

Commemorating the Flight from War-Torn Berlin A Tale of Two Families

By Cornelius von Baeyer

**Completed for the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of
Hans Jakob von Baeyer on August 16, 2012**

On an evening in March 2012, in a little town in western Austria, I was a guest of honour at a large celebration of a local engineering company. This small family firm is actually the world market leader in the technology for testing electrical power systems, particularly high-voltage cables. It was the 100th anniversary of the birth of the founder, Josef Baur, who had passed away in 1997. The festivities were led by the next generation – his son Martin and wife Valentine. And why was I invited to this happy event? Because of a unique German car, a powerful local schnapps, and a poem about Saint Viktor! But let me tell the story from the beginning.

Introducing the Original Event

In 1944, the last full year of the Second World War, the year of my birth, my father Hans Jakob and Josef Baur had been working for some time at Telefunken in Berlin, in separate divisions. Telefunken was a huge company at the time – 40,000 employees in all branches of electronics. Both men were passionately involved in scientific research, at the cutting edge of discoveries on radio and microwave systems, as well as TV and radar.

My father, with a PhD in physics from Heidelberg, favoured the theoretical side but also registered numerous patents for practical applications. Josef Baur from Austria was more the master experimentalist, fascinated with the workings of all things electronic. Both happened to be musical. More importantly, both were trying to focus their lives more on science rather than on the war effort. Neither was a trained soldier, and employment at Telefunken protected them from active military duty. They both hated the Nazi dictatorship.

Of course some basic science my father and Josef produced would find application in weaponry. Both were also assigned military projects. Josef worked on the reverse engineering of a captured British radar unit used in night bombing raids, and my father then worked on decoy techniques, including metal sheets positioned at ground level to look like buildings on the radar, and aluminum strips or chaff dropped from airplanes to confuse the radar. (The British soon sent daytime flights to locate the metal sheets, and the German Air Ministry dismissed the foil strips, which the British also developed and used to great effect against the Germans.)

Nevertheless, it would appear both men tried to avoid making contributions directly to German weaponry, on occasion delaying the dissemination of findings, and later on assisting the communications efforts of the Austrian resistance.

They were actually introduced to each other in 1944 by a third Telefunken employee, Dr. Karl Gruber, already active in the Austrian resistance. And so began a friendship of two individuals with much in common, but also many differences. Josef was gregarious, a proud citizen of the Austrian state of Vorarlberg, and a committed member of a patriotic Austrian Catholic student fraternity. Hans Jakob was diffident, the son and son-in-law of eminent German professors of medicine in Heidelberg and Marburg, who were both driven from their positions by the Nazis because of links to families of Jewish ancestry.

Hans Jakob and Josef had good reasons to think about leaving Berlin. The Germans were losing the war. The Russians were advancing from the east, dispensing vicious payback for the terrible treatment they had suffered when the Germans first attacked their land. Both men knew this was not the direction for them – they both had reasons to go south. Josef wanted to return to his homeland, where he had already sent his wife, and Hans Jakob's father-in-law had found a haven in Basel, Switzerland, where my parents sent my older sister and brother.

But first, there was the matter of my birth in August 1944 in a village to the west of Berlin, an area of frequent air raids. A doctor came from Berlin with his wife and a midwife. In addition to a sizeable fee, he demanded gasoline for his car. Enter Josef Baur. His father owned a fruit orchard in Vorarlberg and produced apple schnapps (a strong alcoholic drink). Josef arranged to ship some to Berlin and to trade it for gas at a nearby fighter base. In the end, the arrangements for my birth proved to be more difficult than the birth itself.

By the end of 1944, they began preparations for leaving Berlin. My father had acquired a car at the beginning of the war – a green Adler convertible. (Adler means “eagle”.) It had been custom-built for tiger-shooting in India – right-hand drive, with a fold-down windshield and removable roof supports to provide a 360° shooting range. The war prevented its delivery to India, so my father was able to buy it cheaply. The car was stored up on blocks in a shed that was only slightly larger than the car. When local officials came around to confiscate the tires for war use, my father said he could not get at them, and the indifferent officials simply left.

There were two further problems to solve. First, gasoline was not available for private use. Re-enter Josef Baur with more of his father's apple schnapps. He couldn't turn water into wine, but he could certainly turn schnapps into gas! Around this time, Josef acquired enough machinery and raw materials for a small factory by trading schnapps, and had it all sent to his father's farm – this was the basis of his post-war commercial success.

Second, only doctors and officials were allowed to travel by car. The two scientists came up with an ingenious solution. They rigged the Adler up as a mobile radio monitoring station, with all sorts of

testing equipment and antennas sticking out all over. A sympathetic Austrian in the Berlin traffic police then provided permits for the research vehicle.

The escape from Berlin was timed carefully to be early enough to avoid the approaching Russians, but close enough to the likely end of the war that Josef and Hans Jakob would not simply be forced into the military after reaching Vorarlberg.

The Flight from Berlin

February 14, 1945 was the right time to leave. Picture the front bench of the convertible with the two serious young engineers (both were 32 at the time) with their secretary, my mother Renata, in the middle. And where was I? I was cleverly hidden in a box labelled "Radio Parts" in the back of the car. My mother had sewn me into my sleep suit and diapers so that I would not kick out of them and cry. In fact, she had given me a hefty dose of aspirin to make me dozy, something she hated to do.

They set off late in the evening. It was rainy and very cold. The car had no heat – it was built for tiger country in India, after all. The adults huddled together. They were stopped several times on the way out of Berlin. But the bad weather, the late night, and the right permits, made it possible to fool the police. By morning they had to hide under a concrete overpass to avoid being strafed by English fighter planes.

The journey went on and on – for two whole days, over 800 kilometers south and west into Vorarlberg. At one point they were running out of gas, but when they showed their permits to the attendants at a gas station, they were told they also needed the proper gas coupons, which they did not have. They talked to the attendants for a while, asking among other things about the weather forecast. The attendants bemoaned the fact that their radio was broken – a tube had probably burned out (this was before the age of transistors), and they were getting no news at all. The two radio engineers, equipped with a large box of radio tubes, had no trouble fixing things, and got the gas.

At another point my mother got out of the car to change my diapers and discovered that the uncomfortable bump she had been sitting on for hours was Josef's pistol. Soon after, they saw in the distance a massive Allied bombing raid on Munich, with German fighters attacking the bombers. They were horrified, but had to move on.

They timed their arrival in Vorarlberg for after dark, and drove directly into a barn at the Baur farm in the tiny town of Sulz, and covered the car with hay. My father regretted that he had not been able to enjoy his wonder car at full speed – aside from having to be cautious on this trip, cars had to be driven at a low speed for the first 1,000 kilometers in those days, and he never got beyond that before the end of the journey.

My parents and I stayed with Josef's parents and were well looked after. But my father was afraid that he could not justify his presence there to the frequent military patrols. As had been arranged with Dr. Gruber, he travelled to Innsbruck to deliver radio tubes to the Austrian underground which had a radio broadcasting operation there that provided a link to the U.S. army in France.

The war was dragging on. My father then did something astonishing – he actually returned to Berlin using public transport. He reported briefly for work to allay suspicion, to touch base with Dr. Gruber, and to arrange an assignment that would take him south again. His task was to deliver a pack of experimental TV tubes to the Postal Department labs in the far south of Germany. From there, it was not far to the Baur farm. Once there, my father busied himself in the sugar beet fields, and did some pruning in the orchard.

A large number of refugees from eastern Europe were in Vorarlberg at the time, mainly women and children and some old folks, trying to get into Switzerland. My mother with persistence and luck got permission to leave Germany with me. On April 30, 1945, in a column of refugees, watched by my father from a hiding place, she pushed me in a baby carriage across the border between Vorarlberg and Liechtenstein. The Princess of this neutral principality headed its Red Cross, which gave special care to mothers with infants. My mother was helped to contact her father in Basel, and was soon on her way to be reunited with her parents and two older children. It was 10 weeks since she had left Berlin.

That very night (April 30) Hitler committed suicide. My father waited in Vorarlberg for the war to end. On May 3 he was standing by the side of the road when a French armoured column arrived to liberate the town of Sulz from the Germans. The huge Sherman tank leading the French stopped directly in front of him and the turret swiveled ominously towards him. There was little he could do. Then the hatch opened, and out popped Josef, grinning and waving at my father.

The French, together with the Austrian resistance (now including Josef), faced no resistance in the town, but in the mountain areas they had to fight the remaining German forces. The radio network of the Austrian resistance proved invaluable in preventing the Germans from blowing up the hydroelectric dams in the mountains and flooding Vorarlberg.

On May 8 the war in Europe finally ended. Ten days later, my father, with the help of his brother-in-law who was a senior Swiss officer, got permission from the local French commanding officer (fortified by a generous quantity of American cigarettes) to leave Austria. He soon joined his wife and three children and began a career in Swiss telecommunications.

The Celebration

We return now to the modern day – the celebrations for Josef Baur and his company. The first visit to western Austria for me and my wife (other than my stay as an infant in 1945) is a surprise. On the one

hand, you are in the valley of the Alpine Rhine – a wide and fertile plain dotted with small villages and towns. On the other hand, you are dwarfed on all sides by towering, beautiful Alps.

The celebration begins with good food for the 200 guests. Then there is a delightful film recapping the story of Josef and his company in photos and drawings. Soon there are strobe lights with thunder and lightening to remind us we are celebrating Baur technology for high-voltage electrical power. Then comes music – pounding rhythms of hip-hop and disco. Athletic young women dance into the hall from the rear. There is smoke, and they lift a sheet from a large object at the front of the hall – an Adler convertible! The car is a sort of mascot for the event – one of Baur’s most enduring products is a line of test vans to monitor high-voltage cables. The original Adler, although a fake test station, was the first of the line.

I am called to the front and tell of the flight from Berlin in a similar car. I am asked about my mother’s impression of these events. Like many of her generation, she never said much about the war years, and less about the time here.

But a few years ago, several decades after her death, I created a website for some of her poems. She wrote most in German in the 1930s and 1940s, when she was in her 20s and 30s. Later in her life, after years of living in Canada, she and several translators produced English versions of many poems. I named the website after the poem I liked best: *Spring on St. Victor’s Mountain*. But I did not know where and when she wrote it.

Some years after that, my younger brother and I decided to find out more about Josef Baur, our father’s Telefunken colleague. On the Internet, we located his firm and the current CEO, Martin Baur. Thus was born the friendship that led to my being part of Josef’s anniversary. I googled the company headquarters located in Sulz where my mother stayed with me – it is right next to Viktorsberg (Victor’s Mountain) in the foothills of the Alps, and the church there is called Sankt Viktor (Saint Victor).

In a flash, I realized that the poem was written in spring 1945, and I would now be able to visit the actual setting of the poem (needing only to remove in my mind some later additions to the view). My mother found the place beautiful, but she was also fearful about what the future would bring.

Those at the celebration much appreciate the story and the last verse of the poem:

By plum trees, swarmed about by bees,
We stood and listened;
There on the mountain, where the saint had rested
Before he went eternally to sleep,
We sat – surrounded by the children’s play.
Sat long in the shadow... not a word was said.
Was this a premonition that the Unknown called?

The celebration continues. Numerous speakers tell of other parts of Josef's life and the story of his company to the present day. Martin Baur, the host of the evening, confesses that as a teenager he and his cousin had helped restore the original Adler, but they could not fix the brakes properly. They ended up crashing into a stone wall, and that Adler sadly was no more.

At the side of the hall there is a large wooden box with war-time radio tubes of all sizes in a bed of wood shavings, bearing the amusing label: "Cornelius was hidden in this box!"

Then there is more thunder and lightning, smoke and music. The gymnastic young dancers bring out copies of a hard-back book about Josef and the company. They hold them up. They twirl around. They do splits. It is the most unusual book launch I have ever seen!

Finally the evening draws to a close. I am approached by Josef's younger brother who remembers my mother's ten-week stay in his parents' home very well. He especially recalled her bravery in the face of a Gestapo visit when she challenged the secret policemen's authority until they left. It is a tale I have never heard before.

So now, dear reader, you know more about the Adler, apple schnapps, and Saint Victor's Mountain than you probably ever wanted to know. You have met some von Baeyers and some Baur. You have heard about the role of the Baur family in my life – Josef and his parents helping to save me in the 1940s, and Josef's son Martin and wife Valentine welcoming my wife and me in 2012. To them I extend my heartfelt thanks. You will also understand why for me the visit to Vorarlberg was above all seriously surreal!

Links

The Baur Company: <http://www.baur.at/> (Also the book referred to above: "45,000 Volt Begeisterung — Die hochspannende Geschichte der Baur Prüf- und Messtechnik", to appear in English towards the end of 2012.)

My mother's poetry: <http://www.vonbaeyer.net/renata>

My father's career in Canada: <http://www.vonbaeyer.net/hansjakob>



Celebration, March 24, 2012, Hohenems, Vorarlberg, Austria. L. to r.: an Adler convertible, photo of original Adler used in flight from Berlin, Angelika Böhler (MC), Cornelius von Baeyer, Martin Baur (host).



The von Baeyer family in Berlin, September 1944. Hans Jakob, Hans Christian, Veronika, Cornelius, Renata. The two older children were brought to their maternal grandparents in Basel in November 1944 by the Swiss envoy to Berlin.



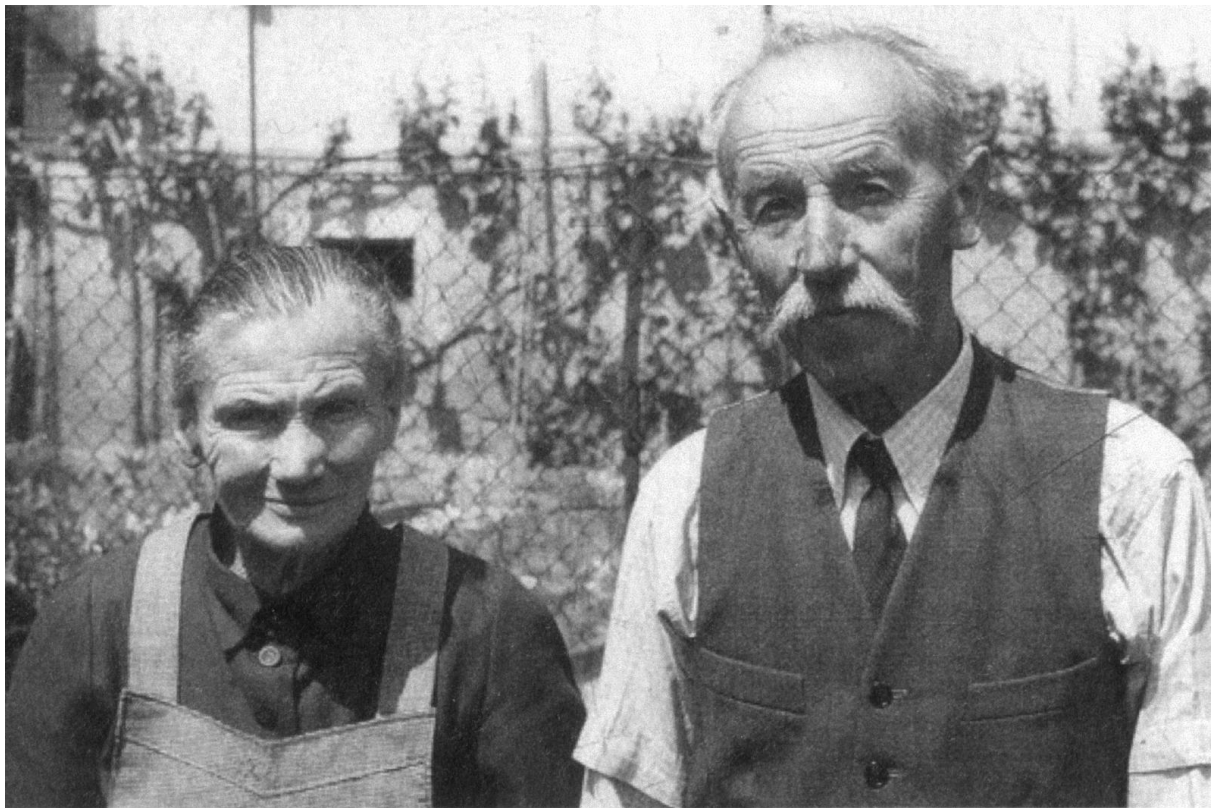
The von Baeyers blending into local life on the Baur farm in Sulz, Vorarlberg, Spring 1945.
Cornelius, Hans Jakob, Renata.



Cornelius and Hans Jakob reunited in Basel, 1945.



Maria and Josef Baur, on their wedding day May 5, 1941, Rankweil, Vorarlberg.



Josef's parents, also named Maria and Josef Baur, on their farm in Sulz, Vorarlberg.



Viktorsberg (Victor's Mountain) seen from the location of the Baur farm in Sulz, Vorarlberg, March 2012.



Cornelius von Baeyer and Martin Baur in the Adler, March 2012.