lodgings were available. Our “guide” waited and accompanied us, to make sure that we are being taken care off – otherwise he would have brought us to his mother’s house and given us his bed. At the Jewish community center they sent us to a hospital and from there we at last got to a shelter. We parted from the young man with many thanks.

At the shelter there were Hungarian Jews, three Slovaks, who also were on their own and a terrible chaos. But the three Hungarian girls in our room were very friendly – they had been deported from Hungary to Austria and were waiting for an opportunity to return.

This morning we went directly to the Jewish community center, but except for a voucher for lunch they could not help us.

We asked around, if there are no ways to get to Bratislava – then we decided, first to eat and then start out on foot.

It was quite funny to ask for directions to Bratislava in the center of Vienna – but we got explanations and the public toilet “lady” even invited us, to use the facilities for free.

Then we were lucky – it just began to rain as a horse-drawn cart stopped for us on the Simmering highway. It was raining harder now and we were drenched. The coachman – apparently the mayor of Schwechat – was explaining to us the whole time that he was no Nazi and always against them and also that he had no idea, what went on in the camps... Anyway, he took us to his house and let us stay the night in a small room in his yard. They even let us wash ourselves and gave us food... I hope that tomorrow we will succeed...!

Here ends the diary, which I began after the liberation in Mauthausen. The next morning we started out and leaving the village I found a horseshoe. That surely means luck!

And indeed, shortly afterwards a Russian military truck stopped for us. Though everybody had warned us, that the Russians will rape us – we looked at each other and decided, that the danger could not be serious... So we climbed on the truck and only when it stopped in the midst of nowhere, we felt uneasy. But it was only one of the Russians, who told us in Yiddish, to accept his coat – we surely are cold.

We arrived in Petržalka – masses of people sat on their belongings and apparently waited for their repatriation. We had our release papers from Mauthausen – in any case we walked straight to Bratislava, over the pontoon bridge. In the center of the bridge somebody asked, who we are. He told us, that our three uncles were shot dead.

First we went to our last flat on the Jirasek-bank along the Danube. Our neighbor had saved the liver from the ice-box on the landing – but alas, it was moldy. And she did not know of anybody from the family turning up. We decided to go to the former Braun store – if anybody returned, he must be there. And indeed, we found there uncle Dezsoe and his son Jozo. Dezsoe apologized, that there is nothing to eat, only cookies, which the mice had gotten into – and both could not understand our roaring laughter.

Then they took us to aunt Mariska, who had survived all this time with “Aryan” papers and already had an apartment. She also knew the whereabouts of Aviva and we phoned her. She came while we were still in the bath and brought clothes – the skirt (in Cadca we had always exchanged clothes) fell to the floor, when I tried to put it on.

The time after that belongs to another chapter. Our parents did not return, of our friends only a few. Some from the camps like we, some survived in hiding or with “Aryan” papers. Our grandmother, who survived in a hospital in Nitra, came to live with aunt Mariska, but died shortly afterwards. That was my first funeral – up to now I had seen only piles of corpses...

Soon we tried to somehow organize ourselves. In the summer we traveled to Budapest for a meeting of remnants of the Youth Movement. After our return the “Red Cross” gave us a former Jewish-owned villa and there we set up a training center for youth. We collected children from the streets, from Christian families, forests, monasteries...

Once I wrote, that I will never forget – I did not, even if much is unclear and hazy. But not the exact dates are important...

I do not know, how to end these notes – is there a moral? Vengeance, retribution, hate? I never believed in these – they cannot bring back what we have lost! The only moral is, to cherish life, every day that I can freely breathe – all the rest is unimportant! I feel, that each day I have lived until today is a present.

The morning is gray, wet and cold  
 by myself  
 I stand in front of the barracks.  
 Darkness!  
 What is that?  
 The red glow?  
 This screaming blood-red light?  
 My heart stops.  
 It is true:  
 there...  
 there---  
 are my beloved ones.  
 Red, red, red!  
 The crematory...  
 Am I still a human being?  
 Are human beings able to do this??  
 Mother, mother,  
 they threw you into it...  
 you are not anymore –  
 you are only a red glow in the sky!  
 Ashes in the wind...  
 Mother!  
 Your child must live –  
 why so much suffering?  
 Why am I not a red glow in the sky, too?  
 Mother!  
 You cannot hear me -  
 ashes in the wind,  
 blood-red glow,  
 Mother  
 there are no tears

You sit crouching  
 in a corner,  
 the legs drawn up tightly,  
 the air is too dense  
 to breathe.  
 Beside you – close by  
 in front of you, to the right, to the left,  
 everywhere!  
 Human bodies.  
 Dirty, stinking,  
 quarreling, pushing  
 bodies.  
 Outside is the world.  
 Through a crack there are meadows  
     and fields,  
 sun and woods.  
 Outside is the world.  
 And does not know of the load  
 carried by the wagon over the gleaming  
     rails.  
 How many tons of hunger and exhaustion,  
 despair and hopelessness...  
 How many skeletons with hungry eyes,  
 empty eyes – shouting...

You crouch motionless and do not know,  
 where the bumping and jerking  
     takes you.  
 To what new hell of torture?  
 You forgot already,  
 that you are hungry,  
 that one can eat.  
 Only when rising  
 you feel  
 that you cannot take it much longer  
 and think... maybe... maybe... I will never  
     arrive?!

AUSCHWITZ, OCTOBER 1944

ChL

I am!  
I am!  
Thousands of women,  
thousands of numbers,  
a substance-less  
mass of misery, meanness and dirt.  
Are these still humans?  
Are they animals?  
Neither...  
But I am!  
My name died,  
like I am dead for the world.  
My heart is of stone,  
prisoner fiftyfourthousand  
and ten.  
A number – a thing.  
My hair shorn  
my tears dried up,  
my life gone...  
But...  
the yearning is still in me...  
it is so strong -  
and I am...  
No – not only a number,  
attached to my clothes like a tag,  
but inside, deep in me -  
where none of you can reach,  
is all that is dear to me...  
No!  
Your beatings,  
your pushing,  
your clubs,  
your curses,  
(bunch of Jews),  
do not touch me.  
I am only one  
of many miserable ones for you...  
a number,  
a prisoner,  
fiftyfourthousandandten,  
but I am – I am!

*Reconstructed in 1995 and  
translated in 1998 from my  
original German notes  
Chavah Livni (Fuerst)  
Kiriath Tivon, Israel*

ChL

# PETR HERRMANN



**Based on a conversation between Petr Herrmann  
and Anna Hydráková at the Jewish Museum in  
Prague.**

I was born in 1926, son of the dentist Dr. Alois Herrmann and Anna nee Schwarz. Both my parents came from Jewish families who lived in the Dobříš region for about 150 years. My father married shortly after WWI, settled down, and opened his office in Kladno. That is where I lived during my childhood; I attended elementary school and later also three years of high school. Our family always used to meet during the school holidays, and so I spent most of these in Dobříš, where there were beautiful woods and fishponds and where I had cousins.

I attended a Czech 5-grade elementary school. At home Czech was spoken. My parents celebrated almost all Jewish holidays; we went to the Kladno synagogue and in the 1930's my father was elected as head of the Kladno Jewish community.

I did not have a Bar Mitzva because that would have been, at my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1939, when the Germans were already in the Protectorate; also – a short time before my birthday a German NCO was murdered and curfew was therefore instated. So, in this situation it was not only impossible to go to the synagogue, but also to assemble a number of people. That was at a time when successively various anti-Jewish regulations were enforced, and I was expelled from high school. For about one year I participated, together with a few more Jewish children from Kladno, in educational courses, organized by the Prague Jewish community. That was possible, of course, only for one year (we even had exams at Maislova Str. 18 in Prague). After that, nothing else was possible but to work. My father sent me to a workshop in Kladno where I earned to repair cars. That lasted less than a year, as the owner of the workshop had to let me go because vehicles of the Kladno Gestapo began to use the workshop, and he was afraid that I would be seen there. Towards the end of 1941 I was helping out in the administration of the Kladno Jewish community, preparing card files of the Jewish inhabitants.

**Petr with parents a short time before deportation to Theresienstadt**



My parents received various offers to emigrate. They thought of Switzerland, Africa, England and other places but when they started to do something about it, it was already too late because all the embassies they approached distributed only numbers, which meant sometimes they had to wait for an entire year for documents.

At the end of that time, the management of the coal mines requested Jewish laborers because of a shortage of miners. It was promised that those reporting for work in the mines would not be deported. So, I reported and worked in the Max mine under very hard conditions – but after three or four months orders arrived to prepare transports to Theresienstadt, and everybody was automatically included, whether he/she worked in the mines or not.

On February 26, 1942, both my parents and I traveled by transport Z to Theresienstadt; I had number 670. In Theresienstadt, where the original population still lived, the situation was very unclear; transports were arriving and leaving constantly. After two weeks I learned that the Kladno mines were again looking for laborers, this time with the promise that the families of those reporting voluntarily would be protected from further deportation. I reported again and around March 15, 1942, I went again to Kladno, with a group of about 100 young men. We were quartered at a restaurant in Libušín, very near to some of the mines. In this restaurant we had lodgings. We were guarded there by Czech Protectorate gendarmes; every day they led us to the mine that was then called Mayran, which after the war was renamed Zdeněk Nejedlý. In Kladno it is popularly called Mayrovka. In this mine I worked until the end of July and maybe that it would have lasted even longer. Life there was significantly better than somewhere in Theresienstadt, mainly thanks to the friendly behavior of the workers and foremen in the mine; they sympathized with us, secretly brought us food – for me it was the best part of the whole time I was persecuted. Contact with Theresienstadt was not possible. Some of us exploited the lax control and used the Sundays for secret outings. They traveled to Prague or somewhere else and returned at night between Sunday and Monday, before anybody found out that they were away. But once Heydrich was assassinated, very strict controls followed. Some of the young Jews were found by the police, either in a bus or on a train. In this way the Gestapo learned that the isolation at the mines was insufficient and towards the end of July we were sent back to Theresienstadt.

After a short time, I began to work in the maintenance department of the electrical network in the ghetto headed by the foreman Bobek. Bobek was a German and obviously had contacts with both the SS command post and the Gestapo; he stipulated that employees working at the electrical network would not be deported because that would endanger the whole ghetto. Thanks to my work my parents, too, were protected. Bobek was very fair to us and after the war I did not meet anyone who would complain about him.

I lived at a youth home designated Q-716. Only boys up to the age of 18 lived there. Our life in Theresienstadt was similar to that of other Jewish families in the ghetto. As a family we could always meet after work hours for about one hour. Father worked as a dentist at the Hohenelbe barracks and lived in a building that I believe was called “Kavalier.” Mother lived at Dresden barracks, and after a time, she had the good fortune to work there in the kitchen.

All the time, transports kept arriving and leaving. On September 4, 1942, transport Bd came from Prague, all its prisoners were lodged at Aussig barracks. At that time the “Schleuse” (sluice absorption facility) was there, and we learned somehow that Jews from Dobříš had also come with this transport. We succeeded in gaining entrance permits and found that with this transport, practically all of our relatives, both from my mother’s as well as from father’s side, had arrived. The oldest one was my father’s step-mother, my step-grandmother, Hermína Herrmannová, then aged 79; the youngest of all was my cousin Zdenička Karpelesová, not yet 8 years old. All in all there were about 23. Everybody tried frantically to get his relatives out of the transport. From our family only 3 people, over 60 years old, were removed from the transport – the Schwarz couple and my grandmother Hermína. After 4 days, on September 8, 1942, the remainder had to walk back to Bohušovice to the waiting transport Dk and we, of course, never heard from them again. Only after the war I studied their fates and learned that they were all taken to Maly Trostinec near Minsk, where they were murdered. According to a published statistic, only 4 people of this transport survived. The fates of our 3 relatives whom we succeeded in removing from the transport were also tragic. Robert and Ella Schwarz were already summoned in October to the next transport that went to Treblinka and grandmother Hermína was deported in December 1943 to the Theresienstadt family camp in Birkenau, where she, too, perished.

Culture played an important part of my life in Theresienstadt. As electrician I was often on duty at venues where theater performances, concerts, operas, etc. took place. That I saw practically all these cultural events had an enormous influence on me; I would say that it somehow marked me for my whole life because only there I got to know serious music and operas, and I internalized it all very differently than I would have done in freedom. For the rest of my life it became a categorical necessity, and these first memories of some artists are still alive for me. In the summer of 1942, a youngster arrived from Prague, Petr Reiner, he was placed on the bunk right beside mine. Earlier, Petr was a student in the violoncello class taught by Professor Pravoslav Sádlo. He was exceptionally talented and since in Theresienstadt he had no possibility to play at all, he “played” (with his mouth, at least) complete Bach suites for me on our bunk. He also used to sit on a bench in front of the latrine singing Bach after work for hours. In January 1943 he was deported to Birkenau, where he perished.

In Theresienstadt, Father and I experienced the whole comedy with the Swiss Red Cross; on September 28, 1944, we were summoned for a transport to Auschwitz. After arrival, the transport immediately went through a selection at the ramp. My father was sent to the left side, which meant to the crematorium; I – to the right side, for work. We arrived at night. Here, they herded us to the “Sauna,” where we had to strip and get other clothes, then we stood at roll call almost until morning... In the morning a new selection took place and after we fell in, a Polish Jewish Kapo walked through the rows. When he came to me, he asked how old I was. I said that I was 18. He reached out and slapped my face so hard that I reeled. My spectacles fell to the ground. I regained my position, and he shouted at me from very near, “You are twenty!” and then he went on to others. After about half an hour, an SS officer came for the selection and among other questions, everybody was asked his age. So I said that I was twenty. My head still ached from that slap. If I would have said 18, I probably would not have passed the selection. Possibly the Kapo could have advised me also without the slap, but it seems that he was already mentally altered because of his long stay in the camp. Just to look that man in the eyes was like looking at a wild beast. It was not even a human look, and to this day I cannot forget the expression in his eyes. That was something I did not know at all until then. A worse development was that after the selection we were brought a small desk, chair, postcards and some pencils and, one after the other, we had to declare if we still had close family in Theresienstadt. When I said that my mother was there, I had to write a postcard with the following text, I remember it, every word: “Wir sind glücklich nach Riesa angekommen, das Essen und Verpflegung ist gut, hoffe, dass ihr bald nachkommt ...” [We arrived happily in Riesa. Food and provisions are good. Hope that you follow us soon...]. Without a signature, and everything written in block letters, we all wrote the same text. And, we had to write “Riesa,” not “Auschwitz.” (Riesa is on the river Elbe somewhere north of Dresden.)

After all that, the same morning closer to noon, successively some from our transport learned from other prisoners that those who did not pass selection were not alive anymore and that the smoke from the chimneys ... that these were actually crematoria. When we arrived, we thought that these are bakeries, that bread was baked there for the whole of the Silesian region.

My mother was included in the transport of October 6<sup>th</sup>. I will never know if she volunteered, like many other women, after they got the postcard; I doubt it because the postcards were all identical. But I think that she would have got into a transport even without volunteering. I do not know when and where she perished – none of the survivors of this transport could tell me anything exact at all.

During the next 14 days, SS officers from various branch-labor camps came to choose people. We nicknamed them “slave traders,” looking for slaves. And when the trader looked too wild, we preferred not to report, we always remained in the last row. Until one day a trader arrived, who looked to us outwardly somehow more

sympathetic than the others ... so we, a small group of prisoners from Theresienstadt, reported and were taken to camp Gleiwitz III. At the time, there were four labor camps, and Gleiwitz III was only now being built. The trader asked everybody about his occupation, and when I said that I was an electrician, he asked me a test question, to see if I knew something about incandescent lamps. He was satisfied and accepted me as an electrician. Then we were tattooed. I received number B 12716.

On October 15, 1944, we traveled first by trucks to Gleiwitz I. In front of the roll call of new prisoners, the local SS commander appeared to inform us that he goes by Schrecken von Gleiwitz (Dread of Gleiwitz) and that those who will work and obey, will be treated well, but those who do not obey will be punished. To imprint this on our memories, he took the cap off a prisoner in the first row, threw it to a distance of some 20 meters and said: "Run for the cap!" As the prisoner started to run the SS man drew his pistol, shot him in the head and said: "That is the fate of all who will not work and obey. That's it, and now go!"

Then we traveled directly to our living quarters, located in the factory complex named Oberhütten Gleiwitz. Here, facilities were hastily installed for the manufacture of V-3 rockets. These had not yet been deployed; it was a totally new process. We, the electricians, had to install electrical cables and switchboards for metal-working machines. The manufacturing process was in the hands of the firm Gollachowski, Pfitzner and Gambler.

Living conditions in Gleiwitz III were substantially better than in other camps, though we did not know that. I could compare it only after the war when I talked to others. The conditions were better both regarding treatment and also because the living quarters – that were inside the factory complex – were heated. Even the toilets and the washrooms were heated. (And the toilets were water closets!) We worked 12 hours but we did not have to go far to work. Since we were doing professional work, we were supervised by a German civilian engineer. His name was Spiess. He was neither good nor bad and had a beautiful logarithmic ruler, which I envied him for. I told myself that, if I survived, I would study electrical engineering and one day would own such a ruler, too.

The hardest measure, meant to strengthen camp morale, was based on the following: those whose bed was not made up perfectly – which was inspected while we were out of our quarters – had to perform a so-called "sport." It was November or December 1944, and it was cold. From the kitchen, huge barrels with soup were brought, these were positioned in the area where roll calls were held. The delinquents, whose beds were not made up properly, had to move, crouching, from one end of the courtyard to the other until the soup was covered by a thick sheet of ice. The ice-crust had to be broken up with a hammer and each "sportsman" got a ladle full of it. I was punished only once because I copied a trick from a Pole who somehow got a square-cut and plane piece of wood. When I stretched my blanket over the mattress, I used the piece of wood to straighten and "iron" my bed, to get an even surface.

In November 1944 I got an abscess on the left side of my neck that started to fester and I started to run a high fever. At that time there was a Jewish physician in the sick room; his name was Dr. Bela Polák. He was one of the physicians in Theresienstadt who already worked at the surgery department, so we were acquainted. When I approached him with my abscess he said, "This is not very nice. The only solution is to open it since if we did not open it, you would be in a bad condition. But here I have no proper scalpel and also practically no medical supplies; you will have to hold on and bear it." I said, "Go ahead, doctor." He had to open the abscess quite drastically. He totally emptied the festering hole. He, of course could not give me any medication and only bandaged it with a roll of toilet paper. He said: "Come tomorrow, we will change your bandage." This whole situation was very dangerous, but ended luckily through this operation. After a few weeks the wound healed, and so I owe my life to Dr. Bela Polák.

In January 1945 a great change came about. We began to hear the rumble of cannon fire from far away, a kind of humming. We did not know what it was about. At first we thought that these are anti-aircraft guns, which could have been the case, but night after night it got stronger and around January 15<sup>th</sup>, we learned that the Russians started a huge offensive push and were approaching Upper Silesia. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, we heard that the camp would have to be evacuated, and we would be taken back to Auschwitz to be gassed. During night shift, at about midnight, the camp commander himself came to the factory. As we heard "Achtung" (attention), everybody stood at attention. He entered by himself, wearing riding breeches and boots as always, but we could see that he was also wearing suspenders and a nightgown with a wadded cap upon his head. He started shouting: "Alle Scheisse, lass es liegen, morgen gem'r weg." [It's all shit, put it down, tomorrow we go away]. And simultaneously we heard the Kapos shouting: "weitermachen!" [continue working].

On the morning of January 19<sup>th</sup>, we did not go to work. Everybody got half a loaf of bread, and we were allowed to empty the straw from our pillows, to use them as a kind of bag for the bread; those who had a piece of string, made themselves an knapsack. At about 10 a.m. we started out, escorted by SS. Orienting ourselves in the town of Gleiwitz we found that we were indeed marching on the road to Auschwitz. We had not yet left the town and suddenly two military motorbikes appeared; the riders talked to the camp commander and the whole column of prisoners made a U-turn which meant that instead of heading to Auschwitz, we returned to Gleiwitz and from there continued on the main road in a western direction.

Someone succeeded in learning information from one of the Germans that we were going to Gross-Rosen. Although we did not know where that was, it did not sound very promising. When darkness fell, we had only reached the industrial area of I.G.Farben, located in a huge forest; nearby there was the small, abandoned concentration camp, Althammer. But – as they say – the camp was still warm. We know that the inhabitants must not have left long ago. We were herded into this camp for the night, and we had to sleep in the dining hall, bodies lying every which way. It

was a terrible night, no one could sleep because whenever anyone moved, he kicked somebody else. Before morning I had to use the toilet. I was only trying to reach the door, but instead I trod on somebody's belly and somebody else's neck. They pulled me down and started to beat me. We were totally exhausted, but in the morning we had to go on. The whole time we heard loud cannon fire. We reached the western shore of the river Oder in the vicinity of the town Kosel, in Polish, Koszle. There we again turned 180 degrees and instead of going west, we returned over the river to the east and it was clear that we could not go on because the Russians advanced much faster than the Nazis expected. The SS commanders went on sleds, drawn by prisoners, but the ordinary SS men who marched, also looked like wrecks. One did not see oneself, only the others. People supported each other, on our feet we wore only wooden clogs and instead of socks, a little bag made of cloth. I re-enacted this whole journey in 1992 by car and cannot believe that we made it on foot; every day we walked about 30 kilometers.

Some fell down and remained there; I was already so lethargic that I almost did not take in what was going on around me. The march ended on late at night on January 20<sup>th</sup> at the gates of concentration camp Blechhammer. First they searched us for one and a half hours, looking for reflectors. In front of us, on a small wooden stage, two machine guns were prepared, and behind us was a concrete wall, about 3 meters high, but visibility was bad, and they still kept looking for searchlights. We were herded to abandoned empty barracks, then, outside, some machine-gun shots were fired. I remember only that I rolled under a bunk, on the floor, and I did not care about a thing.

When I awoke there was already some light, confusion all around and our people called out that the SS men are gone. The prisoners tried to find something to eat. In the camp kitchen were still a lot of half-boiled potatoes in cold, almost frozen water. Feverish ransacking went on, during which suddenly white uniformed guards with automatic weapons appeared in front of the kitchen. It turned out that that were units of the German field army retreating, and when they saw that many prisoners were moving around, they immediately started shooting with machine guns at everything that moved. This whole episode did not last longer than 20 minutes, though it caused a large massacre. From our group, Pepík Kňína from Prague was killed. He laid on the kitchen floor, with horrible pain, as he was shot through the torso. Near death, he laid in a pool of blood among potatoes, water and old clothes. A certain Mr. Stern, whose first name I do not remember was also shot through the torso. Petr Novák, at that time my closest friend, was shot through his left forearm and about 5 or 6 more prisoners, whom I knew still from Theresienstadt, were somehow wounded.

I will never forget that under these conditions the then nearly 50-year-old Dr. Bela Polák, disregarded danger, cold and hunger, in order to begin immediately caring for the wounded. He could not do anything except clean the wounds and bandage them with pieces of torn shirt; he also helped to move the wounded to the living quarters, so as not to expose them to a possible further attack. Alas, Pepík Kňína died after about an hour in that kitchen. Mr. Stern died with high fever during the night. Petr

Novák and others survived the war. I will never forget the dedication of Dr. Bela Polák, because in such situations, most people become absolute egotists. He showed, what humaneness means, what it means, to be a physician. He returned and after the war he ran a clinic at Petrské náměstí in Prague.

We found ourselves, so to say, between the front lines, in no-man's-land. There was no food, we were weakened, afraid and tired. We tried to find shelter in a nearby hole. SS men were nowhere to be seen. Only the next day, January 22<sup>nd</sup>, the more courageous among us, who dared to go through the woods to the road, saw the first Russian tanks. The following few days were very chaotic. I only remember that during the next two days our group of comrades from Theresienstadt and Gleiwitz kept together all the time. We had to start looking for food, and we learned that this whole area was full of prison camps. All of us had been hastily evacuated; therefore, the camp kitchens remained empty and abandoned with a little partly cooked or uncooked food left there. There were indescribable scenes. Prisoners from various concentration camps were everywhere, some with almost cannibalistic inclinations. Armed with axes, they would beat any prisoner who approached. For a few potatoes, they were ready to kill. Danger was everywhere – from the Soviet grenades and tanks, the retreating German units, and also from the ferocious prisoners.

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, regular Russian units arrived and on the 28<sup>th</sup> was our first contact with the Soviet field police. We got our first ID papers, so-called bumazhky, written in Cyrillic letters. On this ID we were identified as liberated political prisoners. They refused to write “Czechoslovak nationality,” instead they wrote “Yevrei” (Jew). Eventually the Russians moved us back to Gleiwitz and later to Katowice. There, thousands of prisoners were concentrated, from diverse regions. The Red Cross and first medical examinations were carried out here. Then a transport was organized, to return Czechoslovaks to their homeland that was not yet liberated. At that time we were told that we would travel through Vladivostok. It was to be again by goods wagons with wooden bunks. We were given no straw mattresses and had to make do with a small oven, whose chimney let the smoke out of the window – these cars were called teplushky. The train started out from Czenstochowa; where we had been brought by trucks. It was the beginning of February 1945. The teplushky train left Czenstochowa east-bound. We traveled through Jaroslaw, Przemysl, and there we got the message, that Slovakia was already liberated. So, instead of continuing east, the train turned South to Sanok and onward through the Lubkov pass to Eastern Slovakia, ending its journey in Užhorod. We arrived there towards the end of March 1945. This time span shows that it was not a systematic journey; we floundered from railway stop to railway stop.

But at that time we were already free people and also very unassuming – we were satisfied with all we were given: we ate everything with pleasure and each person even had a blanket and pillow. In Užhorod, the Russian authorities did not want to let us in. Evidently they thought that we were in a Russian area and not a Czechoslovak one. We did not yet see that coming. So, they sent us again on our way to Slovakia, to Trebišov.

A whole group of us refused to wait passively and demanded that they enable us to enlist in the army group of general Svoboda – we wanted to fight the Germans. I remember that I had to report five times to the recruiting commission because they never wanted to accept me; they looked me over, looked at my “bumazhka” and said to me something vulgar about my looks – and in such a condition you want to enlist! I returned there the next day. I just had put it in my head that I was going to be in that army and that I would still fight – the war was not yet over. On the fifth time they recruited me and assigned me to the newly established officer’s school in Poprad. There I began officer’s training for the Czechoslovak army, but before I finished, the war was over. I said that I wanted to return to Prague, that I did not know if my mother or some of my relatives had returned. But I could not talk to the commander, he only said “Now you are in the army and in the army there must be order, you have to obey. What do I care if you have any relatives!?” In short, I was in that training almost until the end of July 1945. Only then, after a written request, the high command sent a pass for permanent leave. I, with a small group of the comrades who had experienced all this together with me, went to Prague on our own by foot. Finally, we were able to take a passenger train from Bohumín to Prague, gratis, still in uniform. I arrived in Prague on the last Sunday of August 1945 at 9:30 a.m. at Masaryk railway station. Twice I dreamed during the war that I would return to Prague by train, to Masaryk station with the sun shining – and that is what happened. So, this is my history.

I did my matriculation exams during a special one-year course, organized for members of Czechoslovak army units from abroad. At the end of the course I got my matriculation certificate. Naturally, I did not know as much as “normal” graduates of the exam, but on that basis I could enroll in college. In 1946 I started to study at the School for Electrical Engineering of the Czech Technical University in Prague. I finished my studies with the second state examination in 1952.

During my studies I also met with anti-Semitism. It was while doing army service that was obligatory for students, too. After a military maneuver I was ordered to report at the district military administration, to get my Draft Registration Card. There they said that everyone should check his/her personal data. My name and birth date were correct, but then it said: nationality – Czech, origin – Jewish. That got to me, deeply. It sounded so “Nuremberg”-like! So I went to the officer and said that I do not understand one thing. And he said: “What, are you not a Jew?” I said: “I am a Jew, but I want to know, why you write “origin – Jewish,” because that was introduced by the Nazis. That is according to the Nuremberg laws. To separate nationality and origin, that needs to be explained.”

**Petr Herrmann  
in July, 1945.**



PH

“Well, comrade, it seems many things are unclear to you.” To this, I responded, “I do not know if many things are unclear, but for this issue I need an explanation.” He then said, “So, leave that Draft Registration Card here and wait, we will call you.” They summoned me to the army command, about a year later – a high ranking officer received me, he even offered me a chair and said: “Comrade Herrmann, we have to apologize to you, there is a certain misunderstanding caused by comrade Čepička” (who at that time was no longer a government minister, it was after Gottwald’s death) and gave me the Draft Registration Card. But, it said the same as before. The “origin Jewish” was crossed out by a very thin red line, beside it was a small red star, everything could be read clearly and at the bottom was an explanation: “Officially corrected: origin Czech,” rubber stamp, signature.

**Commemoration  
ceremony for the  
murdered Jews  
of Dobříš**

**(September 12, 2002)**



In 1948 I became acquainted with a music student from the Prague conservatory and in 1950 we married. In 1952 I finished my studies of Electrical Engineering at the Czech Technical University in Prague and after a time as an assistant at the School for Film and Sound Technique, I was employed at the Czechoslovak State Film sound recording department. In 1957 our only daughter Michaela was born.

In 1968, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, we decided to emigrate. We succeeded in reaching Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. I found employment with the firm Philips, in the communication department. Later I attended the local university, to validate my engineering title and then I lectured – as an external docent – on electro-acoustics and on acoustics of closed spaces and also on sound control, for architecture students. In Caracas a number of halls with very successful acoustics were erected. I had planned them for the architects of those spaces.

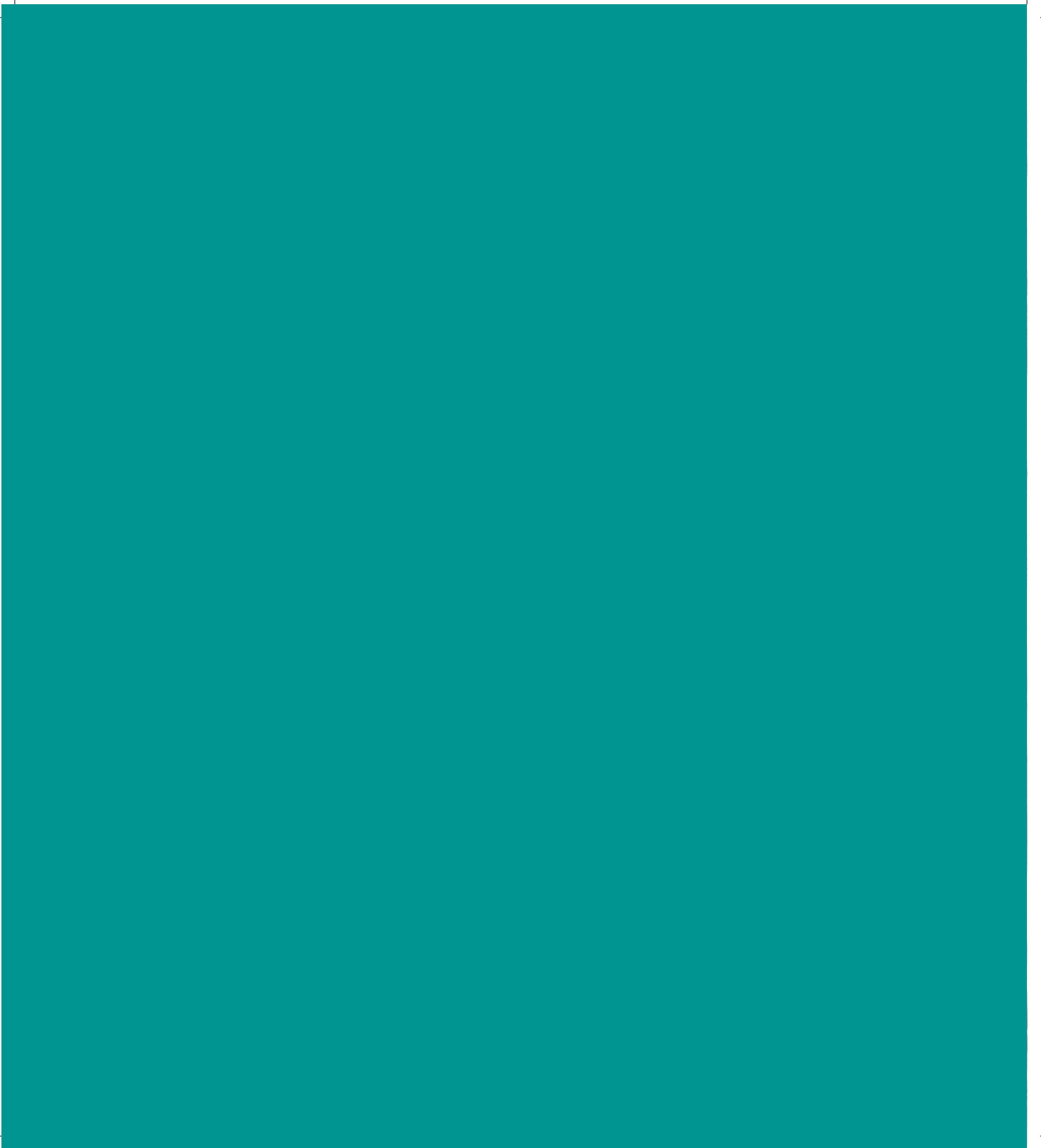
After my return to Prague, I dedicate myself to a thorough study of the fate of the Dobříš Jewish population in the Holocaust – both my parents came from there. I endeavored to acquaint the public, namely that from Dobříš, with the result of my studies.

# EVA ROČKOVÁ

**Eva with younger son Thomas, 2004**



**Eva and Jan Roček in front of the doors of the  
Clam–Gallas Palace in Prague, 2004  
[they were married there in 1947]**



# *Shakespeare Saved My Life* ER

*To our sons Martin and Thomas  
and grandchildren  
Miriam, Thomas, Laura and Julian*

## **Preface**

I am a storyteller, not a writer. It takes me days to gather enough energy even to write a simple letter; as a result all the writing in our family was relegated to my husband, Jan, who likes to write as long as it can be done on the computer, but does not like to talk. I have told parts of my story many times on different occasions and I gave a videotaped interview for the Holocaust Educational Foundation (a Yale University sponsored project) in 1994 and for Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1995. However, I have been under constant pressure from my family and good friends to write my memoirs and so I finally started reluctantly and very slowly sometime in 2001. Because of my aversion to writing, the progress was very slow, but I eventually finished my recollections about my family, my early life and got as far as my departure from Theresienstadt. Then my writing efforts again stopped and in 2006 I could not continue because of my failing memory. Jan therefore offered to complete my memoirs from his own memory of my stories which he has heard me retell dozens of times and also from the video recordings. Together, we then went through everything he wrote, and I corrected and supplemented it. Here is the product of first my own and then our joint efforts.

## **Father**

My father Viktor was born on May 1, 1898 as the first child of Eleanor (Lora) Münz and Zibrid Porges. Zibrid was a businessman of middling success; he imported fish into Czechoslovakia. He was born in Horazdovice, a small town in southwestern Bohemia, where his parents owned a country store. My father's mother Eleanor (Lora) was also born in Horazdovice. She was the only daughter of Edward Münz and his wife Bertha, née (born) Dubská.

The Münz family had a largish farm and also manufactured whiskey from the rye they grew. Today there is a restaurant in the house in which they lived, which the owner, Ing. Horak, named "U Münzu" in memory of the original occupants.

I found an interesting note about my great-grandfather in the book “Die Juden und Jugendgemeinden Böhmens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart“ (The Jews and Jewish Communities of Bohemia in the Past and Present), Hugo Gold, 1934. In an article “The History of the Jews in Horazdovice and Surroundings“ written in Czech, the author Karel Nemec noted:

*“As everywhere else under Austrian rule German was the official language of the Jewish community. However, in 1885 the Jewish community elected as its chairman the progressive Eduard Münz, a manufacturer of spirits, who during the first meeting announced: “We, the Jews, live here in a totally Czech locality and have no interest in the German language. I am therefore proposing that the community should use the Czech language in its official dealings and further that the Czech language be used for prayers in the synagogue, at funerals and that the inscriptions on the gravestones should also be in Czech.” The proposal was accepted and from there on Czech was used in the business dealings of the community. There were certain difficulties from the side of the Austrian offices, so that for example it took ten years before the Austrian authorities permitted the use of the Czech language in birth and death records. The other members of the first board to conduct its business in Czech were: Jakob Kohn, merchant, Herman Steiner, merchant, Jakub Porges, merchant, Marek Kohn, chemist, Josef Eisner, economist. Eduard Münz was also responsible for the Jewish school’s change from German to Czech. It behooves me to note that the newly appointed rabbi, Martin Friedman, was asked to conduct the prayers in the synagogue in Czech, although he knew barely three words of Czech. He promised to do so and after a day’s of hard work delivered. Only the pronunciation was not quite right, but even that improved with time.”*

My great-grandfather Eduard and great-grandmother Berta had six children: Karel, Josef, my grandmother Lora, Pavel, Frantisek and Jaroslav.

The farm and the family business were inherited by Frantisek. None of his family survived the Holocaust. According to the records in the Terezin Memorial Book, was his wife Malvina, nee Ofnerova (b. 6/27/1892) and their son Hugo (b.12/6/1912) were deported to Terezin (Theresienstadt) from Klatovy on 2/26/1942, transport “Cd“ and then to Auschwitz in February 1943. There is no mention of Frantisek – he probably was no longer alive. Jaroslav died at a young age as a result of appendicitis.

Karel Münz married one of my mother’s stepsisters, Ella Bondy. Karel and Ella moved to Abbazia on the Adriatic Sea, part of Austria-Hungary, part of Italy between the two world wars, and now known as Opatija in Croatia. They too had two sons; the older, Jaroslav (Jaro) Münz, survived the war in Canada. The younger son (named surprise, surprise!) Jula fell in love with a beautiful gentile Italian girl and they had two children Franco and Giuliana. This was already

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**My father Viktor Porges**

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during the war and – because Jula was Jewish – they could not get married. When the Germans occupied Italy, Jula joined the Italian partisans, but when he learned that Jews were being rounded up and deported, he went to rescue his parents, Karel and Ella. Unfortunately they were all caught and perished in Auschwitz. The train in which they were transported to Auschwitz happened to pass through Horovice. One day Mr. Stepanek, Ella’s gentle brother-in-law, got an anonymous phone call informing him that his sister-in-law would be on a train stopping in Horovice. He did not know which sister-in-law it would be – he assumed that it would be one who had been arrested for political reasons, but in any case packed up a basket with food and came to the train station. Surprisingly enough he was able to approach the train, find the Münzes, and give them the food. They gave him some jewelry – which he returned to the family after the war. After the war Jaro Münz went to Italy, found his brother’s children, who during the war were in boarding schools, financed their education and arranged that they receive the Münz family name. Franco is married to an Italian physician; they have three children and live not far from Florence. Giuliana married an American, a Mr. Kaufman, had two children with him, Julian (another Julian in the family!) and Deborah. Giuliana later got a divorce; she lives in North Carolina.

Pavel Münz, emigrated to Canada with both of his children Helena and Ota. Jaro and Helena, though they were first cousins, were married in Prague about 1931 or 1932, and my cousins Harry Pisinger and Edward (Eda) Werner and I carried the long train of the bride’s dress. Another of my grandmother Lora’s brothers, Josef, who had three sons, perished with his entire family in the Holocaust.

My father had two younger sisters: Anna, who was married to Vilem Werner, a silversmith, and Ruzena, who was married to Ing. Arnost Pisinger. The entire Werner family perished in the Holocaust. Arnost and Ruzena Pisinger survived in Theresienstadt only to learn that Harry died shortly before the end of the war, in April 1945, in the concentration camp Kaufering.

My father attended a Czech grade school in Horazdovice and was then sent to attend a German gymnasium in Prague. (By the way, one of the well known writers of the Czechoslovak Republic, Karel Polacek, was a graduate of the same gymnasium and a friend of my father). Upon graduation in 1916, Father was immediately drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army as an “Einjährig freiwilliger” [one-year volunteer] which was an officer training program for men who had finished at least a gymnasium education. (In peace time it was a one-year officers’ school). It was voluntary, but had he not enrolled, he would have been drafted for 3 years of service. He spent the war on the Italian front, was wounded 3 times and came home with strong antimilitary feelings, a bullet hole in the calf of one leg and deafness in one ear. Of the stories he told me, I particularly enjoyed the one, about a fellow army officer, whom father somehow offended with a joke and who consequently challenged father to a duel by throwing his white glove at father’s feet. Since father considered

dueling an uncivilized custom, he picked up the glove and asked the challenger politely if he should take it to the cleaners. That stopped the potentially dangerous and nonsensical fight. However, Father was not a coward: once in his youth some man in his birthplace made an anti-Semitic remark. Father picked him up and threw him in the water fountain.

Father was lots of fun and would sometimes play jokes on mother. He had a rather strange sense of humor, which I think, I inherited to some extent. I remember one day walking with him in the center of Prague, when he suddenly yelled out: "Yucatan." Once when we rode in a train, we made our way to the second class even though we had only third class tickets, because the third class was overcrowded. When the conductor came and demanded additional payment, my father kept saying: "Don't shout at me, I am afraid of you" until the conductor started yelling like mad. Once, when he forgot my mother's birthday, he got very upset and angry with her because she did not remind him: "You did that on purpose!" At a party, when he was a little tipsy, he started undressing. Mother stopped him quickly by taking off her jacket and starting to unbutton her blouse; in a jiffy Father was fully dressed again.

Food was very important to Father and Mother cooked the things he liked. She was not allowed to telephone him when he was in the office, but there was one exception – when she changed the planned menu. That was something he needed to know, he did not want to come home unprepared. Once we had guests for dinner and Father complained that the rice was overcooked. The guests did not agree and helped themselves to more of it. Father was offended and left the table – though not for long. He had a short temper, but his anger always lasted only a very short time. Once he got angry at mother for some reason, scolded her and left the apartment, but when he reached the street level, he decided that he had not scolded her enough, took the elevator, came back home and continued. Neither mother or anybody else, and most likely not even he himself, took these occasional outbursts seriously.

Upon his return from the war, Father had a big argument with the rabbi in his hometown and left the Jewish congregation. I never found out what the argument was about, but I know that Father became an atheist. He enrolled in the law school of Charles University and upon graduation joined a large and prestigious law firm in Prague as a "koncipient," a sort of apprentice attorney-at-law. He was doing really well when a problem arose: his boss liked him so much that he wanted him to marry his daughter, promising him a 1 million Crown dowry. (In those days it was a very large sum of money). Since father did not want to marry this particular lady, he lost his job, but quickly found another good one. Generally he was a very cheerful fellow, had a number of friends, liked to joke around, and spent Saturday afternoons and all of Sundays with us.

He was not a strict disciplinarian and whenever I asked him whether I could do this or that, his standard answer was: "Ask Mommy." Mother used to joke that Father was the head of the family, but she was the neck, which turned the head. I think, in retrospect, that it was not a joke but a fair description. Father did not seem to mind.

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During the German occupation all Jewish men had to have a medical examination to determine whether they were suitable for physical labor. Father returned completely shattered: "I have tuberculosis and the doctors were already shaking their heads about my case." Mother immediately got dressed and went to find out what the situation was. Yes, they had indeed found that he had tuberculosis, but they were not shaking their heads because they thought that it was a hopeless case, as Father believed, but because: "A big strong guy looking like health itself, does not sweat, does not cough and he has a cavity the size of a five crown coin!"

I loved my father very, very much and missed him terribly.

### **Mother**

My mother was born in Horovice on May 17, 1899. Her father, Julius Bondy, died in 1906 when Mother was only seven years old and my grandmother soon started relying on her more and more for help and support. Mother finished nine years of school and then was sent to a "pensionat," a sort of finishing school, for two years to learn German and French. I know that as a young woman she also learned sewing and cooking and that she used to play tennis. However I never heard her speak French. Being the eldest of the four children of grandmother Jana (my Babicka), she used to escort her three younger siblings to and from school. Once she came home very angry and reported that some kid was shouting anti-Semitic slurs at them. My grandmother dressed up and had herself driven by the coachman to the school in order to complain. The school principal took her to the class in order to investigate. One of the boys said to the principal: "Sir you do not have to punish the guy anymore, Aninka (that was my mom) tore out a plank from a fence and broke it over him."

After finishing her education, Mother accepted an office job in Prague. Her childhood girlfriend, Jindra Houdkova, was now married to Mr. Alois Schier, a merchant in a town in northern Bohemia, Jablone nad Orlici; it was not a happy marriage. Jindra had a health problem that required her to spend some time in the capital of the young Czechoslovak Republic. So Mother and Jindra were now together and could enjoy their time in Prague. However there was one problem: the two attractive young women with no male escort were often bothered by the unwanted attentions of admirers, who wanted to flirt with them. They decided that they needed a male escort, who would treat them just as a friend. In a few days they spotted a tall handsome fair young man and my mother said: "There is our elephant," (meaning a safe escort). This young man was Viktor Porges, whom my mother knew, because his uncle, Karel Münz, was married to Mother's half sister Ella Bondy. So Viktor started escorting the two women around Prague and after some time confided to Jindra that he had fallen in love with Anka (Anna). But he was afraid to propose to her because she had such a sharp tongue. Jindra promised

to help him and one day soon after, while they were in a restaurant, she suggested that they all three drink to their friendship. Viktor used the opportunity to propose. I suspect that Jindra must have been pretty sure of my mother's feelings and knew that my mother rather fancied Viktor. I actually found among my mother's papers a letter from my father addressed to Jindra where he thanked Jindra for her help and wrote how very happy he and Anka were. It was written after my parents' marriage and Jindra must have kept it all these years and given it to my mother only during one of her visits to America. Funnily enough, Mother never showed me the letter, though she told me the story. Grandmother Bondy hesitated to agree to the marriage, because she feared that the Porges and Münz family would not approve of it, since my mother, except for furniture, had no dowry. Father solved the problem by suggesting that they should play cards and if he won, she had to give them their blessing. He won.

Anna Marie Bondyova and Viktor Porges were married on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1926 in a civil ceremony in Horovice.

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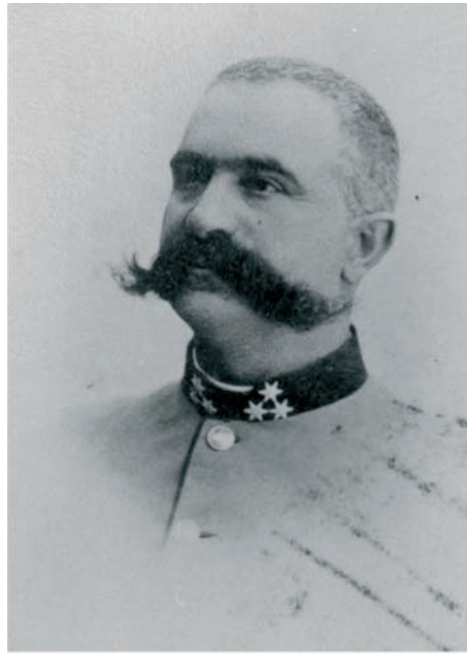


**Mother,  
Father  
and I**

**Grandfather Julius Bondy**

My mother's father, Julius Bondy, had a rather interesting background. He was born in Horni Jeleni, a tiny village in eastern Bohemia, where his mother, née Eleanor Fuchs, had grown up. Later they lived in Golcuv Jenikov, a town in the same region. His father, Solomon Bondy, was a very pious man and spent much of his life on trips to the "Holy Land." He did not provide for his wife and children very well.

Solomon Bondy died on one of his trips somewhere in Istanbul and left his widow and several children (I do not know how many) in the care of some relatives. One day a cousin of my grandfather came for a visit. He was a student of a military academy, a training school for officers of the Austro-Hungarian Army. This cousin said to my grandfather: "If you had graduated from a gymnasium (an eight year high school following five years of grade school), you too could have attended a military academy and become an officer." My grandfather Julius had finished only five years of grade school; he knew, however, that a nearby gymnasium had burned down not too long before. He wrote to the military academy, claiming that he had lost his gymnasium graduation diploma. He explained that he could not replace the missing document, since the gymnasium from which he had graduated had burned down. The explanation was accepted and Julius Bondy was admitted to the entrance examination and having successfully passed it, was admitted to the military academy; upon graduation he joined the army. He rose through the ranks to captain. At that time he gave up his military career because he fell in

**My maternal grandparents:  
Johana (Jana) and Julius Bondy**

love with a girl who had no dowry. In the Austro-Hungarian army an officer had to live like a gentleman, so a poor man had to marry a rich girl if he wanted to pursue his career as an “officer and a gentleman.” (By the way a Jew could have risen only to the rank of a colonel. To rise further he would have to have been baptized.) Anyway, grandfather chucked his army carrier, married his first wife, (I think that her maiden name was Glaser), moved to Horovice, a town about 50 km west of Prague) and started manufacturing matches. Later on, he switched to manufacturing furniture. However, thanks to his military rank he belonged to the prominent citizens of Horovice: official visits were often welcomed by the master of the Horovice chateau, count Vilem von Hana, and by Captain Bondy.

Grandfather Julius Bondy became the head of the Horovice Jewish community and was instrumental in the building of the first and only synagogue in town. He secured the support of count von Hana, a protestant and also an army officer, who made the largest monetary contribution of 500 Guilders. In spite of his prominent position in the Jewish community he asked to have on his tombstone the following verse of Heinrich Heine, a leading German poet, a Jew who converted to Christianity:

*Keine Messe wird man singen  
Keinen Kadosh wird man sagen  
Nichts gesagt and nichts gesungen  
wird an meinen Sterbetagen*

**Grandmother Eleonore (Lora), my father Viktor,  
aunt Ruzena, aunt Anna and grandfather Zibrid Porges**



In loose translation (my own):

*No mass will be sung  
No Kaddish will be said  
Nothing will be said nor sung  
On the anniversaries of my death.*

His wife gave my grandfather, Julius Bondy, 8 children; 5 sons: Bruno, Leo, Frantisek, Joseph, Karel Frantisek, (better known as Karl Franz) and 3 daughters: Ida, Ella and Milena. Six years after his first wife died, he married a beautiful young woman named Jana (Johana) Pollakova, who was a clerk in his factory office. Jana was a daughter of Herman Pollak and Saly (Anna) née Schoenova. She bore him four children: The first, my mother Anna Marie, was born on May 17, 1899. She died on November 9, 1993 in Wilmette. Mother had 3 younger brothers: Jan, Antonin and the youngest, appropriately named Michael Benjamin.

Upon my grandfather's death in 1906, his villa and the factory in Horovice were inherited jointly by my grandmother and by Frantisek, one of the sons from grandfather's first marriage. Frantisek was married and lived with his wife and his mother-in-law in the same villa as my grandmother and her own four children. Grandmother and her children lived on the first floor and Frantisek with his wife and his mother-in-law lived on the second floor. In September 1914 upon the outbreak of World War I Frantisek was called up for the army and, unfortunately, almost immediately killed. His mother-in-law demanded that my grandmother immediately pay half of the value of the villa and factory to Frantisek's widow. To be able to do that, my grandmother had to heavily mortgage the factory. In the nineteen-thirties during the Great Depression, the factory closed for ever. When my parents married twelve years later, in 1926, Father took upon himself the responsibility for paying off the loan and even of supporting his mother-in-law and her polio-crippled son.

### **Mother's siblings**

I do not know too much about the fate of my mother's half siblings. My grandfather Julius was a strict father to his sons; he sent Leo and Bruno to America, because he was angry with them. It was never explained to me why, and I do not know whether my mother knew the reason. After all, she was not even born when it happened. She was seven years old, when her father died. Mother told me that the ship with Leo was lost at sea, but that Bruno had made it to the USA. Brothers Josef and Karl Franz were exiled to Vienna and both did quite well. Josef was a businessman and, apparently, a ladies man as well. He was married and had, I think, one or two children, one of them certainly a girl. But he also had a mistress. Eventually he divorced his wife, married the mistress and then acquired another mistress. When Hitler marched

into Austria, Josef took his former and current wife as well as the current mistress and emigrated with his daughter and son-in-law to New Zealand (it might have been Australia). I think that the son-in-law, who was a lawyer, became a ski instructor and was killed in a skiing accident. The daughter was a physician. Anyway, as far as I remember, at the end of the war in 1945, Josef and his family were all dead.

Karl Franz was the most successful of Mother's half-siblings. In Vienna he started publishing an industrial magazine for manufacturers of wood products, but before long he owned a string of Viennese newspapers, including the influential *Telegraf*, *Echo*, *Neue Wien-Zeitung* and a number of other publications. He established contacts with the Austrian government and even befriended prime minister Schuschnig. His newspapers strongly supported Austrian independence and were highly critical of the Nazi regime in Austria's neighbor, Germany, as well as of Hitler himself. It came as no surprise that on the day of the "Anschluss", when German forces marched into Austria and the Nazis assumed power in 1938, they immediately came to arrest him. Fortunately he managed to escape across the Hungarian border at the very last moment in a taxi, together with the editor of "Telegraf" Eugene Lennhoff and reporter count Curt von Straszewitz – but only after an unsuccessful attempt to enter Czechoslovakia, which had closed its borders to Austria. (See Eugene Lennhoff, *The Last Five Hours of Austria*, Frederick A. Stokes, New York, 1938).

### **My mother's family in Horovice around 1910**

*Last row: Milena Bondy(?), Karel Münz*

*Center row: Jan (uncle Honza), Ida, Ella (m. to Karel Münz),  
grandmother Jana, my mother Anna, a maid*

*Front row: Michal and Antonin Bondy, Jara and Julia Münz*



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At Karl Franz's home the Nazis found only his wife. She was his second wife (the first had died years earlier). However, as she was a Gentile and fortunately could prove it, they did not arrest her. Instead they "confiscated" all her jewels including her wedding ring. From Hungary Karl Franz came to Prague and he stayed with us for some time. My father urged him to stay in Czechoslovakia; after all he was born there, so father could have easily obtained permission for permanent residency for him. Karl Franz just laughed at my father and said: "You will have Hitler here within the year." My father, a Czechoslovak patriot and reserve lieutenant of the Czechoslovak army said: "Hitler here? Never!" Hitler's army marched into Prague on March 15, 1939. Karl Franz and his son Julius (Djusi) ended up in New York, where they were later joined by Karl's wife, who got out of Austria via Italy.

I have in my possession two newspaper clippings. One is from the Telegraf, the paper owned by my uncle until the German invasion, which then had its name changed to "Deutscher Telegraf" (German Telegraph). On the first page is a caricature of uncle Karl Franz and of his son with the caption: "Bondy and his son, the Jewish press hyenas, escape to Paris from the homeland Vienna. They took with them large sums of stolen money and want to found a new "newspaper." A clipping from another newspaper devoted a long section to Karl Franz Bondy and his coworkers and denounces him as "a newspaper dictator with close contacts with the government, particularly with the minister of finance," and identifies him as "the principal culprit of the relentless persecution of the National Socialists and responsible for their suffering in prisons."

**Great uncle Eduard Munz and his son Karel on vacation with their families (1912).**





*Vienna, Monday May 16, 1938*

*cartoon:*

*Bondy and his son, the Jewish press hyenas, escape to Paris from the homeland Vienna. They took with them large sums of stolen money and want to found a new “newspaper”.*

*headline:*

*Scandalous affairs of Austrian emigrants in Paris / Several arrests/Jew Bondy founds a newspaper.*

# Antlitz der Hetze

Das sind die, die das Leben und die Existenz tausender Volksgenossen in der Ostmark auf dem Gewissen haben. Jahrelang hat die Mischpoche in allen Blättern Wiens in der übelsten und infamsten Weise ihre Drecktäteln über die Menschen ausgeschüttet, die Freiheit und Wohlergehen ihres Volkes über alles stellten. Gemeinsam mit den Machthabern des Herrn Schuschnigg hat sie zu Mord und Verfolgung gegen die Nationalsozialisten gehetzt und geschürt. Immer war sie bereit, jede Schandtat des Systems zu decken. Alle Urteile und alle Verurteilungen gegen die wehrlosen Kämpfer der deutschen Freiheit waren ihr zu milde. Einst, der gefährlichsten jüdischen Banditengruppen war in den Blättern des „Telegraf“-Unternehmens, Besehen Sie sich diese Visagen: Sind sie nicht wie aus dem Verbrecheralbum gerissen?

„Wir haben die Christen, hingelagert“, das scheint sich der Erwin Engel, der Lyriker des „Sport-Telegraf“, zu denken. Er ist fröhlicher Dinge und hatte damals auch allen Grund dazu.

Romblice

Der Jude Bondy jun.

Gesamter deutscher Außenhandel in

Zusammenbruch



Der Jude KARL FRANZ BONDY. In seinem sorgenvollen Antlitz ist eine Vorahnung des Endes seiner Gaunereien zu sehen. Er, dem nicht nur der „Telegraf am Mittag“, das „Echo“, „Telegraf“ (Nacht Ausgabe), das „Tagblatt“, der „Sport-Telegraf“, sondern auch der „Internationale Holzmarkt“, „Der Holzmarkt“, „Die neue Wein-Zeitung“, „Der Lebensmittelmarkt“, „Der Kolonialwaren- und Produktenmarkt“ sowie das „Weinland“ gehörten, war im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes der jüdische Zeitungsdiktator von Wien. Seine sprichwörtliche Verbindung zur Regierung, vor allem zum Pressenminister Ludwig, verschaffte ihm eine Vormachtstellung, die er im Interesse des internationalen verbrecherischen Judentums auf das infamste und gemeinste ausübte. Er ist der Hauptschuldige an der maßlosen Verfolgungshetze gegen die Nationalsozialisten in all den Jahren des Zuchthauses und des Anhaltelagers. Sein schlechtes Gewissen hat ihn auch im ersten Moment des Umbruchs zur Flucht getrieben. Er würde wohl vor der berechtigten Expropriation des deutschen Volkes in Wien auch kaum zu schützen gewesen.

Der Jude und Fremdenverführer Eugen Lénhoff, der Außgewalttäter Bondys und Vertreter der „Telegraf“-Journalie beim Völkerverbund. Als bester Freund Bondys an dessen Gaunereien er lobhaft Anteil nahm, ist er mit ihm auch gemeinsam geflüchtet, übrigens mit dem



Der Paragol des Herrn Bondy. Der Vaterlandsverräter und Emigrant Graf Kurt Strachwitz, der sich nicht entblödete, die Mischpoche von Wien jahrelang mit seinem Hetz- und Schandgestammel gegen Führer und Reich zu ergötzen.



DR. GUSTAV CANAVAL. Der Vertreter Schuschniggas im „Telegraf“, als dessen Regierungskommissar er seinerzeit auch bestellt worden ist, Canaval, der den Kreisen der streng katholischen C. V. entstammt, war ein willfähriges Werkzeug in den Händen des Juden Bondy.

captions:

It is those who have the life and livelihood of thousands of our people in the eastern region on their conscience. For years the clan [mischpoche] has emptied out its sewage in the newspapers of Vienna in the most ugly and infamous way over those who put freedom and prosperity of their people [Volkes] above all. Together with the rulers of Mr. Schuschnigg they called for murder and persecution of National Socialists. It was always ready to cover up all despicable deeds of the system. All judgements and all injustices against the defenseless fighters for German freedom were too mild for it. One of the most dangerous Jewish bandit gangs was sitting in the newspaper of the Telegraph company. Look at those faces. Are they not taken directly from a photo album of gangsters?

*“We outwitted the Christians“ – apparently is that Ervin Engel, the lyricist of the sports Telegraph is thinking. He is in a good mood and at that time had all the reason to be.*

*The Jew Karl Franz Bondy. In his worried face, you can recognize the premonition of the end of his gangster deeds. He, who not only owns the Midday Telegraph, the Echo, the Telegraph Night Edition, the Seven Day Journal, the Sports Telegraph, but also the International Wood Market, the Wood Market, the New Viennese Journal, the Food Market, and the Colonial Wares Market, as well as Wine Country, was in the true sense of the word the Jewish newspaper dictator of Vienna. His legendary connection to government, in particular to press secretary Ludwig, gave him a privileged position which he exploited in the interest of the international criminal Jewry in the most infamous and mean way. He is the main culprit of the immeasurable persecution and defamation campaigns against National Socialists in all those years of imprisonment and detention. His bad conscience drove him to flee in the first moment of the new times. He would have been hard to protect from the justified indignation of the German people [Volkes] in Vienna.*

*Dr. Gustav Canaval, the representative of Schuschnigg in the Telegraph. He was also appointed his government commissioner. Canaval, who comes from strictly Catholic circles, was a willing tool in the hands of the Jew Bondy.*

*The show horse [Paradegol] of Mr. Bondy. The traitor and emigrant Count Curt Strachwitz, for whom it wasn't too stupid to fawn upon the clan [mischpoche] for years with his inflammatory and shameful babbling against the Fuhrer and the Reich.*

*The Jew and Free Mason leader Eugen Lenhoff, the foreign minister of Bondy and representative of the Telegraph journals at the League of Nations. As the best friend of Bondy, in whose gangsterism he avidly participated, he fled with him...*

*The person who enabled the pre-eminence of Jews in the Viennese press, and who against all better insight and against the interests of the people, supported and defended it, the press chief of Schuschnigg, the proxy secretary of the shameful system, Eduard Ludwig, was the true boss of the inciting Telegraph, who even Bondy, with whom he was not only friendly but financially bound, was subservient to. When Bondy sometimes did something that embarrassed the government all too openly, then Ludwig issued a house ban and Bondy was not allowed to come into the Telegraph building for several days. Otherwise he was “one heart and one soul“ with his dear friend Bondy.*

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After the war, my mother somehow got in touch with Karl Franz and he actually offered to take me to America, but I did not want to go and she did not press me. I was head over heels in love with Jan and busily catching up with my drastically interrupted education. I seem to remember that Karl Franz died the same year in New York. He also informed my mother that his son Djusi met his uncle Bruno Bondy, another half-brother of my mother, on a previous trip to the USA on which occasion Bruno informed him that he did not want to have anything to do with the Bondy family, because he was treated so poorly. After we came to the United States Mother contacted Djusi; he offered help, but as we did not need any, he had no interest in renewing family ties. Jan and I met with him once when we visited New York. By that time his name had been shortened to Bond and he was working in some capacity for the United Nations. He took us to lunch but showed no interest in continued contacts. That was the last time I saw him.

I also made a feeble attempt to find out about Bruno by searching the Mormon files, but couldn't find anything. Perhaps he too had changed his name.

Of my mother's three half-sisters, Ida married Mr. Stepanek, who used to work as a foreman in my grandfather's furniture factory and later opened his own factory and became a competitor. My grandmother did not approve of the marriage; however, it turned out that Mr. Stepanek was a very decent man who helped our family during the war. Their daughter, Zdena Lastovkova née Stepankova and Julius Bondy (see below), were my only cousins who survived the war. Zdena and her husband Antonin Lastovka had a very nice summer cottage in Cila near

**The Münz Brothers company truck, Horazdovice, around 1927 Frantisek Münz in the drivers seat, grandfather Zibrid on the roof, Father and Mother standing in the truck**



the village of Skryje, where we used to spend our summers, and we visited them frequently and they were always very helpful to us. When we started visiting Prague again after the fall of Communism in 1989, Antonin was no longer alive, but we visited Zdena and her daughter Olga regularly and both of them visited us in the United States. Zdena died at the age of 89 in 2004. Whenever we are in Prague, Olga meets us at the airport and generally takes care of us.

The next half-sister of my mother, Milena never married. She was a gifted artist and perished in Auschwitz.

The third of Mother's half-sisters, Ella, married Karel Münz (my father's uncle, see section about Father) .

Mother's younger brother Jan (Honza) Bondy was born in 1900, just a year after my mother. He was struck by polio at the age of eight or nine and never walked again. He spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Even though his hands were crippled and he held the brushes in a peculiar way, he learned to paint very well. He was able to earn a little money by painting portraits of people in the neighboring villages and also by making crosswords and other sorts of puzzles for several newspapers. He was my favorite uncle and I spent a lot of time with him whenever I was in Horovice.

My mother had two more younger brothers: Antonin (Tonda) married a gentile, survived the war and died in the nineteen fifties. Their son, Jula Bondy (another Julius in the family!), born 1929, being a "Mischling" (from a mixed marriage) was not sent to a concentration camp, but was kicked out of school, although two years later than the kids who were "fully" Jewish. After the war, while he was fulfilling his compulsory military service, his Czech commanding officer said to him one day: "Bondy, you are Jewish, why don't you join the Haganah?" Haganah, the Jewish army, was at the time training in Czechoslovakia under the auspices of the Czechoslovak minister of foreign affairs, Jan Masaryk, the son of the late president Tomas Masaryk. He joined the Haganah, went to Israel and fought in all the wars. He and his wife Ester had four children and all live in Israel. He is my only living male cousin.

My mother's youngest brother Michael Benjamin died in a drowning accident about the time I was born.

## Childhood

I was born May 29, 1927. During my early childhood there was not much variation in my life. We lived in Prague and used to travel on most weekends by train to my maternal grandmother's villa in Horovice, about forty miles from Prague. When I was very small, we lived in a small apartment on "Na porici" street. Our first apartment was small and poorly equipped in an old house (the toilet was outside the apartment in the hallway and was shared with several other tenants); apartments in downtown Prague at that time were very scarce and my father's

income as a beginning lawyer was rather modest. After I finished 1<sup>st</sup> grade, we moved to a much roomier and modern apartment in Trojanova street.

I remember very little from my early childhood. My mother used to take me to play in Prague's parks, but before too long I got a "Kinderfräulein," a nanny, who was to teach me German. This was discontinued after Hitler came to power in Germany, but I actually learned to speak and read the language. From first grade I remember virtually nothing. I missed a lot of school, because I managed to get most of the common childhood diseases with the exception of scarlet fever and polio. I even got TB, and have a calcified hilus gland, which probably gave me some resistance against contracting TB during my stay in concentration camps.

When I was born, my father, who had left the Jewish congregation after a row with the rabbi upon his return from WW I, wanted me registered "without religion." My mother responded "All right, but then you should change your name." Since Father did not want to do that, Mother declared: "If you don't and her name is going to be Porges, she may as well be registered as a Jew." (Porges in Central Europe was so typical a Jewish name, that many characters in Jewish jokes were called Porges). So I was registered as being of Jewish faith. In school, religion was taught as a regular subject. There were separate classes for Catholics, Protestants and Jews. However, as my parents did not want me to be exposed to religious instruction, every year they had me excused from religious instruction. While other children had religion classes, I would be sitting somewhere reading a book. When we returned to Prague after the war, Mother changed our names to Trojanova and changed my religious registration to "without religion."

The only attempt at religious education came from my maternal grandmother who, when I was very little, tried to teach me a children's prayer: "My angel guardian, look after my soul, so that I will always be good and please God." However, in Czech the diminutive term for "guardian" was "straznicek" which sounded very much like to word "straznik," meaning policeman, and "look after," in Czech "opatruj," sounded similar to "opatri" or to procure or provide with. So I modified the prayer to "Angel policeman, find me something good [to eat]," thus already in my early year betraying a gluttonous outlook on lifes.

I loved to read. My favored book at that time was one based on Greek mythology; I was fascinated by it. I must sadly confess that a beautiful huge illustrated book based on the Bible and called "Biblical Stories" made a lesser impression. By the time I was eight or nine I read everything within reach that was printed.

Father and I would take long walks together, but he sometimes forgot that my legs were a lot shorter than his. I was told that on one of these walks, I must have been perhaps five years old, he went too fast and I found it difficult to keep up with him. So I called after him: "Daddy, where does your blind passion lead you, I can not keep up with you." (I must have picked up the phrase "blind passion" from some movie ad.) He was always inventing funny stories: for



▲ The author around 1930



▲ With cousins (left to right)  
Harry Pisinger and Eda Werner,  
about 1932

▼ Eda, Eva, Harry



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example, whenever we saw a wild rabbit in the fields, father would say: “Look there goes Snukrdlik.” Snukrdlik was father’s invention: he claimed that this rabbit hid dyed eggs in grandmother’s garden on Easter Monday. While I knew that the Christmas gifts came from my family, for some time I actually believed in the Easter Rabbit. Father reinforced this belief by shouting: “Look there goes Snukrdlik,” every time we saw a hare or a wild bunny running in the fields.

During our weekend walks in Prague Father would sometimes take me to a delicatessen and buy me a slice of pineapple or one of the typical Czech style open faced sandwiches and an orange drink. Sometimes we went to one of the floating eateries on the Vltava river where we ate fried fish. On rare occasions he took me to a movie. After my grandmother Eleanora (Lora) Porgesova died, when I was about five years old, Father’s father, grandfather Porges, lived with the family of my father’s sister Anna Werner on the the other side of the Vltava river. Grandmother Lora used to call me her “little princess.” On weekends spent in Prague, we sometimes went to visit the Werner family. Father and I would walk, while Mother usually took the streetcar. All in all I was a pretty spoiled and self-centered little girl, but I think not a selfish one.

We did not own a car. While I believe that my father earned good money, he also had large expenses: the payment of the mortgage on the then already defunct Horovice factory and also the salary of the guard, Mr. Stejskal, who had to punch

**Young Eva at Lago Maggiore (ca. 1934).**

*clockwise from left: local man, Eva, mother Anna, father Viktor, aunt Ella Munz, and uncle Karel Munz.*



the clocks distributed around the property in order to have the property insured; Mr. Stejskal was originally a stoker in the factory. Father also paid all the expenses for the Horovice household, since my grandmother had no income and my lame uncle Jan's (Honza's) income from painting portraits of the villagers and drawing puzzles for children's newspapers, were marginal. Father also contributed to the upkeep of his own father.

After we moved to Trojanova street, I started to go to the Wenigova school near the Vltava river. I loved that school, and had very good friends there. While the mothers sat on the park benches and kept their eyes on us, we played detectives in the park on the Zofin island (just opposite the National Theatre). We formed a secret detective agency called "The Brotherhood of the Red Dog;" I still remember these girls' names, but I do not remember a single of our detective cases solved or unsolved.

School started at 8 AM and ended at noon. During the year, Father would come home for lunch and, after a short siesta, return to his office. In the hot summer days, he would spend the noon break at a swimming establishment floating in the Vltava river off the Zofin island. I would join him and Mother would bring lunch there. I soon learned to swim well enough that even my overprotective mother would allow me to rent a little row boat and use it around the Zofin island between the two weirs.

By the time I turned about seven or eight, I started English and piano lessons. I also continued German in school, where it was taught as an optional subject in addition to the main curriculum. My piano teacher, Rafael Schächter, was to play an important role later in my life. Though I never really picked up playing piano after the war, he certainly enriched my life to a great extent.

My first English teacher was a young German Jewish refugee from Hitler. When she, wisely, left to go to a safer place (I hope she made it), my next English teacher was a refugee from Russia. Both ladies taught me the grammar and spelling very well; unfortunately I never learned to speak with the proper accent. I remember that my English lessons took place on Wednesday afternoon. I came from school after 12 or one o'clock, and lunch consisted invariably of cauliflower soup, followed by pancakes with jam and then by the two hour long English lesson. I hated Wednesdays. Many years later, in Wisconsin, I told my mother how much I hated this particular lunch. She shook her head in wonder and said: "But you never said a thing." I answered her with a question: "Would it have helped?" She thought for a short moment and then she said: "No." Since after the war I had to learn so much in order to graduate from high school, or rather gymnasium, (which was an eight year continuation of education after finishing grade school and a requirement for the entrance to the university), I never tried to improve my English pronunciation. By the time I came to the U.S., I was 33 years old and my Czech accent was too strongly entrenched. I had to learn too many things, so I had no time to worry about my accent. It somehow did not seem to bother my students at UIC.

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In the summer of 1934 we went to Italy and stayed with my mother's half-sister Ella and her husband, Father's uncle Karel Münz. By-and-large we all had a good time there; I actually have a photo from that summer showing all of us on a trip to Lago Maggiore. The only problem was that almost every day we went to the beach, where my parents would climb over the shark nets and swim in the sea while I sat on the beach in great fear that my parents would be eaten by a shark. These fears were not exactly alleviated when some sailors brought in a shark and my father tried to buy a shark tooth. Even the delicious lunches that my aunt Ella packed for me (they owned a delicatessen store), did not help much, though, as is typical for me, I remember them to this day.

In 1938 I finished grade school and enrolled in Benesovo Statni gymnasium in Praha, Londynska 29. My father believed in "classical" education and the school he had selected for me stressed classical languages. Like in every gymnasium, German was taught from the first and Latin from third grade. However, while in the fifth grade most schools introduced another modern language, most commonly French, our gymnasium taught ancient Greek. The gymnasium was called "classical" to be distinguished from the much more favored "real" gymnasiums. None of the girls from my grade school attended "my" gymnasium and so I had lost contact with my grade school friends before I formed any friendships in my gymnasium. Suddenly I, who had always had a bunch of friends found myself sort of isolated.

### **Horovice**

Horovice, the small town where my mother was born and where my grandmother Jana and my uncle lived, occupies a very special place among my memories. I loved the weekends and summers in Horovice in my grandmother's villa. There were kittens and a large garden full of fruit trees. My uncle Jan Bondy would give me a bit of money to buy plants such as daisies or pansies. I would plant them around the fruit trees. Once I remember being beset by a decorating mania; I bought rolls of pink crepe paper and decorated the long entrance corridor of the villa with it. It must have been at a time when my mother was in Prague with my father since she would have never stood for such nonsense. In Horovice I got to play with the children from the neighboring village of Tlustice; they were children of factory workers. Their families owned little one story houses with gardens; they kept chickens and rabbits. In their homes I ate bread with margarine and perhaps some cheese and they in turn ate bread with butter and ham in our villa. I remember that one of the children once stated that at "Plevno" (that was my grandparents' house unofficial name) even the water tasted better. I enjoyed those sandwiches in their houses as much as they enjoyed those in the villa. We used to play all kinds of silly games, for example having a store in which we used all kinds of plants, fruits and grasses to represent various

vegetables. Sometimes we would find a dead mouse or little bird and give them elaborate funerals. In the early spring, when the snow started to melt, I would take the small coal shovel from the kitchen and spend a lot of time rearranging the flow of the water from the melting snow and occasionally trying to float a little paper boat on such a stream. But actually I did not like the very early spring very much and waited impatiently for the arrival of real spring with violets and primroses, followed by lilac bushes blooming in great profusion under the kitchen and dining room windows.

The “Villa Bondy“ was a two story building. On the ground floor was a large kitchen, where the family ate when my father was not present. When he was in Horovice my grandmother (that is my maternal grandmother who adored him and never called him anything other than the diminutive Vitousek) had all the meals served in the dining room, which adjoined the kitchen. There was an alcove separated from the dining room by a hanging carpet. It was in this alcove that the Christmas tree was placed every year; the hanging carpet would be removed after the Christmas Eve dinner and the beautifully wrapped gifts under the shining and decorated tree would be revealed. Even when I was little I knew that the gifts came from my parents, my uncle, my mother’s friend my “aunt” Jindra, and from Artur Fishmann.

My grandmother “Babicka“ Jana became a young widow when my mother, her oldest child, was 7 years old and her three younger children, all boys, ranged from 6 to about 2. She apparently did not think that this was enough work and started inviting a little boy from the Prague Jewish orphanage. His name was Artur Fishmann and he was about 15 years older than I and continued visiting my grandmother’s place even as a young adult. Since his childhood holidays were spent with my grandmother, he also got used to the family customs of celebrating Christmas and dyeing eggs at Easter time. I remember that he once gave me one of



**The Horovice  
villa**

the very few German books I owned; it was called “The Bee Maya” and I am sorry to say that I have no recollection of having ever read it. I really loved Artur; we called him Turek, and he is in my memory truly a member of my family. He eventually studied law and upon graduation worked for a short time in my father’s law office. Around 1940 Artur Fishmann married, and lived with his wife Dita (Edith) in Prague. Like so many others, he and Dita perished somewhere in the East.

But to continue with the description of the villa: next to the dining room was a large room, called “the salon.” It housed an old grand piano, some plants (including a large oleander), and a stand with marble top and more plants. There was a sofa with matching easy chairs and an ornate coffee table and, as in all the other rooms, a huge ceramic stove. There was also a collection of old guns, and two large oil paintings, one of my grandfather and one of grandmother Jana hanging on the wall above the sofa. In order to avoid turning the guns in during the Nazi occupation, they were thrown down the well in the factory yard. In the center of the room hung an elaborate crystal chandelier. The salon had four entrances, one from the dining room, one from a verandah (porch) accessible from the garden, one from the front entrance hall and one from the master bedroom; that door was kept closed, particularly if there were guests in the house. Every year during the warm months swallows built a nest on the crystal chandelier above the large oriental carpet and so Babicka, who believed that the swallows brought luck to the house, left the door to the verandah open and the huge oriental carpet was protected by thick layers of old newspapers. By the way, that carpet was saved for us during the war by Zdena Lastovkova’s father together with one of the easy chairs. Jan and I mutilated that chair after the war, since we did not like the old fashioned fabric covering, and so we reupholstered it with some bright red artificial leather!

Babicka normally slept in the master bedroom. When I was in Horovice without my parents, I slept with her in a little bed under an old fashioned clock, something like a grandfathers clock but shorter, with elaborate machinery, chains and weights. When my parents were there, Babicka vacated the master bedroom for them and moved to uncle Honza’s adjacent bedroom, which had an extra bed. Honza’s bedroom had another two doors, one led to a corridor which had an entrance to the cellar. The corridor continued to the main entrance hall. The other door from the room led to a little pantry, which had a window that used to be open all the time. There my grandmother kept the numerous jars of her home made preserves.

Along the front of the villa, facing the factory, was a long narrow corridor which led to the toilet, which once upon a time was actually a flushing toilet, but from when I can remember, it had to be flushed with a bucket of water which was always kept ready. The water was brought in a large wooden vessel from a well in the factory complex. There were washstands in the bedrooms and water was heated in the kitchen. In order to bathe, one had to go across the street to a laundry building, which contained a big kettle for heating water as well as a bathtub. However, as a

child I was always bathed in the kitchen in a small wooden tub with the water heated on the kitchen stove. There was also a very small swimming pool (really small) in the factory building. It was not heated and the only person I remember who swam or rather plunged into it was my father, who every year on New Year's morning, snow or no snow, would put on a bathing suit and run barefooted around the villa and then across the road into the factory and submerge himself in the cold water.

There was a stone staircase to the upper floor, which was arranged exactly like the ground floor. As far as I can remember, the only room that was frequently used was the one above my uncle's room, in which my aunt Jindra and her son Zdenek always stayed. For reasons I didn't know and I never questioned, it was called "the Nest." At Christmas-time Jindra and Zdenek had their own Christmas tree in their room, in addition to the one in the dining room downstairs.

Babicka had a stroke when I was, I think, in the third grade. It happened in Prague and I vaguely remember that she stayed with us until she recovered and only then went back to Horovice. After that, as far as I was concerned, everything was back to normal.

I guess you could say that I always had some sort of nesting tendency. In our Horovice garden there was an old gazebo and I tried very hard to repair it. I used remains of old boxes and layers of old newspapers in order to make it "livable" but I never succeeded.

Another family activity in Horovice was mushroom gathering. I used to go mushroom hunting with both parents. When I was very little, father used to carry me on his shoulders, but as soon as we reached the forest he had to put me down.

I remember one incident which for some reason made a lasting impression on me: I was always fond of cats and dogs. At that time I had neither, though there was always a surplus of kittens in Horovice. Once I got hold of a kitten, dressed it in my doll's dress and put it in my small doll carriage. Mr. Stejskal, who at that time functioned as a guard of the now closed factory (it probably must have been around 1933), saw me with the kitten and very angrily ordered me to release it immediately, which I did, but I ran to my mother right away to complain; Mother, however, said that Mr. Stejskal was absolutely right.

Much later, during the war, my "aunt" Jindra used to go to Horovice trying to get some food, which at the time was rationed. (She used to send us food packages to Theresienstadt. Some, of course got lost, but some made it.) On one such trip she met Mr. Stejskal and asked him how he was doing. Mr. Stejskal said: "Mrs. Schierova, they tell me that all my life I was exploited by the Jews. But my life will never be as good as it was during that time." After the war, upon our return from the camps, Mr. Stejskal, a member of the Communist Party, told my mother: "Young mistress, sell the whole thing (the villa and the factory), they (meaning the Communists) will take it from you." For him my mother always was the "young mistress." The "mistress" was my grandmother who at that time had been dead for seven years.

ER

So as soon as I became the owner the villa and the defunct factory (I was the heiress according to my grandmother's will), Mother sold it to the local butcher. Two years later the state confiscated it. When we returned to Czechoslovakia in 1990, the factory was nonexistent and the villa in virtual ruins. I am certain that I idealize my stay in Horovice, but it was a totally carefree time: I could run in the garden, pick fruit, use my swing, later even ride around on a bicycle (a second hand one, but mine). I had my two tortoises there, in the winter they hibernated in the cellar, but the rest of the year they spent in a pen in the garden and lived on lettuce leaves. Periodically they would dig under the pen and go for a walk in the fields. However the villagers would always find them and bring them back to us. After the occupation we donated them to the village school.

### **German Occupation.**

In 1938, even before my graduation from grade school, Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia cede to Germany the border area of the republic referred to as Sudetenland, which admittedly had a large number of German speaking Czechoslovak citizens. Czechoslovakia mobilized and at that point I believe the nation was more than ready to fight and defend itself. Certainly my father was. Though his attitude was very anti-militaristic, he felt strongly, that Czechoslovakia should not yield to Nazi Germany. The defenses on the border were well built and even pacifists like my dad were ready to fight the Nazis. The army was very well equipped and the people of this otherwise peaceful nation were truly ready to defend their country. I remember coming home one day from school crying, because we were told in school, that there was a mobilization and so we thought that there would be a war. When I got home I found my mother packing a little suitcase for my father; she told me that father went to enlist even though he was not called up; he was a reserve lieutenant. She told me that she was going to spank me if I did not stop crying. However, in a few hours Father came back home, very unhappy, since he had been rejected; he had claimed that he had been called up, but that he had lost the card, but they obviously did not believe him. He was 40 years old and only in the second reserve.

Czechoslovakia's ally France joined with Great Britain, and they pressured Czechoslovakia to yield to Germany and give up the border territories (with all the country's defenses) in order to "save world peace." President Benes yielded to the pressure by Chamberlain and Daladier (the prime ministers of England and France). He then resigned and escaped to London. The army was demobilized and a gloom settled over the country. Thus the Nazi regime got not only a lot of military equipment but also the excellent munition plant of the Skoda factory in Pilsen. All the defense fortifications on the Czechoslovak borders were in the area ceded to Germany. I am sorry to add that Poland and Hungary hurried to occupy the Czechoslovak areas adjacent to their respective countries.

We had one more vacation on the sea shore in the summer of 1938. This one was in Yugoslavia in a resort called Crikvenica. Nobody could have predicted that nine years later I would spend my honeymoon on that same beach.

On March 15, 1939, Hitler's troops marched into Prague with no resistance from the Czech people. That was the end of Masaryk's Czechoslovakia, for a time the most advanced country in that part of the world. It had lasted only 20 years. I feel that the demise of Masaryk's Czechoslovakia actually marked the end of my childhood.

The day Hitler rolled into Prague I was in the middle of my first year of gymnasium. I remember that day very well: on my way to school, I saw people crying in the streets. When I got to the classroom everybody sat in their place quietly like at a funeral. As we waited for the professor, everybody looked gloomy and we were all silent. Finally one of the boys, Jiri Para, got up, walked to the blackboard and wrote: "Do not lose your courage even when they are shitting on your head." He is the only boy from that class I will never forget. I never saw him after the war and I have no idea what happened to him.

Before the Nazi occupation I went to various gym classes and even to a ballet school, but I was never too good in gym and sports, though till today I am a reliable (though slow) swimmer. As it turned out, swimming became pretty important in my later life. As far as ballet was concerned, it actually led to the only case in my entire life of deceiving my parents: during the Nazi occupation, I could no longer attend the ballet school. So my parents decided to have me take private lessons. Unfortunately I discovered a pile of mysteries in my ballet teacher's bathroom and I used to spend a lot of time reading those instead of dancing. I always read a lot (not just mysteries). I also practiced piano playing willy-nilly with my mother sitting by my side, though she had no idea about music. I even started French lessons, but those were quickly ended by the Nazi invasion. However, I continued with my piano lessons practically up to the day of the deportation.

During the first years of the occupation, summers and many weekends were still spent mostly in Horovice, though my maternal grandmother had died on Christmas of 1938, and my uncle Honza now lived there alone.

I am not quite sure when I actually got my first dog Jolly. It definitely happened after things started to get bad. Father did not like dogs or cats, but around the time of the Nazi occupation he allowed me to accept it from a butcher in Tlustice from whom we bought meat, when we were in Babicka's villa. This is how it came about: There was a small circus visiting the village of Tlustice. (My grandmother's villa was approximately halfway between Horovice and Tlustice.) The butcher was a generous man and apparently gave some meat to the circus people, who then gave him a pregnant wire-haired fox terrier dog. The terrier had four puppies. One day when we were in Horovice and went to buy some meat, the butcher offered to let us pick one of the puppies. Father, much to our surprise, called out "Jolicku (little Jolly), Jolicku" to the liveliest puppy which started to toddle towards him; he then let me accept the gift.

ER

Poor Jolly had a complicated life. It all started when we, as Jews, were prohibited to own pets. We had to turn them in or to present a certificate that the pet had been killed. We gave Jolly to aunt Jindra complete with his favorite easy chair. My mother then went to a pet shelter where she selected a dog which looked as though somewhere in the distant past one of his ancestors might have been a wire haired fox terrier. She then proceeded to take the animal to some veterinarian who did not know our Jolly, with the intention of having the poor dog euthanized instead of Jolly. She was so upset over the entire thing that she appeared at the vet's office in tears. The vet said: "Just give me 10 Crowns and I will give you a certificate that I killed your dog. But I promise you that I will find a good home for it." She was very glad that the poor dog could be saved, thanked the vet and was about to leave when the vet asked her: "You forgot to tell me the dog's name." Mother, of course, did not know his name, but quickly came up with a clever response: "His name is Tumas." "Tu mas" meaning something like "here you are" or "come and get it" is how in Czech one would call an animal to get food – and she was quite sure that any dog would respond to this name.

On March 15, 1939 the day the Nazi army marched into Prague, my father, like all the Czechoslovak Jewish lawyers, was immediately forbidden from further practicing law. This prohibition appeared so soon after the German invasion that it must have been issued by the right-wing Czech government (which assumed power after Munich and President Benes' departure) even before a German directive could have been received. I am sad to have to conclude that it must have been prepared even before the invasion at the behest of some of the Czech lawyers who were eager to get rid of the Jewish competition. My father shared his office with two other lawyers; the senior partner was father's distant cousin, Otto Popper, and the junior partner was Dr. Kautsky (as university graduates, lawyers in Czechoslovakia used the title Doctor), who was a gentile. Otto, who was Jewish, managed to get a visitors visa to the USA, but left his wife behind. She perished in the Holocaust. Dr Kautsky was a brave and decent man: he allowed my father to continue his practice. At one point Father was summoned by the Gestapo, because a disgruntled secretary denounced him and reported that he was illegally continuing his practice. I learned what happened only after Father returned safely home. I don't know how he managed to defend himself, but I always assumed that probably his demeanor and supposedly "Aryan" looks helped. He was very handsome, tall and blond. Upon his return, he told us that while he was waiting there he observed an unlucky Jew who was just being released, but at the last moment the Gestapo agent decided to search him. He found only a toothbrush, but that was enough for the Gestapo to declare that the man "had a bad conscience", since he had prepared himself for being detained, and to arrest him.

I finished only the first two years of the gymnasium before I, like all other Jewish students, was kicked out. All the students and all the teachers with one exception treated me well. The exception was the natural science teacher, named

Hnevkovsky. He was a fascist and an anti-Semite. As if that wasn't bad enough for me, he also had a good reason to hate my mother. He came from the same region as my mother and at a county ball in Beroun she had publicly slapped him in the face. I asked her why she did it and she told me only that he was being fresh. When my mother went to school to inquire about my progress, she met Mr. Hnevkovsky and they recognized each other immediately. So now he had two reasons to hate me: not only was I Jewish but my mother had publicly humiliated him. This, of course, was a challenge for me and so I was always perfectly prepared for his class. He would make rude anti-Semitic comments, but in the end I always got an "A." One day he was lecturing on some primitive prehistoric creatures and next time he asked a question which nobody could understand. In a feeble attempt to jolt our memory, he told us that the name of the creature in question was similar to the name of an ancient panslavic god. I got his stupid message and I said: "Triglav (the old Slavic god of prophesy with three heads) and trilobite." That was the correct answer, but the way he praised me was, I think, remarkable. He said: "I am used to the sad fact that if I ask a question about natural history, the only person in the entire class who knows the correct answer is a Jew. But when I ask a question about our panslavic mythology and the only person who knows the correct answer is a Jewess, admittedly one with an outstanding record, that is something for which you, the entire class, should be ashamed." Surprisingly I received an A in the natural history on the final report card. It was the last report card for the next five years. In the fall of 1940 all Jewish students were kicked out of all schools. Our school principal asked my mother to come to school, apologized for what they were being forced to do and told her they regretted that they had to expel all the Jewish students but that they particularly regretted losing two upperclassmen and me.

Our parents arranged for small private courses; in my group ("circle") we were perhaps 6 or 7. Jewish teachers were found, not necessarily people trained as teachers, but people knowledgeable in a particular field. And so we continued our study of the Czech language and mathematics and started learning about chemistry (I actually learned to balance chemical equations then and there) and learned some fundamentals of Latin. A few years ago in Australia, I met the man, Ota Wachtel, who taught me mathematics at that time. I recognized just his name, but he did not remember me.

Before the German occupation Mother had a live-in-maid and a cleaning woman who came in once or twice a week, but Mother did the shopping and cooking herself. After we were no longer allowed to employ anybody (about 1940) I became the dish washer and I cleaned the carpets.

While in Prague I still continued my piano lessons. Rafael Schächter had another student whose parents emigrated to Prague from Vienna. His name was Honza Tausik and he used to have his lesson just before mine. Pretty soon he began to wait for me and walk me home. He was tall, somewhat redheaded and freckled.

We also used to meet on the Hagibor playground. Hagibor was a Jewish sport club with a playground located near the Jewish cemetery in the part of Prague called Vinohrady. I started to frequent Hagibor after Jewish youth and children were forbidden from entering public parks and playgrounds. I was never very good at sports – I could swim fairly well, but that was about all. On the Hagibor playground I used to play volleyball, certainly more enthusiastically than skillfully. I also used to meet Honza Tausik there and he would walk me home pushing his bicycle, of which he was extraordinarily proud. At the time I also acquired my first Jewish girlfriend – Eva Steiner. She had dark hair like I, but hers was braided in two impressive long plaits. We both were freckled and wore glasses. I think that Honza Tausik was not quite sure in which of us he was actually interested. I remember my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. I invited all classmates from my “circle” and my mother made some refreshments. Honza Tausik gave me a little chain bracelet with small animal pendants and stole a photo of me. That made me very happy. I might add that we never even held hands. He was deported in June of 1942 in a transport labeled AAh. I remember standing by the window and crying. When, in Theresienstadt two years later, I started dating my Honza, he told me that Honza Tausik had been his fellow student in the chemistry course he had attended. By then we knew that the AAh transport bypassed Terezin and went straight “East.”

Sometime in 1941 we had to start wearing yellow stars and in the fall of that year the transports started, first to Lodz and later to Terezin (Theresienstadt). Fellow students from my “circle” started vanishing on the transports one by one. My grandfather Porges died in 1941; he used to live with Father’s sister Anna, Uncle Vilem Werner and my cousin Edvard (Eda). Shortly after my grandfather’s death the Werners had to give up their apartment and moved into ours in Trojanova street. I was very fond of my cousin Eda Werner, and we got along very well. He was just a year younger than I. Unfortunately, the Werners did not live with us for too long; they soon vanished in the East never to be heard of again.

We had to make room for them and for their furniture. My mother stopped a coal delivery wagon on the street and paid the driver to deliver our dining room furniture and some other objects to Mr. Stepanek’s (Zdena Lastovkova’s father) Prague storehouse. Mr. Stepanek had been married to my mother’s half-sister, who had died of cancer many years earlier. This furniture was returned to us after the war. Dr. Kautsky also returned Father’s office furniture to us.

After my piano teacher, Rafael Schächter, was deported to Theresienstadt with the second transport (AK2), I continued my piano lessons with his girlfriend Erna Grünfeld. She lived only a couple of houses from us and I was told that she and Mr. Schächter could not get married, because she was half Jewish and had she married him, she would also have been subjected to deportation. As long as we had a radio (later we had to turn it in) Erna, one of her sisters, and Lisa Klein (the older sister of Gideon Klein, a very talented musician, who perished in the

Holocaust) used to come to our apartment to listen illegally to broadcasts from England. I used to be sent to the kitchen to prepare tea and if it was too weak, Erna would derogatorily call it “Maricka Magdonova’s pee.” (Maricka Magdonova was a character in a patriotic poem by the poet Petr Bezruc. Bezruc later became a Communist, as did Ms. Grünfeld.)

A friend of these people was E. A. Saudek, who was married to the daughter of the famous Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlicky. Saudek was Jewish but was at that time protected from deportation because his wife was a Gentile. Saudek decided to perform Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” using his own recent translation (the play was actually translated several times before and after) in the Prague Jewish Orphanage. Somehow he could not find a satisfactory Titania among the children in the orphanage, someone suggested me, and I got the role. I was thrilled and quickly memorized the role. It seemed that I was best when Titania argued with Oberon, but I did not do so well in the love scenes. Anyway, I never got to play in a performance, because I was sent to Theresienstadt before the play was performed.

I mentioned Artur Fishmann in the description of my family. While he was not a blood relation, he was really like a family member. After his wedding there was a big party in the Jewish orphanage. Artur (Turek) gave my mother a big bouquet of red roses with a card that said: to my dear mother, Turek. I remember the party well: I actually got to dance with the poet Jiri Orten whose little brother lived in the orphanage and – in the Midsummer Night’s Dream – played the role of Puck. When I was about eleven, my parents invited a girl from the Jewish orphanage to spend the summer with us in Horovice. I am ashamed to admit that I was actually jealous of her because once, when my father was reading a newspaper and she wanted his attention, she just hit the paper he was holding and Father did not act angrily and immediately started talking to her. I knew that he would not have tolerated it had I done the same; by coincidence it was this girl who inherited my role of Titania and actually got to play it. She vanished somewhere in Auschwitz or possibly beyond. In Theresienstadt my mother and I shared a room with the mother of my “Oberon-to-be,” the boy who, in the role of Oberon, would have been my partner in the play, for a short time.

## **Terezin**

In July of 1942 my father was put in the AAv transport; I was in the reserve of the same transport and my mother was not called. I don’t really remember packing and getting to the old exhibition palace where the long journey towards death for most of the Jewish population of Prague began. Even though I was with Father I was totally unhinged by the separation from Mother. I do not have any recollection of the time spent in the gathering place or of the train ride to Theresienstadt or even of our arrival in Theresienstadt, where I was, of course, separated even from

Father. I vaguely remember being housed with some ladies from Germany and then meeting Father and hanging on to him in the street in Theresienstadt. I know that Mother came a week later with the next transport AAw. Mother was told by the Jewish official who actually drew up the deportation lists, that I had bawled him out so vehemently for sending me – a little girl – without her mother, that he had to put her into the next transport. Some favor!

I don't remember when I started working. My first job was to wash public toilettes. I do not recall being terribly unhappy being assigned to this particular job, but I think I did not stay with it too long. From that job I remember only one funny encounter: an elderly gentleman, after having used the toilet, asked me in German where I was from. I told him I was from Prague and asked him where he was from. When he told me that he was from Vienna I told him that I had an uncle in Vienna and that perhaps he might have known him. He said: "Little girl, Vienna is a very large city." I said: "But my uncle is Karl Franz Bondy." The gentleman said: "Are you telling me that a niece of Karl Franz Bondy is washing toilets in Theresienstadt?" I just said: "Yes."

Very shortly after arriving in Theresienstadt I moved to the "Jugendheim" for girls. I enjoyed my stay in L410 (that was the "street number" of the home for young girls, "L" standing for "lange" – long streets, while the cross streets were labeled Q for "quer"). I was also assigned to a new job in the "Jugendlandwirtschaft" (youth agriculture). The youngsters in that group ranged, if my memory does not fail me, from something like 13 to perhaps 16 years old. Though I do not remember being extremely hungry, we were always in search of something to eat. At that time we were assigned to turn a part of the grassy ramparts surrounding Theresienstadt into land ready for planting. We were supervised by a Mr. Werner, who was a fellow prisoner and a very knowledgeable farmer who used to own a large farm in Germany; he survived the war, emigrated to Israel and lived into the 1990s. Mr. Werner taught us how to turn soil in two layers two spades deep. It was not very easy, but he was a nice and reasonable guy and I actually enjoyed the work. I remember once digging up some kind of a cache of small roots and afterwards peeling and tasting one, sharing it with those of my new friends who were willing to take the risk. I also vaguely remember tending some garden plots with various vegetables.

There was a small redheaded girl, two years younger than I, who was talking about her older brother all the time, reciting poems he had taught her and in general extolling his virtues. Little did I know that five years later I would marry her brother and that by then she, both her parents, my father and many other close relatives and friends would be dead.

I enjoyed my stay in the "Jugendheim." I probably clowned a lot. I liked reciting poetry including long passages from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which I had memorized at the time when I was learning the role of Titania. I entertained my fellow roommates by reciting my role whether they liked it or not.

This relatively peaceful time for me ended abruptly when one day in December I awoke with a severe headache and a very swollen eye. It turned out to be a severe sinus infection. I went to the hospital where they first tried to open my sinuses using punctures and treating me with a sulfonamide named Prontosil but everything failed and not only was I in great pain but I also had a very high fever. Eventually Dr. Tarjan, a nose and ear specialist, decided that only surgery could help. He made a small opening into my right sinus, but that did not work either and so the physicians decided, that the only way to save me was to perform a major surgery called a Ritter-Jansen operation. This meant that they would remove a narrow part of my forehead and so damaged part of my right eyebrow and made a cut a bit over an inch down my nose. This was done under local anesthesia and when, at one point, I asked Dr. Tarjan whether the worst was behind me, he said: "Yes, if you consider Dr. Schlanger the worst, then yes, he is standing just behind you." Dr. Schlanger was Dr. Tarjan's assistant. It was claimed that Dr. Tarjan was trained in the U. S. as an oral surgeon. There is no doubt that he saved my life. I much later learned from Jan that Dr. Tarjan also operated on him to treat his ear infection. Both Dr. Tarjan and Dr. Schlanger vanished in Auschwitz or perhaps beyond in October 1944.

I stayed in the hospital till April 1943. The hospital supplies were very inadequate and so used bandages were washed, dried and then given to me and I rolled them up and at the same time removed the remnants of the bone that had not been washed out. Then they were sterilized and used again.

In the hospital I met another patient, Marianne von Rücker-Hütte. She was a beautiful young woman. Her husband, a minor German nobleman, divorced her and took their only child, a little girl, with him. She was very unhappy, but was very good to me, talked to me a lot and told me her sad story. What she did not tell me was that she had become a drug addict and stole morphine from the meager hospital supply. After I was released from the hospital I lost all contact with her, but I met her once again, after the war, in Prague actually in the Krakovska street where Mother and I – and after my marriage also Honza – lived till our escape from Czechoslovakia. She looked shockingly ill, no longer beautiful, but had her little girl with her. We talked a little but I never saw her again and I do not remember what happened to her husband.

While I was in the hospital my father, who was not working, visited me a lot. In order to stop the spreading of his tuberculosis the physicians collapsed the infected half of his lung. My mother would come every time she could get away from work. One day my mother came in looking particularly sad. She had gone to the room in the home for the young girls where I lived until my hospitalization. She was in a state of shock: about one half or possibly more of the young girls with whom I had shared the room had died of typhoid. At that point Mother decided that I must not go back to the young girls' home, but that I had to live with her. She managed to arrange it so that we shared (with two other ladies) a very tiny room in a house just across the street from the hospital where both my father and my mother's younger brother Honza Bondy (the one that had polio as a child and consequently spent the rest of his life in a wheel chair) were staying.

I believed that the fact that we remained in Theresienstadt until the fall of 1944 as well as the way Mother could get us the little room so close to the hospital were both thanks to a very good friend of my father's, Dr. Altenstein. Dr. Altenstein was an important official in the Department of Justice before the destruction of the first Czechoslovak Republic. He was deported to Theresienstadt fairly early and while he was not a member of the Council of Elders, he was in a position to help some people. (He eventually ended like all but two of the Theresienstadt "prominents" in the gas chambers of Auschwitz). Some people in important positions were able to protect members of their families from the transports to Auschwitz until September 1944. I do not know what the rules or limits for such protection were or if they even were any rules, but I have always assumed that our protector must have been Dr. Altenstein, who was a bachelor and lived with a widowed sister and her two daughters. Funnily enough, after the war I never asked my mother whether my assumption was correct. I got the answer to this question only many years later while we were living in Chicago, when Jan and I attended a performance of a children's opera "Brundibar." This opera was composed by Hans Krasa and performed a number of times in Theresienstadt; Krasa was one of the many talented artists who perished because they were Jewish. After the performance in Chicago's Blackstone Theatre the audience was asked whether there were any former prisoners of Theresienstadt present. Even though the theatre was full, only three people got up. Jan and I and another gentleman. We were invited to come to meet the lady who traveled with the theater group, lecturing, and who, as a small child, sang the role of the cat in the original Theresienstadt production. The lady, Ela Weissberger, spoke first to the gentleman and then I approached her, introduced myself and told her my maiden name. This Czech Jewish lady exclaimed: "Jesus Maria" and embraced me. I said: "You know, there were two girls named Eva Porgesova, one had dark hair and the other was blond. I am the dark haired one." She said: "It is you, I am a niece of Dr. Altenstein." She remembered where I lived and then proceeded to tell me things that, to my shame, I had forgotten. She told me that she used to come with her uncle to our apartment in Prague where my father and her uncle played chess. I did not even remember that my father played chess. She also told me that when she, her sister, and her widowed mother had to move from Sudetenland when Nazi Germany occupied it in 1938, and that my father had been very helpful to them. I then asked her whether it was her uncle who kept us in Theresienstadt till October 1944 and she told me that my assumption was correct.

When my parents led me from the hospital, we met Mr. Schächter. He took one look at me and said: "Evicko come and sing in my chorus. "So from then on I spent much of the time after work singing with Mr. Schächter. During the time I sang in the chorus we performed Smetana's operas "The Bartered Bride" and "The Kiss" as well as Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" and Verdi's "Requiem." My cousin Harry Pisinger also sang in the chorus.

After I recovered, I went back to working in agriculture, “Landwirtschaft,” – no longer the group for young children, but for adults (16 or older). Our group worked outside the ghetto in the surrounding fields. Of course all of us kids tried to bring back some vegetables for our parents and the challenge was how to do it. I had a wide skirt which I wore over shorts. My mother put rubber bands into the leg openings of my shorts. Thus I could fairly safely bring a few carrots, tomatoes or potatoes into the ghetto. The Czech gendarmes never checked us and most of them probably could not have cared less if we brought a few vegetables, which were intended for the Germans, into the ghetto to our families. When I knew that we were going to work close to the greenhouse where my cousin Harry Pisinger worked and where they grew cucumbers, I would put on a bra, which I really did not need but which was very well suited for hiding a cucumber.

At about that time, my Prague friend Eva Steiner was diagnosed with tuberculosis and hospitalized and we sort of drifted apart. At work I found a new friend (another Eva) whose name was Goldschmied; she was not from Prague but from Nachod. Through her I met two of her friends, Tom Löwenbach (now Luke) and Honza Bondy, who was no relative of mine though he had the same name as my mother’s younger brother (the one who was a polio victim confined to a wheelchair and who died in Theresienstadt).

Once we were bringing a cart of vegetables into the ghetto. The delivery place was in a courtyard which was reached through a gate and a covered passage. The trick was to have the vegetables weighed and thus get credit for turning them in and then, if possible, steal a few. Both Eva and I stole a few carrots and I also took a very small head of red cabbage because I knew that it was Father’s favorite vegetable. Since we were already in the ghetto and thus were not passing through any checkpoints, I started ahead of Eva merrily swinging my head scarf in which I was carrying the vegetables. As I exited the gate I saw one of the worst SS men in Theresienstadt, Heindl, just passing by. I panicked. Had I ignored him and proceeded, he probably would not have noticed me, but I stepped back behind the gate and dropped the scarf with the vegetables. He followed me, stopped me and before he started yelling I said (in German): “Excuse me, please, just one moment” and then I ran back and said to our supervisor, a girl in her early twenties or so: “Gertie, I just got caught by Heindl.” Meanwhile my friend Eva Goldschmied, who had been walking just behind me was caught by Heindl as well. Gertie stepped forward and said: “I am responsible for these girls.” Heindl then ordered us to march in front of him. I was certain that if nothing else we would be beaten up and I asked Eva if she thought that I should take off my glasses. Heindl shouted at me to shut up, which I, of course, did. As our sad procession marched on, Tom Löwenbach (Luke) and Honza Bondy saw us and started approaching us until they noticed that we were signaling with our heads that we were being escorted by an SS guy. They quickly retreated and went to notify our parents. My mother later told me that she

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was close to a heart attack when a couple of boys unknown to her found her at work and told her: "Excuse us, but your daughter had just been picked up by Heindl."

This dramatic situation had an incredibly lucky ending: as we were marching, we encountered a Jewish ghetto policeman and Heindl passed us to him, told him of our transgression and ordered him to make sure that we were severely punished. The policeman took us (I do not exactly remember where, but of course, inside the ghetto) probably to the ghetto police headquarters where the Jewish policemen locked us up. I do not remember the exact sequence of the following events. The ghetto authorities staged a trial. My father was quite impressed by the performance of the defense attorney assigned to us by the ghetto authorities. It was Zev Scheck, who survived the war, emigrated to Palestine and later became Israel's ambassador to Italy. Prague was really a rather small world. I heard later that after the war he married a girl with whom I, as a little girl before I even started school, attended YWCA exercise classes. However she and I never became friends, not even after we met again as teenagers in Theresienstadt, and have never had any contact.

My friend Eva Goldschmied was sentenced to one day and I to two days in jail. I do not know till today, whether my longer sentence was due to the red cabbage or to my stupidity which attracted Heindl's attention. Our stay in the ghetto prison was quite fun. We had visits from various boys and we were very happy with the outcome, considering the possible serious consequences that could have taken place. However, Eva complained that as we had to share a bunk on the one night we were both incarcerated, I kept on putting my legs across her and when she objected, I just mumbled: "Sorry, but tonight I am sleeping in your bed." In December my friend Eva Goldschmied was sent on with a transport to Auschwitz. She did not survive the war and neither did my first "Eva" friend, Eva Steiner. Both will live forever in my memory.

My last Theresienstadt girlfriend was Eva Sternschuss. We met through our work in the "Landwirtschaft". I remember that in the summer of 1944 we worked together on a large field of tomato plants. That was a great job: on our way to work we used to pass through an apple tree alley and there was always hope that we could find an apple. We could also eat as many tomatoes as we wanted and even smuggle some home to our families. Later that year I worked in a potato field, which was great, though transporting potatoes covered with soil in your underpants is no great fun.

Once on our way to work we saw some prisoners from the so-called Small Fortress working in the moat deep below the trail we were on and we threw them our meager lunches. We knew that they were much worse off than we. Theresienstadt's Small Fortress was a terrible prison for political prisoners. Sometimes people from the ghetto were sent there as punishment, most of the time never to be heard of again.

Once, we were about 15 to 17 young people working on the bank of the river Ohre (German Eger) weeding a huge field and it was very hot. So we got the crazy idea that the next day we would put on only shorts and T-shirts and go for a swim in the river. Our supervisor Mr. Werner, the German Jewish farmer, as well as the

Czech gendarme who was guarding us, let us be, but the festivities ended when the German supervisor Kurzawy came riding on a horse and started shouting his head off. Actually that was all he did. There was no punishment for anybody. I learned after the war that Kurzawy actually often tried to protect people whom he knew personally from the transports to the East, i.e. Auschwitz.

One more unusual thing happened when we worked in the tomato field. There were two sisters, twins, who were from a so-called mixed marriage. The mother was a gentile and she did not divorce her husband and thus protected him from the transports. However, she could not protect her own children. One day the gendarme, who was supposed to guard us, brought her to the field and let her spend the day with her daughters. Fortunately it was not discovered and so there were no dire consequences.

### **Honza**

In May of 1944 there were several large transports sent from Theresienstadt. Everyone who was called for transports had to report to the Hamburg barrack a day before; from there they were loaded into trains the next day and shipped to what we called “the East,” not knowing, of course, the real destination and fate awaiting them. After I came back from work I organized a bunch of girls somewhat younger than myself. We got hold of a pushcart and used it to help older people to carry their luggage to the place in the Hamburg barrack where they were to spend their last night in Theresienstadt. Towards the end, when it appeared that there was no more work to be done, because almost everybody in the transport had already arrived, I let the girls go and then I helped an elderly person to carry his or her luggage by myself. That suitcase turned out to be a bit too heavy for me and so I asked some boy who was just passing by for help. He did so for a short time, but then someone called him away and so I dragged the suitcase myself until I found another guy, with whom I then delivered the piece of luggage to its destination. After that, there was nothing more for us to do. We stood on the second floor of the barracks and we started talking. I do not remember much of the conversation, but it turned out that we both had lived in Prague, he in the suburbs and I downtown near the river. But I became interested in him when we were saying goodbye and he clicked his (bare) heels, bent from the waist down, offered me his hand and said: “If you allow me to introduce myself, I am Honza Robitschek.” (Honza is the common nickname for Jan, the Czech version of John) I was very impressed. I had been friendly with several boys, but I had never actually dated anybody. Once I had been asked on a date – this was at the time before my head surgery – and the boy had tried to kiss me on our first date. I adamantly refused to be kissed and lost all interest in him and, of course, he in me; I later found out that he complained to his mother, that I was immature.

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The conversation with Honza and his clicking of bare heels impressed me to no end. I was thinking about this boy who behaved so differently from all the others I knew. Then one day, I think it must have already been June, I was accompanying my friend Eva Sternschuss to a meeting with her boyfriend (who actually was my classmate for the two years I attended high school in Prague), when I noticed the red-haired and heavily freckled Honza Robitschek coming towards us on the other side of the street. I said: “Eva, let us quickly cross to the other side, I would very much like to “accidentally” meet that red-haired guy over there.” And so it happened: apparently chatting with my girlfriend and not paying any attention to the approaching Honza we met him; he stopped us and started talking to us. After a short time Eva excused herself and Honza and I started walking and talking. The topic of our conversation was French impressionistic paintings. Neither of us knew anything about it, although Honza was attending a series of lectures on nineteenth century art offered by Gustav Schwarzkopf (later Solar, who survived and later was a member of the Czechoslovak embassy staff, I believe in Sweden, perhaps a cultural attaché, I am not sure). Eva and I went to the next lecture and when we reached the “lecture room,” a former store without its store window, the front bench was already occupied by Honza and his roommates. Eva and I stayed in the back of the room and after the lecture was over – since Honza did not seem to notice me or pay any attention to me if he did – we quickly exited with the intention of leaving. I was not willing to make any more attempts to meet that guy. What a nice surprise it was when upon exiting through the door in the back of the former store, we found Honza, who had jumped out through the window, waiting for me outside. Eva quickly excused herself and left, but Honza was immediately ambushed by the twin children of one of his several cousins, who started climbing on him; they were very cute. After he disentangled himself we proceeded to walk together, discussing what we had just learned. He eventually walked me home and asked for another date and from that time on we met about two or three times a week until he eventually kissed me on June 26, 1944. When I came “home” I started crying, I somehow felt violated by that kiss, but Mother reassured me that it was all right and sang to me a Czech song with the words “Kissing is not a sin in those years of youth.” Honza also tried to sit me on his lap, but that I vehemently refused.

Some time later Honza met my parents. After I introduced him, my father’s first act was to take him by an ear and proclaim to my mother: “Look Anka, he has criminal ears.” Honza froze and obviously did not know how to respond to this charge, whereupon my father – after a while – added happily “Just like me.” Much later, after the war, Mother told me that after we left he told her: “This is horrible, she is going to marry him, they will read poetry on their wedding night, and I will have redheaded grandchildren.” We were married on June 26, 1947 about a month after I graduated from high school with straight A grades; to make father’s prophesy come true, we did indeed read some poetry during our wedding night, but I failed to produce redheaded children; both our sons have dark hair.

The period between June 26 and September 28 1944 was a very happy period of my life. Both my parents were alive and I was seriously in love. Honza and I met about three times a week after work, talked, read poetry, Dante's Purgatory, some translations of contemporary French poetry, and Göthe's Faust, though Jan sometimes brought a college textbook of general chemistry. He also lectured me on philosophy – he was at that time attending philosophy lectures by Gustav Schorsch and was fascinated by him. I was simply enthralled. Then one day we met the little red-haired girl with whom I had worked some time previously in Theresienstadt and I realized that Jan was that big brother whom she so adored. Meanwhile I was working in the fields and generally speaking was as happy as one could be under these circumstances.

That changed drastically and suddenly in September 1944, when 5000 young men were sent eastward and no one really knew where. Among them was not only Honza, but also my cousin Harry Pisinger, who, as we learned after the war, died in April 1945 in a horrible concentration camp, Kaufering. In August of that year he would have been 17 years old.

### **Auschwitz**

In October 1944 my parents were placed in a transport and I volunteered to go with them. This was not really an act of bravery on my part, I simply did not want to be separated from my family. That turned to be one of the best of two decisions I made in my entire life: it saved my mother's life. The second took place only later in 1947 when I married Jan. But before that happened many events took place.

I remember almost nothing of the trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau, except that shortly before the train came to a stop my mother opened a can of sardines that she had saved all that time and gave it to me to eat.

When we arrived in Auschwitz, there was a lot of shouting, "Rauss, rauss" (get out [of the railroad cattle-cars]) and we were ordered: "The sick ones on one side, the healthy ones on the other." Father, who had tuberculosis, joined the group of sick people and at first Mother stayed with him. I did not like it and so I approached one of the prisoners in striped prisoner's clothes who was unloading the luggage and asked him: "What is that, what is going to happen to these sick people?" He just shook his head and grinned. At that moment one of the German soldiers with a dog grabbed me by the neck with the crook of his cane and dragged me in front of the SS-officer (obviously it was the infamous Dr. Mengele, but of course I did not know it at that time); when Mother saw that she immediately left Father and ran to join me. I never saw my father again. The soldier reported to the officer: "Here are two women who stayed behind with the sick." And now we stood before Mengele. He asked first whether we were mother and daughter – we answered in

the affirmative – and then how old we were; we gave the true answers – 17 and 45. Forty-five was really too old for an effective slave and very few people of this age made it through the selection and most of them only by claiming to be younger. Mother was a strong, tall woman and Mengele asked her: “Wouldn’t you rather go with the sick people? It would be much more comfortable for you.” Mother answered (her German was excellent): “I am strong, I can work. Please allow me to stay with my daughter.” Surprisingly enough he did. Later I spoke with some girls who went through a similar situations but whose mothers were sent to the gas chambers.

While we stood and waited we saw the chimneys with flames shooting out of them. I thought that they must be steel mills and I thought to myself: “I would much rather work in the fields.” We were led to a huge room and were ordered to undress completely and leave everything behind except eyeglasses. As we were undressing a female political prisoner, who heard us speaking Czech came to us and told us in Czech: “Girls, they will take everything from you. If there is something you would like to save, give it to me and I will find you later and bring it to you.” I gave her my glasses, my shoe inserts (I had flat feet and was led to believe that I could not walk without them), photographs of my parents and of Honza, and also a holy picture of St. Jude Tadeus, which my “aunt” Jindra gave me before we left for Theresienstadt and which I had promised never to part with. We had our heads and entire bodies shaved, went through the showers, and received some old rags and wooden shoes; the coat had a thick red stripe painted the whole length of the back. The “new” clothes which we got after our “delousing” were already lice infested, but fortunately these lice were not infected with typhus. Later on, in order to keep some appearance of normalcy, I “changed” for the night by switching my outer and inner garments and in the morning reversing the procedure. Of course, we never saw any of our own things again, but the Czech woman did find us and returned the things we had entrusted to her. I managed to protect the pictures through the entire time and when we finally returned to Prague I proudly returned the very badly mangled picture of St. Jude Tadeus (I wore it in my wooden shoe and at times stored it in my straw mattress) to “aunt” Jindra. I think that she believed that it saved my life.

What I remember from Auschwitz was shouting, screaming, more shouting and endless roll calls (“Appell”). We were counted again and again. The weather was terrible, I remember one girl fainting as we stood for hours to be counted. I also remember our first food. In Theresienstadt we had our own pots and other food containers and, of course, our own eating utensils. In Auschwitz a capo (a prisoner in a supervisory position and with almost unlimited power) threw a wash basin with some kind of watery soup at us. We were to share it among us and with another woman. We got no spoons, but had to lick it like dogs, probably to remind us that – to the Germans – we were not better than dogs, though they usually did not kill their dogs. But at this point we were not hungry. We were too upset about

what had happened to Father – people told us that he would be gassed, but we could not believe it. Actually it took Mother several months after the end of the war before she could accept it. The third woman with whom we were to share the soup must have been in the camp longer, because she immediately grabbed the wash basin – we did not care. But the capo noticed it, hit her, took the food from her and handed it to my mother and me.

Next I remember that they herded us into a barrack. There were no bunks there and we were so many that we just had to sit on the floor with each woman sitting between the legs of the woman behind in long rows from wall to wall. I was so exhausted that I slept anyway, but Mother told me that she had to protect my head because people were walking all over me.

We went through another selection and had to parade in the nude before an SS doctor. Mother had a sprained ankle. Someone told her to throw away the bandage, because one should not show any sign of any illness or injury. She did, and although the ankle was still swollen, she passed without any problems. On the other hand I, who was young and healthy was subjected to extensive scrutiny, because I had flea bites on my stomach. It took quite a time during which my mother was dying of fright. But eventually I passed, too.

### **Kurzbach**

Mother and I were lucky because we spent only about four days in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Very soon we were transported to a small camp, Kurzbach, in today's Poland (according to my Polish friend it is now called Zmigród), located about 40 km north of Breslau, now Wrocław, in the center of Lower Silesia.

Kurzbach was a small women's camp with only one thousand women, about half of them Czech, half of them Hungarian and just a few Dutch and Polish. (You could easily tell the Hungarians from the Czechs. Since the Hungarians had been in camp longer than we, their hair was already significantly longer, perhaps three to four centimeters while ours was just a few millimeters long.) We were housed in some stable or barn, but we had bunk beds with straw mattresses. In the morning we got some black water – “ersatz” (substitute) coffee – and in the evening watery soup and a little piece of bread. We all suffered from diarrhea – the latrines were something I would not like to describe. We were divided into ten groups of one hundred women each, given pickaxes and shovels and then sent out to dig antitank trenches against the advancing Russian army. We arrived in Kurzbach at the end of October and it was rapidly getting cold. In the frozen ground, digging was hard work particularly for my mother; I was glad that I could carry her shovel (in addition to mine). In a concentration camp being 45 was very old and people of that age had little chance of survival.

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There were several people in the camp I knew from Theresienstadt: my very good friend Eva Sternschuss, her aunt, Lisa Klein, the sister of the well known musician Gideon Klein, and two cousins of Honza, Hana and Eva Ehrlich.

The commandant of the camp, probably a retired army officer, was for me – at seventeen – quite an old man. He was not too bad a person, never hit anybody, never ordered any beating in the camp. At one time a pregnant woman in the camp had a miscarriage and one of the prisoners, who was a physician, helped her and buried the fetus, because being pregnant was sufficient reason to be sent to the gas chambers. Unfortunately, the commandant's dogs dug out the fetus, but neither the woman nor the doctor were punished. (The commandant actually liked and respected the physician, who was quite an attractive woman.) The other guards were also elderly; only two of them were a bit younger, perhaps in their forties. Two of the guards always accompanied and guarded each group of hundred women.

The commandant was a bit crazy. We were divided into groups of one hundred women, called "Hundertschaft." The commandant selected one special "Hundertschaft" of the most attractive women (I was not among them) and they would always lead the procession and had to sing a specially composed song:

*Von vielen hundred Frauen  
da waren wir erwählt,  
das Zeichen von Vertauen  
und dass man mit uns zählt.  
Ein jeder hat, wie ein Soldat  
zu marschieren und exerzieren  
und Ordnung halten beim Appell  
Wir sind jung and lernen alles schnell.*

*Wir sind die beste Hundertschaft  
bei uns klappt alles fabelhaft  
wen wir zu Schantzen gehen.*

*From many hundred women  
we have been selected,  
this is a sign of confidence  
and that we are being relied on.  
Each of us must like a soldier  
march and exercise  
and keep order at the roll call  
We are young and learn everything fast.*

*We are the best Hundertschaft  
with us everything works perfectly  
when we go to dig the trenches.*

Most of the guards were males, but we had two German female guards. One of them was quite decent, but the other was mean. One time she hit a woman next to me for no reason; I gave her a look which clearly expressed what I thought of her. She noticed it and slapped me in the face, but I must say that I was actually pleased and rather proud that she got the message. I always felt superior to our jailers and that feeling of superiority sustained me. I was always convinced that I would survive the war.

One day, I think it was in November, with snow already on the ground, we were standing on “Appell,” the endless roll calls during which we had to stand in formations outdoors regardless of the often freezing weather and during which we were counted and recounted until the numbers agreed. Suddenly they asked whether there were any gardeners among us. I always loved gardening and so, without thinking, stepped out. I clearly was not using my brains: it was the middle of winter and everything was frozen, there was no way one could plant anything, but I just reacted impulsively, when I heard the word gardening. Two other women, also from Prague, stepped out as well.

It turned out that a woman in the sick bay had died and we, rather than gardeners, were to become grave diggers. A gentile Pole came with an ox driven cart and a wooden coffin with handles and we were ordered to place the dead body in the coffin. We, the three “gardeners,” the guard and the coffin were then taken by the cart to a place in the nearby woods. There we were ordered to dig a grave and then dump the corpse into the grave and bring the coffin back. I did not mind the digging, but I was petrified and absolutely unable to touch the dead body. Fortunately, the two other girls, who came from an orphanage (the older of them had been a teacher there) did not grow up in an environment as sheltered as mine and were willing to handle the corpse without me. I must say that they were very good to me and did

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not ridicule or resent me for my inability to touch the corpse. I was so shaken up by that experience that, when I came back to the camp, I was quite hysterical and kept crying. The Jewish “Lagerälteste” (camp elder, sort of the Jewish head of the camp responsible to the Germans for order in the camp) came to comfort me and kept telling me that burying the dead is a good deed, pronounced a blessing and told me that I would be rewarded for it. She was one of the Hungarian prisoners. Actually, I don’t remember any of this – I somehow suppressed the memory of my first contact with a dead human being – but that is what my mother told me.

There were many more deaths and burials, perhaps around 40, and after a while I got used to it; it became just a job. On the way to and from the burial ground I chatted with the other “gardeners” and started entertaining them by reciting poetry, some of which I had read with Honza in Theresienstadt, but also long passages from Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which I had learned by heart when I was supposed to play the role of Titania in Prague.

It was rumored that the guard, who usually accompanied us on our trips to the burial site, was from the “Sudeten,” the mostly German speaking border region of former Czechoslovakia, and that he actually had a Czech name, Suchy; I have no way of finding out whether this was true, but I shall refer to him as Mr. Suchy anyway. I think he must have been a noncommissioned officer because he was clearly in charge of some of the other guards. He probably did understand some Czech, because he seemed to be listening to my recitations and once asked me: “Was haben Sie studiert?” (What have you studied?). For a German guard it was most unusual and against the rules to use the polite form “Sie” rather than “Du.” I answered that I was just a high school kid and then he asked about the profession of my father. I replied that he was a lawyer and that was the end of the exchange – the guards were not allowed to talk to prisoners except to give orders. But somehow Mr. Suchy (if this was really his name) noticed me and took some interest in me which later saved my life. I think that it was also through him that I was able to get my mother a much better and less strenuous job – namely splitting wood for the kitchen and washing kitchen pots and the Germans’ plates. This freed her from the truly exhausting work of digging trenches in the frozen ground and moreover gave her the chance to occasionally scrape a little bit of leftover food from the pots and plates.

## Evacuation

Sometime, I think it was in the middle of January, we started hearing artillery getting closer. I remember a little episode when we were being passed by a group of French prisoners of war just as we heard a big explosion. A young Frenchman put his hand to his ear and as if in apology said: “Oh, pardon!” It was funny and cheered us up.

One day we were told that the camp would have to be evacuated and we were to march towards some destination unknown to us. The commandant even ordered the distribution of whatever additional clothing he had in the store – there was not much of it, but at least he tried. As we were all standing at roll call suddenly there was a call for the “gardeners.” This time I did not move. Mother kept urging me to step forward, she was sure that I would be found out and severely punished if I did not. I told her, that as they were liquidating the camp, I was sure that they would have us dig a mass grave, shoot all the people from the sick bay (there were about 50 of them) and then shoot us and put us on top, but finally I gave in to Mother’s urging – I have always been a very obedient child. So we, our usual group of “gardeners” with about ten additional women ordered to help us, went to dig – while the rest of the camp prisoners were being marched off.

I was right. We were ordered to dig a large grave. We were all crying while we were digging, because we were sure that they would kill us all once we finished our work. We actually saw the procession of sick people from the sick bay being guided to the grave. Then suddenly Mr. Suchy came on a bicycle and told our guard: “That is enough; take the women and catch up with the main group.” Later, after the war, I learned that Mr. Suchy also sent the sick people back to the sick bay and that they were left for the Russians to liberate.

It was dark by the time we caught up with the main group – they were already in some barn. When I came to the ladder to climb up to the loft, Mr. Suchy was standing there with a flashlight in his hand and shone it into my face. When he saw and recognized me he said “Also da sind Sie!” (So here you are!). He was obviously waiting for me. He had earlier promised my mother, who by then realized the danger I was in, that I would be all right.

I remember almost nothing of our evacuation trip. We were always sleeping in some barn belonging to a deserted farm house. When, in 1964, I visited Ruth Hirsch Weir in Palo Alto (then Associate Professor of Linguistics at Stanford University, originally Ruth Hirsch from Brno), she thanked me for pulling her on a sled, which her mother somewhere requisitioned, during our evacuation march when she was totally exhausted and unable to walk. I have absolutely no recollection of it, but she assured me that it was definitely me who pulled her along.

## ER **Escape**

One morning, after we spent another night in some barn in a farm house, my mother walked through the yard looking for a place where she could relieve herself. Mr. Suchy saw her, went straight to her and asked: “What are you going to do?” A surprising and strange question indeed – as if we had any choices! My mother answered: “What can I do?” She could hardly believe her ears when he told her: “Do not go to Gross-Rosen. Do not go to Gross-Rosen. Think of your daughter!” And then he started yelling: “Scram, I don’t have any bread.” Of course, we did not have the slightest idea that we were being led to Gross-Rosen and besides we had no idea what Gross-Rosen was. Only much later, after the war, did we learn that it was a horrible camp infested with typhus where people died by the thousands and from which people were driven on further death marches under horrible conditions to other camps as the Russian front was approaching. Kurzbach (or Kurzbach-Gruenthal) was one of the 97 sub-camps of Gross-Rosen (cf. Wikipedia). (See the Appendix for Renata Kraus’ recollections.)

Mother was quite bewildered. She returned to our group and said: “Girls, Suchy told me to run away.” She spread the information around and quickly found three women who decided to join us. A while later, when we were lining up to continue our march in a long column five wide, our row of five slipped across the road into the deep forest just on the other side of the road. The column closed behind us and after a while left without any of the guards noticing that we were missing.

It was January, the snow was knee deep and we were very poorly dressed and had only wooden shoes. We were, half naked and freezing, but waited until it got dark. Only then did we venture out of the woods back onto the road and actually continued in the same direction as our column had gone. After a while we came to a village, which seemed deserted. We tried one of the houses – it was not locked and we went in. Mother, who up to this time was rather passive and dependent on me, now took command of our group. She found a piece of pork frozen to the top of a dog house. She tore it off with part of the wood and brought it to the kitchen. In the meantime the other women started a fire and using snow from the ground – there was no other source of water – mother began boiling the meat.

We had not been in “our” house very long when someone knocked on the door and a German woman with six children asked whether she could join us. She was a rural woman who was running before the approaching Soviet army. We told her that we were Czech workers and that we too were trying to escape the Russians. She did not really care and did not seem to notice either our strange appearance – shaved heads, by now covered with hair less than an inch long – or our “outfits” with the red stripes down our backs. Or maybe we had already discarded the incriminating coats, I don’t remember. In any case the woman was interested only in feeding and protecting her children. Mother sent me to a little room behind the

kitchen, because she thought that I looked too Jewish – the other four women did not – and that it was safer if I was not seen. For me it was like a theater: I was just sitting there and observing what was happening.

A bit later there was someone else banging on the door and in walked a German soldier, I think he was what was called a Waffen-SS (this was the SS who fought at the front rather than serving in concentration camps), with a submachine gun. His hand was in a sling. He told the women that he had been wounded not far from there by a Russian tank. The German woman started fussing about him and feeding him our precious pork and so the other women had to pretend solicitude too. I remained hidden in the little room behind the kitchen. Finally the officer was ready to leave. He told us that we could stay overnight, but that we should leave in the morning because the Russians could be there very soon. As he was leaving, he stood up in the doorway, raised his hand to a Nazi salute and said loudly: “Heil Hitler. Und doch werden wir siegen!” (And yet we shall win!)

After this incident we realized that it was the smoke coming from the chimney, advertising our house as inhabited, which was attracting attention in the otherwise deserted village. So we extinguished the fire and then spent a night without further visitors. In the morning the German woman with her children was ready to leave and urged us to join her. Blaming it on my mother's age (at the age of 45 she did indeed look quite old; her hair was all gray) we said that we would rest a little longer and then follow her.

## **Liberation**

We spent several days in our new home, mostly looking for food. There was not much left, but I did discover a big pot of molasses. Mother warned me not to eat it, but I was too hungry and starved for something sweet; so I consumed a totally unreasonable amount of it. Fortunately I only paid for my foolishness and disobedience with a severe bout of diarrhea. It could have been much worse – many people liberated from concentration camps died after eating too much regular food following months of starvation. Fortunately, since our situation in Theresienstadt had not been that bad and we had been in Auschwitz and Kurzbach only a little over three months, our organs were still able to cope with normal food.

After a few days my mother went to the outhouse and came back excited: “Girls, I saw some soldiers in strange uniforms with stars on their hats. I think they are Russians.” No sooner did she finish when the door burst open and soldiers with submachine guns trained on us burst in. We started yelling in Czech (we did not know Russian, but Czech, also being a Slavic language, is similar enough that we hoped they would understand): “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot, we are Czechs!” A while later they were joined by a young officer who kept looking at us searchingly and then walked straight up to me and asked: “Yevreika?” I did not know any Russian,

but “Yevrei” sounded very much like “hebrew.” I understood that he was asking me whether I was Jewish. I nodded hesitantly – until now admitting that one was Jewish was not exactly recommended. The Russian was delighted. It turned out that he, too, was Jewish and that we were the first living Jews he had seen in the conquered territory. He took my mother to a pigsty and shot a pig and donated it to us. He also told us that they were the elite troops, but warned us that the troops following them were dangerously undisciplined.

I can’t quite remember the details, but after a few days we acquired a cart and an ox. Mother found two nice Polish boys who knew how to handle the ox and we started out in the eastern direction. (We believed that the boys were actually “Volksdeutche,” Poles who claimed to be German and who served in the German army, but who, at the last moment, discarded their uniforms and tried to mingle with the rest of the population.) The ground was covered in snow and I noticed that the Russian soldiers had white sheets so I kept telling Mother and the others that we should also get some white sheets, to make us less visible, but was told to shut up. A few minutes later a low flying German plane spotted our cart and attacked us with its machine gun and then dropped a small bomb. Fortunately, our ox was a lot smarter than we were: he made a sharp turn and dumped us all in a ditch, thus saving our lives. Mother groaned that she had been shot in the back, but it turned out that she was only hit by a piece of flying gravel propelled by either the bomb or a machine gun bullet. After this incident we did acquire white sheets and used them. (Getting stuff like that was not difficult – there were many deserted houses and the Germans running away from the Russians could not take everything with them. After what they had taken from us, we had no compunctions about helping ourselves to what we needed.) We traveled from village to village and spent the nights in deserted farmhouses.

There were no problems with the first Russian soldiers, presumably an elite group. However, things changed with the next group. I have a clear recollection of one night when I was lying in bed with Mother and a young soldier burst in and ordered my mother to get out of the bed so that he could lie with me, and threatened her with his gun. Mother refused and kept berating him. He was repeating: “Go mother, or I will shoot you.” Mother kept responding; “Shoot me, shoot me!” Of course he spoke Russian and my mother responded in Czech, but they did understand each other. For some reason, I was not really scared – I had immense confidence in my mother’s ability to protect me and found the entire situation actually amusing – I was that silly. Finally my mother yelled at the soldier: “For three years we have been prisoners of the Germans and they never touched us. You say you came to liberate us and look how you behave!” He asked incredulously “They never touched you?” “No” shouted mother. That must have made an impression on him. He lay down on the floor next to our bed and fell asleep. When I woke up the next morning, he was gone. Mother, of course, did not sleep all night.

At another time, drunken Russian soldiers came to the room we occupied. I just happened to be outside at the water well. Mother ran after me and ordered me to go to the neighboring house which was occupied by a large family of Yugoslavs – the Germans took entire villages for forced labor – which was also trying to find its way back home. Their family name was Merslavic. Mother ordered me not to leave the Yugoslavs regardless of what I heard. All I could hear were loud voices, first singing which after a while turned into shouting and then some gunfire. I was petrified, but being an excessively obedient child I just stayed with the Yugoslavs and waited through the whole night. What happened was that the three women who escaped with us were quite friendly with the soldiers and chatted and drank with them, but that the soldiers demanded more. When the women refused, they raped them while one of the soldiers kept pointing a gun at my mother. Mother at the age of 45, all gray and wrinkled, looked very old indeed and so, fortunately, the soldiers did not seem interested in her. Besides, she refused to drink with them and just kept plucking a chicken and cooking and berating the soldiers. They were threatening her with a submachine gun, but did not touch her, only kept ordering her to keep quiet. The three women later asked the Russian commandant for protection.

As much as one would have liked to be friendly with our liberators, it was too dangerous – they were not used to stopping at friendly conversations. I was once stopped by a soldier in the yard with the question: “Where are you going, little girl?” I answered “If you really want to know, I am going to the outhouse.” And that was that. He just stood there baffled and left me alone.

For some women from our concentration camp things ended a lot worse. One day we discovered the dead bodies of two women from our camp – they were Dutch and the Russians probably took them for Germans, raped and killed them.

After this experience, Mother asked the Yugoslavs whether we could move in with them. They were very nice and agreed and after that we had no more problems. Mr. Merslavic, the head of the extended family of about 18 members, from babies to grandparents, was very good at dealing with the Russians. At first he told them that he had a brother fighting the Germans in Marshall Tito’s partisan army. Since that made a good impression, the number of his brothers fighting with Tito increased to three. He became the spokesman for our entire group including Mother, referred to as “pani Ceska” and me, “gospodicna Evicka.” We sort of became part of the family to the extent that when one young woman in the family died, it was my mother who washed the body and prepared it for burial.

We settled temporarily in some village and the Russians employed us. The Yugoslav (Slovenian) men were carpenters and therefore useful to the Russians. We were mostly loading everything the Russians could find onto railroad cars to be taken to the Soviet Union. For that work we were given shelter and food. I have one memory: when I was loading very heavy sacks (about 175 lb) of flour, some boys were making fun of me for needing help putting the sacks on my back. That annoyed

me and to show them, I did manage to lift a sack by myself. Another memory is that once when I lifted a sack, I uncovered a nest of mice and the baby mice somehow climbed up over my back up to my neck. I stood frozen until someone helped me to get rid of them.

Mother did not have to work, but did a lot of cooking for all of us. We were invited to a May 1<sup>st</sup> celebration and there we learned that large parts of Czechoslovakia had already been liberated and so Mother told Mr. Merslavic that it would be good if we all went to liberated Czechoslovakia and he agreed. He succeeded in persuading the Russians to give us a railroad car and let us move towards the Czechoslovak border. We ended up in Czenstochova, still all living in that railroad car, when on May 8<sup>th</sup> we were woken up by a tremendous amount of gunfire. At first we did not know what was going on but then we learned that the Russians were celebrating the end of the war.

There was one incident which spoiled the otherwise wonderful pleasure of being free and having survived, and Germany having been defeated. Mr. Merslavic was talking with a group of Poles outside our car. One of them said: "What the Germans did was horrible. The only good thing they did was to rid us of all the Jews." How a member of a nation which had suffered so much at the hands of the Nazis could say that is something I could not understand and can never forget.

We then managed to get our railroad car attached to another train which took us to Katowice, where there were large collection centers for all kinds of displaced persons.

### **Return to Prague**

A Czech, who was somehow in charge of a camp for displaced persons advised us: "Don't wait for the Russians to repatriate you – they have a very broad concept of a country and may well take you somewhere to eastern Slovakia by God knows what route. Try to make it on your own!" We followed his advice and parted with the very nice Yugoslavs. We started on foot, crossed into Moravska Ostrava, and then continued on foot, hitchhiking on trucks, and eventually by train; finally we managed to get to Prague.

When we arrived in Prague, we made it to the apartment house where Mother's best friend, my "aunt" Jindra Schierova, lived. It was early in the morning, about four or five o'clock, and the house was locked. We stood in the street and shouted "Jindro, Jindro!" and she eventually opened the window and waved inviting us in. She came down, opened the house, and we stayed with her until we found an apartment. Jindra was wonderful, she returned to us not only all the things she kept for us but even those from the Werner family from which nobody survived. Aunt Anna, my father's younger sister, had been married to Vilem Werner, a jeweler, and he gave Jindra several pieces of jewelry for safekeeping. Mother and Jindra stayed friends until her death – she visited Mother twice for several months in America.

I was most concerned with what had happened to Honza. Before we parted, we exchanged the addresses of our gentile contacts in Prague. I gave him the address of Aunt Jindra and he gave me the address of his father's secretary, Jindriska Seidnerova. In addition we agreed to send letters addressed to "general delivery" at the main post office in Prague. It may sound ridiculous, but I was far too shy to go to Mrs. Seidnerova and ask her whether she had heard from anybody from the Robitschek family. So every day I went to the post office looking for a message from Jan, but in vain. I also used to go to the former Jewish town hall, which became a sort of meeting place for young people who had returned from the camps and a place where we exchanged news about friends and relatives.

I remember that it was the day of my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, May 29, 1945, three weeks after the end of the war, when I came to the Jewish Town Hall after another futile visit to the post office, and my friends asked me whether I had heard from Honza. I responded sadly: "No, I believe that he must be dead, otherwise I would have heard from him by now." At the time we still lived with Jindra. When I came home that day she waved at me excitedly with a letter in her hand – it was from Honza, from a hospital in Zatec, about 45 miles west of Prague.

I immediately said that I was going to visit him and Mother had no objections; Aunt Jindra was a bit shocked that Mother would let a young girl visit a man on her own. When I found Honza in the hospital, he was so weak that he could not even leave the bed. I think that he was glad to see me, but that he was still very much in shock after learning that neither his parents nor his sister had survived. From then on we exchanged frequent letters, but Honza's "love letters" consisted mostly of reports how his diarrhea was improving. He returned to Prague only after four months, in September, and from then on we saw each other regularly.

Mother started searching for an apartment. That meant going to the Housing Office (bytovy urad) and waiting endlessly. I think that it was at that time that Mother decided to change our name from Porgesova, a very typical Jewish name, to the Czech sounding Trojanova. She claimed that with the Czech name she got much faster service. Eventually, she got a voucher for a three-bedroom apartment in the center of Prague, at Krakovska 10, where we then lived until our escape from Czechoslovakia in 1960. My mother made no attempt to regain our prewar apartment (in Trojanova street – that is where our new name came from) and never even visited it, although it could have still contained some of our property – she simply could not face visiting the place full of memories of Father.

I was eager to go back to school and to live a normal life. I had no difficulties being accepted. Everybody from the director to the classmates was very nice to me with one exception. When I first came to class, still in May 1945 I probably looked pretty awful – I still had very short hair after it had been shaved only half a year before. I did not have any shoes, just some old sneakers into which someone had cut holes on the tops. When I entered the classroom one boy said out loud: "What does

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this Polish Jewess want here?” There was a stunned silence and then everybody started talking as if nothing had happened. I never spoke to that boy again until we met at the 55<sup>th</sup> class reunion in 2002. He saw me and greeted me cordially. For a moment I hesitated, unsure whether I should talk to him or say something about what he said on my first day of school, but then I decided that it would only spoil the mood for everybody and so I responded in a friendly tone. The next time we met he had had a stroke and could barely speak; he came and sat next to me and told me “You are all right by me;” I assume it was his way of apologizing. The following year the class, including me, went to his memorial service.

The school not only waived my tuition, but even awarded me a stipend. As the religion teacher, a catholic priest, was the one who was in charge of student welfare, he would call me out of class to hand me the stipend. One of the protestant teachers used to kid me: “Is he trying to convert you?” But it was the girls in my class who made my return to a normal life not only possible, but easy. They received me in friendship and helped me to catch up with all I had missed. I was banned from the school in 1940, after finishing only the second year of the eight year program (corresponding to the seventh grade of an American school) and now, when I was readmitted I was placed in the sixth (11<sup>th</sup>) grade at the very end of the school year,

with only about one month left before the start of the summer vacation. So there was a five-year gap only partially attenuated by a bit less than two years of home schooling between 1940 and 1942.

#### High school graduation picture 1947



I don't think I ever worked as hard as when I was trying to catch up with the high school material. My classmates were very helpful. One of them, Helena Pilarova, helped me with Latin and Greek (I was in a “classical gymnasium” where Latin was taught from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year (8<sup>th</sup> grade) and classical Greek from the 5<sup>th</sup> year (10<sup>th</sup> grade.). We became good friends until one fateful evening in February 1948 when she and her husband Jan Cap were at our home just at the time of the

Communist putsch, which Jan and I decried and they vehemently defended. During the heated discussion Cap called Jan an “over-critical, over-individualistic utopian socialist.” Both Helena and her husband remained Communists and I was told she later worked as a psychologist in a prison. We never talked again until just a few years ago at one of the class reunions and we never discussed her political views or her life during the Communist regime.

Another person who was incredibly helpful to me was the best student in the class, Milada Wünschova, who helped me with all kinds of subjects and did not mind that I would sort of become her rival for the position of number one student in the class. I remember fondly the hours we spent sitting together in the little park on Zofin island (in the Vltava river) solving mathematical problems. We remain lifelong friends and she visited us twice in the States.

As soon as Jan returned to Prague we resumed dating. We would go for long walks, go to the movies or to the theater, and he would very frequently have dinner at our house. I also was a frequent guest at the Reisers, where Jan lived during his first year back in Prague, and I attended some mathematical lectures Arnost Reiser gave to a small group of interested younger people. Milena Pollertova, Jan’s classmate and friend from his days of the chemical course offered by the Jewish community after Jews were barred from public schools, was also there. Jan used to study with her both during the war, before Theresienstadt, and again after the war when they both were enrolled at the Technical University. One evening, when Jan was walking me home after one of the sessions with Arnost Reiser, I was very depressed and finally burst out bitterly crying. Jan could not understand what was going on until I told him that if he liked Milena Pollertova, he was free to do so and that we could break up. It took him quite some time and effort to reassure me that she was only a colleague, with whom he liked to study, but that he had no interest in her as a woman. Although he was not interested in her and she not in him, the same was obviously not true of her mother, who once said to my aunt Ruzena (who lived in the same neighborhood as the Pollerts) “I don’t understand why Jan wants to marry Eva: she is neither pretty nor does she have any money” to which my aunt answered not too cleverly: “But she is intelligent.”

I spent the first summer after my return from the camp in a very elegant environment. A prominent Czech humanist, Premysl Pitř, organized a summer recreation camp for children who returned from the camps in chateaus which used to belong to some nobility in the villages of Kamenice, Olesovice and Stirin. Mother worked there in some sort of supervisory capacity in the kitchen of the Kamenice chateau, where I stayed too. I was too old to be one of the children and too young to be one of the supervisors, so my status was something in-between and I was basically free to do whatever I wanted. I spent the time gardening and felt a bit like the lady of the manor. I rested in the beautiful parks, studied and wrote letters to Honza. I also helped care for the younger children. One of them was the six-year old Eva Treulich, the daughter of Jan’s cousin. Very atypically for children who had

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just returned from the camps, she ate very slowly. I was losing patience and told her “Tak uz honem jez” (Now quickly eat), whereupon the little squirt answered in English: “You are a silly ass” which rhymed perfectly with the Czech sentence. I keep reminding her of that whenever we meet.

The next summer, in 1946, Mother borrowed a summer cottage at the edge of the woods near the small town of Zebrak from some friend of Mr. Stepanek, who had been married to Mother’s half-sister Ida (who died many years ago). I spent almost the entire summer there with Honza, of course under the watchful supervision of Mother. Honza slept in the main room, a sort of living and dining room, while Mother and I slept in a small bedroom. As the cottage was quite far from any other inhabited place, Jan thought that he should be armed and slept with an ax under his bed – God only knows what he would have done with it if an intruder had appeared. Fortunately, the only intruder was a dog who one night, when our bitch Bibi was in heat, jumped right onto Honza through the open

#### Wedding June 26, 1947



window above his bed. We spent every morning studying mathematics. Jan borrowed a very good English textbook, I believe it was called “Calculus for Scientists and Engineers,” but his English was very poor and so I helped him by translating such difficult terms as “hence,” “therefore,” “if we substitute” and so on. We essentially went through the entire book together and solved hundreds of problems. In the afternoon we usually went for walks in the woods.

In May 1947 I passed my “maturity examination” and graduated from the gymnasium with straight A’s in spite of all the lost years. Many years later, at a class reunion, I reproached our physical education teacher for grading me unfairly. At first she was taken aback. I said “You gave me an A even though I was probably the clumsiest girl in the class and could never climb a rope.” Her response was: “I graded by effort.”

About a month later, on June 26, Jan and I were married in a civil ceremony. Because the traditional place for civil weddings, the Old Town Hall, had been seriously damaged during the Prague uprising in the last days of the war, the ceremony took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Glam-Gallas Palace in Husova Str. in Prague’s Old Town. (Many years later, during one of our visits to Prague, our older son Martin was taking a sort of memorial picture of us standing in front of the palace and kissing. Some tourists noticed

it and assuming that it was some special local custom, started lining up in front of the palace kissing and taking pictures.) The wedding was followed by a lunch at our home. The guests were our witnesses, Dr. Adolf Kocna, a lawyer (lawyers in Czechoslovakia were awarded a JUDr. degree [doctor of law] and used the Dr. title) and very close friend of my parents, particularly of my father, and Jan's 70-year old uncle, Oto Robicek, with whom Jan lived up to the date of the wedding. Also present were uncle Oto's 80-year old mother-in-law, Matilda Fiala. "Aunt" Matilda was a widow who lost both of her children and lived with uncle Oto not only in the same apartment, but later was forced to share a single room with him when the Communist authorities decided that a two-room apartment was excessive for two old people and moved another family in. Dr. Kocna's Jewish wife was of course also one of the guests. Because her gentile husband refused to divorce her, she never went to a concentration camp, although he himself was sent to a work camp. (Dr. Kocna was immensely helpful to us; when he first learned of our return he came and gave Mother a fairly large sum of money and told her to ask for more if she needed it.) At the dinner Dr. Kocna gave a speech on the theme "Mens sana in corpore sano" (a healthy mind in a healthy body); it was meant very well but I don't think that Jan and I found it very inspiring or interesting. The only other guests were my beloved "aunt" Jindra and her son, Zdenek. All the girls of my class, who, of course, were at the wedding ceremony, came for a visit in the afternoon and were served pastries – Czech "kolace." Because of the belief that the one who got the corner piece would marry next, they wanted to know which ones were the corner pieces, to which my mother responded: "All of them."

After lunch Jan and I went on our honeymoon trip – to a small hotel "Modra hvezda" (Blue Star) in the little village of Olesovice, which I remembered well from the summer of 1945. In the afternoon we went for a walk and then lay down on a patch of grass in the woods. There Honza tried for the first time to unbutton my blouse, but I was still too shy and tried to divert his attention by pointing out the heather nearby. He responded with a somewhat annoyed "OK, OK heather" and that phrase has been used by us many times since – whenever somebody tries to avoid a subject. In the evening we had dinner and then I washed in private in the washbasin in our room (we had no bathroom) and dressed again so that Honza could undress me for our wedding night. To fulfill my father's prophesy, we brought with us and read for a while a book of poetry which Honza had given me earlier for my birthday and which he inscribed with a line from one of my favorite children's poems of the well known Czech poet Frantisek Halas: "...a slza, slza je voda, co je sama." (...and a tear, a tear is water that is alone). I have not been a tear since.

From here on we experienced almost everything together and – except for my professional life – Jan already described our lives in his Memoirs.

I started studying chemistry (had it not been for Jan's influence it is unlikely that I would have selected that field of study) at the Technical University in Prague as Mrs. Rocek (actually Rockova), but many of my colleagues did not know that I was married. This generally did not matter, but once, at a "Chemistry Ball" one of my classmates asked me for a dance and then kept dancing with me, until I – not quite knowing how to end this – asked him "May I introduce you to my husband?" He was obviously very annoyed that he had wasted all that time and effort on a sub par dancer and never spoke to me again during the four years of our studies.

I remember my first exam – it was in mineralogy and we had to identify a large number of minerals. Jan had told me that he did quite well, but had a problem with one mineral which he incorrectly identified as cassiterite (a tin ore), when in fact it was chromite (a chromium ore). When it happened the second time, old Professor Ondrej said "If somebody knew chromite, he would have recognized it." I remembered that story. Having spent countless hours going to the museum and studying rocks, I did very well during my exam, but there was one sample, I could not identify, until Prof. Ondrej started: "If somebody knew..." I immediately interrupted him and said "chromite" and I was right.

### **Award of the degree of Doctor of Technical Sciences 1953**



My greatest success was in the mathematics course. The professor, Dr. Hampl, liked to call students to the blackboard to demonstrate the solving of problems. At one point he complained that only men were volunteering to come to the blackboard and asked for a woman volunteer. One girl answered the call, but she was totally incompetent and Hampl enjoyed making fun of her and ridiculing her. She did not seem to mind and volunteered again and again. I, on the other hand, got quite annoyed and angry that she was representing the female students and casting them in a ridiculous light. So the next time when Dr. Hampl asked for a female volunteer I got up before the usual victim could. He seemed to be glad to have found another victim, but I disappointed him – I was very well prepared and had no difficulties solving the problems. From then on he used to call on me often and I always did very well. He did not know me by name, I was just “ta slečna” (that Miss). However, when it came to the final written exam, I experienced an inexplicable mental block and messed up the exam completely. The normal routine was that he would review the written exam and call each student to his office to award him the final grade. When he came to my exam, he said that it was a D exam, but then he recognized me and asked “Is this your exam, Miss – what happened?” I said that I did not know, I had a complete panic attack. So he gave me more problems to solve right in front of him in his office. After the first he said “Well, now it would be a C” and tested me patiently going through one problem after another until I finally earned an A.

When I graduated with my Ing. degree (roughly equivalent to a M.S. degree) in 1951, I was assigned to an explosives plant outside of Prague, but because I was married and my husband was a graduate student at the Technical University in Prague at the time, I was allowed to find a job in Prague. I managed to get an interview at VUFB (Vyzkumny ustav pro farmacii a biochemii, Research Institute for Pharmacy and Biochemistry), which had an opening in the organic synthesis group. For some reason on that day the only applicants who were interviewed were women. The verdict of the group leader for organic synthesis, Dr. Budesinsky, was: “I don’t want any woman in the lab, but if I have to have one, then I’ll take that Rockova.”

However, his decision was not enough: it had to be approved by the political personnel officer, who interviewed me in the presence of the director of the institute. He wanted to know about my political activities – I had none, only the essentially compulsory membership in SCM (Svaz ceskoslovenske mladeze), the state sponsored youth organization. He was not satisfied and pointed out that I had held no leadership position. I felt that my chances of getting the job were already lost anyway, so I did not care anymore and answered: “All the time you read in the newspapers how terrible it is that Jews forced themselves into leading positions everywhere. Here you have one Jewess, who is not in a leadership position and you aren’t satisfied either.” (This was at the time of the infamous Slansky affair which was accompanied by a full-fledged attack on Jews, particularly on those

in leading positions in the Communist party, many of whom were jailed and convicted on trumped up charges. Slansky, the former most powerful man in the Party, its Secretary-General, was executed.) The political officer was taken aback and responded: “We don’t need people with a warped character here,” but to my great surprise I got the job.

I think that Dr. Budesinsky was rather fond of me – I was very touched that, in 1990 (after the fall of communist regime in the “Velvet Revolution“), when Jan and I visited the Institute of the Academy where Jan used to work, Budesinsky came to see me. He had to get permission to leave the hospital, where he was lying ill with terminal cancer; he died shortly after our meeting.

At first I worked on the synthesis of anti-tuberculosis drugs. As part of this work I tried to follow the work published by an American author in the most prominent American chemical journal, the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, and could not reproduce the work. Everybody must have been convinced that it was just the incompetence of a beginning chemist, but finally I was able to prove that the work was wrong, and that what the author considered a single compound was in fact a mixture of two isomers (compounds of the same composition but with different structures). I submitted the work as my doctoral thesis and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Technical Sciences (equivalent to a Ph.D. degree). Since doctoral degrees in chemistry were not very common, they were still awarded individually in a fairly elaborate ceremony. A senior faculty member serving as the “Promoter” formally recommended me to the Dean for the degree and the Rector and then awarded it. I had to give the obligatory speech thanking the working class for supporting my studies.

Later I was transferred to another group, led by Dr. Semonsky, where I worked on the synthesis of anticancer drugs, among them nitrogen mustards, compounds analogous to the mustard gas used during WW I. One day I awoke at night with a blister on my finger – my rubber glove must have had a tear and I had a mustard gas burn. I got quite upset and called my boss in the middle of the night, waking up his mother-in-law, who was not too pleased. He recommended that I go to the military hospital, which I did, but they did not know what to do with a mustard gas burn either. Fortunately, the burn was small and healed by itself after some time.

When we arrived in America, I stayed at home for a while, taking care of the children and our new household, but after a few months I got an offer to work for Teddy Traylor, a senior postdoctoral fellow of Professor Paul Bartlett in the Harvard Chemistry Department. We met Teddy because he was the husband of Pat Traylor, a graduate student in Frank Westheimer’s group. Teddy was a wonderful person and I was very fond of him. After he left Bartlett’s group to accept a faculty position at the then new San Diego campus of the University of California, I inherited his position and became a postdoctoral fellow in Paul Bartlett’s group.

In 1962, when Jan accepted a faculty position at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., we moved to a house in Bethesda, Maryland, which belonged to a colleague in Westheimer's group, Karl Schellenberg; he later sold the house to us. The closing of the sale took place in the office of a lawyer and was a bit unusual. Until the last minute we kept arguing about the price – Karl asked for \$20,000 and we thought that that was unreasonably low and wanted him to accept more, but he refused. Then the lawyer informed us that there was a codicil on the house, that “it must not be sold to a Negro, an Armenian, or a Jew,” but that, in 1964, it was unenforceable. Karl said: “That of course does not concern you!” to which I replied: “It does.” Karl: “You are not Armenian?” Me: “No, but we are Jewish.” At this point Karl, with whom we had spent two years at Harvard wanted us to tell him right there, in the lawyer's office, how we survived the war. I think that the lawyer found it a quite unique house sale experience and so did our good friend, John Krasny, an Austrian of Czech descent, who asked us to make sure to invite him the next time we were going to buy a house.

I found a job at a little company with a somewhat strange name “Resources Research, Inc.,” and was supposed to perfect a method for detecting life on Mars. The method was based on the assumption, that living organisms must contain ATP (adenosine triphosphate), which could be detected, because it is an inevitable component of the reaction between luciferin and luciferase. It is this reaction which is responsible for the light flashes produced by fireflies. I was able to reproduce the synthesis of luciferin, but my principal contribution to the project was a negative one, but one which saved the company some serious embarrassment. My

**Thomas, Eva, Jan, and Martin (1974).**



ER predecessor on the project had achieved a very high sensitivity for the reaction – he could get the luciferin-luciferase mixture to generate (on an oscilloscope) very visible signals even with the tiniest amounts of ATP. However, to my amazement I found that he never bothered to carry out a blind experiment, i.e., one in the absence of any ATP. When as one of my first steps carried it out, I got an equally strong signal with no ATP present, just by injecting pure redistilled water. Even though the company paid me well – they spontaneously increased my salary by about 50% after a few months and my salary actually exceeded Jan’s – I did not think that this was serious work and suspected that the company exploited the then easily available government grants. So I quit the job as soon as Jan accepted his offer from the University of Illinois.

In Wilmette, Illinois, I stayed home for the first time in my life – for about two years. The children enjoyed it a lot and volunteered me for every possible job at school. Then one day I heard Jan on the phone saying: “No, I don’t think, that she would be interested, but you can ask her.” It was one of Jan’s colleagues, Professor Robert Walter, who had just been hired as Director of Freshmen Chemistry, looking for an assistant. Jan was wrong: I was interested and accepted the job.

Walter was not very well organized; he had difficulties delegating work and I did not have much to do. On the other hand, he was very often away from his office and so when his freshmen students came with questions, I started helping the students and working with them. Obviously I must have been doing quite well, because more and more students were coming to seek my help.



**Retirement from the  
University of Illinois  
at Chicago in 1994**

**Jan’s 70th birthday (1994).**

*left to right front: Miriam,  
Thomas Moll-Rocek, Laura,  
Julius;  
back: Thomas, Eva, Jan,  
Karen, Martin, Ute.*

The following year Walter was replaced by another faculty member, C. F. Liu, as Director of the Freshmen Chemistry program and Liu brought with him his own assistant. Bill Sager, the Head of the Department, asked me if I could help the department, which at that time had a large freshmen class, but very few graduate students and therefore not enough people to assist lecturers handling classes of two- to three hundred students, by becoming a Teaching Assistant. My response was that I could not, because I had never done any teaching, to which Sager replied: "And what do you think you have been doing here all this time with all those students? We have been watching you." So I started teaching as a T.A. but not for very long. One day I was at home and got a call from C.F. Liu asking me to take over the entire course including the lectures. I was very reluctant, but finally he persuaded me and I started lecturing. I don't think I ever worked as hard as when I was preparing my lectures. It took me 10 to 15 hours to prepare a 50 minute lecture. I had to go back and restudy things I had long forgotten, but the class was a success. And from then on I taught freshman chemistry to many thousands of students, sometimes smaller classes for honor students, sometimes huge classes of 300 or even more students, until my retirement in 1994. I was a popular teacher, in spite of the fact that I was a very strict grader and my classes tended to dwindle in size considerably. But the students nominated me for a teaching award almost every year and I actually won the Silver Circle Award for Excellence in Teaching twice. I loved teaching and the contact with the students, a few of whom still write to me.



## ER APPENDIX

Renata Kraus (later Seligman) was with me in Kurzbach, but unlike Mother and I did not manage to escape from the Evacuation march. Here is (in Jan's translation from the German original) her vivid description of her horrendous experiences and suffering during the last months of the war, particularly after the time of our escape. Her description gives full insight of the fate which Mother and I escaped thanks to Mr. Suchy's warning.

(I wish to thank Mordechai Livni for sharing with us Renata's account and to her sons, Michael and Ralph Seligman, for permission to append it to my memoirs.)

*And we are in a train again. We are going and we don't know where. Allegedly for work.*

*One thousand women get of the train. One thousand women march one kilometer after another until they finally stop at a barn. The next day we go to work. The work is hard; the winter is cold. We are half-naked and our wage is a quart of soup.*

*Snowed covered fields, snow covered paths. Snow covered fields. We go to work in groups of one hundred. A spade on one's shoulder, we labor day in and day out. The screaming and cursing of the Schupos accompanies us: "Will you hurry up, you dung heap vermin, you barn owls, you whore's daughters, you stinking Jews."*

*The snow is frozen and we are being driven to walk faster. One after the other falls down. "Up! What, you don't want to go on?; Up;;; Quick;;; Run;;; Tempo – Down! air raid cover; What? You don't want to practice air raid cover? Up; – Down; – Up; Down; Won't you do it, you dung heap vermin!"*

*Three month have passed. In the distance we can hear the thunder of cannons and shooting. These are our most beautiful symphonies and the only thing which keeps us up. Perhaps we shall be liberated soon? Is it possible that peace could come?*

*One day we want to get ready for work as usual. The camp commander yells at us: "Stay inside. Whoever goes out will be shot."*

*Our symphony is coming closer and closer. We are getting restless. Why aren't they sending us out to work?*

*"Counting roll-call, counting roll-call." We fall into line. Turn left; and now we are marching out of the gate forever. We start singing our camp anthem:*

*Oh Kurzbach, I can't forget you  
because you are my fate,  
only who leaves you, can fathom  
how splendid freedom is.  
Oh Kurzbach we don't lament or moan,  
in spite of everything we want to say YES to life,  
because the day will come and we will be free.*

*And we march day and night and day and night. "Faster, faster." We want to walk slowly, we want to be liberated. But every time our steps slow down we are again driven forward: Fast, fast.*

*We sleep sometimes 2-3 hours in an open barn. When we wake up we are snowed in and frozen to the ground. One tears the other up from the frozen ground. We have received nothing to eat for a number of days. But we have to go on, we want to live to see peace....*

*We walk for nine days. And from the distance we again see barbed wire. The concentration camp Gross-Rosen. What is in store for us there? We hope for a warm soup. – Ten days have passed and we are again driven onwards. This time to a train.*

*They crowd us into open railroad cars. 80 to 100 women each car. Where? Where? When will we ever find rest? We ride for five days and five nights. We are hungry. We are snowed in and wet. Where? Where? The women start to quarrel. There is not even enough space to sit down. One of us becomes deranged and starts choking her friend. Another one is dead and we are going and going and the trip won't come to an end.*

*At noon on the fourth day the train stops in Weimar. ----- Air raid. The railroad station is being bombed and we are sitting in the train and not allowed to go out. Houses next to the railroad are collapsing. The railroad station is hit and collapses, but our train stays. Several cars were hit, but it is not too bad. Perhaps 20 dead. A stone from a house falls on me. However, I know, I know with certainty, that nothing can happen to me. I know that my Mommy protects me.*

*We continue. Bergen-Belsen;;;*

*What is in store for us there? We are passing a sign. "Prisoner-of-war and exchange camp Bergen-Belsen." We are jubilant. Perhaps we are really to be exchanged? We will certainly meet with people we knew from Theresienstadt. However, we are soon disappointed. We are again led to a shower, our miserable clothes are taken from us and replaced by even more miserable ones. Then we are driven out into the snow.*

*I have nothing but a pink organdy dress and a torn up coat. It is the beginning of February and spring will come soon.*

*Four people on a lice infected straw-mattress. But only those who are lucky, the rest have to lie on the ground. I don't know how I came by so much luck. Lying down during the day is forbidden. But after all, I am on a straw-mattress.*

*There are early, daily roll-calls; we stand two to three hours, sometimes four, in the snow and rain. Then we are driven in and the putrid smell of the wet clothes fills the entire room. There we sit the entire day, day in and day out, helping each other hunt for lice, and waiting for the soup and for the command: Go to sleep.*

*In the morning we comment dryly on how many people died at night and how many of our friends are among them. Every day one is surprised that one is still*

alive.

*Cowering in a corner lies Lotte Krohneim. She is 24 years old, almost two head shorter than I am. I am very fond of her. She calls to me softly: "Rena, Rena, today is my turn." "Don't talk like that; don't let yourself go." She is too weak to go to the counting roll-call, and when we return to the barrack, she is dead.*

*I am lying next to my friend. We are hunting for lice. "If one of us should die, the other has to tell their relatives what has happened." "Don't speak nonsense." "My sister's name is S, and she is from Brünn. Say, I..." She starts to cry. "Rena, there is really no point. Why should we unnecessarily suffer so long, we wont survive anyhow. Today it is the fourth day we did not get any bread and barely any soup. Touch me, see how feverish I am." I, too, have a high fever. We all have typhoid fever. Isn't she right? Why go on living? Only to suffer more torture?*

*I am going to the latrine and as I am returning someone calls at me: "They just carried Liesa away, she cut her artery." Is she right? Is she right?*

*One after the other dies. Perhaps only 60 women survive of the thousand. But we don't want to live any more. We have had enough of losing our friends daily. Why can't we all perish at once?*

*A new excitement. What does it mean? What happened? Do they perhaps give out bread or soup? For days we had nothing to eat. What is the meaning of this uproar?*

*"Kids, a white flag was raised on Block A?" What an impossible rumor, – gossip – Who tells such fairy tales? Latrine reports? But here comes the next one and another one that he has seen the white flag.*

*But in a while it is all forgotten. After three weeks one grasps the first little piece of bread. Each one twelfth of a loaf. "The end will certainly be here soon" called someone. "Be quiet, there a German is running away." "There another one." "There are soldiers there there with white armbands." "Perhaps it is really peace?" Peace, peace .... Have we really lived to see it?*

*"What is driving there?" "A tank." ... An English flag.... no... Russian.... American.... Is it not a swastika? No, we are free, we are free... it is the English flag after all....*

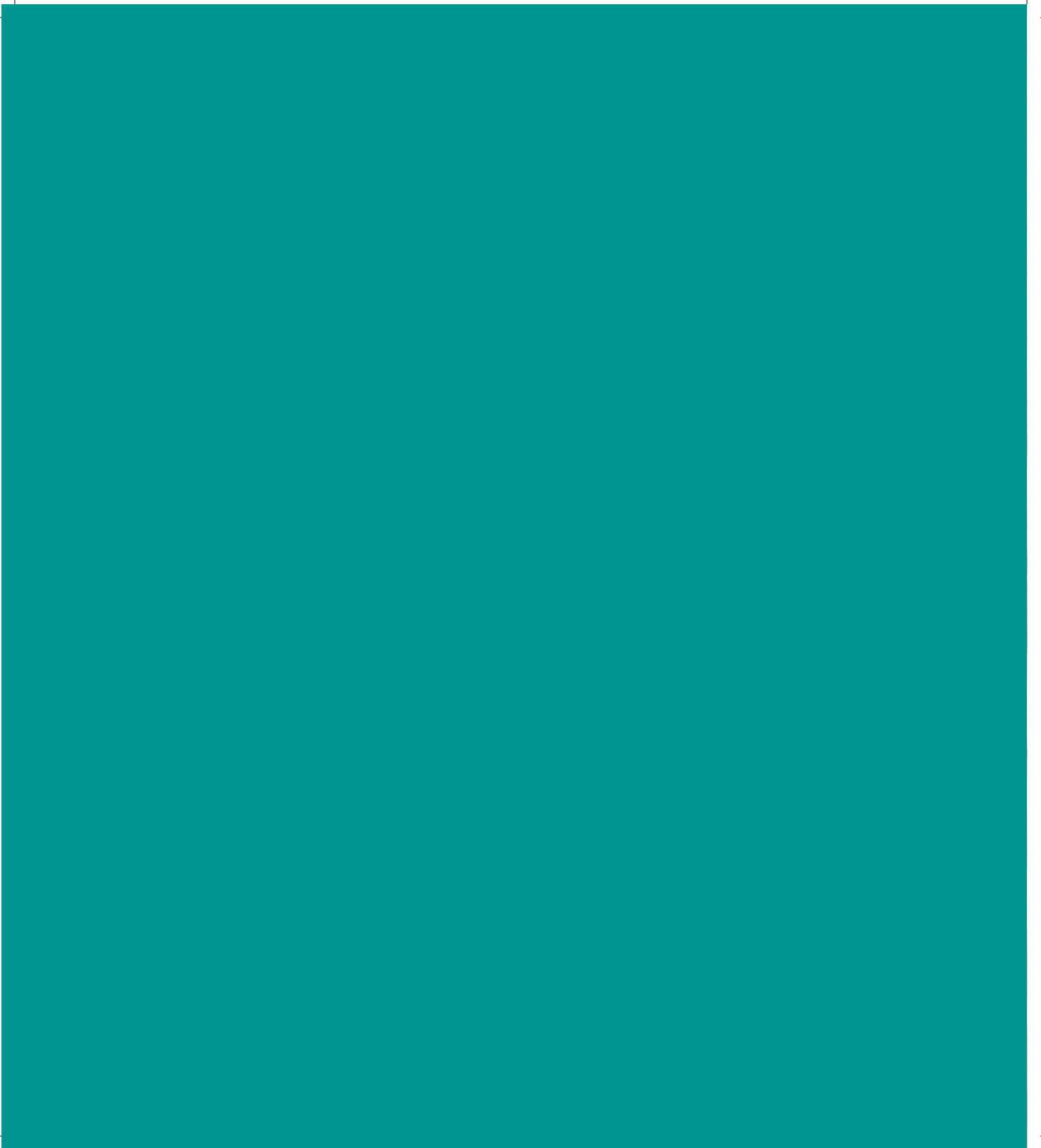
*(Prague 1945-46)*

# JAN ROČEK

Jan with older son Martin, 2004



Eva and Jan Roček in front of the doors of the  
Clam–Gallas Palace in Prague, 2004  
[they were married there in 1947]



## INTRODUCTION

For years our sons and friends have urged us, Eva and me, to write the stories of our lives and for years I have resisted. I had more urgent things to do, and besides, though our stories are certainly unusual, they are hardly unique. So many much more talented writers have written their stories, stories far more unusual, revealing and interesting than ours. Moreover, I have a rather poor memory and so all I could produce would be fragments, occasional and unsystematic recollections. Furthermore, for a long time I was convinced that though my memory was poor and I remembered far less than many others, the few things that I could recall I remembered correctly – that my memory was limited, but very reliable. Unfortunately, I relatively recently realized that not even that is true, and that I made mistakes even in matters I thought I remembered exactly. So why write at all? Well, perhaps some day one of our grandchildren might want to know more about us and the times during which we lived – though I don't know why they should. I myself have never been very interested in my ancestry. I always found it much more interesting to think and learn about the present and speculate about the future and prepare for it than to concern myself with the past. Still, they might be different from me in this respect, as they are in so many others. And besides, I have sort of promised a number of well meaning friends that I shall try to write something about my life and it seems that if I don't do it now, at the age of 78, I never will.

## PRAHA (PRAGUE)

### Mother

I was born on March 24, 1924 in Prague, actually in a private hospital or sanitarium named Sanops in Prague-Smichov. When I was little I was close to my mother, Frieda or Friedericke, later in Czech Bedriska, who played with me and loved to read to me. She was born on September 7, 1895 in Jablonec nad Nisou (Gablonz and der Neisse) to Abraham Löbl (Loebl) and his second wife Leontine nee Gutmann and grew up in Jablonec, a German speaking town in the Sudetenland, the northern part of Bohemia. At the time she was growing up girls could not go to a gymnasium (college preparatory high school) and so she spent a year in Lausanne, Switzerland, in a private school (pensionat) to finish her education and to learn French. During World War I she was a volunteer nurse. Also during that time she and her friends used to stuff cigarettes for the soldiers and she learned to smoke. She had a much older half-brother, Hugo Löbl, born July 16, 1875, from her father's first marriage, who became a very successful industrialist and owned a large electrical supplies factory in Jablonec. He was married to a very nice lady, my aunt Lilly, born May 18, 1894, and they had two daughters, Hella and Susie. Susie was my age and Hella was five years older and very beautiful. Mother and I used to be invited to their elegant large villa in Jablonec.

As far as I am aware Mother never lived in a Czech-speaking town until she married Father in 1922, and she never learned Czech very well. She spoke it, of course, particularly after 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany, and Father forbade the speaking of German in our home, but she was never comfortable with it. When I was little she read to me German fairy tales and a bit later Schiller's romantic poetry and even his drama "William Tell." I loved both the poems and the drama and learned one long poem, "Die Bürgschaft," by heart probably at the age of five. When she was reading to me she would sit in the large stuffed easy chair in our festive dining room and I would sit on the ground on a large pillow. I still remember little fragments of several of the poems today. When I was little Mother had a small business at home; she made painted handkerchiefs and similar things and even employed a helper. She must have been quite artistic and had an interest in paintings, but never painted herself. She was much more interested in physical activities than Father, played tennis, was a good swimmer, and liked to hike, skate and sled. I liked to go hiking with her, but cared less for obligatory walks in our neighborhood. She

also took me swimming, skating and sledding. I particularly remember a two day hike in the Krkonose (German: Riesengebirge) mountains when I was eight years old. Together we climbed the tallest mountain in Bohemia, the 1603 m high Snezka (Schneekoppe); it was a very windy day and I held on to her afraid that the wind would blow me away. We then spent a night together in a hotel in Spindleruv Mlyn before returning the next day to Janske Lazne to Father and my sister Helga. Unfortunately, Mother became very ill in 1936 or 1937. It turned out that she not only had very high blood pressure, but also a serious coronary disease and deteriorated rapidly. From a formerly physically active woman she became very easily tired, had to lie down a lot, and Father, Helga and I took over household chores. In Terezin, she spent almost the entire time in the hospital. In addition to her heart condition she got paratyphoid fever, chronic pleurisy and finally a stroke that paralyzed the right side of her body so that she could no longer get out of bed. Staying in the hospital for almost the entire time we were in Terezin was possible since my cousin, Erich Klapp, who was also her physician, was the first doctor to arrive in Terezin and therefore assumed charge of the health establishment. I visited Mother regularly in the hospital. In the fall of 1944 she went to Auschwitz with my father and my fifteen year old sister Helga and there certainly directly into the gas chambers.

### **Father**

My father, Hugo Robitschek, was born on June 12, 1887, in a small Czech town, Popovice near Benesov, about 30 miles SE of Prague. He was the youngest of 7 children (there may have been more, but I knew of only six siblings who lived to adulthood) of Friedrich (Bedrich) Robitschek and Josefine (Josefa) nee Rosenzweig. He was quite young when his father died, probably thirteen or fourteen; his religious mother forced him to go to the synagogue every day for a whole year to pray for his father and he did not particularly enjoy it.

Father finished four grades of a gymnasium and then a business school from which he graduated with an equivalent of a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> As a young man he must have led a fairly active life. He later told me that he had his first sexual experience with a maid when he was only 14 years old. He was not a good student and I was shocked when I once came across his old report cards and found that he even had had a failing grade. He must have fallen in with a group of German students at the time when dueling was still popular. He recalled one duel held in a friend's apartment while the friend's parents were away. It ended without bloodshed when one of the duelists

<sup>1</sup> He was therefore entitled to serve in the army in the officer training program as a "one-year volunteer" (Enjährlig Freiwilliger) – it was voluntary only to the extent that the other option was to serve for three years without officer training.



**Jan's father, Hugo Robitschek**

unit was staying; when he asked about Father he was told that he “sauft and brüllt,” (drinks and yells [meaning sings]). He also must have led a fairly active sexual life. He told me that he once thought that he had been infected by syphilis and decided to shoot himself, but fortunately it turned out to be a false alarm.

Nothing of that remained when I knew him. He was a serious and very responsible person, fully devoted to his family. He never met with his friends from his younger days except once. When I was about eight years old and our family was vacationing in the mountains, Father and I visited an old army buddy of his. During this visit we were served the most unforgettable venison meal; I have been searching in vain for an equally heavenly venison for the rest of my life. Father never drank, except for a glass of beer when it was very hot in the summer and that happened not more than half a dozen times over the course of a year. The only alcohol in our house was rum kept in a cut glass carafe and it was only used one teaspoon at a time, added to a cup of tea – a custom which he brought home from Siberia. He used to sing when he was younger, but stopped completely when he started worrying about the future during the depression and when the Nazis came to power in Germany. He did have a mistress, his secretary, a married woman, who was obviously very devoted to him and to our family.<sup>2</sup> He told me that the relationship started only after Mother got ill and the doctors discouraged her from having sex. His older brother understandably disapproved of that liaison and it led to some conflicts between them. Despite all

tore through a large oil painting with his rapier. He personally knew the famous Prague journalist Egon Erwin Kisch and there is a mention of Father in one of Kisch's books, “Soldat im Prager Korps” (Soldier in the Prague Corps). Father recalled how a large group of young men walked with Kisch over one of the Vltava (Moldau) bridges where toll was being collected. Kisch ordered everybody to say “the last one will pay.” Kisch was the last one and did pay – but only for himself; the others were gone and there was nothing the toll collector could do. Father met Kisch at the train station at the beginning of WWI and Kisch parted with him yelling across the station “Auf Wiedersehen im Massengrab,” (see you in the mass grave). During the war Father's older brother, my uncle Otto, once arrived in the same place Father's

the frankness with which he told me about his life (that all happened when we were in Terezin and I was between 18 and 20 years old) he never told me anything about sex – he probably assumed that at that age I must know it all and I was too shy to ask. Surprisingly, considering his own background, or perhaps because of it, he expressed the hope that I would have my first sexual experience with the woman I was going to marry.

Father must have inherited some money when my grandfather died, although he told me that it was badly mismanaged by his guardian, somebody from the Petschek family,<sup>3</sup> who used it to his own benefit. Still he was able to purchase a small paint and varnish factory together with his elder brother, Otto Robicek.<sup>4</sup> When WWI started both my father and uncle were called to serve. Father fought first on the Serbian front, where he was injured and then, after he recovered, on the Russian front where he was taken prisoner of war quite early in the war, probably sometime in 1915. He spent time in a Russian prisoner of war camp in or near Tashkent, Uzbekistan. He was in an officers' camp while the men were in a different camp under far worse conditions and where about 90% of the 20,000+ men died in a typhus epidemic. Summers in Tashkent were unbearably hot and to escape the heat in the crowded living spaces Father built – obviously with the permission of the camp commander – a little hut from sticks and mud next to a brook within the camp perimeter. He kept a photograph of his “house.” The officers were also allowed to go swimming in the river. However, they had to sign a pledge that they would not attempt to escape and were then escorted by armed guards. Father considered that an insult to his honor – he would either sign or be watched by guards, but refused to sign if his promise was not trusted. He never joined the bathers' group. Because of a suspicion that he participated in an escape plot, he was later transferred to a “punishment camp” near Vladivostok at the eastern edge of Siberia. The officers still received their officers' pay which in the beginning was sufficient, but with the inflation during the war it became progressively worth less and less. To support themselves (I don't understand what they received as prisoners and what they had to buy) Father and two of his friends started manufacturing shoe polish from soot and tallow and sold it in the area; they obviously must have been able to move around fairly freely. They would also go to the market and in the winter buy milk in solidly frozen blocks. To pass the time in the camps Father also started a stamp collection. To get the stamps he wrote to some embassies and they obliged; he brought the collection back with him on his return to Prague.

<sup>2</sup> I was married in a suit made from material Father bought at the beginning of the war and which she kept for the entire period and gave me when I returned to Prague. I still have the suit and wore it at the celebration of our 50th wedding anniversary.

<sup>3</sup> The Petscheks were the richest Jewish family in Czechoslovakia. They owned coal mines and banks.

<sup>4</sup> My uncle's name was spelled differently probably because the clerk registering his name when he was born changed the spelling.

Later he joined the Czechoslovak Legions, an army formed primarily from Czech and Slovak prisoners of war. The Czechoslovak Legions in Russia accomplished a remarkable feat: to secure their return route home after the war, they occupied and held the entire length of the trans-siberian railroad until they evacuated everybody to Vladivostok. From there the legionnaires proceeded home by ship either via America or, as Father did, around India and through the Suez Canal to Trieste, Italy. The Russians were not very pleased with the fact that the small Czechoslovak army in effect controlled the vast territory of Siberia and called them instead of “Chekoslovakii” (Czechoslovaks) “Chekosobaki” (Czech dogs).

Father returned home only in 1920, two years after the end of the war. He and uncle Otto rebuilt the factory and both of them worked there until our deportation to Terezin (Theresienstadt) in 1942. During WWI uncle Otto was hit by shrapnel in the abdomen, a very serious wound which not many people survived; I don’t know whether he recovered sufficiently to return to the front. Because he was not taken prisoner, he returned to Prague as soon as the war ended.

Father liked music. When I was little he would sing a lot, mostly arias from German light operas and operettas, like Johann Strauss, German drinking songs and many other songs. However, the singing stopped when things got bad with the rise of Hitler in Germany and the depression. When I was little my parents used to go quite frequently to the German theater and later Father purchased a radio and liked to listen to music during meals. Mother, on the other hand, was practically tone deaf. Neither of my parents played any musical instrument nor did any of my parents’ siblings. The only musical person in the family was my uncle Rudolf Klapp, the doctor, who was married to Father’s sister, aunt Klara. Their son, my cousin Erich, also a doctor, was a gifted musician and played the cello very well.

When I was little I was a bit afraid of Father. He was a highly principled and somewhat stern man, who did not believe in displaying personal emotions. As far as I remember he kissed me only once – the last time I saw him when I was in the transport from Terezin to Auschwitz. I assume that he did kiss me when I was a small child, but I don’t remember that. When he was angry, he almost never resorted to physical punishments, but would not talk to me, usually for several days. I found this very hard to bear and tried desperately to break his silence; I later discovered that the best way to make him talk to me again was to start asking questions about his war experiences. However, this was not because he liked the military; quite to the contrary, he returned from the war as a confirmed pacifist; I was never allowed to have any toy arms, no toy guns, sabers, or soldiers. He changed his attitude only when the threat from Germany became evident, and he would have gladly defended the Czechoslovak Republic. In later years we became very close. I loved Father very much, and he certainly was the dominant influence on me.

## Other members of the family

I was very fond of my grandmother, Leontine Löbl, Mother's mother. She was the only grandparent I knew. She lived first next to us in a separate one-room apartment on the same floor of the house and later, when we had to move, with us in our apartment. Grandmother was paralyzed by a stroke, wore braces and a cane and walked with difficulty. While she lived in her own apartment she had a woman taking care of her and at the same time helping Mother with us, sort of part-time nurse and nanny. I used to play chess and dominoes with Grandmother. I think that she was from the Czech town of Domazlice and she therefore spoke Czech better than Mother. I remember her as a very kind and nice person to whom I would go when I felt unhappy. She died in 1935 at the age of 77.

My sister, Helga, was born in 1929 when I was five years old. She was a redhead like I and had a round face. Once as a little child she got hold of scissors and while sitting under the table managed to cut off a lot of her hair. I also remember when she took her first steps: she walked, but always had to hold on to someone. Then one day she got a new toy, a little wooden lion on wheels with a string; holding on to the string gave her enough confidence that she took her first independent steps. As a small child she was quite sickly; she preferred just to lie on a sofa and was not very interested in games. My parents were obviously worried and preoccupied with her health. I don't remember much of what was done, but I do recall very clearly that at one point the doctor prescribed a grey ointment containing elemental mercury, which was massaged every day into her entire body. Nevertheless, she did get better after the age of about three and then had a normal childhood. Because of her early illness or the treatment, she was a somewhat slower learner. As I was five years her senior I helped her with her school work and would even go to school to talk to the teacher instead of my parents, so that my relationship to her was a bit like that of a third parent. She was a very nice person with a sunny disposition, much more popular with the other children and also much harder working than I. I can't remember that we would ever had a conflict or fight.

My wife, Eva, got to know Helga before we ever met; she worked with her in Terezin in the fields. Eva remembers that Helga always talked about her older brother whom, as Eva later told me, she loved and admired, and she kept reciting poems she learned from him (me). It is sad that my own memory is so faulty that I have no more recollections of her short life. She was 15 when she went to Auschwitz and too young and perhaps even younger looking to have a chance to pass through the selection. To Mengele she did not look like a good enough slave to be worth keeping alive for a few more months.

I had a number of uncles and aunts and quite a few cousins. The family, my uncles and aunts, got together every Sunday afternoon, the men for a game of cards, "tarok," a game popular among Austrian army officers. In the earliest days that I remember, the four card players were Father, his older brother, uncle Otto Robicek,

JR

**Jan with  
his sister  
Helga**



uncle Rudolf Klapp, the physician, husband of Father's sister aunt Klara, and uncle Wilhelm Fried, the widower of another of Father's sister's. Uncle Wilhelm was the oldest and when he stopped coming, his son-in-law, Otto Flusser, took his place. Otto Flusser and my cousin Elsa were the parents of twin girls, a redheaded Susie and blond Liesl, who were shipped to England in 1939 at the age of eleven just before the outbreak of the war with one of Mr. Winton's children transports.<sup>5</sup> My aunts gathered for conversation in another room; regular participants were Mother, uncle Otto's wife, aunt Mimi, Father's sisters aunt Rosa, aunt Klara and later, after she moved to Prague from Radnice, aunt Ema. Uncle Otto's mother-in-law, Matylda Fiala also came

quite often. The site of these regular family meetings rotated among the principal participants. They took place in the afternoon and refreshments were always served but everybody went home for dinner. My many cousins on my father's side, who were almost 20 years older than I, came just occasionally; I was glad to see them and enjoyed the company of young adult relatives. Otherwise I restricted myself mostly to sampling the available food in both rooms. One time this resulted in a late night call to our doctor, my uncle, who brought with him a surgeon to make sure that the suspected appendicitis was diagnosed properly and that the surgeon could operate without delay. However, careful examination revealed that the cause of the severe stomach ache was not the appendix, but the excessive number of strawberries I consumed as I alternated visiting my uncles and watching the card game for a while with visiting my aunts and listening to their complaints about domestic help.

<sup>5</sup> An Englishman, Mr. Nicholas Winton, came to Prague in 1939 and began to organize transports of Jewish children to England; England was willing to accept children under 18, but no adults. The children were placed either in foster families or boarding schools. When we visited Prague in 2000 we saw a Czech movie, "Vsichni moji blízcí" (English version "All my Loved ones") based on Winton's childrens' transports. At the end of the movie was a list of the over 600 children Winton saved, but the list passed by too quickly to be readable. I knew that the Flusser twins got to England and it occurred to me that they might have been in one of Mr. Winton's transports. With my son Martin's help I got hold of the list and indeed found their names there. I started searching for them and finally got in touch with Mr. Frank Barratt of Edinburgh, Scotland, who had been married to Susie. Unfortunately she had died in 1995 and her sister Liesl a year later. When they came to England they were placed and brought up in the Oulton Abbey boarding school. To my surprise I found that my cousin on my mother's side, Susie Löbl, later Lind, also came to England with one of the Kindertransports.

## My early life in Prague

In the early years of my childhood we spoke mostly German at home. My name was Jan Kurt, but at that time I was always called Kurt or more often by the diminutive Kurtl. We of course also spoke Czech with Czech friends and neighbors and with our maid. My best friend, Milos Milota, was Czech. Being from the German speaking part of the country, the “Sudetenland,” Mother’s Czech was far from perfect; Father was bilingual, but had had only German schools. My parents subscribed to a German newspaper, the “Prager Tagblatt,” a very good paper whose editorial staff was largely Jewish, and we used to go to the German theater.<sup>6</sup> When I was five years old I went to a German (mostly Jewish) private kindergarten and there fell in love with the daughter of the lady who ran the kindergarten. Her name was Liesl and when my sister was born I wanted her to be name Liesl. My parents selected the name Helga, but accepted my choice as the second name, so that my sister was named Helga Liesl, but the name Liesl was never used. However when I started elementary school I went to a Czech school. At the moment when the German National Socialist (Nazi) party with their vicious anti-Semitic program gained the support of a large fraction of the German population and Hitler came to power, Father prohibited the use of any German in our house and I and my sister grew up as Czechs.<sup>7</sup>

I did not think of myself as Jewish. I was not a member of any religious group. I knew that my mother was registered with the Jewish community, but also that my father left it when he returned from WWI. I grew up with the belief that being Jewish, like being Catholic or a member of one of the protestant religions, meant belonging to a religious community, participating in religious education and going to a church or synagogue. I remember being taken to a synagogue only once in my life to visit a very old uncle during the Day of Atonement. I never heard of anybody

<sup>6</sup> My cousin Elsa’s husband, Otto Flusser, was the head cashier of the “New German Theater” and I sometimes got free tickets from him.

<sup>7</sup> After the war one was supposed to prove ones Czech or non-German ethnic background by getting a certificate about the ethnicity indicated during the 1930 census. The demand for these certificates was so huge that the archives could not handle it and -- at least on the day I came to get my certificate -- allowed people to find their census sheets themselves. I was in complete shock when I discovered that in 1930 Father listed the family as German. In the light of what had happened it seemed inconceivable and I had forgotten that things were so very different just fifteen years ago. I did not know what to do and then took the census sheet, hid it under my clothes, walked out of the office, brought it to Eva’s home and there burned it. Obviously I never got the certificate that my family had been of Czech (or Jewish, which was also acceptable) ethnicity, but I could claim that the census form could not be found; I somehow managed without it and by now I can’t even remember for what purpose the certificate was needed.

celebrating seder or Hanukkah, I never went to a bar mitzvah or a Jewish wedding.<sup>8</sup> I never heard a word of Hebrew or Yiddish. We celebrated Christmas and Easter like everybody else, of course in a totally non-religious way. After Hitler came to power in Germany and Father somehow discovered that Christmas trees were originally a Germanic custom, we had Christmas without a tree but still with presents and a festive Christmas Eve dinner. We never talked about religion in our home; I once asked Mother why she did not leave the congregation and her reply was that she would not do it at a time when Jews were being persecuted. I knew that some of my relatives were Zionists and one of my older cousins, Frieda Ehrlich, actually went to Palestine with her husband as one of the early pioneers in the twenties, but later returned because life on the kibbutz was too hard. I considered myself Czech and had actually strong patriotic feelings, quite similar to my gentile classmates. My sister was even a member of the Sokol, a quite patriotic Czech physical education organization.<sup>9</sup> I knew that during WWI Father had joined the celebrated Czechoslovak Legions, the army formed from prisoners of war fighting against Austria-Hungary for an independent Czechoslovakia. While there certainly was some anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia, I do not recall experiencing any during my childhood. After all Thomas Masaryk, the president and founder of Czechoslovakia was famous, among many other things, for his defense of a Jew, Hilsner, against the accusation of ritual murder and for his strong condemnation of the entire belief in ritual murder by Jews.

Father left the Jewish community when he returned from WWI and learned that his very religious mother was no longer alive. He wanted me to select my own faith when I was old enough to decide for myself. Because he did not want to influence my own choice, he never talked about religious matters and never told me what his beliefs were, although I am now sure that he was an atheist. However, he was very emphatic about his belief in truthfulness and lying would have been the worst crime I could have committed. He told me many times the story of the boy who cried wolf, many times quoted a German proverb “Wer einmal lügt dem glaubt man nicht, auch wenn er dann die Wahrheit spricht” (Who lies once is not believed even if he later speaks the truth), and repeatedly told a story about how, when he was a soldier, his

<sup>8</sup> Even my cousin Hedda, who later emigrated to Palestine, had a civil wedding in the beautiful town hall of Prague’s Old Town. When aunt Mimi died, she was cremated in Prague’s crematorium.

<sup>9</sup> Earlier my parents thought of sending me to Sokol, but on the day we visited the Sokol gymnasium the boys exercised with wooden poles as if they were rifles and my very pacifistic father did not want to join me a potentially militaristic organization. He obviously was not worried that the Sokol would instill militaristic ideas in my sister, and by that time, because of the growing German threat, his pacifism must have given way to the need to defend the country. By that time I was no longer interested; I was never good at or attracted by physical exercise.

whole unit (platoon?) did something (I don't remember what it was) and was called to a "rapport" and each soldier was individually asked whether he knew why he was there. All of them answered that they did not know, only Father admitted his transgression and was the only one who was not punished. I still remember the first time I was caught lying: I must have been perhaps four years old and still was supposed to sleep after lunch. Father came into to bedroom and asked whether I had slept and I claimed that I did. Somehow he knew that it was not true and I got a lecture about the evils of lying and it obviously made a lasting impression.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on truthfulness was also very much in tune with general ethical beliefs in Czechoslovakia at the time I was growing up. President Masaryk's motto was "Pravda vitezi" (Truth prevails) and the country's most celebrated 15<sup>th</sup> century hero, Jan Hus, was admired for his adherence to the truth as he saw it even under the threat of excommunication and death by being burnt alive at the stake. In a widely quoted letter from his cell before his execution he urged his followers to "allow everybody to have [his] truth (pravdy kazdemu prejte)."

Later I loved to read the witty epigrams and poems of the Czech journalist and satirist Karel Havlicek (1821-56), like his irreverent poem about the arrival of Christianity in Russia (The Christening of St. Vladimir). Havlicek was originally a seminarian who became disillusioned with the church and became an outspoken atheist and critic of the Roman-Catholic church and of churches in general as well as of Austro-Hungarian dominance over the Czech nation. He was a leading force in the Czech national revival, and became very popular and respected, and after his exile and early death was considered a martyr for that cause. He probably affected my views on religion. In 1997, on our trip to Cortina, Italy, we stopped in Bressanone (Brixen) at Casa Havlicek, Havlicek's place of exile, to pay our respects.

Our family lived in a suburb of Prague, Strasnice. When I was little we had a three-room apartment. The rooms were fairly big – about 5x5 meters or 270 sq. ft. There was the bedroom with my parents' two large beds, my sofa, and later also Helga's little bed. It also had two big armoires with my parents' clothing and carefully starched and ironed bed linen from Mother's dowry, a small table and two chairs and a vanity. The living room had a table and chairs, a desk where I did my school work, a bookcase, a sofa, and an "American" (Edison) stove: a huge ornate iron stove with a number of small mica windows. The stove was filled with coke or anthracite from the top once in the evening and once in the morning and one had to start the fire only at the beginning of the heating season, a great advance over the ceramic

10 I remember another incident which must have happened at about the same time. I hated to have to take a nap after lunch and got very bored. I was still in a little bed for children which had a metal frame and string netting on the sides. I had a pair of little play scissors but they proved good enough to cut the strings of the netting quite thoroughly. My parents were not pleased with my effort, but it was certainly not as serious a transgression as lying about having slept.

stoves we had in the other rooms, but rarely used – ashes and slag had to be removed daily. The living room was the only room that was heated, but there were connecting doors to the other two rooms. The third room was a formal dining room with elegant dark furniture; it was used only when we had guests. It also had display cabinets with china figurines, a silver tea set which Father had brought from Russia, and a huge easy chair in which Mother sat when she read to me. The apartment also had a kitchen with a coal stove, an adjacent little room for the maid, a small pantry room, and a bathroom with a coal heated hot water stove where we took a hot bath every Friday. On other days we just washed in cold water. A fairly large balcony overlooked the street; it had a table and a sofa and we would sometimes eat there in the summer. There was also a small balcony looking onto the yard and used mostly for storage. On the same floor was a one-room apartment for my grandmother and her nurse; the nurse also doubled as a sort of nanny. My grandmother spent most of the day in our apartment. Later we had to move into another apartment in the same block of houses, but that was in the beginning of the Depression. From then on we had a three bedroom apartment almost identical to the previous one, but our grandmother now lived with us and slept on the sofa in the living room – we no longer could afford the nurse and perhaps somewhat later the maid. After my grandmother died in 1935, I slept on the living room sofa bed and Helga advanced from her little children's bed to my former bed in my parents' bedroom.

Although Father was a co-owner of a factory, we lived quite modestly and thriftily, particularly after the onset of the Depression. One of the first things people could do without when times got difficult was new paint, and Father's business suffered considerably. In the earlier years we did have a live-in maid, as was very common among middle or upper middle class families. Neither we nor any of our relatives in Prague, including my uncle Rudolf (a quite successful and prosperous physician), or any of my older cousins (a lawyer and a doctor) owned a car. Only my very rich uncle Hugo Löbl in Jablonec had one, of course with a chauffeur. I remember the amazement of the family, when, probably in or around 1939, a letter from a fresh immigrant to America reported that "Imagine, in America almost everybody has a car and nobody has a [live-in] maid." We never ate out, and used a taxi only once a year: when going to the train station with a lot of luggage on our annual vacation in the mountains. Not even Father's factory owned a car or truck. We did not have a phone, though some of our relatives and, of course, the uncle who was a physician, did. Except for one summer vacation in Austria in my early childhood before Helga was born, we never traveled outside the country. We ate well, but jam (only home made), honey, or "babovka" (German Gugelhupf, a sort of high coffee cake) was served only on Sundays. I don't remember that we ever had a guest for dinner or that we would have been invited for a major meal.

Almost every year we went for a summer vacation, mostly in the mountains. I particularly remember one or perhaps two vacations in Orlicke hory (Eagle mountains); I think I was eleven or twelve year old, and there was a girl about

my age there and we were sort of in love and corresponded for a few years. I still remember her name: Herta Nussbaum; she was from Brno. I also remember the enormous quantities of mushrooms, boletuses, which grew there at the time, and which Father, Helga and I collected and Mother cleaned and dried.<sup>11</sup> It was the last nice vacation we had as a family.

I had a number of toys, though very few compared with what children have nowadays. I got some presents each birthday and each Christmas. My most extravagant toy was a beautiful black pedal car with lights, a horn, a windshield, and a crank; all my uncles and aunts together gave it to me perhaps for my fourth or fifth birthday. I actually don't remember using it a lot; it was later re-painted and refinished for Helga. I also got some money, which I put in a savings account and never used, and of course I received books. Also, for every birthday I got a can of pineapple and a jar of strawberry jam, my two favorite food items. My favorite toy was a scooter that I rode all over our suburb of Strasnice, sometimes to the railroad station to meet Father, and even to (very unsuccessful) French lessons from a teacher who lived at least two or three miles away. Sometimes we rode it together with my friend Milos Milota; the scooter was not really meant to be ridden by two people and our ability to steer it when we rode together was somewhat limited. I remember that once we were going pretty fast down a hill and ran into a man who was neither particularly amused nor very friendly after our a bit-too-close encounter. Another memory from my scooter riding days is that Mother sent me to get some bread from a bakery, which was quite far, probably a mile or so from our house. The bread was not yet ready and I had to wait till it was taken out of the oven and while I waited I was allowed to watch the bakers at work – I was very impressed how they could knead two loaves of bread at the same time, one with each hand. When the bread was finally ready, I ate a large part of the fresh hot loaf before I got home – it was the best bread I ever tasted. For Christmas in 1937 I got skis and a prepaid trip to the Krkonose mountains with the Czechoslovak Club of Tourists. The one thing I wished for but never got was a bicycle, and I was quite annoyed that Father, who had had a bicycle as a young man, had given it away and did not think that one day he would have a son who would urgently desire it. I also got a tennis racket and took some group tennis lessons, but was never good at it – I preferred ping-pong.

<sup>11</sup> It was at during that vacation that I won against a chess master. He played without looking at the chessboard against a group of chess players including Father and won, while I beat him although he looked at our game. The slight difference was that he was playing ping pong with me and chess with the adults.  
In the summer of 2001 Eva, our grandson Thomas, and I visited the area, and I managed to find the hotel, Orlicka chata, in which I had stayed with my parents and sister so many years before. It looked a bit shabby and the area around it had changed a bit -- the beautiful blue field of flax was nowhere to be found.

While the Depression affected us, it affected others far more. I remember one incident, probably around 1934, when a boy in my elementary school class fainted from hunger – there were no school lunches. I also remember beggars ringing our doorbell and usually being handed some food which they ate while sitting on the stone stairs outside our apartment door.<sup>12</sup>

Milos Milota, who lived on the floor below us, was my closest friend; he was three years older than I, but we played together a lot. I got a ping-pong set even before I could read and write, and we played almost every day on our living room table, which was about half the size of a normal ping-pong table. It was perfect – I could reach to the net. Uncle Rudolf gave me an old thick physician's appointment calendar and we used it to record the scores of every game we played. Milos's father was a very strict disciplinarian and I was afraid of him. Milos and his younger sister Libuse were frequently beaten with a switch for minor transgressions. Milos used to help me occasionally with my homework. I still remember one instance that astounded me. I was supposed to write a simple essay, something like "My day," and could not think of much. Milos wrote it for me and described how I entered a streetcar to go to school: "I recognize the familiar faces of the other travelers." I never noticed and much less could recognize strangers, even though I might have seen the same people many times, and I was absolutely astonished that Milos, and obviously most other people, did notice, remember, and recognize even strangers to whom they had never spoken. The difficulty of remembering and recognizing people has stayed with me for my entire life.

## Schools

I started elementary school in the Prague suburb where we lived, Strasnice, when I was 6 years old. It was about a 15 minute walk to school and except for the first day I always walked to and from school by myself. During the first few weeks I sometimes needed some help since – in 1930 – we spoke mostly German at home and I was not completely fluent in Czech, but that lasted only a short time. I was very fond of my first grade teacher, Mrs. Harnachova, and used to visit her for many years and she even visited us after the war. Because the population expanded and the school building did not, I had to walk a bit further, about a mile, to classrooms in temporary wooden pavilions during the last two years of elementary school (fourth and fifth grade).

<sup>12</sup> In most houses in Prague the house doors were locked only at night so that during the day everybody could walk up the stairs to the apartment door. Uncle Otto's apartment house was an exception – there one had to ring a bell and my aunt Mimi would send the house key down in a little cloth bag on a string from the window.

Schools were more socially integrated than they tend to be in the US. Because most people lived in apartment houses and elevators were still rare, the social stratification was vertical. Poorer people lived on the ground (first) floor, where people could peer into their windows, or even in basement apartments, and on the less accessible upper floors, whereas the richer ones lived on the second and third floors.

As a child and as a young man I was a flaming redhead and my entire body was covered by a dense network of freckles. Father was a redhead, too, and so was my sister Helga, while Mother had black hair. Being a redhead was not pleasant for a young boy. Redheads were quite rare in Czechoslovakia and therefore very noticeable. I must have heard children calling at me innumerable times:

*Zrzy, zrzy, co te mrzi?  
Ta zrzava palice.  
Podivej se do zrcadla!  
Vypadas jak opice.*

In an approximate translation:

*Rusty, rusty, what is troubling you?  
Your rusty bean.  
Look into a mirror!  
You look like a monkey.*

It was believed that Judas, the betrayer of Christ, was a redhead and that therefore redheads were generally shifty characters. On the other hand, it was also believed that spitting into one's sleeve when meeting a redhead brought good luck and I have seen countless people doing just that as they passed me on the street.

At the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, in 1935, I passed my admission exam for a high school, in my case called a gymnasium, an eight-year school prerequisite for university study. One of the compulsory subjects taught for six years in a gymnasium was Latin. The majority of the children, whose parents had no plans to secure an advanced education for them, continued for three or four more years in a secondary school (called *mestanska skola*, or *Bürgerschule* in German). There was definitely a tendency for middle class children to go to gymnasium (high schools) and for children from working class families to go to secondary schools, although poor children could attend a gymnasium and could easily obtain tuition waivers. Other high school options were a "classical gymnasium," with six years of Latin and four years of Greek, or the "real school" (*realka*, or *Realschule* in German), with only

modern languages and an emphasis on mathematics and preparation for science and engineering; the “realka” took seven rather than eight years to complete. The real-gymnasium was the most popular choice of the secondary schools with a balance of classical and modern languages (German from grade one, Latin from grade three, and a second modern language from the fifth grade).

For me, the change from elementary to secondary school came as a bit of a shock. From elementary school I was accustomed to be one of the best pupils without ever having to do any studying at home. I carried the same working or, rather, non-working habits into the gymnasium, and suddenly found myself doing rather poorly. Moreover, I was not really interested in most of the subjects. I actively disliked anything that had to be memorized, particularly life sciences, which required memorization of the descriptions of animals and plants, and I actually hated Latin. Neither did I develop any strong interest in history with its memorization of names of rulers and dates of their reigns and of battles. I liked mathematics and later physics (given only in the third year of the gymnasium). I liked to read, but not necessarily what was required by the school curriculum. My parents did not pay much attention to my school work. Mother could not understand it because of the language barrier and her own limited education, and Father took the attitude that I was to be responsible for myself and that if I didn’t want to study, I did not have to go to a gymnasium – it was simply up to me. So I floundered around as a mediocre student. I almost flunked the fourth grade because of Latin; we had an eccentric teacher who flunked almost one third of the class and I was saved only by passing a sort of make up exam (“reparat”) at the end of the summer vacation. Because of Father’s paint factory, which I should have joined and eventually taken over and inherited (my uncle, the co-owner, had no children), it was always assumed that I should study chemistry and so, at the end of the fourth grade of the gymnasium I tried to get accepted into a chemistry “industrial school” (prumyslova skola) which would replace the upper four years of the gymnasium. I did not get admitted and therefore stayed in the gymnasium. At that time our school, because of its size, had three fifth grade classes, each one with a different modern language: French, English and Russian. By the time I found out that I was not accepted into the chemistry school, the French and English classes were already full, so I was assigned to the class with Russian. I started working more seriously in the fifth grade, but at the end of it I was expelled from the school together with all students who were considered Jews under the existing German race laws.

## Life in Czechoslovakia

JR

I now realize that I suddenly got to the summer of 1940 without recording what preceded it. Let me go back to 1935. At that time Czechoslovakia was prosperous, having recovered from the depression of the early thirties, and the general mood was very optimistic. Thomas Masaryk, the revered founder of the republic, was still president. In school we learned a song with the text

*Tatíčku starý náš  
šedivou hlavu máš  
pokud Ty Jsi mezi námi  
Potud bude dobře s námi  
Tatíčku starý náš*

*Our Old Father  
your head is grey  
as long as you are among us  
all will be well with us  
our Old Father*

and we sincerely believed it. Masaryk, then 85 years old, resigned later that year and was succeeded by his hand picked successor and long-time co-worker Eduard Benes. For years, Benes had been minister of foreign affairs and was a well respected statesman who served as president of the League of Nations at the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Czechoslovakia was aware of the rising power of nationalism in Germany and built a strong modern army and a sophisticated chain of fortifications along the German borders. As far as I remember and could judge – I was only 11 years old – everyone was confident that what was happening in Germany could never happen in the democratic Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia accepted some German refugees, the most prominent among them the writer Thomas Mann. However, a pro-Nazi German party under the leadership of Konrad Henlein started gaining strength among the German population of the border regions, the Sudetenland, They started to demand unification with Germany under the Nazi slogan “Ein Volk, ein Reich, Ein Führer” (One nation, one country, one leader). The situation grew much more tense after the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, as a consequence of which many new refugees entered Czechoslovakia, among them Mother’s closest childhood friend, Steffi Fried. I still remember the words “johlende Menschenmenge”

(howling crowds) which Steffi used in her description of the mob greeting the Nazis and turning against the Jews.<sup>13</sup> Steffi did not stay long and continued on to her sister in Holland, and later succeeded, via Portugal, Africa, and Cuba, to get to New York, where we met her after our escape.<sup>14</sup>

At that point Czechoslovakia felt threatened, but firmly determined to defend itself and confident in its army, its fortifications and – mistakenly – in its allies, France and the Soviet Union. In May the army was mobilized and we were preparing for an attack. Everybody got gas masks and we wore them even to school. We glued strips of paper on the windows believing that that would protect the windowpanes from shattering during air raids. There was a blackout and I remember walking in the streets with a flashlight with some sort of a civil defense group. Spirits were high. I can't judge whether adults felt as confident as my contemporaries and I (I was 14), but if they did not they certainly didn't show it. During the mobilization people rushed to the army even when they were not called.

Then came the negotiations of the Western powers with Hitler, Lord Runciman's visit to Czechoslovakia and eventually, in September 1938, the Munich capitulation to Hitler's demands followed by Chamberlain's boast that he had secured "peace for our time." Czechoslovakia had to give up all its border regions with Germany and with them all its fortifications. The country was thus left totally defenseless. Poland and Hungary joined in and at the same time occupied Czechoslovakia's border regions with Polish and Hungarian populations. President Benes resigned and left for London and was succeeded by Emil Hacha, the president of the Supreme Court, a decent, but entirely powerless old man. The nation was devastated and demoralized. A new right wing government was formed. In March 1939 President Hacha was summoned to Germany and forced to sign an agreement by which the western part of Czechoslovakia, Bohemia and Moravia, became a German protectorate. The Eastern part of the country, Slovakia, declared its independence under the rule of a fascist priest Tiso. On March 15, during a snowfall, the German army occupied what was left over of the former Czechoslovakia. The radio urged everybody to stay

<sup>13</sup> It is strange how I remember this one word I never heard before or after -- I looked it up in the dictionary only now, 62 years later. Her description of what had happened in Vienna must have made a tremendous impression on me.

<sup>14</sup> Hers was a sad story: she was married to an Austrian lawyer and, in order to work with him, finished the gymnasium in the evenings and then earned a law degree. They divorced pro forma to protect his law firm, she left and he stayed in Vienna; they had no children. However, during Steffi's absence her husband took a lover, fathered a child and married the lover, and Steffi's pro forma divorce became real and final. Steffi stayed in New York working as a companion for a rich emigrant old lady, one of the Petscheks. She was such a good and understanding person that, after the war, she sent packages to her former husband and his child, and when she went to Europe for vacations she would meet with him. She died in New York in the early sixties.

calm. I remember Father hearing the news and saying “a clovek jde dal jako kun” (and one goes on like a horse).

On the surface life continued, very subdued, but still went on. Father, then 52 years old, started thinking of emigration and made some attempt to get a visa to one of the Central or South American countries (I don't remember which it was), and hoped to start there again manufacturing paints. Mother at that time was already very ill, I was 15 and Helga only 10. Obviously the project failed; there was not enough time. He also tried to get me and Helga to England, asking for help from one of his distant relatives of the very rich Petschek family, but they refused.

Very soon various orders and laws against the Jews were instituted, not all at once, but one following the next in short intervals. One of the first, or perhaps the first was the order that all Jews had to get a red letter “J” stamped into their identity card, a sort of internal passport everybody had to carry. Then came a registration, I only vaguely remember standing with my family for long hours in lines somewhere in a great hall. Then the Jews had to give up radios – I have a recollection of having to carry our radio to some distant collection place. Later we had to turn in skis, stamp collections (I asked a friend to keep my collection for me), pets (we did not have any). There were restrictions on what Jews could buy – their food rations were smaller than those of non-Jews, and there were also restriction on the times one could shop. Jews were allowed to use only the last compartment of the last car of the streetcar and their travel by train was restricted. Then came the order that all Jews had to wear yellow stars with the word “Jude” (Jew). Then came a curfew at 8 PM. I do not remember the sequence or the timing of the various prohibitions and orders, but there were many more and new ones were announced frequently. I do remember that the wearing of the yellow stars came some time in 1941. I remember meeting a former classmate and he greeted me jokingly as “sheriff” because of the star. However, talking to Jews became risky, people would be denounced as “zidomil,” Jew-lover. I remember a fascist Czech newspaper, “Vlajka” (The Flag) which was posted not far from our apartment warning people, who would even acknowledge former Jewish friends or neighbors by winking, with a little verse “mrky, mrky, mrk, pana svrbi krk” (winky, winky, wink, the gentleman has an itching neck [for a rope]). Many people were intimidated; others, however, made a point of at least greeting, and even secretly visiting their Jewish friends.

After I was prohibited from going to school, I worked for a while in the office of Father's factory. The factory was in a suburb of Prague, Hostivar, just one train stop away from the suburb we lived in, Strasnice, and Father and my uncle Otto, the co-owner, commuted there daily by train. The Strasnice train station was about 15 minutes from our apartment and the Hostivar station less than 10 minutes from the factory.<sup>15</sup>

I liked the office work, but then Father found me a sort of an apprentice job with one of his clients, Mr. Kleinhampl, who owned a machine shop which manufactured steel furniture, mostly for doctors' and dentists' offices. I must admit that I did not like the work there very much. Previously I lived a very sheltered life and was not used to the ways of workers, not hostile, but crude. I liked working with machines, the lathe, the drill, and I even did some spot welding and learned a little bit of regular welding (I once learned by painful experience that a fresh weld is still very hot even though it is no longer glowing red). But most of the time I had to just work endlessly with a file and smooth the spots where the iron tubings forming the frame of the furniture were welded together. It was hard and terribly monotonous work, and I really hated it. Moreover, the owner was a very stingy man and instead of using proper welding rods, he used just narrow strips of sheet metal – and they were harder and more difficult to file. (He also severely reprimanded me once when I was washing my hands, of course with cold water only, that I must turn the water off while soaping and washing them before rinsing. “One pays for water, and one pays dearly” [“Voda se plati, a draho se plati”]). While I was a rather poor and lazy student when in school, I now discovered that I really wanted to study. In my last year of school (the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of the gymnasium) I started Russian and became very fond of our teacher, a WWI refugee (or emigree, as was the usual

<sup>15</sup> When my parents married, about 1922, there was a very serious housing shortage and they lived for a while in the office building of the factory before an apartment for which they paid a deposit was completed. The factory, which had the name Frantisek Christof nastupce (successor), had just a few workers, about six, two secretaries and a salesman. It also had a small laboratory where Father tried out new or modified paint compositions. Later on I used that laboratory as a source of chemicals for my home lab. The factory manufactured paints and varnishes. At that time, in 1940, it must have already had a German “Trehuš nder,” basically an overseer, but I don't remember having had any contact with him – I assume that he just occasionally came to collect money and otherwise left Father and Uncle to continue running the factory. Later they were forced to sell it to a German – I have no idea who he was and whether it was the Trehuš nder himself or somebody else, but they still continued to work there until their deportation to Terezin.

terminology of the time)<sup>16</sup> from Communist Russia. I brought my Russian textbook to work and used the lunch break to study rather than join in the discussion with the others. In the end, in spite of my dislike for the work there, it probably saved my life, because later on in Auschwitz, I was able to claim that I was a metal worker and lathe operator.

### **The Chemistry Course**

Late in 1940 or early in 1941, the Jewish Community opened a series of re-training courses (“Umschulungskurse”), to re-educate young Jews for practical jobs instead of academic study. Under this guise they also opened a chemistry course, probably listed as a course for training chemical technicians, and I was accepted into it. Because Father owned a paint factory, it was always assumed that I would study chemistry, although at the gymnasium I was not particularly fond of the subject. This time things were very different. Having now been denied education, I discovered a great desire to study. I loved the course and was really very happy in it. We had some excellent teachers, good lectures and even laboratories, though improvised in an apartment house never intended for a laboratory. The lectures were on inorganic and analytical chemistry and some physical chemistry principles; in the laboratory we did qualitative inorganic analysis. I almost immediately became enamored with chemistry and from that moment on it was clear to me that chemistry was what I wished to do for the rest of my life. I worked and studied enthusiastically and quickly became one of the best students in the course. I often studied with one of my classmates, Milena Polertova, and we reviewed and debated chemistry – there was not the slightest romantic undertone to our frequent meetings.

Once, I had an unpleasant accident in the chemistry course. We checked our laboratory equipment out every day and returned it in the evening. While standing in a line waiting for my turn, I dropped something and quickly bent down to pick it up. Unfortunately, the student right behind me was obviously tired of holding a ring-stand (essentially an iron rod about half an inch thick and three feet in length on a heavy iron base to which one could attach various rings and clamps) in his hand and put it down on the floor and I rammed it right up my rear, about 1/2 inch

<sup>16</sup> I believe that before WWI Alfred Bem was a professor of the University of Kijev. While he was teaching us at the gymnasium he also lectured at the Charles University in Prague; he was a wonderful teacher who read us Russian poetry and was able to get even me excited about studying a language. It just so happened that his daughter was a schoolmate of my friend, Arnost Reiser, and later married Arnost’s uncle. From Arnost I learned that Bem was arrested by the Soviet secret police in 1945 and taken to Russia; he was never heard of again.

from the anus. I ended up in the Jewish hospital where they removed the pieces of clothing from the wound and sewed me up. I must have missed part of the course. For my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday I received an approximately 1000 page university textbook, Votocek's "Anorganicka chemie" (Inorganic Chemistry), and immersed myself in it.

### **Dye Shop**

When, in the fall of 1941, the first transports of Jews from Prague started, the chemistry course came to an abrupt end (after only about four months), but it still gave me a good foundation in chemistry, and particularly a firm resolution to continue my studies. The first transports went directly to Poland, to the Lodz ghetto. These transports consisted mostly of wealthy people whose property was of immediate interest to the Nazis or their collaborators. Included from my family were uncle Hugo Löbl from Jablonec (Gablonz), Mother's half brother, his wife aunt Lilly and her mother; their children, Hella and Susie were fortunate enough to have gotten to England before the outbreak of the war. Uncle Hugo owned a big factory and large villa in Jablonec, although of course he lost them when the "Sudetenland," where Jablonec was located, became a part of the German Reich after the Munich dictate in the fall of 1938; he then moved to Prague and lived in a quite modest apartment. My aunt Rosa, one of Father's sisters, was also in one these early transports to Lodz. Aunt Rosa was a widow, not wealthy, but she owned a nice villa in Strasnice, the same suburb of Prague where we lived.

Later transports went to Terezin (Theresienstadt). My cousin Erich Klapp was the only medical doctor in the first of them (Ak1).<sup>17</sup> People who were summoned for a transport, usually with a three day notice, were allowed to bring 50 kg (110 lb) of luggage with them. Since they correctly assumed that there wouldn't be much of an opportunity to keep white bed linen clean, the Jewish community provided them with an opportunity to have them dyed. Our laboratory was converted to a dye shop and both the teachers and the students of the chemistry course continued working there. We offered a selection of two colors – blue and brown and had a lot of work to keep up with the demand.

<sup>17</sup> Each transport had a designation, usually a letter or letters sometimes combined with numerals. The first five transports A,B,C,D and E, went to Lodz in Poland, transport F went to Minsk. The first transport to Terezin was Ak, probably for "Aufbauskommando" (building command). It consisted of only 342 men whose task it was to prepare Terezin for the arrival of the many more transports. It was also referred to as Ak1 because the next transport of 1000 men (officially transport H), which arrived only six days later with the same task, was usually called Ak2.

During this period of time I had another accident. I stood on a stool stirring the cloth in a large pot with dye; the pot stood on tripods and was heated with gas burners. I lost my balance and instinctively grabbed the pot and the boiling dye solution spilled over me and I was badly scalded. I ended up in the hospital again, but healed fairly rapidly and could return to work. I remember that we worked through the winter of 1941-42 because I have a clear recollection of our finished products drying on clothes lines in the attic, being frozen solid.

I was not about to forget chemistry and so I started a home laboratory in the former maid's room (at this time we of course could not have a maid), and I also used the kitchen, which had gas and water. I used the double window as a sort of exhaust hood and installed there a primitive hydrogen sulfide generator.<sup>18</sup> In retrospect I have to admire the tolerance of Mother as well as of the other tenants of the house. I had a good friend from the course, a short swarthy boy, Karel Kohn, and he and I used to prepare complicated mixtures for each other to analyze. I remember the pleasure of going to the store in downtown Prague to buy some chemicals and, as I already mentioned, I also got some from Father's lab. Once I also prepared some silver nitrate by dissolving – with my parents' permission – an old silver pocket watch.

New restrictions and orders concerning Jews came out all the time. It was at about the time when the transports started and when I started working in the dye shop that we were ordered to wear the yellow Jewish star, with the inscription "Jude," sewn firmly on the outer garment. There was also an 8 PM curfew. Generally I did not experience any difficulties of hostility except once. I was walking with Kohn on Vaclavske namesti (Wenceslaus Square) in the center of Prague and talking when suddenly I saw a fist in a leather glove just in front of my face and was hit and fell down on the pavement. It happened so fast, I did not even see the man. I was not injured, just knocked down and in shock. I got up and ran, quite shaken, to the streetcar and made it home. Nobody seemed to notice or pay any attention.

## Transport

In May we received our summons to the transport. We were ordered to present ourselves, I think on May 12, to the great hall which used to be part of the Prague trade fair (veletrh, Messe). I remember very little of the preparations. We packed our permitted 50 kg into suitcases, two suitcases per person, with clothing and some, mostly non-perishable, food. We were given transport numbers, mine was Au1 698, which also had to be painted in large letters on the suitcases. From then on the transport numbers essentially replaced names. My parents managed to hide a

<sup>18</sup> Hydrogen sulfide has a penetrating odor of rotten eggs.

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few things with friends and neighbors. People living one floor above took some rugs, a lady who used to make girdles for Mother hid the only painting which we now have from my childhood home, Father's secretary hid material for a suit (it became my wedding suit), a classmate of mine took my stamp collection, a camera and binoculars, somebody hid some jewelry. I remember that the lady who ran the milk store offered Mother that she would hide some things for us, but don't remember whether we took advantage of her offer. With just a few exceptions, I got all of the things back after the war. I remember that relatives came to help us pack, say good-bye, and cooked a very good last meal for us.

On the appointed day some volunteers from the Jewish Community helped us carry the luggage. We went by street car. I don't remember the reaction of other people riding with us – I have the feeling that they were embarrassed, afraid to show sympathy, and rather looked away. I certainly do not remember anybody being unpleasant or expressing pleasure at seeing us go.

The exhibition hall was large and there were straw mattresses on the floor and that was the first time I came into closer – but fortunately not too close – contact with SS officers. The man in charge was called Fiedler and he carried a large flashlight – a flashlight of that size was then called “fiedlerovka.” I have very little memory of that experience, except that I do remember one frightening moment, when a group of SS-men came to a family located close to us and starting searching them. It was clearly the work of an informer – they went straight for the man's shoe, tore off the sole and found hidden money and led him away. He did not return.

## TEREZIN

I have really no recollection of the way to Terezin. I think we went in passenger cars to Bohusovice and walked from there. The luggage was put on carts and transported for us. We did get it back. At that time there were still non-Jewish civilians living in Terezin and we were confined to barracks. Our family was separated. Father and I were together in barracks for males, the “Sudetenkaserne,” Mother and Helga were in the womens’ barracks, the “Hamburger Kaserne.” One could not move freely around – only occasionally were we allowed to visit the womens’ barracks in small groups. We were in a large hall densely filled with double three-level bunk beds – six people on each bunk bed with only a very narrow space between. There were 400 men in one hall, which probably served in the past as a large storage area. We went to work assigned to a “Hundertschaft,” a group of 100 men (a century) and sent wherever we were needed. I remember very little of this period.

One trivial recollection I have from my stay in the Sudeten barracks is about the latrines. They were obviously not meant for so many users and there were lines of men waiting for a seat. Special guards were assigned to keep order, to keep people in line and to encourage people inside the stalls to hurry up. I still remember the constantly repeated words: “Dress outside, the line is growing!” (“Oblekat se venku, fronta roste!”). I also remember a fairly original verbal encouragement painted on the walls by an anonymous poet: “Shit cylinders, shit cubes, but above all shit fast” (in the original: “Serte valce, serte krychle, ale hlavne serte rychle”). As far as I recall, I fainted only once in my life, and that was while waiting in a latrine line when I was sick with an ear infection.

### Family

Father was in good health, but Mother was very ill. She suffered from a serious heart disease. Her doctor was my cousin Erich Klapp, who by virtue of being the first physician who came to Terezin, became a member of the Council of Elders and was in charge of the health department. Mother did not stay in the barracks for very long and soon was moved to the hospital and remained there for the rest of her stay in Terezin. I visited her there regularly, but remember only one occasion when we went together for a short walk outside the hospital. I did not realize at that time how young she really was – only 47 when we came to Terezin.

I was close to Father and saw him frequently. Father, who was 55 when we came to Terezin, originally worked in a lumber yard, but got a hernia. Because he was a reserve officer he was then assigned to the Ordnungsdienst and became commander of a small unit.

Inside the ghetto there were two groups of Jewish “police” maintaining order. The “Ghettowache” (Ghetto guard) who, in lieu of a uniform, had caps with a yellow band, was basically responsible for order outside the barracks. The “Ordnungsdienst” (Order police), with caps with blue bands, was responsible for order inside the barracks, such as keeping the lines at meal distributions. The Ordnungsdienst did not have any weapons, and I never heard of any case where there had been any problems, much less where any physical force was needed. The same was true for the Ghettowache, though I have the feeling that they were issued wooden cudgels more as a symbol of their office than for actual use.

Father derived some advantage from this position in the Ordnungsdienst – he was later able to move to a small room in the “Kavalier Kaserne,” which he shared just with one other person; it happened to be a brother of the famous writer Egon Erwin Kisch; Father knew Egon personally and is even briefly mentioned in one of his books.

My sister Helga was only 13 when we came to Terezin. She lived in the girls home, L410, and worked in agriculture, where she met and talked a lot with Eva before I knew her.

I don’t remember when and where we met as a family, but I certainly saw all the members of the family frequently after the entire non-Jewish population was moved out and we could move freely inside the ghetto.

Besides my immediate family there were many other relatives in Terezin: Cousin Erich Klapp and his father, uncle Rudolf, the old doctor, and his mother, aunt Klara. They survived, but Erich did not and they never quite recovered from the loss. Father’s elder brother, uncle Otto, was in Terezin and survived together with his even older (78 years in 1945) mother-in-law, Matylde Fiala. The reason why several older members of the family survived was that Erich Klapp, by virtue of his membership in the Council of Elders, could protect most members of the family until the fall of 1944 when he himself was deported and murdered. However, at that time old people were excluded from the transports. Cousin Fritz Treulich, a very capable engineer, became the director of the central laundry in Terezin and in this function was protected together with his wife Mali and two little children Helena, now Eisler, and Eva, now Holzer, both of whom now live in Switzerland. Fritz’s mother, my aunt Ema, born 1872, also stayed in Terezin and survived, but four of her other children perished together with their families.

## Sick

Not too long after our arrival I got sick with a mid-ear infection. I lay in a sick room and things did not get better in spite of a very painful eardrum perforation performed by a former military doctor. Eventually I was transferred to the hospital in the “Hohenelber Kaserne” and Dr. Tarian performed a skull trepanation. I remember the beginning of the surgery, namely the anesthesia – the doctor had no other equipment and simply put a piece of gauze over my nose and started dripping ether on it – some of the ether got directly into my nose and I started choking, but then fell asleep. I was in the hospital for quite a long time, but I could not tell how long, definitely several weeks, maybe a month. The hospital room was large; I would guess that there were some 14 to 20 beds there. Many patients died. For many years I was convinced that an intravenous infusion is administered only to patients very near to death, because I always observed that people would be put on an infusion (probably of saline solution or glucose) and then died. One man, who was shot in the head by an SS-man, was brought into our room and hallucinated and yelled obscenities through the night before he died. The doctors and nurses were very good, but their means were limited. There were of course no antibiotics. The earliest sulfonamides (Prontosil) were already known, but I don’t remember to what extent if any they were available. I don’t remember getting any.

After I was released from the hospital I was still sent for recuperation to a sort of sick room, where we still had a nurse taking care of us. It was located in the former school building, L417, the building which today houses the museum. I remember that once – and that was a very big thing and happened only once – we got a small piece of real butter, somewhat rancid, but still butter, probably taken from people on a freshly arrived transport.

## Jugendheim

Eventually I was declared fit, moved into a “Jugendheim” (youth home) for boys, Q710, a fairly large room with some thirty or so boys and one somewhat older supervisor, (“Zimmerältester”). I remember him, because he told us that he had been imprisoned at the “Kleine Festung,” the “Little Fortress,” very close to the Terezin ghetto. It was a terrible place where prisoners were routinely beaten to death. I don’t remember how and why he got there nor how he managed to get out of there alive. I also recall that at that time Fredi Hirsch, the well known youth educator and organizer, lived in the same house but I had little contact with him. The other very clear memory I have from that time was the number of fleas that tormented me – I would get up at night trying to catch and kill them; I was very sensitive to flea bites – they itched for a long time. There were also many bed bugs, but for some reason they did not seem to bother me much, although they would sometimes fall into my face and I would squish them. Although I remember the problem with fleas most

vividly from that particular period, they were omnipresent and a constant bother throughout our stay in Terezin; I became pretty adept at catching them. Other people were more sensitive to bed bugs and I remember seeing people take apart their beds, pouring kerosene into the joints and even starting small controlled fires at the edges of the bed frames.

By the time I left the hospital and the sick room, Terezin had changed dramatically. The entire non-Jewish population had been moved out and their houses converted into living space for more inmates. Terezin was opened up so that one could move freely within the limits of the ghetto until curfew, except for spaces reserved for the German “Comandatur” and the access street to it<sup>19</sup> and other spaces occupied by the German forces. As far as work assignments was concerned, Terezin was organized on a seniority system. When I finally was ready to start working again I discovered to my great surprise that I had enough seniority to be able to select to some extent what I wanted to do. Of course, I opted for work in the kitchen – the only place where one could get enough to eat. The food was wonderful; not only was there enough of it, but as it was also specially prepared by the cooks for themselves and the rest of the kitchen personnel, it was much better than what was distributed to the ordinary ghetto inhabitants. However, the work I was assigned to was carrying coal from the cellar to the kitchen on the second (or third?) floor in big crates with two bars so that two people could carry it. Unfortunately, the work was too hard for me particularly after my surgery and the long time spent in the hospital and I had to give it up after just a few days. I then started working in the “Landwirtschaft,” (agriculture department), in the vegetable fields. It was not very strenuous, it was outside, but I was never much of an enthusiast for gardening and field work. I carried with me a small German booklet on organic chemistry<sup>20</sup> and studied it in any free moment.

### **The Chemical Laboratory**

One day I was sent with a wheelbarrow for some manure and on the way I passed what used to be a gymnasium, a “sokolovna,” a building which must have been built by the Czech Sokol organization for physical exercise and community activities. I looked into the windows and to my amazement I noticed glass bottles, which, as I clearly recognized, came from our chemistry course – they still had the large black numbers painted on them to identify the laboratory table (we did not

<sup>19</sup> It was unthinkable that Jews would be allowed on the street used by the Germans. There was just one crossing which only people with a special permit were allowed to use as long as no Germans were in sight. Everybody else had to go around the whole ghetto when they needed to get from one side of the restricted street to the other. The crossing had gates and was guarded by the Ghetto wache.

<sup>20</sup> I cannot remember where I got or borrowed it.

have proper benches, just regular tables) to which they belonged. It was a chemical laboratory. I walked in and introduced myself to the director of the laboratory, Dr. Adolf Pollak from Prague, and he gave me a sort of examination of my knowledge of chemistry. I must have impressed him. I asked whether I could work in the lab and he promised to find out. He was refused on the grounds that he could not justify the need for another person in the lab – he had already two, one middle aged man, by the name Fischl(?) and a young blonde woman, Trudy. Neither of them knew any chemistry; it was rumored that Trudy was assigned to the lab because she was the lover of somebody higher up in ghetto administration. However, Pollak gave me permission to come to the lab after work, which I did enthusiastically. Some time later the lab received a large shipment of chemicals from Prague and I helped with its unpacking and sorting. For me it was an incredible delight – I handled each flask containing a pure chemical reagent with pleasure and excitement. Now, with a decent store of chemical reagents, the lab could do more work and could therefore justify another member and I was finally reassigned there. I was very happy.

The laboratory did all kinds of totally useless work, mostly analytic in nature, but it was fun. We analyzed all sorts of things which came into the ghetto, determined fat content in milk, nitrogen (protein) content in meat products – once and only once, we got a fairly large number of cans with hashed meat, euphemistically called liver pate. After analyzing it for water, fat and nitrogen content (Kjehldahl analysis) we consumed what was left over. I even have to admit to the only falsification of results I did during my scientific career: since we found that the various cans gave very similar results, I decided to stop the analysis, invent similar figures for the rest of the cans and eat the meat rather than unnecessarily destroy it for the purpose of a useless and superfluous analysis. We measured how much noodles gained in weight when cooked; these samples, too, were welcome because we could eat them afterwards – but the amounts were rather small. We determined the water and salt content of bread; later on, when Professor Leo Lederer, a physical chemist and a German refugee living in Holland before his deportation to Terezin, replaced Dr. Pollak, he even developed a mathematical model of moisture distribution throughout the entire loaf of bread. We determined water content in wood samples, analyzed soaps and washing powders and probably other items I no longer remember.

We were trying to do soil analyses for the agriculture department (Landwirtschaft). The choice of chemicals we had at our disposal was limited and so were the literature sources – we had just a handful of books, less than a dozen. Even more limited was our combined knowledge. I had studied chemistry just for a few months and at that only inorganic chemistry and qualitative analysis. Pollak had a Ph.D. in chemistry, but was really a metallurgist with very limited knowledge of analytical or food chemistry and the other two members had no chemistry background whatever. So, by default, I became sort of the expert particularly in the

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analytical area, though a very inadequate one. I experienced great problems with soil analysis. We were trying to determine calcium, potassium, and most importantly phosphorus. The problem was that the standard procedure for phosphorus determination was based on precipitation with ammonium molybdate and we did not have any and were denied its purchase because molybdenum was an important element for the war industry. Another method for determining phosphorus, which I knew from textbooks, was based on its precipitation with magnesium and ammonia, but that required working in ammonia rather than in an acidic medium; however, the addition of ammonia caused the precipitation of copious amounts of iron(III) hydroxide making the method useless. Finally, I thought that I solved the problem – I learned somehow that citric acid will prevent the precipitation of iron(III) hydroxide and so I started precipitating phosphorus as magnesium ammonium phosphate in the presence of citric acid. The problem was that I could see no precipitate forming. To induce crystal formation I patiently scratched the walls of the beakers until a reasonable amount of it formed, then I filtered it through a filter crucible, heated it in a small furnace and weighed the result. I was surprised to find that the filter crucibles could be used only once, the next time they stopped filtering – no liquid would come through. Finally, after performing a number of analyses using my method, I discovered that citric acid inhibited not only the precipitation of ferric hydroxide, but also of the desired phosphorus compounds, and that what I had been weighing was glass which I scraped off the walls of the beakers with the glass rod and which then melted and clogged the pores of the filter crucibles. Curiously enough, after the denial of permission to purchase the needed molybdenum salt, we suddenly got two packages of it from two different sources and could then perform proper phosphorus determinations..

Some time later I met Arnost Reiser, whom I knew from the Prague chemistry course, introduced him to Dr. Pollak and he, too, started working in the lab. I was delighted to have my friend as a lab colleague. Later on his sister Susie, also from the chemistry course, joined us as well.

One day the German supervisor of the agriculture department, Mr. Kursavy, came to the laboratory with an urgent request: he wanted the lab to make drinking alcohol for him and his friends. This became a high priority of the lab and Dr. Pollak took charge of it with his usual energy and determination. Kursavy provided us with some dirty sugar swept off the floor and we learned – with the advice of some consultants whom Pollak approached – to ferment it into alcohol. We cut many narrow glass tubes into small pieces (“Rashig rings”) and filled with them several wide glass tubes connecting the top of one section of the column to the bottom of the next, building thus a rather monstrous distillation column (none of us had the slightest idea about distillation). The fermentation took about a week and we then went on to distill and did produce alcohol. The problem was that the distillation was very slow and so we ran it 24 hours a day – except that for some reason the

water was turned off every night between midnight and 3 AM and without cooling water the distillation had to be interrupted. This led to a major accident. One night, when when I was on duty I decided to have a little nap during the time the water was turned off. I lay down on the lab table and to make quite sure that I would wake up I opened the water tap so that the sound of flowing water would wake me. Unfortunately, it did not and by the time I finally did wake up, there was a lot of water on the floor. I mopped it up as well as I could and when the boss arrived and asked why the floor was wet, I told him that I decided to wash the floor. What I did not know, was that he had a huge treasure hidden under the laboratory cabinets – namely many cartons of cigarettes which were used as currency in the ghetto – and they were all soaked. I still don't understand why he did not kill me or at the very least throw me out of the lab.

One day we were given molasses instead of sugar and fermented them in the same way in about 10 gallon demijohns (large narrow-necked glass bottles); however, when we came in the morning we found out that the fermentation went very quickly with the formation of a thick foam and almost all the fermented product was on the floor.

Not all of the alcohol was delivered to the Germans; some of it Pollak used for his friends. He organized a party in the laboratory to which I and the other members of the lab were also invited. The party got a bit too wild – I remember being very upset when Pollak's sister, Hermina, broke a lot of irreplaceable chemical glassware and one of the guests thought it very funny to take scissors and cut off the ties of other guests. Another memory from this party is that of one drunk member questioning another whether she was a Zionist with the words "Jsi Salom nebo nejsi Salom?" (Are you a Shalom or aren't you a Shalom?).<sup>21</sup> I did not enjoy this type of "entertainment."

Once Pollak decided to entertain us by demonstrating the preparation and properties of nitrogen triiodide, a deep brown powder which, once it was dry, would explode even at the touch of a feather. The explosions in the small quantities were quite harmless, but the powder spread around the lab and created mini-explosions on almost every step. We were quite concerned how the Germans would react to it, but fortunately, most of the nitrogen triiodide was gone by the time the next German visit arrived.

We also did some synthetic chemistry. Dr. Pollak decided that we should synthesize saccharin for our own consumption and for family and friends. It was a fairly complex synthesis starting with toluene. I remember a runaway permanganate oxidation phase of the synthesis when the reaction overheated and the contents

<sup>21</sup> Zionists were nicknamed "Salomaci," because they used the greeting "Shalom" and were to some extent disliked by others because they in effect constituted a sort of ruling and privileged class in Terezin. Their leading role in the ghetto came naturally because they were the only ones who had an organization while the assimilated Jews had none.

ended up on a wall and up to the ceiling, but we learned and managed to produce small but usable quantities of the sweetener and I got my first experience in synthetic organic chemistry.

Later Pollak decided to synthesize chloropicrin, trichloronitromethane (from picric acid), a toxic and highly irritating liquid tried as a war gas during WWI; we worked in gas masks and rubber gloves. The idea was to use it against the omnipresent bed bugs, but I don't believe that the experiment was crowned with success. A total failure was the attempt to prepare acetaldehyde by way of catalytic hydration of acetylene. Pollak managed to get an acetylene generator. The acetylene formed from calcium carbide by dripping water on it, was then lead through flasks with a solution of mercuric sulfate which was supposed to catalyze the addition of a water molecule to acetylene, thus converting it into acetaldehyde. We were pleased when we started smelling acetaldehyde, but our pleasure and satisfaction did not last long. A few minutes later there was an explosion and the whole room from the lab bench up to the ceiling was filled with thousands of particles of very fine soot; fortunately, the explosion was not at all violent and nothing else happened, but this was the end of the attempted acetaldehyde production. In any case, how Pollak hoped to convert the aldehyde to ethanol remains a mystery to me.

Another important activity carried out under Dr. Pollak's leadership was the making of soap – we managed to get some fat or tallow and I remember smuggling it out from some place in a can suspended between my legs – obviously the amount of it was not too large. I spent an entire night studying a book on soap-making and thus overnight became the soap expert in our laboratory; the soap making was successful. Later on, already under Prof. Lederer, we made some artificial honey by hydrolyzing sugar – I have no idea how we got it – with phosphoric acid.

At one time we also did some blood analysis. The blood was precipitated with trichloroacetic acid and the separated plasma was then analyzed for residual nitrogen by the Kjeldahl procedure. The amount of the separated plasma was not very large and once, trying to suck it into a pipet, I managed to get in into my mouth; we did all the pipetting by mouth without any protection. I had no idea from whom the blood was, certainly from a sick person, but fortunately nothing happened.

We had an interesting and unusual experience when one day a German (SS?) requested that we make some Eau de Cologne for his girlfriend. We had some perfume ingredients that came to us from Prague from the liquidation of some shop, and we had the alcohol, and Arnost Reiser undertook the task. He made sure to prepare a most vulgar smelling concoction and then to prepare a beautiful label for the flask – he was very good in drawing and painting. For the model of the label he selected the famous “No. 4711” original Eau de Cologne, but he substituted “606” for “4711” – a clever, but very dangerous joke. The number 606 stood for Salvarsan (Ehrlich-Hata 606), the first effective anti-syphilis drug. Fortunately for Arnost, and possibly for all of us in the laboratory, neither the donor nor the recipient were clever or educated enough to understand the joke and its implication.

When I joined the laboratory it was located in the “sokolovna.” Next door to us was a laboratory monitoring water quality, certainly a more useful activity but probably less fun than what we did. The third laboratory was a microbiological laboratory, headed by a former Czechoslovak army major, Dr. Pavel Fantl, a man with a great sense of humor, who was also a good cartoonist.<sup>22</sup> The building, probably the most modern in Terezin, had central heating and the stoker lived quite comfortably, though not legally, in the basement near to the furnace. This provided him with a private place, certainly preferable to a crowded room in the barracks. At one time Dr. Fantl managed to get some very official looking papers informing the poor man that a rhinoceros for biological experimentation would be delivered to the laboratory and would have to be stabled in the place occupied by the stoker – the poor man believed it and was in panic, and we all of course derived great pleasure from the joke and its effect.

Later the building was converted into a hospital used mainly for typhoid fever patients and the laboratory was moved into an old apartment house, I believe that it was in block GIV, and later we moved again into what was called the “Bauhof” (building court) where most of the mechanical and other shops were concentrated. By that time Dr. Pollak had left the laboratory, was succeeded by Professor Leo Lederer, and the laboratory staff was joined by Dr. Walter Eisenschimmel, whom I knew from Prague from the chemistry course. I think that Arnost Reiser’s sister Susie also joined us only after our move to the Bauhof. I don’t remember whether Fischl and Trudy were still with us; I don’t think so.

The work in the laboratory was very interesting and I could learn a lot of new chemistry; moreover, the laboratory offered an entirely stress-free environment. However, although we occasionally got some food samples which could be used to subsidize our diet, these subsidies were very few and in very small quantities and we were constantly hungry. If one wanted to feed oneself and one’s family members better, one had to find a more profitable line of work; that was, I believe, the reason why Dr. Pollak left – he was senior enough that he could get a job which gave him a better chance to supplement his rations. Arnost Reiser also managed to get to work for some time in the bakery, but I was neither aware of any such opportunity for myself nor I did not seriously try to find a more nourishing type of activity because I was far too happy to be able to spend my time doing chemistry.

<sup>22</sup> I recently discovered to my pleasure that some of his cartoons -- but not the author -- have survived and are in the Yad Vashem Archive; some of them are reprinted in “University Over the Abyss,” Elena Makarova, Sergei Makarov and Victor Kuperman, Verba Publishing Ltd., Jerusalem 2000.

After a few months in Q710, I moved into a smaller room in Q708 with a group of eleven other boys; we were very compatible and became very good friends. Most rooms in Terezin had three-level bunk beds; our room, number 127, had four of them and there was another room behind us whose inhabitants had to walk through our room. We decided to rebuild the room. I don't remember who was the driving force behind it – certainly not I – and who designed it. However with a lot of stolen material including wood from crates used to transport laundry, we completely rebuilt the room, built a little corridor for the occupants of the other room to pass through without disturbing us, built a platform with four beds over the corridor and built a table and two single beds in the corner under the window. These were used as sofas or as seats at the table by everybody during the day and served as beds at night. We left only two of the original four three-layer bunk beds. There was still room under the platform for a closet for coats and for shelves. The stolen wood and particularly the laundry crates had to be disassembled quickly and any identifying numbers removed, because there was a danger of somebody coming to check. My principal contribution was to bring some potassium permanganate from the lab. When the wood was painted by its aqueous solution, it produced a very nice and durable dark brown stain. There were a number of very clever guys in our little group and the room became really quite nice. There was even a secretly hidden hot plate (hot plates were illegal). Because electricity was very uncertain and there were frequent black-outs, we made a hole through the main wall into the next house which was on another circuit so that we could have at least some light if our circuit was down. I have no recollection about heating; I am fairly sure that there was none, but I don't remember suffering from cold. There was one communal toilet for the whole floor on the balcony and a washroom on the ground floor – we were on the first floor or what in the US would be considered the second floor. The toilet was a source of certain concern since some fastidious people did not want to sit on a seat used by so many others, but their aim was not always perfect. Somebody cut out a miniature toilet seat out of plywood to be used as the key ring for the toilet and it was artfully decorated with an inscription “Drz se manyry, delej do diry” (Mind your manners, aim at the hole)

I can recall almost all of the eleven people with whom I shared the room. I had one of the “sofa beds” in the corner of the room – like all other beds it followed essentially the same construction: four posts connected with four boards on the outside and two more boards inside the post at the head and foot of the frame; three or four long boards connected with two short ones and resting on the two inner boards formed a base for a straw mattress. The other corner bed belonged to Egon Loebner, who survived the war, emigrated very soon after the war to the US, became a physicist, worked for the Radio Corp. of America, then joined Hewlett Packard,

served for two years as the U.S. scientific attache in Moscow,<sup>23</sup> and unfortunately died in 1989 of cancer. On the platform were two sets of beds, one pair occupied by Tom Löwenbach, now Luke, who survived the war due to unbelievably heroic efforts of a Czech political prisoner and a Czech doctor who in Mauthausen amputated his frozen toes with a pocket knife. His companion and friend, Jan (Honza) Bondy, now Loding, from Hronov like Luke, was lucky: his mother married a Swede and Honza and his kid brother were therefore transferred to a special section for foreign nationals of neutral countries in Bergen Belzen where they survived and got to Sweden very shortly after the end of the war. The other two platform beds were occupied by Otmar Karpfen, who was a cook in Terezin and was always generous to me and later to my girlfriend Eva when he was distributing food and we were in the right line. After the war he studied at the Technical University, got a C.Sc. (=Ph. D) in an engineering field, and moved to Slovakia. We started corresponding after 1989 and met in 1990; unfortunately he died in 1995. Next to him was Karel Hahn, a very nice guy, who did not survive the war. Another member of our room was Petr Herrmann; we always made fun of him, because he tried to plan his time and allocate exact amounts to various activities and we teased him about how he planned the dates with his girlfriend. He returned to Prague, became an acoustic engineer and married a Czech gentile; he and his wife Jarka, a professional musician, left Czechoslovakia in 1968, and lived in Caracas, Venezuela until the late nineties.<sup>24</sup> Next I remember Stepan Alt from Moravska Ostrava, a very nice guy, who did not survive the war. Another member of the group was Ota Adler, who returned to Prague and, I think, became a tailor. Next there was Maxi Lieben, who as far as I remember, was an electrician and was responsible for our connection to the electrical circuit to the other house. He lives under the name Mordechai Livni in Israel and is very active in Beit Terezin<sup>25</sup> affairs. We visited him during our first visit to Israel in 1993. Another member of the group was a somewhat withdrawn young

<sup>23</sup> He and the U.S. ambassador to the USSR were the only two Americans admitted to the launching of the Soviet spacecraft Soyuz which docked with an American spacecraft. We visited Egon in 1964 and 1979 when we were in California and he visited us several times.

<sup>24</sup> We visited him there and also in his cottage in Maine, and he and his wife Jarka visited us in Chicago. Since his wife died in 1999, he has been planning to move to Texas to be with his daughter, but must wait until she becomes a U.S. citizen. He now lives in Prague where we visited him in 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Beit Terezin (Terezin house) was founded about 1970 by former prisoners of the ghetto Terezin in Israel; it developed into an educational institution incorporating a museum, archives with collections of documents and art work from the ghetto. It is located at Kibbutz Givat Hayim Ihud, about half-way between Tel Aviv and Haifa. For many years Mordechai Livni (Max Lieben) was chairman of the "Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance Association," the legal body behind Beit Terezin.

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man who constantly studied mathematics and whose name I cannot recall – as far as I know he did not survive. It was a very congenial group and I don't remember that there were ever any arguments. I may have been the oldest in the room and in any case was declared "Zimmeraeltester," the "elder" of the room; I don't recall that this function imposed on me any specific responsibilities or provided me with any particular authority. I can't remember how long we lived in room 127, but I think that it must have been somewhere between one and a half and two years. It seems strange, but I don't remember any turn-over in the room, as if nobody from our group was deported to "the East" before the final transports in the fall of 1944. I may have forgotten or maybe the population was by this time reasonably stabilized and the transports to Poland were filled almost exclusively from new arrivals.

### **General situation**

The situation in Terezin was certainly very bad: overcrowding with up to 60,000 people in a town that used to have a civilian population of just a few thousand, poor sanitary conditions, constant hunger, very high mortality particularly among older people, and periodic or constant fear of transports to "the East." The conditions were particularly brutal for old people. The Jewish administration made the harsh but understandable decision to sacrifice the old, particularly the very old, and to try to save the youth. So while we had crowded, but still livable accommodations, many old people lived in dank dark former storage magazines in the old Terezin fortifications, lying on straw mattresses on the floor with barely enough space to walk between them and very little daylight. Or they lived under similar conditions in the attics of the old houses. It was sad to see old people beg the cooks who distributed the soup "please from the bottom" hoping to get something more nourishing than the empty liquid from the top. They did not live long and there were over one hundred deaths per day. They were not mistreated in any overt way, there was no brutality and nobody was killed, but they just died. (There were several executions in Terezin, but that happened before my arrival.)

We were incomparably better off. We, too, were constantly hungry, though not really starving. Still I remember that many times I would hang around the kitchen waiting for possible seconds after all people had been fed. I don't quite remember the system, but we must have had some food cards for every meal and everyone was assigned to one of the kitchens located in one of the former army barracks. I also don't remember much of what we were fed. I think it was just black "coffee" in the morning. We did get some solid food, probably at noon; I remember that about once a week we got one "buchta" a sort of a bun from white flour (I felt very proud and virtuous, when I sometimes managed not to eat it and bring it to Mother who was in the hospital), we had some unpeeled potatoes – I remember those in particular, because we were amused that Prof. Lederer would, as a civilized person, carefully

peel them while we ate them, of course, with the peels. Naturally, Lederer could not afford to throw away the peels, so he dried them and then made a soup from the dried peels and ate them in this form. I think there was some meat in a hashed form. I also remember a sort of porridge made from millet, but I am sure the repertoire was richer. There were also soups, whether just alone as the evening meal or with some solid meal I cannot recall. I do recall that one of the most frequent and for me least favorite soups was something called lentil soup, but the resemblance to lentils was very minimal indeed. Of course, we ate everything, nobody could afford to forgo a meal or a part of it. In addition to that we got a portion of bread which as far as I can recall was delivered to the houses where we lived. We also got some margarine and once a week(?) a small amount of sugar. (I remember how happy I was when I once succeeded in tricking Father – I poured my sugar ration into his coffee without him noticing it; he drank it and commented how much better the coffee tasted, but did not discover or did not admit that he discovered the reason.) The bread was transported on hearses, drawn and pulled by men; this was the general and only means of transportation in Terezin. There were many hearses, they must have brought them in from many Jewish communities. They were also used to collect dead bodies and they were a very common sight. Whether the same ones were used for the dead and for food, I don't know, but they looked the same.

At one time there was no salt in Terezin and only then did I realize how essential it was and how terribly bread and other food tasted when it was completely salt-free. Until that time I was not even aware that bread contained salt. As a result of the salt-less period I started salting quite a lot later on and while I am trying to reduce salt intake and Eva salts very little, I still like salt and find it hard to enjoy food with very low salt content.

I should emphasize, that I do not recall any fights for food or any thefts. At least to me it seems that every thing was very well organized and functioned surprisingly well and people were disciplined and behaved in a civilized way. We hardly ever saw any of the Germans. The gates to the ghetto were watched by the Czech gendarmerie but even with them we had little contact.

One dramatic event in the life of Terezin was the taking of census of the ghetto. I don't remember when it took place, but I do remember that everybody except the very sick had to get out of the ghetto to some huge meadow, form columns and lines and squares and stand there for hours and hours to be counted. For us young people it was not particularly exhausting and neither did we fear that there might have been a much more sinister reason to get us standing all in one easily controlled place – we had not yet heard of and therefore did not think of mass executions. It must have been very different for old people and people with more imagination. It was at the very least an incredibly stupid enterprise. I do remember that at the end of the census, when it was already slowly getting dark we, the young people, helped to organize an orderly return to the ghetto.

The ghetto had a wonderful collection of intellectuals and artists and a flourishing cultural life, in a sense very free, perhaps the least restricted place within the German Reich. After all, the Nazis knew well that none of us was supposed to survive, so they did not seem to care what we did in the last moments before our extermination. Cultural and other events had to be reported, but in general the term “Kamaradschaftsabend” (friendship evening) was acceptable. There were concerts, theater, operas, lectures, poetry readings, active painters, courses in all kinds of subjects, debates and discussions.<sup>26</sup> I tasted just a very small sampling of it, but still the time in Terezin was intellectually the most stimulating period of my life. I attended lectures on philosophy, physics, analytic geometry, history, history of art, theater performances,<sup>27</sup> and cabaret type evenings.

The most famous cabaret type of entertainment were those of Karel Svenk (Schwenk) – they were light and upbeat and one of his songs became the unofficial Terezin anthem:

**Karel Schwenk:**  
**Všechno jde**

1. *Jarní bouře ozvěnu kdo přehluší  
Komu smích byl do kolébky dán  
Komu plakát bez příčiny nesluší  
Kdo zná lásku a je milován  
Každý ať už taký nebo onaký  
Zkrátka kdo je na tom světě rád  
Ten se nikdy na nikoho nemračí  
Vesele si zpívá častokrát*

*Refrain:*

*Všechno jde když se chce  
Za ruce se vezmeme  
Navzdor kruté době  
Humor v srdci máme*

*Den co den stále jen  
Sem a tam se stěhujem  
A jen ve třiceti slovech  
Smíme psat  
Hola zítra život začíná  
A s ním se blíží čas  
Že si sbalíme svůj raneček  
A půjdem domů zas  
Všechno jde když se chce  
Za ruce se vezmeme  
[Já, ty on, my všichni]  
(po první a druhé sloce)  
[A na troskách ghetta]  
(po třetí sloce)  
Budeme se smát!*

<sup>26</sup> Elena Makarova, Sergei Makarov and Victor Kuperman in their book “University Over the Abyss,” Verba Publishing Ltd., Jerusalem 2000, list 2309 lectures held in Theresienstadt between the year 1942 to 1944.

<sup>27</sup> Elena Makarova, Ekaterina Neklyudova, Sergei Makarov, Victor Kuperman and Alex Lelchouk: “Long Live Life! or Dance Around the Skeleton; The stories about Theater and Music in Terezin Concentration Camp 1941-1945,” Verba Publishers Ltd., Jerusalem 2001

2. *Kdo po městě nad Vltavou zatouží  
 Komu tuřín s kávou nestačí  
 Komu česká píseň duši rozbouří  
 Kdo se jako otrok plahočí  
 Každý at' už taký nebo onaký  
 Každý kdo tu není příliš rád  
 Ten si jistě najde důvod nějaký  
 Aby si moh' s námi zazpívat*  
 Refrain

3. *Kdo kavalce třetí patro obývá  
 Komu vadí temných hradeb stín  
 Komu žena v Křivoklátě zahýbá  
 Na koho pad' kasárenský splín  
 Každý at' už věří nebo nedoufá  
 Že i pro nás slunce bude hrát  
 Ten si ani tentokráte nezoufá  
 Když slyší marš tereziánský hrát*  
 Refrain

In a very loose and poor translation:

**Karel Schwenk:**

**Everything goes** (i.e. everything is possible, everything can be done)

1. *He, who can drown out the echo of spring's thunderstorm  
 Who received laughter in the cradle  
 To whom it does not become to cry without reason  
 Who knows love and is loved  
 Everybody whether such or other  
 In short, whoever is glad to be alive  
 Never frowns at anybody  
 And cheerfully will often sing*

Refrain:

*Everything is possible if you want it  
 We will hold hands  
 In spite of the cruel times  
 We have humor in our hearts  
 From day to day  
 We move from here to there  
 And are allowed to write only  
 In thirty words  
 Hey, life begins tomorrow  
 And with it comes the time  
 When we will pack our little bundles  
 And go home again  
 Everything is possible if one wants it  
 We will hold hands*

*[I, you, he, we all]  
(after the first and second stanza)*

*[On the ruins of the ghetto]  
(after the third stanza)*

*We will laugh*

- 2. Who longs for the town on the Vltava river  
For whom turnip with coffee is not enough  
Whose soul is moved by a Czech song  
Who labors like a slave*

*Everybody whether he is such or other  
Everybody who is not too happy to be here  
Will certainly find some reason  
To sing with us*

*Refrain*

- 3. Who lives on the third level of the bunk  
Who is oppressed by the dark shadows of the ramparts  
Whose wife in Krivoklat flirts with another  
Who suffers from barracks blues*

*Everybody whether he believes or gave up hope  
That the sun will shine even for us  
Does not despair even now  
When he hears the Terezin march being played*

*Refrain*

The song had a light tune and really helped us to keep up our spirits. It became immensely popular. The reference to Krivoklat relates to a group of women who were sent there for a time to plant trees in the woods, although there is little reason to believe that they were or even had much of an opportunity to be unfaithful to their husbands who stayed behind in Terezin.

I heard Svenk and the song the first time when I still stayed with Father in the Sudeten barracks and the performance was also attended by some Czech gendarmes who seemed to enjoy it as much as we did.

Some of the lectures took place directly in our room 127. Arnost Reiser gave a marvelous course on analytic geometry, arguably the best course I ever attended. Most members of our room participated. Gustav Schwarzkopf, later Solar, gave in our “Jugendheim” (youth home) an extensive series of lectures on the art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The workshops even made him a projector with which he could project pictures from a book onto a screen. Gustav Schorsch and Rabbi Murrelstein held a public debate, also in our youth home, on the question of whether the New Testament contains new elements not present in the Old Testament; understandably,

the rabbi took the position that it did not. Schorsch gave a lecture on Masaryk and also one on Hus, the famous Czech religious reformer and rector of Prague's Charles University who was convicted of heresy at the Konstanz Council, excommunicated and burned at the stake in 1415; these were not commemorative accolades, but very critical analyses of their philosophical positions and contributions in the light of their contemporary societies.

### **Gustav Schorsch**

Gustav Schorsch, born in 1918, was just a six years older than I, but he became one of the greatest influences on my life. He was undoubtedly an exceptionally gifted man. He had deep penetrating eyes and a magnetic personality. He almost always wore the same clothes, particularly a green suede jacket. Before he was expelled from the university as a Jew he studied philosophy, but he was also very active in the theater and as a very young man started and directed his own theater group. In high school he translated Lucretius' "De Rerum Natura" from the original Latin into Czech. He transformed Thomas Mann's story "Tonio Kröger" into a radio play. He was deeply and very genuinely concerned with moral values. He could have easily gotten a comfortable job assignment, but he preferred most ordinary manual labor. He had a deep interest in young people and in their intellectual and moral development. He was a perfectionist – he could recite poetry superbly, but would not do it publicly when he felt that he did not achieve the level he was striving for. In Terezin he organized and directed the theater performance of Gogol's "The Marriage," lectured on philosophy, discussed historical figures, debated the originality of the contributions of the New Testament. He gathered about himself a group of young followers or apprentices.

I don't quite remember when and where I met him. However, I do remember that following our first discussion of my self-formed philosophical views, he encouraged me to write them down and later compare the development in my thinking. I started attending his lectures on philosophy, primarily on Henri Bergson, with whom he was obviously very impressed, but he was also quite aware of, and indeed emphasized, the temporary nature of any philosophical system. It was not just lectures. We had many discussions about philosophy and about all kinds of other things, poetry, how to read poetry, theater, ethics, politics. At an earlier stage he joined the Communists but became utterly appalled by their attitude that the ends justify the means. He was shocked when the party asked one of its female members to seduce somebody they wanted to convert. He became definitely anti-Communist and his attitude protected me from the seductive Communist propaganda ("justice for the poor, the downtrodden, the workers, the powerless, free education and medical care for everybody, end of exploitation by the rich, etc.") after the war. He was also the first one to explain to me human reproduction – it may sound incredible, but at the

age of 19 I was quite ignorant; Father never spoke about it and Mother showed me some pictures about chromosomes, but I did not dare to ask anybody about the mechanics of sex.

Schorsch, I think, believed in Henri Bergson's "élan vital" (vital impulse) as a special force responsible for generating new forms of life.<sup>28</sup> I was very impressed by Schorsch's description of the experiment in which the German biologist Driesch<sup>29</sup> separated a fertilized egg of a sea urchin in the early stage of cell division; instead of dying the two halves of the embryo developed into two normal urchins – in Driesch's view a clear demonstration that the future of the urchin could not have been predetermined in the embryo, but that a life force was at work. My roommate and friend Egon Loebner and I got hold of a copy of Henri Bergson's book "Matter and Memory" and we woke early every morning to study it before we went to work. Schorsch also encouraged us to read Kant's "Prolegomena,<sup>30</sup>" which I started reading together with Vilem Pollak, a very gifted youngster. Although he was only 16 years old, he managed to read the entire book, while I gave up. At the same time, with all his interest in philosophy, Schorsch encouraged me to do something else, such as concentrating on chemistry.

Schorsch introduced me to the theater. He would let me come to rehearsals which gave me good insight into what he expected as the director. I felt that one gets much more out of seeing the performance in its formative stage than just watching the final product. He also introduced me to poetry. He gave me a typewritten copy of poems of the two Russian poets, Jesenin and Pasternak; this copy later played a role in my starting to date Eva.

### **The Murmelstein Affair**

Sometime in the spring of 1944 Terezin was being prepared for a visit from the Swiss Red Cross. In true Potemkin fashion Terezin opened a coffee house, some stores, a very nice children's pavilion for a handful of selected children, even a park with a band stand in the middle of town; almost a spa-like setting. It was claimed, though not confirmed, that the SS commandant Rahm would distribute cans of sardines (something totally unheard of in the ghetto) to the children when the Red Cross committee arrived and the children were trained to complain "Again sardines, uncle Rahm?" To be able to demonstrate how well people lived, a few

<sup>28</sup> Henri Bergson, 1859-1941 was the leading French philosopher of the early 20th century. His most important work was "L'Evolution créatrice" (Creative Evolution) published in 1907.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Adolf Eduard Driesch, 1867-1941, German biologist and philosopher.

<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, prominent German philosopher. "Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können" (Prolegomena to any future metaphysics which will be able to appear as a science), 1783. His most famous work is the "Kritik der reinen Vernunft" (Critique of pure reason).

well known “prominents” were each assigned an entire room for themselves, where they could live with their wives. To create the necessary space for these “luxurious” accommodations, many more people were squeezed into attics, hot in the summer and cold in the winter, with no windows, just lying on the floor on straw mattresses. Sidewalks were scrubbed by hand and people were not allowed to use them, they had to use the streets. This was carried out by the Jewish administration on orders from the Germans; I could not and cannot judge how enthusiastically they followed or even anticipated orders. What infuriated me, however, were the posters deriding a dirt-loving character, “Herr Schmock,” who did not like all this cleaning up and making things look pretty, that were plastered everywhere on the order of the rabbi Murrelstein, who was in charge of the “Verschönerungsaktion” (beautification project). This was certainly adding insult to injury by somebody who was generally viewed as a totally spineless collaborator of the Germans, an opinion already based on his activities in Vienna, where he played a major role in helping in the organization of the transports.

I was young, idealistic and pretty stupid and decided that this insult should not be left without a response. So I composed a rather silly verse:

*Herr Schmock antwortet:  
Aussen kanst Du schmutzig sein  
Wärest Du nur innen rein  
Mein lieber Herr Murrelstein.*

or

*Mr, Schmock responds:  
You can be dirty on the outside  
If you just were clean on the inside  
My dear Mr. Murrelstein.*

Susie Reiser typed it for me. She used a typewriter, one of the few in the ghetto, located in the office next door to the laboratory. She typed it several times using several layers of carbon paper, producing a total of 44 copies of my “masterpiece.” I brought them home to our room and my friends enthusiastically volunteered to paste them all over the ghetto. Later it turned out that the distribution was somewhat uneven with a very high proportion of the leaflets ending up on the outside of building L410, the girls’ home.

I was so naive that I did not realize how easy it was to identify the typewriter on which the pamphlet was written. By about 10 AM the next day two gentleman from what must have been something like the ghetto’s secret police found the typewriter, found out who used it, and Susie Reiser of course had to admit that I was the author. They took me straight to Murrelstein, at that time probably the most powerful man in the ghetto administration. I was left with Murrelstein alone in a fairly large office and he started by asking “So, I am not clean enough for you?” I felt very heroic

and told him what I thought. He was amused. He could easily have put me into the next transport or sent me to the dreaded “Small Fortress” to be beaten to death, but surprisingly nothing happened to me. Actually, he made sure that I would not be in any of the next several transports so that nobody could accuse him of revenge. However, whenever he saw me in the streets, he would call me and introduce me to his friends as the “young man who thinks I am unclean.” I was very proud of what I did and expected praise from Schorsch – and was very disappointed when he expressed his disapproval, though I can no longer remember for what specific reason.

The affair had its last act after the war in Prague. Murrelstein and Freiberger, both members of the “Ältestenrat,” the Council of Elders of the Jewish ghetto administration, were the only ones arrested for collaboration with the Nazis. Murrelstein called me as a witness, and I, of course, gave a totally truthful deposition. Mindful of how hungry we had been when we were prisoners, I brought some sandwiches with me to the police facility where he was being held. Murrelstein in a grand gesture turned them over to Freiberger. As far as I know, neither of them was ever tried; they were released after some investigation.

### **Eva**

I was not very interested in girls. For a while I was secretly in love with Susie Reiser, but never told her. I had one date with another girl, but found it boring. Then something unexpected happened. Along with many other young people I volunteered to help people to carry their luggage during the transports in June 1944. The people in the transport were first concentrated in the “Hamburger Kasserne” (Hamburg barracks) and from there we helped them towards the trains as far as we were allowed to go. A girl dragging a heavy suitcase asked me for help. I carried the suitcase and then we started talking and talked for quite a long time. I found our talk very pleasant. The next time we met by chance when I was walking from the Kavalier barracks, probably after visiting Father or Mother. In my recollection we started talking again and this time the talk turned to poetry. I offered to lend her my collection of Jesenin’s and Pasternak’s poems and we went together to pick it up and that gave me a good reason to see Eva again. She remembers it differently and we will never know who is right. In any case, I fell in love and we started dating regularly on June 26, 1944. We used to go to the edge of the ghetto, on top of the ramparts or in the moats or around the “Sokolovna.” We would sit and talk about everything. I told Eva about Schorsch, about Bergson’s philosophy, she talked about operas and sang arias from them – she was at that time singing in the chorus of Smetana’s “Bartered Bride” performed by her former music teacher Raphael Schächter, a very talented musician. I brought a chemistry text and talked about chemistry. We read poetry together. We read Dante’s “Purgatory,” part of his “Divine Comedy.” We talked about everything, families, our lives, philosophy, literature, music, paintings; I have never known anybody with whom I felt so close, so at ease, with whom I had so much in common and with whom

I liked to be so much. It was wonderful. I would pick Eva up at the place where she stayed with her mother; I never really learned to whistle, but I did manage somehow to whistle a brief note which was our signal and on which Eva would come down and join me. Our relationship was much more intellectual and spiritual than physical, though eventually, and it was after we had been dating regularly for quite some time, I dared to kiss her, the first time in my life that I ever kissed a girl. But that was as far as it went. I made one attempt to sit Eva on my lap, but that was very vehemently rebuffed. I met Eva's mother and even her father, who was sick with tuberculosis. Eva met my father. It turned out that she actually knew my sister Helga, with whom she worked in the "Landwirtschaft" (agriculture) and who, according to Eva, used to tell her about her older brother. However, I don't believe that she ever met Mother, who was confined to the hospital. When I was leaving for "the East" three months later we exchanged addresses of our gentile friends in Prague.

### **My feelings about Terezin**

For people who were in Terezin until the end of the war, Terezin was a terrible place, the worst they lived through. Of course it was bad – hunger, diseases, fear of transports, crowded conditions, total lack of privacy, high mortality: it was a huge prison.

Curiously enough, for me and others who have been through the hell of Auschwitz and other concentration camps, Terezin seemed almost a paradise. No gas chambers, no brutality, no beatings, our own clothing, at least some solid food, work under no terrible pressure, generally no direct contact with the Germans, freedom of movement inside the ghetto, and an enormously rich cultural life. Of course there was the curfew, but one got used to it. There were transports and these were times of great anxiety, but one got used even to them and one always foolishly hoped that they wouldn't resume, particularly when there were long pauses, as in 1944 when there were no transports from January to mid May, and then peace and quiet again from May 18 to almost the end of September. Moreover, as far as I remember, it was mostly the most recent arrivals in Terezin who were sent on to "the East" as we used to say, because that was all we knew about the destination. I can't remember that we lost anybody from our room 127 until the fateful transports of the fall of 1944 which emptied the ghetto of most young people and took me to Auschwitz and my parents and sister to the gas chambers.

Curiously enough, I have to admit that I personally can count at least some of the time spent in Terezin as one of the good times of my life. Yes, I was constantly hungry and suffered from fleas, but on the positive side I felt, until the fateful fall of 1944, reasonably safe from transports to the East, I had work which I loved, I lived with people I liked and who seemed to like and respect me, I developed a very good and almost adult relationship with Father. I was in the most intellectually and artistically stimulating environment in which I have ever been, and most important of all I was in love for the first time and found – as it later turned out – a partner for life.

## OSWIECIM/AUSCHWITZ/BIRKENAU

### Transport

A huge series of transports from Terezin to Auschwitz started in the fall of 1944; within one month, from September 28 to October 28, there were 11 transports totalling 18,402 people.<sup>31</sup> We were told that we were needed for work and were led to believe that we were going to a new camp; this claim seemed supported by the fact that old people, I believe over the age of 60, were excluded from these transports.<sup>32</sup> Consequently the only members of my family who survived were old people, my uncle Otto Robicek, born 1877, his mother-in-law, Matylda Fiala, born 1867, and Erich Klapp's parents Rudolf b. 1869 and Klara, b.1880, and another aunt, Ema Treulich, b.1872. The only exception was my cousin Fritz Treulich. He was a very capable engineer and became the director of the Terezin laundry which served the entire ghetto. He was needed and thus survived in Terezin together with his entire family, his wife Mali and daughters Helena b. 1935 and Eva b. 1939.

Nobody, or at least nobody around me who would have told me, knew anything about what going to "the East" meant. I did hear the story that somebody received a strange card from "the East" where his or her relatives wrote that "they were very close to uncle Josef." It was strange because uncle Josef was taken to a concentration camp much earlier during the occupation and the family was actually informed that he had died there. People did not want to understand the meaning of the message, so instead it was interpreted that "the Nazis are really not as bad, in reality they did not kill uncle Josef, just transferred him to another camp and informed the family that he was dead in order to intimidate people."

During these massive transports my cousin Erich Klapp obviously could no longer protect me or my family. I was in the first of these transports of 2,499 people on September 28, 1944. Eva and her parents followed on October 19<sup>th</sup>. Erich Klapp himself was deported to Auschwitz in the same transport as my parents and sister, on October 23; I have heard that – unlike others who went through a selection – he was called out by name and immediately executed.

<sup>31</sup> "Terezinska Pametni kniha," Vol. I, Terezinska Inicivativa, Melantrich, CR 1995, p.73.

<sup>32</sup> Re-reading my letter from 1946 (Appendix) reminded me that we were explicitly assured that we will be working in Germany, will remain in contact with our families in Terezin, will probably return to Terezin and will remain on the books as Terezin "residents."

Everybody who was in the transport had to report to the Hamburger barracks, the same place where I met Eva for the first time three months earlier. The one thing I do remember was that when Father came to say good-bye to me, he kissed me – something he had not done for many, many years; he considered kissing or any display of emotions between grown-up men inappropriate and unmanly. It surprised and touched me. Did he know or suspect more than I did? I do remember one much earlier conversation with him, still in Praha, on the balcony of our apartment, probably in 1940, when he said to me: "Hitler will lose the war, but he will succeed in killing the Jews."

There is very little I remember from the trip. We were in cattle cars with a pail for a toilet. The train was strictly guarded and we were strictly prohibited from throwing anything out of the train. We heard that in one car somebody forgot and threw out a piece of paper after he ate some food which he had wrapped in it; a guard opened the door and asked who threw the paper out. The man admitted that he had done it and was shot dead on the spot and his body was left in the car. Nothing dramatic happened in our car. We were all young and in spite of the apprehension managed to keep up our spirits and even managed to sing. I can't remember how long the trip lasted – the distance is less than 200 miles and I don't have a recollection of a terribly long trip.

### **Arrival in Auschwitz**

Again, my memories are foggy. We were ordered out of the railroad cars, to leave everything behind, and to form a line which proceeded to an SS-officer, probably the infamous Dr. Mengele, who stood there and with a flick of a thumb sent us either to the right side (his left) or the left side. He just inspected people visually, probably asked some people a simple question before deciding whether the person should go immediately to the gas chambers or be allowed to live for a while and work for the Reich. I was sent to the "good" side without being asked any questions – I was 20 years old and in good health. We did not have the foggiest idea what was going on. I do remember fairly vividly the four chimneys with flames shooting out at the top.<sup>33</sup> I had no idea what it was and rationalized it as some industrial plant – I had previously heard some rumors that one worked in Auschwitz under very hard conditions with a high mortality rate and assumed that the chimneys belonged to some factory.

<sup>33</sup> After having completed writing these memoirs I reviewed a letter I wrote early in 1946 to a friend of my mother, Elsa Kohn (see Appendix) and there I speak of only one flame. I therefore have to assume that my recollection of four flames is incorrect.

We were marched in a column between tall barbed wire fences to a large hall where we were ordered to undress completely and to leave everything behind except eyeglasses, belts and shoes. From there we were driven to a group of “barbers,” prisoners, who shaved our heads and body hair both under the arms and around the private parts, smeared us with some very stinging liquid, perhaps carbolic acid, and then we proceeded to the showers. After the showers we each were handed a shirt, pants, a jacket, vest and a cap and were driven out naked and wet into the cold early morning air. Most of us still had our shoes; only those who came with fancy high boots (“kanady” meaning Canadian boots) lost them to some of the older prisoners and probably got wooden clogs instead. We had no towels, so that we had to put the clothes on our wet bodies and then we stood for a long time somewhere between barracks. We did not get the usual striped prison garb – they obviously had run out of them, but our jackets had an inserted rectangle of the standard striped prison material on the back; in addition it had a wide red stripe painted down through the middle of the back.

We finally got our first meal, some sort of soup. We had no spoons and we were given the strangest assortment of vessels – no plates or bowls, but old pots, wash basins, and chamber pots. As we had no spoons we had to eat and lick the soup like animals, everything to make the degradation complete. We then got into the barracks – large structures, perhaps originally Polish military stables. We were so crowded that nobody could lie down, the only way to squeeze in was for one person to sit leaning against the wall, for the next person to sit between his legs and lean against him, and so on and so on until the last person in the row reached the low masonry structure, perhaps part of the heating system for the stables, which ran through the middle of the barracks lengthwise. I would estimate that there were some ten to fifteen people in each row and there must have been some forty or fifty rows, one next to the other – I believe that we were 1,000 people in a single barrack. How anyone could sleep under these conditions is a mystery – but I was only 20 years old and at that age I could sleep in any position. At one end of the barrack was a small room for the kapo, a prisoner with unlimited power over everybody, who always walked around with a stick and communicated only by yelling or hitting. Many kapos were homosexuals and had young boys, perhaps eleven to thirteen years old, living with them. They would delegate their power to them and the boys could be worse than the kapos themselves and nobody would dare to say a word. They were often the ones distributing the soup, very arbitrarily and unevenly. Nobody could dare to protest anything the boys did or he would have been immediately beaten up by the kapo.

On the other end of the barrack was a huge barrel serving as a toilet; sometimes in the morning it would overflow. I remember at least once having to carry it out and empty it with some other prisoners and it would spill over our feet.

Very early during our stay we were ordered to write postcards, of course in German, printed and limited to a very few words, to our families in Terezin. We were told to write that we are well and hoped that they would join us soon. I tried desperately to weave into it a message warning Father not to go and not to volunteer with Mother if he did not have to; I had some faint hope that his position in the “Ordnungsdienst” could have protected him. I have no idea whether he ever got the card and whether the hint could have been understood. In any case I am sure that Father was far too principled a man and would not have left Mother to go alone even if he fully understood the futility of his joining her.

### **Life in Auschwitz**

In a way it is fortunate that one has the ability to forget – and I have been particularly good at doing it. I remember surprisingly little of our stay in Auschwitz, although I spent almost a month there.

We were moved into another barrack which had three tier bunks and there we could at least lie down on the bare boards. There we were so many of us squeezed on each level of the bunks, that we had to lie on one side and everybody had to turn to the other side on command at the same time. I remember that we were forbidden to keep our shoes on in the bunks and that I violated the rule because I was afraid that someone would steal them. The kapo caught me, ordered me to come down from the bunk and slapped me in the face, but was decent enough to ask me to remove my glasses first. I have no recollection that we had any facilities for washing, but I am not sure. I also don't remember what daytime toilet facilities were there; there was of course no paper and at first I found it difficult not to be able to wipe and tore out a pocket of my vest for this purpose (that is actually why I remember that I had a vest), but of course the vest had only four small pockets so that was not a solution and I had to get used to the idea that other animals also exist without toilet paper and we were certainly less than animals. I also remember the signs “Eine Laus dein Tod” (One louse your death) – I did not understand whether it was meant as a warning to avoid lice because they might infect you with deadly typhus or as a warning that we would be killed if lice were found on us. In any case it did not make much sense, we were given lice infected clothing, there was no way of getting rid of the lice even though we spent a lot of time hunting for them and squashing them; there were also no inspections looking for lice – they would have found them on everybody. Fortunately, neither the Auschwitz nor the Meuselwitz lice carried typhus.

Another memory which springs to mind concerns shaving and I don't remember whether it refers to Auschwitz or to Meuselwitz. The Germans liked people to be clean shaven, but of course they did not provide any means for shaving. On the other

hand it could be to our advantage to look as well as possible. I have a recollection of standing in a group of men in which somebody had a tiny piece of soap and a razor blade (not a razor, just the blade) and trying to shave with it.<sup>34</sup>

I already mentioned the food distribution. My only recollection is that one day I had a washbasin with a lot of red beet soup and it was so bad that some people could not eat it – that was the only time I could eat as much as I wanted, but since that time I don't eat red beets. I was recently told an episode I had completely forgotten. My distant cousin, George Horner, told me that he met me when he arrived in Auschwitz two weeks after me, with the October 12 transport. When he got his first soup, he would not touch it and I asked him to give it to me if he was sure that he would not be able to eat it. Later of course he was able to eat his own soup.

One basic feature of the camp were the "Appells." Every day we were required to stand in rows and columns to be counted by an SS-man. Sometimes one had to stand for hours.

After a few days somebody told us that the flames we saw were the crematoria for the gas chambers, but we could not believe it. The thought was so monstrous, so totally unbelievable, that it took us several days to accept it. I remember a friend of mine from room 127 in Terezin, Egon Loebner, crawl in horror and utter panic on the floor under the bunks.

I remember an episode when a "Schreiber," a clerk who kept the records helped a young boy in a peculiar Auschwitz way. He was recording everybody's age. As he was going down the line he came to this boy, who answered the question obviously truthfully "Fifteen" and the Schreiber slapped him in the face, then asked him again "How old are you?" The boy repeated the answer "Fifteen" and was hit again and that happened once more and the boy started to cry. Finally the boy got the message and next time the question "How old are you?" was posed, he answered "Seventeen." The Schreiber nodded, recorded the age and walked away. He may have saved the boy's life at least for a while, though in a somewhat peculiar way.

Another memory which comes to mind is of one of the kapos who would yell and scream at us and wave his cane (every kapo had a cane and most of them used them without hesitation for the slightest reason) when somebody was within earshot, but behaved in quite a civil way when nobody could hear him. It was claimed that he was a Hungarian physician.

A more sinister recollection is that of a body of a prisoner hanging in the electric wires of the fence. The dead body was left there for quite some time so that everybody could see it. Whether it was a case of suicide or murder by somebody having forced him to run to the fence, I have no idea.

A positive recollection is that of Jirka Wachtel lecturing on Czech history while we were standing somewhere between the barracks and had nothing to do but wait. Jirka was three years older than I. In Terezin he had been sort of in charge of

<sup>34</sup> It may be that later in Meuselwitz, but certainly not in Auschwitz, we could occasionally get a shave from a Polish-Jewish prisoner, but the recollection is so foggy that I can't be sure.

younger boys in the same “Jugendheim” I lived in. Now, in Auschwitz he seemed to have decided that we should do something positive for our education. One could see it as a demonstration that in spite of all the misery, degradation and humiliation, while being forced to live far worse than animals in the middle of the death factory, he and we, the audience, still demonstrated our humanity at least to ourselves.

My most devastating recollection is that of a large group of children being led to the gas chambers. The children had been in Auschwitz for a long time and they knew exactly where they were going. They must have gone through a selection and did not make it. We were locked in our barrack, but we could see through the cracks between the planks. The children, I would estimate their ages between eight and fourteen, did not cry and went without any resistance or protest. Because they obviously had been in the camp for some time, many of them had managed to acquire spoons. Knowing only too well that they would no longer need them, they threw their spoons away so that we could find and use them. The picture of the column of children throwing away their spoons is something I will never forget.

### **The “Leipzig transport”**

Auschwitz at the time served as a huge slave market. Representatives from German industries would come and select people for their factories. During one such occasion they were looking for “Metallarbeiter,” metal workers. I knew that physically I was not very strong and that I would not do well in a situation requiring heavy physical labor. I assumed that working in some sort of machine shop or factory would most likely require less physical strength. Moreover, I did have the brief experience in Mr. Kleinhampel’s shop and thus raised my hand and claimed to be a lathe operator. This turned out to be very lucky. I was selected for the transport to a munitions factory in Germany near Leipzig. We were a relatively small group, I think some two or three hundred people. We received winter coats (with a wide bright red stripe painted down the back) and underpants, perhaps they also exchanged our rags for cleaner ones. The underpants were made from tallithim, black and off-white Jewish prayer shawls, obviously as a calculated insult and humiliation. We left Auschwitz on October 27. I remember the date because it was one day before the Czechoslovak Independence Day, October 28, and there were rumors that the Germans might want to kill a large number of Czechs on that occasion as they did on March 7, Czechoslovakia’s first president Masaryk’s birthday, when about 4,000 Czech Jews from the September 1943 transport were gassed.<sup>35</sup> We felt very lucky to be leaving Auschwitz before that dangerous date. We had not been tattooed, perhaps because we were not staying within the Oswiecim administrative area, but I don’t really know what determined who would be tattooed and who not.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Rudolf Vrba “I Cannot Forgive,” Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, British Columbia 1997.

## MEUSELWITZ

### The camp

Upon arrival in Meuselwitz we were led to a small concentration camp nestled inside a large factory. The large factory buildings – I would guess that there were about six of them, formed a sort of letter “L” and our barracks were inside the two legs of the letter. Administratively, the camp belonged to Buchenwald, but we never had any direct contact with the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Compared with Auschwitz the accommodations were certainly a big improvement. As far as I can recall, the Czech Jews together with some Hungarian and Dutch Jews occupied two barracks, each divided into several rooms. In each room there were three-layer bunks, fairly narrow, but each of us had his own space, a straw mattress and two grey blankets made of some ersatz material, but still blankets, one used as a sheet and the other as a cover. We each got a regular soup bowl and even a spoon – what luxury!! For food we got black “coffee” in the morning, some soup at noon and again in the evening, and in addition a small loaf of bread to be shared among three people. We did not get any knives, but we soon learned to make them for ourselves in the factory from broken metal saws and used them to cut and divide the bread. To divide it fairly became quite a procedure. I and my bunkmates developed the system that one would cut the bread into three thirds and the other two would then chose their portions and the order of cutting and choosing would rotate. Others even managed to make elaborate balances specifically for ensuring fair and precise division of the bread – our only solid food for the entire time except for one single day during our entire stay in Meuselwitz when we got a few potatoes.

A major problem was whether one should eat the whole ration at once in the evening or save some for the morning “coffee.” I usually tried to keep one slice for the morning, but sometimes I did not succeed and when there was an air raid at night I always ate the morning slice figuring that it would be a terrible waste if I was killed so hungry with a slice of uneaten bread left behind.

I would estimate that there were about thirty people in one room and perhaps six rooms per barrack. The rooms had a stove and we had some coal and could make a fire and some people toasted their bread. I remember a little episode when one of my roommates, one of the twin brothers Stern (Bedrich or Beda and Jindrich or Jindra, later Stanek), managed to bring some oil from the factory and fried his

bread in the oil. I warned him, that the oil was undigestible mineral oil and that paraffin oil is used as a laxative (here my chemistry background came in handy), but he would not listen, until he found out for himself.

There were, of course, the daily “Appells” (roll calls) which required standing in front of the barrack in formation until the SS managed to count everybody and got the count right. There was however one exception. One SS-man, I think he was a noncommissioned officer, was so exceptionally decent that he told us not to stand outside and he counted us inside our room – this was an unheard of consideration totally against regulations and he was certainly the only one who would do it. He also behaved to us in a very civil way in other ways, no shouting, no screaming. Once he got a bit drunk and started talking about us as “my Jews.” It was claimed that he fought on the Russian front in the Crimea, contracted malaria and was therefore transferred to lighter duty of guarding concentration camp prisoners.

The “Kommandant,” commanding officer, was an SS-officer, strict but not sadistic – there was no random beating, only punishment for what he would consider a violation of the rules. People were beaten for not meeting their quotas at the factory or for other transgressions. The commandant would call out “Schemel,” a stool would be brought out and the prisoner would receive a number of strikes from the guards with rubber truncheons; rubber truncheons were standard equipment all guards carried all the time. We were always required to stand in formation and watch the administration of the punishment. I remember in particular the beating of a well respected older prisoner, a Polish Jew, who already had grey hair and who, I think, was a survivor of several camps. He was charged with quality control in the factory. His crime was that he let some defective pieces go through, obviously not wanting to endanger the people who made them. He was sentenced to a certain number of strokes. When the beating was over he was able to get up. What impressed me was that the “Lagerälteste,” a soft spoken Hungarian inmate given certain responsibilities for the operation of the camp, went up to him and in front of the SS embraced him. It was an act of courage and defiance, but nothing happened to him.

The most gruesome case of a public beating I remember was that of somebody who allegedly tried to escape, but perhaps was only too exhausted and simply stayed behind – it was certainly no organized escape plan. He was put down on a stool with two SS-men standing on each side and one over his head. The two on the sides were beating him with rubber truncheons; when he moved the third man hit him over the head with his truncheon. When the man fainted they poured a pail of cold water over him and the beating continued. I have no idea what happened to the man – I think that he was alive and they led or carried him away, but I doubt that he could have survived for very long.

In the camp there was also a fairly large contingent of Polish Jews, who occupied two additional barracks. I think that they, or some of them at least, were moved with the factory equipment from somewhere in Poland, perhaps Czestochowa, when the

Russian front came dangerously too close. The place where they were before must have been far worse than Meuselwitz with people being beaten to death by a vicious kapo or overseer with a huge wrench – we experienced nothing like that.

Besides our immediate camp there was another big section separated by a barbed wire fence and that was a women's camp with about a thousand Polish women reportedly from the Warsaw uprising (August-September 1944), an uprising which the German army brutally suppressed while the Soviet army stood by and did nothing.

The camp had a washroom and a sick room and there was a Dutch Jewish doctor available to treat certain medical problems. We occasionally got clean shirts, supposedly disinfected, but they were full of lice anyway. Fortunately, the lice did not seem infected, so they were just a nuisance and we spent a lot of time picking them out and squashing them between our fingernails – but it was a losing battle.

My boots wore out and I got a pair of wooden shoes, clogs. They were not very comfortable to wear, but to my surprise I found out that they protected me against the cold of the frozen ground much better than my old leather boots. We did not have socks, but I think that we managed to get some pieces of rags to wrap our feet in.

My bunk was in the corner of the room. One of my two bunk mates was Vilem Pollak, a seventeen year old friend from Terezin, with whom I had tried to study Immanuel Kant (he persisted but I gave up). The other was Jan Sander, one year younger than I, who was a nephew of the former Czechoslovak minister of health affairs, Dr. Meissner. Across the aisle were Karel Svenk, a well known entertainer, the actor Jiri Süsslund (Cajlajs) and his older brother Vilem. This group was older than ours; Vilem Süsslund was already 29, Svenk 27 and Cajlajs 24; both Svenk and Vilem Süsslund came to Terezin with the first transport, Ak1 on November 24, 1941, together with my cousin Erich Klapp. We were all good friends, sort of two triumvirates. I remember very few other people from our room except one man by the name of Salus who used to come and talk to the older guys of our aisle. He claimed to have once been Leon Trotsky's secretary and kept on extolling the importance of eating eggs for brain development.

The fact that we divided everything equally among the three of us benefitted me on one occasion. I found some bulbs or roots which I thought were edible, or actually I did not think about it much, we were just so hungry that we would try anything. However, as a good friend I shared my find with my two bunk mates and as a result we all got sick, but nobody too badly.

In spite of the fact that everybody was constantly hungry, there were no cases of theft among us – there was a spirit of friendship and camaraderie. We were all in it together and nobody tried to improve his lot at someone else's cost. I remember just one case where someone was caught stealing some bread – he was not from our group – and he was punished by having to hold two full pails of water, one in each outstretched arm left and right of his body and standing there for a long time. I don't recall who imposed the punishment, whether it was the Germans or the prisoners themselves.

## The factory

We worked in the Hasag factory. Most people worked in the main hall making anti-aircraft shells – just the metal parts, no explosives. Their work was important; they had to produce a certain number of pieces each day. I was lucky in that I was assigned to a small shop which made matrices for bullets – hardened steel cylinders with a precisely bored and shaped hole into which pieces of steel were pressed to form the bullets. New matrices were needed only when the old ones wore out and they were not in short supply and making more of them would not accelerate the production of bullets – we were not the bottleneck. Consequently, I worked under no particular pressure and had no quota as far as I can recall.

My experience with lathes was of course limited to just a few days several years earlier in Mr. Kleinhampel's shop. When I was assigned my job at the lathe I did not know what to do and claimed that this lathe was a bit different from the one I had been used to. I was a bit afraid that I might be punished for having claimed to be a lathe operator, but nothing of that sort happened. The German civilian worker showed me how to operate the machine and what I was to do. It was very simple – I just had to reduce the outer diameter of a short steel cylinder, about 6 or 7 cm long and about 4 cm in diameter, to a slightly smaller diameter and I learned that very quickly. The only problem was at night when I became very sleepy, particularly around four o'clock in the morning. When I dozed off the cutting tool would continue to move until it reached the spinning part of the machine, the chuck, and the tip of the cutting tool was broken off. Fortunately, the regime was fairly benign – I was shown how to sharpen the cutting tool and soon could repair the occasional damage myself. The work was of course totally monotonous; I could not speak with anybody and so I tried to pass the time away by reciting for myself all the poems I remembered.

We worked 12-hour shifts with one hour for rest. I don't remember what happened during the day shift, but I assume that we were taken back to the camp to get our soup. I do remember however that during the night shifts we could sleep for one hour – except there was no good place and the few places like benches were already taken. So I put my coat on a central heating radiator and lay down on it. The radiator was perhaps 8 or 10 inches wide and through it one could hear the thumping of enormous presses on the floor below which continued throughout the rest time – the heating pipes carried the sound only too well – but I somehow managed to sleep all the same. The presses on the lower floor were making the heavy sheet-metal parts of the "Panzerfausts," bazookas.

I can't quite remember why, but for some reason I tried to make a cigarette holder from a piece of bone I found somewhere – other people must have done things like that. I tried to do it perhaps just to do something different than to turn the same identical pieces on the lathe for 11 hours a day or night or perhaps somehow

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might have hoped to sell or trade it for some food – I don't know. In any case, my experiment was not a success. I cut a nice piece of bone with a saw but when I tried to shape it on a grinder, there was a terrible smell of burnt bone and I had to give the project up.

The few German civilian workers on the shop floor had very little contact with us. They never abused us but also did not try to do anything for us – they were just “correct” and kept their distance; of course, a guard was always present. The only positive case which I seem to recall was that somebody got a needle and thread from one of the civilian workers; of course, nothing like that was available in the camp.

I had a serious accident in the factory. I was changing the chuck of the lathe and dropped it on my foot and it injured my right big toe. The doctor in the camp had some ointment and bandages – I remember that the bandages were of crepe paper and I think that I was allowed to stay out of work and in the sick room for a few days. The toe healed, but I lost it later to frostbite anyway.

We did not have Sundays off or at most half a day. If we did not work in the factory we had to carry some crates from one place to another – it seemed just to make us work – I remember carrying long wooden crates of “Panzerschreck,” another anti-tank weapon.

### **Air raids**

There were fairly frequent air raids and in the beginning we loved them. During the alarms we were brought back to the camp – it was only a few minutes walk – and we did not have to work. By day we could watch the aircrafts high in the sky with the condensation trails behind them and by night we watched the flares – we called them “Christmas trees.” The air raids became very regular, almost every day, the first one around noon and another one at night. It was a most welcome proof that the Allies controlled the skies and were winning the war. We felt very safe, sure that they would never bother with a little town like Meuselwitz, until during one bright sunny day the bombs were suddenly falling on us. One fell close to our barrack and knocked in a wall, but fortunately the roof held, so that I don't think anybody got injured. However, when the bombs started falling some of them fell into the women's camp and the women broke out of the camp and ran into a small wooded hill just above the camp. For some reason a lot of bombs fell exactly into this place and many of the Polish women were killed. One of the guards later told us that one of the allied aircrafts got hit and disposed of all its bombs, unfortunately exactly into the area where the women were seeking safety. Men from our camp were ordered to go up to the woods and collect the remains, often just pieces or severed limbs. I did not have to go because of my foot injury. A number of factory buildings had been damaged, even though a bomb which went right through the building and ended up in the middle of the power station failed

to explode. The Germans had casualties, too. There were air raid bunkers in the cellars of the factory. One bomb, however, penetrated all the way through into the shelter and exploded there, killing a lot of people. After that, whenever I was in the camp during an air raid, I would crawl under the bunk, not out of fear – I was not really afraid – but because I thought that the bunk might hold up the roof if the barrack should collapse.

The air raids on “our” factory – there actually were two of them, the first one during the day and a second one at night – changed a lot of things. For one, it took away the pleasure and the feeling of safety when air raids were announced. Second, until the raids, the Germans had used the shelters in the basements of the factory buildings while we were led back to the camp with no protection. After the experience of the bomb penetrating all the way into the underground shelter, the policy was changed. For the Germans, fairly elaborate underground shelters were being dug into the side of the hill next to the factory. We, on the other hand, were now to use the basement shelters in the factory; the thinking must have been that if the factory got destroyed, they would not need us anyway so we might as well go together with the factory. Being in the underground shelters was far less pleasant than being able to watch the raids from the outside or from the barracks. The concrete structures of the factory with metal ductwork amplified the sound of the anti-aircraft guns and of the bombs and one had no idea what was going on; one just heard the noise and had to sit and wait. Each explosion sounded like it was right next to us. One of the worst experiences was one night raid when the Polish women who were in a shelter next to us became hysterical and started praying loudly.

With part of the factory destroyed and our work not being a bottle-neck, I was assigned to other work. There was a place nearby, where logs (needed to support the construction of the air raid shelter being dug into the mountain side) were impregnated with a salt solution to protect them from decay. There we had to load the logs on small iron cars on rails, then push them into a chamber which was first evacuated and then filled with a concentrated solution of salts under pressure. The logs were thus saturated with the salt solution and after some time we had to remove them. This treatment made them very heavy and so the work became very hard. That was not what I bargained for when I claimed to be a lathe operator, but there was nothing I could do about it.

Sometimes we also had to go and remove debris from bombed out buildings – I don’t remember much of it, except a little episode when I had to go to the bathroom and a guard took me there and waited for me outside. Since I took a bit longer than he thought was necessary, he chased me back to the work area hitting me a couple of times with his truncheon; I have to admit that it felt good to sit down for a while and that I did take a bit longer than absolutely necessary.

We were also given the opportunity to volunteer for bomb excavation work – it was really voluntary for a reward of an extra slice of bread. I volunteered several times. Most of the times the bombs were in fields around town and we had to dig big pits

into the ground following the path of the bomb. We dug large square holes of about six by six feet and probably some ten to fifteen feet deep. The 250 or 500 lb bombs usually fell fairly straight down into the ground but in the end would turn sideways and even slide upward a foot or so. The bombs left the soil loose and discolored; a German soldier, a demolition expert, who accompanied us in addition to our guard, would probe the ground with a long metal rod and determined the places where we had to dig. Once the bomb was exposed one of us, and not the demolition expert, had to remove the fuse.. It was almost always a seventeen year old boy, Jirka Porges, who volunteered. We all stood around and did not take shelter, so that it would have made no difference – had the bomb exploded we all would have been killed. Once the fuse or fuses (I think that there might have been one at each end of the bomb, but I am not sure) were removed, a metal plug with a ring was screwed in and the Germans dragged the bomb away – we no longer had anything to do with it. In the evening, after we returned to the camp, we got our extra slice of bread.

Once we were digging in a town among bombed-out houses. In the rubble I found a copy of a German bible and took it to the camp – I believe that it was the only book in the camp. I started reading parts of it and was particularly taken by the Book of Job – it sort of rang a bell. I don't recall finding anything else of use except perhaps some rags which I used as foot wrappings.

### **Evacuation**

One day in early April we were told by one of the guards “You are lucky – the Americans will be here in a couple of days.” It was at a time when the American army was advancing rapidly, but a day or two later came the bad news. The American advance was halted. There was a battle in the “Thüringer Wald,” (Thuringian Forest) a low mountain range about 70 miles SW of Leipzig; Meuselwitz is about 20 miles south of Leipzig. That unfortunately gave the Germans enough time to evacuate us.

Meuselwitz had a large briquette factory which made briquettes from compressed coal dust. These briquettes, about 7x2.5x2.5 inches, were widely used for heating. On the particular day of our evacuation, I think that it was on April 12, there was a trainload full of briquettes standing in the railroad station. We got orders to clear the railroad cars, throw the briquettes on the ground and get into the cars. These were open freight cars and we were squeezed more than hundred people into a car. There was not enough space to sit, just a small fraction of us could, but these places were immediately occupied by a group of far more aggressive Polish Jews who alternated them among themselves. We, the Czech Jews, did not have a chance.

We had no food and I don't remember that we were given any water, but I also don't remember being thirsty so perhaps we did have some. It was also quite cold so that thirst would not have been our principal problem. The trip took about five days

and it was a horrible experience. We were exhausted from standing – for several days and nights we were just standing in this terribly crowded car and could hardly move; one person went insane. Perhaps on the third day we stopped next to a train with some turnips and were able to help ourselves to some of them.

Eventually the train arrived in Kraslice, a town formerly on the Czechoslovak side of the old Czechoslovak-German border but then, after the annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938, part of Germany. There we were finally allowed out of the train and could spread out a bit along the tracks and on the low slopes next to them. After a day or so of rest a German military train arrived on the other tracks followed by dive-bombers in hot pursuit. They bombed the train, but also managed to hit one or two of our cars which started burning. I don't remember whether anybody was hurt; we were all outside and the planes must have used small bombs.

However, there was another very bad effect of the raid. We were told that the good citizens of Kraslice did not like our presence and thought that we presented a danger to them – such as attracting dive-bombers. So the SS decided to move us. At this point we were given some food – they obviously still had some bread and potatoes. The distribution of potatoes resulted in a tragedy. One guard was throwing the potatoes down from a railroad car and a group of prisoners tried to collect them. Another guard perhaps did not know what was going on, saw a group of prisoners pushing and perhaps fighting, and simply started shooting. Jirka Porges, the young boy who always volunteered to defuse the unexploded bombs, was hit in the back; he survived but remained paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life.

### **The march**<sup>36</sup>

We left the train and set out to march. We each carried our grey blanket and I probably had my soup bowl and a piece of bread we got before the march. Up to that point I carried with me my – and possibly the camp's only – book, the Bible, but when I knew that we would have to march I did not want to be burdened with any unnecessary weight and threw it away. That was the only time my friend Vilem Pollak got very angry with me. In a furious and almost insane rage he picked up the Bible and kept it for himself.

I have only a very foggy recollection of all that happened next. I remember that we were led to some churchyard in a small village and spent the night there sleeping on the ground. My last recollection of my friend Vilem Pollak is from that night. He

<sup>36</sup> A much more contemporary and therefore certainly more correct description of our life during this period was given in the letter one of my friends, Vilem Süßland, wrote while we were together in the hospital in Zatec. His letter dated June 7, 1945 was recently published in English by Makarova et al. Cf. footnote 27 and included in the Appendix. I am intentionally writing these memoirs according to my current recollections and have not corrected them to reflect the more contemporary descriptions.

disappeared somewhere and did not return, but I don't know when and how he died. We were told again that the Americans would be there very soon and the guards started disappearing. I think that all or many of us dispersed into various directions, at least some certainly did, and some managed to avoid being caught later on.

I just have a vague recollection that I once tried with a couple of other people to run away, but I don't remember whether it was after this first night or later on. In any case, we were caught by some local policemen, put into some jail or maybe just a stable or shed. The way we looked, it would have been impossible to hide without some help. We were walking skeletons in rags, red stripes painted over our backs, hair shaven off and later, in order to save on the effort of a full shave, just a broad swath about a one or one and one half inch wide cut down the middle of our skulls from the forehead to the neck. We must have been quite a sight. Probably the next day we were turned over to our guards and reunited with our group. At this point we were not punished for running away, everybody knew that the end of the war was very close and the guards did not seem really to care except for their own survival – I don't think that the camp commander was still with us. The one clear memory I have from this failed break-out was that, as we were kept in that shed or whatever space it was, local young boys came to look at us and when we begged for food they amused themselves by feeding us raw potato peels and watched with interest and pleasure as we devoured them. They did not give us any decent food, they had too much fun watching us like animals in a cage eating those raw potato peels.

Unfortunately, the advance of the American army changed directions and instead of moving straight east across the old Czechoslovak-German border, turned northeast along the Krusne Hory (Erzgebirge) mountain range. That gave the Germans time to gather us again – or at least most of us. From then on the real march began, each day perhaps ten miles or a bit less. They were not trying to lead us to any specific place, they just kept us marching as long as they could between the two approaching lines, the Russian and the American.

In the beginning there was no food at all and we got terribly weak. We slept outside in the mountainous area and at the end of April it was still quite cold; it must have been there that I got my frostbite, though at the time I was not aware of anything. We were incredibly weak and hungry and started collecting whatever seemed edible, nettles and dandelions, but there was essentially nothing. One day we came across some sugar beet and I remember trying to eat some, but even as hungry as I was I could not eat much.

A bit later the guards arranged for us to sleep in barns and even to get a bit of soup in the evenings. At some point we must have even gotten some potatoes. I don't remember getting them, but I do remember that one night we slept in some barn and when I woke up two people, Ing. Stein and his son, both had died of exhaustion during the night. They had saved a few potatoes and I took and ate them – they did not need them any more.

One day our friend Karel Svenk decided that he could not go on and hid in the straw. He must have been found and shot. Several days later I became so exhausted that I decided not to go on and frankly I did not care whether they were going to shoot me or not. I had become terribly weak, suffering from severe diarrhea and had watery blisters all over my body. So I just lay there pretending that I was dead. A guard found me and believed that I was indeed dead – not surprising considering the way we looked – but then another guard tested it by pouring water in my nose as I lay on my back. I could not prevent myself from moving, probably coughing or something. To my surprise the guards did not kick me, beat me up or shoot me. Instead they organized some sort of a wagon and put me and several other prisoners who could no longer walk on the wagon and we were pulled along with the rest of the marching group. I don't remember whether the wagon was pushed and pulled by the other prisoners or pulled by a horse or ox; it is hard to believe that any of the other prisoners would have had the strength to pull the cart, but I have no recollection of a draft animal. My diarrhea and exhaustion were getting worse and I was no longer able to get off the wagon and simply had to let go into my pants – the only thing I could do was to stuff some straw on which we were sitting into my pants. I remember, that the Dutch doctor DeVries, who was also on the wagon, got very angry with me for that and reproached me how I could have discussed philosophy with him some time ago, and now behave like that.

## **Liberation**

One day, it may have been May 8, 1945, the guards disappeared and we were left in the middle of some fields. It was a bright day and it was late in the day. We saw a village not too far away, but we were in no condition to get there. We just managed to crawl into a nearby haystack and spend the night there. There were four of us: Jiri (Jirka) Süssländ (Cajlajs, the actor), his brother Vilem (Vili), Jan (Jenda) Sander and myself. Vilem Süssländ was in the best shape, as far as I remember he walked and was not on the wagon, but he wanted to stay with his younger brother who was in a very bad shape. The next morning Vilem managed to get to the village and get help. He came back with some people – I think that they were the Czech “Revolutionary Guards” with red arm bands. They brought along a flat wagon and they took us to the village and cleared one room in a farm house for us. The room had four beds, one in each corner and a bucket (to serve as a toilet) in the middle. We all had terrible diarrhea.

People were coming and bringing us food – all kinds of food. Some must have heard that starved people should start out with a light diet, so I think we got some chicken meat, but others wanted to give us whatever they had and so we got butter

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and bread and possibly lard, I don't remember, but I do remember the butter. I also got a pair of old boots and I was very happy to part with my wooden clogs. After a few days they took us again on an open wagon to a hospital in the nearby town of Zatec (Saatz). It was a very hot sunny day and a slow trip.

### **In the hospital**

My first memory from the hospital is that we were put on stretchers in a corridor and a doctor took one look at us and ordered a bath and no food. At the moment Jenda Sander heard that verdict, he immediately ate what was left of the butter we got in the village; he had it hidden under the blanket and it was melted and already quite rancid because of the long trip in the hot sun, but he would not give it up. Fortunately, it did not have any fatal consequences. After the bath we were put in a room together with two other fellow prisoners, formerly from Vienna. Sadly, Jirka Süßland was so exhausted that his heart gave out and he died during the second night in the hospital. An elderly nun was sitting with him the whole night.

The hospital was actually run by German nuns and the doctors were German, too. The nuns were very nice and I felt that the doctors took proper professional care of us. We kept gradually improving. Both Jenda Sander and I had frostbites on our feet; some of the toes turned completely black. The surgeon amputated my big toe on my right foot, while the little toe fell off by itself. There were also frostbite on some of my other toes and some parts of them which turned black, but they did not have to be amputated. For some time we could not put our feet down on the floor, because they would start bleeding, but gradually things improved; our diarrhea got under control and we started gaining weight. Vilem Süßland was at the beginning in far better shape than we were, but then suffered a sudden reversal and he died about two months after liberation of intestinal tuberculosis. I do not remember much about the two Austrians – I think they improved sooner and were released much earlier.

I remember that one day the Czechs caught one of our guards and brought him to our room and asked us to identify him. The others recognized him, but I am so very bad at remembering faces that I could not. I don't know what happened to him. After my friends confirmed that he was one of the guards they took him away.

After some time Jenda and I were able to use wheelchairs and once we got used to them we would race along the long hospital corridors. Later we started walking with a cane, first in the hospital garden and later outside and finally we were released on the same day after about four months in the hospital. What I find hard to understand today is, that after being inseparable friends throughout Meuselwitz, the march and then the entire hospital stay, we never met again and did not even exchange letters. We both must have had a strong desire to leave the past behind

and to concentrate fully on our new lives. All I heard about him was that he studied medicine and became a doctor. It was only during our visit in Israel in 1996 when we met with Lena Makarova that I inquired about him in the hope of meeting him again, but unfortunately learned only that he had died two years earlier.

In the hospital I became quite friendly with one of the nuns. She was a very cheerful person and we used to talk. I even asked her why she joined the order and I was surprised by her answer. She was from a liberal and not very religious background, her father was a Social Democrat, but she was afraid of men and sought refuge in the convent.

During the war I was sincerely convinced that only Germans were capable of the terrible atrocities they committed, that it must be a special trait in the German character. However, there were two incidents in the hospital which led me to change my mind, and to accept that inhumanity is not restricted to one nation, but can appear among any group of people if the conditions are right and if people are allowed to act without being accountable for their acts.

One case which shocked me was the following. One patient in the hospital was a young woman, probably there because she had contracted a venereal disease. But she liked to talk to us, and among other things told us that she became a friend of a man named Roth – she had no way of knowing that he was with us in Meuselwitz, but was better off than the rest of us, because he was an electrician and could fix radios for the SS guards. She told us with pleasure how he would interrogate captured Germans and extinguish burning cigarettes on them. I was shocked. I would have never believed that a Jew, particularly one who had gone through the same hell as I had, could act like that.

One day an older man was brought to the hospital. It turned out that he was a Czech who had stayed in the Sudetenland after it had become part of Germany; the vast majority of Czechs fled to what remained of Czechoslovakia after the Munich dictate. When the Czech Revolutionary Guards came he was put in a detention camp together with all the Germans. He had no papers to prove that he was Czech. Finally a family member came, identified him and got him released. However by the time he got to the hospital he was so undernourished that he looked like one of us and died within a few days.

Today, after so many years and having learned about so many terrible things people have done to other people, these two incidents would probably not affect me particularly, but at that time I was very sensitive and they deeply shook my belief in the moral purity and superiority of Jews and Czechs over Germans. However, they did teach me a lesson that became a firm principle for me for my entire life: never to judge somebody by the group he or she may be a member of, and never assign traits or characteristics to an ethnic or national or any other group of which one became a member by birth or external circumstances and which one did not choose voluntarily and consciously.

As soon as I could, I wrote to Prague to find out who survived and to reestablish contacts. I wrote immediately to Father's secretary, Jindra Seidnerova, and she came to visit me. Up to this point I did not know whether my parents and Helga survived – I knew that my parents did not have the slightest chance if they were sent to Auschwitz, as at 57 and 49 they were far too old, but I still harbored some hope that they may have stayed in Terezin. Mrs. Seidner's visit put an end to that hope. Her first words were "Your uncle Otto is alive." She did not have to say more. I was devastated. Although I had expected that my parents did not survive, only now did the verdict become final. There was still a small chance left that Helga may have escaped death, but she was only fifteen and short and looked younger, and so the chances were very dim. I never heard of her and she obviously went with my parents straight into the gas chambers.<sup>37</sup>

I memorized the address Eva gave me of her adopted gentile "aunt" Jindra Schierova, and wrote to her. Eva came to visit me very soon after she got my letter, which she received on May 29, exactly on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. From then on we started a regular correspondence, though she later reproached me that my "love letters" were mostly reports about how my diarrhea was improving. She came to see me again a bit later.

I always thought that my friend Arnost Reiser came to visit me, but he assures me that it was not he but his sister Susie. The Reisers made me a most generous offer to stay with them when I got back to Prague until I could find more permanent accommodations. I enthusiastically and gratefully accepted. My childhood friend, Milos Milota, also came to see me and so did my uncle Otto, who survived the end of the war in Switzerland together with his mother-in-law. Towards the end of the war the Germans allowed some people to go to Switzerland; I don't know why and under what conditions. In 1945 my uncle was already 68 years old.

<sup>37</sup> I never could bring myself to think of or to visualize my parents' and sister's last moments in the gas chambers. To this day I cannot think of it for more than a fleeting instant and immediately turn the thought away. Perhaps it is cowardice, but I simply can't and perhaps don't want to face it.

## PRAHA (PRAGUE)

I was released from the hospital after about four months, in September. I remember that before my release somebody, some local Czech organization, took me to a warehouse full of things left over by the Germans who were forced to leave Czechoslovakia and I was able to select some clothing. I also recall that I went out for a walk with Jenda Sander and bought a beer – it was the first beer I ever drank and I was 21 years old! Father sometimes offered me a sip when I was young, but I just smelled the beer and did not want to taste it, unlike my much younger sister who liked it. I am still not much of a beer lover – a bad Czech.

In Prague I settled in with the Reisers. Their family owned a large house practically in the center of town, just across from the main railroad station, but separated from it by a park. When Arnost and Susie returned (their parents perished in Auschwitz and their younger brother Jan died in Terezin of tuberculosis), they managed to get a small two-room apartment on the top floor. It had a bathroom and a small hallway, but no kitchen. Susie, Ruth (Arnost's girlfriend and later his wife) and their cousin Eva who survived the war in France, lived in one room, while Arnost, myself and Felix Pollak, a friend of the Reiser family who served in the British army and returned to Czechoslovakia after the war, lived in the other room.

We had a very nice time – all young people with Arnost at 25 the oldest and Ruth at 19 the youngest and we all started new lives as free people. Eva would come over frequently – she lived just some 10 or 15 minutes away on foot with her mother and, of course, I started visiting her regularly. The Reisers were a musically gifted family and together with Eva Reiser's father, Arnost's uncle Egon Reiser, they would perform entire operas, playing the piano and singing. Since I unfortunately did not share their musical talents, I usually hid in the other room. There were a number of visitors and very interesting discussions, even an attempt at some semi-formal classes, but they did not work out as well as Arnost Reiser's analytic geometry course in Terezin. One of my nicest memories from that time are the Sunday mornings when we would all get into beds in one room and Arnost would read Kipling's "Just So Stories" aloud to us. I can't remember now with any certainty whether he read the stories in English or in the Czech translation, but I think that it must have been in the original English supplemented by Arnost with some translations and explanations for those of us whose English was very limited. Those days I also spent a lot of time in a not very successful attempt to learn to type.

Because I had been prohibited from going to school from 1940, I had completed only five of the required eight years of the gymnasium. I was, of course, not the only one in this situation. The government established special courses for people returning from concentration camps or from the army to learn material that enabled them to take the final examination, the so-called maturity examination, required for enrollment at a university. The course lasted about four months and at the end we took the examination. It was very easy and we certainly did not learn or were expected to demonstrate even a fraction of the material we missed – in my case, three years of gymnasium. My final report card was very good except for two D grades: one in physical education and one in drawing. I was thus able to enroll in the chemical faculty of the Technical University (something like an Institute of Technology) for the spring semester of 1946. To earn a little bit of money I tried to teach a young Slovak officer, who returned with the Russian army and was my classmate in the course, some mathematics and trigonometry. My illusions that I taught him something were shattered when one day before the “maturity exam” he asked me “tell me, what actually is that sine?” Still, he passed as we all did.

The first one to leave the Reisers’ apartment was Felix Pollak. One day he declared that he has consumed his entire supply of Churchman cigarettes and therefore had to return to England.<sup>38</sup> Then Ruth moved in with a girlfriend of hers and I felt that it was time for me to leave too, although I enjoyed living with the Reisers very much.

My uncle Otto was able to get his prewar rental apartment back and invited me to move in with him, although aunt Klara and uncle Rudolf Klapp already shared the small two room apartment with him. I accepted. The Klapps had the larger room and uncle Otto and I slept in the smaller one. Aunt Klara, who was 66 at the time, cooked, but was not exactly a gourmet cook. When her husband did not seem enthusiastic about the meal, she would ask in a sharp tone “Didn’t you like it?” and he would answer meekly “Oh yes, but it was filling.”

### **University studies**

Very soon after Germany occupied the Czech part of Czechoslovakia and established the “Protektorat,” all universities and other institutions of higher learning were closed down, many students and faculty imprisoned, and many more sent to work in Germany. When the universities reopened in 1945, after six years, there was a tremendous influx of students and the facilities were totally insufficient – in addition to the fact that they, and particularly the equipment, were badly

<sup>38</sup> In England he studied chemistry and later worked for Kodak. When we were in Denmark after our escape he was able to secure a job offer from Kodak in England for Arnost.

damaged or destroyed. To deal with this situation students were allowed to take exams whenever they felt ready regardless of whether they attended lectures or not; many students had studied and learned a lot of chemistry on their own during the war years, particularly those who were lucky enough to find jobs related to their studies or providing them with enough free time.

Laboratories were a special bottleneck. It would have been impossible to run the laboratories for an entire semester in the usual fashion of several hours a week. Instead they were run on a very intensive schedule. Once one got a slot, one worked in the lab the entire time, eight, ten, or more hours a day until one completed the prescribed set of experiments; I do not think that the number of experiments had been in any way reduced.<sup>39</sup> It was of course impossible to attend lectures at the same time, and we relied mostly on mimeographed lecture notes and/or whatever books were available.

Although I used to be a rather poor student in the gymnasium, I loved the study of chemistry and became one of the top students, though not the fastest one, in the class of about 2,000. Some students were able to take advantage of the relaxed rules and graduate in two years or even faster, while I took three and a half years, almost the full normal four year period of specialized chemistry study. Unlike in American universities we had no outside courses except for physics and mathematics, though only as much as was considered necessary for a future chemist. On the other hand, we had numerous courses on a variety of chemical technologies, such as metallurgy, glass and ceramics, organic and inorganic chemicals, dyes, the sugar industry, water technology, explosives, fermentation technology, fuels, and others.

I attended very few lectures during my studies – I found it much more useful and profitable to study from books and occasionally with colleagues, often Milena

<sup>39</sup> Getting a place in the labs was difficult and one had to wait. Once new spaces opened one had to be there on time or one would lose one's chance. I had very little money and was very thrifty, but once, when I was worried that I might be late and miss my chance for a spot in the lab, I even took a cab -- an unbelievable luxury. It was a funny experience. When I told the driver where to take me he became very uneasy and suspicious and then told me that at the beginning of the war he was hailed by somebody to drive to the same chemistry building I wanted him to take me now. When he arrived there, he was asked to wait and after a while the men who hired him returned with an elderly gentleman who carried a bottle of a yellow liquid. He was asked to drive to some place outside of Prague. At one moment, when he drove a bit faster around a curve, the old man, whom the younger one called "Professor" told the driver "You must drive more carefully, we have two liters of nitroglycerine here and we don't want it to explode." The elderly gentleman was Professor Kraus, the chair of the Department of Explosives and he was ordered by the Germans to remove the nitroglycerin -- they themselves did not want to handle it. Only then did the frightened cabbie notice the military vehicles in front and behind him. The nitroglycerin was safely dumped in a remote area, but he never wanted to have anything more to do with any chemist.

Polertova. However, I did attend lectures of Dr. Wichterle on reaction mechanisms. These lectures were not part of the otherwise rigidly prescribed curriculum; it was not a course for which one could get credit or take an exam, but I found the lectures and particularly Wichterle's personality and presentation fascinating. It was an entirely new look at chemistry, not a cataloging of compounds, their preparation and properties, but an attempt to understand the relationship between structure and reactivity, to be able to predict properties and reactions, to bring logic and understanding into a science which up till then was presented largely as a collection of facts. Wichterle also wrote a little book on organic chemistry, which I found most refreshing after the tedious descriptiveness of the principal book I used to study organic chemistry (written by the famous Swiss Nobel prize winner Paul Karrer).

### Eva

Back in Prague we immediately resumed dating, except that there was less time for poetry and philosophy. We were both focused on our studies, Eva catching up for all the years she has missed in the gymnasium and studying Latin and Greek in addition to all the other subjects, and I at first preparing for the "maturity exam" and then starting seriously with my chemistry studies. Eva managed an almost incredible feat – not only did she catch up with most of the material she missed during the five years when she was out of school, but she became one of the two top students in the class and graduated with straight "A's" and, of course, with distinction. But we did find time for long walks, for theater and for movies.

Eva acquired a little dog, a wirehaired fox terrier named Bibi, a daughter of the dog, named Jolly, she had gotten at the beginning of the war and which she had had to give up.<sup>40</sup> Bibi was a regular companion on our walks.

Eva joined us frequently at the Reisers and I became a regular visitor at Eva's home and a regular dinner guest. One time, when I was walking Eva home, after one of the evenings at the Reisers with several other people including Milena

<sup>40</sup> Early after the German occupation, Jews were prohibited from owning dogs or other pets, and the pets they owned had to be destroyed and a document from a veterinarian certifying that he had performed the execution had to be presented to some office, perhaps the police. Eva's mother managed to save Eva's dog, Jolly, by giving it to some gentile friends and taking another dog, which she got from the dog pound, to the veterinarian instead. The veterinarian offered to write the death certificate and to find a new home for the dog for a modest fee. A slight problem arose when he asked for the dog's name and Eva's mother of course did not know it. But she very quickly responded that the dog's name was "Tumas" (Getit), the way one would call the dog in Czech when one wanted to give him something to eat, assuming that every dog would respond to this call.

Pollertova,<sup>41</sup> she started crying and I could not understand what was the matter with her. Finally, she offered to break up with me. I could not understand why and finally she told me that she was convinced that I really loved Milena and she would not want to stand in my way. It took a lot of effort to reassure her that I regarded Milena only as a good colleague but had no interest in her as a woman.

Once I was house-sitting for a friend of my parents, Mrs. Kühnelova, in the Prague suburb Strasnice where I grew up. At that time I was living in Strasnice in uncle Otto's apartment. So I was able to play the host and to invite Eva to join me there – I don't remember what I offered her, but it felt very nice to be together alone in a place which was at least temporarily mine. Being together alone in a house and safe from any intruders did not result in anything we could not do under her mother's guardianship – Eva was far too modest and I far too non-aggressive for that, but it still was a very nice feeling to be just by ourselves.

We spent the summer of 1946, the first summer after my return to Prague, together, of course under her mother's supervision. Some friends lent her mother a nice cottage in the woods some 40 miles from Prague. Eva slept with her mother in a small bedroom and I slept in the large living room, the only other room in the cottage. Because the place was quite isolated and far from any other dwelling, I slept with an ax under my bed, though I have no idea what I would have done with it had an intruder appeared; fortunately, we had no intruders except a dog which jumped through the window right on my stomach when Bibi was in heat.

At the time I was preparing for my math exam and found the standard Czech textbook very difficult to study from by myself. Arnost Reiser lent me an excellent English text, something like "Calculus for Scientists and Engineers" but the problem was that I knew practically no English. Eva knew a lot more and so we studied together every day and she translated for me the difficult phrases such as "if we substitute," "it follows" and so on, and we managed to go through the entire book during those two months. We had a wonderful time; after spending several hours on math and solving the problems for each chapter we would go for long walks in the woods, visit the nearby ruins of castles, Zebrač and Tocič, ride bicycles, pick berries and mushrooms, and mostly talk. One day we tried, completely unsuccessfully, to teach Eva's mother to ride a bicycle, though it seemed ridiculous to us that such an old person could even think of riding a bike – she was 47 at the time.

<sup>41</sup> I met Milena in 1941 in the chemistry course organized by the Jewish community and we used to study together at her home, which was in the part of Prague that was the former Jewish ghetto, and where many Jews who lost their houses and apartments were forced to move, usually into quite cramped conditions. She had a real interest in chemistry and we spent a fair amount of time together, but it was a strictly professional friendship. After the war we started studying together again, this time in her mother's villa, which was returned to them, in a fancy part of Prague not far from the Technical University.



**Eva and Jan dancing**

We somehow forgot to get engaged. It was simply obvious that we would get married as soon as Eva finished school – at the time a married woman would not be allowed to attend the gymnasium – and we set the wedding date for June 26, 1947, exactly three years from our first date in Theresienstadt. It was about a month after Eva’s graduation from the gymnasium and she was the first one of her class to get married except for one classmate who had to get married earlier and was therefore not allowed to graduate. We had a civil wedding in the Clam-Gallas palace in Prague’s Old Town; the palace substituted for the traditional place for civil weddings, the ancient Old Town City Hall which had been seriously damaged during the Prague uprising at the very end of the war. Eva’s entire class came to our wedding. After the wedding we had lunch in Eva’s apartment with just a very few invited guests, uncle Otto, who was my witness, Dr.Kocna, Eva’s witness and an old lawyer friend of her father and the family, his wife, and Eva’s “aunt” Jindra and her son Zdenek. Eva’s gymnasium class came later for dessert. We then left for a short honeymoon in a small pub with a few guest rooms less than 15 miles from Prague. We went for a long walk, ate dinner and finally retired to our room for the wedding night – two totally inexperienced virgins.<sup>42</sup>

Eva’s relative, Otto Munz, a cousin of her father, who had emigrated just before the war to Canada and then had moved to the US where he became a patent lawyer and was reasonably well off, visited Prague shortly before our wedding to take care of some family financial matters. He gave us a generous wedding gift,

<sup>42</sup> Eva’s mother had arranged for me to see their family physician a short time before the wedding to get some basic instructions. I was so naive that I even asked him whether one undresses completely for the intercourse, whereupon he replied “That’s why we have skin so that we would not to be naked.” How he was able to keep a straight face I don’t understand, but he did. A couple of days before the wedding I went to a drugstore and bought a large supply of condoms so that I would not have to suffer through that embarrassing ordeal again too soon.

something like 50,000 Czech Crowns, which we used to pay for a honeymoon trip to Yugoslavia. The trip was organized by the Czechoslovak state travel agency, Cedok, and it was not luxurious. It started with a very long train trip to Yugoslavia in 3rd class compartments with hard wooden benches. With eight people to each compartment, we were fully packed and managed to sleep only by one person putting his head on the other person's lap and the other in turn putting his head on the first person's back. The train trip was followed by a not particularly comfortable bus ride to our destination, Crikvenica, a place where Eva had vacationed as a child with her parents. We were accommodated in a modest hotel with beds that kept collapsing under us. For me it was my first time at the seaside and I remember my first reaction: the sea looks just like I imagined it – no overwhelming impression.

We had a good time. We went for walks, visited the market and the harbor. We swam, although Eva kept very close to shore, constantly afraid of sharks. We lay on the beach in the sun and read Oscar Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan" aloud together in English, dividing the roles. This was the last book we ever read together because Eva found my reading too slow for her. We even went dancing, or more correctly pretended to be dancing, since Eva was not a very good dancer and I had never danced before and thus had not the slightest idea what to do. A picture of us "dancing" in Crikvenica survived. We also drank our first Turkish coffee, took a boat trip to a nearby island (Eva got a bit sea sick), visited Opatia and found the house where her aunt and uncle used to live and which still had the sign "Villa Munz." We took a ship to a nearby town of Novi; I remember that the ship was leaning to one side and I worried what we should do if it capsized. Our visas were not for Yugoslavia, but specifically for Crikvenica and we had to get permission to go for a trip to another town. We even got used to drinking wine mixed with soda water. We had our first glass of it just after we arrived, tired after the long trip and very hot, and we both felt tipsy, but we soon learned and were able to consume much larger amounts – an entire carafe of wine for the two of us – without any effects.

An important political event took place while we were enjoying our honeymoon in Crikvenica. Czechoslovakia was invited to join in the Marshall Plan and accepted. A few days later, the then foreign minister, Jan Masaryk, the son of the founder and first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, Thomas Masaryk, was summoned to Moscow. After he returned – and clearly on orders from Moscow – Czechoslovakia withdrew from the Plan. When this happened we had a foreboding that the future of the Czechoslovak Republic was grim and that we perhaps should leave. But I was in the midst of my university studies and Eva was about to start in the fall, we had just gotten married and somehow hoped that things wouldn't be too bad and that we would have time to decide after we completed our education. It was a bad mistake.

I needed some industrial experience. My cousin Fritz (Bedrich) Treulich became director of a plate glass factory in Olovi, a small town in northern Bohemia, and he invited me to work there during the summer. Shortly after returning from our honeymoon, Eva and I went to Olovi, rented a room, and I started going to the factory while Eva tried for the first time in her life to cook and keep house. Her cooking experience was extremely limited and moreover there was almost nothing one could buy – everything was rationed and the local shops were very poorly supplied.<sup>43</sup> But we had a good time and enjoyed being together. My cousin was not only a very capable engineer, but also fully devoted and fascinated by his work, and took immense pride in the quality of the glass he was producing. He was delighted to be able to show me and sometimes also Eva the entire operation. I liked working in the factory – it was not much work, but I was able to see every aspect of the glass production process and play around in the laboratory and do some analytical work.

It was also an opportunity to impress Eva. One day I left some test tubes with a silver solution standing overnight in the lab and a silver mirror deposited on the walls. When I tried to clean a test tube with a brush, the test tube exploded and so did the next one. So I demonstrated my magic test tubes to Eva and she was duly impressed. At the end I wrote a detailed report on the whole operation for which I later got full credit by the Department of Glass and Ceramics (though credit in Industrial Espionage would have been equally appropriate).

After I finished working in the glass factory we set out for a long hiking trip in the mountains. We had very little money for the entire trip. By misfortune, the first village we came to was the seat of the local glove industry. Eva at that time loved gloves (these days she never wears any gloves unless it is very cold, but at that time wearing gloves even in the summer was considered elegant) and I could not resist buying her not one, but two pairs – they were much cheaper than in Prague. However, this unexpected purchase exhausted almost all our funds, which were supposed to last for the entire trip, and from that moment on we had to be very thrifty indeed. We had some adventures. Twice we managed to walk into some sort of prisoner-of-war or similar camp, but had no problem explaining who we were. We got totally lost in the woods during a persistent rain and learned there that the claim that lichen grows on the northern side of the trees is a myth – it grew on all sides. We descended into a valley and came to a house with some very nice children who would have invited us in, but their parents had gone to town and had locked them in. Finally we arrived in the late afternoon tired and soaked to the bone at a large hotel at the top of the mountain; the hotel was totally devoid of any guests. We asked for the price of a room and then immediately inquired how far it was to the next village. They understood and offered us a room with only one bed for a lower price which we could just manage. They also understood that we would not

be eating there, but we could afford to buy some hot tea. The staff of the hotel was very understanding and nice and even dried all our clothes for us. Another time we walked along the Czechoslovak-German border and met a Czechoslovak border guard on a motorcycle who looked at us with suspicion – people were smuggling things from Germany – but after talking to us for a while he must have decided that we were all right and since there was no place to stay he invited us to his house, where he and his wife offered us a very nice guest bedroom, which we gratefully accepted.

## **Vacations**

Although we studied and worked hard, we always took time for a summer vacation. In 1948 we made a long bicycle tour of “Cesky raj,” (“Czech paradise”) in north-central Bohemia. We had ordinary single-speed bicycles and each of us carried a small backpack; we slept in youth hostels and visited several old castles and ruins. When we stayed in Zelezny Brod we asked about a cheap place to eat, misunderstood the directions and ended up in an empty luxury hotel, the “Krystal Palace.” We were all dusty from the road and in shorts and several waiters in tuxedos descended on us and we were too shy to admit our mistake. So we sat down and ordered the very cheapest food we could find on the menu. But then Eva noticed that they also had fresh strawberries and she wanted them. So we ordered one serving and it came with a finger bowl; we had no idea what to do with it and had lots of fun debating whether we should wash the strawberries or our fingers before or after and in the end decided to use it for all three possibilities.

One of the yearly summer vacations that I remember was with our friends Jiri Mostecky and his wife Eva. We went to Slovakia and hiked in the “Slovensky raj” (Slovak Paradise) and then in the Lower Tatras. Eva Mostecky developed knee problems and had to abandon the trip, and we continued by ourselves. There were no accommodations and we carried no tent or camping equipment except a blanket. The only people living on top of the mountain range were shepherds who during the summer tended sheep on the mountain pastures for an entire village. Their huts were extremely primitive – they had an open fire in a fireplace with no chimney, and the huts were used not just for sleeping for the two or three shepherds, but also, at the same time, as smokehouses for the excellent sheep cheese. We asked and got permission to sleep with them inside on the floor on some brushwood that we gathered in the vicinity. The huts were filled with smoke and our eyes watered whenever we lifted our heads from the floor. In retrospect I am surprised that we did not have the slightest concern sleeping there with a very attractive young woman and an obviously not very robust protector in total isolation with two or three men who lived there for months alone in the mountains, but they behaved like perfect



**At a ball, 1952**

gentlemen. We had to get up very early in the morning, at about five o'clock or earlier, when they began the laborious job of milking their sheep.

In 1950 our lives changed: we got a small, a very small, motorcycle: a 90 cc (5.5 cu in) Manet made in Slovakia. It was very weak and had a strange design – two pistons with a single head and a sparkplug. It was not legal for two people to ride it, but we did anyway. It happened occasionally that we were stopped and Eva had to get off and walk far enough to be out of sight of the police before she could get on again and we could continue. One time she talked us out of a problem and obviously argued so persuasively that the policeman finally asked “are you a teacher?” Already in the first year of ownership of the motorcycle we drove all the way to Slovakia with a labmate from the university, Jiri Vogel, and his then girlfriend Jitka. Jitka got her mother’s permission to go with her boyfriend Jirka only because she would be with Eva, who, as a married woman, was qualified to act as chaperone, even though she was younger than Jitka.<sup>44</sup>

In 1954, I had a bad accident. We wanted to visit aunt Klara and uncle Rudolf, who at that time had moved to a Jewish old peoples’ home in Marianske Lazne. It was already getting dark, but not dark enough to turn on the headlights. Suddenly I saw in front of me the heavy wooden beam of the gate protecting a railroad crossing. It was too late for me to stop and I would have hit it with my neck, which could well have killed me. I managed to swerve, hoping to slide under the bar, but did not quite succeed. I hit my head on the metal frame holding the reflecting glass, but fortunately just between my right eye and the temple. Eva did slide under the gate and was not hurt, but I was unconscious. Someone stopped the train and put me on it and took me to the hospital in the nearest town, Rakovnik. There was a doctor there but no nurse to assist him and so Eva had to help him while he sewed up the gash on my head. I had a concussion and the doctor said that it would be good to put

some ice on my head, but the hospital's ice machine was out of order. So Eva took two buckets and walked across town to the brewery and got ice for me and for some other patients as well. Arnost Reiser offered to come and pick up the motorcycle and drive it back to Prague.

In 1956 we advanced to a larger motorcycle, a CZ 125 cc; CZ stands for Ceskoslovenska Zbrojovka, Czechoslovak Armament Works. We did not enjoy it for long. We were ready to go for a vacation trip, but when I went down to the yard of our apartment house in the morning, the motorcycle was gone. At first I could not believe it; I thought that I must have put it somewhere else, but it had just disappeared without a trace – even though the yard was locked at night. The police just wrote up a report and I heard from them again only once when they wanted to know whether the motorcycle was still missing. We still had our old Manet, and Arnost Reiser offered to come with us. So I rode on the Manet and he and Eva on his CZ 125, and we set out for southern Bohemia. We had a tent I borrowed from a colleague, but we used it only twice. The second time was when we were already near the southern borders in the Sumava mountains. We started a fire and Arnost and I went in search for water. We asked a local woman and she not only directed us to a spring, but also told us that there were some very dangerous soldiers (“they are not our people”) in the area and that just last month a young woman “also from Prague” was killed because she refused their sexual demands. (“Protoze jim nechtela dat” – “she did not want to give them”). We did not want to alarm Eva, but quickly extinguished the fire and were very nervous the whole night whenever we heard an approaching motorcycle, which we assumed must have been a military patrol. After that we slept in small inns. Later we were able to replace the stolen motorcycle with another one of the same make and size.

## **February 1948**

Between 1945 and 1948 Czechoslovakia enjoyed at least partial democracy. Eduard Benes, who had been president before the Munich pact of 1938 was president again, the press was relatively free, people could travel more or less without restrictions. Although most of the pre-war political parties were abolished, ostensibly because of charges of collaboration with the Nazis but in reality because they were unacceptable to the Communists, there were four political parties: the Communists, the Social Democrats, the National Socialists, and a Catholic party, the Peoples Party (Lidova strana). The elections of 1946 were free and the Communists got some forty percent and together with the Social Democrats held a majority. Immediately after the war there was a lot of sympathy for the Communists, partly because they were among the most persecuted of the political movements during the Nazi era, partly because the Soviet army liberated a large part of Czechoslovakia, and mostly

because of good organization and clever propaganda. However, the government was a coalition with ministers from all four officially sanctioned parties. Later, in 1947, the mood of the country started changing. The Communists' grab for power became more apparent and they quickly started losing support. Up to that time the Social Democratic party was led by a crypto-Communist,<sup>45</sup> Zdenek Fierlinger, but he was deposed in a party congress and replaced by an anti-Communist. It became clear that the Communists could not win the next elections and without the support of the Social Democrats could not hold on to power. They therefore triggered a crisis. The non-Communist ministers resigned with the understanding that their resignations would not be accepted by the non-Communist president. The Communists mobilized the "Peoples guards," a private Communist army organized nominally for the protection of factories from saboteurs and enemies of the state. The minister of defense, another crypto-Communist, General Ludvik Svoboda, refused to get the army involved. Under tremendous pressure, the old and ailing President Benes finally gave in and accepted the resignation and named the chairman of the Communist party, Klement Gottwald, as the new prime minister. With that the Communist usurpation of power was complete. Many of the leading persons of the other parties fled, many others were arrested and later tried and sentenced on trumped-up charges, and some were executed.

Neither of us was ever a Communist – I was well immunized against it by Gustav Schorsch. Still since we strongly believed in social justice, we leaned more to the left. Eva joined the youth organization, "Svaz ceskoslovenke mladeze" (Czechoslovak youth alliance) and I actually applied to join the Social Democratic party after the congress in which the pro-Communist leadership was ousted. Fortunately, my application got lost, so that I never became a member. After the Communist takeover the Social Democratic party was simply merged with the Communist party and all members automatically became members of the Communist party unless they took the rather courageous step to refuse and risk retributions. This is what my friend Arnost Reiser did, but very few people showed that much courage. While we disapproved of the tactics of the Communists and particularly of the outrageous appeal to class hatred and envy when they instituted the "Millionaires' tax," a highly punitive and confiscatory tax on people whose property was valued at or over one million Czechoslovak Crowns, we were not opposed to the nationalization of banks and large industrial plants. We liked the concept of free schools and medical care. However, we were always confirmed democrats and in the moment that the Communists usurped power in a totally undemocratic way they lost any remaining sympathies we may have had for them.

<sup>45</sup> By the term crypto-Communist I mean people who were either secret members of the Communist party and paraded as either unaligned (Svoboda) or as members of another party (Fierlinger), or people who simply served the Communists and followed their orders. I have no information whether Fierlinger and Svoboda actually were secret members of the Party, but they certainly did what the Communists wanted them to do.

Eva after the war had a good friend in her class, Helena Pilarova, who was very good to her and helped her to catch up with a lot of material, particularly with Latin. We used to invite her and her boyfriend, Jenda Cap, and they were at our apartment just after the February Communist takeover. We got into a fierce argument during which Cap called me an “utopian idealistic socialist” and we never met again.<sup>46</sup>

The country changed dramatically. The borders were closed; to leave the country one needed an exit permit which was granted only to reliable party members and supporters and almost invariably only to people who would have to leave their families behind as sort of hostages; there was certainly no way for legal emigration. Still, during the first year many people managed to cross the borders and escape at considerable risk, but that became more and more difficult and dangerous as time went on. The media became totally controlled and lied blatantly. There were purges, many students and faculty were dismissed or fired from the universities and the secret police started arresting suspected “enemies of the state.” Ordinarily we too would have probably been expelled from the university as my father was a capitalist, a factory owner, and Eva’s father a lawyer. However, the fact that our fathers were killed in the concentration camps counted as a mitigating circumstance and also allowed us to lie about their professions. My father became a technical clerk and Eva’s father just an employee of a law firm, not an independent lawyer exploiting his employees, in his case, one secretary. People started disappearing for a year or so and then would confess in show trials to things they could not have done. One lived in fear. The society split, non-Communists would not speak with Communists; they could not trust them not to report them or to inform on them. Everybody, or at least the younger people, had to “volunteer” for work “brigades” and undergo indoctrination.

I remember well the first “free elections” under the Communists. There were pre-printed paper ballots with the names of the official candidates of the “National Front,” i.e. Communists, with a token representation from the remaining two other approved political parties, and in addition one received a blank ballot. One was just allowed to cross out the names one did not want to vote for or cast the white ballot as a rejection of the entire slate; no write-ins were permitted. There was no election campaign – nobody could speak out against the Communist government without being immediately arrested for “crimes against the state.” It was strongly encouraged that all inhabitants of each apartment house go voting together. When we entered the election room, a classroom in a nearby school building, we had of course to give our names, which were then checked off, and we received the two ballots. Then we were told: “There is a screen on the other end of the room and you can use it if you want, but most people want to demonstrate their support of

<sup>46</sup> Only at the urging of Eva’s closest friend, Milada Tautermannova, did Eva meet with Helena again in the late nineties, but they never talked about politics again, just old school memories and family matters; by that time Helena was divorced.

the National Front and cast their ballots openly directly into the ballot box right here.” And, of course, there were many people watching and taking notes. I was not very brave, but still did not want to turn in the ballot as I was asked to; instead I went behind the screen. As far as I remember, there was no pencil there, but I came prepared: as a futile gesture I crossed the whole ballot with a little piece of lead broken off a pencil. I stuck the piece of lead under my thumb nail so that I could cross the ballot by just drawing my thumb over it. It did not make the slightest difference: the official slate won by over 99% even in small villages where people knew exactly how people voted.

Everybody had friends or relatives who were in prison. Eva’s mother’s cousin, Pavel Hasterlik, who fought with the British army against Germany and was a very religious Protestant who worked for the YMCA was sentenced to some twenty years. My friend, Vladimir Tomek, with whom I shared a lab as a graduate student at the university and who later worked at the Ministry of Chemistry, was a Social Democrat who refused to join the Communist party. He was sentenced on ridiculous trumped up charges of spying for the US to many years, most of which he spend in uranium mines in Jachymov.<sup>47</sup> Later, when I already worked in the Academy, I had a technician, Karel Eisler, whose father was imprisoned during the Slansky affair – he was accused and convicted of negotiating an allegedly unfavorable trade agreement with the British, an agreement which the government accepted and signed. A colleague of Eva, Erika Hach and her husband were imprisoned for trying to leave the country illegally while on vacation in Yugoslavia. The father of another colleague, Josef Rudinger, who was actually a confirmed Communist himself, was also in prison for many years. So was the father of Eva’s classmate, Irena Zertova-Poduskova; her father was a director of a factory where something went wrong and, of course, this could not have been just an accident, it had to have been an act of sabotage and a scapegoat had to be found. The brother of my student Frank Mares was in prison for religious activities – a group of Catholics got together to discuss

<sup>47</sup> His wife, who had to support herself and their little daughter, could not get a job as a wife of a “traitor” until she divorced him – she remarried him immediately after he was released from prison in an amnesty in 1960. When I was in England I bought a nice little dress for their daughter and we even dared to invite Tomek’s wife to our apartment to give it to her. The fact that we felt quite nervous and at the same time very brave for inviting the wife of a convicted spy and even brought her a gift, speaks for itself of the atmosphere we lived in. Tomek’s real “crime” was that he had not informed on his wife’s cousin, who had asked him for information which Tomek had refused to give him. The cousin had been recruited by the Communist secret service by threats and intimidation. He did not have enough strength to refuse, but was so enraged that he offered to provide information to Radio Free Europe as well as sort of revenge; he was caught and implicated Tomek. Because of his exposure to radiation in the uranium mines Tomek never dared to have another child. In 1968 he and his family managed to escape to Ireland where we visited them in 1980.

religion; any unauthorized group gatherings were viewed as dangerous. The father of a colleague was in jail allegedly because he participated in some silly seance. The sister of one of the Institute's secretaries was in jail, too. These are just the cases we were personally aware of, and we had only a very limited circle of friends and acquaintances.

One lived in fear. For instance, once I was studying at home with a colleague late into the night and suddenly the door bell rang and when we opened the door a policeman appeared. We were petrified, but it turned out that my colleague's wife, worried when her husband did not come home, called the nearby police station, as we did not have a phone.

We had to go to celebrations such as marching every May 1, the Communist Labor Day, and even to punch the clock, although it was a holiday and the celebration was "voluntary." One had to parrot the stupid phrases and express confidence in the party and in the Soviet Union. Most of all one had to very careful what one said in front of the children.

### Graduate Studies

When I finished with my "Ing." (Engineer) degree in 1949 I wanted, of course, to continue towards a doctoral degree and approached then Docent Otto Wichterle. The first problem he gave me was to determine the velocity of a critical reaction in the manufacture of the European version of Nylon, polycaprolactam, namely the Beckmann rearrangement of cyclohexanone oxime into caprolactam.<sup>48</sup> Industrially, the reaction was done in a batch process and Wichterle wanted data which could be used for a continuous operation. In this way I was introduced to my first kinetic measurements. Wichterle himself knew very little about kinetics and I had to discover almost everything for myself, which was certainly a good experience.

It was just at that time that a new system of graduate support was being established, the so called "aspirantura," a three year fellowship for graduate studies. The principal driving force behind the establishment of this fellowship system, patterned after a Soviet model, was professor Frantisek Sorm, then Professor of Organic Technology but also Secretary General of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and soon to become director of the Institute of Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry of the Academy. In the beginning, all the fellowship holders

<sup>48</sup> Wichterle discovered this polymer independently during the war. Only when he filed for a patent, did he learn that there was already a secret German patent for the same polymer and polymerization process. Under Wichterle's guidance Czechoslovakia shortly after the war quickly started manufacturing polycaprolactam in quite substantial amounts. The polymer was first known under the name of WINOP for Wichterle and his two coworkers Novotny and Prochazka, and later as Silon.

or “aspirants” worked with Sorm and I was – I believe – the first one (at least in chemistry) who applied for the fellowship while studying with somebody else. Eventually I or Wichterle succeeded, but it took over half a year working without financial support. Later professor Wichterle managed to get me some money from the industrial plant which benefitted from my measurements to compensate me for my unpaid period.

I finished the work relatively quickly, in about two years, and submitted my thesis for a Ph.D. equivalent, the “Doctor of Technical Sciences.” I then received a warning from the professor of organic chemistry, Rudolf Lukes, that I would be drafted for two years of military service immediately after receiving my degree. So I withdrew the thesis and asked Professor Wichterle for another project, specifying that this time I would like to work on a more organic chemistry subject. Wichterle had an enormously creative mind and hundreds of research ideas. So he brought me a full drawer of index cards with research ideas and asked me to select a problem myself. He made fun of me for my preference for theoretical concepts and as I was going through the index cards he would stand behind me and occasionally pull out a card saying that this could be potentially useful and therefore was something I would be interested in. I finally selected a diene addition to thionylamines, a problem which led to a new but totally useless class of heterocyclic compounds.<sup>49</sup> I still remember the thrill when I came to the lab one morning and found the flask, in which I carried out the reaction the previous day, filled with beautiful crystals of a new compound, a compound nobody before me had ever seen. I imagined that it was a feeling like an explorer must have had when discovering a new land.

I completed the work in 1953, but submitted only the earlier work on the Beckmann rearrangement for my thesis, somehow thinking that I might use the diene addition work for some later purpose. The defense of the thesis was carried out in a rather formal way, open to the public and with quite a lot of students coming to watch. There was an appointed “opponent” who criticized the work and I had to respond, but I did get his criticism ahead of time and thus could prepare my answer. Then there were questions from the committee and finally from anybody in the audience. My opponent, a noted professor of physical chemistry, Rudolf Brdicka from the Charles University, was in fact quite critical of the work and I am afraid that I was rather aggressive in my response. Of course, he really understood kinetics and I was completely self-taught. I was the first person who graduated under the new system at the Chemical Faculty of the Technical University and received the degree of “Candidate of Sciences,” equivalent to a Ph.D.

<sup>49</sup> Wichterle wanted to know whether compounds with the structure  $O=S=N-R$  would form five-membered rings like sulfur dioxide  $O=S=O$  or six-membered rings like nitroso compounds,  $O=N-R$ ; I found that the new compounds had a six- rather than a five-membered ring.

## Military service

JR

As an “aspirant” I was entitled to abbreviated military service, something similar to the ROTC, and as chemists we were assigned to the chemical corps. We had military lectures every Saturday and sometimes some rudimentary drill training, and then spent two summers in the barracks. Our military commander was a Major Felcman, who was a chemist himself, but graduated from only a high school level chemical institution. He was impressed that we not only had engineering degrees but were doing research and working towards doctorates. He treated us very well and with a certain level of deference. He himself had a checkered history. He served in the Czechoslovak army, then in the Slovak Army, fought against the Russians, then managed to cross lines and to join the Czechoslovak units fighting on the Soviet side against Germany. On one occasion he gave us a fairly detailed account and instructions on how to run over to the enemy, hardly a part of the standard military curriculum. On another occasion he told us that he was supposed to lecture to us about the organization of the platoon, but that the professional officers are so stupid that in the case of a war we would have to take over anyway and so he would rather tell us about the organization of divisions and brigades. We were all very fond of him, but that fondness certainly did not extend to any other members of his staff.

We had a nice example of military stupidity. We got a document that was classified “top secret” about the military use of poison gases – except that it was a word-by-word translation of an article I read earlier in the American chemical journal “Chemical Reviews” available in every science library around the world. Perhaps the army was worried that the enemy could find out that somebody in the army could read and even translate from English.

The first summer we were in Jaromer for basic training and the noncommissioned officers and junior officers hated us for getting away with such a short time of service and so they tried to make things difficult for us. For instance, when we failed to sing loudly enough while marching, they ordered us to don our gas masks and sing with them on. But overall it was not too bad; we were among friends and colleagues. One serious incident occurred when one of our colleagues wrote a card home in which he disclosed important military secrets, such as the fact that we had to get up at whatever time it was and, what was far worse, that our officers are idiots – just imagine if this information got into the hands of the enemy. He dutifully presented it for censorship – he was clearly not too bright – and the young officers saw a wonderful case which they could prosecute and get him sent to a military prison. He was saved by Major Felcman, who yelled at him non-stop for ten minutes in front of the entire unit and then announced that his transgression was so severe that he did not have enough authority to handle it himself and would have to take it back to Prague to present to his superiors – and that was the last time anybody heard about it.

Because we served only during the summer and only for two months at a time, we did not have our heads shaved as ordinary recruits did. However, we were expected to have reasonably short haircuts. During one inspection a friend of mine, Jaroslav Plesek, was ordered to have his hair trimmed, but he somehow forgot or perhaps ignored the order. The next week he was ordered to have his head completely shaven as a punishment while I at the same time was ordered to have my hair trimmed. We went together to the barber: Plesek sat down in front of the mirror, closed his eyes and did not open them until he was done and could turn around without seeing himself in the mirror. In the next mail he received a tress of hair from his girl friend who cut it off as a sign of sympathy.

I was not a good soldier. One time they dragged us through mud and then ordered us to clean up and appear in formation in the yard of the barracks in about five minutes. We had high boots and we were not supposed to wash them with water – I still don't know how one was supposed to get the wet mud off – but everybody of course did. My problem was that I have a rather high instep and my boots were anyway quite tight. When the leather got soaked washing off the mud I managed to put on my left boot, but try as I might, the right one would not go in. I finally appeared late in the yard while everybody else was already standing in formation, with one boot and one sneaker. I was so agitated that I put my rifle in my left hand and saluted with my right – one was not supposed to salute when one held a rifle and it always had to be in the right hand. There was a lot of laughter. Another time we were practicing throwing dummy hand grenades; the next day it was the real thing, but I forgot to notice that the direction where we were to throw the grenades had changed from the first day. I threw my grenade in the old direction – right at the place where the officers stood watching our performance. What saved them and me was that I was a very poor thrower, so that the grenade metal band attached to the safety pin did not have time to unwind and the grenade therefore did not explode. They had to call in a demolition expert to detonate it.

Our second summer training was in Liberec and there I had the unpleasant experience of having to use a flamethrower, a really frightening weapon. We also practiced chemical decontaminations of items supposedly contaminated by mustard gas. The work had to be done in very heavy rubber suits, gloves, boots and in gas masks; it was not a very pleasant experience in the summer heat, particularly when we had to run in these outfits.

The third summer we were again in Jaromer, but this time I was assigned to the laboratory and we had a very easy time. The commanding officer of the lab brought a big bottle of denatured alcohol and our job was to purify it so that he – and we – could drink it. We were all experts in this decontamination procedure. One very onerous task was that we had to play canasta, a rather boring card game, with him for hours on end. Otherwise we played around with the chemical detection of nerve gases and saw a pretty frightening demonstration of the effects of a nerve gas on a poor dog.

## The Academy

When I finished my graduate studies with Otto Wichterle and received my Ph.D. equivalent degree, Candidate of Sciences, I hoped that I could stay with Wichterle, but that was out of the question – firstly because I was not politically qualified to deal with impressionable young students, and secondly because Wichterle now headed the Department of Macromolecular Chemistry and I had avoided learning anything about polymers and was really interested in organic reaction mechanisms.

Wichterle recommended me to Professor Sorm who headed the Institute of Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. He was a Communist and a very influential man who also served as General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and had been one of the prime movers in establishing it. He later became President of the Academy. Every job application had to go through a Communist Party personnel officer whose sole job was to see that only politically reliable people could get into any position of importance or significance. My application was rejected on political grounds in spite of excellent professional recommendations. A short time later there was a change in the party personnel officer and I got the job after all. I heard different versions of what actually happened. One was that my mother-in-law employed a seamstress who had some connection to the personnel officer. The other was that Sorm really wanted me and managed to get rid of the personnel officer who refused my application.

In any case I started working at the Academy in the summer of 1953 just at the time of the “currency reform,” during which a very small amount of old Czechoslovak Crowns were exchanged at a 5 to 1 exchange rate, but larger amounts at only 50 to 1, meaning that most of the old money became worthless. Bank savings deposits were treated a bit better. My first memory of coming to the lab was that I could not open a drawer and asked someone in the lab next door to help me. He said “Oh, you just have to jam a scrap of paper into it,” took out a 1,000 Crown note and stuck it into the lock. This was Frank Sipos, who later escaped in an interesting way.<sup>50</sup> He now lives in New Jersey and we are still friends.

<sup>50</sup> In 1965 Frank and his family managed to go for vacation to Yugoslavia and to get to a resort directly on the Italian border. One day he ordered his wife and children to collect sea shells and drift “accidentally” into the Italian side. Once they were there, he started running toward the border with a Yugoslav border guard in pursuit. He tripped and fell, but fortunately directly over the border and landed on the Italian side, and was saved by an Italian border guard. He wrote me a detailed account of his escape and I just had the letter with me when we were passing through Boston on our way for a hiking vacation in the White Mountains. We were invited to a party at the Westheimers and I regaled the company with the story of Sipos’s escape; Professor Woodward immediately offered Sipos a position in the Woodward Institute in Basel, Switzerland, but Sipos preferred to find a job in America.

I was in the Section of Organic Synthesis headed by Jiri Sicher, who studied in England during the war. He and Josef Rudinger, who also got his education in England during the war, and who was in charge of the peptide section, were unquestionably the best chemists of the Institute and also did a great job of bringing the foreign language Czechoslovak chemical journal "Czechoslovak Chemical Communications" to world standards.<sup>51</sup>

Sorm asked me to "look into chromic acid oxidation," because chromic acid was being used in the manufacturing of progesterone from cholesterol, and they encountered some difficulties during the oxidation step. I decided to start looking at a very simple model compound, methylcyclohexane. That started my life-long interest in oxidation chemistry and specifically in chromic acid oxidations. Sorm was very different from Wichterle – he just selected a broad field without specifying any particular approach, while Wichterle had numerous detailed ideas although he would not mind at all if I selected my own. In any case Sorm did not object to my approach, which launched me into physical organic chemistry, and he did not complain that I never came anywhere close to providing him with specific advice on how to improve the yields of progesterone.

Later I branched out into different types of compounds including alcohols; the chromic oxidation of alcohols played a very important role in my life later on. Through the oxidation of tertiary alcohols I became acquainted with the work of William Sager. I later met him and in 1966 he hired me to the new Chicago campus of the University of Illinois and we became very good friends. I am indebted to him for the great opportunities Chicago has offered me. The oxidation of a secondary alcohol, isopropyl alcohol, brought me at first into conflict, then into collaboration and finally friendship with Frank Westheimer and his wife Jeanne. Frank brought us to America and had an enormous influence on our life after our escape from Czechoslovakia.

The Institute was a good place to work. As part of the Academy, it had a preferred status; we had a far better supply of chemicals and equipment than universities, no teaching responsibilities, and very little distraction from research. That does not mean that research equipment was freely available to us. Although we had more of it than the universities, there was only one infrared and one UV-visible spectrophotometer for the entire institute and they were under the control of specialists who would also interpret the spectra. When I needed to use the UV-visible spectrophotometer extensively, I got permission to use it by myself at night, after normal working hours, but I lost my permit when it was found out that I was doing my measurements in acetic acid, the vapors of which were not exactly beneficial to the instrument.

<sup>51</sup> Both Sicher and Rudinger left the country after the Soviet invasion in 1968 and settled in Switzerland and both died at a relatively young age of cancer like many other Czech organic chemists. During WWII Rudinger served in the Royal Air Force and hunted German submarines; he liked to tell stories about his war time experiences.

While the institutes of the Academy were developing and expanding, the universities were degraded to mere teaching institutions with primary emphasis on the political correctness and loyalty of the faculty, and very little emphasis on or opportunities for research. Most of the best people went over to the Academy, leaving the universities in rather sad shape – particularly since the institutes of the Academy also had the right to train graduate students and award advanced degrees. Graduate training did not involve any formal course work or classes, just the presentation of a significant enough piece of research and its defense. The only formal exam was in Marxism-Leninism<sup>52</sup> and a Russian language exam – I am not sure, but a second foreign language may also have been required.

I was essentially free to do whatever I wanted so long as I got reasonable results and published.<sup>53</sup> I got a technician and later a graduate student (“aspirant”), Frank Mares, with whom we became good friends and who later also escaped to the US and had a very successful career in industry.

In addition to my principal research work I became interested in building distillation columns and together with a friend, Jiri Farkas, built a few. I was also in charge of the library, i.e., advising the library staff and trying to help with acquisitions through exchanges.

Because of my interest in acidities and acid catalysis, Milos Hudlicky asked me to contribute a volume on acid catalyzed reactions to his extensive series of books on preparative chemical reactions.<sup>54</sup> I accepted the offer jointly with my friend

<sup>52</sup> When I was an “aspirant,” i.e. a graduate student with a fellowship, I took my Marxism exam with a group of other graduate students. One of them was somewhat older, already with several children, not very bright, and terribly nervous and scared. The examiner was very kind to him and asked him the easiest question. He read to him the beginning of Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto “A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of Communism” and asked him to identify the source. The student did not know. So the examiner told him the source and asked him to comment on the present situation. The poor guy thought for a while and then suddenly burst out: “It is still haunting, particularly the farmers.” Although, not surprisingly, he did not pass the exam on that day, the examiner arranged for a private retaking and then passed him.

<sup>53</sup> The rule in the Institute was that papers had to be presented to the director, Prof. Sorm, without authors and he would decide who the authors were. It was not as bad as it sounds – he would never put somebody on the paper who did not participate in it, but he wanted to decide on which papers he would put his own name and he was also opposed to the inclusion of the names of technicians. In my case he put his name only on my first paper. Malicious gossip had it that he put his name only on papers he understood.

<sup>54</sup> Hudlicky was a docent (something between Assistant and Associate Professor) at the Chemical faculty, but was later dismissed for political reasons and found work in the Research Institute for Pharmacy and Biochemistry, the same institute in which Eva was employed. He was an incredibly active person, wrote several books himself and edited this large series. He and his family escaped in 1968 and he became a professor at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. He specialized in fluorine chemistry.

Jiri Novak and from then on every week we spent three long evenings working in the library after hours. I enjoyed working on the book and enjoyed also the many discussions I had with Novak, who was a Catholic intellectual educated by the Jesuits. I never finished the book. When we escaped in 1960, Novak was informed that the book could not be published with my name and so he found another collaborator, Jiri Zemlicka, with whom he completed and published the book.<sup>55</sup>

This was actually not my first experience with book writing. I once reproached Wichterle that his very original book on organic chemistry had no references. So, when a new edition was due he asked me whether I would be willing to supply the references and I gladly accepted. He brought me drawers of index cards which he used in writing the book and I had to research each compound or reaction to find the original reference. It was not easy; Wichterle's notes were most sketchy – sometimes the journal with page, sometimes a name, sometimes just the reaction. It was a lot of work, but it gave me pleasure to do it.

## Children

While we both were studying, we did not want to start a family, but after Eva graduated with her Ing. degree and started working at the Research Institute for Pharmacy and Biochemistry in 1951 and I was approaching the end of my graduate studies, we decided to go ahead. However, Eva was unable to become pregnant. I

<sup>55</sup> Thinking of my friend Jiri Novak brings to mind two dangerous incidents. One was after he was expelled from the University and prohibited access to it -- he already had his Ph.D but was still doing research with Professor Wichterle. He came to me and asked me whether I would allow him to use my lab to finish a synthesis which needed just one more step; I agreed, of course. Normally, nobody would have paid any attention, but unfortunately, the experiment resulted in an explosion which shuttered several windows, and started a fire. If it had been established that I, a graduate student, illegally allowed an unauthorized person who had been banned from the University to use my lab, it could have led to my expulsion. Fortunately for me, Professor Wichterle saved me and Novak by accepting responsibility and falsely claiming that he had given him permission. The second incident happened when I was already in the US, at Harvard, and a friend told me that he was going to Prague and asked if I wanted to send something. I remembered that Jiri used to talk about curry, the Indian spice, which was not available in Prague. I don't remember why he was interested in it, but I bought a jar of it and gave it to my friend Bob Wall and asked him to give it to Jiri when he visited the Institute where I used to work. Bob did not meet him, but was so intent on delivering the package that he somehow got in touch with the Czech underground and asked them for help. Fortunately, they were wise enough to turn him down. I shuddered when I thought how I could have gotten my friend in contact with the underground and arrested because of a silly little gift. It taught me how impossible it was even for a very clever and educated American used to a free society to understand the conditions in a totalitarian police state. Like many of my other Czech chemist friends, Jiri Novak died of cancer at an early age.

had my sperm count tested and was proud to be told that “I could serve as village stud bull.” Eva was originally told that because she spent her developing years growing up in the camp, her uterus was so underdeveloped that she might never be able to have children or would have a number of miscarriages. She was put on hormones – these were not synthetic ones, but natural ones isolated from the urine of pregnant women – and we were told to have sex as often as possible. After a while Eva’s mother noticed that Eva was getting sick, vomiting and after a short time eating again happily and made the correct diagnosis. At the same time Eva also managed to do a very nice piece of research in the course of trying to reproduce a synthesis described in a paper published in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, the prime American chemical journal. She was able to prove that the paper was wrong and provide the correct interpretation and identification of the products. She submitted this work as her Ph.D. thesis. She received her Ph.D (called Doctor of Technical Sciences) while already significantly pregnant – perfect timing.

We had a literature club with two chemical friends, Jiri Novak, who worked in the lab next door to me at the Academy, and Karel Syhora, who, being considered politically unreliable, found refuge in some kind of institute for egg research. We would meet regularly every Tuesday in the home of one of us and report on interesting journal articles – we had divided the principal chemical journals among us and each of us was responsible for a set of journals. On Tuesday, January 12, 1954, Eva did not come to our meeting and when I came home she was not there either. I was surprised and asked where she was and her mother responded: “you can guess three times.” We did not have a due date and Eva worked the entire time, so I was a bit unprepared. I went to the hospital, but there was nothing I could do; men were not allowed in – in fact I could not see her until she was well enough to walk down to the visiting room and I could not see the baby until a week later when Eva came home. So I just walked aimlessly back and forth in front of the hospital for some time and eventually went home and the next day went to work where I got a phone call that a boy was born at about 10 AM.

I was a very enthusiastic father. We had an experienced lady give Martin<sup>56</sup> his first bath and to demonstrate to us how to do it, but it was I who gave him his second bath the next evening. Eva had very little milk and I assisted in feeding, which in the beginning was complicated: we had to weigh the baby before and after the attempted breast feeding and then prepare the appropriate amount of formula to make up for the mother’s missing milk. Later, after Eva developed a bad

<sup>56</sup> I remember that we were definitely looking for an “international” name, not one which would be unique to the Czech language. The same consideration applied later in naming Thomas, although the Czech version is missing the “h.” Besides, Tomas became a very popular name among those who remembered and admired the democracy of pre-war Czechoslovakia, because it was the first name of its founder, President Masaryk.

inflammation of the breast and could not breast feed at all, it became simpler. Since Eva was an evening person, but had difficulties waking up in the morning, whereas I was the exact opposite, she took care of the baby in the evening and late into the night and I, who woke up much faster when Martin cried in the early morning hours, fed and changed him then.

Martin was born in January and it was a rather cold winter. Our room was heated by a coal stove, but it was not warm enough and we used to put burning candles around him on the table, when we were changing him after the bath, to keep him warm. We, particularly Eva, were very concerned about infections and we all would go near the baby only with a face mask covering our mouth and nose; Eva even insisted on boiling and ironing the diapers for many weeks.

At one point I was very worried about Martin's hearing. He reacted nicely when he could see us and followed our movement, but lay totally undisturbed when I clapped my hands behind him or rattled keys or threw them on the floor; this lasted for quite some time and I was afraid that he might be deaf.

We borrowed a little wooden bed with wheels from some friends. Unfortunately, Martin developed the habit of sleeping in a kneeling position and rocking back and forth in his sleep with the result that the bed rolled all over the hardwood floor of our room, making a lot of noise and interfering with our sleep. In retrospect I don't understand why I didn't do anything about it, such as removing the wheels, but I probably did not dare to do something with a borrowed piece of furniture.

We had no difficulties conceiving our second child, but there was a serious problem carrying him to term. Eva started bleeding very strongly and had to be hospitalized and was essentially immobilized for an extended period of time. When Thomas was born it turned out that one of his feet was folded upwards, touching his shin. We were obviously quite concerned, but several weeks of regular exercise took care of the problem. Unlike Martin, he was quite a nervous child and would react to any sound in the room.

We were very lucky with both our boys, experiencing none of the problems so many other parents complained about, and we had a lot of fun with them. Actually I seem to have offended some people by claiming that we wanted children simply for fun – it seemed like a frivolous and not dignified enough reason.

Since Eva was working and we lived in my mother-in-law's apartment, Eva's mother took care of the children during the day time and also for most of the summer when she moved with them to the small village of Skryje, some 40 miles from Prague. At first we rented some rooms and later a dilapidated old farmhouse. We visited every weekend on our motorcycle. Martin loved the motorcycle and, when we did not watch him, would lick the dusty red reflecting glass on the rear fender. We used to take the children to the river with Eva holding Thomas on her lap while I had Martin sitting in front of me on the gas tank and the dog, Bibi, running behind us, a mode of transportation not too highly recommended by safety experts; however, we would not take the children on the motorcycle on normal highways.

I have one precious memory of that time. I was going for a walk with Martin, I would guess that he was perhaps five years old, and I was telling him about the moon and the fact that (at that time) nobody knew how the other side of the moon looked. Martin asked “Nobody knows it? Not even you?”<sup>57</sup>

The Academy of Sciences owned an old castle in Bechyne and a small chateau in Liblice and employees of the Academy could get permits for vacation stays there. We were in Bechyne with Martin in 1955 when Eva was pregnant with Thomas; it was just at this time that Martin insisted on riding on her shoulders rather than mine. It was also at the time when we tried to potty train him. He would happily sit on the potty for infinite periods of time just sliding around but refusing to do what was expected of him and then he even refused to eat and got us all terribly worried. The people in the restaurant tried to prepare all kinds of things for him to entice him to break his hunger strike.

At the time, at the age of about 18 months, his vocabulary was very limited. He divided animals into two categories: large ones were “haff,” the Czech sound for a dog’s bark, and the small one were “pipi,” the Czech children’s name for birds. Horses, cows and deer were all haffs, birds and cats were pipis. The hallways of the castle were decorated with hunting trophies and Martin would point to every mounted head of a deer and happily yell “haff” until we came to the library, where a bust of Stalin immediately evoked another enthusiastic cry “haff, haff.” We quickly took him out of the library.

In the winter of 1956 I took Martin for a short vacation to the hotel Martinovka in the Krkonose mountains. Eva could not take so many days off and so she stayed in Prague with Thomas and joined us only for a few days towards the end of our stay. The weather was miserable and Martin and I had to stay inside for several days. Finally I could not take it any more, and took Martin out for a walk. We followed a trail marked by poles sticking out of the snow some 50 ft apart. I planned a triangular route first uphill and then on another trail downhill towards a third trail which would bring us back to the hotel. The walk up went well, but when we turned in a sharp angle downhill there was a strong wind blowing into our faces and Martin started crying. I covered his face by some plastic and carried him and then suddenly the trail markings disappeared. I became terribly worried – I did not know whether I should turn back and retrace the entire trip in the deteriorating weather or continue in the hope of finding the markings and the trail again. I thought of what would Eva say if we got lost and if Martin or both of us froze to death there. As we are both here, it must be obvious that I did find the trail again and we made it back safely, but I experienced some very frightening moments.

<sup>57</sup> This level of confidence in my omniscience did not last too long. On another walk, this time in Bethesda, Maryland, some five years later, Martin asked me a series of questions which I could not answer and had to admit my ignorance. After a while he commented “Daddy, besides chemistry, you really don’t know much!”

I remember another time in Bechyne – probably in 1958 when Thomas was two and a half years old. We were sitting on the bank of the river and Thomas was holding a twig over the water and “fishing.” He leaned over too far and suddenly fell into the river head first and got stuck with his head in the mud – he did not have a chance to utter a sound. Fortunately, I was sitting right next to him and grabbed his legs which were sticking up and pulled him out. The same year both boys got infected with sores, impetigo, and I remember bandaging them and feeding them yeast. We had a lot of experience with impetigo, it was very common in Terezin and was believed to be the result of vitamin B deficiency; yeast is a rich source of the B vitamin.

Here is another memory from this early childhood period which I found funny. Martin was looking at a box of chocolates which he got the previous evening from some visiting friends, and suddenly turned to me “Daddy, I bet this chocolate won’t be here tomorrow!” “How come?” “Our Mommy is a big chocolate eater” (Nase mama je velky zavec na cokoladu). Martin did not care for chocolate that much and it was not that healthy for him anyway.

### **The Hungarian Uprising**

1956 started as an exciting year. First came Khrushchev’s “secret speech” exposing Stalin, then a Polish mass strike and the return of Gomulka to power and finally the Hungarian revolution. Things there progressed rapidly. Hungary freed political prisoners, allowed other parties besides the Communist to form and have a real say and finally Hungary even left the Warsaw Pact. We followed this progress with great hopes and immense sympathies. The Communists were very nervous and finally started preparing us for the loss of Hungary. We were elated. Then came the Russian invasion, the revolution was crushed and we were devastated. The Party called a meeting of all members of every section of the Institute, and a Party representative, in our case in the Section of Organic Synthesis it was Jiri Farkas, an otherwise thoroughly decent and nice man although a Party member, read to us a “proposed” version of a cable to be sent to the Hungarian Academy of Science. “We, the members of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, congratulate our colleagues in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for their victory over the counterrevolution.” We were in the small office of the section chief, Jiri Sicher, and were asked to vote. Nobody dared to say a word, nobody dared to vote against, nobody even dared to abstain – everybody raised a hand voting in favor of sending the cable. I never felt as humiliated as then. I voted, as did all my colleagues, most of whom had the same feelings as I, in favor of something I found deeply offensive and on our part was the height of cowardice. The Hungarians risked their lives and many were killed, many more imprisoned, persecuted, and the lucky ones, who managed to escape to the

West, had to leave everything behind – and we did nothing, did not even protest and did not even have the guts not to raise our hands. I felt that it was morally the bottom to which one could descend, the ultimate degradation. This became one of the principal reasons why I did not want to live under a regime which had forced me to behave this way and much less did I want our children to grow up in such an environment.

### **Secret Police**

One day, probably in 1956, I was asked to come to the entrance of the Institute. There was a gentleman there who introduced himself as Mr. Schuh and told me that he was from the Ministry of the Interior and that he would like to talk to me. I had no idea what that could be all about nor did I know what the Ministry of the Interior actually meant. I said, yes, of course we can talk. No, he did not want that, he wanted me to come to the Ministry office the next day. I did. Besides “Mr. Schuh” there was another man there and they were quite friendly, they offered me a cup of coffee and started asking me lots and lots of questions which did not make much sense.

They wanted to know all about me – what I did in the Institute, what I did privately, where I had travelled, how I liked the Institute, whether I wanted to be a professor, whether I wanted to have a car, what I thought about the director of the Institute, Academician Sorm, whether I did not feel unappreciated and overlooked, and dozens and dozens of other questions I can no longer remember. I responded that, no, I did not feel that I was being discriminated against, that I had been treated very well, no, I did not want to be a professor, no, I had no interest in owning a car, everything was just fine. Then they started asking me whether I could help them. I replied that my expertise was so narrowly specialized that it would be most unlikely that they could use it, but that they should ask the presidium of the Academy which would be able to direct them to the most competent expert in any given field. Yes, they knew all that, but they were particularly interested in me because I was such an outstanding scientist – which was of course nonsense, I was just one of many scientific workers working in one of the many institutes of the Academy. One or the other of the two men left the room from time to time and then returned. The conversation went around in circles and did not lead anywhere and, finally, after several hours they let me go. Because of all the questions they asked about the Institute and about Sorm I reported it to him and I also talked about this strange experience with friends and colleagues. Friends told me that I was a fool, that the “Ministry of the Interior” in fact meant the Secret Police, and that they are obviously trying to recruit me as an informer. The only strange thing was that usually they would have something to blackmail and to threaten a prospective informer with, and I was not aware of anything of that sort. At that time I heard of a number of people who had been pressured to act as informers. It became clear to me that the

Secret Police managed to form an extremely dense network of informers, albeit unwilling ones, throughout the entire country.

They soon called me back for another meeting. This time they started rather aggressively. They claimed that they had told me that our meeting and its content had to be kept absolutely secret and that I violated that secrecy. It was not true – they had not said anything of this sort during the first meeting. Then they ordered me to prepare and sign a handwritten statement that I understood the secrecy of our meetings and that I was not to divulge them to anybody under any circumstances. After that they calmed down and continued the conversation from the first meeting only with more emphasis on “helping” them in their work. During the first meeting I must have told them that I was in charge of the Institute’s library. This time they brought some small clippings from chemical journals and wanted me to identify the journals from which they were taken, obviously a trivial task which I found hard to refuse without telling them clearly and openly that I would have nothing to do with them – and I was not brave enough to do that. “Mr. Schuh” gave me a code name by which I should call him, but I never used it and never called him.

The next meeting was in a coffee house in the “Army House.” I don’t remember anything particular about that meeting. Then came another meeting in the building of the Ministry. Suddenly the tone changed dramatically: no pleasantries, no coffee, just a glass of water after some time. “We had so much confidence in you and you have disappointed us. We know everything. Confess!!” I had no idea what I should confess to. Although there was no threat of physical violence, the environment was very threatening and intimidating, and I was scared. I eventually convinced them – but it took a very long time – that I really did not know what crime I had committed and what I should confess to. Finally, they pulled out an envelope which looked as if it had been rolled over by a muddy wheel of a cart and then showed me a letter I had written to my cousin’s husband and the microfilm which had been enclosed with it. The letter was not damaged and showed no sign of having been run over by a wheel.

The origin of the letter was the following: My cousin’s husband, Dr. Otto Saxl, a pediatrician, was director of the Childrens’ Hospital in Brno and had many years earlier earned the title of “Docent,” meaning that he was qualified and entitled to teach at a university. He was very interested in becoming a professor. We visited him and my cousin Hedda one summer, and he asked me whether I could get him a copy of a draft of a new law regulating the awarding of academic ranks and positions. This draft was just being circulated at universities for “comments and inputs,” an obviously totally pro forma activity. Saxl’s relations with the Brno Medical School were not entirely friendly and so he turned to me. I promised that I would try to get it. Since I was no longer at the university myself, I did not have direct access to the document, but I asked my friend Jiri Mostecky if he could get it for me. He did, but I had to return it soon. So I asked the Institute’s photographer to copy the document

for me on a microfilm – this was years before xerox. I returned the original to Mostecky and sent the microfilm to my cousin in Brno. Some time after that my uncle Otto Robicek visited our relatives in Brno and when he came back I asked him whether Saxl got the microfilm. He did not. So I repeated the procedure and sent it to him again and this time it arrived.

What the Secret Police had was my first letter and the microfilm. They claimed that they got it because “it was damaged in the mail and an alert postal clerk thought that the content was suspicious and sent it to us.” In reality Otto Saxl’s mail was being checked because he had been in Palestine during the war and moreover he joined the Czechoslovak Army in exile and fought on the Allied side against Germany. Anybody who had been in the West was suspect because he could have been infected with wrong ideas about freedom and democracy and was therefore dangerous. It was general knowledge that they censored international mail, but it did not occur to me that they would censor domestic mail as well. They also produced a letter from the Ministry of Education informing them that, although the document was not marked “Secret,” it was still of a “confidential nature.” Actually, I was glad to receive this information, because had they told me that the document was stamped “Top Secret” I would have believed it, too.

They wanted to know from whom I got the document and I have to admit that I told them; later I was relieved to know that it had no ill effects on Mostecky.<sup>58</sup> Then they told me that I had committed a crime and they would have to turn the case over to the State Prosecutor, unless I could persuade them of my devotion and loyalty to the regime: the only way I could do that would be to work for them. They wrote out a long report on the case and brought it to me to sign and informed me of my right to add something in my defense. I said “I would just note that I never would have sent the letter by mail if I had the slightest suspicion that it was not legal,” whereupon they reacted in a very offended and threatening way: “Comrade Engineer, are you suggesting that you don’t trust the confidentiality of our mail which is guaranteed by our constitution?” I was so flabbergasted by the cynicism of that response that I waived my right to add anything and signed.

I did not accept the invitation to work for them in order to avoid prosecution, but also did not reject it explicitly – I simply did not say anything and they immediately gave me my first task: to write all I knew about Jiri Mostecky.

<sup>58</sup> Mostecky later became Rector of the School of Chemistry. He was a Social Democrat who did not refuse membership in the Communist party when the Social Democratic party was abolished and its members automatically became members of the Communist Party after the Communist take-over in 1948; he used his party membership to help many other people. While he was a member of the Party, he was certainly not a Communist. We were and remained good friends, and we visit him when we are in the Czech Republic.

At the next meeting I told them that I had not written anything about Mostecky, that I couldn't do it, that I didn't think I had done anything illegal, but if I did I was willing to bear the consequences. If they thought that they had to turn me over to the State Prosecutor, then they would have to do it. They dismissed me with the words "You will hear from us," but fortunately I never did. Why I managed to get away with my refusal to work for them I don't know. Moreover, I was rather surprised when, not so much later, I got permission for a study trip to England.

This experience was another major factor in my desire to leave the "Communist paradise" with my family.

### Visit to England

In about 1957 Professor Sorm decided to organize a conference of chemists from the "Socialist block countries" with the idea that he could persuade them to coordinate their research efforts and thus avoid duplication. Three young scientific workers, Jiri Farkas, Milos Kraus, and I were charged with the responsibility for organizing the meeting. The conference was to be held in a small chateau belonging to the Academy of Sciences in Liblice near Prague. We had equipment for simultaneous translations and recruited and tested qualified interpreters. Finally we had a sort of dress rehearsal in Liblice and at that occasion all the bosses were present – Academician Sorm, the section leaders of the Institute and, as it turned out – most fortunately for me – also Academician Wichterle.<sup>59</sup> Wichterle had a bad cold and decided to treat it with hot wine and the other prominents joined him to make the cure more effective. They were sitting at a table drinking and we young subordinates were politely standing around them and listening to the conversation.<sup>60</sup> Sorm got into a good mood and started bragging, that thanks to him Czechoslovak chemistry was now so well regarded in the world that he could send any of his people wherever he wanted. Wichterle reacted quickly and took him up on this statement by asking "Could you send Rocek to work with Ingold<sup>61</sup>?" Sorm

<sup>59</sup> The most prominent of the professors, scientists and scholars were appointed to membership in the Czechoslovak Academy of Science; the first set of academicians was selected relatively fairly based on scientific and scholarly merit with only moderate emphasis on politics and additional members were elected by the membership. That changed later, particularly after 1968, and Academy membership became much more politically determined.

<sup>60</sup> Of course, it did not occur to Sorm to invite us to join in, he -- the prominent exponent of Communism -- had a very developed sense of rank and status.

<sup>61</sup> Christopher Ingold at University College, London, later Sir Christopher, was the founder of modern mechanistic organic chemistry.

answered yes, of course he could. Wichterle's question constituted a critical event and turning point in our lives. Several days later, back in Prague, I approached Academician Sorm and asked whether I could indeed write to Ingold and ask for his permission to work for a short time in his department; Sorm gave his consent. I wrote to Ingold with Jiri Sicher's help, and received a positive response and the Institute started the process of applying for a visa and exit permit for me. I started taking English lessons to improve my very limited knowledge of the language. It turned out that there was a problem with the visa, not with the British visa<sup>62</sup> but the Czechoslovak exit visa. From what I heard it was at first refused, but then Sorm guaranteed my return and it was finally granted after considerable delays and my trip materialized just before Christmas 1957.

I was incredibly excited. My modest per diem support was for a six week stay. I took the first flight in my life on a British Viscount airplane which was practically empty. The only other passengers were a very distinguished looking English gentleman and his wife. The man was very nice and explained and demonstrated to me the complex British currency system – this was before Britain went decimal – and provided me with other useful information. I thought that he must have been a nobleman, but then it turned out that he was the chauffeur at the embassy. I remember being a little nervous being in the airplane so far above ground, but was greatly reassured when I noticed the RR, Rolls Royce, symbol on the plane's engines. I also clearly remember my first view of London from the air – a network of yellow lines formed by sodium street lights; at first I had no idea what they were and could not figure it out.

Somebody at the Academy Institute gave me an address of an elderly Czech couple from whom I rented a room with breakfast for a very modest price, I believe that it was 10 shilling and 8 pence per day, while my per diem was, I think, three pounds. I tried to spend as little as possible on food to save for some of the other marvelous things available in London, particularly the fantastic Terrylene (polyester) clothes and drip-dry shirts. Sometimes I ate just a 3p chocolate bar from a vending machine at the underground (“tube”) station for dinner, sometimes I splurged on a 6 pence bar, and other times I ate some bread and cheese. However, while I lived very thriftily, I certainly did not starve – I ate good lunches at the college cafeteria and compensated for the meager dinners when I was invited by my wealthy cousins. The room which I rented had a gas heater which had to be fed with coins and although it was quite cold in December and January, I never

<sup>62</sup> To get the British visa I had to visit the British consulate in Prague. From there I took the street car back to the lab. I did not notice anybody -- I was too excited -- but shortly after I returned to the Institute I was told that a secret policeman followed me all the way and then inquired who I was.

dreamed of using it and rather put on more clothes when I went to bed. In this way I was able to save enough money for presents for my family and for some clothes for myself: my first drip-dry shirts, Terrydene pants and even two suits for myself (Terrydene, at about £ 10 each); neither polyester nor drip-dry materials existed in Czechoslovakia at that time. I also saved enough to extend my stay by a week and to do some traveling.

Because of the delay with the exit permit, I arrived at the wrong time – everybody was just leaving for the Christmas vacation. Professor Ingold assigned me to his close co-worker, Clifford (Bunny) Bunton who assigned me space in one of his labs and let me choose a project. I decided that I wanted to learn a technique I had only read about, dilatometry – measuring the rate of a reaction by carefully monitoring the change in volume. It was a very bad choice: I selected a technique which was soon thereafter completely forgotten and replaced by various spectroscopic techniques, but I worked diligently with my thermostat and dilatometer and got some usable results, and Bunton generously included my name on two of his publications. After a few days I was left alone in the lab with my only occasional companion being the custodian, who came to check whether everything was all right and to make sure that the lab had not been set on fire. After about two weeks the lab filled up again, Bunton and the students were back from their vacations and I had more of a chance to practise my very limited English. It came as quite a shock to me that neither Ingold nor Bunton spoke any German; I had always thought that, with the dominant role of German chemistry before WWII, no chemist could exist without knowledge of the German language. But I gradually managed to communicate in English and even to understand it, which was harder. I went to several lectures and was immensely impressed by Professor Ingold's lecture, an impressive performance of re-creating in front of the class, with his eyes closed in deep thought, the mental process which led him to classify reactions according to their mechanism. It was without doubt one of the greatest classroom lectures I ever heard.

I found everybody at University College incredibly friendly and helpful, from the custodian and the students up to Professor Ingold and his wife. Bunton invited me several times to his home – the first time I was in a home which was really heated by a fireplace with coal – and he took care of me in almost every way. He took me to a session of the parliament and to Hampton Court. I also met and had interesting discussions with most of the other faculty members; John Ridd invited me to his home.

I probably did not learn a great deal of new chemistry during my stay there, but I enjoyed the time immensely and it had an enormous effect on me and on our entire future life. I used my free time to visit as many places in London as I could – museums, markets, the docks, the courts, and of course chemists at other universities, particularly those working on oxidation reactions, such as Hickinbottom

at Queen Mary College and Waters at Oxford; Waters treated me to my first glass of English cider. I met with Professor Barton at Imperial College and made trips to Cambridge and even to Glasgow<sup>63</sup> and Edinburgh in Scotland where I visited not only the universities but also made a pilgrimage to Loch Lomond. Invariably I had wonderful receptions from extremely friendly people.

I also immediately made contacts with two of my cousins on Mother's side, Hella and Susie nee Löbl. Hella, who is five years older than I, was married to a wealthy and very successful Englishman, Derrick Kleeman. Susie, born the same year as I, was married to Stanley Lind; the Linds were not rich, but lived very comfortably. Both families were unbelievably nice to me and we quickly re-established close family ties. I was a frequent guest at their homes, I met their children, and they sent gifts to our children. I talked very openly about the situation in Czechoslovakia with them, but I found that I simply could not do it with an open door – I always had to get up and close it, even though we were sitting in a private apartment with nobody present; it was a deeply ingrained habit that had developed into an obsession.

I also met with another relative, Liesl Flusser, a daughter of my late cousin Elsa Flusser. Liesl and her twin sister Susie got out of Czechoslovakia in 1939 with one of Mr. Winton's childrens' transports. They were eleven years old at the time. Their parents did not get out and were killed at Auschwitz. The meeting was a bit of a disappointment. Liesl, a nurse, was not very interested in talking and took me to a movie and that was all. I also met Beda Eisler, the brother of my technician and friend Karel Eisler. The only visit I did not enjoy was with an English chemist who was a Communist and who tried to convince me how fortunate I was to live in a Communist country – and of course I did not dare to say a word. I also looked up Felix Pollak with whom I shared a room for a few months in 1945 when Arnost Reiser invited both of us to stay with him; the three of us shared one room of Arnost's two room apartment. By this time he was a chemist working for Kodak and married to Olga, a very nice woman who took me shopping. I remember how overwhelmed I was seeing the abundance of fruit in the market at the time when in Prague one had to stand in line to get a few oranges. She also helped me shop for apparel. I recall how Felix showed me slides from a trip to Switzerland and how I felt that I will never be able to see anything like that and was a bit annoyed that he was sort of showing off.

At the time I came to England I was very naive. I knew that the Communists were lying and that almost everything they claimed about the situation in Czechoslovakia was untrue and changed practically from day to day with the

<sup>63</sup> When I was shown the library of the Glasgow university I made a faux pas: I said to the librarian something about this being my first stay in England, but was immediately sternly reminded that I was in Scotland, not England.

changing needs of the Party.<sup>64</sup> However, since I had no direct information about life outside of the country, I did somehow believe their claims that everybody under capitalism was terribly exploited and that such improvements as general access to medical care and to higher education were possible only under communism. So I sort of believed that we had to suffer all the deprivation of personal liberty in order to provide the working class with these new opportunities. When I came to England I was shocked to discover that the British Public Health system was better than ours and that higher education was practically available to everybody and that the British at the same time enjoyed full freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of travel, and had no reason to be afraid of the secret police. I visited “Speakers’ Corner” at Hyde Park and listened to all kinds of orators, some crazy, some expounding all sorts of political ideas. I noticed that there was a policeman there and I approached him and asked him why he was there and whether there were things people were not allowed to say. His response was that the only restriction was that “You are not allowed to insult the Queen.” In addition to full freedom and real democracy, I saw that materially people also lived in every respect far better than in the “Communist Paradise.”

My stay in England changed my attitude completely. No longer was I willing to let myself and my family suffer “for the good of the workers,” no longer did I believe any of the anti-western propaganda, and my supreme desire was to leave Czechoslovakia and to bring my family to the West. I did not want our children to have to grow up in a system where they would have to learn to lie, to suppress any independent thought and just to repeat what the system expected of them on any given day. I begged my cousins and their husbands to see whether they could help us get out and I had some crazy ideas how to do it. I wondered about getting us out with false passports, or getting us out with a boat if we managed to get to a seashore in Yugoslavia, or perhaps even landing a plane somewhere near the border and flying us out of the country. They were too sensible to be receptive to any of these ideas. Finally I had to return. I am not an emotional person and I have cried very rarely in my whole life. But when I was on the plane back to Prague I went to the toilet and wept bitterly – I was leaving a free country and returning to the prison named Czechoslovak Socialist Republic with very little prospect of ever getting out.

<sup>64</sup> A particularly hilarious example was the situation of Yugoslavia and Tito, who at first was a great hero, a victorious Communist fighter against Germany. Then when he dared to disobey Stalin he suddenly became the “bloody dog Tito,” a stance which was later moderated a bit and we jokingly called him “the not-so-bloody not-quite-dog.” The official assessment of Tito fluctuated so rapidly that it caused serious concern to students taking the Marxism-Leninism exam, and they were relieved when one day they found a sign on the door of the Department of Marxism-Leninism “There will be no questions about Yugoslavia on the exam.”

## Back in Czechoslovakia

My visit to England had changed my life. From that moment on I thought all the time about a way to escape; Eva was very positive about it and I would have never attempted it without her full, courageous and enthusiastic support in spite of the obvious dangers. We shared our views with our best friends, Arnost and Ruth Reiser, and they too were ready to try, with Ruth being particularly keen.

Not too long after my return in February, 1958, I got an invitation to attend a conference on the mechanism of oxidation reactions organized by Professor Hickinbottom of Queen Mary College in London and I got permission to attend it. I believe that the conference was held probably in the spring of 1959. We conferred with the Reisers and they gave me the name and address of an old family friend, Nelly Palache, a retired actress. This time I took with me passport photographs of all the adults and children, still with the hope that one could somehow get false passports.

## Second visit to England

The conference was not large and only a very few foreigners were invited. There was one Russian, whose name I don't remember, and who was always accompanied by somebody who was obviously watching him. The Russian and I were the only participants from the Communist bloc countries. Then there were two Americans, Harvard professor Frank H. Westheimer and University of Washington professor Kenneth Wiberg, both of whom had done important work on chromic acid oxidations, work with which I was intimately acquainted. Frank Westheimer was really the father of mechanistic chromic acid oxidation chemistry, and his Chemical Reviews article on the subject was the starting point for anybody working in the field; I don't think I have ever read another review article which provided such a rational analysis and deep insight in its subject. However, I have found some facts which seemed to put certain aspects for the generally accepted "Westheimer mechanism" in question and I had published a communication proposing an alternate mechanism in the British journal *Science & Industry*. I don't recall any other foreign participants at the conference.

This time I went as an official guest of the conference and as such had a room in the elegant Cumberland Hotel next to the Marble Arch. As soon as I arrived I found a message from Frank Westheimer to come to see him in his room in the same hotel. I knocked at the door and a young man opened and introduced himself: "I am Frank Westheimer." I was so surprised that a famous professor could be so young and blurted out "I thought you were much older," whereupon Frank replied "Yes, I am." Frank was born 1912, so he would have been 47 years old at that time.<sup>65</sup> Then we had

a long discussion – I asked all kinds of questions about America. I knew from the Communist press how exploited professors in America were, particularly at private universities whose rich owners, I was lead to assume, lived somewhere in grandiose villas while the poor professors had to supplement their meager salaries by working as waiters at night. I remember asking him whether he had a car and when he said he did I asked “of course, it is a second hand car, isn’t it?” whereupon Frank told me my first American joke: “Q.: What is a pedestrian? A.: A man with two cars, a wife and a daughter” I also asked about anti-Semitism in America, about whether he ever had a Negro invited to his house and many other questions. Frank later told me how amused he was by my interrogation. In any case I found out that the “terrible” capitalist system was very different than what we were lead to believe even after we discounted 90% of what we were told.

I also spent a lot of time with Ken Wiberg. We went together to Oxford where we visited the grand old man of oxidation reaction and of free radical chemistry, W. A. Waters. Ken told me how to construct my own gas chromatograph, which I later did when I returned to Prague. He invited me to come to work with him at the University of Washington.

Of course I visited my cousins again. They were as nice as could be but not crazy enough to get involved in some harebrained rescue mission. I also visited the Reisers’ friend, Nelly Palache, who was most enthusiastic about our plans to escape and was much more willing than my cousins to work on some crazy scheme; I left the photographs and personal data with her.

The day we visited Oxford with Ken Wiberg we returned early in the evening and I did not feel like wasting my time in my beloved London by going to bed early and set out for a walk and walked all the way to the Houses of Parliament. By the time I got there it was past midnight and I had a sudden pressing problem. All the public bathrooms were in the underground stations and they were closed and I was in urgent need of one. Finally, in utter despair and in fear that I would be caught by a policeman and arrested, I found some stairs down to the Thames and enriched its waters. On the way back I walked through the famed Soho district where I had expected to witness the excesses of capitalist decadence and immorality but to my surprise found it utterly asleep. I entered a bar and drank a glass of something non-alcoholic. There was just one couple there, nothing else going on. Finally, on the street I was approached by a girl asking me whether “I was interested in business,” a question she had to repeat before I got the meaning and politely refused. I returned to the hotel at about 2 AM and saw a group of women waiting for a bus at the corner of Hyde Park, until it occurred to

<sup>65</sup> The scene repeated itself in 1981 at Thomas’ wedding. When the father of Martin’s friend, a patent lawyer with a degree in chemistry, was introduced to Frank Westheimer he also expressed his surprise at Frank’s young age and received exactly the same response as I did 22 year earlier.

me that there were no busses at that time and that they must have been waiting for something else. So much for my wild adventurous night life in London.

On the professional side, I thought that my lecture, which had been polished and rehearsed a dozen times, went well. I was most impressed by Westheimer's and also Wiberg's lectures and thought that they were a class above all the other lectures I heard.

Sometime during my stay in England I discovered that I had lost a little notebook with all the addresses of my relatives and friends in England and generally in the West. It must have slipped out of my pocket perhaps during a subway ride. The loss of the addresses did not bother me – I had already made all the contacts – but I was petrified that somebody would find it and try to mail it to me or perhaps send it to the Czechoslovak embassy thinking that he or she was being kind and responsible and doing me a favor. As I had never admitted to the Czechoslovak authorities that I had any relatives or friends in the West, this could have had dire consequences, at the very least some very unpleasant secret police interrogations, quite possibly a suspicion and accusation of secret contacts and espionage and quite likely loss of the job (a position at the Academy of Sciences was certainly considered a privileged position which should be held by loyal and trustworthy citizens) and with it perhaps an assignment to some chemical plant outside of Prague. The loss of the notebook kept me very worried for quite some time, but fortunately for me whoever found it – perhaps the cleaning crew of the subway – probably threw it into the trash.

### **Trip to Poland**

After I came back we began thinking even more seriously about ways to get out. A colleague from the Academy, Cerny, the group leader of the steroid team, owned a car and invited us to join him, his wife and young daughter on a trip to Poland in the summer of 1959. We gladly and gratefully accepted because we were eager to find out whether it might be easier to escape from Poland than from Czechoslovakia. We did not have passports or visa, we just got permission for a “small border contact” allowing us to go to the tourist center Zakopane on the Polish side of the Tatra mountains, but not further into Poland. It was an interesting experience. Poland was totally different from Czechoslovakia. At the crossing the Polish border guard, instead of inspecting the content of our car, invited us to the station and gave us a lecture about how the Russians murdered the Polish officers at Katyn.<sup>66</sup> He assured

<sup>66</sup> This was a place where large mass graves of Polish officers were discovered still during WWII by the Germans. Under the Communist rule the official version was that the mass murder was committed by the Germans and not by the Soviets, but this was a crime the Nazis were in fact not responsible for.

us that the Russians would be defeated and generously promised us the return of the “Podkarpadska Rus” (Subcarpathian Ukraine), which the Soviet Union annexed in 1945. He showed no fear that we might denounce him, although he could have been very easily identified as the guard who was on duty at the given crossing at that time. In those days nobody in Czechoslovakia would have dared to say a word against the Soviets outside of the closest circle of intimate friends. When we arrived in Poland and had a little snack at a restaurant, we started talking to the man who shared our table and asked him what he was doing. He quite openly said he was a “speculant,” a black market operator, an admission which in the Czechoslovakia would have landed him immediately in jail. He also wanted to know what we had to sell; he was interested in plastic raincoats or shoes<sup>67</sup>

We were surprised to find that many roads had a speed limit of 5 km (3 miles)/hour and that there were about as many horse or oxen driven wagons as automobiles. The main road was new and had a nice concrete surface, but all side roads were dirt roads covered with mud. In Zakopane we set up our tent in a park in the middle of the town; there were already many other campers there, but no sanitary facilities except a few trees at the edge of the park and that area was clearly heavily used. The town is beautifully located under the Tatra mountains and we had several nice hikes. We took a cable car to the top of one of the mountains; with us in the gondola was a young Polish woman who was scared to death, she kept looking down and repeated the words “death” in Polish over and over.

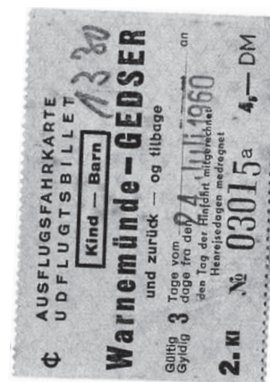
Being so close to the ancient city of Crakow, we tried to visit it, although we knew that we were not supposed to. We had bad luck: we were stopped by the police and they demanded to see our identity cards. I was petrified, because being reported as illegally traveling more deeply into Poland would make it quite unlikely that we would be permitted any travel outside the country in the future. It would mean a mortal blow to any hopes for escaping. Eva and I sat frozen in the back of the car; we did not move and did not respond to the order to hand the policeman our ID cards. We were extremely fortunate: the policeman somehow did not notice us and was satisfied by having the ID’s of the driver, our friend Cerny, and his wife and was busy writing down their names. We were enormously relieved when he then ordered us to turn around and return to Zakopane without remembering that he did not get the ID’s of all occupants of the car. I can still feel the fear and panic of that situation when we saw our entire plans for our future going down the drain. Later, after we were assured that nobody checks passengers on the busses, we took a bus and did visit Crakow, its castle and cathedral.

<sup>67</sup> We were told a joke which characterized the difference between the two Communist countries well. Two dogs meet at the Polish-Czechoslovak border running in opposite directions. The Czech dog asks the Polish dog where he was running. “To Prague.” “Why?” “I am hungry.” Then the Polish dog asked the same questions and the Czech dog answers “I am running to Warsaw, I want to bark.”

Visiting the cathedral was a novel experience for us. It was full of worshipers – people of all ages; in Bohemia we were used to seeing only tourists and a few old people, mostly old women, in the churches. We also had a little incident while waiting to enter the cathedral: a priest noticed that the little daughter of our friends – she was probably five or six year old – was eating. He got very indignant and berated her mother how she could permit such a profane activity while waiting to enter the cathedral.

Otherwise the trip was a failure – we did not find out anything about escape possibilities via Poland.

## ESCAPE



Sometime in the fall of 1959 I talked to the technician from the next-door lab, a young girl who just returned from a summer vacation on the Baltic Sea in East Germany. She told me that she had been on a German ship going from Sassnitz, on the peninsula Rügen, to the Swedish harbor of Trelleborg and that the passengers were allowed to visit the Swedish harbor. I found that truly amazing and supremely important if indeed true. She said she did not join the Germans visiting Trelleborg, because they would have stamped her ID and that could have gotten her into trouble back in Prague. I kept talking to her again and again trying to get more information but without arousing suspicion that this was the particular point I was interested in, but I did not find out anything more. I could not quite believe the story, but she kept repeating and confirming it. If it were true, it would offer a wonderful escape route and obviously I would not mind having my ID stamped. I shared the information with the Reisers and we started looking for a possibility of going to East Germany. The girl also told me that there were American ships anchored waiting to enter the Polish port of Stettin (Szczecin) and that they got in rowboats so close to them that the seamen threw them oranges.

Early in 1960 we got our car, for which we had waited three years and for which we had – at the time of applying – deposited money in a bank account which we were not allowed to touch without voiding our car application. We had no choice in the make or color of the car but we were very happy with our grey East German four-door Wartburg, with a three cylinder two-cycle engine.

One problem was that that Eva had a driver's license good only for a motorcycle, but not for a car and she failed the first drivers' test she took. Only authorized state run driving schools could legally teach driving – there were no learners' permits – and the lessons were very expensive. So one evening I took her to what I thought was a very quiet and safe area and tried to teach her parallel parking, which had caused her a problem in the last test. I made just one little mistake: I forgot that the nice quiet street I had selected in the Prague suburb of Strasnice was close to the radio transmitter of Prague's second radio station. As Eva was practicing parking, suddenly there appeared a police motorcycle with a sidecar coming from the opposite direction and stopped just in front of us. I froze, but Eva had much more presence of mind and said "let's quickly change places," because she was of

course illegally in the driver's seat. We tried, but succeeded only half way: When the policeman came she was just on my lap. The policeman told us "we were watching you driving around the radio transmitter, what are you doing here?" But then he saw Eva on my lap and began suspecting that maybe we just had a love affair. He demanded our ID's but did not believe that Eva was really my wife and started testing her. "What are the names of your children? When were they born?" (All this information was in the ID.) Obviously she passed. Then he suspected we might have been drunk, but it was clear we were not. Again he was becoming more suspicious with respect to that radio transmitter and Eva understood the danger and quickly said "Officer, I have to make a confession: I flunked the drivers' test and my husband was teaching me how to drive." It dawned on him "You were driving" and Eva responded totally calmly and naively "But officer, that is not allowed." I sat through the whole exchange in frozen stupor totally unable to do or say anything. The penalty for letting an unauthorized person drive was loss of one's driver's license and that would have meant that we would have to give up any hope for an escape using the car. Whether the policeman really believed Eva or not we don't know, but in any case he let us drive home, although he followed us almost the whole way. I vowed that never again would I try to be Eva's driving instructor, but she passed the test on the next try without any help from me.

We found that the government travel agency, Cedok, was offering a trip to East Germany by car, and we and the Reisers immediately registered for it and put down a hefty deposit. Of course we would not know for a long time whether we got in, so we also registered for another trip to Poland in spite of our unsuccessful exploration from the previous summer – and we had to put down another deposit. Now we had to establish a good record. Eva and I became members of the automobile branch of the "Svaz pro spolupraci s armadou," the Association for Cooperation with the Army, and we had to exhibit some activities. We went to incredibly boring meetings and I volunteered to be a judge on some sort of a kids' competition. In the meantime Eva's mother diligently decorated windows at prescribed Communist holidays. We went of course to the First of May (Labor Day) parades and did whatever we could to establish a record as good loyal citizens.

We got through the first step and got into one of the groups for the East German trip. However, when we went to our first meeting, the group's leader gave a small welcoming speech, expressing his hope that all of us present would actually go together to Germany. He warned the group however, that "there are some people here who want to go with their whole families and one couple – ha, ha, ha, – would even like to take the grandmother along!!!" He advised us to leave the children behind (not even to mention grandmother), because it would be most unlikely that an entire family would be allowed to leave the country together. We were depressed, but since we were not interested in visiting East Germany, but only in an escape, we did nothing and waited. Each of us needed recommendations from our place of work

and the trade union. The head of my department at the Institute of Organic Chemistry of the Academy of Sciences, Jiri Sicher, knew me too well not to be suspicious, but he gave me the recommendation anyway. Since I was a reserve officer, I also needed permission from the army. Because my mother-in-law did not work, she needed to secure a recommendation from the “Ulicni vybor,” the “Street Committee.” Eva got her recommendation from her place of employment, The Research Institute for Pharmacy and Biochemistry, without any problems, though her lab partner and good friend upon hearing that the children and the grandmother were to go with us said: “I can see it now: you are all going to run away and I am going to end up with a Communist in the lab.” Perhaps in order to prevent any interventions and appeals, the decision on the issuance of the exit visa was announced only about one to three days before departure and it came separately for each of us. I think that my mother-in-law’s permit came first, but we all got them just on time for the departure date. However not all of the Reisers got their permits; they could not go and we had to leave Prague without them.

During this entire time Eva was absolutely supportive and enthusiastic and did not show any fear even though she was as aware as I of the seriousness of the risk. Had we been caught we would not only have ended up in jail for a long time, but the children would have most likely been taken away and been indoctrinated and “educated” in some governmental institution. In retrospect I am surprised that we were willing to risk all that, and even more that Eva never voiced the slightest concern or opposition. I certainly would never have attempted the escape if I had not had her totally wholehearted support and misplaced trust.

The last days before our departure we destroyed all records that could have implicated other people as having been friends of traitors. We started burning correspondence and all kinds of papers with names or addresses on them under the kettle in the laundry room,<sup>68</sup> but it seemed too much and we were worried that it might become suspicious, so we then took the remaining papers and walked around the nearby Vaclavske namesti (Wenceslaus square) and threw the torn pieces into various trash containers. We also had to consider the not unlikely possibility that we would be caught. In order to have at least some things to put on when we would have gotten out of prison, we put a few essentials into a suitcase and deposited it in a luggage storage room at the main railroad station. It was a curious selection of things: my wedding suit, my electric shaver, which I had gotten from my cousin’s husband in England and treasured, an old and tattered leather briefcase I somehow still had from my high school days (I don’t remember who saved it for me during the war), and not much more on my side – I don’t remember what Eva put in the

<sup>68</sup> Each house had a laundry room with a large coal fired kettle for boiling the laundry and large wooden tubs for washing. Its use rotated among the families living in the house; each family had its “wash day.”

suitcase for herself. We gave the deposit slip to Helena Eisler<sup>69</sup> and we also gave her our jewels, which came mostly from Eva's family and particularly from her uncle Vilem Werner, a goldsmith who had perished with his entire family. Helena was the only person whom we told our plans. A few days before we left I also brought my typewriter to my graduate student, Frank (Frantisek) Mares.<sup>70</sup> He was quite surprised by my insistence that he keep it until we return. Otherwise we did not remove anything from the apartment – we thought that if we were caught we could claim that it happened on the spur of the moment and that it was not premeditated; I don't know whether it would have made any difference. Also, if we had visibly removed things, the police could have found out who was hiding them for us and we would have thus seriously endangered other people; every citizen had the responsibility to report anybody suspected of trying to leave the country illegally. We also took a small suitcase of family photographs to aunt Matylda, the 93-year old mother-in-law of my late uncle Otto and asked her to keep it while we were on vacation. Another part of the preparation was that I sent a set of my reprints and a microfilm of Frank Mares' thesis to Ken Wiberg at the University of Washington.

We drove in a convoy – I think we were thirteen cars – and we spent the first night in a small hotel on the Czechoslovak side of the Czechoslovak-East German border. We had to leave Prague without the Reisers, because they did not have their exit permits, but then they suddenly appeared: they had gotten their permits after all and caught up with us.

In the morning we were ready to cross the border. At the border the cars were subject to a fairly thorough inspection up to the time when a border guard ordered Ruth Reiser to unpack a suspicious looking package. She did and produced a potty for her four-year old son Pavel (Paul). There was a lot of laughter and the border guard was embarrassed and speedily concluded the inspection.

<sup>69</sup> We were very close to Helena. She was the daughter of my cousin Fritz (Bedrich) Treulich, who at the time lived in Sokolov in northwestern Bohemia near the East German border where he was working for a coal mine as engineer. When Helena studied at the university she lived with us for a few years around that time when Martin was born; she had one of our three rooms. She and Martin were very fond of each other. Martin called her "Nena" and that was one of the first words he learned, about the same time he learned to say "Mama" and "Tata." She lived with us until the time Thomas was born and we needed more space. Helena was very pretty but very shy. One day Eva decided that she should meet my laboratory technician, Karel Eisler, and invited Karel, his parents (Karel's father had just gotten out of jail where he had been because he had somehow been connected with the Slansky wing of the party), Helena and her sister Eva. Helena and Karel got married in the spring of 1960 and we drove them from the wedding ceremony in our new car. Helena later managed to send us all the jewels and most of the other things we left there. I could thus wear my wedding suit for the celebration of our golden wedding and Eva could give a diamond ring to each of our daughters-in-law and still keep one for herself.

<sup>70</sup> Typewriters were not that common at that time; ours came from Eva's father's office.

Our first stop was in Dresden. We had written earlier to Christa Meyer, an East German chemist whom we had met a couple of times during her visits to Prague – the first time when she brought me a set of reprints from her professor who was working on reactions of hydrocarbons and whose results had some relevance to our work on the oxidation of the same compounds. We liked her and had a number of interesting and quite emotional conversations – such as when she described her memories of the bombing of Dresden – and she repeatedly invited us to visit her and her husband in Germany and offered us assistance. Specifically, she offered to give us German Marks that we could later repay in Czechoslovak Crowns during her future visit to Prague. Normally the amount one could legally exchange during trips even to Communist countries was quite limited and private exchanges were illegal, though they would have been difficult to trace. When we wrote to her that we would be in Dresden she was very enthusiastic and, as we found out later, repeated her offer to lend us some German money in a card written to Eva and addressed to the Research Institute of Pharmacy where Eva worked. Because trading money was illegal, she offered to “help in whatever way we can.” The card however arrived only after we had left Prague and after our escape the above phrase assumed – for the Meyers – a much more dangerous meaning when it got into the hands of the secret police, as it certainly did.

Christa met us in the hotel where we were staying and introduced us to her husband, Rudolf Meyer, a physicist. They were eager to show us Dresden and to take us to the famous art gallery. In Czechoslovakia we were most careful not to mention our hopes for escape to anybody except Helena Eisler, and Eva was shocked when I suddenly and without any prior consultation with her told the Meyers directly: “We are not really interested in seeing Dresden or any art treasures, we have only one interest and that is to get out. Can you help us?” We had never met Rudolf before and had no idea about his views – he could have been a Communist for all we knew – and we put ourselves completely in their hands. They were shocked. I asked them about the possibility of getting into Berlin – that was a year before the infamous Berlin Wall<sup>71</sup> was built – and about the visit to Trelleborg I had heard about from my friend’s technician. They knew nothing about the latter, and as for getting into Berlin, one needed German IDs. But Rudolf promised that he would make inquiries and meet us again in Potsdam, where our convoy was supposed to arrive in about three days. He didn’t not know Potsdam, but remembered the name of a church, “Garnisonenkirche” (Garrison church), because Hitler once gave a speech there. He suggested that we meet there; since we did not know exactly what time of day we would be able to get there, we agreed to try every hour on the hour.

<sup>71</sup> In 1961 the Communist erected a high wall around the entire Soviet sector of Berlin to stop the all too frequent escapes by East Germans into the Western sector. The thousands of people fleeing the “Communist paradise” to be exploited by the western capitalists became an embarrassment to the Communist government they could no longer tolerate. The Wall finally came down in 1989 with the collapse of Communism.

## Potsdam

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We continued our tour through Germany. I have just a vague recollection of being in a picturesque rural place with lots of water where we were taken on a boat punting through shallow canals. A couple days later we arrived in Potsdam and went to the place where the Potsdam Conference between Churchill, Truman, and Stalin took place at the end of WWII. The whole group went to the chateau Sans-Souci, but we, of course, were not interested in it but wanted to cut loose from the group and meet Rudolf Meyer at the Garnisonenkirche. We started claiming that our poor children were deadly tired and we had to get them to the hotel. The children were not very cooperative – instead of looking tired they bounced around happily, but we still managed to pester the tour leader long enough that finally, to get rid of us, he let us leave the group and take the children and Eva's mother to the hotel. We then started looking for our meeting place. It turned out that it was not all that simple. Every person we asked seemed to be new to Potsdam after the war and nobody knew of the Garnisonenkirche. It took us a long time until we finally found somebody who remembered that indeed there had been such a church, but it had been completely destroyed in an air raid and then directed us to an empty plaza with a heap of stones where the church used to be.

We waited for almost an hour when we suddenly saw several cars approaching us, stopping and a number of men jumping out and coming towards us. Our first thought was that Dr. Meyer turned us in and that the secret police came to arrest us. But no, it turned out that these were all Rudolf's friends whom he had asked to advise us. So we held a brief meeting, the result of which was not at all promising. They said that it was impossible to get to Berlin without German ID cards and there was clearly no way we could get them – particularly considering that there were, with the Reisers and Eva's mother, nine of us. So that was the verdict: forget it! We were depressed. It was tantalizing to see Berlin on the other side of the river, to walk by the short, but unfortunately far too well guarded bridge which led to Berlin, and not to be able to get there; at that time it was quite easy to get from East to West Berlin by train. We felt defeated, but did not give up.

Later in the day we spent several hours in a long and entirely candid conversation with Rudolf Meyer. We told him of our history and that of our families during the war; he told us that he served as a German soldier in Norway. We also tried to convince him that they should go to the West as long as it is possible for them; it may be too late for us, we missed our chance in 1948 or shortly thereafter, when many people still managed to escape, but they could still do it. He did not see why. They had good jobs in Dresden and had even just bought a piece of land there. Whenever they wanted to go to the West, they went to Berlin, crossed easily to the West sector, where they were issued West German papers with which they could travel wherever they wanted and then return to their home in the East. I assured Rudolf that there was no way this could last. With thousands of Germans leaving for the West, "voting

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with their feet” each month, the Communists would most certainly close this only remaining loophole in their otherwise impenetrable iron curtain. And we tried to describe to him the life in Czechoslovakia, a fully totalitarian police state. At the end we asked him to try to find out more about possible escape routes. If he did have any useful news for us, he should write using the name Eva Martin and mail the letter to general delivery. We gave him a list of places where we would be able to check at the post office.

### **At the Baltic Sea**

From Berlin our caravan continued to the Baltic Sea and the East German-Polish border. I again managed to pester the expedition leader, Dr. Munk, with the need of “our poor little children” to get to the hotel early, so that they could get some rest. He finally let me drive ahead just to get rid of me. We had no specific plan in mind, just wanted to be away from the surveillance of the group and to be able to explore the situation. We drove fairly fast but at one point we were overtaken by a white Studebaker car with Swedish licence plates. We had two contacts in Sweden. Jan (Honza) Loding, formerly Bondy, who was one of the boys from my room 127 in Terezin, now lived in Sweden and we had his address. We also had the address of Karel Eisler’s uncle. We had some notion that if we could send them a message, they could perhaps manage to get Swedish papers for us, meet us in Germany and smuggle us to Sweden, or perhaps find somebody who would take us over by boat. In any case it was worth trying to send messages or just one message. We decided to send it to Loding.

I followed the Swedish car as fast as I could, but certainly could not overtake it on the open road; the Studebaker, a much stronger car with only two people, was much faster than our overloaded Wartburg. However, I managed to overtake it in a rather reckless way in the narrow street of a small town through which we were passing and where he slowed down as any responsible driver would. It was a scene like from a gangster movie. I then kept driving in the middle of the road so that he could not pass me again. When we were out in the open countryside, I started signaling the driver to stop, which he did – I wonder what he and his wife must have been thinking about being ambushed like that!!! I asked him to take Eva in his car and told him that she would explain to him what we wanted. So Eva got into the Swede’s car and they drove ahead and I followed them. In the beginning he drove quite fast, but as Eva was talking he drove more and more slowly as Eva’s explanation of our situation and of our desire to escape seemed to capture his attention. Finally he stopped the car and Eva came back to our car. It turned out that the man was obviously quite sympathetic to our cause; by sheer coincidence he was also a chemist and he promised that he would deliver the message. We actually don’t know whether the message ever was delivered; in any case there was no action

from anybody on the Swedish side. This episode slowed us down a bit and we were surprised and shocked when we arrived at our destination only minutes before the remainder of the group. It would have been very difficult to explain had they seen us with the Swedes.

We next moved into a tent camp on the coast. This was the coast about which my friend's technician had spoken – where they went by rowboats to American ships waiting to enter the Szczecin harbor, and where American sailors threw them oranges. We did not want oranges, we would have liked them to take us on board. We could see several ships anchored in the distance and we found the place where one could rent rowboats. However, only four persons were allowed in each boat. So the Reisers got one boat, but we had to get two: I had the boys in my boat and Eva took her mother. We started rowing out into the sea. Patrol boats came by and told us that we were not allowed to go further out and that we should turn back, but we ignored them and they did not seem to care too much. However, we did not seem to make any progress. Although we were already quite far from the shore, the ships did not seem to get any closer and we were not even able to recognize to which nation they belonged. It was getting pretty late and finally, after perhaps one hour or more rowing out into the sea, we decided that it was hopeless and that we had to give up and return. The way back was somehow much harder, perhaps the wind or tide was coming from the shore, but it took us several hours to get back, quite exhausted. It was ironic that in the end we were happy to be safely back on East German terra firma. So this was another failure.

We had one disturbing episode during our stay on this particular beach. Ruth Reiser talked to a young German, who told her that the Swedes were very nice to people who managed to get there and allowed them to stay; on the other hand the Danes “don't like us Germans and send people back.” This bit of information worried us a lot later on.

Our big hope still lay ahead. We were not too far, only some 120 km or 75 miles from Sassnitz, the place from which my informant, my friend's laboratory technician, claimed one could go to Sweden and be allowed to visit the Swedish harbor of Trelleborg. The question was how to get there? Arnost Reiser knew of a university in Greifswald and so we concocted a story about a chemist at the University of Greifswald who was very interested in Eva's work on anti-cancer drugs and invited her to visit him. We managed to get permission, and Eva, Arnost and I set out for Sassnitz, leaving the children with Ruth and Eva's mother. We arrived in Sassnitz and looked for the ticket office for the ferry. It was closed, but Arnost, who carried out most of the conversation in his impeccable German, found out where the cashier was – in a nearby pub. Arnost found him but learned that the crossings were sold out. However, with the help of a gift of leather gloves he persuaded the cashier to save nine tickets for us in case they were not claimed by the people or organization which had reserved them. We were supposed to come a few days later.

After a couple of days our entire group moved to another tent camp on the

island Rügen on which Sassnitz is located. On the way we stopped in the harbor town Stralsund. There was a store selling all kinds of ropes and other boating supplies and some people were buying ropes for their cars in case they needed to be towed. I got the crazy idea to buy some ropes which we could tie to the railing of the deck of the ship and use the rope to slide down into the sea.

I can't remember when and where, but we visited several post offices looking for general delivery letters for Eva Martin. It turned out that Martin was a fairly common family name in Germany: there were several letters for people named Martin, but none of them for Eva Martin. On one occasion a woman heard us speaking Czech and immediately struck a conversation. She was from the Sudetenland and we found that most people from the Sudetenland – rather than being bitter and hostile towards us for having been forcibly evicted after the war – were rather friendly and liked to talk about cooking recipes. So we got into a conversation with her and in our desperation started asking indirectly but still very recognizably about escape possibilities. The woman was somewhat taken aback, but then said “Let's go into your car, I have to be careful, you know, I am a Party member (Ich bin doch eine Parteigenossin)” and then she told us to be very careful not to contact any of the fisherman, because they all work for the secret police. Eva gave her another present, I think another pair of gloves, but we did not get any more useful information out of her, just this warning.

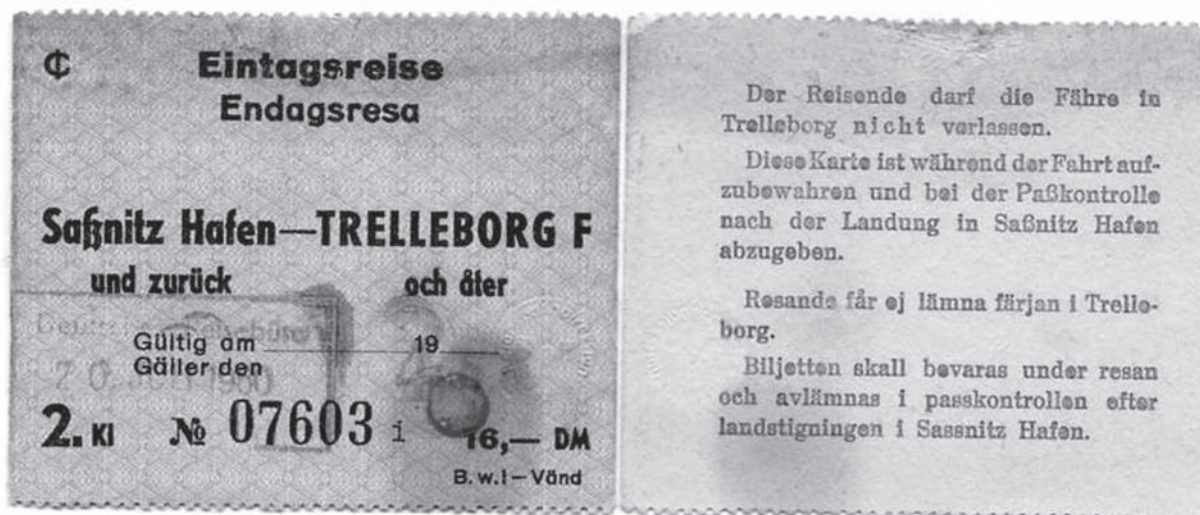
On the appointed day we slipped out of the camp, drove to Sassnitz, got our nine tickets and got on the German ship Sassnitz, a huge ferry boat with railroad cars at the lowest level, two decks of automobiles and several more passenger decks. Eva and I had our ropes wound around our bodies under our jackets. To prepare the children I told them that it sometimes happens that a ship runs aground and starts sinking and that in that case one simply had to jump into the water and quickly swim away from the sinking ship so that one would not be sucked in with it when it went down. The kids registered the information, but were not frightened. We walked a lot around the ship – being with children made it easier, one wanted to show them everything – and we even managed to get all the way down to the railroad cars, which one surely was not supposed to do. Each car was sealed with a wire and a lead seal, but I had a pair of pliers in my pocket with which I easily could have cut the wire and gotten into the car. We were debating it with Arnost and he firmly refused. If they checked the seals before allowing the cars to leave the ship, we would be caught and it would be difficult to explain how we got into a sealed freight car by mistake. Of course I don't know to this date whether they did indeed check the seals or not. In any case, I lost my courage and gave up on this plan.

We noticed a group of Swedes and approached one man and asked him whether he could smuggle out our children and Eva's 61-year old mother; we would then jump overboard. It turned out that he was an owner of a small factory who was returning from a vacation trip with his workers and he felt that he would have to consult them; he could not take the risk without their knowledge. After a while he

came back with tears in his eyes and told us that his workers did not want to do it, but he also warned us that they overheard some people, obviously secret policemen dressed as railroad workers, talking about very suspiciously behaving Czechs; he warned us to be very careful. But he also promised that he would alert the Swedish harbor police to pick us up if we decided to jump.

We got quite alarmed and indeed noticed that some very unfriendly railroad workers kept following us. So we first decided to get rid of the incriminating evidence. I went to the toilet, unwound the rope from my body and placed it into a little pack. I gave it to Eva, she went into the ladies toilet, and disposed both of her and my rope in the place for ladies sanitary napkins. We then tried to be as inconspicuous as possible and waited for the landing. When the ship landed in Trelleborg my mother-in-law made a feeble attempt to leave the ship with the children, but was turned back. In the meanwhile we had found out that the story told us by that lab technician about being able to visit the harbor had indeed been true, but because of too many defections the practice had been stopped. We then considered whether we should jump – we had to be on the top deck. It was again Arnost who had more sense and warned us that we would kill the children if we jumped from that height. I did not know and obviously did not want to take that risk – I still don't know from what height one can safely jump, but I am inclined to think that he was right.

So we gave up and I felt totally defeated. I can still remember the terrible feeling when the ship started out on the return trip. We were so close to a free country, just a few yards away and now I watched Sweden, the promised land, receding into the distance and we were returning to that place of lies and fears where the children would grow up bereft of human dignity. I also expected to be arrested upon our return to Germany. I snapped out of my depression and tried to behave as a normal



tourist would. We bought duty free chocolate and wrote postcards to be sent to our places of work. I would have liked them to be sent from Sweden to pretend that we were there and were voluntarily returning home, but that was impossible to arrange. And so we approached again the German harbor of Sassnitz. To our surprise and very considerable relief nobody paid any attention to us when we were leaving the ship. We were very glad indeed that they did not arrest us and did not even request to see our I.D.s to make reports back to Prague.

We returned dejectedly to the camp. To pacify our fellow travelers we distributed the duty free chocolates we bought and told them that the tickets were arranged by Eva's mysterious friend from the University of Greifswald. We sat down to dinner and a while later we heard little Thomas – he was four and a half years old – telling people how we had been on a ship and how “Daddy told me that sometimes a ship can sink, but that we would just jump into the sea and swim away from the ship and we would be safe.” Fortunately, nobody paid much attentions to him. Later somehow the tour arranged for most other people to make the same trip on the “Sassnitz” which we had prepared and conducted in so much secrecy and with such disappointing results.

### **Warnemünde**

In a couple of days we drove on to our last destination on the sea coast – another tent camp, this time near Warnemünde. I think that it was during this trip that we were stopped by a rather intoxicated German soldier – after all our Wartburg was a German car – who asked for a ride. He told us first how he was recruited into the “volunteer” army. It was a very classical story: they got him drunk and he signed up not quite knowing what he was doing. We also learned from him that the borders with West Germany were strictly guarded and full of trip wires which went off all the time even when a hare triggered the alarm; they also had speedboats with which they would catch people trying to escape by sea. Not a very cheerful prospect or one to improve our depressed moods.

We settled in our tent and went to explore Warnemünde gloomily. We heard that there was a ferry boat going to Denmark and wanted to see it, but were rudely thrown out by a German worker. We then went to a stationary store and wanted to buy a postcard with the picture of the ferry ship, but were roughly rebuffed by the sales lady: “You would not expect us to advertise a ship of a NATO country? That would really be asking too much!” We were pretty uninformed and did not really know that Denmark was part of the NATO pact, but we were glad to hear it. We were still worried by what that German had told Ruth, namely that Danes return escapees. So we did not accomplish anything and returned to the camp even more depressed and reconciled to the idea that we were going to return to Czechoslovakia and would spend the rest of our lives under communism, as would our children.

In the evening we went to a tent where a number of people had gathered just to chat. There was a visitor there, a guy from another group who made the same tour as we did but travelled by bus rather than by cars. They followed the same route but were a day behind us. He came with a “gossip” (drbecek): Somebody from his group was on the same ship we had been on, the Sassnitz, and managed to jump into one of the open freight cars as they were being pulled out of the ship. He was on Swedish ground before the Germans could do a thing. I ran out of the tent in total disgust. Eva followed me and I complained bitterly: “You see, we could have done it, we are just cowards; it serves us right.”

The next day we went again to Warnemünde and walked along the shore in a very bad mood. There were telescopes there through which one could watch the ships on the sea after inserting a 10-Pfennig coin. Since I was so depressed, I at least wanted the children to have some fun and so we joined a line in front of one of the telescopes. Ahead of us were two little German boys. Suddenly I saw one of them to point out to a ship and heard him say to his friend: “Here comes the Seebad Ahlbeck back from Denmark.” I immediately struck up a conversation and asked about the “Seebad Ahlbeck,” a relatively small ship from which one could jump without any fear of injury. The boys said that it was a German ship and that one could take a trip to Denmark and back and buy duty-free chocolates and cigarettes on board. We brought the information back to the Reisers and Arnost managed to talk the cashier again into saving nine tickets for the next trip for us should there be any left unclaimed.

In the meantime I was still very worried about this claim that the Danes would return refugees to Germany. I decided very logically that we needed to talk to a local person who was not a Communist and would not turn us in. There were not too many locals around – the town was overrun by tourists – so I had the brilliant idea of going to the local cemetery, not a place frequented by vacationers and also a place where one could guess the social status of the family.<sup>72</sup> There were very few people there, but we did find an elderly lady tending her late husband’s tomb; however, as soon as we started a conversation

<sup>72</sup> In Europe it was not uncommon to engrave on the tombstones titles, honors and even occupations if they would add prestige and status to the deceased and the family.



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and broached the subject of what happens with people trying to escape, she fled in terror. After this failure we went to the local church where people were just leaving after mass. This time, we had better luck: our victim, another elderly lady, was not scared, understood why we were interested, blessed us, but unfortunately did not know a thing. The Reisers by that time declared that they were fed up with us, that we were dangerous fools, and they left for the camp, which was some 30 minutes by car away.

At this point we were ready to give up. We could not take the risk of attempting an escape only to be extradited back to the Communists. Eva's mother and the children were waiting for us in a little park and we were going to pick them up and go back to the camp. Then I noticed a little stand with a man selling smoked fish. I hate fish, but Eva loves it and so I thought I should do at least something for her to cheer her up if I could not get her out of the Communist paradise and when I was in such a lousy mood. I got into the line and waited patiently for my turn. In front of me was a youngish man. After a while an elderly couple approached him, greeted him as an old friend or acquaintance, and started talking with him. I listened to the conversation and understood that he used to own a store in Warnemünde, but no longer did; I assumed that it was nationalized and that he had lost it. So this was a local man who was probably not a Communist. I still purchased the fish and then ran after him and started the conversation in my usual highly sophisticated way: asking for the time, trying at the same time to hide my watch, and then immediately starting to wonder whether by any chance people may not be escaping from the ships when they land in Denmark. Well, they did. And what happens to them? The man was no fool "They don't like us Germans, so they send us to Germany, to West Germany, not back to the East, but they would keep you."



This was wonderful to hear and it made perfect sense and explained the garbled information Ruth had gotten earlier. We rushed back to the ticket office and indeed they held nine tickets for us, but the Reisers were back in the camp and most of the passengers had already boarded the ship. We had no choice – there was nothing we could do. We felt very bad about leaving the Reisers behind, but this was our only chance. It was the last day, the last boat leaving on this day and the next morning the entire group was going to start on the way back to Czechoslovakia. We got into line. Behind us was another friendly Sudeten German lady, who wanted to chat with us. However, they had oversold the tickets, and we were the last ones to get on the ship, while the Sudeten German behind us did not. We were glad not to have her hanging around us.

I was exploring the ship with the boys while Eva was still debating with her mother, who had still not decided whether she would join us in the escape. The ship was quite small, just two decks and we seated ourselves at the stern of the ship, but we also walked to the front and got sprayed with water from the waves, which I somehow welcomed as a preparation for the jump. I offered to buy some chocolate, but the then six-year-old Martin refused with the words “Perhaps we will have to jump into the water and then the chocolate would get ruined.” After about two hours the ship reached the Gedser harbor of Denmark and was tied to the pier. Shortly before that Eva finally convinced her mother to jump – she claimed primarily to avoid the questioning by the police after our escape.



It was a beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon, the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1960. People with valid travel documents were leaving while almost everybody else was watching the shore and people on it. I assume that a lot of people of Gedser like to promenade along the water front in the harbor and watch arriving and departing ships, and on a sunny Sunday afternoon there were quite a few people there. While everybody's attention was focused on the shore side and on the Western tourists leaving the ship, we were preparing to jump into the water on the other side. We were practically alone in the back of the ship. Eva told me that she could not jump by herself and asked me to push her in. She climbed on the railing holding Martin and I pushed her and immediately took Thomas and jumped with him into the water.

We had never discussed the details of the escape, never thought beyond the moment of jumping into the water. Eva just swam around the ship and – as she later told me – handed Martin to a Dane after questioning him seriously whether he was indeed a Dane and whether he was indeed sure of it. He seemed to have passed the test. What Eva did was much smarter and the right thing to do. For some reason I thought that I had to get away from the ship. I saw across the harbor some stairs going into the water and I aimed in their direction, swimming on my back with my right hand and holding Thomas with my left. I lost my glasses and my sense of direction. I thought that I needed police protection from the Germans and so I kept calling: “Help, send the police!” I could not see the stairs and found that I was aiming at some sort of a wooden log structure, I don't know what it was to this day. At the same time the Germans launched a rubber raft with two seamen or policemen and they were catching up with me. I reached the log structure just a moment before the Germans reached me. There was a man in the water calling at me in German to give him Thomas. I did not know who he was and was not as smart as Eva to ask him whether he was Danish, but I had no other choice: the uniformed Germans were already catching up with me. I handed him Thomas. I was totally exhausted and actually had my hand on the rubber raft and expected that they would drag me in and back to the ship. But then I heard the wonderful words: “Also da kann man schon nichts mehr machen” – “So there is nothing more one can do” and they left and paddled back to the ship.

I was helped out of the water and, together with Thomas, we were taken to some office, probably in the customs office. However, I did not know what had happened to Eva and Martin and nobody there could tell me. It seemed that the harbor had two separate offices, one on each side of the harbor, and there was no connection between them. I got a bit hysterical trying to persuade them that they must not let the ship leave until they made sure Eva and Martin were safe. It took what appeared to me a very, very long time, but finally a minibus arrived with Eva, Martin and Eva's mother and we were all united. Eva's mother, who was then 61 years old, later

told us that she waited until we all bobbed up above the surface, then took off her coat and shoes and let herself fall into the water; she was not a very good swimmer. Somebody threw her a lifesaver and then they came with a boat to help her out of the water.

We were taken to the nearest hospital in Nykøbing, where we all got a bath as if we had not had enough water already. As all our clothes were soaked, they lent us blankets and we thus continued our trip to Copenhagen wrapped in blankets like saris.<sup>73</sup>

We were exhausted both physically and mentally, but ecstatically happy that we had succeeded. Finally we were free and confident that we would be able to bring up our children in a free country without having to teach them how to lie and pretend.<sup>74</sup>

## Copenhagen

We arrived in Copenhagen at night. There were reporters and photographers there, but I don't remember much of it, except that we have some newspaper clippings showing us wrapped in the hospital blankets – we, or actually our pictures – made the front page of a Danish newspaper. Eva was certain that her mother resembled Indira Gandhi. We had a very exciting and exhausting day behind us. We were received by the police, a special section for foreigners, and informed that unfortunately I would have to go to jail until they checked me out. They apologized for that and I remember responding that I expected to end up in jail and that I was very happy that it was a Danish and not a Communist jail. Because of the children, Eva and her mother would stay with the kids in a pension run by a Mrs. Vives located just across from the police station. I spent the first nights in the downtown police station and answered a number of questions.

My first concern was about the Reisers. I was terribly worried about them, felt very badly that they were left behind, and I tried to convince the Danes that they should do something to get them out. I knew that the Reisers had a good friend who was somehow connected with the British Secret Service and who I thought was at that time somewhere in Germany and could help them. The response was

<sup>73</sup> After our escape was discovered, our Prague apartment was of course sealed by the police. Shortly thereafter Petr Sagher, the son of my cousin Hedda Saxl, came to visit us and then reported to his mother and stepfather that “The Roceks were not home, they must be on vacation, but they must be very important, because they had their apartment guarded by the police” Hedda and Otto Saxl had already heard about our escape via radio Vienna and were very amused.

<sup>74</sup> However, for many years I suffered from a nightmarish dream in which I by some mistake on my part went back to Prague and did not know how to get out again.

## Czechs, Kids, Granny & All Go Overboard for Liberty

The ferry's destination of record was Denmark, but the real goal of the Czech family that boarded it from an East German port was freedom.

### How He Worked It

The latest family group to wiggle through the Red Iron Curtain arrived at International Airport yesterday to settle here permanently. The members were Jan Rocek, 36, and his wife, Eba, 33, both research chemists; their two children, Martin, 6, and Thomas, 4, and Mrs. Rocek's

mother, Mrs. Anna Trojan, 61.

Rocek said he made the freedom leap by the ruse of joining an automobile club. While on vacation, the family decided to escape through East Germany. Driving to Warnemunde, they boarded a German motor launch for Gedser, Denmark.

Leaving the boat was forbidden, but as it neared the slip, the Roceks and Mrs. Trojan plunged into the water and made it safely to Danish jurisdiction. They eluded a German patrol boat.

Rocek, who will do research in theoretical physical organic chemistry at Harvard where he has a fellowship, said that while economically conditions are not bad in Czechoslovakia, the people live under a rigid political control.

"I was not willing to disguise my views and bring up my children where they would have no freedom of conscience or belief," he said.

### The Rocek's escape in the press

quite negative. They told me that it is quite possible that they will give us asylum in Denmark and would do the same for the Reisers if they were here, but it is out of the question for them to actively help them in their escape. However, because of this conversation they knew all about the Reisers and I was absolutely delighted when I was called down to the office of the president of the foreign police the next day and informed that the Reisers had just safely landed in Gedser.

When we did not return and no police came to the camp to investigate our escape, the Reisers concluded that we must have succeeded and that the police therefore still did not know who we were and from which group we were missing. The Reisers then decided to follow us. In the middle of the night they informed the tour leader that they had problems with their rather old car and would have

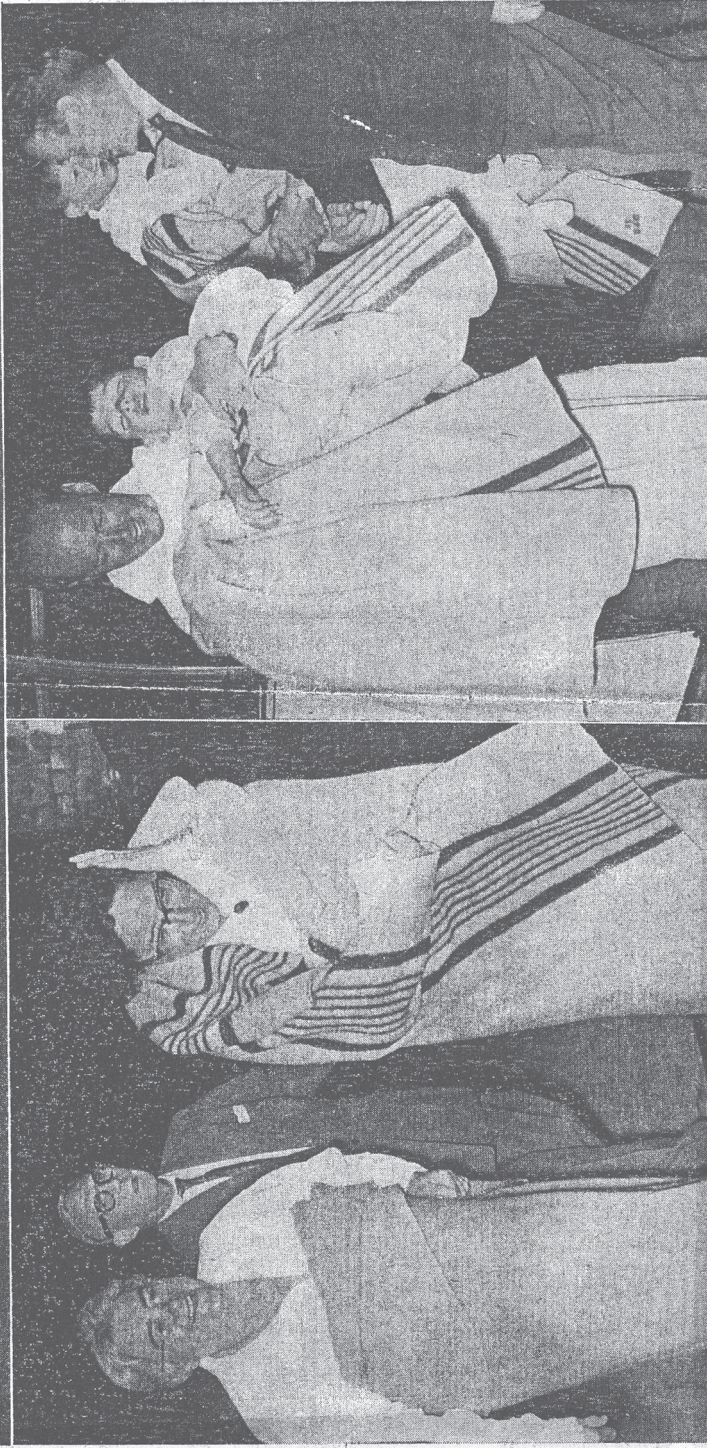
**Mode-ugen i Paris begynder: Side 6 \* Vi gør vejr-regnskabet op: Side 3 og 5**

# EKSTRA BLADET

MANDAG 25. juli 1960 . 57. årgang . Nr. 136

Rådhuspladsen 33 . Kbh. V. . C. 8511 . 50 ØRE

**De fem lykkelige mennesker fra afhopper-dramaet**



to have the car checked in Warnemünde<sup>75</sup>. They left the camp very early in the morning, managed to get tickets to the morning crossing of the Seebad Ahlbeck and followed our example. They had the advantage of being told by a seaman – in response to Ruth’s direct question – that they, the Germans, have to respect the sovereignty of the Danish waters. The Reisers therefore learned that they would be safe from the moment they were in the water, something we did not know. On the other hand, they were watched; the lower deck from which we jumped was closed and Arnost actually had to fight with somebody who tried to restrain him.

Ruth with the children, Jan (8) and Paul (4), were placed in the same pension where Eva, her mother and our children were staying, and Arnost joined me in jail, though in a separate cell; in the beginning we were kept strictly apart.

We were soon transferred to a large jail, probably somewhere in a suburb, I don’t really know where it was located. In a way it was an interesting experience. The jail was well organized. I was held in strict solitary confinement. I got my food in my cell. When I needed to use the toilet, I gave a signal by pushing out some sort of flag and a guard then took me to the toilet, which I could not flush – the flushing had to be done from the outside by the guard after he made sure that I did not try to dispose of any incriminating material. Prisoners were supposed to go to the toilet only for “number two,” and were given some sort of bottle to urinate into and keep in the cell to be emptied once a day. I refused to do that and the guards were not happy to have to lead me to the toilet more often than they were supposed to, but somehow they tolerated it.

We were taken to exercise daily for one half hour. There was a large round area divided into numerous pie-shaped sections. The dividing walls and the outside wall was solid, but instead of a roof there was a heavy wire mesh grate to let in air and the sun. There was a watch station in the center and around it a narrow circular space through which one could enter the individual sections. It was all organized very efficiently. We were led in single file, the first one entered the last section, the last prisoner the first section, so that one never passed another prisoner and thus could not talk to anybody. In the pie shaped exercise area – I would estimate that they were some twenty or twenty five feet long and some eight feet wide at the wide end – one could walk or run a bit. Also when we were taken to a shower, there was no chance to communicate with another prisoner, but it was all done in an orderly way without any mistreatment. Similarly when I was taken to the downtown station for some more questioning, I would go in a truck or bus with small individual compartments, just large enough for a seat and even with a little window covered by wire mesh, but again with no contact with anybody else. The only time the vigilance to prevent communications among prisoners was a bit relaxed was during the Sunday religious services which I once attended out of boredom and curiosity.

<sup>75</sup> The day before they explained our absence by claiming that we obviously and understandably must have had car problems because our car was so new, but anyway, both explanations were accepted as equally plausible.

Only one of the prison guards spoke some English and another some German, but unless one of them was on duty I could not communicate with anybody. I asked for and got a beginner's text of Danish, but did not make any progress and could not concentrate on any reading material. I became a bit impatient particularly because they at first told me that it would be just a few days – I thought that they meant three or four – and it kept dragging on.

I was informed that the Czechoslovak ambassador or somebody from the embassy wanted to talk to me and I was quite willing to tell him why I did not want to live in the country under the present regime, but I was told that I did not have to talk to anybody if I did not want to and I felt that there was an implied suggestion that I should not, so I refused the visit. I did write a letter to my boss, the director of the Institute of Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science, Frantisek Sorm. The purpose of the letter was to protect my friends by declaring that I did not have any friends there, that I could not trust anybody because all the other people in the Institute were satisfied and bought off by the advantages and good working conditions available to them. As I later learned, the letter was posted on the bulletin board of the Institute together with Sorm's reply to the "traitor Rocek"; he did not bother to send me a copy. However, I later found out that some people misunderstood my letter and its purpose and took my disclaimer of having had no friends literally, and were offended by it. In a curious coincidence I learned about one of them during our visit to Australia in the fall of 1999, and at the urging of our common Australian friend, Edith Sheldon, I called Milos Cihar right there from Sidney. He was very pleased to hear my explanation, and I was glad that I could reassure him – I later learned that he died the next day.

I immediately wrote to Sir Christopher Ingold who sent me a very nice reply expressing regret that I "did not jump overboard a bit earlier" since he would have had a good temporary job for me and suggested that I might want to consider Canada, where his own son now lived. He also wrote to several other people, including Niels Bohr, Ken Wiberg and most importantly to Frank Westheimer. Niels Bohr<sup>76</sup> wrote a letter to the Danish foreign police, of which I was informed by the police president who was very much impressed, but it did not seem to accelerate the asylum procedures. Frank Westheimer reacted immediately with a wonderfully worded offer to "work together for a while" and included a \$200 check. Frank's letter and offer completely changed our lives and de facto determined our entire future.

After a while the Danes decided that there was actually no good reason why Arnost Reiser and I could not talk to each other while waiting to be granted asylum and we were allowed to be in the same cell during the day, which made the wait much more bearable. Eva discovered that when she got terribly unhappy Mrs. Vives called the police and they brought me in from prison to console her. The first time

<sup>76</sup> Niels Bohr, the 1922 Nobel prize winning physicist, who proposed the first useful model of the atom and played a part in the development of the atomic bomb, was Denmark's greatest scientist and is regarded there as a national treasure.

her distress was very genuine, but when she saw the effect of it she repeated the performance a couple of times later and so we had the chance to see each other a few times during my incarceration. The Danes were very nice and I could not have wished for a better stay in jail. During my jump into the sea I had lost my glasses and so they took me out of prison to the royal optician to get new glasses.

The news of our escape made its way into many newspapers, not only in Denmark, where we made the front page with large photographs, but also in Germany, England, and even the New York Times. The Reisers' friend, Nelly Palache, noticed the article in an English newspaper and – although it did not mention names – immediately identified the Reisers and us and right away notified Arnost's wealthy uncle in Boston, Robert Reiser, as well as my cousin Hella Kleeman and her husband Derrick. Robert Reiser financed Nelly's trip to Copenhagen and offered to pay all expenses for the Reisers, while the Kleemans did the same for us. In addition, Eva contacted her relatives in America, Otto and Jaro Munz, and they all sent us some money.

We were finally released from prison after 18 days, much longer than we had originally expected, but bureaucracies always work more slowly than one would like. Nelly immediately took care of us and arranged for all of us to move to a small hotel in Esrum, a small peaceful and isolated village, and even wanted to hire body guards to protect us and particularly the children from a possible abduction, but we were assured that that was not necessary.

In the meantime I tried to contact a Danish chemist I had met in England, Ulrik Klänning; he had also worked on chromic acid oxidations. Unfortunately, it turned out that he was seriously ill. However Klänning's wife worked with a biochemist, Peder Olesen Larsen, who came to visit us and actually offered Eva a temporary job. To Peder's embarrassment the offer was later withdrawn because his boss, Professor Kjer, did not want to risk offending Sorm, with whom he had friendly relations. However, Peder's father, a minister, offered us the use of his summer cottage – an offer that we very gladly and gratefully accepted, particularly because we were rather uncomfortable about the Kleemans having to pay our Esrum hotel bills. Peder's father<sup>77</sup> made his offer in the most tactful way, "under one condition," namely that we would not pay him anything because he would have to pay taxes on it. So we moved to Birkerød and spent time going to Copenhagen trying to check up on our visa situation and other related affairs, but we also had time to do a little bit of sightseeing. We had of course very little money – though certainly enough to eat well and buy whatever we really needed – and tried to spend as little as possible. When Eva and I spent the day in Copenhagen we would usually not eat and wait to

<sup>77</sup> Peder's father was a very kind and generous man. He was also a scholar who wrote a lot about Kierkegaard. He was however not very tolerant toward Catholics and surprised us when in our first meeting he made the statement: "It is the devil's dream to get the Communists and the Catholics together." We thought that we did not understand him, but he repeated his assertion.

having dinner when we returned to Birkerz d. That did not bother me very much, but Eva really suffered: she becomes very unhappy when she is hungry, and particularly was tormented by all the tantalizing wonderful open faced sandwiches in the shop windows all around us. Sometimes we simply could not resist and splurged.

One late evening a Czech voice asked to be let in and my mother-in-law immediately recognized the voice of our old friend from Terezin, Thomas Luke. Tom escaped in 1948, got to Australia and became an Australian citizen. He studied in America and was currently living in Geneva and working at the United Nations. He drove all the way from Geneva to visit us, and it was a great reunion. He even offered to take us for a few days to Geneva, which he could have done with his diplomatic car, but Eva's mother refused to take responsibility for the children and so we could not go. He brought each of our boys, who at that time had no toys except a cheap plastic boat, a battery operated toy gun which shot sparks when the trigger was pressed. It was touching that Martin told him that he did not have to bring any gifts. A little later, while we were already in the US and without the slightest hint from us, but to our great pleasure and pride, Martin removed the little electric motor from the gun and installed it in a boat to run the propeller – "swords into plowshares" in action. Tom also brought some things for us and I remember wearing his silk shirt for many years.

Finally, after about three months, the visa arrived – there was just a minor problem: the Americans needed passports to issue the visa and the Danes were ready to issue us foreign passports as soon as we presented them with the visa. It took some doing and running back and forth between the American consulate and the Danish passport office, but the problem was finally solved. The Reisers left at the same time for England, where Arnost had a job at Kodak waiting for him.



**Meeting of  
the Roceks  
with Tom  
Luke in  
Prague,  
2005**

Our stay in Denmark was most wonderful – we were really free, we had succeeded, we and our children had a future and I had been offered a wonderful start at the world’s greatest university!! The people were incredibly nice to us and we even had the chance to enjoy Tivoli, the Pinacotheca, and our new friends took us for some sightseeing trips. We were invited several times at the Olesen Larsens and also at the homes of a business friend of the Kleemans – he had a very nice and friendly family and lived in a charming house set in a lovely garden. There also was a biochemist who had spent a sabbatical in the US who took special care of us and invited us to his home; I remember that his children brought from America models of American cars and were very proud of them. The same biochemist – I am ashamed that I don’t even remember his name – even brought us a stove when it turned colder; the Olesen Larsen’s cottage had no heating. He also took us for a visit to Hamlet’s castle, Elsinore, which we enjoyed a lot, but bored our four year old Thomas. I chided him and told him that he better pay attention, since in America he won’t have any chance to see anything like that because there were no old castles there. His response: “No old castles? Good!!!” (It does seem ironic that he became an archeologist) We are still friends with the Olesen Larsens and the Heiedes – Kristine Heiede is Peder’s sister.

## England

Our trip to America was organized and paid for by the International Rescue Committee (IRC, an organization we have been supporting ever since). Because of my two cousins in England and because I had so many wonderful memories of my two stays there, I asked whether it would be possible to go via England and spend a few days in London, and IRC was able to arrange it. We stayed with the Kleemans and frequently visited the Linds, and besides that I took Eva to visit some of the places she knew only from my pictures and description. The boys got a ride on a double-decker London bus. The Kleemans’ chauffeur took them to the bus station in a Rolls Royce and then followed the bus to pick them up again when they got off – they loved the bus, but a Rolls Royce did not mean anything to them. The Kleemans took us to our first musical, “My Fair Lady.” At first I was appalled that G.B.Shaw’s play – I was and I still am very fond of Shaw – would be made into a musical, but to my great surprise we both loved it. We also visited the Buntons – to Eva’s great embarrassment: after I had returned from my first visit to England with lots of photographs, including one of Bunny, Eva commented on what a singularly handsome man he was, and I had told him about Eva’s assessment during my second visit, when I did not expect that they would ever meet.

My cousins, Hella Kleeman and Susie Lind, took the boys for some shopping to enrich their very sparse wardrobes. The kids were not very appreciative and criticized my cousins’ selections, not being aware that they still retained enough Czech to understand them.

## AMERICA

From England we flew with Pan Am – after refueling in Shannon, Ireland – to Boston and on to New York’s then Idelwild, now Kennedy, airport, where we went through immigration and received our green cards. Eva’s father’s cousin, Otto Munz, and his wife Gerta were waiting there for us. There was also a representative from the IRC and pictures were taken which then appeared in the newspapers. Then we parted: Thomas and Eva’s mother went with the Munzes to Annapolis, while Martin joined Eva and me on a flight to Boston, where we were met at the airport by Frank Westheimer.

### Cambridge

Frank took us to his home in Belmont where we met his wife Jeanne, who then took charge of us and made our new start incredibly easy. She arranged for us to stay for the first couple of weeks with a wonderfully nice lady, Isabella Halsted, a member of a distinguished old Bostonian family,<sup>78</sup> who welcomed us to her house with the words “Call me Iby and here is the refrigerator, use whatever you want.”

Frank took me to the university, introduced me to his group, and assigned me a large space in a beautiful and very well equipped lab in the new Conant building.<sup>79</sup> It was a wonderful environment to work in and a very stimulating group. However, I remember how shocked I was at the first group meeting, when Professor Westheimer was at the blackboard giving his interpretation of some findings, and a young graduate student, Charlie Perrin,<sup>80</sup> sat with his feet on the table, puffing on a

<sup>78</sup> Iby’s father was Charles Hopkinson, a painter who painted one of the American presidents. The family owned a forty acre estate in Manchester, Massachusetts. The fact that Dr. Halsted married Ann Roosevelt, FDR’s daughter, after he and Iby got divorced is indicative of the society which the Halsteds frequented.

<sup>79</sup> When I joined the laboratory I had to get safety glasses and Frank decided to demonstrate to me how shock resistant they were. So he took his own safety glasses and threw them with full force on the floor -- and they shattered. But I still believed that they were more impact resistant than ordinary glasses and got them and wore them.

<sup>80</sup> Charlie was probably the brightest student in the group; he became a professor at UCSD.

pipe and saying “This is nonsense.” I could not believe it. In Czechoslovakia nobody would have ever dared to speak to a professor like that, although in retrospect I have to admit that I used to have some quite lively discussions with Professor Wichterle myself, but Wichterle was young and very different from the typical European professor. Frank suggested that we work together to settle some of the differences of opinion we had on the mechanism of oxidation. The results clearly supported Westheimer’s mechanism as far as the formation of an intermediate ester of chromic acid was concerned, but not the proton transfer to an external base.

Jeanne took Eva, found us a large apartment – actually the entire second and third floor of an old house on 36 Garfield Street, which was owned by the university and located only about ten minutes walking distance from the lab.<sup>81</sup> The rent was only \$100/month, but the rental office requested a deposit of \$100 in advance and we did not have any money yet. Eva recalls that Jeanne Westheimer just told them “I am Mrs. Westheimer, Mrs. Frank H. Westheimer, and I assure you that they will pay” and that took care of it. Jeanne even negotiated with the office to pay for the paint and Eva started painting the walls with a daring combination of grey and yellow. Jeanne personally helped clean the house and even cleaned the oven of many layers of accumulated burned fat by herself, though at home she had a full-time maid.

Just about at the time we got our apartment Eva received an urgent letter from her mother asking her to request that Thomas join us in Cambridge – Otto did not treat him well. It was not badly intended, but Thomas was not happy there. So Thomas, aged four, soon arrived by himself on a plane from Washington – the “unaccompanied minor” program had not yet been introduced. It was of course Jeanne Westheimer who drove us to the airport; she took care of us in every respect and the boys started regarding her car as ours. Thomas arrived with a little lunch box with some toys. It was really touching to see the two boys together again. Thomas ignored us all and sat down on the floor in the middle of the airport with Martin to show him all his treasures.

The house was empty, but Jeanne made a collection of necessities from among her friends, and one day she rented a U-Haul trailer, had it attached to her car, and we went from house to house to collect pieces of furniture. We got all we needed and more and it all came from prominent people, mostly from scientists. We had things from Robert Woodward (later a Nobel prize winner), Konrad Bloch (later a Nobel prize winner), from Ron Vanelli (Director of Laboratories), chairs from Harvard’s president Pusey<sup>82</sup> and many others I can no longer recall. One day I was coming home from the lab and in front of the house stood a car with a bed on top and a

<sup>81</sup> We looked up the house in 2001: it is still there, but the university sold it to private owners, who did some renovations, but did not change the outside much.

<sup>82</sup> Many years later we gave the Pusey chairs to Eva’s mother and, after she died in 1993, they were refurbished and are now in Thomas’ and Karen’s home in Newark, DE.

very attractive young lady struggling to pull it down. I offered to help and asked where she was taking it and she pointed to our house. She introduced herself as Ann Büchi, the wife of MIT's chemistry professor George Büchi; she was amused when I corrected her pronunciation of her own name; Büchi was originally Swiss and I pronounced it the German way and at first did not understand her americanized pronunciation.

Occasionally the boys would come to the university. I vividly remember Martin's very first visit, during which he got his first English lesson from Frank. Frank drew a picture of the sun on the blackboard in the seminar room and taught Martin the word "sun." They would also occasionally visit me in the laboratory and I would try to impress them with my rather limited glassblowing skills. One of these laboratory visits had a rather worrisome outcome: Martin developed a blister on his stomach. Eva assumed that it must have been poison ivy, a strictly American problem and thus proof that our children were already real Americans. However, our pediatrician, an elderly Austrian lady, disagreed with Eva's diagnosis and said "If I did not know that it is impossible, I would swear that it is a mustard gas burn." Bob Purdy, in the lab next door was indeed working with mustard gases and must have spilled some on a bench against which Martin leaned. It was not serious. Another time I left Martin in the Peabody museum while I went to the lab to finish some work. When I came back I found him in conversation with Harvard's Professor George Wald.

Everybody was helping us – I don't think that anybody had an easier and more exciting start in America than we did. My late mother's old girlfriend from Gablonz, Steffi Fried, came to visit us and, although of very limited means herself, bought Eva many things for the household. One day Steffi was home alone when a woman came to deliver curtains. She thought that it was somebody sent from the cleaners and wanted to tip the woman, but then it somehow did not seem right, so she invited her graciously for a cup of coffee. Eva returned just when Mrs. Pusey, the wife of Harvard's president, was leaving. One day Ibbey Halsted called us that she was getting a new washing machine and we could have her old one, which was still perfectly good. My friends from the lab helped me to move it and set it up for us and we had our first good washing machine ever.

We were frequent guests at the Westheimers and were invited by them for our first Thanksgiving dinner<sup>83</sup> and to many parties. Frank and Jeanne treated me much more as a friend and a faculty colleague than as a post-doc, and made a real

<sup>83</sup> That was where Eva learned how to celebrate Thanksgiving. The next year she already gave a Thanksgiving dinner of her own and invited all the single students of the Westheimer group. Without the slightest warning she suddenly asked me to carve the turkey, which I had never done before. I was surprised and a bit in a shock, but I somehow managed (though not very professionally).

effort to introduce me to as many important people as possible. I just regret that I was not bright enough and a good enough chemist to be able to take full advantage of it. I remember a dinner with Louis P. Hammett, a very famous chemist whose book "Physical Organic Chemistry" was sort of a bible for people of my ilk which I had studied thoroughly back in Prague. I was seated next to Hammett, expecting to learn something momentous about his views on science, but I was disappointed when the great man entertained the company with a story about a collect phone call he refused to accept. I asked him about an interesting concept which he had proposed and of which I had made use, the Zucker-Hammett hypothesis, and his answer was succinct: "It was a mistake." We were also invited to the celebration of the Westheimers' 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and of course got to know their two daughters, Ruth and Ellen, very well. We were also invited to a theater performance in which Ellen played a role.

At the first research group party that I attended at the Westheimers I also learned – albeit too late – what a daiquiri was. It was very hot and I thought I was drinking lemonade.

At the Westheimers we met all the important people of the Harvard chemistry faculty: Robert Woodward,<sup>84</sup> Paul Bartlett,<sup>85</sup> Konrad Bloch,<sup>86</sup> E. Bright Wilson,<sup>87</sup> E.J. Corey,<sup>88</sup> and many others. The one person whom we did not meet at the Westheimers was Louis Fieser, a man whose fame was claimed to "grow with the square of the distance from Cambridge." Indeed he, his work on steroids, and his many books were very well known in Prague; he was probably better known than any other member of the Harvard chemistry faculty. It seemed that in Cambridge he was no longer able to attract graduate students and had only a few Indian post-docs. I was never quite sure what was the reason for Frank's deep dislike for him, whether it was the way he used to run the department when he was chairman, before being deposed by the younger guard, whether it was because he was the inventor of napalm (jellied gasoline that made flamethrowers far more deadly and horrible) or for ethical questions having to do with the employment of his wife Mary, or his support of cigarette manufacturers until the time when he himself developed lung cancer. In any case Frank, normally so polite, pretended not to hear me at all when I was telling him that Eva and I went to Fieser's famous annual lecture on incendiaries.

<sup>84</sup> Nobel prize in chemistry 1965, a brilliant synthetic organic chemist.

<sup>85</sup> A leader in physical organic chemistry; he trained a whole generation of physical organic chemists and his Ph.D. graduates and post-docs occupied a large number of faculty positions in physical organic chemistry at U.S. universities

<sup>86</sup> Nobel prize in physiology and medicine 1964. A leader in biochemistry; he elucidated the biosynthesis of cholesterol.

<sup>87</sup> One of the foremost physical chemists of the time.

<sup>88</sup> Nobel prize in chemistry 1990 for developing new synthetic methods for complex organic compounds.

Thanks to the Westheimers we got also invited to the Blochs, the Woodwards, and later, when Eva started working in Bartlett's group, to the Bartletts' student parties. When we finally left Cambridge and moved to Bethesda, our boys stayed the last night with the Woodwards.<sup>89</sup>

I had the good fortune to have Don Dennis<sup>90</sup> for my lab-mate. He and his wife Marilyn were wonderful; they essentially adopted us as part of their family. They undertook to introduce us to American life, bought our kids their first hamburgers (they were 10¢ a piece then), took us to picnics,<sup>91</sup> invited us numerous times, introduced us to inexpensive shopping. One day they took us for an outing to the sea north of Boston. Eva was always afraid of sharks, but Don assured her that the water there was too cold for them. However, as soon as we arrived at the beach we practically stepped on a dead shark, but Don argued that this only confirmed his previous statement – it was too cold for them to live there.

In the beginning, when we had very little money, Eva would go shopping to the Boston farmers' market on Haymarket Square, but only on Saturdays shortly before closing time, when unsold vegetables were almost given away at truly bargain prices and she would just buy whatever was available. She would take the heavy shopping bags by subway to Cambridge's Harvard Square but then, instead of taking the bus to our street, would drag them on foot all the way to save the 10 cent bus fare. We also would buy day-old bread and simply try to save in any possible way. Considerably later I splurged on our first wine, a bottle of Chianti in a woven basket, all for the exorbitant price of \$1. We soon learned about Filene's Basement, where clothing of all sorts could be bought at bargain prices.

Jeanne Westheimer's care of our family extended into every area. One day Eva got a call from Jeanne asking her whether she did not have anything to tell her. Eva did not know what Jeanne meant and was quite surprised and confused. Finally Jeanne let her know that she found out through the grapevine that I had asked Frank's secretary to recommend a doctor for Eva. Jeanne was obviously concerned that we were looking for an abortionist and was very relieved and happy to hear that the problem was an unwanted tapeworm rather than an unwanted baby.

In the late spring of 1961, we talked about possibly getting a car and Don Dennis discovered for us a splendid twelve-year old Cadillac for \$90! We loved the car, but it had a sad end. Until then we had owned only two motorcycles and then

<sup>89</sup> Mrs. Woodward made her own applesauce and the boys demanded that Eva do the same: "If Mrs. Woodward can do it, you can do it, too."

<sup>90</sup> Later Professor at the University of Delaware.

<sup>91</sup> One day Don invited Martin, Thomas and me to join him and his sons Drake and David, for a "boys only" outing into the nearby mountains. The two girls, Tyrin and Robin decided to stay with Eva so that she would not be lonely; Marilyn after all had the baby Eric to keep her company. Because the Dennises had at that time five children -- and later six -- Jeanne was convinced that they must be Catholics. Don's response was: "No, we are just sexy Protestants."

our escape car, the Wartburg, all of which had had two-cycle engines. So we were used to adding oil to the gas but there was never any oil in the engine to check and nobody told us that that was what one had to do with a four-cycle engine. Moreover, while the Cadillac started without any problems when it was cold, it was impossible to get it started when the engine was hot; as a result of that I learned never to turn the engine off when taking gas. Thus, very unfortunately, the oil was never checked either by me or by the gas station attendant (there were no self-service pumps at that time); the sad result was that one day I heard a loud banging in the engine which foretold the untimely end of the car. After that we bought our first new car, the cheapest which was available, a Ford Falcon for \$1,900. By that time I had learned my lesson, and knew how to check the oil.

We also met an old friend. One day I was called to the phone and there was George Vogel, with whom I had shared the lab when I started working in Wichterle's group in 1949. When we got our motorcycle in 1950, we spent a part of our first motorized vacation with him and his girlfriend Jitka in Slovakia.<sup>92</sup> He then escaped over the border and got a job as a director of a tanning factory in Ethiopia, but later managed to get to the U.S. and in 1960 was a professor at Boston College. I was delighted to hear him on the phone. George asked whether we would like to meet and, of course, I was eager to see him again, but he was very cautious. I did not understand why. Then he told me that he did not know whether it would be dangerous for me, because he was a refugee. He was under the impression that I was there on an official visit; I assured him that we were refugees, too. He came right over and we spent almost the entire night talking. We then saw quite a lot of the Vogels and he invited us for our first barbecued steak – we were too thrifty to buy any beef during the entire first year.

During our stay in Cambridge, Frank also gave me some money to attend my first American Chemical Society Meeting, which at that time was held in Chicago. Bob Blakeley, a member of Frank's group, offered to take us there in his old VW Beetle, and on the way we stopped at Niagara Falls. It was an unforgettable trip. We traveled very modestly, one night we slept in some field, but in Canada we purchased a whole basket of wonderful fresh peaches<sup>93</sup> and had a wonderful time. In Chicago

<sup>92</sup> During that trip we had a most improbable experience. We were driving a different route via a town in Jablone nad Orlici, a place Eva visited as a child, while the Vogels were driving directly and we were supposed to meet in the Mala Fatra in Slovakia. At one place the cable on my clutch broke and we stopped and tried to find a little missing piece. We walked up and down perhaps some 100 yards along the road, but could not find it. Instead we found strewn along the highway a set of camera filters, all undamaged, except one which was cracked. When we arrived the next day in Stefanova in the Mala Fatra, George Vogel was in a bad mood. He was an avid photographer and had lost his entire set of filters somewhere on the way; it was a good set, only one filter was cracked.

<sup>93</sup> We shocked Blakeley by eating the peaches with the skins; he always peeled his carefully.

we stayed with an old friend of my mother, Elsa Kohn. The only thing we did not like on the trip was driving through Gary, which, with its iron works and flames and smoke everywhere, looked like the gates of hell, and Eva stated emphatically: "I would not want even to be buried here" referring to the entire Chicago area – famous last words.

Working in the neighboring lab at Harvard was a very clever young woman of Japanese ancestry, Pat Traylor, who always seemed to make the best comments during the Westheimer group meetings. We became friends with her and with her husband, Teddy Traylor,<sup>94</sup> who worked in Professor Bartlett's group. Teddy was very interested in music and they took us to our first American musical, "Oklahoma," which Teddy, who seemed to know all the operas of the world, declared to be the American analog of Smetana's "The Bartered Bride," probably the most famous Czech opera. The Traylor's also introduced us to Gilbert and Sullivan. One day Teddy offered Eva a job as a sort of his assistant and so Eva started working first for him in the Bartlett group and later, when he left to accept a job at San Diego, she became a regular post-doctoral fellow with Professor Paul Bartlett.

Eva's mother, who joined us after spending about a month in Annapolis with Otto Münz, also started working as soon as she could. Her first job was in "The Window Shop," a small restaurant opened by a group of Viennese Jewish refugees who came before the outbreak of the WWII. Later, I think that it was thanks to Steffi Fried, she found a wonderful job as a companion to a wealthy old couple from Germany living in a residential hotel in Boston. The man, Mr. Loeb, was Jewish and a former banker; his wife was not Jewish and was a professional musician. The Loeb's were art collectors and my mother-in-law cooked with original paintings by Kokoshka and other modern masters hanging over and around her.

We also had time to visit the area museums. During one such visit Thomas, who must have been about six years old asked me rather loudly, "why are these people naked?" pointing at a painting of Adam and Eve. I told him that these were

<sup>94</sup> Teddy had an interesting history. He was part American Indian and his half-brother lived on a reservation. He was a high school drop out, who at the beginning of the war joined the merchant marine only to discover that he suffered from sea sickness. He spent some time in England and became an avid reader. Because he had served in the armed forces, after the war he was entitled to free education under the "GI bill." Since he had not finished high school, no university would admit him, but he managed to get accepted by some small college. After a year he transferred to UCLA and earned his Ph.D. with Saul Winstein, one of the most prominent physical organic chemists. He got married, had several children, and worked for a chemical company. One day he got into a car accident -- he collided with a young American-Japanese girl, a chemist working in the same place; some time later he got a divorce, married her and they came together to Harvard, Ted as a post-doc to work with Professor Bartlett and Pat as a graduate student with Frank Westheimer. In 1961 Teddy got a job at the new San Diego campus of the University of California where he quickly rose to full professor and prominence. Unfortunately he died of lung cancer in 1993.

the first people, so they did not have any clothes yet. He thought for a while and then retorted: “Daddy, this is strange, I would have thought that they would have looked much more like apes.” I must admit that I was rather proud of this. Another time he asked the supreme authority, his older brother, why a certain picture which he did not like was in the museum. Martin explained “a painting does not have to be good, it just have to be famous to get into a museum.” We did not get bored when we were with our kids.

We always liked to go to the theater, but in the beginning could not afford it. Steffi Fried, during her visit, took us to the theater for the first time, and it was a rather devastating experience. We saw Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” in a terribly run down theater, the Charles Playhouse in Boston. We were almost the only people in the audience and it was all very depressing. So our first impression of American theater was very disappointing and particularly Eva was quite depressed after this experience.<sup>95</sup> But later we started going to the Loeb theater in Cambridge and saw some good performances in much nicer theaters and we have, of course, seen many wonderful theater performances since.

Our entire two years in Cambridge were just like a dream – everybody was so nice and wonderful, we never encountered one hostile or negative reaction. Although I was older than everybody else in Frank Westheimer’s group and had a totally different background and many deficiencies, I felt totally accepted and among good friends. We were invited and Eva started to invite people herself. A Harvard faculty member, Martin Gouterman, arranged for Martin to be accepted on full scholarship to a wonderful private school, the Leslie Ellis School, which was associated with the Leslie College of Education; later Thomas got accepted too, first into preschool and then into first grade. By a mistake on the part of the school he skipped kindergarten and thus started first grade a year prematurely. A friend of Ibbey Halsted, Katherine Goodman, a painter, offered us the use of her summer home in Vermont, where we had our first American vacation. There was just one slight problem which I encountered there. The room had only fireplaces and I knew nothing about flues so that we slept in the cold after the first unsuccessful experiment with the fireplace. One time Ibbey Halsted let us use the only new building (she called it “the motel”) on her family’s estate and also gave us some furniture from there in spite of the very obvious disapproval of her old aunts. Arnost Reiser’s uncle, Robert Reiser, was also very nice to us, inviting us several times and offered to loan us money so that we could afford better furnishings for our home, but we preferred to live on our own income without debts.

<sup>95</sup> In Prague the main theaters were very elegant large buildings elaborately decorated with paintings, carpeted hallways, large foyers, gilded chandeliers, velvet covered seats -- originally built by or for the nobility or emulating the same style. There were practically always full and people generally dressed up for going to the theater.

We enjoyed participating in some of the social activities at Harvard. I particularly remember the elaborate departmental party with a play making fun of the faculty, particularly of Robert Woodward. At that time it was clear that he was a serious candidate for the Nobel Prize and everybody knew that he was expecting it. So the student playing Woodward was sitting by the phone and waiting for the call and singing a song about it based on one of the Gilbert and Sullivan tunes.<sup>96</sup>

Because at that time there were very few refugees coming over we were a bit of celebrities. Eva was invited to speak to the Harvard Womens Club, which she did. I was invited to write an article for Readers Digest, which I declined.

But most importantly, being at Harvard and particularly in Frank Westheimer's group was a superb professional and educational experience. I have never met anybody with a more rigorous approach to science and research than Frank. I was already tremendously impressed when I read and many times re-read his Chemical Reviews article on chromic acid oxidations, which summarized the field with perfect logic and organization. It was wonderful to discuss science with him and to listen to him during the weekly group meeting. I also attended his lectures on physical organic chemistry for graduate students, and it was a true delight to follow his logical reasoning. I also greatly enjoyed Paul Bartlett's lectures on advanced organic chemistry. Overall, the two years I spent at Harvard were the most stimulating and interesting years of my life as a chemist.

## Washington

Frank Westheimer was extremely helpful in trying to find me a permanent position. Through his help I had many invitations to give talks in departments like Princeton, Pennsylvania State, Brandeis, Albany, and many others. I was also invited to speak at Delaware because I knew the head of the department, Bill Mosher, who had done some work on chromic acid oxidations and whom I had met when he and his colleague and friend Professor Beachel, a physical chemist, had visited Prague.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Woodward did receive the Nobel Prize not too long after that performance. I was a bit surprised when during the party the wife of Professor Paul Doty came to me and noted "It is a strange feeling to be at a Christmas party and not be pregnant." I really did not know how to respond to this opening of the conversation.

<sup>97</sup> I was delighted to have American visitors and tried to show them around Prague a bit. Beachel told me that his wife was Czech and he was going to visit her relatives in some small town outside Prague. They had a Czech driver and interpreter, because they did not speak any Czech and did not expect the relatives to speak any English. When I found out about the arrangement I rushed to warn them to be very careful because I was sure that the interpreter would be working for the secret police and would report anything incriminating. They thus could get Beachel's wife's family unwittingly into very serious trouble. This warning to Professor Beachel later helped me in America: Mosher was able to testify to the State Department as to my anti-communist feelings.

My first job offer came from Karel Wiesner, a prominent Czech chemist at the University of New Brunswick in Canada. I accepted, and because of this acceptance I turned down a likely offer from the University of Toronto, which I would have liked much better. However, it later turned out that Wiesner promised more than he could deliver – namely a job for Eva. He wanted her to apply for a fellowship and make herself younger because the fellowships were limited to people under a certain age and Eva was already older. After that Frank, who had the highest ethical standards of anybody I knew, agreed that I could withdraw my acceptance. I sometimes wonder how our lives would have developed had we gone to New Brunswick. One attraction they offered was that any resident of the province was entitled to shoot two bears each season. In any case I am very happy that we stayed in the U.S.

Not too long after New Brunswick fell through, Frank recommended me to the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and I got the job. The chairman offered me a starting position as Associate Professor with a salary \$8,000, but the administration considered that excessive and reduced it to \$7,900.

**Eva with Sonya and Egon  
Loebner and children, 1964**



When it became known in the group that I was moving to the Washington area, Carl Shellenberg<sup>98</sup> offered to rent us his house in Bethesda, a very good area just north of D.C. We were more than happy to accept; it was just perfect for us. It had three bedrooms, a large living room with a dining area and a nice garden. Anatol Eberhard, another member of Frank's group, offered to drive our U-Haul truck for us to Bethesda and would not even allow us to pay for his return trip.

In 1962 the chemistry department at Catholic University was not in a good shape. It was in steep decline since the days when it had a number of good physical chemists under the chairmanship of O. K. Rice. It

<sup>98</sup> Carl had an M.D. degree, and had worked at the National Institutes of Health before deciding to get a Ph.D. in chemistry with Frank Westheimer at Harvard.

had a lot of “dead wood” and only one good organic chemist, a young Assistant Professor, Robert Moriarty, who had joined the department just a year earlier and whom I knew from Harvard where he had been a post-doc in E.J. Corey’s group. There was a new department head, Basil de Baskerville Darwent, a physical chemist who had done some good work and had a concept of quality. The department soon divided into two camps, Darwent and the new more research oriented faculty vs. the old timers. Darwent later hired another very good organic chemist, John Eisch, with whom we became friends.

On the personal level, we liked life in the Washington area. There was something exciting to be in the seat of power of the most powerful country on earth, to go to the Capitol and hear senate debates, to live not too far from the White House, to visit the Library of Congress and walk by the Supreme Court. Most of Washington is really beautiful and life in Bethesda was very good. We joined a babysitting club, a group of people exchanging babysitting services without any exchange of money; it happened to be a very nice group of educated liberal-minded people, some of whom were associated with the Unitarian church. We became friends with John Krasny and his wife Mary. John was Jewish, born in Vienna, studied in a textile school in Liberec, Czechoslovakia, and spoke a few words of Czech; the boys fondly remember his favorite phrase “ja te zabiju” (I will kill you) and they assured him that he spoke the best Czech in Parkwood (the section of Bethesda we lived in) besides our family.

We also became friends with several Czechs, primarily the Rechcigls; Mila was a biochemist who worked at the Agency for International Development (AID); his wife Eva was very nice and helpful on many occasions. Through them we met Sasa Borkovec, a chemist with the Department of Agriculture, who played the guitar and sang old Czech songs at many of the parties, and his wife Vera. After Eva started working for “Research Resources, Inc.” we improved our financial situation sufficiently to start furnishing the house with Danish furniture, to which we had become addicted during our stay in Denmark. We also started going to theaters<sup>99</sup> and taking real vacations. The

**Jolly Rocek,  
USA, 2006**



first vacation, in 1963, was to Newfoundland, the next one, in 1964, a trip across the whole United States to California and back in our Ford Falcon. During the spring break we drove to Florida, saw our first palm trees, and our first alligators.

We also met the Sagers again. Bill Sager, a chemist who got his Ph.D. with Paul Bartlett at Harvard and who, at that time, was teaching at George Washington University in Washington, DC, had published work on chromic acid oxidation very similar to mine and actually “scooped” me – he published the correct mechanism for the oxidation of tertiary alcohols just shortly before we did. We met him and his family for the first time in Boston at the home of Norman Lichtin, a chemistry professor at Boston University who used to come regularly to Harvard seminars and who was an old friend of the Sagers. The Sagers were then just on their annual migration to their summer home on their island on Lake Meddybemps in Maine. They were incredibly friendly and immediately invited us to visit them in Maine, which we did and had a wonderful time with them; It was there that I had my first – and last – water skiing experience. Bill took the boys fishing. In Washington we saw the Sagers quite frequently.

In 1964 our landlord, Carl Shellenberg, accepted a position at Johns Hopkins and needed money for a house in Baltimore, and offered to let us buy the house we were renting in Bethesda. We were more than happy to do so, and were excited about owning a house for the first time in our life. We were told that we had to go through a lawyer and asked our friend, John Krasny, to come with us to the lawyer for the closing. The transaction was a bit unusual. We first bargained about the price: Carl wanted \$20,000 and we tried to convince him that this was an unreasonably low price and that we would like to pay more. We argued for a while, but eventually gave in – he would not accept a cent more. We had the feeling that the lawyer was a bit bewildered. Then the lawyer told us that he was obligated to inform us of a codicil prohibiting the sale of this property to any Negro, Jew or Armenian, but that the codicil was now unenforceable. Carl said “Well that does not concern you anyway” and Eva responded that it did. “You aren’t Armenian?” “No, but Jewish.” We had been in the same research group for two years and he did not know, but now he wanted to know right away, right there in the lawyer’s office, how did we manage to survive the war. After we satisfied his curiosity, at least in brief outline, we finally closed the sale and became house owners. John Krasny begged us to invite him again the next time we would be buying a house.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> We particularly liked a tiny theater called Theater Lobby hidden behind a church.

<sup>100</sup> Not too long before that we had received some “Wiedergutmachung” money from the German government as compensation for our years in the concentration camps. With these funds and a loan from Eva’s mother we were able to pay cash for the house and did not need to take a mortgage.

Our life in Washington was almost perfect. The only thing we used to have in Prague and which we did not have in America was a dog, and so for Eva's 38<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1965 I bought her a wirehaired foxterrier puppy. It was a beautiful purebred dog; he was named Jolly in memory of Eva's first dog, which she had gotten at the beginning of the war. He very quickly became the center of the family life and only a few weeks after we got him Thomas came with the question "How could we ever have lived without Jolly?" We took him everywhere with us, starting with our hiking vacation in the White Mountains in the summer of 1965.

We liked life in Washington a lot and I could not complain about the university: they were nice to me and Darwent certainly favored me. But I wanted to do more than just teach my courses and do my research. I would have liked to be involved in general university policy matters and I felt that that would have been quite inappropriate and unethical to do so at a religious institution when I was in fundamental disagreement with its basic tenets. I therefore made it clear that I would be interested in another position, although I did not actively seek one. I was approached by Brooklyn College and they seemed seriously interested and were speaking of an offer at the level of \$12,000, a lot more than I had at Catholic U. I told the head of the department, Basil Darwent, and was quite concerned that he would consider me ungrateful and get mad at me, a reaction I certainly would have encountered from Sorm in Prague. Darwent's reaction was quite different: he said that he would have been ashamed to hire somebody nobody else would try to hire away from him and immediately used the offer to get me a promotion to full professor and a substantial salary raise to \$11,000. That was very nice, but it did not change my feeling about involvement in university affairs. However, I turned down the feeler from Brooklyn College because Eva – the only time in our life – asked me not to take it because she did not want to live in New York.

**Eva, Martin,  
Eva's mother  
(Anna),  
Thomas and  
Jan, 1969**



Sometime in 1964 Bill Sager was recruited as a new department head for the Chicago branch of the University of Illinois and he immediately tried to recruit me. I visited Chicago (the university was then still in its temporary location at Navy Pier) and talked to the dean, Glen Terrell and got an offer, but I could not make up my mind. Bill was very patient and did not pressure me. I finally accepted the offer after Bob Moriarty reported that Roger Adams<sup>101</sup> from Urbana, whom Moriarty met at a meeting, expressed the opinion that the Chicago campus will eventually become the primary campus of the University of Illinois.

As soon as we were allowed to apply for U.S. citizenship, after five years of residency, we did. We had a little bit of a problem, because they wanted us to write to Czechoslovakia to get some documents, perhaps birth certificates, but we finally found a sensible official who understood that we neither could nor would like to do it. We needed two witnesses who had known us for most of the time we had spent here. Don Dennis served as one witness, Bob Moriarty as the second. Bob came to pick us up; the moment he opened the door our dog, Jolly, raced out of the door and we all had to chase him in our best suits and dresses, worried that we would be late, but we did make it on time.<sup>102</sup> We got our citizenship just before leaving for Chicago and immediately applied for passports. What a wonderful feeling it was to be finally full fledged citizens of a free country and to hold our U.S. passports in our hands!! And shortly thereafter, in the fall of 1966, we moved to Illinois where I would spend my next 29 years at the University of Illinois and where we by now have been living in the same house in Wilmette for over 36 years.

<sup>101</sup> Adams was one of the most famous chemists of his time and was singlehandedly responsible for transforming the Urbana chemistry department into one of the best departments in the country.

<sup>102</sup> Our citizenship examination took place in Rockville, MD. I was asked what the 19th amendment to the constitution was. When I replied correctly that it gave suffrage to women, the judge asked me a follow-up question: "Do you agree with it?"

## Illinois

JR

From here on our lives were not that unusual and I shall therefore mention the period from 1966 to the present year of 2003 only briefly.

I found it very exciting to be at a new campus and I am grateful that I had an opportunity to play at least a modest role in its development. My administrative involvement started quite early thanks to Bill Sager, who nominated me to several important campus committees, such as the search committee for the dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Executive Committee of the Graduate College. The latter eventually resulted in my appointment first as Acting Dean in 1969 and then as Dean of the Graduate College in 1970, a position I held until 1979. After a one year sabbatical leave I returned to the Chemistry Department first as Acting Head in 1980 and as Head one year later. In 1993 I was appointed Vice Chancellor for Research and Dean of the Graduate College. I retired in 1995 at the age of 71. In the earlier years of my life as administrator I was able to maintain a respectable level of research activity and keep my grant support, but later I felt that I could not manage both activities well enough and decided to give up research.

On the personal level our life was very good. We had a charmed family life with lots of work but also with time for great family summer vacations with travel and hiking and – during the year – for theater. Eva started teaching freshmen students in the Department in 1969 and became a very successful and admired teacher; she retired in 1994 after 25 years of teaching. Both our sons did exceptionally well, with



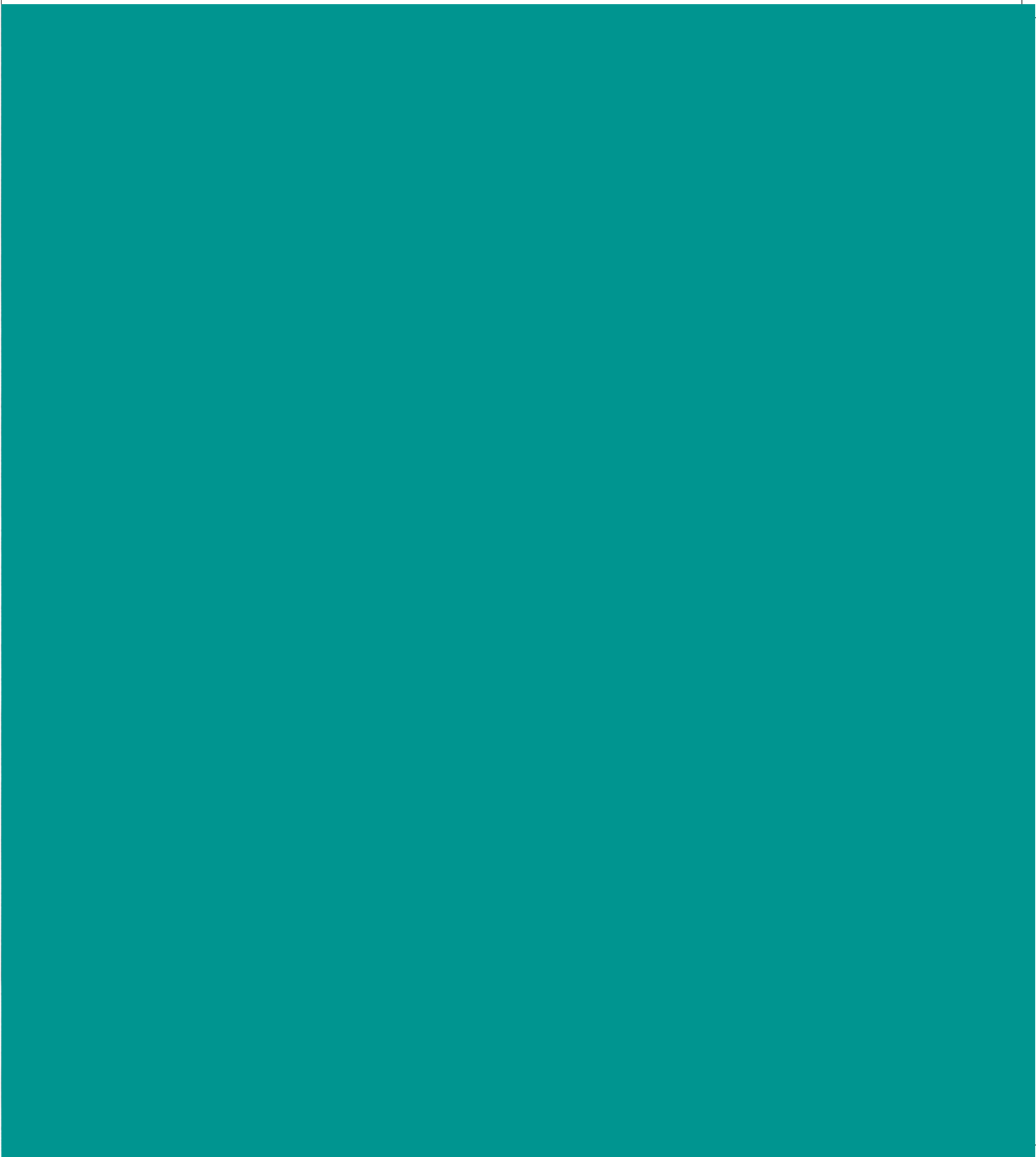
**Thomas,  
Eva, Martin,  
and Jan  
Rocek,  
2004.**

Martin, a National Merit Fellow, going to Harvard and Thomas, a National Merit Finalist, to Princeton. Both earned their Ph.D. degrees, got married, provided us with two grandchildren each and followed our footsteps in not only becoming academics themselves, but also marrying wives who became academics, too.

Our otherwise peaceful time was shattered when Martin, at the age of 20, had a terrible explosion while working as a student at CERN in the summer of 1974, and had burns over 50% of his body; we did not know for almost three weeks whether he would survive.

### **Thanksgiving, 2006**





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# Room 127

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