March 1938 - August 1940:

A short personal history of my family during 30 turbulent months

Hans Schneider

When the German army marched into Austria in March 1938, my father expected a return to some kind of ghetto existence. Both my parents were dentists in Vienna: my mother, Bella (Isabella), worked for the municipal dental service inspecting school children, and my father, Hugo, had a successful private practice. My father believed that he would lose all his non-Jewish patients; on the other hand many Viennese Jews went to non-Jewish dentists, and some would now come to him: not good, but tolerable. Within three months he realized that he had been quite wrong; he was one of the first to realize that this was a new and virulent form of persecution. The immediate cause was the appearance of a young man at his door in SA uniform who announced that he was also a dentist and one of my parents' two consulting rooms now belonged to him.

I was 11 years old in 1938. At this remove, I have a sense that I was quite aware of restrictions and possible dangers in the three months that I lived under Nazi rule, but nevertheless my daily activities continued much as before. On one occasion, I remember being called out into the courtyard of my school with all other boys of Jewish descent and being told by the headmaster that it was impossible for true Germans to associate with us, and he probably added some less than complimentary words about the group in front of him. My parents reacted by remarking: First this man was red (which meant a supporter of the moderate social democrats that ran the city until 1934), then black (a supporter of the Catholic oriented government that took over Austria in 1934), and now he is brown (a Nazi). Wise words, they stopped me from taking seriously anything he may have said.

My father was a very careful and cautious man, yet he took an extraordinarily bold action which was crucial to our survival. In June 1938 we took a train to Czechoslovakia. As the Nazis' aim was to drive out Jews, leaving Austria was possible and legal, but the difficulty of getting permission to enter another country was huge. In our case, a Czech border guard had been bribed and we entered the country illegally. Thus ended what had been a secure middle class existence up to the annexation of Austria by Germany, and we became refugees without resources, status or prospects; three lives in limbo. My parents and I went to live with one of my father's brothers in Karvina, the town where my father was born. This town was very close to the Polish border and it was ceded to Poland by the Munich agreement in late 1938, and thus we found ourselves illegally in Poland.

In the fall of 1938, my parents managed to get a place for me in a Quaker school in the Netherlands which had been established for German and Austrian refugee children. I had to travel to Warsaw to obtain a visa from the Dutch consul there and then, to get to Holland without entering Germany; I would need to take a plane to Prague and then a plane direct to Amsterdam. But the first plane could not leave because of bad weather, there was a wait of 10 days for the next available seat on the plane from Prague and no hotel would take a person without papers. My father, who was accompanying me, had to find a way for me to stay in Warsaw. He asked the first reliable looking man he saw in the street for help, who sent us to a member of the German embassy in whose apartment I then stayed. Equally amazing, the man who sent us there turned out to be a Polish policeman in the very department charged with deporting illegal aliens. I do not know why. Was it a humanitarian action or was it political? This is one of the few stories my father would tell about our experiences; surely the family I stayed with was German and I was told to say that I was a relative from Vienna if anyone asked.

While living with my uncle in Karvina, my parents were denounced to the authorities, but the local police, instead of deporting them back to Germany according to regulations, allowed them 24 hours to flee to the interior of Poland. There they again lived illegally with distant relatives and waited for British or American visas, whichever would come first. In April 1939, my father was one of about 40 German or Austrian dentists permitted to enter Britain, which my parents reached by boat from Poland. They lived in London for some months, but there was pressure from the refugee organizations for the refugees to disperse to other parts of the country. My parents chose to move to Edinburgh where I rejoined them in August 1939, just before the outbreak of war. I do not know if I realized during our separation that I might never see them again. I imagine my parents must have had such thoughts, but I do not know for sure, for the events I am writing about here, or even our previous lives in Vienna, were never discussed later.

In retrospect, I see the decision to leave Austria as a huge gamble. Had my parents not been in a town annexed by Poland before the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, had the Nazis invaded Poland six months earlier, or had Polish policemen not acted contrary to their duty on two occasions, their fates and mine would have ended very differently. Our survival was a mixture of skillful and decisive action, and extraordinary good luck. My father urged his brother to give up his clothing store and to leave for the west. I do not think he tried to do so, but, even if he did, it is highly unlikely that any country would have admitted my uncle, his wife and young son in time. They were killed in the holocaust, a fate that seems particularly poignant as my father's eldest brother fell fighting for Austro-Hungary in World War I.

There was a second disruption of my parents' lives. In May 1940 Germany invaded the Low Countries and France, and a rumor swept Britain that their rapid progress was due to the help of German spies disguised as refugees. My father, who had just managed to complete his examinations for dental surgery which he required to exercise his profession again, was interned like all other German or Austrian refugee men living in Edinburgh, a town considered sensitive in view of its location on the East coast. All had previously been classified by a British tribunal as "friendly enemy aliens". My mother was not interned but had to leave Edinburgh and went to live with three or four other refugee women in one room in Glasgow, while I (being under 16) could stay in Edinburgh and attend one of the best schools there, living with a single Scottish lady of independent means (who later took in several Austrian and Hungarian refugee boys who had reached Scotland without their parents). Sometimes I think this may have been the worst part of my parents' lives as they were forcibly separated. While my father was interned on the Isle of Man, some refugees were transported to Canada, and one such ship was sunk by a German U-Boat. It was several weeks before my mother heard that my father was safe. I do not think that such thoughts occurred to me at the time, then aged 13. I was focused on doing well at my academically oriented school (George Watson’s) and I am still grateful for the education I received.

My father was released from internment in August 1940 largely through the efforts of the Church and some members of Parliament. He was among the first; dentists were needed since many had been conscripted to serve in the armed forces. He established a practice in Edinburgh and thus ended a period when we had been supported by charity, living in two rooms in some landlady's flat. My mother did not attempt to resume her professional life; I do not know why. During the next five years we shared the experience of the British people at war, a remarkable people whom the world owes gratitude for their decision in September 1939 to fight Hitler. For a teenager, this was an exciting time; though I was an avid reader of newspapers, I did not realize the full horror of it until the war was over.

I have already mentioned that the past was never discussed in my family in subsequent years. As a postscript I'd like to give an explanation. In my opinion, the reason is not at all that thinking about the past was unbearably painful, for I was aware that up to the German annexation of Austria we had led a privileged life compared with the great majority of mankind, whatever the difficulties that I may have been unaware of as a child. Rather, there was a tremendous need for assimilation and adaptation to our new lives in Scotland, particularly for me as a teenager. Attachment to a dead past is a burden when coping with the difficulty of rebuilding your life in a new country; for many years our eyes were firmly fixed on the present and future. I used to remark "I was born in Edinburgh at the age of 12", a joke with serious content. Until I reached my late sixties, I claimed that I had no recollection whatsoever of the first eleven years of my life - and believed it; my prenatal existence was hard to admit and remains shadowy in spite of a conscious effort to recapture it.

hs 23 Dec 2000 (24 Nov 2001)

To see my picture at Warsaw Airport in November 1938 click on <http://www.math.wisc.edu/~hans/scan0002.jpg> . The sleeve is my father's.

To see my father's picture in internment in 1940 click on

<http://www.math.wisc.edu/~hans/internment.html> .

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Added 16 March 2006

About two years ago I received a file of letters mostly written to or by Jacoba {"Bobby"} Coster-Lucas who was a member of the Dutch Comite voor Hulp aan Buitenlandsche Kinderen (Committee to help foreign children). Many of these are from my mother written in Karwina (see my story above). The aim was to get me an entry permit to the Netherlands where I would then join the Quaker School in Eerde. . I here present some excerpts; the translations from German are mine.

My mother's first letter was written on 10 September 1938 and it shows that she had already been in contact with the Quaker School. I flew from Warsaw to Amsterdam possibly on 17 November 1938 on a travel document issued by the Dutch Consul in Warsaw. I entered Britain on 11 August 1939 on this document.

24. Oct (1938)

Karwina, Poland

Dear Mrs. Coster, please don't be angry that I ask you to speed up the matter. Our situation here is so uncertain that I hardly know whether an acceptance that occurs only after a few weeks would still find us here. We are here completely dependent on our relatives who themselves do not know how their situation will develop in the next few weeks. That is why we would be so glad to know that our child has reached safety.

Should this matter be delayed for some time despite your kind efforts then it would help us greatly if you knew of a Dutch family in Poland (in Warsaw or elsewhere) who would be ready to keep Hansl until his departure.

29. October (1938)

We received an order to leave this country within 48 hours. This order was then changed; we may stay until November 9. It would be our great good fortune if the matter of Hansl were settled by then. .... We are infinitely grateful to you for your efforts and I wish I could prove this to you some day.

9. November (1938)

First of all my heartfelt thanks. I can hardly express in words how happy and grateful we are that Hansl has been granted an entry permit ... [This letter then explains why I got held up in Warsaw.] ... Hansl was intensely looking forward to his getting out of here and it must have been a big disappointment to him ...

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Short biographies:

HUGO SCHNEIDER, born 1897, Karwin (Karvina), now Czech Republic; moved to Vienna to attend the Gymnasium; medical degree with dental specialty, 1922; Dentist. Emigrated 1938, illegal residence in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Admitted to Britain as a dentist on condition that he takes the final dental examinations, 1939; moved to Edinburgh, Scotland. Interned in Britain 1940. Re-established himself as dentist 1940. Died 1968, Edinburgh.

ISABELLA SCHNEIDER, nee SAPHIR, born Vienna 1897, married Hugo Schneider 1922, medical degree with dental specialty, 1922. School dentist in Vienna. Emigrated 1938. Died Edinburgh, Scotland, 1968.

HANS SCHNEIDER, born 1927, Vienna; emigrated 1938 to Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Netherlands; moved to Edinburgh. Scotland, 1939; Married MIRIAM WIECK in 1948, M.A. (1948) and Ph.D. (1952) in Mathematics; (Assistant) Lecturer, Queen's University, Belfast, 1952 - 1959; (Assistant, Associate, Full,

Emeritus) Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1959 - .

MIRIAM SCHNEIDER, nee WIECK, born 1925, Koenigsberg, Germany; emigrated to Scotland 1939 on a Kindertransport; married Hans Schneider (1948); moved to Belfast, N. Ireland, 1952; to Madison, Wisconsin, USA, 1959; violinist, member of various orchestras and violin teacher. Children: Barbara Anne (1948), Peter John (1950), Michael Hugo (1952).

hs 20 Dec 2000

CODA

(added Julne 2014)

I am writing this coda as I am sitting on the porch of our beautiful home as my life is ending for I have terminal cancer. I’ve had a good life with a loving wife of 66 years and three children we can be proud of. Thinking of the turbulent years described above, I strongly reject the term “holocaust survivor” as applied to me. It’s an insult to those millions who were murdered and to the millions who died fighting Hitler’s tyranny. It is a word properly applied to a person who suffered deportation and the horrors of the camps and yet survived. Call me a person who escaped the holocaust if you wish. The same applies to my wife Miriam who was born in Koenigsberg and left Germany on a Kinderstransport in July 1939.

Finally, my deepest regret is that I failed to tell my parents how much I owe them.