

Reaching back to earliest memories

How far can we reach back to our earliest memories? The risk in such distant exploration is that what we seem to remember was in fact told us by our parents in late evening chats to become our own memories. Even if the memories were our own the parental retelling has embellished them. Still it is worth digging deep into our distant consciousness for I believe the earliest memories when our brains were still developing last over a lifetime.

All three of my earliest are connected with the fear of abandonment, *my parents left me behind never to return, poor me was on his own, no one there to protect him*. These memories were episodic, not continuous, something happened then very long gaps followed in the narrative but the episodic were traumas so without too much psychological insight they have remained because in my young existence they were the real life threatening dramas. So I thought.

The first such memory, hard to believe but true, was when I was only eighteen months old. My father and his brother, plus their wives and toddler me, travelled to France only a few months before the outbreak of World War Two. Hungary was becoming ever more enmeshed with the Axis Powers, it was best to leave for a safe, civilised country like France, it seemed at the time. The brothers, my father was the senior in every way, had some kind of business contact near Lille, all of this I was told, to go into partnership for manufacturing glazing putty, one of the products from their own factory in Hungary. I expect around Lille there was a whole industry of glass houses to grow whatever the French appetites demanded, with so much glazing there was a great demand for putty. Why there would have been an opening for yet another putty manufacturer has puzzled me ever since but perhaps the brothers had a more advanced recipe for putty manufacture, perhaps their putty did not crack after the first winter, all conjecture never to be resolved. At any rate they had to travel around to set up the business and a little boy would have hindered their efforts so they left me in a residential *jardin d'enfants*. And the memory of this seeming abandonment is what has remained in me ever since. The only good thing that came out of it was, I have some sort of late pride in this, that my first words were uttered in French. Wish they had survived in my mind but have not. Ever since 1956 I have been a studious but faltering student of the French language.

In the *jardin* there were bigger boys than me, one them knocked me over hurting my head somewhere along a fence. I am quite clear about the fence. The boy was Russian this must have come down from my mother, yet another source of later pride – *injured by a Russian!*

With my head bandaged I had to stay in bed, one of those white tubular frame contraptions. I still remember seeing my socks drying on the end frame. Absolute misery, injured, left to strangers, what will happen to me? At last my

father and mother turned up, perhaps, no definitely, the greatest relief of my life. Rescued! Thereafter blank until the next memory.

Once War was declared, on 3rd September 1939, all foreigners associated in any way with the Axis were told by the French Republic to leave. I still have uncle and aunt's passport, joint then, stamped at the Gare de Modane, *Vu A La Sortie* on 5th September. This was the last train station in France before reaching Italy so we must have boarded the train at the Gare du Lyon in Paris then changed in Lyon itself. We travelled on the overnight train to Triest expect because fascist Italy was a place where you could go with a Hungarian passport. It was the discomfort of trying to sleep on the hard bench on this journey that seemed to go on and on, which has also remained with me. No recall of our pleasant stay in Triest, judging by the photograph on the quayside, has remained indeed nothing else until I was three years old or so.

My second trauma was also being lost. This must have been 1941 by which time we were back in Budapest in comfort and safety but the latter was an illusion. Still, then, a bourgeois existence was possible. Probably on a Sunday my father took me for a stroll in Margaret Island (named after a Scottish saint), a favourite park in the middle of the Danube. On the island there were long pleasant winding footpaths, shrubs, clumps of trees, flowerbeds and glimpses of the river on either side. My father must have met some people he knew and while they chatted I wandered off and was soon lost. No father anywhere! Here I was again on my own, will he ever find me? I laid down in sad anxiety on a bench, a stranger tried to reassure me. After a time a very irritated father found me, took me home dumping me in front of my mother '*here is your son*'. The quote is from my mother's memory.

After this generally a blank apart from another test of my father's patience when I failed to learn cycling on a brand new bike he bought me, well I was only four.

The next abandonment was more serious. By 1944 the illusion of safety was a longed for memory. The Germans marched into Hungary on 19th March 1944 and thereafter we were in constant danger. My mother and I moved to 22 Pozsonyi ut (road) to be with her brother, my father had long been sent to the Russian front, a single woman with a child felt safer nearer a man. One day we were marched with dozens of others to a nearby building, exactly where has been lost but recall there was a steep stair leading up from the front door of the modernist building. We were put up in a flat. A *razzia** ensued one day when they rounded up people in the building to be taken to the *Brickworks*, a staging post for deportation to the camps. My mother, who always had an acute sense of judging a situation, telephoned my uncle during the twenty minutes they were given to gather a few belongings. She must have told me to hide, no recollection of that, and I found myself age six all alone in the building with an old woman who somehow was also overlooked. We just sat on the steps not knowing what would happen next. After several

hours my uncle turned up, the one who went with us to France, to collect me. He had false identity papers and moved around town with confidence. Here I was rescued again. Yet another uncle bribed a policeman to take my mother out of the Brickworks and we were soon reunited surviving the siege of Budapest. I have often wondered what happened to the old woman, who rescued her?

* razzias were raids when those in charge threw a cordon around an area checking each persons' papers. On another occasion, this is entirely from what my mother told me, we were caught up in a street razzia. My mother with her usual aplomb said to someone guarding the cordon '*come on my son, we have nothing to do with this*' and walked out with me to safety.