

Hilton Hall

by Ivan A. Backer

We drove up the winding driveway that I had always walked before and it soon came into view. The big brick building that had housed the school which the Czechoslovak government in exile had established for refugee children in England stood there like a solid bastion of security. That is what it felt like when I attended it in the early 1940's during the war.

I recognized the remains of the stone balcony on the second floor which had collapsed under the weight of my friend who had climbed on it while the building was being converted into a school. He was lucky to escape with a broken leg only. During the two-month construction period we kids had a much welcome prolonged Christmas holiday.

Now, in 1985, I was showing my wife the several places I had lived while in England. As we parked next to a flat bed truck that was being swept by a good looking man in his late thirties, I wondered who was living here now and what Hilton Hall was used for. The young man jumped down from the truck and extended his hand in greeting. He was the son of Mr. Lewis, the brother of the John Lewis I knew who ran the farm surrounding the mansion. Not that it was a mansion, but since it was large and imposing it seemed so to me when I was 12. The young Lewis invited us in to meet his mom and dad, who had served in the British army in the war.

As I walked inside, the grand staircase seemed much smaller and I found the hall with its fireplace more normal than 43 years earlier. No longer was it the hall where knights gathered around the blazing fire of logs 12" in diameter. What really startled me as I walked around were the small metal plaques on each door which indicated in Czech the use for that room: Dining Room, Music Rehearsal Room, Principal's Office, and Classroom. The Lewises had never bothered to take them down.

As we reminisced with our hosts I remembered mother Lewis, now long departed.

When I was at school there, the kitchen was in the basement and the food was brought up to the dining room by a dumb waiter. A number of us vied for the privilege of pulling the rope hand over hand. Sometimes, as it was being hoisted, it stopped briefly as Mrs. Lewis, one floor lower, apparently helped herself.

Food was not too plentiful, although we were never truly hungry. But a small group of us decided to assuage our hunger pangs by hunting the plentiful number of wild rabbits on the farm. In the evenings we would set wire traps at the openings of the rabbit holes. Then we got up early in the morning to see if we had caught anything. Occasionally, we were successful. We roasted our prey over an open fire and congratulated ourselves on eating such a tasty morsel. We soon grew tired of the effort, however.

I learned that having the Czech school in their home led to long term relations between a few of the Czech teachers and the Lewis family. Several of them had visited Prague and visited some of the staff that had run our school. They even spoke a few words of Czech and praised the beer.

Hilton Hall is located in the small town of Whitchurch in Shropshire to which I had walked every Saturday afternoon when we had off. The town had changed but little since those days. The church still stood on the hill and the only shopping street spread down the hill from it. More memories flooded in as I recalled that my brother, a soldier in the Czechoslovak army regiment attached to the British army, had been stationed there for a few weeks while he completed a specialized course. I was bursting with pride to see my older brother in uniform fighting for his country.

I left the Czech school in the middle of the war to attend an English boarding school. Soon after I left, the school abandoned Hilton Hall for new quarters in at the Abernant Lake Hotel, [Llanwrtyd Wells](#), in Wales. Many years later a few of the Czech school's alumni organized a reunion in Washington, DC. To my surprise and disappointment I knew only two

sisters and no one else. The rest had been in Wales only and Hilton Hall was scarcely mentioned.

When I think back to my days at Hilton Hall, I can still see the cows being brought from pasture to be milked, the farm equipment strewn around, and John Lewis rushing around in knee high rubber boots – Wellingtons – trying to keep up with everything since he had no one to help. Other young men were fighting the war. Nostalgia fills me with warmth again as I remind myself how lucky I was to be there.