

A Tale of Two Portraits

Rudolf Beran



One picture is this portrait above of my mother, Irene, painted in 1921 by a well-known Munich artist of the time, Hugo von Habermann. The artist so cleverly captured my mother's flamboyant character that it always had pride of place in our pre-war family home in Brunn (modern name Brno) in the Czech Republic. The other was this portrait to the right, of Habermann himself, and of which more anon.

They say that every picture tells a story but what I want to tell here is a story about a picture - in fact about two pictures that once hung together on the walls of my family home, were then separated in the tragic turmoil of wartime Europe, but now, after 70 years, brought back together.



Like so many Jewish households, my family was caught up in the horrors of the Nazi occupation. The family dispersed with a few of our treasures, including the portrait of Habermann, but our home was confiscated, Philip Beran, my father, was deported to Theresienstadt and our treasured pictures disappeared; lost forever or so we thought.

Then, amazingly, in May 2006, and nearly 70 years after its loss, her portrait reappeared. The story of its disappearance and reappearance reads like a whodunit, with a tangled love story, human tragedy, and even modern technological wizardry playing their parts.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The time, as I have said, was 1921, and the place, the studio of a well-known Munich artist, Freiherr Hugo von Habermann, and Irene, his subject 500 miles from her home. Let me first explain how this came about?

The Beran family had prospered in Brno - the textile factory, founded by my Great Grandfather, reached its peak under my grandfather, Alois, who employed more than 1,000 workers. We supplied khaki cloth to the Austrian Imperial army. Alois had two sons, Philip and Bruno. Though close, the two brothers were marked out for different careers – Philip was destined to take over the family factories and Bruno, who showed great talent in art, was sent to Vienna, Munich and other important artistic centres to develop his talent.

In 1905 Philip met and married Irene Subak, the daughter of a family of well-to-do merchants. Two children followed – my older sister, Minnie, in 1906 and myself in 1913. With the outbreak of WW1 Philip was in a reserved occupation – managing the factories – but Bruno was called up. He was a rather delicate young man and army life aggravated his condition so that after six months service he was discharged and came to live with us in our flat above the Mlynska Street factory.

It must have been in this period that mother fell in love with Bruno and although as a young boy I was not aware of it, I was raised in a ménage-à-trois. Brno in this era was an important cultural centre and the sons and Irene could indulge their passions for music and art. The family accumulated a wonderful collection – an early Kokoschka, some old masters, and Irene's large collection of drawings from important artists of the Vienna and Munich Secession such as Gustav Klimt and Franz von Stuck.

Bruno restarted his artistic career after the Great War. Munich had become the centre of German artistic life and Bruno had struck up a friendship with his old tutor from ten years previously, Hugo von Habermann, sharing his Munich studio. Mother visited Bruno on several occasions and sat for Hugo as

his model. I am inclined to think that the portrait he painted was commissioned and paid for; how else would it have become a permanent fixture in our home and a favourite of Philip's who displayed it in a central position in our sitting room?

In 1929 the family fortunes changed dramatically. The output of the factory was geared to the large market of the Austrian Empire but this had fragmented into smaller nations, such as the new country of Czechoslovakia. Each country was trying to promote its own industry erecting trade barriers, and to make matters worse our factory held large stocks of quality wool from Yorkshire and Scotland purchased at a price that was undercut by cheap wool from Australia. The inevitable result was financial collapse and the takeover by the bank of the factory, our home included.

This was a period of great change for our family. We moved to a smaller flat in my grandfather's large house at the corner of Parkstrasse (now Drobneho) and Speckbacherstrasse (now Erbenova) elegant streets at the northern edge of Brno. Bruno spent extended periods travelling and painting sometimes alone, but ever more frequently accompanied by Irene, a situation which continued until Bruno set up his studio in Paris, after which Irene became his constant companion. She brought with her many of Bruno's earlier pictures and some of the family's art collection, which were put into storage in two large crates where they remained until after WW2. Her own portrait, however, remained behind at Philip's specific request as he was devoted to it. In 1935 Irene and Phillip were divorced and for the next two years Bruno and Irene travelled across southern France and Spain with his easel and paintbrushes. He particularly loved the scenery, the light and the people of Ibiza in the Balearics and they rented a house there.

As for me, it was felt that I too should find a future outside Brno. It was Bruno who took my education in hand; first he sent me to London, then to Lausanne, and then on to Barcelona where I found employment as a salesman for a newly established torch battery factory – a new industry for Spain. In this period I also came to regard Bruno as a second father and in some ways was closer to him than to Philip and when I talk about “my parents” it is actually Irene and Bruno I mean.

So it was that in July 1936 I visited my parents in Ibiza. While we were all together there the Spanish Civil War broke out and Ibiza declared allegiance to Franco. It was our good fortune that the British destroyer "The Granville" docked at the island to pick up stranded holiday makers and brought us all to Tilbury. I found work in England where I have made my home ever since. My parents could not settle and in 1937 returned to Paris where my sister Minnie and her Swiss husband were living. There they remained until the turmoil of WW2 caught up with them. That odyssey of their escape would fill several extra pages but is hardly connected to our picture, the object of my tale.

Only Philip was now left in Brno where life was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Already in the pre-war period tensions between the German and Czech speaking populations had increased, made worse by anti-semitism. Bruno and Irene wanted Philip to join them in Paris but he refused – he had never harmed a fly, he said, so why should anyone harm him. So he remained in Brno; how tragically wrong he was to do so.

History shows that there had been plunder of Jewish property and pogroms dating from the start of occupation, March 1939, so clearly many of the local population were not unsympathetic to the brutalities of the German occupiers. An ordinance of July 1939 led to Jews being forced to register for emigration, and divested of their property. In October 1941 at the order of Adolf Eichmann, emigration was banned and the extermination programme started. Philip was one of the early victims. In the prisoner list of the Theresienstadt ghetto his entry reads "Philip Beran, born 26.5.1880, arrived at the ghetto Terezin from Brno on 5.12.1941 in transport number K 512". A later entry reads, "he went from Terezin to Riga on 15.1.1942 in transport number P 461." This is the last we know of Philip. Of the 1,000 Jews transported to Riga only 16 survived. Philip was not among them.

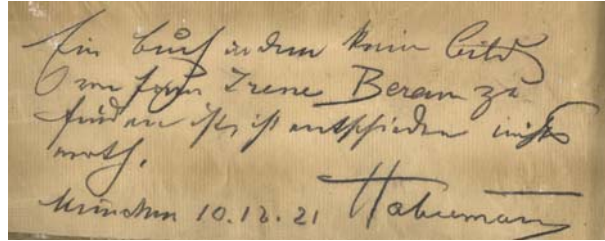
The house at Drobneho was confiscated - presumably with its contents and most likely with Irene's portrait. Land registry records confirm that the confiscation process commenced in November 1941 and was complete by September 1942. Contact was of course impossible.

It was not until 1945 that the Red Cross brought the family together again. I was married, with a family, working in Birmingham; Irene and Bruno were in Montreal, Bruno earning his living as a

portrait painter, and my sister Minnie still in Paris where her Swiss citizenship spared her from the fate of so many other Jews.

That Swiss connection not only spared my sister, it also spared that part of the family's art collection which all this time remained intact in the two crates and which we did not open until Bruno and Irene returned to Europe. When we did open them up, one of the items we found inside was a book that has crucial importance to this story – it was finely bound and a numbered copy of Ostini's biography of

Habermann. Clearly this was a present to Irene because inside is his handwritten dedication, "Ein Buch in dem kein bild von Frau Irene Beran zu finden ist, ist



entschieden nichts wert. München 10.12.21" (A book in which there is no picture of Irene Beran is not worth anything). There was also a signed conte sketch – presumably of Irene - but the most significant inclusion in this book was a beautiful colour reproduction of Irene's portrait. Another treasure found in these crates was Bruno's portrait of his mentor, Hugo Habermann.

Nothing changed for 30 years until modern technology comes to our aid in the shape of the world wide web. A German enthusiast for Habermann's work, Sabine Scheele, had put together a website with a life history and images of his work. Contacted by my son, Sabine asked to add both Irene's portrait and Bruno's portrait of Habermann.

Then, out of the blue, in May 2006, we heard from Sabine that the picture had been recognized by a staff member of the "Foundation of Prussian Palaces and Gardens Berlin-Brandenburg", a type of National Trust for the area located in Potsdam. The picture was in the Foundation's store. How did it get there? According to their records, the picture had been seized in 1948 by the Soviet Military Authorities in East Germany, one among other works of art that somebody tried to transport to the West without the necessary papers. Irene's portrait was sold to the Provincial Government of Brandenburg and finally brought to the Foundation at Potsdam.

Just think what an amazing chain of events have closed the circle on these two portraits: my family's bohemian way of life; Philip's fondness for the portrait; Habermann's generous dedication and his colour reproduction of the portrait; the diaspora of many family members; the survival of Ostini's biography and Bruno's portrait of Habermann thanks to my sister's Swiss connection; the clandestine traffic in art from East to West in communist times; the existence of a Habermann website in which we could draw attention to the picture's loss; and the watchfulness of the Potsdam Castle authority that put two and two together.

Our request for the return of my mother's portrait was dealt with by the Foundation authorities. With information provided by the Documentation Centre for Property Transfer of Cultural Assets of WW II Victims in Prague, they agreed that I was the rightful owner and my son attended a small official handover ceremony in Potsdam in December 2006. So, once again, and at the age of 94, I have the pleasure of gazing at my mother's image over my own mantelpiece.

That really concludes the main part of my story with its happy ending despite the many tragic twists and turns. There are a few footnotes to add though. Sabine uncovered this preparatory sketch made by



Habermann for the portrait. After 15 years of court battles my right of ownership of our property in Drobneho was recognized and my family and I are right now in the process of returning it to its former glory. As to what became of my parents – Bruno made a successful career as a portraitist “Stateside” and for a while Irene, true to her exuberant nature, became a pioneer “TV chef”. In later life they retired to their beloved Spain where they died within a few months of each other in 1979. In reality these final years can be seen as Bruno's most productive now being able to give full rein to his love of landscape and his exploratory spirit for abstract

art. Bruno's work is on display in galleries and collections in Europe and USA with perhaps the most notable works to be seen in the main state museum and gallery in Palma. The family also has many of these later works and anyone interested in finding out more can contact my son, Max¹.

¹ maxberan@oldboot.demon.co.uk; +44 1235 812493.