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**Members of the Low-Beer, Tugendhat and Stiasni families
meet in Brno in 2017**

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The Low-Beer, Tugendhat and Stiasni Family Reunion at 'Meeting Brno 2017' (19-24 May)

by Iain R. Smith

The Mayor and city authorities in Brno invited descendants of the Low-Beer, Tugendhat and Stiasni families to this gathering to commemorate the important role the families had played in the life and economic development of Brno during the century up to 1939 when their presence in Moravia came to an abrupt end. These families had contributed a great deal, over many generations, when Moravia was their home and Brno was a dynamic and rapidly developing city at the centre of Europe. It was a unique occasion, a generous and symbolic effort to reconcile and heal past wounds between Brno's Czech, Jewish and German populations with a carefully considered and well organised programme, which was greatly appreciated by almost a hundred people who took part. A few representatives of the Stiasni family and a good handful from the Tugendhat family were present, and around 80 descendants of the three main branches of the Low-Beer family came from Brazil, Venezuela, Canada, the USA, the UK, France, Switzerland and Austria. Those coming from the New World predominated but few of them had continued in the business and entrepreneurial activity which characterised their Moravian forebears.

The Jewish Low-Beer family originated in Boskovice and left the ghetto and took the German form of their name (Löw-Beer) as was obligatory in the Habsburg Empire after 1788. We visited the Jewish cemetery at Boskovice where some of the family members are buried. Several different branches of the family played a major part in developing the woollen textile industry in and around Brno during the course of the nineteenth century. From modest beginnings, their factories soon developed into huge industrial complexes which were amongst the most important textile companies in the Habsburg Empire, exporting their products throughout Europe and later also to the Middle East and South America. Alongside their factories they built houses, schools, community centres and kindergartens for the children of their employees, and contributed large sums to various charitable organisations. The economic and social advancement of Low-Beer family members was also marked by the holding of civic office and the building of villas of outstanding



Alfred Low-Beer's house on Drobného Street, Brno

architectural interest and importance e.g. in Svitávka and Brno itself, where the Tugendhat House is today a star tourist attraction. The gift of Alfred Low-Beer to his daughter, Greta, on her marriage to Fritz Tugendhat, it was designed by Mies van der Rohe (1929-30) and is today listed by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage Site and one of the most important modernist houses in Europe. In May we spent a day in this outstanding building, guided by Ivo and Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, who for the past twenty years have actively campaigned for its rescue and careful restoration. It is now owned by the City of Brno and is connected to the publicly-owned Alfred Low-Beer's villa, which has recently been opened as a museum. Since the Alfred Low-Beer villa can be reached through a gate from the garden of the Tugendhat House, a joint entry ticket for both houses would help to put the Alfred Low-Beer villa on the tourist map. There are many other Low-Beer houses in Brno which, without restitution, have passed into private hands.

We spent a whole day on a bus tour visiting some of the Low-Beer factory sites in Brno, Svitávka and Brněnec. Little remains of the factories, but we were most warmly welcomed by the Mayor at Svitávka and visited the Big and Little Villas built by the Low-Beers there, the former now the headquarters of the town's administration, the latter in private ownership. We then went on to Brněnec where the Löw-Beer factory was the site of Oskar

Schindler's 'Ark'. First brought to global awareness by Thomas Keneally's book in the early 1980s, and then by Steven Spielberg's film in 1993, this factory employed and saved over 1,000 Jews from Auschwitz during 1944-1945, when the Plaszów forced-labour camp near Kraków in Poland, where Schindler had an enamelware factory, was evacuated in the face of the advance of Soviet troops. The surviving buildings of the Plaszów camp have recently been turned into an Oskar Schindler Museum dedicated to the Nazi occupation of Poland. At Brněnec (Brünnlitz) the factory buildings survive in a totally derelict condition amid what is now an expanding industrial site. Recently covered by a Protection Order from the Czech Ministry of Culture, the factory is now owned by the Shoah and Oskar Schindler Memorial Foundation, which hopes to raise sufficient funds to restore it. As "the only Nazi concentration camp in the Czech Republic that is still standing in its original building", according to Jaroslav Novák, the head of the Shoah, the idea is to turn it into a Holocaust memorial museum with an exhibition depicting Schindler's life (1908-1974). Few Czechs had heard of Schindler before Spielberg's film and today they still regard him with very mixed feelings although he was honoured as a 'Righteous Among the Nations' by the Israeli government in 1963.

During this family gathering in May, there were also excellent tours arranged of the city of Brno. Until the early twentieth century, Brno was a city that looked to Vienna as the great metropolis, rather than Prague. Today, when the majority of tourists go to Prague, Brno has a bit of an inferiority complex. Yet, quite apart from its older historical buildings, the emergence of Brno at the beginning of the twentieth century as a dynamic, rapidly developing industrial and cultural centre, undergoing fast population growth from the surrounding Czech countryside, was accompanied by some splendid modernist architecture in its industrial and commercial buildings as well as in some of the private residences, such as those built by members of the Low-Beer family. We went round some of these early modernist industrial buildings and marvelled at their beauty, how they drew on the skills of Brno artisans and builders, and their ingenious ways of maximising daylight and the airy, open working space. The factories and villas built by the Low-Beers during the first three decades of the twentieth century testify to the optimism and faith in the future that characterised this unprecedented period of dynamism and



The 'Little Villa' of the Low-Beer family at Svitávka

development in Brno. This all came to a sudden and shocking stop with the Nazi German occupation of 1938-39, the Second World War, and the end of the Low-Beer presence in Brno, Moravia and what was then Czechoslovakia.

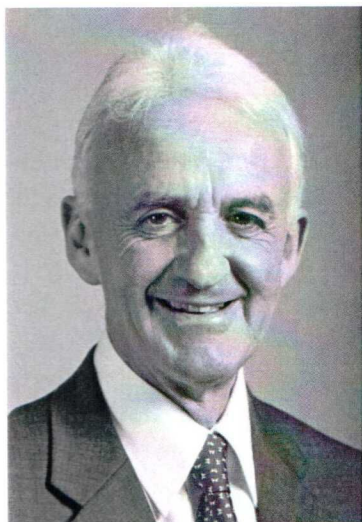
Today, the important part played by these leading Jewish families in the development, business and civic life and culture of Brno is far less well-known and acknowledged than it should be. This formed the subject of a series of discussions that took place with the Mayor and city authorities during the May gathering. The rescue and renovation of some of the buildings in recent years has been well acknowledged, not least in well-illustrated books about the Low-Beer Villas and especially the Tugendhat House. But too little has been said about those for whom the buildings were built, who lived and worked in them, why they left, and what happened next. These important families were driven out because they were Jewish. Those who got out in time became refugees in other countries. Those who did not, including Alfred Low-Beer, perished. There are no Low-Beers in the Czech Republic today.

How to put the human story back into a picture which is perhaps too focused on who designed and built the buildings rather than who commissioned and lived in them? Some specific suggestions were made which the city authorities promised to consider. The introduction of a blue plaque system for these and other buildings of historical importance would enable the people who commissioned and lived in them to be included along with the architects and builders who built them. Children walking past on their way to school would thus easily learn some local history and be

encouraged to ask what happened next? Alfred Low-Beer's Villa on Drobného Street in Brno is now a museum with very little in it. There is empty space there waiting to be filled with the history of the Low-Beer family, their factories, and the story of Oskar Schindler and the 'Ark' he created at the Brněnec factory. Then there is the need to teach the teachers, who give the history lessons in schools, about the important part played by these Jewish families in the economic and cultural development of Brno during the century before 1939. Daniel Low-Beer is just completing a book about the history of the Low-Beer family from the eighteenth century. When this is published, in Czech as well as in English, it will be a valuable source of information for those schoolteachers, their pupils and the general public.

Iain R. Smith is a historian. He has known three generations of the Low-Beer family, to whom he is related, and he attended the gathering in Brno.
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Peter Koenig, who attended the reunion and whose mother Margaret ('Didi') Low-Beer fled to London in 1939, adds: *"At a time when populism and nationalism are a growing trend in Eastern Europe, the city of Brno once again revealed its post-modern tradition in hosting a festival for 'Reconciliation'. This was not only a symbolic token to reconcile and heal past wounds between its Czech, Jewish and German populations but the energy and spirit it represented were a visceral beacon, a peaceful and loving invitation which could be felt by all present, to transcend any and all forms of political or cultural nationalism. This call by the administration of a regional city was extraordinary, as also the generous, impeccably organised and warm-hearted invitation to families such as ours (Low-Beer/Tugendhat/Stiassni) to partake and so help carry this message out to the wider world. A worldwide first, undoubtedly."*



Peter Koenig

The Strahov Stadium - the Mirror of Twentieth-Century Czechoslovakia

by Eva Hrončková

Every day crowds of international tourists walk up to Prague Castle and further towards the Strahov Monastery, to visit sites of major events throughout centuries of Czech history. However, only a small percentage of them is probably aware of a structure which reflects 20th-century events in Czechoslovakia as no other does, located only a few minutes' walk away. Today it is hard to believe that the Great Strahov Stadium in its state of disrepair is in fact the largest sports stadium built in the modern world. With its original capacity of up to 250,000 visitors, according to some sources it may be rivalled only by the Roman Circus Maximus. For comparison, the capacity of Wembley Stadium in London is only 90,000.

It may come as a surprise that the need of the relatively small Czechoslovak nation for such a gigantic stadium - mostly known for displays of synchronised gymnastics under the direction of the Communist Party - was in fact much older.

Being one of many small nations united in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czechs had been actively trying to define their own national identity since the late 18th century. The Sokol movement, which hand in hand with its credo "a strong spirit in a strong body", connected like-minded Czechs through physical and cultural activities and soon became a symbol of national pride. It continued to play a significant role in public life in the first period of the independent Czechoslovak State, after the Empire collapsed following the First World War. Displays of mass gymnastics by the Sokol movement, for which individual member units across the country rehearsed identical choreography to perform it later together in one place, brought the need for a new venue since, reportedly, every fifteenth person in the newly formed Czechoslovakia was a member.

The Stadium in the interwar period and during World War 2

The construction of the first sports stadium in Strahov began in 1926. This structure, designed by Architect Alois Dryák, consciously built for the 8th Sokol Gymnastics Festival, was wooden and rather simple compared to the gigantic concrete icon known to the people of Prague today.