War and displacement

My family story

Peter Lawrence

Abstract

In this personal memoir of the impact of war and displacement, I tell the story of my father, a Polish-Jewish student from Lwow, then in Poland, who became a refugee after the German invasion of Soviet occupied Poland in 1941. It is the story of loss, survival and reinvention of nationality and family. It is a story familiar to those many refugees through the ages who coped with displacement and loss and made a new and successful life in a foreign country.

Keywords: personal, memories, refugee, family, war, displacement, loss

As we are currently seeing with conflicts in Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, and several parts of the Global South, one of the main consequences of war is the migration of the affected population to countries of relative safety. We are living through a period when we are seeing a migration of peoples caught up in various conflicts such as we have not seen in the 84 years since the outbreak of World War II, a period we like to call in our Global Northern-centric way, “peacetime”. There are currently around 84 million people who are not citizens of the country in which they live of which 37 million (20%) are refugees, displaced by conflict or persecution (World Bank, 2023). Of those refugees, only a quarter are in the Global North and yet, to many citizens of those countries, including those who were originally migrants, they are considered a threat to their way of life. Even the vocabulary now used officially sees migrants, especially refugees from conflict, as objects to be “processed”. The UK Government’s declared policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda for “processing” recalls an earlier period of history not only when Jewish, mentally challenged, physically disabled and Roma people were processed through the Nazi gas chambers, but also when residents of the UK who were nationals of Germany, Austria, and Italy were, as “enemy aliens” shipped off to Canada and Australia.

In the 1930s and indeed historically, the migration of peoples because of conflict, persecution, or economic circumstances was common and relatively unrestricted. But for being allowed to stay in the UK, my father could have been one of the Jewish people “processed” through the gas chambers. He was born in Lwów in eastern Poland (now Lviv in

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western Ukraine) into an “assimilated” Jewish family. He left Poland in 1938 to study for a Chemistry degree at London University. He went home to spend the summer of 1939 with his family. He returned to London to continue his studies in late August 1939, taking a boat from Danzig (now Gdansk) to London’s Tilbury (he said was the third but last boat to make this journey before the Germans invaded Poland on 1 September). Lwów was prior to 1918 known as Lemberg and until then had been in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1939 Poland was divided up between Germany and the Soviet Union as part of the non-aggression agreement between Hitler and Stalin (the so-called Molotov–Ribbentrop pact negotiated between the foreign ministers of the two countries). After the war and, because of the Yalta Agreement between the USSR and the US, the UK, and France, which moved Poland west, Lwów became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic and known as Lvov.

There was a university in Lwów, but the Polish government had imposed a *numerus clausus* restriction on Jewish attendance at university of 10% of the age cohort in a city where a third of the population was Jewish. My grandfather may have thought my father would not make it into the 10%, giving some support to Polonsky’s view that Jewish assimilation had failed (Polonsky, 2000). He may have seen war coming and wanted to make sure my father was spared. When he arrived in London with his papers, he was told that he did not satisfy UK matriculation requirements. He enrolled at Battersea Polytechnic, now the University of Surrey. I presume he matriculated successfully but I cannot find any record that he was accepted for a chemistry degree. He did try to gain a London University external degree by correspondence after the war but never finished. In any event he found himself in London when war broke out.

After the outbreak of war in 1939, the British government classified German and Austrian nationals (and later Italians) living in the UK as “enemy aliens”. These included Jewish nationals from these countries. Most were subject to detention. Many German and Austrian Jews were labeled “enemy aliens” and detained in prison or more famously on the Isle of Man along with fellow nationals, some described as “Nazi sympathizers”. Initially the policy was to ship detainees to Canada or Australia: the latter’s government even volunteered to take them. As we know from the tragedy of the sinking of the SS Arandora Star, the detainees did not always get there (Kershaw, 2015; Gillman & Gillman, 1980). As a foreign national of an ally, my father was classified as a “friendly alien”. He wanted to join the British armed forces but was not accepted until he was naturalized in 1943 and then was called up, not to fight in the European theater, where he wanted to be, but in Burma and Malaya at the Japanese front.

In the meantime, he had met my mother – coincidentally in the same lodgings as the cousin with whom my father had come to England to study (see below). She was not Jewish, but Catholic and a foreign national who had emigrated from Vienna in 1936 having been an *au pair* five years earlier with a well-connected English family. Because of her connections she escaped detention as an “enemy alien”, though she was still classified as such. She was not a casualty of war having deliberately returned to England in 1936. Both her parents had died, and she had liked the UK the first time around. My father spent time as an air raid warden and eventually got a job with Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), then a major British corporation, in Manchester. My mother worked in a Lyons Corner House in London and then in a munitions factory in Manchester. My father was naturalized in 1943, adopted an English surname and translated first names, all with the same initials as his Polish name and married my mother the same year.

My father had wanted to join the British Army and now as a British citizen he could. He was sent to the Far East and spent the rest of the war and its aftermath in Burma, Malaya, and Singapore, first on the Japanese front and then in the military police, being demobbed in 1947. During those three or four years my mother and I lived in private rented accommodation in Manchester but once my father came back from military service, we were allocated
one of the newly built Council prefabricated bungalows (popularly known as “prefabs”) built on pleasant parkland. According to my mother, my father did have thoughts of returning to Poland, but she was not interested. In any event, Lwów, now Lvov, was part of the Soviet Union, and the Cold War was well-established.

As for the family my father left behind, his parents, sister, and other relatives continued to live in Lvov during which time Soviet-occupied Poland was incorporated into the Ukraine Soviet Republic. Under Soviet occupation, Jews were treated differentially by class and by political affiliation, with the Jewish middle class faring worse than the working class and Jewish communists, with some (especially rank and file Polish soldiers and police) being deported to Siberia (Halikowski-Smith, 2023). How much my father would have known about his family’s situation is impossible to say. Letters from Lvov to England did get through Soviet censors and the no doubt tortuous journey to get there (Sands, 2016). However, I do not have any evidence of such communications between my father and his family. Nevertheless, it appears that the family did survive Soviet occupation. As the family were landowners, traders, and lawyers, they would have been affected by collectivization of land and the nationalization of trade, but how far this had gone in the two years of occupation is not clear. However affected, it would have been nothing compared with what was to come.

After Germany reneged on the 1939 agreement and invaded Soviet-occupied Poland, Ukraine and then Russia itself, the more than 150,000 (Mick, 2011) Jewish population of Lwów (now again Lemberg) were set to work in the Janowska camp on the outskirts of the city but allowed to live outside. After a few months they had to stay in what became the Janowska concentration camp (Pahiria, 2020). My father learned at some point that my parents and sister were murdered by a German patrol because they were out on the street after curfew, although the only record in the Shoah database (https://yvng.yadvashem.org/) that I could find states that my grandfather and great-grandfather “were murdered” and says nothing about the women. If the story my father was told is true, then this would have been during the brief period when Jews had to work in the camp while being able to live outside.

After the war, my father found and maintained contact with his uncle and cousins on his father’s side who had ended up in Paris, the US, and Israel, and an aunt on his mother’s side who migrated to Australia, as well as keeping a lifelong friendship with the cousin with whom he came to England in the first place. How the scattered members of the family found each other I have yet to discover. And how much he learned from them of the fate of his own family is something I can only conjecture, although I suspect his uncle could be the source. The latter and his second wife left their baby son with their Polish farm manager, went back after the war to collect him and then found their way to France. His uncle’s first wife and their two sons managed to escape and reach Hungary where they were able to stay until the Germans invaded that country in 1944 after which they escaped to Palestine. Another part of the family went to Australia. My American cousin who is now 97 and has lived in the US for around 70 years recalls that my grandfather made no attempt to escape, believing that he and his family would survive as they had money to bribe the guards.

It is hard to imagine how a 19-year-old Polish student, living in a foreign country, hundreds of miles from home, with little or probably without any contact with his family and not even knowing what had happened to them, would be affected by living through the trauma of separation and war. Not only could he not return to his home, but he found himself in a country under attack, in its capital city and vulnerable to German bombing. My father never talked much about this period of his life and my mother didn’t encourage questions. What I do recall is that he wanted to join the Army and fight the Germans; he was disappointed not to be able to do that. The only war story he ever told was of sheltering in a trench from a Japanese air raid and feeling liquid trickling down his neck and thinking he’d been wounded. It turned out that he had knocked over the drink of tea he had just made as he was taking shelter. Not long after, the Japanese surrendered.
Once back in England, returning to his job with ICI, using his Chemistry education to market dyestuffs, he and my mother set about becoming proper Britons. My father became active in the Labour Party. I recall going around our estate with him on Sunday mornings collecting “subs” from party members. In the 1951 election he positioned me outside a polling station collecting polling cards which, as then the parties issued their own cards, gave an indication of how people had voted. Someone from the Conservatives gave me two shillings and sixpence or half a crown (equivalent now to £0.125 but a lot of money in 1951) for their polling cards. My father made me give the money to the Labour Party!

He was also a sports fan, becoming a lifelong supporter of Manchester United, then very much the second team, whose ground had been bombed – a natural choice for my father’s bias toward the underdogs. He also learned to understand cricket and became a member of the Lancashire Cricket Club, and even tried to play the game but understandably not too successfully. His love of classical music led him and my mother to be season ticket holders at the Halle Orchestra’s fortnightly concerts in Manchester’s Free Trade Hall. When my mother didn’t feel up to it, I went in her place.

My mother’s Catholicism ran to believing but not practicing much. However, Catholic priests knew the rules. A child of a marriage between a Catholic and a non-Catholic could only be recognized by the Church if the child was brought up a Catholic. So, at the age of 6, I was taken out of the local state primary and sent to the nearest Catholic school, one short train journey away and brought up a Catholic, as was my sister, four years behind me. The priests even tried to convert my father who described himself as agnostic, but was willing to undergo some instruction, finally deciding it was not for him. But he was fine with his children getting a Catholic education, though not uncritical of some of the religious aspects of that education.

My father had secured a respectable job, and my parents’ next ambition was to have their own house. My father applied to the Foreign Compensation Commission to be compensated for the loss of property in Poland resulting from the war and displacement. He was awarded enough to put down a deposit on a newly built semi-detached house. By 1959, Harold Macmillan could boast of us “never having it so good”. Our family was the perfect example: owned a house, a car, children in grammar/high school, and by then taking “continental” holidays in mainland Europe.

So, assimilation became complete, except for the foreign accents, although my father was once assumed to be Scottish by one of his business clients at the other end of the phone. This always led to the inevitable question: “where are you from?” My mother whose accent remained with her throughout her life found this increasingly annoying and would point out that she had lived longer in England than her younger questioner, or would name an English town that she liked as her birthplace, only to be asked “no, but where are you really from?”

The issue of accents also extended to me. Growing up in Manchester, I spoke English with a local accent. My parents had both learned English through their education topped up with night school in England. They were very strong on English grammar always correcting me and later my sister. But they wanted me to adopt “received pronunciation” and sent me to elocution lessons so I would speak BBC English, as we called it. The other way in which they tried to ensure I would be fully integrated was not to speak to me in either of their native languages but always in English. However, my father spoke German reasonably well and so my parents communicated in German when they didn’t want me to know what they were talking about. This helped me later when I started to learn German.

Nevertheless, my parents didn’t forget their origins. My mother talked of Vienna with some nostalgia and after the four-power occupation was over, she took my sister and me to visit the city and the area in the suburbs where she was brought up. We also visited her uncle on his farm and met her cousin but after that never maintained contact. There were holidays in Austria (including one at the summer home of the famous Vienna Boys
Choir), and I went on a summer exchange staying with an Austrian family with a child of my age, having an emergency appendix operation and learning quite a lot of German! On the other hand, my father expressed whatever nostalgia he had for Poland in the music of Chopin and Polish folk songs. He had been an accomplished pianist and eventually was able to buy a piano after some 20 years and resume playing.

As a child, I grew up with no idea of what my parents had managed to achieve in starting a new life and a family in a foreign country. I had much the same experience as other children in my neighborhood and my schools. My parents ensured that my sister and I had a good education to university level – books, music and broadsheet newspapers were ever-present in the house and when we eventually got a television, viewing was directed to classical drama and current affairs. I imagine my father probably tried to recreate the cultural atmosphere of his family house in Lwów. However, unlike most other families, there were not any extended family members on hand – no grandparents, no uncles and aunts. There were friends of my parents whom we called uncle and auntie and there was a cousin by marriage of my father, with whom he came to England also to study. He married the daughter of a vicar and converted to the Christian faith – they were uncle and aunt to us. There was one occasion in primary school when we were asked by the teacher to do our family tree with the help of our parents. My father’s response to this was to help me make one up. Decades later, he produced a detailed tree of his family. Interestingly, I have no memory of doing a tree on my mother’s side. I do not recall ever feeling “foreign” at school or outside. The only occasion I can recall of an indication of discrimination was in the Sixth Form of my grammar school, when one Conservative party supporter told me that my parents had no right to vote Labour because they were foreigners, which, of course, by then they had not officially been for the best part of 20 years.

Whatever traumas, discrimination, and feelings of not belonging my parents may have experienced were kept well hidden from their children. They were determined to integrate with English society and its ways, including drinking strong tea! They were successful in making a living, building a family, giving their children a good home and education. They overcame war, displacement, and permanent migration. Their story is not unusual: so many people from other countries have been displaced by war and forced to settle in countries that have been prepared to welcome them. These migrants have successfully rebuilt their lives, as my parents did after the Second World War.

Notes

1 The degree to which Jews were “assimilated” or “acculturated” is a contested subject. “Assimilated” was the word used by my father showing that they saw themselves culturally integrated into Polish society. However, whether this was really the case has been contested (Polonsky, 2000).

2 The SS Arandora Star was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic on its way to Canada. There were “712 Italians, 438 Germans (including Nazi sympathisers and Jewish refugees), and 374 British seaman and soldiers. Over half lost their lives” (Kershaw, 2015).

References


