

How Mayer came to Kingston

I was eleven years old on that 14th March 1939 evening when the German army arrived in Ostrava, in their open top lorries and half-track vehicles towing enormous canons.

Not much happened at first, except that by the next morning all road traffic had changed over to the right hand side. There were no cheering crowds, as had been seen in Austria a year earlier, neither were there any panics in the streets. Everyone expected 'bad times' ahead – especially the Jews and political opponents. The notorious Nuremberg Laws were not applied in the Protectorate initially. The Holocaust, and the Final Solution, had not at that time been formulated so most Jewish families settled down, *keeping their heads down* and expecting bad times.

In any case, there were not many places abroad willing to take them. Britain, for example, expected a £50 down payment for anyone wanting to come here. Those who did have contacts or friends abroad got out as quickly as possible.

There were, however, others – socialists, communists and opponents of the German National Socialists – who knew that the concentration camps had been set up largely for them. For those the immediate outlook was grim and many of those went into hiding immediately.

One of these was my father, Alfred, who apart from being Jewish, had been active in the German (speaking) Social Democratic Party and, as such, was in great danger. He, therefore, immediately *disappeared* to Prague from where he could review the situation. When nothing dramatic happened in the first couple of weeks he returned home to Ostrava to plan his escape.

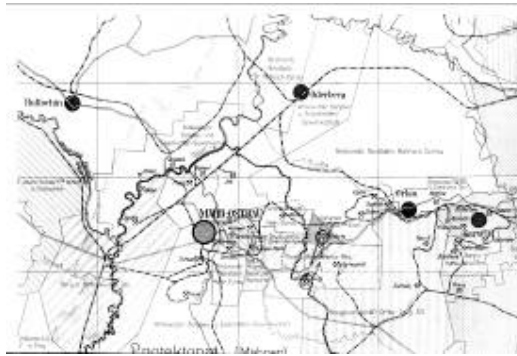


If we go back to look at the map of Czechoslovakia after the notorious Munich Agreement, we find that the Poles, by occupying some parts of the Republic to which they felt they were entitled, actually made escape from Ostrava rather easier than might otherwise have been the case.

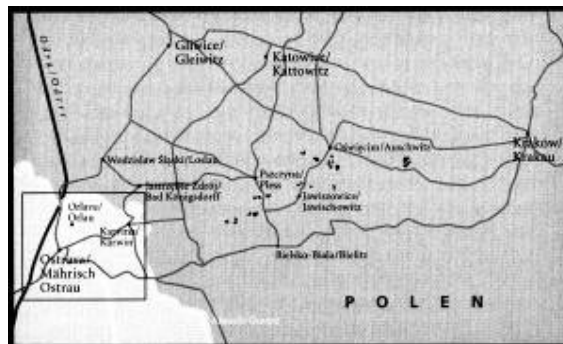
My father, therefore, joined a group to be guided across the nearby Polish border at night. At first everything went as planned, as they got past the German border guards, but when the Polish guards discovered them, they were turned back. This now became a dangerous situation, as they now had to get past the Germans, who would not have looked kindly on them. My father returned home in the early hours of the morning = shattered by the experience.

He tried again a few days later but soon turned back on his own, as he realised they taking the same route again.

It was now April 1939, and things were bound to change for the worse before very long. Fortunately Alfred was now found a much more promising escape route – once again thanks to the Polish occupation of Ostrava neighbourhood, and specifically the coal mines.



This somewhat confusing map shows the distribution of coalmines in the area, a number of which were now crossing the Polish borders – underground. This organised escape route consisted of picking up escapees by car at their home and taking them to a mine on the Czech side – possibly the *Ludwig* mine. There they were transported by underground train to the Polish side, where another car waited to take them to inland Poland, away from unhelpful border guards. And that is how he finally got out and finished up with some relatives at Biala-Bielsko.



He now sent a message to my mother telling her to join him there by crossing the border in broad daylight to avert suspicion. And so, on this pleasant April afternoon, my mother and I said good-bye, or rather *au revoir*, to all our relatives – grandmothers, aunts, uncles, cousins etc and left, little knowing that we would never see any of them again.

I had already informed my teacher not to expect me at school as we were about to go away for *an extended holiday*. “A very good idea!” he replied.

We took the Karviná tram, which now only went part way, to the border. From there we headed for the footpath through the woods towards the Polish border.

Once again, the German guards were not interested in anyone leaving, but a couple of 100 metres on, the Pole had different ideas. My mother had briefed me to keep out of the way while she tried to persuade the guard that we had been visiting relatives in Ostrava and were just returning to our home – on the Polish side. He, however, was not inclined to accept her story so, after nearly an hour, and fed up ‘playing’ on my own, I joined them to find out what was going on. Seeing me, the guard enquired whether I was her son, and in effect said ‘bugger off and don’t try to do this again’.

Very much relieved, my mother grabbed me by her hand and ran down the road – now in Poland – to a small inn where she asked for shelter and help. There we were ushered into a

back room, to await the arrival of a delivery van, which would take us inland, to be reunited with my father in Biala-Bielsko.

From there, we made our way to Kraków, where Alfred's party was foregathering their refugees before transporting them on to Britain, Sweden, or Canada where they had organised their reception.

Thus, on 20th June 1939 we arrived in England and finished up in a splendid refugee hostel, Montrose College, in Margate.

The Vogels at
Montrose College
Margate



When war broke out, my father joined the Czech Army, went over to France in May 1940, in time to join the retreat (largely on foot) to Marseilles, from where he was lucky to get back to Liverpool in late July.

May 1940
On the way to the front



July 1970
Retreat from Marseilles
To Liverpool



Meanwhile, the British forces had managed to retreat via Dunkirk, at which time the south coast area was declared a Protected Area and all, except established residents had to leave.

One of my mother's brothers and his wife and 5-year-old daughter had by this time been helped by the Quakers into their hostel in Marple, Cheshire. My mother and I therefore headed up North, where, to cut a long story short, I went to school in Stockport, learned to speak English and grew up to become a Mancunian.

My desire to fight for the liberation of my country led me to interest in the RAF and all things aeronautical. Fortunately the war finished before I could join up and so I decided to pursue a career in aeronautical engineering.

And that is how in 1966 I finished up at BAC in Weybridge, which after numerous re-organisations became the Weybridge-Kingston Division of British Aerospace. Following the closure of the Weybridge site in 1986 I finished up as Chief Engineer Future Projects and Research, what was by then the BAE Military Aircraft Division. At the same time, John Fozzard, who had been one of the Chief Designers of the Harrier jump-jet, moved to Washington DC and I was asked to take his place at Kingston Technical College, later to become Kingston University, as Visiting Professor in Aerospace Engineering, instilling practical experience into their Group Design Project activities.

I finally retired from BAE at the end of 1988 – some 40 years in the industry, but continued my association with Kingston University until the early 2000s.

1219 words = 8¼ minutes