

No Night So Dark



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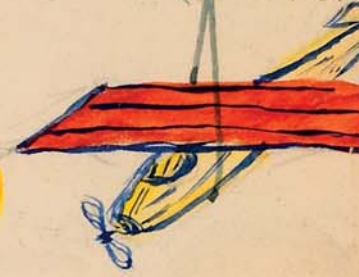
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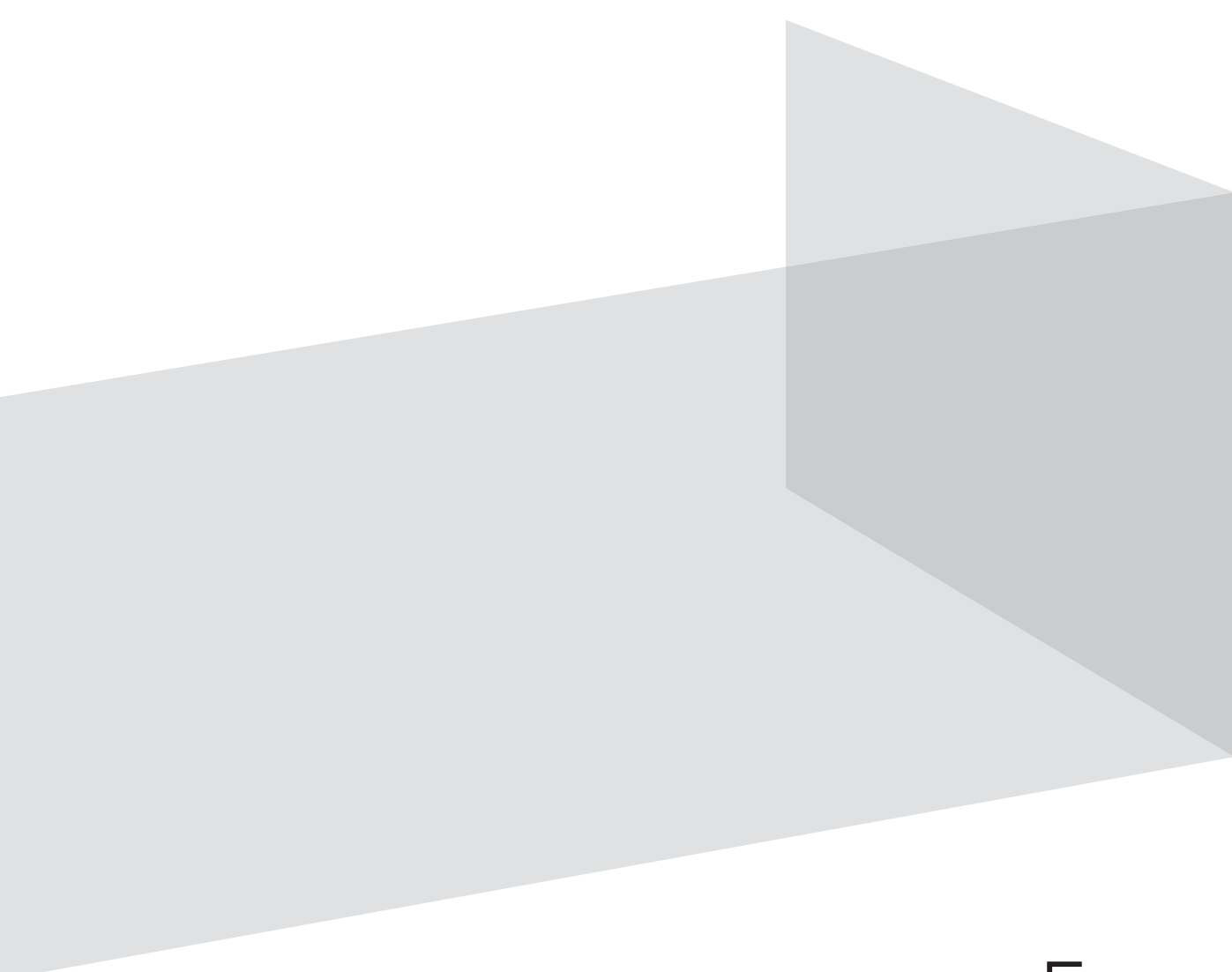
*There is no night so dark
that it is not followed by
the dawning
of a new day.*

Šimon Wels
U Bernatů



No Night So Dark

One family's story of memory
stolen and regained



It is an honour for us to be part of an exhibition about the Wels family, whose story has not been forgotten thanks to a combination of chance and foresight. There is no one in the family alive who can tell us about their life before the Second World War, but their descendants in the United Kingdom, who knew almost nothing about their Czech family, have managed to piece together the fragments, most of which were preserved in a single box. The family archive includes two books that draw us right into their world, *U Bernatů* and *Sancta Familia*.

With the help of David Vaughan, we can now follow the family's remarkable story. He has mapped their lives from the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, through Czechoslovakia between the wars and on to the period of the Second World War itself. In 2018 he told the story in a five-part series for Czech Radio, but he realised that the family archive, with so many drawings, documents and photographs, would also make for a fascinating exhibition. He turned to us. We were delighted to help, because that is exactly what Post Bellum tries to do: to tell stories that would otherwise be lost.

The Post Bellum Team

We often think of the past as a very different place from the world we know today, but the more I have come to know the story of the Wels family, the more I have felt that they are people like us. In the second half of the 1930s the architect Rudolf Wels, his wife Ida and their sons Tomáš and Martin were living just a couple of streets away from where I live with my family today in the Prague district of Holešovice. Towards the end of 1938, the two boys put together a book with the title *Sancta Familia*, made up of scenes from their daily life, and gave it to their parents and grandmother. When I had the chance to read the manuscript eighty years later, I felt I could be reading about my own family or about other families I know in Prague today. Their world – their values, the way they spoke, their humour, even many of the details of their day-to-day lives – seemed very much like my own. Yet the circumstances under which they were murdered in Auschwitz just over five years later are quite beyond my imagination. Only Tomáš was to survive the war, by escaping to England in 1939.

I first came across the family when the publishers Triáda brought out an edition of Šimon Wels's memoirs *U Bernatů (Life at the Bernats)* in 2011. Šimon was Rudolf's father, and the grandfather of Tomáš and Martin. The book was written over a hundred years ago, but as I read it, I had much the same feeling as when I came to read *Sancta Familia* a few years later, that I was being drawn into the world of a family with which I could identify, sharing their "experiences, their sorrows and their joys," as Šimon writes in the introduction of *U Bernatů*. That is the power of this story. Thanks to these two books, along with hundreds of letters, documents, photographs and drawings, that have survived in a box in an Oxford suburb, we can piece together the life of the family over several generations.

I first met Tomáš's son Colin Wels when he was visiting Prague in 2014 and I was moved by the story of his search for his family's past. Over the years he has been helped by others who have realised the significance of his family's legacy: Gerald and Alice Turner, Zbyněk Hejda, Michael and Jan Rund, Lydie Procházková, Marta and Pavel Holeka, Zdeněk Lukeš and others. I went to Oxford twice to visit Colin and his wife Tilly. We pored over the family papers. Material gradually piled up on the dining room table and then on any other table or chair available, while the venerable family cat, Rebel, looked on. When I suggested putting together an exhibition about the family, Colin was enthusiastic.

In *Sancta Familia* Tomáš and Martin were hoping "to capture the idiosyncrasies and the habits of each individual and to preserve them for all time." With the exhibition *No Night So Dark* we have tried to continue in this spirit, to tell the family's story in their own words. They take us to rural West Bohemia in the 19th century, to pre-First World War Vienna and to the fascinating and complex world of Czechoslovakia between the wars. Then we see how they face with dignity the ever more malevolent bureaucracy that makes the Holocaust possible. We are taken to post-war Britain and to Czechoslovakia in the last years of the communist regime, and we witness the gradual healing process that has been possible in the three decades since the fall of communism in 1989. Today Šimon Wels has ten great-great-grandchildren living in Britain and the United States, and the family continues to thrive.

David Vaughan

No Night So Dark

In 1838 the young Josefína Löwy undertook a journey of over two hundred kilometres on foot to ask Count Sternberg for a permit to marry her beloved Bernard Wedeles. At that time Jews in Bohemia and Moravia were only allowed to marry according to rules that were precisely defined by the so-called Familiant Laws. It was only thanks to her strong will that all the subsequent generations of the family we get to know in this exhibition were to see the light of day. Here we tell their story, a story that was not meant to survive.

Josefína's adventurous journey is one of many episodes described by her son Šimon Wels in his memoir *U Bernatů*. He completed the book in 1919 and it evokes the atmosphere of the West Bohemian countryside in the 19th century with humour and sensitivity. Šimon had a small shop on the village green in Osek near the town of Rokycany. His family had been living in the village for generations. He was born in 1853, three years after Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who was later to become the first Czechoslovak president. Masaryk was a humanist and a passionate believer in democracy, and Šimon greatly admired his ideas, bringing up his children in Masaryk's spirit.

His older son Rudolf was admitted to the Academy of Arts in Vienna, where he studied architecture. There, in the years just before World War I, he became a student and then colleague of Adolf Loos, one of the most influential architects of his generation. Rudolf went on to design many buildings in Czechoslovakia between the wars. They reflect his strong sense of space, his immensely creative approach to design and his idealism. Like his father Šimon and his grandmother Josefína, he believed that it was possible to make the world a better place. It is no coincidence that he focused on projects that had a social function – housing estates for workers, children's sanatoriums, old people's homes and schools.

His successful career and happy family life were brought to a violent end when German troops marched into Prague in 1939. In March 1944 Rudolf, his wife Ida and their younger son Martin were murdered in Auschwitz. The family was meant to be forgotten, along with hundreds of thousands of other Jewish families.

This was not the case. Just before they were deported to the Terezín ghetto sixty kilometres north of Prague, they left their most treasured possessions in a box with friends. As well as the manuscript of *U Bernatů*, these included a richly illustrated book with the title *Sancta Familia*, which Martin and his older brother Tomáš gave to their parents for Christmas 1938. It was made up of humorous scenes from the daily life of the family – a “family as it should be.” By a small miracle the box survived, even though the building received a direct hit during an Allied bombing raid on Prague in February 1945.

Tomáš succeeded in fleeing to Great Britain just after the beginning of the occupation. He served in the Royal Air Force and married an Englishwoman, Joy. He returned briefly to Prague just after the war and soon discovered that his parents and brother had perished. He took as much as he could of the family archive back to Britain, where it remained at the back of a cupboard. Tomáš never talked to his three children about his family's past, but he was careful to keep everything that he had brought from Czechoslovakia.

But this is not the end of the story...

The Black Elephant

“We knew that he was covering up a lot of pain.”



Tomáš Wels with his grandson Simon

In 1984 Tomáš Wels was admitted to hospital for a heart operation. He was 64 and living in Oxford. During a visit from his son Colin he said that he wanted to tell his children about his life before the Second World War, something that he had never spoken of before. Three days later he had a massive stroke that left him unable to speak and he never did tell his story.

Colin remembered a box that his father had always kept at the back of a bulky cupboard nicknamed the “Black Elephant”. The whole family knew that the box existed, but they had little idea what it contained. They decided to open it. Thanks to the numerous objects inside, they were able to unravel the family’s story. They found Šimon’s memoir *U Bernatů*, the book *Sancta Familia*, hundreds of letters, sketches, documents and photographs. Most of what you see in this exhibition comes from this unique family archive, which against the odds survived the Holocaust.



Some of the things from the family archive in Colin’s house in Oxford

“I sort among these memories as one does when raking over the dying embers in the stove.”

Šimon Wels, *U Bernatů*

When Colin Wels opened the box, the first thing he found was a handwritten book. It had just under 300 pages, the title *U Bernatů (Life at the Bernats)* and on the cover was a coloured drawing of a village. The author's name was Šimon Wels. Although he did not realise it at the time, this turned out to be the memoir of Colin's great grandfather, Šimon. As we find out on the first page, Šimon completed the book in Rokycany in 1919 at the age of 66. He died three years later, in 1922. In the introduction he writes:

How I came to tell this story: At the request of my children: Rudolf, Aninka and Otto, I sat down one calm evening and started sorting through the memories of my own life and the lives of my parents. I wrote down these fragments on scraps of paper, or on clean pages torn out of my children's old exercise-books, and one incident in my memory would call forth the one before and the one after. In just a few weeks there was already a good handful of such scraps. Now I intend to put them in order and write them out properly on nice lined paper. I sort among these memories as one does when raking over the dying embers in the stove and I observe just how eventful and interesting can be the life of even the least and most lowly of human beings.

Šimon was not an educated man, but he had a great literary talent. His memoir is an immensely readable account of life in a rural Jewish community. It is full of humour and wisdom, as Šimon draws us into the day-to-day life of a West Bohemian village in the 19th century. He lived in Osek, about five kilometres north of the town of Rokycany.

On the evening of 20th April 1853, in a tiny room on the first floor of house No.15 in Osek, hale and happy I first saw the light - of a little oil-lamp. It was no easy job for my father to keep my brothers and sisters quiet in the adjoining kitchen (for we had no other rooms), so excited was everyone about my arrival.

Šimon Wels's family had been living in Osek for generations. His father had sold goods that he carried on his back from village to village. He was very pious, but, as we read in *U Bernatů*, he was also a very open-minded person.

My father Bernard was born in 1803. His father was born in Osek too and tilled the land for a living... My parents were very devout and Papa was well versed in the Law. He could spend hours with Mamma and me in contemplation of Holy Scripture. And since he also enjoyed discoursing with Christians, he had a good knowledge of the New Testament too. His friends would often tell him what “the Father” had said in his sermon and whenever there seemed anything not quite right about it, or if he thought the priest was mistaken he would take down his copy of the New Testament and look it up for himself.



Old photograph of the village green in Osek. Šimon's house, including the shop, is on the right.

Synagogue

The Jewish church [synagogue] stood two doors away from our house. It was quite a large, roomy building with some eighty seats for the menfolk, and a large gallery along its west side for the women. Around the walls, on all sides, were benches with numbered places, in front of which were stands for the “sidorim” and “makhsorim” (prayer-books). The eastern wall contained a cupboard for four Torahs behind a curtain known as the “peroches”. In the middle of the room was a raised area surrounded by a low wall where the Torah was read.

...

We all washed. Mamma would wash us little ones. We men of the family would dress up for the church. When we came home from the service Papa would bless us all, laying both his hands on our heads and saying the Hebrew blessing Yevarekh ekho adonai...



The former synagogue in Osek today / photo © Karel Cudlín



In the Jewish cemetery at Osek we can still find the graves of some of Šimon's relatives. Their original surname was “Wedeles”.

Josefina's Story

The story of how Šimon's mother Josefína had to overcome anti-Semitic Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy to marry his father Bernard is told in a way that is almost like a fairy tale, but the discrimination was real. The Familiant Law, which defined who could marry whom, was applied until the middle of the 19th century. “The squire issued the permits and his officials used to turn a pretty penny from trading in them.”

She arrived there footsore and with her shoes ruined. At last she was in the city where the all-powerful Count was abiding. When she was admitted to him he immediately recognised her and asked what she wanted. At that all the strength went out of her and he led her to a couch. All the way she begged him earnestly for mercy and justice. He raised her up and asked what had happened to her. She told him all about the difficulties she had encountered while waiting three years for the family permit which His Excellency had promised her and how she had now learnt that her brother-in-law Levý had been given it. She told him how she had walked from Radnice to Prague and from there to Karlovy Vary, and that she would never get married if she could not have the fiancé she had loved so much for more than eight years already. After that it was apparently like in a fairy story. The Count stroked her hair and said “I know nothing about the matter, but just you go home and don't worry.” He asked her about the lucky fiancé who had such a loyal and devoted bride. Mamma started to relate all sorts of things about him, so that she became inflamed and her eyes glistened. The Count apparently laughed heartily and said: “Run off home then, my dear, and have no more worries. Report to my steward. Before you arrive he'll have received a message to issue you the permit.” At this a burden fell from her shoulders and with tears in her eyes she took her leave.

Emancipation	Emancipation		Miter and name of the family	The marriage certificate		The husband's name		The wife's name	
	Name	Year		Marriage date	Wife's name	Year	Marriage date	Wife's name	
	Josefína	1868	Levy Josef						

This event is recorded in rather less poetic terms in the so-called Book of Familiants.

3 / RUDOLF'S CHILDHOOD

“My Rudolf enjoyed every minute of it!”

Šimon Wels, U Bernatů



Rudolf Wels as a child



His younger brother Otto

Šimon was 28 when his young wife Anežka gave birth to Rudolf in 1882. A year later Anežka died, and in his memoir Šimon writes of his overwhelming grief. After a few years he married again and with his second wife Žanyňka he had two further children, Aninka and Otto.

Šimon must have been an unusual figure in the village. He followed closely what was happening in Prague and the world beyond. He subscribed to the periodical *Čas (Time)*, which was close to the humanist and democratic ideals of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, later to become Czechoslovakia's first president. Šimon was deeply troubled by intolerance and anti-Semitism. “How is it possible that people just refuse to understand it, that they are able to kill each other because they happen to be Jews, Christians or Muslims?” he writes in his memoir.

He managed to get Rudolf admitted to the Premonstratensian grammar school in Plzeň, which was unusual for a Jewish family at that time. But Rudolf was deeply unhappy and suffered frequent headaches.

They did not turn out people with free spirits and bodies, but people with twisted spines or none at all. Long afterwards those scholars would relive the terror inspired by that petty schoolwork. And what became of that intellectual elite for the most part? Sycophants to their superiors, tyrants to those below them. Like a military hierarchy! Keeping their noses clean and kow-towing to the powers-that-be! I used to get very cross until Rudolf reassured me by saying I took it more seriously than he did...

To the consternation of the teachers, Šimon decided to transfer his son to the technical school in Plzeň, and from then on Rudolf was a great deal happier.

From the moment he started at the Modern School he thrived and had no more headaches.



Premonstratensian grammar school in Plzeň

From his earliest childhood, Rudolf was fascinated by anything connected with building. One of the most entertaining episodes in Šimon's memoir tells the story of a trip to see the rebuilding of the railway bridge over the Klabava River in Smědčice, a few kilometres from Osek.

We set off one Sunday in July 1889 at five in the morning and in three hours we had covered that distance of eleven kilometres. There were already many spectators by eight o'clock.

And it was worth coming to see. The immense weight of the iron construction complete with the track started to shift from one bank to the other in total silence. The spectators all held their breath at the sight of the engineers' skilful work.

I was standing in about the third row from the front and all of a sudden the little lad broke away from me and wormed his way through to the front in order to get a better view, but he was unable to keep his balance there on the edge of the chasm and hurtled downwards...

Then, as if in a dream I heard a cry and the clamour of the people: "The bush has broken his fall!"

I looked down. Below me lay the little body and it was not moving.

I ran down to the river by a roundabout path in the company of several others. Little Rudolf was just picking himself up.

Nothing at all had happened to him. I felt him all over and he had not even been grazed...

I took him by the hand and we scrambled back up, helping each other

Back at the top, one woman said to him:

"Oh, you confounded little whippersnapper, I could already see your Daddy gathering up your little bones into his hankie!" ...

He turned and looked at me rather anxiously: "Papa, we shan't say anything to Mother about it, shall we?"

After completing school and his compulsory military service Rudolf found work with the successful Prague builder Alois Richter. At the same time he passed his first building exams. His father was very proud of his choice of profession. In his memoir he writes:

It strikes me so often that architecture and building are such commendable activities, as beneficial as the work of the doctor, and I am gratified that he chose such a profession, for his own satisfaction and for the pleasure, and yes, the happiness and progress of humanity. There are few fields of activity which offer scope for both - providing a livelihood and promoting human happiness - as building beautiful and salubrious homes for all, including the poor.



Bridge in Smědčice today / photo © Karel Cudlín



Bridge in Smědčice in an old photograph

“A bricklayer who has studied Latin.”

Adolf Loos

After several years in Prague, Rudolf won a place at the Vienna Academy of Arts in 1907, where he studied under Friedrich Ohmann, the architect of the Kramář Villa in Prague, today the official residence of the Czech prime minister. Unlike the more famous Otto Wagner, Ohmann was supportive of Jewish students. Rudolf sometimes felt his studies would never end. He was constantly short of money and often felt homesick. When he wrote to his parents on his 30th birthday, 28th April 1912, Rudolf was far from happy.

What shall I do after the academy? Slave away for someone else again, just to keep myself in clothes and food. I feel sick when I think about myself and the miserable conditions around me... I'd rather go and work in the shop with you, Dad... The Academy has really disappointed me too... I suppose the good thing is that things can only get better, and that I'm more or less in good health and in fairly good spirits... Dear Dad, forgive me, I'm very sorry etc. and maybe I'll be able to pay you back soon: I've run out of money, send me enough so that I can have 225 crowns on the 1st and on the 1st June as well. Is that alright?

As a student Rudolf was outstanding. He won scholarships to Rome (the coveted “Rompreis”) and to Great Britain, where he was inspired by the garden city movement. On his return he published a short brochure, promoting the concept.

The advantages of the English garden cities can be seen both in the whole and in the details, not just in layout of the individual houses and in the exterior design features, but also in the basic principle: in the fact that each family has its own enclosed living space, even if the house is in a terrace.



Rudolf Wels at the time of the First World War

He also came to know some of Vienna's most interesting cultural figures, and not only in the field of architecture. His letters refer to Karl Kraus, one of the most celebrated Viennese writers and journalists of the time, and one of Rudolf's best friends was the poet Alfred Grünewald. It was at this time that Rudolf changed his surname from Wedeles to Wels. His parents followed his example.

In 1912 Rudolf began attending classes being given by Adolf Loos at his “Bauschule”, an informal architecture school, set up by Loos as an alternative to the more conservative Academy. For two years (1912–1914) Rudolf worked as chief architect in Loos's building office.

Šimon Wels visited his son twice in Vienna. As Rudolf later recalled, “He managed to astonish Loos who found it hard to believe that an ordinary chap should have such wide knowledge and experience.”

At the beginning of the First World War, Rudolf volunteered for the 6th Infantry Regiment in the West Bohemian town of Cheb. In 1915 he returned from the front injured and was excused further military service. On 23rd April 1915 he wrote to the Czech poet J. S. Machar.



Ida was working as a nurse



Ida and her parents are sitting at the front, at the back (from left to right) the siblings Otto, Aninka and Rudolf

I have come back from the front for the third time - and this time I hope for good. Bullet wound - chest, left-hand-side, neuralgia, chronic middle ear infection. The last of these really hurts and will carry on hurting for some time, but it will be what saves me from the battlefield. Mr Machar, the withdrawal from Krašnik and the second from Ivangrorod and now the trenches near Zakliczyn - God I've had my fill of it all. At the beginning - in the autumn - at least there was a sense of novelty, the bullets flying around and all that, putting your life on the line for God knows what - but now nothing but mud and a pain in the head, I'm just glad I'm back under a roof, and it's as if I've returned from a delirium.

In Cheb he met his future wife Ida Krafft, who was from a wealthy local Jewish family and at the time was volunteering as a nurse.

The newlyweds Rudolf and Ida spent the last two years of the war in Vienna. In 1917 Rudolf designed a utopian garden city for children in Lainzer Garten on the edge of the city. The plans, which were never realised, included a Catholic church, a Protestant church and a synagogue.

Rudolf's idealism is reflected in a poem, which Alfred Grünwald dedicated to him. With humour he writes of a visionary dreamer, who is, perhaps, not so very different from Rudolf.

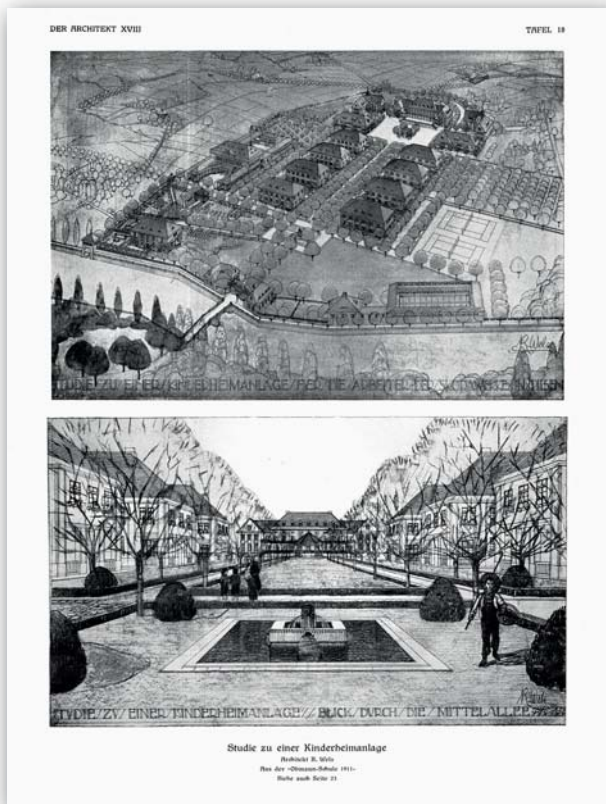
*So two by two
and hand in hand
the dreamer led them
to his neverfoundland.*



Rudolf's coloured perspective drawing of Loos's unrealised Stein department store in Alexandria. The original hung in Loos's living room. / © Wien Museum



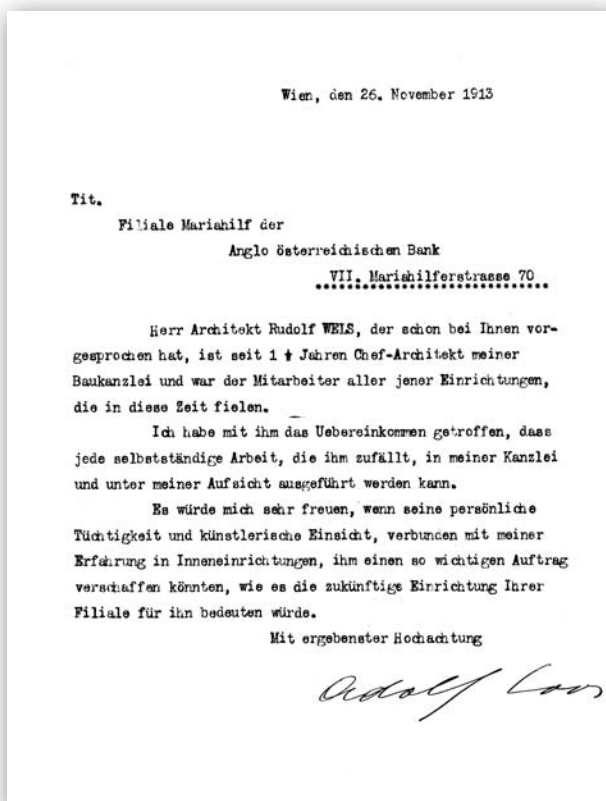
Rudolf's first known completed project is the interior of the Pekarek apartment in Vienna, 1917



Rudolf's design for a home for the children of workers at a large factory. Magazine Der Architekt, 1912



Rudolf's plans for Palackého Embankment in Prague. Magazine Der Architekt, 1912



Letter from Adolf Loos, confirming that Rudolf works in his office

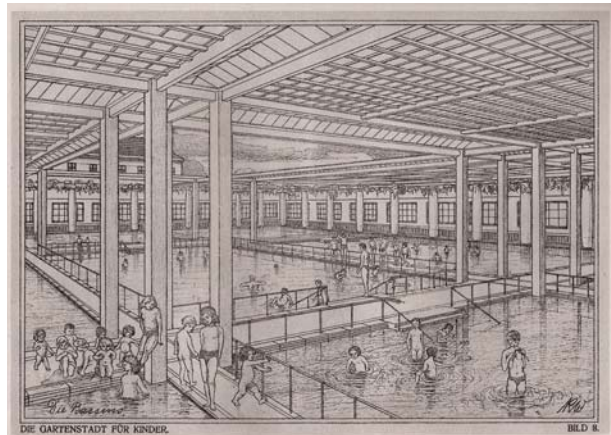
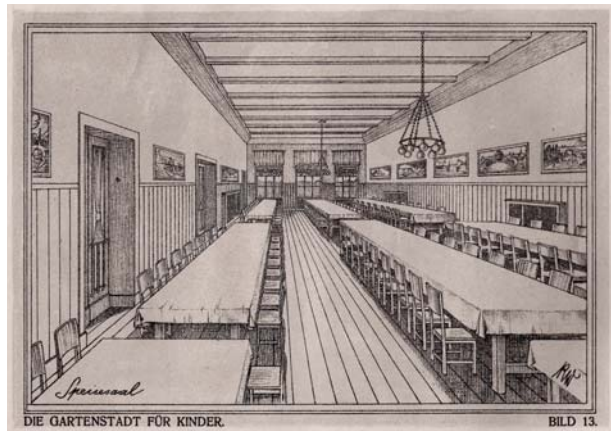
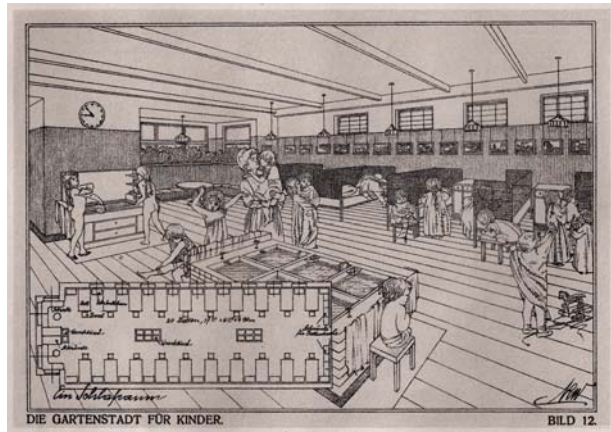
26th November 1913
 Re: Mariahilf branch,
 Anglo-Austrian Bank
 VII. Mariahilferstrasse 70

For a year now, Mr Rudolf Wels has been working as chief architect in my building office and from the start he has been involved in all our projects. On the basis of his ability and knowledge, combined with my own experience with interior design, I would be glad if you could honour him with such an important commission as the design of the interior of your branch.

Yours most respectfully,
 Adolf Loos



Unrealised project for a Garden City for Children, Lainzer Garten, Vienna, 1917



Rudolf and Ida in Vienna, 1917

“The right man in the right place.”

from Rudolf Wels: *Neue Architektur* 1931

After the First World War Rudolf and Ida returned to Cheb, and to the newly created Czechoslovakia. In 1920 their son Tomáš was born and in the same year they moved to Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad), where their second son Martin was born five years later. Rudolf's father Šimon died in November 1922, three years after completing *U Bernatů*.

Rudolf's first projects were relatively modest, including a terrace of houses for glassworkers in Chodov near Karlovy Vary and an estate of miners' cottages in Sokolov (then Falknov or Falkenau in German). The influence of the English garden city is clear.

The industrial town of Sokolov was the focus of many of Rudolf's projects in the early part of his career. In 1923 he was awarded a commission to build the multifunctional Miners' House at the heart of the town. He designed the exterior and the interiors, including a relief running the length of the façade, called *A Day in the Life of a Miner*. The internal layout, in particular the changes in level between the different halls and rooms, was inspired by Loos's spatial concept of the Raumplan. The building opened in 1925. "Some respectable townsmen considered it altogether much too left-wing," says Michael Rund, director of the Sokolov Museum. "In one room there stood two busts, a pair that you would never expect. It was Marx and Masaryk."

Some of Rudolf's most interesting buildings were in Karlovy Vary, where one of his clients was the celebrated glassmaker Moser. He designed several buildings for the factory, including the showroom and canteen, and he also designed glass for the firm. In Karlovy Vary he designed a number of hotels and sanatoriums, and the Jewish old people's home. One of his most innovative buildings was the District Health Insurance Office of 1930. Because it was outside the historical centre, it was freed from the "ever inflexible rules and regulations of the building police."



The family in Karlovy Vary, mid 1920s

The family lived well, as we can see from family photographs. At one point they lived on Sadová Street, in a building known as the British Hotel, where Rudolf also had his office.



Miners' village, Sokolov, 1922



Miners' House, Sokolov, 1923-1925



The Gea apartment block under construction, Karlovy Vary, 1928. Rudolf is standing third from right.



District Health Insurance Offices, Karlovy Vary, 1930



Spa VI, Karlovy Vary, 1926 (demolished 2006)



Jewish old people's home, Karlovy Vary, 1930



In 1922 Rudolf Wels designed a series in black hyalith glass, with motifs of dragons, cranes and herons, for the firm Moser. Four years later he designed another collection "Animor", with animal motifs.



On holiday in Binz on the island of Rügen, on Germany's Baltic coast, around 1930. Around ten years later Rudolf sent this photograph from the occupied Protectorate to Tomáš in England, "so you can have all four of us together. When and where will that happen again?"



Rudolf and Tomáš, Karlovy Vary



Martin and Tomáš



Tomáš



Martin drawing

“... on sets by Lagus and Wels.”

In 1933 Rudolf Wels and his family moved to Prague. Adolf Hitler had just come to power in neighbouring Germany, and growing anti-Semitism in the mainly German-speaking Czech borderlands certainly played a role in their decision. Rudolf opened an office with another architect, Guido Lagus, on Wenceslas Square. Their office was in the Stýblo (or Alfa) Arcade, which they also designed. This was also where Martin Frič's classic comedy film *Hej rup!* (*Heave Ho!*) had its premiere in 1934. The opening titles inform us that the film takes place “on sets by Lagus and Wels.” The two architects worked together on further popular Czech films made at Prague's Barrandov studios.

After Hitler came to power Guido Lagus helped German writers and artists who had fled to Czechoslovakia. He published and edited the émigré literary magazine *Neue Deutsche Blätter*. Lagus and Wels designed a number of interesting buildings in Prague, above all smart apartment blocks, all of them outstanding in their attention to detail, the quality and sophistication of materials used and the ingenuity of their design. One of them – on the corner of the streets Veverkova and Heřmanova – is just a hundred metres from the so-called Radio Market, the place where, during the occupation a few years later, Jews were forced to wait, sometimes for several days, before being deported to the Terezín ghetto. At the end of January 1942 Rudolf, Ida and Martin were among those deported.

In 1935 the family moved to a spacious top-floor flat with a large terrace on Dobrovského Street, in the fashionable district of Letná. The building was designed by Rudolf himself. While Rudolf and Ida's older son Tomáš was technically inclined, Martin showed considerable artistic talent. He attended the French Lycée in Prague and from the age of thirteen took part in courses organised by the private art school *Officina Pragensis*. The school had been founded in 1934 by Hugo Steiner-Prag, who is best



Still from the film *Hej rup!*, 1934. Lagus and Wels designed the sets. / photo © W. Ströminger



Still from the film *A Woman Who Knows What She Wants*, 1934

known for his lithographs illustrating Gustav Meyrink's famous novel of Jewish Prague, *The Golem*. From 1938 the school was headed by the artist and graphic designer, Jaroslav Šváb, who put great emphasis on teaching his students book design and layout, so they could “thoroughly, tastefully and creatively apply graphic design in practical life.”



The Stýblo (Alfa) Arcade, Wenceslas Square, Prague, Lagus and Wels, 1934. This was where the film *Hej rup!* was first shown.

The Stýblo (Alfa) Arcade, Wenceslas Square, Prague, Lagus and Wels, 1934 / photo © Karel Cudlín



Apartment block in Veverkova Street, Prague, Lagus and Wels, 1938 / photo © Karel Cudlín



Apartment block in Školská Street, Prague, Lagus and Wels, 1937 / photo © Karel Cudlín



Apartment block in Baranova Street, Prague, Lagus and Wels, 1938–1939 / photo © Karel Cudlín



Interior of the apartment where the Wels family lived in Dobrovského Street, Prague, Lagus and Wels, 1935



Apartment block where the Wels family lived in Dobrovského Street, Prague, Lagus and Wels 1935



Martin, Ida and Tomáš on the terrace of their apartment in Dobrovského Street



Interior of the apartment in Dobrovského Street, where the Wels family lived



Tomáš, Martin and Ida



Ida and Rudolf in the street Národní třída, Prague, second half of the 1930s



Rudolf and Martin, Prague-Letná, February 1938



Ida, Tomáš and Martin, Prague, cca 1934



Tomáš and Martin, on their way to school, Prague-Hanspaulka, April 1933

“Every sentence in this book has been spoken!”

Martin and Tomáš Wels, *Sancta Familia*, 1938



Karlovy Vary, shortly, after the German annexation, October 1938

On the night from 29th to 30th September 1938 the Munich Agreement was signed. Great Britain and France enabled Hitler to annex a huge area of the Czechoslovak borderlands, including three of the towns closely associated with the Wels family – Cheb, Sokolov and Karlovy Vary.

The American journalist Vincent Sheean visited the border region a few days after the signing of the Munich Agreement. He happened to pass the Jewish old people's home in Karlovy Vary, which Rudolf Wels had designed eight years earlier. "The home for the aged... actually had several swastika flags hanging from the windows," he wrote in his diary.

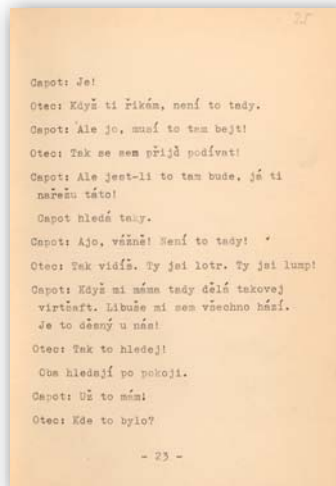
Rudolf and Ida succeeded in getting Ida's mother Therese Krafft to Prague. She came to live with them in Dobrovského Street. In October 1938 the whole family applied for a visa to the United States, where several members of their wider family were already living.

For Christmas 1938 Tomáš and Martin gave their parents and grandmother a book, which they called *Sancta Familia*. It was made up of scenes from the family's everyday life, richly illustrated by Martin. The dialogues are lively, shifting playfully between Czech and German. The book gives us a flavour of their lives as a happy, loving family, "a family as it should be," as the two brothers write with more than a hint of good-humoured irony. On the opening page they write:

At some point every sentence in this book has been spoken! That was our aim, to capture the idiosyncrasies and habits of each individual and preserve them for you for all time. We hope we have succeeded, at least in part. To set down every typical expression was quite impossible, because new ones are constantly appearing and old ones disappearing.



Cover of the book *Sancta Familia*



Sancta Familia continues a tradition established by the boys' grandfather Šimon, who wrote in *U Bernatů* that "it is my hope that always one member of each succeeding generation will continue writing things down, recording their experiences, their sorrows and their joys." The names in *Sancta Familia* are changed: Martin is Capot in Czech, Zapott in German and Suppot in the occasional dialogues in English, Tomáš is Fridolín, Rudolf is Karolus and Ida Margarita, but they are instantly recognisable. The scenes are set in the near future, in the spring of 1939. The family is planning to emigrate to America, and Tomáš is already on his way. At the time, none of them could know that on 15th March 1939, Prague would be occupied by Nazi Germany.

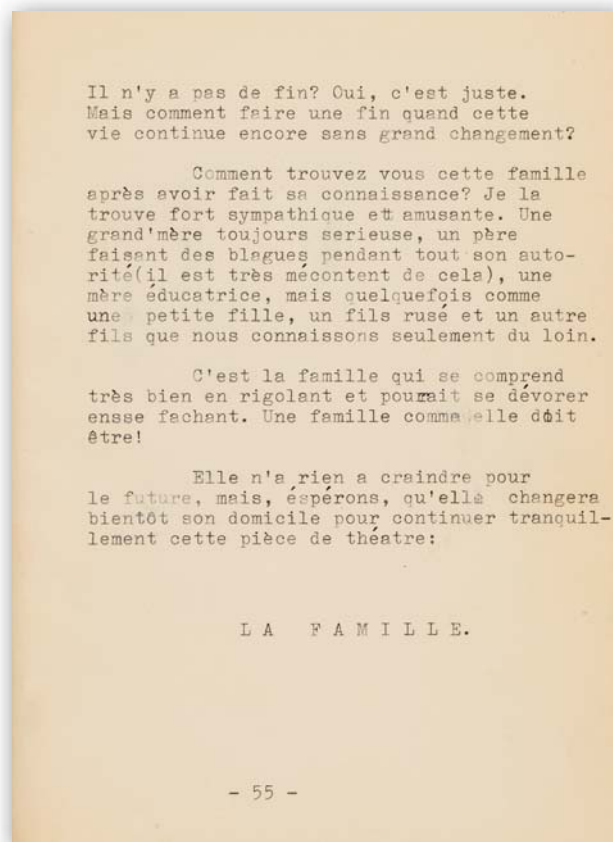
Sancta Familia ends with a paragraph which Martin wrote in French. We can only speculate why. Perhaps he felt that he could travel more freely in a foreign language. Perhaps it offered him a way of stepping back from his own fears. He reflects on the future.

How do you find this family, now that you've got to know them? I think they are thoroughly likable and amusing. A grandmother always serious, a father making jokes and losing all his authority (which really bothers him), a mother who tries to be educational but is sometimes like a little girl, one son who is cunning and another whom we only know from afar.

It is a family full of harmony when everyone is joking together, but quite capable of tearing itself apart when a fight breaks out. A family as it should be!

It has nothing to fear for the future, but let us hope that before long it will find a new place to live, to carry on this play in peace and quiet.

THE FAMILY.



“Others are acting in our place.”

Rudolf Wels, autumn 1939



The manuscript of *U Bernatů*, with Martin's cover illustration

On 15th March 1939 German troops marched into Prague. A week after the occupation, on 22nd March 1939, the American Embassy sent the Wels family a letter informing them that their visa application had been postponed indefinitely:

The Consulate General wishes to confirm herewith that you and your family were registered here under the Czechoslovak quota on October 30, 1938. Under the present immigration laws, it is assumed that your turn might be reached within the next fiscal year, i.e. between July 1 1939 and June 30 1940. This estimation of your waiting time is given without any obligation.

The family was trapped in the so-called "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia", but a month later Tomáš succeeded in escaping to Great Britain via Poland. He described his dramatic escape in an article published in 1942 in the student magazine of the University of Swansea where he was studying engineering. The article ends with the words:

At G [Gdynia] we boarded a brand new Polish ship and three days later arrived at Dover. Still refugees, but refugees in a free country, refugees glad to be refugees.

His uncle, Rudolf's brother Otto, who was an aircraft designer, also managed to reach Britain, at the end of August 1939, just before war broke out.

In the Protectorate Rudolf was no longer allowed to work as an architect. Ida had an idea to keep him from sinking into depression. The manuscript of Šimon's memoir *U Bernatů* had been preserved as a pile of scarcely legible "rags", as Šimon himself called them. Ida persuaded Rudolf to make a neat copy and have it bound. Martin designed the cover. Rudolf also wrote an afterword, dated 1st November 1939.

I did as I was bid - and it was worth it. Often I would forget about the time - and the times - for hours on end.

This is how Šimon's memoir came to be preserved. Rudolf earned a little money by making sketches of Prague, from which prints were made. In one letter, Ida writes that he "is drawing a great deal and with real flair."



One of Rudolf's sketches of Prague

The Golden Necklace

For Christmas 1939 the 14-year-old Martin and his mother wrote a fairy tale *The Golden Necklace*, the story of a princess's search for her necklace that has been stolen by a black crow. The story, which echoes the mood of the time, has a happy ending:

What great joy there was at the castle and in the whole land, when the beloved princess returned. The horrible period had not lasted long, but how dangerous it had been.

For the first two years of the occupation, Tomáš and his family could still communicate by letter through friends and relatives in the United States and Switzerland. Their letters reflect their attempt to lead normal lives in abnormal circumstances.

Rudolf: Today is a beautiful, quiet, sunny, hot Sunday afternoon. We're at home and our minds are full of thoughts of you, Tom. Martin is on the terrace writing you a letter with a blissful smile on his face. It must be something nice. He went to play tennis with Mum this morning, so they didn't want to go swimming this afternoon under Saint Matthew's. The latest ban only applies to swimming pools owned by the city. Do you read the papers? What do they write about us?

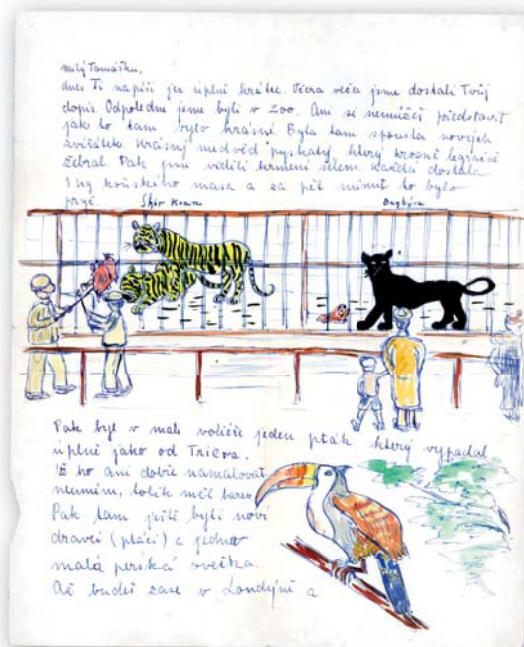
If things don't get any worse than now, we should all come out of this alive and well. You can't imagine with what enthusiasm we'll pick up our lives again!! Once truth prevails! But for now, we just have to take each day as it comes.

Martin: Dear Tom, this is just a quick note. I was ill for three days, but I'm fine now. I've just been repairing the deckchairs, but most of the time I'm bored. I might be going to our postman's cottage for two weeks. I loved your letter and read it twice today. Mum's telling me to hurry to the post office. Have fun. With love, Martin.

Rudolf: We cannot complain. It is quiet here, with nothing to upset us, no newspapers, no radio, and we walk around as if at the theatre, watching a play we do not understand. A little detached, stupid, without worries, because others are acting in our place.



The Golden Necklace, a fairy tale



One of Martin's illustrated letters to Tomáš

MRS. WAITSTILL HASTINGS SHARP
28 WASHINGTON STREET
WELLESLEY HILLS, MASSACHUSETTS

March 8, 1940

Mr. Thomas A. Wells
Merton Lodge
Stonehouse, Gloucester
England

Dear Thomas:

I have been very negligent in not answering your letter before this, but I have been waiting to hear from your parents about the telegram which you mentioned in your letter.

I would do anything I could to help your father, but I have no understanding of what their present need happens to be. I have been trying to get them a position but have not yet succeeded, though I think there will not be great difficulty on his arrival. However, the position could not help him to leave, since his turn was to come on the regular quota in April. Therefore, I do not understand what they need from me. If you can get word from them about their situation, and what they want me to do, I wish you would transfer it to me as soon as you are able. I would do anything in my power to help them, and your young brother.

From Britain Tomáš corresponded with the American Martha Sharp, who, together with her husband the Unitarian minister Waitstill Sharp was trying to help Jews flee occupied Europe for the United States.

Dear Thomas, I would do anything I could to help your father, but I have no understanding of what their present need happens to be. I have been trying to get them a position but have not yet succeeded, though I think there will not be great difficulty on his arrival. However, the position could not help him to leave, since his turn was to come on the regular quota in April... I would do anything in my power to help them, and your young brother...

The draft of Tomáš's reply, written on the same sheet of paper, also survives.

Thank you for telling me about your own work, waiting - we hope that you may be coming to America with them in April.

If you need a scholarship here for next year, will you please send me a curriculum vitae and picture, and I will try to arrange it for you.

Sincerely yours,
Martha Sharp

MS/K

Dear Mr Sharp,
Thank you for your letter of March 8th I did not answer it any sooner, because I was waiting for my parents' reply. I had translated your kind letter word for word and sent it to them. You cannot imagine how delighted they were. "We are sorry to hear," they write, "that Mrs Sharp cannot help us for the time being. We have to wait our turn patiently. But the thought that we have friends who will help us after our arrival in the USA gives us new strength and confidence." This letter from my parents is dated April 12th. In an earlier letter my father says that the American consulate is working very slowly and that they will have to wait very much longer than expected. Let us hope their turn will come before the end of this year.

Dear Mrs Sharp, Thank you for your letter of March 8th. I did not answer it any sooner, because I was waiting for my parents' reply. I translated your kind letter word for word and sent it to them. You cannot imagine how delighted they were. "We are sorry to hear," they write, "that Mrs Sharp cannot help us for the time being. We have to wait our turn patiently. But the thought that we have friends who will help us after our arrival in the USA gives us new strength and confidence." This letter from my parents is dated April 12th. In an earlier letter my father says that the American consulate is working very slowly and they will have to wait very much longer than expected. Let us hope their turn will come before the end of this year.

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“We are calm and composed.”

Ida Wels, November 1941

Since the middle of the 1930s the Wels family had been close friends with the family of Josef Štifter, a pastor in the Union of Czech Brethren, one of the Protestant churches in Czechoslovakia. Shortly before the outbreak of war they joined the church. During the occupation and despite growing anti-Semitic discrimination, they remained welcome guests at the Štifiers' apartment above the prayer-room in Římská Street, in the Prague district of Vinohrady.

Early in 1941 they were made to move out of their apartment in Dobrovského Street. They moved into one cramped room in the apartment of the doctor, Emil Vogl, in Mánesova Street, also in Vinohrady, sharing the apartment with several other Jewish families. Dr Vogl survived the Holocaust and in a letter to Tomáš just after the war, he wrote:

They were in good health, your brother spent his free time sketching and we were all very fond of him. I remember he enjoyed playing the flute and was good at it.

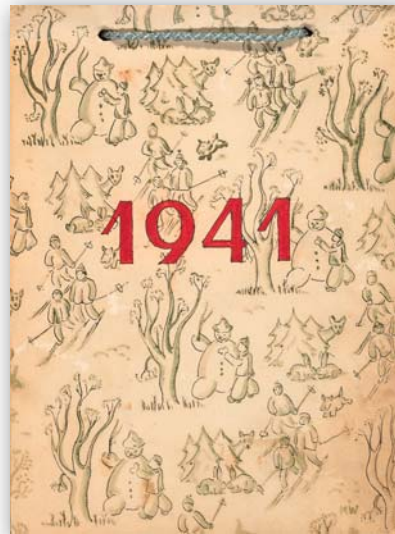
In the autumn of the same year, Rudolf, Ida and Martin received a letter summoning them to join transport “V”, which left Bubny Station for the Terezín ghetto on 30th January 1942. They were allocated the numbers 837, 838 and 839. The transport was made up of 1,000 people. Before leaving, they left a box containing their most treasured family items with the Štifter family. Ida wrote to a friend, the actor Petr Lotar, in Switzerland:

Do not worry. We are calm and steady, and truly in good form. If possible Josef or his wife will write to you, when they hear from us. With sincere affection we embrace you, The Wels family.

We are strong in our faith. Give our love to all our friends - Thinking of you all keeps us going. Keep well. A special hug to Tom and Joy. And the same to you as well, our dear friends, from me and Martin. Keep well, as we hope to as well.



In this photograph, taken on the 65th birthday of the pastor Josef Štifter in March 1941, we see both families together (the Štifiers are sitting at the head of the table, Rudolf is sitting at the back on the right, Ida on the left, Martin is seated second from left). A calendar made by Martin is hanging in the background. This too has survived.



Calendar, made by Martin for the year 1941

Terezín

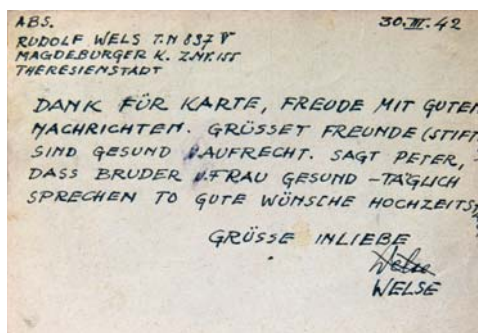
From Terezín Ida, Rudolf and Martin were sometimes able to send short messages to friends in Prague. One of these was Dr Josef Poláček.

30. 3. 1942:

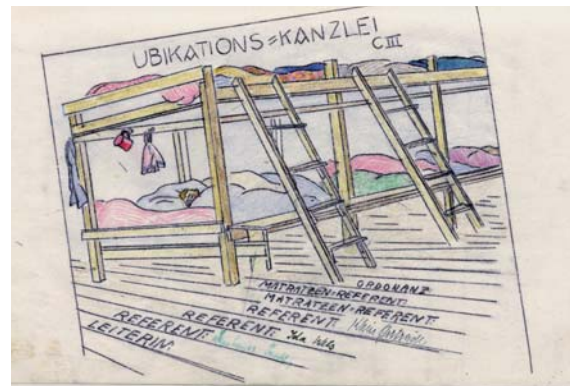
Thank you for the card. Your good news brings us pleasure. Send our regards to our friends the Šifters. We are holding up well. Tell everyone that Martin and my wife are well. I speak with them every day. All the best to Tom on his first wedding anniversary. With love, the Wels Family.

31. 3. 1942:

Dear Josef, our warmest thanks for every package. They reach us quickly and intact. We know that you will not forget us and we are very grateful... There is nothing new here.



The “yearbook” of the Hamburg Barracks in Terezín, where Ida and Martin were held, has also been preserved in the Jewish Museum in Prague. The yearbook is a summary of life in the barracks for the year up to 17th January 1943. Prisoners were made to run the barracks themselves, and Ida shared the responsibility for finding space for new arrivals. The yearbook is richly illustrated. The illustrations are not signed, but it is likely that some are by Martin.



We are the housing committee – Emma Goldscheider, Trude Steinhauer, Trude Klein and Ida Wels.

My home is my castle – 70 centimetres wide – For a year now this old barrack, that used to house soldiers, has been full of women’s laughter and children’s tears. On 18th January 1942 the first women arrive in the Hamburg Barracks. Young, good-looking women, who were used to a comfortable life, arriving with the few bits and pieces left to them. A child in their arms. Each one of them has a home somewhere, a 1, 2 or 3 room flat with a bathroom and central heating, here they have a space strewn with straw, often unheated, cold and as bare as a January morning. There is no point sighing or complaining, 20 have to fit into one room...

Our hardest task is to persuade the newcomers that it’s at all possible to fit into 70 cm, for living, washing and cooking. Bit by bit they get used to it, and in the end, at the end of an extremely hard shift, we hear laughter and sometimes even song...

... The first transports are leaving for Poland and are leaving huge holes in our barrack life. Old-new friends leave for Poland. The gaps are filled by newcomers...

... A little town is created in one big building. The Jewish woman deserves our full praise. Once spoiled, but now full of patience and energy, strength and courage, full of culture and humour, she bears her fate with courage.

16. Dec. 1943
 Lieber Josef, unsere letzte Karte vom September
 half Ihr mit Lieber Form beantwortet, wir
 sind immens dankbar dafür, Bitte
 Sorge + eiser dafür, daß Ihr unsere Freunde
 oft an uns denkt, Jan + Maria werden
 viel besonders unterhalten. Es kommt
 alles schnell + gut aus, von Liba hatten
 wir 4, von Jan je 1. Bitte immer noch
 + die meist. Es ist alles voll kommen, B. ist
 besonders. Hier sind gesund. In Liebe
 von uns mit Liebe Hochachtung + Respekt
 das Beste
 Ida Wels

15. Oct. 1943
 Meine Freunde, Mann, Sohn und ich
 arbeiten jetzt hier. Hier vermissen sehr
 von Euch und unseren anderen Freun-
 den Nachricht, grüßt sie alle herzlich
 und sie sollen wie bisher nicht an uns
 vergessen und uns oft schreiben, grüßt
 besonders Kusak und Seidel.
 Auf baldigste Nachricht freuen
 wir uns. In aller Freundschaft
 Deine Ida Wels

Auschwitz

Ida, Rudolf and Martin were deported from Terezín to Auschwitz on 6th September 1943, on transport No. 2766. There they were placed in the so-called family camp. The transport included 2,451 people, eleven of whom survived the war. Unlike other parts of Auschwitz, prisoners in the family camp were occasionally allowed to send short messages to friends and relatives.

7.9.1943:

Today we have started working, Rudolf, Martin and myself. Please write to us, let us know how you all are. Say hello to everyone. We are well. Regards, Ida.

15.10.1943:

Dear Friends, my husband, son and I are working here. We are longing for news from you and other friends. Give them our warmest regards and tell them to continue to keep us in their minds and to write... I look forward to a speedy reply...
 Your old friend, Ida Wels.

16.12.1943:

Make sure that our friends think of us often. We are well. We wish you the best for Christmas and the New Year. Yours, Ida.

From a letter sent in 1966 by Dr Poláček to Tomáš in England, we know how these cards from Auschwitz came to be preserved.

One day in 1942 I heard that your parents had been sent on a transport. I got a few cards from them and tried to help them as well as I could. At that time I myself was not yet in direct danger of being transported, being a so-called mixed married... I was sending hundreds of parcels to friends of mine and to people who knew my address... Near the end of the war, even I was sent to Terezín and luckily survived. Some time ago, going through my war correspondence... I found the cards of your parents... I think that the enclosed cards are the last sign of your parents. I doubt they were able to write to you in any way.

On the night from 8th to 9th March 1944, 3,792 prisoners in the family camp were murdered in the gas chambers, six months after they had arrived. This was the largest mass murder of Czechoslovak citizens during the Second World War. Ida, Rudolf and Martin were among those who were killed.



"Stolpersteine" (stumbling stones), set into the pavement outside the Wels family's apartment in Dobrovského Street in memory of Rudolf, Ida and Martin

“A family as it should be.”

Martin and Tomáš Wels, 1938



Joy and Tomáš

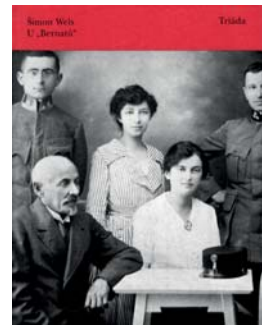
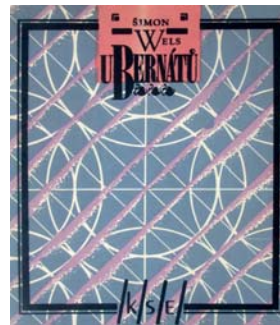
Early in the war Tomáš fell in love with an English-woman, Joy, and they were married in 1941. A year later he interrupted his studies in Wales and joined the Royal Air Force, serving in Coastal Command. He survived.

At the first opportunity he came back to Prague and realised that no one in his family had survived. He visited the Štifter family, who gave him as many of the family papers as he could take back to England. Others they sent on later.

Tomáš had no one left in Czechoslovakia. In England he cut himself off from his past. He never told his children about his life before the war. The only thing that betrayed something of his former life was the Central European lilt to his English. As his son Colin remembers, “we instinctively knew that he was covering up a lot of pain.” But Tomáš was careful to preserve the family archive.

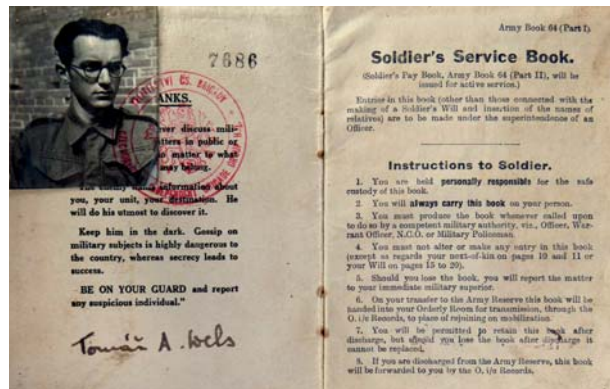
When Colin first opened the box of family things in 1984, he had no idea what was inside. He spoke neither Czech nor German, but he happened to have a friend, Gerald Turner, who was a translator and whose wife Alice was Czech.

As soon as Gerald and Alice saw the manuscript of *U Bernatů* they realised that it was something exceptional. Together they translated the book into English. This was the first time that Tomáš’s children were able to read about their Czech ancestors. In 1986 Alice came to Prague and gave a photocopy of the manuscript to the poet Zbyněk Hejda. He published it secretly in samizdat in 1987. News of the book quickly spread through underground channels in what was still communist Czechoslovakia. This was the first news of the Wels family in Czechoslovakia for 40 years.



The book *U Bernatů* has been published again several times since the fall of communism. *U Bernatů*, samizdat, 1987 (left) and in an edition published by Triáda, 2011 (right).

Tomáš’s daughter Tania died in 1991, but with the fall of the Iron Curtain, his two sons Colin and Ivan began to visit Czechoslovakia. They built up a friendship with Lydie Procházková, the daughter of Josef Štifter, and her daughters Marta Holeková and Lydie Trnková. For the Wels family a part of their memory returned, after being all but wiped out by war, the Holocaust, the Cold War and the language barrier.



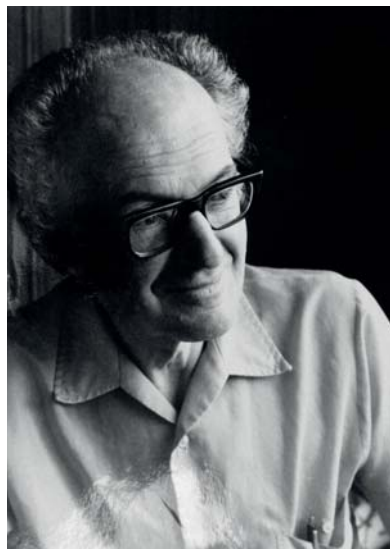
Tomáš's service card as a soldier in the British armed forces, including the stamp of the Czechoslovak Brigade

Families have their family tree, which is a very thin description of what families are actually about. What the book *U Bernatů* did for us was to make it so colourful – the real lives of people and what actually went on and how they thought and what they did. It's unusual for a family to have a chronicle like that. It takes things from the fact that people died, to something very human. I think what makes it unusual is that it's not about kings and queens and important rulers, it's about everyday really very poor folk, but written in a way that one can really relate to. We were cut off from our family, from our past. Suddenly it all came back. And then there are also the letters, Martin's drawings and the book *Sancta Familia*. I feel a huge pride that Šimon managed to write *U Bernatů*, and in my grandfather Rudolf for getting it all written down. It feels very special.

Colin Wels, Oxford, 2018



Tomáš with his son Ivan



Tomáš Wels

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Extracts from *U Bernatů* translated by Gerald Turner

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