

Memories of Prague

Lipman Bers

Before his death in 1993, Lipman Bers began writing a memoir that eventually grew to about eighty pages. The memoir, which has never been published, covers his early life up to his emigration to the United States in 1940. What follows is an excerpt from the chapter about Bers's life as a student at Charles University in Prague, where he received his doctorate in mathematics in 1938. He arrived in Prague after fleeing his native Latvia, where he was wanted by the secret police for his antigovernment political activities. This excerpt is published on the occasion of the donation of Bers's mathematics library to Charles University in Prague (see the related article in this issue of the Notices). The Notices thanks Victor Bers and Ruth Shapiro for permission to publish this excerpt from the memoir.

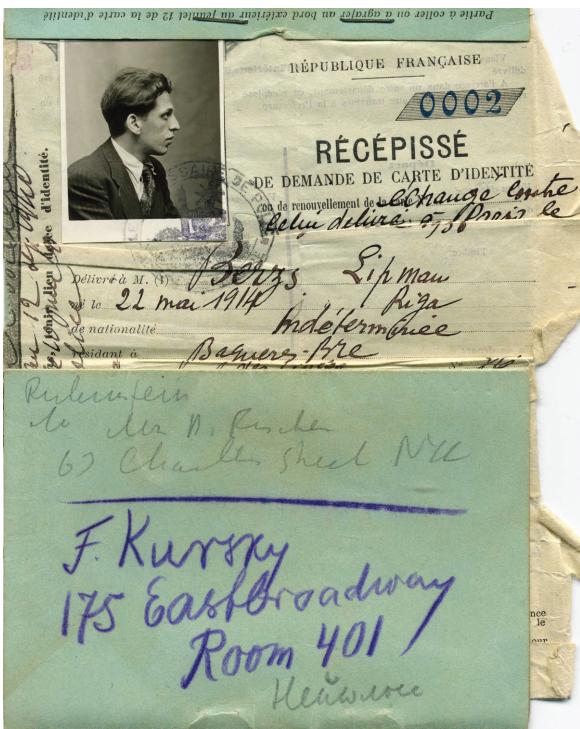
As before, I was struck by the beauty of the city. After a few days I went to the police station to register, and the clerk asked me whether I could prove that I came as a political refugee. At this point a story published in the Riga paper *Tonight*, that Bers was hiding from the Latvian police, proved useful. Next, I went over to the administrative office of the university. It was manned, if I remember correctly, by Czech civil servants, and they were favorably inclined to giving me, at once, a one-year permit to live in Prague, which would be enough time to complete two academic terms. When nearly all the formalities were completed, I was asked to produce a permit to live in Prague for the year. "We cannot complete your registration without the permit," I was told. "You can get the permit at the police station."

"No," the police told me, "you are mistaken; we may issue you a residence permit only when you are registered as a student at the university." "But that's what I'm telling you: to register, I need the permit to stay." "No, it is a simple formality. Once you are a student, you are permitted to stay, but we cannot issue a permit to stay without something justifying your stay."

This back and forth required repeated trolley trips between the two offices. At the time I did not know the name of Kafka, Prague's most famous author, and did not know the meaning of "kafkaesque", but I will never forget the feeling of complete frustration that I felt after a day of shuttling between the two offices. The most peculiar element in this game was the fact that all the officials were actually intelligent and benevolently inclined.

The next morning I remembered having been told that whenever refugees in Prague are in trouble, they visit the president of the Czechoslovakian senate, Dr. František Soukup. I followed that advice and was not disappointed. Soukup introduced me to the Assistant for Refugee Affairs, a young law student of about 22. Soukup presented my case





as a complex dilemma, but the assistant was not at all impressed. "It is clear what you have to do. Apply to the Foreign Ministry for permission to leave Czechoslovakia for another country. You will certainly get it, and the permission to leave brings with it permission to stay in Prague for one year. With this permission you can register as a student, and by showing your registration to the police, all your difficulties will disappear." Just as the assistant predicted, the Foreign Ministry issued me the famous pink document, the Czechoslovakian "Foreign Passport for Foreign Persons". I took this to the university, which issued me a study permit allowing me to register. I was fortunate enough to be able to use Soukup and the assistant's influence on two more occasions. When I told the story of my Czechoslovakian papers to the famous Jewish Polish mathematician Hugo Steinhaus, he remarked that it confirmed a rule he always followed: everybody ought to hold at least two false passports.

The German University in Prague, sometimes simply called "The University", was the oldest in [central] Europe...and was founded by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV. The university had a good mathematics faculty, including the exceptional mathematician Charles Loewner. Of course, we students were unaware of that. I discovered how good he was only after we met again in America. The students were mostly interested in teaching high school math; very few were doctoral candidates. The professors who were interested in research followed the tradition of German *lehr und lern*—teach and learn.

Courses that could be thought of as forerunners of modern logic were taught. I took a number of

courses with the great logician Rudolf Carnap. The university took pride in having on its faculty one of the first physicists who did independent research in relativity theory. Einstein taught there briefly. As in most universities, students learned most from talking to each other. And this was not much to boast about. Still the seminar sessions were stimulating, particularly when they were directed by Loewner. I always imagined him to be a few inches taller than the average man, with a lionesque mane, as his name would suggest. He was actually a very shy and unassuming person. Such is the strong dependency a student feels for his teacher, especially when it comes to the thesis.

Loewner assigned me to report on a paper, and when I looked at it I saw that Lebesgue's integration was used everywhere. So I went to Loewner and confessed that I did not know it. He simply handed me a small book and said, "You will find it here." Indeed I did and never again had any trouble with what was for me, at the time, an advanced topic. The author of the paper Loewner wanted me to discuss was Kramer, a mathematical poet who was a very talented rhymester. I admired his style but unfortunately did not become too interested in the subject of my report. My interest switched to potential theory....

On completing my degree, the Rerum Naturallium Doctor, I needed permission to change my passport to one issued to "Dr. Bers" and also to renew my permit to travel from Czechoslovakia to a foreign country. Through contacts with the French Socialist Party I was able to get a permit to go to France. I went to say goodbye to Soukup and to thank him for his help. The Munich Agreement, which resulted in the division of Czechoslovakia, had been signed, and Soukup was a broken man. "You are lucky that you're leaving this part of the world. It will be horrible." "Why don't you leave?" I asked. But Soukup was immovable: "You are a refugee who may someday return home. I cannot leave my country in its hour of greatest need." Many years later in America I met a gentleman who knew the Soukup family. As I feared, Soukup had been killed in a German camp.

Passport and identity papers of Lipman Bers, shown on this page, are courtesy of Victor Bers.