

Interview with Eva Loeffler, April 2011

My father was a very successful neurosurgeon in Hamburg. He was assistant to the chief surgeon and was expected to succeed him. Then after 1933 it became impossible for Jews in Germany to hold professional posts and he became the Medical director of the Jewish Hospital in Breslau. While there he received several offers of medical work from institutions in North America and South America that would have allowed him to emigrate, but he stayed on through the 1930s, partly to help other Jews in Germany.

In 1938 during 'Kristall Nacht' when Jewish houses and businesses were attacked, over 60 Jewish men fled to the Breslau hospital during the night. My father said they must all be allowed in, whether they were ill or not and they were all admitted to beds on the wards. The next day the Gestapo came round to see my father, wanting to know why such a large number of admissions had happened overnight. My father was adamant that all the men were sick and said many of them were suffering from stress. He took the Gestapo from bed to bed, justifying each man's medical condition. Apparently he also pulled faces and grimaced at the patients from behind the Gestapo's back, signalling to them to pull the same expressions and then saying, 'Look at this man; he's having a fit.'

Then in 1939 the German government ordered my father to go to Lisbon. He was to treat a good friend of the Portuguese dictator, Salazar, who was believed to be suffering from a brain tumour. It was part of the Nazis' attempts to build good relations with Portugal. My father turned to the official and said, 'But how can I travel when you have taken my passport away?' By the next day it had all been sorted and he was flown to Lisbon. Apparently the man didn't have a tumour. On the way back he stopped in London and met people from the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, an organisation that was helping Jewish academics get hold of visas. He was told our visas had already been sent to Berlin and he had been offered a research post at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford he returned to Breslau and told my mother to start packing.

It was 1939 and I was six years old. I remember I was abnormally frightened at the time; I used to cry a lot. Even as a small child I picked up the fear and sadness felt by my parents. Although Jews were allowed to take out some furniture, clothes and linen they were not allowed to take any money, gold silver or jewellery. But the official who was supervising us came round the day before and told my mother 'I shall be an hour late tomorrow'. It was obviously a hint that we might pack what we wanted; but my mother was too frightened to take anything forbidden as she thought it could be a trap.

When we arrived in Oxford we stayed in the Masters Lodge Of Balliol College. The Master, Lord Lyndsay had heard that my father would be working at the Radcliffe Hospital - doing research on peripheral nerve injuries - and offered hospitality to this

Jewish refugee family. I remember; it was a very strict English household; the children weren't spoken to; we had high tea on our own at 5.00 and were sent off to bed.

Then we moved out to a house in Lonsdale Road in North Oxford. I have very happy memories of my childhood there although when we arrived in England my parents insisted on all of us speaking English which I did not understand or speak for a few weeks. Our small semi-detached house was crammed full of the large, heavy German furniture that we had been allowed to bring with us; it all seemed so overpowering in the small rooms. But it was a very happy home.

My father started working at Stoke Mandeville in 1944 when I was eleven. It meant that he became increasingly absent. He would set off on the bus on Monday morning and basically stay there all week and come home at weekends when he would be busy writing medical papers and often travelling to other spinal units abroad. Eventually he bought our first car and travelled to Stoke every day, but although he was very supportive of my brother who became a doctor and me when I trained to be a physiotherapist he was too involved in his work to play with us and I only remember one family holiday.

During the Wheelchair Games at Stoke Mandeville I used to go along and help as one of the volunteers; in the early years it was almost totally run by volunteers. I used to help pulling the arrows out of the archery butts and picking up the ball during table tennis matches. There was a wonderful atmosphere at the Games and I recall there was always an enormous party in the sports hall on the final evening. I used to run around with a tray handing out pints and pints of beer and everyone got very merry. I remember one year Margot Fonteyn the ballerina was there while her husband a tetraplegic was having treatment in the spinal injuries unit.

Later on, in 1956-7, when I had finished my training as a physiotherapist I worked at Stoke Mandeville for a short time.. . It was difficult because my father would ask me questions I couldn't answer and correct me in front of everyone. He was absolutely devoted to his work; and when he wasn't doing that he was at home writing papers or preparing talks; or else he was away travelling. He retained that very Germanic strain of authoritarianism. It was difficult to disagree or argue with him. It's an attitude that wouldn't last five minutes in a hospital today. One of the very few people who managed to disagree with him and get away with it was the head physiotherapist Dora Bell. However in spite of this he was loved and respected by staff and patients and was known as 'Poppa'.