



The Andorra Star

By William Rabinowitz

It is a strange way of remembering Otto. But every July 2, I go to his grave site at the Judean Garden of Light and Remembrances off of Route 441 in Boynton Beach. I have two ice cold Beck's beers with me. I place his opened beer on his grave. After saying Kaddish drank mine down with a soft L'Chaim.

It is not the conventional way of remembering a friend in a Jewish cemetery.

I first met Otto at the Israeli Stamp Collectors club. They meet once a month at Temple Anshei Shalom on Jog Road, usually the first Monday of the month. Everyone is retired so Monday's are not a problem.

Otto Braun was his name. Otto was from Dusseldorf. His English was heavily accented with a slight British twist to it. I guess it was the British English accent that encouraged me to pry.

I walked up to Otto, extending my hand to him, "Hi, my name is William, William Rabinowitz, but I go by Bill."

Otto looked up, smiled, and shook my hand. "My name is Otto Braun."

"Braun?" I asked. "Wasn't that the name of Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun?" I asked.

He smiled. "Yes, if she was family, I would not have been sent on the Kindertransport to save my life," he answered. "If she had been family, she could have done a Judith on Hitler and driven a tent peg into his temple while he dozed after sleeping with her. I might have stayed in Dusseldorf to grow up with my brothers and sisters." He looked aside with his deep blue eyes still clear after the many years of his life and said "Olah L'Shalom, they died in the Holocaust, only I survived."

“I heard about the Kindertransports. But I do not know much about them could you tell me...” I asked him.

That is how the conversation started at the Israel Stamp Club. We got to know each other over the next few years before his kidneys failed. He died, his blood poisoned with waste that had nowhere to go.

Otto was 17 years old when his father Karl and his mother Bertha put him on a train bound for Holland. It was August 18, 1939. He was the youngest in his family. His brothers and sisters were too old to be included in the Kindertransport. The British had agreed to accept 10,000 children between the ages of 4 and 17 as temporary guests in Britain provided they came alone and the Jewish community guaranteed that they would not become economic burdens upon Britain. A bounty escrow of 50 pounds for every child had to be paid to the Government to fund sending them home once the war was over. Otto had been on one of the last trains out of Germany. Even at the train station the Germans did not want to let

the children leave – they had other plans for the Jews. Christian Quakers met the children at the bahnhoff and escorted them to Holland. They helped them board ships across the channel to England where others, Jews and Christians, met the children and sent to private homes and shelters.

Otto left with only one small brown suitcase. It contained a little bit of clothing, a picture of his family, whom he never saw again, and ten Deutsch Marks.

Arriving in Britain, Otto was directed with another group of German speaking young people about his age to a different train. A woman who accompanied them put name and destination tags about their necks. His read Whittinghame, Scotland.

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Thursday afternoons, Otto, Mendel the Chasid and I, gather to laugh, talk, and share bits of wisdom. Sheila is out of the house doing her nails, hair, toes, shopping, returning what she just bought the day before, doing lunch or playing Mah Jong with the girls

Mendel, friends called him Mendel the Hassid, because he was a Hassid. Mendel had been shipped to Florida by his Rebbe to get him out of the cold and damp of Brooklyn. The Rebbe of Beth Dovid, where Mendel went to schul, suffered deeply when he saw Mendel, very painfully climb the stairs to the steibel and shuffle to his seat in the corner. Mendel’s arthritis was severe. He grimaced every time he had to stand during the services. Mendel’s Rebbe sent him to Florida so he too would not have to suffer deeply with every painful move Mendel made.

I found Mendel, lost, confused and sweating at Starbuck’s on Boynton Beach Boulevard next to the Vitamin store. Starbucks is a regular destination. I need my daily Mocha Java Grande with extra Mocha and cinnamon.

It was Thursday and Sheila was away. Otto and I sat drinking Beck's beers. Mendel drank cold Manishevitz spritzers from his private stash at the house and from his own "becher." Norman, my Cockatzu, lay at our feet, attentive as any good guard dog should be for an "accidental" dropping of a pretzel or potato chip. Mendel was usually the guilty accidental dropper.

"Nu, so Mendel, tell me," I began..."why is the third hand on a watch called the second hand?"

Otto jumped in quickly, "If Webster wrote the first dictionary, where did he find the words."

We grinned; it was Mendel's turn now. "If the entire world is a stage, where does the audience sit?" Mendel smiled.

Otto turned introspective and quiet.

"What up Otto?" I asked.

Mendel asked a very good question. It brought back something from many years ago when I first arrived in Britain as part of the Kindertransport. We were the ones on the stage, everyone in the train station, was the audience."

"You know, I was sent to Whittinghame in Scotland," he said.



Whittinghame House

“O.K., what is so special about Whittinghame?” I asked.

Otto put down his German beer and told the story. There were 18 of us on that train being sent to the Whittinghame Farm School. Whittinghame is east from Edinburgh. It is in a area called East Lothian near the coast; rolling hills, sheep, and isolation. Whittinghame was the home of Arthur James Balfour.”

I broke in, “Lord Balfour, the author of the Balfour Declaration creating the national home for the Jews in Palestine” I asked, my eyes and ears grew bigger with interest at this unique bit of history.

“Yes”, Otto said. “Whittinghame was the ancestral home of Lord Balfour. He is buried on the property near Whittinghame Tower, a 14th century keep, a military tower; it overlooks the stream that cuts the land in two. Lord Balfour believed in the justice of Zionism all his life. He died in 1931. His nephew Lord Tremain, inherited the property and he too was a Zionist. When the darkness of the Holocaust gathered over Europe, Britain barred us Jewish children from being sent to Palestine. But we were accepted to come to Britain, on a temporary basis. Lord Tremain opened Balfour’s house to the Kindertransport children. A special school was set up for us there. It was called the Whittinghame Farm School. We were to be trained to be farmers for hoped resettlement in Palestine someday. Eventually, Balfour’s home sheltered 180 of us. Ironic isn’t it. Balfour who struggled so greatly for Britain to solve the Jewish problem by opening a national home that wanted us in the end could only give us his personal home for shelter. It was Britain that would not let us return to Palestine. It was Britain that trapped us in Europe for the German’s solution to the Jewish problem.

Mendel and I grew very, very quiet. Not even Norman moved. He sensed that Otto was telling us something important about his life.

“It was the best year of my life at Whittinghame. True, we were away from our families. Letters from home became rare commodities and then stopped. At Whittinghame we formed our own new Jewish home, our own community. We learned English, but we also studied Hebrew, Jewish songs, learned about Palestine and even had a small synagogue in Balfour’s house where we lived.

It was a good time between the months of the “phony war.” Otto told us.

“Phony war?” I asked. Mendel responded, he knew what Otto was talking about.

“William, the phony war was a relatively quiet period, between when Poland fell and the shooting began with France almost a year later. Everyone prepared for war, only nothing was happening. When the German Blitzkrieg began in 1940, everything changed.” Mendel said.

“Everything changed for all of us at Whittinghame as well,” Otto said. “With the defeat of France and the desperate escape of the British Army at Dunkirk, Britain feared invasion. It feared that there would be spies, enemies, saboteurs inside Britain who would help the Germans. The Italians had joined the Axis powers. Britain was alone. Fear, panic, but mostly fear gripped

the country. Foreigners, especially German and Italian's were viewed as potentially fifth columnists. If you were not English or from a country that was fighting the Nazis you were viewed with the utmost suspicion. We at Whittinghame and at many homes around Britain were from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. If you spoke German you were the enemy," Otto explained.

"For crying out loud," I said. "You have got to be kidding. You were a German Jew. How"

Otto picked up. "It was a national madness that gripped the country. Neighbors who lived together for years, peacefully, worked together, their children played with each other, were suddenly not to be trusted. If you spoke German or Italian you were suddenly under suspicion. Winston Churchill's newly formed government took the advice of MI5 the secret service. Round the lot up was Churchill's phrase. I think he even invented it. And that is what they did.

British police fanned out throughout the country arresting every German and Italian they could find. If you were over 16 years old, you were potentially a Nazi agent.

They came to Whittinghame. Thirty seven of us were suddenly arrested and taken away without any ceremony. We appeared before a magistrate – usually some ill informed local person who had no rules or ideas except to get rid of the enemies. Most of the recent immigrants to Britain, about 28,000 in the preceding years were German speaking. Most of them were Jews. They all immediately were placed under arrest. At the hearings, it was a joke to call it a hearing, being it was just you and your "judge". You were given a letter, an A, a B or a C. classification. C was considered the least dangerous to be an enemy of Britain but still required watching. B usually meant a very high level of national observation. A was simple- You definitely were an imminent national danger to Britain. Single young men, such as me were promptly classified as A. I vanished one day and never returned to Whittinghame. Some of my friends were sent to internment camps in places like the Isle of Mann. I was given over for "special treatment. You know, what was the worst part of the story? The worst part was that British Jews supported the national action against us.

Through a German contact in Zurich, the British intelligence services were told that the German refugee Jews in Britain cannot be trusted. The Germans had their families, their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers in their custody. They would use their families as weapons to gain cooperation from the Jews who had run to Britain for safety. The Jews were a fifth column and were dangerous to Britain. To the British intelligence services and even the Churchill government in 1940, it made sense. They agreed. But the Jewish community in Britain, they too, agreed. They did nothing to protest. They did not want their own skins to be caught up in the anti-Semitic hysteria." Otto's voice had turned quiet and cold.

"I was sent to Glasgow as a prisoner. Hundreds of us "Germans" almost all of us Jews were marched through the streets to be deported to Canada. It was late June 1940. The people stared at us. Some called us names, a few threw stones. It was true; amongst us were some hard core German fascists who had lived in Britain. For the most part, the Germans that marched past the taunting Scots were Jews.

We were loaded, with hundreds of Italians on a converted ocean liner, the *Andorra Star*. Churchill did not want to take any chances with us. He ordered that barbed wire be strung along the deck, railings and upper structures to be sure and keep us contained.

We sailed for Canada. About July 1 or July 2, the ship was torpedoed off the northern coast of Ireland. The explosion ripped a huge hole into the *Andorra Star*. The crew jumped to action to launch the life boats. Only 9 could be freed, not enough. The captain stayed aboard directing the rescue operation to save as many lives as he could. Of the 1200 “internees” on the ship, 700-800 drowned trapped within the barbed wire. The Captain went down with the ship. For months, bodies continued washing up on the shores of Ireland. Many innocent Italians died. Some Nazis went down and many Jews drowned with them – all enemies of Britain. Murdered by a Nazi sub commander who said later, he mistakenly read the *Andorra Star*’s silhouette for a war ship when he decided to attack.

I was rescued only to be put back on another ship with other German Jews, Italians and Germans. We were sent to Nova Scotia for “internment.” I spent a year in the “internment” camp in Canada. German Jews, Italians and Nazis, all of us together were in one camp. There was periodic trouble in the camp. The Italians pretty much stayed out of it but the Nazis – they were Nazis to the end. Many a day the German speaking Jews, now organized to defend ourselves, fought the Nazis in head bashing confrontations. The English commander of the camp finally decided to separate us entirely with a barbed wire mechitzah. Late 1940, the British seemed to have come to their senses and realized that a Jew, even a German Jew, was very unlikely to be an enemy agent. I was released and joined the Canadian army to do my best to kill Germans.” Otto words hung in the air.

Mendel “accidentally” dropped a large potato chip, Norman sprang into action.

I tried to break the tension by starting our game again.

“Why do we drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?” I asked.

Mendel began: “Why?”

God saw you hungry and created McDonalds, Wendy’s and Dairy Queen.

He saw you thirsty and created Pepsi, Juice, Coffee and Water.

God saw you in the dark and created Light.

God saw you without a Good looking adorable Friend....

Mendel twisted the payyah hanging from the side of his head....

So He created ME!

We all laughed. Otto and I lifted our Becks, Mendel his Manishevitz, and together we said – L'Chaim.

http://www.jewishmag.com/145mag/andorra_star/andorra_star.htm