



THE STORY OF RALPH WILLIAMS (FORMERLY RALPH SPIELMANN)

Ralph Gunter Spielmann was born in Munich, the capital of Bavaria, in 1925. His father was an architect and his mother a concert pianist. One day in 1938 (then aged 13) Ralph was outside the family apartment in the Prinzenstrasse cleaning his bicycle, when Hitler's Mercedes car drove down the road. The car stopped and a voice ordered Ralph to salute Hitler, when he refused he was arrested and sent to Dachau concentration camp. His uncle, who lived in Switzerland, paid 20,000 Swiss francs for his release.

Ralph attended a Jewish school until November 1938, when the school was burned down during the anti-Jewish riots, known as Kristallnacht (the night of the broken glass). The night of 9th /10th November 1938, Kristallnacht, was the start of the anti-Jewish pogrom in Nazi Germany and Austria. During that night hundreds of synagogues were destroyed, thousands of homes and businesses were ransacked, ninety Jews were murdered and 20,000 – 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps at Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. Some were later released after they had agreed to emigrate; their property was confiscated by the State. Many of those imprisoned were killed and hundreds more committed suicide because of the harsh brutality of the guards.

Ralph's father was held in Dachau concentration camp but was released and made an escape to Buenos Aires. After September 1939 very few Jews were allowed out of the expanding borders of the Third Reich. By the end of 1941 the deportation of German Jews to the east had begun.

Following the destruction of Ralph's school in Munich, his mother Edith, placed him with a Roman Catholic tutor, Professor Emendorfer. On Friday 19th June 1939 whilst taking a walk together, his tutor told him that he would be leaving Germany later that same night and would be taken to England.

Ralph arrived in England on 21st June 1939 and with 62 other boys went to live at the National Children's Home in Clitheroe, Lancashire. Although the children were evacuated by the Kindertransport organisation, their accommodation was arranged by the Society of Friends, as those children whose parents had chosen to leave the faith (Ralph's mother had placed him with a Roman Catholic establishment) were not acknowledged by the Jewish religious community organisation.

In 1941 the chance came to join the British Forces, recruits were needed in Home Defence. Ralph saw it as his opportunity to join the British Merchant Navy at Liverpool. He became a crew member on a tanker and sailed to Egypt. But when the

tanker arrived in Egypt Ralph was arrested as an alien. He was then shipped back to Britain onboard the 'Empress of Britain', with German soldiers captured by the British Army in North Africa.



Above left: Ralph Spielmann, Friday 19th June 1939 the day he was told he would be leaving Germany for England



Above right: Ralph Williams (formerly Spielmann) Lingfield 2005, proudly wearing the wings of the Parachute Regiment

After April 1943 the rules regarding the recruitment of Enemy Aliens changed, recruits were allowed to join fighting units. German and Austrian recruits were encouraged to anglicize their names in case of capture. If they had not done so they would have been killed as traitors rather than treated as POWs if captured by the Nazis. According to Peter Leighton-Langer's research, one in seven German and Austrian refugees who came to England between 1933 and 1939 volunteered for and enlisted in the British Forces.

Ralph joined the Royal Artillery at Larkhill Barracks, Salisbury, in 1943. It was then that he changed his name to Ralph Williams, 'Wilhelm' was a family name. He also served with the 50th Parachute Brigade and was parachuted into Burma.

After the war Ralph joined the Cecil Gee organisation and became General Manager from 1958 until 1962, when he left the company to found his own gent's wear shop. Ralph and his wife and daughter moved from their home in Sanderstead to Ladbrooke Hurst, Dormansland, in 1967.

Ralph visited his father in Buenos Aires several times and learned from him the fate of several members of his family. His mother, Edith, her sister and his father's sister had all been deported to the Latvian capital, Riga, where they were all murdered. He knows that his mother was shot on 30th November 1941.

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Sources:

The verbal testimony of Ralph Williams (formerly Ralph Spielmann)
The King's Own Loyal Enemy Aliens: 1939-45: German and Austrian Refugees in Britain by Peter Leighton-Langer