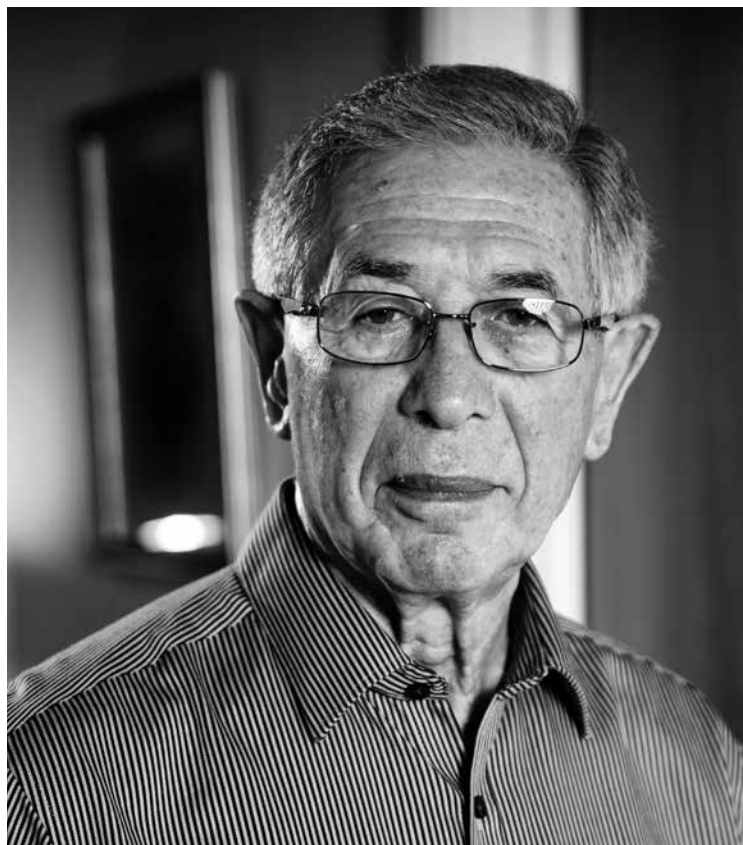


My Story

Ernest Simon, BEM



My Story
Ernest Simon, BEM



These are Ernest's words. This is his story.

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

www.ajrmystory.org.uk

www.ajr.org.uk

This book was made during the Covid-19 lockdown, 2020. Ernest spoke to AJR volunteer Alix Lee to share his story. Thanks also to AJR volunteer Shelley Hyams.

Portrait photography Copyright Guardian News & Media Ltd 2020

©The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) September 2020

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licencing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).

First published September 2020

Designed by: Berenice Smith, MA

Produced by: Debra Barnes

Printed in Great Britain by BookPrintingUK

The authors, editor and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce any copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

My Story

Ernest Simon, BEM

At midnight on 11 January 1939, my parents took me to Wiener Westbahnhof, one of the main train stations in Vienna, and put me on a train bound for England. They had absolutely no idea whether they would ever see me again, but they knew, following the terrible events of *Kristallnacht* the previous November, that this journey was likely to save my life.

But let me start at the beginning...



Contents

06	Family roots	48	On the move again – to Paris and Brussels
12	My parents look for a way out	49	Brussels sprites
20	My <i>Kindertransport</i> experience	51	We move to Hungary, the home of my ancestors
22	My first impressions of England	55	My role in post-Communist restructuring
23	The Simon family is reunited	56	A new working role late in life
26	School days in Leeds	57	Back to Brussels – and off on a world of adventure!
29	Post-War discoveries and settling into a new life	58	We move back to England
33	From Russian to love of Anita	61	The story of our son
37	Time for a change	64	Sharing my Holocaust story
40	I move to ICI and the start of an international career	67	Supporting other refugees
43	We become parents	69	Brothers together
46	We move to Germany		

Family roots

I WAS BORN Ernst Simon in May 1930 in the Jewish ghetto of Eisenstadt. The ghetto had been there for at least 200 years. It was located close to Schloss Esterhazy, the residence of the Austro-Hungarian noble family who acted as protectors of Jews in Eisenstadt and other towns in the province of Burgenland. My father, Ludwig (or Lajos – his name in Hungarian), was 28 years old at the time and my mother, Karoline or Lina, was 26. We lived in a flat on the Judengasse, *Jews' Street*, until I was about five, when we moved outside the ghetto.

Before the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, Burgenland had been part of Hungary. Eisenstadt was named Kismarton, and Hungarian was widely spoken alongside German. My father was born in 1901 in Malomhaza, and my mother came from Kald, a small village in Hungary near Sarvar. As a young woman, Lina left home to work in Austria, where she met and married my father in 1928. They then settled in Eisenstadt, where my father worked in a shoe factory.

Jews had lived in Eisenstadt since the Middle Ages. It was considered a safe haven for people driven out of Central Europe. In 1622, Eisenstadt was “bought” by Graf (Count) Nikolaus Esterhazy and Jewish residents paid a tax to the Graf in return for protection. By the middle of the 17th century, at a time when Jews were pushed out of major cities such as Vienna, they were made to feel safe in Eisenstadt and in six other small towns of North and Central Burgenland. A rich Jewish culture developed in these towns, which came to be known in Hebrew as the *sheva kehillot* (the seven communities).

The Eisenstadt ghetto was self-imposed, to enable Jews to practise their religion in peace. It consisted of one long main street with several shorter side streets. The *Schabboskette* (Sabbath chain) at each end of this main street was put up at the eve of the Sabbath every Friday evening and taken down at the conclusion of the Sabbath. Its objective was to prevent the passing of vehicles on the Sabbath day. There were two cemeteries just outside the ghetto area, the “old” and the “new”, where my grandparents and great-grandparents are buried. My great-great grandfather Rabbi Moshe Yitzchak Tachau died in 1887 and lies in the “new” cemetery while his father Rabbi Abraham Tachau, who died in 1854, lies in the “old” cemetery. The synagogue, where I was circumcised on Shavuot in 1930, was destroyed by Nazis on *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, by which time the whole of Burgenland was already



My father aged 20

Judenrein – free of Jews. We weren't there to see the synagogue destroyed – we had already been driven out of Eisenstadt by September 1938, just six months after the *Anschluss*, when the Germans marched into Austria and were greeted by a large part of the Austrian population with cheers, Nazi salutes and flowers.

I don't have many memories of Eisenstadt, but I do remember Kindergarten. I had one year there, and I remember playing with both Jewish and non-Jewish children. Our flat was in a two or three-storey building around a central garden area. There were my parents, my younger brother Kurt, and my father's younger sister Gisi also lived with us for a while. My paternal grandparents had died in about 1927, but my mother's parents were still living in Kald, where we would visit them for holidays every year. I learnt some basic Hungarian so I could communicate with my grandparents, as it was the only language they spoke.

My mother was one of 12 siblings: she was number two in the pecking order, I think. Her younger sister Olga had married my father's brother Alexander (known as Sandor, his Hungarian name), but they were separated after the *Anschluss*. When the Germans annexed Austria, my aunt wanted to say goodbye to her parents, so she went to Hungary with her daughter Claire. While they were there, Austria closed its borders to Jews. Olga and Claire were stuck in Budapest, where they spent the whole of the war in hiding. In the meantime, Sandor managed to get from Austria to England and would fight in the British Army during the war. ■

“ We weren't there to see the synagogue destroyed – we had already been driven out of Eisenstadt by September 1938, just six months after the *Anschluss*, when the Germans marched into Austria and were greeted by a large part of the Austrian population with cheers, Nazi salutes and flowers. ”



Mother aged 20



Kurt and me in 1936



Family portrait c. 1937

My parents look for a way out

AFTER WE WERE kicked out of Eisenstadt, my father managed to find us a small flat in the second district of Vienna, from where he then began a desperate quest for exit visas. England, Palestine, USA – whichever came first, that was where we would go. To our dismay, shortly after we got to Vienna, my father was imprisoned for no other reason than being a Jew. Luckily, he was released after several weeks and continued his efforts to find a way to leave Austria.

We were well aware of antisemitic violence in Vienna, carried out by the Nazi Black Shirts who roamed the streets looking for any Jews to attack. Our parents kept Kurt and me indoors as much as possible during this period to keep us out of danger. Then, on 9 November 1938 came *Kristallnacht*, a day of carnage throughout Germany and Austria, when Nazi gangs pillaged, destroyed and burned Jewish property, shops, businesses and synagogues, and murdered 91 Jews. Fortunately, the concierge of the building where we lived had warned my mother and advised her to keep the family indoors on that day. The Nazis built a bonfire in the street below our second-floor bedroom window, and burned Torah scrolls and prayer books taken from the local synagogue, a sight which remains clear in my memory. It has been extensively documented that the widespread murder and destruction of *Kristallnacht* had been well planned and prepared. The police forces and fire brigades of Germany and Austria had clear instructions not to interfere with what was to happen.

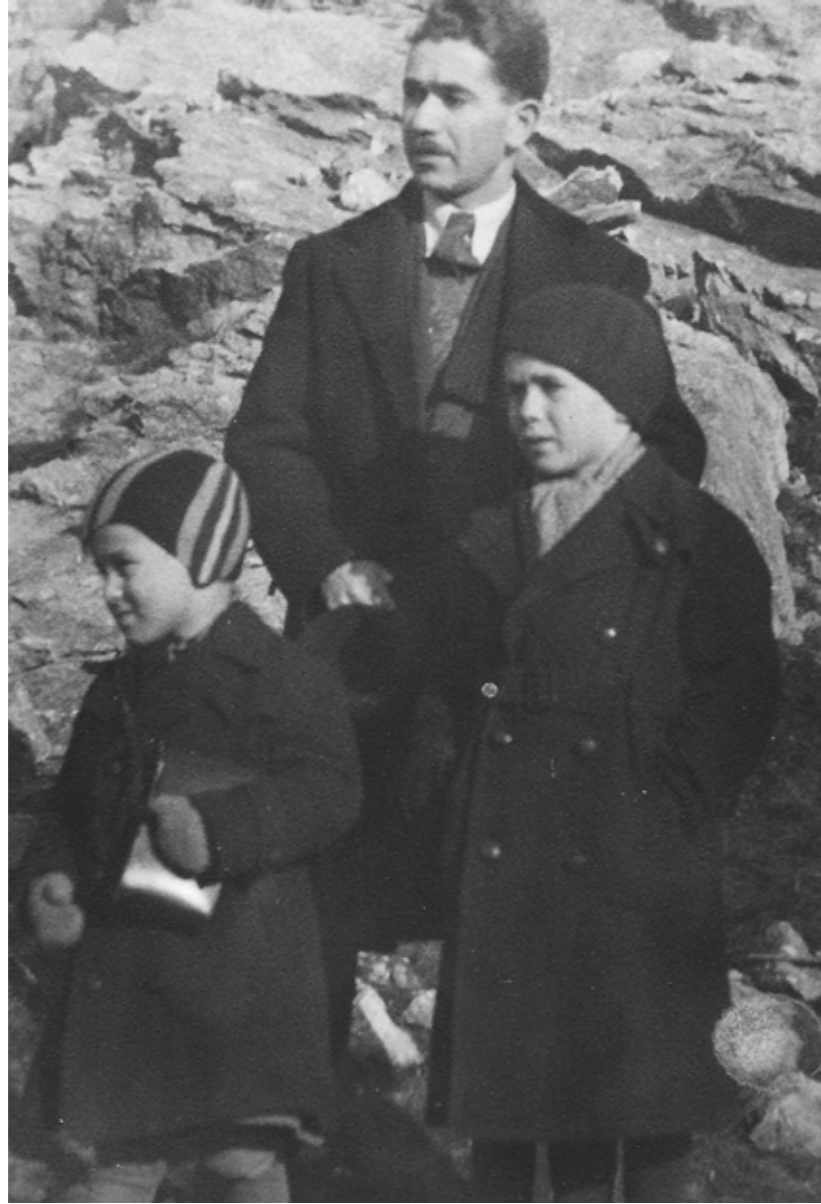
Although as children Kurt and I did not really understand the full danger we were in, our parents were clearly aware that our situation, like that of all Jews throughout Austria and Germany, was becoming increasingly precarious. Many thousands in both countries made desperate efforts to find refuge elsewhere, but all major countries of the world were closed to Jewish refugees. An international conference convened by Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1938 at Evian les Bains in France with the objective of finding a solution to the plight of German and Austrian Jews, ended in total disaster – no country, not the USA, not Canada, not Australia, was prepared to take in any significant number of Jews. The very fact that the conference failed to issue any sort of communiqué condemning the Nazi treatment of Jews practically gave them the green light to continue their evil acts.

And so, the news of the *Kindertransport* was greeted by many with mixed feelings. Here was an opportunity to save the life of one's son or daughter, but what was the likelihood of ever seeing them

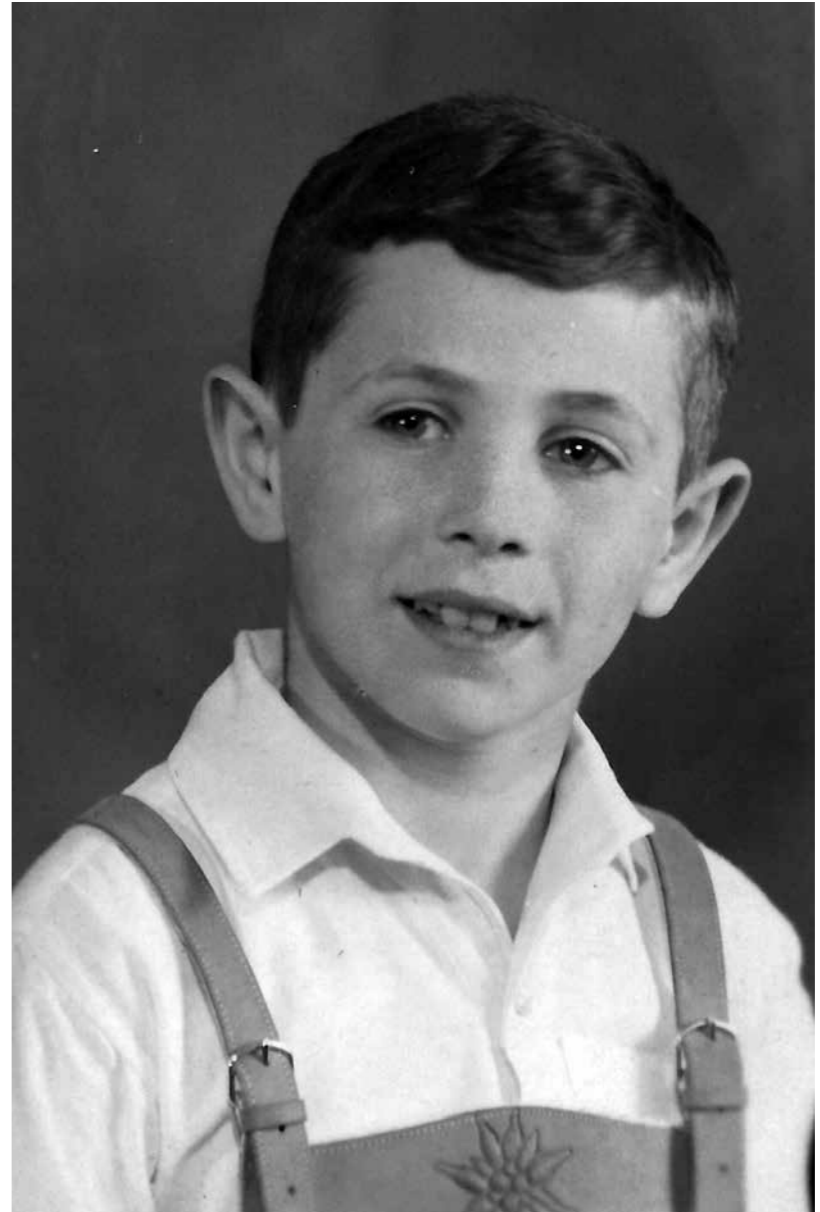
again? This was the dilemma faced by thousands of parents, my own included. What courage it must have taken to make such a decision. How desperate they must have been.

The creation of the *Kindertransport* is well documented and does not need repeating here. Suffice to say that some 10,000 mainly Jewish children were saved from Nazi persecution by being taken to England where they would be able to live to adulthood in safety. Sadly, most of these children never saw their parents again. The adults were caught up in the Nazis' *Final Solution*, sent to concentration camps and murdered. The surviving children generally learned of the fate of their parents only after the conclusion of the war. I was much luckier than so many of my compatriots. ■

“ We were well aware of antisemitic violence in Vienna, carried out by the Nazi Black Shirts who roamed the streets looking for any Jews to attack. Our parents kept Kurt and me indoors as much as possible during this period to keep us out of danger. ”



Father, Kurt and me c.1936



Aged 7



A gathering of the extended family in Einsenstadt. I am in the white shirt with black tie and Kurt is in the buggy. Behind us are our parents. To my father's left is Olga, my mother's sister and on the extreme right is her husband Alexander (Sandor) who was my father's younger brother - two brothers married two sisters. To the right of the buggy is my father's sister Gisi who came to England in mid-1938 as a domestic servant and was instrumental in finding foster parents for me in Leeds and employers for my parents. To her right is Hugo Weiss who was married to my mother's elder sister Rosa (not in the picture), holding his daughter Hannah.



Schabboskette at the entrance to the Eisenstadt ghetto

My Story Ernest Simon, BEM



Outside our home in Eisenstadt, c.1937.
Left to right: Mother, Father and his sister Gisi

My *Kindertransport* experience

HOW I CAME to be selected for the *Kindertransport* and the various negotiations between my parents and the Jewish community of Vienna is a closed book to me. Nor do my brother and I understand why I was sent, and not he. He was old enough to go – almost six years old in early January 1939. These are questions we should have asked our parents while they were still alive, but regretfully we did not. Be that as it may, I found myself, at the age of eight and a half, at the Wiener Westbahnhof with my mother and father trying desperately to hide their worry. They encouraged me to think of it as an exciting adventure, reassuring me that they would soon be with me in England – though the truth was they had absolutely no idea if they would ever see me again.

My parents had received instructions from the Offices of the Vienna Jewish Community, detailing what had to be done and what was strictly forbidden for *Kindertransport* passengers. They had to pay my fare of 44 *Reichsmark* (RM) plus a further five RM for the transport of my luggage. Absolutely no valuables were permitted. The contents of the luggage was limited to necessities – no musical instruments, no cameras, no money. Only one person could accompany me to the station and take me to the third-class waiting room. All goodbyes had to be carried out in this waiting room, not on the departure platform, though my memory of that evening was that both my parents were with me on the platform.

My recollection of that journey is vague, with certain moments standing out and others totally forgotten or suppressed. Peter Hedderly, a friend and railway enthusiast who has good knowledge of the logistics of the *Kindertransport*, has shared documents with me that contain details I could not possibly remember. He tells me that our train left the Wiener Westbahnhof at 22:40 on 11 January 1939 and was attached to train D67. We travelled nearly 1300km to the Hook of Holland, where we linked up with the overnight sailing to Harwich. I must have slept for much of the train journey. I remember the departure, the goodbyes, the number 226 on a card hanging around my neck. The arrival in the Netherlands was certainly memorable, since we were greeted by friendly people offering sweets, soft drinks and cakes. My next clear memory is of being violently seasick on the overnight ship to Harwich, sailing through typical winter weather on the North Sea.

I learnt more details only a few years ago, when I attended the AJR forum for the 80th anniversary of the *Kindertransport*, held at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2018. There I met Peter, and Paul Weidling, professor of Oxford University whose mother had been on the same train as me from Vienna. He had done a lot of research into this. He sent me a list of the names of all the *Kindertransport* refugees on that train, including my own. ■

428

This document of identity is issued with the approval of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to young persons to be admitted to the United Kingdom for educational purposes under the care of the Inter-Aid Committee for children.

THIS DOCUMENT REQUIRES NO VISA.


PERSONAL PARTICULARS. 2430

Name SIMON ERNST

Sex M Date of Birth 26.5.30

Place EISENSTADT

Full Names and Address of Parents
SIMON LUDWIG & KAROLINE
10. HERMINENGASSE.
VIENNA II



My entry permit on arrival at Harwich, January 1939

My first impressions of England

MOST OF THE children on that *Kindertransport* crossing made the journey to Liverpool Street Station in London, where they were met by their new foster parents or by volunteers who arranged places for them in a hostel.

Documentation obtained some years ago from World Jewish Relief indicates that I spent my first night in England at a hostel in the Whitechapel area of London. The next day, I was taken to Leeds. All this remains a total blank in my memory. I have no recollection of the hostel, nor do I know who collected me and how I came to Leeds. It is likely that it was my aunt Gisi, who had lived with us in Eisenstadt. Gisi, or Gisella to give her full name, had managed to obtain a domestic service visa for England in late 1938 and was working for a Jewish family in Leeds, and found me a foster home nearby.

My foster parents, Mr and Mrs Morris, lived at 56 Sholebroke Avenue in the Chapeltown area of Leeds, at that time a very Jewish neighbourhood. They had daughters, all older than me, so I was very much the baby of the family, well treated and probably rather spoiled. They were kind and welcoming, mindful of the trauma I was experiencing in this new environment, missing my parents and not speaking a word of English. Within days of arriving in Leeds, they packed me off to the local elementary school, Cowper Street School, about 15 minutes' walk from their home.

My memory of my first days at that school is quite clear. I wore my Austrian uniform of knickerbocker trousers, designed for the cold Viennese winters (it was January), but very different to the shorts worn by English schoolboys in all weathers. This, added to the fact that I spoke no English, made me the centre of attention. Luckily for me, one of the teachers was Jewish and spoke some Yiddish, a distant cousin of German, so we managed to find some understanding between us. Happily, children of that age are like sponges when it comes to learning a new language, and within weeks of my arrival I was able to communicate on basics with my new friends and foster family. ■

The Simon family is reunited

Meanwhile, back in Vienna, my father continued his efforts to obtain an exit visa. Some weeks after my departure, with more help from my aunt Gisi, he was finally successful. One of the very few ways of obtaining a visa for England was to find a family willing to employ you as a domestic servant. Gisi found such a family. Two non-Jewish doctors living in Guiseley near Leeds were prepared to employ my mother as a cook and my father as general handyman. The relevant guarantees went to Vienna and, just a few weeks after my arrival in Leeds, my parents and Kurt got there too. Our joy at seeing each other again can be readily imagined. A foster home was found for Kurt, just a few hundred yards from where I lived. He then started at Cowper Street School like me, which meant we saw each other every day. Our parents managed to come and visit us every couple of weeks on their day off.

War broke out in September 1939 and, very soon after, children from the larger cities of the UK, including Leeds, places that could become targets for German bombs, were evacuated into the countryside as a safety precaution. I found myself with Mr and Mrs Kemp in Branston near Lincoln. They were a farming family, non-Jewish, and obviously didn't speak a word of German. Nevertheless, they welcomed me into their family and treated me very kindly. My English improved rapidly but my German deteriorated just as quickly, since it was no longer being used. I was fast becoming a typical English schoolboy. About four months after my evacuation, my mother and father came to visit. By this time, my father's English was slowly improving, but my mother was no linguist and she was finding great difficulty with the language. The result was that on their visit they spoke to me in German: I understood them perfectly, but I replied in English, now my preferred first language. My poor mother burst into tears, really upset that she could no longer communicate properly with her son. She insisted that I return to Leeds as soon as possible – “back to civilisation,” as she put it. She wasn't entirely wrong: Leeds was hardly attacked at all during the war. I think there was one air raid and that was it.

In spring 1940, some six months after leaving for Branston, I returned to Leeds and went to live, alongside Kurt, at a hostel for refugee boys on Stainbeck Lane in Chapel Allerton. The hostel had been set up by the Leeds Committee for Refugee Children and was managed by Mr Spiro. It was a strictly orthodox Jewish establishment, kosher in every sense and observant of the Sabbath and the festivals.

I have very positive memories of our 12 months there. Kurt and I were the youngest of about 50 boys and we continued to attend Cowper Street School.

At the start of the war there were 80,000 potential 'enemy aliens' in the UK who, it was feared, could be spies or willing to assist the enemy in the event of an invasion. All Germans and Austrians were called before a tribunal and divided into three groups:

- A - High security risk – about 600, who were immediately interned;
- B - Doubtful cases – about 6,500, who were supervised and subject to restrictions;
- C - No security risk – about 64,000, of whom some 55,000 were Jewish refugees. They were initially left at liberty.

This changed in Spring 1940, when there was an outbreak of spy fever and agitation against enemy aliens. Churchill gave instructions to 'collar the lot!' The majority, including my father, were interned on the Isle of Man, some in Huyton near Liverpool, others were shipped to Canada and a number went to Australia. After about 12 months of internment, my father was released along with many others: the Government had realised that these Jewish internees had more reason to hate the Nazis than the average Englishman, and, since most of them spoke German as their first language, they could be of great value in the war against the Nazis.

By the middle of 1941, my father was working in a munitions factory near Leeds, while my mother was now working as a cook in the Leeds home of the Labovitch family, the owners of a textile mill. Towards the end of that year, my parents had somehow saved or borrowed enough money to take on a house in Shepherds Lane, close enough to Cowper Street School for Kurt and me to walk there. The *cheder* we attended (for our Jewish education) was also in Cowper Street. So now, for the first time in about two years, we lived together as a family.

Kurt and I were growing up like typical English-Jewish schoolboys – though we did not have typical English parents, since they continued to have problems with the language. For many years, they would talk to us at home in German and we would reply in English. If they wanted to talk of matters not intended for our ears, they would speak in Hungarian, which neither Kurt nor I understood. Their friends in Leeds were all German- or Hungarian-speaking refugees, and indeed, even 50 years

later, my mother still spoke English with a very broad accent. Though she spoke three languages fluently – Hungarian, German and English – she was never a good linguist. In later life, she emigrated to Israel and lived in Haifa, but she never learned Hebrew. She used to joke, "Well, if they can't speak English, German or Hungarian, they can't be worth speaking to anyway."

During the war, our parents started taking in lodgers to make ends meet. These would be young Hungarian, German or Austrian men, refugees in need of a home. They usually ate with us, almost as members of the family. There was rationing, so food was limited, but we never went hungry. My mother was a wonderful cook. The food she prepared always had a strong Austro-Hungarian flavour, which helped us – and our lodgers – feel very much at home. ■



My family in 1941

School days in Leeds

BY SPRING 1942, the time had come for me to take the 11-plus exam. Unfortunately, I failed. I suppose I hadn't had enough education in England by then. Fee-paying places were available, however, so this was the route my parents took. The nearest grammar school in North Leeds was Roundhay, but the fees were £15 a term, far beyond our means. In South Leeds, Cockburn High School's fees were only £5 a term, so that is where I went from the age of 12, travelling across the city every day either by tram or bus, or on my bicycle as I grew older. After two years, there was another opportunity to take an exam to allow me to continue my education without fees. This time I passed.

My six years at Cockburn passed pleasantly and relatively successfully. South Leeds was not a particularly Jewish area, but there were a few other Jewish children at the school in a similar situation to me. In my class of 30 or so, we were three Jewish boys. In



Leeds Maccabi c. 1949-50 with Frankie Vaughan front left and me front middle

the class above, there were maybe three or four. I became close to those Jewish boys, and they stayed friends until we left school. I was always in the upper quartile academically, and I enjoyed all the sports activities. Results of my School Certificate exams were very good: out of nine subjects, I had seven distinctions. My Higher School Certificate results, however, were less good, possibly because I had by then developed an interest in girls and going to the Mecca Ballroom. I specialised in languages – English, French and Latin, with German as a subsidiary – and as a natural linguist, I did well enough to get into Leeds University to study Economics and Commerce with languages, resulting in a Bachelor of Commerce degree after three years.

My teenage years in Leeds passed reasonably pleasantly. Much of my social and cultural life then centred on AZA, the boys' branch of B'nai B'rith that had recently arrived from the USA. This excellent organisation catered for Jewish teenage boys without any specific slant on religion. Many long-lasting friendships developed within AZA, and my involvement bore rich fruit in later life, when I was to work for B'nai B'rith in England and Europe.

My keen interest in sporting activities – soccer, cricket, athletics and even tennis – also grew apace at that time, mostly within the framework of school. Later, I played soccer for the Leeds Jewish Institute, part of the Northern Jewish Soccer League. These were Sunday matches, played against other teams across the North of England. My active interest in soccer continued until I was 30, when I left England to work in Switzerland. I still love the sport, though, and remain a lifelong supporter of Leeds United Football Club, taking every opportunity I can to follow their fortunes. ■

“Much of my social and cultural life then centred on AZA, the boys' branch of B'nai B'rith that had recently arrived from the USA. This excellent organisation catered for Jewish teenage boys without any specific slant on religion.”

Post-War discoveries and settling into a new life

IN 1945, THE Second World War ended. I was 15, old enough to join in with the VE Day parties and celebrations. My parents and many of their friends in Leeds, refugees from Germany and Austria, were of course overjoyed that the war was over. Yet their joy was mixed with sadness as they began to learn the fate of the families they had left behind. That was a major problem for my mother particularly. My father's family all managed to get out, but many of my mother's close family members were killed in the Holocaust, including her parents, while two of her sisters and two brothers died in the camps.

A number of the others subsequently came to England after the war. Olga and her daughter Claire, who had spent the war years in hiding in Budapest, came to England in 1946 and stayed with us. That's when we found out what they'd gone through. Claire is about seven or eight years younger than me, so we got to know each other well then, but I can't say she told me a lot about what she went through in hiding. At that time, people didn't dwell on the details of what they had suffered, you just got on with life and looked to the future.

Two of my mother's brothers who also survived, Sandor and Ignatz, lost their wives and children in the Holocaust, but they managed to escape. They told my mother about their parents and siblings who had perished, although it took several years for all the information to come out.

My parents took us back to Austria at the first opportunity, maybe in 1948 or '49. By that time we had all been naturalised British and went on a summer holiday to a village near Innsbruck in the mountains. We stayed at a small hotel for a couple of weeks, just enjoying the scenery, the mountains and the good food. We didn't really mix with the Austrians who lived there. Obviously, there was bad feeling about what had happened to my mother's family but that didn't stop us from making the most of the familiar Austrian *Gemütlichkeit*.

After the war, my parents managed to buy a larger, semi-detached house in Copgrove Road, a rather more affluent area. They continued to take in lodgers to help with the family finances, usually a young European man who would eat with the family. Around this time my father started his own business. His experiences in the shoe factory in Eisenstadt had given him a good understanding of leather, and he saw that there was good market potential for high quality leather handbags among the ladies of



Proud parents 1951

Leeds. This is where he excelled. He developed fashionable styles in calf, snakeskin and crocodile, which quickly earned him a good reputation. My mother, as well as running the household, soon became my father's very proficient business assistant.

National Service was obligatory when my university education came to an end, and in 1951 I was called up into the Royal Air Force for my two-year stint. This was the time of the Korean War and the growing tensions of the Cold War. The British Government realised that there were precious few men of military age in England capable of speaking Russian, and so they created a Joint Services Russian course. I learned of this during my basic training. I had studied German, French and Spanish (as well

as six years of Latin), so I felt I was ideally suited for this, and, indeed, my application was successful. After finishing my basic training, I was posted to Coulsdon in Surrey and joined 300 other National Service personnel from the three services – Navy, Army and Air Force – on an introductory Russian course. After two months of intensive language training, an examination filtered out the top 150 for further training as interpreters, while the remaining 150 learned to become translators, working on the written rather than the spoken word.

I was one of top 100 posted to the Cambridge University Department of Slavonic Studies for interpreter training under Professor Elisabeth Hill; the other 50 studied at the University of London. We were given the rank of Officer Cadet and lived in an officers' mess in a large mansion in Newmarket. We were bussed daily into Cambridge and spent the next year in very concentrated studies of the Russian language, achieving a high degree of fluency, and living a life more akin to that of students than military personnel. We studied hard, knowing that falling below a certain level in the regular exams would mean exclusion from the Russian course and a return to our service units.

The next stage of our training introduced a military perspective, giving a practical application to back up the theory acquired at Cambridge. This took place at Bodmin in Cornwall, where I found myself in the early spring of 1953. I quickly realised that we had enjoyed a life of luxury in the previous 12 months. This was a proper army camp, run with a great deal of military discipline. In addition to further Russian language training, we learnt – in Russian – the principles of flight, the technicalities of jet engines, how to interpret at a military conference, how to interrogate a prisoner of war, and how to listen to Russian pilots in the air. Many of the instructors were Russian or Polish refugees, not military people, and we developed good friendships with some. Many pleasant evenings were spent playing bridge together in Russian.

The end of my six months of advanced military Russian coincided with my demobilisation in August 1953. My two years of conscription turned out to be a valuable learning period for me, an opportunity to acquire another language among an interesting group of like-minded young people. In the end, I never actually used any of those language skills for their intended purpose. I used Russian very occasionally in later life, when I went to Moscow a couple of times on business and was able to get by. Today, I can read it but I couldn't possibly speak it. ■



Graduation 1951

From Russian to love of Anita

IN THE AUTUMN of 1952, halfway through my two years in the RAF, came a turning point in my life: I met Anita Weinstein. Anita's mother had died five years earlier, and her father, a hairdresser in Forest Gate, London, had remarried. His wife was Betty Sacofsky from Leeds, who was related to friends of my brother and me. When Anita expressed a wish to train as a teacher, it seemed appropriate for her to go to a training college near Leeds so she could benefit from this family support. She was with them for Yom Kippur 1952, a time when I was also home on leave from the RAF.

It was the custom in those days to hold a post-Yom Kippur dance at the Leeds Jewish Institute. I had no girlfriend and, as I was due to leave early the following morning to return to Cambridge, I did not plan to go to the dance. But my friends had other ideas. Two or three of them approached me in the synagogue and spoke of "this lovely bird from London" who was keen to meet me. Who could have resisted? Anita and I met, danced together and enjoyed each other's company. Our long-distance courtship lasted many months, involving many letters and phone calls but relatively few personal meetings. Anita finished her training and started teaching in London.

August 1953 saw my return to civilian life with no clear idea of how I would earn a living other than in some area of business or commerce. The Leeds-based Bellow Machine Company traded in all types of machinery for the garment making industry, which was very important in Leeds at that time. Some machines were manufactured in Leeds, others, such as Pfaff Sewing Machines, were imported from Germany. This was very much a Jewish family business with Irwin Bellow, son of the founder, as Managing Director, and Ted Hyman as Sales Director. They had ambitions to develop an export trade and Ted Hyman recognised my language abilities as a valuable asset. I was employed at a salary of £8 a week, and was trained in two specific business areas: the machinery used in garment cutting rooms, and the specialised sewing machines used in the production of hats. I travelled to the Netherlands and France, visiting clients with the local sales agents, slowly beginning to understand the needs of the industry.

After some six months with Bellow, I was head-hunted into a totally different world – Evans of Leeds, civil engineering contractors and dealers in earth-moving equipment. I had been giving language coaching to Michael Evans, the 17-year-old son of Fred Evans, the company's owner and Managing



Anita 1952. How could I resist her?

Director and a good friend of Alfred and Lola Dixon, who were my parents' best friends. When Fred offered me a job at a raise of £12 per week, it was an offer I could not refuse

My courtship of Anita was still long distance – she working in London, I in Leeds – so in 1954 we arranged to marry later that year. After a good deal of family discussion, it was agreed to hold the wedding in Leeds, primarily for financial reasons: the cost of a London wedding would have been prohibitively high. We married at the Beth Hamidrash Hagadol Synagogue in Chapeltown, our family *shul* since the early 1940s. The wedding party, a dinner and dance, was held at the Moortown Corner House. Kurt had married his girlfriend Betty White about six months before, and so many other friends had married in 1954 that most of our young female guests wore wedding dresses at our marriage party!

We honeymooned in Paris, a city I had visited a couple of times as a student hitchhiker, but Anita had never been, so it was an exciting adventure. We flew from Croydon in a twin-engine Elizabethan of British European Airways and stayed in a rather cheap hotel in central Paris. The highlight of our stay was a dinner at the Lido nightclub on the Champs Elysees. The dancing of the famous Bluebell girls remains clear in my memory. ■



Our wedding on 26 December 1954. Anita and me with my parents, Kurt and Betty

Time for a change

1955 WAS A very mixed year in our family fortunes. I left Evans of Leeds to join Marks and Spencer as a management trainee. I was based at the Harrogate store, at a starting salary of £750 per year, commuting daily from Leeds to Harrogate on the No. 36 bus. It was our first year of marriage. We found a small flat in a terraced house in Street Lane, halfway between Roundhay Park and Moortown Corner. No sooner had we settled in than my parents moved in with us, having sold the house in Copgrove Road and bought a small maisonette in Roman Avenue, just around the corner. They needed somewhere to stay while their new home was being decorated.

Then, to our eternal distress, my father died, aged only 54, after suffering a heart attack followed by a brain haemorrhage. We had always been a very close family and his passing was extremely painful to us all. Kurt, who was in the middle of his medical studies, clearly understood better than my mother and me what was happening to our father during his brief stay in hospital. My mother was suddenly alone, a widow at 51. Fortunately, we lived around the corner, and Kurt and Betty were not too far away. Above all, my mother had very good friends who supported her through this difficult period, as well as her sisters Olga and Gisi living nearby.

My mother never remarried and remained alone until her death in 2002, just a few days short of her 99th birthday. She was a wonderful person, very strong. Various men wanted to marry her over the years, but she refused them, despite encouragement from Kurt and me. My Aunt Gisi, on the other hand, moved to Atlantic City in the United States after she stopped working as a domestic, and married Moritz Max, a distant relative.

Bereavement aside, this was a busy and exciting period in our lives. Anita worked as a teacher in Kirkstall, a rather deprived district of Leeds, and came home each evening with tales of the misdeeds of her pupils. I was learning the retail trade in Harrogate. We had a busy social life. With friends we formed a B'nai B'rith Young Men and Women's Lodge and worked hard to raise money for charity. I played football regularly for the Leeds Jewish Institute, and during the summer my Sunday afternoons were devoted to cricket with New Rovers, for whom Anita was official scorer and tea maker. In late 1955 we bought our first house for the princely sum of £2350, having borrowed £200 from my mother to pay the deposit. It was in Alwoodley, a very "des-res" area for young Jewish families.

After about 12 months in Harrogate, I was transferred to the Leeds branch of M&S, at that time probably the fourth or fifth largest in the UK. I enjoyed my job, the contact with the public, the relations with my colleagues, and I expected to work out my career there. All that changed one day, about six months later. I was in charge of ladies' lingerie at the Leeds store, and the store manager, Mr Keane, was inspecting my department. Quite unexpectedly he asked me: "How many languages do you speak, Ernest?" I replied that I had studied German, French, Spanish and Russian, and spoke some better than others. He then quietly asked: "So why are you selling knickers to Yorkshire housewives?" It was a question that changed my life. It forced me to take stock of my abilities, to think about what I had that others did not – my language skills. Where could I make best use of these skills? How could I improve my career potential? ■



Mother in her 80s



With the two women in my life, 1962

I move to ICI and the start of an international career

AFTER THINKING THINGS through, I wrote a letter to the Personnel Manager at ICI Fibres, which was located in Harrogate, asking if they had an opening in their export department. Three weeks later, in the autumn of 1957, I was in. My main role was the marketing of ICI's polyester filament yarns and staple fibres – Terylene and Crimplene – to textile industries across the four countries of Scandinavia. Luckily, my lack of Swedish or Danish did not prove too much of a handicap, since the average educated Scandinavian spoke good English or sometimes German. I learned to enjoy the sauna in Finland, the crayfish season, the strict dinner rules in Sweden and the sight of ladies in Denmark smoking large cigars. In Norway I had my first attempt at skiing, on the slopes of Holmenkollen on the outskirts of Oslo.

I also spent time helping to train the local ICI marketeers in Switzerland and Austria, and in mid-1960, I was asked if I would be interested in moving to Zürich, to take responsibility for the marketing of the ICI Fibres range there and in Austria. After a couple of days looking round Zürich, Anita and I agreed that life there had to be more interesting than in Leeds. We moved into a two-bedroom flat in Kilchberg on the east coast of Lake Zürich in the autumn of 1960.

Thus began what I now consider to be one of the happiest times of my life. I had a car for the first time – a Morris Oxford. I was busy learning about the business in the two countries. The General Manager of ICI Switzerland in 1960 was Bryan Hilton-Jones, an extremely bright and pleasant man. It was not until many years later that I discovered he had been the commander of a special (Jewish, German speaking) Army commando unit during the war. Sadly, he was killed in a motoring accident in 1970.

I spent one week in four in Austria, mostly in Vienna, until local performance problems resulted in our having to move there in late 1961 so I could spend six months concentrating on the Austrian side of the business. The winter of early 1962 in Vienna was one of the coldest for many years, not an easy time to enjoy the pleasures of our new temporary home. But as the weather improved, we explored the areas around Vienna during the weekends, and visited Eisenstadt and other parts of Burgenland. This was a rather strange experience for me. Our original home in the Schubertplatz was gone and a shopping centre stood in its place. The famous *Schabboskette* (Sabbath chain) was still there, hanging on a pillar as a memento of days gone by. The Jewish Museum had not yet been established. Schloss Eszterhazy stood there in its royal yellow glory.

Towards the end of 1963, I was asked to spend some time in Israel, to survey the potential for polyester fibres there. Just at this time we discovered that Anita was pregnant, an extremely important event as we had by then been married for nine years. We decided that Anita would accompany me to Israel. We arrived in January 1964, with Anita some three months pregnant. The weather was dreadful: continuous rainfall, cold and windy. Hotel Samuel overlooked the sea in Tel Aviv, the only significant hotel at that time. Members of the Israeli Cabinet would turn up for lunch nearly every day. I had family in Israel whom I had not seen since my seventh birthday. My mother's oldest sister, Rosa, had emigrated in 1938 with her husband Hugo and three children. They lived in Haifa, and we spent pleasant times with them and Hannah, their elder daughter, who was already married with two small children.

My survey was complete after four weeks. I decided to spend an extra few days in Israel so I could write up my report without being distracted by my day job back in Zürich. We went to Eilat on the Red Sea, which at that time was totally undeveloped, and stayed at the Hotel Queen of Sheba, the only suitable hotel in the resort at that time. The weather was superb – beautiful hot sunshine every day. After four days we flew back to Tel Aviv and then returned to normality in Zürich. But it was not normality, as suddenly everything was very different for us. ■

Skating in Flumserberg with good friend Hans Haffter



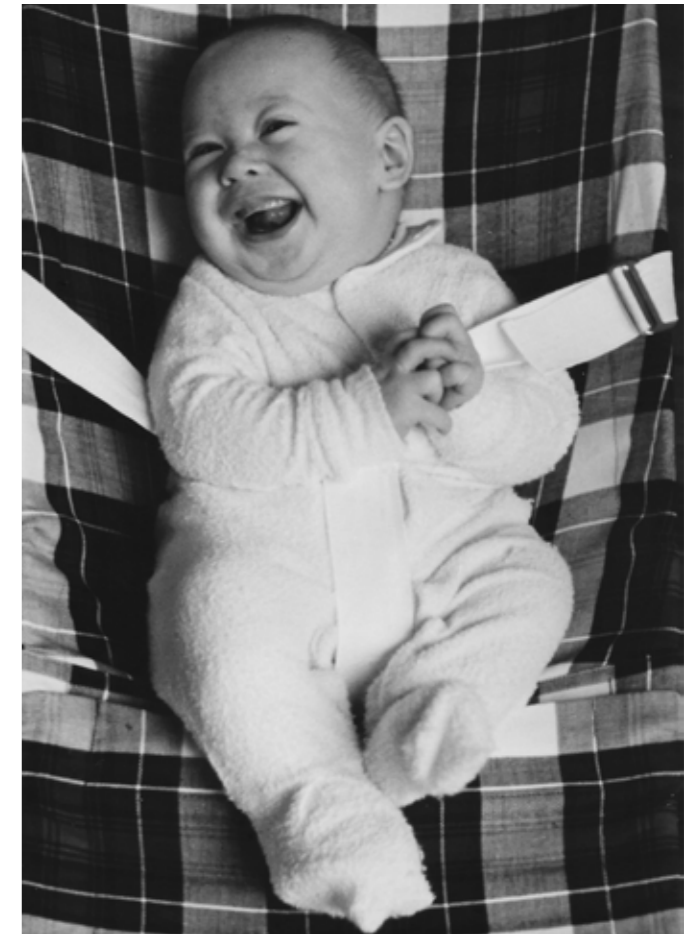


In 1964 during my business trip to Israel we visited Acco with my cousin Hannah and her children

We become parents

OUR SON MARTIN was born in July 1964 in a Zürich nursing home. The Swiss expected the father to be present at the birth, something I had not anticipated. As somebody who had fainted at my nephew Paul's circumcision some years earlier, I was very hesitant about this. In the event it was an experience I would not have wanted to miss. It was not a particularly easy delivery, but *we* made it!

We realised very quickly, however, that there was a problem – Martin's right foot was turned inwards, a so-called 'club foot'. We immediately sought the advice of a leading paediatrician and treatment started a few days after his birth. The foot was gently and slowly manipulated to move it into the correct position, then held in place with plaster of Paris. Bathing him required two people, one to hold his leg out of the water, the other to wash him. When, after 12 months, we were able to discard the plaster, it was amusing to see how Martin continued to hold his right leg out of the water without any prompting. ■



Happy Martin 1964



Martin aged 4



Martin ready for St. Aubyns in 1973

We move to Germany

OUR LIFE IN Switzerland was pleasant and agreeable. Martin grew into a happy child and we got used to the regular medical visits he required. By 1965 I was in my fifth year in Zürich. This had been planned as a two-year secondment. The work remained interesting, but it was clear to me that a change was needed if my ICI career were to progress. Just at that time, ICI Fibres was in the process of setting up a new European headquarters in Frankfurt. The manager of this new enterprise was Peter Beazeley, whom I knew well from ICI Fibres in Harrogate. I phoned him and he invited me for an interview in Frankfurt.

The possibility of this move to Germany presented me with a personal dilemma. Did I, a refugee from Nazi oppression, actually want to work in Germany? How would that respect the memory of my aunts, uncles and grandparents who had died at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust? Lengthy discussions with family and friends followed, but the situation remained unclear. Going to Frankfurt for my interview helped to clarify my thinking. I was offered the job of European Marketing Manager, and I decided to accept. I felt that the majority of people with whom I would have contact would be too young to have been involved personally in the Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust. I did not hold them responsible for their parents' actions or inactions, so why shouldn't I live and work alongside them?

“The possibility of this move to Germany presented me with a personal dilemma. Did I, a refugee from Nazi oppression, actually want to work in Germany?”

I moved to Frankfurt, at this point without Anita and Martin, in the autumn of 1966. My office was in a very modern high rise building in the city centre, I had a brand-new BMW as my company car, and I was aided by the best secretary I could have wished for. My first meeting with Marie-Therese Krein was almost a reverse interview – she wanted to be sure that she really wanted to work for me. Luckily for me, she decided that she did. She was an excellent linguist, speaking fluent French and English as well as German, and very well organised. We remained good friends right up to her death in 2019.

Anita and I found an attractive penthouse flat in Gravenbruch, Neu-Isenburg, south of Frankfurt centre. Martin was just 20 months old at this point. We quickly established regular contact with a paediatrician at the Frankfurt University Hospital to ensure the ongoing care that Martin needed for his foot, and were astonished to learn at the first consultation that his treatment would be quite different to the Swiss approach. It turned out to be very effective. Martin developed into a lively and happy boy, speaking German with other children and with his various soft toys, and English with adults. This was fine in Frankfurt, but when we visited England for a holiday and my mother took him for a visit to the local nursery school, he created no end of confusion by trying to speak German with the other children there. In 1970, at the age of six, Martin started attending the American International School, located in the Taunus area in the north of Frankfurt, so we moved house to be closer. Living in Oberhochstadt had the added benefit of enabling me to play at the very elegant Golf Club in Kronberg, where I spent many enjoyable Sunday mornings. ■

On the move again – to Paris and Brussels

BEFORE LONG WE were on the move again. In 1971, I was asked to take up the position of Deputy Sales Manager of the Fibres Department of ICI France, and after an initial period in Paris, spent alone so as not to interrupt Martin's school year, we moved as a family in the summer of 1971 into an apartment in a newly built area near Versailles. The English School of Paris, today known as the British School of Paris, was ideal for Martin. Within weeks he was speaking basic French and beginning to forget his German. On Sunday mornings we took him to Hebrew School in Versailles, where a friendly Sephardi community welcomed us.

Our stay in France lasted only two years. I was just beginning to feel comfortable with the language when I was asked to move to Brussels as Sales Manager responsible for the Benelux countries, a potentially important market for yarns and fibres destined for the carpet industry. Martin was nine years old by now and we were worried about the stability of his future education. As an ICI expatriate, I was liable to be moved again at any time. We reluctantly decided that continuity could best be assured if we found a suitable boarding school for him in southern England. St. Aubyn's in Rottingdean, just outside Brighton, proved just that. While Anita and I were devastated at the thought of sending Martin away, he accepted the situation very calmly. When we took him to Victoria Station to join other new boys on the train journey to school, he walked away from us at the ticket barrier without even turning around for a last wave. Much to our relief, he seemed happy at the school, made friends and wrote us regular letters. On Sunday mornings he went by taxi to Hebrew classes in Hove. We saw each other frequently, either in England or at home in Brussels during the lengthy school holidays. ■

Brussels sprites

ANITA AND I settled in easily to our new life in Brussels. There was a very active ex-patriate community – Americans, British, German, French and many others – and we quickly began to socialise in this group, particularly with the Jewish members. Miriam and Eric Mark were among our first friends, both originally refugees in England, Miriam originating in Poland and escaping the Holocaust by the skin of her teeth just before the outbreak of hostilities and Eric having arrived in England from Germany a couple of years before the war began. Through these new-found friends Anita joined Hatikvah, an English speaking Jewish ladies' organisation that included a wide mixture of nationalities and which regularly arranged excellent social gatherings to which husbands were usually invited.

Anita also joined the British Women's Club, where she learned to play bridge, Martin seemed happy at Carmel College in Wallingford, where he was now in the Sixth Form preparing for A-levels, and the Fibres business in Benelux was doing well. Then a bombshell hit us – Anita was diagnosed with breast cancer. This was a major shock, but fortunately Anita pulled through this difficult period very quickly. She underwent surgery and we spent about ten days on the French and Italian Riviera to help her recuperation. Maureen Coplin came from Leeds and spent a couple of weeks with us in Brussels to help Anita to convalesce. I had known Jack Coplin since my arrival in Leeds in 1939. We were both at Cowper Street School and lived near each other in Chapeltown. Our parents became good friends.

“Miriam and Eric Mark were among our first friends, both originally refugees in England, Miriam originating in Poland and escaping the Holocaust by the skin of her teeth just before the outbreak of hostilities and Eric having arrived in England from Germany a couple of years before the war began.”

Jack also went to Cockburn High School, a year ahead of me. Our friendship lasted 80 years, until his death in 2019. He married Maureen in 1954, the same year I married Anita. Happily, the two wives got on well, which strengthened mine and Jack's friendship, so it was totally in character for Maureen to drop everything in Leeds and come to support Anita in her hour of need.

Wherever we lived, we had frequent visits from family and friends. My mother would spend weeks at a time with us and other people visited regularly. Betty and Kurt and their three children saw us in every country. During our early days in Belgium we would regularly rent an apartment at the Belgian coast for two or three weeks in July or August to coincide with Martin's school holidays. The beaches are wide and shallow and well supervised, quite safe for young children, and the climate can be wonderfully bracing.

My business life continued to progress well. The carpet manufacturing industry was almost entirely located in Flanders, and I was expected to communicate with my customers in Flemish, a language I had never previously spoken. So I took private lessons in Dutch, even though all these Flemish customers spoke English and quite adequate French. It was a matter of principle for them that their suppliers should at least make the effort of speaking Dutch or Flemish. ■

We move to Hungary, the home of my ancestors

1987 SAW THE next and final step in my ICI career. I was 57 years old and approaching retirement – it was common practice for ICI managers to retire at the age of 60. Then a friend within ICI told me of a vacancy for the job of General Manager of the ICI office in Budapest – a role that carried a generous financial package. It sounded very tempting and, after some discussion with Anita, I put my name forward. My application was accepted quite quickly, and before long I began a total Hungarian language immersion course at the Brussels Berlitz School. Over three weeks, I spent seven hours a day with two Hungarian ladies, having lunch with one or the other each day, at which I would be compelled to struggle with my limited Hungarian. I was constantly complimented on my good pronunciation of this complicated language. I didn't tell them my mother was Hungarian and that I had heard this language regularly since my birth – let them think I was simply a good student!

We settled into our life in Budapest very easily. We took over the house where my predecessor had lived, situated quite high up the hill in Buda well away from the polluted city centre. As Manager of a major British company responsible for about 35 percent of all sales from the UK to Hungary, I was invited to the British Embassy to meet the Ambassador and his team. During our three years in Budapest, Anita and I attended most major receptions at the embassy, particularly when British dignitaries, such as the Duke of Kent or Prince Charles and Diana, came visiting. We socialised with embassy staff and were accorded the privilege of shopping in the special duty-free shop linked to the embassy.

Before leaving to work in Hungary I had been briefed about some of the problems I could face behind the Iron Curtain. I was warned that, as General Manager of a major British company, I would be watched carefully, that my phones would be "tapped" at home and in the office, and that I needed to behave with due caution. As I was an expatriate, there were no restrictions on my travels, so every five or six weeks Anita and I would make the three-hour drive to Vienna, to use the ICI offices there to make phone calls of a sensitive nature or to organise any meetings we didn't want the Hungarian authorities to know about. We also used these trips to shop for goods, mostly foodstuffs, that weren't readily available in Hungary. We often went to the large supermarket in Eisenstadt, which carried an excellent range of merchandise. It was not unusual for me to stand there and wonder what might have



Budapest 1988. Left to right: Cousin Ella, Aunt Regina, Mother and Aunt Olga

become of me had there been no *Kindertransport* – or, even, no Hitler, no Nazis, no need for my family to have left this now peaceful little town.

Some years later I was reminded of my Hungarian experience by my nephew Neil. He had volunteered for intelligence work as part of his military service in Israel. During his interview he was surprised to be questioned about me, about the fact that I had studied Russian during my military service and that I had lived and worked in Hungary, inside the “Soviet Bloc”. Amazingly,

Israeli intelligence services had taken an interest in me and had linked me to him. To this day, Neil is convinced I was once an important member of MI5!

When I told my mother we were moving to Budapest, I was astonished to learn that I had a first cousin living there. Ella was roughly the same age as me and had been brought up by our mutual grandparents after her mother died in childbirth or soon after. When she was about 14, Ella was sent to Auschwitz. She survived, returned to Hungary, married and had two children, a boy and a girl. Later she and her husband separated; he went to live in the USA, taking their son with him, while she stayed in Budapest with their daughter. I was keen to meet her, but was worried that communication between us would be a problem: she spoke only Hungarian and my command of 125 words would hardly be sufficient for any meaningful conversation, so I took my secretary, Mary Varsanyi, as our interpreter when Anita and I first visited Ella.

Like so many Hungarians at that time, Ella lived alone in a very simple flat in a traditional apartment building with very few modern conveniences. Her daughter had married and had two children whom we met on a separate occasion. Ella was unable to understand that I could not speak Hungarian. After all, we had played together and spoken that language at the ages of six and seven, when our family visited my mother’s parents each year during the holidays.

My mother came to visit us in Budapest when she was 85 years old. She had left Hungary to marry my father in 1928, returning to visit her parents for holidays until about 1937. She had never been to Budapest, which was at the other end of the country from her little village, so she was genuinely

“When I told my mother we were moving to Budapest, I was astonished to learn that I had a first cousin living there. Ella was roughly the same age as me and had been brought up by our mutual grandparents after her mother died in childbirth or soon after.”

excited by the prospect. In the late spring of 1988, Anita and I collected her from the airport in Vienna – direct flights from Tel Aviv to Budapest had not yet begun. It was late afternoon and we felt that the long drive to Budapest might be too tiring for her, so we drove to Eisenstadt and spent the night there in a comfortable hotel. Next morning, in beautiful weather, we wandered around Eisenstadt, which had seen many changes since our expulsion. My mother had, in fact, been back there on her own some years after my father's death, when she had met people she had known in 1938 – including the one and only Jew to return, who had re-opened his textile shop.

My mother loved Budapest. She spent time with Ella and her family as well as her two sisters, Olga and Regina, who were on holiday in the city. I took her to meet the staff at my office. They were fascinated by the old-fashioned Hungarian she spoke; if you don't live in a country, you are not up to date with the language as it develops.

My mother was keen to visit Kald, her home village. It lies in the west of the country, about two and a half hours' drive from Budapest. One weekend we drove to Sopron, the largest town in western Hungary, which had had a significant Jewish community from the Middle Ages. After this we drove to Sarvar, a medium sized town where my mother had attended school as a weekly boarder – there were no suitable schools in Kald – and from there it took just 10 more minutes to get to Kald. Mother was amazed: "It used to take three hours when I did that journey!" she said. I explained that I had 138 horses in my car while she'd had to rely on just one 70 years before!

Kald was a very simple village with one main surfaced street: the side streets were just earth, certainly mud when wet. Mother was keen to find the house where they had lived as a family. We drove around for about 15 minutes, but she could not recognise anything, and she was becoming increasingly frustrated and upset. Then I spotted an elderly lady in the street and suggested that my mother should ask her if she could remember the Farkas family. Mother got out and spoke to the lady. After two or three minutes, they walked into a nearby house. Ten minutes later, they came back, a big smile on my mother's face. It turned out that the lady's husband clearly remembered the Farkas family with its 12 children. He had known my grandfather Herman, the village shoemaker, and he remembered where the family lived. His wife got in the car with us and guided us to the house. My mother was absolutely delighted and smiled all the way back to Budapest. ■

My role in post-Communist restructuring

IN MAY 1990, towards the end of our three-year stay in Hungary, I celebrated my 60th birthday and started thinking about my retirement. This was, of course, a tumultuous time in Europe. On 9 November 1989, thousands of Germans had brought down the Berlin Wall, the physical representation of the Iron Curtain. Thousands of East Germans came to Budapest and camped outside the West German Consulate, which was located a few hundred metres from our house, waiting to get a visa that would allow them to pass through Austria and into West Germany. The Hungarians of the neighbourhood welcomed them with food and drink.

The fall of Communism was of major importance to the ICI business in all the Eastern Bloc countries, and a training programme was created with the prime objective of "Managing Change". As my final task in my 33-year career with ICI, I was asked to run this programme in all seven countries – Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Russia and East Germany – my remit being to help to convert about 150 national employees of ICI from communism to capitalism. This task continued beyond my official retirement in the autumn of 1990; during much of 1991, after our return from Budapest to Brussels, the company continued to employ me as a consultant leading these seminars.

In 1991 I completed one such seminar in Bucharest with the intention of going on to Sofia to do the same with the team there. I couldn't find a flight that suited my timetable, so I arranged to be driven by car instead. This led to a strange episode, so typical of those times, at the frontier between Romania and Bulgaria. The driver took me to the border but dropped me just in front of the checkpoint, leaving me to walk through with my suitcase. He explained that, if he crossed the border in the car, he would have to spend most of the rest of the day in line waiting to return to Romania. He had therefore arranged for the ICI Bulgaria driver to meet me at the other side. This car journey revealed to me the extreme poverty in the Bulgarian countryside: you would see a solitary cow grazing at the roadside, and there was always a small child nearby guarding the animal, probably the family's most valuable asset. ■

A new working role late in life

DURING MY LAST year in Budapest, Stephen White, nephew of my sister-in-law Betty, and senior partner in Scotwork, the leading company in Europe in the field of Negotiating Skills Training, invited me to become a part-time tutor. This was to shape my life for the next 17 years. I sat in on a course in Glasgow and decided that, with training, I could certainly do this. We then looked at the possibility of running a course in Budapest while I was still in the country. The General Manager of Citibank, who was a friend, agreed to run a course for members of his staff, which gave me a second opportunity of observing.

So, after my return to Brussels, in addition to my work for ICI as a training consultant, I also began working for Scotwork as an occasional second tutor on courses in England. After some months I was asked if I could do this work in German, as Scotwork was in the process of starting up in Germany. I jumped at the chance and was quickly in demand. These were residential courses, usually from Monday to Thursday, which meant I had to spend more time away from home. A couple of years later, Scotwork set up a French branch and asked me to be one of their second tutors. I ended up doing courses in three languages, all across Europe; in one year, I worked on 26 courses, almost busier than a full-time job! My role at Scotwork lasted for 17 years, until my 77th birthday, at which point they put me out to grass. It was an interesting and enjoyable time, which certainly helped to keep my mind active. ■

“I ended up doing courses in three languages, all across Europe; in one year, I worked on 26 courses, almost busier than a full-time job!”

Back to Brussels – and off on a world of adventure!

DURING OUR THREE years in Hungary we had kept our flat in Brussels since Martin was living there and we visited him regularly. In Budapest, however, we had grown to enjoy the advantages of living in a house rather than a flat, so on our return we decided to have a house built. We found a development just starting in a very desirable area in Kraainem, a typical Belgian town house, very modern, rather tall and thin with living accommodation on four levels. Once we had settled into our new house, we began to take advantage of my retirement, travelling regularly, mostly in Europe, to France, to Switzerland, to Italy, seeing old friends.



Rounding Cape Horn with Betty and Kurt, December 2001

Our very first cruising venture was to the Norwegian fjords with the Hurtigruten line, a working ship which sailed from Bergen, to Kirkenes beyond the North Cape, almost in Russia, and then back again to Bergen, calling at 34 different ports to deliver all sorts of merchandise, from bicycles to toilet seats, and taking 12 days for the round journey. Since then, we've gone on a cruise almost every year. We cruised around South America in 2001 with Kurt and Betty, who had been a travel agent and organised the whole thing for us. We flew from London to Rio de Janeiro, spending 21 days in total, sailing around Cape Horn, visiting Chile, the Iguazu Falls, everything. It was a fabulous holiday. Subsequently, we've been around the Far East, visiting various countries like Thailand and China, including the wall. We went to South Africa and spent a total of around three weeks there. We've been on cruises in the Mediterranean, and the last cruise we did, in 2019, was to Iceland on Queen Victoria. Seven or eight years ago we cruised through the Panama Canal, also on Queen Victoria: we flew to Los Angeles, took the ship from there and finished up in Fort Lauderdale. ■

We move back to England

IN THE EARLY part of 2001, Anita developed a serious problem with her knee, not sufficiently serious to warrant surgery but bad enough for the stairs in our house to become too painful for her to manage. This was a major dilemma. We thought about installing stair lifts, but this seemed impractical as there were several flights of stairs. We considered moving to an apartment in Brussels, but in the end we decided to return to England after an absence of some 40 years. We wanted to be living in an English-speaking Jewish community in our old age – the possibility of having to move into a Belgian retirement home with Flemish-speaking staff was not appealing to either of us, and our experience of the Jewish community of Brussels had not been inspiring.

Despite my history with Leeds, we agreed that we wanted to live in London, in a suburb with an active Jewish community. Anita had followed my European wanderings for the last 40 years and now it was my turn to follow her, which I was more than happy to do. We saw an advert in the *Jewish Chronicle* for an upmarket development of 36 apartments in Pinner, NW London. It was still very much a building site when we first visited, but it ticked all our boxes – size, price, location, public transport, shopping. We missed out on the flat we first chose, but the ground-floor flat directly below was still available – same price, same size – so we went for that, and have lived there happily ever since.

The following year, in August 2002, my mother passed away in Israel. Betty and Kurt were living in Israel but were in England at the time as Betty was having eye surgery at Moorfields and needed to recuperate for some time without flying. I was in Israel staying in their house, so I could be near my mother. Her pacemaker had stopped functioning, but she refused to have the minor operation needed to replace it, so we knew the end was near. Anita flew from London with Kurt for my mother's funeral and Martin flew from Brussels. We sat *Shiva* in Kurt's home in Kfar Vradim. Her grave is in a beautiful cemetery on a hill with a great view of the sea. She had lived for her sons, for her daughters-in-law, but above all for her grandchildren, with all of whom she had a wonderful relationship.

Back in London, our new life was exciting. We enjoyed the cultural scene, the theatres, the concerts, we met new people and re-established contact with old friends. We joined B'nai B'rith in London and made new friends. In 2004, I became President of the Shlomo Argov Lodge, which was very active in the early 2000s with a membership of more than 100. Then, in 2010, I put myself forward for election to the Executive Committee of B'nai B'rith Europe. I spent three years as a member of the executive.

Then I was elected as General Secretary. Over the following three years I spent a lot of time going backwards and forwards to Brussels, using my language skills in helping to run the office.

We also joined the AJR in London, and I volunteered as a “befriender”, visiting elderly lonely members of AJR to provide company and help. During this period, I was still occasionally working for Scotwork, usually in Germany.

I revitalised my interest in golf, too. I had played in all the countries in which we lived – even in Hungary during the Communist times, where there was a nine-hole course on an island in the Danube. In 1994 I joined Pierpont Golf Club, located between Charleroi and Waterloo in Belgium, and played quite regularly there. I once got a hole-in-one and I have a framed award certificate commemorating that on the wall in my study. After that, I entered a competition organised by Johnnie Walker for anybody in Belgium who had made a hole-in-one in an official competition. Everybody who took part got a bottle of whisky!

On arrival in Pinner one of my first tasks was to determine which of the many local golf clubs would give me most enjoyment. I played at about four of them and finally chose Pinner Hill as being the most challenging and the most welcoming to a newcomer. I joined the very active Seniors Section, regularly playing friendly matches against the seniors of other neighbouring clubs. Four years ago, however, I found that the hills were getting “hillier”, so decided to move to the easier Grims Dyke Golf Club. I now find it difficult to walk 18 holes, but I can still walk nine holes, and if I have to play the full 18, I'll take a buggy.

There were few major changes to our life in Pinner over the next few years. We marked our Golden Wedding Anniversary at the end of 2004 with a lunch party for about 50 of our family and friends at the Aviv Restaurant in Edgware. Our active membership of B'nai B'rith and AJR ensured regular contact with like-minded friends, and my twice weekly golf at Pinner Hill Golf Club kept me fit and healthy. Anita and I played quite a lot of bridge together in our younger days, and in Brussels, in clubs, duplicate bridge, competitive bridge. Nowadays it's just social bridge with friends, and I play online bridge, sometimes late into the night. We play Rummikub, too, which is very good for the brain. Our B'nai B'rith Lodge organises Rummikub evenings. ■



Patricia and Martin's wedding, 1991

The story of our son

A GREAT SADNESS of our lives is that our son Martin died in 2016. We are thankful that he had a rich and fulfilling life. He started university in Huddersfield in 1982, but after 18 months he realised this was not for him and spent time in Israel instead. He lived on a kibbutz where he learnt Hebrew and worked in the fields. After six months at the kibbutz, he went to work in Ashkelon for an organisation supporting new immigrants.

When Martin returned to Brussels, he studied Tourism and Travel at the Institut Charles Péguy in Louvain-la-Neuve. As part of his final examination he had to make a journey of his choice and then produce a travel guide for a fictitious family who might undertake this same holiday. He chose to drive around Yorkshire with his new girlfriend, Patricia Kohn. This journey produced two good outcomes – he achieved an excellent mark, and he cemented his relationship with Patricia, resulting in their marriage some time later.

In 1991, a year after our return to Brussels from Budapest, Patricia and Martin married at the *Maison Communale* of Woluwe St. Lambert, where they lived. In the mid-1990s, Martin applied for a post at the European Patent Office in Munich. He went for an interview and was offered the job subject to a satisfactory medical examination. To everyone's shock, this exam found he had a heart murmur, a result confirmed by two further doctors. He needed open-heart surgery to repair his mitral valve. This went well, but Martin and Patricia decided against him taking the Munich job and leaving Brussels.

“ He chose to drive around Yorkshire with his new girlfriend, Patricia Kohn. This journey produced two good outcomes – he achieved an excellent mark, and he cemented his relationship with Patricia, resulting in their marriage some time later. ”

This was, however, just the start of Martin's health problems. In 2002, my mother passed away in Israel just a few weeks before her 99th birthday. While we were sitting *Shiva* in Israel, Kurt spotted that Martin had developed acromegaly, a condition caused by a tumour, usually benign, on the pituitary gland, which then produces excess growth hormones. Martin had the tumour removed but a side-effect of the condition was enlargement of his heart, which added to his existing cardiac problems. Before long he needed more open-heart surgery, to have a mechanical aortic valve and pacemaker inserted. Again, he recovered well from this and returned to work. We celebrated Martin's 50th birthday in 2014 by taking him and Patricia on a cruise to the Baltic cities, the highlight of which was a wonderful visit to St Petersburg. But a few months later the aortic valve stopped working and needed to be replaced, resulting in yet another open-heart operation. This was the most difficult procedure yet, and Martin was lucky to come out of it alive. After this, he tired very quickly and was no longer able to work full time. By early 2016, he had to retire from work entirely, and was on the waiting list for a heart transplant.

Patricia and Martin celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in the summer of 2016. But a few weeks later, we suffered a dreadful blow when Martin passed away in his sleep on 22 July 2016, just two days before his 52nd birthday. Many people from the Brussels hotel where he had worked attended his funeral and it was clear that he had been a valued colleague and friend, always cheerful and positive in outlook. His grave is in the Jewish section of the cemetery in Wezembeek-Oppem, in the commune where he and Patricia had lived for many years.

We keep in good contact with Patricia, who still lives in Brussels. Sadly, they had no children, which could well have been a side-effect of his illness. Kurt, though, has six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren, who are very supportive of us and we see them regularly. ■



With Patricia and Martin on the Belgian coast in 1995

Sharing my Holocaust story

DURING MY ACTIVE business life, and indeed for the first few years of my retirement from ICI, I had rarely given much thought to my Austrian origins, other than to apply for a pension. Then, in 2010, AJR asked me if I would give a talk about my *Kindertransport* experiences to a local council wishing to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January. I'd never done that sort of thing before but I was happy to give it a try, and started work on a presentation that I could illustrate with photos and documents. My talk to a crowded hall at Hounslow Council went well and this became the first of many presentations given in and around London over the next few years. At Islington Council I shared the platform with Jeremy Corbyn and Emily Thornberry, both MPs for the borough, just at the time when Corbyn was coming under attack for his alleged antisemitism. My experience that day, however, was that both he and Emily Thornberry spoke strongly and passionately against all forms of racism and xenophobia.

My career as a speaker has taken me to many unexpected places – including prisons, the United States Air Force base at Mildenhall – and, thanks to joining up with the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) a few years ago, many, many schools. My talk covers my origins in Austria, my *Kindertransport* journey to England, my early experiences here and my later life. Visits to schools in the southern half of the country have now become an important part of my life and I speak to about 25 schools in a year, ranging from some in very deprived areas to exclusive private boarding schools, including the International School of Geneva. A talk to a Muslim boys' school in Wolverhampton stands out clearly in my memory – it took place in the prayer hall and I had to remove my shoes in the usual manner.

In nearly every case, an educator from HET ensures that the group to whom I talk is well prepared with information about the Holocaust and antisemitism. I have never come across a group that knows nothing about it, although often they know little or nothing about the *Kindertransport*. It is relatively easy for schoolchildren to identify with my story of being taken away from home and parents and sent to a foreign country. Questions come thick and fast – it just needs somebody brave to ask the first one. Typical questions include 'Were you very scared to be sent away?'; 'How did you feel when you saw your parents again?'; and 'What is your attitude to Germans today?'

The point is that I didn't personally have any really traumatic experiences. The only trauma I experienced was the actual, physical act of being separated from my parents but that only lasted for a couple of months. So mine is basically a happy story, and it's a bit of a change for children to hear a survivor speaking of a happy life, rather than the awful things that happened to so many others in the camps. I think that's why children find my story interesting – because they can somehow see themselves in that position.

Holocaust education shows how the Nazis were able to murder millions of people for racist reasons, and relate this to the genocides that have taken place in other countries since: Srebrenica, Darfur, Rwanda and so on. Then you can see how important it is to take a balanced view of things – and to kill the racism, the xenophobia, at its root. Making sure that children see the story from every point of view helps them learn to think clearly for themselves. That's the message I try to convey. ■

“It is relatively easy for schoolchildren to identify with my story of being taken away from home and parents and sent to a foreign country. Questions come thick and fast – it just needs somebody brave to ask the first one.”



With the Commanding Officer of the USAF Base at Mildenhall after speaking there in 2019

Supporting other refugees

ONE IMPORTANT ROLE that I have helped the AJR with is its work as the UK link to the Claims Conference, the organisation set up in 1951 to help people make material claims against Germany for losses endured as a result of Nazi atrocities and for compensation. They also support needy survivors around the world. In the UK, the AJR is the agency that handles the money, several million pounds a year. I am on AJR's Austrian committee, which meets about once a month to help in the decision-making for some of the funds.

I do these things because I believe they are important, but they do have their perks. Anita and I are invited each year to attend the major fundraising dinners organised by the HET, which raise in the region of a million pounds each time. And in 2019 I was surprised – and delighted – to be honoured for this work, when I was awarded the British Empire Medal for my services to Holocaust Education. It turned out that Anita had known about this for some weeks before I was told but was sworn to secrecy! The award was announced on the Queen's Birthday Honours List in June. The actual award ceremony took place on 15 November 2019, at the Tower of London, led by Sir Kenneth Olisa, the Lord Lieutenant of Greater London, representing Her Majesty the Queen. There were 37 people receiving the same honour. We were from all walks of life and were honoured for a variety of activities, ranging from services to charity, to education, to boxing, to the Tamil community and even to bell ringing. Five people were honoured for services to Holocaust Education: in addition to myself, these were George Vulkan, Ruzena Levy, and Ann and Bob Kirk. We got called up one by one in alphabetical order, and Sir Kenneth said a few words to each recipient while photographs were taken. All aspects of the ceremony were beautifully planned and executed, like a well-oiled machine but with a very human slant. I was very proud and pleased to be part of it. ■



Receiving my BEM

Brothers together

MY BROTHER CAME back to England the year after me, in 2002, after living in Israel for many years. Kurt and Betty were very friendly with another couple, Victor and Anita Zermansky. We knew Victor when we were teenagers in Leeds, and he and Kurt remained lifelong friends. Kurt was very ill about ten years ago. He was in hospital for a couple of months, and Victor used to visit him nearly every day. Kurt recovered, but then Victor died and shortly afterwards Betty died, too. One day, Kurt phoned up Victor's widow Anita and asked her out, and the rest is history. Now they live together and are very happy. So we have two Anita's, which is a bit confusing, but very nice.

Kurt and I are still very close. I talk to him nearly every day. We get on well together. We have very similar interests. He's a keen golfer, too. You know, in many families you get *abroiges*, but in our family, luckily, I cannot remember ever having any sort of *broiges* that lasted more than a few hours. ■

“Kurt and I are still very close. I talk to him nearly every day. We get on well together.”



My Story Ernest Simon, BEM



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.

My Story Ernest Simon, BEM



“At midnight on 11 January 1939, my parents took me to Wiener Westbahnhof, one of the main train stations in Vienna, and put me on a train bound for England. They had absolutely no idea whether they would ever see me again, but they knew, following the terrible events of Kristallnacht the previous November, that this journey was likely to save my life.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk