



# My Story

## Renate Beigel



*My Story*  
Renate Beigel



These are Renate's words. This is her story.

'My Story' is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).

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Portrait photography by Katie Davies

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# My Story

## Renate Beigel

“In May 1939 my father took us to Trieste on the Italian-Yugoslav border to put us on the train to England. My mother was so beside herself at our parting that she didn’t come to see us off.”

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## My family

I WAS BORN in Vienna on 21 February 1933. I lived there until I was five years old with my parents and my sister Trudi, who was five years older than me. My family were not religious and I have no memories of ever going to synagogue, observing Shabbat, or even eating Jewish food. My mother, Stephanie Beigel (née Herlitschek), was born in Vienna in 1904. My father, Walter, was born in Zurich in 1897. He came to Vienna as a young man and was conscripted into the Austrian Army during WW1.

My mother's father, Eduard Herlitschek, was born in Vienna, and her mother Marie was born in Poland. My grandfather was employed by the Tagblatt Library, a publishing and printing company. They lived near us and I spent a good deal of time with them as a child. In February 1941, my grandparents were deported to the Modliborzyce Ghetto in Poland where they died. The same year, their son Alexander was sent to the nearby Urzendow Ghetto. Alexander's wife Hilda was pregnant at the time with my cousin to be Hanns-Peter and he and his non-Jewish mother were able to survive the war in Austria. Hanns-Peter, now married to Waltraute, became a successful businessman, and is the only remaining family connection to my country of birth.

I knew very little about my father's family, as his parents had died before I was born. I do know that my grandfather, Jakob, an engineer, was married twice, so my father had two sisters and three half-brothers. It was a large family and my father had many first cousins, some of whom lived alongside us in Vienna while others emigrated to America. Among his cousins was Dr Hugo Beigel, who became a famous sexologist in the USA. The annual Hugo G. Beigel Award is named after him and promotes and rewards research excellence in sexual science. Hugo's only daughter, Uli Beigel Monaco, also found fame as a writer and one of her sons, Nicholas Goldberg, is a well-known journalist.

On the Herlitschek side of the family, my mother's cousin Walter immigrated to America and later changed his name to Herley. His son, my cousin Peter Herley, and I share a great-grandfather, Moritz Herlitschek. Moritz and his wife Betti both came from Czechoslovakia and are buried in the Jewish cemetery in Vienna. They had four sons – Eduard, Ludwig, Jakob and Josef – and a daughter, Gisella. Peter Herley's grandparents, Ludwig and Karoline, perished in Maly Trostinec concentration camp. Peter forged a career as a police officer and became Chief of Police in Los Angeles.



Me at 18 months old, Vienna



My sister Trudi aged seven, Vienna



My parents, Stephanie and Walter on their wedding day, October 1926



My grandmother Marie Herlitschek



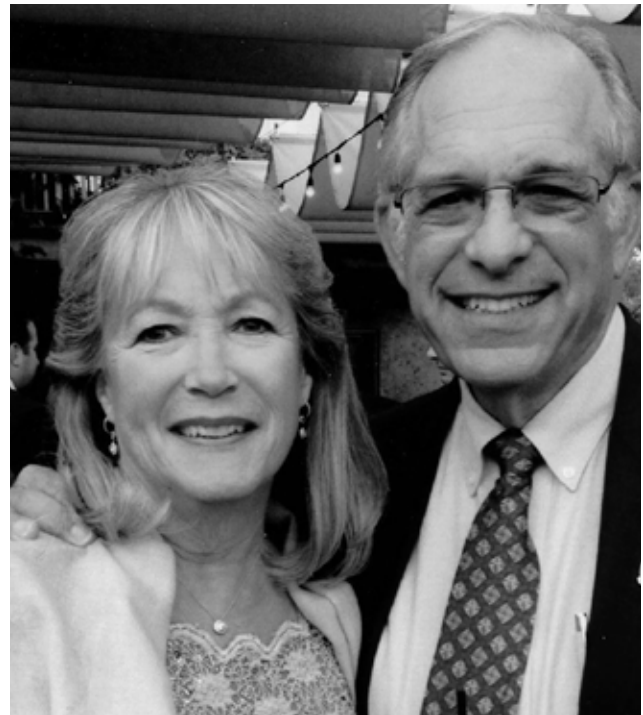
Uncle Alex

My mother had a large extended family with many aunts and uncles; she was a great letter writer and I still have many of her letters in which she refers to them often. I may have been familiar with these relatives at the time the letters were written, but I have very little memory of them now and know that several of them did not survive the war.

Despite the horrors of the war experienced by both sides of my family, it is heartening that some of those who survived went on to create happy and successful lives. ■



Hanns-Peter and his wife Waltraute



Peter Herley with his wife Susan



My great grandfather Moritz Herlitschek (seated centre) with his five children. My grandfather, Eduard is on the far left. Ludwig and wife Karoline died in Maly Trostinec. Gisella married Edward Stolper who also died in Maly Trostinec but Gisella got to USA. Jakob married twice and died in USA. Josef went into hiding in Holland where his family still live.



Great-uncle Josef back centre in between his wife Anna and son, Otto. Front row: Josef and Anna's daughters Monika and Irma sit either side of their grandfather Moritz



Left to right: Grandfather Eduard Herlitschek with daughter-in-law Hilda, my grandmother Marie and at the rear my mother Stephanie and her brother Alex (children unknown), circa 1920s

## Life in Vienna

I HAVE FEW memories of going to school in Vienna, but I remember that my sister did. Hitler visited her school and, alongside other children, Trudi shook his hand, a memory that upset her in later life. I do, however, remember the Nazis marching into Vienna: I remember seeing the black and red flags and the music blaring from the loudspeakers on top of their vans, quite often Wagner; *Tannhäuser*, particularly, triggers that memory. The soldiers' jackboots also loom large in my memory because I was only five and not much taller than those boots. To this day I hate images of goose-stepping and those boots.

After the Nazis arrived in Austria in 1938, life was increasingly difficult for us in Vienna. We frequently moved from address to address, staying with various relatives. I didn't understand why we had to keep moving. I still have hazy memories of the places we lived: I can picture my bedroom with large eiderdowns on the bed and then those eiderdowns hanging out of the window to air. I remember my mother making strudel at the kitchen table and holding up the thin pastry with a hole in the middle that we could look through, which made us laugh.

I also see a large room with a Christmas tree lit with candles. There were other children there, we were holding hands and dancing around the tree. Even now, the sight and smell of Christmas trees takes me right back to that moment. And I remember St Nicholas bringing Trudi and me small gifts of fruit and nuts, but only if we had been 'good children'. I also remember going to the cinema to see Shirley Temple, who was a great star at the time, and my father, who had a good tenor voice, singing popular Richard Tauber and Erich Kunz songs.

By trade, my father was a hat-maker but in common with most Jews in Vienna he was forced out of his job and unemployed. To earn a little money he began doing piecework, assembling cigarette lighters and radios. He would often ask my sister and me to help, as our small fingers could handle the tiny components. I remember some disjointed details, but it's the larger details, particularly regarding my parents, that I wish I could remember more clearly. ■



The last family photo. Zagreb, May 1939

## Zagreb

WITH LIFE BECOMING increasingly dangerous and unpleasant for the Jewish community, my parents decided we should leave Vienna and in October 1938 we moved to Zagreb, in Yugoslavia. The country remained neutral during the first years of the war, and it was the nearest place we could find that seemed to offer a degree of safety. We left secretly, without fuss, taking only one small suitcase each.

I remember Zagreb quite well because it was such a horror, swarming with refugees and with nowhere for us to stay. With my father having been out of work, my parents did not have much money and we couldn't find a hotel or a lodging house. We walked through the fish market asking if anyone knew of a place where we could sleep. One of the market traders said he owned a warehouse in which he was already providing accommodation to other refugee families. He warned us that it was extremely basic, and he wasn't wrong: it was one huge room filled with broken-down furniture. There was a dilapidated chaise longue, on which my sister slept, and some rickety chairs which my parents lashed together for me to sleep on. Meanwhile, they slept on an iron bed that frequently collapsed. In the corner was an old gas cooking ring. I don't know if this collection of ramshackle items was already in the warehouse, or whether my parents found them. There was a toilet that we shared with the building's other residents – I don't remember the washing facilities, which may be just as well. When we turned the lights on in the morning, the noise of cockroaches scuttling across the wooden floorboards terrified me and is a vivid memory of Zagreb that remains with me.



My doll, which accompanied me from Vienna. Sadly just the head survives.



Papa, Trudi and me. Zagreb, 1938

While we were there, our parents decided to have all of us baptised into the Old Catholic faith that was practised in Yugoslavia, in the hope that this might ease our escape. We undressed, donned thin white robes, then stepped down into the water until totally immersed and up steps the other side, rather like a cattle dip. I know I screamed the place down and have hated having my head under water ever since.

From knowledge acquired later, I believe we were allowed to stay in Yugoslavia for roughly six months, from October 1938 to May 1939. My parents spent all their time there trying to find a country that would accept us more permanently. They visited many organisations and embassies, specifically American, Canadian and British, but no one would take us. Eventually they discovered Austrian Self Aid, an agency that had been formed in the UK to help people leave Austria. It was affiliated to the Austrian Centre in London, which was established in March 1939 by Austrians seeking refuge from Nazi Germany and helped 30,000 Austrians enter Britain before the outbreak of war. Austrian Self Aid had Sigmund Freud as its honorary president, and it was through this organisation that my parents managed to secure travel visas for myself and Trudi. We became part of the *Kindertransport* scheme, something I was unaware of until later in life. Unfortunately, the Agency was unable to find a single sponsor to house me and Trudi, or any help for our parents.

Trudi and I left Zagreb on 17 May 1939. Two weeks later, our parents were deported. ■

“ While we were there, our parents decided to have all of us baptised into the Old Catholic faith that was practised in Yugoslavia, in the hope that this might ease our escape. ”

## Travelling to England

MY FATHER TOOK us to Trieste on the Italian-Yugoslav border to put us on the train to England. My mother was beside herself and very emotional at our parting, so she didn't come to see us off. We wore labels with our names and details of our destination. There were many other travellers on the train escaping the Nazis, but we did not travel with them as part of a group. I'm unsure whether they were even Jewish. My father asked a kind-looking lady on the train to keep an eye on us.

From Trieste we travelled through Switzerland and France, changing trains in Basel and Paris. At some point during the journey I remember armed soldiers boarding the train and ordering everyone to open their suitcases so they could confiscate any items of value. I know we had a stop-over in Paris because in one of my mother's letters she mentions the people who put us up and how glad she is that we were able to stay safely overnight. In Paris, we took another train to Boulogne, and from there we somehow boarded a boat to Folkestone.

Our next destination was Victoria Station in London, where we were supposed to be met by a member of Austrian Self Aid. But no one was there. My mother had told us that if anything went wrong, we should find a British policeman because, unlike the Austrian police at that time, British police were kind and helpful. The officer we approached realised we could not speak English. He read the labels attached to us and found a taxi to take us to the Austrian Centre in Paddington. When we arrived, a woman came running out, horrified at having missed our arrival at Victoria. We never did discover what had gone amiss. ■

## My new home

WE HAD BEEN travelling for two days and got to the Austrian Centre late in the afternoon. It was then that we were told that Trudi and I would be going to live with two different sponsors – I was to go to Wiltshire and Trudi to Kent. I was distraught. That very day Trudi was taken to Broadstairs. Her destination was St Nicholas School, a preparatory boarding school for girls run by her sponsors, two single mistresses called Dorothy Seeley and Janet Duthie. Soon after the start of war in September 1939, the school was evacuated to Colwall, near Malvern, Worcestershire. I, on the other hand, was met by a German-speaking woman, Prudence Perkins, who drove me to her home village of Dinton, near Salisbury in Wiltshire. Miss Perkins was a captain in the army and was the only person I met from then on who spoke to me in German.

It was late at night and very dark when we arrived at the home of Mr and Mrs Wheeler who lived in the Lodge belonging to Philipps House, Dinton. Being left alone there was the worst moment I can remember. Up until that point, it had all felt like a bit of an adventure. As my big sister, Trudi had been in charge – I had been given strict instructions to obey her and had left everything to her. When Trudi was taken away I felt utterly confused, frightened and bereft. Not only had I lost my entire family, but I had also been separated from my big sister in the cruellest way.

I spent the first night in such a state of despair, anger and misery that I cried almost the entire night. My carers didn't know how to comfort me and thought they might have to hand me back. I eventually fell asleep, probably from sheer exhaustion. When I woke up the next morning, I came to a new realisation: this was how it was going to be, no one was going to come and rescue me, I would just have to deal with it. And it was all very grim.

I discovered later that my sponsors were Miss Isobel Gordon and Miss Agnes MacIntyre, two elderly, single ladies living in the village. However, when they realised I was only six years old and they had no previous experience of small children, they felt they couldn't take responsibility for my day-to-day care. That's how I ended up with Mr and Mrs Wheeler. They were also childless, but Mr Wheeler had been married before and had two grown-up daughters living in Somerset, so they were willing to take me on.



Philipps House Lodge, Dinton

Philipps House Lodge was set in gated parkland owned by the Philipps family until the main house and land were gifted to the National Trust after the war. Bertram Philipps, a former High Sheriff of Wiltshire, did not inherit the family title but lived a privileged life. The Wheelers worked for the family, he as chauffeur, and she as lady's maid to Mrs Florence Philipps. Despite their grand surroundings, the accommodation in the Lodge was very basic – no running water, no electricity and no heating. There was an outside toilet, which terrified me. We had to walk half a mile for our drinking water and other water was collected in rain barrels. On Friday nights, a tin bath was taken off the wall



Soon after my arrival in the UK with the Wheelers in Dinton



With Ada Wheeler in Dinton, aged about 12

and filled with heated rainwater. The house was lit with oil lamps and there was an open range for cooking, which also heated the big kitchen, the room we mainly lived in. Upstairs, my bedroom was so cold that I developed chilblains and at one point was barely able to walk.

Life was tough. I was encouraged to help with many of the household tasks, from the ritual Monday wash day using the copper boiler, washboard and mangle, to cleaning and filling the oil lamps and paraffin heaters, cleaning out the fireplaces and blacking the kitchen range. Mr Wheeler grew all our fruit and vegetables in their large garden; he taught me how to weed and I watched with wonder at his skilful scything of the grass.

All these unfamiliar things were a frightening world away from my former life in Vienna, where we had lived quite comfortably in a bustling city surrounded by friends and family. I often wonder how on earth the Wheelers were considered suitable to foster a traumatised six year old who spoke no English and had been separated from everyone she knew and loved. Although they were kind, they had an extremely strict, very Victorian attitude to life, and the lack of warmth and affection was hard to bear.

In August 1939, during the school holidays, Trudi and I were reunited for the first time since our arrival in England. From then on, either my sister visited me in Dinton during the holidays or I stayed with her in Worcestershire. I have to say the holidays in Dinton were not fun packed and I much preferred to visit Trudi, where at least there were other children. These holidays were generously paid for by either Mrs Perkins (Prudence Perkins' mother) or by Joyce Carr, my next sponsor.

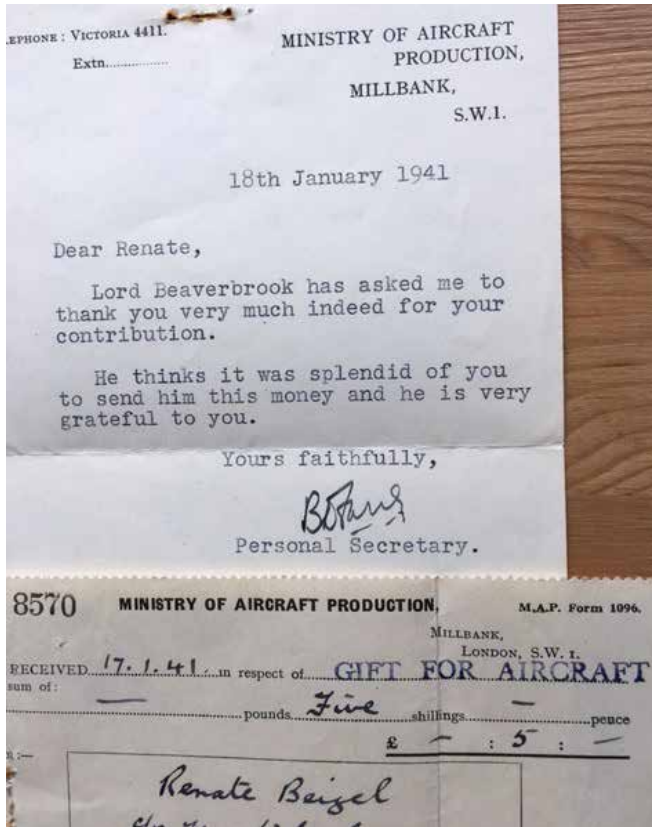
My sponsors, Miss Gordon and Miss MacIntyre, lived about half a mile away in the centre of Dinton in a very comfortable house with a full-time maid. I divided my pre-school time between the Wheelers' home and that of my sponsors, and I couldn't help but compare the disparity in their standards of living. ■



Trudi and me in Dinton

## The only foreigner in the village

EVERYONE SEEMED INTENT on instilling into me the British way of life. My Jewish ancestry was completely ignored. Mr Wheeler was verger at the village church, and it was taken for granted that I would attend church and Sunday school every week. Before long I was baptised and later confirmed into the Church of England – without my consent and entirely against my wishes.



Letter from Lord Beaverbrook

It was likely that no one had ever seen a foreigner in Dinton until my arrival. Whenever I walked through the village, I was aware of curtains twitching in the cottage windows so the residents could take a good look at the foreign child. There were very few other children in the village, but I managed to form some sort of relationship with a few of my neighbours. The Engleheart family stand out, as they offered me a chance to earn pocket money. Mary Engleheart and her elderly mother lived nearby and kept a variety of small animals – goats, a few sheep, rabbits and bees. I would visit weekly to muck out the animals and was paid a few pennies for my trouble. After many months, the pennies I earned had amounted to several shillings, which I was encouraged to save. Any thoughts of spending it on myself were quickly dispelled: I was reminded that there was a war on and was encouraged to donate my precious five shillings to Lord Beaverbrook's Aircraft Fund. Ah well!

This was not my only contribution to the war effort. I learned to knit and made balaclava hats, gloves, socks and scarves for the troops. I also

knitted scarves and other warm items for my grandparents in Poland, as I knew they would be suffering badly from the cold, though unfortunately these didn't always reach their destination.

The Misses Gordon and MacIntyre were among the millions of women mobilised by the government to carry out war work. The two friends worked at a munitions factory in Salisbury and this enabled them to keep their small car on the road. Soon after my arrival, Philipps House was requisitioned, first by the British Army and later by the American forces. The peace and quiet of our private drive was totally shattered by the constant roar of vehicles. At one time, the Wheelers were asked to billet an American officer in the Lodge as we had a spare bedroom. This had some advantages as he gave us the remains of large cans of food that would otherwise have been thrown away, and proffered nylons, cigarettes and candy. ■

“ Soon after my arrival, Philipps House was requisitioned, first by the British Army and later by the American forces. The peace and quiet of our private drive was totally shattered by the constant roar of vehicles. ”

## School days

THROUGH NECESSITY I learned to speak English quickly and was reasonably fluent within six or seven weeks of my arrival in England. My sponsors were particularly keen that I should speak 'the King's English' and not pick up any of the local accent. In fact, I found it impossible to lose my Austrian accent, and when I started attending the village school at the age of eight or nine, it wasn't long before the other children spotted I was a foreigner. To them, anyone speaking German was a Nazi and they couldn't understand what I was doing there. The abuse I consequently received was very unpleasant, with the children regularly calling me names and eventually throwing stones. The headmistress gave the culprits a talking-to, but this made little difference, and as it was the only school in the village, there was no possibility of changing to another. It was decided to remove me from school, and I was home-taught by Miss MacIntyre until I turned 11. Her syllabus consisted of simple maths, geography, English history, and much reading aloud from Charles Dickens – *The Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield* – and, for light relief, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

The Wheelers had an old piano in their cold, normally unused, front room and during this time I started having piano lessons. My teacher was blind, but he had an uncanny ability to identify poor fingering. I had missed the music that had been a huge part of my family life in Vienna.

Miss MacIntyre's home schooling proved successful and I easily passed the 11-plus exam. I could have attended the grammar school in Salisbury, but as some of the village children would also be going there, there was concern that the awful experiences I had endured at the junior school might be repeated. So instead, my sponsors took the extraordinarily generous decision to send me to the Godolphin School, a girls' public school in Salisbury. I started there as a day girl but after the first term I became a boarder.

This was a new and cosmopolitan experience for me, mixing with girls from all walks of life, many of whose parents were working overseas. There were even one or two other Jewish students. I was very happy there. Apart from an excellent education, I was able to continue my piano lessons and played in the school orchestra. I learned all kinds of crafts, of which sewing was to prove both useful and pleasurable in later life, when I made most of my own clothes and later the furnishings for my homes.

After the cloistered lonely existence in Dinton, the Godolphin introduced me to a whole new world, and gave me the confidence that was to serve me well in my future life. Furthermore, I was finally able to enjoy the company of other children and lucky enough to be invited to stay in their homes for the school holidays. These short periods within a family environment made a huge difference to me as an 11-year-old, as I was missing my family and particularly my mother. At the time, I didn't fully appreciate the kindness of my sponsors in giving me such a wonderful schooling, though its benefits became clearer to me as I grew older.



Me (middle row third from left) at Mundeford beach with Godolphin School

## Moving on

UNFORTUNATELY, WHEN I was 15, Isobel Gordon died and Agnes MacIntyre said she could no longer fund my education at the Godolphin School or, indeed, keep me in Dinton. This came as a complete shock: yet again I was to be torn away from everything and everyone I knew – school friends, people who cared for me and a reasonably settled environment. Miss MacIntyre told me that her friend, Joyce Carr, whom I had never met, would take me to live with her in Norfolk. Miss Carr's name had cropped up several times in letters from my mother, as a woman who had helped to fund my school holiday visits with Trudi, and possibly also contributed towards our keep. I think now that Joyce Carr may have been instrumental in arranging our initial entry and sponsorships in England.

As with my previous sponsors, Miss Carr was unable to have me stay with her; she lived with her ailing mother who would not cope with having a youngster in the house. Instead, she found lodgings for me with the Lambert family in nearby Ditchingham. I saw Joyce Carr occasionally and discovered that she came from a landowning family in the Ditchingham area. Her brother, Brigadier William Carr, lived in Hedenham Hall, (his niece Diana Athill, the well-known editor and author also grew up there). Joyce and her elderly mother lived in the Dower House. My main memory of my sponsor is of a tall, slim, austere woman who visited me when necessary and drove me to Norwich in her small Austin 7 car to buy school or other clothing, with a large drooling poodle scampering totally out of control on the back seat.

As for my host family, Mr Lambert had just died of tuberculosis. I lived with his widow, Florence, and her two daughters, Margaret, who was roughly my age, and Doreen. I was sent to the Sir John Leman School in Beccles, a co-educational school recently formed by the merging of the boys' and girls' grammar schools in the area. This was another huge change for me. While the teaching was of a high standard, the atmosphere in the mixed-sex classes was not always conducive to learning. On my first day at my new school, I was lucky enough to meet another girl of my own age, who was also new to the school and the area. Barbara and I naturally gravitated to one another, sitting together in class, and we remain friends to this day. I only wish we lived closer, but Barbara has lived with her family in Scotland for many years.

I wasn't in Norfolk long enough to put down roots with the Lambert family, but Margaret and I became close through studying together, though we did not go to the same school, and we still keep in touch with emails and Christmas cards.

I was fully aware by now that there were no certainties in life, and my future would not be an easy ride. In her letters, my mother repeatedly emphasised the importance of a good education, so I worked hard in the 18 months or so that were left of my schooldays, managing to attain Matriculation, the first step to possibly going to university. ■



Me (centre) with Margaret and Doreen Lambert

## My parents' story

TWO WEEKS AFTER Trudi and I left for England, my parents were deported from Yugoslavia. Together with other Jews, they crossed the border into Italy in June 1939 and passed through Venice to Milan, then via Florence, Genoa and San Remo to Ventimiglia. They were seeking safe haven and decided to aim for Nice in the South of France, where they had heard that the Jewish Committee was helping Jews financially and with obtaining permits for travel to England. Their adventures on this journey are perfectly described in a long, now translated letter, my mother sent to Trudi and me, dated 19 August 1939 from Nice:

“My golden children!

We received with great joy your letter 14 days ago with the picture of Renate in a bathing suit. For 14 days, we had no sign of life from you. Since then, we have been in Nice in France. Your post and Omama's post is probably still in Ventimiglia, and has not been forwarded to us yet. We think about you constantly my dearest ones, but we can hardly expect to receive news from you at the moment. We went through a lot before we arrived in Nice and were allowed to stay here. I want to tell you briefly. In Italy, they sent Jewish people back to Germany because Italy was overwhelmed with Jews. You know what this means dear Trutscherl. The Committee no longer operates there. We had no money for lodging or food. We were literally starving. Because the person who arranged the transit to France pitied us, he asked the people with money for a little extra and took us on board for free. Otherwise, it would have cost 800 lire per person. So, one night at midnight, a car took us to a hidden place by the sea where a motorboat was already waiting (approximately 40 people were able to fit in). Under cover of night, we sailed for about 3½ hours until the ship moored at a peninsula at 4am. We ran into a forest and hid in the bushes to wait until dawn. If the French had caught us, they would have sent us back to Italy. Then there would not have been any prospect of coming to you, as Italy is enemy territory, and if it comes to a war, borders will be shut. But now we are closer to you. Just one border between us. However, I want to continue, dear Truderl.



My parents in Zagreb, 1938

As soon as it got a bit lighter, the 40 people dispersed. Papa said we must go as I had mosquito bites all over my body. As we came out of the bushes, three elegant men came towards us wearing linen suits and in front of us was a splendid castle. We were afraid it might be the police. The three men asked us what we were doing and we told them the whole truth, and they invited us for tea in their villa. They told us that the castle belonged to the Duke of Kent and that they lived in the adjoining house over the summer. Moreover, they told us that they were Britons and would return to England

the following day. We told them about you and Miss Gordon and they were so moved, they promised to visit you and to inform Miss Gordon about our situation. They offered us tea, butter, eggs, cheese etc., but because of all our excitement we were only able to drink the tea.

The villa was approximately 28km from Nice. Now, we had to get there without even 1 franc in our pockets. If we had been caught before we reached the Committee, the French would have arrested us and sent us back. Two of the men offered to drive us to Nice in their car, but said that if anyone stopped us, we would have to say that we stopped the car and that we do not know the men. Otherwise, they would get into trouble. So, everything worked smoothly to Nice, and the men gave us 100 francs so that at least we had some money, and they said goodbye. Afterwards, Papa and I went to the Committee in Nice and that afternoon we were taken to the police station. When we arrived, the officer was angry at the sight of so many people and instructed old and sick people, as well as people with children, to come forward.

All our passports were taken away and we were immediately put on a train with a police guard to go back to Menton, the border town. This meant going back to Italy. Papa and I were among those people. My golden children, you can imagine how exhausted we were from all the exertions of the past night and now we were to be sent back over the mountains to Italy. When we reached Menton we were lined up like criminals. When the officer in charge saw me he told me and three other women to stand separately. I refused to go anywhere without Papa, so he was allowed to come with me. Everybody else was sent back to Italy.

They told us that those who had money could sleep in a hotel, everyone else would have to sleep, under arrest, at the police station. We were so happy about the 100 francs and being able to sleep elsewhere. In the early morning, we were interrogated at the police station and the next day we had to go to the gendarmerie where they questioned us for hours, and took our fingerprints.

Two days after we had been arrested, we were taken to Nice under police guard. In Nice the state solicitor decided to acquit us. We were picked up by the Committee in Nice and got our passports back. For 4 days, we had no accommodation but out of pity kind people allowed us to sleep in their home. Yesterday, we were finally able to find cheap accommodation, but there are bugs. However, the lady promised to clean it today. Lunch and dinner are provided by the Committee but don't ask how much it is or what we get. We got our breakfast from a kind German-speaking lady who pitied us. We have no money. We cannot even pay the letter rate.

Because we were not able to bring our luggage onto the boat we came on, a transporter from Ventimiglia sent it to the customs office here. They demand 300 francs, so we can't even think about getting our stuff back. But, the longer it's in their office, the more it costs. For 14 days, we have been walking around in the same clothes and underwear, which I wash daily. A miracle would need to happen for us to get our luggage back. Truderl, you know we have nobody from whom we can expect anything. Further, the customs demand 150 francs per person. We will probably be sent to a camp where we can wait and see if a journey on to England is possible. Nice is already overcrowded with immigrants, who all want to move on. But we are not too worried by all of this because we are no longer in an enemy country. And the thought of you, my golden Truderl and Renaterl, helps us to get through all of this. Hopefully, we will be able to tell all our stories in person soon. I hope that you excuse the long span of silence, but I assume I have made up for it with this letter. How are you doing, how is it being back together? I am looking forward to hearing and reading more of you and Renaterl. Truderl, do not forget Papa's birthday on the 26th August. He is 42 years old. And, Onkel Alex's birthday on the 27th August, who is 37 years old. Write to Papa – you as well Renaterl. Look at our pictures every day so we are always in your thoughts. Please, Renaterl and Truderl, write back soon and detailed. Feel hugged and kissed a 1000 times by your Mutti, who is constantly thinking about you two.



Fort Carré near Antibes

It seems that Miss Gordon and Prudence Perkins sent money to my parents so they could retrieve their luggage and pay the various fines. For a while my parents lived in relative security in Nice supported by the Committee, who supplied meals twice a day and gave them 20 francs a week to cover their costs. However, in September 1939, my father was interned in Fort Carré camp in Antibes. My parents found the separation very difficult: it was the first time my mother had been alone. She visited my father when she could but was only permitted to speak to him for 10 minutes through a wire fence. A short while later, he was transferred to a holding camp nearer Nice where my mother could visit more easily,



My father, third left front row, in a detention camp in the South of France, 1940

three times a week. She gives a vivid description of his living quarters, “*Papa is lying on straw with many others in a barracks. At night it’s very cold as it is right by the sea. Breakfast is black coffee, there is soup at midday and rice, meat and potatoes. When I visit him we are able to walk about together and there is even talk of his possible release.*”



My father seated at the rear with fellow detainees

Meanwhile, my mother was trying her hardest to get them to England, beseeching my sponsors to find them domestic work that would enable them to come. In a letter from my mother in May 1940 I was surprised to learn that *“Papa has been under English command for the last four weeks and works for them. Only English is spoken, and his treatment and food are excellent. If Papa didn’t have the Channel in the way, he would be nearer to you than me.”* I can only think this was with the BEF – British Expeditionary Force – in northern France, but I have no idea how he became involved. (The BEF was the contingent of the British Army sent to France in 1939, after Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany. It existed from 1939 until May 1940, when its troops reverted to the command of the Home Forces in Britain.)

In May 1941 my mother was relocated to Puget Theniers, a village in the Alpes Maritimes, 90 minutes by train from Nice, where pockets of Jewish people had lived for generations. She wrote, *I have a very nice room with a view of the mountains. It would be so lovely here if I were not so lonely. I have now not seen your father for one and a half years. I am cooking*



The Jewish Ghetto in the 13th to 16th century in Puget Theniers

*with wood for fuel, a donkey wanders up and down the road braying, his stall is opposite my window, and there are goats, cows, sheep and hares.'*

Apparently, Uncle Felix, my father's half-brother, at the time living in Paris prior to emigrating to America, sent money to my mother as she wasn't allowed to work. My father's sister Emma and her husband also sent money from their home in Switzerland. My mother did find a little unofficial work with two other Jewish refugee ladies in the village, for whom she cooked and kept house.

In March 1942 my father wrote from Camp Suzzoni, Boghar, Algeria, where he had been held as a prisoner for two years. (French Algeria was used at the time to contain large numbers of prisoners

from France). The camp housed many other BEF soldiers, and I believe they were employed in building roads, a task my father would have found very hard to bear. My mother appealed to many authorities to have her husband returned to France, including writing to Marshal Pétain, but without success. At some point my father was relocated further into the desert to Colomb Bechar. I wish I'd been able to find out more from him about this period of his life.

My parents wrote to each other frequently in the three years they were apart. I still have the five very long last letters that my mother wrote to my father in which she refers to his 100+ letters to her.



Plaque in Puget Theniers installed in 2010 by the Mayor and Municipality and attended by the Jewish Union of France, reminding passers-by that in the Middle Ages the Jewish community who lived there contributed greatly to the progress and history of the region. The Jews gained their freedom and equality on 27 September 1791. Sadly, that freedom was easily forgotten when the Jews sheltering in Puget Theniers in 1942, among them my mother Stephanie, were deported by the Vichy government on French railways, at the behest of the Germans, to Drancy and then Auschwitz.

BEIGEL<sup>2</sup> SEPT  
Stéphanie 1942  
ex-autrichienne  
Hans  
  
Départ 2.9.42

2.9.42

**J** **N**

N°

Nom : BEIGEL

Prénoms : Stéphanie

Date Naissance :

Lieu :

Nationalité : ex-autrichienne

Profession :

Domicile :

N° du C.C. :

233-E — 6376-40

A copy of my mother's deportation from Drancy to Auschwitz on 2 September 1942.  
From the Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris

Mutti's letters to us stopped in July 1942. It was the last we ever heard from her.

My father wrote from Algeria to tell us that our mother had been deported on behalf of the German authorities, but he didn't know whether it was to Germany or Poland. I know now that she was rounded up with all the other women and children in the area and put on a train to Drancy, the detention centre in Paris used for holding Jews before deportation to concentration camps. She was transported from there to Auschwitz in September 1942 and sent to the gas chambers immediately on arrival.

One of the hardest parts of the long separation from our parents was not knowing if we would ever see them again. For many months after the war ended, we lived in hope of finding our mother again, but we knew that if she was alive she would have found a way to contact us. In our hearts we knew the worst.

With the advent of the Internet, I learnt the details about what happened to my mother in 2004, through the Holocaust centre in Paris which holds records of all the Jewish people who were deported from France. From German archives I even have a record of the convoy number of the train that took my mother from Drancy to Auschwitz. But both my father and my sister died without knowing the details of her fate.

In 1941, we heard that first my Uncle Alex and then my grandparents had been deported to Poland. They had been given three days' notice to leave Vienna and were not allowed to take anything with them. Along with many Jews from Vienna, my grandparents were sent to the Modliborzyce Ghetto in the Lublin region of Poland, while Uncle Alex went to Urzadow Ghetto. He found ways to help them a little with money, food and clothes but conditions were terrible and they did not survive long. The ghetto itself was liquidated in October 1942. ■

## Reuniting with my Father

MY FATHER SURVIVED the war. Post-war in Algeria, he joined the British Pioneer Corps because he knew it could be his best chance of reaching England. He was in fact posted to a military camp in North Shields near Newcastle upon Tyne. There he met Ruth, one of the volunteers looking after the foreign troops and they became friends. It then transpired that the British Government was planning to send back all the foreigners in the Pioneer Corps to their place of enlistment. We could not believe that the British Government could be so cruel. To avoid him being returned to North Africa, Ruth and my father decided to marry; allowing him to remain in this country. Shortly afterwards, as a result of strong campaigning by relatives and Members of Parliament, the Government backtracked and the troops were granted permission to stay in England. So, ironically my father had not needed to marry, though Ruth had been very willing to become his wife.

The last time I had seen my father had been at the train station in Trieste in 1939, when I was six years old. Eight years later, he suddenly turned up, in his army uniform, at my boarding school in Salisbury, accompanied by his new wife Ruth. This was quite a shock as I knew nothing about her, and I also had to come to terms with a much-changed father who was like a total stranger. I had no idea how to react. He spoke just a few words of English and I had forgotten much of my German. I had studied French in school, however, and as he spoke French well, we communicated in pidgin German and French. It was an impossible situation and I seem to remember it went rather badly.

Ruth and my father moved to London and lived in a bedsit in Victoria. Accommodation was scarce: many people had been bombed out of their homes during the war and competition was fierce for the new council flats being built. Ruth argued with the local council that my father was a broken man who had lost everything and had an under-age daughter to provide accommodation for; this gave them priority and granted them the tenancy of a flat in Tulse Hill, Brixton.

I was now 17 and about to leave school. I very much wanted to go to university, but my sponsor Joyce Carr, explained that as my father was now in England and asking for me to join him, she was no longer responsible for my welfare. Living with my father and Ruth in their Brixton flat was not something I had any wish to do, but as I was still a minor I had no choice. I moved in with them and it was awful. My father had found a job in the packing department at Harrods, where his lack of English wasn't a



My father and I outside the Tulse Hill flat



## My sister Trudi

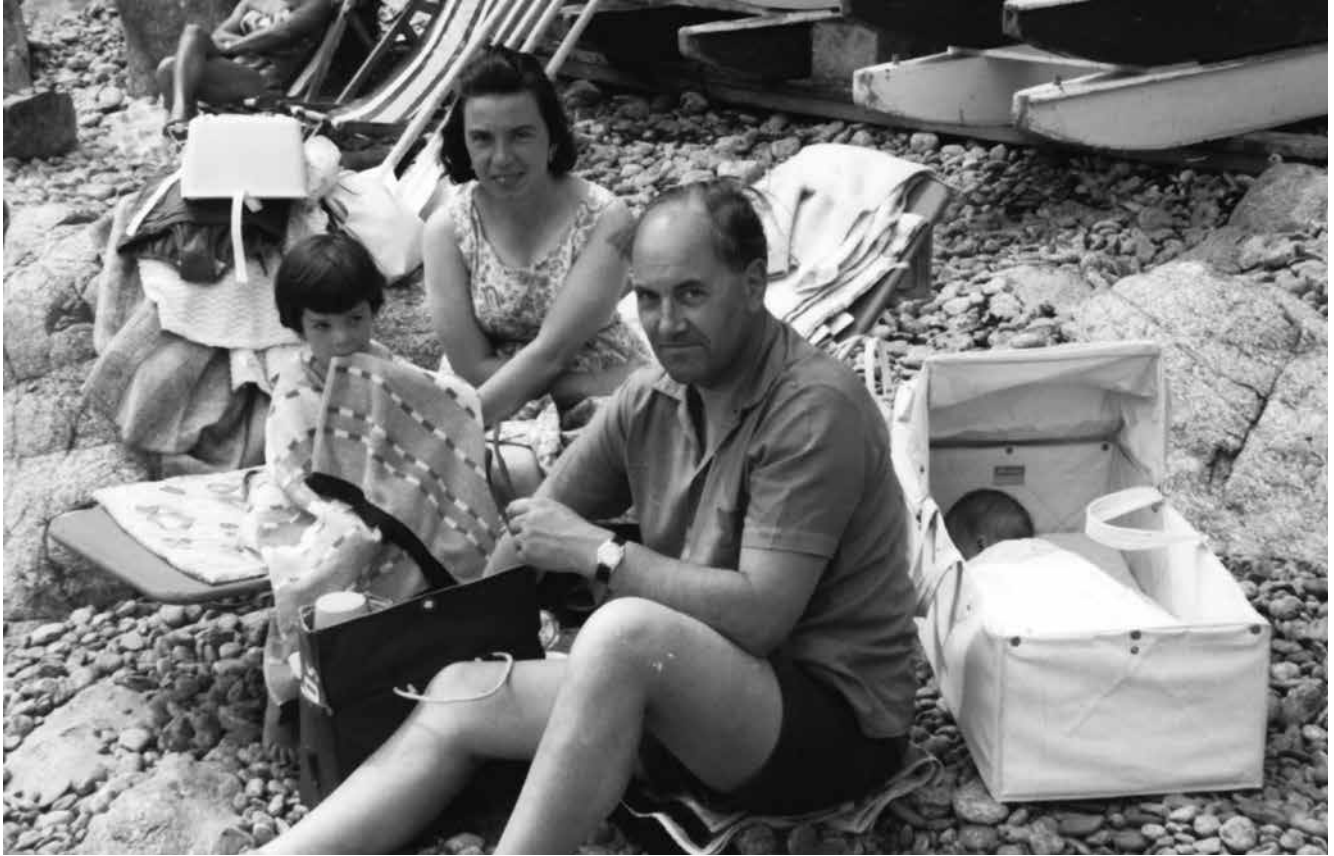
AFTER OUR CRUEL separation when we arrived in England, my sister Trudi was fortunate in meeting another child refugee, also from Vienna, at her boarding school, so she continued to speak German while learning English. But her other experiences at the school were not happy, due to the bullying behaviour of some of her fellow pupils, and in letters to our parents she asked several times to be moved. This never happened. On leaving school at 16, Trudi moved to London and found work with the psychoanalyst Anna Freud in one of her three Hampstead War Nurseries. These were supported financially by the American Foster Parents' Plan for War Children (AFPPWC) and gave refuge to hundreds of children made homeless by the Blitz. In 1945, they also took in child survivors from the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Trudi's wartime experiences, her knowledge of German and her love of children made her the perfect employee.

Soon after starting at the nurseries, Trudi met Malcolm Andrew and they married in 1946 when she was almost 19. Trudi and Malcolm worked together, managing a children's home called The Lea near Denham in Buckinghamshire which catered for child refugees, mainly orphans from across Europe, a venture also supported by the AFPPWC. On their return to London, Trudi became a nursery nurse as well as working with children in private families. Later, Malcolm studied social work, a career he followed until his retirement.

Trudi and Malcolm's first home was a small flat in Chalk Farm, later they moved to a cottage in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where they lived for over 30 years, before moving to Cheltenham. They had two daughters, Sue and then Rachel, whom they adopted as a new born baby. Rachel followed in Trudi's footsteps and became a nursery nurse. She is married to Peter Hay, lives in Grantham, and has four grown-up children and two grandchildren – the family she always wanted. Following school, Sue studied for a Fine Arts degree and became a museum curator in London, travelling the world for her work. She is married to Lo Cole, a talented author and illustrator whose work appears regularly in newspapers, as well as his own books for children. They live not far from me, and in my older years I am thankful for their help and close friendship.



Trudi and husband Malcolm in their first home



Trudi and Malcolm at the beach with daughters Sue and baby Rachel



My niece Rachel and Peter on their wedding day



Trudi and Malcolm with three of Rachel's children



My niece Sue and her husband Lo

When I came to London at the age of 17, I was finally living in the same city as Trudi and we re-established a proper relationship; not one that relied on fleeting get-togethers in school holidays. It was not straightforward as our wartime experiences had taken us into entirely different environments where we mixed with very different people. This became even more apparent when we were reunited with our father. I know he felt that we had been taken from him in spirit as well as reality. Though our lives took different paths, I think Trudi and me shared a similar goal – of finding security following our wrecked and insecure past. Trudi was lucky to meet her life partner so early and she settled into marriage and children, while I went on to work throughout my life, strongly motivated by the need for financial freedom and self-sufficiency. But I was happy to share in Trudi's life, with regular visits to her home in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Trudi was a great cook and would serve up delicious Sunday roasts, along with many of the Viennese dishes our mother used to make. As the years passed, we built a family together, especially when her children came along; we were finally able to share those family events that others take for granted.

Sadly, Trudi died when only in her late sixties. The great shame for me is that we hardly ever spoke about the past, just snippets of information. Like many others we didn't talk much about what had happened to us. It's a shame because I am sure her memory for events would have been much better than mine. At least, I now have the large cache of correspondence our parents and grandparents sent her during the time we were apart, and they give some insight into Trudi's life at that time. ■

“ Though our lives took different paths, I think Trudi and me shared a similar goal – of finding security following our wrecked and insecure past. ”



Trudi and I at Rachel's wedding

## Out on my own – career moves and house moves

MY FIRST JOB was at May, May and Deacon, a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields where, as my maths and calligraphy skills were reasonable, I worked as an accounts clerk. My first digs were in a room shared with three others in a hostel in Gower Street, built by G.K. Chesterton's sister-in-law, for girls of very small means – of which I was certainly one. I recall it backed on to a square containing a fleapit cinema and the warmth from the heating grills attracted an insalubrious collection of characters hoping to attract the attention of the hostel's female residents!

At work, I became friends with Ursula (known as Sula), who later lived for a time in Trinidad with her husband. On her return, she introduced me to her West Indian friends who had moved to the UK and with whom I later shared a house.

I remained with May, May and Deacon for a couple of years before moving in 1955 to Senate House (the administrative centre for the University of London) as a clerical officer in the examinations department. The job gave me access to the university library, refectory and all other student facilities. It was also a stone's throw from the British Museum, where I spent many a lunch hour browsing. By then I had moved to a hostel for over 100 girls in Holloway, opposite the famous women's prison. I was reliably informed that our single rooms were about the same size as a cell in the jail opposite.

My wages were meagre. The £3.15 I was paid in my first job had to cover the £2 cost of board and lodging at the hostel plus travel, lunches, and all other necessities of life. In order to survive, I took on several part-time jobs – as an usherette in the evenings at a London Odeon; on the haberdashery counter in Jones Brothers, Holloway on Saturday mornings; and serving tea in a café at London Zoo on Sundays. At this point, my sponsor Joyce Carr kindly sent me £2 a month for a year or so, to supplement my wages.

In 1960, I had an interview at Thorn Electrical Industries to work and train in their publicity department. The company commissioned London's first commercial skyscraper, a 12-storey building in Upper St. Martins Lane. It housed a fantastic state of the art lighting showroom where we received many celebrities along with architects and engineers from all over the world. This was the beginning of my career in public relations, which was then in its infancy. It was certainly a steep learning curve,

## GUEST CRITIC



**G**UEST critic this week is Renate Biegel, of 13a, St. Ann's Terrace, St. John's Wood, N.W.8. Renate is assistant Press Officer for the huge Thorn Electrical Industries. She says "After a tiring day at work nobody can pep me up better than the sultriest girl in show business, Eartha Kitt.

"That unique, silky brazen voice is at its best on her L.P. "EARTHA REVISITED" (London HAR 2296). All my favourites are here—"Old Fashioned Girl", "I Wanna Be Evil", plus some new ones—a selection to soothe and stimulate the 'Career Girl'".

**Don't forget. You can be this column's guest critic. Send me details of yourself, name, address, and job, enclosing a clear photograph which is unreturnable. Then describe, briefly, your favourite record, giving label, number and artist. Chosen guest critics will be featured in forthcoming issues of "Career Girl", and each will receive a record of her own choice from a list which I will personally send to her.**

Featured in *New Career Girl* newspaper, 1961

but an extremely stimulating and exciting company to work for and I really enjoyed it. Interestingly, Jules Thorn, the company founder, came from Vienna, and many of the directors were Jewish, so I felt very comfortable working there.

On the housing front I shall quickly pass over a shared bedsit in Maida Vale where we burnt a hole in a moth-eaten carpet, and another in Archway where we were in constant danger from an explosive gas water heater. I then had the good fortune to find a flat share in Kensington High Street, just behind Barkers department store, and when that came to an end I moved into the even more rarefied environs of St. John's Wood where, thanks to my good friend Sula, I moved in with some of her ex-pat friends. There were five of us in a three-storey house in St John's Wood High Street. We all became firm friends, and I am still in contact with one of them who now lives in Italy and another in West Sussex, though sadly two others have since died. Despite the house having no central heating and rather basic facilities, this was a very happy time. There was a huge attic room, ideal for gatherings, and we certainly had some interesting parties.

In 1963, I took up a new job as press officer for Formica, part of the De La Rue group. During my time with them, the company undertook several interesting projects for which I handled the PR. These included the bi-annual 'Kitchensense' exhibition, featuring futuristic kitchen design, the pre-launch fitting of the first QE2 ship and a British Rail train tour around the British Isles, showcasing Formica in all its uses. Other work events included a weekend at Silverstone with John Surtees, the racing car and motorcycle hero of the day, and trips to Paris with Formica competition winners.

I continued with my house moves with the ultimate intention of purchasing my own home. After St John's Wood I shared a mansion



Me at a radio and TV exhibition in the 1970s

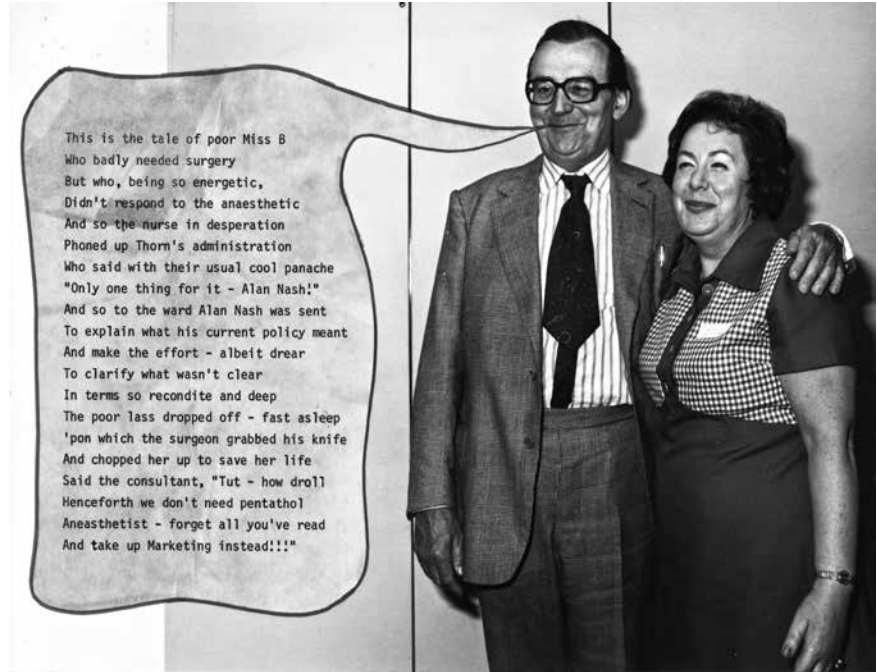


On duty at the Kitchensense Exhibition

flat in Baron's Court with my friend Jean. When she left to get married, I took on the role of landlady, sharing with a series of tenants over a period of ten years. When the flat's landlord wished to take it back, a period of hard bargaining resulted in a pay-out that enabled me to purchase a ground-floor flat in Acton – my first step on the property ladder.

After 10 years with Formica, I was invited back to Thorn Lighting in 1973, to the position of press and publicity manager. It was a challenging role, commanding a high degree of responsibility. I sat on lighting industry committees and attended a House of Commons Select Committee. I produced an award-winning quarterly newspaper for the industry and company employees with a run of 50,000 copies. I travelled extensively around the UK and Europe attending exhibitions, helping to organise sales conferences and promote a vast range of products. I attended the newsreel filming of such major events as the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana in St Paul's Cathedral, where specialist camera lighting was used, as well as the floodlighting for the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations. I made several publicity films, including one in conjunction with Sir Terence Conran, to launch the

With Cyril Fletcher, famous for his Odd Odes and appearances on the Esther Rantzen show, *That's Life*. I had just finished making a video with him for a Thorn Lighting promotion when I had to undergo an operation. My work colleagues used this picture on a get well card and cleverly copied the Odd Ode style to cheer me up!



first domestic low-energy fluorescent lamp. We managed to secure Prime Minister Harold Wilson to open the company's ground breaking lighting laboratory in Enfield. One of my more exciting experiences was a trip to Athens in 1973 with a group of photographic equipment contractors when we found ourselves in the middle of the student uprising against the military junta, and live bullets whistled around us during a walking tour of the town.

I remained with Thorn Lighting until 1982 when, sadly, internal tensions led to me leaving the company and resulted in an unfair dismissal case, which found in my favour. I was awarded a substantial pay out which helped me to buy a small Victorian terraced house in Ealing. A short employment with Osram/GEC followed and in 1986 I became a freelance PR consultant, working until 1993. ■



In Paris while working for Formica



At Brands Hatch with a group of customers



I was the only woman representing Thorn Electrical Industries at The British Electrical and Allied Manufacturers' Association at the Central Office of Information in 1961



Outside my new abode in Ealing, 1983



Stanley and I finally marry in 1993

## Stanley

I FIRST MET my future husband Stanley Lyons when our paths crossed at Thorn in the 1960s. He was a work colleague, married, a lighting engineer, who went on to work for the Electricity Council, became a Fellow of the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers, wrote six full-length technical books, manuals for power stations, many press articles and several non-fiction books on various subjects. He became well-known in his field and appeared regularly in print. He also wrote poetry, played several stringed instruments and had served as a Special Police Constable in London. At one time, he also edited the magazine of the Humanist Society. He was a man of many parts.

We met again 20 years later, by which time he was divorced. Our friendship slowly grew and turned to love and marriage. We had both lived in London for most our lives, but by 1985 we were both self-employed and decided our computer-led work would enable us to leave London. We shared a love of the Cotswolds and relocated twice before finding our 'forever home' near Broadway in Gloucestershire in 1995.

We both worked from home very effectively, Stan as a technical author and journalist and I as a PR consultant. We often worked together on projects, for instance writing a book on lighting in the home and another on flooring.

Stanley was Jewish, but unlike many members of his large orthodox family, he did not follow his faith. We had much in common and had an extremely happy life together. We loved to travel, particularly to France, which we visited many times, especially the Dordogne, to where we even considered moving. Sadly, he died long before his time after contracting bladder cancer. He initially made a good recovery from surgery, but the cancer returned, and he died in 2000. I took his death extremely hard and still miss him enormously. ■



Stanley and I on holiday in Majorca



Stanley and I at home in the Cotswolds

## Returning to Vienna

APART FROM MY two nieces and distant relatives in America, the only other living relatives that I have contact with are my cousin Hanns-Peter Herlitschek (Peter) and his wife Waltraute (Traute), who still live in Austria. Peter's father Alexander (Alex) was my mother's only brother. Soon after we left for Zagreb, the Nazis deported Alex to Poland. As a non-Jew, his wife, my aunt Hilda, was forced to divorce him, even though she was pregnant at the time with Peter. Hilda had a dressmaking business in which she employed her niece Emma as an apprentice. When the Nazis came, they removed Emma from the business, telling Hilda, as the wife of a Jew, she was not morally fit to train her niece. Peter survived, but he never knew his father. The last letter they received from Alex was in December 1942: he had joined an underground unit formed to help Jews living in Polish ghettos. When Peter visited *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem with his grandson, he was proud to see Alex's name listed as a righteous Jew.

Peter now lives in Graz, and is retired from the company he founded, an international transport business specialising in the movement of hazardous waste throughout Europe. He has a daughter, Judith, and a grandson, Maximilian, who is currently studying at Vienna University.

When I returned to Vienna in 2005 with my niece Sue, Peter and Traute took us around the city and showed us the places where my family had once lived. I was amazed to recognise the large block of flats



Aunt Hilda with granddaughter Judith, Monika Herlitschek (daughter of my great uncle Josef) and Traute, cousin Peter's wife, 1975



Aunt Hilda with son Peter and his wife Traute



The Rabenhof apartments in Vienna



70  
 Front left, Traute, grandson Maximilian, my cousin Peter. Back left: Maximilian's father Mario and mother Judith. Celebrating Maximilian's graduation



Sue and I in Vienna with my cousin Peter and his wife Traute, 2005

we lived in, which was accessed through an enormous archway surrounded by greenery. When we visited the Rabenhof, I thought I recognised the apartment where we had lived and recalled looking down from the balcony onto a green area and the playground equipment below.

We also visited the Jewish cemetery and managed to find the neglected gravestone of my and Peter's great-grandmother Betti, but not that of her husband. Since then, Peter has located the broken headstone of our great-great-grandfather Salomon. Although we behaved like tourists, attending a performance of Verdi at the State Opera House, visiting museums, St Stephens Cathedral, the Vienna Woods and of course a coffee house, I was surprised that after so many years I felt such a strong sense of belonging, a connection with the city of my birth. The most poignant and upsetting



Sue and I in the Jewish cemetery in Vienna

experience of our visit was at the Stadttempel Synagogue, the only synagogue left undestroyed after the war. It houses a large circular scroll with the names of all the Jews of Vienna who perished. I found 10 family members' names on that scroll.

In 2021, on the 83rd anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the Austrian government unveiled the 'Shoah Wall of Names' in Vienna: 160 granite slabs, listing 64,440 names, to commemorate every Austrian victim of the Holocaust, including those of my own lost family. ■

## Being Jewish

I AM TELLING My Story because I am Jewish. But being Jewish was not something I was aware of from birth, as my parents did not practise the Jewish faith or follow the Jewish way of life. When I came to England via the *Kindertransport* scheme, aged six, I did not associate all the bad things that happened to me, and those around me, as anything to do with being Jewish. It was some time before I discovered what had happened to my family and the terrible experiences they had suffered, just because we were Jews.

I was fostered by non-Jews in England, baptised and confirmed into the Church of England, and sent to a non-Jewish school; there was no acknowledgement of my Jewish heritage. From the age of 18, I lived in London and my friends were cosmopolitan – all creeds and none. At that time, being Jewish seemed to have caused nothing but misery in my life, and I preferred to look forward and forget my past.

Looking back, I can now identify the events in my life that changed my attitude from misery to acceptance and pride in being Jewish and a part of the Jewish community.

The first event to define my Jewishness was, of course, when I boarded that train in Trieste without my parents – though its significance was lost on me at the time. The next milestone was a trip I made to Israel in my 30s, which included a mind-blowing visit to Yad Vashem. My grief was unbearable and I sobbed uncontrollably.

The first time I confronted my past in detail was through one of my oldest friends, Judy, who worked as a solicitor's clerk for Henry Ebner. She told me that her boss Henry, a fellow refugee from Vienna, was heavily involved with restitution claims with Germany and pension claims with Austria. Henry confirmed my right to a claim against the Austrian government – an administration that for many years failed to acknowledge its role in the Holocaust. Thanks to Henry's help in completing the paperwork, I received restitution payments and, since 2002, an Austrian pension. But filling in all those forms meant I had to recount details about my family and experiences I had long buried. This brought home to me how being a Jew is at the very heart of my existence. (It is only in recent years that

I became aware that Henry was also an AJR member, and it was through the AJR that I learnt of his death in 2020.)

Another important milestone was meeting my husband Stanley who, like me, was Jewish and an atheist. He had been devout in his younger years, having been raised in a large orthodox family. We spent many hours discussing our race and culture; he had a fund of Jewish stories and jokes. After his death in 2000, I felt a need to reach out to other Jews and joined a group of Liberal Jews. I enjoyed the warmth and feeling of belonging, of being with my own kind when I attended their meetings and social events.

I'm not sure how I discovered the AJR, but this is what has probably brought me the closest to my Jewish heritage and provided great comfort and help. Before this, I had never met other Jewish refugees, or any from the *Kindertransport*. Living some distance from London, I couldn't participate in the many AJR activities available in that city, where most members live. Nevertheless, I have been able to enjoy the holidays and local lunch gatherings that the AJR arranges, as well as the Zoom events put on during the Covid pandemic lockdowns and beyond.

As a result of my involvement with the AJR, I had the opportunity to meet Prince Charles on two occasions, when he hosted events to memorialise the 70th and 75th anniversaries of the Kindertransport. The former child refugees from Vienna, Berlin and Prague, whom I met at these events, all appreciated the Prince's continuing interest in us and our stories. He told us how proud he had been that his paternal grandmother had sheltered Jewish refugees when she was living in Athens at the start of the war.

It's been a long journey of discovery for me, but I have finally embraced being Jewish! ■



With Prince Charles at Clarence House on the 70th Anniversary of *Kindertransport*

## A legacy in letters

THROUGHOUT OUR ENFORCED separation, my parents wrote regularly to both Trudi and me, as well as to each other; just between the two of them they exchanged more than 100 letters over three years, and nearly 80 to Trudi and me. Miraculously, nearly all of these missives eventually reached their intended destinations.

Many of the letters speak of my parents' fervent desire that Trudi and I show gratitude to our hosts, behave well and study hard. They repeatedly make requests for us to write back at length and with as much news as we could share. The overwhelming emotion expressed is how much they loved and missed us, and their desperate prayers that we would be reunited as a family. They mention many aunts, uncles and cousins who sadly I have now completely forgotten, and some of whom were, of course, murdered by the Nazis.

The letters sent from my grandparents were mostly written in Kurrent script, which is very difficult to read or translate but was commonly used across the German-speaking world until the early 20th century. My poor grandparents, Eduard and Marie, who were deported to Modliborzyce in Poland, wrote in tiny Kurrent script on the censored postcards permitted by the German authorities, telling of their utterly miserable existence in the freezing cold, and the constant lack of food. They say they have sold everything they possess, and that my grandmother knits small items to sell. Those family members who were still around sent them parcels of food and clothes, but many of these never arrived.

This collection of letters forms the precious documentation of a family desperately trying to survive the deprivations of war, separated and torn, living through extraordinary circumstances. It is my wish that they should be preserved, to inform and educate future generations. I have also related elements of my story for the AJR's Refugee Voices Project as well as sharing my memories of the *Kindertransport* with the U3A, of which I am an active member. ■

## My life now

I STILL ENJOY a full life, although – like everyone’s – this was somewhat curtailed by the Covid-19 pandemic. I enjoy playing bridge. I am an active member of the North Cotswold Branch of the U3A, which Stanley and I helped to set up over 20 years ago; I handled the publicity and Stanley wrote articles for local press and was interviewed on local radio. Our success encouraged others to start their own U3A groups in nearby towns and villages. Our local branch has over 30 courses on offer, and during my membership I have sat on the committee, started up monthly open meetings with speakers and organised speakers for the gardening group.

My sister Trudi and I were both keen gardeners –she opened her Cheltenham garden to the public under the National Garden Scheme, and I still try to retain the lovely garden that Stanley and I designed (he was a keen vegetable grower while I was in charge of the main planting), though now I have the help of a gardener.

I am an avid reader with eclectic taste and I love classical music. I also enjoy jigsaws and craft activities – at one time I took pottery and upholstery classes. When I was younger, I made many of my own clothes, mainly through necessity, and in the last 20 or so years I have taken up quilting. Throughout life I have been an enthusiastic knitter. Both before and after retirement, I loved to travel, and did so many times with friends and with Stanley, feeling lucky to have got to many of the places on my wish list – from India, where I saw the Taj Mahal and stayed on a houseboat in Kashmir, to safari in Kenya, the Valley of the Kings and the pyramids in Egypt, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Marrakesh, Greece and many of its islands, Turkey and many more countries.

If I were to leave a message for future generations, based on my own life experiences, it would be this: be self-reliant, be patient and persevere. Don’t let small problems in life stop you achieving your goals. Always remember that other people will have had terrible experiences in their lives and yet managed to achieve wonderful things and find happiness.

Everything is possible. ■



Stanley and I designing our first garden in the Cotswolds



## About the AJR

Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional groups offering members a unique opportunity to socialise in their local area. Members receive support from volunteers and can obtain advice and assistance on welfare rights as well as on Holocaust reparations.

The AJR is committed to the education of future generations about the Holocaust and is now the UK's largest benefactor of education and memorialisation programmes and projects which promote teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

About 70,000 refugees, including approximately 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, arrived in Great Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s. The AJR extends membership to anyone who fled a Nazi-occupied country as a Jewish refugee or who arrived in Great Britain as a Holocaust survivor. We also welcome the descendants and spouses of the refugees as members.



“In May 1939  
my father took us  
to Trieste on the  
Italian-Yugoslav  
border to put us on  
the train to England.  
My mother was so  
beside herself at  
our parting that  
she didn’t come to  
see us off.”

 **AJR** The Association  
of Jewish Refugees

[www.ajr.org.uk](http://www.ajr.org.uk)