

When Goddess Fortuna smiled on a refugee

After fleeing Hitler's persecution of the Jews, luck and being able to seize opportunities helped me on the long road to Singapore



Peter Ellinger

The number of refugees seeking asylum is escalating. My object is to tell them that such an experience or depressing start does not preclude a person from finding a satisfactory route. My own experience illustrates the point.

I was born to Jewish parents in Vienna in 1933 – the fateful year in which Adolf Hitler won the democratic elections in Germany. The fate of the Jews was beyond doubt after the notorious Enabling Act, which granted Hitler unlimited powers.

In 1938, my parents had no option but to flee. If they had postponed their escape by just a few days, I might have ended up like other family members of whom we never heard from again.

We spent a few months in Sicily, where father had business connections arising from his occupation as an agent for the

import of Italian citrus fruit to Vienna. Later on, we found refuge in France. I recall the pension in Chantilly which housed refugees and the puppy love I felt for the proprietress' daughter – fair-haired Collette. I also recall how I contracted severe bronchitis which triggered asthma.

After a few months, we managed to get a train to Marseilles. One afternoon, father and I were picked up by the police. They wanted to press him into the Foreign Legion. Shortly after, mother came over, threw a tantrum and secured our release.

Fortunately, we got visas to Mandatory Palestine (Israel today), and were able to board a ship. We arrived in Haifa in 1939. I had my primary and secondary schooling in Tel Aviv. This entailed a linguistic change. At home, we continued to speak German and I also gained a good reading – alas not writing – knowledge. The Italian and French I had picked up during our months as refugees were lost. A relative taught me Hebrew and, of course, I picked up many words by osmosis. English was taught as a second language in primary and secondary schools.

Regrettably, asthma and bronchitis plagued me during my childhood and teens. My ability to play with other children was therefore limited. However, I turned the handicap to an advantage: I became a voracious reader.

Israel was blessed with many learned bilingual scholars. French, Russian and Scandinavian authors were skilfully translated into Hebrew. I recall reading Emile Zola's *Germinal*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime And Punishment* and dramas by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in translation.

Still, during my years in secondary school, I started reading English literature in its original language. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* were amongst them.

Israel was founded in 1948, when I was still in secondary school. I recall the struggle but, as our family lived in Tel Aviv, I did not experience shortages and fear. Independence did not benefit everybody. For instance, my

maternal grandfather and my late father lost their customers in the surrounding countries. Both returned to Vienna.

Having been disqualified from army service, I was able to enrol straightaway in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I opted for a course in law and, in addition to my studies, I obtained the position of a cadet in a leading law firm in Tel Aviv. I believe that, in this respect, the Goddess Fortuna smiled: she directed my feet to a suitable career.

A LINGUISTIC ADJUSTMENT

She smiled again shortly after I finished my studies in Jerusalem. I was practising on my own in Tel Aviv when a friend returned from postgraduate studies in England and sang the praises of Oxford. He also provided contacts. My father offered to support me and so off I went.

The shift to Britain entailed yet a further linguistic adjustment. Before long, I discovered that my reading and writing knowledge of the tongue did not enable me to converse in it. For a while, I continued to think in Hebrew and translated my inner monologue into English. Naturally, I was often incomprehensible. My inability to cope with everyday speech was yet another problem. I recall with amusement how disappointed I was when I ordered a "toad in the hole" and, instead of the exotic dish I anticipated, was served a mere sausage roll.

Singapore is an ideal habitat. I cannot think of any other place that would have enabled me to have such a satisfying and peaceful life far away from the limelight. The friends I have made over the years have continued to look after me. Their friendship and empathy have given me strength.

Oxford University admitted me to the doctoral programme. Writing my thesis on a financial facility involved regular hours in the library as well as day trips to the banking world in London. By the middle of my second year, I had completed my transition from German and Hebrew to English, which became my principal language.

I was running out of money and the required zest, when Fortuna chose to smile again. A friend from Oxford was appointed to a post in the newly established Faculty of Law of the University of Singapore. He urged me to apply for a position and I was duly appointed in 1961.

I spent six years in Singapore, mixing with both local and expatriate circles. The medium of teaching was English, which became my lingua franca. I also found that Singapore's milieu suited my temperament.

Having landed a steady job, I was able to consider family life. I courted and in due course married a local – Chinese-educated – girl. A friend, Tommy Koh, who is today a professor at the National University of Singapore, was my best man. His mother helped to select a suitable diamond engagement ring and actually bargained on my behalf. His father lent me his luxury car, which took us to and back from the ceremony.

The university let us a fine house in Kheam Hock Road. Frequently, we went to a pasar malam, which stretched from the bottom of Tanglin Road to the corner of Orchard and Patterson Roads, to the splendid food stalls in Albert Street, and occasionally to Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands.

Another stroke of luck materialised after the end of my sixth year in Singapore. A university in New Zealand appointed me to a chair and, for the next 11 years, Wellington was our home.

RETIREMENT IN SINGAPORE

An offer from a university in Victoria, in Australia, was, however, irresistible. We spent nine years there but, in 1986, returned to a chair of law at my old university, which had changed its name to the National University of Singapore (NUS) and become a renowned institution. Side by side

with my academic career, I managed to establish a lucrative part-time practice. I remained in my post until I reached the age of 65, the age of retirement.

At this stage, Fortuna smiled once again. My star student, whose father had established a medium-size practice, took over and built the firm up. He invited me to join him. I had two fascinating years as a practitioner.

However, when the university invited me to become a full-time professorial fellow, I grabbed the opportunity. My post was renewed over the years and I remained in service until I reached the age of 80. For a number of years, I also continued practising on a part-time basis. My happiness during all these years was marred only when my wife developed a fatal disease.

I now lead the life of a fully retired academic. Singapore is an ideal habitat. I cannot think of any other place that would have enabled me to have such a satisfying and peaceful life far away from the limelight. The friends I have made over the years have continued to look after me. Their friendship and empathy have given me strength.

I am aware that my way was paved by the support and care of my late parents. Nowadays, fortunately, many philanthropic organisations are willing to support deserving cases. Furthermore, I knew how to make the best of opportunities provided by Fortuna. From as early as my years in my secondary school, I knew that one had to wait patiently until she decided to smile. Any attempt to chase her was bound to be futile.

As indicated by German playwright Bertolt Brecht, often you tire yourself out by trying to hunt luck, whilst all the time she is chasing you. I do, also, believe that my ability to persevere and to overcome handicaps helped me along the way.

This very road is available to all who wish to pursue it, even if their start is initially unsatisfactory.

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• We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at stopinion@sph.com.sg