

# **“We Have to Rely on Our Memory”**

## **Escape from Germany and Survival in Britain**

**Louis Bissinger**

*edited by Andrew M. Greene*

*In 1942, when my grandparents Louis and Frieda Bissinger were living in London, my grandfather wrote a brief memoir describing their lives in pre-war Germany, their escape to Britain, and their lives there. He addressed it to his infant daughter, my mother Edna.*

*In 2014, I started re-reading it more closely, and used genealogy resources to find the document trail created by their lives. What I found made his words so much richer and more meaningful.*

*This document is based on his writings. I have performed minor editorial cleaning (e.g., by correcting spelling or adjusting punctuation), and in a few instances where his original German draft is more evocative than his English translation, I have taken the liberty of providing my own translation. My additional notes are in italics, and most of the images come from my research rather than from the family collection.*

*I have taken as our title a quote from the section of the memoir, not included here, where my grandfather goes into the genealogy of the family. He starts that section by writing “As we have lost all our documents, we have to rely on our memory.” I can think of no epigraph more fitting.*

**DRAFT OF WORK IN PROGRESS**

**LAST UPDATED 17 DEC 2014**

Heiratsregister Nr. 260 des Jahres 1937 H

### Heiratschein

Vornamen und Familienname des Mannes: Louis Bissinger,

Stand: Kaufmannslehre Ungersdallau,  
aus München,

geboren am 23 ten Juni 1902  
in Frauenpforten, K. O. Geringhain,

Vornamen der Frau: Frieda,

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geborene Friedmann,

aus Koblenz,

geboren am 21 ten März 1911  
in Koblenz,

Eheschließung am 19 ten März 1937  
in München, Kumbelmarkt III,  
München, am 19. März 1937



(Siegel)  
MÜNCHEN

Der Standesbeamte

Fried

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Ehemann: Geburtsregister Nr. 73, 1902  
des Standesamtes in Frauenpforten.

Ehefrau: Geburtsregister Nr. 1198, 1911  
des Standesamtes Luzern in Koblenz.

It was not exactly peaceful times to get married and... to live in Germany. Since 1933 Hitler reigned and what this meant you may learn from the history books. Under other circumstances you would have found other surroundings and most certainly you would not have been born in England and this report would not have been written in English.

Nevertheless, we tried to make the best of it as we started married life. We were married March 21, 1937 and have been living in Munich. Under the circumstances, it ran smoothly until June 1938.

*Right: My grandmother, Frieda Friedmann, on her wedding day at the main synagogue in Munich. On the right is my grandfather, Louis Bissinger; on the left is his brother Leo.*



Your father got fired and the big question came for us: where to go? There was certainly no place in Germany and, as we did not have any connections, we tried everything to find somewhere abroad, somewhere, even if it meant to leave everything behind. It was unbelievably hard to get a visa if one did not have, somewhere, relatives with money. There was a bad time ahead for us and millions of other Jews.

These were terrible months. One waited and tried to kill the time learning English; the Executive of Photo Schaja became a waiter apprentice – and paid for it.

And between studying and writing letters and hoping, the time went by and it was November 1938. We will never forget the terrible time of the days of November 8 and 9, 1938, with the pogroms, the burning down of the synagogues, and the mass deportations of the Jews to the concentration camps. Fortunately, your father escaped; he belonged to the few who managed not to get caught and lived in fear and horror for days. For many was the trip to the concentration camp the last journey. Your uncle Leo belonged to them.

Pr. 211 *Bismarck* Prittlbach G. 1

*Prittlbach*, am *16. Dezember 1938*

des *Verstorbenen* *Leo Gimmiger*

*Mosbacher*

wobei *im* *Kirchhof*, *Kirchhofstr. 17*

ist am *16. Dezember 1938* um *15 Uhr 30* Minuten

in *Prittlbach* verstorben.

Der Verstorbene war geboren am *1. Februar 1885*

in *Ischenhausen*

(Standort *Ischenhausen* Nr. \_\_\_\_\_)

Vater: \_\_\_\_\_

Mutter: \_\_\_\_\_

Der Verstorbene war – nicht – verheiratet, *Ehefrau*

*unbekannt*

Ertragene auf *mündliche* – *schriftliche* – *Zeugnis* *des Kreis-*

*polizeistellens* *Kirchhof*.

D. *Kirchhof*

Bezeugt, geschehen am \_\_\_\_\_ unrichtigen

Der Unterschrift mit dem *Wortlaut* *Wortlaut in Kirchhofstr.*

*Prittlbach, d. d. 1938* *und Ischenhausen gemeldet.*

Der Standesbeamte *Göttsche* Der Standesbeamte *Göttsche*

Zeichensatz: *cc. Bergert!*

Heiratsbuch Nr. \_\_\_\_\_ am \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_

(Standort \_\_\_\_\_ Nr. \_\_\_\_\_)

Leo's death certificate from Dachau

After this we doubled our efforts to get out of Germany. Month after month we have been waiting, we wrote letters and we did everything what was in our power to reach the goal – saving our lives. So far, we had an affidavit for the USA and a reservation for January 1940. But that was not enough. The war loomed in the background, standing at the door, and it was high time to get out.

In April, a narrow gap opened. Your mother's cousin, Gus Hines, was at this time in Holland, and his sister-in-law Gogo, alias Gilbert, but really and truly named Sofie Guckenheimer, visited them. She had been living for a few years in England. Our desperate letters moved them so that they put an ad in an English paper and so we got employment as Butler and Cook in a deserted hamlet with a reverend at Cardynham near Bodmin, Cornwall, in England. It was the usual way for the desperate to save their lives and we have been more than glad to get the job, and so we waited for the visas.

Rev. F. G. H. Tambling, who formerly held Indian chaplaincies in the Diocese of Lahore, has been appointed by Mr. M. Coode to the rectory of Cardinham.

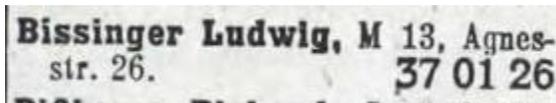
*(April 11, 1938)*

**MARRIED Couple (36, 28). German Jews ; intelligent. diligent : wife perfect cook and housemaid : husband reliable chauffeur, undertake all work : Town or country. —L. Bissinger, München 13, Agnesstr. 26.**

*(Times of London, April 15, 1939)*

Meanwhile, Unity Mitford, a daughter of Lord Redesdale and friend of Hitler, took over our apartment.

*That's all my grandfather wrote about this. It turns out that this has been well-documented by Unity Mitford's biographers: the address was Agnesstrasse 26 in Munich. The Munich phone book for 1937 and 1938 indeed lists him at that address:*



*Mitford's nephew, Jonathan Guinness (of the brewer's family), and his daughter Catherine, wrote in "The House of Mitford" (2004):*

*In the meantime, Hitler had helped Unity to find a flat. Writing to Diana on 5 June she says: 'Well, today's exciting news is that I have a Wohnung [flat]. Wolf told Wagner [Adolf Wagner, Gauleiter of Munich] that they were to find one for me ... So, today a young man from the Ministerium took me round to look at some ... At last, we found the perfect [Unity's italics] Wohnung in Schwabing, in a modern block of flats ... It belongs to a young Jewish couple who are going abroad.' With them she dealt, it seems, perfectly amicably; at any rate she bought a cupboard from them, she told Sydney in a letter written on 28 July. On the surface, then, the amenities were preserved between Unity and the owners. Yet just to let drop that they were 'going abroad' now comes over, looking back, as distinctly chilling.*

*David Pryce-Jones, one of Mitford's first biographers, interviewed a friend of hers who accompanied her on the day that she visited the apartment and chose it from among the four that she was offered. (More to come here as I learn it.)*

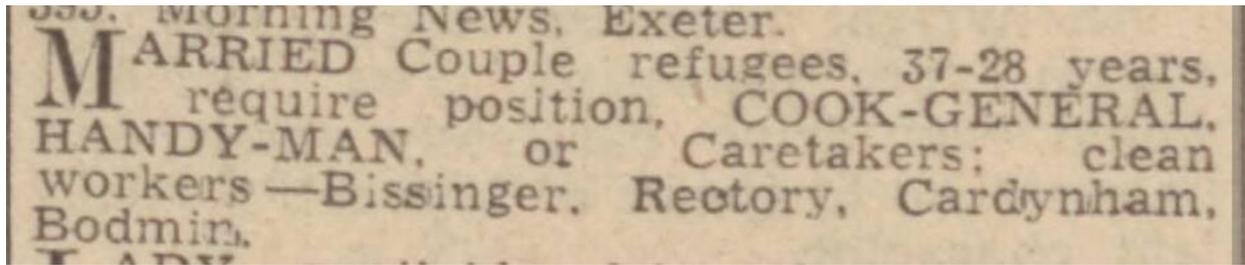
*The building was supposedly rebuilt in the 1950s, but here is what it looks like today on Google Street View:*



We began to get ready. Part of our stuff should go to England, another part straight to the U.S.A. One August morning it came. In 48 hours we got ready and said Good Bye to our loved ones and Munich. We went to Nuremberg, saw your grandmother and your uncle Juler and during the night we travelled through Germany to the border. We crossed into Holland and we have been free.

We pray you will never have the experience we went through all these months. And looking back, it was saying "Good Bye" forever. We never saw them again and we would have perished like our loved ones and millions of others if we would not have been lucky to get the job as butler and cook.

It was three weeks before the war broke out as we arrived in England. We worked like slaves in the big house in the isolated hamlet of Cardynham in Cornwall.



*This advertisement, from the 1 Nov 1939 issue of the Western Morning News, Devon, shows my grandparents seeking a better position than the one at the Rectory in Cardynham.*

After three months we moved up to Torquay, a lovely town in Devon. The position was not much better but we found friends and had people to talk to. And here we learned that all our possessions got stuck in Germany and that we had to make the best out of the things we had with us. As I said before, we saved our naked lives and nothing else.

And it happened in Torquay that we met our English friends who did so much for us and for you. They took care of you before, during, after you arrived in this world. They brought everything what a baby needed and they never let us down, the Quaker of Torquay and our dear friend Mrs. Helena Griffith.



*Helena and Harold Griffith with their daughter Mary. In Nov 2014, while transcribing this text, I searched for Helena Griffith Quaker Torquay on Google and found a site documenting RAF training crashes in Yorkshire. Sadly, one pilot who was killed was Michael Griffith, a son of Helena and Harold. The webmaster of that site had received information about the family from Michael's niece Vanessa, and he was kind enough to forward an email message to her. She provided the above photo of her grandparents and aunt, and we are continuing to correspond.*

The war did not go well, the allies were getting defeated and after six months in Torquay we had to move for security reasons. We went to London and shortly afterwards I left for 14 months for the Onchan Camp on the Isle of Man. Your mother was left alone in London, with not much money, under the heavy "Blitz" which became the expression for the heavy nightly air raids. It has been difficult times, full of anxious thoughts for your father and nerve-wracking for mother.

250

FEMALE ENEMY ALIEN—EXEMPTION FROM INTERNMENT—REFUGEE

(1) Surname (*block capitals*) BISSINGER,  
 Forenames Frieda, Sara  
 Alias \_\_\_\_\_

(2) Date and place of birth 31st. March, 1911. Nurnberg, Germany.

(3) Nationality German.

(4) Police Regn. Cert. No. 733324 Home Office reference if known \_\_\_\_\_  
 Special Procedure Card Number if known \_\_\_\_\_

(5) Address *prior to internment* The Rectory, Gardinham, Bodmin, Cornwall.

(6) Normal occupation Married woman.

(7) Present Occupation Domestic Servant.

(8) Name and address of employer Rev. F.G.H. Tombling,  
The Rectory, Gardinham, Bodmin, Cornwall.

(9) Decision of Tribunal Exempted from internment Date 21-11-47

(10) Whether exempted from Article 6(A) (Yes or No) Yes

(11) Whether desires to be repatriated (Yes or No) No

(7535) 28717/835 25m 9/39 G & S 704 [over]

251

Reasons for Decision.

After examining this case I came to the conclusion that this alien was a genuine refugee and friendly disposed towards this country, and the interests of national security would not be prejudiced by her being allowed to remain at large and by the removal of the special restrictions under Art 6 (a) and 9(a) of the Aliens Order, 1940, as amended.

Tribunal District Cornwall

Signature of Tribunal GDR Roberts

*Release and special case m/l 25.8.41 Without restrictions*  
 MALE ENEMY ALIEN - EXEMPTION FROM INTERNMENT - REFUGEE *redactions*

B. B. W.

(1) Surname (block capitals) BISSINGER, *Released 3.9.41*  
 Forenames Louis Israel **INTERNEED CIRCULAR 21.6.40**  
 Alias

(2) Date and place of birth 23rd. December, 1902 - Ichenhausen, Germany *2/02*  
 (3) Nationality German.

(4) Police Regn. Cert. No. 738823. Home Office reference if known B. 23156.  
 Special Procedure Card Number if known C 4

(5) Address *prior to internment* The Rectory, Cardinham, Bodmin, Cornwall.  
*at the time:* Cumberland w. B.E.C. Crafton Hall, Thursday

(6) Normal occupation Cartist  
 (7) Present Occupation Butler

(8) Name and address of employer The Rev. F.G.H. Tambling,  
The Rectory, Cardinham, Bodmin, Cornwall.

(9) Decision of Tribunal Exempted from internment Date 21-10-39 *85*  
*2-9/10*

(10) Whether exempted from Article 6(A) (Yes or No) Yes *85*  
 (11) Whether desires to be repatriated (Yes or No) No *Onchan 65619* *85*

173351 28717/835 25m 9/39 G & S 704 (OVER)

*Release and special case m/l 25.8.41.*  
 REPORT OF INTERNMENT. *Without restrictions.*  
 Released 3.9.41

Name of Alien BISSINGER Louis I. Police M.P.D. Div. "D"  
 Date of Birth 23.12.02. Nationality  
 Interned on 23.12.02. H.O. No. B23156.  
 Handed to  
 Reason for internment Circular 21.6.40.  
 R.C. No. 738823.

*Onchan 65619*  
*85*

On 31 Oct 1939, while my grandparents were still working for Rev. Francis Gordon Hill Tambling (1885-1963) at the Rectory, Cardinham, Bodmin, Cornwall, they appeared before a tribunal which decreed that they were both "Exempted from Internment". German nationals were divided into three classes; Class C, as legitimate refugees, were allowed to remain free.

But, as my grandfather wrote, and as histories of the time attest, in June 1940 the British government yielded to popular pressure and decreed that all males in Class C should be sent to internment camps such as Onchan on the Isle of Man; that's what the "Interned Circular 21.6.40" stamp means and my grandfather's number was Onchan 65619.

From what I have learned through other sources, Onchan wasn't a terrible place to be. The internees were fed reasonably well; the climate was mild and the barracks provided shelter. And it was far from where the Germans

*were bombing. But of course it was still a prison and the internees were worried about their loved ones in London and elsewhere.*

With the Lord's help these 14 months went by. I got released as trustworthy and helping the war effort by being an agricultural worker in Wigton, Cumberland. Your mother joined me there soon and told me that the few things we brought with us from Germany went up in flames in one of the terrible raids in London. Our luggage in September 1941 was not very heavy. And so it was easy to go in January 1942 back to London. I got a nice job very quickly this time and we began to build up again... our appearance, our expectations, and ourselves.

*In the summer of 1942, calmer heads prevailed and realized that not only were these refugees not a security threat, they were an untapped labor force. So many of them were released from the camps and assigned to "WAECs" – War Agricultural Executive Committees. You can see on line 5 of my grandfather's internment card the handwritten addendum, "Address after release: Cumberland W.A.E.C. Crofton Hall, Thursby" which is part of Wigton, as he wrote in his memoir.*

*Wikipedia has this photo of a "Surviving Farm Building near site of Crofton Hall", which was demolished in the 1950s.*



<http://www.visitcumbria.com/cm/thursby/> has several aerial photos of the former Crofton Hall site



It was around the middle of July 1944 that Edna left everything behind and started to walk. It was a big event for Mummy, but she was unable to tell me right away as at this time I was in a hospital for observation. And together with this event – your staying on your own feet and my being in a hospital – came the start of the flying bombs. It was the beginning of the months of nerve-wracking excitements, the daily runs to the shelter. In daytime your Mummy carried you to the basement and the nights we all slept in a shelter. At the end of July I could not stand it any longer and Mummy and Edna got evacuated to Torquay in Devon.

And so you had the opportunity to be afraid of the water and the waves and to learn to negotiate the first steps in the house near the top of the hill which belonged to our dear friend, Mrs. Dean. After two months I took you both back to London, the biggest danger over and trusting in the good Lord that he may help us and give us the strength to go through the coming months. And very soon the “Rockets” started and we all lived like on top of a volcano.

“Edna is frightened” is now an expression when you hear a noise which you don’t like. And when you say your nightly prayer, your “Lass Mummy and Daddy gesund” is of a very deep meaning if you don’t understand what it means to all of us.

*The following letter was written by Louis Bissinger from London to his brother Hugo Bissinger in America. The letter is not dated.*

Between your two letters has been an interval of nearly a month and we have been wondering all the time what was going on. Your letter explains a lot and we are so glad to know that you, dear Hugo, are on your way of convalescence and by the time the letter arrives we do hope you are quite well again. It is a nasty thing we believe you but after all you had the opportunity to get rid of your trouble in relative peace and quietness and the days which you have spent at home did you certainly a lot of good. As you say, Hilde did manage business and home alright and Marion has given you certainly a hand.

Your complaints have us a bit amused. We will try to explain to you, who are so 3,000 miles from here in quite comfortable circumstances, without the slightest idea what war means to us, and we do not want to create the impression that must be pitied. We only think it is time to tell you how things are. Sometimes we listen to the BBC American bulletin and the speakers confirm that you all don't know what's like over here. Of course we are not starting to make out commentary, we only will tell you about us, quite ordinary refugees, who are thankful to be here and how we see this damned business and how it affects us.

We live in two rooms, very cheap, in a boarding house. The room on the third floor is very small, about the size of your kitchen in F[rankfurt]. This room is kitchen, dining room, sitting room and nursery. Our property here is a cheap wireless, small gas cooker, and Edna's play pen. Two set of plates, and the absolute necessary cutlery. The bedroom is on the fourth floor and contains as our property Edna's bed. This room is about the size of your bedroom in F[rankfurt] with one window 1x1 meter. But we have our bath and hot water in bath rooms and we can afford it. Edna is 29 lb heavy and must be carried all the stairs. All these months we have struggled to save a bit, to let our appearance not be too shabby and to manage as good as possible. I have a job which is not too bad and I have to stay, then you can only change your jobs with a permission of the authorities even if the other job would bring to the double amount of your present salary.

To make ends meet Friedl is busy in here very few spare hours to do some housework and if you have nobody who does the washing of baby's laundry apart from your own, nobody who is looking sometimes after her to get you some recreation and to work in your evening hours, apart from the problems of going shopping and queuing for this and that, then perhaps you have an idea, that having a baby in F[rankfurt] is a bit different as here. Of course a few seconds should have been found to write a few liens, but one is sometimes and Friedl for many many month too tired or exhausted to do anything what is not routine job.

And if you are tired you should have your sleep and get up in the morning with fresh resources. We suppose you can do it. Thanks heaven we had a quiet time. But it was just the time this boy Katz paid us a visit. He did not phone before, he simply was there at 6 o'clock in the evening. I came home shortly before him. It was a Thursday and we have been in a hurry to be prepared and in case of an air raid I had to begin fire guard duty. The days – or better, the nights – before had been everything but quiet and we have a bit nervous. Rushing in the middle of the night from an exhaustive sleep with baby 500 yards to a shelter, going back, trying to sleep, perhaps being disturbed is not great fun. Reading about bombs in New York news is not very exciting and more

peaceful as living here and hearing guns and planes and bombs, sometimes too near but still far enough to be only scared. Coming home from the shelter and seeing the sky red for a short time or smelling the smoke of the devilish phosphorous bombs.

With baby in your arms you are so thankful that you forget to sleep again and anyway baby enjoys it very much. And if a night was without raid, it was nearly the same. You are half clothed in bed and prepared in exactly two ½ minutes to be dressed and transferred to a shelter. Don't forget 4 staircases and the blackout and listening all the times for guns then shrapnel splinters which must come down somewhere are not less dangerous. During this time of our nightly raids came this inexperienced boy. Of course we have asked him to stay. But he wanted to go and have a look for one of the clubs and anyway we have not been prepared. Not with the food, not with a plate or fork, not in our minds. The direction in this days of the early blackout was alert, and be prepared. Baby, we for ourself. Dinner must be finished at 7.30. May[be] the siren are starting before – well, that's just bad luck. But you have not to care for yourself. There is baby which is helpless and must be cared for an we can tell you we found here several times as we rushed upstairs as the sirens have started, standing in her bed and crying, so intensive is the feeling of a human being with only primitive sense for what's going on.

Shall I tell you that I had pneumonia during this time and no opportunity to recognize it till blood came and soon everything was already ok. Well you could not stand in bed on the top floor and wait if something is coming through the roof. You had to keep things going and there is of course not much room for formalities and hospitality.

I suppose you have read this letter and you feel a bit sorry for us, but we don't want it. If you have an impression what life is like a few miles from the Channel, if I remember right a plane is in 5 minutes from the Channel in London, so we are sure you fell how unimportant it is if Friedl writes a few lines or the boy K. was disappointed. As long as one of us is able to write, everything is OK and that is the main point. We don't know what we have to expect when the second front starts. Maybe till you get this letter she is well underway. Let's hope for the best and pray that everything will turn out right. That one day we may write our letter in peace and visitors find us as hospitable as before, that one day we have something of our own where little Edna knows that is her house too, and not two badly furnished rooms. In the meantime we hope your peace will only be disturbed by complaints of a young boy who wrote a silly letter about things which he does not understand.

## Sources

Page 2, Marriage certificate and photo from private collection of Edna Greene

Page 3, death certificate from U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

Page 4, newspaper ad from FindMyPast.co.uk (need to provide more specific citation)

Page 5, Munich phone book retrieved from Ancestry.com; street photo from Google Street View

Page 7, Western Morning News, Devon, 1 Nov 1939, retrieved from FindMyPast.co.uk. Photo from Vanessa Griffith

Pages 8 and 9, images from records of British Home Office retrieved from National Archives website (need to provide more specific information)

Page 10, Crofton Hall photo from Wikipedia (need to add URL)

Page 11, Crofton Hall photo from visitcumbria.com