

OTTO & DARIA



# Otto & Daria

*A Wartime Journey Through No Man's Land*

Eric Koch





*In memory of my mother,  
my sister Margo,  
and my brother Robert.*

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## Preface

THIS MEMOIR COVERS A PERIOD OF TEN YEARS, FROM 1938 to 1948. During this time, I was a refugee, a Jew forced to emigrate from Frankfurt, Germany, who eventually established roots in Canada, in Montreal and later Toronto.

The book contains excerpts from letters from Daria Hambourg, who, too, spent those years in limbo, but in a different sense. She was a member of a distinguished musical family in London but felt alienated from them. Throughout the war years, she moved from job to job and made a valiant attempt to find meaning in her life. This is reflected in her writing. While our experiences were different, what we had in common was that we were both young people caught up in the physical and psychological stress of the time.



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INTRODUCTION:

## Meeting Daria

WHEN I MET DARIA SHE DIDN'T SAY A WORD. ALL SHE did was blush.

I was sitting in the lounge, waiting for lunch to be served. The date was August 7, 1938, a little more than a year before the outbreak of the Second World War, and the place the two-star Hotel Mirabeau in Champéry in the Swiss Alps, up the street from the five-star Grand Hotel. It was near the end of my summer vacation after my first year studying economics at the University of Cambridge. Adolf Hitler was threatening the world. But no one in the Hotel Mirabeau seemed to be aware of it.

Champéry, a famous skiing resort, was busier in the winter than it was in the summer. But now, in late August, the chairlifts took hikers to innumerable paths with splendid

views of the multi-summitted Dents du Midi. I preferred to stay in the hotel.

I had seen Daria at breakfast, the only other person in the dining room who was alone. She had lovely blue eyes, brown hair, a superb complexion, and was wearing a dark grey blouse. I discovered later that she was seventeen. She seemed perfectly happy reading a book.

A little later, lining up outside the dining room before lunch, Daria was standing with two other English girls, one of them called Angela and very forgettable. The other I had met the previous evening in the bar. Her name was Bea. She was flirtatious and attractive. Pursuing her, I thought, might well pay off. Both seemed to be chummy with a family called Wharry.

I rose to talk to Bea who remembered my name, which was promising. Admittedly, Otto is not a common name in England. She introduced me to Daria, who seemed shy but nodded and gave me a polite little smile. I bowed to her. I knew that English girls did not shake hands. I was wondering what she was doing in this hotel, also alone. Waiting for a grown-up to join her? I would probably find out later. For the moment I was more interested in Bea.

“Hungry?” Bea asked me.

“Not very.”

“I suppose you’re never hungry unless you know you’re getting sauerkraut.”

Daria poked her in the ribs.

“I have nothing against sauerkraut,” Bea laughed.

She turned to me. “Did I say anything offensive, Otto?”

“Not at all,” I replied, although I suspected she had noticed my accent and was going to tease me about being German. I had not told her I was a Jewish refugee.

“Are you a Nazi?” she asked me.

This time Daria poked her hard with her elbow. How interesting, I thought, a little puzzled. I looked at her face and noticed that she was blushing. Anger? Embarrassment?

“No, Bea.” I spoke slowly, in an even voice. “I am not a Nazi.”

“That’s too bad,” Bea replied. “I think the Nazis are much maligned in my country. My uncle attended one of those Nuremberg rallies and thought it was wonderful. He said one has to remember what a mess Germany was before Hitler came in.”

This time Daria left without a word and threw herself on a leather armchair in the lounge.

“Strange girl,” Bea said to me, shrugging. “Anyway, your sauerkraut should be ready by now.”

Lo and behold, the doors opened. I let Bea and the others go into the dining room. I turned around and sat down on the side of Daria’s chair.

“I think you made your point,” I said to her. “I am very impressed. May I sit with you at lunch?”

“That would be nice,” she said, careful not to sound too inviting. Those were the first words she spoke to me. For the next two days, once she had overcome her shyness, we spent most of the time together talking, in the lounge, during walks, or in the bar in the evening, drinking freshly pressed lemonade—never in each other’s rooms. A dam had burst. Although she kept saying that she could express herself better on paper—she hoped to become a writer—she turned out to be an articulate, voluble, almost irrepressible talker. And she was magnificently English. I quickly forgot Bea.

Daria was by no means waiting for anybody to join her. She was killing time, waiting for her older sister, Sonia, to return to Paris, where she was living. Daria was going to stay with her for a few days, on the way home to London. Sonia was working as an editor for Albatross Press, Daria said. She had to meet an author somewhere in Normandy. She, Daria, had spent a week in Switzerland with one of her aunts, to celebrate her matriculation. I had got my matric after two years’ residence at Cranbrook School in Kent, in the spring of 1937, a little more than a year before.

I was delighted to discover that she was the youngest of four daughters of the celebrated Russian-born concert pianist Mark Hambourg, whose recording of Beethoven’s Concerto in C Minor I had often played on the portable gramophone I had with me in Cranbrook. I learned that



her mother was the daughter of Sir Kenneth Muir Mackenzie, who had been—until his death in 1930—principal secretary of five successive lord chancellors. Daria's mother was the granddaughter of William Graham, MP, from Glasgow. She was a violinist universally known as Dolly, good enough to have studied with the great Eugène Ysaÿe in Belgium, the musician to whom César Franck had dedicated his violin sonata.

Daria gave me the family history without any shyness, more amused than boastful. I tried not to reveal how impressed I was. I wondered, of course, whether or not Mark Hambourg was Jewish, and if the reason Daria had poked Bea in the ribs was that she had guessed that I was Jewish and that therefore it was an expression of some kind of solidarity. Refugees like me were not used to consorting with granddaughters of lords and ladies and were therefore conditioned to cultivate “connections” outside Germany. But that was not—not consciously, anyway—the reason why I enjoyed my new friend so much. As I discovered later, Daria was not particularly interested in Jewish matters.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I'm from Frankfurt, and I'm going into my second year at Cambridge,” I replied. “I am switching from economics to law.”

“Oh, economics,” she shuddered. “I am supposed to go to the LSE in the autumn.” She was referring to the London

School of Economics. “I don’t know why I allowed myself to be talked into that.”

For the rest of our time together we discussed many things other than the joys of higher education. We could not know that this harmonious conversation would continue on paper for the next five years.

In 1995 I discovered a stack of Daria’s letters in my desk in Toronto. They were sent to me between 1938 and 1943. Mine to her are lost. In 1938 Daria was seventeen, I eighteen.

I had not looked at the letters for decades. When I did so that year, I had an unexpected insight. Outward appearances notwithstanding, it seemed to me that our experiences were essentially the same. At that time, we were both passing through No Man’s Land. My journey took me from the ruins of a shattered existence in Frankfurt, Germany, to the safe harbour of Canada. Daria’s letters told a parallel story. They described vividly, often humorously, the road she travelled between a happy childhood and an unknowable future, and the mostly futile attempts she made to find herself, to carve out a role for herself.

Her story formed a counterpoint to mine.

## CHAPTER I

# Frankfurt: The Centre of the World

*Es is kaa Stadt uff der weite Welt,  
Die so merr wie mei Frankfort gefällt,  
Un es will merr net in mein Kopp enei:  
Wie kann nor e Mensch net von Frankfort sei!*

[There is no city in the wide world  
which pleases me as much as Frankfurt,  
and it does not enter my head  
how anybody could not have been born there.]

—FRIEDRICH STOLTZE, “*Frankfurt-Gedicht*”

THE FRANKFURT POET FRIEDRICH STOLTZE CONFESSED—in local dialect and in verse—that he could not imagine anybody not born in Frankfurt. He spoke for all Frankfurters.

Frankfurt-centredness came naturally to us. It was not easy for my uncles and aunts to welcome my sister Margo’s fiancé, who was born in Cologne. In the golden 1920s the

world considered Berlin the most exciting capital in the world, overflowing with advanced ideas. To Frankfurters it appeared vulgar and noisy. Having been born in 1919, I was, alas, too young to have an opinion on the subject.

The moral and intellectual superiority of Frankfurt was, of course, pure mythology. True, the city had been a financial and trade centre for centuries, and true, Frankfurt had been the place where coronations of Holy Roman Emperors took place, but it did not have a university until just before the First World War, and before the twentieth century it achieved little in the arts and sciences. Even then it was home to only one Nobel laureate, Paul Ehrlich, the father of chemotherapy, but he was not even born in Frankfurt. One celebrity who was, Goethe (1749–1832), perhaps the most admirable German who ever lived, left Frankfurt for Weimar when he was twenty-six, already the author of a bestseller, and only returned, not to see his mother, but to exchange poems with one of the many women he loved.

Mythology beats facts any day.

There is another celebrity who made Frankfurt famous—Mayer Amschel Rothschild (1744–1812). He was the founder of the Rothschild banking dynasty and was born in the ghetto, on the only street where Jews had been allowed to live since the Middle Ages. There was a curfew every evening, and the gates closed. The street was squalid and overcrowded. Rothschild never left the ghetto, even

after he became rich. Throughout the nineteenth century, as its inhabitants became increasingly emancipated, the ghetto was gradually dismantled, and Jews were allowed to enter the larger community. My grandmother's grandfather lived down the street from Rothschild.

There was a painting of the "Jew Street" by Anton Burger in our dining room. In the 1960s a friend wrote to my mother, who was then living in New York, that he had seen it hanging in the leading art gallery in Hamburg. We thought it was an obvious case of art theft, somebody having stolen it from my mother during the hectic process of her emigration in early 1939. We were wrong. Burger painted a number of versions of the scene, perhaps hoping, with good reason, that people like my parents would buy one to remind themselves of where they came from. The Hamburg gallery had bought its version legitimately. Ours had disappeared.

My grandmother Flora Koch was born 1859 in Frankfurt's East End, no longer a ghetto. I remember her telling me that when she was seven the Prussians came and annexed the free city. The family fled to the nearby Taunus mountains, taking their silver spoons with them to save from the invaders. There was some resistance on the Hauptwache, the main square. One member of the Frankfurt militia was killed, and the mayor, Karl Viktor Fellner, committed suicide. A street is still named after him.

My grandmother's family moved to the West End at the end of the century, after her husband Robert Koch had established the jewellery firm to which we owed our good fortune. Thanks to his perseverance, good taste, and natural distinction—he looked like an ambassador—he became court jeweller, and his store became a Frankfurt version of Tiffany's or Cartier's. The location was less than one block away from Frankfurt's "Ritz," the Frankfurter Hof. Robert Koch's rise to prominence coincided with the boom following German reunification in 1871.

Robert was born in Geisa, a small town not far from Frankfurt, the son of a country doctor who had died in 1870. His penniless widow, referred to in the family as Grandmama Doktor, moved to Frankfurt hoping to find suitable wives for her four sons in the Jewish community that had emerged from the ghetto. She was not disappointed. Her one daughter, a gifted pianist, however, slipped away; she married a Hungarian adventurer and moved to Paris.

Two of Grandmama Doktor's four sons, Karl and Fritz, went into business but failed to achieve spectacular success because they were more interested in "higher things," namely intellectual and scientific pursuits. The other two, Robert and Louis, struck it rich as upper-echelon jewellers. Robert's oldest son was my father, Otto, who died in 1919 when I was three months old. He served as an absent role model for my brother and me throughout our childhood.