

Name: **Peter (Hans Jacob) Reiser**

Date of Birth: April 4, 1922

Birth Place: Prague, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic)

Parents: Richard Reiser and Minnie Reiser Samek née Brandl

Siblings: the late Stefan David Reiser, 1923-1948

Children: Two

Grandchildren: One

Peter and Stefan were born into an affluent industrialist family in Prague. The paternal family had lived in Bohemia for many generations. It was reported that the origins were in Cologne, Germany. The maternal family came originally from the Burgenland, the easternmost province (and renowned wine producer) of Austria, bordering Hungary. As a legacy from the Austro-Hungarian Empire most Jews in Bohemia and Moravia spoke German at home and Czech to the servants and on the street. Peter and Stefan were bilingual by age 3.

Most of the Reiser family lived in a 6 story (by American count) apartment building in a central area of Prague, next to the City Park. Richard's family lived on the top floor, with his cousins' families occupying the next two lower floors and the family businesses office below that. The family owned a malt factory in a suburb of Prague, two brickyards, a 750 acre estate in the country and other real estate. Grandfather Robert was also chairman of the supervisory board of the largest paper mill in Central Europe, located in southern Bohemia. Grandmother Ada Reiser was the youngest daughter of the family that owned the paper mill. For several years grandfather was president or chairman of the Czech produce exchange. Robert and Ada lived in a villa in the best residential quarter of Prague. The Reiser family enterprises were run by grandfather and four other family members, including Richard.

On mother's side the Brandl and Tauber families owned a winery outside Prague, but no vineyards. They all lived in a large country home with tennis courts, stables for horses and large gardens. Mother was the middle child of seven siblings. She was considered a beautiful woman with bright blue eyes and dark hair. Her father Albert died in 1928, and was one of the few family members not later affected by the Holocaust. After his death Grandmother Otilie moved to the vicinity of her eldest daughter in Baden, a well-known resort near Vienna. As public schools were excellent, based on the Austrian school system, which vied with France to be the best in Europe, there were only very few private schools based primarily on religion or foreign languages. The boys went to public German language schools first, but were after 4th grade switched to Czech schools for several years, and again back to German.

Things began to unravel in 1935 after Peter and Stefan were sent to separate summer prep schools in the south of England to perfect their English. After they returned mother told them

that father had left them, they divorced and he emigrated with a new wife to Singapore. Apparently grandfather paid him off and disinherited him, but no written proof exists.

Anti-Semitism was not felt in Prague until the Germans annexed Austria in the Spring of 1938, and the Sudetenland, the German speaking part of Bohemia, in the Fall of 1938. It started to appear in the schools and Mother decided to terminate the boys' education. Most of the Austrian family members and later those from southern Bohemia came to Prague, but still believed in Chamberlain's "Peace in our Time."

It looked more and more that Hitler would also annex the rest of Czechoslovakia, and everybody was aware of the way Jews were treated in Germany and Austria. The families started to look for emigration destinations. But by then most countries were closed. Earlier attempts by the family to convince grandfather to sell everything and emigrate by using excellent business connections, especially in Switzerland and South America, were not used as he insisted: "I have always paid my taxes, nothing will happen to us." The richest Jewish family in Czechoslovakia, investment bankers with large industrial holdings, who were close friends, did just that. But grandfather was adamant; he must have rued these words later. Mother tried many consulates for immigration permits, but to no avail.

The Jewish Agency for Palestine, the Jewish self-government within a government, started to assemble a transport to Palestine. Although the Balfour Declaration of 1917 promised the Jews a Homeland in Palestine, under pressure from the British owned oil companies in Arab countries, the Mandate government limited immigration certificates to only 1500 a month, a pitifully low number. Yet the transport (named "Black Rose" after the office building where it was located), started taking shape. Two siblings of mother and their families and Peter and Stefan were registered, altogether 11 family members. Mother did not register, as she wanted to stay to take care of her mother, who by that time was disabled and could not travel. Mother's companion, Dr Julius Samek, then stayed because of her.

The German Army marched into Prague on March 15, 1939. After tearful family goodbyes the family group left on April 30. Everybody was allowed 10 kg (22 lbs) baggage and 10 Reichsmark, about \$4 in those times. The Gestapo agents (German "Secret State Police") who processed the group actually weighed the luggage, but otherwise did not in any way assault anybody. All gold jewelry was confiscated. The passengers were loaded into 3rd class passenger cars that were sealed and took an overnight trip to Vienna. There the cars were shunted onto a siding alongside the Danube River, next to two Yugoslav side wheel steamers, and all passengers were transferred. The steamers started down the Danube. After a short trip the ships landed in Bratislava (Pressburg), Slovakia, and more refugees came on board. All in all there were about 650 people on the transport. Accommodations were very tight, most people could not find a berth and slept in shifts, or in the common rooms.

After a few days the ships crossed the border into Yugoslavia, and everybody rejoiced that the ships had left the German occupied territories. A week later the ships landed in Sulina, a small Rumanian Black Sea port in the Danube Delta. There another ship awaited the transport but was not ready, it took another two weeks before the 650 could board. The ship was an 1800 tons

rustbucket named Frossoula, under a Panamanian flag of convenience and what looked a Greek pirate crew.

The whole trip took 127 days, a long odyssey, too long to narrate here. After a stay in the quarantine station in Beirut everybody was transshipped on high seas onto another ship that came from Poland with 800 refugees. The Tiger Hill was beached in Tel Aviv on September 3, 1939, the first day of World War II. Almost everybody was caught by the British Police and was bused to the largest Army base. All were fed, photographed for identity cards, and were released after 10 days into the hands of the Jewish Agency. They took us to another camp, gave everybody clothing and tried to find jobs, but these were scarce.

After working in agricultural jobs for a while Peter and Stefan were given shelter by mother's oldest sister Hanna and her husband Dr Oskar Sgalitzer who had some money outside the German sphere and was able to rent an apartment on Mt. Carmel in Haifa. Hanna became the boys' second mother. Both boys found jobs in Haifa, but materials became scarcer due to the war. In March 1942 both enlisted in the Royal Engineers of the British Army. The unit was a Port Operating Company, which after basic training operated ports in the Red Sea, Egypt and other North African ports. When both boys were stationed in different ports in Libya in 1944 they had already heard about the atrocities in the extermination camps. As the company was exclusively manned by Jews from Palestine the concern was of course very serious. Peter and Stefan were very concerned about the family, especially mother, and the grandparents.

After VE Day the boys were informed by the War Department that mother was alive and on the way back to Prague. Sister Hanna contacted her at last and found out that their mother perished in the camps. Later information also revealed that mother's husband Dr Samek, both Reiser grandparents, several cousins, aunts and uncles, and all older siblings of the grand-parents perished. According to a report that mother received both grandmothers walked hand-in-hand into the gas chambers. Mother married Dr. Samek sometime in 1940. He was a dermatologist with a very good practice and was in his mid-thirties already an assistant professor at Prague Charles University. First both were deported to Theresientstadt, the Nazi "Transit Camp" in Bohemia, and then to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex in Poland. Samek was sent to the Auschwitz hospital and mother, who had worked in the Jewish Community clinic before deportation, claimed she was a nurse and was also sent to the hospital. That allowed her slightly better rations than the other inmates

After a while in the camp she accidentally met her first cousin Fritzi Geiringer and her daughter Eva. Mother was able to smuggle some food to them. At one "selection," when prisoners were sorted between those that could work and those that were sent to the gas chambers, mother was able to save Fritzi from the gas by standing up to the SS guards claiming: "she is strong, she can work!" Mother was a most courageous woman, in the sense of moral courage, standing up for right, for justice. She was like that all her life, but in the camp it might have easily cost her her life. But her bearing and the bright blue eyes might have also played a role. She claimed she also saved others.

After all were liberated from the concentration camps it took some time to find alive relatives who were dispersed in several DP (displaced persons) camps. Transportation was in disarray,

and it took weeks to reach hometowns, which might also have been totally destroyed. Many survivors from the eastern camps reached home via Russia and Black Sea ports, or even Vladivostok in eastern Asia and a many weeks voyage by ship to Europe. But finally the tragedy of the immense losses of relatives became a reality.

In 1947 Peter met Rita Klahr and they got married in January 1949. Son David was born in November 1949, and Gad in November 1953. Rita had lost her parents in the Holocaust. Her own story of life in Nazi Germany is also published in this series. Peter, having served in the British Army, was able to get an immigration certificate for mother and she came to Haifa in 1947. Sister Hanna of course was also able to take her in. On May 14, 1948 at midnight, Israel came into being, and the four surrounding Arab countries attacked on all fronts. Even before that the Jewish leaders started preparing for war and all persons in certain age groups were registered for service. Peter, Stefan and Rita were drafted, Peter into the Navy and Stefan wanted the Army armored corps, but there was no armor, so he was posted to mine laying. Both were immediately promoted to lieutenants. Peter became Chief Fuel Supply Officer, whose main task was to find fuel for the Navy, no easy task after the Arabs closed the pipeline from Iraq. Stefan was posted to a brigade in the North at the Lebanese border. Rita posted to a raiding party of the Army, one of 5 girls in a squad of 40 men.

In July 1948 the United Nations arranged for a cease fire and all the mines on the border had to be removed. On July 9 Stefan, 25 years old, apparently stepped on a mine and was killed on the spot. He was buried in Nahariya on the same day and Peter was notified through Army channels. When he brought the awful news to his mother, the tragedy of the wars really came to bear on the family and especially on mother who suffered through most of the war and then lost one of her sons, whom she had saved from the worst. It took mother several years to recover from these tragedies. A few days later the truce was broken and the mines were replaced.

After the war cousin Fritzi, who lost her husband and a son, met Otto Frank who lost his wife and daughters Anne and Margot in the Holocaust. According to some reports he was saved from a worse fate because of his distinguished service as a German officer in World War I. They married and settled in Basel, Switzerland. After Anne's diary was discovered in Amsterdam and published, Otto established the Anne Frank House Fund from the royalties of the book, and later from the play. At the House young people from all over the world meet. It is still an extremely successful undertaking. Both Otto and Fritzi worked almost exclusively for the House. Fritzi answered every letter that was sent to them. Both or separately frequently traveled by train between Basel and Amsterdam, a long overnight trip. They lived very frugally, the money from the royalties was never used for personal expenses; both lived on social security and from German Reparation pensions.

In gratitude for saving Fritzi, Otto sent mother money so she could travel to Europe and visit them. Both also came to visit the family in Nahariya, and some photos of that visit are enclosed. Otto was very good with children, Peter and Rita's sons David and Gad, then in their preteens, loved him for his attitude, even though they had trouble communicating with him, because their German was spotty. Fritzi spoke good English. Otto met with several school classes where his speeches, and questions and answers were translated. Otto died on August 19, 1980, at age 91.

After his death Fritzi moved to her daughter Eva Schloss in London, where she died on October 2, 1998 at age 93. Eva wrote a book "Eva's Story" (St Martin's Press) where she recounts her stay in Birkenau and her and her mother's return to Amsterdam, via Russia. Mother is mentioned (misspelled Mini) several times and there are two pictures of her in the book. The late actress Audrey Hepburn once said of Otto: "He was a beautiful looking man, with a very fine, almost transparent face, very sensitive. He struck me as somebody who had been purged by fire. There was something so spiritual about his face. He had been there and back."

In 1965 Peter, then an export manager, was sent by his employer with family to the United States to further its export there. After the contract ended the family decided to stay in the States, and after several jobs with transfers from New York to Atlanta, Quebec, London, and back to Quebec, Rita and Peter settled in retirement in Asheville.

[ADDENDUM January 26, 2005 from Peter Reiser]

Text of letter Peter received from Eva Schloss concerning Peter's mother Minnie (pictured in the pre-war picture with Peter, Stefan and her mother)

"What you asked about Minnie, you can partly read in my book. But through her husband Dr Julius Samek, who was a skin specialist in Auschwitz/Birkenau and treated many Germans, Minnie got work in Birkenau hospital where she attracted attention by Mengele. She was even in Birkenau a very attractive and strong and positive woman, and Mengele liked that. So she was able to ask him favors here and there, so for instance she asked him to look my mother over again and save her. And that what he did. She also hid other women when there was a selection. She got me at the end into the hospital block, and protected us when there were people taken away from the camp and transported to other camps. Most of those people did not survive as they had to wait till the end of the war to be liberated. I hope this information will be useful." Eva

(Note: Eva [born 1929], who lives in London, was the daughter of Fritzi Geiringer [1905-1998] a cousin of my mother Minnie Reiser Samek [1901-1984]. After the war the widowed Fritzi married the widower Otto Frank [1889-1980], father of Margot Frank [1926-1945] and Anne Frank [1929-1945].)