

Villa Haas, Brno, 1928

What Happened to the Family

by John Selby



After the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 Brno became the second largest city of the republic with aspiring economic and cultural ambitions reflected in buildings of the period. It was one of the foremost centres of Functionalism in Central Europe. The Villa Haas, designed by Ernst Wiesner in the style of 'nautical functionalism' inspired by the architecture of transatlantic ocean liners, had to be abandoned by the Haas family in 1939. The villa was nationalised in 1948, transferred to the possession of the Czechoslovak state in 1955 and then used as the seat of the Brno Municipal National Committee. Later it was divided into several apartments and sold to private owners. Online search shows that 'there is no information about the fate of the family'. Here John Selby, grandson of Gustav Haas who built the villa, tells the story of what happened after 1939.

The online description of the Haas villa ends with the sinister words, 'the fate of the Haas family is unknown', code perhaps for 'they probably perished in the Holocaust'. So, to put the record straight, the direct descendants of Gustav and Gina Haas are alive and well and living in England.

Gustav Haas (1884-1965) was my grandfather. His daughter, Anita Haas, was my mother, who was born in Vienna in 1914. The Haas family moved to Brno shortly after the First World War to take advantage, I believe, of fresh business opportunities in a new and exciting environment. It may be too that they felt Viennese antisemitism had not entirely vanished. In 1938 Anita married a Czech industrialist, Zdeněk Taussig from Prague, then owner of Zbirovia, a company that manufactured hand tools and which still exists.

Once the Haas family were settled and Gustav

successful in Brno, he commissioned the construction of the villa. We don't know if he personally knew Ernst Wiesner, but it's most likely he would have chosen him as the 'go to' architect of the day who also had commissions from other wealthy Jewish families. Gustav was proud of the new 'Functionalist' style of the villa and kept many photographs, which have stayed with the family. He was a cultured businessman who loved the theatre and collected paintings that he liked, some of which were on display in the villa, although we don't know at this distance in time who the artists were.

In 1939 when Hitler's armies marched into Czechoslovakia, Gustav, who was, we believe, a director of the Anglo-Czech Bank in Brno, helped organise the departure of close family members to London. He had the foresight to sell his business interests in time and had also exported wool to England, for which he was paid locally. It may well be that his position in the bank helped to deal with the financial aspect of the immigration. The USA was their first choice but no visas were then available.

Although some optimists in the wider family chose to stay, he and my father Zdeněk were under no illusions as to what would happen to them under Hitler. My mother Anita told me that the German officers who were to take over the Haas family home advised them 'to go on a long holiday', code of course for 'never come back'. It wasn't exactly a holiday and they never came back. Anita always spoke fondly of her childhood and school years in Brno, especially in contrast to what she perceived as class obsession in the English educational system.

After they left the villa, Anita's cousin Herta stayed there while she decided on the best course of

Villa Haas, the garden elevation



action (which in her case turned out to be flight to Chile). The Germans in Brno were doing house-to-house searches. The ex-family chauffeur Havrinka, who was at hand, borrowed some Nazi insignia and badges from a non-Jewish Nazi sympathiser, and wore the items when the Germans came calling. He marched to the door and with a *Heil Hitler!* told them that there was no one of interest any longer at the villa. They nodded and went away. And so Herta was saved, she believed, from a concentration camp and almost certain death.

The immigrants to pre-war London (Great Britain was not at war until September 1939) were Gustav, Gina, my parents Anita and Zdeněk, Leonard Haas, Gustav's then 15-year-old son, and Gina's widowed sister Ella Weinreb (formerly Ella Fichtner). She brought her young daughter Jola, who later wrote a memoir in her married name Jola Zalud - *Einem Arbeiter gibt man nicht die Hand* - which included some early memories of being a refugee.

One moving incident relates how she was walking in crowds in Oxford Street, apparently friendless and lonely, when she heard a voice call her name from afar. It was her childhood friend Mimi with whom she used to play in the park. She too had recently arrived, but on the *Kindertransport*. She was living in a children's refugee hostel.

Gustav, Gina and her sister Ella later set up home together near Bradford, then the centre of the wool trade. He became a successful wool trader and formed a partnership in spinning mills in Keighley. He lived with his wife and Ella in the village of Baildon in a house named Windyridge on the moors, which had views over what was then the industrial smoke that hung over Bradford. Ella, who had been a lead actress at the *Burgtheater* in Vienna, was the dominant personality and accompanied him to business meetings. It was said that he had two wives. Whatever the truth of the matter, such an unorthodox trio would not have been thrown together had they not been refugees. Windyridge was a long way from life in Brno, except that Gustav still maintained strong links with the Jewish community through the Bradford synagogue. He tried, unsuccessfully, to re-establish links with a cousin, Bruno Kreisky, later to become the Austrian Chancellor, but Kreisky didn't want to know. Kreisky did not really like to acknowledge his Jewish origins, presumably as it was not politically expedient at the time. Gustav was, it must be admitted, a tireless networker, who didn't allow his incomplete grasp of English to hold him back.

By contrast, his daughter Anita, my mother (and my father), turned their backs on the Jewish connection as it was simply too problematic. They maintained they were just 'Continental'. They changed their name from Taussig to Selby, the latter name being chosen by an accountant for the UK company started by my father for dealing in wallpaper and paint after the war when paper supplies became unregulated. They used to say 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'. The Taussig name survives in Taussig Films Ltd, a company set up by my daughter Claudia who works in television and film.

Leonard Haas, Gustav's son, was educated at Brighton College. He studied medicine at Cambridge, trained as a doctor at Guy's Hospital and did National Service as a captain in the RAMC in British Somaliland, as it was then. He married Ilse Philipsohn who had come over on the *Kindertransport* from Leipzig and was working as a nurse. Leonard became a distinguished pediatrician and was for many years the consultant at the Royal and Devon Hospital in Exeter. They lived in Torquay and had three children, Richard, Elizabeth and Fiona Haas, all of whom are now happily married with their own children.

Leonard once returned to the Haas Villa when on holiday with Ilse after the house had been turned into flats. He described how shocked he was at the change: the main room in which he had played as a boy now had a wall down the centre: childhood blocked off.

I have never been to Brno myself, although it is the town of my Czech address for the purposes of my Czech passport obtained in the context of Brexit and to maintain a strongly-held European identity. My parents never returned - at the time of the Velvet Revolution my father was too frail to consider return and restitution. Leonard was too busy as a doctor to think about it seriously. Barbara and I went to Prague for a long weekend many years ago. It is of course a stunning city architecturally. We visited the beautiful New Jewish Cemetery in the woods, where my paternal grandfather Otto Taussig is buried. He died, I believe, in 1937. In memoriam, Otto Taussig was also my name at birth, so it was somewhat unsettling to see it on the headstone! We also visited Kafka's grave which, as always apparently, had flowers on it. And I found it so surprising to hear the half-remembered family language of my childhood actually being spoken in public by

complete strangers. Last year Richard's daughter Laura (Lottie) Haas, Gustav's great granddaughter, was married at a ceremony at her parents' house. Gustav would have been very proud.

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Ernst Wiesner, *architect, (1890-1971) died in Liverpool, forced to emigrate due to his Jewish origins. He left behind a great deal of work of lasting value, including the St. Nicholas school complex close to Liverpool's Roman Catholic Cathedral.*

