

It's wonderful to see so many of you here today, and I'd like to thank particularly those of you who have come from far.

Let me take this opportunity to invite you all, after the burial, back to Mat's house in Shepherds Hill for a glass of port.

Two other notices:

- Today at 5pm a mass will be held for Mat in the Catholic church in Madunice in Slovakia, in which he was christened.
- At 2pm on Wednesday special Buddhist prayers, called a Powa, will be said for Mat at the Buddhist Meditation Centre at 13 Woodstock Road, Golders Green. Details from Sarah Tier who will be at the back of the church after the service.

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You might think that at 97 my father's passing would not be a shock, but I for one have been touched by the reaction of so many close friends. Mat's great spirit was undiminished to the end, and he remained so generous in character - without complaint and oblivious to his poor mobility - that it seemed he might go on forever. And so his passing has actually come as a sudden loss to many of us.

The numbers of you here today and the reaction to Mat's passing truly reflect the deep friendships that Mat held, about which I will say more later.

Many of you will know Mat as the former chairman of the Highgate Society, as a founder member of the French Circle, or as former chairman of the Highgate Horticultural Society. Some of you will know Mat through his Philosophy Group, that his grandson has told you about.

I want to tell you about Mat as a son saw him. I'll talk about the things he enjoyed, for today is intended as a celebration of his life.

Now a eulogy writer faces two broad choices: whether to go for a chronological approach, describing what the subject did over the course of his life, or a thematic one, picking out topics. For Mat, a themed approach is easiest, and in a moment I'll explain why.

Some of you may also be expecting me to provide some useful insights into Mat's longevity - and I may be able to shed some light on that.

But back to the apology for the chronology. In Mat's case, trying to cover his life story in a eulogy would be too ambitious: there are many parts to his life: at home with his mother, on the farm with his father – for his parents got divorced when he was 13; his many friends; much travel both as a young man around Europe, and later globally first as sales director then general manager of a large chemical company and then as technical consultant with the UN. His long life covers periods of great change. Indeed Mat sometimes joked that he had lived in three countries before the age of 2 without leaving his front door.

Mat himself rarely gave a chronological account of his first 22 years. As children, he limited himself to telling us certain stories – we all recall them. We only saw the whole story when, upon retirement in 1978, he wrote some 350 pages of memoirs. Even then, the historical and political context and complexity of his story is daunting. His memoirs are crying out to be edited and published – and there is no doubt in my mind that Mat's story is far more interesting than many I have read or seen featured on programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Mat was not adverse to talking about his past: once we were adult, he was always ready to answer questions - but you had to choose the moment carefully, and you could only ask so much at a time.

So we children quickly picked up on his pain that the world of his youth had disappeared – not just that he'd had to leave it, but that it had been destroyed.

Let me tell you a bit about the first 22 years of his life.

Mat grew up in a comfortable household, the eldest son of a reasonably well-to-do farmer. Czechoslovakia was a new country, carved out of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He went to school in Bratislava, the 3-way meeting point of Germanic, Slav and Hungarian cultures, and grew up with their three languages in what we would today call a multicultural environment: he spoke German

with his nanny, with his parents, and at school; Slovak in the street and with friends; yet his parents and many older people spoke Hungarian to each other. His classmates and friends came from all **the** different ethnic backgrounds that were present in Czechoslovakia at that time.

These 3 very different languages gave Mat a wonderful linguistic base. Staying for 2 months with a family in Vevey on Lake Geneva when he was 15 to learn French, and in Bexhill in the summer of 1938 where he took private English lessons, Mat added 2 further languages, making him fluent in 5 languages by the age of 21.

His final “Matura” exams at age 18 covered a broad syllabus – 16 subjects including Latin, Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy, Geology, Geometry and of course Philosophy.

Mat had an exceptionally close knit group of school friends that he remained in contact with all his life. We have a picture of him on his school steps, in the midst of a group of friends - there appear to be several girls hanging on his arms – very much as today’s young people might take a group selfie after their final exams.

Mat describes in his memoirs how much he enjoyed those final school years in Bratislava. He writes:

I walked the corso almost every day, alone or with friends - we would meet others too. The corso was between 6 and 7pm, with the evening meal at home around 7.30pm. In summer the corso extended to a square by the Danube. We chatted with friends, looked out for a particular girl, made a mental note of “who was walking with whom”, bought theatre tickets, arranged to see a film, or received an invitation to a party.

He wrote with friends an occasional literary magazine, which Mat duplicated at home on a Gestetner using wax stencils and ink, much of which ended up on his bedroom furniture to his mother’s displeasure. The magazine extolled a humanistic view of life and a belief in freedom and liberty – concepts which interested Mat deeply all his life. When some teachers declared it a communist plot, Mat was hauled in front of the headmaster. He carefully refuted the allegations – but production was stopped.

After school, he studied Chemical Engineering at Charles University in Prague, where he met new friends – there is a picture of him about to down a Sherry Cobbler before a ball in your Order of Service. He also attended other faculties to broaden his interests – Philosophy and History of Art - and a medic friend even took him into a dissecting class.

And so Mat had a normal healthy upbringing full of friends, study, travel and varied sports and interests.

But then at the age of 21 neighbouring Austria was invaded and ethnic differences came to the fore. In Bratislava he could hear German propaganda on loudspeakers across the Danube from the rowing club he attended. He wrote in his memoirs of this time:

We deeply felt the blow. How easy to write that down and how difficult to describe that feeling.

And he goes on to describe how foreign embassies were besieged by would be emigrants.

Later that year parts of his own country were invaded, and to complicate matters, just as pressures from abroad were mounting, from within the country Slovak nationalists pushed their own agenda - a further blow to anyone with Jewish heritage.

And so Mat's family contemplated emigration, though they knew this would be difficult for father as a farmer. Mat wrote:

It was decided that I should go to England that summer, first of all to learn English and possibly to prepare the way, should it become necessary to emigrate.

His mother arranged for him to stay in Bexhill. Mat had many happy memories of that stay, no doubt establishing for himself that he could live in England. When more recently he visited his daughter Veronika, who happens now to live in Bexhill, they would visit a tea room overlooking the sea, and Mat would reminisce about a bank holiday dance there in 1938.

That is most of what I'm going to say today of the chronology of Mat's early life, but I would like to relate the story of his departure from Czechoslovakia, because the detail says much about him.

On 30th January 1939 Mat boarded a train with two heavy suitcases, finding space for an evening jacket and riding boots. He was seen off by his mother, whom he would not see again, and 3 friends.

Opposite him in the train compartment was a young couple. The man was Herbert Lom, a friend, of the same age, and in the same situation. Lom later had a successful acting career, playing the blinking inspector – the boss of Peter Sellers' Clouseau - in the Pink Panther. Sitting next to Lom was his girlfriend Didi, who was Jewish.

Mat writes in his memoirs:

We travelled via Germany and I felt uneasy until we reached Oldenzaal in Holland the next day. Perhaps the guards thought we were Nazis from Czechoslovakia, since we spoke perfect German – they were certainly very polite.

Comparing Mat's description of this journey with that of Lom, which appeared two years ago in obituaries, I realised how much Mat downplayed the danger of this journey.

Lom's chroniclers refer to the journey as an escape; Mat says he got on a train. The journey through Germany was in reality a game of Russian Roulette - and Didi did not make it, she was taken off the train and never seen again; Mat, with characteristic understatement, writes of his 'unease', with no reference to the fate of Lom's girlfriend.

His memoirs continue:

We landed in Harwich on 31st January 1939. There were other refugees – for that is what I had become – who tried to gain admission. Most had probably never been to England before. My passport expired in only 11 days time. There was some jostling in the queue, but knowing the English mentality already I stood quietly. It was my turn, and the officer saw from my passport that I had been in England 5 months before. "Student?" he asked, and I replied "Yes - I hope", and he stamped my passport and waved me on.

And so Mat came to live in and love this country.

Mat's upbringing had undoubtedly equipped him well for life. Moreover, the loss of that world and of his family shaped his character deeply. Hitting him when he was young but already fully adult (he was 28 when they died) somehow made him stronger, and there was never the slightest trace of bitterness over the hand life had dealt him.

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Now before I tell you about the three things Mat loved most, let me mention the extraordinary memory that my father was blessed with, which remained right up to his last day.

He wrote his memoirs largely from memory - few family members survived to help him - nor could he have brought much memoir material in those 2 suitcases.

His unusually good memory is evident from his book *Slovakia The Path To Nationhood* which he wrote in 2002. In the Introduction he describes his first memory, in the winter of 1918/1919, barely 2. He was in the back of a calash - a shallow carriage with seats facing each other, pulled by two horses - with his parents, nanny and baby sister, wrapped up in blankets smelling of horse. The young family had fled their farm, and there were fires in the countryside around them, started by the abandoned remnants of the Austro Hungarian army. After a gang of soldiers had robbed and torched the local inn, they marched on Mat's farm. However, the local catholic priest organised the villagers to defend and save the farm. Shortly after this incident, in March 1919, as a thankyou to the priest, the whole family was baptised.

But I digress, as is easy with Mat's story. My original point was that he could recall every detail of that night as a toddler, down to the smell of the blankets.

In his philosophy lecture in February this year to the Highgate Society, Mat recalled with perfect clarity his first boyhood memory of something English:

My father's steam engines for ploughing the fields were the latest available. They were from Leeds, from a company called John Fowler & Co that invented steam driven ploughing – and as a boy I always wondered what country is Leeds that produces such wonderful machines!

Mat's sharp memory was of course a double edged sword, bringing back vivid memories of his youth and lost world.

But let me now tell you the things Mat enjoyed – which is also why he enjoyed life.

His three joys were: **FOOD**; **TRAVEL** and **FRIENDS**, and I'm grateful to my sister Veronika for many examples.

FOOD

This was a BIG part of Mat's life.

He knew every National Trust property by its tea rooms.

He remembered every meal he'd enjoyed in every restaurant in the world.

He chose which garage to buy his petrol from by the cakes for sale.

Mat was a great meat eater, but the vegetable he enjoyed most was asparagus.

TRAVEL

This was really an ENORMOUS part of Mat's life and work. He had tales to tell of many cities around the world, and when meeting hospital workers and hotel staff from abroad, wherever they came from, he loved to talk about **their** town and ask whether a certain hotel was still there.

Wherever he went, he brought home presents of ethnic delights such as musical instruments, Pacific grass skirts, dolls in national costume, dreamy American nighties, dirndls, lederhosen, turquoise from India, opals from Australia, Mao jackets from China, and reindeer slippers from Finland.

He shared his love of skiing with us, taking us to Austria and Switzerland many times.

One of his most treasured trips was cycling with Joan in 1951 in Italy when they did a circuit from Perugia to Florence, and back via Siena and Lake Trasimene.

It was Mat's ability to travel and speak languages that allowed him to transform his company Armour Hess from a relatively small domestic player, to a large international supplier of chemicals, bringing about a four fold increase in revenue.

A few months ago, The Times carried a review section listing the flags of the world, and Mat amused himself counting every country he had visited, something he had never done before. The answer was 64 – and that **excluded** countries he had only passed through.

FRIENDS

People and Friends were just HUGE for Mat, they were really what he was all about. Mat could talk to anyone. He had a special way with people, and kept his friends for life.

Mat encouraged others, gave them belief, introduced them to people of mutual interests, and had an uncanny knack of being able to engage in an interesting conversation on any topic with anyone, by asking pertinent questions and really listening.

As Terry put it

Mat was very open spirited to me. When I turned up with his daughter for the first time, he didn't know what sort of person I was, but he made me feel at ease straight away.

Mat and Joan loved to entertain. They had parties and dinner parties. Visiting overseas business colleagues were invited home for meals. Many colleagues became lifelong friends.

It was Mat's friends that sustained him these last few years, and the constant stream of visitors would always be invited to stay over for a meal. Fortunately Mat's carers, who are here today, understood him well, and soon made sure there was always enough food on hand to be able to accommodate visitors.

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So those were Mat's three joys: FOOD, TRAVEL and FRIENDS – and he needed nothing else.

In fact my father had no cherished possessions: no special pen, watch or anything, he was just not interested in material things.

Now Mat's pleasures can of course be combined, and so Mat usually preferred travelling and eating with friends and he loved eating abroad.

And I can just about picture Mat now, enjoying all three pleasures, in some distant land, where asparagus is plentiful, sitting at the meal table with all his friends around him.

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Now no eulogy of my father would be complete without mention of his humour, and many of you have referred to this in your messages and letters, usually describing it as 'mischievous' or similar.

Earlier this year, when in the Whittington Hospital for 3 weeks, a catholic lady chaplain doing the rounds came to Mat. Mat kicked off with:

You know I've read St Paul

and soon they were in lively debate about religion and politics and more. She then took a mobile phone call, and walked away in conversation. Some time later, I remarked to my father that the chaplain hadn't come back, and he turned to me from his bed, and said:

She must have got a call from God.

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I'd like now to tell you about my Dad in rhyme.

Mat grew up in Bratislava,
where three cultures meet,
Son of a farmer,
learned to stand on his feet;
was schooled in Philosophy,
took an interest in the Arts -
got that gene from mother
(the mitochondrial parts).

He studied in Prague,
learned to drink beer,
Trained as a scientist,
Chemical Engineer;
then he saw his world broken
(Czechoslovakia began to crumble)
so he set out for a new life,
towards England he did stumble.

He met Joan and was smitten,
love worked its magic,
Four children appeared –
so they added the attic.
Weddings Silver, Gold and Diamond
were celebrated with zest.
Then dear Joan departed,
in peace may she rest.

Waltz, fox-trot and tango,
were some of his pleasures,
Saw 64 countries,
and many of Earth's treasures;
delighting in his food,
from Asparagus to Pimentos -
brought back for his children,
many ethnic mementos.

Charming all whom he met,
Mat always found synergies,
spoke about your interests,
gave you more energies;
worked hard as a farm hand,
respected as a boss -
and never even once
breathed a word of his loss.

Memory razor sharp,
avid as a texter;
maybe it was all those languages
that shut out the dementia.
And so your tale is nearly done
save for this one last addition:
We thank you Mat,
for inspiration given.

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Now I said earlier I would try and shed some light on the secret of Mat's longevity. Well, as I draw to a close, I can see that some of you are **still waiting** for my answer.

My first advice is: you need to choose your parents **very carefully**.

But more importantly – and I think my father has proved it - the secret of longevity is simple: **ENJOY LIFE**.

Dad, you've been a great inspiration to me and to many others, and we thank you for that with all our hearts.

May you rest in peace.

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William Schwitzer, 10th November 2014

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