

Saving and Rebuilding Schindler's Ark

by Daniel Low-Beer

In 2017 the Brno Meeting invited back the Low-Beer family who had fled from the Nazis in 1938, as reported in issue 18 of the *Newsletter*. During the family reunion, I visited two heritage sites related to the two branches of my family. The first was the Tugendhat Villa, built in the garden of Alfred Low-Beer for his daughter Greta, both houses now open to the public. The second was the ruined Low-Beer factory in Brněnec. The factory was stolen by the Nazis and then by Schindler, and became the Schindler's Ark of the film *Schindler's List* by Spielberg.

I had visited Brno many times, but the Brno Meeting in 2017 was the first time we were made to feel at home officially after eighty years. What difference did this small act of reconciliation make? What did it mean to reconnect the family and people with the places of their past?

The 2019 Brno Meeting this June hosted two events to follow the connection of the family with their heritage. This article describes the two events.

The first event was the launch of the Low-Beer trail in Brno, which brings the family stories back into ten places in Brno. The second event focused on the future, the project to save and rebuild Schindler's Ark, and to restore the Arnold Villa and link the gardens of the three villas of Alfred Low-Beer, his sister Cecile Arnold, and his daughter Greta Tugendhat.



Daniel Low-Beer

The Brno Meeting in 2017 had reunited the Low-Beer family, and the Tugendhat and Stiassni families, for a weekend in Brno. The Low-Beers came from around the world, from Brazil, Canada, North America, England, Australia, the Caribbean, and Switzerland. None had survived in Czechoslovakia.

We had dinner and listened to music in the Tugendhat Villa built by Mies van Der Rohe and the finest Modernist home of the 20th century. For me, I only then appreciated how the building came alive, built movingly by a German architect with Brno glass and wood artisans for a Jewish family. Children and grandchildren played in the museum spaces that weekend in 2017, flowing through its garden and living room, inside and outside, round and about. It made the Tugendhat Villa a hundred times more beautiful, expressing its real architectural form as a home.

The Tugendhat Villa in Brno





People on the Low-Beer trail in Brno

We visited Low-Beer houses and factories and shared family stories during that ephemeral weekend visit in 2017. As part of the Brno Meeting this year on 2nd June 2019, I opened the Low-Beer trail with ten stops in Brno. This follows the route we took in 2017 but leaves a permanent trace on the city. Over 60 people walked together (more than the 60 headsets provided) to discover the culture of Moravian Jewish Modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, and how this culture was shattered in 1938 with the stories of how our family fled for their lives.

The Low-Beer trail is organised through physical plaques in front of the buildings, and QR (quick response) codes which allow you to access the history and stories of those who lived there. You can visit Brno in this way the next time you are there. The Low-Beer family from Brazil, Paris and Geneva attended the walk. At the end there was a chance to share a beer with the Low-Beers and ask questions.

Reconnecting heritage with the families that lived

Poster for Foundation Arks with an image of Schindler's Factory



there influences the future as well as the past. The second event in Brno City Hall on 4th June, presented two projects pursued since the Brno Meeting in 2017. The first project is to save and rebuild the ruined Low-Beer factory which became Schindler's Ark of the Booker Prize-winning novel by Thomas Keneally and the film *Schindler's List* by Spielberg.

Following the family reunion in 2017 the family renewed its partnership with the local community to create the Foundation Arks. The factory was bought by the family and put into the foundation which aims to:

1. Save and develop a memorial to Schindler's Ark, the Shoah and the Low-Beer factory for schoolchildren and visitors to experience the history and film where it occurred.
2. Promote activities which benefit the people of Brněnec and the wider Moravian region and its promotion in the heart of Europe.

The project plan developed with experts and a local team was presented (available for open consultation and comment at the website www.arksfoundation.net).

The first stage completed in 2018 was to consolidate the land in an apolitical and transparent foundation. The second stage in 2019 was to publish the project plan and save the buildings which are in danger of collapse. The key building was Schindler's Ark, a concentration camp which saved 1,200 Jews, and this has been secured, replacing the windows, roof, staircase, metal and wooden beams.

The third stage from 2020-21 is to rebuild the buildings into what will be one of the leading museums of the Second World War. The material will be based on unique archives of interviews with the Schindler Jews, the film and the history of the factory which has seen European history from 1848 when the Jews left the ghettos, the First and Second World Wars, Communism, the Velvet Revolution, to the present day. The story is universal but also very Czech, in a line of Czech stories from Soldier Švejk to Schindler, of how an individual can stand up against the system and discrimination.

The project has progressed remarkably in saving a

key part of Czech, Jewish and European heritage. In the next stage, it will need all the support it can get, including working parties, European and Czech grants. As Spielberg said this year when rereleasing *Schindler's List* after 25 years: "I think there is more at stake today than even back then".

Finally, the project to restore the *Art Nouveau* Arnold Villa built in the early 1900s was presented. The Friends have provided some important support to document and present the Villa. The Arnold Villa was the home of Cecile Low-Beer, the sister of Alfred Low-Beer. The project aims to restore the building with a space for dialogue, research and cultural events, to complement the neighbouring Tugendhat and Low-Beer Villas. This would create a unique set of connected buildings which reflect a family and a European heritage.

Perhaps the most important but not the most prominent part of the project is to link the three gardens. This would highlight the family park and way of life which the architecture of the buildings expresses. It would allow visitors to walk between these unique homes as the families did in the 1930s.

What difference has it made to link the heritage of the buildings with the families that lived there? It was a limited but significant gesture on the part of the Mayor of Brno and organisers of the Brno Meeting to officially invite back the Low-Beer family for a weekend in 2017. The Brno Meeting in 2019 showed some of the consequences and responsibilities which come with this reconnection.

There is a distinction in English between a house and a home, where a building expresses a way of life and people who lived there. I could not have imagined the implications of being made to feel at home in Brno for the first time since 1938. The initiatives shown in Brno in 2017 and 2019, of linking buildings with the families that shaped them, are significant for the past and the future of heritage.

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