

THE GUARDIAN

Rixi Markus

IN THAT last summer of peace, the European bridge championships took place at The Hague. If we had still had a nation to call our own, the Austrian ladies' team, with which I had already won three European titles and one world title, would have been favourites. But, like some of the others, I had been forced to flee from Vienna in 1938 when the Nazi troops marched in.

That year, the photographs of our famous team had appeared in the brochure for the European championships in Oslo. But, like me, they had lost the country whose representatives they would have been. Hitler's followers had no time for bridge; in fact it was as good as forbidden.

So in the 1939 championships after the French ladies had won the title, their captain, Mme de Montaignu, sent me a gracious cable: "Grâce à Hitler nous avons gagné." (Thanks to Hitler, we won).

Fortunately, I had a haven from the Nazis as my parents had moved from Germany to England in 1936. Here I received a warm welcome in bridge circles, but in the spring of 1939 I went back to Europe, taking my mother to a clinic in the south of France. On our return journey, the Blue Train stopped at Marseilles and I bought a copy of France-Soir which had pictures of weeping women in Prague on its front page; the Wehrmacht was on the march again.

Paris was like the Tower of

Babel, with refugees from all over Europe desperately seeking help. I met many friends from Vienna as they waited for visas and passage to "safe" countries. Some were luckier than others. I even found time for bridge and won a ladies contest — and a Boucheron wrist-watch — with a French champion, Mlle de Boismartin.

Back in London, I soon settled into the old routine: bridge at the club, dinner in Soho with friends, a roof over my head with my parents, my little girl, and my younger sister. Our home became a meeting place for the new refugees — they brought us news and we helped them as much as possible — but I had to sack an Austrian maid whom I suspected of being a spy. During the war we continued to play the game we loved and it was a great comfort when the bombs and gunfire of the blitz banished all hope of sleep. I did my bit by firewatching and working as a secretary at the British Red Cross. On days off, I even played poker with some refugees just to keep my French up to scratch!

The following hand is from the quarter final of the Gold Cup — a knockout contest for teams of four — which was played at Bexhill-on-Sea in the summer of 1939.

My team consisted of Standish Booker and Peter Elmassion, two pupils of Dr Stern, and my former team-mate from the Austrian national team, Gertie Brunner. To everyone's surprise we reached the last eight, but were beaten on the final board when we reached the wrong slam contract.

Our opponents were the team led by Mudie Bach (Leslie Dodds, Jack Tottenham and Pat Cotter — a world croquet champion!).

Richard Lederer's team beat Mudie Bach's in the final. Lederer was a Czech who fought for Britain in the first world war and the other members of his team were the Tarlo brothers, Louis and Joel (who now plays for Spain) and Jack James.

Dealer South (Brunner) with me in the North seat:

North		
	♠ J 8 7 4 2	
	♥ —	
	♦ A 10 6 3	
	♣ A Q 6 2	
West		East
♠ 5 2		♠ Q 10 6
♥ Q 7 6 5 4		♥ J 10 9 2
♦ Q 4 2		♦ K 9 7 5
♣ J 4 3		♣ 7 5
	South	
	♠ A K 9	
	♥ A K 8 3	
	♦ J 8	
	♣ K 10 9 8	

This was our bidding, playing the Austrian system:

South	West	North	East
1NT	NB	2S	NB
3S	NB	4D(1)	NB
4S	NB	6S	NB
NB	NB		

(1) Culbertson asking bid.

My only hope seemed to be to drop the queen of spades, but a heart was led and I lost one trump trick and one diamond trick.

In the other room, Dodds and Bach bid as follows:

South	North
1C	1S
2H	4C
4NT	5NT(1)
6C	

(1) The old Culbertson ace inquiry.

Our team-mate led a small trump and the slam could not be beaten.

© Rixi Markus