



Vlad stroking ICBC boat, Head of the River, 1959

Fr Vlad Felzmann was born in Prague in 1939 and came to London at the end of World War II. He studied Civil Engineering at Imperial College London and received his Doctorate in Divinity (summa cum laude) from Lateran University in Rome.

Vlad has led retreats, lectured and spiritually guided people ever since his priestly ordination in 1969. He speaks English, Czech, Spanish, Italian, French and Latin. He enjoys friendship, prayer and writing. He keeps as fit as possible and does press-ups daily to the total of each year of his life since conception.

He is the Canary Wharf Multifaith Chaplaincy's dedicated Catholic Chaplain and is also Catholic Chaplain for sport, CEO of The John Paul II Foundation for Sport (which he launched in 2011) and is a trustee of The Passage, CaAPA and Genesis. A social entrepreneur, Vlad founded and directed two different pilgrimages to Lourdes and founded the Spiritual Peer Educational Centres SPEC, LOFT and SPECeast.

£3.00



ALL SQUARED

A Journey to Eternity

The early years: 1939-59



Professor Monsignor Vladimír Felzmann
(aka Father Vlad)

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**[Me Old China As in Cockney rhyming slang “China
plate, mate.]**

By Professor Monsignor Vladimir Felzmann
(aka Father Vlad)

Introduction

The first two chapters of “A Journey to Eternity” tell the story of the first part of my life. Given its content, I have been advised to have it published posthumously. You, MOC, are invited to read it before or after “Life Squared – a guide to life in an accelerating age”, in which I set out the lessons life has taught me. I plan to have it published before Christmas.

In this, the first part of my autobiography, I set out the events – the times and tides, favourable - and prima facie - not so favourable (*) that have shaped my life.

You, MOC, might notice how important has been my prayer life and my Taurine stubbornness – friends would call it resilience – in getting me where I am. Keeping on keeping on can make a difference, no matter how mediocre the raw materials may have been.

This is a tale with a tail that sweeps up space and time, leaving a trail that seems to have done some good – and although I have been witness to the tragedy of the Second World War, I have managed to keep my cool, and my life. I have to say, mainly it has been great fun.

I was born in Prague in 1939 and came to England in 1946.

After 1939, It is tantalizing that there have been many 9s in my life.

Born	1939
Joined Opus Dei	1959
Ordained Priest	1969
Given roles of Chaplain to Young People, and Pilgrimage Director	19 89
Awarded Papal ‘Prelate of Honour’ - hence ‘Monsignor’ title	1999
Appointed Visiting Professor at St Mary’s University Twickenham	2019

Mise-en-scène

Me? I am like any old china. A bit chipped, its glaze worn. Not yet cracked.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Father - Adolf Felzmann	1909-1961
Mother - Jiřina [née Slavík] Felzmann	1910-1996
Sister - Jarmila	1937 –
Sister - Georgina [Baptised Jiřina]	1941-1995
Brother – John [Baptised Jan]	1946-1967

Ava Pospíšilová– our wartime [sadistic] Nanny.

Libuše Kalinová – our Nanny who replaced Ava

Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov - a Russian Red Army general. During World War II, he fought in the Battle of Moscow and later was captured attempting to lift the siege of Leningrad. He defected to Nazi Germany. As the war drew to its end, he changed sides again and ordered his troops to aid the Prague uprising against the Germans. He then tried to escape to the Western Front, but were captured,, tried for treason and, after being subject to severe and prolonged torture hanged with piano wire, with a hook in the back of his skull.

Milos Novak - our mother’s first cousin - and his wife Hanna .

Opus Dei – which I joined in 1959, applied to leave in 1981 and managed to leave in 1982.

Zdeňek Mančal – stepfather of Dagmar, the daughter of the Novaks.

Vladimir Slavik – known as Ajík – one of my mother’s brothers.

Ivan Stepanovich Konev - Soviet Field-Marshal, the first ‘Allied’ commander to enter Prague.

Father Tanner – curate/assistant Priest to Canon Pritchard, PP of St Simon Stock, Putney

The Early Years. 1939 – 1949

BIRTH INVASION AND WAR

Having been expected on the 20th of April 1939, I was born - weighing 4760 grams [10lb 7 ½ ozs.] (Sic) - in Prague at 14.30 on 6th May 1939. (**) Slightly strangled, slightly blue, initially I did not cry. However, by 15.00 I was fine.

Until he arrived at the hospital, my father imagined he had another daughter, as the German-speaking midwife had not made herself clear. “Je to hošiček” sounded – down the dodgy line, - like “Je to holčička”.

Probably due to my forceps delivery I – the second of what eventually turned out to be four children- had, according to my mother’s journal, no chin, elongated skull, small slanting eyes and no nose. I had no hair: a premonition of my expanding forehead ever since I was 21.

(*) as we shall see in the subsequent chapters.

(**) Soon after my mother stopped breastfeeding me, I was inadvertently given tainted formula milk and lost weight. In the autumn of ’39, I got a bout of bronchitis. Bottom line, by the age of one my weight was average.

On the 25th May 1939, in the Prague Carmelite Church, wherein you can see the baby Jesus of Prague, I was baptised Vladimir – after my maternal grandfather, Vladimir Slavik and an uncle; Jan – after my mother’s other brother; Antonin – after the Monsignor, a friend of the family, who Baptised me [and died in Auschwitz]; and Vaclav [Wenceslaus] – the patron saint of Czechoslovakia.

“Felzmann” means ‘stoneman’. “Slavik” is Nightingale. This might explain why, though not tone-deaf, I am tone dumb. [A bit like the English cricket team, I know what I should do, but cannot do it.]

Thanks to Jarmila, I discovered that our mother kept a staccato journal of early wartime events. Whether she wrote them for her parents who were in London throughout the war (*), or for us, her children, in case she was killed, I do not know. However, thanks to her, some of the facts are clear.

Aged six weeks, I was taken on – what was then - a four-hour journey by car to Jindřichuv Hradec where my mother’s family owned a spacious house on the bank of a lake – well actually a large pen-pond used to breed carp – named Vajgar. We lived there until the Gestapo evicted us in 1943.

Due to change in administrative re-arrangements following the German invasion of the Sudentland in 1938, Jindřichuv Hradec had been renamed “*Neuhaus in Böhmen, in Mähren* [Newcastle in Bohemia, Moravia.] Thus sounded a bit barmy but turned out to be not much worse than “The London Borough of Bromley, Kent – where my mother eventually, towards the end of her life, lived.

Living under the Nazi ‘protectorat’ and with a sadistic nanny on the home front, my early years were swathed with fear.

I remember a number of events that, as you will notice, have a common emotional content. Fear. Though memory is creative, I believe they were real, potentially photographable.

One of the earliest is when, walking through a wood near Jindřichuv Hradec with our nanny Ava, there was a sudden rushing noise. Out into the clearing rushed two groups of men practicing a bayonet charge.

Then there was that sudden guilt-pang of glee, yet terror, after I had pushed my younger sister, Georgina's pram away from the path down – what seemed to me aged perhaps three - a steep embankment. It stopped in the tall grass. She was not hurt. I was not punished. Ava imagined the pram had slipped. Perhaps she felt guilty that she had left the pram and me momentarily alone.

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Later in life, I discovered that sibling rivalry could, indeed, start at a very early age. I knew the deed I had done was wrong yet the impulse – from who knows where inside me – had been there. There were at least two more instances of 'getting Georgie' - as she became known once we had landed in London. While still in Hradec, I threw a wooden train engine that hit Georgie on the head. Much to the annoyance of Jarmila, my mother excused me by saying I just wanted to share my toys with my little sister.

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A few years later, one evening in Prague – I must have been aged four – I received what seemed to me to have the mother of all hidings. I knew I deserved it. That afternoon I had been playing 'gee-gees' with Georgie. She, being the horse, had a rope around her neck. I, the rider, was running behind her. As she trotted past a door, I swung the rope over the door handle and pulled her up. Her face turned purple. My mother, hearing the noise, swept into the room, released Georgie and said she would tell my father what I had done. She did.

While still back in Hradec, I remember the terror on my mother's face as she came into the room where I had been watching my father's four rowing – racing – on the lake. In my excitement, I had started to bang the window with my forehead. Suddenly the glass shattered. My mother saw my blood-smearred face and, thinking the worst - panicked. In the event, the cuts, though deep – and the scars still show on my upper-lip (*), nose and forehead, were not as serious as they looked. My eyes were safe. I just remember my face being peppered with green powder; some sort of antiseptic I believe.

A few years ago, Jarmila reminded me that I had tried climbing up the 1942 Christmas tree and pulled it down. What impressed her was the efforts the adults made to snuff all the candles before the entire tree burst into flames. From that year on, all Christmas trees were tied to furniture fittings.

It was probably the following Christmas Eve that I had been sent upstairs to bed as my father and other members of the family stayed downstairs playing with my recently received clockwork train. I imagined I would never get it back as the last I saw of it that night was a figure eight track and the train racing round and round.

I think it was that winter when, having been warned never to touch metal when there was snow on the ground – and never to wee in the open as my Willy would freeze and fall off – I touched the rails on the bridge and peeled off a rectangle of the tip of my right forefinger. I did not cry. I felt a fool. Ava, giving me an accusing look, put a little bandage on it.

I never did try weeing outdoors in the winter.

(*) All this came back when, as a teenager, I tried to grow a moustache and the scar on my lip gave the attempt a lop-sided look – and my whiskers short shrift.

Perhaps because he got involved with the Czechoslovak Government in exile, based in Putney, SW15, my grandfather (*) was deemed an ‘Enemy of The Reich’ and so on 10th February 1942, the Gestapo came to confiscate our Hradec House. They sealed most of the rooms and painted a large V on the outside wall. However, we were permitted to stay in a small section of that large house until December 1943.

Apparently, as they were removing valuables from the part of the house we could use and storing them in the sealed-off ones, I went up to the Gestapo officer and gave him one of my toys – a mounted soldier. “Take that!” it seems I said. Years later, my mother reminded me that the man was surprised by defiance – and how proud she felt by my gesture of solidarity.

While cleaning out a room, they discovered a loaded Colt revolver, high up, out of sight on one of the ledges. The rest of the firearm collection had been dumped in Vajgar. When next the pond was drained, a few rifles appeared sticking out of the mud. Friendly, non-Nazi-collaborative fishermen disposed of them, swiftly.

Years later, my mother told us how the Gestapo officer had said, “do not worry. You may be executed but your children will be safe. The Fuehrer has plans. He needs your children. As soon as we have won the war, we will eliminate the Poles – *Untermenschen*, horrible people. Their country will be re-populated by you Czechs. Your people know how to work. Not like the Poles. Your children will live there.”

In the event, as the Nazis were trying to win over the population – and, perhaps as my father was called Adolf – and Slavíks were held in high regard in Hradec – my parents escaped execution. However, the family did lose the house and all its contents.

(*) In 1939, he had been in Brussels as Czechoslovak Ambassador to the Benelux countries and escaped before the Wehrmacht reached Belgium.

In 1943, five wagonloads of furniture were moved out ‘to be used to furnish castles on the Rhine after the war.’

(After the war, my grandparents, back in Hradec, were given back their house. In ’46, a few bits and pieces were returned. However, after the 1948 Communist take-over, my grandparents were ‘persuaded’ to give everything they had to the local museum. In 1963, the Communists razed the building to the ground. Where it stood, there is now a ring road.)

Turfed out by the Nazis, just after Christmas 1943, we moved to a rented flat on Štěfanikovo Náměstí, 3 – Praha 3, the bottom of Kinsky Park. After the war - and we shall soon see why - it was renamed Náměstí Sovětských Tankistů: Russian Tank Corp Square. [Now ‘Namesti Kinskych’]

The block of flats had deep foundations. That side of the Náměstí – or Square – had been built on what had been the Hladová Zed’ or Hunger Wall; built between 1360 and 1362 by order of Charles IV to give men work and thus income during the famine. I remember them as very deep – with long stairways – and dark. The cellar walls separating the houses had been knocked down in case one of the buildings was – by mistake – bombed. The aim of the Allies was not to attack Prague, but the aim of the US Bombers was not always perfect; as Switzerland more seriously and Prague somewhat lightly found out.

Those cellars were very handy in April-May 1945. Our family and neighbours slept there as General Vlasov and his troops entered Prague and the street fighting erupted.

Before those heady days, whenever the air-raid siren sounded – always night-time – we were told to get out of bed and in the dark get dressed before descending those cellar stairs. The secret was to stack my clothes in the correct order on the bedside chair. I used to be faster than my sisters were and usually was ready first. In the mooring I would see how much ‘window’ – the silver strips of metal the bombers dropped to confuse radar – I could find. Their texture told us which air force had passed over Prague that night.

The plan had been to place us children for the duration of the rest of the war with our mother’s first cousin Milos Novak and his wife Hanna who owned a farm in Nebřeňice – half an hour by train, southeast of Prague. There, there would always be enough food.

One afternoon, as I sat alone on the seat of a two-horse wagon in the farmyard, the horses started to move. I grasped the reins and pulled them back. For that, I was praised for being very brave and strong. Maybe it was because praise was so rare that that event was etched deep into my memory. Maybe my mother, frustrated by the way things had turned out for her thanks to Hitler, felt dead inside, and was somewhat parsimonious in affirmations.

That was before Ava scuppered our parents’ plan. She wanted to be back in Prague where – as I discovered during a walk one afternoon, she had a boyfriend working in - I remember a very smelly - garage. She upset our hosts by accusing them of not feeding us properly, so we ended up in Prague with just occasional forays to that farm to top up nutrition and prevent loss of weight as the war dragged on.

On one of our trips there, I was careless and had my right-hand middle finger slammed in the train door. The nail turned black. When back in Prague our doctor pulled it off with a set of steel pliers. It taught me to be careful with train doors. OK so far!

One hot autumn day- the wheat had just been harvested – I was taken by cart to inspect an auxiliary fuel tank jettisoned by a US warplane. It smelt of petrol. We were told that - unfortunately - down the road, another tank had been found. A local yokel, trying to see what was inside, lit his lighter and blew himself up. Another useful lesson early learnt.

PRAGUE, FAMILY LIFE AND DICING WITH DEATH

Though my parents – products of their culture – were very un-tactile: a kiss on the forehead before bedtime, a cross on the forehead to bless us on leaving the house, were the only expressions of affection I and my sisters remember – they were keen to communicate their culture.

Afraid that I looked like developing Pigeon toes, I had to walk and walk with my feet pointing outwards - walking Duck feet-wise. Consequently, even though I am bandy-legged, [my parents could think of nothing to ‘cure’ that] when I walk, my feet are parallel.

My parents wanted their son to be socially acceptable. As my ears were deemed to stick out too far – to look like bat ears - for many years, they were stuck back by Elastoplast overnight. A hairpin prevented my hair getting into my eyes and - for a few months - frosted glass on a pair of spectacles over my left eye taught my ‘lazy’ right eye to play its fair share. In my teens, I would be measured for a brace to straighten my teeth. I was too impatient to wear them long enough. Hence, my teeth are as they are!

Most Sunday mornings, while mummy and Ava, our Nanny, cooked and prepared lunch, our father would take Jarmila and me for long walks. It could be up the hill to Petřín. (*) It could be around the City to show us the sights and historical sites. He concentrated on explaining what they meant. After the war, when we were older, he explained it was in case he and mummy were killed, and we survived the war – and ended up in Poland – we would know something of our culture and history; and who we really are.

Not everything was doom and gloom in Prague. I remember –and I have been known to use the memory in my preaching – the Hall of Distorting mirrors [Ref ‘Life Squared’ for details]. Going swimming in The Lido was fun- seeing bare parts of bodies I had never see, not on strangers anyway.

The Funicular railway to Petřín was exciting. Dating back to 1851 when it used to work on water overbalance mechanism, its activity restarted in 1932 after being electrified and run up to the year 1965, when, due to massive landslips at Petřín hill it had to be interrupted for about 20 years. In 1985, it started again. If you are ever in Prague, well worth a trip, MOC.

When I heard that an employee at the local hospital had risked his life to steal the medicines that were there only for Germans but which my parents needed to cure me and my sisters of whooping cough, I remember swearing to myself that I would never allow myself to become addicted to cigarettes. That man had risked his life for just one of the cartons of 200 cigarettes my parents had wrapped in tinfoil just after Germany had invaded ČSR in March 1939.(**)

(**) I started smoking aged nine, I began inhaling aged thirteen. However, I gave up smoking every Lent. Thus, when aged 40 and I had buried two mothers who had died of lung cancer, I decided to quit, and it was painless.

Turning left from our flat and left at the next turning, we would - occasionally - walk towards the Carmelite Church. (**) There, high up on the right side, was the glass case containing the statue of the baby Jesus of Prague. His vestments were changed in step with the colours of the liturgy. How I admired – and was fascinated by – his elegance.

The Prague Astronomical Clock - or Prague Orloj - with its moving figures was a constant source of wonder. I was told that it was a medieval astronomical clock, installed in 1410, making it the third-oldest astronomical clock in the world, the oldest clock still operating.

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As soon as I could after the Velvet Revolution, I returned to Prague in April 1990. I felt uncomfortable, an emotion I had not expected. I soon realised it was faded fear. It reminded me of the morning smell of stale tobacco in a Pub or – when a boy – the top deck of a bus.

When I returned the following year, that feeling had evaporated.

(*) Ref ‘The Hall of Mirrors’ in ‘Life Squared’

(**) Karmelitska 9, Monastery of the Infant Jesus of Prague, Prague 118 00,

Prague was exciting – and beautiful. Perfect - before advertising – and hordes of foreign visitors taking advantage of its fine - and cheap - beer started to swarm. Its architecture is still magnificent. Well worth a visit, MOC.

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There were many happy moments before the war drew to its initially unexpected happy end with the victory of the Allies. However, it was the underlying emotion of fear that marinated the land of my heart all those years.

I remember how, while we were on a tram, my mother whispered to me “Don’t ever say that. It could get us killed”. I had seen a squad of Nazi soldiers marching by and I had blurted out “When I grow up, I am going to kill them all.” The few passengers on board froze, silent. Luckily – providentially – there was no Nazi sympathisers on board that day.

In my mind’s eye, I still see the three small, cardboard suitcases by the wall in the corridor by the entrance to our flat. They were a daily reminder of my life’s fragility. They contained clean underwear, just in case the Gestapo took us to an orphanage – on our way to Poland - and our parents to concentration camp. We Felzmanns had always to be clean. My mother made that crystal clear.

(**) Ref Dropping litter in ‘Life Squared’ and how that ‘daring to be different’ would stand me in good stead later on in life.

(***) To contribute to the War Effort, many office workers were forced to be physically creative. Dad worked at S. Vašak & Co in Maniny, now within the boundaries of Prague.

Underlining my tram mistake, those suitcases were a daily reminder to stay quiet and catch nobody’s eye. The D-Day landings and Russian advances on the Eastern Front made the Nazis more paranoid than ever. The best security – and I still believe this – is anonymity.

Neighbours were always a threat. Anyone could accuse anyone of spying or acting - even talking - against Germany. Sad to say people did just that; to remove a neighbour they objected to, or for a some financially profitable purpose. By the ends of the war, we children knew that silence – even when playing – was golden: a matter of life and death.

I grew up controlled. What was important was not what I felt I would like to do, but what had to be done to help my family get through. In wartime – and for fascists anytime – obedience is paramount. Until I left Opus Dei – though there was a gradual decline as I approached that watershed moment in my life - I always tried to obey; not only God but those who were – as I had been told – the transmitters of God’s will.

I remember how a mixture of fear, excitement and pride that I was trusted like an adult surged through my little body every night as my father locked the front door, drew the curtains and, removing a brick up the chimney, pulled out a greaseproof paper packet.

Opening up the map of Europe, he switched on our Telefunken Radio. He then tuned it into the BBC. On the right-hand knob there hung a piece of card. I carried a dire warning in two languages. How proud I felt that Czech was more concise than the German “To listen to foreign programmes is punishable by death.”

We Felzmanns would listen to see how the East and West fronts had moved the past 24 hours. My father used a red pencil for the east, blue for the west. I now thank God that those colours drew ever closer.

I still remember the German mantra on the local station. "Our heroic soldiers have withdrawn to previously prepared defence positions from which they will soon launch a crushing counter offensive." Moreover, that, even as the Soviet army had reached Berlin.

To survive – to try to survive – Ava, our sadistic Nanny, I learned to lie. A lie was always worth a try. Double or quits. I did my best, using wartime stratagems to camouflaging reality to avoid another new ladle or carpet-beater being christened with my name; an honour conferred of whichever child was the first to feel its contact with their behind. Typically, me.

Then came May 1945. On the 5th of May our 'uncle' - a good friend of the family - Jirka came to warn us of the imminent uprising against the Germans as they were about to retreat westwards – towards the US army – away from Vlasov's army as it laid siege to the outskirts of Prague. My birthday cake was in the oven. That year it never was baked.

Ava, Jarmila, Georgie and I were moved into the cellar. Mummy, nursing Johnny who had been born on 22nd April, moved into the ground floor flat. Daddy, in his old army uniform, went out to play his part.

The voice of Zdeňek Mančal – Dagmar's stepfather - was heard on the radio up-dating the city on where weapons could be obtained, and which parts of the city were still occupied by the Wehrmacht.

I slept the night of my birthday down in the cellar. As Vlasov - ignoring the Soviet High Command which had planned to do to Prague what they had done to Warsaw and allowed the Nazis to eliminate the Resistance - advanced on Prague, fighting broke out outside our flat.

Soon there was blood on our stairs as a sniper, shooting from the turret above our block of flats received a hit and staggered down to street level. He knocked on the door of the doctor who lived on the first floor. However, while there was shooting around his flat, he refused to open his door to anyone. The poor man had to stagger out into the square. I never found out what eventually happened to him.

A barricade was built at the north end of the square on the street towards the Carmelites. A German soldier, right in front of our flat, dressed as a nun, was spotted by his boots. He tried to run but was shot. He fell sideways and floated on the water of the reservoir dug to supply water in case of an incendiary-bomb attack. Buoyed up by his amusing dress, he floated for over a day before being pulled out and his body added to the growing pile of corpses just outside our flat.

On Petřín Hill, above the square, there was a structure from where some Germans were shooting down into the square.

Vlasov's men brought up a small cannon. The first shell they fired hit the tree in front of our flat. Thank God, I had left the front room minutes before the blast blew in the windows. Had I not left the room when I did, the shards of glass we found stuck in the wall would have pierced me in more than one place. Someone was taking care of me, I mused.

Death can come unexpectedly. And fast. Maybe that is when I started to question the value - and meaning - of life on earth.

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Ever since I can remember, I never wanted to have children. Was it that I never wanted anyone to have a child who had to go through my experiences? Was it my low self-esteem that convinced me that my children would be deformed as a punishment for my being bad? On the other hand, was that 'knowing without knowing' that I carried what one day would be identified as the 'von Hippel-Lindau syndrome'? Who knows?

It was only after my brother Johnny's death at the age of 21 and Georgina's similar 'benign' [I ask you, benign?] brain tumours – which, in her case, had been identified when she was 49 - that the doctors derived a conclusion. Von Hippel-Lindau tumours appear between the ages of 21 and 50. [My nephews and nieces have been tested. They are clear. Thank God.],

Probably I am a carrier of that genetic defect. Whatever the facts, that conviction-decision was one of the foundation pillars on which, one day a celibate vocation would appear.

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I remember a column of German POWs marching into the square down from the Carmelites. One of them, as he passed by our baker's shop, pulled a stick-grenade out of his tunic and hurled it into the shop – whose front window had been blown out. He was identified and as the rest of the column drifted on, ordered to stop in the gutter.

A Russian soldier came up close and shot him in the left temple with a pistol. Silently, he crumpled. I watched all this from our blowout flat front-room window. He lay there until the evening when his body was piled into the growing barricade of corpses outside our front door. Death could be quite quiet. And final.

Shot through their skull people die effortlessly. Blown up by a hand grenade – as those in the bakers - are much messier.

I remember sneaking out one morning after breakfast to collect the Iron Crosses on so many dead German bodies. When I brought them into the kitchen and proudly laid them on the table, my mother was shocked and ordered me to put them back immediately. I did not put them back. I just placed the hand-full on the top of the nearest bloodstained grey uniform.

On 8 May, the Czech and German leaders signed a ceasefire allowing the German forces to withdraw from the city. However, not all Waffen-SS units obeyed. Fighting continued until 9th May.

At the end of May, as much as possible of the Czechoslovak Independent Brigade Group [CIABG] – which had been under General Patton's command were allowed to come to Prague for a Victory Parade on the 30th, having to return to their positions on the demarcation line immediately after the end of the parade.

When its tanks rolled in, someone had the bright idea of placing low-value – and I remember rather soft – coins on the tarmac. A misshaped coin was an honour. It proved you had been there.

Our family were allowed to visit Uncle Ajík's tank [Ajík was the nickname always used to identify my mother's brother Vladimir]. The tanks were clean and shiny for the event, and I was allowed to wriggle down and sit where my Uncle sat as he crossed Europe. I did not like the experience. I felt a twinge of what I learned was called claustrophobia. Much to her chagrin, Jarmila was not allowed in. She was a girl. That was that.

What surprised – even shocked – me was that though the body and gun of the tank was spotless, the tracks were utterly mucky, caked in clay. Ava would never have allowed that!

Prior to its dedication on 29 July 1945, by Soviet General Ivan Konev, the Russians used German POWs to build the monument to The Russian Tank Corps. It was to stand in front of what, during the war was an army barracks - now the Ministry of Justice -on the square where we lived.[I later discovered that, to make a political point silently, its gun faced west!]

From our now repaired front window, I watched them work. Knowing that Ava had punished me whenever I lost anything, I had an idea. A plan. Once the German POWs had been marched off for lunch and the coast was clear, I went down to the site and got hold of a pickaxe. It was far too heavy for me to lift it, so I dragged it into the entrance lobby of our block of flats. Then went back upstairs.

When the German soldier, whose pickaxe was now missing, returned, he was helpless. One of the guards came up to him and – without warning - smashed his face with the butt of his machine gun [which looked like those I later saw on Al Capone films]. He crumpled. As he bled, I grinned with glee.

When in 1991 I visited Prague for the second time, the tank had been painted pink. A year later, it was gone.

LEAVING FOR LONDON

As soon as the war had ended, my father was sent to London as First Secretary at the ČSR Embassy. That last winter in 1945 before we left for London was very cold. The snow was deep and as we had moved from Štefanikovo Náměstí to, we had fun tobogganing repeatedly down the slope in front of our house.

Once accommodation arrangements had been sorted out, we – my mother, my two sisters, Johnnie and Nanny Libuška, who had replaced Nanny Ava – flew to London on April 2nd, 1946.

The London plane that day was a Junkers 52: a three-engine machine with its unusual, corrugated-duralumin, metal skin; just like the one in the Clint Eastwood- Richard Burton Film, “Where Eagles Dare”.

Facing forward, there were rows of seats on the right-hand side with a corridor on the left. One of the windows on the left had a sliding hatch.

I – being almost seven - wanted to test out our speed’s wind-pressure. Which I did - until the co-pilot came down and told my mother to order me to pull my arm back in. The extra drag was veering the plane off-course.

Then, to pass the time, Jarmila - my older sister - and I wrote bad words on sheets of paper that we folded and posted out through that window. Czech words like knickers and bum were bound to offend and hurt those nasty Nazis a few hundred feet below. That is how low we flew! No need for cabin pressurisation.

Our first stop was Frankfurt. The shattered-building skyline, the steel-plank runway – as well as the spearmint chewing gum given to me by a USAF GI – gave me my first, and for many long years only contact, with Germany soil.

Then on to Brussels. As we were approaching to land, we could see a plane – just like ours -, with a dislocated wing, at the end of the runway.

The day before, we were told, as it was about to take off for London, the wing had fallen off. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt. However, the passengers had to get to London and fast.

Naturally, they all climbed aboard our plane - with their luggage. All the seats had been taken in Prague. However, as in those days ‘health and safety’ was still a very small cloud on the horizon, that was no problem. They stood in the corridor, as I would soon see people on the underground, but holding on to the back of our seats and the ribs supporting the corrugated fuselage.

Being thus rather overloaded, we skimmed a few, very few, hundred feet over the white cliffs of Dover. We could easily see the faces of people waving at us.

Excited, all too soon, we landed at Croydon: in those days still London’s civilian Airport.

Then by an embassy car onto Putney where we initially stayed as paying guests in a house on Lytton Grove. Things were rather cosy. Two parents, four children and a maid and Nanny all in a one top-floor meant we slept rather closer than had been my previous experience.

Soon, very soon, we moved to 20 Gwendolyn Avenue and the Parish of St Simon Stock: where, within a year, instructed by Father Tanner, I received my First Holy Communion.

On my arrival in England, the only English I had was: “I love to go to sleep to cinema.” Being – as was made VERY clear as soon as I went to school - a BF [Bloody Foreigner], I was motivated to learn my new home’s language. Fast.

So as to blend rapidly into London's cultural scenery, in the evenings, I used to spend a lot of time listening to the BBC: Light programme and Home Service. I tried to pronounce words as I heard them. I would even go out into the garden and practice, until they sounded about right. As the song goes, "Things ain't what they used to be." Maybe, just as well. However, it was fun. The first English word I learned was Hand-kerchief. It seemed a very long word for a rather simple piece of cloth.

That September I was enrolled at a day-prep-school in Putney called Glengyle. [Now under new management it is called the Merlin School.] My first report – though praising my efforts to acquire English, pointed out that I had a tendency to impetuosity [a word I had to look up].

My parent recruited one of my teachers to coach me in English after school. I remember he had served in Palestine and was very partial to walnuts. As in our back garden we had two walnut trees, there was always a copious supply.

I soon discovered that 1. Being a BF and thus chased and roughed up in the playground and afterschool, as soon as I learned to speak without an accent I was accepted, safe, and 2. If I was naughty, I became accepted by the baddies. I was safe. I belonged.

I swiftly learned swearwords and became a naughty boy. I was not seriously bad, just naughty enough to explode bonfires and explore bombed-out house, liberating whatever we found there.

The biggest belt whacking I ever received from my father came because of an experiment I and a friend thought up. We had poured the gunpowder/cordite from a dozen 12-bore shotgun cartridges we had discovered in a bombed-out house into a beer bottle. We then placed it close to a bonfire in our back garden and moved way back. The effect was spectacular. The whacking was soon forgotten.

The experiment inspired similar activities later on when my parents had moved me to St Peter's, a boarding school in Merrow, near Guildford. (*) An easy train ride from Waterloo.

Our family were all fond of water. Probably due to the fact that in and around Jindřichuv Hradec there are ponds and lakes galore. Whatever its aetiology, this enthusiasm directed us towards Roehampton swimming pool. One warm afternoon etched itself into my memory bank.

Before I had learned to swim, Jarmila was giving me a piggyback as she waded from the shallow end into the deep. Suddenly – perhaps she slipped – her head disappeared under the surface. Panic. What was I to do?

If I stayed with her, we both would drown. Somehow, I propelled myself backwards and after much splashing found I could stand. Jarmila – coughing a bit – also reached safety. Maybe that is why I favor the backstroke.

Once we moved to Dulwich, Brockwell Park, down by Herne Hill, became our favourite; even though it always gave me the creeps. I had overheard my parents talking about a child who had contracted polio in that swimming pool. I was terrified of ending up in callipers.

One day, still at Putney, all four children - I cannot remember why - were allowed out for the afternoon with just Jarmila - aged not even eleven - in charge.

Off we went to Roehampton. There, climbing on the monument near the church, Johnny slipped, cracked the nape of his skull on the edge of one of the steps. He started to gush blood. Jarmila remembered that our gardener Mr Wade lived close by, took us round to his house. He managed to bring the bleeding under control.

Aged seven, I remember the excitement of being driven - in a khaki-coloured Humber, an army staff-car I learned later – to Pinner where Dr Ungar, the Embassy medic, used liquid nitrogen to burn off the warts on my left wrist. I still carry the scars!

In the summer of 1947, that car – accompanied by a black Tatra – with its rear-engine that inspired the VW Beetle – took our patents and their close friends - which included General Plas, Military Attaché at The Czechoslovak [ČSR] embassy (*) - on a trip through Scotland.

The General, who became a close friend - and came to live with us as a paying guest - as together he and dad – both refused to join the Communist Party - were the first London based Czechs to resign their diplomatic posts in May 1948. They became political refugees together.

However, although the Iron Curtain had dropped, hope survived. We were going to return ‘next year’. The children had to speak Czech at mealtimes until 1956 when the Hungarian Revolution clearly showed the empty promises made by the USA. There would be no going back. So later that year we applied for and obtained British Citizenship.

(*) 9, Grosvenor Place, London SW1. It was from its balcony that on 8 June 1946 we had watched the WW2 Victory Parade

In 1948, our neighbour invited us to watch the Olympic Games on their Television; black and white, the size of a postcard. It was magic. Our hero was Emil Zatopek, an inspiration in dedication, stubbornness, courage and pain-domination. For me he was hero who won 10k Gold and 5K silver in '48 and four years later, at Helsinki the Gold in the 5k, 10k and Marathon – a race he had never run before. A man of steel with gold medals that has stayed with me ever since. (*)

Back in Czechoslovakia, the Communists had confiscated all our assets, Family finances became precarious.

It took my father six weeks to find a job as Marks & Spencer. First at Kingston, then Ealing then Catford. In 1951, he was Departmental Manager at Marble Arch. In 1953, he ended up at the HQ in Barker Street. By the time he died, he had reached the heady heights of Deputy Head of Packaging. No wonder he turned to me to try to find some sort of at least vicarious fulfilment. His life was far harder than mine was.

When young, he was a successful oarsman. I had a bag of medals to prove that. He represented Czechoslovak Universities at Chess – and won medals there. In Prague, he obtained a Doctorate in Law and then a qualification from the *Ecole des Sciences Politique*, in Paris. In 1936, having married the daughter of an ambassador, the future must have looked bright.

To enable my older sister Jarmila to complete her studies at Merrow Grange (*) and read English at King's College, London, pieces of furniture, pictures, chandeliers as well as jewellery were sold. In 1951 - soon after we moved to West Dulwich, London SE21 - I was taken out of St Peter's and completed by secondary education at Clapham College Grammar School.

(*) Our parents had asked our Parish Priest, Canon Pritchard, about boarding schools. Mummy wanted Jarmila out of the house as far as was possible [they never did get on, as Jarmila eventually found out from her mother's Journal] and boarding for boys seemed an attractive institution in our new English culture.

Jarmila, who did not like the Ursuline Convent in Brentwood that had been suggested, went to Merrow Grange Convent School. I to St Peter's, just across Horseshoe Lane. Archbishop Amigo of Southwark - who in 1947 had had founded St Peter's in order to give the surge in clergy vocations a place to stay and job to do - had instructed all his clergy to encourage their parishioners to send their sons.

As mentioned, Libuška, our Nanny - was a good thing. She looked after us gently yet firmly. While still in Putney, I remember her - comparing notes with mummy – to make sure that whenever we had to buy new

shoes – which at our age was often - our feet were never cramped. She would spend time peering down the x-ray machine to be certain the shoes had the correct width. Thanks to that care, my feet were never deformed. They are still in fine fettle [and the X-rays did not cause us cancer!]

A cultured and educated person, she not only introduced Jarmila to Czech Surrealist Poetry and the Rosary – which we used to pray around a makeshift shrine in Jamila’s bedroom – but thanks to her, we started to attend Sunday Mass at the local church just round the corner. It was there, at the church of St Simon Sock that we received our first Holy Communion.

During the preparation for this Great Day, I asked Father Tanner, the curate who was leading us, how often I should go to Mass. He replied, “How often would you go, if every time you went, you were given a £5 note [now worth well over £50]”. I mumbled “probably everyday”. He continued, “Isn’t God worth more than a fiver?” Another nudge, I now think, towards my priestly vocation.

To make That Day as spiritual as possible, neither of us dressed in any special way.

(*) A role model that urges me on whenever I am tempted to pack in my current – on alternate days – 81 push-ups and full squats.

At St Peter’s I was to learn many things not taught in the classroom, things that in those days no one ever spoke about with adults. My father never broached what in those days was called “the birds and the bees”; sex education. Not one word. Ever.

As a boarder, I became familiar with the naked bodies of my fellow pupils. Our twice-weekly baths were taken in a large, open-plan bathroom hosting a row of deep baths. War-games, using paper pellets launched on rubber bands were between Roundheads versus Royalists. To make it ever less likely that we had any Jewish blood, I was never circumcised. Clearly, I was a Royalist.

To prove to the Nazis that we were at least three generation Christians and not Jewish, our parents had to produce three generations of Baptismal Certificates. A bit of a pain then. A boon to my sister years later when she took an interest in our family’s genealogy.

Morning ablutions took place in the dormitory. Jugs of water – which froze in the winter – and large porcelain bowls, stood on a wide, untreated-wood tabletop at the end of the room by the windows. When, in 2012, helping a young man set up a John Paul 2 Foundation 4 Sport Basketball Club in St Peter’s, I drove past where Craigie – St Peter’s dormitory accommodation - had stood, it was no longer there. Replaced by a Primary School.

Craigie had been a very steep-roofed Victoria building. Climbing that roof – which was strictly forbidden as very dangerous – was essential if I was to be accepted as OK. Even though I have never liked heights, my pride and fear of rejection overcame my fear of heights. Besides, it was usually too dark to see the ground from up there.

The clergy at St Peter’s were a mixed bunch. Some were admirable and attractive. One of them - the name has slipped from my memory, but it might have been Father Feely, perhaps Father Furey, allowed me to clean and polish his Vincent motorbike. Others seemed to enjoy caning the boys. Some used a belt. Our Housemaster preferred a slipper on our naked buttocks as he held us over his knee.

For a while, I held the record for both dayboys and boarders. Having been whacked after breakfast and then again morning break, I went for broke. That day, before dinner, I received eighteen with a cane on my bum. I had relearned to move slightly between each stroke, so the blows were spaced rather than all on one spot. That night, once we got back to Craigie the state of my backside was inspected – and admired – by many in my dorm.

Three friends and I decided we were going to create secret society. It would be called 'The Red Riders of Ruddy Pompooh. No, do not ask my why. Perhaps something from a comic, we were reading. We had secret post-boxes in tree cracks and a loose brick in a wall along Horseshoe Lane.

In winter, when walking down to Craigie at night, we would peel off, hide in the bushes, pull on our grey-cloth mask and, as the Tail-end Charlie priest disappeared down the road with his feeble torch sweeping the ground, we would - as soon as we got our night vision - run through the gardens, melting back into the crocodile before it reached Craigie. We never did get caught.

Having read about Cats Eyes Cunningham, the ace fighter pilot who, it was said, was able to shoot down so many Jerries because he had enhanced night vision thanks to the extra a carrot in his diet, to improve our efficiency as nightriders, carrots were welcome. Whenever they appeared on the table, we traded them for potatoes.

Generally, food was grim. Food parcels were eagerly awaited and shared among the gang.

One afternoon, as my class was on potato-picking duty, a rabbit suddenly appeared. Surrounded in two concentric circles of young boys, it did not stand a chance. I caught it. It felt soft. We placed it in a DIY pen until, one day it was gone. Probably freed by a softhearted nine-year-old.

During the endless prep-time evening house, I remember turning over the maps of the 'Empire through the ages' and - many times - reading Hiawatha and The Ancient Mariner and leafing through pages and pages of frayed, leather-bound copies of 19th century editions of Punch. I had an Oxford dictionary by my side. Words - and puns - started to fascinate me. The earliest I remember are still with me.

"Your teeth are like stars. They come out at night" "Your cheeks are like peaches, football pitches." "Your lips are like petals, bicycle pedals." And even" 'Dirty work at the crossroads by Who Flung Dung or was it Elisa Down?"

Even in the 21st century some children smile when they hear, "If you see a little bunny/ with its nose a little runny/ you shouldn't say it's funny/ Cos it's snot.

"I shall waste no time in reading your book."

"A woman without her man is a savage" Punctuate!

The gym-master, who was not a priest, and was happy to buy us our cigarettes – always Players Weights - encouraged us to take up boxing. However, after one bout with a boy who knew what he was about, I took more than a sufficient number of punches to the head. I decided that boxing was not my cup of tea.

Due to our family's precarious financial position, my pocket money had to be reduced. To earn extra cash, I used to write their lines for the older boys. Having spent many hours trying to acquire a good hand by copying pages of copperplate, real-nib writing, my counterfeit handwriting passed the test, time and time again.

Our family had no car. To get to Merrow where my sister Jarmila was also at school but with different holiday dates, my mother would take me to Waterloo and, as a treat, take me to the cartoons showing at the station's cinema [no longer there]. Then I was placed on a train to Guildford. There the school would make sure we arrived at St Peter's. Pickford's looked after my trunk.

After my first year at St Peter's, I used to travel on my own on those wonderful steam trains.

Once, I remember, I dozed off. I woke with a start as the train pulled into a station. The name did not register. Panic! I must have overshot Guildford. What to do? I sat tight and hoped for the best – and, of course, I prayed. And pray I did.

What a relief when the train pulled into Guilford. Due to maintenance on the main line, the train had taken a loop-line. That was all. I made sure I never dozed again. I used to stick my head out of the window, trying to make sure no speck of soot got into my eyes. The way back was OK. Waterloo was the end of the line.

I had always been afraid of my father's disapproval. While still at St Peter's, I even once intercepted my end of year report. I had made sure I picked up the letters as soon as they dropped in through the letterbox. The target was easy to spot. The letter carried a Guildford postmark. I tore it up and pushed it deep into the dustbin. I had not come in the top three in class. My parents assumed it must have got lost in the post. I survived that Summer Break intact.

Decade no. 2 1949 – 1959 SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATION OF LIFE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

General Alois Liška - Czech army officer who served in both World Wars, ultimately as a Brigade General commanding the 1st Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade at Dunkirk in 1944-45. Born on 20 November 1895 he escaped in 1948 and died on 7 February 1977 in Putney.

Jaroslav Drobný - Czech (12 October 1921 - 13 September 2001) World No. 1 amateur tennis and ice hockey champion. He left Czechoslovakia in 1949 and travelled as an Egyptian citizen before becoming a citizen of the United Kingdom in 1959, where he died in 2001. In 1954, he became the first and, to date, only player with African citizenship to win the Wimbledon Championships (aside from dual citizen Roger Federer, who holds South African citizenship but officially represents only Switzerland in sports).

Gladys – my 125cc BSA Bantam two-stroke motorbike.

Lieutenant-Commander Greville Reginald Charles Howard (7 September 1909 – 20 September 1987) - a British Conservative and National Liberal politician.

A younger son of Henry Howard, 19th Earl of Suffolk, he was a member of Westminster City Council, and served as Mayor of Westminster from 1946 to 1947. Where he met my father and became a very close friend of the family. We used to spend many a summer holiday at his home in Marazion, Cornwall. He served as Member of Parliament (MP) for St Ives from 1950 until he stood down at the 1966 general election. Greville married Mary, daughter of William Smith Ridehalgh, in 1945.

One springtime morning in 1949, Father Ryan – he of the slipper bum-whacking at night - peered into my eyes. ” Ah, they are very yellow. You had better go and see Matron.” No idea how, I had caught hepatitis.

Immediately, I was isolated in the infirmary. In that tiny, single-bedded room, I experienced the horrors of what I later learned was claustrophobia. As at night the ceiling appeared to drop ever closer to my face, sweating, I would lurch out into the dimly lit corridor and sit on the floor until I started shivering. I was too timid/silly/proud to mention this to anyone.

To top it all, in the infirmary picked up an ear infection. It taught me the relativity of ‘personal time’. Just before switching off the light, I used to look at the watch, a recent birthday present. After what seemed like hours – and must be almost morning – I put the light on. Barely fifteen minutes had passed.

Middle-ear infections bugged me for years. The only treatment I ever received was hydrogen peroxide dropped into my up-turned ear. The shummy-fiz is something I have never been able to forget.

Whenever someone complains that time seems to be passing, oh so fast, I make the point that they are lucky and blessed. In chronic pain, in prison or a hospital bed year would crawl along, often lurching to an apparent full stop,

Eventually, a private ambulance took me home. During that journey, I remember feeling rather special. Once the ambulance reached West Dulwich, my mother warmly welcomed me. My bed had been moved into our parents’ bedroom. There I stayed for some six months until the jaundice passed.

As this was before the Korean War [25 June 1950 – 27 July 1953] during which experiments with tens of thousands of US GIs proved that diet made no noticeable difference, I was given what was then considered

the most appropriate, totally fat-free diet. This consisted of – I joke not – just powdered glucose, which came in very large tins, and water biscuits.

Mind you, even of cheese it is possible to have a surfeit. Slabs of USA Food Aid Cheese in the late 40s-early 50s were ubiquitous in our house. Welsh rarebit, cheese omelettes, cheese bake, cheesecakes, cheese sandwiches, cheese with celery or carrot, cheese with meat and veg... That, together with powdered eggs, which could be rather yummy when treated properly – got us through,

When, eventually, I was allowed to get out of the bedroom, my leg muscles had wasted. It took some few weeks before could walk – let alone run – again.

Outcome? One. I hate cream crackers – and water biscuits. Bread with cheese every time. Two, I determined I would never be ill again and thus soliciting obligatory rather than gratuitous affection.

Until I was operated on the first – of my two – kidney stones, I never once lost a day's work. While teaching at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in the 70s – thanks to an Opus Dei doctor - I was able to take Valium and Distalgesic to control the symptoms of my slipped disc and sciatica. I kept on keeping on so as not to become a burden to anyone. A burden? Never. Better dead than that.

Mellowing with age, I now see the benefits of being ill. I discovered – when I had that kidney stone removed in 1998 how tenderly some of my friends really do care for me. Unable to communicate their care under normal circumstances, when I am weak, they can.

With shortage of money becoming an ever greater problem, in 1951, having found me a place at Clapham College, Nightingale Lane, London, SW12, a Grammar school run by the Xaverian Brothers, my parents were finally able to take me out of St Peter's. My only problem was that aged 12, I went straight into 2A where, for quite a while, I felt an intruder, an outsider.

To discover my identity – apparently it is quite a common attempt – I remember writing down my full address: Vladimir Jan Antonin Vaclav Felzmann, 15, Alleyn Road, West Dulwich, London SE21, England, British Isles, Europe, The World, Our Solar System, The Milky Way, The Universe.

I longed to belong. Being naughty, by running with the 'baddies' across Clapham Common to escape from the 'Parkies' at lunchtime – with my cap in a pocket! - and being even evil [I remember once, together with the rest of 'the gang', nicking sweets from the Tuck Shop] helped to make me acceptable. I began to feel at home.

Training hard in athletics, I achieved the dizzy heights of becoming Under15 Wandsworth Javelin champion. After that - and accepting the fact that my physique would be a hindrance to further progress - I concentrated on football.

My strategy was two-fold. As relatively few boys were naturally left-footed, I practiced controlling, passing and shooting with my left foot. I ended up ambidextrous. I thus found a place as Left-half in my year's A-Team.

I took up serious training. Every night, in my dark-blue tracksuit – whose trousers I narrowed by stitching the baggy bottoms into drainpipes – I ran down to Dulwich Village and back with lots of interval-running along, in those days, very dimly lit streets. Then press-ups and pull-ups. In my heyday 70. (*)- footnote on Page 32

By the time I was in the fifth form – nowadays year 11 – I was in the School's First Eleven thanks to my training-fitness and thus ability to keep on running, even on the thick-clay pitch at Norbury, our home ground – after 80 minutes of a game when many others were slowing down. I was awarded Football Colours and for three years proudly wore the label on my blazer. Life was beginning to feel good.

1953 The Coronation

Around the Coronation of the Queen, I have three clear memories.

First - before the great day on 2nd of June in 1953. I 'benefitted' – or so it then seemed – from a prolonged skive-off class. Being quite good at art, I was selected onto the team that were going to work on an illuminated velum manuscript, that would be sent - I suspect with hindsight to show that RCs were excellent citizens - in her honour to Buckingham Palace.

Consequently, I missed at least one month of classes as we beavered away learning how to produce splendid mediaeval-style lettering. My finest hour came when I produced an ornate - including gold-leaf tracery - 'E' filling almost a quarter of that page. I and the other boys wrote italic script, filling the ends of the lines with mediaeval decorations. Before you ask, I cannot remember what that document actually stated. (*)

The second was the day itself. Having taken an early train from West Dulwich to Victoria, I walked along the traffic-empty Victoria Street and up Whitehall. I settled at Trafalgar Square, on the corner of Whitehall and The Mall. There, as I did not have the funds to buy one of those periscopes on sale, I managed to squeeze myself to the front. Later on, after the Coronation I was able to see close up the vast number of Commonwealth uniforms and famous men as they were driven by in open carriages. My cigarette card collection had some to life.

At the end of a long and hungry day – the sandwiches I had brought had seemed adequate when packed - however the excitement had whetted my appetite - over the evening meal I was able to un-pack my experiences to all my family. They had watched the events on the television of General Liška, a paying guest, who owned the only TV in the house. (**)

The third took place, a few weeks after The Day, as the school were lining up before marching down to Tooting Bec Cinema to watch the whole event on the large screen. Just before we were meant to move, we heard a rather large bang coming from the Chemistry Lab on the west side of the playground. Out limped Brother Dunstan – he of the home-grown tobacco and wine – holding his right hand. Later on, we discovered that he had been grinding something in a pestle and mortar when this concoction exploded. He lost the tip of his thumb. He carried for many years and died well into his 90s.

HOME LIFE, HOLIDAYS AND HOLY DAYS

Johnnie, Georgie and me – as well as Jarmila when home on holiday – used to attend The Czech Sunday mass in the Mount Street, Chapel up the stairs in the Presbytery next to the Jesuit Church whose main entrance was - and still is! - on Farm Street.

In line with Czechoslovak liturgical practices for High or Sung Masses, Holy Communion was never distributed. We, the children, who used to go there on our own. (**) changed that

(*) Talking about skiving reminded me of a fourth form two lesson skive. I volunteered to sit as a model for the A Level art exam. The posture was sitting cross-legged: right one across my left knee. After a half an hour or so, I got pins and needles, then nothing.

When the 90 minutes were over and the sketches had been collected, I was given permission to stand up. I tried – but fell down sharply sideways. I had lost my right leg! These skiving meant I did not have an academically ambitious leg to stand on. However, as soon as the leg woke up and I was able to walk to class.

(**) Mummy never went to mass. Daddy - occasionally - just Christmas Midnight mass.

However, we were able to convince the wonderful Czechoslovak Chaplain Father John Lang SJ. We received Holy Communion as Sung Masses back home, why not here? We felt very proud that we had had an impact for the better.

Maybe this primed my heart for the next, when aged 15 – and greatest – step on my life-journey to eternity.

Meanwhile, at home, when not doing my homework or helping mummy with chores around the house, I passed the time listening to the radio [I was suckled on Dick Barton Special Agent, ITMA and later on The Goons], I used to play with my Dinky toys, [If Only I had kept them I would be rich!] I built model Jetex powered planes, designing and building some quite ambitious structures with my pre-war, German meccano and playing war games. Over the years – even in Prague - I had started to acquire a decent collection of lead toy-soldiers, quite a few on horseback.

Model airplane and boat building as well as sailing – and then the steam-powered model boat on Wimbledon Common pond - honed my interest in engineering.

I spent a fair amount of time reading. Quantity was fair. Quality poor; certainly, towards the ‘low brow’ end of the spectrum. Every week, The Wizard, Rover and Comet – even the Dandy and Beano - were devoured after being bought, borrowed or swapped.

I also read books! I remember Swallows and Amazons, Just William [on whose style I cultivated my baggy socks], all the Rudyard Kipling books – my mother’s favourite author. They were her present every Christmas and birthday; until all were on my shelf. I re-read many times the whole of the Horatio Hornblower series and, of course The Cruel Sea. There was Captain Blood by Rafael Sabatini and a number of novels by Sir Walter Scott. There were others. However, they have gone with the wind, out of my memory.

There was “Scouting for Boys” with its splendid oxymoron, “A scout smiles and whistles at all times”. Mind you, the motto “Be prepared” may be behind my – even now – carrying as much activity-support equipment - including my ubiquitous, when not flying, Swiss army knife – in my pockets.

In the 50s, as we did not have a television and the children were allowed to watch only Yehudi Menuhin and Wimbledon on General Liška’s, cinema played an important part in my ‘culture-education’. The excuse for Wimbledon was Jaroslav Drobný, who eventually won the singles and was a friend of my Uncle Ajík, who

had spent a fair slice of the war playing tennis for the ČSR army – and who gave me one of Drobny's rackets – wooden in those days!.

Then there was the dark room. Inspired by Greville Howard (*), my parents set aside a large store cupboard as a photography lab. Developing and printing photos passed many a happy – and timeless – hour in that red-lit tiny space.

My mother, even before she married, had been the proud owner of hand-cranked, home-movies. The tiny rolls included Pathé News items, Felix the Cat and Harold Lloyd. Lots of Harold Lloyd. These I learned to project, repair and never got tired of watching.

One of my 'regrets in life' is leaving behind the projector, transformer and box of films - as well as my extensive stamp collection – when, in 1981 I requested to leave Opus Dei, I was asked to move from Netherhall House to Westpark, in Ealing. Wanting to impress by travelling light and detached from material possession, I paid the price. My other – and far greater – regret is that I never took up my parents' offer of piano classes.

A keen philatelist, father owned a very fine collection, in particular of Czechoslovak stamp. These he used to trade me for weeds. To improve his lawn at 20 Alleyn Road, I could choose any stamp for every 10 weeds I had, with our weed-extractor, winkled out of the ground. Judging by the hundreds of stamps I accumulated over the years; thousands of weeds must have bitten the dust.

My mother found it difficult to show us affection. She certainly loved the idea of me. A brass bracelet I bought her at Woolworth's for her 1947 Christmas present stayed on her wrist till well into the 70s.

(*) More on him in 'Life Squared'

A picture of St George, slaying a dragon to rescue a damsel in distress, hung above my bed from as far as I can remember. My constant efforts to help her by washing floors, laying and cleaning fires, using the Hoover [well, actually an Electrolux] to keep not only my own bedroom clean – as well as carrying the shopping, may have been inspired by that picture. She was the damsel in political and thus financial distress. I was the knight in shining armour. [Currently, that picture hangs in the entrance of my – well diocesan - Bow Road flat.]

My brother Johnnie had his own dreams. Steadily and stealthily had been stealing small sums of money from General Liška until he had accumulated quite a stash. Eventually caught – red-handed – he explained that he and a friend were going to run away, make a fortune and return to release mummy from poverty. He could not bear to see her making herself a martyr by never buying any clothes: committing Suttee in the kitchen every day.

Over the years, there were quite a number of paying guests selected from among our parents; Czechoslovak acquaintances and friends. Our longest stay was General Alois Liška who eventually saved enough while staying with us to buy himself his own home.

To gather enough capital – and keep himself occupied, he ran the office of the "Language Tuition Centre", east end of Oxford Street. He employed me in my holidays to catch up on filing, checking and collating adverts in foreign newspapers, cleaning desks [some were mega-yucky with chewing gum, and much else] as well as repainting blackboards; my favourite task.

Away from home, our summer holidays were somewhat austere. As money was short, the daily treat was either one ice cream or a cup of tea. At Eastbourne, we had to stay out of the house from breakfast to suppertime. We wandered the streets. It was too wet and cold to sit on the beach. The following year at,

Skegness, I learned shrimp catching. Then Lyme Regis, where the weather was warmer, were progressively better.

Once reached the age of sixteen, I was recruited to help run holiday camps for Czechoslovak boys. Clacton by the Sea was ok – even though the man in charge with whom I shared a bedroom, snored like a steam engine climbing a steep slope. The one in The Lake District - c/o a Youth Hostel - with our canoeing on Lake Windermere, was much more fun.

Though my father was very bright intellectually, he was financially somewhat impractical. To make ends meet – as he used to say – he purchased some chickens. For a short while, we had free, free-range eggs. Not only did the area smell horrid, after a month or so our neighbour's dog massacred the lot.

He converted the bottom right corner of our rather large garden into an allotment so we could grow our own vegetables. My task was to keep it weed free.

There was the assembly of costume jewellery. It raised some funds but at the cost of vast swathes of time. How many hours Georgie, mummy and I spent picking up shiny bits of glass with our wax-tipped prongs, placing them one by one in their holders before pressing them shut with another concave-topped meal implement with its wooden handles, I dare not hazard a guess. Whenever I see that stuff around the necks of women, I wonder who did the boring work for them, was it also child labour – albeit, in our case, lovingly given?

Perhaps my father's smartest financial investment had been improving - before selling - our house in Gwendolyn Avenue. He and his friends added a garage to number 15.

Using me to climb up onto the roof so I could paint the gutters, fascias and soffits he could not reach from the ladder, enabled him to get a better price when he sold Gwendolyn Avenue and bought Alleyn Road. This was a far bigger building, and thus, in those days actually cheaper. Before central heating became affordable, large houses were a pain to heat and thus unpopular.

At Alleyn Road, I had my own large study-bedroom. The house an ideal pace with its large garden and spacious inside for playing 'Marshall and Gangster', paper-pellet fights with Johnny. Wearing goggles and bandana facemasks, the thrill of scoring hits outweighed any real pain. As long as we picked up all the ammunition, there were no parental censures as we roamed time and again up-stairs, downstairs and all the rooms. The General's was utterly out of bounds.

At school, I could be a typical, nasty, puberty-driven teenager. Until I was 15, serious study was just for cissies. Reports and thus Parents Evenings were – to select an English understatement - unsatisfactory.

I still shudder when I remember what my classmates and I did to a poor, inexperienced teacher whose name I cannot – maybe I do not want? – to remember. This man – a Kiwi – made a big mistake when he first entered our 3A classroom. He started with "I think you ought to know I fought the Japs. I flew fighters. I won the DFC. I will have no trouble with you." BIG mistake.

Unbeknown to him, he had declared war. It was his Pearl Harbour. It would end with his Nagasaki.

Not a Roman Catholic, he never stood a chance- especially as twice a week his lessons spanned mid-day when we always prayed The Angelus.

In our class, we had Wilkinson, an actor-genius. We knew he could keep an utterly straight face when all around him others were falling about laughing. As the Kiwi was not able to lead the Angelus, we commissioned Wilkinson.

As soon as we heard the Angelus Bell, Wilkinson would – as double slow-speed – come up from the back of the classroom. He would start to pray at double-slow-speed. Whenever the Kiwiman urged him to hurry up, Wilkinson replied, "Sir, this is how we, Catholics, are meant to pray. With dignity" – and start from the top.

Poor Kiwiman. When a classroom decides that all of its thirty pairs of eyes are going to focus on your left year – or chin – and stay locked onto that for as long as it takes before you leave the classroom, light up a cigarette, take a few quick drags before coming back to face the silent stares yet again, you had it. His Hiroshima was a nervous breakdown. His Nagasaki losing his job.

Please forgive us, dear Kiwiman. Shalom. Pax. I hope the rest of your life was better.

As neither of my parents went to Sunday Mass, I ‘rebelled’ by going. I felt it gave me the moral edge. Every Sunday morning, I used to cycle to St Matthew’s in West Norwood. Going to mass was an agreeable routine I had picked up at St Peter’s, serving Mass every morning before breakfast. (*)

Clapham College was friendly place. Teachers were encouraging if not inspiring. Some of the Xaverian Brothers were memorable. Annual retreats were something else. Looking back, I have a less critical view. They reflected the general ethos of the Catholic Church in the 50s.

To prove we loved God, we were invited to come to the front of the Chapel and kneel, holding our arms extended as though on a cross - for as long as we could. We were informed that the longer you could hold the pain, the greater was your love of God.

I was never convinced but pride and peer-pressure worked a treat. Thanks to training for my javelin throwing, I did rather well. (**)

Aged sixteen, I remember a retreat preached, if I remember rightly, by a Redemptorist. We were enriched by a short story for our meditation.

”An altar server, leader of the Solidarity allowed himself to fall into temptation. As he was leaving that House of Shame, an unseen hand dislodged a roof tile. It slipped off the roof and smashed – sharp end - into that boy’s head. Killing him instantly. What do think is the moral you should take from that?”

As the well-meaning man paused for effect, my friend sitting next to me whispered, “Always wear a crash helmet when leaving a brothel.”

(*) Much later on, I used to joke with parents “If you really want your son to become a priest, never go to Sunday Mass.”

(**) Many years later, while on a Summer Course at Gort Ard University Residence, Galway – to prove my fitness and stay in step with other Numeraries, I did climb Craogh Patrick. I never felt it brought me closer to God. I never bothered to visit Lough Derg.

SCOTLAND, SEX, PENTECOSTAL EXPERIENCES AND OPUS DEI

At St Peter's I had become friends with John Bowie. John was an orphan, looked after by two maiden 'aunts', both doctors — who happened to own a cottage on Eriskay, Outer Hebrides. As John lived in Dulwich Village, we had kept in touch.

Therefore, in the summer of 1954, John and I went together — on our own! — To spend a couple of weeks on that island. By coach to Glasgow, train to Oban, ship to Lochboisdale on South Uist, then a rickety coach — on which some people paid with vegetables and eggs which the driver stored under his seat — to the south of the island, then a small motorboat to Eriskay. Finally, on foot to the cottage.

In those days there was no running water, no electricity; but on the first night, vast silent swathes of bed bugs. Top priority next morning was getting rid of these with powder we obtained from our nearest neighbours. These were friends of John's aunts. They owned a number of Scottish Long-Haired Cows.

Watching these being milked taught me the trick. Allowed to milk them every day [obviously, there was no fridge] renewed my memories of fresh, untreated milk we used to drink at Nebřenice.

Lighting was by Tilly lamps. The toilet was a bucket with a seat on top, emptied almost every day into a newly dug hole out in the turf behind the cottage.

Not all the flour we managed to get was self-raising; cooking scones was not always a success.

One day, when John was playing with his friends, I decided to climb the hill, the highest point on Eriskay, passing on my way the skull and horns of a deceased sheep. At the top, I sat down, looked West across the Atlantic Ocean. Suddenly something utterly unexpected happened.

The only way I can to put it is “I fell in love with infinity”.

It was my Pentecostal Experience.

I experienced the Divine Presence throughout my body.

I never asked for it, I never expected it. However, that moment — no idea how long it was before I climbed down that Benin Scathing peak of 185m — has stayed undiminished and fresh, glowing, solid still within my heart. Gradually, as the years went by, realised that that 'Infinity' was — and is — the One we tend to call 'God'. [More on this in “Life Squared”]

That experience altered my life 180 degrees. Instead of trying to be naughty so as to be accepted as 'a part of the gang' I started to study hard, to strive to be good — going to Mass every day before school. (*)

The following year I was awarded the RI Prize. I was prompted — no idea why — to ask for a copy of *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St John of The Cross which I read and re-read avidly. Not understanding much, it made me feel dedicated to God.

When, two years later, I got the upper sixth RI prize, I choose the complete writings of St Theresa of Avila. Unbeknown to me, *The Hound of Heaven* was drawing ever closer.

Girls I gave a miss — as did a number of my friends who were far too ‘tough’ for that sort of thing. Drinking enough was enough.

Jarmila has assured me that she did not orchestrate my first passionate, French kiss. I had imagined that it had been she who had incited her friend Claire Hurley — who came from Purley — to initiate me into the pleasure of a deep kiss. Though wonderful, it made me feel vulnerable. They were not for me. (*)

After my Eriskay Experience I felt a deep and clear sense that I was on this planet to help God. Though occasionally chased – by Georgie’s friends – I remained chaste. I imagined that I had been selected for something important. I had no idea what.

(*) Anyone, if their sex drive is not paramount, who is utterly committed to God; thanks to the divine-human ‘we’ [as we shall see, I encountered aged 15], only infinity is adequate for intimacy.

Which, being timeless, keeps you young at heart - and even across the whole of your PIES:

The Physical, Intellectual Emotional and Spiritual dimensions of our holistic life.

Intimate disclosures to the divine-infinite are safe, never used against you [not as in intimate relationship breakups].

My early years under the Nazis honed my survival skills. God would be safe. Whom else could I ever trust?

God is an incredibly gifted artist in shaping the instruments God needs. Fascinating.

My position in the 1st XI Football team was secure. I got my 1st XI Colours. Though physically unimpressive, the team knew that towards the end of any game, I had legs that still worked when most others on the pitch had slowed down – especially on our Norbury home ground with its gluttonous mud.

Aged 16, I while playing tennis with my dad in Dulwich Park, I suddenly realised I was match point away from winning. “I can’t humiliate dad”, I thought. And let dad win. We stopped playing tennis. I was too busy preparing for my O Level exams.

My background handicapped any dreams I played with. Born behind what was now The Iron Curtain precluded me from politics and the military. My physical stature inhibited any dreams of elite sporting successes. However, sanctity? In that quest, there would be no handicaps.

Consequently, I dreamed of becoming a member of that exclusive club “Celebrities Anonymous”- with its membership including the inventor of the wheel, creator of beer – probably in Egypt – and the authors of all four Gospels. I was going to become an anonymous saint.

A priest? Never!

Born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire – 1909 and 10 – where clergy were, in practice, a part of the Civil Service, my parents did not have any high regard for clergy. In fact, quite the opposite. Thanking ‘God and the Emperor for the Harvest’ put them off the ecclesiastic institution. Having heard that a young village lad when asked what he would like to become replied “A cow or a priest” and when questioned explained that neither did much apart from eating and sleeping, put me off the priesthood even though, as mentioned, some of the clergy at St Peter’s were fun.

(*) In 1962, having been asked by Opus Dei to pack up rowing, I stopped training. However, I decided to celebrate my 70th birthday with 70 push-ups and squats. To manage that, I started two months before my birthday and built them up – gradually. Now, aged 80 I alternate daily 81 push-ups with 81 full-squats. Sunday is my day off. Why 81? I hear you cry. Answer: 80 years breathing + nine months alive in my mother’s womb = 81

Aged sixteen, I took up pre-Christmas work at the Herne Hill Post Office. The 3/3d – three and threepence – an hour (*) enabled me to buy a second hand, green BSA Bantam 125cc motorbike. In those days, a pound went a long way! I passed the test first time round.

I started to take to bike to school, taking Georgie on the pillion to her La Retraite RC Girls' School, Atkins Road, Balham; impressing her friends subtly – or so I thought.

Jarmila remembers an exquisite – her word – Sunday in Guildford. I had ridden Gladys – my name for the Bantam bike – to her school, picked her up and then rowed her down the Wey through banks of blue forget-me-nots. Until she reminded me a few years ago, I had forgotten. Talking about that afternoon resurrected my memories of the slap of water on the side of the boat, the hazy-heat and the dank smell of dark water under the trees. I remember my heart swelled with pride the way I rowed with my sister there.

Then in 1956, thanks to a family friend, Jarmila and I spent the summer in Paris. We stayed at the *College Neerlandais* in the *Cité Universitaire*. Short of cash, many a lunch was just red wine and bread. Cheese would have broken our budget. To earn enough to eat properly, we worked as waiters in the college restaurant. To wash away the boredom, I managed - once the clients had left their table - to empty lots of almost empty bottles.

Introduced to a rather rich family with a little boy with callipers, it seemed only fair to give him - on our expense account - a chance to see Paris from the top of the Eiffel Tower – and visit a number of museums.

To thank the woman who had organised our lodgings and having earned enough child minding – we took her to the Paris Opera. Lohengrin was on the menu. The eponymous character was short and fat, the leading lady tall and fat. This visual experience put me off Opera for years.

For my A Levels I chose Pure Maths, Applied Maths, Physics and Czech – which I studied at home with my mother. I had four reasons for deciding was going to be a Civil Engineer.

(*) there being, in those days, 20 shillings to a pound, 12 pence [written as ‘d’ for denarius] to a shilling. 240 was the old Carolingian division of a pound of silver. ‘Decimal Day’ when d became p was on 15 February 1971.

Engineers would never end up as teachers. My mates and I had decided that teachers were *Untermenschen*. The nickname we gave one was Amoeba – the lowest form of life.

Secondly when the UK was invaded – optimists though the USSR, Pessimist China – Civil Engineers would not be initially eliminated. They would be used to rebuild the country.

Thirdly, I would not be competing with Jarmila who as reading English – arts not sciences- at King’s College, London.

Finally – underpinning the first three – was my commitment to God to make the world a better place.

Roads, bridges, water supplies, dams for hydro-electricity, houses and factories were all needed. As the 50s drew to a close, the amount appeared unending. Engineers were nationally precious. Engineering students had their National Service deferred. I missed mine. Due to labour-shortages, conscription ended in 1960.

As mentioned, my Eriskay Experience changed me into a ‘good boy’. As in ’57 I entered the Upper VIth, I was appointed School Captain, Head Boy of Clapham College. As Christmas approached – to unite the different ages - it seemed a good idea to have each House celebrate Advent with a house lunch-party. When

I approached the first House Captain, he replied, “I will if the others will.” I said, “Yes, they had agreed.” Therefore, he signed up.

As Head Boy, I had the authority to go into classes and ask to see a prefect – including of course House Captains. By the end of the afternoon, my original statement had become a fact. The House Parties were a great success. Bother Peter, The Headmaster, was rather pleased. (*)

My School Captaincy introduced me to beer. As honorary guest at the Xaverian Old Boys Association, I was plied with copious quantities of this unfamiliar liquid. Rather swiftly I realised I liked the taste – and the effects. I think I remember being taken home by car. Probably by our favourite teacher -Cecil Pocock –in his recently acquired, blue Ford Popular.

I applied to four universities to read Civil Engineering. To enhance my CV, I got myself picked to play cricket in the 1st XI. I batted sixth, scored four runs and that was that. I now could put cricket, together with assistant scout master, football, athletics and Head Boy into my application forms.

The first University to offer me an interview was Imperial College, my first choice. I was accepted. I went to no other interviews. I passed my four A Levels that Summer and, living at home, started at City and Guilds – the engineering section of Imperial College – in the Autumn of 1958.

In those days, as there were so few university students, the State paid all tuition fees and – given my family’s financial status, even gave me a small ‘life support’ stipend.

On Fresher’s Day, I signed up for the OTC – Officers Training Corps - The Catholic Society and the Boat Club.

(*) What do you reckon, MOC? Was I honest when I stated something being a fact based on an optimistic conviction that did, in the event become true? Discuss.

Within a few weeks, I dropped out of the OTC, became an active member of the Cath Soc and took up rowing. Seriously. The last of these pleased my father who had won a drawer-full of medals in his younger days. Through me, he could vicariously live his pre-war years as he stood on The Hard at Putney watching me get into my eight out of the Imperial College Boat House and onto the Thames.

Often, he would come and watch me race – and even occasionally - train. I spent hours on my own training on the ICBC indoor facility with its water, oars, racing seat and mirrors in which I could hone my technique. Soon I was stroking an eight, winning four Cups – with their individual pewter Pots –and was elected Captain of City and Guilds Boat Club. That year C&G won both Morphy and Lowry Inter-IC Colleges boat races.

One cold afternoon, in my single scull out on the fast-flowing Thames above the ICBC, I caught a crab. Luckily, I was able to swim and pull the scull to the bank. Thank God, it was low tide.. Emptying it, I managed to scull back up the ICBS and took a seriously needed hot shower. I had taken great care not to swallow any of the murky mix that was - in those days – the poisonous Thames. The following year I ended up as Secretary to the ICBC. Without knowing it, the Holy Week of 1959 would change all that.

That year in Holy Week, I went on my first Students Cross: a walked-with-full-sleeping-kit pilgrimage from Ely Place - then the RC University Chaplaincy church, London - to Walsingham. During thattreck, a medical student befriended me. As we were coming home by coach, he invited me to Netherhall House, a students’ residence run by Opus Dei in Hampstead, NW3. I was thrilled. I had a reason to cross London on Gladys. Without knowing it, I had met a Numerary member of Opus Dei.

Soon I was invited to help set up the recent Opus Dei acquired facility in Oxford: Grandpont House. A great excuse for riding Gladys up and down the A40! Thanks to the decorating skills I acquired helping my father back home, I was soon seen as an asset. I spent many a weekend there, painting and decorating – and punting on the Isis and up the Cherwell.

As one does when leant on by a ‘friend’, I started to attend meditations, days of recollection, even ‘Circles’ at Netherhall and Grandpont. My spiritual life was being stirred. Riding Gladys I would use my fingers and thumbs as beads to pray the rosary.

After a Day of Recollection at Netherhall House, I overheard that, just round the corner at Southwell House, the Jesuits had a squash court. A florin [a two bob/shilling coin] in the meter supplied an hour of light. It was on that court that I realised I had been caught out. It was not true that rowing used every muscle in my body. The day after my first match – and even more stiffly the day after – I felt my backside Gluteus Maximus muscles I had never noticed before.

Doing my bit as a RC, I joined the Union of Catholic Students. I ended up as Chair of International Events. On a weekend or two each term – and often on holidays – I used to go to Spode House, Conference Centre, east of Rugely, in those days run by the Dominicans.

One summer weekend – my sister was home - rather than take Gladys, I took up Steve’s offer of taking us both up in his car. A big mistake. Sunday evening that car would not start – no matter how much everyone tried to push. Therefore, while Steve stayed behind to see what could be done with his car, I hitchhiked home.

I arrived home around midnight. In the kitchen was my mother and my sister Jarmila.

“What happened to you then?”

“Oh, Steve’s car broke down. I had to hitch-hike.”

“Why didn’t you take the train?” Jarmila asked.

“I had no cash “I answered.

“Yes, you did! Look inside your backside pocket.” She sighed, pitying her hopeless brother.

In those days I wore tight jeans and to avoid being pick-pocketed and not to spoil the line of my *derrière* – as in those days we called that lower region – I never put anything in those backside pockets.

I rummaged down with my forefinger and its mate. Sure enough. There was a £5 note – far more than a train fare from Rugely. My wonderful sister has slipped it there while giving me a farewell hug. Just one level of denim away, it did me no good. (*)

Then, in the Summer of 1959, I was back in Scotland. First year Civils were encouraged by their tutors to get practical experience in the Summer holidays. I signed up for it and was assigned a month with JL Eve Ltd - in Argyll.

Working on the power-line down to Campbeltown, I was allocated a caravan in Tarbert. This I shared with one of the managers who took a single, weekly bath, every Saturday morning in the Hotel there.

Surveying, though good exercise as it meant walking over the hills where the pylons would be located, was a wee bit tedious. Not so, while clearing a way for the ex-army tracked-vehicles to reach these points and bring up the steel. I learned not only to drill the rocks that were in the way, but also to blow them up with gelignite [which, by the way, MOC smells of almonds]. (**)

One memorable morning I was working on a rock large enough to need - it seemed clear to me – two holes drilled. To stagger the explosions, I made one fuse longer than the other. However – silly me – I lit the longer one first. So, bang-whoosh [like thunder after lightning] – although all the men had retreated to a sensible distance – fragments of the rock splattered around us into the grass. My Guardian Angel must have played his part. No one was hit. A cheer and applause all round.

The landscape, sea and the sky marinated my head and heart with memories of my Eriskay Experience. I became ever more desperate. I had to do something.

Straight back from Scotland, I went to Paris for a holiday with Jarmila who was studying there. She had found a room for me above a nightclub. Late at night, even after the club emptied, by the light of a very low wattage bulb above my bed, I pored over *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St John of The Cross. [Remember MOC, my Sixth Form prize?]

The crisis swelled. Roaming the streets on the Left Bank, rather than go to the cinema, I gave many Francs to beggars. It did not assuage the pain. I knew what I had to do.

(*) I use that story when preaching/teaching God's presence in our lives. Though there, if we do not realise its presence, that Love does us no good.

(**) In those days, we were allowed to leave sacks of gelignite sticks – with their fuses – up in the hills overnight and even over even weekends. While I was there, none went missing.

I would join the Jesuits. In this elite intellectual force within the RC Church – I would commit my life to God. With them, I would be able to help God make the world a better place – and find peace.

As soon as I was back in London, I telephoned my Heythrop Jesuit friend. He arranged for me to speak with their Vocations Director, then based in Manresa House, Roehampton. However, it was clear to me that I could not leave university and join the Jesuits without first speaking with my father. Therefore, I pondered, prayed and planned.

On the Monday, the evening before the 23rd of September, I sat with my father listening to the Telefunken Radio [remember, MOC, the same one we had in Prague during the war].

As soon as the nine o'clock news finished and dad had switched it off, I blurted out "Daddy, I have decided to join the Jesuits."

The shock, the horror on his face was such as he said, "You can't!" made me instantly explode "OK, then. I will join Opus Dei". (*)

My father said "Fine." Months down the line, he admitted he had thought Opus Dei was a student's club, a confraternity as had existed in Central Europe before the second world war. (**)

Early next morning, the 23rd of September 1959 I rode Gladys up to Netherhall House. I spoke with Dick Stork, the Director, and write my letter to The Father (***). I had joined Opus Dei as a Numerary Member.

The joy - peace - I felt were indescribable, heavenly. Tears ran down my face as I walked around the garden there that night. I felt I was home. My Eriskay Experience had returned. It is still there within my Heart even as I write this, now in 2019.

(*) Remember, MOC, how my Prep School teachers said I was impetuous?

Born in 1909 in what was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – Czechoslovakia in 1919 – he and his family were republicans. To my father – a highly intelligent liberal – clergy, and in particular the Jesuits, were anathema.

(**) Poor daddy. What a life. Graduation, marriage and hope in the 30s. Grim 39-45. A struggle the on until he died and the last year of his life, his son in a Fascist-Catholic Organisation. He must have thought, “Where did I go wrong?” Maybe his disappointment in me accelerated his death. Who knows? At least he did not have to suffer the problems of old age. He was a good man. He is, I suspect, where one day soon, I hope to be. Alive with God in divine eternity.

The following summer my father was dead. Two heart attacks while on holiday in Cornwall with the Howards took him away. Escriva – who used to spend summer in London writing his Pastoral Letters, took me under his wing. Soon, I was ‘*el mimado del Padre*’. His favourite son.

(***) As members of Opus Dei called The Founder - and now the Prelate of Opus Dei

I convinced my parents that, as the Academic Year was about to start, it would be good for me to leave home and live in a student’s university residence. They took the point and agreed. Their actual feelings they did not discuss.

The following spring – I well remember our walk around Regents Park – he tried to convince me, by pointing out chapter and verse in “The Way” by Escriva, the Founder of Opus Dei – which I had given him to win him over. Fat chance. According to dad, Opus Dei was extreme right wing: so many statements chimed with those of Adolf Hitler.

Awash with dopamine and all that goes with being in love with God – I did not see it. Then.