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PRE-WAR EXPERIENCES IN GERMANY

19th - 24th July, 1939

by

Arthur Brown



Monograph Number Four

RUSI - Australia

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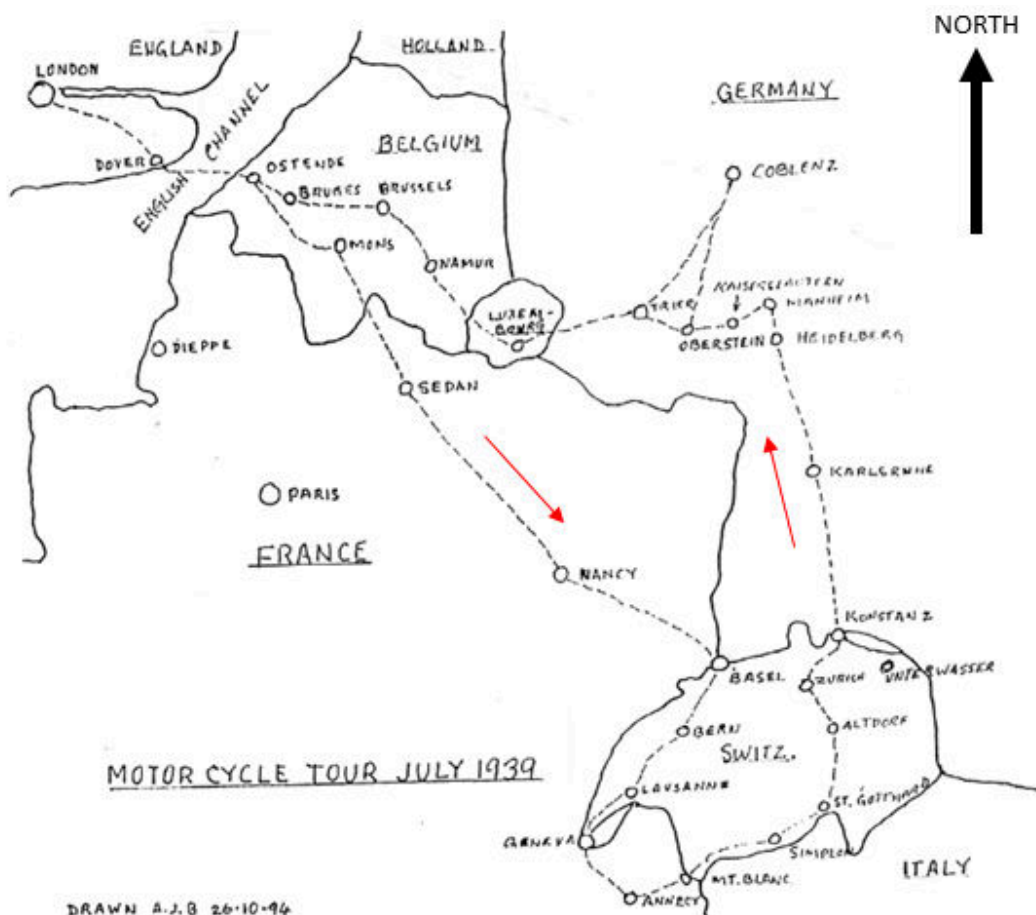
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Pre-war Experiences in Germany:
Wednesday 19th - Monday 24th July, 1939



Route of the tour undertaken by Arthur Brown and Arthur Roberts (Robbie in 1939)



A 600cc Ariel Square four of the type Robbie and Arthur used on their track.

This monologue follows a description of the tour up to the Swiss border (now lost).

Sunday 30th July, 1939

And now! and how! for a full description, as far as possible, of what happened in Germany. Up till the time of departure into this country I think you have - or will have - the full description of the first part of our tour, up to Lake Constance. Leaving on Wednesday morning we were accompanied by Hans and his brother Morier into the town of Constance (or Konstanz). Crossing the Swiss/German frontier, we had to declare all our money, English, Swiss and German. Our German money was previously bought in England in the form of travel cheques. When bought outside of Germany, we received twenty-one Reichsmarks for a Pound, which was all we purchased, whereas if changed in Germany, we would have only received twelve. However, after having a spot of lunch and taking a walk around the town in a blazing sun (good) and looking at the age-old historical buildings, (from this town I believe the airship air raids to England used to start) we made a start, after bidding Hans and Morier goodbye.

Wednesday 19th July, 1939

Everything went well except for another puncture in the back tyre - a large boot nail. From now on and to the end of our time in Germany, uniforms were to be seen everywhere. Black ones (S.S. or, as we suggested, silly saps) Brown ones (S.A. or silly asses) and another crowd a bit more mottled: the Nazi political party, also the equivalent of the Boy Scouts in brown, with the swastika sign on their armbands. The S.S. boys were a very supercilious crowd. These of course are Hitler's special Black-uniformed boys. My reason for the description above came from the high and mighty attitude with which they seemed to regard all and sundry, except their fräuleins, whom most of them seemed to have attached to their arms when walking down the streets in their official uniforms. My opinion of them was not improved when, while repairing the rear tyre, one passed by and was greeted by me with the equivalent of "gooday" ("Guten Tag."). Hearing this, I think he must have gained the impression that the motor bike had spoken to him and that he wasn't going to be bothered; he just kept on his way.

Once more on the road we kept on in a NNW direction through lovely "Black Forest" scenery; something like Scottish River Dee scenery of gushing streams and pine-clad slopes. Towards afternoon a thunderstorm was developing. When we stopped so we could put on waterproofs to keep off the now frequent spots of rain, an old German came tearing along on a pushbike and shouted something at us in his haste. Oblivious to what was coming, I shouted "Yes, I think so too."

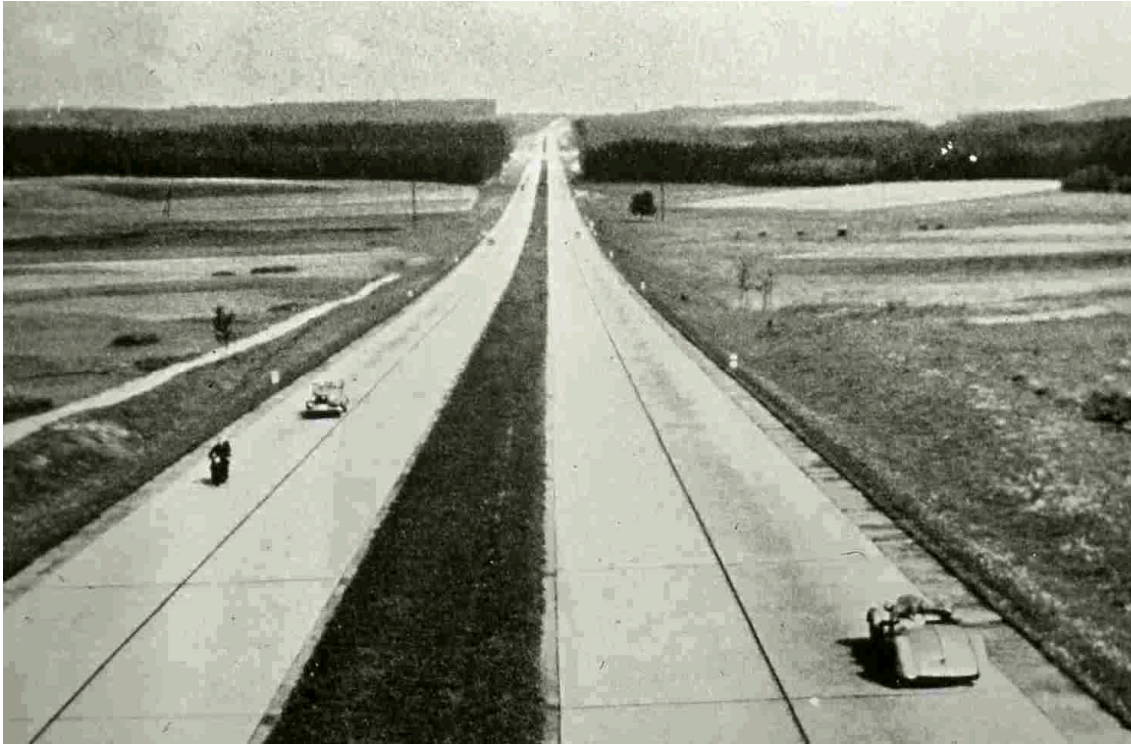
Three minutes later, hailstones came thick and fast for five minutes, and during the time it took me to get out a big tarpaulin, my rubber boots had a handful of them in each and there were at least three handfuls in the sidecar with Robbie. With the hail came a terrific gale which well-nigh lifted me off my feet, and the chunks of ice, at least one and a half inches [*4 cm*] in diameter - some larger - rained all around us, leaving the ground covered as if in a snowstorm.

However, we eventually dried ourselves out and camped beside a nice river eighty miles [*130 km*] from Konstanz, with threatening weather still hanging around and occasional light showers of rain, to aid us rapidly erect the tent and assemble groundsheets. The tent was veritably thrown up.

Thursday 20th July 1940

Thursday arrived, and fortunately, it was a day of fine, though not entirely, sunny weather. We made an early start and set off on the long trek across Germany - unknowingly to our internment. On our path we passed through quaint and pretty villages until we arrived at Heidelberg, the university town of Germany (like Oxford and Cambridge). On arrival in the town, we saw and heard a lot of the students coming home from school; a combination of mild procession and rowdy commotion. They were all sitting on tree-bedecked farm carts, singing and playing concertinas, which of course brightened up the place after all the uniforms. As we didn't have much German coin to spare, we bought biscuits, fruit etc. I had the time of my life asking for things in German, and I think, somehow or other, towards the end of my shopping excursions, my questions were being slightly understood. When they could not understand, I waved a hand at the desired object, which of course was really of more use than speaking. As I've discovered on my travels in foreign countries, never a truer word was spoken than "actions speak louder than words."

After we had a look around the historic town we started off westward and found ourselves on a Reich Autobahn. Of all the roads I have been upon this is the best. It is like a billiard table. At sixty miles per hour, [*100 kph*] the Square Four was like a push bike except of course for the wind, and at forty miles per hour, [*65 kph*] one seemed to be loitering along at twenty [*32 kph*] There are no direct cross-roads; arrangements for all cross-traffic and entry or exit roads are provided by bridges or tunnels over or under the main road. The roads, concrete in construction, are split into two parts, one in each direction and both can accommodate about three cars abreast.



A German Autobahn in the 1930s

Along this ten-mile [16 km] stretch to Mannheim, we did our boy scouts' turn and towed a solo machine for a few miles which had run dry of petrol (there being no bowsers on this main road). Going westward towards Trier, we passed through an old-world town called Kaiserslautern with one-time palaces on the pretty outskirts.

After this the beginning of our downfall started. We encountered bad roads which were under construction. This necessitated detours through villages which probably have never seen an English let alone an Australian tourist. This meant vile roads and bad wearing of the back tyre. We had about twenty miles [32 kms] of these conditions, which played havoc with the tyre more than I had expected. After we had got going properly again on a good road, and were thirty miles [48 kms] from the Luxembourg frontier, just as I swung around a bend onto a railway bridge, bang! went the tyre like a shotgun. I managed to keep it under full control and promptly pushed the machine off the bridge and off the main road to a cart track leading to the right. Whilst we were pushing, an old farmer with a load of hay passed by and as he went by we asked, (in sadly broken German,) if there were any camping places. He gave us the impression that over the rise in front of us there was a river. Whilst we were still pushing, a chap in a car stopped to see if we wanted a hand but we assured him we could fix it up.

This is where the trouble started. A chap turned up on a pushbike and immediately demanded to see our papers. We showed them to him, and so far as he was concerned

they were ok. He also asked us whether we had taken photos of the place and upon my reply in the negative, he was quite satisfied and tootled off.

Just behind us in a wheat field, there was a big notice up which, amongst a multitude of other things (in German,) forbade the taking of photos. However, by virtue of not understanding, we blindly went ahead with the job. Whilst I was doing so, Robbie took a walk over the hill to see where the river was, as it was about seven p.m. and we would be obliged to stop somewhere overnight (we certainly did - but not where expected). He came back to report that the promised land contained no river and that there was an immense steel gate across the road but that it was open for road traffic. The critical moment came when two birds [strange gentlemen, not young ladies] came along on a motor bike (wouldn't I like to meet them again ?? !). The pillion passenger, looking very much like our old green grocer "tab and tol," but with a fanatical glint in his eye, copied the British registration plates. That started things! He gabbled at us ; we showed him our papers, but somehow or other that didn't satisfy the demon that was biting him. Then of all things, he spotted my camera sitting on top of the tool box. He grabbed it and veritably went mad (that is, if he could have become worse) and started stopping passing cars. The stopped cars were not interested, and nor were a few other motorcyclists he pulled up. All along the line from then on, he was the only individual of the drama really interested - or should I say, incensed. All others tried to laugh him off.

By this time all the village of at least fifty inhabitants had called in to see what was going on and were, in a very friendly manner, giving us the once-over. However, this other bird still insisted, and come ten o'clock, he managed to get the cops along. Whilst the cops were coming, we found a couple of boys who could speak fair English and we had some nice conversations with them. They told us that we were the first Britishers to have passed that way (or at least stopped - in our case, unfortunately) for years and that we were sort of curiosities - hence the village reception. With the arrival of the cops - very nice chaps, and in smart blue uniforms - the fanatic raved again. The cops were not very concerned other than checking our papers etc., but the "snake in the grass" (as we now refer to the lad) persisted, so the cops decided to send for the Gestapo or Secret Police. In the meantime our translators informed us that we could go with the cops and themselves, to the local inn. They would not let us take the bike, but one of the villagers was put in charge of that and he looked after it until we returned, (at a later date.) Whilst we were in the pub and short of German money (being so close to the border and not being allowed to take any German cash out, we had spent most of what we had,) the cops shouted us a couple of glasses of mineral water and gave Robbie cigarettes. In such an out-of-the-way place as this, there was an old chap - once a sailor - who had been to Sydney and so, in a variety of ways, we talked of the place.

The two boys were telling us that Germany didn't want another war like the last one, which is reasonable to expect from any sane person, and that so far as the average German in the country was concerned, they liked the English people, to the extent that, in his own case, he had a pen friend in America and had been playing football himself just as we hit upon the scene. He gave us the startling news that we would have to go back thirty miles [48.2 kms] with the Gestapo and stop in the clink overnight, which I must say cheered us up, to say the least of it - for here would be bed and breakfast. As the time wore on we were informed the Gestapo's car had broken down and by this time I was feeling pretty weary after a one hundred and eighty mile drive, [290 km] with the bad section included, so we stretched out on some chairs. Come 2.30 a.m. they turned up, whereupon we were taken into custody, bade farewell to the boys with grateful thanks for their assistance, and tootled off into the night and back to a town we had come through earlier in the day, Oberstein. Here we had to turn out our pockets and after having everything tabulated, we signed for it and were taken into the cell. As we walked into the single bedded cell, I remarked to Robbie "We do see life don't we".

Friday 21st July 1939

When we were ready to retire, (in all our clothes and with a couple of blankets they lent us) dawn was just creeping through the prison bars; so I recalled to Robbie the "prisoner's song" which cheered us up a little.

During the morning we had a little sleep, at 8.00 a.m. breakfast was served: brown bread and butter and a liquid resembling (in colour only) coffee, without sugar or milk.

Midday we were supplied with cherries and a sort of leathery spaghetti. During the morning we managed to put in a bit more sleep as there was nothing else to do, but come afternoon we were getting fed up with this ramp, and just to pass the time away we walked around the cell and made remarks which were not complimentary to the fanatic and Mr Hitler's methods.

All the time we slurred our speech and referred to Hitler as Mr So and So or other applicable names which suggested themselves, in case there were mikes installed. One suggestion which reminded us of our predicament was that book "The Innocents Abroad"; very applicable under the circumstances.

Whilst we were in this first cell, we heard guns booming over the hills and looked at each other and in parallel remarks said "for the term of". However Robbie recalled having seen in the German paper in the pub that friend Goering was going to the "west front." That explained why they asked us during the evening if we had been there

near 4.00 pm. We had probably turned up just after military exercises had been in progress.

At two thirty, they decided nothing could be done at this place so we were packed off via the same Mercedes Benz car, in rain, up to Koblenz, seventy-five miles away, [120 km] on the river Rhine. During the trip this car was getting along at seventy miles an hour, [110 kph] and I thought to myself: "I wish, if they wanted to kill themselves on wet roads, they would let the criminals get out and walk". However, we got there safely, other than a puncture, (whilst doing fifty,) [80 kph] whereupon we were greeted by another of the Gestapo who in fair English wanted to know what we were up here for. In response, we ever so sweetly asked him if *he* could possibly tell *us*. He told us we would be allowed to buy our own tucker if we wanted any better than the stock material, whereupon we gave him about a 1/- [equivalent of 10¢ in 1966] and he went and got us some rolls, sausage and lemonade.

After this we went down into another cell, feeling more like gaol birds every turn of the clock. Here we had three beds between us, so we slept comfy overnight, to be greeted in the morning by the gaoler clanking his keys and a request to come out and wash (still in German.) He then gave us a hunk of rye bread, which announced its presence when held at arms' length, and a copy of the liquid tasted previously.

Saturday 22nd July 1939

At 9 o'clock they interrogated Robbie for an hour and a half and then it was my turn for an hour. If I was to write everything, it would need another dozen sheets, but suffice it to say that they asked us all the fool questions about the place, laying stress upon whether we knew we were in a fortified zone, and had we taken photos. As answers to both questions were in the negative, and we nearly bit their heads off telling them so, after repeated queries, and with our individual stories tallying so well, they called their bluff off.

During this period we were demanding to see our consul and to send a telegram to London. One thing in my favour: they could not understand an Australian accent, which gave me time to repeat some of my statements more correctly, whereas Robbie's accent could be followed quite easily. After they developed my film and found out that we hadn't taken photos of anything of strategic importance, they were as sweet as pie. They ran us all the way back to the bike and scene of our undoing, made sure we had everything in good order and condition, and set us on our way.

When we went over the aforementioned hill we saw the reason Why. Pill box forts were all along the hillside - the last line of them, evidently, thirty miles [50 km] from the frontier.

However, this was Saturday afternoon 5.00 p.m. and our boat went from Ostend at 10.00 a.m. next day, so from then on we didn't stop except for punctures, blowouts, petrol etc. Five miles [8 ks] from the Luxembourg frontier, the tyre blew out again. Several of the boys along the road, in an over-willing manner, helped us fix it up again, and did we breathe a sigh of relief when we crossed the frontier bridge. At 10.00 p.m., in the town of Luxembourg, we knocked up a garage, and bought a new tyre, fitted it on in his garage, and then shot off into the night with about another two hundred and thirty miles [370 kms] to go.

Sunday 23rd July 1939

Our next forced stop was at Namur to fix up a side-car puncture - another wretched boot-nail - just on dawn. Then, nearing Brussels, we ran short of juice and had to knock up another garage at 5.00 a.m., but the French and Belgian people are very forbearing and will always help.

All around here we struck awful cobbled roads. I would sooner be on bad Australian ones than these Belgian roads, as it seems as though all the last war was fought on some of them.

Finally at 9.40 a.m. we hit Ostend and had a shave (first since Wednesday) on the boat, and without being seasick (thanks to pills) at last reached the "land of the free". With another seventy miles [110 km] to go to London, this drew to a close the most adventurous holiday of either of our careers and one which we have no desire to repeat.

Having described all this, I might also add that, though the people themselves in Germany are no different than ourselves, (as I expected) and all through we were treated very well except for the one "snake in the grass", the poor devils are all ruled by an iron hand and in all conversations must greet and bid adieu to each other with the "Heil Hitler" salute, to which we used to mutter to ourselves, but not acknowledge the salute, "I'll 'it yer". Hitler has certainly done a lot of good in the country but his treatment of Jews, of which we saw evidence in notices forbidding Jews to enter in the towns, is beyond all reasons of decency and, as a dictator, is not for the ultimate benefit of Germany.

Which brings us to our old moot point - it isn't the people - it is the rulers of the place.

I'll 'it yer - Arthur.

POST SCRIPT

An incident during interrogation at Koblenz

" Oh for the Wings for the Wings of a Dove "

Thus goes the well-known anthem. This anecdote I have shared with the Oxford St. Choir and I trust that they will excuse its repetition. This familiar melody invariably transports me back to pre-war Nazi Germany. The place was Koblenz on the river Rhine. I was being interrogated by the Gestapo under suspicion of photographing military secrets. My travel bug and photography had put me into dispute with them.

A cousin and I were touring Europe on my Ariel square four motorcycle and side-car and we were camping out. We were on the last leg of the journey from Heidelberg to Luxembourg when we had a rear wheel blowout on a bridge. We had made repairs and were ready to move off when a passer-by observed my camera on the sidecar. The train of events took us to Koblenz where on the second morning we were being questioned about our activities. Actually we had no idea that we were on the eastern edge of the Siegfried Line.

My English cousin spoke fluent French and was questioned longer than I was. The Australian accent was strange to the translator but he managed. Whilst we were being interrogated my film was processed. It was quite innocuous: scenes at Lake Constance and a camp scene at the River Neckar.

Seated as I was with the chairman of the committee sitting at the end of a long polished table, an open window behind him and another window to my right, I espied two doves outside. They were cooing and strutting about as doves do on the roof next door. My mind immediately flashed to the anthem "O for the wings for the wings of a dove". A sense of the ironic struck me and my reaction was a broad smile. The reaction of the chairman was markedly not like mine. In fact he seemed quite hostile and demanded an explanation. He then rather pointedly insisted that I concentrate on their questioning.

Before the morning was over our silent prayers had been answered and we were on our way back to the village where the motorcycle had been garaged. By late afternoon we were on our way through the Siegfried Line with the warning: no cameras and no stopping! We needed little encouragement! We were told that the guards on the Luxembourg border had been advised of our approach and would be expecting us.

After twenty miles [32kms] or so we saw the Siegfried fortifications and we had no desire to stop; we only hoped that one of the back tyres would make the distance.

Late that night we managed to purchase a new one at Luxembourg. We rode all through the night on cobblestone roads, through Belgium. Finally, we reached the ferry an hour or so before it left for England.

The date of those events was the last week of July 1939. You all know what started on 3rd September 1939!

Author's Note :

To the reader fifty-five years after the events described in my diary of 30th July 1939, some of the colourful expressions used may be confusing. "Birds" were not nice young ladies but were odd or unpleasant characters of the male sex. Other expressions used were suggested by the circumstances under which we found ourselves.

Arthur Brown
Epping N.S.W.
26th October 1994



30° BELOW.
HANS & ARTHUR ON THE ILTIOS - UNTERWASSER SWITZ.

Photo of Hans Kobler and myself on the slopes of Mt. Iltios at Unterwasser Switz. Christmas, 1938

A FINAL NOTE

My friend HANS KOBLER, mentioned in page one, is still a resident of Zürich, Switzerland and in recent years he has visited Australia several times. By the end of December 1994, we will both be aged eighty. I met Hans originally at the Santis Hotel in the little Swiss village of Unterwasser in the N.E. corner of Switzerland. It was late in December 1938. We were then both aged twenty-four. My cousin, Arthur Roberts ("Robbie") passed away in September 1986. We were good mates through the years. Since the incident reported, I have visited Koblenz and Heidelberg several times, but not again the

little village near Luxembourg, where the event started.

Submitter's Note

Arthur Brown was my step father-in-law. Shortly before he died on 26 February 2001, Arthur passed me a copy of this monograph. He thought with my military background I might be interested; I was fascinated as will all readers be. Here was a young Australian with his English cousin on a motorcycle tour of Germany but a couple of months before the conflagration of World War Two started. Arthur's current extended family have all agreed to the inclusion of this document in the RUSI-A Monograph series.

Arthur was a radio technician, he was working in the UK prior to the war, and was not allowed to enlist, the war needed his skill as a civilian technician. When the Japanese entered the war the Australian Government needed him at home and organised wartime passage. Again he was not permitted to enlist in the armed forces. The story of what he did in the war is one Arthur never told. After the war, Arthur was a Technical College teacher in Sydney and Newcastle. For most of his adult life Arthur was a ham radio enthusiast.

John Howells OAM RFD

October 2022