

The Challenges of Reconciliation

One Family's Experience

by Peter Ratzert

I was fascinated to read Petr Kalousek's article in the last *Newsletter* and to hear about the *Declaration of Reconciliation and a Shared Future*. My parents were Sudeten-Germans, both fluent Czech speakers, whose family included members who married Czechs. Given the family links with Brno, his article prompted me to pull together some key experiences of family members that illustrate the complexities and challenges of the issues behind the word *reconciliation*.

My father was born in Brno and the sister of his mother, Stephanie Ratzert, married a Czech. His descendants all lived in Brno (his grandson, my second cousin, died last year) and I still keep in contact with my second cousin's children and grandchildren. My second cousin's father rose to become the manager of part of Brno's transport system in the 1930s and when the Germans took over Czechoslovakia his position was under threat from a German who wanted the job for himself. To protect his position and his family he took German citizenship, a not uncommon step at the time; approximately 70,000 Czechs voluntarily became German. In the National Cleansing that took place after the war he was put on trial and sentenced to 12 years hard confinement (intensified by a hard bed once a month) in a hard labour unit, and forfeited all his assets to the State, leaving his family bereft. His sentence included a period working in the uranium mines at Jáchymov.

He was eventually given a conditional release in 1955 on the grounds that 'the punishment of the prisoner had already fulfilled all its educational purpose and therefore it can be expected that the prisoner will henceforth lead the orderly life of a

working man'. He had in addition shown himself to be a 'person with a positive attitude towards the people's democratic regime'. He came out a broken man and worked in an electrical assembly factory till he retired, and for about eight years after that, to earn a little pension. I was surprised to be able to find the mainly hand-written transcript of his trial in the Moravian archives. This example adds a rather different dimension to *reconciliation* than simply relations between Czechs and Germans.

My second cousin, then seven years old, and his mother were on the infamous Brno Death March in 1945, part of the expulsion of the German population agreed by the Three Powers, presumably because she was considered German after her husband's change of citizenship. They went to the makeshift camp at Pohořelice and there they were able to establish that they were really Czech and they were able to return to Brno, with my second cousin in a pushchair as he could not continue on foot. They had to leave behind a maid from my second cousin's grandparents' household who was born a German, despite her Czech name. She had been with the household for 30 years and been treated like a member of the family; she was not heard of again.

Unbeknown to my second cousin and his mother, my grandmother Stephanie Ratzert was also on the Brno Death March. She reached the Austrian frontier at Drasenhofen and collapsed there before being thrown back by the Austrians and removed from the road by the Russians and thrown into a lorry. She came to in the camp in Mušlov near Mikulov and recovered. She volunteered for the Czech labour front and spent time working in mined fields bringing in the harvest. She recalled seeing a horse and cart and workers blown up. At the end of the harvest she was hailed as an industrious worker and was given permission to return to Brno. She managed to get a room in her



The Brno Death March 1945. The photograph was taken by an American military observer

old house but shortly afterwards was denounced as a youth leader, presumably under the Germans.

Image courtesy of Staatliche Archive Bayerns,
BayHStA-A V-5051.11-1731/1/2

It took her ten months as an innocent party in a compulsory labour camp before it was established that the person they were seeking was a 20-year-old Miss Racká (pronounced Ratska), not Ratzler - my grandmother was 64 years old. She was then sent to an evacuation camp in Maloměřice in Brno. She was eventually rescued from there (in exchange for a pair of tyres!) by my father who had worked for the British Bat'a Shoe Company in England since the mid-1930s; he was a rare Sudeten German, working as a manager for the international Czech shoe company founded in Zlín. My grandmother was allowed to join our family in Sunbury-on-Thames (as was my maternal grandmother a year earlier, immediately after the end of the war – but that is another whole story). My father was fortunate in being able to obtain an exit permit for her since the Czech official responsible for issuing exit permits in Prague was a former Bat'a employee from Zlín for whom my father had paid for a suit, shirt and a haircut when he had reported for a work assignment at Bat'a in England before the war.

In the years after the war at school my second cousin's 'character profile' came to light and despite his excellent school report he was denied further education. He then trained as a lathe operator, a job he remained in for the next 44 years. When his time came for military service he was assigned to train as an anti-aircraft gunner, but when his background was discovered he was assigned to the Auxiliary Technical Battalion, which was the penal battalion made up of a distinctly mixed group of ex-criminals and others. The only weapons he was allowed to handle were picks and shovels for building roads and officers' houses. Fortunately his son was able to get a university degree and now has a successful professional career in Brno.

I admire Petr Kalousek's work on the *Meeting Brno Festivals*. When I reflect on the experience of my family alone, illustrating how Germans treated Czechs, how Czechs treated Czechs and how Czechs treated Germans, I can only feel that even three quarters of a century after the end of the Second World War his work will remain vital as an example to others for many years to come.

Peter Ratzler, a member of *The Friends*, lives in London