

Meet Bernard Teltscher

by Chris Duckworth

Bernard Teltscher was elected President of the LMBA in 1990, following the resignation of former President Terence Reese, so after 19 years an interview with him is probably long overdue. He invited me to his Chelsea home, where he lives with two adorable long-haired dachshunds, and entertained me with stories about his life for this article.



Bernard was born in Vienna in 1923, though he is actually native to Czechoslovakia. He came to this country in 1938, when his brother was coming to England to study anyway, and his family were astute enough to realise it would be a good idea for the rest of them to join him. At the age of 15 Bernard was sent to a boarding school near the south coast, the name of which he cannot remember, as he stayed there only three days before running away. The public school culture was alien to him, and he was permanently cold! His family relented and his schooling continued in London until he went to university - for a first degree in engineering at University College London, which was actually evacuated to Swansea during the war, then a second degree in economics at Trinity College, Cambridge.

Because of a childhood illness which left him with a limp in one leg, Bernard was deemed unfit for military service during the war, though he did join the Home Guard and later the university Air Squadron. His original intention was to become an electrical engineer in the Air Force, but circumstances changed and instead he joined the family firm of wine importers. The company was started by Bernard's grandfather in 1875, and was subsequently managed by several of his 11 sons – there were no daughters! The eldest surviving son was always the “emperor” of the firm, as Bernard described it, and as Bernard's father was the seventh son it was a while before his turn came to run things. Bernard himself joined the company in 1946 and in due course it became his. The company started importing Yugoslav wines in 1948, which became very popular. At their peak, in about 1980, 2% of all white wine drunk in this country was from Yugoslavia and Teltscher Bros imported 95% of the total. The company was eventually sold to Martini and Rossi in 1991, who sadly wound down the Yugoslav wine imports. But Bernard kept a number of the properties, including a major building in the Isle of Dogs which he turned into a successful Business Centre. This in turn was sold in 2006, just before the current property slump!

Bernard started playing bridge as a young child in 1931, whilst in a sanatorium in Switzerland. Although he had a grandmother, an aunt and several cousins who played, his immediate family did not. He's not exactly sure whether it was auction or contract bridge, but whatever the game, its attraction was lasting. He continued to play bridge at university in Swansea and again in Cambridge. The bridge club re-started there after the war in 1946, during Bernard's second year, and he became first President of the University Bridge Club. He played in the first Oxford v Cambridge Varsity match, which he was pleased to report that Cambridge won.

(They lost the following year, when a certain Alan Truscott played for the Oxford team!) Bernard also restarted the University table tennis club and again they won the first match against Oxford, with Bernard personally beating their first, second and third players.

After graduating, Bernard continued to play bridge at a number of London clubs. These were mostly rubber bridge clubs in those days, and he really only started playing duplicate when he played for his tennis club in a south London league and met a talented 20-year old who had recently taken up the game – this was John Collings! Bernard and his partner teamed up with John and his brother-in-law, who had introduced John to the game having learned himself as a prisoner of war, and together they won the Lady Rose, the main Surrey Teams-of-four Championship in 1954. This was the first of many competitive bridge successes – since then Bernard has won many of the major domestic competitions, including the Spring Foursomes, the Championship Pairs at Brighton, the Lederer – three times – and the Hubert Phillips.

Through his membership of Crockfords Club, Bernard became friendly with Irving Rose, who was the bridge professional there. They played together in a number of events including the Cavendish, the prestigious annual world invitational Pairs competition, where they came last in one session and first in another - that was typical Rose, who Bernard described as his most amusing partner. He has titles for all his bridge partners, and Irving was, of course “The Great Rose” – after whom TGR’s bridge club, originally set up by Bernard along with Howard Cohen, is named. Bernard reckons he learnt most of his bridge technique from “Sir William” – Willie Coyle – and he greatly enjoys playing with “Sir Victor” Silverstone, now a regular partner. But his favourite partner of all is “His Serene Highness, Prince of Quedgley” – Tony Priday. Bernard rates Tony, at almost 87, as still as good a player as any of the younger stars around now. He is also justly pleased that at his own age, his bridge is still as good as it has been at any time over the last 30 years. In fact, he assured me that Sir Victor says he plays better now than he did in his 60s!

	♠ J 6 5	
	♥ A 9 5	
	♦ A K Q 5 4	
	♣ A 4	
♠ Q 10 8 2		♠ 9
♥ J 10 7		♥ 8 6 4 2
♦ J 9		♦ 8 6 3 2
♣ J 9 6 3		♣ K 8 7 5
	♠ A K 7 4 3	
	♥ K Q 3	
	♦ 10 7	
	♣ Q 10 2	

Victor provided this hand which shows Bernard’s sharpness at the table in a 6♠ contract. A club lead would have left him without resource, but West led the ♥J which allowed Bernard to display his skill. He won in hand and played Ace and a low trump, catering for Qxxx with West. Now when West won the ♠Q and played a club Bernard was in control. He rose with the Ace, cashed the Jack of trumps, crossed to hand with a heart and drew the last trump. Next came three rounds of diamonds and a diamond ruff to establish the twelfth trick and Bernard still had ♥A entry to enable it to be cashed.

Bernard has mixed with all the greats of British bridge and is full of stories about them. He recalled an occasion in St Moritz where he was with Rixi Markus and Fritz Gordon. Although they were a long-

standing women's partnership who dominated the game for a period, there was no love lost between the two of them. On this occasion Rixi came to the table after skiing looking particularly tired. Fritzzi solicitously enquired how she was, saying she did not look well. Rixi snapped back "Don't tell me how I look, or I'll tell you how you look". Of course he also knows the current players well too – another anecdote is about Heather Bakhshi, who had just played a session with her husband, David. "How did it go?" Heather was asked. "Oh, very well" she replied "I only cried twice". His favourite story, though, is about a Polish diamond merchant, Leslie Barr, who played rubber Bridge with an English lady called Dodo Davidson. At one stage he stopped and said "Madam, every day you play worse, but today you play like tomorrow"!

Bernard of course sponsors the Lederer, and more recently he has taken on a new sponsorship, that of the Seniors Camrose. This was introduced last year to complement the junior and open home internationals. As there are five countries competing for the title, and an even number of teams is much better for a weekend competition, Bernard brings a Patron's team along to play in this. The team of himself and His Serene Highness Tony Priday, Sir Victor and "Commodore" Chris Dixon, the Learned Doctor Robert Sheehan and "Chief Superintendent Colombo" Colin Simpson came second in last year's inaugural event. If Bernard has an outstanding ambition in bridge, it would be to win this competition. And he probably will, before long!



