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A Hole In The Ground

While other visitors to London went to see Buckingham Palace, London Bridge, the Houses of Parliament, and Madame Toussaud's, I went in search of a building. Not only because I had seen the other sights half a dozen times on previous visits, but because it was more important to me personally to look for Bloomsbury House than it was to see Stalin one more time in a wax museum.

Two questions urge themselves on people when I tell them this. They want to know, for one thing, how a building can disappear, adding that even buildings which have been bombed must have a geographic spot on a map so that one can at least say: "Here is where it stood"; and, further, they wonder why it was so all important to locate the place where the house used to stand, or maybe was still standing, that I chose to forgo the pleasure of sightseeing in London. Both questions deserve an answer but I am going to reverse the order.

I left Nazi-occupied Austria in March 1939, one year after the country was overrun by Hitler, and spent the next fourteen months in Hertfordshire, near London. I worked in a cardboard manufacturing plant for the equivalent of 30 cents an hour, which had to suffice for all my needs. Before the beginning of the war with Germany on September 3, 1939, I had been free to go wherever I liked, but once the war was on I, as an alien, needed a special permit to take the train to London, where from time to time I called at Bloomsbury House, near the British Museum, to collect a few second-hand clothes benevolent British people deposited for indigent immigrants.

I never had any trouble finding the place, which was in walking distance from the King's Cross railway station. Despite language difficulties I was able to ask my way to the house which provided me, free of charge, with everything I wore for more than a year, but had no money to pay for. The train fare was all I needed to avoid going to my daily factory job in tatters. From the King's Cross terminal to Bloomsbury House it was a fifteen minute walk, and since I always returned to the train after collecting my clothes, because the authorities issuing my permit insisted on my immediate return, I never saw anything of London during those early war months. Nor would I have had the money for an extended afternoon in the capital.

But when, after the war, most of which I had spent in America, I went back for a visit, I could no longer find my Bloomsbury House, source and symbol of British hospitality and good will. I was told by people in the neighborhood that it had been bombed out, converted, renovated, or under a different management. In reality nobody really seemed to know, or care. A map I bought at the station showed the same streets I had traipsed years earlier, but when I reached the street I knew so well I could see no house which remotely looked like the spot I had set my heart on finding. There were some empty lots, of which postwar London had many, and I concluded that one of them had to be the one I was looking for. But I was not sure, even though