Writing the Life of a Kindertransportee: Memories and Challenges

Leslie Baruch Brent

I arrived in the UK on 2 December 1938 from Berlin, where I had spent the previous two years in the Second Jewish Boys’ Orphanage in Pankow. After three years in Bunce Court School, a German-Jewish boarding school, and four years in the British Army, I studied Zoology at Birmingham University and pursued postgraduate studies in immunology at University College London. With Prof. P.B. Medawar I was involved in pioneering research in the field of organ transplantation. After retirement in 1990 and the publication of an academic book on the history of my field, I wrote an autobiography, initially for the benefit of my grandchildren. It grew into a fully fledged book, published in 2009, and in this paper I have attempted to summarise how the book came to be published and how I approached the writing.

Why did I decide to write my autobiography? The initial trigger came from the Foreword that Dr. Ray Owen, a senior immunobiologist, wrote for my A History of Transplantation Immunology. In this book I had included twenty-one brief life histories of some of the pioneers in the field but had naturally not included my own. Owen wrote:

The author himself deserves a place among the twenty-one. A sketch of his life and contributions would be among the most valuable of the collection. As to his contributions, the reader can glean from the text and citations that he has been a leader in transplantation research and immunology over the whole of its modern history. As to his life, an account of it would be as inspiring as any in his collection. Happily, like our science, it isn’t over yet.1

And so it was in the year 2000 that I began to write about my life. Initially intended primarily for my grandchildren and their offspring, it developed into a full-blown autobiography that friends persuaded me should be made available to a wider readership. It was written over a period of eight years. In 2003, when Iraq was attacked by the Americans and British – an action that I found totally abhorrent - I was so upset that I ceased writing for about a year; and later, when I had completed the first draft and several publishers had turned it down, I became discouraged and let the manuscript lie in my computer. A year later one of the editors who had read and liked it but
who had been unable to persuade his committee to take it on board, wrote to me to say that he had moved to another publishing company and that he would be delighted to edit and publish the book. He suggested a number of alterations and some shortening, and in a relatively short time *Sunday’s Child? A Memoir* was published in paperback on a ‘print-on-demand’ basis.²

I suppose that there is another motive for the publication of autobiographies. I began mine by quoting Margaret Atwood, who wrote in her novel *The Blind Assassin*:

> Why is it that we want so badly to memorialise ourselves? Even while we’re still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants.... At the very least we want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent, like a radio running down.³

She went on to give this excellent advice, which I have tried to follow: ‘The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself.’⁴

I certainly tried to be as honest as possible when writing my memoirs, whilst at the same time doing my best not to hurt anyone’s feelings gratuitously, especially members of my family. However, there are some people and institutions, most of them in the public domain, of whom I wrote critically. For example, like many others I have never been able to forgive Tony Blair for having led this country into a disastrous and misconceived (as well as illegal) war in Iraq, and I have not hidden my critical views of some of the actions taken by successive Israeli governments in the West Bank and in Gaza. Rightly or wrongly I felt that my autobiography should not be exclusively concerned with just my own affairs but also provide an opportunity for remembering people I have encountered in my life who I admired and who influenced me, and who have, in some instances, sunk unjustly into oblivion. Further, I pondered on important issues such as the causes of the Holocaust and the question of whether the German nation as a whole has to bear responsibility for it; the question of identity, which all former refugees have to face up to sooner or later; the new anti-Semitism, which I am convinced owes much to the dire situation in the Middle East; my love affair with France and the less than admirable conduct of the French during the war towards their Jewish population and, in this context, the behaviour of British citizens in the Channel Islands during the German occupation; and the