

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

POWS AND REFUGEES

European refugees in Worthing [four pages]

Extracts from *Despatches from the Home Front, The War Diaries of Joan Strange 1939-1945* (Monarch Publications, 1989)

1939

January 14th Up to London by the 12.33. We went to the News Theatre. It's 'Stage and Screen' day, i.e. all cinemas and theatres give 10% of their takings and actors and actresses give part of their salary and the public are asked to subscribe to Lord Baldwin's Fund for Refugees. The Facists are furious and are trying to hinder people by standing near the theatres and giving out leaflets against it.

January 25th Rained all day long and heavily too! Had five German and Austrian Jewish people to tea – a sorry tale but all of them courageous. Later Annie Margot, Mother and I went to the Odeon to see *Pygmalion* with Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller in the cast.

January 30th While all Germany was listening to Hitler's broadcast on the sixth anniversary of the Third Reich, Worthing held a most interesting meeting in connection with the Jews. A Mr Davidson from Woburn House, London gave a talk on the work of the refugee problem and a committee was formed to co-ordinate efforts being made here in Worthing – I got on!

February 3rd In all the evening for once! Very nice. Washed hair and telephoned Kit (nine minutes!). Listened to excellent broadcast 'Children in Flight', a series of sound records of the German child-refugees. Peter Laufer, five and a half, was one of the refugee boys interviewed – the Laufer family is now living in Worthing. His father told me that Peter asked him if it were true that when he came home to England he would be allowed to go into a garden again. In Austria and Germany Jews are not allowed in public gardens.

February 25th At 6.30 called for Hanna, the refugee from Berlin, staying with Mr. Sunshine, to hear Backhaus at the Dome. She was so excited as she's musical and has not been allowed to visit concerts recently in Germany because of being a Jew.

February 27th All the cinemas here have granted free passes to all refugees. At the Refugee Committee meeting the Treasurer reported already over £4 definitely (pledged) weekly ie enough to support an aged couple, and our leader wired off to the two old people who have been chivied from Germany, Austria, Jugoslavia and now Italy (by March 4th) to say we can have them. So we've done something concrete at last.

April 2nd In the afternoon took Helen and John and two Czech refugees. Frau Weingarten and Frau Lettna awfully nice young women, for a drive. Frau Lettna flew from Prague on Thursday with the twelve who were much in fear at the thought of being sent back and threatened to jump out if that happened. She

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expects her first child in two months time – she's twenty-five and a lawyer. Her husband is in danger in Prague, so is the other's husband.

April 3rd Met Fraus Laufer, Lettna and Weingarten and Herr Weingarten has arrived most unexpectedly in England – great joy! He is a Jew and has suffered much. Frau Lettna has had a wretched domestic place for a month – a Dean's (Welsh) household and she has worked from 6am to 10pm. She looks ill but delighted with the news.

April 7th Good Friday. In the afternoon called for the Weingartens and Frau Lettna and took them to the bungalow that Miss Page is lending them for a month at Salvington. To tea here with the Laufners. A lot of talking and exchange of experiences (all grim). Herr Weingarten tells us that in Prague now anyone listening to English news on the wireless has twenty years' imprisonment, and death if caught listening to Moscow.

April 9th The Laufers sailed for the USA – Mr Thornycroft took them down to Southampton, a very sad farewell he said it was. Poor things and they are some of the few 'lucky' ones out of millions.

May 8th to May 27th Missed writing the diary because Mrs Lynes and I 'finished' the refugee house, 72 Canterbury Road, and it took all my spare time. We got the stuff from all over Worthing and district and the finished product is really quite nice.

May 23rd Mr Beerman had his first free haircut at Mr Chippings! Mrs B made him go as it was Mr Chippings' first free day offer and we felt someone should make use of it!

May 26th Awoke to find Alice, the maid, telling me that our front step, path, wall and pavement outside had been written out in tar 'Jews get out', 'Britons before aliens'. Reported to police and Mrs Thornycroft who came by early to help remove the marks with petrol and scrubbing. All off in half an hour. Very disgusting.

June 1st The refugees had their own social at the club room in the evening. Many there and all went off well. Mrs Beermann is quite overcome and overjoyed that everyone *laughs* again.

September 18th The blow fell on Sunday when we heard on the wireless at 10.30 that Russia had marched into Poland. Poland is now being crushed by two great states. Our refugees were depressed about it but they were cheered up on Saturday morning when Mr Ritter heard a most interesting broadcast from a German woman belonging to a secret anti-Nazi society, urging women to prevent more bloodshed. She hopes to broadcast next Saturday. The end of the speech was jammed. I took Mother and the Piltzers, a Czech refugee couple, for tea on the Devil's Dyke – they being 'friendly aliens' can go outside the five-mile limit of Worthing – not so the Beermanns who are 'enemy aliens'! They may leave only with police permission.

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September 28th Today, Mr Ritter had his first job and earned 1s 2d an hour by mowing Uncle Bert's lawn. Now all three have jobs – Mr Beermann cleans Dr Gusterson's car twice a week and Mrs Beerman 'chars' Bache's flat twice a week too! All thoroughly enjoy their work.

October 7th Beermanns heard that after all they are to report at the USA consulate on the 18th. Great excitement. They will be off in November probably. A glorious morning and I set off with two Beermanns for the Tribunal for 'Enemy Aliens' set up in Chichester. It was a very pleasant interview for them and we were free by 11.15. Looked over the Cathedral – it was as lovely as ever but all the ancient tombs had been completely sand bagged.

October 13th Today Mr Ritter appeared before the Tribunal and we were all very anxious about the result. His is a complicated case as he was counted an Aryan as his Polish Jewish grandmother's papers were lost at the time when everyone had to prove his purity! He's been an officer in the Austrian army and even held a state position. He also got out of Germany plus money! All he desires is to get to Australia and to marry Annie there! Will he be counted a 'friendly alien' and allowed to travel to Australia?

Mother sponsored him and put his case very forcibly. Mrs Beermann also helped as his future sister-in-law.

October 24th On the five o'clock post came a most important letter for Mr Ritter from the Government of Australia about his entry into Australia. They say they will have him but our side won't grant him his exit permit.

December 4th Refugees Committee in evening – the work increases rather than decreases as since evacuation started there are over 1,000 aliens in West Sussex and Worthing is the only place with a committee – there are about 500 in Worthing – over 200 have registered at our office.

December 5th Poor old Ritter heard from Australia House that no enemy aliens are allowed in Australia between the age of eighteen and forty-five. He is forty-three next month. He's seen the local Roman Catholics to see if they can help him as his money is running out.

1940

May 12th Mr Weingarten came at 10.30 to tell us that Mr Ritter is to be interned together with all Austrian and German refugees between sixteen and sixty.

May 13th Whit Monday. No news of all our refugees. It is very sad hearing the wives' tales. The Czechs are all right and those Germans who came over on Czech passports.

May 15th Holland capitulates. News of our internees. After an anxious morning Mr Durst was released from Chichester and was re-united with his family and I saw them off at 3.30 from West Worthing station for Liverpool en route for the USA. He says about 100 men are all living together in Chichester in a large hall –

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food is good, beds are straw mattresses on the floor. All are in "good humour" – we hope so!

May 23rd The wives of the interned refugees are so sad and upset, almost as if they were dead, as they are not allowed to write. Mr and Mrs Dornbusch are off to Bolivia tomorrow – they came to say goodbye and to bring some apfelstrudel!

June 7th At last we've got Mr Ritter's first letter written eleven days ago – very poor food and poor furniture in their camp.

June 12th The office says that in all probability all Germans and Austrians must leave Worthing before the end of next week. Several of our hostels will have to close of course. The Germans are only 30 miles from Paris.

June 14th Uncle Herbert, Mother's half brother in Canada, wrote sending me his allowance – for just £100 per year which I can use as I like! Mrs Schlichter came to say good-bye to Mother (all enemy aliens are to leave the coast) and she will receive the first sum as she is in a terrible plight.

1943

June 13th Whit Sunday. Mrs and Mrs Ward (Weingarten) are staying here for their seven days' leave. Aliens in the Pioneer Corps are able to change their names for English ones now.

1944

April 23rd Gottfried Ritter was released on Friday - he's been interned since May 1940!

April 30th I went up to London to meet Gottfried Ritter and hear about his plans after internment. His experiences would fill a book. He looks well and seems happy once again.

1945

January 24th We had a Refugee Committee meeting today to discuss plans for coping with hundreds of war-shocked, badly nourished Dutch children. It looks as if the German children are in a similar plight.....

March 17th Worthing Refugee Committee announced they were looking for holiday accommodation for young Dutch children. Within three days over twenty families had applied. We heard that the children are proving rather difficult as they are all young and some cannot remember their country not being occupied. Hence, what was right then - lying to Nazis etc - is *wrong* now! A bit difficult for young minds to get accustomed to the right way of living.....

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