

The Story of Max Berl as told by his daughter, Rose Berl

Except for a couple of years my father, Max Berl, lived in York from March 1939, until his death in October 1999. However, he had been born in a 'faraway country' about which little was known, namely Silesia - part of the Hapsburg Empire in 1906 when 'Dad' was born to Mr. Heinrich Berl, an orthodontist, and Emily Berl. He was the eldest of their three children. My grandfather was one of several brothers, the eldest of whom inherited the family sawmill business of 'Max Berl and Sons'. This did not change when, in 1918, the allies created Czechoslovakia from former Hapsburg lands. The Berls had to learn Czech as Silesia was German-speaking and was known as 'the Sudetenland'. Although Dad was happy studying chemistry at the University of Vienna, he had to take on the family business in 1934 when his uncle died without sons.



This all was smashed in 1938 when the Nazis were allowed to occupy the Sudetenland. Dad was put in jail and given the option of legally giving the family business to the Nazis or finding out what the Nazi officer would do with the gun placed on the table between them. Jews were not allowed to own property so Dad, his mother, brother and sister had to give up the family home and move to Prague where they hoped to be safe. The allies had guaranteed the integrity of Czechoslovakia but Dad had been alerted and queued for 48 hours for an exit visa. His family hesitated. My grandmother did not want to be even further from the grave of my grandfather who had died of cancer in 1933. My uncle and aunt did not want to leave without their mother. Dad waited till the last day it was possible to use his visa even though he was not allowed to be on a train going through Nazi Germany as he had to for his visa was for England.

At Prague Railway Station my grandmother and Dad parted. Grandmother gave Dad a valuable violin that had been Grandfather's. Another mother was putting her small son on the train for The Netherlands - what pain these partings caused but many had to choose between staying together or the hope of protection from the Nazi persecution. The mother asked Dad to keep an eye on the little boy and the boy possibly saved dad's life for the guard, Dad told me, turned a blind eye to a Jew illegally travelling on a train. Did that guard have a son himself? There was no compassion for my grandmother, uncle and aunt who eventually were incarcerated first in Theresienstadt (Terezin) and then transported to Auschwitz where my grandmother and aunt were murdered and my uncle, a doctor, forced to work in the clinic. He survived somehow.

Dad was received by the Refugee Committee in York, assigned board and lodgings at an Irish couple's along with his old friend, Sigmund Cohen. As well as a place to stay the refugees were given pocket money and free tickets to the cinema, Rowntree swimming pool and the Saturday dances at the Assembly Rooms. It was at a dance that Dad met a young York woman. Soon Dad enlisted in the British Army in the 'friendly aliens' Pioneer Corps. The young York woman, Margaret King, my mother, travelled down to Taunton, Somerset to marry her tall, dark stranger.

When the war ended Dad returned to Bruntal where his former business had been based. I do not know how or when he heard the spirit-shattering news of the death of his mother and sister.

The family business had been taken from the Nazis by the Bruntal Community and nationalized. Dad became the manager as he had been when still the owner. Mum followed him, seen off at York Station by my weeping grandfather. Mum had never been further than the Isle of Man but her time in Czechoslovakia ended abruptly when, in January 1948, the Communist became the only party of government. Dad was labelled 'a capitalist', he had a German-sounding name, and he was a Jew. Sadly, the hard-left is as intolerant as the far-right. His life was again in danger. Mum could get out on an old war plane in January, Dad not till March and then only by pulling strings, he told me. I was born in June in the shadow of York Minster - Pureycust Nursing Home. As Mum was officially Church of England, I was Christened. According to Jewish tradition you are only certain of being your mother's child, not your father's! However, Mum and I attended Jewish services in the meeting place in Aldwark where the tiny Jewish community of the pre-university days met but Mum did not convert, and she died before I was mature enough to enquire about such matters. My parents left me free to follow my personal beliefs. The only religious statement Dad made was 'God is love'.

After living with my maternal grandparents on Poppleton Road and the ground floor of a house on Hull Road, we were given the key to a newly built council flat in 1951. The flat was one of the Festival Flats at the corner of Fishergate and Paragon Street. I eventually attended Fishergate Primary School where we learnt about the stories from the Bible. So I was surprised when a fellow pupil said, "Your Dad's a Jew". Where was his beard and long robe? When I asked Dad "Are you a Jew" I took him off-guard for he said "Yes, but don't tell anyone". Was he being over-cautious? To me Dad didn't look like the Jews in the Bible. He earned our living as a commercial traveller and always was smartly dressed in a suit and tie, clean-shaven and short-haired. He was an ultra-liberal member of the Jewish faith but attended the services and fasted on 'the Day of Atonement', Yom Kippur. "Atoning for my sins before I commit some more". His sense of humour had not been destroyed.

Dad twice was given sanctuary in this lovely city of York and I consider myself fortunate to have been born and raised here. Dad had to hold together a mind and spirit smashed by extremism. In his last couple of years he came to forget his past, perhaps mercifully, but he enjoyed hearing my rendering of the 'Marseillaise' (memories of the film 'Casablanca'?), recitation of 'If I Should Die' by Rupert Brooke and speeches from Shakespeare especially "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" (from 'Julius Caesar'). He could recite some of the latter almost to his dying day. In October, 1999, he died peacefully at South Park Nursing Home where he was "happy".