

Brexit and Honour - from the Heart of Europe by Daniel Low-Beer

In September 2020 I travelled to the *Brno Meeting* to take part in two events which commemorated how Jews, who were central to cultural and economic life in Brno, left Europe for Britain in 1938.

To many Czechs the first Brexit was in 1938. Britain stepped out of its European treaties without warning. They agreed with Hitler to split Czechoslovakia in two at the Munich Agreement. The Czechs were not invited to the table. The first Brexit was equally populist. Chamberlain returned to cheering crowds to offer “Peace with honour .. Peace in our time”. It was left to Churchill to challenge him, almost alone in Parliament, “You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour ... You will have war.” To Europeans, borders and treaties are not just about trade and technological solutions. They weave the fabric of community and can become too easily issues of war and peace, in Ireland as in Czechoslovakia.

In response to the war, Churchill urged “Let Europe arise!” into “a United States of Europe” in 1947, with a common market, defence force and currency. He observed “Luckily, coins have two sides, so that one can bear the national and the other the European superscription”. It is true that Churchill would have added a third side to the coin for the British Empire. He saw no contradiction in being British, European and international. Many Brexiteers, such as Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg, see themselves as Churchills, yet they are in the direct Brexit line to Chamberlain.

A Jew holding up the Nazis

The day after Britain declared peace in our time, my grandfather Walter Löw-Beer stood by the stream that flowed through his factory in Czechoslovakia. The stream had suddenly become a frontier cutting Czechoslovakia in two, Europe in two, and the Jewish world into pieces. He was now standing, armed with his walking stick, facing a battalion of Nazi soldiers on the other side of the stream.

Apparently, the Nazis got down from their armed vehicles and asked him to cross the stream to negotiate. If he had done so, they would have packed him into their truck and off to a concentration camp. But Walter stood his ground,



The Löw-Beer factory at Brněnec, the Schindler's Ark

protected by his stream and his stick. He told the soldiers they could go no further, to phone Prague or Berlin to check their borders and orders, which they did. That is how a Jew, manning the borders of a broken Czechoslovakia, held up the Nazis for three full days.

What was my grandfather defending?

I often wonder what my grandfather was defending on that day on that frontier, from where he drew the force to stand his ground. He was a Czech nationalist and fluent in Czech, he was Jewish, he spoke and admired German, was one of them, he studied textiles in Bradford in England, and sent his children to Czech, German and English schools. He had taken to heart what the first president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Masaryk had said, to his peoples, the Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks, Germans, Jews “As many languages you know, as many times you are a human being.”

Walter had seen how the new Czechoslovakia had got the best from its peoples to become one of the most creative and ten most prosperous countries in the world, with a more modern army that might well have won a war against Germany. In the invasion of France a year later, one third of the German bullets were made in Czechoslovakia. I think my grandfather was defending a European identity in the heart of Central Europe. He refused to be split into pieces, a Jewish, a Czech, a German part. The Löw-Beer factory was then stolen by the Nazis and became *Schindler's Ark*, a concentration camp where Jews were saved, not exterminated as seen in Spielberg's Oscar-winning film *Schindler's List*.

The Brno Meeting, 2020

- stand out and stand up

The *Brno Meeting* is one of those events that still brings Europe together, in the heart of Europe, which is more in Brno than Brussels. In 2020 thirty

discussions and cultural events delved beneath the surface “to know our own roots, and, firmly grounded, to be able to take on the challenges of the present. The motto of the year was ‘Stand Out.’” The events were split by Covid-19 into two events in July and September, with masks, social distancing, yet a resilient and infectious dialogue.

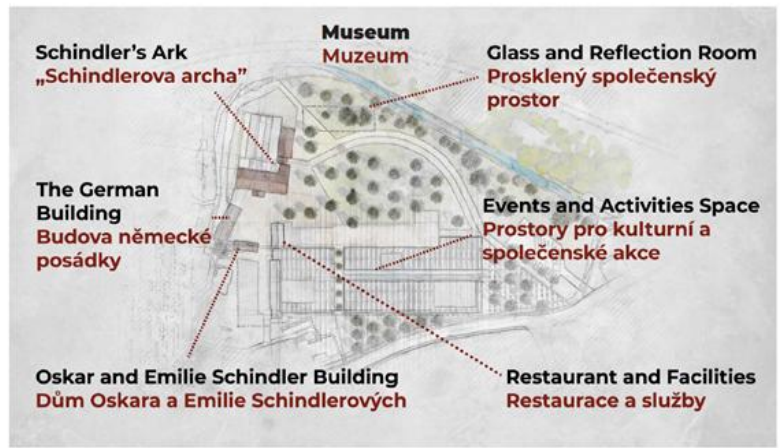
During the *Brno Meeting* I launched my book of the family stories behind two well-known heritage sites, *The Arks - the Löw-Beer story behind Schindler's List and Villa Tugendhat*. *The Arks* follows the story of my name, of two successive escapes from the Jewish ghettos to freedom.

The first escape is of the Jews from the ghettos into the centre of European culture, from 1848 to 1938. I call this the journey from the closed ghettos to the open glass homes. The Jews, with a Moses instinct for freedom, built a promised land of a radically modern Jewish way of life in the heart of Europe. They could not settle there. In 1938, this culture is shattered and the Jews are sent back to the ghettos. The Löw-Beer factory is stolen by Nazis and becomes *Schindler's Ark* in Czechoslovakia. The Löw-Beers use their Noah instinct to tear away their roots and escape for a second time.

The white light of the Tugendhat Villa, built by the German architect Mies Van Der Rohe, with Czech artisans, for a Jewish family, shines on the hill above Brno. The open, glass home is the opposite of the closed ghetto. Like the crest of a wave, it is the highlight of European culture that came crashing down. The Löw-Beer factory and concentration camp shine a darker light. *The Arks* is the journey of survival and freedom. It tells the untold stories behind two key heritage sites in the Czech Republic. The story shows how quickly discrimination can break Europe apart and asks how we would respond now. How do you bring alive the real stories and history in a heritage site? How do you connect places to people in the present?

The Löw-Beer Museum and Tugendhat Villa, 4th September 2020

The *Brno Meeting* in 2020 linked the Tugendhat Villa and *Schindler's Ark* to the people and history behind them, in a succession of remarkable events. First in Brno, the Löw-Beer family stories of life in the 1930s and escape in 1938 were presented in the Löw-Beer Museum, from the book *The Arks*. I travelled the world to collect the stories from



Plans for the Löw-Beer Museum

people who lived there in the 1930s and escaped, before they are no longer with us. The Löw-Beers now live throughout the world as its citizens in Brazil, Canada, America, Australia, England, the Caribbean, and Switzerland. None survived in Czechoslovakia.

A *Löw-Beer Walk* now links ten places in Brno with plaques. They provide online links to the stories of the people who lived there. Linking the past to the present, the Löw-Beer Museum then housed a debate on anti-Semitism and discrimination today. Thomas Keneally, the author of the Booker Prize-winning *Schindler's Ark*, spoke of its relevance today. He revealed the Czech and Moravian story of Oskar Schindler, of how an individual can stand up to discrimination, then as now.

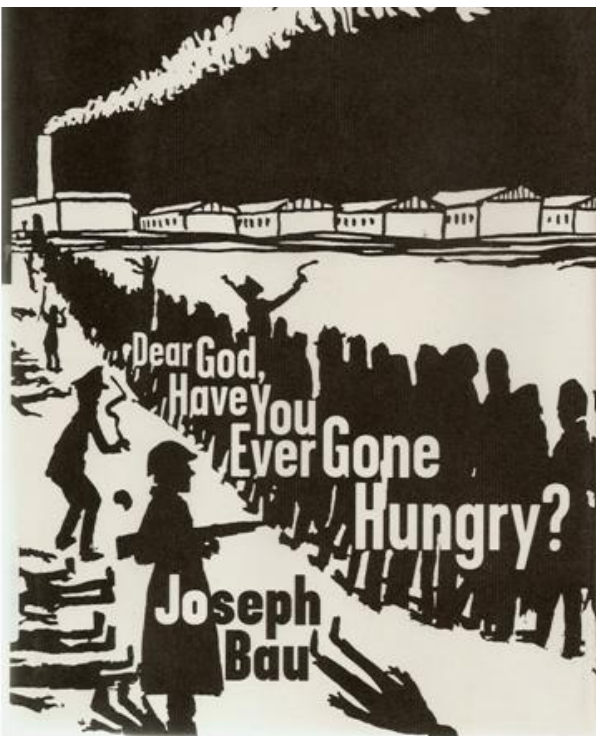
How do we teach the next generation to stand up to discrimination? Eva Lustigová (the daughter of Arnošt Lustig), Tomáš Kraus from the Jewish Federation, Christoph Benn from Germany, and Rena Finder, a surviving Schindler Jew, all discussed this issue. Christoph Benn spoke of growing up in Germany after the war, haunted by this lost Europe. He talked of the unique opportunity Germany has to help rebuild Europe now, and rebuild their own history. As survivors have commented, the Ten Commandments tell us what we should not do - do not steal, do not kill. After the Holocaust some have said this is no longer enough, we need an eleventh commandment to act, to stand up to discrimination. The museum in our factory will teach the difficult ethics and practice of action, “Whoever saves a life, saves the world entire”. In the evening, Lukas Hammer, the grandson of Greta Tugendhat, opened a concert in the Tugendhat Villa. His mother Daniela had led the effort to bring the Löw-Beers back to the *Brno Meeting* in 2017.

**Discovering the Czech Schindler's Ark,
5th September 2020**

The next day the *Brno Meeting* moved to the ruined *Schindler's Ark* in Brněnec, perhaps one of the most important remaining monuments of the Second World War. The Löw-Beer family who owned the factory has reunited with a remarkable local team, led by František Olbert, to bring the ruins back to life as a museum, and to create local jobs. This valley was one of the most beautiful and wealthiest valleys in Europe and is now one of the poorest. The basic aim of the Foundation is to save and rebuild *Schindler's Ark* and support this valley to become beautiful and prosperous again, as Jews tried to in 1848, in 1938 and now. This is the challenge of Europe, on a small, village scale. In the morning a consultation was held with local villagers on the plans, a frank and practical discussion on how a place of heritage can contribute again to the history of this village. Memories were shared, as well as practical concerns for traffic and how the village can be involved and earn a living.

Josef Bau – a Schindler Jew's art returns to Schindler's Ark

An exhibition of Josef Bau, a Schindler Jew, was shown in the ruined factory, *see below*. He had become the 'Walt Disney of Israel' for his graphic art and animated films after the war. He had used his artistic skills to forge documents for Schindler. He fell in love in Schindler's Ark and his secret marriage in the camp is shown in the film *Schindler's List*. His two daughters joined the meeting by Zoom, and in an incredibly moving address spoke



Poster by Josef Bau

of what it meant to bring his art works back to the place where he was saved. Due to Covid-19 his museum in Israel is unable to survive financially, and will be brought home to the buildings of *Schindler's Ark*.

Schindler's List shown where the events occurred

In the evening, scenes from *Schindler's List* were shown as the sun set in the ruins of the factory which became *Schindler's Ark*. As the ghetto was liquidated a storm broke out overhead, with lightning coming in through the skylights of the factory, the past and present connected.

Closing of the Brno Meeting in the heart of Europe

Finally, the *Brno Meeting* closed at the Arnold Villa, whose restoration is supported by The Friends of Czech Heritage. To many in Europe, Britain has been in and out of Europe since 1938. Today, the work of the *Brno Meeting* and The Friends of Czech Heritage is incredibly important. It helps us to keep one foot in Europe, and not become a faraway country. As the people who witnessed events in the 1930s and 1940s disappear, these places are what remain. The work shows how heritage needs to bring alive the real people and history hidden just under the surface.

I stand by the stream where my grandfather held up the Nazis eighty years ago. In the events in 2020, I can hear in the bubbling current of this stream that history is not just behind us. Its current flows through these places, past me and ahead more freely to the future.

Dr. Daniel Low-Beer works at the World Health Organisation as an epidemiologist, and lives in Geneva, Switzerland. He is a poet, writer and is the grandson of the last Jewish owner of the factory that became Schindler's Ark. His book *The Arks*, Kindle Edition, £6.63, is available to download from www.amazon.co.uk

Also available in Czech from: www.kosmas.cz/knihy/280854/the-arks/
All proceeds go to saving and rebuilding Schindler's Ark

