BOY 30529
A Memoir

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

Foreword by Suzanne Bardgett

Acknowledgements

Preface

PART I: CHILDHOOD

Chapter 1: The Golden Years
Chapter 2: Dark Clouds
Chapter 3: The End of Hope

PART II: THE CAMPS

Chapter 4: Holocaust Literature and Reality
Chapter 5: Ghetto Theresienstadt (Terezín)
Chapter 6: Auschwitz-Birkenau
Chapter 7: Blechhammer
Chapter 8: The Longest Walk, The Coldest Train Journey
Chapter 9: Buchenwald

PART III: THE RETURN

Chapter 10: Prague
Chapter 11: Ústí nad Orlicí
PART IV: ENGLAND

Chapter 12: A Lancaster Bomber

Chapter 13: My Father

Chapter 14: Natural Philosophy

Appendix: Chronology 1942–45

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

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

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

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

Secondly, it is clear just how much Felix Weinberg’s eventual survival of Terezín, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Blechhammer, Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald camps owes to the ‘cocooning’ of his early years. A father who loved playing with his two boys and a mother with an instinctive ability to bring fun into her children’s lives – these were the wellspring from which Felix would draw during his two-and-a-half-year captivity. To dream of his past life – enriched by doting grandparents, journeys by paddle-steamer on the Elbe and trips by horse-drawn sleigh – only to wake up in the stench and misery of the concentration camp barracks was excruciating. But it was these memories – together with the chance inner reserves that came from having a father who was a fitness and nutrition fanatic – which enabled the young Felix to survive.
Hunger, ill treatment and finally the trauma of Allied bombing left Felix ‘half-alive’ at the end of the war. His closing chapters lay bare aspects of the liberation of the camps I had not heard about – the ‘Wild-West interregnum’ before the arrival of proper relief organisations saw child survivors blowing themselves up with weapons taken from the arsenal abandoned by the Nazis. The almost apocalyptic scenes Felix witnessed at this point, and their tragic aftermath, stayed with him forever.

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

_Suzanne Bardgett, Head of Research
Imperial War Museum
September 2011_
Acknowledgements

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

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

Regarding the battered leather jacket which she mentions and which now graces her display: if there were a prize for the world’s ugliest garment, I would back it as a leading contender. I do not think it was ever designed to be worn on the outside; my guess is it was originally intended to be worn under the Luftwaffe uniform by flight crews operating at high altitudes in order to keep them warm. The main body was stitched together from a large number of small squares of fleece, with the sickly off-white-wash leather facing outward. The sleeves were knitted and loosely attached at the shoulders. The design spoke of a nation poor in material resources but well endowed with slave labour. What made it such a valuable prize, first for a Buchenwald guard and then for me – to the point that I brought it on the Lancaster Bomber for the flight to England – was that it was uncommonly warm, and certainly the warmest undergarment I ever owned. Perhaps I ought to mention that the Buchenwald guard raised no objections to my taking it, as he was dead at the time, possibly due to an earlier visit by some of my fellow prisoners.
Before exposing the jacket to public view on my motorcycle, I made a questionable improvement to its dead sheep exterior appearance by dyeing the leather, using a deep-brown suede shoe dye. That is how it appears today. My children remember me washing the car in it – perhaps because of the embarrassment it caused them. I am sure that, at the time of presenting it to the IWM, nothing was further from my mind than writing up my wartime experiences. Still, it was the first time it came to me that some apparently totally useless things might be worth preserving for posterity rather than ending up in a ragbag, so perhaps a seed had been sown.

Felix Weinberg
16 September 2011
Preface

A difficult decision

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

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

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

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

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

Childhood
The Golden Years

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

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

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

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

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

Every Saturday was market day and the whole square was covered in stalls with umbrellas. Every Saturday also my grandfather went to the market and bought a pigeon for my dinner.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I believe that he had a new nurse and about the same time I acquired a Fräulein – or rather a Slečna – a very charming young Czech lady with a brand new teacher’s diploma. (Slečna = ‘miss’, but somehow neither ‘nanny’, ‘governess’ nor ‘au pair’ quite fits the bill.) I am not sure she even spoke German. I suspect that the idea was to make me speak Czech most of the time, in preparation for school. We were bilingual (my parents also spoke French and English; my knowledge of English was confined to one phrase: ‘Not in front of the children!’, generally said rather loudly and associated with parental arguments). In 1932, when the citizens of the Sudeten had to choose, my parents opted for Czech nationality though my father’s Czech was never perfect.

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

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

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

Big brother, little brother on holiday

In winter we went skiing. I had my first short skis at the age of four. The nearest makeshift ski slopes were only as far as the terminus of the tram that passed our house, at a place called Telnitz. At weekends we were allowed to put our skis on the tram and I believe that it was only about half an hour’s ride from our home. Sometimes we went for cross-country expeditions further afield, staying overnight in ski chalets in the mountains. I loved the forests covered in deep snow. The only problem was that my father was an excellent and totally fearless skier, neither of which attributes could truthfully be applied to the rest of the family. His expectation that we would keep up with him used to cause me some anxiety.

At Eastertime we went to a ski hut/hotel at the Keilberg. That involved a train journey followed by a long ride in a horse-drawn sleigh. The luggage went into the back and I was allowed to sit next to the driver with a blanket across my knees. The horse was also covered by a blanket and suffered from flatulence. I was greatly intrigued by its passing wind, not least because it could be perceived by three senses; apart from the two obvious ones, the farts were also visible as little clouds of steam.
Whenever going on holiday involved an early morning start, my mother used to wake us children with a special song she composed for the purpose, just to enhance our sense of excitement. It worked so well that, although my excitement caused me to wake much earlier, I pretended to be asleep in anticipation of her creeping through the door.

My mother was very talented. As a young girl, she had been sent to finishing schools in England and Switzerland, spoke five languages, and spent her spare time playing the piano (and teaching me to play – both the piano and the harmonica) and producing beautiful etchings on glass and metal objects. I believe that she rebelled against her privileged and affluent upbringing by developing strongly socialist leanings. That affected me mainly in the books she gave me to read. She was active in WIZO (Women’s International Zionist Organisation), which had the left-wing policies of the early kibbutzim at its heart. The greatest benefit to me when I was little was the pure joy of participating in her tea parties for lots of Jewish ladies and, in particular, the shopping expeditions beforehand. The shopkeepers always offered samples to taste and my expert opinion on various salamis, cheeses, etcetera was clearly in great demand. (I am still addicted to salamis, anchovy pâté and other constituents of my mother’s nibbles.) The only downside was having to play with the children of my mother’s acquaintances. To the best of my recollection, none of them had sons; all I can remember is having to be polite to lots of really obnoxious little girls who wanted to play their games, their way. I much preferred being included in my mother’s excursions with her friends to exclusive gourmet coffee houses. I didn’t share in coffee and gossip but I did in tasting the cakes; marzipan ‘potatoes’ in particular left a lasting impression.

Clearly, my mother did not live by my father’s dictum (one of many) that one should stop eating when food tastes the best. If my father taught me iron self-