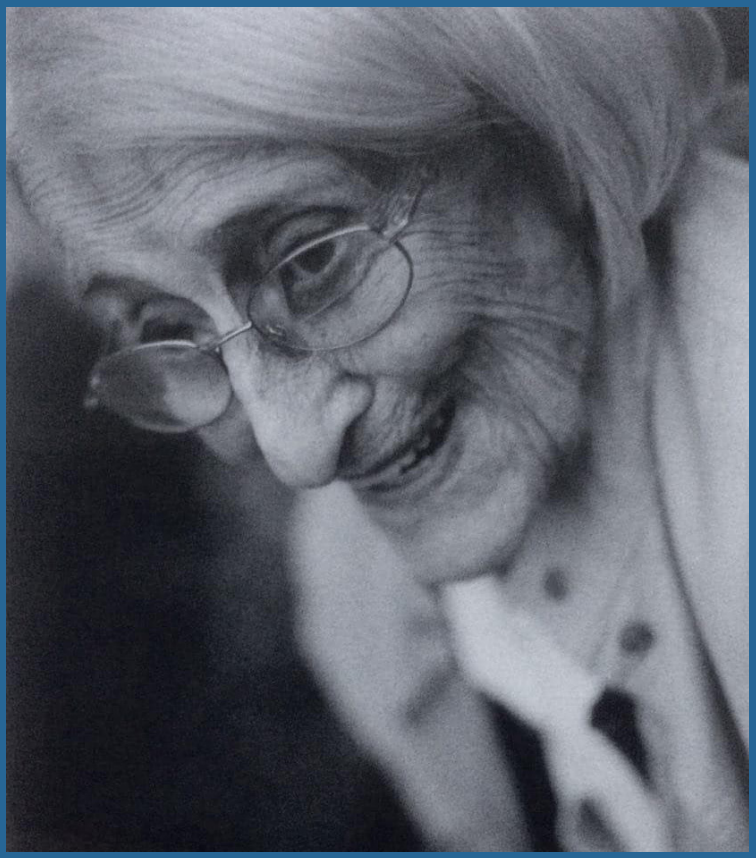

My Story

Hana Newman

AJR The Association of Jewish Refugees

My Story

Hana Newman

These are Hana's words. This is her story.

'My Story' is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).
www.ajrmystory.org.uk www.ajr.org.uk

An annotated version of this book is available to read online at
www.ajrmystory.org.uk/people/Hana-Newman

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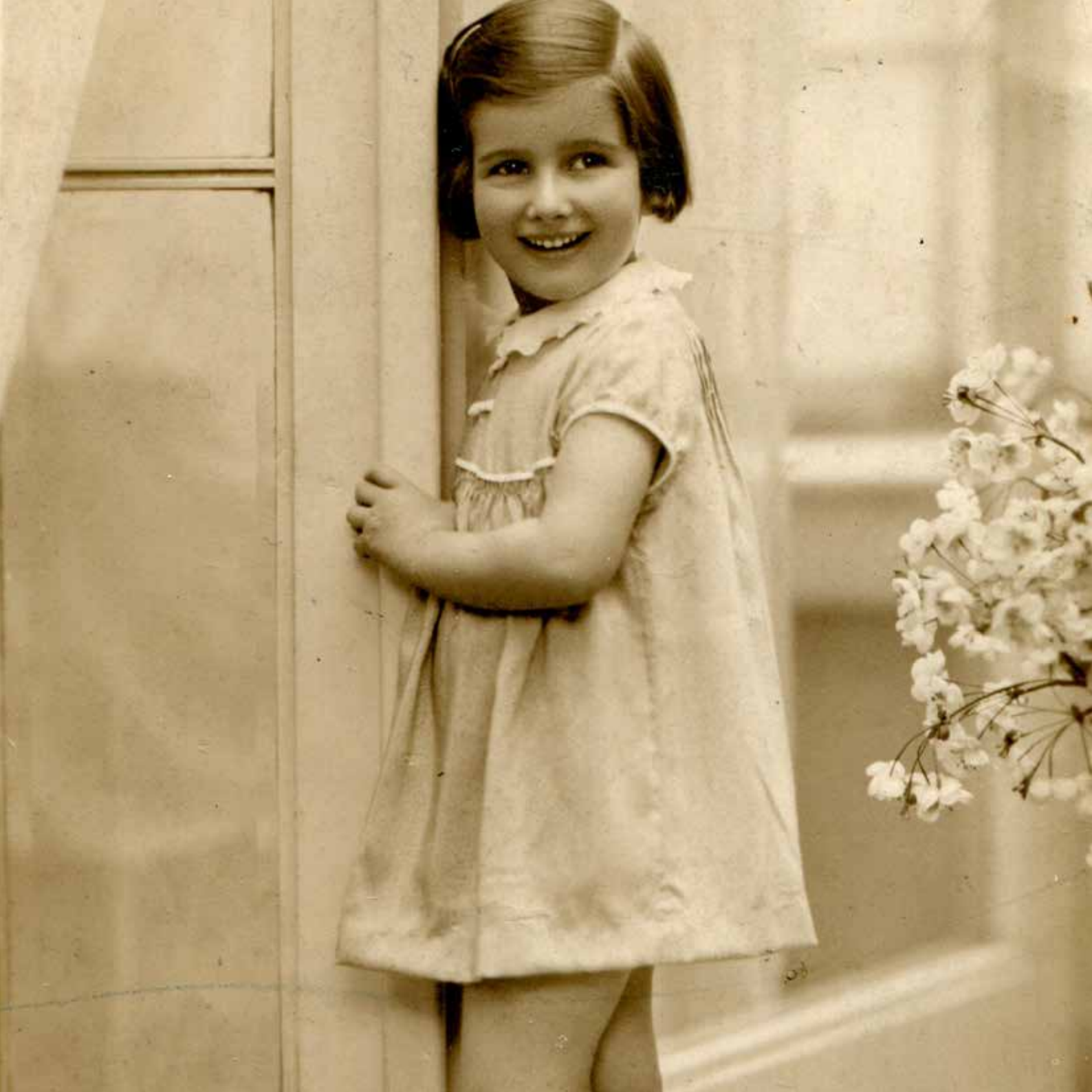
My Story
Hana Newman

"What happened to my family and me in the Holocaust is part of my life, always present, and I accept it. It's sad, but when I think of my mother and father, I remember the nice times we had in Pilsen and then at the same time I remember how it all ended. That is always with me."



Contents

My parents and their families

MY NAME IS Hana Newman (née Löwidtová). I was born on 14 April 1929 in Plzeň (Pilsen), then Czechoslovakia.

Otto (Ottokar) Löwidt, my father, was born on 30 October 1883 in Skořice, a small village in Bohemia in the district of Rokycany, not far from Pilsen. My paternal grandparents, Babeta (née Weilová, born in 1838) and Emanuel (born in 1832) had over 10 children, of whom my father was the youngest. The family had lived in the area since at least the first half of the 19th century, although part of the family moved to Pilsen after the emancipation of the Jews in 1848, when residence restrictions, which had forbidden Jews from living there previously, were lifted. I was extremely fond of my paternal aunt, Hela (short for Helena). She was much older than my father and was like a grandmother to me. Three of my father's sisters emigrated to the United States of America in about 1898. My paternal grandparents died some time before I was born; Emanuel in December 1910 and Babeta in May 1918.

Rosl Scheuer, my mother, was born in 1899 in Plan (Planá in Czech) to Valerie (born 17 March 1871) and Ignaz. She had a brother, Robert. Plan is a town near Marienbad, which at that time was within the Sudetenland, a German-speaking part of Bohemia. Ethnically, the family was Jewish, being neither German nor Czech. Ignaz was a *Kohen*; he died a year or so before I was born.

My maternal ancestors were buried in the most beautiful cemetery lined with trees, which served Plan and Gutenplan and possibly other places in the district. I remember we used to walk there; it was quite a long walk for me, but I could wander from one grave to another, tracing the names of family members. It was a peaceful place.

My brother, Franta (František), was born on 31 August 1923. I saw him as an extension of my parents because he was six years older than me and much closer to them than I was. He gave me guidance and it seemed to me that he knew a lot about all sorts of things. We were very close; I looked up to him and adored him. ■

Life in Pilsen

IN 1922, BEFORE I was born, my parents and my paternal uncle and aunt, Leo and Margitte Löwidt, bought a house at Riegrova 18, a road in the centre of Pilsen leading into the main square. It was a lovely house reconstructed from quite an imposing 19th century property.

Uncle Leo and Aunt Margitte had a son, Hanuš, born on 13 November 1914. The three of them lived on the first floor and we lived in a spacious five-roomed flat on the second. The third-floor flat was let to a tenant, the Švec family, with whom we became friendly, and who were helpful to us when things started to go wrong. In the fourth smaller flat lived the concierge, *Pan* (Mr) Suda, who looked after the house and whose wife, *Paní* (Mrs) Sudová, used to help my mother.

The ground floor was a manufacturing and wholesale textiles business jointly owned by my father and uncle. A large part of the business was sewing and making shirts, some of which were made by home workers, although they also sold all sorts of other items including nightwear and fabric. It was a thriving business and must have been very successful as my parents were able to retain a good architect to renovate our flat and rearrange it exactly as we wished. We went on holidays, and I had a governess.

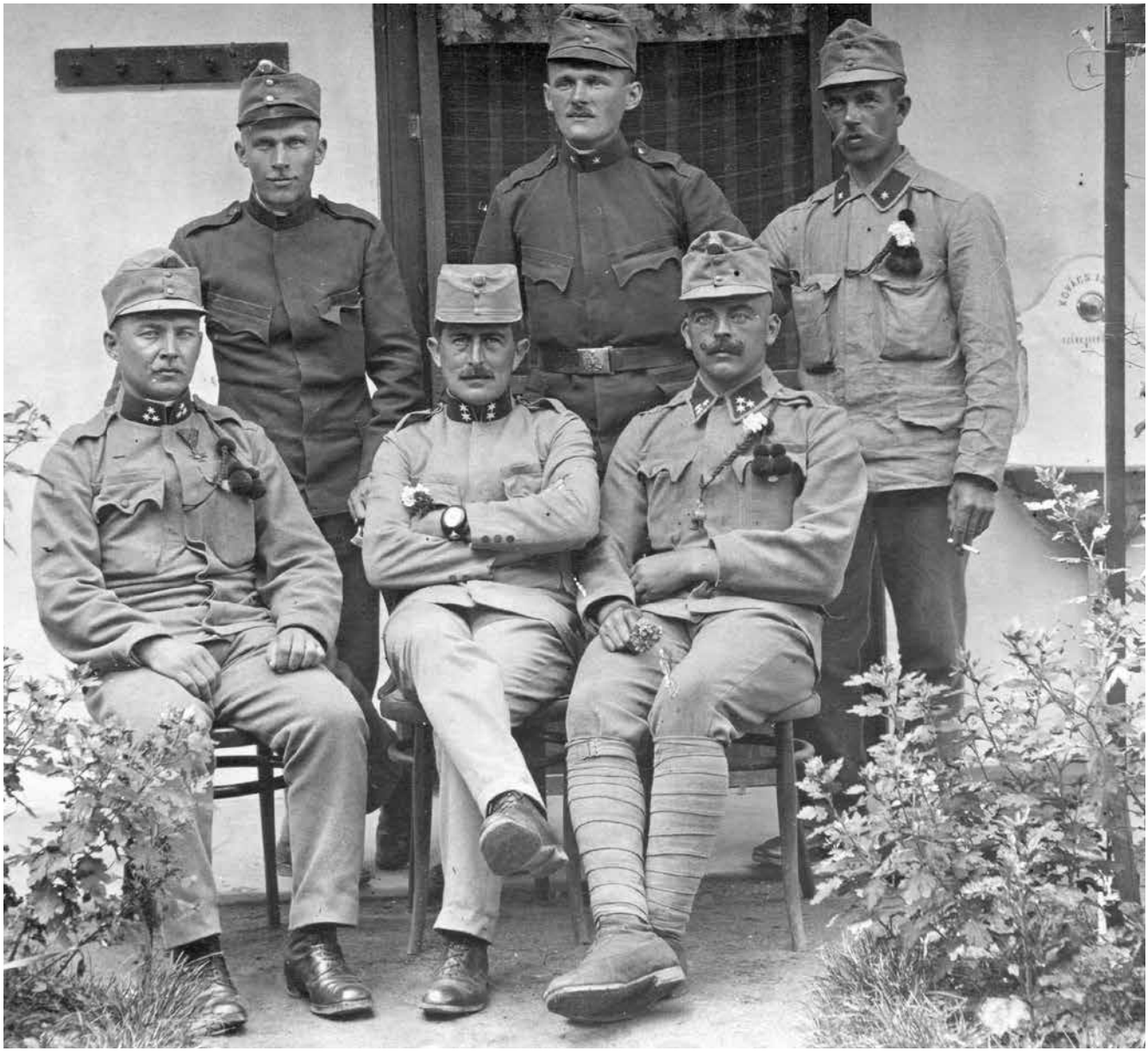
My father's family was bilingual in Czech and German. We spoke Czech together. We would go on walks and discuss quite serious things even though I was young - for example, the difference between being wise and being clever. We would also discuss books my father had bought for me. Those walks were so important to me. My father was *such* a lovely man, loving and wise. He always knew what one should do.

I also enjoyed going for walks with my mother or having tea and cakes together. She was very beautiful and even as a young child I was proud of her. We spoke German together as she didn't initially know much Czech. As things changed throughout the 1930s, she made more effort to learn Czech, although she still insisted that I spoke German with her. She believed what was happening at the time wasn't anything to do with the language and that because Heine and Goethe were German and I would be reading German literature in the future, I had to be able to speak it. ■

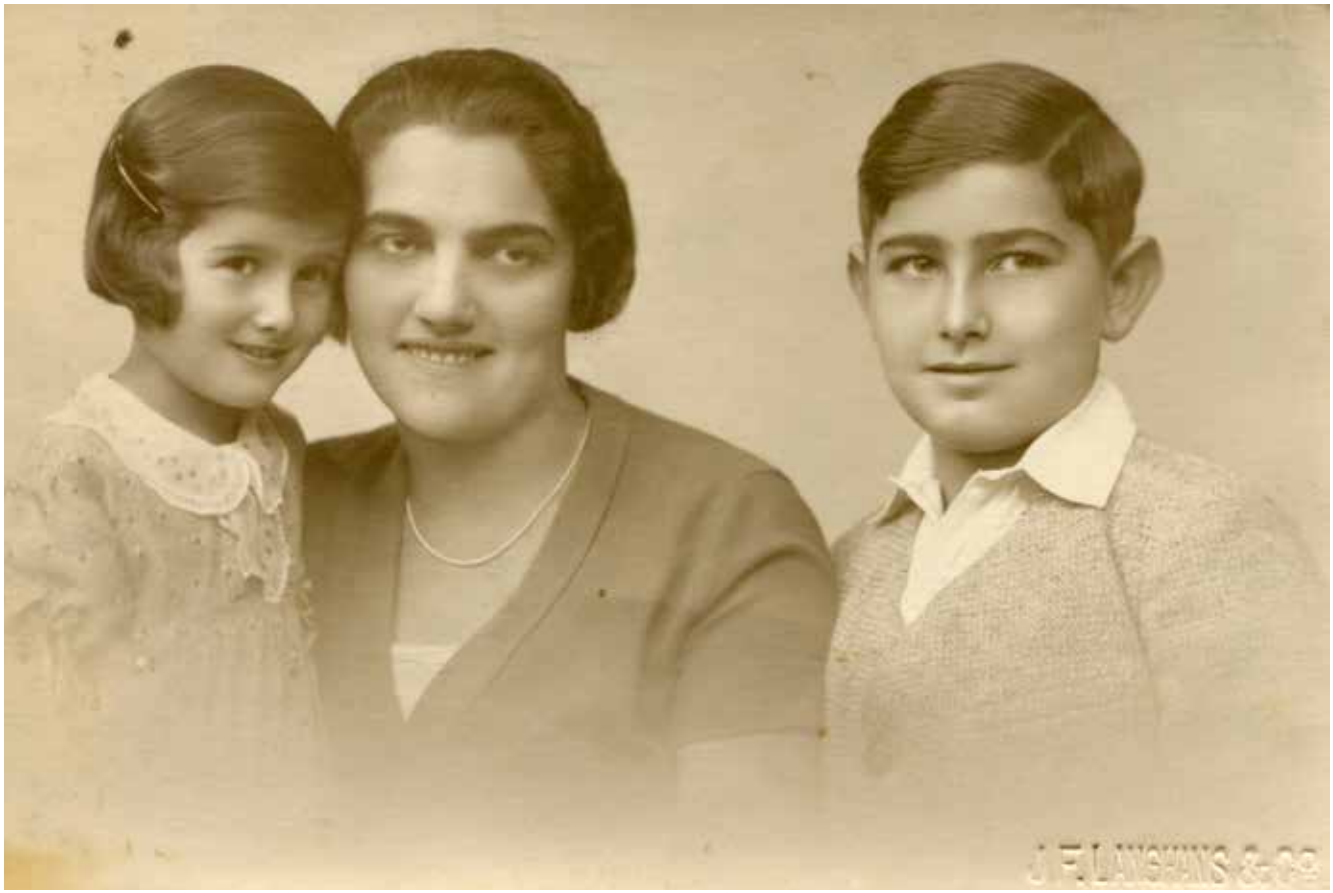
Winter 1929

The textile shop belonged to my father and his brother Leo, and we lived above the shop

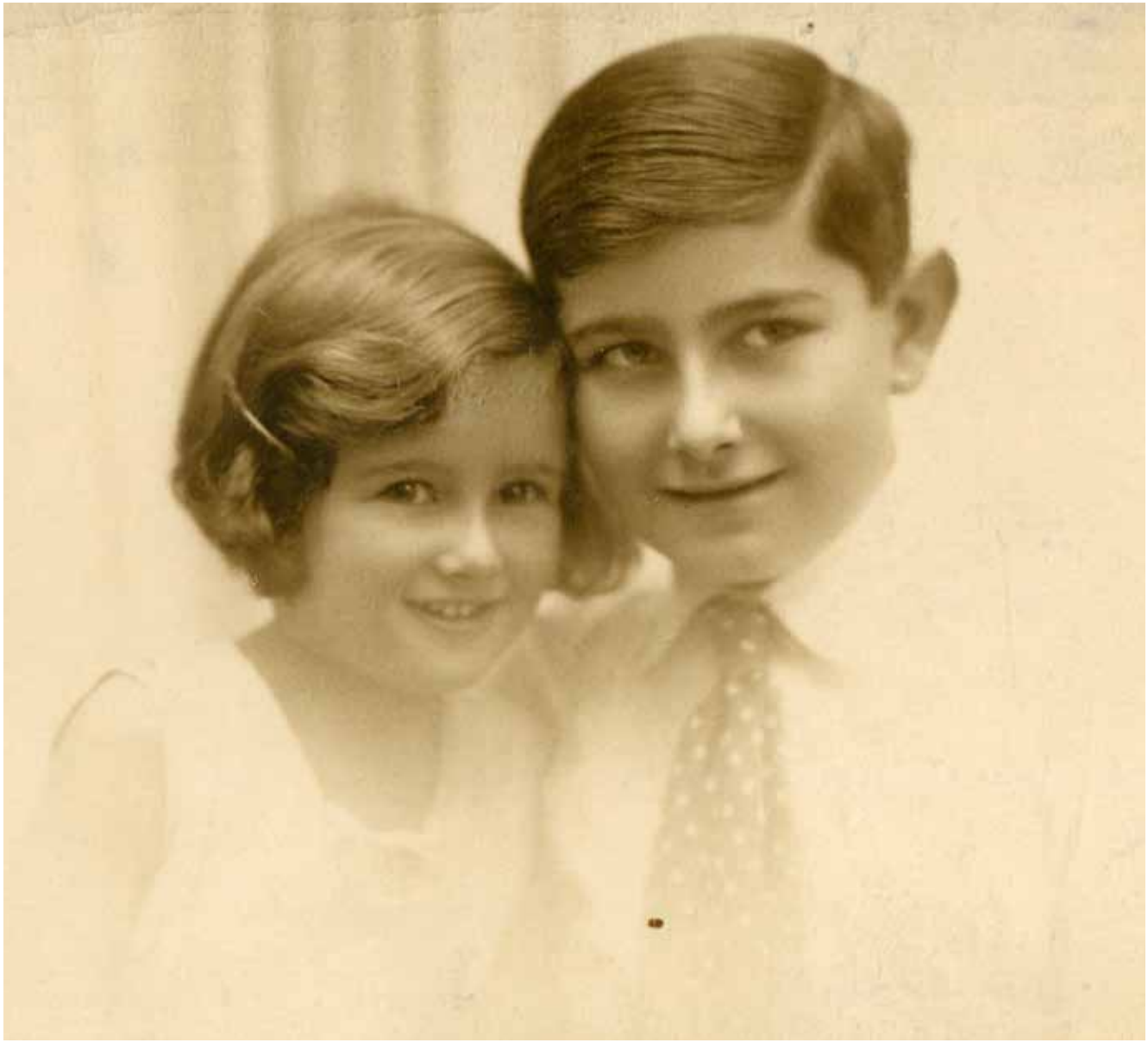
My father on the right with his brothers, Leo and Emil



My father in the Austrian Army, August 1915 (front centre)



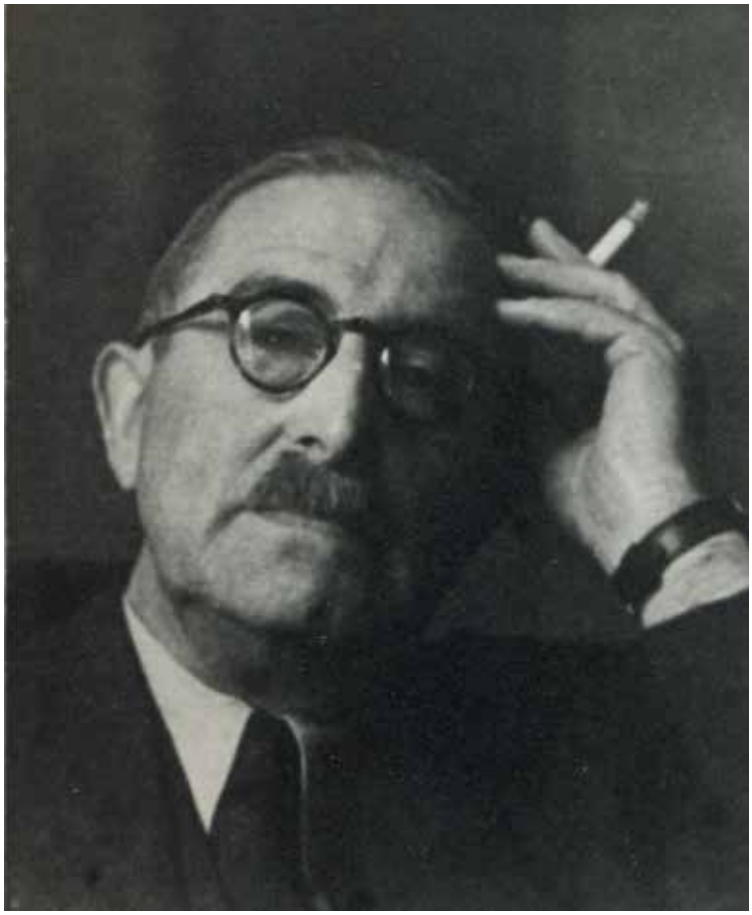
With my mother and brother, 1933



With my brother

My brother, Franta, as a teenager

My mother



My father

My aunt Hela Bleierová, who was like a grandmother to me

With my governess Marie Pešlová by Lake Bolevák

With my parents in Pilsen

My brother

From the family album:
my brother and me.

Nazis occupy the Sudetenland . . .

UP UNTIL 1938, I lived a happy life in Pilsen. I went to the local Czech school. My passion was reading and I enjoyed sports such as swimming, skating and gymnastics. Franta went to the local *gymnasium* (secondary grammar school).

In 1938, things changed. The Nazis occupied - or rather, the German Army was *given permission* to occupy - the Sudetenland, where my mother's family lived.

The first news we had of the Nazi occupation was on 13 September 1938, when my grandmother and Uncle Robert arrived in Pilsen in the middle of the night, as refugees from Plan. They had been unable to bring practically anything with them.

Uncle Robert unfortunately decided to return to Plan the next day to collect something he had left behind, which was terribly naïve and silly of him, because he was immediately arrested by the Germans and sent to Dachau. He was kept in Dachau until about 1941. Somehow or other he survived.

My grandmother initially lived with us. It seemed to me she was depressed about my grandfather's death. In the morning, she would warm up my coffee, because I woke up later than her, and would sit with me for two minutes before she went off, leaving me alone. She didn't take much notice of me and she never really talked to me properly, although I knew that she loved me. I remember her sitting in her armchair and saying, '*Ach Gott, ach Gott, ach Gott*' ('Oh God, oh God, oh God'). Later, my parents found a flat near us for my grandmother to stay in. ■

My brother and me with Uncle Robert in my grandmother's garden in Plan

. . . and then the rest of Bohemia

ON 15 MARCH 1939, the Germans occupied the rest of Bohemia. The weather was bad that day, and I scowled at every German soldier I saw on the way to school. It was my way of protesting. They took no notice, of course.

My cousin Hanuš, who was 15 years older than me, having completed his studies at a *gymnasium* and a business school, had been serving with the Czechoslovak Army since 1935. When things started to look rather dangerous with the ambitions of the Germans, and certainly by the time of the occupation in March 1939, Hanuš left by train for Paris, from where he eventually joined the Czechoslovak Army in Britain. I didn't see him again until after the war, but he was later to play a huge part in my life.

In May 1939, my father and Uncle Leo were arrested by the Nazis for the first time, together with a group of about 50 other Jewish men from Pilsen. They were taken to the local prison, Bory, from where they were released after about six weeks. Their successful business was taken over and an Aryan executive took control of it.

“In May 1939, my father and Uncle Leo were arrested by the Nazis for the first time, together with a group of about 50 other Jewish men from Pilsen. They were taken to the local prison, Bory, from where they were released after about six weeks. Their successful business was taken over and an Aryan executive took control of it.”

In 1940, Uncle Leo and Aunt Margitte were ordered to leave their flat, which was given to a Jewish family who had been evicted from their large villa (the father had been a director of a bank or something similar). Leo and Margitte moved in with us, taking two of the rooms. We were more cramped, but we all tried to make the best of the situation, attempting to stay cheerful and hopeful.

One night in October 1940 my father and Uncle Leo were rearrested. They were taken from our flat and sent to the *Kleine Festung* (small fortress) in Terezín; this was the fortress prison, separate from the ghetto. We received news of them from time to time through a young Czech woman who probably bribed the guard to be able to see them and who brought us a photograph of them.

In Pilsen, things changed a lot. Laws were passed which excluded Jews from any public life. We weren't allowed to go into shops (most of them had *Juden Verboten* - 'Jews forbidden' - signs) or to be in any public gatherings, such as the cinema or theatre. Some people on the street passed antisemitic remarks, while others remained friendly and tried to show their support for us.

My best friend was the daughter of the Director of Plzeňský Prazdroj (the Pilsner Urquell brewery). Our governesses were friends, so we used to go walking together practically every day. Suddenly, she didn't want to have anything to do with me. My Czech Christian friends also started ignoring me and not answering my greetings. I had left the Junior Scouts because of the new laws passed. I greeted my friends with the Scout sign as usual, thinking that the Scouts were a moral example of how one should behave, but they would look away.

I particularly remember one incident. At that time, we were still allowed to go ice skating. As I was putting on my skates one day, an attractive boy walked by and I just looked at him. As he passed me, he spat in front of me and said 'Jew!' - as if it was somehow a normal exchange to have with somebody – and he added, 'I don't want to have anything to do with you.' This sort of thing was very unpleasant: it made one feel like a criminal. I was now a complete outsider.

We were no longer allowed to go to school. I had passed an exam to get into the local secondary grammar school, but when the time came for me to start attending, I wasn't accepted.

From that time on, we, the Jewish community (and particularly the children), made a life of our own. We knew we weren't wanted. A school was established for Jewish children and small groups of about nine or ten of us met regularly at one of the families' houses. We were taught by university students (who were no longer allowed to go to university) from whom we learnt the subjects they had been studying, with one student generally overseeing everything. This system worked well, and we even enjoyed it more than our usual school.

Someone had been able to get a copy of the national curriculum so that we could be taught in line with it and wouldn't miss too much of our education, but we also learned things which we would not otherwise have learnt at school. One day a teacher brought a record and played us Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. We also had group meetings just for us children, which we enjoyed very much. A very nice girl talked to us about all sorts of subjects, from politics to sex.

We were nine, ten or eleven years old and had a solidarity; we pursued what interested us and completely turned away from our other life which we were no longer part of. The people from that life didn't want us, and we were happy with what we had.

I don't think that any of this was a secret from the Germans; they didn't seem to be concerned that we met as Jewish children together, so we carried on really quite happily like this until 1942. ■

We are all deported to Terezín (Theresienstadt)

IN JANUARY 1942, all Jews in Pilsen and the annexed cities were instructed to gather at a certain point to be transported to Terezín. That was the name in Czech; in German it was Theresienstadt. There were three transports between 18 and 26 January 1942.

We were given two weeks' notice to prepare. It was a very unsettling and upsetting period for everybody. I didn't appreciate how terribly hard it must have been for my mother to be alone to cope with everything with my father away - the worries she must have had and how hard it was for her to leave her home. I'm sure we must have been short of money because there had been no income coming in. My brother had become the sort of head of the family, standing in for my father.

We were allowed to take one suitcase and bedding per person. Uncle Emil, my father's brother, as the only man in the family still in Pilsen, came to help us pack.

On 20 January 1942, my mother, brother, grandmother, Aunt Margitte and I left our home. Some of us had lived in Pilsen all our lives. As we walked through the town with our suitcases, the non-Jewish Czechs we passed were completely indifferent to us. There was not a word, not a gesture from them. Maybe they were afraid - I don't know.

We stayed overnight in a large exercise hall. The following day, on 21 January 1942, we were transported to Terezín on Transport 'S'. There were SS guards going through the train who eventually picked out some young men, including my brother, and took them to the front of the train. The men were terrified of what was going to happen to them. After about an hour they returned, looking shattered. When I asked my brother about it, he said that they were forcing them to do silly things and had beaten them a bit. He didn't say any more than that as he didn't want to frighten me.

On arrival in Terezín, we were marched from the train to the barracks. At this point, the town was still inhabited by its Czech population of about 5,000 and we were kept in the barracks of the garrison town. We were all separated: my brother and Uncle Emil went to the barracks for men, my mother and I to a women's barracks and my grandmother and aunt to a different women's barracks.

That was the last time that I saw Uncle Emil. It was utterly confusing, with masses of people and overcrowded rooms.

When we arrived in Terezín, we were hoping to catch a glimpse of my father, but around the same time he, Uncle Leo and the group of men from Pilsen in the *Kleine Festung* were sent to Mauthausen.

Then, in February 1942 my mother and a number of other women in Terezín received notice (most likely through the Jewish Council there) that my father and the group of men transferred to Mauthausen had died on 6 February 1942. Aunt Margitte would have got a similar notification. Given that all of them died on the same date, it seemed obvious they were murdered. ■

My father in Mauthausen

Life in Terezín

AT FIRST, WE lived in a very big room with lots of people. I became ill with something, I don't remember what, after which my mother got a room in a pleasant part of the barracks, which was just for 10 or 12 people and was much more liveable. Our best friends from Pilsen were there: Růžena Sachselová (we called her *Paní* Sachselová) and her daughters, Hanča and Eva. When I was growing up in Pilsen, *Paní* Sachselová was my absolute favourite. She was my mother's best friend, a lovely, intelligent woman who would treat me like a grown-up, which was rather wonderful. In Terezín, the group of us spent our time talking about the past and the possible future, about what we had read and what we thought.

We had a narrow mattress with a suitcase next to it, which was the space for each person. A normal-sized room would have had about 14 people in it. We were very cold and very hungry as the portions were so small. It was a terrible shock and a traumatic transition from normal life.

Life was miserable. We were always hungry. People were dying and being put on to carts and taken to the border of the ghetto to be buried. We lived with the threat of being sent East.

Children whose fathers were in the men's barracks were allowed to go and visit them occasionally. As I didn't have a father, I could go and see my brother, Franta. He was working as a locksmith in Terezín. After he had been forced to leave school following the German occupation, he trained as a car mechanic, so he had the technical training to become a locksmith. He was a great comfort to my mother while he was with us. ■

“Life was miserable. We were always hungry. People were dying and being put on to carts and taken to the border of the ghetto to be buried. We lived with the threat of being sent East.”

Otto Schließer (top left), Uncle Robert (top right)

Otto Schließer and the *Schutzliste*

BEFORE WE WERE deported to Terezín, my mother had taken some things to our neighbours (the Švec family) for safekeeping until we returned. The items included clothes, bedding and some photographs.

Among the photographs was one (from around 1921) with my mother, my maternal grandparents, uncle Robert, my mother's cousin, my grandmother's sister and a man who I believe was Otto Schließer. There are five identical copies of that photograph, which is unusual and could only really mean one thing: I think that my mother and Mr Schließer were engaged (before my mother met my father), and that their engagement must have been called off at some point.

In 1942, while we were in Terezín, Mr Schließer came to see my mother and wished her a happy birthday. When she remarked that he had remembered that it was her birthday, he replied: "How could I have forgotten?"

Mr Schließer was a member of the *Judenrat*, a Jewish Council set up by the Nazis to organise services within Terezín and to enforce Nazi orders and select people to be transferred to concentration camps (the selections were overseen by the SS). There were some exemptions, so certain people were protected from the transports, including those who were employed in essential jobs (such as doctors, nurses or cooks) and other qualified people whose jobs were necessary for the running of the ghetto. Members of the *Judenrat* were allowed to have a *Schutzliste* (a 'protection' list) of their family members who would be protected from going East. Mr Schließer put my mother, Franta, my grandma, Uncle Robert and me on his *Schutzliste*.

The most terrible thing which was always present in Terezín was the threat of being selected by the *Judenrat* for one of the regular transports East. At the time, of course, we didn't know where the transports were going. The loss of people and friends and the constant fear of being sent on a transport was a sort of always-present undercurrent. ■

Moving into the Youth Home

IN MAY OR June 1942, the remaining civilian population from Terezín was evacuated and the town was established as a ghetto only for Jews. It was announced that youth homes would be established where children could live with other children, a Czech and a German one each, and one solely for boys. The idea was to protect the children from the very harsh living conditions and to give them a more normal way of life.

My mother felt that it was right for me to move into the youth home, so she gave her consent. I didn't realise how difficult it must have been for her because she would be on her own. It was really very nice for me to live with children of my own age, although, as it happened, they were a little older than me. I followed a friend from Pilsen called Dáša Růžičková; I went wherever she went. Our rooms were on the ground floor. There was a very clever girl in our room, Eva Lipschitzová, who I became friendly with and I think she tried to improve my mind. Her parents were intellectuals, so she was trained to think, and she tried to do the same for me. I lived there happily apart from the usual things, such as there not being enough food.

Mr Schließer got my mother a job in the kitchen, which meant every day she could bring home some potatoes and a bit of margarine. In the evening, my mother, brother and I would meet, and my mother would prepare fried potatoes for the three of us. This extra food was a lifesaver. ■

“My mother felt that it was right for me to move into the youth home, so she gave her consent. I didn't realise how difficult it must have been for her because she would be on her own. It was really very nice for me to live with children of my own age, although, as it happened, they were a little older than me.”

A world of culture among the horror

WE SAW HOW Theresienstadt developed. The arts, for example, evolved quite spontaneously: it wasn't something which was set solely in preparation for the visit of the Red Cross in 1944 or only engineered by the Germans. Not at all. I remember the first time a woman in our room sang an aria from the Dvořák opera, *Rusalka*, entirely spontaneously, and it transported us to another world. It was the first time in Terezín that I experienced this wonderful feeling that one can forget everything that is around you.

Some former actors and students started putting on sketches in spaces in the attic. They would take a space and at first perform funny sketches which were – surreptitiously - a bit critical. We had to watch out that there were no Germans coming but if there were, we would pretend there was nothing happening.

These sketches developed into performances, which was wonderful, for instance, of an early opera by Mozart. Gradually this developed further, into more elaborate performances, put together so that we would, at least, have an idea of what the relevant piece was about. Mozart's Figaro was one of them, followed by some other operas or plays put on in an abridged form. Eventually this grew and we had complete, or almost complete, performances of operas and plays. It was such a thrill to be able to see those; we just had to be careful not to let the Germans surprise us.

"I remember the first time a woman in our room sang an aria from the Dvořák opera, *Rusalka*, entirely on impulse, and it transported us to another world. It was the first time in Terezín that I experienced this wonderful feeling that one can forget everything that is around you."

A friend of mine from school of whom I was very fond, Honza Treichlinger, had the leading role in the Brundibár opera, which was written and performed in Terezín. He later perished in Auschwitz.

There were hundreds of illustrious people in Terezín including professors, writers and artists, and they all shared their skills and knowledge with us. The artists produced pictures and we had lectures from university professors, which I would never have otherwise been able to hear at the age of 14 or so, and which I found fascinating.

Although the life we had in Terezín was extremely miserable, cultural life was blooming and it made us feel human, somehow. It was an important part of our life there.

The most important and interesting performance was of Verdi's Requiem. Rather than large symphonies, people had been performing operas and various pieces which didn't need big instrumentation. Verdi's Requiem was ideal in that way, technically, because there was a resource of human voices, which was important, and they could put it on with a minimum of instruments. Secondly, its significance for us and for those who put it on, was that it was really a normal mass, but it was a mass which begged for everlasting life and forgiveness. It was absolutely wonderful.

I went to the performance twice: once I was inside and once just outside, when I saw SS men also there listening. I wondered what they were thinking, because even during those performances, selections were being made for transports to go East. ■

Working in the garden

THE NAZIS DECIDED to make commercial gardens on top of the walls which surrounded the ghetto (which were really just grass) and it was where children in the youth home were mostly allocated to work. I worked with a number of girls under the supervision of a gardener and we started a garden there from scratch. I enjoyed it very much because, as you can imagine, it was somehow much nicer than anything else we could have been doing. We grew vegetables, although not for us - they were harvested and sold outside the ghetto. We would get some leftovers, leaves that were too green to be sold or fallen apples.

In the winter, we could choose whether to work in the garden or to do sewing; I did two years of sewing and one of gardening. ■

“I enjoyed it very much because, as you can imagine, it was somehow much nicer than anything else we could have been doing. We grew vegetables, although not for us - they were harvested and sold outside the ghetto.”

Cynical changes made for the Red Cross visit

MY GRANDMOTHER DIED of meningitis in the summer of 1944. Later my mother lamented that she had died so soon before the end of the war. In June 1944, the Red Cross came to see how the Jews were treated in Terezín. The Germans went the extra mile, presenting a nice square with coffee being served and music playing in the bandstand. It was just for show as they tried to give the impression that it was a 'normal' place. They even printed Theresienstadt money; I have a 100 KCZ note dated 1 January 1943.

Everyone knew it was a sham, but we were still amused by it. What we didn't quite put together is that before the Red Cross visit, in order to make room for the visit and to clear the ghetto, a number of transports East were arranged.

After the Red Cross visit there was an upheaval within the *Judenrat* in Terezín. Mr Schließer was no longer able to protect those members of our family on the *Schutzliste*. He and my brother were included on the first *Einsatzkommando* (Ek) transport, on 28 September 1944. It was terrible when Franta left: it felt as though part of me was going and was lost. My mother ran out to the train to reach Mr Schließer's wagon and she called out to him: "Please look after my son", but apparently, Mr Schließer was murdered on arrival in Auschwitz. Franta survived the selection.

"It was just for show as they tried to give the impression that it was a 'normal' place. They even printed Theresienstadt money; I have a 100 KCZ note dated 1 January 1943."

Theresienstadt banknote

Less than two weeks later, on 9 October 1944, my mother and I were on a transport to Auschwitz on a passenger train. A frightening incident happened during the journey. It was a beautiful day and, after years in the ghetto, I was quite overwhelmed by the countryside, which I hadn't seen for so long. I was enchanted looking around me and started writing in my diary about what I could see, about my boyfriend, things like that. Suddenly, the train stopped and a *Schupo* (a German soldier, who was in charge of the train) was pointing a gun at me, shouting that I wasn't allowed to write anything. He asked me to come out and tell him what I was writing. Luckily, I was able to explain in my best German that it was just my diary and to tell him what I had written. My mother was on the train terrified and crying. Somehow, the *Schupo* seemed to take a sympathetic view of a fifteen-year-old who spoke German and appeared quite innocent. He gave me back the diary, told me I mustn't write anything and sent me back onto the train.

That was my first lucky escape. ■

Arriving at Auschwitz

THE JOURNEY FROM Terezín took at least two days. It was still dark when we arrived in Auschwitz in the early hours of the morning. There was an enormous amount of shouting '*RAUS! RAUS! RAUS! ALLES RAUS*!' (Out! Out! Out! Everyone out!). We came out of the railcars into a very strong light from reflector lamps.

We were marched towards a man who I presume was Dr Mengele. He would say, 'Left' or 'Right' choosing people in the selection line to go one way or the other. My mother was sent left, and I was sent right. She was crying '*Mein Kind, mein Kind*' (my child, my child) and she quickly pressed into my hands a little loaf of bread in a net bag which somebody had given her as we left Terezín. She couldn't have known what it meant being sent left, but she wanted me to have it when we were separated. The people on the right consoled me and told me not to worry, we would meet those on the left wherever we were going; the older people would be sent by lorry and we would have to walk. I thought that was odd as my mother wasn't old.

Of course, they were not sent by lorry. They were sent to the gas chambers.

Those of us on the right who had been selected to live were marched not very far, passing through the entrance under the sign *Arbeit Macht Frei*, which seemed a peculiar thing. Then we were led somewhere to the left to a lower building, a bathhouse, where we had to strip and hand over our clothes and everything we had on us (including my diary and the bread loaf). They shaved us and sent us to the, fortunately real, showers. We were given some quite inadequate clothes for the time of the year in Poland (a dress and some underwear) and clogs. We walked to the barracks with our clogs getting stuck in the mud. In these long wooden huts were bunk beds with just some straw. A Polish woman greeted us and wanted to know the news from outside. Then she told us what we were and weren't supposed to do.

This was our arrival in Auschwitz. After we were showered, shaved and wearing ragged clothes, we had changed from human beings to something subhuman that could be dispensed with and looked at with contempt. For the first days at Auschwitz I was absolutely dazed. Maybe it's something one learns, to just distance oneself from what is actually happening. ■

I learn the truth

IN THE MORNING and late afternoon we went outside for *Appell* (roll call), when we would stand in rows of five or ten people which the SS would count to make sure that everyone who was supposed to be there was present. After the *Appell*, we could stay outside for a while.

One day, during a lovely late afternoon with a blue sky, I noticed quite a big building to my right with a very tall chimney with black smoke billowing from it and a peculiar smell. I stood staring at it. A woman who had been in Auschwitz for some time saw me looking and asked me if I was wondering what it was. I said that I had been wondering. She asked if I had come to Auschwitz with my mother and if we had been separated upon arrival. I said that we had. "Well, you see, that's what happened to your mother," she said, telling me that my mother had been sent to the gas chambers after the selection and this was the crematorium where the bodies were burned.

You can imagine what that did to me. That's how I landed. It has haunted me ever since.

I went back into the barracks and cried bitterly. I was just 15 and alone. I noticed that the friends who had come with us from Terezín (a mother and daughter who were friends with my mother and me respectively) wouldn't come and talk to me at all. They must have felt embarrassed and not known what to say. Two young women from Pilsen did appear, Hanička Epšteinová and Inge (unfortunately, I do not remember her surname). Inge was a little bit older than me and she and Hanička became sort of my sisters. The three of us stuck with one another, living together and looking after each other. ■

"I went back into the barracks and cried bitterly. I was just 15 and alone."

A friend of ours from Pilsen, Karel Hebák, gave me news of my brother. He told me that Franta had been sent away from Auschwitz with a work transport. I was pleased for him as, although it meant that I had just missed him, at least he was no longer in Auschwitz. Karel also brought me a scarf to put over my shaven head, which was nice of him as it was degrading to have a shaved head.

We survived from day to day with the *Appells* and sitting, talking and hearing the stories about all the things that could happen to you in Auschwitz.

The food was completely inadequate. My first meal was a beetroot soup and I thought it made a nice change from Terezín as it was a different soup, but there was so little of it. Breakfast was served when we were standing for *Appell*. A tin of *Ersatzkaffee* (a sort of coffee substitute which wasn't coffee but just a brown liquid) was passed down the row and everyone took a few sips. Once a day we would get a small bowl of vegetable soup with some bread and I had to save a little piece of the bread for breakfast. It was just enough to get thinner and thinner all the time. In Terezín we were hungry; in Auschwitz we were starving. The threat always hung over us that we would be found too thin at the next inspection and be sent to the gas chambers.

I think I only stayed three weeks in Auschwitz altogether. Those three weeks were enough to show me that Auschwitz was absolute hell. It seemed to me a good idea to be away from it. It was a place of evil, permeated with the thought that you must use all means to keep out of the gas chamber. Looking back at Terezín once I was in Auschwitz was like looking back at a home. Hard as it was, at that time, I thought I would rather spend all my life in Terezín than have to go to Auschwitz. ■

Leaving Auschwitz for Kurzbach

IN OCTOBER OR November 1944, we had news that we would be leaving Auschwitz, which we felt positive about. Wherever we were going, it couldn't be worse than Auschwitz.

We were sent to a bathhouse where we were given a shower and another set of clothes. This time, instead of clogs we were given shoes (not very good shoes but they were shoes). I plucked up the courage to approach the SS woman in charge to ask for another dress because the one I was given was cotton (which was inadequate for the time of year) and torn. She touched me playfully a bit over the back and I think she even smiled. I found out later that she was rumoured to be lesbian. I think that the fact that I was young and quite good-looking and spoke German perfectly saved me in certain situations. She ordered a different dress for me and I was issued with a warm dress and a coat.

We were so tired that we just folded like cards, falling asleep one on the other. We slept a little before being called out for *Appell*. It was still nighttime or early morning; it was terribly, terribly cold and we were hungry. We must have stood for 12 - 14 hours waiting for a train to take us to where we were supposed to go. It was awful. Finally the train arrived and when we were put on it I was so tired that I collapsed on the floor and just fell asleep where I lay.

When I woke, the train was going through the German countryside and it stopped in front of a town, the name of which I forget, somewhere in Eastern Silesia. We were marched through the town and over the countryside until finally we stopped in the middle of nowhere, in front of a very tall hay barn with another building on the side of it. We were to sleep and stay in the hay barn on three-storey bunkbeds.

It was evening when we arrived. We were given a slice of bread and some sausage, after which we went to bed. There was a blanket and, as usual, some straw or something to sleep on.

This was Kurzbach, a labour camp, part of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. Our camp was made up of one thousand women transferred from Auschwitz. My job was to dig trenches to serve as antitank traps to prevent the Russians getting through. We were divided into hundreds which the Germans called *Hundertschaft* with one *Schupo* in charge of each *Hundertschaft*. Our *Schupo*, Gerhardt,

was particularly nasty and he looked for every occasion to make life difficult for us. He would inspect our digging so that he could tell people how they should dig if they did not dig well enough. I used to take the mickey out of him a bit when he approached. I was a gardener in Terezín, so I knew how to dig perfectly well.

In the morning, we woke very early and had the usual breakfast; we stood for *Appell* five to a row, passing down the canister of *Ersatzkaffee* from which we all took a sip. We usually started when it was still nighttime, so I should imagine it was about six o'clock in the morning. We were each given a shovel and marched about two or three kilometres past the village to a grassy meadow where we were to dig the trenches. Initially, we dug through the grass with shovels and later we were given pickaxes to dig deeper.

We would dig until midday, when we were taken to a place near the village and given lunch. We went to a sort of hut to get our soup (which was made up of just some vegetables, sauerkraut or whatever). Then we were marched back to where we had been digging and back to work. Before it started getting dark in the evening we were marched back to our camp and we would get a slice of bread with either half a slice of salami or a teaspoonful of jam, or something like that. I still always saved a little piece of bread for breakfast. We had a very weak cup of tea (it wasn't really tea - it was a sort of brown liquid) and I used to drink some with my bread and save some for washing myself because it was warm. This time I had a petticoat under my dress, so I tore a piece of cloth from my petticoat to use as a flannel to wash myself with. One sort of adjusted with what one had.

We were starving and freezing. It was getting increasingly colder and we worked even when it was snowing. We got terrible chilblains because our shoes were so inadequate.

Inge, Hanička and I tried to help each other to make things a bit more comfortable. Inge, the oldest, had the good idea to sleep lying straight out next to each other, like sardines, and share our blankets, so that instead of one blanket, we would be covered by three blankets as long as we didn't move too much. ■

A long march through Silesia

ON OR AROUND 20 January 1945, there were orders to leave the Kurzbach camp because the Red Army was advancing and getting close. I had been in the sickbay as I had been quite ill. My friends came for me and told me that I had to join them in the main building because we were all leaving the following morning.

Next to me was a Hungarian girl who had anaemia. When she heard we were due to leave, she tried to walk because she didn't want to stay on in the sickbay, but she collapsed and was pulled back. She was crying bitterly because she knew what that meant: those who stayed behind would be shot.

I joined my friends and we left the camp the next morning. We marched through Silesia for two days, staying in some sort of stables on the first night. Everybody was being very kind, carrying my spade and encouraging me. We walked with roads full of refugees. On the second night, the Camp commandant told a group of us that if we were not strong enough to march 30 kilometres the following day to cross the River Oder, we could stay over together in the agricultural college. We could have a day of rest there and wait to be picked up by another prisoners' transport to walk the following day. As I was thinking it over, the Camp commandant showed me the telegram which confirmed this, which I thought was good of him. I thought it better to stay because we would have to cross the river. I knew – from reading books such as Tolstoy - that the advance of an army stops in front of a river and I was sure that once they got us across the river, we wouldn't have a chance to escape.

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I decided to stay along with approximately 20 to 30 other women, although I worried whether I had made the right decision. The rest of the group, including my two friends Inge and Hanička, went on and were eventually taken to Belsen, where most of them died. I met one of the survivors and heard that only about 12 women survived.

Those of us who stayed behind were put in a room behind the main larger room at the college. After the others left the following morning, we all stayed absolutely quiet so no-one would realise we were there. The next transports came and somehow didn't know about us. They didn't find us and, surely just by luck, we were left behind.

We stayed very quiet for another day. We realised that there was nobody in the whole college at all, only some chickens and geese. One of the women from Slovakia said she could catch a goose and pluck and roast it for us. We looked desperately for something to eat with the goose – some bread or potatoes - but we couldn't find anything except some pickled pears. So, after having been starved for months, we ate the goose and of course it was very heavy, and I had tummy trouble for months afterwards.

The following day we looked out of the window and saw there was nobody around. We went down into the yard and out into the street, and we managed to break in or go into some of the local homes. Everything had been abandoned and there was nobody there, so we took some things we needed like clothes and towels. I took a skirt, a towel, soap, a toothbrush and I also picked up a teddy bear for some reason, which turned out to be a brilliant thought. We took these things back to the room in the agricultural college. ■

In the Russian hospital

THE NEXT DAY, the Russian Army arrived at the college and, of course, everybody was a bit worried about what would happen. Some of the women decided they would make friends with the Russian officers, because they were worried that they might rape us or something. Late one evening, after the lights were out, a couple of Russians came into our room. I happened to be lying on a mattress not far from the door. I felt somebody put a hand on my blanket, and I jumped up in bed and screamed '*Mummy! Mummy*!' One of the women turned on the light. I had the teddy bear in my hand and with my shaved head I looked so much like a child that the Russian must have thought that I was one. He just moved on to somebody else. The teddy bear I had taken from the house saved me. I had a lucky escape but someone else was unlucky: they did rape other women that night.

After that night, we thought that we should get ourselves organised and decided that we would go to the Russian commandant of the town and explain who we were and what had happened. I spoke a bit of Russian as I had studied it in Terezín. My mother had insisted that I carried on learning German but about six months before I left Terezín, when I heard that Russia was going to be the power that took over Czechoslovakia, I decided to learn their language. The Russian commandant arranged for a nurse and doctor to examine us. The decision was made to take us to the Russian military hospital where we could be looked after and, if we were well enough, be put to work. The Russians in the hospital were very good to us.

I was more or less alright, so I started to work as an auxiliary nurse, although I did not have any medical experience. I looked after the Russian soldiers who came in injured and got them ready for surgery, took their clothes and cleared up after operations. I remember throwing out a leg one time. I also worked on the wards, sitting with the injured Russian officers to see to their needs. It was an interesting experience because I got to know the Russians and hear about their lives in Russia and their attitudes to the war and what was happening. I met some wonderful people there. They were also interested in our background. They wanted to know how we used to live and were amazed when I told them we had had a five-room flat. I worked in the hospital for around three months or so. My Russian improved and I quickly learned to use the everyday language.

We also had some narrow escapes there. We (the women who had stayed behind in the agricultural college) were staying in a couple of rooms in a house near the hospital and one night some Russians came to break into our rooms. I was looking around to see whether I could jump out of the window to escape them when a nurse came round and called for me because I had to go on duty. She sent them off.

Conversely, another day a Russian soldier was outside our house and he gave me a loaf of bread. He sort of knew who we were and wanted to do something for us.

After about three months the hospital received instructions that all ex-prisoners should now be sent to the Red Cross centre, which was also in Silesia but quite a distance from the hospital. There was no transport provided: we were given directions and told to make our own way there, by whatever means possible (mainly by hitchhiking and stopping Russian vehicles to take us) so that we could be dealt with and sent home.

We set off on 14 April 1945. I hitchhiked along with a few other ex-Czech prisoners. We stayed overnight at a working place for Russians run as a farm, which was interesting because the people there told us stories about their background in Russia. We saw a Russian propaganda film which was being shown. One of the people in charge said he noticed we would be fearful or move away when there was a man coming near us. He asked whether we were raped by the Nazis and I said: 'No, we had that experience with the Russian soldiers.' He was very shocked.

After two or three days we got to the Red Cross centre, where we were examined, had a health check and given food. We stayed in houses in the village and it was very relaxing. We met a lot of other people from different concentration camps and compared our experiences. ■

The long journey home

AFTER ABOUT TWO weeks, a group of us from Czechoslovakia were put on a train leaving the Red Cross centre for a camp in Slovakia. As Bohemia was still occupied by the Germans, the train had to go a very roundabout way from northern Silesia through Poland, Russia, Carpatho-Russia (which used to be part of Czechoslovakia) and then Slovakia. If I had waited until the end of the war, I could have had a short journey to Prague.

During the long train journey, I met some men from Theresienstadt. A friend from Pilsen, Arnošt Ehrlich, also boarded the train. He had been an acquaintance of my brother whom I had known since I was a child.

We were supposed to go to a DP (Displaced Persons) camp, wait until Prague had been liberated and then be transported directly to Bohemia. However, Arnošt and I decided to make our own way home, to go through Hungary and then Vienna (both of which had already been liberated) to Brno, and from there to Prague.

When we came to a place, we would look for the Jewish community who were already set up for travellers like us and where we would always be looked after – given some chicken soup or something to eat and somewhere to stay for the night.

Our first stop was a place in Hungary. I tried to ask a policeman for directions, but he didn't speak any German and I no Hungarian. I asked if by chance he spoke Czech and it turned out that he did, as he had been stationed in Czechoslovakia.

We made our way to Budapest and when we arrived there we again looked for the Jewish community. We were sent to a centre where we all had to prove we were Jewish by saying something in Hebrew. I recited '*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu*' fluently and was accepted as a Jewish refugee. We were given 50 pengő (Hungarian currency at the time), something to eat and accommodation in a house.

Arnošt and I wondered what to do with the 50 pengő we each had. He wanted to buy a bar of chocolate which cost about 30 pengő, but I said we shouldn't spend the money on that as it was all we

had to live on until we got further. There was such high inflation that by the next day, the chocolate bar already cost 50 pengő.

We stayed in Budapest for a few days and it was actually there that we learnt about the end of the war. We went to the cinema for the first time since before the war. It was 8 May 1945 and it was a well-known film - I think it was Waterloo Bridge. Suddenly the film was interrupted, there was a big announcement on the screen in Hungarian and all the people started clapping, laughing and hugging each other. I wondered what had happened. Someone next to me said: "It's the end of the war." The atmosphere was jubilant.

We started to think of going home. Arnošt had hurt his foot and couldn't leave yet so I had to leave him behind. He was very cross with me because he felt that I should have stayed with him and not gone home until he was better. Perhaps he was right. I told him I *had* to go home because my brother would be looking for me in Pilsen.

I left Budapest and headed to Brno which wasn't far. I hitchhiked and was taken all the way there by Russians who seemed to be army intelligence officers. As we crossed the border, I was reading the Czech inscriptions on the shops and they were very amused, saying '*Anuška jedjet v rodinu*' (Annushka is returning to her country).

"Suddenly the film was interrupted, there was a big announcement on the screen in Hungarian and all the people started clapping, laughing and hugging each other. I wondered what had happened. Someone next to me said: "It's the end of the war." The atmosphere was jubilant."

From Brno, I took the train to Prague where I stayed with a friend with whom I had been in the same youth home in Terezín (our beds were next to each other) and her mother. I met friends who had been to various concentration camps and who had news about what had happened. It was a very, very sad time because it was when one got news of all of the people who had died and wouldn't be coming back.

I also found out what had happened in Kurzbach at the end. We had had a commandant who was a humanitarian, considering he was an SS guard. I remember I once got ill and fainted. I sat on the ground and he came to me and said '*Menschenkind, steh doch auf, du wirst dich da erfrieren*' which translated means '*Child of man, get up or you'll catch a cold here*.' I was very touched that he spoke to me like that and that he called me a 'child of man' rather than 'Jewish swine' which was the usual term that would be used when we were being abused. I couldn't believe it. He also got us extra rations because he didn't think we could work on the sort of diet we had. But the friends who I now met in Prague told me that the people who were left on the sickbay (as well as a couple of people who were responsible for the maintenance of the camp) had been shot. It seemed a conundrum to me: I thought it so incredible that this commandant, who obviously had humanitarian feelings, should have either ordered or given permission for such a terrible thing. ■

Returning to Pilsen

AFTER A FEW days in Prague, I left to return to Pilsen.

I arrived at our house in Riegrova in the early evening. I was standing in the street outside the house looking for the Švec family, the tenant neighbours who used to be our friends, but somebody else was living in their flat. I didn't quite know what to do. I was thinking it over when a man came to me. He saw my very short hair which he realised meant I had come from a concentration camp. He asked if this was my house and if I was trying to get in touch with somebody but didn't know who to contact and I said that was correct. As it was late in the evening, he gave me an address where I could go and sleep and suggested I come back in the morning to get information and sort it out.

I went to the address and it was rather amusing and charming because it was for people who had nowhere to stay in Pilsen, many of whom were prostitutes. They were absolutely wonderful to me. They couldn't do enough for me, giving me chocolate and food, talking to me, telling me stories (including stories of their professional services with the American soldiers who liberated Pilsen). They really spoiled me. I stayed there overnight and had a good time with them.

In the morning, I did what the man had suggested the night before and went back to the house and I plucked up the courage to ring the doorbell of the concierge, Mr Suda. He was the only person in the house now who had been there when we lived there. I remember so well the look of surprise (slight horror and then faint pleasure) when he opened the door and saw me. Then he started smiling, asked me upstairs, gave me breakfast and told me where the Švecs were now living.

The Švecs were shocked and very pleased to see me. They couldn't believe what had happened. They gave me an enormous dinner - I couldn't stop eating dumplings (I had about six of them with tomato sauce). They were really lovely people.

They advised me to go to the administrative office which dealt with the flats and ask for the key to my flat, which I did. I was questioned as to who I was, what my mother and father's names were and then they gave me the key.

The office wasn't too far from the house and as I was walking there with the key, I crossed the road near our street and people were calling me saying:

"Haničko! Haničko! Hanuš just went past here on a tank!"

When they saw Hanuš passing they shouted:

"Hanička is back, she is here!"

Hanuš (my cousin) immediately got leave to visit me and I think he went back to the flat first. In the meantime, I had gone to the Švecs to tell them of the happy outcome at the administrative office. I told them I'd better go back to the flat because no doubt Hanuš will be looking for me and as I was walking back, he was on his way to the Švecs and we actually met by chance on the street. We were both absolutely overjoyed. It was very moving. I cannot describe how happy I felt seeing him – his face, the face of my family, full of love for me.

He was the only member of my family who survived.

My brother, Franta, was not waiting for me in Pilsen as I had hoped when leaving Arnošt in Budapest. There were conflicting accounts as to how he died.

In January 1945, the Germans started evacuating people from concentration camps in the territories which were being taken over by the Russians, including Auschwitz. They were trying to get rid of any evidence of the existence of concentration camps. All prisoners from Auschwitz had to march to another concentration camp, including my brother.

After the liberation of Auschwitz, we were sent the record of Franta being there. The official report from the Red Cross stated he had been sent to another working camp where he died on 2 April 1945.

However, I had a report from my brother's good friend who maintained that Franta had died on a death march in April 1945 from Dachau. He had been sent on from camp to camp and he may have been on the way to Terezín because some prisoners were being sent back there. I rather believe that the account of my brother's friend is probably the correct one. ■

Life in Pilsen and Kladno

HANUŠ WAS A Junior Lieutenant in the army at the time (with 18 months left of service), stationed not far away from Pilsen. On that first day we met, he came back to the flat with me and then had to return to the army base. He got proper leave to visit me in Pilsen and would often come back to visit, either by himself or with his officers, and I would cook for them. He applied for a discharge from the army and was demobbed in July or at the beginning of August and he arranged for his wife to come to Pilsen. He had been in the Czech Army in exile throughout the war. During that time he had married a pretty and very lovely young woman called Pearl who came from an Orthodox Jewish family in London.

While Hanuš went to collect Pearl in Prague, I prepared everything for her arrival. I was looking forward to meeting her. I had made a cake and sandwiches for tea and, as I thought they'd be arriving soon, I made a pot of tea. I was a bit premature with making the tea, so I had to throw that pot away and make a fresh one when they eventually arrived.

Everyone admired Pearl: it was easy to love her and her warm outgoing personality. She took everything that must have been strange to her in her stride.

The three of us lived together in the flat for a while but as Hanuš and my father's business had been amalgamated with another one and we could not recover anything, we decided to go and stay with Hanuš' cousin, Franta Lowy, in Kladno. Franta's parents had been sent to Auschwitz and died. He had inherited his family textiles business which had been set up in 1919 and he got his family flat back.

“Everyone admired Pearl: it was easy to love her and her warm outgoing personality.”

My cousin Hanuš and his wife Pearl.

We moved at the end of August or beginning of September and settled down in Kladno. Franta had a very nice house with a lovely garden. He lived in the first-floor flat, and we had the second-floor flat. I was 16 years old and started going to school after six years. I had a sofa bed and a desk in the dining/living room. Hanuš and Pearl were in charge and took care of me, partly like brother and sister and partly like parents. Pearl was at home looking after all of us. She had a baby called Helen and I helped her quite a lot.

We lived happily in Kladno. Life promised to be good now, the business did well, we were catered for by a good cook who used to work for Franta's mum and would come before each weekend and cook and bake enough food to last a few days. We kept chickens in the garden for fresh eggs and, thanks to Franta's connections, we had enough food. Conditions in Czechoslovakia were improving quite rapidly in the two-and-a-half years since the end of the war. By autumn 1947, Hanuš and Pearl were expecting another baby. ■

Life under a Communist Regime

THE PROMISE OF a good life came to an abrupt end in February 1948 when the democratic government was overthrown in a Communist *putsch* (*coup d'état*). The Communist Party took over from the elected Social Democrat Party, demanded President Beneš abdicate and announced that it was now in control.

In my class at school I was one of four Deputies (one each responsible for sport and culture and two others), whose role it was to tell the class about interesting things to do or know about. When I got to my class that day, I was informed by a rather stupid little girl that we were all dismissed and that she was now in charge on behalf of the Communist Party which would tell us what to do. I went to the Headmaster of the school and told him what had happened. I said we were elected by the whole class to be in our positions. The Headmaster looked at me and said: "Well, that's how it's going to be now."

The family business was immediately taken over by a Communist manager; Franta and Hanuš became his employees. My plan was to finish school and go to university, but I could see the signs: people were simply disregarding the idea of democracy and freedom. Former officers of the Czech Army in the west were mistrusted and threatened; everybody became frightened of the Communists.

Our relatives from Pilsen, Lotka (Aunt Margitte's niece) and Jožka, decided to leave and gradually, partly with my persuasion and partly with theirs, Hanuš, Pearl and Franta agreed that we had to leave while it was still possible.

As a British subject, Pearl (who by now was heavily pregnant) was able to leave officially by plane with Helen, who was about two years old at the time. Although Hanuš was married to Pearl, he didn't have British citizenship yet. If we wanted to leave, he and I would have to leave illegally. I packed Pearl's luggage, which was to be sent by rail after inspection, smuggling in some clothes for Hanuš, Franta and me. When we left, we would only take overnight things with us and leave everything else behind. ■

We escape from Czechoslovakia

BY LATE MARCH or early April 1948, we had put together a plan. Lotka and Jožka found a guide who would take us over the Czech border into Germany on foot. Franta was nervous that if we all left for Pilsen together, it would look suspicious, so Hanuš and Franta left together for Prague and, for some reason, I was the last to leave the house in Kladno. Unfortunately I was in a bit of a panic, so I accidentally left behind some things I had prepared to take with me including a letter about what had happened to my brother in the war and some jewellery; all I took was a little bag with one change of clothes.

The plan was for me to meet Hanuš and Franta at the train station in Prague. From there we took a train to Pilsen and then another train to the last station near the border, where we were met by the guide.

During the night, the guide led us along the fields, through the woods and over the hills towards the border. I don't remember quite how far it was, but it was a long walk. Eventually, we came to a road which ran parallel to the border with Bavaria, in Germany. A car came along with its headlights pointing to each side of the road, looking to see if there was anybody there. It was very frightening. We threw ourselves onto the ground and lay face down in the field, not moving. Luckily, they didn't spot us.

> "As we heard military steps coming towards us, Hanuš wanted to be quite sure that we were on the right side. He boomed in a deep voice '*Halt! Wer da*?' (Stop! Who is there?) '*Die Bayerische Grenzpolizei*' (the Bavarian Border Police) came the answer."

Once we had crossed that road, we were practically next to the German border. The guide told us to continue walking, as he could not accompany us right to the border. If we walked to the left, we would reach the Czech border police station. Walking to the right, we would reach the German-Bavarian frontier guard. The guide told us to keep going until we reached either the guard or the police station.

As we heard military steps coming towards us, Hanuš wanted to be quite sure that we were on the right side. He boomed in a deep voice '*Halt! Wer da?*' (Stop! Who is there?) '*Die Bayerische Grenzpolizei*' (the Bavarian Border Police) came the answer. We had gone the right way. We were safe.

We were taken to the station and given something to eat. The border police were used to people crossing over and told us about others who had done the same: a mayor, a professor, and so on. In the morning, we were taken to Fürth, the nearest town and American Army Headquarters. After a good breakfast, we went to a refugee shelter in a school in Regensburg, where we waited a day or two to be transferred to a DP Camp for Czech refugees near Dillenburg, in Hesse, in the German countryside.

The DP Camp was simply a large building, like a barn, which had been equipped with bunks and had a farmhouse next to it. Hanuš and Franta stayed in the big barn, while I stayed with the women and children in the farmhouse, which was slightly better accommodation. We stayed there for three months while we waited for our British visas to arrive. On 27 April 1948, a telegram arrived announcing Susan's birth; we were happy but also sad that Hanuš and Pearl had to be apart at this time. The separation during these months was hard for them and life in the DP camp was unpleasant for all of us. In our hunger we gathered snails to cook, but did not succeed in making them edible. ■

Our journey to the UK

AS SOON AS the visa formalities were completed, we left the DP camp; Hanuš and Franta headed to London and I went first to Holland to visit a cousin of my father, Fritzi. She and her husband were very nice. She bought me a coat. By then I had a cardboard box to carry my belongings as I had more than just the one-day's change of clothes with which I had left Czechoslovakia.

When I arrived in the UK by boat a week later, an immigration officer questioned me. He was impressed by my English, which I'd been speaking for years. My mother loved English; I had started learning it when I was about nine and continued until about 1944 when I was in Terezín and started learning Russian instead. I spoke English with Hanuš and Pearl at home.

The immigration officer asked who would support me in England and I told him about Bubbe, Pearl's mum, who was taking care of everybody. I don't think he found it particularly promising when I said that she lived on her old age pension. Of course, I added that I was hoping to be able to work and earn my own living.

He asked how long I was intending to stay. "For ever," I answered. He nearly fell off his stool! He consulted a superior and I was given a visa to stay for six months after which I could apply for another visa. So, that's what I did.

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I made my way to Croydon where Hanuš and Pearl were living with her mother and sister, even managing to buy a nice pair of brass candlesticks on the way to replace those that I had forgotten to pack in Kladno.

Pearl belonged to a large Orthodox family originally from the East End. Her mother's flat was much too small: there was no room for me (or even really for them), so they got me a small room next door with a neighbour for about £1 rent.

Franta also lived in Croydon. He and Hanuš stuck together and eventually got work. Hanuš worried about the future and even more so when Pearl became pregnant with their third child. They were quite daunted by the prospect and to cheer them up I told them that this time it was sure to be a boy… and it was!

Before the baby, David, was born, Hanuš and Pearl bought a house in Nova Road, Croydon. It wasn't particularly nice, but it was quite roomy, and they bought it very cheaply, so it was a great opportunity. I was able to take a room with them. ■

My passport, 1951

Connecting with friends and family

WHEN I ARRIVED in England, I met some friends from Czechoslovakia, including a very good friend from Pilsen. We heard through relatives about those who had survived and come here. I met Dorit Kesner, with whom I had been friends in Terezín. We had known each other since we were about 12 and had now reconnected, staying friends throughout the years after. Dorit had come over to England with her mother.

I had written to relatives on my mother's side, the Adlers, with whom I used to correspond when I was in Czechoslovakia, to let them know that I was in England now and that I hoped to see them. I got a very nice response from them inviting me immediately to their home in Wales. Rudl was a cousin of my mother, so technically my second cousin, but I saw him as an uncle. His wife, Marian, was fantastic - she was such a lovely person - and his children, Dorothy and Tom, became my friends. It was a wonderful family and I was very fond of them all.

Rudl gave me £50 so that I would have some money and suggested that I studied something. He told me about a commercial course near to where I lived, where I could study and train for six months and then look for a job. So, that's what I did. I got a job in a firm which had previously made goods needed during the war but now designed kitchens. Initially, I was a shorthand typist, but gradually I helped my manager more and took on design work in kitchens and other areas. I found it quite interesting and enjoyed working in a factory where things were produced.

Every year, I spent my holidays in Wales with the Adlers. In about 1950 I moved in with them for three months after I was ordered to rest completely following a flare-up of the TB of the glands I had suffered in Theresienstadt. I grew very close to them during that time and was treated like part of the family. It was a different example of family life from our family in Croydon, which was more pressured. The Adler family was settled and regulated. I thought it was quite wonderful. I decided then that I should aspire to do what my aunt Marian did and look after a husband and family. It was something I felt strongly about after spending that period of time with them.

After my prolonged visit to Wales to recuperate, I had to continue to take things very easy and not travel too much, so I took a job near Croydon, closer to where I lived. It was during this time that I met Frank. ■

Frank's story

FRANK WAS BORN Franz Neumann on 6 January 1922 in Teplice-Šanov (a city in northern Czechoslovakia near the German border) to Richard and Irma Neumann, who were originally from Vienna. He later took on a middle name, David. His father was the sales manager of a very big textile factory called 'Fezfabriken' which made Fez hats (the headgear of the Islamic population of East Turkey) and other items, and exported to the East. Frank's parents lived in Vienna and when Frank was about eight years old, moved to Berlin.

The family was happily settled in Berlin until an event one day changed everything. Frank was playing football with his friends and the ball went through a window in a neighbouring house. Frank went over to the house, rang the bell, apologised, saying he was 'terribly sorry' and that he would make sure to get the window repaired. The man who lived there was an SS or German officer of some sort who told Frank that he should tell his father to leave as soon as possible because 'things will get very difficult here.' Frank's father took this warning seriously and started making plans to come to England.

When Frank's father was in England, Frank's mother waited anxiously for news in Belgium, at that time considered a safer haven than Germany or Czechoslovakia. Frank left the textile college he was studying at in Czechoslovakia and returned to a boarding school he had previously studied at in Zugerberg, Switzerland. Frank later arrived in England on 27 March 1939, shortly after his parents had safely emigrated, and decided to stay, against the wishes of his parents who wanted him to return to Switzerland. Instead he got a job in a factory in Huddersfield. It was from there he was arrested as an enemy alien and sent to a detention camp on the Isle of Man (sharing accommodation with four talented string players who later became the Amadeus String Quartet).

After a year in the detention camp, Frank was conscripted into the Pioneer Corps of the army. His first rank was pioneer, a manual role. After promotion, he became part of the British Intelligence Corps, because he spoke German. At that point, he was asked to change his name from Neumann to Newman. He interrogated German prisoners, gathering intelligence.

After applying for a discharge, he went to help his father. His father's business hadn't been very successful, so Frank opened a business for knitted fabrics in Wigmore Street and invited his father to join him as Director. They were so-called 'converters' who would reserve a certain amount of yarn with which a factory would make samples of fabric. Frank sold those samples in London to dress manufacturers and then, depending on how sales would go, he would order amounts of the actual fabric. ■

With Frank

Our wedding day

Meeting Frank

I WAS FRIENDLY with Lotka and very fond of her mother, Aunt Else. I used to go and visit them when we were all in London. Aunt Else wanted Frank and his parents to meet me and so, one afternoon in January 1951, she just happened to invite us all to tea. I had no idea that it was a set up, although it obviously was. That evening Frank actually took me to my date with my then boyfriend because I already had plans to meet him.

Frank and I arranged to go to a Purim ball together the following week. After we had been to choose our fancy-dress outfits, we went to his flat to await his other friends who were coming to the ball. The door opened and, just by coincidence, there stood Dorit Kesner, with whom I'd lost touch by then. Another friend of Frank's, Steffi, also came that evening. I hadn't known her before, but she impressed me enormously - she was very pretty, with a wonderful dress for the party and she was very nice to me. We became good friends and remained close until she died recently.

After the Purim ball, Frank and I continued seeing each other, going to the opera, concerts and exhibitions and enjoying each other's company. I was living in Croydon and Frank, being a true gentleman, would take me home every time, which no one else had done for me before.

Frank was jolly, comfortable and caring and also very practical; he could always be relied on to know what to do. He was much more sensible than me, while I was a romantic and had ideas which were more 'out there'. His parents went overboard for me. They would have loved to have had a daughter and were absolutely delighted with me and, in fact, they kept badgering Frank to marry me.

One day Frank and I went to Rye for a picnic, although he thought it rather odd that I would choose to go for a picnic because he was used to going to restaurants. Anyhow, we had a picnic on the downs of Rye. It was very windy and we had sand in our sandwiches. Out of the blue, Frank suddenly said he wanted to marry me. We talked about it a bit and I told him: "You know, it sounds very nice, but I don't want to marry anybody yet. I think I'm too young. I want to do something myself, you know, *achieve something*."

I was about 21 at the time and I didn't want to just marry and be a wife at such a young age so we carried on going out together. I got a room to rent near to where Frank was living in St John's Wood and he no longer needed to take me back to Croydon each time we met up. Frank obviously picked up on me saying that I wanted to 'achieve something' and must have thought it very funny because he used to tease me about it for years afterwards. Even many years after we got married, he would sometimes come home and ask: "So, what did you achieve today?"

Eventually we did agree to get married. ■

With our son Michael and Frank's parents Richard and Irma

With my husband Frank on our delayed honeymoon, 1952

Me in 1966

Married life

FRANK AND I married in October 1951 at Marylebone Registry Office, after which we went for a nice lunch with Hanuš and Pearl, Frank's parents and another good friend. It was a very small wedding.

We moved into a flat in Netherhall Gardens in Hampstead, which Frank's father had helped find. Michael was born in 1954. In 1958, when I was pregnant with Evie, our landlord refused to renew our lease as he no longer thought it was suitable to have children in the house. I found a very nice house in Cyprus Gardens and we lived there for about six years. In 1966, we moved to 32 Hendon Avenue.

I stayed at home to look after the children. Michael was very inquisitive, always wanting to know and learn things. He seemed to be a very intelligent child, picking things up quickly. Evie was more playful. Michael had an interest in art which seemed to come from me, and Evie was very practical and pragmatic, like Frank. They both had a lot of characteristics from Frank.

I also learnt to cook properly. My mother-in-law was a fantastic cook, and I made it my task to cook everything that was eaten on the continent, working my way through all of the usual menus including things like calf's and pig's heads. Frank seemed to enjoy my cooking and sometimes his father also came to eat dinner when my mother-in-law went to various recuperative places for slimming.

Frank died on 10 January 1984. He is buried in Willesden Liberal Jewish Cemetery. ■

Evie and Michael with Ringo

Frank's 60th birthday party, 6 January 1982

My cottage in Wales

I WAS IN regular contact with my relatives in Wales. One time, Rudl and I went to buy wood for someone in a place called Hay-on-Wye. I absolutely fell in love with Hay, as the locals called it. The countryside recalled so much the countryside of Czechoslovakia: the hills, the woods and the fields. I thought to myself that I'd love to live there one day.

Many years later, Michael phoned to tell me he'd found a wonderful cottage in Hay, so I went to have a look at it. Romantic as we all were, we thought it was beautiful. All secluded on its own, it was an old stone cottage, and it was quite cheap because it needed a lot of modernising and building up. I bought it at auction.

We would go to the cottage as often as we could. I used to make any excuse to go - there was always something that, I would insist, needed to be done. We did a lot of work to it and it took quite a long time. I furnished it and made curtains.

The back entrance was full with soil because there was a steep slope on the border between our land and the farmer's land, and the soil came down the slope over the years and it buried half the cottage, so all of that had to be removed. We engaged an architect and a surveyor, and in the end the farmer was persuaded to give us a few feet of his land. We came to an agreement and we were able to make a patio at the back, and eventually it was very, very pretty. ■

The fate of my family and friends

MY MOTHER, FATHER and brother Franta all died in the Holocaust.

Uncle Robert was deported from Terezín to Auschwitz in about 1943. He survived and returned to Plan after the war, where he tried to get his house and his sawmill business back. Unfortunately, the Communists didn't want to return anything to Uncle Robert and, in fact, they persecuted him for being a German-speaking Jew. He was only allowed the use of one room in his house and in the end he was put to work as forced labour. Sadly, he committed suicide in 1947.

Aunt Margitte was deported to Auschwitz in May 1944, where she died.

Uncle Emil was deported to Warsaw on 25 April 1942, where he died.

Aunt Hela was deported from Pilsen to Terezín on 26 January 1942 and from there to Treblinka on 15 October 1942, where she died.

“Uncle Robert was deported from Terezín to Auschwitz in about 1943. He survived and returned to Plan after the war, where he tried to get his house and his sawmill business back.”

Three of my father's sisters left Pilsen in about 1898 to settle in the USA. I was only really in touch with two of them. I corresponded a lot with Paula, who was very sweet. The elder sister, Berta, became quite wealthy producing corsets. She lost most of her money in the Depression in 1929 but made it back again. She seemed to take a real interest in me and made a will leaving everything to my cousin Hanuš and me, probably because she felt we needed and deserved it more than her relatives in the US who had what they needed. In the end, the will was contested by Paula's children (not Paula herself), on the basis that they were the closest relatives. On the advice of the British Consulate, we settled the dispute and split the money with them as, had we contested it, all the money would have been spent on legal fees and we would have been left with nothing.

Our best friends from Pilsen, Mrs Sachselová and her daughters Hanča and Eva, were transported from Auschwitz to the Christianstadt camp. In the beginning of 1945, they set out on a death march to Cheb, from where they boarded a train to Bergen-Belsen. Mrs Sachselová died of typhus just after the liberation of the camp. Hanča and Eva survived. Eva very sadly died, apparently from Alzheimer's, although I find that hard to believe as she died so suddenly, and I wonder whether she actually died of something else. Hanča and I continue to write to each other. She is a wonderful person with great humour, and many interests.

Dáša Růžičková was deported from Terezín to Auschwitz in October 1944, where she died.

I wasn't able to go back to Czechoslovakia until after the Velvet Revolution and the fall of Communism in 1989 which was after Frank had died, so I was never able to show him where I grew up. I did go back with Evie and Michael a few times and I showed them our former house at 18 Riegrova. I went back to Terezín with Michael; Evie was not able to come with as she was pregnant. ■

Conclusion

What happened to my family and me in the Holocaust is part of my life, always present, and I accept it. It's sad, but when I think of my mother and father, I remember the nice times we had in Pilsen and then at the same time I remember how it all ended. That is always with me. ■

Travelling in style with Nick in Prague

With Evie and Katie

Evie, Michael and the grandchildren Nick, Yoyo and Katie

Afterword by Hana's daughter, Evie

Hana and Holocaust education

In her fifties, Hana was asked to present her story to children in her local primary school in Finchley, London. When talking to young people she would take great care about the way she presented the events of her life, always emphasising survival and hope. She received many touching letters from the children she spoke to.

Her story was also made into a BBC Holocaust education film for Year 7 students (aged 11 and 12), alongside teaching materials. This was presented by teachers in schools all over the country. The BBC produced a faithful and moving account of Hana's experiences. There is also an audio-visual interview of Hana created by the USC Shoah Foundation.

Evie and Michael and their children

Evie married Paul Davies in November 1984 and has a son, Nicholas, born in October 1990 (married Rosa in 2022) and a daughter, Katie, born in April 1994; Michael has a son Joachim (Yoyo), born October 1997.

Hana was fortunate to see her three grandchildren grow up. She felt great love for all of them, fostering unique relationships with all of them, always showing a keen interest in their lives. Each took pleasure in her company, as much as she in theirs. She presented her own history to her children and grandchildren with consideration and thoughtfulness. The memories of her parents, Otto and Rosl, and beloved brother Franta, who all died in the Holocaust, were kept alive in the stories she told to her family. Her children and grandchildren's lives, in turn, have been enhanced by her exceptional talents, as a gifted sculptor who loved art and music, as a wonderful, generous cook and as a highly intelligent and complex person. Aware of how the experiences Hana went through left her with indelible scars, the compassion, love and admiration for Hana felt by her family and her dear friends is testimony to the life she was able to live. ■

Hana's Death

Hana died on the morning of 5 April 2020 in Highgate, London, less than two weeks before her 91st birthday, with her daughter Evie by her side. In accordance with her wishes, she was cremated at Hoop Lane Crematorium on 28 April 2020 and her ashes buried with her husband, Frank, in Willesden Liberal Jewish Cemetery, with a plaque to commemorate her parents, Otto and Rosl, and brother Franta. ■

AJR The Association of Jewish Refugees

About the AJR

Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional groups offering members a unique opportunity to socialise in their local area. Members receive support from volunteers and can obtain advice and assistance on welfare rights as well as on Holocaust reparations.

The AJR is committed to the education of future generations about the Holocaust and is now the UK's largest benefactor of education and memorialisation programmes and projects which promote teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

About 70,000 refugees, including approximately 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, arrived in Great Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s. The AJR extends membership to anyone who fled a Nazi-occupied country as a Jewish refugee or who arrived in Great Britain as a Holocaust survivor. We also welcome the descendants and spouses of the refugees as members.

“What happened to my family and me in the Holocaust is part of my life, always present, and I accept it. It’s sad, but when I think of my mother and father, I remember the nice times we had in Pilsen and then at the same time I remember how it all ended. That is always with me.’

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www.ajr.org.uk