

## Reminiscences of a Berliner: Fritz Schwab 27 May 1922 – 8 July 2014



Till now, after 57 years in Australia, I say “I am not Australian and I am not German – I am a Berliner.” Those were Fritz Schwab’s first words to me when I contacted him to tell me about his life. This he then did – willingly, with humour, contemplatively and without “taking a leaf out of his mouth.”

Fritz Schwab and his wife Inge came to Australia in 1954. After one year at the Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre they moved to St Albans, where Fritz lived till his death. Many Germans were in his memories: his beautiful Berliner Schnauzer, and the Sport Splitter that he wrote regularly wrote for die Woche, or of the imports from Germany that he brought to Melbourne. “I imported everything that culture had, German books, journals, ??schallplatten – also Christmas decorations and coffee. At least 30,000 colourful plates that one could serve the sweets for the children,” he says. As a sports journalist he also wrote for various newspapers in Germany and he covered both German and Australian athletes e.g in football, boxing, and cycling and swimming. But the man, who brought boxers such as Hans Schilling (German master in flyweight class) and Connie Rudholf (German and European master in lightweight class) to Australia, also has another side.

He hardly knew his beloved mother. She died at age 27 years due to TB. His father was a social democrat and member of the council of Sachsen-Anhalt, a cheerful man who liked to roar around the region in his Mercedes Sports.

“1934 it was when things started to go bad. My father was Jewish and his second wife was also Jewish. Fritz was twelve years old and in the fifth class when he experienced discrimination, In the school he and one other youth, a full Jew from another class, were mercilessly bullied. Soon also the parental home was seized and his parents and step-siblings confined in the ghetto in Leipzig. Fritz and his sister Helga were sent to the “Arian” grandmother in Berlin. On 23 December 1937 they received the last postcard from their father. The father inquired about his children’s wishes for Christmas. Shortly afterwards the family fled – first to Prague and then to Switzerland. The Swiss closed their borders and they came to Belgium where they sought get a passage to the USA.

“You are half Jewish”, said the father to Fritz and Helga. “You have a chance to survive here.” Because the children’s German grandmother has abandoned her hatred, Helga can hide herself in a cloister, Fritz can survive in the underground. He cannot go any more to school and he also must abandon his ambition to become a teacher in an abattoir.?? He will go to the “Pebble representative”, to the freelance waiter (so known because of the pebble stones in the garden restaurants!) He sleeps in the garden colonies, and at night he secretly rises to let people in. Or on the sofas that are located on the staircase landings in his houses near Ruhen. Later he joined others who wanted to remain hidden because they did not have the right papers. They slept firstly in abandoned apartments, then in bombed out houses. Always they had to take care not to get

caught by a patrolman. Berlin was bombed, friends and acquaintances fallen victim to the attacks – Fritz was once again lucky, and came out of it with his life. A short war ending through a sad blow. The son died at the age of three months – 1945 ended there in Berlin chaos. There were no drugs to help save the young life.

On the buffet in his living room in St Albans is an urn. In the urn rest the ashes of his second wife, Inge, and each week Fritz places fresh flowers beside it. “We were married for 62 years, and she is still with me.” Inge it was who finished the immigration. Not only was the survival in Berlin after the war difficult, the further news of death was worse. Fritz’s sister Helga has turned to the German Red Cross to trace the father, stepmother, and the three half-sisters Edith, Margit and Liliana. If the Germans invade Belgium, these would have been hidden there two years with a Belgian family. Then they would be denounced. All would end up in Auschwitz – and Fritz’s uncle, the father’s brother and both his cousins, Herma and Gerd.

Despite all Fritz was a positive man. “We have found our luck in each other, Inge and I, and in our children,” – Lorenz and Kathrin, who were born in Germany, and Olivia. However, when Lorenz died at the age of 52 years, Inge could not cope with it. Her health suffered and she survived Lorenz by only seven years.

On the question, if he was fulfilled in Australia, Fritz Schwab answered, “I have never let myself be diminished.” He was happy when I gave him the book that included his biography. “My experiences were not lost in Switzerland.”

Now Fritz has left us, and the world is a little bit sadder without him. Farewell, Fritz.

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