

Ernest Gellner

Ernest Gellner
An Intellectual Biography



JOHN A. HALL



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Preface

When Ernest Gellner died in December 1995, the flags of the University of Cambridge, where he had taught from 1984 to 1992, were set at half mast. This reflected the status he had achieved in the last years of his life, as a public intellectual able to comment on a very wide range of issues. It did not mean, however, that his views had lost their bite. If Gellner's name had been made during the scandal surrounding his early attack on Oxford linguistic philosophy, his late essays – not least his attack on Isaiah Berlin as a 'Savile Row postmodernist' – were capable of causing just as much outrage.¹ Still, many felt affection for Gellner, with whose voice they had become familiar, and to whom they often turned for guidance and insight. All the same, very few people knew what to make of him. He *was* hard to pin down. For two decades he had the curious title of Professor of Sociology with special reference to philosophy at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) – held, it should be noted, in two different departments: first Sociology, then Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method – before taking up the William Wyse Professorship of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He had separate reputations as scholar of Islam, theorist of nationalism, philosopher of history, and historian of ideas. He ended his career in Prague, the city in which he had grown up as a boy, though in his final years he was most interested in developments in Russia. His status as public intellectual rested on this background, that of a multilingual polymath, a modern *philosophe*. He was sometimes cited as one of the last great thinkers from Central Europe whose Jewish background meant a direct experience of the twentieth century's horrors.

It is possible to hint at what follows by noting the very particular way in which Gellner fits into this last category. The contours of his formative experiences are clear, and were pungently expressed by Gellner himself

1 'The Savile Row Postmodernist', *Guardian Weekly*, 19 February 1995.

when discussing the work of Hannah Arendt. The rise of nationalist sentiment at the end of the nineteenth century created a dilemma for Jews, especially those who had experienced the Enlightenment and an end to anti-Jewish discrimination by the state. Gellner insisted that the return to cultural roots was always an illusion, a piece of pure romanticism he neatly illustrated by noting sardonically that ‘it was the great ladies at the Budapest Opera who really went to town in peasant dresses, or dresses claimed to be such’.² Illusion or no, the Jews felt the pull of belonging just as much as others did – perhaps even more. But the romantic call to belong affected the minority Jewish community and the demographic majority in two very different ways.

[T]he minority had no illusion *of its own* to go back to. It only had the recollection of the ghetto, which by definition was not a self-sufficient community or culture at all, but an unromantically (commercially) specialized sub-community of a wider world within which it was pejoratively defined. Although in fact a literary populist nostalgia for the *shtetl* does exist nevertheless, Jewish populist romanticism is in the end a contradiction in terms . . .

So the romantic reaction placed the Jews in a dilemma . . . They were largely deprived of the illusion of a possible return to the roots, an illusion indulged by their gentile neighbours with enthusiasm and conviction. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s *Gemeinschaft!* But, of course, one does. So what’s to be done? The options which were logically open were either to infiltrate the Other’s *Gemeinschaft*, or to create a new one of one’s own, whether or not there had been any peasants available for the past two millennia, who could define its folk culture.³

But the desire to enter does not mean that one will be permitted to do so – or, even worse, permitted to remain within, as relatively assimilated German Jews were to discover. In consequence, a third option arose, rejecting the similarly homogenizing forces of assimilation and Zionism, namely that of pure cosmopolitanism. A political version of this cosmopolitanism which had world-historical consequences was that of the Jewish-born activists and intellectuals who became the key stratum of the early Bolshevik leadership,

2 *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983, p. 57. He went on to say that ‘ethnic’ gramophone records were consumed in the Soviet Union by sophisticated urban dwellers.

3 ‘Accounting for the Horror’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 August 1982, reprinted as ‘From Königsberg to Manhattan (or Hannah, Rahel, Martin and Elfriede or Thy Neighbour’s *Gemeinschaft!*)’, in *Culture, Identity and Politics*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 79.

and sought to create a left-wing empire in the East in which they would be safe.⁴ An intellectual version of this cosmopolitanism that held equal power was Karl Popper's famous call for an open society, in which tribal yearnings for the womb – including those of Zionists – would not be tolerated.⁵ Thinkers of this sort were prone to a romanticism of their own, liable to forget that the empires from which they came were sites of ethnic antagonism more often than they were arenas of benign multiculturalism.⁶ Allegiance to cosmopolitanism could also be demanding, potentially homogenizing into a single model, for all its emphasis on the universality of human values.

Thinkers of Jewish background lived the tension between cosmopolitanism and ethnonationalism in a variety of ways, and their ambivalence was in many cases intensified by the creation of the state of Israel. The uniqueness of Gellner's thought derives from his acceptance of this tension, acknowledging each position's weaknesses, whilst continuing to recognize both the power of universalism and the importance of nationalism. Accordingly, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose thought Gellner had disliked from the start, became the great 'bête noire' in the book he was writing at the time of his death. The Austrian philosopher had moved from a total endorsement of universalism to the uncritical acceptance of a *völkisch* relativism, thereby, in Gellner's view, being utterly wrong twice.⁷ The particularity of Gellner's intellectual achievement can be further illustrated by the briefest of comparisons with Popper, the contemporary thinker who influenced him the most. The immediate contrast concerns nationalism: Gellner took this protean force much more seriously, principally by empathizing with its proponents and attempting to understand its emotional appeal. A childhood in interwar Prague rather than Vienna helps to explain this, but far more fundamental differences are at issue. Gellner did not think that nationalism could simply be usurped by cosmopolitan ideals. For one thing, good ideas alone were unlikely to have that much power. For another, Gellner differed from Popper and other liberals in believing that Enlightenment values were not fully grounded, that universalism could not justify itself in purely philosophical terms. Consider his views on Julien

4 L. Riga, 'Ethnonationalism, Assimilation and the Worlds of the Jewish Bolsheviks in Fin de Siècle Tsarist Russia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 48, 2006.

5 M. Hacoheh, 'Karl Popper in Exile: The Viennese Progressive Imagination and the Making of *The Open Society*', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 26, 1996.

6 M. Hacoheh, 'Dilemmas of Cosmopolitanism: Karl Popper, Jewish Identity and "Central European Culture"', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 71, 1999.

7 *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*, Cambridge, 1998.

Benda's famous argument that modernity had witnessed a '*trahison des clercs*'.⁸ One might well expect a thinker with a Central European Jewish background, all too aware of Bolshevism and fascism, to heartily endorse the thesis of a betrayal by intellectuals of their heritage. But Gellner did nothing of the kind. To the contrary, he turned the tables on Benda – choosing to speak of '*la trahison de la trahison des clercs*'. For Gellner, a thinker such as Nietzsche had not betrayed intellectual values: rather, his honesty and rigour were almost unbearably painful to observe, and certainly worthy of the highest moral approbation. Gellner instead saw Benda as the traitor, because of his unjustified complacency about the solidity of liberal and rationalist values. The liberal's position is in many ways precarious rather than secure, and to deny this is to falsify modern intellectual history.

Gellner's own strategy was to ground his thought – partially yet powerfully – in a particular outcome of historical development, namely that of the higher standard of living and increased life expectancy brought about by modern science. But that is only one half of his position. Philosophical considerations are equally useful for understanding the nature of modern society. Gellner is thus the philosopher of industrialism and the sociologist of philosophy – a very particular mix of a highly integrated mind. This is reflected in his intellectual toolbox. Key themes, figures and ideas appear in rather different contexts. Thus Weber is seen as the sociologist of the rise of the West, but also as the best guide to modern epistemology. Hume has centre stage when the theory of knowledge is under discussion, but his arguments about enthusiasm and superstition are used as a key to understanding European development and the sociology of Islam, and as a vital clue to the genealogy of civil society. Gellner's mind was equipped with a broad range of intellectual resources, the versatility of which was surprising and elegant. It is crucial to stress as forcefully as possible that he was, to use the well-known opposition made famous by Isaiah Berlin, a hedgehog, even though his contributions in different fields made some think of him as a fox.

What concerned Gellner most was simply the nature of modernity. His son David once suggested that his father wanted to produce a philosophy of modernity. This is helpful, but it misses something. Gellner's brute definition of modernity, industry and nationalism, established an agenda: his concern was not just to explain the emergence of 'soft' and rational society and the contours of feeling that it allows us, but also to ask whether it might spread beyond the particular location in which it originated. He joined normative to social-scientific concerns. He did not merely define modernity, but also sought to defend and even to extend it.

8 '*La trahison de la trahison des clercs*', in *Encounters with Nationalism*, Oxford, 1994.

This is the appropriate point at which to explain my own personal connection with Gellner. In the academic year 1972–3, as a young graduate student at the LSE, I attended twenty lectures by him on ‘Modern Ideologies’, effectively drawn from *Legitimation of Belief* (1974). It was a thrilling experience. For one thing, nothing less than a new model of the world, with its central ideas and institutions specified and analysed, was on offer, challenging the listener to accept or to reject it. Quite simply, this provocation made me think for myself for the first time. Later on, from about 1977, I came to know Gellner personally. I gave classes at the LSE to supplement his lectures in social philosophy during the years when he was a member of its Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method. Subsequently I taught at the Prague campus of the Central European University in Prague, to which Gellner moved after the collapse of communism – an experience which allowed me to gain some sense of his background and what it meant to him. I found him to be an exceptionally attractive human being: witty, extremely kind, modest, and blessed with a genius for creating something of a tribe around himself, cemented by an endless stream of postcards – sent, one felt, to counteract a sense of loneliness. Despite my warm feelings for the man, this book is not a hagiography, which he certainly would have hated. Due perhaps to his influence I share some of his dislikes, but I do not accept all of his positive arguments or normative stances. Differently put, I am no self-appointed guardian of his life and thought, and so I take care to point out where his theories and arguments are, in my judgement, problematic or wrong. More generally, I seek to explain the pattern of his thought, to place it within the context already noted, rather than simply to list and describe every argument that he made.

Still, this personal link allows me at times to draw on my own memories. Though there may be dangers in this, in the end it is an advantage. For the materials available to a biographer are severely limited. Gellner was able to publish most of his thoughts. The Gellner Archive deposited at the LSE does contain some material, notably: a manuscript on ‘Conservatism and Ideology’; a huge mass of detailed fieldwork notes from Morocco; short pieces from the world-transforming year that Gellner spent in Moscow watching *perestroika* and *glasnost* open the doors to the strange and sudden death of the Soviet Union; some important correspondence, notably an exchange of views with Noam Chomsky; and, above all, what will be termed ‘The Notes’, written from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, in which he worked out his central intellectual positions, often by means of distilling his thoughts into aphorisms. In addition, the LSE kindly allowed me to examine another useful source, Gellner’s personnel file. This, in

combination with nearly all of his passports, now in the possession of his family, allowed me to reconstruct his movements with a fair degree of accuracy.

It is a great pleasure to be able to acknowledge a great deal of support from very many quarters. The Gellner family has allowed me to quote from his papers, and its members have always been available for discussion and sometimes simply to look after me. Still, this book is not official in any sense and I am responsible for what it says, although I hope that Gellner's relations find its portrait veridical. Scholars of central Europe – Jiří Musil, Peter Bugge, Malachi Hacoheh, Anatoly Khazanov and Roman Szporluk – were generous with their advice. I have also learnt a great deal from comments provided by Wolfgang Kraus, Al Stepan, Dominique Colas, Perry Anderson, Aviel Roshwald, Dominique Arel, Tom Nairn, Pierre Birnbaum, Siniša Malešević, Lilli Riga and Bill Kissane. At one time the book was to have been written with Brendan O'Leary. Though his other pressing concerns in Northern Ireland and Iraq prevented joint authorship, there are many traces of our discussions in what follows; his comments on a final draft of this book were invaluable. Another major debt is owed to Ian Jarvie, not least for his marvellous complete bibliography of Gellner's works.⁹ I have reminisced about Gellner with many people since he died, and thank them all – especially those who gave the formal interviews noted in the text. I am grateful to Noam Chomsky for letting me cite his letter to Gellner, in chapter eleven, and to Mrs Melitta Mew for permission to cite two letters from Karl Popper, in chapters two and five. Csaba Szilagy, librarian of the Central European University, helped locate material related to Gellner's years with that institution. Research was vitally supported by a STICERD Fellowship at the LSE, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Social Science, a Fowler Hamilton Fellowship at Christ Church College, Oxford, a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, a Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Humanities, and by my own university.

⁹ This is available online at <http://www.yorku.ca/jarvie/ErnestGellner.htm>. Many of Gellner's essays have been collected, and my citations are to those volumes unless changes to dates or names are significant, in which cases the original version is noted.

I

Malign Fates

History has no single gear, no set speed. Long periods of stability oscillate with moments of trauma, capable of sending societies in new directions. History was certainly on the move, to use Arnold Toynbee's expression, in the Bohemia from which Ernest Gellner came. Once ruled by the Hapsburgs, it saw in his lifetime the interwar Czechoslovak democracy dominated by Tomáš Masaryk; a short period of ethnic tension and political stalemate after Munich; incorporation (without Slovakia) into the Third Reich; and a further short period of putative Czechoslovak independence followed by effective rule by Moscow between 1948 and 1989, leading in turn to renewed independence for Czechoslovakia and ultimately the creation of separate Czech and Slovak Republics. Gellner's childhood was spent in Prague, and he returned to the city in 1945 after, as he put it, a first period of exile.¹ A long second period of exile followed when he left again in 1946, convinced that communist rule would condemn Bohemia to a period of darkness as long as that which had followed the imposition of the Counter-Reformation after the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620.

This chapter describes the formative period of Gellner's life, leaving for later the evolution of his views about Czechoslovakia and the Czechs – in which lack of interest turned to engagement followed by return. The Hapsburg world from which his parents came needs to be evoked here. Memories of that world were part of his childhood, and some of its tensions – above all those to do with nationalism – were also present in the Czechoslovakia of his youth. Gellner's brilliant parable about the character of nationalism, as the conflict between Megalomania and Ruritania, clearly derived from the late Hapsburg empire.² Gellner's theory will later be

1 J. Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 32, 1991, p. 65.

2 *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1983, pp. 58–62.

confronted with evidence drawn from late-nineteenth-century Bohemia, but my initial intention is simpler: to put his theory to one side in order to describe a social world as it appeared to him in his early years.

Family Background

Identities were in flux in late nineteenth-century Bohemia. Two particular social forces need to be mentioned. First, industrialization utterly changed the character of social life. By 1914 Bohemia was producing fully half of the industrial output of the Empire, thereby turning peasants into urban industrial workers. But another force pointed in a different direction. Nationalist leaders sought to cage people vertically within national communities, preventing them from making lateral connections across them. This is a very careful formulation. Nationalist leaders were trying to *create* national identities; they were ‘nationalizers’ rather than representatives of pre-existing communities. It is important in this regard to stress that the use of a given language did not necessarily determine one’s sense of belonging. German in particular was a language of social mobility, given its status in Vienna, for anyone who became fluent. German speakers had initially felt that the language transcended national identity, imagining that there would be some general movement towards the use of German, at once the language of a high culture and that employed at the heart of the imperial state. But this did not happen. Czech nationalist activists sought rather to create an alternative community. They turned Czech from a peasant dialect into a medium of high culture, thereby seeking to transform rather than merely to protect Czech speakers. Once they had achieved some success, a rationale for German nationalism developed in turn, that is, nationalist activists amongst German speakers sought to create a German-identified community capable of making its own demands.³ The general point can be put in a different way. Feelings of national belonging had been, and often remained, very weak. In areas of mixed language use people’s declared national identities switched back and forth in decennial censuses, deeply irritating nationalist militants.⁴ The censuses in question did not allow the reporting of multiple identities, nor did they provide the option of claiming an identity based merely on political loyalty to the Hapsburg state. Further, it was not possible to report a Jewish national identity. A word of warning

3 P. Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914*, Ann Arbor, 1996.

4 P. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*, Cambridge, (MA), 2006.

should be issued at this point: both German and Czech nationalist movements were in fact loyal to the state, seeking to change its character rather than to destroy it.⁵ And by the turn of the century they had at least partial success, as Vienna partly abandoned its hopes of remaining a supranational entity by explicitly recognizing national group loyalties.⁶ This did not, however, prevent many Jews and socialists from remaining loyal to the ideal of a polity that would include or supersede all national affiliations.

The Jews of Bohemia, including Gellner's forebears, faced unique difficulties. As the struggle between Czech and German nationalizers intensified, not least because state funds were often allocated based on the size of purportedly solid national communities, Jews were under pressure to choose sides. The more educated and urban among them were German speakers, many of whom were loyal to the empire. Because of the limited options provided by the census form, the crucial question was whether Jews would identify themselves with what might be termed the German or Czech 'communities-in-formation'. If some Czech militants wanted Jews to assimilate completely, others resisted this – and Masaryk, despite his fundamental liberalism, was sufficiently ill-at-ease with Jews to reject assimilation in favour of integration, that is, to allow Jews civil rights while preferring that they remain a distinct cultural group. Many developments followed from this, including the creation of new Zionist politics, with intellectuals who felt especially 'de-territorialized' often moving between different positions in short order.⁷ Nonetheless, a generalization can be made: Jews slowly moved, under pressure, towards the Czech side, calculating that they had little choice given the demographic weight of Czech speakers in Bohemia.⁸ Some indication of the situation can be seen in 1921 figures for

5 Judson, in *Exclusive Revolutionaries*, gives details of some of the ambitions of German activists; the situation of Czech activists is brilliantly analysed by P. Bugge, *Czech Nation-Building, National Self-Perception and Politics, 1780–1914*, Doctoral Dissertation, Aarhus University, 1994 (revised edition forthcoming from Harvard University Press). Bugge's book is exemplary in demonstrating that no Czech nationalist militant sought secession from the Hapsburgs in the late nineteenth century.

6 Analysis of various plans can be found in J. King, *Budweisers into Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948*, Princeton, 2002.

7 S. Spector, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle*, Berkeley, 2000. Spector offers a brilliant account of a de-territorialized group of intellectuals – whose numbers included Kafka, Egon Erwin Kisch, Max Brod, Franz Werfel, Hans Kohn, Alfred Fuchs, Pavel Eisner and Hugo Bergmann – moving between Czech identity, populist Judaism, high German culture, Zionism, and Catholicism. Kohn is one of the most well-known theorists of nationalism, but most of these thinkers had distinctive ideas about the national question.

8 H. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870–1918*, Oxford, 1988; and *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands*, Berkeley, 2000.

Prague: 94.2 per cent of Prague, as measured by mother tongue, claimed to be Czech, highlighting the absolute end of German-speakers' hegemony in the city.⁹ Within the Jewish community 5,900 claimed Jewish national identity (the new census form allowed this religion, but no others, to be selected as a nationality), 7,426 chose German, and fully 16,342 opted for Czech identity. This last figure may well have been exaggerated, as many sought to hide their links to the German community.¹⁰ While Jews agreed to schooling in Czech, many took care to ensure that their children also gained German cultural capital. Gellner's parents exemplify this situation.

Gellner's father, Rudolf, came from the northern part of Bohemia, the area that became known as the Sudetenland. Rudolf's maternal grandmother was born Friederike Meltzer and later married William Lobl. A family memoir by Julius Gellner, the younger brother of Rudolf, describes their marriage in these terms:

Mr Lobl was happy in his life in a small village: he got on well with all the peasants, though being a Jew and a very true believer – he ran the village shop, had a cow, a field and a little schnapps distillery, he was happy in his unlimited and unconditional belief in the goodness of God. Not so Friederike his wife: the strongest person I ever experienced (in direct contact) in my life, most powerful and dictatorial. She said one day, after having given birth to three children: 'enough is enough – I want to go to the big town of Saaz' . . . she wanted to live an intellectual life; indeed she did; she was not only a free thinker and an atheist, she believed in the rights of women . . .¹¹

Their daughter, Anna Lobl, married Max Gellner, and the family initially lived in Kadan before moving, as the result of anti-Semitic riots, to Saaz in 1897 and to Prague in 1910. There were nine children; Rudolf was the eighth, born on 13 August 1897, and the fourth of five sons. The family was German speaking, and the names of the children – Hedwig, Toni, Otto, Elsa, Rosa, Fritz, Wilhelm, Rudolf and Julius – demonstrated, not

9 The classic analysis of this process remains G. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914*, Second Edition, West Lafayette, 2006.

10 Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry*, chapter 7.

11 J. Gellner, 'England Receives Me as a Human Being', unpublished memoir written in the 1970s. Julius Gellner appears in T. Ambrose, *Hitler's Loss: What Britain and America Gained from Europe's Cultural Exiles*, London, 2001, pp. 99–100. This memoir is the main source for the information in this paragraph. Ernest Gellner's son David possesses two family trees, one drawn up with his father in 1984, the other with his grandfather a year later, which contain a good deal of further detailed information.

least to Gellner at a later date, that the family's fundamental loyalty was to Vienna.¹² The dominant influence upon the children was that of the grandmother and mother; the latter came from a well-educated and affluent family, and surely gained centrality when Max's two business ventures failed. The two parents and nine children initially lived in two rooms, and slept on mattresses held up by chairs. Poverty was counteracted by cultural capital for 'literature was the substitute for luxury'. The eldest sister Hedwig would soothe the younger children to sleep by reciting the great monologues of Schiller's *Maria Stuart* and *Don Carlos*, and especially Goethe's *Faust*. The two eldest brothers later lived with rich local families, offering tuition for their children in exchange for room and board. If this helped the family to move to a slightly larger apartment, the character of family life did not much change: both Rudolf and Julius learnt great set pieces from *Faust* which they had to declaim to neighbours and visitors. The family made up for its lack of affluence by means of this emphasis on intellectual achievement, and through dramatic social mobility. Most of the brothers and at least one of the sisters gained doctorates in the professions. Hedwig ran the Zionist offices in Prague for many years, and then became a civil servant in Israel of sufficient seniority to embarrass her nephew by arranging for his transport by tank for a visit to the desert on what was probably his first journey to Israel in 1951. The two oldest brothers were lawyers; they started a law journal specializing in translation. Wilhelm became a medical doctor, eventually settling in Paris to work for agencies linked to the United Nations. Julius became a producer for the German Theatre in Prague before achieving fame as a theatrical producer in London. All Rudolf's siblings were to escape the Holocaust by moving to Palestine or to England, with the exception of Otto who refused to leave the successful international law firm he had established, a decision that led to his family's deaths, including his own, at the hands of the Nazis.

Rudolf ran away from home to fight as a volunteer in the First World War. 'The state of mind in which he did it must have been strange and contradictory', in the later judgement of his son, 'because he was at the same time some kind of pacifist'.¹³ He was wounded, saved by Russian soldiers after lying in the snow for two days, and imprisoned near Lake Baikal – where, with prisoners giving lectures to each other, he received, in

12 Jiří Musil, 'The Prague Roots of Ernest Gellner's Thinking', in J. A. Hall and I. C. Jarvie (eds), *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 31.

13 Asked by his son whether he had killed anyone in the war, Rudi replied that he had always taken care to shoot into thin air, not wishing to be responsible for the death of another human being. These details come from Gellner's address at the funeral of his father in December 1987, in the possession of David Gellner.

his son's estimation, an education in what must then have been one of the greatest universities in the world.¹⁴ The young Rudolf developed a fascination with Russian culture and language; it seems that he visited Russia two or three times in the interwar period.¹⁵ These sentiments were passed on to his son, who in his own turn loved to speak Russian and spent a sabbatical year in Moscow in 1988–89.¹⁶ Rudolf was sympathetic to the Bolshevik revolution. Amongst his fellow prisoners was Arnošt Kolman (1892–1979), a cultural Zionist who became a communist in Russia during the war, and who was later something of an official mouthpiece of the regime in Prague.¹⁷ Rudolf eventually left aboard a ship from Vladivostock and passed through Yokohama, perhaps receiving help from the Jewish community in the latter city. His intellectual interests then led him to Berlin to find out more about Max Weber, who had recently died and whom he came to admire greatly.¹⁸ He then returned to Prague to gain further qualification in law at the German university.¹⁹ He married on 30 January 1923. The marriage took place against the wishes of his eldest sister, who had extremely high expectations of her siblings. There is a sense in which she was right. Ernest André Gellner was born in Paris, on 9 December 1925,

14 Ibid.

15 Musil, 'The Prague Roots', pp. 31–2.

16 He started to learn the language, without much respect for grammatical rules, from the late 1960s, working at it first by listening to records, and later by going to Russian films. In the last decade of his life he liked to listen to Chekhov on records that he had brought back from one of his visits there.

17 Kolman was imprisoned in Germany for six months in 1922 before living in the Soviet Union until 1945. His return to Prague lasted only until 1948 when he was arrested and taken to the Soviet Union, where he spent three and a half years in prison. He returned to Prague in 1959. Ernest Gellner went out of his way to meet him, and wrote an essay about him in 1958 which showed how Kolman was testing the waters after de-Stalinization, and trying to reconcile contemporary physics with an improved version of dialectical materialism ('Ernst Kolman: or, knowledge and communism', *Social Survey*, vol. 23, 1958). Musil observes that 'Kolman was very proud of the amount of time that he spent in prison' under diverse regimes ('The Prague Roots', p. 31). Apparently Rudolf also knew Rudolf Slánský, executed in 1948 after a Stalinist show trial made particularly infamous on account of its open anti-Semitism. Kolman eventually protested against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, but he was not arrested, and left for Sweden in 1976 never to return. It is worth noting here in passing Gellner's considerable linguistic abilities, including the ability to read Russian at this time, though his oral skills were learned much later.

18 Weber was not well known in Czechoslovakia at the time, so this interest probably reflects the influence of his time in prison.

19 It is not clear whether this was a diploma or a doctorate. Rudolf was always known as Dr Gellner, and the first doctorate seems to have been earned either in Prague or Berlin before his son was born.

because Rudolf was undertaking research for a second doctorate on the works of the anti-revolutionary thinkers De Maistre and Lamennais. This project had to be abandoned, and Rudolf became a frustrated intellectual.²⁰ The birth of a second child in 1929, Marianne Rita, doubtless made an academic career still less likely. There was genuine poverty in the early years of the marriage, survival on one occasion dependent on the selling of books. Thereafter Rudolf gained employment in a chemical firm, and eventually established one of his own with a partner, Arnošt Taussig. Rudolf was the brains behind the business while his partner excelled at 'salesmanship', a formula they would reproduce successfully in England.²¹ Rudolf's continuing intellectual interests found an outlet when he became the publisher of *Právo Československé* (which means both 'Czechoslovak Law' and 'Czechoslovak Right'), a legal journal that was close to the official ideology of the republic and which offered commentaries on new legislation. The young Ernest would see the proofs in the apartment, often with the title page badly printed. He would joke that the journal should have been called 'Czechoslovak Right with Crooked Letters'. 'The symbolism of Czechoslovak Right having wobbly letters was not lost on me, even at the time'.²²

Ernest's mother, Anna Fantl, came from Krumlov, a beautiful medieval town in the south of Bohemia, much patronized by Viennese artists in the years before the First World War. Her family, comprised of the parents and three daughters, was predominantly German speaking. Anna was born on 13 November 1894, and so was slightly older than her husband. Her family had been more economically secure than Rudolf's, although it suffered badly due to the decision to invest in Imperial War Bonds in 1914 – on the mistaken grounds that these would be secure. But the family was never much more than lower middle class. It seems likely that the family had liberal leanings. The young Ernest was upset by a copy of a locally famous painting showing the arrest by Austrian police of Karel Havlíček, the outspoken Czech nationalist militant and journalist, that hung in the family house, and asked about its meaning.²³ Secularization had taken place

20 Ernest later said in private conversation that he felt blamed for the end of his father's intellectual career. This may have been so, but it seems to have been exacerbated by Rudolf witnessing the son having the career that he had himself wanted – something which made Rudolf at once proud and envious. (Information on this point comes from several sources, notably Michael McMullen, interviewed in February 2003).

21 J. Gellner, 'England Receives Me as a Human Being', p. 44.

22 'Funeral Address'.

23 Musil, 'The Prague Roots', p. 32. Gellner did not specify exactly why he found the picture disturbing.

in Anna's family a generation before it had in Rudolf's. Anna herself had Zionist leanings. In 1921 she worked for the twelfth Zionist Congress in Karlovy Vary.²⁴ She too moved to Prague, and worked as a secretary in the Zionist offices together with Hedwig. There she met Rudolf. Her Zionism, her considerable gift for languages (amplified sometime before the marriage by a year spent in England), and the fact that she married into an exceptionally intellectual family might indicate some concern with ideas. But Anna was not an intellectual; indeed, by common assent she was not very well educated. She was extremely warm and was remembered with great affection by Eric Hošek, whose mother was a friend of Anna's. The boys, too, became friends, and their mothers decided to send them to the same primary school.²⁵

Gellner was much impressed with Perry Anderson's powerful argument that the exiles and émigrés who came to Britain from Central and Eastern Europe tended to adopt conservative views, while those with more radical opinions moved to the United States.²⁶ But Gellner was not always careful with the details of particular texts, and attributed an interpretation to Anderson – that the difference can be explained by the fact that the former but not the latter had lost their estates – that the essay does not in fact contain. This reading lies behind Gellner's insistence, at the end of his life, that his family had never enjoyed privilege:

Both families I spring from were unambiguously petty bourgeois, and provincial to boot. The family only became very precariously middle class in culture (but not yet economically) during my father's generation and in the course of my youth. My father had a degree and so even did some of his sisters, but my mother had only pretty elementary education.²⁷

This somewhat downplays the cultural development and educational achievements of Rudolf's family: it was unusual, for example, for women to obtain degrees. Further, Rudolf and Anna were able to establish a niche in the intellectual life of the city. The family lived in the Dejvice district and their longest residency was in an apartment on Veverková, the street on which Prague's modern art gallery was then found. This location is revealing. It was a new middle-class area, far removed from more

24 A copy of a letter furnished by the bureau in Karlovy Vary, asking the central organization to enter her name into their books as a member of Congress staff, attests to this.

25 A great deal of information about Gellner's Prague years was given by Hošek in an interview in January 1999.

26 P. Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, no. 50, 1968.

27 'Reply to Critics', in Hall and Jarvie, *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, p. 624.

recognizably Jewish areas of the city. Gellner remembered the meetings of many Czech intellectuals in the apartment. Amongst them were the sociologists Josef Navrátil, the last pre-war director of the Masaryk Institute; Karel Kupka, who worked in the Institut d'Études Slaves in Paris and wrote several articles on Max Weber; the architect and painter Arne Hošek; and Moritz Winternitz, an Indologist at the German university in Prague. An interview with Gellner late in his life led his friend, the sociologist Jiří Musil, to portray the parents as patriots of the first Czechoslovakia, deeply supportive of Masaryk's ideals, and integrated into the new local high culture.²⁸

This was a deeply prosaic culture: social democratic and liberal, anti-fascist and opposed to irrational tendencies of all kinds.²⁹ The most general characterization of the family must be that it was 'Czechoslovakifying', but with knowledge of a Jewish cultural background and of Zionism. They were happy to take the holidays allowed to Jewish students – although these were used for picnics and other family outings. Jewish cultural identity emphatically did not translate into any Jewish religious observances, not even the minimal ones of circumcision or bar mitzvahs. Gellner was profoundly ignorant of the details of Jewish religious observances to the end of his days.

The census return of 1930 supports this view, but adds a little complexity. The law required people to identify their birthplace, their date of arrival in Prague, the district in which their legal records were kept, their nationality by mother tongue, their religion, and their profession. One element of the Gellner census return perhaps gives evidence of loyalty to Masaryk's world, and certainly to parental desire for their children to function successfully within it. A Roman Catholic Czech maid, Božena Krudičková, lived with the family so as to ensure that the children would be fluent in Czech, which was indeed used between them, while the parents spoke together in German despite the fact that they had also learned Czech. Beyond that there are interesting complexities. A German-speaking governess of Jewish religion, Paula Gutmann, lived with the family, to ensure familiarity with German language and culture.³⁰ Then the father claimed German as nationality by mother tongue for himself and for the two children. In contrast, Anna's nationality was

28 Musil, 'The Prague Roots', *passim*. The relations between Gellner and Musil are described below, principally in chapter 6.

29 Musil, 'The Prague Roots', p. 36.

30 Paula Gutmann left at some point, but she was replaced by another German-speaking governess (interview with Marianne Sigmon, February 2003).

declared to be Jewish. Both the parents and children were accorded a Jewish background in the religion column. This census return suggests that there may have been some difference of opinion within the family, given that Anna's nationality is reported as Jewish. This view may also be supported by her earlier work for the Zionist bureau, as well as by a passport application of 1938 in which her religion is given as 'Israel' – a term somewhat stronger than 'Jewish'.³¹ One reason for this change was the clear understanding on the part of the Jewish community of Masaryk's desire to diminish the size of the German population. Nonetheless Rudolf identified himself as German, despite the family's admiration for Masaryk.³²

There were obvious reasons for the admiration of Masaryk. Czechoslovakia was the only new democracy east of the Rhine to endure after the Great War. It proved to be an exceptionally vibrant society. The republic was radically democratic, instituting a mass of social reform programmes – from the right of women to vote to tenant protection, from the removal of all aristocratic privilege to varied acts ensuring the protection of labour rights. Czechoslovakia attracted thousands of students from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, while many Jewish students from Hungary and Poland came either for university or for technical training. Prague boasted not just German and Czech universities, but also a Ukrainian one. The German university was particularly distinguished, numbering amongst its staff Rudolf Carnap.³³ Ukrainian and Russian émigrés and exiles flocked there, including Roman Jakobson who did a great deal to create the celebrated Czech school of linguistics, noting when he left for the United States in 1939 that he felt more Czech than anything else. French and Russian gymnasia and an English grammar school were opened, adding to the four German gymnasia already in existence. If intellectuals of the right moved to Belgrade and many of the left to Berlin, Prague tended to attract social democrats. The culture of the city at that time looked resolutely to the West, and particularly to the United States, whose powerful avant-garde art was much admired.

One should not idealize this world. The weakness of the Second Republic established after Munich showed that liberal democracy had not taken very

31 The 'may' in this sentence is deliberate. Ernest's sister has no memory of Anna's support for Zionist causes being stronger than Rudolf's, noting that the father considered giving money to Israel (interview with Marianne Sigmon, February 2003).

32 Jiří Musil worked hard to obtain the census return; help in interpreting it was given by Roman Szporluk and Hillel Kieval.

33 The young Willard van Orman Quine, later Harvard's most distinguished twentieth-century philosopher of logic, was tutored by Carnap in Prague in the years just before the war, and spoke to Gellner of their meetings during a visit to Prague in the early 1990s.

deep root. Crucially, national groupings failed to reach any final form of political accommodation. Czech nationalists occupied the German theatre in the early 1920s, and they protested vehemently against the showing of German films in Prague cinemas in the 1930s. This is one element that lies behind the Republic's notable democratic deficit. A form of power-sharing between the major political interests, the *petka*, prevented full popular participation, not least because the Sudeten Germans were excluded for a long period. Perhaps this was inevitable; it seemed to allow the country to function. There was also a second element to consider. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš tended to see politics as a science rather than as an arena for competing interests, thereby creating what was very much a 'guided' democracy, in which the ruling forces never lost an election.³⁴ Still, one should not judge a democracy by timeless, Platonic standards. Prague in those years was a vibrant success, especially when seen in comparative terms.

Childhood and Youth

Gellner was a particularly handsome and mischievous child, often getting into scrapes as the result of 'dares'. The family was apparently a peaceful one, however, and there was little outward sign of differences between the parents.³⁵ At the weekends the family would visit Rudolf's father Max, who lived in the old town, and close relations were maintained with Anna's sisters.³⁶ Winter holidays were taken in the Reichenberg mountains in northern Bohemia. Some part of summer holidays were spent in Příbram, a small town to the south of Prague, where Anna's sister Ida helped her husband, Bergmann, run an ironmonger's shop.³⁷ The importance of the periods spent in Příbram needs to be underlined: Gellner was as aware of rural life as he was of the extreme poverty in Prague, whose population and industrial power both grew rapidly in the interwar period. Further, the young boy attended summer camps, then highly popular in Central Europe: he learnt Czech songs, became a fine skater, and gained a proficiency in canoeing that he retained thereafter.³⁸ Beneath this pleasant upbringing, however, there were tensions within the family, which sometimes strained relations. Gellner himself apparently felt that the father was closer to the

34 P. Bugge, 'Czech Democracy 1918–39 – Paragon or Parody?', *Bohemia*, vol. 47, 2006–7.

35 This point was stressed by Hošek in an interview in January 1999.

36 Interview with Marianne Sigmon, February 2003.

37 Gellner made a point of taking a long detour to Příbram, probably in 1992, when returning from a Central European University student outing to Krumlov.

38 Miroslav Hroch once claimed that at least some of the songs Gellner still knew late in life were in fact Slovak.

daughter, and later claimed, as previously noted, that he was blamed for curtailing his father's intellectual career. Equally, he felt suffocated by the mother, who habitually opened his mail even when he was an adult. Her desire to 'feed him up' apparently explained his near-vegetarian diet.³⁹ He certainly felt that his childhood had been unhappy and made this clear to his own children, who were well aware of his desire to give them the sort of upbringing of which he felt deprived. It is hard to weigh these psychological dynamics against the disorientation and sense of loss resulting from exile. Both elements contributed to his sentiments and character.

Gellner went to two schools in Prague. His primary school, which he entered in 1931, was 'amiably named "By the Little Fountain", which suggests an inn rather than a school . . . [It was on] the edge of the park where one might meet the President on his rides if one was lucky'.⁴⁰ It was within walking distance from his home, and he attended lessons with Eric Hošek who remained a friend thereafter. The school was Czech, and this led to a particular scene that Gellner would recount in later life. After the singing of a popular song, he put his hand up in class and said that he knew a different set of words, and then sang a German version. This was received with sufficient coldness that he never made the same mistake again. One detail of the school reports – repeated in his next school – is worth noting. Despite a lack of religious upbringing he was classified as Jewish or Hebrew, and thereby exempted from religious instruction.

In 1935 Ernest transferred to the Prague English Grammar School. One of his classmates was Otto Pick, who later also escaped to England, before pursuing an academic career, first in the United States and then in England.⁴¹ Pick's parents had sent him to the school because they could see the writing on the wall. They had relatives in England, and felt that an English education might help emigration. Perhaps a similar calculation motivated Ernest's parents. Rudolf's sister Elsa had married an Englishman who worked in a shipping firm, and with whom she had three daughters; this happy fact

39 These last sentences draw upon Gellner's own account as given to many people, notably to members of his own family. Some of his friends – notably Hošek and McMullen – were mystified by Gellner's tense relationship with his mother, not least because she was particularly warm toward them.

40 'Foreword' to E. Schmidt-Hartmann's *Thomas G. Masaryk's Realism: Origins of a Czech Political Concept*, Munich, 1984, p. 7.

41 Interview with Otto Pick, January 1999. Gellner maintained contact with Pick – as he did with other exiles from Czechoslovakia – in England, inviting him on at least one occasion to a dinner at the LSE. Pick had a distinguished career at the University of Surrey before returning to Prague in 1993 to become Director of the Institute of International Relations. He was later Deputy Foreign Minister.

made the acquisition of a visa much more likely.⁴² The school was also attractive, however, solely for the quality of the education it provided, and Gellner was sufficiently fond of it that he later went to some trouble to track down former pupils of whom he was aware, from before and after his time there.⁴³ In later life he described being taught by figures resembling Auden and Isherwood, that is, by casually dressed and relaxed young men who had attended public schools and Oxbridge. This was a happy contrast to the strict formalism of both Czech and German education. Indeed, one of his first assignments was to learn how to tell a joke in English. His school reports show that his progress was superior, with ‘very good’ marks sustained for more than half the subjects studied.

This did not mean that his intellectual formation was English in character. Very much to the contrary, his sentimental education at this time was overwhelmingly Czech. Several indications of the depth of this early identity can be seen from Gellner’s later behaviour. He was in the habit of singing Czech songs with Peter Stern (who had married the sister of Michael McMullen, a close friend Gellner made at Oxford).⁴⁴ Then there is his declaration late in life about his fondness for Czech folk songs, responding to the charge made by critics of his theory of nationalism that he was insensible to nationalism’s emotional appeal:

. . . I *am* deeply sensitive to the spell of nationalism. I can play about thirty Bohemian folk songs (or songs presented as such in my youth) on my mouth organ. My oldest friend, whom I have known since the age of three or four and who is Czech and a patriot, cannot bear to hear me play them because he says I do it in such a schmaltsy way, ‘crying into the mouth organ’. I do not think I could have written the book on nationalism which I did write, were I not capable of crying, with the help of a little alcohol, over folk songs, which happen to be my favourite form of music.⁴⁵

42 There was another English connection. One of Rudolf’s great-uncles settled in England, and one of this relative’s daughters married into the Du Vergier family. This name was later given by Rudolf and Taussig to the firm they established in England. .

43 For instance, in a letter to Gellner dated 22 December 1976, Dr. Jan Tumlir, an economist several years his junior, responded, ‘Yes, our paths must have crossed in the Prague English Grammar School’. Gellner also attended a ceremony to mark the reopening of the school after the collapse of communism.

44 Stern had a similar background to Gellner’s, although he served in the air force during the war. He became a successful academic, writing powerfully on Kafka, Junger and on Hitler’s relationship with German culture.

45 ‘Reply to Critics’, pp. 624–5. The friend in question is Eric Hošek. I can attest to the fact that Gellner did sometimes take out a mouth organ and play these songs.

This is the appropriate moment to reiterate that, while he knew the tricultural world of Kafka, he was part of a different generation which was able to envision belonging – ‘re-territorialization’ – within a world which was, especially in comparative perspective, manifestly attractive. It was precisely the abandonment of a potential site of belonging that was so painful for Gellner, and which led him to classify his periods away as those of exile. Two elements of identification are relevant here.

The most obvious element was simply that the presence of Masaryk symbolized the possibility of entrance into mainstream society. The presence of the Founder-President of Czechoslovakia was absolutely pervasive in the new state’s public life, not least in schoolrooms where his picture was displayed. He had been a professional philosopher and sociologist before becoming the ‘President-Liberator’. He maintained that the Czechs were returning to the path upon which they had set out before the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620. Czech democracy and Czech liberalism had been foreshadowed by the Hussite proto-Reformation of the fifteenth century, the socially radical practice of the Taborites, and the elective monarchy of George of Poděbrady with its plans for a novel and peaceful international order. Their incipient progress was brutally halted by the triumph of the Hapsburg Counter-Reformation.⁴⁶ Further, Masaryk was internationalist in his intellectual sources, and provided a philosophical justification for Czech state formation. In his *World Revolution*, published in 1925, the year of Gellner’s birth, he argued that the Czech national revolution was vindicated as part of a wider global triumph of democracy and liberal national self-determination that was displacing theocratic and absolutist modes of governance, which were locally represented by the decaying Hapsburg Empire.⁴⁷ Gellner late in life described the impact of Masaryk’s general credo on his fellow citizens in these terms:

The West is democratic, the West is strong, it is democratic because it is strong and strong because democratic, and because this is the way world history is going. We had been in on this splendid movement sooner than most, as early as the fifteenth century, we had been unjustly deprived of our birthright, but now we are safely back where

46 Gellner enjoyed pointing out with Masaryk’s critics that it was a ‘good job we did indeed lose on the White Mountain, for otherwise the Prussians would have Germanized us in the course of using us as their Protestant allies’ (‘The Price of Velvet: Tomáš Masaryk and Václav Havel’, in *Encounters with Nationalism*, Oxford, 1994, p. 119).

47 It was translated into English as *The Making of a State*, a more accurate reflection of the bulk of its contents than the original Czech title, but an appalling mistranslation of its central message which was, in Gellner’s view, that the Czech democratic and national revolution was an inevitable part of the wider triumph of the West (‘The Price of Velvet’, p. 117).

we belong, and so we are indeed safe . . . I have had my primary education, and two and a half years of secondary education, in Prague schools, and I can only say that this message emanated, unambiguously and confidently, from the portraits of the President-Liberator which adorned every classroom. Major premise: world history is our guide and guarantor. Minor premise: world history has chosen democracy and the West as its agents, and therefore they are irresistible, and their allies (notably ourselves) are safe.⁴⁸

There was much to admire in the life of this philosopher-president, including his debunking of fraudulent manuscripts intended to demonstrate Czech medieval glories and his brave public stance in defence of Rudolf Hilsner, a Jew falsely accused of ritual murder. Masaryk was a nationalist for whom Gellner had a lifelong appreciation, a man who did not knowingly embrace ethnic fictions and who resisted the anti-Semitism of many of his co-nationals. When Masaryk died in 1937, the young Gellner was one of those who walked past his coffin at the great national ceremony.⁴⁹

Quite as important were the books that influenced the young schoolboy. He particularly enjoyed the works of Karel Čapek, Egon Erwin Kisch, Jaroslav Žak, Jaroslav Hašek, František Kopta and Vítězslav Nezval.⁵⁰ Čapek was probably the most important humanist Czech writer in the 1920s and 1930s, and a close friend of Masaryk. He warned against the dangers of modern civilization, and in his work, mainly his plays, he was anti-fascist – dying after Munich, popular myth had it, of a broken heart. Kisch was a committed journalist who wrote in German about his travels and about the lives of Prague people on the margin of society. Žak was a teacher writing witty stories from the grammar school milieu. Hašek was perhaps the best-known Czech writer internationally, thanks to his hero *The Good Soldier Švejk*. An indication of the distance of Gellner's generation from that of Kafka's is contained in a 1975 review of a new edition of the novel – in which Gellner claimed that the low humour and cunning compromises of *Švejk* were quite as much part of the Czech character as were the metaphysical mysteries of Kafka. Gellner further claimed that one of the characters in *Švejk* was based on a distant relation, the superb but drunken

48 Ibid., p. 122. There are curious echoes of Masaryk in Francis Fukuyama's thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, 1992. Fukuyama argues that we are at the end of history with the triumph of the West, liberalism, and democracy. Gellner had a good deal of sympathy for this book.

49 'Foreword', p. 7.

50 These were the names given by Gellner himself. See Musil, 'The Prague Roots', p. 32 and passim, on which the rest of this paragraph draws.

poet František Gellner, drawings of whose public readings hung in his house in Hampshire in later years.⁵¹ Kopta was the author of novels about the Czech legions in Siberia – that is, the legions which fought briefly against the Bolsheviks in 1919. Gellner particularly remembered being impressed by Nezval's *Fifty-Two Bitter Ballads*: these Villon-like poems were for a time his favourite reading.⁵² To this portrait of long-run background intellectual influences can be added the political satires of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, which came to the fore in the 1930s. Gellner apparently particularly liked their 'Heavy Barbara' sketch, which involved a struggle between two mythical countries, Eidam and Yberland, the latter of which resembled Nazi Germany.

If there was a prospect of genuine belonging, it was not automatic or unconscious. At the age of eleven he would, he later remembered, systematically miss out one word at random from the national oath taken as the Czechoslovak flag was raised at his summer camp, not out of disloyalty, but because he felt it too early to commit himself until he had 'figured it all out'.⁵³ This element of contingency in his identity was surely exacerbated by storm clouds in the political sky.⁵⁴ The happy decade of the 1920s for the multinational Czechoslovakian state came into question in the 1930s. Deep tensions came to characterize Prague life. With unemployment came an exacerbation of poverty, and there were a few pro-fascist demonstrations and many anti-fascist ones – unsurprisingly, given that Prague had become the home of the exiled organizations of both Austrian and German social democracy. Edvard Beneš, another professorial president, uncritically absorbed from Masaryk a facile liberal historicism – the belief that history was patterned, and that democracy was its *telos*. This led Beneš to believe at the time of the *Anschluss* in 1938 that the Nazis were doomed, and left the new Republic's leaders insufficiently

51 'Review of Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk*', *The Political Quarterly*, 1975, pp. 358–9. Interestingly, Gellner's private papers contain the poet's family tree – although there is no indication as to the nature of the exact relation to Gellner himself.

52 Musil, 'The Prague Roots', p. 32.

53 Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', p. 63.

54 When living in Hampshire, Gellner used to play 'Categories' with local friends. A list of categories, perhaps 'painters' or 'countries' or 'philosophers' was chosen (one by each contestant). Then a letter of the alphabet was selected at random. Contestants gained points when they gave examples, starting with the given letter. One is more likely to win if one can guess the obvious examples and avoid them. Not content with this, Gellner was famous for the obscurity of the categories which he chose. One of them was 'political assassinations of the 1930s'. There were many such, and they comprised his earliest political memories – as he made clear at LSE in the 1980s when casual conversation turned to this topic.

alarmed by the rise of Hitler.⁵⁵ Many Sudeten German speakers turned to the Third Reich. Konrad Heinlein, their leader, increasingly took instructions directly from the Nazis, and sought to make it impossible for Prague to govern the Sudetenland.⁵⁶ Appallingly ignorant British intervention, first by Lord Runciman and then by Neville Chamberlain, encouraged France to abandon its defence treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. This led to the handing over on a plate of the Sudetenland to Hitler in the Munich agreement signed on 29 September 1938. Czechoslovakia lost 86 per cent of its glass production, 80 per cent of its textiles, and 70 per cent of its iron and steel industries. Still more important, it lost its defensive lines, allowing Hitler easy entry six months later.

Throughout the late 1930s the adults in Ernest's family could not have been unaware of increased danger to themselves and to the state. 'As Munich time approached, the anticipation of war and of the bombing of Prague which, it was thought, would certainly accompany it, caused my mother to take me and my sister to a small town in central Bohemia where her kin (one of only two Jewish families in the community) ran an ironmonger shop'.⁵⁷ He recalled President Beneš announcing that he had a plan to cope with the crisis, but subsequently resigning and flying off to Switzerland: 'In Czech, the word plan is the same as the final part of the word aeroplane, and the joke went around – yes, he had a plan, an aeroplane.'⁵⁸ After Munich, the returning Gellners had to prove they

55 I. Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s*, New York, 1996, p. 200. This remarkable piece of revisionism makes readers appreciate the pressures under which Beneš laboured, even if it does not exonerate him. Gellner himself always considered Beneš a disastrous figure, not least in a late discussion with Popper in which both stated firmly that they believed that Masaryk would have fought rather than capitulated. The conversation is recorded in *In Memoriam: Karl Popper in Prague*, a booklet prepared and printed by the Central European University in 1994, when Popper received an honorary doctorate at Charles University.

56 R. M. Smelser, *The Sudeten Problem, 1933–38: Volkstumspolitik and the Formation of Nazi Foreign Policy*, Middletown, 1975.

57 'Munich in Prague', *The National Interest*, vol. 13, 1988, p. 117. The town in question is Příbram, as mentioned above.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 118. A second short piece remembering Munich – 'Contribution' to 'Worin sehen sie den sinn des Gedenkens an die Ereignisse vom September 1938', *Bohemia*, vol. 29, 1988 – records both change and constancy in Gellner's views. He came to feel that British behaviour, given the horrors of the First World War and honourable conduct in the Second World War, was excusable:

My gut reaction to Beneš's surrender has remained the same over the years. Had Beneš refused to surrender, no doubt that would have been the end of me and my family . . . All the same I regret that surrender. No doubt it is very easy to make brave recommendations

were residents of Prague when the authorities tried to stop an influx of refugees from the Sudetenland, fearing that if too many German speakers came into the diminished Czechoslovakia they might endanger the new state by giving Hitler a new irredentist argument.⁵⁹ Any lingering optimism the Gellners may have had would have received a salutary blow from the speed with which the Nazis rounded up political opponents and Jews as soon as they entered the Sudetenland. Catholic anti-Semitism also became a much more palpable force in Czechoslovakia. It had always been vigorous in neighbouring Austria, and was legitimated there as government policy after the *Anschluss* with the German Reich. Gellner recalled that his teacher of Czech literature, who would abandon membership in the League Against Bolshevism to become a member of the Communist Party after the war, 'just happened to select, for reading aloud, a passage from a novel about peasant life in which the main character indulged in an anti-Semitic expletive'.⁶⁰ The Second Republic itself was witness to intensifying conflict between Slovaks and Czechs. 'Masaryk had hoped that the Czechs and Slovaks would come together as the English and Scotch had done; the Slovaks turned out to be the Irish'.⁶¹ The Slovaks found Czech talk of their 'little brother' patronizing, and their growing self-assertion prefigured future crises.⁶² In these circumstances it was not surprising that the dictum often repeated in the last years of the republic was that there were Czechs and Slovaks, but the only real Czechoslovaks were the Jews.⁶³

Rudolf traveled to England twice in 1938 to make arrangements for a life abroad. But the family was still living in Prague on 15 March 1939 when the Nazis marched in, perhaps because Rudolf and Tausig had had

for hypothetical situations . . . I plead guilty to the charge of such facility, such cheap pseudo-fortitude.

We will see that Gellner felt that Beneš's surrender established a pattern whereby Czechs would continue to give in, time and again.

59 'Munich in Prague', p. 118.

60 Ibid., p. 119. The same teacher once asked the class to remember important sayings of Masaryk. Gellner suggested to his neighbour 'a state which betrays the ideas on which it is founded will perish'. The neighbour understood his meaning, but the teacher found the saying – in fact Roman, although attributed to Masaryk – to be of little interest ('Contribution').

61 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809–1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austro-Hungary*, Chicago, 1976, p. 255.

62 See L. C. Skalnik, *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia*, Princeton, 1968; and A. Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Good-Bye*, New Haven, 2001.

63 E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, Bloomington, 1983, p. 149.

difficulty in selling their small chemical firm. The family was in a perilous situation. It was, however, possible for Anna and her two children to leave by train, though this required Rudolf overruling Anna's sisters, who felt it irresponsible to leave given that Ernest's sister Marianne had a severe cold.⁶⁴ They eventually reached England on 9 April 1939, after a difficult journey through Belgium, apparently escaping inspection on one occasion because someone had written on the door of their carriage that the inmates had diphtheria. But Rudolf and Taussig were twice turned back at the Polish border. Otto Pick's father was shot dead while trying to cross the border illegally, but Rudolf and Taussig were luckier, and entered Poland illegally and clandestinely on their third attempt.⁶⁵ There they made contact with some old friends of Rudolf's from his period of imprisonment near Lake Baikal. They were well-placed inside the Communist Party, and this somehow enabled them to provide documents allowing the two Czechs to reach England through Sweden. Rudolf arrived in England on 23 May 1939.

London, Oxford and Prague

The family was reunited in London. Initially they joined Rudolf's brother Wilhelm on Parliament Hill in North London, but in short order were able to find their own place in nearby Highgate at 11 Makepeace Avenue, London N6. This remained Ernest's home until he married, except for two years spent evacuated at St Albans and time spent on active service and at Edinburgh University. Rudolf and Taussig went into business again, and began to make money immediately through a process that turned waste plastic chips and cuttings into plastic sheets.⁶⁶ The family was financially secure, and Ernest was even somewhat spoiled by his parents according to one of his university friends.⁶⁷ At a later date, Rudolf was able to support

64 The mistake was theirs, for they died in the Holocaust. However, Ida's son Karel survived the camps, and Gellner would later visit Karel's son Pavel who became a surgeon, and had two children of his own. These were Gellner's only relations remaining in Czechoslovakia.

65 Julius's ordeals and escape were as dramatic as Rudolf's. He was robbed three times, duped by a young innocent-eyed girl, and betrayed by both Czechs and Poles. He nevertheless talked his way out of an SS arrest on one occasion, demonstrating his acting skills in a life-threatening encounter ('England Receives Me as a Human Being', pp. 7–17).

66 When David Gellner visited the firm in the early 1980s there was evidence also of some moulding, of toilet seats and other bathroom fittings.

67 Interview with Michael McMullen, February 2003. Gellner never received a formal allowance, although Susan Gellner remembers that he did occasionally receive envelopes containing as much as a thousand pounds.