

# **Franz Maximilian Magdalena Michael Steiner**

**Knight of St Gregory**

**“Franzi” to his family**

**“Frank” to his friends**

**Born Vienna 2 October 1922**

**Died Oxfordshire 24 February 2019**



In the last years of his life, Franz Steiner, who has died at the age of 96, had lost the ability to move around unaided. First he had to relinquish his beloved microcar (more feared than loved by his fellow travellers), later he was mostly confined to a wheelchair, which made every outing from his home a bit of an ordeal.

However, every time I visited him in Deddington, he insisted that we would go out for a decent meal, with the Horse & Groom in Caulcott our absolute favourite. His legs may have deserted him, but his head was working perfectly well to the last minute (and his appetite remained healthy). From the moment we had sat down and placed our orders to long after pudding and coffee he entertained us with his stories, amazed us with his sheer inexhaustible knowledge and entertained us with his fine, self-deprecating sense of humour. He was perhaps the only adult who could keep my teenage son away from his mobile for hours while listening to the story of his life.

To spend his old age in the beautiful countryside of Oxfordshire was not something “I grew up to expect”, as he said himself. Franz – Franzi to his family, Frank to his friends – was born into a well-established family in the very heart of Vienna in 1922. With his father a high court judge, this family of Jewish ancestry with roots in many corners of the Habsburg empire, was one of many led to believe they had become constituent pillars of society.



**Grandmother Steiner's 80th birthday, 2 December 1923.**  
*Back row, l to r: Richard (father); Leo (uncle), Helma (cousin), Max (uncle); front: Heli (cousin), Gretel (Max's wife), Hansi (Leo's wife); Johanna (grandmother) with brother Willi, Paula (mother) with Franzi.*

From the school – the Benedictine *Schottengymnasium*, of which no one lesser than the last emperor was an old boy – to the location of the family apartment in the aptly named Habsburgergasse – everything pointed towards the most solid and safely grounded upbringing. Thanks to an education which was as conservative as formative, Franzi and



Franzi and Willi, ca. 1927

his older brother Willi learned to speak languages, to play musical instruments and to become loyal Austrian citizens.

Until lightning struck. Following the Nazi occupation of Austria in March 1938, their father was banned from the bench and the family suddenly had to experience the other side of the famous Viennese “heart of gold”. It was a time when Jews were forced to scrub pavements with toothbrushes. After being forced into diplomatic shelter during “Reichskristallnacht”, it was decided to send Franz on one of the first “Kindertransporte” to Britain in December 1938 where he would be reunited with his brother who had travelled as a refugee earlier in the year. Franz was just 16.



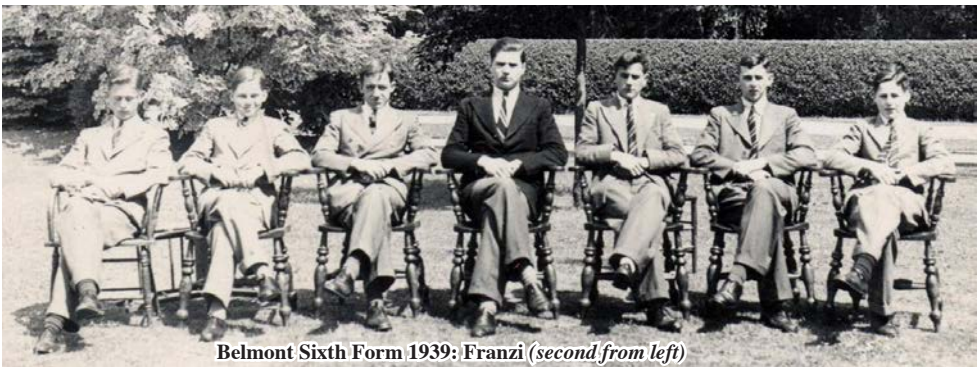
in school uniform, ca 1933

He would never see his parents again. Their trace is lost somewhere between Budapest and Auschwitz. It was a loss that would stay with him forever. In later biographical notes Franz wrote about himself: “He thought that in a long life everything had gone right for him in things that did not matter all that much, but where it really mattered there had been real catastrophes such as the events of 1938 and what followed.”

After his arrival in the UK Franz was accepted at Belmont Abbey School in Hereford, run by the same order, the Benedictines, as the *Schotten*, where he graduated in 1940. Instead of being allowed to support his new home country in the existential fight with Nazi Germany, he was now interned as an “enemy alien” on the Isle of Man, a measure he deeply resented as equally stupid and malicious. It was only in 1942 that he “cheerfully”, as he himself put it,



The family in 1938, around the time of the *Anschluss*



Belmont Sixth Form 1939: Franz (second from left)



**Franzi, the civil servant, ca 1946**

was finally allowed to join the war effort and “do my bit”. He never looked back. The Austrian refugee became a faithful adherent of everything representing the British establishment. He claimed that he was the first foreigner to join the Civil Service. He was appointed to the International Secretariat of the OEEC (The Marshall Plan), spending some pleasant years in France, becoming acquainted with the social life of Paris and gleefully accepting invitations to occasional weekends in country houses.

Returning to England, he had a brief career in the oil industry at the Manchester Oil Company run by two ex-Viennese, one of whom was Dr Georg Tugendhat whose children include the present Lord Tugendhat and Mr Justice Tugendhat of the High Court. Sadly, the oil crisis

of 1957 put paid to his career and the company.

During this time, Franz travelled extensively, often on his 25cc moped which he used to take himself to Italy via France and Switzerland. He graduated to a Vespa, different models of which he maintained until well into his 80s.

His job-hunting was not going well. At Christmas 1959 he agreed to transport to Cambridge his niece’s Christmas present from her Godmother who asked him whether he had found a post. Franz recalled, “I knew her husband was something in the City but I had no idea he was a high-powered stockbroker. By a curious coincidence they had a vacancy for an economist”. He had completed a BSc (Econ) degree during the war years and thus he ended up in that quintessential City institution, a stockbrokerage, from 1960 until his retirement in 1987. In his own words: “As the scum floats to the top of a lake, so did I rise with the growth of the firm without being specially gifted for trade. But I was good at languages and there was a need to get into the continent to look for clients – I developed quite a following.”

At least equally important were his many other activities: in 1949 he joined the Reform Club of which he remained a lifelong member and ardent supporter, the same year he started reporting for the newswire service of the Austrian Catholic church *Kathpress*, a job he would do for the next 50 years with characteristic compassion and commitment. It was during one of the last press conferences he attended that I first met him. To further refine his very English rite of passage he also joined the Glyndebourne Society in 1954. And riding all over London on his beloved Vespa scooter in perfect City attire, including bowler hat, “added to my reputation for eccentricity,” as he put it. He also joined the Catholic Union of Great Britain and for many years chaired the Parliamentary and Public Affairs Committee, probably the most significant Catholic lay body influencing political decisions impacting



**Franzi and his 25cc moped  
with distant cousin Evi Perl in  
London, 1950s**



upon religious or moral life. On his retirement as Chair in 2005, the Vatican awarded him the most prestigious lay-honour: The Knighthood of St Gregory.

His deepening ties with Britain did not mean a severing of his ties with the old home country. As early as 1946 he returned to Austria, searching for his parents. A man with a big heart and never one to bear a grudge indefinitely, he was firmly opposed to any kind of collective guilt or responsibility: "Those Austrians I am friends with are good people", he once said to me. "And those who are not, I don't want to know." In 2000, he was awarded the Republic of Austria Insignia in Gold by the Ambassador in a ceremony in the Austrian

Embassy for his outstanding service to *Kathpress*, and later, in 2009, a long service award by Cardinal Schönborn in a ceremony in Unser Stephansdom, Vienna's St Stephen's Cathedral. He felt a dual identity: "Rather like the old symmetrical emblem of the old Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, I was a symmetrical Anglo-Austrian or Austro-Brit."

Private happiness finally arrived in 1963 when Franzi, in his own words, "met, fell for and quickly married Rosemary Oldham, daughter of an old established dynasty of South Warwickshire farmers". They had two children, Rob and Claire,



With Claire and Rob, Gregory, Emily and Alfie

had intended to commute regularly to work in London (Rosemary put her foot down at the suggestion he might ride his scooter!), he found the journey increasingly intolerable. He retired from Grieveson Grant in 1987.

In was only a year later when lighting struck again: In 1988 Rosemary was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. "The world fell in", Franzi wrote. A slow but inexorable decline set in, culminating in her death in 1990; she never saw her grandchildren, the oldest of whom was born six years after her death. He remembered: "Rosemary arrived in my life too late and left too early."



Cardinal Schönborn in Unser Stephansdom

and later the family was blessed with the grandchildren Emily, Gregory, Alfie, Betty, Lola and Wilfie. After moving to Highgate in 1966 Franzi and Rosemary quickly became pillars of the Church of St Joseph's Highgate Hill or Holy Joe's as it was fondly known all over North London. In 1986 they moved to Deddington, to Rosemary's Aunt Vida's house following her death. They found contentment in The Field House, overlooking the Oxfordshire hills, and although Franzi



Rosemary and Franzi, 1987

Never one to sit on his hands, Franzi engaged with Oxfordshire life. He maintained his commitment to his faith by worshipping regularly at St John's RC Church in Banbury, and sometimes at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Hethe where his Papal Knighthood was conferred in 2005. It was at about this time that he made arrangements for his own funeral by seeking permission from the then Vicar of Deddington, Revd Dr Hugh White, and the Diocese of Oxford for his Requiem Mass to be celebrated in Deddington Church by Canon Mervyn Tower, then Parish Priest in Banbury.

To Franzi's delight, in 2016 Canon Mervyn moved to Corpus Christi Church in Headington, Oxford, and thus to be Parish Priest to his niece, Maggie and her family. Their friendship continued at various family gatherings and Franzi reaffirmed his desire for Mervyn to celebrate his Requiem Mass "when my demise eventually comes."

### **Veteran police volunteer Frank is thanked by Chief Constable**

OXFORD MAIL 1 April 2015



A PENSIONER who decided to volunteer for the police in his 80s has been given a special award to mark a decade of service.

Frank Steiner, 92, spent 10 years volunteering for his local police in Deddington, near Banbury, working across the county to help the force improve its services.

On Monday he was praised by Sara Thornton in one of her final acts as Thames Valley Police's Chief Constable.

In Deddington, he became well-known as a village character. He joined the editorial board of the *Deddington News*, where his meticulous grammar was no doubt greatly valued as Letters, and later Church and Chapel, Editor. He also became a volunteer for Thames Valley Police and delighted in receiving his long-service Police Medal from Chief Constable Sara Thornton in 2015. He worked front-counter at Deddington police office and at the force's headquarters in Kidlington, where his key role was to vet the local and national media for stories about the force and report them to the senior officers. He was also a "mystery shopper," posing as a member of the public and interacting with staff at various Police Stations, reporting back to HQ on the quality of service he received. Speaking of his award he said, "It flatters my vanity. I am slightly amused that somebody in their early 90s is still considered worth honouring."

In 2018, after falling from his bed and fracturing his leg, Franzi suffered from increasing ill-health. Months of hospitalisation and rehabilitation followed before he finally came home - he never recovered his physical strength but his mind remained as sharp as ever. Franzi continued to hold his family together in many ways and remained professionally and intellectually active as long as he was able to. He died peacefully on Sunday 24 February, 2019; he will live on in our memories forever.

Franzi's Requiem Mass was attended by 150 people travelling locally, nationally and internationally to honour him. His son, daughter and grandchildren were actively involved in the service and, in honour of his Jewish roots, Canon Mervyn recited the Jewish Prayer of *Shema Yisrael* at the final commendation. Over 40 mourners then travelled to his burial at Burton Dassett Church, "the Cathedral in the Hills", where he is now at rest.

**Finally reunited with Rosemary, together may they Rest in Peace.**

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