

FROM BEYOND THE CRADLE
MY FIRST THIRTY YEARS

by Mat Schwitzer



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This online edition with foreword and new appendices

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FOREWORD

Like all such works, my father's memoirs suffer from an overwhelming number of issues, such that for many years I found them almost impossible to grapple with. His unpublished book - one of four personal copies he made for his children - is hard enough to read, let alone dare edit.

There's the utter sadness of his personal loss that blocks progress, despite a desire fuelled by years of starvation of the details of his story. For my childhood questions typically got one sentence responses "they died in the war", followed by such a change in tone (or subject) that you knew you would learn nothing more that day. I knew he had Jewish origins, but as he had been brought up a Catholic he brought no Jewish traditions into our family, so I gained none of the awareness of Jewish issues that other boys of my age would have picked up, despite having many Jewish friends in my secondary school.

It must be understood that memoirs fulfil a psychological need for the writer: after years of protecting us from the tragedy of his family history (and to a lesser extent the fate of his homeland), the story had to be told. This need evidently hit my father as he approached 70, completing his memoirs a month after his seventieth birthday.

Then there is a whole class of "technical" problems facing a writer of memoirs. Our memory of events four to five decades ago becomes decidedly selective - I know that myself now - protecting us from dwelling on unpleasant happenings. So my father writes that he recalls nothing of his final month studying in Prague at the end of 1938, undoubtedly a period of highest drama, other than knowing there was utter despondency in the air.

Aide memoirs

But he had a collection of documents to assist his writing: some 60 items of wartime correspondence, those to his mother given to him "in a bundle" by his brother-in-law Pali, his family's only survivor of the camps, when he met up with him in Bratislava in 1946 (see Chapter 30). These include Red Cross messages (limited to 25 words, read & censored, all 24 million of them routed via Geneva, they took months to arrive - do think about that if you like complaining about email), long letters from his mother forwarded via contacts in neutral Lisbon (who were only there temporarily awaiting boats to North and South America), and notes (104 & 105) from his aunt to his mother rounded up in a ghetto (Gyöngyös) before being deported to Auschwitz.

We do not know how many letters and messages did not get through, though Alice wrote she feared many didn't. But without that "bundle" we wouldn't now have many of the messages from his mother, for these Red Cross Messages had a reply facility on the reverse to return them to sender, so in some cases Alice's messages had ended up back in Budapest with my father's reply on the back.

He also had his visitors book (Appendix F), which moved with him from digs to digs in Prague and continued in London, and his passport, stamped on almost every border, as they were in those days.

Some family photos were given to my father by Micka Szegö, grandfather Szilard's carer in old age, whom he met on an early post-1989 visit. The 1921 family photos (pages 79 & 80) came from his father's wallet, appearing "years after" the war, handed to cousin Schnuki in Nitra by someone who probably witnessed his death (as recounted in Chapter 10).

Seeing the visitors book and all the items of wartime correspondence for the first time after my father's passing in 2014, I see now that all these artefacts were crucial in refreshing his memory when he wrote *My First Thirty Years*.

My father only actually included a small number of these items in his memoirs, in part because of the not-so-tiny task of translating them carefully from three languages. Today, with the assistance of family members - in particular a big thank you to Richard, Ilona, Zsofi, Hendrickje and Katrin - we have made good progress, and the results are now available in Appendix E. Where possible we provide alternating original and translated paragraphs, allowing anyone with some ability in the original language to flip between them. With their varied authorship, I believe being able now to read the original correspondence adds a great deal to my father's narrative, offering a level of detail, intimacy and vibrancy to what would otherwise be a somewhat one-sided story.

No drama please

Next among the difficulties is my father's need to downplay the drama at every point. This was, I believe, his coping mechanism. So he writes "Return to England", when Herbert Lom's obituary writer wrote "Escape" (they travelled in the same train compartment; Lom's girlfriend was refused entry into Britain and later died in a camp), and "we travelled via Germany and I felt uneasy until we reached Oldenzaal in Holland... perhaps German officials thought we were Nazis... since we spoke perfect German, they were certainly very polite" for what was probably the most terrifying journey of his life.

So don't expect his narrative to be framed as good fortune or bad luck, you will find neither. For had he dwelt too long on the tragic events that shaped his life, he could never have become a balanced individual, devoid of bitterness, who went on to achieve higher things. He did, in fact, what Rudyard Kipling urges us to do from so many bedroom walls: having met with Triumph and Disaster (more of the latter at that point), he treated those two impostors just the same.

At every turn his family's story is a rollercoaster: my grandmother tried to sit out the war in Budapest, avoiding the May-July 1944 deportation of 300,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz (perhaps in part because she spoke fluent Hungarian and was as assimilated as you could be), but then lived through bombing mid-1944 (I read now that these early air raids on Budapest's essential infrastructure were American and British planes flying from southern Italy). They then travelled back to Slovakia (she legally, her partner illegally) before the Russians entered Hungary, thereby escaping the devastating siege of Budapest over the winter of 1944/1945. My father would later discover an uncle (Béla Szemző) lived

through this hell, getting papers through contacts for him and his son to be released from forced Jewish labour gangs, sitting it out - alongside German officers - in the Hotel Gellert when his house was requisitioned, and hiding in a friend's basement during the worst of the Soviet bombardment. Back in her home town (Hlohovec) in Slovakia, my grandmother and aunt went into hiding, only to be discovered and deported on 2nd December 1944, and gassed just a month before Ravensbruck was liberated. Also in Ravensbruck with Alice and Anni was a Bratislava schoolfriend, Zsuzsi Geröfi, who survived, and so when my father met up with her in Bratislava in 1946 he heard first hand of their few months in the concentration camp (see Chapters 29 & 30).

But my father recounts this and so many other stories in a matter-of-fact style, without undue drama, analysis, or speculation. The drama and emotion we must perceive ourselves from the facts.

Events, dear boy

Then there is the problem of context. His story would be incomprehensible without understanding the fast-moving historical and political events which so greatly shaped his first thirty years, spanning as they did the end of an empire, the birth of a nation, the collapse of an old order and rise of Nazism, and the emergence of an iron curtain. (Here I must insert my father's anecdote that in the first three years of his life he had lived in three countries without leaving his front door.)

His schooling was entirely in German, but by 1935 the language of instruction has become political, and so (as explained in Chapters 17 & 19) he chose a university education in Czech. To address the need for context, my father has included sections on history and politics - which probably set him on a path towards publishing *SLOVAKIA The Path to Nationhood* in 2002.

But the historical sections feel like interludes, there to afford the author a brief respite before having to resume the tough narrative of personal tragedy. And sometimes the politics become a downright obstruction, we just want simple chronologies and lists, where he, his family and friends were, what they did, and where they ended up.

Pre-Internet

Then it must also be remembered that *My First Thirty Years* was written before the internet dawn, so he couldn't just pull up a map (and streetview) of a central-European village like we can now, he couldn't fact-check the sequence of political events without laboriously thumbing through books or visiting a library, and he couldn't become a wiki-expert on the First Vienna Award in seconds. In Chapter 13 my father refers to his father's land in *jutars*, but does not provide a conversion to something more familiar. Today it only needs google to tell us that a Slovak *jutar* is the same as a German *joch* which is 1.422 acres.

This difficulty may be underestimated by some readers. But the effort required to connect with other known topics was so great - and would have been so useful in so many areas - that it changed the character of works like this. It largely explains why my father writes so very much from

the viewpoint of where and who he was, living through these eventful times, without necessarily knowing what was happening elsewhere at the same time, or how these events were viewed by others. And as I will come to later, this gives his memoirs a certain purity of viewpoint.

How to make the facts findable and the story readable

Finally there is a problem of structure. How to present in one work a chronology of thirty years, how to describe the family and friends we could never know, how to balance (as alluded to above) the historical and political context with the personal narrative. 'Memoirs' being plural already gives a hint that the genre is a licence to ramble, and my father's are no exception.

Word-processors today make it easy to review, revise and reorganise text. Instead this was a traditional production where changes were annotated by hand and could only be incorporated by re-typing the entire chapter.

His memoirs cry out for numbered paragraph headings, to give richer structure and avoid overloading the chapter titles. This would allow a useful "two-level" contents to help find things. The chapters on his Mother and Father would become sub-sections of the preceding chapters; similar amalgamations of other chapters would also help make the work more manageable.

His story in his words

Despite these difficulties, we should recognise what he has left us. Here is a fascinating first-hand account of life in Central Europe between the wars, growing up in a melting pot of Germanic, Hungarian, Slavic and Jewish traditions with all the vibrancy of multiculturalism at its best. His world was multilingual, with German school, Hungarian with the older generation, Czech university, and learning Slovak from the family cook. He breathed the idealism of a newly formed state and thought with the egalitarian instincts of youth.

Whilst some of the historical events are well known, this is an incredibly personal account from someone who lived through them. His Anschluss was not learned from a book, from Bratislava he could hear German propaganda blaring from loudspeakers across the Danube. He doesn't always write clearly what happened to different people because, in the chaos of those times, he did not know himself (or in a few cases only discovered decades later). We should recognise that some of the difficulties in reading his memoirs are actually ours, not his. His memoirs are written "in one go", so are relatively "pure" as a personal record, without extensive re-alignment to currently accepted historical interpretations. His facts are generally reliable, coming as many do from contemporary sources. He does not indulge unduly in speculation (or at least makes clear when he does). His writing suffers more from issues of viewpoint than from historical accuracy, and that to some extent is our problem, not his.

So it is notable that in a 1985 letter (049) responding to sight of an early draft, his surviving sister Jean expressed very different opinions

on a number of aspects of their upbringing; this, I believe, reinforces the very personal nature of these memoirs.

A thousand strands

Like the Danubian rivulets he describes in Chapter 1, his is a story with a thousand braids. You can read about the character of family and relatives (more below), of their fate in the holocaust, sense the severity of the difficulties faced by farmers in the 1930s, of his wonderfully broad education and upbringing, his travels and pursuits, his rapid adaptation into Britishness, his depiction of rural life in Slovakia and later in Hampshire, of living through the Blitz (heavily downplayed, despite his lodgings in 18 Gordon Street taking a direct hit soon after he moved out), and of his international circle of friends in London.

Within the vivid account of his school days (Chapter 13) lies a model for education policy in a multicultural society, with the Czechoslovak state agreeing to provide education for different ethnic groups. My father was very aware of the cost-conscious solution - to timetable equally both his German school and the Hungarian school in the same building - which reads almost comically at times, especially the "wanderklasse" - but where else has such a simple solution been adopted and successful?

As a twenty-something year old continental, many things in Britain struck my father as strange, but he already understood many of the historical and cultural reasons for what he experienced socially. After stating the ambitions and aspirations he had had as a youth, Chapter 28 provides an insightful commentary on what British society looked like to a foreigner and how he managed his own transformation, whilst also offering much about the pre-war Czechoslovak society with which he compares life in England.

Then there's the political angle: how my father, his friends and family reacted to the rise of Nazism. Chapter 14 gives a first-hand account of "racial awakenings", with the cultural richness of dance classes available for Germans, Hungarians and Slovaks, but then his personal experience of being told he was "gate-crashing" German dance classes. The first 2 and last 2.5 pages of Chapter 17 are a fascinating personal account encapsulating how political viewpoints hardened, writing that by 1935 the difference in outlook with the ethnic Germans had become an "unbridgeable abyss". Emigration became part of everyone's mindset, including his family's; for younger people the concept was easy, being comfortable could be fatal. He describes (back in Chapter 14) how his family walked out of New Year's Eve entertainment (1935/1936) in an Austrian mountain village (Murau in Styria) when they found themselves in the midst of "jubilant cheering" at the appearance of a large swastika. These incidents, a portent of the war to come, serve as a cautionary tale for those who won't embrace multiculturalism, don't appreciate 75 years of postwar peace in Western Europe, and choose not to recognise divisive policies for what they are.

Hidden within his story are a myriad of other tales waiting to be told, like that of his wartime employer Bamag (Chapters 25 & 26), a German

company whose London office was taken over by the Alien Property Administration and run by Jewish escapees who had brought out crucial designs for industrial plants from Germany in the nick of time, and went on to build plants around Britain for the Nitric Acid production needed for armaments. He would later regret those armaments were used on civilians in Dresden and other cities of the German heartland, and his memoirs downplay his role as "one of 20 draughtsmen", complaining all designs had to be converted from metric to imperial, but undoubtedly (and here I must indulge in some speculation) his fluent German and Industrial Chemistry studies in Prague must have made him particularly useful to his employer.

More was to come

Having written these memoirs under the gentle pressure of advancing years, my father went on to live a further 27 years, during which time a great deal happened in Slovakia. In particular, the 1989 Velvet Revolution, just two years after completing this book, opened up the country, and my father was quick to take advantage of these changes, making several trips to Slovakia and Hungary, accompanied by different members of his family. His last trip, accompanied by myself and my daughter, was in 2011 at the age of 94, when we caught up with relatives in Nitra, Bratislava, Madunice and Budapest. These visits energised him greatly, he loved the chance to speak Slovak again, old friendships and family relations were reinvigorated, and new ones established. He was able to visit for the first time, since attending his funeral as a 20 year old, the mausoleum of grandfather Simon Schwitzer in Teplic̣ky - in fact, this became pretty much a fixed point of pilgrimage on every trip. He visited the houses of his family, in Bratislava, Nitra and Veľký Lapas, found the Budapest apartment his mother lived in during the war, and paid for a gravestone for grandfather Simon Szilard who had been buried hurriedly (and probably secretly) in December 1944 in the Jewish cemetery in Hlohovec, the exact grave location having been discovered only recently by relatives. On one trip to Madunice, admiring the well-kept gardens in the village street, he recognised two concrete sheep which had adorned the gate posts of his father's farm. Soon after another trip, he received a letter informing him he had a half-brother he never knew existed, who had been brought up in Madunice. Whilst he was too late to meet him, there was a whole new branch of the family he was able to get to know, and as a result of new contacts, in 2013, on the occasion of Madunice's 900th anniversary celebrations, the mayor awarded him the freedom of the village. However, for various reasons, my father never revised his memoirs, so these developments have not been incorporated into them. This book remains therefore a 1987 record of what he knew at that time.

Bill'll fix it??

I have considered taking on myself the task of addressing the various issues set out above, and what would need to be done for such an edit. There is no doubt in my mind that the task would be immense - probably as big a job as the original memoirs - for once you get into the text, cross-reference the detail, review the structure, and apply updates for

developments since 1987, I fear you would end up rewriting it. I've mentioned above the need for numbered sub-section headings. Not all the articles and various exhibits in the original memoirs will be of wider interest, and could probably be reduced. The number of pictures could probably be reduced too, selecting those of highest quality so as to improve the average quality. In addition, a number of items of the Wartime Correspondence archive will be of interest. But to balance against those improvements, that "purity" which is part of the appeal, might be compromised. I will be interested to hear others' views on what they see as possible and worthwhile for a wider audience.

For the time being, therefore, I am limiting my plans to (i) making substantial parts of the memoirs available online so as to be able to share with others, (ii) this updated contents and foreword, and (iii) additional appendices including a new family tree (Appendix B), a timeline of my father's whereabouts (Appendix C), a cross-reference of the individuals mentioned in the text with their fate in WW2 (Appendix D), and the Wartime Correspondence (Appendix E). These additions avoid having to intervene in the text itself. I have abbreviated slightly the chapter headings for the contents list above, but the original chapter headings are still there with the body of the text. Further condensation of chapter titles would be possible if sub-sections were added.

His family

As far as the depiction of his ancestors is concerned, one of the most striking things is how different the backgrounds of his four grandparents were.

The **Kufflers** were wealthy industrialists with connections to Vienna, my father describing them as in the textile dyeing business (blaufärberei) using indigo dyes, his only ancestors not originally farmers. Their imposing tombs at Beckov and large box funeral announcements in the Viennese press (find them on anno.onb.ac.at) give an impression of their status.

The **Schwitzers** (see Chapter 6) were farmers and grain dealers "with round faces", always associated with the land, and fairly successful, or at least until the 1930s; Simon Schwitzer is named as a large and benevolent landowner in a history of Nitra, and a 1928 postcard of the procession and celebrations as the large bell with his name on it is carried through Nitra by a heavy wagon pulled by oxen for installation in the Piarist Church gives an image of his standing, and my father writes that Stefan Schwitzer was perhaps the largest farmer in southern Slovakia.

About the **Szilards** my father knew very little, writing only that Grandfather Szilard was a lawyer and probably the first of his family with higher education, but that his career was limited by being an unfortunate generation trained in Hungarian law when everything had changed in the new Czechoslovakia; his name appears many times in legal case reports in the Austrian press (find them on anno.onb.ac.at), but I have not yet had time to investigate further.

Finally the **Hajos** branch were the most intellectual and internationally minded (see Chapter 4), with a Photographer, Translator, Lawyer, Judge,

Professor of Psychology and a Mathematician in the family (the last two being of sufficient note for inclusion in Wikipedia), one emigrating (in the early 20th century) to Greece then America and another marrying a granddaughter of Scottish engineer Adam Clark of Chain Bridge fame.

Both grandfathers took frequent foreign holidays, some of which which my father has written about. You can now see the exact dates of (some of) their spa stays, popular in the early years of the 20th century for those who could afford them: Simon Szilard is named in the *Curliste Karlsbad* in 1901, 1908, 1910 & 1911, and Simon Schwitzer is in the *Ischler Bade-Liste* for 1911. These publications, for respectively now Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic and Bad Ischl in the Austrian lake district east of Salzburg, are available at anno.onb.ac.at, were produced to socialise guest names and where they were staying in these spa towns.

With these backgrounds my father and his family grew up travelling widely, both nearby and further afield. Indeed whilst he describes (Chapter 1) his roots as a relatively small triangle in southern Slovakia, his family's story moved in a much larger area of Bratislava, Nitra, Prague, Vienna, Košice and Budapest, and numerous locations inbetween.

Knowing them

Many of us never really get to know our parents or their stories. For various reasons we never get round to asking them the questions we have been framing all our life - and then it is too late. I got to know my father better in the last five years of his life, my father in his nineties, me in my fifties. Often on a Sunday afternoon there would be just the two of us in his front room, and we could chat at ease. Perhaps the relative age difference had narrowed sufficiently that the conversation was more that of friends than father and son. He would always be interested to hear news of my family, or if I had just returned from a trip abroad what I'd been up to. Conversation would meander between his time on the board of a multinational to the horses and carriages on his father's farm. Sometimes his mobility issues meant he had a bad day and conversation would have to focus on more immediate problems, but he was blessed with a mind that was still razor sharp, nonagenarian or not. And so I learned more of his personal role in expanding a small British chemicals business into a global supplier. I might ask the fate of some of his colleagues that had been part of his early career, and here a protective mechanism would kick in - he would not dwell on their passing - and so I understood better the pain that is written into these memoirs. There was an amazing story about lunch in rural France with salesmen from competitor big name chemical firms each with their client list, but that one is best not told. Or he would remark that today was his mother's birthday, and would follow up with more about her, and what she treasured in her home.

So with those conversations and these memoirs, I won't be someone who suddenly realises I didn't know my father. Whilst much was not put into this book, if more had been included, it would not have been readable.

But I for one am immensely grateful to my father for taking the time to write what he has.

William Schwitzer, March 2021