

The Munk Family

This portrait of life in Brandýs nad Labem is drawn from an interview given by Jiri Munk, to Terezie Holmerova, January, 2006, centropa.org, recalling his childhood. In the late 19th century, there were 250 souls living in Brandýs who identified as Jews. Although they had achieved emancipation in 1860, allowing them to move to Prague (which many did), by 1930 only 60 of them remained. Others who were of Jewish origin, although they did not identify themselves as such, still remained in Brandýs; they, too, would go in the Nazi Transports. There were about 80 of them in all. The men in the Brandýs community were mostly in the textile business, and had worked their way up economically during the first Republic (1918-1938). However, Mr. Umrath, who was of Jewish origin, owned the largest factory in Brandýs, called Melicharka. His partner, Mr. Melichar, had been an ordinary blacksmith and locksmith, who made an important invention by improving seeding machines. He was poor, and made his machines by hand. When Mr. Umrath, who was wealthy, discovered this, he went to Mr. Melichar and they went into business together, creating the biggest farm machinery business in Czechoslovakia. The factory exported their machines all over Europe. Other prominent Jewish businessmen in the town were Adolf Munk, Jiri's father, who was a lawyer, and Dr. Laufer, his close friend.

There was no organized Jewish community in Brandýs. When the Munks were children, the community had already been secularized. There was no longer a visiting rabbi, nor was there any communal leadership. Munk recalls that a rabbi sometimes came from Prague to teach; however, he also thinks that there must have been some structured system, because the rabbi would have needed to be paid for his time. The community was neither Orthodox, nor Liberal, nor Conservative, and there is no record of anyone celebrating Passover. However, the community did observe the High Holy Days, and a rabbi was present for those.

The community consisted of the synagogue, which had originally been built in the Renaissance style, but had undergone reconstruction many times; the school, which continued to exist well into the 19th century; and the old cemetery, which was next to the synagogue. Jiri Munk has a recollection of walking around the synagogue with candles during Purim, which he recalled as a Jewish custom. He described the synagogue itself as "very beautiful – inside it has a vaulting roof like the sky, blue with stars." That is his only memory of the synagogue, and it is shared with his sister Helena. None of the Jews of Brandýs spoke any German, possibly as a result of the influence of Rabbi Bondi. However, in his extensive interview with Centropa, Jiri speaks of having a devout Catholic nanny who knew German; he called her Nanicka. When he was a child, the family was not religious, although he did attend some cheder classes both before and after the war. Christmas, however, was observed in the Christian manner. He attended Catholic services with his nanny in Brandýs and recalls a time when she pressed him forward to meet Cardinal Kaspar, who blessed him and gave him an autographed holy picture. He thought this might be one reason why he survived Terezin. He says that he only attended religion class during first and second grade; after that, it was prohibited by the Nazis. He enjoyed the classes because the rabbi gave him sweets. It appears that he attended class by himself, as he does not recall whether there

were any other Jewish children there or not. He remembers little about the classes, except reading from the Old Testament.

Adolf Munk, Jiri's father, was born in Brandýs in 1887 to a poor family. Although he was not expected to attend high school or university, he did go on to both. Adolf's sister and brother, Bedriska and Josef, did not go to high school. Since Adolf was not a particularly good student, he was sent to stay with his uncle, Rabbi Kohn, in Rychnov nad Kneznou. Afterwards, he studied at the Faculty of Law in Prague, where he also studied philosophy with Professor Masaryk.

In addition to his education, Adolf was an accomplished carpenter. He had a workshop where he made furniture – tables and chairs – and he gave away his products as gifts. He also painted. There was a studio in the attic from which he could see, through the window, a view over the Polabi landscape. Jiri remembers that his father painted beautifully, and taught the children some of these skills. Jiri's sister wanted to be a fashion designer, but never did become one. In all, they were a talented family. Adolf Munk's closest friend, with whom he spent a lot of time, was Dr. Laufer. Dr. Laufer had a famous brother, Josef Laufer (1891-1966), who founded Czech sports journalism and radio commentary; he was never molested by the Germans during the war. He was of a mixed marriage, which helped him, but he was also too well known from his radio soccer commentaries to be in danger. The doctor and his family were not so lucky; they all perished in Auschwitz.

Jiri's mother, Olga Nachodova, was born in 1897, ten years after his father. She was also from Brandýs, but while she was still young, her family moved to Smichov, near Prague. Her grandmother was Aloisie Eisenschimmel, whose husband's name was Jakob. Olga's other grandfather was Simon Nachod, who had a "smoke shop" in the ghetto; they lived at building Reg. No. 105. Olga had two sisters, Elsa and Quido. When they were young, a very strict aunt or governess took care of them. Olga recalled Archduke Karel (the late emperor) and King Karel I (1887-1922, and the last emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1916-1918), staying at the Chateau in Brandýs with their own regiment of dragoons. Olga thought they were beautiful "guys", but her aunt and governess refused to let her meet them.

Later, when they lived in Prague, and after their mother had died, they were cared for by their grandmother Aloisie. She observed Jewish customs, including the dietary law separating milk from meat. While living in Prague, the family also bought a house in Brandýs, which later became the Munk home. Olga's father, Nachod, also happened to be a lawyer, and since Adolf needed an apprenticeship and training, he began to work for him. In this way, Adolf got a wife, a law practice, and a house, all at the same time. Olga, who was very attractive, married Adolf on 27th September 1923; he was 36, and she 26.

Jiri Munk did not think that his parents were well suited to each other. Olga was unhappy in the small town and frequently took a taxi to Prague, where she liked to visit cafes. Adolf, however, was quite different; he enjoyed tranquility, and although he had bad legs, he liked to walk with his dog, Rek, from the road through the fields in the direction of the village of Zapy. Sometimes Jiri went with them, sometimes Dr. Laufer. There were no cars at that time. Jiri was unaware of his father's political opinions but thought that he was a social democrat.

Munk, therefore, spent his childhood in Brandýs. His earliest recollection is of his dog waking him in the summer by jumping into the house in the early morning through an open window and licking his head. The dog was the same age as Munk and they looked out for one another.

The house had a veranda covered with purple clematis, which was edible in the summer. It was located on the main avenue, which Munk thinks was called Masarykova. It had two floors, but only a ground floor at the back, and faced north-south so that it was always cold in the front. The law office was located on the ground floor; on the first floor there was an apartment with about five rooms and a kitchen; and Munk lived upstairs in a room with his nanny. His windows looked over the garden. There was a cellar built into the hill where coal was stored, and a garden opposite with very old trees; later, these were cut down to make way for an apartment block.

The family employed a cook, a Mrs. Klouckova, who was a stout lady from a poor family, as well as another who helped around the house, in addition to the nanny. The family ate breakfast and dinner together at a large, round wooden table. Since they were from a poor family, they were required to eat everything on the plate; Jiri recalls that Viktor, his brother, didn't like cauliflower soup. However, this lesson stood them in good stead during the war, when they learned to appreciate it.

Jiri had an older brother and sister. He described his brother, Viktor, as a greater rascal than he himself was. Viktor did not do well in school, which may have influenced Adolf's choice of Jiri to take over the law firm one day. Jiri's sister, Helena, was very pretty and considered one of the beauties of Brandýs. A lot of boys would turn their heads when she walked by. The young people used to go on "dates" to Stara Bolesla, where they bought ice cream at U Horacku. Once, one of Helena's dates bought ice cream for Jiri so that he wouldn't tell his parents when he got home. Helena, however, did not exploit her assets because her mother had told her not to "think that you're going to be some sort of beauty." Despite her prettiness, she was miserable because she had freckles.

Munk recalls an incident with his brother when he was chasing him around the dining room table; his brother fell and dislocated his arm, and needed to be taken to Prague by taxi. Viktor said it "hurt like hell." Dr. Laufer went with him. Viktor has a vivid recollection of being given the anaesthetic – when the mask was applied to his face, he screamed, "Dr. Laufer, help me!"

When Jiri was small, he did not associate much with other children. Every day, he went for a walk with Nanicka. They would go shopping together, where his nanny knew everyone and got all the latest gossip. They visited the Nobles' Garden near the Chateau, where Nanny would sit on a bench while Jiri played. Despite being encouraged to play with other children, he resisted. He remembers the visit of the Romanian king, Karol I, before the war: a delegation drove in front of the house wearing feathered helmets on their heads. He also remembers the last Sokol Slet, held in 1937-38, which was national and regional games held every six years in Prague, and a "milestone in the Slet movement." This included a visiting delegation of mainly Croats and Serbs, who formed a procession and marched to Prague.

Jiri did not attend kindergarten because he was with Nanny, but instead entered straight into elementary school. He was overweight when he began school, but quickly lost it. He did well in Grades 1 and 2 in most of his subjects. At one time, his father was called in and his teacher, Mr. Karhan, told him that his son had perfect pitch and should study music; he regretted that he never had the opportunity to do so.

He remembers Nanny collecting him from school, but he soon found this embarrassing and went home alone. The only other Jewish child in the school was Honza Lustig, who was a distant relative. Occasionally the Lustigs would come to visit; there were two Lustig families in Brandýs, one who had a textile plant and one who had a beverage plant.

Jiri made friends with one boy, who was called Homolac. They played together at the Munk house, often playing ping-pong in the garden. Jiri was not permitted to leave the house, so Homolac always came to him. Although Munk had been “thrown out of school,” Homolac’s parents still allowed him to go to his house for some time, even though it was beginning to become dangerous. Jiri does not recall any problems with other boys and was not picked on. Instead, he refused to fight, saying that his brother was four years older and big for his age.

From 1939-40, when Jiri would have entered the third grade, Jewish children were no longer permitted to attend school. He claimed that he was fortunate to have begun Grade 1 early in 1938, before the age of six; otherwise, he would not have even had two grades. At first a special teacher was hired to come to the house, but eventually she became too afraid to continue.

He recalls that before the war, “I was still small.” He didn’t think about other people, whether they looked at the Jews in a different way, and he didn’t feel different from others. He was aware that his family was better off than most, and that the other children in his class at school were very poor; often, they were barefoot. Sometimes he would give his lunch away. He felt no sign of anti-Semitism from the other children; that did not begin until the Germans came. His father, who enjoyed a good reputation as a lawyer who helped the poor, is remembered there still.

After the war, Jiri went into third year at school. He couldn’t read or write properly and was missing four grades; he also did not know grammar, math, or the rudiments of education. Even at university, he hadn’t learned fractions and had to compensate for the little schooling that he had had during his childhood.

During the communist regime, when there were great changes throughout Czechoslovakia, he had great difficulty finding work. However, he lived through the Russian occupation, and at his retirement took an interest in philosophy.

Whilst many Jews changed their names and allegiances to avoid any link with Judaism, Munk was an exception. In or about 1959, he married a girl from the Synek family, who were publishers from Schweik. She had been registered as Catholic in the hope that it would help her in life; however, she had also been in Terezin and was one of the “kinderheime.” This was a particularly poignant connection between them. She had been one of the children encouraged to write poems and draw in the camp, under the remarkable direction of Frieda Decker Brandýs, and was one of the last surviving children. Her drawings and poems are now preserved in the extraordinary exhibition and book, *Butterflies don’t live here*