

Transcript

Hilary Smith talks to Frank Steiner part 2

Duration: 0:29:30

START AUDIO

Presenter: The next episode of Deddington Discussions; Hilary Smith talks to Frank Steiner.

Hilary Smith: [I bet if we move that on 0:00:14].

Frank Steiner: Back in 1938, yes there was an attempt by [Shushanik 0:00:21] to call a referendum to insist on ordering [independence 0:00:29], which he would have won; there's no doubt of that. And that was too much for Hitler.

And the resistance was admittedly half hearted. But Dr. [Nicklas 0:00:56], the otherwise fairly traditional, rather powerless president, was told that the German air force, the Luftwaffe was prepared to bomb Vienna to smithereens if there was any attempt at resistance. And I dare say they would have done it.

What we didn't realise of course, was the German army was all against that and the Germans had attempted to push – as they did almost, later that year over the Munich agreement, the whole Nazi nightmare would have collapsed, but I mean there we are.

Hilary Smith: [?? 0:01:35]. So when everything then changed as a result of that, that is where pressure started to be put on citizens, to try to leave the city.

Frank Steiner: Well, the curious thing was Nazi oppression, totalitarianism and persecution of the Jews had been building up gently in Germany over five years. What happened in Germany over five years, happened in Austria in 24 hours. So much so that [?? 0:02:19] Jews in the course of 1938 went to Germany for holiday to escape the Nazi...

Hilary Smith: How ironic. So this bid for independence brought attention, basically, to the [?? 0:02:37] perceived threat as it was to the Nazi regime.

Frank Steiner: Yes.

Hilary Smith: So what happened with yourself and your family?

Frank Steiner: Well, to the three of us nothing much happened. My father was suspended from office and eventually retired – officially retired in July on pension.

Now the very curious thing was that throughout the Nazi period in Austria, state pensions were paid to Jews and non-Arians while all other pensions were stopped. And that was for many people a disaster, that all private pensions and private insurers were dishonoured from one day to another.

Vast number of suicides of elderly Jews in Vienna is put down at least partly a fact that suddenly a lot of retired and elderly people lost their pension entitlement and were completely penniless.

The odd thing is that as I say my father's pension was paid until he left Austria in February of 1940. My two great aunts – I mean my grandmother's two younger sisters, who had founded a girls school, which had eventually been taken over by the state so they became senior ranking civil servants in effect, their pensions were paid until they left Vienna.

But anybody who had – my grandmother who had two life insurance pension schemes, her two pensions stopped immediately. Fortunately she had means of her own. But since the majority of Viennese Jews were miserably poor...

Hilary Smith: [?? 0:04:45] dramatic tone.

Frank Steiner: Yes.

Hilary Smith: So you left at that point.

Frank Steiner: I left – my brother left Vienna in September '39.

Hilary Smith: How much older was he than you?

Frank Steiner: Not quite four years. To become a bar student at Gray's Inn. Now that has its funny side. Why should distinguished institutions like [?? 0:05:12] have left in this particular refugee as a student?

Because, before the war there were far fewer judges in England than there are now. And they had a different status. One of Her Majesty's – to be one of Her Majesty's judges was somebody.

And so when in my brother's application where you asked about parental background, he mentioned my father had been head of a division of one of the appeal courts. They thought he was something distinctly grander than he had been, because if you know your – in Switzerland where judges are elected isn't the same thing anyway, but if you know your France, the judges are not uncontroversial, beings floating above [?? 0:06:20] but they're part of the fray.

So my brother – and fortunately some relatives in America guaranteed his upkeep so he got a British visa. Student visa, and went to become a student.

Two things happened, as far as I was concerned. My school... When the Nazis came, all schools were instructed to exclude Jewish and non-Arian pupils, or at least to separate them out further and eventually to concentrate them in other schools.

The one school in greater Germany which didn't do that was the [?? 0:07:18] Schottengymnasium in Vienna because, with a straight face they told the educational authorities "We have no Jewish..."

Hilary Smith: This is the school that you were attending.

Frank Steiner: Yes. Now that was technically true. Because what had happened is that ten years earlier there'd been a major reform movement in the Benedictine order worldwide which effected Austrian Benedictine monasteries and made them much more – and one of the things monastic schools were told was ensure to accept only catholic pupils.

And of course those who were there weren't affected by this. And the last Jewish and protestant boys in our school left in the summer of I think either '36 or '37. So when the Nazis said "You've got to do that with your Jewish pupils," the Schotten said "Well we haven't got any." They knew perfectly well who the non-Arians were who were affected by this.

Hilary Smith: They went on the new rules, in fact.

Frank Steiner: Well, not strictly. Yes, they went on the [ecclesiastic 0:08:33] new rule, that's right. And to the eternal credit of everybody at the school – teachers, pupils and even the local Nazis who were existent in the school – fell in with this fiction and didn't ask.

Hilary Smith: That is extraordinary.

Frank Steiner: And that is part of what you might call in German, the [Schottengeist 0:08:57], the spirit of the [schotten].

As I've said in this article which I'm trying to find for you, having been at that school is not only a social mixture – the last emperor of

Austria, Charles I, and Dr. Alfred Adler - Victor Adler, the Jewish physician who founded the Socialist Party, were both old boys of the school.

And you can find old boys of the school in all the major political parties and also in all social settings. Most of the great aristocratic families sent their boys to that school as day boys; families [?? 0:09:57] there at the moment.

Hilary Smith: Still exists.

Frank Steiner: What?

Hilary Smith: The school.

Frank Steiner: Oh, ah. It's all because I couldn't find that thing which I was going to send you. The school was reorganised in 1807, more or less on its present basis, well hardly. [?? 0:10:20]. It has now gone over to a five day week, all horror, and it's got girls in the school.

Hilary Smith: Even more horror.

Frank Steiner: But it's still in the same premises, old fashioned as they are. It's run by the same abbey, which has been there since 1158. As I say, it has just celebrated its 200th anniversary, 2007.

Hilary Smith: So if you look back on it and try and encapsulate it, what was its legacy to you?

Frank Steiner: First of all as a monastic school which had such a reputation for progressive and liberal education, the Jewish and protestant families were anxious to send their boys there while they could. Also, this is rather like history, it produced the background of general education which has not really ever quite left me.

But which was very marked in the '30s because when I went to Belmont Abbey with less than perfect English, and not knowing the syllabus, I was put into the fifth form and by the end of the summer term I was ahead of the form. Not what I'd learned in those two terms, but from what I'd brought with me.

Hilary Smith: Now this is the school you went to in England.

Frank Steiner: Yes. Also run by Benedictine monks. But even so, now I've really had all that confirmed a few weeks ago, because I've resumed contact with a chap with whom I was at school between 1930 and ['38 0:12:17] who spent years as a consultant neurologist in Edinburgh where he now lives, aged 89.

And I was checking up on what had happened in the meantime. He'd served in the British Army and finished up as a major, losing an eye in Belgium. And he said "Oh, I was sent to a very scruffy school." I said "Where?" "St. Edmund's College in Wales." I said "I

thought that was a seminary for budding priests.” He said “Yes, but it also had a fairly inferior secondary school attached to it into which I was dumped. But I got my [London metric 0:13:03] easily thanks to what we’d learnt at the Schotten.”

Hilary Smith: There you are, yes. So it gave you a very good foundation for continuing education.

Frank Steiner: Yes. The events of March '38 in retrospect were even more horrible than I realised at the time. As I say, whatever had happened in Germany over five years gradually, happened in Vienna in 24 hours. People being arrested, taken to concentration camps, thrown out of their flats...

And then came – life was still liveable if you had means, and we were not devoid of means. But then came Kristallnacht, night of broken glass, when persecution began to be really very unpleasant. I didn't realise, living a rather sheltered life among on the whole non-Jewish friends, how many little synagogues there were in Vienna.

10% of Vienna's population was Jewish, and there were synagogues all over the residential districts, particularly in those where Jews were concentrated. I didn't know that. I only knew of the great stadttempel, which is still there. The historic, great synagogue.

And it's the only synagogue in Greater Germany which was not burnt down on that day because it's too far among other buildings and they were afraid that it would...

Hilary Smith: All of them.

Frank Steiner: Yes, all the synagogues in Germany and Austria and Bohemia and so on were burnt on that night – were torched.

Hilary Smith: And you were sort of 17 at the time?

Frank Steiner: I had just turned 16. And the problem was what to do with me. Because I couldn't have stayed on at school even if the school hadn't been forcibly closed by the Nazis anyway.

And then I was rescued, and I still don't know quite how I was shoehorned into it, by the Kindertransport, which may or may not be a thing you've heard about.

Hilary Smith: Yes. Who ran that boat?

Frank Steiner: It was run by an organisation I think called the Refugee Children's Movement, in which all the churches – I mean obviously Jewish organisations were very prominent given the numbers, but it was organised among nondenominational basis by the Quakers.

And as I said before, the fact that the British government was the only government in the whole world that did something about letting in some refugees without formality, was the Kindertransport, and

that was a very generous gesture which the Tory government of the time has not had the credit that it deserves.

And I think it may have had something to do with the fact that the home secretary of the day was a Quaker.

Hilary Smith: Yes, and that was who?

Frank Steiner: Sir Samuel Hoare, later Lord Templewood.

Hilary Smith: So as a result of that you were transported to...

Frank Steiner: Yes, I landed here on 10th April – no, I left Vienna on 10th December '38 and arrived at Harwich with a large number tag around my neck.

Hilary Smith: With all sorts of “what to do with this boy” type of messages.

Frank Steiner: No. Just numbers. I think I was number 386. I think. I can't really remember.

Hilary Smith: But you managed, I think, once you were in England, to complete your education.

Frank Steiner: Yes, thanks to the generosity of the Benedictine monks of Belmont Abbey who had founded the school relatively recently, with a young and dynamic headmaster, Father Christopher McNulty, who offered to in effect scholarship places to boarders [?? 0:18:07] community.

Hilary Smith: One of the things if I may I'd like to move on to is we've got your – you matriculated, but following that you suddenly found yourself interned – was it the Isle of Man?

Frank Steiner: It was, the Isle of Man.

Hilary Smith: I mean, that sounds the most awful experience, but I gather that it had some good sides as well.

Frank Steiner: Well it was reputed at one time. I think it was the Guardian who said that at one time it was the centre of European high intellect, because so many distinguished people were there. The idea of treating as enemy aliens, refugees from Hitler who had more reason to dislike-

Hilary Smith: Yes, exactly.

Frank Steiner: But there was a tradition, of course – there's a book called 'Island of Barbed Wire'. Because the Isle of Man, not surprisingly, had been used for internment camps for enemy aliens during the First

World War. And incredibly enough Bertram Sargeant, who under the title of Government Secretary, ran the Manx Administration, had been there Government Secretary of the First World War and was still there when he was-

Hilary Smith: Continuation of his...

Frank Steiner: Yes, it makes one smile because the Manx Administration in those days was the government secretary and the very small staff. Now they've got a fully fledged autonomous government with ministers and the chief minister.

Hilary Smith: Because they've been practicing for a long time.

Frank Steiner: Well I don't know about that.

Hilary Smith: But for yourself, Frank, when you think about that – was it a year you were..?

Frank Steiner: 15 months.

Hilary Smith: 15 months – you know exactly, 15 months.

Frank Steiner: 15 wasted months, let's face it.

Hilary Smith: Were they completely wasted? Was there anything-?

Frank Steiner: Well nothing that I learnt there has... I took Spanish lessons, alright. And a bit of that has remained. I took recorder lessons from the great musicologist of the recorder era, Dr. [Walter Bagman 0:20:16].

Hilary Smith: Did you?

Frank Steiner: And I passed grade 1 of the recorder fairly recently at [Banbury 0:20:23].

Hilary Smith: So this is a wonderful follow on to your internment experience.

Frank Steiner: With 50 years – 60 years in between.

Hilary Smith: Brilliant. [One pass 0:20:34].

Frank Steiner: They'd never seen a 76 year old...

Hilary Smith: When you were doing that, did it bring back memories of the Isle of Man, of you learning the recorder there? Struggling with the instrument?

Frank Steiner: Well, not really...I mean the memories are there anyway. And I went to the Isle of Man two years ago, because a splendid chap – who's English of course and non-Manx. Alan... It'll come back to me in a bit. He's the librarian at the Manx National Heritage – I quote it in Manx in a minute, something [?? 0:21:20] – [??].

There is now a thing called the Manx National Heritage, which is round at the Manx Museum in Douglas. And Alan Franklin's the librarian; he was a great collector of... And they've lost their records. They were anxious to retrieve the information and so they had to find fossils and survivors like me.

Hilary Smith: Oh I see. So you've contributed to their memoirs, as it were.

Frank Steiner: Oh, very much so. And then my nieces and nephews, I never realised what a hamster my brother was. When they went through their father's papers after his death, found that he had kept every letter which – he was released nine months before I was.

Hilary Smith: On the Isle of Man?

Frank Steiner: Yes.

Hilary Smith: Okay. So he was pretty experienced..?

Frank Steiner: No, the point was that he had kept every letter I wrote to him during those nine months.

Hilary Smith: Your letters.

Frank Steiner: And they're a complete collection which gives a fairly vivid illustration of life in the camps and who was who and so on. And I had great thanks from the Manx National Heritage for presenting this correspondence.

Hilary Smith: I bet. Have they published it? Or has it gone into a work of some sort – a collection of memoirs?

Frank Steiner: That, I don't know, but I think they've digitised it. And I do hope that the Bodleian has now digitised – they've got something like 15 volumes of my memoirs, handwritten, so far. Not memoirs, which I have never done, but I mean all together 25 volumes of diaries, handwritten, bound...

Hilary Smith: You've kept diaries all your life?

Frank Steiner: Well not all my life, only from, properly from between 1961 and '87.

Hilary Smith: Okay, so during, in a way, spanning your professional career.

Frank Steiner: Yes. And the terrible thing is that '63, which was a very important year in my life, because inside my employment with [?? 0:23:49] and Grant, I was steered onto what eventually became my main work there, and it's also when I met and married my wife. So it was an important year. And that year, '63, my diary is lost.

So I've now got – it's one of the things which is on my agenda is to reconstruct it. So I've asked the librarian of the reform – I don't know how relevant it is, I've been a member of the Reform Club in London for over 60 years. And the librarian, Simon Blundell, is something of a friend. He's given me a perpetual calendar for 1963 so that I can readjust what day of the week is what bit.

Hilary Smith: [?? 0:24:36] helps. Yes, okay. So just to look back on the Isle of Man experience...

Frank Steiner: A cultural melting pot at one time. Though of course as the nice people were released, it became less and less convivial. And was less-

Hilary Smith: [?? 0:24:56] people were assimilated back into the population.

Frank Steiner: Yes, and because – well if you want the details, it turned out a few weeks after the internment started that it had all been a mistake. But no government in wartime can afford to admit to egg on its face, so what they did was they cooked up a system of release for people in 13 categories of internees...

Hilary Smith: So they created a kind of bureaucratic system to hide what was originally a mistake.

Frank Steiner: Yes. And that included school boys, and students. But I'd fallen between the two stools. So I sat there for the next 15 months while my brother, who was a fulltime student, was released 9 months early.

Hilary Smith: You say 15 months with such feeling because it was extended beyond – because you were neither fish nor fowl really.

Frank Steiner: I was neither fish nor fowl. By which time the majority of the internees were genuine enemy aliens and not friends.

Hilary Smith: Oh yes, so the population there had changed also.

Frank Steiner: Yes, and of course among the people, the idea of releasing people depending on how useful they are to the war effort is inherently

illogical because you [shouldn't 0:26:15] release people if they're a danger.

There were all sorts of jokes about a Nazi in uniform walking down Piccadilly and somebody said to him "Why haven't you been arrested?" He said "Because I employ 13 natives."

Anyway, but among the people who were released – fairly quickly too, some of them – there were very distinguished people. The people who founded the Amadeus Quartet met in the Isle of Man. I don't know how many professors from Oxford and Cambridge went back to their teaching posts on release.

Among people interned was the future Right Honourable Sir William Kerr, who having been released from the Isle of Man went into the air force, then read for the bar and became a lord justice of the peace.

Hilary Smith: So it was a melting pot, as you say, of intellect and ability.

Frank Steiner: Claus Moser, who is now a peer, who was head of the government's statistical office, hence his KCB, went straight from the Isle of Man into the air force.

Hilary Smith: So it turned out to be like a sort of exclusive club, in a way.

Frank Steiner: It was what you might call a folk university.

Hilary Smith: A folk university, yes.

Frank Steiner: Quite a number of distinguished artists, quite a bit of work was published, produced there.

Hilary Smith: So these are all people who have made their name in some way before being arrested.

Frank Steiner: Or who made their name afterwards.

Hilary Smith: Oh, okay, yes.

Frank Steiner: I mean [Michael Kerr 0:27:59] was a student when he was interned; he then became a senior judge later. Claus Moser became Professor of Statistics at Oxford, then head of the government's statistical office, eventually Warden of Wadham, and a peer.

Hilary Smith: So does this mean that these people kept in touch with one another because of the shared internment?

Frank Steiner: I wonder. Certainly there was one woman who had been on the Kindertransport who 50 years later created sort of a reunion. And 10 years later still, when we were all older than we had a right to expect to live to, there was a further reunion. And out of that has

grown an organisation called The Kinder, which is now a section of the Association of Jewish Refugees.

Hilary Smith: So it's evolved.

Frank Steiner: It's evolved. I don't think there's been anything like a regimental reunion of the ex-internees.

Male 1: And we'll rejoin Hilary Smith talking to Frank Steiner in the next episode of Deddington Discussions.

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