

## Tom Gondris

**24/05/1930 – 11/02/2019**

Thomas, Tom, Gondris was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1930 in the Czechoslovakian town of Teplice, the only child of Eugen and Else. In the beginning, life in the Sudetenland was relatively peaceful.

Eugen ran a factory which manufactured Airtex shirts, Else was a schoolteacher. But the family were Jewish, and at the start of the Sudeten crisis, in October 1938, Eugen and Else worried that they would no longer be safe in Teplice and so they decided to move to Prague with a view to the family leaving Czechoslovakia and moving into Europe.

While living in Prague, Tom's family heard of a series of trains that were organised by a British man, Nicholas Winton, that were taking children from Czechoslovakia to the relative safety of the UK. Children who travelled on these trains needed to be sponsored to enter the UK, and Tom was lucky. Through his parent's connections, a sponsor was found in the form of a family living in Hampshire, the Parsons Family.



On the 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1939, Tom boarded a train from Prague main railway station bound for Harwich in Essex. His parents had told him he was going for a holiday. They waved him off from the platform, with the intention of following Tom through mainland Europe to meet him in the UK. Sadly, that wasn't to be, and Tom's parents didn't survive the war.

Tom's train was the very last of the Kindertransport trains to arrive in the UK, the one which was scheduled to leave Prague on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September was turned back at the Czech border. Tom was met at Liverpool Street Station, by some of the Parsons family, including the only one of their four boys who could speak German, Tom's first language.

In England, Tom absorbed English so deeply that he entirely forgot German or Czech, and had to learn German from scratch again at school!

Tom was welcomed into the Parsons family with unflinching generosity. At the end of the war, this family learned, from some neighbours of Tom's parents that both of his parents had been killed in a concentration camp. From that time on, Robert and Simone Parsons made Tom feel even more entirely part of their family. Just how much they had tried to do for him, he only found out years later. This was through the chance discovery of papers in an

attic that charted the unceasing – but frustratingly unsuccessful efforts that Robert Parsons had made to get the Home Office to accept Tom’s parents into England.



He left school at 18, he was at first disappointed that, because he had not been born in England, the law did not allow him to take part in national service. He was delighted then, when the law changed, and he signed up immediately and was sent to Egypt for eighteen months. Usually cautious, he enjoyed recalling a day when he and a friend stripped off their uniforms and happily swam across the Suez Canal. It only occurred to them to worry about what might happen to the clothes and boots they had left on the bank when they had reached the other side!

When he returned to England he had various kinds of jobs including working “on the line” with Cadbury, in Bournville for a short while. Tom was responsible for making the “soft centres” and as a perk of the job, he was allowed to eat as many sweets as he liked. Tom, not being one given to excess, rationed himself to one sweet per day so as not to sicken himself to the tasty treats like his co-workers!

After the soft centres – and an unsuccessful attempt to sell slot machines, Tom was taken on by a small firm, recently started by fellow central European, Harry Erben. Starting off with a weekly salary of three and a half guineas, Tom was sent off to Germany to learn about bottling machinery and lodged with a local butcher.

Back in London, he drove home with Harry every evening after work, their eager discussions of the Labour Party making them oblivious to the traffic. From these modest beginnings, the firm flourished and Tom stayed with it for the rest of his working life, he became managing director, and he and Harry became lifelong friends.

In 1958, Tom went on a skiing holiday in Austria. There, on the nursery slopes he met Pat. Pat was a bit disgruntled. She’d thought she was rather good at skiing, but had been demoted from one of the higher groups down to the nursery to be with the beginners.

Pat tells me that when she first met Tom, he was rolling around on his back, with his skis all tangled up. He looked something like a beetle. Apparently, she took pity on him and helped get him to his feet. Although the pair became firm friends on that trip, both were involved with someone else, and so, after exchanging numbers, they went their separate ways.

This was not the end however, oh no! Pat was walking home from work one evening in Piccadilly, when a bus drove past. She thought nothing of it then, but later that evening she had a call which said “This is Tom, I see you have got legs after all!” It turns out that Tom

had been riding on this bus, and had happened to look out of the window and spy Patricia, no longer sporting her shapeless Alpine ski suit, on the pavement outside!

6 months later, on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 1958, they were married, a marriage which was to last over 60 years (and there's a telegram from the Queen to prove it!).

The children Joanne and Peter were born in London, but Alexander was born in Ipswich, where the family relocated when Tom's work with the company moved to the area. All this time, Tom had kept one precious link to his past by cultivating a friendship with the Czech family who had told him about his parent's death. With the threat of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Tom, sensing a real risk to the future of this family, sent a letter of invitation to them, allowing them to cross the border and come to the UK. They arrived with nothing but a Christmas tree and decorations, stayed a while, and then moved on to build happy and successful lives.

One of them, Darla, has flown here to be with us today. Last Christmas, her daughter, Katerina, now a professor of the History of Architecture in the Midwest, wrote to the Gondris Family to say

“this year (just a few days ago) it was fifty years ago that we arrived in the UK and, thanks to Tom and Pat were able to build lives that would otherwise have been impossible, indeed beyond imagination.”



Tom, even though he had built a new life in England, never forgot his roots. Worried that his parents, killed in the Holocaust, had no known resting place, he took it upon himself to create a memorial for them. A local sculptor, Bernard Reynolds, designed a grouping of three abstract figures, which could be seen as two parents and their child. Tom and Pat

donated the work to Christchurch Park, here in Ipswich, and it proudly stands behind the Mansion. A plaque at the foot bears the simple inscription, "This sculpture is dedicated by Tom Gondris in memory of his parents, Eugen and Else who died in World War II"



The placing of the memorial in Ipswich was true to Tom's life, which was centred in this town. He worked tirelessly for it in many ways. Always self-assuming, he would be astonished to read a recent headline in the local paper labelling him "The Refugee that Saved the Town's Heritage". But he would also have been grateful for the recognition of the importance of this work, and deeply pleased too that the Chairman of the Ipswich Society, John Norman, is here to tell us about some of the things that Tom did for the town.

## Tribute by John Norman

Tom was an amazing man who from such difficult beginnings contributed so much, a gentle giant, not in stature but with tenacity, persistence and determination in all that he did.

All of us whose lives were touched - and I suspect that includes everybody here, owe Tom a great deal. I for one was honoured to have known Tom and to have listened to his wise counsel, acted on his sensible advice and taken heed of his astute guidance.

Ipswich is a richer place, the Ipswich Society is a stronger organisation and the Suffolk Architectural Heritage Trust owes its very existence to Tom's love of ancient buildings.

Tom served for a time back in the 70's as Borough Councillor for the Valley Ward. Using the expertise and knowledge he had acquired whilst serving on the Planning Committee he was able to persuade the council to set aside a substantial sum as a loan, the operating capital for the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust, which Tom established in 1978

Back then there were 550 Listed buildings in Ipswich and over 40 of them were considered at risk, today there are just 5.

The first building to be restored by the Trust was a pair of cottages in Bolton Lane but Tom soon moved on to what became his favourite Ipswich building, Pykenham's Gate House, restored by the Trust in 1983. Not only did Tom love this building but his family knew it well, spending hours folding leaflets and sorting publicity material.

Until recently the Building Preservation Trust has been constantly busy with restorations: - the Half Moon & Star in St Matthew's Street, The Globe in St George's Street, and in the naughties the particularly difficult Curson Lodge in St Nicholas Street.

When Tom retired from work he used his newly found spare time to create, in 1997, the Suffolk Architectural Heritage Trust, an off shoot of the Suffolk Preservation Society.

This increased the scope of buildings in need of restoration to encompass the whole of Suffolk. The first, and the one I consider Tom's greatest challenge was St Andrew's church, Mickfield.

With very little capital Tom and his fellow trustees set about rescuing the church and preparing it for a new use. By 2004 the church was ready and was sold to become a Christian Retreat.

Back in Ipswich the Conservation and Design Panel were meeting monthly to advise the Council's Planning and Development committee on planning applications in Conservation Areas, on major applications and on the design of proposed new buildings. You will not be surprised to learn that Tom had been a member of the Panel since its inception in 1975.

Tom (with others including the Borough's Greenways project) campaigned for and developed the Riverside Footpath between Stoke Bridge and Sproughton, a project that included two works of Public Art, The Navigator (John Atkin) and Against the Tide (Laurence Edwards).

These are but sculptures beside the river; a much more significant contributor to the overall success of the scheme is the Skate Park at Stoke Bridge. I'll conclude by suggesting that if Tom has one disappointment amongst his achievements it is that the Skateboarders don't wear helmets when using his skate park!

We have lost an inspirational, supportive, encouraging and generous friend.

Thank you John.

Tom faced many challenges in his life, but he always adapted to them and took them in his stride. He was not a man who suffered with self-pity or bitterness. He faced a long illness with courage and grace, and could never express enough the gratitude he felt for those who looked after him – especially the tireless care of his beloved wife, Pat. In his last months and days, he was surrounded by love.

I'd like to close this section of the ceremony with this reading adapted from the Yizkor Service. You will find the words in your order of service, and perhaps you will help me by joining in with the line "We will remember him" which is shown in bold.

If you are able to please stand.

When we are weary and in need of strength,

When we are lost and sick at heart,

We remember him.

When we have a joy we crave to share

When we have decisions that are difficult to make

When we have achievements that are based on his

We remember him.

At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring,

We remember him.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn,

We remember him.

At the rising of the sun and at its setting,

We remember him.

As long as we live, he too will live

For he is now a part of us,

As we remember him.