

The Vogels' Escape from Ostrava

- Heinz Vogel -

In her *East Silesia* display at the Worthing Residential Weekend 8 – 10 June, Yvonne mentioned her late husband Fred Gren's connection with Karviná, Tony Bosworth touched on Ostrava in his *Bohemia and Moravia* display, and Richard Wheatley's *Heroes* highlighted Staff Captain P Řídký who originated from Ostrava and escaped to Poland from where he made his way to England to continue his fight to liberate Czechoslovakia. These three events, in their different ways, brought back memories of how I came to England with my parents just before the outbreak of WW II in 1939. When I mentioned this to Yvonne she suggested that I might like relate my story to the meeting. This, then, is a more considered version of the five-minute version I related at Worthing.

On that 14 March 1939 evening when the Germans arrived in Ostrava, I was eleven years old. I have no personal pictorial records of that event, only memories of the soldiers in their open-top lorries and half-track vehicles towing enormous cannons, and a postcard for my stamp collection from my auntie Bertl. Three years later my Aunt Bertl, together with her teenaged children, Edith and Paul, were murdered at Treblinka.



Commemorative postmark: *The Town of the Black Diamonds thanks the Führer – Day of Liberation.*

Message reads: *Best Greetings – Auntie Bertl 17 III 39.*

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 was there any panic in the streets. Everyone expected bad times ahead – especially the Jews and political opponents. The notorious Nuremberg Laws were not immediately applied in the Protectorate. 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 guarantee for anyone wanting to come here. Those who did have contacts or friends abroad got out as quickly as possible.

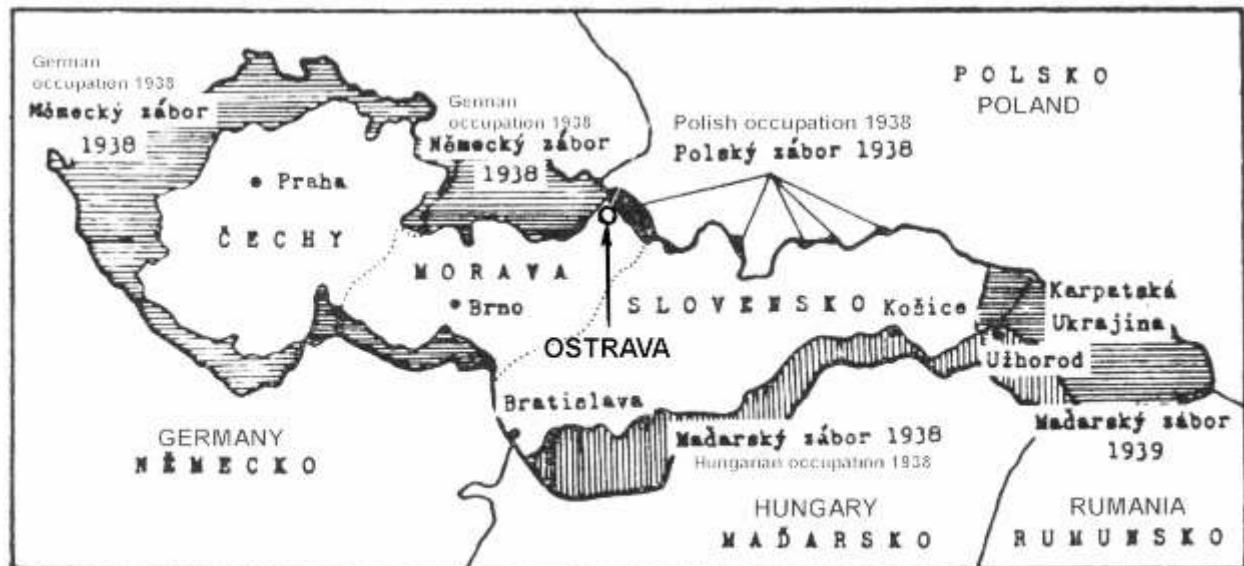
There were, however, others – socialists, communists and opponents of the German National Socialists – who knew that the concentration camps had been set up largely for them. For those the immediate outlook was grim and many of them went into hiding immediately.

One of these was my father, Alfred, who, apart from being Jewish, had been active in the German (speaking) Social Democratic Party (Deutsche Sozialdemokratische Arbeiter Partei) under the leadership of Wenzel Jaksch. As such, he 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.

Looking at the map of Czechoslovakia after the notorious Munich Agreement, one finds 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 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 then became a dangerous situation, as they now had to get past the



Territorial losses in the years 1938 - 1939
Obr. 2 Územní ztráty v letech 1938—1939

Germans on the way back, 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 were taking the same route again.

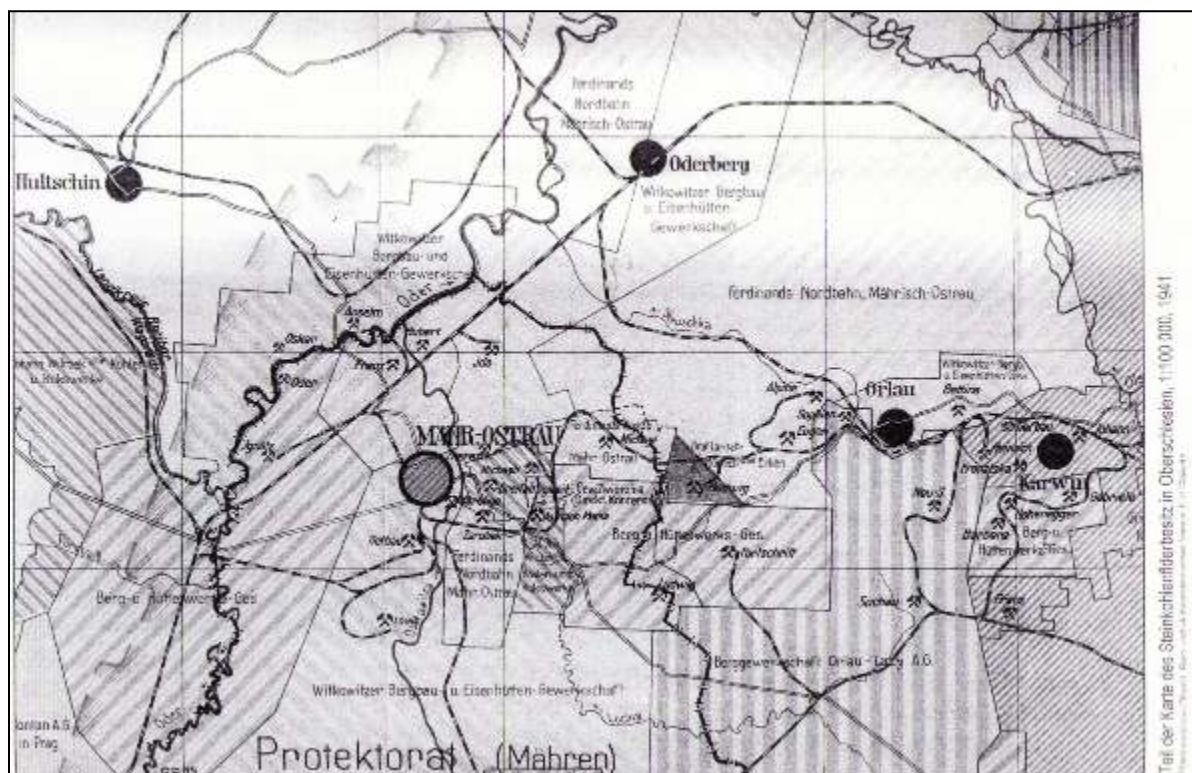


Map showing the 1939 borders between the Bohemia and Moravia Protectorate and Poland. Note the Ludwig mine on the border between Radvanice and Petřvald.

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

These maps demonstrate the somewhat confused situation in the area during this period, as a result of which a number of coalmines were now crossing the Polish borders – underground – by 1939.

The escape route involved picking up escapees at their home and transporting them to a mine on the Czech side – probably the *Ludwig* mine. The story of this is described by Ina Boesch in her book



German 1941 map showing the coalfields of Upper Silesia.

Grenzfälle: Von Flucht und Hilfe – Fünf Geschichten aus Europa [1]. There they were taken by underground train to the Polish side where a 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.

Once in Biala, Alfred sent a message to my mother, Ethel, 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.

The Ludwig coal mine near Radwanice on the 1938/9 border of Polish occupied Czechoslovakia, through which Alfred made his escape in April 1939

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 knowingly.

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 further on, the Polish guard 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, when Ethel confirmed this, he looked at us for a moment and in his own words told her to get - - - - out of there and never try that trick again.

Very much relieved, my mother grabbed me by the hand and we 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.



Montrose College, 1940.

From there we made our way to Kraków where Alfred's party gathered refugees before transporting them on to Britain, Sweden, or Canada where they had organised their reception. Thus, finally, we embarked on the Polish MS *Sobiesky* liner on 17 June 1939, arriving at Dover on 20 June and then to a splendid refugee hostel, Montrose College, in Margate, Cliftonville.



On the way to France, May 1940.



Returning to England after the defeat of France, July 1940.

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 Sète, near Marseilles, from where he was lucky to get back to Liverpool in late July.

The rest is my life.