

This is a tale of two men. They have seen the best of times, they have seen the worst of times. Both are in their 90s. Both live in London. Both are refugees from Hitler's Nazi regime. Both have remarkable stories to tell. On the eve of Mensa's Diamond celebrations BRIAN PAGE met two of Mensa's oldest members

# A spot of Hocus Pocus

Erwin Brecher sits at a solid desk in the centre of a beautiful book-lined room, high in a splendid home overlooking a sun-drenched Regent's Park. From behind him light streams in from deep windows. It's a striking image. It is, you suspect, meant to be. He pauses for just a few seconds before rising to his feet and offering a hand.

An image of Marlon Brando as the Godfather springs to mind. For a moment Erwin looks like a benign and less weighty Don Corleone. I'm not sure whether to shake his hand or bow and clasp it in supplication.

But this is no Mafia boss. Erwin Brecher is the picture of respectability. He's dressed beautifully for this hot day, in that smart casual that most men simply fail to master. And he's a charming host. He offers light lunch before springing in spritely fashion through to another high-ceilinged, bright and airy room. While we wait for our tea and sandwiches, Erwin settles me into a comfortable armchair and then settles some business.

For some time he has been keen on Mensa Magazine using excerpts from his popular Hocus Pocus series of bridge, chess and logic puzzle books. The details of a deal are quickly and efficiently nailed down and duly noted.

There is no doubt that, as he approaches his 92nd year, Erwin Brecher still has a

brilliant business brain. His attention to detail is absorbing. This might be a minor deal – the tiny amount we are talking about is hardly significant to a man who is more than comfortable in financial terms but he wants to clinch it.

Such tenacity, albeit tenacity with a friendly smile, may well be the reason why Erwin lives today in this lovely apartment in a palatial block in one of London's property hot spots. He has worked hard to create this life. To surround himself with the trappings of success.

Born in Budapest, the young Erwin studied maths, physics, psychology and engineering in Vienna and Czechoslovakia before fleeing to London following the Nazi invasion of Sudetenland.

He spent the war years working in aircraft design before moving into banking. Until his retirement in 1984 he was the chief executive of various financial institutions in Britain, Switzerland and north and south America.

But it is not his business acumen that has made Erwin famous. His fame comes from what he likes to call "my hobby"... writing and publishing puzzle books.

A Google search of his name on the Internet throws up more than 4,000 hits – a staggering figure. Erwin Brecher is big in the puzzles world. It's a fact which clearly delights him.

"Really?" he says when I tell him of my

search results, "more than 4,000. That's really incredible, isn't it." He beams with genuine pleasure. By now we are into our interview seated back at his Don Corleone desk. "I would never have thought," he says, "so many."

Not bad for a hobby, I suggest. Especially one which he did not take seriously until he was aged 79 a time when most men, if they are lucky enough to still be around, are thinking of little more than where they left the Zimmer frame.

"I was always interested in puzzles," he says. "From when I was a boy, since I was 15, I created a lot of puzzles myself. I retired in 1984 and when I was 79 I went back to that."

The result has been 25 books which have appeared in six different languages. They range from lateral logic puzzles, challenging science puzzles to brainteasers.

But perhaps most famous of ail and certainly accounting for the bulk of the Google search results – have been his Hocus Pocus series. These are three books based around two of Erwin's great loves... chess and bridge. Each carry an intriguing set of problems which have attracted countless fans across the world.

"The three Hocus Pocus books have been very popular" Erwin says. "I have attracted a lot of letters from readers and I have a very active correspondence with them. I like that."

Naturally enough, he has combined his hobby and his business mind. After years of collecting royalties from other publishers he decided to set up his own company to publish his books.



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“You write for someone else you have royalties of seven to ten per cent,” he said. “Why not publish them myself and take the profits. It is my work, after all.”

That he has been successful owes much to the fact that his books are far from ordinary – each of them takes a different slant to puzzling, each has an unusual twist.

And they have not only proven popular they have also improved the minds of their readers.

Erwin tells me that Random House conducted research into the techniques outlined in another of his popular books, *The IQ Booster*. Of 39 people surveyed, all saw their IQ ratings boosted after using the book – on average their IQ score went up by 20 per cent.

“Of course,” Erwin says, “you cannot really increase your IQ. From the age of about 16 your IQ is set and does not improve as such. We are talking here

about IQ sophistication, how to look at things in a different way.”

In short, while your IQ doesn’t change, he explains, you ‘learn’ how to do the puzzles put before you.

All of which must have helped him with the Mensa test, which he took a decade ago, shortly after his 80th birthday. It’s not polite, of course, in Mensa circles, to talk actual numbers. Suffice to say that Erwin’s rating is formidably high.

I feel encouraged. His IQ Booster technique, I can appreciate. When I first came to the job as editor of Mensa Magazine, I could do very few of the Tea Break puzzles. Nine years later, having dealt with them month after month, I’ve learned to look for the “pegs” on which the puzzles are built.

“Precisely,” he says. “Buy my book, you will get even better.” He smiles broadly.

So, is this why puzzle books are so popular I ask. Because they give you

such a sense of satisfaction when you can work out the questions. “I think so,” he says. “People like to have their minds challenged, to use their brains, to test themselves.”

And, I ask, could this be the secret of his longevity? “I think it is important, yes, to have an active mind as well as an active body. That certainly helps.”

Active in mind and body himself, Erwin was a great fan of skiing – and played tennis regularly until a few years ago.

Now it is chess and bridge which occupy his time. He plays both frequently – and he must be a formidable opponent.

But then this a determined man. Erwin was doing his national service in the Czech army when the German tanks and planes paved the way for the invasion of the Sudetenland.

He made his way to England via Switzerland – and within three weeks he had a job, as an engineer in south London.

“They were difficult times,” he says. “But we were treated well in England. As soon as war broke out I volunteered for the RAF but they insisted that, as an engineer, I was in a reserved occupation and would be more useful staying at work.”

Erwin’s parents and his brothers had made their way to Paris and, when France was under threat, he managed to get them across to England.

“This country has been good to me,” he said. “I have had a wonderful, rich life, despite all the problems with the Nazis. I am very happy.”

And, while looking back on the past, he is still very much looking forward to the

future. “You keep planning,” he said.

“Why would you not? None of us know how much more time we have but I still have things I want to do.”

This includes finding someone to take over his publishing company. “My children and grandchildren have other things,” he says. “I would like to find someone, a younger person perhaps, who wants to buy into a publishing business that they can run themselves. Perhaps they would like a partnership, then they can take over when I die. I am not looking for a lot of money but it would be nice to know that the business will continue.

“If there is anybody out there who is interested, they should get in touch. We

can talk.”

Yet another of those projects presently occupying his mind is Mensa itself. Erwin is enormously proud of his membership – but he thinks could be improved.

“I have some ideas,” he smiles. “Things which could be done to bring in more members, maybe increase the money coming in. I will send them to you. Perhaps they can make things better. I think you will be interested.

And why not, Erwin Brecher after all, is an interesting man.

He accompanies me to the lift outside his door “Let us hope we meet again,” he says. I think I would rather like that...

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