Exile and the Other Side of the Fence.

My aunt Bronka Schneider, who was my father's sister, wrote about the experience she and her husband Joseph had, as refugees from Hitler's Austria. Hoping for Visas to the United States, but unable to get them for many years, because Joseph, though an Austrian citizen, was assigned to the oversubscribed Romanian quota, they were fortunate to be able to go to Great Britain as servants. It is this year--1939-40--that she remembered in a manuscript she entitled The Other Side of the Fence. By that she was not referring to the proverbial place where the grass is always greener, but rather to her position as a servant—a place where she had never been before. It is her one bitter comment. I shall come back to that.

When my friend, neighbor and colleague Barbara Rigney and I approached the Ohio State University Press to publish this MS with our assorted commentaries, we decided to call the volume EXILE: A Memoir of 1939. EXILE is indeed, in many ways, the defining condition of the bloody, indeed the bloodiest, century just passed, and it continues into the present one.

But before we talk of what all this might mean and indeed of why we should look at the case of a single couple of survivors, people who themselves were not killed, or even herded into a ghetto or a camp, let me show you some slides, to put you, as it were, into the picture.

Later I shall want to say a few words about how one might think of all of this—how people who had narrow escapes were still damaged by all of it in significant ways.

But we'll come back to that shortly.

Slides:

1-Bronka in her '20s--dust jacket photo. Note setting—probably in the Vienna Woods—the nearest place for Sunday excursions.
2. Her older brother, my father, as a 17 yr old Gymnasium student, in Krakow--note uniform. There were four children: my father, who was the oldest and three younger sisters. Bronka was the third child and the last for eight years. And then there was a younger child, a girl.

3. My mother, in her 20s--note shape of the picture.

4. Bronka, age 8, standing for an oil portrait, suggesting solid middle class status (there were other family portraits in oil).

5. Bronka, on a visit to her younger sister on the Belgian Coast, mid-30s.


8. National monument to the victim's of Nazism. Note the small item between the columns. Located behind the Opera, at a central tourist location.

9. Street scrubbing by Jews, at the time of the Anschluss.

10. City Memorial.

Text:(my translation):

Here stood the house of the Gestapo

It was hell for those who believed in Austria

for many of them

it was the forecourt to death
it fell into ruins
like the thousand year
Reich Austria however
revived
and with it our dead
the immortal victims.
The text is difficult to translate, and quite strange, so that one might ask: just what does it mean?
The title or first line: NIE VERGESSEN, could be translate as "never forget." The word Bekenner, which I translated as "those who believed in Austria" has a religious connotation, as in "one who professes" a religion. The revival, more literally the "resurrection" (Auferstehen) of Austria also has a religious connotation, but it is here used with an active verb, suggesting the absence of complicity. And who were the victims, "our immortal dead?" Homosexuals and Jews, as suggested by the pink triangle and the Star of David on the monument? And the killers, only Nazi Germans, the Gestapo and the Third Reich?

As Egon Schwarz has put it:
The myth, entirely unbelievable for anyone who was there, irrespective of side, that Austria was a victim and not an agent of fascism,
undoubtedly brought political advantages, but causes blunting of intelligence [Verdummung] and other psychic damages among those who suddenly believe it themselves. (Schwarz 1992:31, my trans.) Schwarz also refers to something ghostly about the postwar Vienna: "A sinful past, which must return again and again, because it has not been liquidated." (1992:318). This might almost be read as a prophecy concerning the current political situation in Austria.


12. Vienna, however, has a long history. The emperor Marcus Aurelius spent a long time there. Archaeological sites, going down to the level of Roman ruins, are now open at various places in the city.

But back to 1939:

13. Joseph and Sheila, the dog, at the "castle"--1939.

14. The "castle," or country house, in an old photo. In the book, Bronka called it Yerkerscleugh. Its real name, according to the Archivist of South Lanarkshire Council, in Southern Scotland, was Gilkerscleugh House at Abington in Larnakshire. (cleugh kliux--a steep ravine.)

As soon as we looked at maps, it became clear that Bronka had given pseudonyms to people and places. And so we had a mystery on our hands,
much of which we were able to solve with the help of Eric Rice, a Professor of Music, who lives not far away from the site and volunteered to take photos.

For example, Lymington, where the railroad station is, is really Symington, Arlington is Abington, Crafton-Ann is Crawford-John, and so forth. And the "Harringtons" were really Hamiltons. And Bronka does say that the house had been in the family at one time and, given their return from India in 1939, the Hamiltons had bought it and attempted to establish themselves there.

and here is what is left of it. The foundations of the house, the wall and gate in background. Photo taken at Easter, 1999.

16. Yellow landscape: View toward the Southeast.

17. View from the East--Gilkercleugh among the middle belt of trees

Professor Rice, our Scottish correspondent, writes in a note he sent with the photos: "Next to the site of the house is a modern bungalow. The resident showed us a photograph of Gilkercleugh before it was burnt down in the late '50s (he thought), adding that the circumstances were suspicious and that the final owners (not the Hamiltons or Harringtons) may have gone bust, but that is only a rumor.

There are few population centers, mostly villages from a few hundred people to, I guess, a maximum of 5 or 6 thousand. Industry mostly services
agriculture which is almost entirely sheep and cattle rearing and commercial softwood forestry.

Although Glasgow and Edinburgh could easily be reached, the bareness of the landscape gives a feeling of remoteness.

In another note Prof. Rice writes:

It may be of interest to you to know that the Hamilton family is big in the history of Scottish nobility. It is very possible that the Gilkercleugh family was a sept of the titled Hamiltons.

The Dukes of Hamilton have for many centuries had their seat at Hamilton, about 10 miles Southeast of Glasgow. Latterly they had a magnificent castle there, built by the wealth from coal mining in their grounds. In 1934(?) the palace was demolished because it was sinking into the mine workings.

There's justice!

When Rudolf Hess flew to Scotland alone during World War II it was to see the Duke of Hamilton whom he had met before the war; to try to get him to use his influence on the government to make peace with Germany. For his pains, he spent the rest of his life in Spandau prison, Berlin.

18. 1940: Bronka, at Nottingham, -while Joseph was held on the Isle of Man.

Later she moved to Oxford.

19. 1948: Bronka and her 4 yr old nephew, in New Jersey.
20. the painting. When Joseph retired from his job in Peoria they stopped to visit us in Columbus on their way. Bronka had learned to drive. Joseph, seeing this painting by my husband, wanted to have it, because, he thought, it looked like Bronka when young. He still saw her in this light.

What is there to be learned from all this?
About how people survive and at what cost?
The other side of the fence refers to a frequently experienced trauma of middle aged middle class people: The loss of status, never to be regained. The loss of a milieu, the loss of their language, among their many other losses.
To understand the experience of the Jewish refugees in Britain, it is important to understand something of the class structure, which was (and to some extent still is), different from the class structure of continental Europe. At the same time, in ethnic and cultural terms, it was a remarkably homogenous society and remained so until the loss of Empire brought its people home to the center--the Indians and Pakistanis, the West Indians and Africans, and all the others.
Here is an example of what I have in mind:

(Cambridge).

In June 1939 The British Home Office attempted to tighten the rules limiting the admission of Jews from Nazi Europe. But: foreigners willing to work as domestics were still being accepted.(and why that was so is another interesting story).

"The British Passport Control Officer in Paris, G.W.Courtney, doubted the suitability of many applicants. He cited the case of an upper middle class doctor, who, on being told that his proposal to work as *mathematics* tutor did not constitute domestic service, announced he would work as a butler. "This, Courtney declared, is absurd, as butlering requires a lifelong experience." One is reminded of the book--and film--The End of the Day.

While Bronka complains remarkably little, a 1939 letter from a woman by the name of Lotte Becher to her ex-husband in France, is more explicit. She was a chemist, but would not have been able to work in a job appropriate to her qualifications in England. She was lucky to get a position as a servant. She writes:

Life here as a servant is very difficult. One is a kind of slave. One gets out on the street only once a week for a few hours, 4-10pm, and is free only every other Sunday, after 4pm. But evenings one always has to be back in time to turn down the beds for these people, these absolute do-nothings, put out their countless glasses, dressing-gowns, slippers, chamber pots, etc. The kind of class-conceit that prevails here is quite unimaginable. A servant, especially a refugee-servant, is an absolutely inferior being. She may only go through the "backdoor", (is never allowed to parade through the "front door"). Work here is shameful (i.e. it is considered shameful).

...I pay my master and mistress for Atti’s room and board out of my wages. (Atti is her 10 year old son, and her wages are 2Ls a month. She writes his father because she is worried about school fees for the following year.)...It's
he (Atti) who enables me to lead this idiotic life and serve this stupid pack. I'm obliged to cook for them, clean up, serve at table in uniform, always run when the bell rings, and all I ever say is "yes, Madam, thank you, Madam." I don't think you can imagine this life of mine...Here everything is prohibited, I must be a servant, otherwise nothing...

We don't learn anything else about this family, only that all of this takes place in a coastal town, perhaps a resort area. Clearly, the situation is different from that in which the Schneiders found themselves, but still, there are similarities, enough to be able to see the structure underlying the details.

I referred to the issue of de-classing, loss of status, loss of profession which was--and is--crucial to professional people. So here is another story. A woman, now living in the Middle West, was a physician in pre-war Poland. She was married an Polish army officer. During the war, she was arrested and spent some time in a KZ. Yet there she was a physician, which enable her to help some of the women. After the war, while they waited in Germany for American visas, she was again or still- able to work as a physician. Yet in the US, because she was unable to prove by documentary evidence that she was a physician, she was denied the opportunity to take qualifying exams. She spent her working life as a nurse's aide--and at 90 tells her daughter that what she regrets most is the loss of her profession.

It is the general American myth,—by which I mean a sacred story of the founding of the social world,—that immigrants came and come to this country out of poverty, and therefore were and should be, willing to bear any hardship; and do so for the good of their children, who will do well, better than their parents. This refers largely to the streams of the poor who came to build the railroads, subways and skyscrapers, the sweatshops of the garment industry and the rest. They could hope for a future while they worked and struggled. They were a lost generation,—in Biblical terms— a generation of the desert—dor a midbar—the promised land was for their children. And this is still true of the poor who come here—the Mexicans and the Haitians, for example, who sent part of their meager wages home as remittances to their families.

But for middle class people, who had achieved and accomplished something, and lost their money and found their qualifications and skills useless, the story was and is different. The physicians and lawyers whose training and degrees were treated as useless, the writers, whose language was not
English. They might have had opportunities in Hollywood, yet never felt at home in the new idiom. This was true of the most privileged. Thomas Mann returned to Switzerland. Einstein, in letters to friends, speaks of the foreignness of exile.

And though the children often did well, got American educations which qualified them for a move into the mainstream, they early accepted—and accept—English as their means of communication. Dialogue between parents and children, if it doesn't cease, takes place in 2 languages; children become translators, experts in the new culture, which the parents haven't quite learned, haven't quite come to terms with. Prevailing American attitudes make it difficult for adolescents to continue to live in terms of a "foreign" home culture, to accept their parents expectations, and so forth. That is, we observe among present-day immigrants, many of whom come from situations of horror and genocide, what we saw among the refugee immigrants of the 30s, 40s and 50s. Many of these people had held on to hope against hope, expecting splendors of every sort once they had arrived at their safe havens. Reality rarely lived up to expectations. In Columbus, some survivors who came in the early 50s, I recall, experienced severe depressions and had to be hospitalized.

Bronka thought that being reunited with her mother, with 2 of her siblings and their families, would solve all problems. It did not. And though her book shows good humor and resilience, and she made proof of such qualities in her life, she remained a thoroughly disappointed and depressed person. However, her memoir, placed in a larger context, helps us to think about a variety of broader issues that still have relevance for all of us.