

AJR journal

Association of Jewish Refugees

Who was Georg Elser?

The brief report in last month's 'Newsround' column that a memorial has been erected in Berlin to Georg Elser, who made an attempt on Hitler's life in Munich on 8 November 1939, probably passed without attracting much attention. The name Elser is almost unknown, certainly when compared to that of Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, instigator of the bomb plot of 20 July 1944. Nevertheless, Elser, an ordinary working man, single-handedly came almost as close to killing Hitler as did Colonel Stauffenberg and his group of army officers, who had the advantage of frequent access to the Führer's person and were motivated, by summer 1944, by the knowledge that Hitler was leading Germany to catastrophe.

Johann Georg Elser was born in the village of Hermaringen in Württemberg on 4 January 1903, the son of a smallholder and timber merchant who only married the boy's mother the following year. He grew up in nearby Königsbronn, left school at 14 and was apprenticed first as a metal worker, then as a carpenter, trades at which he became highly skilled. He changed jobs frequently, but worked mainly as a joiner in clock factories, where he became familiar with timing devices that could be used to detonate explosives. In late 1936 he took a job in an armaments factory, where he had access to ammunition and fuses, and in March 1939 he started work in a quarry, where he added to his stock of explosives and learned about blasting techniques.

Elser was something of a loner, largely unpolitical and with no interest in ideology. He had voted Communist before 1933 and joined a Communist organisation, the Roter Frontkämpferbund, but left it after a couple of years' mostly inactive membership. He did, however, have a strong sense of the rights and interests of ordinary working people, which was to be one of the main motives behind his decision to try to kill Hitler. The remarkable thing about Elser was how unremarkable he was – a working



Bust of Georg Elser (facing Interior Ministry, Berlin)

man among millions of others, distinguished only by his moral conscience and his willingness to act on it.

Elser was angered by the conditions imposed by the Nazi regime on industrial workers, by their low standard of living and the restrictions on their freedoms, which were to be aggravated by the War Economy Decree of 4 September 1939. He was also concerned about the prospects for peace, realising that the Munich agreement of autumn 1938 was but the prelude for further territorial demands by Hitler that would inevitably lead to war. Elser intuitively grasped the objectives of Hitler's policies and decided to act on behalf of the German working class, to remove the Nazi leadership and avoid bloodshed on a massive scale.

The next meeting of Nazi leaders after the watershed of Munich was, as Elser learned from the papers, the annual gathering of party faithful in the Bürgerbräukeller in that same city. Every year, they met to hear Hitler speak there on the anniversary of the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 8 November 1923, an event enshrined in Nazi mythology. Elser travelled to Munich to reconnoitre the hall on the day of the meeting, observing Hitler's arrival and noting

that access to the hall was easy, except after it closed late at night. He decided that the best means of achieving his end was to place an explosive charge in a pillar behind the rostrum where Hitler would speak, using a clockwork timing device to detonate it. Over the following months, he meticulously designed and tested his detonator and timing device and constructed a model of his bomb, revisiting the Bürgerbräukeller in April 1939 to take more detailed measurements and photographs of the pillar.

Elser gave up his job in May, and in early August moved to lodgings in Munich, where he built his bomb, alone and undetected. On 5 August 1939, he started the formidable task of hollowing out a space where he could install his device in the pillar, which beneath its wooden panelling was made of cement. It took him over 30 nights to get the job done. After waiting in the restaurant of the Bürgerbräukeller until it closed, he would conceal himself in a storeroom while everyone else left, then set to work for three or four hours. He had to remove a section of the wooden panelling and hinge it, then chisel out a hole in the cement, working on his knees for lack of space; over time his knees went septic. By early morning, he had to remove the rubble in bags, cover over all traces of his labours and return to his hiding-place before the personnel arrived.

Elser went to great lengths to ensure that his device worked. He fitted his contraption with two clocks attached to a triple detonator and lined the hinged opening in the pillar with tin, to avoid the device being damaged by someone nailing a notice to it, and with cork, to muffle the ticking of the clocks. He finished work on the night of 6 November 1939 and left Munich to stay with his sister in Stuttgart, telling her that he was leaving illegally for Switzerland. But he returned once more to the Bürgerbräukeller on 7 November, to check that the mechanism was functioning properly. On the evening of 8 November, Elser was detained while

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Thank-Offering to Britain Research Fellowship

The British Academy Thank-Offering to Britain Fellowship for 2008/09 has been awarded to Dr Patricia Clavin, Fellow in History at Jesus College, Oxford, to carry out research on the role of the League of Nations in fostering international economic, financial and social co-operation. The Fellowship has been funded for some 40 years by money raised by the refugees from Nazi Germany through the Thank-You Britain Fund, administered by the AJR, which had raised £96,000 when it was handed over to the British Academy in 1965. The Fellowship aims to provide a year's research leave for an established scholar to bring a major piece of research towards completion. Dr Clavin has already written about one of the most distinguished refugee scholars, Professor Moritz Bonn, himself a contributor to the Thank-You Britain Fund. Dr Clavin writes:

There has always been more to the history of the League of Nations than its spectacular

failure to preserve peace in the interwar period. Its earliest historians recognised the importance of aspects of its humanitarian work, none more so than the contribution of the Norwegian Arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen, the League's High Commissioner for the repatriation of prisoners-of-war. Within a year of his appointment in 1920, he and his three assistants helped return 430,000 men from Russia to their homes in 26 countries, and the Nansen International Office became the world's first inter-governmental agency charged with refugee assistance and protection. It gave its name to the Nansen passport – the paper lifeline that enabled many stateless refugees, including ex-German Jews, to travel in the 1930s.

But there are other elements of the League's humanitarian work which are much less well-known, notably its contribution to international economic and financial relations. My research project will recover

the lost history of the Economic and Financial Organisation of the League (EFO), the single largest agency in the League after the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. As the world economy enters a new dark phase, the research project could not be more timely.

Based on archival research in the little used archives of the League of Nations in Geneva and on national and private collections of papers in Britain, France, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany and Australia, this project explores the League's pivotal role in the creation of a new architecture of international economic, financial and social co-operation in the middle of the twentieth century. The economists who worked for the EFO read like a *Who's Who* of modern economics: Gottfried Haberler, Gustav Cassel, Bertil Ohlin, Jan Tinbergen, Tjalling Koopmans and James Meade.

But the EFO did more than help to

continued opposite

WHO WAS GEORG ELSER? *continued from page 1*

trying to cross the Swiss border with an out-of-date crossing pass.

At first, luck was with Elser's enterprise, for Hitler had decided not to attend the anniversary celebrations in Munich, but had changed his mind at the last minute. Elser knew that Hitler's annual speech for the occasion took about an hour and a half, lasting roughly from 8.30 to 10 pm. Accordingly, he set his device to explode at 9.20. But Hitler had to shorten his speech, to hurry back to Berlin for urgent consultations with his military chiefs; he spoke for just under an hour, ending at 9.07, and left at once for the capital. So when Elser's bomb exploded immediately behind the dais where Hitler had been standing, killing seven people and injuring many more, it missed the Führer by less than 13 minutes. Elser, inspired by his sense of social justice and simple religious faith, had come within a whisker of decapitating Nazi Germany almost before the Second World War had begun in earnest.

The German security authorities, unable to believe that the bomb had been the work of a single man – and a German worker, at that – were slow to accept that Elser was responsible for it; he had fallen into their custody largely by chance. They consequently peddled the line that the bomb plot had been the work of the British secret service, fuelling a wave of support for the Führer after his 'providential' escape. They

were helped in this deception by an entirely unrelated event, the capture on 9 November 1939 of two British agents, Captain S. Payne Best and Major R. H. Stevens, at Venlo on the Dutch-German border.

Elser confessed on 14 November. He was detained at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, presumably to be used after victory over Britain in a show trial to incriminate the British intelligence service. He was later sent to Dachau, where on 9 April 1945, with victory over Britain a lost hope, he was murdered. This is where the widespread ignorance about Elser has its roots, for he was not able to counter the false accounts of his activities that were current in the post-war years and that contributed to his exclusion from the pantheon of German resistance.

In his book *Venlo Incident* (1950), Captain Best, who had survived Sachsenhausen, where he met Elser, maintained that Elser was a mere pawn acting at the behest of the Nazis; so did Pastor Martin Niemöller. Early standard works like Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* and William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* took a similar line. It was not until 1969 that an article by Anton Hoch in the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* proved conclusively that Elser had been the lone perpetrator of the attempt on Hitler's life in the Bürgerbräukeller. The following year saw the

publication of the transcript of Elser's interrogation, which further set the record straight. Now, every standard work on Hitler and Nazi Germany devotes a few pages to Elser's feat of courage and ingenuity.

I first came across Elser in J. P. Stern's book *Hitler: The Führer and the People* (1975). Stern, a Jewish refugee born in Prague, was a distinguished scholar famous for his studies of German nineteenth-century literature. His study of Hitler contains a chapter on Elser, in which he argues that it was Elser, the provincial nobody of semi-legitimate birth, who was Hitler's 'true antagonist', not the right-wing officers who launched the bomb plot in July 1944. This may have been straining a point, but it helped to rehabilitate a good man who followed the behest of his conscience and who deserves to be better known than he is.

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The getting of wisdom — the hard way

I'd have preferred the dreaming spires — of course I would. But I was 52 years old with a busy full-time job. I won't add 'and a home to run' for, as all my friends know to their cost, I've never been much of a home-runner. And there it was, a tantalising option, the brain-child of Jennie Lee, still in its infancy: the Open University.

The temptation was great. I'd always regretted my lack of education, had always felt inferior to university graduates, and here was my chance of obtaining a degree in my own time. But would I be able to do it? Wasn't I too old? Should I even consider it? I dithered but my husband encouraged me. He thought I should, and could, do it. I applied and was accepted.

So, in January 1972, at the beginning of the OU's academic year, I started my career as a mature — not as mature as I am now, but mature enough — student. The Arts Foundation Course was my obvious choice for the first year. When I presented myself for our first session I felt much as I had, not quite six years old, on my first day at school. I met my fellow students and was introduced to my tutor and counsellor. There were some people of about my age but not many. Most were in their thirties and forties, white and middle class. If the government had hoped to attract ethnic minorities, preferably working class, it had failed.

The teaching was mainly by correspondence, with some supplementary TV and radio broadcasts and monthly tutorials. I began to lead a double life. During office hours, I was in charge of an office, signed cheques for large amounts, smiled at VIPs my boss had asked me to 'charm'. At night, I worked furiously on my assignments — we had to submit at least six essays of about 2,000 words during the academic year — drafting and redrafting, all on my little portable typewriter. No

cutting and pasting then! And, of course, I read. I read on trains and buses. I read during my lunch hour. I read in libraries. I did much of my research in the old Guildhall Library, which was close to my office.

Like an adolescent, I waited anxiously for the return of my marked essays. An A was a cause for celebration, the very occasional C one for deep depression, a B one for quiet satisfaction. I was mostly a B student.

In October it was exam time and I was as nervous as if something really depended on the result, for which we had to wait until Christmas. I passed and could now move on to second-level courses.

We still had holidays abroad at least twice a year. Sometimes I contrived to combine leisure with my studies. When I was doing the 'Renaissance and Reformation' course we went to Florence and visited as many churches and art galleries as we could cram into a week. While doing 'The Age of Revolutions', I looked at every neo-classical painting, from David to Delacroix, in the Louvre.

For my third-level courses I concentrated on literature. I got through 'The 19th Century Novel', 'World Drama' and '20th Century Poetry'. I learned what T. S. Eliot thought of the Jews and Philip Larkin of mums and dads (not printable in this journal). I also did a course on 'Religions of the World', which only confirmed me in my agnosticism.

My diary entry for 3 June 1978 reads: 'Al. Pal. Hot sticky day.' My proud husband beside me — and indeed it was his achievement as much as mine for, without his selfless support, I'd have never been able to do it — I was awarded my degree at the old Alexandra Palace. When I get the odd communication from my alma mater, with BA (Hons) after my name, I still think they can't mean me.

Edith Argy

THANK-OFFERING TO BRITAIN RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP *continued*

generate new economic ideas and a pioneering set of statistical studies that are still used today. It was a forceful advocate in inter-governmental negotiations of the need for international organisations to help nation-states to co-ordinate their economic and financial policies. Its ideas helped give rise to such pillars of the post-1945 economic system as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (today's World Trade Organisation), and to the European Economic Community (Jean Monnet also worked for the EFO).

The EFO was also concerned to connect its activities to what it called the 'common

people', launching pioneering enquiries into world nutrition and poverty and developing a new language of global economic entitlement. This work was important for the global development movement. The EFO's guiding objective, as its report on *The Transition from War to Peace Economy* (1943) made clear, was 'the fullest possible use of the resources of production, human and material, of the skill and enterprise of the individual, so as to attain and maintain in all countries a stable economy and rising standards of living.' These words remain relevant today as the world economy enters a new phase where the key to recovery remains international co-operation.

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FROM KRISTALLNACHT

Recollections of Kristallnacht FRED BARSCHAK

Merely to have seen, at the age of seven years and eight months and 25 yards from my bedroom window, the setting on fire of the famous Schiffschul, one of Vienna's 23 synagogues, and the desecration of its contents does not in itself confer any particular expertise on the subject of Kristallnacht. It does, however, lend a certain perspective to one's recollections.

The term Kristallnacht is, of course, a complete misnomer since the destruction of some 800 synagogues and *shtiebels* in Germany and Austria effectively shattered the spiritual and communal life of these communities far more than the smashing of the plate glass of the shop windows.

The best general remark I ever heard was that of Chief Rabbi Jakobovits, who on the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988 said that those who burned synagogues and books would never rest until they had burned the bodies of those who read the books.

Was there any help from non-Jewish neighbours? I know of three such instances. First, after the initial night, we moved out of my father's hotel and restaurant (Hotel Barschak), located in the 2nd district, which in Vienna was the epicentre of the violence and arrests, and stayed for three or four nights in a flat in Floridsdorf belonging to a non-Jewish Social Democrat. Second, in the 3rd district a small group of Hitler Youth were running around a block of flats in order to mislead a crowd of Nazis, SA and Gestapo, shouting 'No Jews here!'

But perhaps the most incredible account is given by a friend of mine who tells of his father having been arrested on the first day and having left him, aged five, in the care of grandparents. Following the mandatory beating, an SS officer (no less) asked his father why he was shaking. He said he was worried he had had to leave a five-year-old to fend for himself – which was, of course, not strictly true. The SS man looked around, then said: 'Right, clear off!' (perhaps using a more vulgar expression). Father and son finally reached England.

Most of the evidence points either to indifference on the part of the vast majority of the non-Jewish population or even, in some instances, to participation. If they had objections, it was due principally to the breakdown of order. And when the figure of '92 dead' is trotted out, one should never forget to add to this number the 1,000 or so victims who perished as detainees, mostly in Dachau within two months, as a result of the 'treatment'.

The immediate result of Kristallnacht was mass panic, especially of parents of young children, and a desperate attempt, represented by the Kindertransports, to get the children out.

Kristallnacht actually saved Jewish lives, especially in Germany. Austrian Jews, having experienced violence from day one of the Nazi takeover, needed no special impe-

tus to emigrate, but thousands of German Jews who had come to believe that Nazism would sooner or later moderate, now made huge efforts to leave. Over 120,000 Jews left Germany between 1938 and 1939; some 170,000 German Jews and 63,000 Austrian Jews perished.

These events also influenced the larger political scene, in particular bringing about a massive change of public opinion in England.

One of the original Righteous Gentiles META ROSENEIL

Shabbat 12 November 1938. We knew all Jewish men were being picked up and we awaited the dreaded knock on the door.

Just seven years old, I was instructed to answer the door of our apartment and say 'Papa ist nicht zuhause.' We were extremely fortunate that the person at the door was an old-fashioned policeman, surprisingly untainted by the Nazi ethos. He asked me to bring Mutti to the door and gently explained to her that if he returned without the person on his list, someone from the SS or the Gestapo would turn up with predictable results, perhaps even trashing the apartment in their fury.

It was obvious that this man was ashamed of his odious errand but had a duty to perform. He came in and immediately did his best for us all, especially my father.

Right away he told him to take off his Sabbath suit, put on warm underwear and take just a few bare essentials in a small briefcase. There would be some arduous walking to undertake, he said, and 'You don't want to be lumbered with a heavy suitcase.'

He then told my father to give power of attorney to my mother so she would have access to money in the bank. He also advised my mother not to carry large amounts of cash in her handbag but to conceal it in her corset on her person for safety.

Finally – and this really shows how humane this elderly policeman was, how ill-fitted he was to his current mission, and how completely out of kilter he was with his Nazi colleagues – he said that in order to spare my father embarrassment at having to walk past neighbours with a policeman at his side, he would follow some paces behind him.

We always wondered what happened to this kindly man. He was one of the original Righteous Gentiles and it is doubtful whether he himself survived the Nazi scourge.

We subsequently learned that my father, together with many other Jewish Frankfurters, was assembled in the local Festhalle, where many indignities were heaped upon them before they were all shipped off to Buchenwald.

In the following days, my mother began the mammoth task of finding ways and means to get him out of Buchenwald and it

is to her great credit that she managed this in only six weeks. When a visa to leave Germany was sent to the authorities, we received a card saying he would be released 'if he is still alive'. But that is another story ...

Miraculous intervention MARTHA BLEND

I remember, as though it were yesterday, my mother saying 'You're going to go to England.' What did I, a nine-year-old, know of England? That there was a picture in the newspaper of a man called a king with a crown on his head and that my pencil bore the legend 'Made in England'. As an only child who had never been away from home, the prospect of going there left me in a flood of tears.

I knew by then that my parents, like all the Jews of our acquaintance, were desperate to get away from Austria after the Anschluss. The reason was obvious: the poisonous copies of *Der Stürmer* with its obscene caricatures of Jews on sale at every street corner; the ranting voice of Hitler spewing out hate; the swastika banners on every building; the lorry loads of aggressive Brownshirts sweeping by as you walked along; and the final outrage – the burning of our synagogue on Kristallnacht and the abduction of my father by the SS.

There had been talk of a possible emigration to Palestine or of my mother coming to England as a domestic but neither scheme materialised so, as a last resort, my parents took the decision which saved my life. I gather that our GP, Dr Singer, knew of a couple in England who were willing to foster a child and he gave their address to my parents. Soon letters began to arrive from a well-set couple (they sent photographs of themselves) who assured my parents they would take good care of me. That must have been some comfort to them – but not to me.

Then came an appointment for a rather cursory medical examination, which I presume I passed, and my departure, late one June evening in 1939, from a Vienna railway station. The *départure*, with our strict instructions not to be emotional, I have described in my book *A Child Alone*. I know what it felt like for me but I do wonder, looking back on the experience, what it felt like for my mother after she left me on the train and for all the mothers who had to make their way home after that fateful parting.

It was many years later that a phone call from a colleague at the school where I was then teaching helped me to discover that I had come to England through an organisation known as the Kindertransport and that there was to be a reunion of the Kinder, now in their sixties, organised by someone called Bertha Leverton. I recognise now the full extent of the miraculous intervention which saved 10,000 children and how lucky I was to have been one of them, and I grieve for my young cousins and the other children who were not so lucky.

TO KINDERTRANSPORT

An Historic Day

'My heart goes out to those among you who, all those years ago, came to a country where you knew nobody and whose language many of you did not speak. I can hardly begin to imagine your sense of bewilderment nor the unbearable agony of separation from your loved ones. And yet, seventy years later, you are parents and grandparents, joined at this important commemoration by those whose lives owe everything to your own survival.'

– HRH The Prince of Wales



Bertha Leverton, founder in 1988 of the Reunion of Kindertransport, with HRH The Prince of Wales



Kindertransport Committee Chairman Erich Reich and HRH The Prince of Wales



AJR Chairman Andrew Kaufman presented HRH The Prince of Wales with a small-scale model of the commemorative statue, designed and donated by Frank Meisler, at London's Liverpool Street Station



Lord Attenborough recalled how he and his family had taken two German-Jewish refugees to their hearts



Former Kindertransport Chairman Hermann Hirschberger presented results of a Kinder Questionnaire



Sir Martin Gilbert provided an historical background to the Kindertransports

By any standards, the 70 Years of Kindertransport Reunion, at the JFS in north-west London on Sunday 23 November, was a resounding success. Almost 600 people, including guests from Israel, the USA, Germany and elsewhere, were present on the day, 20 years after the first Kindertransport Reunion founded by Bertha Leverton.

The guests were greeted by Erich Reich, Chairman of the AJR's Kindertransport Committee, who told those present that 'We are celebrating one of the most important decisions ever taken by the British Government. Thanks to its intervention, some 10,000 children, myself included, were saved from certain death.'

Following a deeply moving service of remembrance by Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sachs and Reverend Bernd Koschland, himself a Kind, Tony McNulty MP, Minister of State for Welfare Reform, emphasised Britain's unique status in offering a home to the Kinder. 'We remember because we must!', he concluded.



The Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sachs and Reverend Bernd Koschland gave a moving service of remembrance

Perhaps the most moving address of the day was that by Lord Attenborough, who, in hushed tones, told of his family's love for the two German-Jewish sisters they adopted.

Lord Janner's impassioned address, drawing attention to the presence of resurgent antisemitism in Europe, was followed by a keynote speech by Sir Martin Gilbert, setting the Kindertransports in historical perspective.

Later in the day, after a lively klezmer concert by Shir, Stephen Smith gave a presentation on the Holocaust Centre's new exhibition for primary school children: *The Journey: Children of the Holocaust*.

Former Kindertransport Chairman Hermann Hirschberger then presented the results of a Kindertransport Questionnaire. Perhaps his most unexpected result was that considerably more children were reunited with their parents than had previously been thought.

A fascinating Question and Answer Session with a panel consisting of Lady Jakobovits, Lord Dubs, Bertha Leverton, Hermann Hirschberger and Linda Rosenblatt, with Edwina Currie in the chair, took questions from the floor.

Undoubtedly the highlight of the day for many Kinder was the appearance of guest of honour HRH The Prince of Wales, who spoke individually to a number of Kinder.

That the Reunion was such a great success was due in particular to the considerable organisational work of Erich Reich, Bernd Koschland, Gordon Greenfield, Michael Newman, Andrea Goodmaker, and the planning committee.

HS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Editor reserves the right
to shorten correspondence
submitted for publication

KINDERTRANSPORT REUNION – A GREAT DAY

Sir – While the euphoria is still with me, I want to tell you how very impressed my family and I were with the 70th Reunion of Kindertransport at the JFS in London. All of us who came here on a Kindertransport at that awful time in 1938-39 owe gratitude not only to those who took us in – and that has been expressed in many places and many times – but also to the AJR and the Kindertransport Reunion for helping to keep the knowledge of this unique event alive.

Erich Reich and his committee did marvels in organising things so well yet managing to keep the atmosphere so informal and friendly. It was wonderful to meet so many friends once more and to hear even more amazing stories – there is clearly an endless supply of these! The speakers were moving and informative and the Chief Rabbi's address brought me and many of us to tears. It was a particular pleasure to see Bertha again: she is a true example to us all.

My decision to bring second- and third-generation family members with me for the day turns out to have been a good one. My 12-year-old granddaughter listened with rapt attention to everything that went on and will surely never forget this day. The presence among us, and happily sharing our tea, of HRH The Prince of Wales, was a thrilling bonus and will be remembered with much pleasure. All in all, a great day and my thanks go to everyone concerned.

Dorothy Fleming, Sheffield

Sir – My son Paul and I took part in the emotional, memorable and wonderful celebration, which was enjoyed by about 560 present. Thanks must go to all who made this event possible and organised it so well. We will always remember this wonderful event.

Josie Dutch, London NW2

Sir – Thank you so much for providing such a wonderful and inspiring programme at the celebration of 70 years of the Kindertransport. The organisation was impeccable and we all enjoyed a most impressive and memorable day.

I feel, however, that there was a most regrettable omission in that there was no mention of the great contribution Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld made in saving hundreds if not thousands of children from Austria, Germany and Czecho-

slovakia, some brought in personally under the noses of the Nazis at great risk to his own life.

My husband, Shmuel ben Yehuda Leib Borger, came to England from Vienna aged only eight with his two sisters in a group organised by Rabbi Schonfeld, who afterwards set up the Jewish Schools Movement and cared about and remembered each and every one of the children he saved.

All those Kinder and their descendants owe a great debt of gratitude to him for his valiant efforts on their behalf during this terrible time in history.

Thanks once again and very best wishes to Bertha Leverton and everyone concerned for providing us all with such wonderful memories of a fantastic event.

(Mrs) Betty Borger, London N16

Erich Reich, Chairman, Kindertransport Anniversary Committee: The 70th Kindertransport Anniversary Celebration was planned as an event to celebrate and thank those involved in obtaining permission from the then British Government to allow as many vulnerable children into the UK as possible. It was not meant to highlight any particular 'heroes' who made such spectacular efforts in helping children to get here once the 10,000 permits were granted. I very much regret that Mrs Borger feels we did not show appropriate appreciation for the wonderful work carried out by Rabbi Dr Schonfeld.

SUPPING WITH THE DEVIL

Sir – Regarding Mr Konrad's article 'Supping with the Devil' (November), I am Samu Stern's grandson. We lived in the same household in 1944 and, as a 17-year old, I was privy to much information about his meetings with Eichmann and the authorities of the time.

It is true that the members of the Judenrat did not spread the news about Auschwitz when they realised that the Jews throughout Hungary were being deported to that horrible destination. It has been documented that the details of the deportations, which identified their final destination, reached the Council shortly after the start of the deportations on 15 May 1944. They came from information provided by the Slovak railways to an orthodox rabbi in Nitra (Michael Weissmandl), who forwarded it to Fulop Freudiger, a Council member in Budapest. When the Council members confronted Eichmann with the information they received, he acknowledged the transports but insisted that their destina-

tions were humanitarian German labour camps. He also warned my grandfather and the other Council members that if they were to spread their false 'horror stories' across the country, all the Council members and their families would be arrested, deported and possibly killed.

I vividly remember that I personally knew about the destination of the trains but I believed Eichmann's threat. I was worried that if I told other people what I knew, my information might trigger a widespread rumour and I might become responsible for the arrest and death of my family. When I questioned my grandfather about this issue, he said I shouldn't feel guilty because in Poland, where Jews had revolted when they learned about the death camps, their uprising triggered massive German reprisals and very few people survived.

My second comment is about the Kasztner train. I was on Kasztner's list with my parents but we decided not to go and transferred our places to relatives. It is a widely held misconception that this was a train for the rich. Paying passengers were a minority and they actually saved the lives of more than 1,000 non-paying Jews by putting up the money the Germans demanded. Anna Porter writes in her book *Kasztner's Train* (p. 233): 'There were Slovak and Polish refugees, Communists and Conservatives, Neologs and Orthodox young halutzim who have trained for the aliya and were singing in newly learned Hebrew, and seventeen Polish and about forty Hungarian orphans.' The selection was made by the Zionist leadership and those who worked for the movement were certainly given preference. There were also well-known writers, musicians, singers and scientists on the train – certainly not overly wealthy people. The majority of the people spent more than four months in Bergen-Belsen before being transferred to Switzerland. Almost everybody survived.

Mr Konrad's conclusion that resistance by the Jews could have 'led to a halt of the deportations' is wrong. The fate of the Polish Jews shows it. Only Regent Horthy could have stopped the deportations, which he actually did on 8 July. Unfortunately, by that time 460,000 Jews had been deported. But 140,000 were saved.

Andrew Elek

Toronto, Canada

Sir – I refer to George Donath's letter (December) in partial response to my article about Eichmann, Samu Stern and Rudolf Kasztner. I agree with everything he says about the disbelief of Hungarian Jews concerning being exposed to deportation and worse. It is equally true that all men of 'arms-bearing' age were by then part of the Todt forced labour battalions. But I maintain that had the Jews in the Hungarian provinces known of the fate awaiting them in Auschwitz, they would have resisted deportation and it was Samu Stern's sole responsibility that they were kept in ignorance.

It is also incorrect to make an exclusive

connection between Kasztner's train and Zionism. I know for a fact that places on the train were readily offered for money in the offices of the Jewish Council. I also know that some leading Zionists (like Kato Kiss of the *Pester Lloyd* newspaper, an erstwhile colleague of my mother) were refused a place on the train if unable to pay.

Thomas Edmund Konrad
London NW3

AUSTRIANS REVISITED

Sir – Eric Sanders' strong reaction to my letter (November) is hardly warranted. I did not allude to anyone in particular. I also fail to understand why he should refer to me as a survivor in inverted commas – that's a bit rich, coming from someone who saw the war out here, surrounded by his family.

Contrary to what he asserts, it would be silly of me to turn my nose up at Austrian confection. It is only certain Lederhosen-clad individuals that I find unappetising: we had a taste of it recently, on the occasion of Haider's funeral. In fact, not only am I partial to Sachertorte and the celebrated millefeuille, but to Zwetschgenknödel as well – the way my wife's aunt from Galicia, then Vienna and finally Brooklyn, used to make it.

Mr Sanders lauds 'a man called Wiesenthal' for choosing Austria, but I know of a man from Austria called Schwarzenegger who chose California.

Actually, Wiesenthal could have done with the 'Terminator' when there, as he had to have a bodyguard. And opting for Israel as his resting place says it all. Wiesenthal was there because of his work and not because he was smitten with the place – and, after all, that's where the Nazis were.

Mr Sanders also states that 15,000 Jews live in Austria. Actually, most originate from needy countries like Ukraine and those who turn Israel down go to Austria and Germany, and they are not all Jewish. Furthermore, Israel recalled its ambassador since Haider.

How profound of him to proclaim that Torte is not anti-Semitic and that mountains did not participate in Jew-bashing, as if I would have it in for a wedge of cake or a range of hills. Though as a keen former skier, I spurned the Tyrol in favour of more benign Alpine regions – I mean people, not rocks! On one such trip, my wife and I were fully laden with three children and equipment and, as we were near the German-Austrian border, I decided to drive into Garmisch-Partenkirchen to explore the former Nazi stamping ground. But as there was little snow at Garmisch we crossed over into Austria to Lermoos to look for snow. The children chatted excitedly in the cable-car, in the only language they know. A bunch of local rowdies responded, subjecting us to Nazi marching songs I last heard during the war. Others joined in the fun. The atmosphere was reminiscent of a Munich Bierkeller. Whether they took us for Jews, as distinct from foreigners, I cannot say, but it would not surprise me.

I realise Lermoos is hardly the most cosmopolitan of places, but it is the *real Österreich* – off the tourist trail.

I could never make myself go to Vienna, a city whose people were at the spearhead of Nazi barbarism and where my father and brother died. I did, however, go with the AJR to Berlin, where we were welcomed by the deputy Bürgermeister with champagne cocktails. After the formalities, he mingled with the guests. He could easily tell I was not German-born and was intrigued to know where I learned the language. I had to tell him I picked it up as a youngster, from the Nazis in wartime Poland. Clearly taken aback, he smiled politely and moved on to the next person without uttering a word. As he was a fairly young man, I regretted having to make him feel uneasy, but it is a legacy that the Germans have to live with and do largely face up to – though not so the Austrians.

Rubin Katz, London NW11

STARING INTO THE ABYSS

Sir – I am most intrigued to have had the dubious accolade of an extreme right-wing propagandist bestowed upon me by Francis Deutsch (December, Letters). To reply to his inconsistencies is unnecessary but, just to make my position clear: as an offspring of a middle-class Viennese family I believed in Socialism, like most of my tribe. I recall that the minute I heard on the radio that the then Labour leader John Smith had died, I predicted that Tony Blair would be the next prime minister.

I was actively supporting Labour and Tony's election represented the zenith of my aspirations and hope. I was not alone. However, as Edward Heath remarked, eventually such people will fall from grace and the higher they climb, the further they fall. So did Margaret Thatcher, presiding over a more than 15 per cent bank rate, after decimating British industry, making pariahs of producers, and propelling the people into pencil-pushers.

The do-gooders and the self-appointed human rights activists have made common cause with 'asylum seekers', turning themselves into Israel-haters and anti-Semites. There is no room for them in our Association: they did not experience our plight. To compare our fate with that of others is odious.

The universal financial disaster was brought about by a handful of crooked American bankers, offering 125 per cent mortgages without collateral, being supported by many of the world's banks, and rushing to make a fast buck in return for worthless papers. The result is universal impoverishment with all wrongdoers escaping punishment!

Our home-grown left-wing rulers, following the US right-wing president, have shown themselves totally incapable of foreseeing this all-embracing disaster. They were aided and abetted by their respective parliament by showering the wrong-doing banks with multi-billion pounds and dollars – yes, *our* money, all of which has disappeared into large black

holes. Nothing – absolutely nothing – has been changed by their actions, certainly the ultimate mismanagement by the respective nations' economists. The disaster we are facing was man-made. We are paying the price for falsely putting our trust into our rulers' hands and into the banks which have robbed us of our money. We are staring into the abyss.

As Britain follows where America leads, this country will be led by people who are not likely to be sympathetic to us. England's slave trade has seen to this. There will be no reversal of the avalanche to come. Democracy, for what it is worth, will be confined to the history books. Our grandchildren's grandchildren will envy the good life we are experiencing at present. By then, however, the majority will have escaped to the only country that will accept them with open arms – Israel. May God save us and future generations, though He has not saved six millions of His chosen people!

Fred Stern, Wembley, Middx

JEW AS 'VICTIMS'

Sir – A Jewish friend of mine recently told me he was fed up with the Jews in the Diaspora always being seen as 'victims'. He blames this on the amount of coverage there is in synagogues, the press, books, films and theatre on the Holocaust.

He gave Kristallnacht as an example. He upset me. I was a Holocaust survivor, albeit I was only three years old when we fled from Vienna to London. I don't want the Holocaust ever to be forgotten. However, having had time to reflect on my friend's remarks, I am beginning to understand where he is coming from. Jews have won more Nobel prizes than any other group of people of our size. We are outstanding in the fields of science, the arts, business. Our doctors, lawyers, accountants are among the best. Many of our writers, musicians, film directors, actors have become legends. At one time, we had four Jews in Mrs Thatcher's cabinet. We have great captains of industry, running some of the largest companies in the country. So should we try to stop being seen as 'victims' and speak out more about our many achievements?

Peter Phillips, Loudwater, Herts

INTER-FAITH HARMONY

Sir – According to a letter in *The Guardian* (15 November), the Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Museum of Tolerance is to be constructed over a Muslim heritage cemetery in the centre of Jerusalem, the Supreme Court having so decided after two years of public outcry (including by Orthodox Jews) and legal challenges.

We wonder if this is a hoax in the spirit of *Catch 22* and *Monty Python*. If it's factual, we eagerly await a lyrical outburst from the Israel-can-do-no-wrong groupies on how this will contribute to inter-faith harmony. And indeed tolerance.

Joyce and George Schlesinger
Durham

ART NOTES

Gloria Tessler

Like his modern successor Saddam Hussein, Nebuchadnezzar wanted his city and his name to last forever. But was this emperor, who ruled from 605-562BC, the cruel tyrant described in the Old Testament – or was his name confused with that of the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus? According to the **British Museum's** current exhibition, **Babylon**, the Bible has got it wrong. It blames Nebuchadnezzar rightly for the sack of Jerusalem and the consequent Jewish exile to Babylon in 587 BC, but thereafter muddles him up with his cruel successor.

If true, this biblical mistake has penetrated the work of artists like **William**



The Tower of Babel 1595, oil on panel by Lucas van Valckenborch. Photograph © Mittelrhein-Museum Koblenz

Blake, who drew Nebuchadnezzar on all fours, condemned by the prophet Daniel to live 'as a beast in the field'. But, the Museum claims, Nebuchadnezzar was not such a bad guy, who merely behaved as all emperors did towards the Jews. It was standard imperial policy to expose exiles to Mesopotamian culture and some, like Daniel, were upgraded into an elite class of dream interpreters, scribes and cuneiform handwriting experts.

The story of Babylon comes to life through artefacts and oil paintings loaned from Paris and Berlin and from the Museum's own collection. They include glazed brick panels embossed with lions, never previously shown in Britain, and cuneiform tablets discussing subsistence rations for Jehoiachin, exiled king of Judah.

Works by **Rembrandt, Dürer** and

John Martin portray Daniel in the lions' den or Belshazzar's Feast. There are many versions of the doomed Tower of Babel, including **Lucas van Valckenborch's** menacing edifice and an etching of the crumbling tower by **Cornelis Anthonisz**. A large painting by the pre-Raphaelite artist **Evelyn de Morgan** shows the exiles – mainly women – hanging up their harps on willow trees.

But, despite their portrayal by many sixteenth-century Flemish and Dutch artists, the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon probably never existed: they are merely tiered roof gardens with eucalyptus and pine trees. However, Babylonian thought has bequeathed us maths and astrology – the division of the day and the signs of the zodiac. We also learn that Saddam Hussein built his modern palace on the ruins of the ancient city, but US military bases there in 2003 created more permanent damage.

Byzantium is the ultimate symbol of religious, cultural and artistic diversity, for which it became the envy of the world. Gilded churches containing icons of the most stunning beauty led visitors to believe they had entered heaven on earth. **Byzantium 330-1453** at the **Royal Academy** traces the history of this artistic superpower, built by Constantine the Great in 330 from the ashes of Old Rome.

The famous icons were banned during the time of Iconoclasm in the eighth century but returned with the rise of Christian Orthodoxy, and artistic links between Byzantium and the early Italian Renaissance in the Middle Ages spread throughout the Middle East and Europe.

The exhibition is worth seeing for the beauty, colour and detail of so many religious symbols, including devotional icons from the Monastery of St Catherine, built on the spot where Moses took off his sandals before the Burning Bush.

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CONTEMPORARY PAINTING
AND SCULPTURE

REVIEWS

FILM

Maria's seven years' war

STEALING KLIMT

directed by Jane Chablani

2007, English and German with English subtitles

The mystery of a woman painted by the modernist artist Gustav Klimt has sparked a historical battle between her heirs and the post-war Austrian government and inspired this documentary about one of the greatest Nazi art thefts in the history of the Third Reich.

The film, shown as part of the UK Jewish Film Festival, describes the seven-year legal tussle between 90-year-old Maria Altmann, heiress to five Klimt paintings, and the entrenched Austrian post-war regime, which refused to hand them back. The Austrians claimed – without legal backing – that the paintings had been willed to the state. Although Altmann was eventually successful in her bid and the Austrian government grudgingly relinquished them, the sale of the paintings drew fire from the art world, which inexplicably felt that her status as refugee-turned-successful litigant should inspire her to donate all the works to public institutions.

The Altmanns escaped wartime Austria, came to Britain, and eventually settled in the US. But the paintings, family heirlooms from a privileged Jewish background, had already been confiscated by Hitler, the failed artist who prided himself on being one of the world's biggest art collectors – even if they were all pillaged from his victims.

Describing how the battle was fought and won, the film begins with the story of Maria's aunt, Adele Bloch-Bauer, a brunette beauty who modelled for two of Klimt's most popular works but died of meningitis in her early 40s. The unresolved mystery concerns the nature of the relationship between the beautiful model and the great artist.

We learn that Adele's husband, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, managed to flee Austria in 1938 but his property and all the paintings were seized and distributed among Austrian art museums, where they remained until 2005, when an Austrian arbitration panel finally ruled they belonged to Maria Altmann.

The story is one of conflicting interests, emotional struggle and controversy as the film traces the provenance of the disputed paintings, in themselves so symbolic of the international quest to achieve justice for surviving Nazi victims. Spokespersons for the Austrian government, journalists fighting for justice, supporters of the

Altmann family and others are the talking heads in this dense documentary, enlivened by archival footage of wartime Austria and, of course, the paintings themselves, which are magnificent in their depth, mystery and colour.

Altmann, who retains a cool dignity throughout her interviews, sold the first portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer to cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder for \$135 million. It hangs in his Neue Galerie, a New York City Museum for modern German and Austrian art. But after 60 years at the Austrian National Museum's Belvedere Gallery, the paintings, worth hundreds of millions, have come home to the prestigious Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Gloria Tessler

Reconnecting to Austrian roots

VIENNA FAREWELL

by David Jordan

New York/Lincoln/Shanghai: iUniverse, 2006, 182pp.

Vienna Farewell is David Jordan's first full-length novel. In this semi-autobiographical work, set between September 1937 and June 1938, the events witnessed by the author as a young adult during the Anschluss and the months immediately preceding and following that ominous event in the Austrian capital are portrayed in fictional form.

The author takes a chronological approach: the work comprises ten chapters, one for each month. The narrative centres on Jacob Abels, the 17-year-old son of a poor Jewish tradesman who is about to embark on his final year at school. Jacob's best friend, Hans Hofer, happens not to be Jewish. In September the class is joined by Erich Aron, the son of a wealthy Jewish banker, recently arrived in Vienna from Riga. These three young men, their girlfriends and respective families provide enough permutations to furnish the plot with a love interest, as well as providing a vehicle for indicating the spectrum of political opinions: from the violent Nazism espoused by Anton, the brother of Liesl, Hans's girlfriend, to the Zionist aspirations of Ruth, Jacob's girlfriend; and from the appeal of pan-Germanism and the attempts of the Nazis to seduce Austrian youth to the ideals of the Jewish youth movement.

The tone is set in the opening chapter, with a portrayal of two types of anti-Semitism: the crude, unthinking version of the streets, endemic to Vienna but given a fresh impetus by the political developments across the border in Germany; and the colder, sardonic humour of the veteran school teacher, intent on humiliating the Jewish minority as a means of appealing to the majority.

The author leaves his readers in no doubt that Austria has little to offer Jacob and Erich. 'There are things in the air', Hans warns Jacob in September, and on the last day of the year Jacob too could feel that 'another era was coming'. Just what this era promises he learns in March. In the chapter devoted to this month, the author varies his usual method of furthering the action by dialogue to give a compelling description of the streets of Vienna on Anschluss day. Jacob witnesses a torchlight procession on the Ring attended by thousands of cheering people oblivious of the sordid drama taking place in the shadows where storm troopers beat a defenceless man and ignore his wife's pleas for mercy. The following chapter, April 1938, begins with a documentation of the draconian measures enacted against Austria's Jewish citizens between April and the end of the year, a process breathtaking in its rapidity.

The closing chapters of the book reinforce the valedictory note of the title. They show that the saddest consequence of this loss of citizenship is the loss of Austrian identity, an identity which Jacob had been happy to embrace before being told he didn't belong. At the New Year he observed: 'I can't get used to the idea of looking at Vienna as just a temporary place of residence, and regarding a country a thousand miles away, and which I've never seen, as my real home.' But after the Anschluss comes the realisation that 'Austria does not exist any more. We are now part of Nazi Germany.' Henceforward the glories of Austrian culture, its art and its music are to be denied to the Jews. So Jacob, who had previously had no sympathy with the Zionist youth movement, has no choice but to emigrate to Palestine. Leaving Vienna on a train, he crosses the border into a country whose language is not German – this very vagueness of geographical location emphasising the experience of dislocation and exile.

This book will be enjoyed by those who like their historical facts leavened with fiction and is to be particularly recommended to readers who wish to reconnect to their Austrian roots.

Jennifer Taylor

Irresistible memoir

THE BLUE SALON AND OTHER FOLLIES

by Vernon Katz
Xlibris, 2008, obtainable through Xlibris Corporation: Orders@Xlibris.com

With a title like *The Blue Salon and Other Follies*, you increase your chances of catching the eye of potential readers – a good start when you enter the crowded market for refugee memoirs. And, to continue the metaphor, the countless market stalls are well-

stocked with any number of mature, unripe and rotten fruits of someone's labour. Not all will make it to the domestic fruit bowl, but this one should.

Vernon Katz knows how to attract the browser's attention and, having hooked him/her, how to keep it. The blue salon of the title epitomises the aching familiar, but heart-rending, response of many German Jews of my parents' generation to the Nazi strategy to rid Germany of Jews and Jewish life. Until Kristallnacht (for which the contemporary nomenclature in Germany is 'der November Pogrom') – arguably the final wake-up call for German Jews that the Nazis meant what Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* – those Jews still living in the 'Fatherland' chose to believe, for a myriad of reasons, that life would be difficult, restricted, uncomfortable – but that despite everything there would be life after Hitler. So for Emmy Katz (Mother), having the 'Salon' decorated and furnished in the most tasteful way regardless of expense was – presumably subconsciously – a life-affirming act.

From the account of his childhood in Schötmar, a small town in Lippe Detmold, to that describing the moment some 50 years later when he returns there as a visitor, Katz peoples his canvas with family members, friends and others, communicating a sense of warmth and humour about the various players in his long life. The cast of characters – almost in the style of one of those long Russian novels – is listed as an appendix and photographs of many are interspersed throughout the book. The reader is drawn into this memoir not least by the contents page thanks to such irresistible chapter headings as *The Fat Krakeeler* and *Tenants, Pigs and Plumpskloos*. Who can resist?

Marion Koebner

continued overleaf



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UPS AND DOWNS IN VIENNA

Once things had begun to settle down a little after the war, my wife Ilse and I began to travel together to Vienna on short visits. Apart from the city being attractive in itself, Ilse enjoyed showing me around her home town and acquainting me with its beauty.

Our visits were made easier by our being able to stay in the family villa. Ilse's father had fought hard after the war and battled through numerous law suits in order to recover his splendid villa, which had passed into Nazi hands after the family left Austria in 1938 but was then back in its ownership. It no longer belongs to the family but has become an embassy building.

Similarly, my father-in-law had been able to recover his business, which, though it had also fallen into Nazi hands, had been kept intact by faithful employees. So Ilse's father was often in Vienna on business, while Ilse and I were there for pleasure. My father-in-law would take the trouble to tell me the places of interest I should visit. He was not a man to be gainsaid. If he specified going to the top of a particular tower or church spire, up one had to go. If there was a crypt worth visiting, down we had to go. I certainly had many ups and downs in Vienna.

Eventually I decided to turn the tables on Ilse and try to show her aspects of Vienna that would be new to her. At that time, I had been elected a London borough councillor. A word with the town clerk and I had an introduction to the mayor of Vienna. This letter I duly



Joseph Cotten in Carol Reed's iconic *The Third Man*

presented to the authorities at the Town Hall. I can imagine how it must have thrown them. What was the correct protocol? How did a member of the Finchley Borough Council rank in relation to, say, the deputy mayor of Birmingham? They took no chances: I was granted an appointment with the mayor.

Ilse and I duly arrived at the magnificent Rathaus at the appointed time. The mayor, it appeared, was indisposed but we would be received by the deputy mayor. A dapper young man led us from his room through an ornate corridor to a slightly larger room containing a larger desk than his and an even more dapper young man ushered us through an ornate corridor into a larger room with a larger desk and the process of crossing into larger rooms with even larger desks went on until we were ushered into the room occupied by the deputy mayor.

We were engaged in an animated conversation for half an hour or so – the

animation, I must say, was on the part of the deputy mayor and Ilse. Their conversation was in German and my command of that language is limited, to say the least. Towards the end of the conversation, however, I did understand the deputy mayor to ask whether there was anything the city of Vienna could do for us while we were there. Ilse was ready for this. She asked whether he could get us tickets for the Opera Ball – the outstanding social event of the year. It seemed, alas, that the mayor's influence did not extend to being able to do this. Was there anything else?

Vienna was at this time, in the 1950s, very much in the public consciousness due to the film *The Third Man*, which was showing with its famous scenes of Harry Lime being chased through the sewers. Ilse was inspired in her next request. I understood enough German to realise that she was explaining to the deputy mayor that my great interest in local government was sewers and that there would be nothing dearer to my heart than to explore the sewers of Vienna.

It seemed that the deputy mayor was impressed and very willing to arrange for me to spend time in the sewers. The situation was desperate. I summoned up all my scanty knowledge of German and intervened. I succeeded in deflecting the plan to consign me to the sewers though I had to compromise: I agreed to the next best thing. The following morning, I would have a conducted tour of the city's garbage disposal units. But Ilse came too.

Cecil Altman

REVIEWS continued from page 9

Paintings returned after 70 years

In October last year, five oil paintings by Leonhard Adam (1891-1960) were returned to his daughter, Mary-Clare Adam. The five panels of roses and poppies were painted in 1940 at the internment camp on the Isle of Man just before Leonhard was deported to Australia on the infamous *Dunera* in September that year.

Those five paintings were entrusted to the care of Walter Bohmer. He joined the Pioneer Corps in 1940 and continued to look after the paintings in the hope of returning them to his fellow internee.

Following Walter's death in 1991, his friend Kath Pearce realised his love for the paintings and his desire to return them, and decided on her retirement from work to attempt to fulfil his wish.

Kath began her search some two years ago, making extensive use of the internet and old-fashioned letter-writing. Finally, she traced Mary-Clare Adam to Tel Aviv and in October she was able to return the paintings to the artist's daughter.

To celebrate with them was Charlotte Lang, the cousin Kath did not know she



Kath Pearce (left) and Mary-Clare Adam with two of the five paintings

had until last February. Their mothers, refugees from Vienna, had lost touch in 1940.

Also joining in the celebrations were Tony Pearce, David Lang and Alberto Portugheis, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee.

Mary-Clare Adam later wrote to Kath: 'Words are far from sufficient to express my admiration to you for succeeding in your quest to fulfil Walter's wish and to locate me wherever I was in the world!'

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PROFILE

by
Howard Spier

Historian of the refugee community: The phenomenal publishing world of Helen Fry

Jewish refugees from Central Europe in Britain have found their chronicler: Dr Helen Fry.

Producing books at what is by any standards a phenomenal rate, Helen Fry, a popular speaker at AJR group gatherings, sees nothing particularly unusual in what she's doing. 'When I'm not at my laptop', she claims disarmingly, 'I'm just an ordinary housewife and mother.'

Helen Fry was born in Ilfracombe, North Devon, in 1967 into a family immersed in the liberally-oriented United Reform Church. On leaving school, she worked for several years in local government. As her interest in both Christianity and local history grew, she took a degree in theology at the University of Exeter. And, while meeting few, if any, Jews, she also developed an abiding interest in matters Jewish, leading to a profound concern with relations between Christianity and Judaism. She began to play an active role in the Council of Christians and Jews. In the early 1990s she went to Israel for the first time: 'It was there that I first stepped inside a synagogue and I felt completely at home,' she says.

Helen published her first book, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: A Reader* (Exeter University Press), in 1995. A standard work in bringing together key texts relating to dialogue between Christians and Jews, the reader has been translated into Russian, Polish and Czech.

The following year, Helen obtained a PhD in Christian-Jewish relations, concentrating her attention on inter-faith dialogue.

Helen's fascination with local history and Jewish history led to her second book: *The Lost Jews of Cornwall: From the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Redcliffe Press, 2000, co-edited with Keith Pearce), the first major study dedicated to the history of the Jews of Cornwall.

But there is considerably more to what Helen describes as her 'deep-seated religious approach to Jews and Judaism'. Tracing her family roots to the early seventeenth century, she believes there is more than a hint of Jewish ancestry in her bloodline: 'We have an oral tradition in my family – that, on my maternal grandmother's side, we are descended from Marranos who came through Cornwall in the fifteenth century. I have always had a deep-rooted – unexplained – interest in things Jewish. Maybe that explains it! I feel I am between two traditions – Christianity and Judaism. In no-man's-land.'

When in 1997 Helen's husband Martin was offered a job as a lecturer in Medical



Physics at University College, the family moved to London. Helen was later to join him at UCL as an Honorary Research Fellow in the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department. She and Martin and their three sons live in the midst of an Orthodox Jewish community in north-west London.

With Evelyn Friedlander, Director of the Hidden Legacy Foundation, Helen co-curated a very well reviewed Exhibition on the Jews of Devon and Cornwall, which opened in February 2000 at the Penlee Museum and Art Gallery in Penzance.

That year too saw the fruits of Helen's continued interest in this subject, leading to her third book, the literally outside publication *Jews in North Devon during the Second World War* (Halsgrove, 2005, reviewed in this journal in April 2006). *Jews in North Devon* won the Devon Book of the Year award.

In 2005 Helen co-edited, with Rachel Montagu and Lynne Scholefield, *Women's Voices: New Perspectives for the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, the first book of its kind to look at Jewish-Christian women in dialogue on a range of issues other than the feminist one.

Almost inevitably, in 2007 appeared *The King's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens: Germans Who Fought for Britain in the Second World War* (reviewed in this journal in November 2007), launched at a reunion of refugees who served in Britain's forces in the Second World War hosted by the Imperial War Museum, sponsored by, among others, the AJR, and attended by some 200 veterans and their families. *The King's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens* was a follow-up to *Jews in North Devon*, in which she had found that one in seven of the 75,000 German and Austrian refugees who came to this country enlisted in Britain's forces in the Second World War. In this later definitive study, in sometimes lengthy quotes the refugees speak for themselves on their motivation to join Britain's armed forces.

The refugee connection is strong too in Helen's *Music and Men: The Life and*

Loves of Harriet Cohen (History Press, 2008). In 1934 Harriet Cohen played duet with none other than Albert Einstein to raise funds to bring Jewish scientists out of Nazi-occupied Europe. She also had the ear of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, a brief lover, and brought the plight of Europe's Jews to him. Making use of previously unpublished letters, Helen recounts the passionate love affair of the glamorous pianist with the composer Arnold Bax and her friendships – and relationships – with figures such as George Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, Edward Elgar, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Chaim Weizmann and Eleanor Roosevelt.

There's no stopping Helen! Out this month is her *Freuds' War* (History Press). Despite his reputation as the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud's security in Vienna changed when Hitler's forces annexed Austria. The Freuds suffered a period of house arrest before making a dramatic last-minute escape to England. Thereafter, both Sigmund's son Martin and his grandson Walter enlisted in the British Forces, the latter being dropped behind enemy lines in Austria.

To return to the Devon connection: Helen's forthcoming *From Dachau to D-Day* (History Press, August 2009) tells the story of 90-year-old veteran and former German refugee Willy Field. Having survived Dachau and the infamous troopship *Dunera*, Willy became a tank driver and fought with the Desert Rats in Normandy, Belgium and Holland. He was the sole survivor of his crew when his tank was hit in Holland. Willy went on to drive his regiment as the lead tank into Berlin, and took part in the Victory Parade, saluting to none other than Winston Churchill.

Building the Peace: Enemy Aliens After the Second World War (Sutton Press, October 2009) tells the story of the so far unrecorded part of the former German and Austrian refugees in the denazification process in Germany and Austria and work with German POWs in Britain. It also charts their vital roles in the hunt for Nazi war criminals, gathering evidence for war tribunals, and a range of intelligence operations.

Helen has also edited and helped in the publication of *Grey Dawns* (History Webb Press, December 2008), which is based on the poems, illustrative art and life story of war veteran Harry Rossney, another former German refugee. After D-Day, Harry was assigned by the army to the Graves Registration Unit in Normandy to sign-write, with his team of German POWs, the grave-

continued on page 16

INSIDE the AJR

Bromley CF tea gathering

At our second meeting, in Sidcup, at the home of Ruth Young, who kindly hosted our tea gathering, we shared some amazing survival stories, spanning the years 1939-56. These personal life stories are endless and ought to be recorded for generations to come. Thank you Ruth, her daughter and Hazel for giving us a very happy afternoon.

Ursula Adler

Next meeting: Early 2009

Record turnout in Cardiff

A record turnout for our speaker, Eva Clarke. We heard the remarkable account of how she – or more accurately her mother, Anna Bergman, who was also present – survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and forced labour camps in Germany to give birth three days before the end of the war. We also enjoyed a lovely lunch thanks to Myrna and some of our members.

Stephen Meyer

Surrey: Many topics discussed

Our host, Edmee Barta, provided us with a most generous array of hot and cold delicacies way beyond Kaffee und Kuchen. She was ably assisted, as usual, by Edith Vanstone. Many topics were discussed, ranging from that of pensions for KT members to outings and tours of Israel.

Vernon Saunders

Next meeting: Feb. Details later

Memorable morning in Oxford

Alan Bilgora gave us insight into the many Jewish opera singers, mentioning in particular that in Italy a singer took the name of his home town – Mario Ancona (1904). A memorable morning.

Anne Selinger

Leeds HSFA: White slave trade

Dr Nicholas Evans gave an interesting talk on 'Leeds and the White Slave Trade'. He began by pointing out that, although the slave trade was legally abolished in 1807, conditions akin to slavery continued long afterwards. Though the term 'white slavery' originally referred to conditions of servitude in ordinary industrial employment, its modern meaning was first encountered in 1881. Contrary to rumours of the time, Jewish involvement in recruiting white slaves was very small. Jewish organisations, however, played a prominent role in establishing homes and other institutions to rescue those who had suffered exploitation or were in danger of doing so.

Martin Kapel

Ilford and the US election

Israeli Community Worker Revital Shloman gave us interesting insight into the US presidential election result. She was hopeful Obama's policy of 'change' would



The Music Man: Gerald Abrahams, 90, entertains Birmingham group members with his ukulele

influence communities all over the world to work for peace.

Meta Roseneil

Next meeting: 7 Jan. Jerry Lewis, 'The Board of Deputies', 10.30 am

SOUTH LONDON GROUP

In November 2008 the South London Group celebrated its 14th anniversary (see report on this page). The first of the AJR Social Groups, it has been meeting bi-monthly until now.

With the passing of time, many members no longer drive and find public transport difficult. Two smaller social groups have now been established in Kingston and Bromley, with further groups of Continental Friends planned. It is hoped that the South London Group will continue to meet in Streatham, but this will be three times a year – in March, July and November. The programme will consist of lunch and a speaker. Details will be sent out nearer the time.

Myrna Glass

HGS: What a lady!

Remarkable octogenarian Bertha Klug kept us spellbound. In 1977 she set up the Wessex Healthy Living Centre to benefit people less well off than herself from Holistic Medicine. She set up the Anne Frank Trust to educate children against racism and prejudice. She was awarded an MBE in 2002. She has been blind for three years and her current project is to revive the Jewish Blind Society. She has also published poetry and was a painter. What a lady! *Laszlo Roman*

Next meeting: 12 Jan. David Lawson, 'The Story of Ostrava', 10.30 am

Wembley CF: Exchanging news and information

Meeting in the usual homely surroundings at Harris Court, we exchanged news and information among ourselves. Sadly, we heard that one of our most active members, Anthony Goldsmith, had passed away. Tea as usual was provided by Myrna and we are all grateful for the enthusiasm with which our group is organised.

Tom Heinemann

Next meeting: 14 Jan, 2 pm

Brighton & Hove Sarid:

Vivid description of visit to Israel

We enjoyed Esther Rinkoff's talk about her recent visit to Israel following a gap of over 30 years. Esther gave a very enthusiastic

and vivid description of Israel, which made me want to go there again. Her husband too was smitten and they plan to visit annually.

Alfred Huberman

Next meeting: 19 Jan. To be advised. 10.45 am

Norfolk: And a good time was had

A throng of nine members descended on Norwich and, fed and chaperoned by Myrna, solved all the world's problems, including how a prospective parentless KT bride proved her Jewishness to the unsympathetic Star (of David) Chamber inquisitors of a synagogue. Eva's baked potatoes were excellent.

Frank Bright

Next meeting: 23 Feb

Edgware: Life of a journalist

Eve Pollard gave us an interesting talk about the life of a journalist and we heard some serious and lighter subjects of a reporter. There was a larger audience than usual.

Felix Winkler

Next meeting: 20 Jan. 'Anne Frank Trust', 2.00 pm

Radlett: 'The King's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens'

Dr Helen Fry's talk was based on her book *The King's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens*, about the 10,000 Jewish refugees who volunteered for service in the British Forces during the Second World War. Helen's talk was greatly appreciated, particularly as some of those present had been personally involved.

Fritz Starer

Next meeting: 21 Jan. Broadcaster Nicky Home, 10.30 am

No mischief in East Midlands (Nottingham)

Our last meeting in 2008 was a lunch party at a member's home. We managed 23 people, including two new members and our eldest, Meta Weinstein at 102. We also had a PhD student from Nottingham University who came to hear guests' stories. Esther Rinkoff made sure we didn't get up to any mischief.

Bob Norton

South London's 14th birthday

21 members attended. After demolishing a cake for our 14th birthday, we were serenaded by Naomi Hyamson, accompanied at the keyboard by Harold Lester, with a selection of operatic pieces. We were especially pleased to hear a song by Walter Wurzbürger, the late husband of Hanna, one of our members.

Jackie Cronheim

'The Rothschilds' in Temple Fortune

Our speaker, Walter Woyda, was born in Berlin, where his grandmother was a concert pianist, which gave him a lifelong interest in music. Walter gave us fascinating insight into *The Rothschilds*, the follow-up to *Fiddler on the Roof*. First performed on Broadway in 1970 and in Israel, it has never been performed elsewhere.

David Lang

Next meeting: 22 Jan. Alan Bilgora, 'Great Jewish Opera Singers'

Hendon weird and wonderful things

Maurice Collins showed us his unique collection of weird and wonderful things,

including a 'skirt-lifter' (for dancing), an early burglar alarm, a 'change-giver' for pubs, and a page-turner for musicians.

Annette Saville

Next meeting: 26 Jan. Ruth Bourne, 'The Life of Constable', 2.00 pm

Cleve Road 2nd birthday celebration

Myrna welcomed us to our second birthday celebration and the candles on the cake were blown out by our oldest member, Johnny Suchy. We were entertained by Lynne Bradley, who had worked with Tommy Steele. Lynne sang songs, recited poems she had written, and told us humorous incidents in her life.

David Lang

Next meeting: 20 (not 27) Jan. Eva Fernandes, 'The Last Jews of Kerala', 10.30 am

Welwyn GC: History of Jews in England

Susannah Alexander gave us a comprehensive account of the early history of the Jews in England. By 1838 they had become sufficiently assimilated for a Jewish lord mayor to be elected. By 1858 a Jew could even enter parliament.

Marianne Linford

Next meeting: 15 Jan. Social at home of Monica Rosenbaum, 11.00 am

North London: Jewish opera singers

In the absence of our regrettably ill speaker Helen Bamber, all 37 members present enjoyed the second visit of Alan Bilgora. Alan's encyclopaedic knowledge of Jewish opera singers and the manner

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of his presentation gave us immense pleasure.

Herbert Haberberg

Next meeting: 29 Jan. Barbara Speigel, 'Only a Fleet Street Secretary?', 10.30 am

Essex: Anne Frank

Ross White of the Anne Frank Trust gave an informative and provocative talk. His knowledge and delivery were extremely compassionate and everyone was able to contribute to the ensuing discussion.

Esther Rinkoff

Next meeting: 13 Jan. 'Holocaust Education Trust', 11.00 am

Pinner: Inter-faith dialogue

In the light of Barak Obama's election the night before, the subject, 'A Three-faith Dialogue', led to much discussion. As always, a superb tea.

Esther Rinkoff

Next meeting: 8 Jan (not 1 Jan). Paul Anticoni, 'World Jewish Relief', 2.00 pm

ALSO MEETING IN JANUARY

Kingston CF 21 January, 1.00 pm
Bromley CF Tba

Liverpool

Susanne Green 0151 291 5734

Manchester

Werner Lachs 0161 773 4091

Newcastle

Walter Knoblauch 0191 2855339

Norfolk (Norwich)

Myrna Glass 020 8385 3077

North London

Jenny Zundel 020 8882 4033

Oxford

Susie Bates 01235 526 702

Pinner (HA Postal District)

Vera Gellman 020 8866 4833

Radlett

Esther Rinkoff 020 8385 3077

Sheffield

Steve Mendelsson 0114 2630666

South London

Lore Robinson 020 8670 7926

South West Midlands (Worcester area)

Myrna Glass 020 8385 3070

Surrey

Edmée Barta 01372 727 412

Temple Fortune

Esther Rinkoff 020 8385 3077

Weald of Kent

Max and Jane Dickson

01892 541026

Wembley

Laura Levy 020 8904 5527

Wessex (Bournemouth)

Mark Goldfinger 01202 552 434

West Midlands (Birmingham)

Ernest Aris 0121 353 1437

Paul Balint AJR Centre
15 Cleve Road, London NW6
Tel: 020 7328 0208

AJR LUNCHEON CLUB
Wednesday 21 January 2009

Alan Bilgora

'Great Opera Singers'

Please be aware that members should not automatically assume that they are on the Luncheon Club list. It is now necessary, on receipt of your copy of the *AJR Journal*, to phone the Centre on 020 7328 0208 to book your place.

KT-AJR

Kindertransport special
interest group

Monday 12 January 2009

Geoffrey Perry

'When Life Becomes History'

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Thur 8 Margaret Opdahl

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Tue 13 CLOSED

Wed 14 Tracey McRoberts

Thur 15 William Smith

Mon 19 Kards & Games Klub

Tue 20 CLOSED

Wed 21 LUNCHEON CLUB

Thur 22 Francoise Geller & The Bagatelles

Mon 26 Kards & Games Klub

Tue 27 CLOSED

Wed 28 Mike Mirandi

Thur 29 Jen Gould

'DROP IN' ADVICE SERVICE

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Linda Kasmir on 020 8385 3070 to make an
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AJR GROUP CONTACTS

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Lilly and Albert Waxman 01274 581189

Brighton & Hove (Sussex Region)
Fausta Shelton 01273 734 648

Bristol/Bath
Kitty Balint-Kurti 0117 973 1150

Cambridge
Anne Bender 01223 276 999

Cardiff
Myrna Glass 020 8385 3077

Cleve Road, AJR Centre
Myrna Glass 020 8385 3077

Dundee
Susanne Green 0151 291 5734

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Bob Norton 01159 212 494

Edgware
Ruth Urban 020 8931 2542

Edinburgh
Françoise Robertson 0131 337 3406

Essex (Westcliff)
Larry Lisner 01702 300812

Glasgow
Claire Singerman 0141 649 4620

Harrogate
Inge Little 01423 886254

Hendon
Hazel Beiny 020 8385 3070

Hertfordshire
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HGS
Gerda Torrence 020 8883 9425

Hull
Susanne Green 0151 291 5734

Ilford
Meta Rosenell 020 8505 0063

Leeds HSFA
Trude Silman 0113 2251628

FAMILY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Birth

Congratulations to Helga and Gunter (George) Lazarus on the birth of their grandson Jake Freddie.

Birthday

Congratulations to Katia Gould, our dedicated proof reader, on her 90th birthday.

Death

Marie Kemp passed away on 9 November 2008. God bless her. She will be deeply missed by all who knew her, family and friends. Morris

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A producer/director with the BBC, I have made several documentaries about children and young people coping with adversity or trauma.

I am hoping to meet people who have direct experience of the Kindertransport of 1938-39 or who are the children of those who had that experience.

I am making a half-hour TV documentary for the BBC's Religion and Ethics department, to be broadcast around the time of Passover in 2009. I hope to film some of the stories of people who lived through the Kindertransport experience, its 70th anniversary last year providing an important reminder of the need to record some of the voices which may not previously have been heard.

Be assured of my ethical and sensitive approach when working with contributors. My aim is simply to increase people's understanding of this crucially important part of our history, by recording some of these stories while we are still fortunate enough to be able to hear people's testimonies first-hand.

If you are willing to meet me or simply talk to me on the phone to discuss involvement in this documentary, please contact me: Lindsay Hill, Zone 3.31, BBC Scotland, 40 Pacific Quay, Glasgow G51 1DA

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*Lindsay Hill is an award-winning
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OBITUARY

Hilda Mazin, 1919-2008

Our mother, Hilda Mazin (née Zigmann), was born in Vienna to Lea (Laura, née Waldman) and Srul (Isador) Zigmann. They lived with elder brother Hans, who escaped with his wife Klara to France, and a younger sister, Serina, who later joined Hilda on the Kindertransport. Hans survived the Holocaust but Klara perished in Auschwitz.

Hilda enjoyed a very happy childhood surrounded by a loving family of uncles, aunts and cousins. She began her college course at the Hauptschule, Staudengergasse while working for Meyer Ladies Fashion Store. Following the Anschluss, she was unable to complete her studies and was never able to realise her dream of becoming a dress designer.

Hilda's boyfriend, Hans Sturm, was able to obtain a visa for the US and they were forced to part when he left Vienna for France in 1938.

Hilda kept a daily vigil outside the Rothschild Centre. One day an Austrian soldier who recognised her from school brought her to the front of the queue, enabling her to obtain a ticket to freedom in England.

Hilda worked as a domestic for a family in Leicester, along with Vali, a friend of Lea, who was employed as a cook. However, the English middle-class palate was not accustomed to the Austrian-Jewish cuisine and Vali was asked to leave. Not wishing to remain alone, Hilda accompanied her to London.

Meanwhile, Serina came to England on one of the last Kindertransports. She had been offered a ticket to Palestine, but their



Hilda and Lew were married in June 1942 at the Christian Street Talmud Torah Synagogue

father insisted the girls remain together. She was placed with a Jewish family in north-west London who mistreated her. When Hilda discovered how unhappy her sister was, she collected her and the girls set up home together and found work in the clothing trade in London's East End.

After the war, Hans Sturm came looking for Hilda but by that time she had met and married our beloved father Lew Mazin, who passed away aged 79 in 1999, and she had two daughters, Laureen and Susan.

In 2006 we sisters visited Yad Vashem to donate the precious letters Hilda received from her beloved mother along with photographs of her family.

Hilda filled the deep void in her young life by bestowing love on her daughters Laureen and Susan. She was a cherished mother, mother-in-law, grandmother and great-grandmother.

Susan Rutherford and Laureen Hart

ARTS AND EVENTS DIARY — JANUARY 2009

Mon 12 Dr F. Rosner, 'Champion Schnorrers' Club 43

Thur 15 B'nai B'rith Jerusalem Lodge. Aubrey Rose, 'Arieh Handler – Modern Jewish Hero' Joint Meeting with Yitzhak Rabin Lodge. Kenton Synagogue Hall, 8.15 pm

Mon 19 Mike Faulkner, 'Maxim Litvinov and the Search for Collective Security: Soviet Diplomacy, 1933-1939' Club 43

Mon 26 University of Glasgow 9th Annual Holocaust Memorial Lecture (in association with AJR). Professor Alan Steinweis (Director, Centre for Holo-

caust Studies, University of Vermont), 'A German Pogrom: Kristallnacht in History and Memory' Western Infirmary Lecture Theatre, 6.15 pm

Mon 26 Geoffrey Ben-Nathan, 'Under-standing Juvenile Diplomacy and Creating Adults Out of Children: The Case for State Intervention' Club 43

Mon 2 February Robin Hanau, 'A Scots-German Jewish Family: Some Reflections' Club 43

Club 43 Meetings at Belsize Square Synagogue, 7.45 pm. Tel Hans Seelig on 01442 254360

AJR REPORT

Michael Newman

Kinder pensions

The bill proposing an amendment to British pension law has now been accepted by Parliament and received Royal Assent following the Queen's Speech at the beginning of December. The bill, tabled by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), will enable Kinder who wish to apply to have their UK pre-1948 credits removed from National Insurance records. In most cases, this in turn is likely to boost the value of their German pensions. The change could affect Kinder who entered employment between 1939 and 1948 in Britain.

Kinder who made contact with the DWP following the announcement of the proposed law change will now receive a further letter from the DWP. This latest letter requests information about employment records as well as confirmation that the applicant was on a Kindertransport and his/her parents were of German nationality.

Claims Conference

The Claims Conference is making an additional \$23 (approx. £18m) available to Holocaust survivors and refugees worldwide in 2009 following negotiations with the German government. The increased allocation will help support Nazi victims with the greatest needs.

Ghetto Fund

To the end of November, 9,000 out of 38,000 applicants to the newly created Ghetto Fund have received their individual one-time payments of 2,000 euros (approx. £1,500).

The Fund was introduced following criticism of the Ghetto pension scheme, which, in addition to having very strict eligibility criteria, had resulted in pensions being granted to only 9,000 out of more than 70,000 applications. *Written enquiries should be sent to Central Office for Holocaust Claims (UK), Jubilee House, Merrion Avenue, Stanmore, Middx HA7 4RL, by fax to 020 8385 3075, or by email to mnewman@ajr.org.uk*



LETTER FROM ISRAEL



A visit to the President

Because of my association with the internet newspaper the *San Diego Jewish News*, I was included in a delegation of contributors invited to interview President Shimon Peres. The meeting took place just one week before he visited England and was awarded a KBE, but this was not mentioned in the interview.

The building which today constitutes the President's residence is an unobtrusive three-storey structure ensconced behind protective walls in Jerusalem's Talbieh neighbourhood. Like all Jerusalem houses, it is covered with Jerusalem stone and blends in with the surrounding buildings. It was built in the 1970s to provide a fitting habitation for Israel's presidents, who had previously been housed in what was known as 'the hut', a modest, prefabricated structure situated in the nearby Rehavia neighbourhood.

The building contains paintings by leading Israeli artists as well as photographs showing leading figures from Israel's past, especially Ben-Gurion. One picture shows him surrounded by IDF generals in 1955; in another he is accompanied by a much younger Shimon Peres; a third shows him sitting in an armchair with his legs tucked under him in conversation with an unseen interlocutor.

The President received us in his office, a large, book-lined room adorned with trophies and artwork. Opposite his desk hangs a large picture of Herzl, while many of the bookshelves also display items of Judaica. He sat with us in a comfortable seating area in a corner of the study. Perhaps partly because his own son, Yoni, was part of the delegation, the President was relaxed and spoke freely about his recollections of various American presidents, recounting amusing anecdotes and jokes and dispelling any nervousness we might have felt.

Now in his eighties, Shimon Peres seems to have total recall about the many distinguished people he has met and the impression they made on him. One could say he has an inexhaustible fund of entertaining anecdotes about famous figures. Asked about his secret for staying physically and intellectually fit, he produced an impish smile and remarked: 'That's a secret so I'm not going to tell you!' In a revealing moment, asked how he enjoyed being President of Israel, he replied: 'I've always been



Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, Yoni Peres, President Shimon Peres, Ira Sharkansky (Emeritus Professor of Political Science at The Hebrew University and a contributor to the *San Diego Jewish News*), and Don Harrison (Editor of the *SDJN*)

controversial. Now I'm popular – or at least respected. I think I prefer being controversial. But I'm trying to trade respect for action. What is important is not one's title, but what one does.' Asked what he regards as his greatest achievement, he replied: 'What I'll do tomorrow.' This may have been prophetic as a few days later he attended a Saudi-initiated interfaith conference at the UN and was listened to attentively by the Saudi delegation.

At the meeting, which took place two days before the US elections, Peres reiterated his trust in America's enduring friendship for Israel, irrespective of which party or person is at its head. He pointed out that the US was not a one-man show, that it would always remain democratic and diverse, and that it would always have a close connection to the Bible. According to Peres, therein lay its strength. He added that essentially racism had ended and that Israel sought to live in peace with all creeds, races and colours. Asked about Israel's democratic nature, he referred to the inherent dissatisfaction and dialogue that characterised Judaism and Jews, adding that, unlike Christianity and Islam, the Jewish religion did not require an intermediary between the individual and God.

In a wide-ranging analysis of historical developments, President Peres pointed to the reaction of the Jewish world to the Dreyfus case and the deep-rooted anti-Semitism it revealed. In seeking to eradicate prejudice, some Jews developed the concept of Communism, which, according to Peres, was largely a Jewish creation. Other Jews responded by fostering a social democratic regime, as exemplified by Leon Blum and his followers. A third approach was that of the Zionists, who sought to overcome anti-Semitism by giving the Jews a state of their own.

President Peres also stressed the influence on the Zionist movement of democratic ideas and processes in Western history, including England's *Magna Carta*. He also mentioned the fact that Ben-Gurion had been in London during the Blitz and had been deeply impressed by the British people's fortitude.

Though pressed for time, Shimon Peres ended the interview with a photo session and handshakes all round. It was truly inspiring to be in the presence of Israel's foremost citizen, its only internationally acknowledged statesman, and patently a man of towering intelligence.

Dorothea Shefer-Vanson

Helen Fry *cont. from page 11*

markers for the thousands of Allied dead who were being buried daily in the cemeteries of Bayeux, Hottot and Ranville.

Helen is also contracted for a book on the life story of AJR member and war veteran Colin Anson: *German Schoolboy, British Commando* (Tempus Publishing, 2010). Trained with other former German-speaking refugees, Colin Anson became part of the elite British Commandos. This charts his part in the invasion of Italy and Sicily, in which he was severely wounded and was revived, to fight another day with his Commando unit in night raids into Yugoslavia, and was also involved in the liberation of Corfu.

Now, Helen is branching out into fiction. Under the pseudonym J. H. Schryer, she and James Hamilton are co-authoring two historical novels, the first of which, *Good Night Vienna*, is due out in June this year.

There is no overall strategy, Helen insists, in the direction of her publishing interests: she picks up the thread from one theme to the next. 'It is vital', she says, 'that we record these stories before they are lost. We only have a small window of opportunity to take down these oral testimonies.'

Above all, this gifted historian sees it is a great privilege that those whose lives she chronicles trust her to the extent of confiding in her their most precious memories.