

The following extracts from “Greta’s Story” have been edited and compressed to explain, briefly, how the Jelinek family escaped separately from Czechoslovakia to England, and were safely reunited at Brook Lodge Albury in 1939:

I was born in Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, in the world-famous spa town of Karlsbad (Carlsbad), now Karlovy Vary, where I lived with my parents Theodor and Marie Jelinek and my two older sisters Lotte and Ilse. Our house was known locally as the house of the “three little girls” “drei mädchen”. I had such a happy childhood.

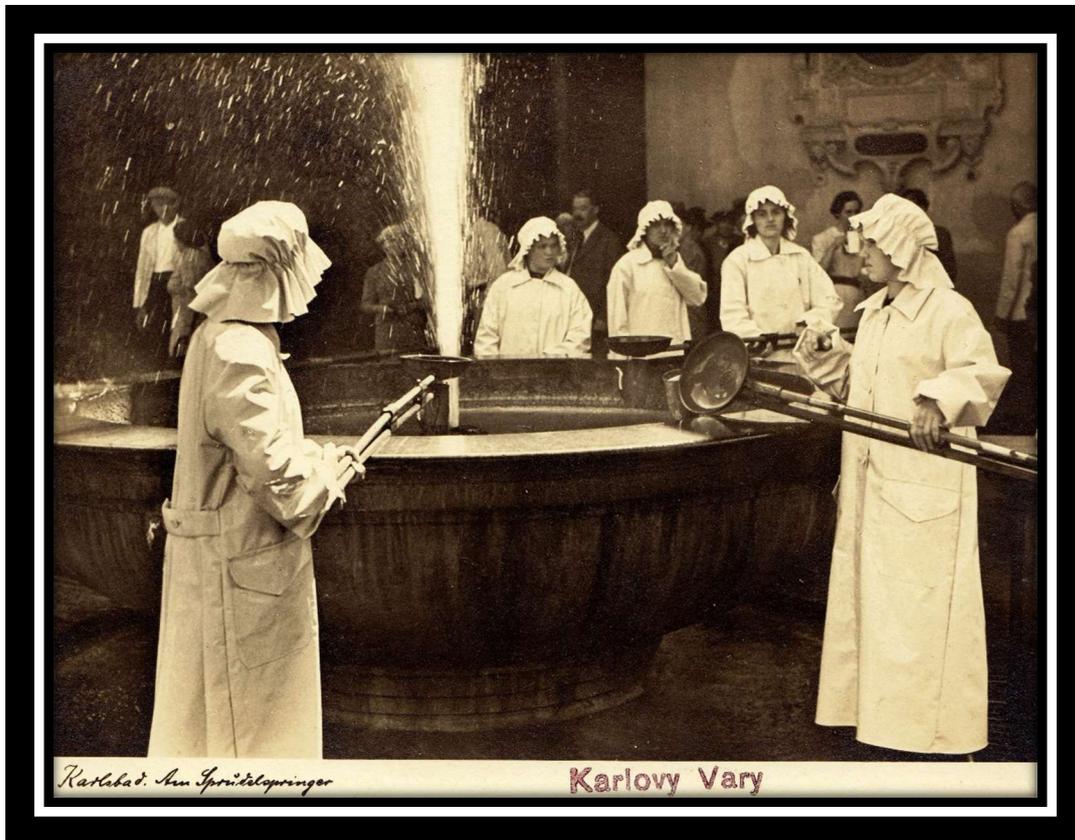


Greta on her fifth birthday with Lotte and Ilse

Part of Karlsbad was geared only to tourism and the season was from May to September. The rich and famous came to take the healing hot waters and all along the promenade were little wells individually encased. Girls in white uniforms, made of rubber for protection, ladled the hot spring water into special beakers for the visitors.

There were big beautiful hotels, and an opera house. High-class shops full of furs, jewellery, artistic needlework and high fashion lined the immaculate sand-covered promenade. A small river with white painted

railings ran alongside and an orchestra played in the morning and evening. It was all so beautiful!



The hot spring in Karlsbad

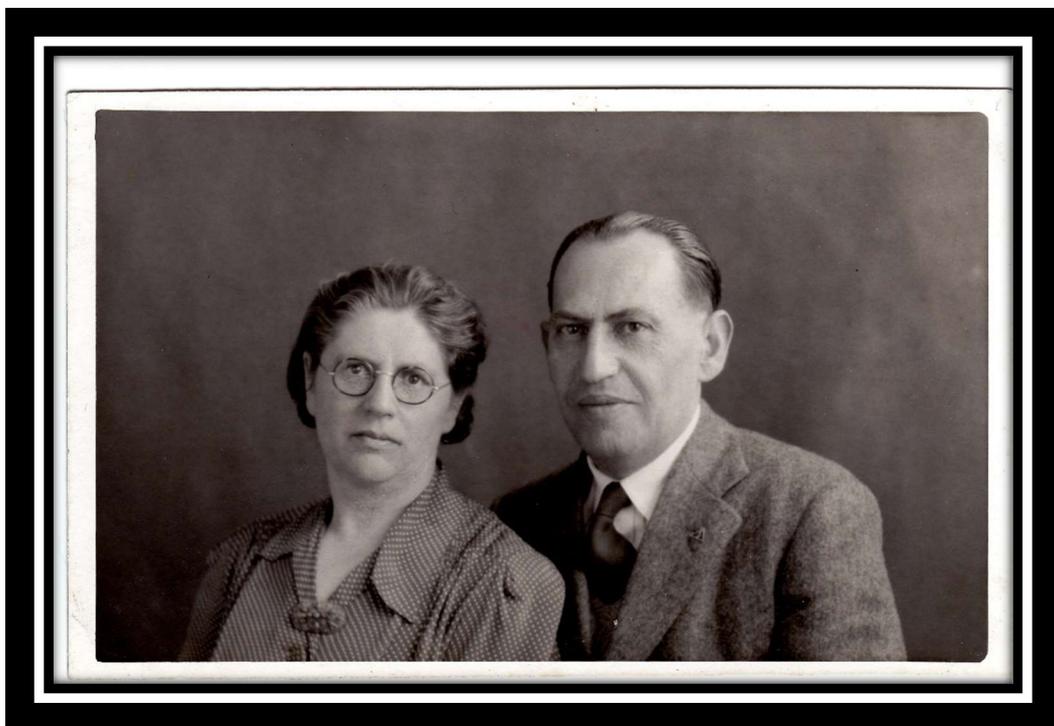
My family lived some way from the well-to-do part of Karlsbad, but it was still lovely as the whole town was surrounded by woods. My dad worked at a daily newspaper. There were two: one left-wing my father's and the other was the Nazi paper

In 1938 I was just 13 years old when the political hatred erupted. I lived in the part of Czechoslovakia called Sudetenland: my mother tongue was German, although it was compulsory to learn Czech at school. In September, of that year, my father sent my mother and us children to Prague for safety. We left with one suitcase. Hitler's army marched into the Sudetenland on 1st October. My father was lucky to have caught the last train out of Karlsbad, as had he stayed, he would have been sent to a concentration camp; he was a well-known "anti-fascist".

All the time we were in Prague we felt uneasy. Hitler claimed that he only wanted the Sudetenland, but we knew that he wanted all of Czechoslovakia.

On 15th March 1939, I was in the Wenzel Platz in the centre of Prague, when I saw so many German tanks. It was an unbelievable sight. The whole town was occupied! During the first few days of occupation everyone had to put out their flags so that it looked to the outside world how much the Germans were made welcome. Those who did not comply were arrested. My father had been helping fellow Social Democrats flee abroad, and as the occupation happened over night he was still in Prague. He knew the Gestapo would be after him so he and two of his friends took a chance to cross the Polish border illegally. After some difficulties they managed to reach the port of Gdansk and set sail for England

Meanwhile, my poor mother had to report to the Gestapo every day. She was very brave. They kept asking her where dad was, but in truth she did not know. She was not physically tortured, but the mental strain was immense. When one day in April an unsigned postcard arrived from England, we knew dad was safe. My mum destroyed the card immediately - but the Gestapo already knew about it.



“My darling mother and father”

It was at the end of April that I was told to get ready to leave Czechoslovakia. A children's transport (Kindertransport) had been given permission to leave for England, and I was one of the chosen ones. It was with mixed feelings that I left Prague. My mother and sisters came to the station to see me off. All I kept telling myself was that I must not cry....

Although I estimated that there were about 100 children on that train, the silence was eerie. The only time we spoke was when the friendly escorts came around to offer us food and drink. As we neared the German border, we were told not to speak a word of German. There were six of us children who came from the Sudetenland, and spoke German, unlike the rest, who came from Prague and Pilsen and only spoke Czech. As we filed past the customs officials, we had to open our cases. When it came to my turn to have my case inspected, the customs officer opened it and on top, to my horror, was my favourite book written in German. He spoke to me, but I would not answer. As I shut my case, he bent down to me and said "I wish you all the luck and may God be with you" and I saw that he had tears in his eyes.....

The next time we left the train was at the Hook of Holland. We were given some money and told to buy whatever we liked. I felt sure that I would see my father soon, so I bought two boxes of pipe tobacco. I felt so pleased that I would now be able to give him a little present. The crossing to England was very rough and we were all sick! When we arrived at Harwich, we took the train to London's Liverpool Street station. I looked for my dad, but he did not even know that I was coming to England.

About ten of us children had no-one to collect them, so we were taken to the YWCA. One morning as I was writing a letter to my mother - in walked my dad. Oh, the joy of it! So much had happened since we had last seen each other, and I could not stop talking. He told me that he was living in a hostel near Guildford and that the authorities had found it difficult to trace him. He was told that he would not be able to take me back with him as I was a girl. He only received half a crown a week allowance and had spent nearly all his money and savings on the fare to London, so he would not be able to come again, but he was assured that a nice friendly family would soon be found for me to live with.

It must have been July, when I received a letter from my mother telling me that she and my sisters were in London. I wanted to see them

immediately, but I was now living in Birmingham, and had to wait for someone to take me. It was so lovely to see them all again!

My mum and sisters joined my dad at Brook Lodge in Albury, and I desperately wanted to be with them! After much pestering and with dad on my side, we were finally all reunited at Brook Lodge.

The hostel where my family were living had beautiful grounds, and as I did not have to spend much time in the bedroom, the squashed conditions did not worry me. That summer must have been one of my best, and the weather was also good. Not far away was Albury Heath and as we were quite a gathering of young boys and girls, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. We had English lessons in the morning and the rest of the day was ours. I remember Albury Heath so well. It was there that I learned to ride a bike, but I was never a very competent cyclist and every time a bus or car passed, I would jump off the bike! You see the lanes were all so very narrow.



Brook Lodge Albury

The men who were not too old had to go to work on the farms. It supplemented their allowance by another half a crown. Dad received

five shillings a week. Not being used to manual work, he would come home exhausted. The women did all the cooking and cleaning.



Greta on the left - happy times at Brook Lodge

On 3rd September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany and we knew the nice time would have to come to an end sooner or later.....



Greta Joined the WAAF in 1943

If you would like to hear more of “Greta’s Story” a digital recording is available in the Reading Room of the Imperial War Museum, together with a written transcript and other documents.

Greta's Story is at <https://www.iwm.org.uk/search/global?query=Greta+Jelinek>

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