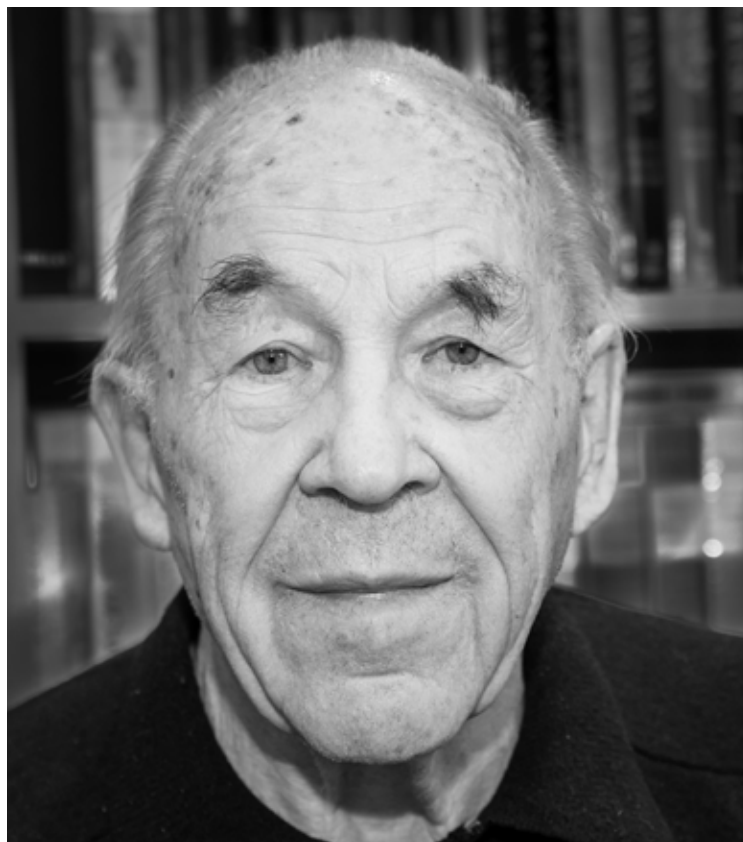


My Story

Dr. Peter Brunner



My Story

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These are Peter's words. This is his story

‘My Story’ is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).
More information at www.ajr.org.uk

Dr Peter Brunner was visited by AJR volunteer Adina White to share his story. Thanks also to
AJR volunteer Shelley Hyams for her editing skills.

Portrait photography by Debra Barnes

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My Story

Dr. Peter Brunner

You could hear the noise of the fighting from all sides. I saw a big crater with a dead man in it.
That made a huge impression on me as a child. I can still see it now, the images and the colours
of the breaking dawn.



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My beautiful childhood in Transylvania

MY NAME IS PETER BRUNNER. I was born on the 5 September 1932 in a town called Cluj in Transylvania, which at the time belonged to Romania. Cluj is a very nice town in a beautiful area with mountains and forests and little hamlets. I cannot imagine anybody having a more beautiful childhood than I did - I think about it every single day. In a sense that was what helped me pull through and survive what would come later. I haven't seen a film or play which can compare to it. The road to my home in London now is quite hilly and when I see the view of the farm opposite, I imagine I am at my childhood home.

As Cluj was situated between Romania and Hungary, my family spoke both languages. Transylvania has been part of Romania since 1947, but there was often conflict between Romania and Hungary over local politics, such as street names. The Hungarian name for Cluj is Kolozsvár although it is now known as Napoca, a name originating from the Middle Ages.

As a child, I called my parents by their given names (in Hungary that is their second name) which was and still is unconventional. Father I called Mandy (full name Mendel) and I called my mother Erzsike which is a diminutive of Elizabeth. The suffix -ke is a term of endearment, which shows how close I was to my mother.

My father was a doctor; everybody in my family was a doctor. He was a neurologist and psychoanalyst. Apparently, he became a member of the British Psychoanalytical Society. He was, for me, almost like God because I thought of him as a man who led by example. He would show us which was the good life, the right life. This is how one should be; this is how one should look at another person, and so forth. The interesting thing is he didn't actually teach me anything. He talked to me and my brother Mihály only twice in his life. Once was initiated by him when we were about five years old. That's when he taught us about procreation in very great anatomical detail and I've never forgotten it. I can actually remember the room, as if I'm in it now. The other time we asked him: "Father, how is it that a submarine which is under the water knows which way to go?" So he explained about a periscope. But when my brother

Me in 1935

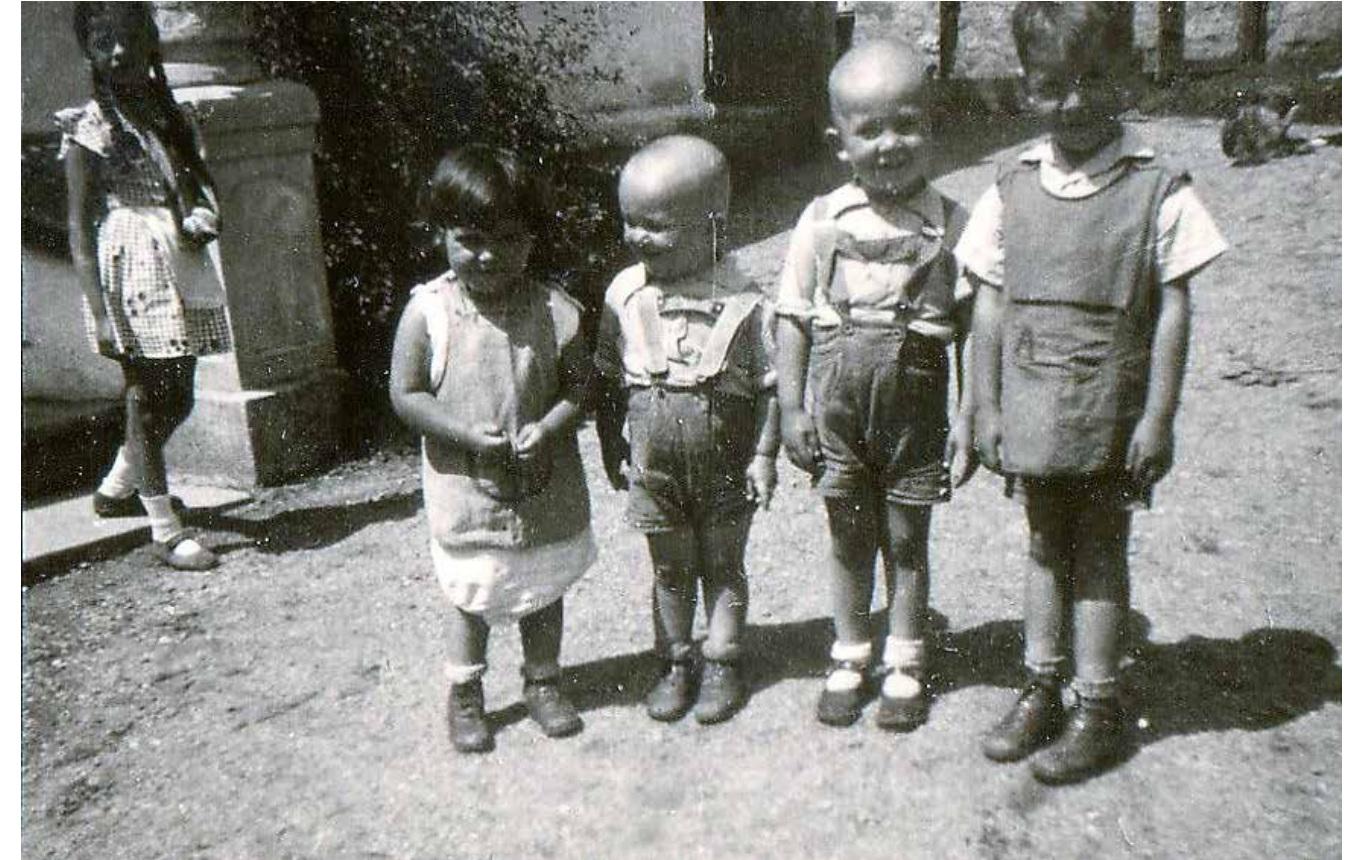


argued that all he would see whichever way he looked is water, my father explained what a compass is. And those were the two discussions. He was a man of very few words. When we had uncles and aunties to tea he didn't usually say anything, so when he did say something everyone was *shtum*. They shushed and said: "Mandy's talking!" It was such a rarity. But that was him. He loved my mother Erzsike, and wrote beautiful poems about her. I never remember seeing him angry.

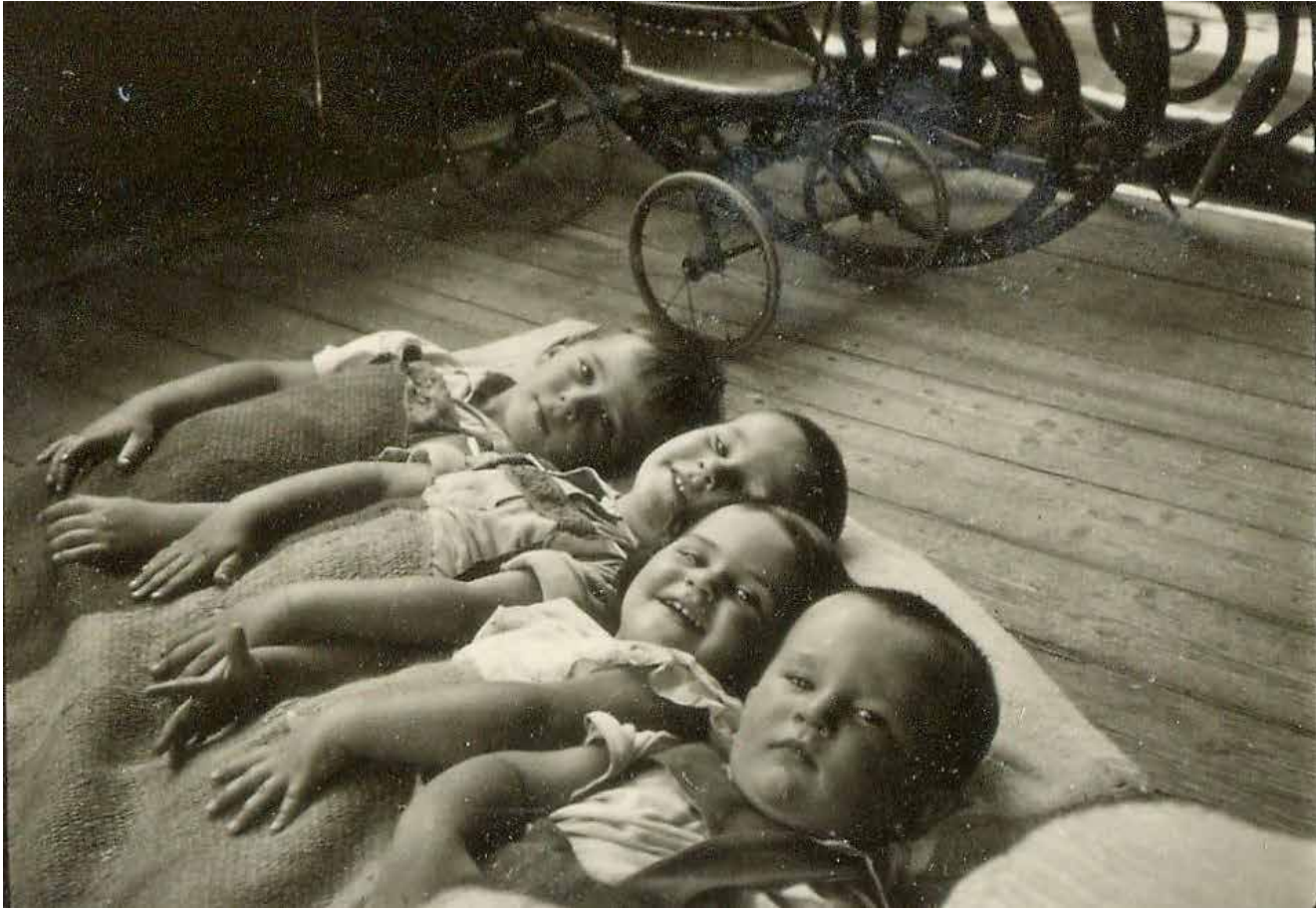
So this is what I learned from Father. I tried to be this way with my children: it's not what you tell them, it's what you do. He never ever told us not to do something or not behave some way, but I knew that he wouldn't do it and that was enough for me.

Whilst my brother was very similar to my father, I am more sensitive like my mother. A film could make me cry, even if I watched the same film three or four times a year, every time it would have the same effect on me. Mother was a very 'feeling' person. She told us everything we knew because Father didn't. She loved poetry and would recite it to us. She told us what to read and what it was about. I got my love of theatre, music and poetry from her. All the nurturing came from Mother, while the example of good living and good behaviour came from Father. I remember Mother could be quite hysterical when we were going through bad times, but as Father didn't react she'd cool down. I could always see and hear that they loved one another very, very much.

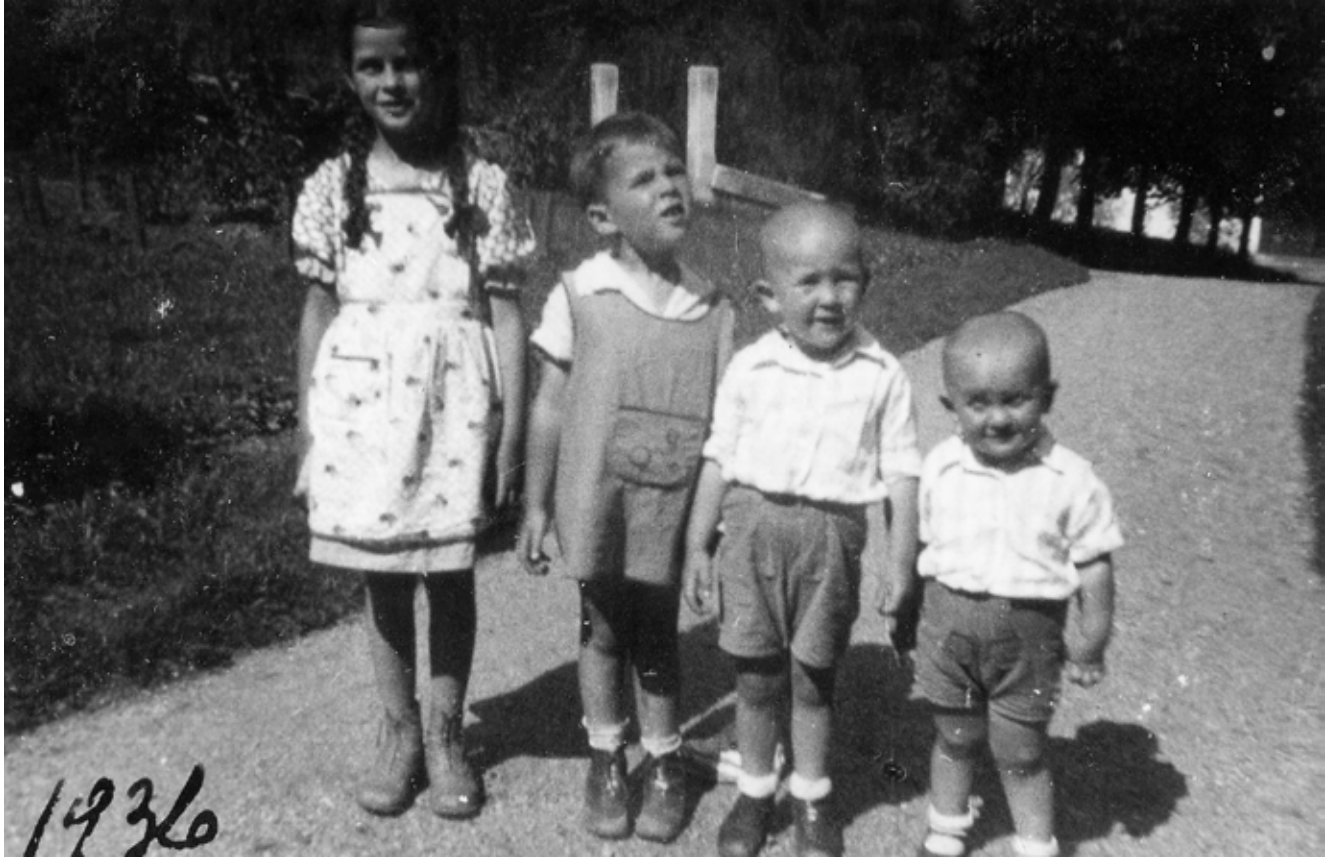
“My father was a doctor; everybody in my family was a doctor. He was a neurologist and psychoanalyst. Apparently, he became a member of the British Psychoanalytical Society. He was, for me, almost like God because I thought of him as a man who led by example.”



(left to right) Anna, Ilonka, Mihály, me and Imre



Imre, me, Ilonka and Mihály on the wooden balcony



(left to right) Anna, Imre, me and Mihály



My brother with Gyorgyika who worked on the estate, 1935

My only brother, Mihály, was 13 months younger than me. Growing up, we were very different. Mihály was a man of data and precision, he was always the clever one. When he was quiet, I would always fight for something. Once, we were playing outside the flat and I shouted up to my mother for a snack. Mihály yelled up: “Me too!” He wouldn’t be the first to ask. Although he only told me that he loved me three or four times in his life, I knew his feelings towards me. I’m sorry now that I used to beat him up, although one day he hit back, much to my surprise. Before that he had, poor chap, just taken it. I never touched him that way again. After leaving Hungary, Mihály lived in Stockholm and I lived in England, so it was like I had two homes really. He came to London and I went there to go skiing. He became very famous in the steel making industry and would give lectures and visit steel works in various countries. He finished his career as head of Research and Development at the Aga company. He died recently, but he had no pain. *C’est la vie*. It comes to us all.

Zsombor was the small village outside Cluj where I lived up to the age of three. It was heaven. It was a small place, but if you think of Kenwood or some other stately home, that’s what it was like to me. The house we owned was much smaller than a stately home, of course. We lived there with Mother and extended family while Father was in Cluj practising medicine. He would come and visit. As landowners of this beautiful place my wife, Vera, calls me an aristocrat, but I’m not.

When I was three we moved to Cluj. I started elementary school at seven years old. There were no school holidays during the year until the long summer, which we would spend back in Zsombor. My first memory occurred on the first day of the summer break. We were put on the bus and the driver was paid to deliver us to Zsombor and that’s when our summer started. The journey was 30 kilometres and felt like a lifetime to my brother and me. I remember the bus and the bus driver and the gear shift as it engaged and disengaged. It stopped at every little village until we got to Zsombor.

There was a long road with a gate and huge trees, and at the end was the very large house. Sometimes we went back for the summer with my parents, sometimes without them. It didn’t

matter because we had lots of family there. My grandfather Jacob used to live there with his wife Charlotte and their twelve children, including my father. We have a little cemetery in Zsombor which is only for the Brunners. Now we send money to a couple who take care of it and keep it in good condition. I could talk about Zsombor for days and nights on end.

We stayed at Zsombor with our aunties and uncles and cousins. There were seven or eight rooms just for the children. Every afternoon, for at least one hour, we were made to lie down side by side on a terrace. We had two terraces, one was the wooden terrace and the other was stone. I hardly saw Mihály then. He would go out with one of our cousins and collect flowers and little ducks. We each had an apron with one very big pocket. Mother duck had eight or

nine baby ducks going after her and Mihály and my cousin would collect them and put them in their pockets.

My uncle Jenö (we called him Muska, but I don't know why) oversaw the estate and everyone loved him. I don't want to say this, but often he was even better than Father. In the morning I would go out with my favourite worker who was responsible for the horses and we would plough or whatever. He would give me some of his lunch. We would sit and eat in the shade of the haystacks. I remember he would have a beautiful white serviette and in it was a pork salami, the curd from cheese making, paprika and of course onions, which I love. Now when I eat onions, my wife says: "You can't eat onions, we are going out with friends!" and my day is ruined.

One enterprise at Zsombor was making alcohol from corn. There was a large building with a chimney. It was very clever for the early 30s. There was an underground pipe going into a large container which held the mulch left over from the alcohol making process. This was put in troughs to fatten the cows which were exported to Switzerland to be sold for beef.

Every evening I remember Katika, my auntie, would play the piano. There was no electricity, we had lamps. I still have a lamp from Zsombor. In the summer the cows stayed out and someone stayed with them. They would usually come back home after a week and one of the cows had a bell around its neck, which I also still have. If we have guests, I use it to call them to dinner. Silly isn't it? Talking about it brings me to tears.

My wife Vera, and I, together with Vera's brother Tom and his wife Gillian, visited Cluj for my 80th birthday. More recently, my lovely group of friends, having heard me describe the beauty of where I grew up, decided to go on a trip to Cluj. They asked me to join them but I decided that I didn't want to go back there again. One of the reasons was because what was my heaven is no longer the same. Places we played in have crumbled down. All the sheds have now vanished. The house we lived in has also gone. At the end of the war, my cousins decided to reclaim the estate from the State and they sold the land. ■

ROMANIA

PRIMĂRIA MUNICIPIULUI CLUJ
OFICIUL STĂRII CIVILE

Extras din registrul Stării Civile pentru NĂSCUȚI pe anul 1932

Nr. cartei	DATA înregistrării (anul, luna și ziua)	ANUL, luna, ziua și ora nașterii	PRENUMELE, numele și confesiunea mamei născut	PRENUMELE, numele, profesia sau ocupația și domiciliul părinților	LOCUL NAȘTERII cînd a decedat de locuința părinților	ARĂTAREA ACTULUI de verificare a nașterii sau provenienței, numelui, preștatului și domiciliului mamei	Evenuale îndreptări sau observații înainte de semnare
	1932 mama născută Drincu dona Sept. 6 5 juc. 192		Jacob Brunner ortodox mărit	Uendel Brunner medic Brunner Yambor Județul Cluj	34 Cluj Spitalul de pueri	Nașterea verificată de medicul Spitalului de pueri la data de 24.10.1932	DECLARANT, (ss) OFITER AL STĂRII CIVILE (ss) p. Secretar general, ȘEFUL OFICIULUI (ss)

DECLARAȚII ULTERIOARE

Primăria Municipiului Cluj
Chitanță No. 1192
Data em. 24.10.1932
Lei 100.

Primăria Municipiului Cluj
Chitanță No. 3559
Data em. 24.10.1932
Lei 200.

Se certifică exactitatea prezentului extras.
Dat astăzi, una mie nouă sute patruzeci și cinci
luna octombrie, anul 1932.

OFITER AL STĂRII CIVILE
(L. S.)
Nr. 1224/1932

p. Secretar general,
ȘEFUL OFICIULUI

My birth certificate. Note the wording is in both Romanian and Hungarian



In Cluj, March 1939



Uncle Muska with me and my cousins. Ariton was the carriage driver. Muska, his wife Kate, Ilonka and Imre died in Auschwitz

Cujka distillery on the Brunner estate in Zsombor



War breaks out and we are rescued by SS officers!

AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR I lived in Budapest. Father had moved first to find a home and work and then Mother and we boys followed on. In Cluj we had already had a sort of *Kristallnacht*. Jewish shops were shut up or broken into, then there was thuggery and then came the ghetto.

However, it was not until 1944, towards the end of the war, that the Germans walked in. There was no resistance in Hungary. I was 12 years old and we had lived in Budapest throughout the war. I remember where I was and what I was doing when the SS arrived - I can picture it just like you must have seen in films, the unending procession of motorcycles with sidecars. That evening Mihály and I had been on the tram. We liked to go from one terminal where it started to the end when the driver would say: "Everyone out!" We would go out and then get straight back in. We were on the tram when we saw the SS arrive in Budapest.

It was evening and the doorbell rang. My mother answered the door and there were two smart and cleanly dressed SS officers. Mother called to Father. One of the two high-ranking SS officers said: "I have this letter in my hand, please read it." At that time the middle classes spoke German as well as they did Hungarian because of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Father opened the letter. It was from his sister Dora who lived in Bucharest, the capital of Romania.

“My mother was crying. I have never seen my father cry ever. It’s unthinkable. Can you imagine how crazy it was to hand over your two children to SS officers?”

“Dear Mandy, please trust these two officers and let them take your children to a Swiss Red Cross home.” My aunt and uncle were very well off. Maxi (my uncle) was a private banker. My mother was crying. I have never seen my father cry ever. It’s unthinkable. Can you imagine how crazy it was to hand over your two children to SS officers?

It never came to light how it was arranged. Father must have known it was genuine because the letter was written in his sister’s handwriting. My aunt and uncle must have paid an enormous amount of money to a very high-ranking officer in Romania who called a high-ranking officer in Hungary. I can’t think it could have been arranged any other way. And so we went. I remember one SS officer held my hand, the other one held Mihály’s hand. If you did this with your children, how would you feel?

The SS officers took us to a Swiss Red Cross house in Buda. There were a number of them in Budapest. They were like embassies, not under Hungarian control. So Mihály and I were safe, but Father was taken away to work as a slave labourer in a brick factory. Mother was alone and went to the ghetto. She was very, very resourceful. Even when she could see that statistically she wouldn’t make it, she was able to survive.

As the Russians and the Germans advanced on Budapest, beautiful bridges over the River Danube were blown up and we found ourselves in a war zone. You could hear the bangs and the bombing and guns. As the front began to move, the Russians were slowly coming in from the east. We had to be evacuated from the first house to another Swiss Red Cross house. That happened overnight. There were a lot of children and two or three ladies. This was the first time I saw Germans on the street shooting. Boom! Boom! Boom! When we approached they told us: “We won’t do that now,” and they stopped. It was like a zebra crossing. And then it was dawn and there was a little bit of light. You could hear the noise of the fighting from all sides. I saw a big crater with a dead man in it. That made a huge impression on me as a child. I can still see it now, the images and the colours of the breaking dawn.

We were moved to a second Swiss Red Cross house. It was a lovely house and a good place to sleep. There were around 20 of us, but the only child I remember (apart from my brother) was a French boy who was always being told off. Mihály and I were there without Mother and Father. We didn't know what had happened to them. Then one day I went to the kitchen because I was hungry and I saw my mother. I was so surprised! She told me to shush and whispered: "I'll see you at midnight. Don't talk about me." She came to the house as kitchen help but we were never allowed to acknowledge that she was our mother, even when she was serving us food. Even so having Mother in the same house was very reassuring. Every single midnight she came to wake us, and recite us a poem.

My brother and I had false papers and much later I heard that Mother had also obtained false papers. She didn't look Jewish with a *sheital* or anything like that, but I don't understand how she managed to use the papers to get out of the ghetto, yet there she was with us in the Swiss Red Cross house.

We were in four different Swiss Red Cross houses in all. The last one, I would later find out, was the girls' school my future wife had attended. It was terrible there because it was full of wounded and dying people, shouting out in pain. No child should ever have to witness that. ■

“Mihály and I were there without Mother and Father. We didn't know what had happened to them. Then one day I went to the kitchen because I was hungry and I saw my mother. I was so surprised!”

Post-war life under Russian control

AFTER THE WAR, slowly things settled down, but the city was devastated. Every other house was bombed or had holes in. Due to the bombing of the bridges, it was difficult to go from Pest to Buda or vice versa.

During the post war period in Budapest, the Russians looted and raped. They would show you their arms with maybe 10 or 12 watches. I think it's what people do in such circumstances. It was awful. I saw dead people and houses broken in half. It was a dangerous time to be around.

Father had not returned yet, so it was just my brother and I with Mother. In the mornings and early afternoons, to make some money, I got a cart and made a sign that I could move furniture. I pulled it myself and tied things with string so they didn't fall off. After I had finished work, I gave the money to my mother. The inflation was such that the price of everyday items like milk could double in a matter of hours. I was never very good at mathematics, but the next day the same item could cost 10 times as much.

All we had was what I earned pulling the cart around. It wasn't a sustainable situation so we decided to return to Cluj. There we went to live with my cousin Anna, who had been in hiding. She is now 89 and lives in Budapest. ■

Father comes back

IT FELT LIKE AN ETERNITY until Father came back, but I think it was within a year of the war ending. He had been in Bergen Belsen, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. The trains between Germany and Hungary weren't running and although it wasn't far he couldn't have walked. I don't know how he made the journey back. I have two cousins in London and their father, who was a doctor like my father was, came home pretty early after the war. He happened to be in the same camp as my father. He told us that my father was alive, but had stayed behind because there were people dying and he was looking after them.

We only knew Father was ok when he knocked on the door. He arrived but he was not the man who had gone away. He didn't look like my father; he was emaciated, his face wasn't his. He looked like a skeleton; skin and bone. It's not just a saying. His eyes were set in because there was no fat behind them. There was a short period of time I remember that he didn't get up. He would sleep all the time. We weren't allowed in his room so I didn't see him really. His sister, Rozalka, came every day for two weeks and she would go and sit with him. Mother said he turned to the wall and just existed. He had to be told to eat. Being a doctor he saw terrible things, even when they were liberated by Allied forces. Many people who hadn't seen food for years were stuffing themselves. Their bodies couldn't take it. They had perforated guts and died.

Slowly Father recovered physically. He remained very slim, that was his body shape, but his soul and mind never recovered. Father decided to go to Budapest to his cousins and he managed to get a flat in a house overlooking the Danube and some work, which was fantastic. Mother, Mihály and I joined him. It was a three story house with four or five people on each floor. It had an inner courtyard like you see in old films. I am quite claustrophobic and the apartment was small, but if you looked out you could see a square and a bridge over the Danube to Margaret Island. Father had two jobs - he started as a neurologist and then practised psychoanalysis at home. I remember having psychoanalysis. I was afraid of the dark and our building had a cellar, where we kept the logs for our wood-burning stove. It was charming, with lovely ceramics and a little place to sit down. But I was afraid of it. ■



My children in Budapest with auntie Rozalka, many years later

We suffer from Communist class restrictions

AFTER THE WAR, THE COMMUNISTS came to power and Hungary belonged to Russia behind the Iron Curtain. These were bad times: initially there was very little to eat and long queues. It was a far-left Communist dictatorship and you had to be a member of the Communist party to get work. Mother got an office job for a company owned by the State. I went to school and matriculated. I wanted to study medicine, but according to the prevailing Communist party you had to be either a peasant or a worker to do so. There were four social classes: the working class (the peasants) were considered the best people; then came the middle class, who were the labourers, which was considered a good class to be; then the upper class were the bourgeoisie, which was seen as a terrible thing to be. We were designated as belonging to the fourth class, the '*Egyeb*' (literally 'different') – this was beyond terrible, the intellectuals!

As an '*Egyeb*' I would not be allowed to study medicine in Budapest. When I was in school I never failed an exam, so as such a good student I was offered a place to go to university in Moscow. I left high school and I went to study for one year for the university matriculation. There I met a girl, Rozika, from the working class. She was my only girlfriend ever until I met Vera in England. She came from a small village where she shared one room with her five siblings. It was nearly time to leave for Russia when I was told there were not enough places in Moscow, which must have been known a year before. Anyway as an '*Egyeb*' I was shoved off, but this meant I could now apply to the medical university in Budapest and be accepted.

At this time, everybody had a name and a number. Your life was not yours. In my class, over the seven years at medical school, there were approximately 200 people, of whom we knew three were KGB agents spying on us. Maybe they did want to become doctors, but we knew they were talking about us. I have an official report which states: "Peter Constantin Brunner. Good results. Never to be trusted. Never to be given a leading role (professor, lecturer or hospital head of department)." That was their opinion of me because I was '*Egyeb*', I didn't fit in, being neither a peasant nor a labourer.

Still, I had a good life. I was more interested in my studies, friends, theatre and sport than politics. Every day I would leave home at 6am to go to Margaret Island and swim 1.5km. Sport was one of the only ways to get out of Hungary. The Russians were very good water polo players. I was in a first division water polo team and in the afternoons I would train in the swimming pool to prepare for weekend matches. Later, in England, I played for London University for two years or so.

The rest of my day was spent studying at university. At 7pm I would go to the opera or a concert or the theatre. Young people were encouraged to queue all night at the opera house to get in perhaps behind a column, or sitting on a step. I'd seen *Madame Butterfly* and *Aida* so many times it didn't matter if I was behind a column! Finally, I'd go home to my parents and to eat a lot because I had eaten practically nothing all day, perhaps just a pint of milk and a scone of some sort for lunch.

In my final year at university (1956) I needed to complete three subjects – medicine, surgery and paediatrics. I would sit on the banks of the Danube and study hard. I would read 50 pages then read them again and underline with pencil the important things and then I would read it again and underline key words in red. I was very good at remembering where the words were on the page. In July I went to see the professor for the final paediatrics exam and I thought I knew everything. The last question was: "Could you tell me the incubation period of measles?" I said it was between four and five days. He told me it was not correct but as all my other answers had been, he would pass me. In paediatrics I wanted to have every answer correct and I hadn't so I asked the professor to please fail me so that I could return in the autumn for another attempt. He looked at me as if to say: "Have you lost your marbles?" but he agreed.

Autumn came and the professor said: "Hello Peter, how are you?" I was shaking I was so nervous. The first question he asked me was: "What is the incubation period for measles?" I answered correctly: "Seven days." He shook my hand and said goodbye. With that, I finished university!

My medical university report. Note the last category in the left hand column is Marxism

This was my army book. Everyone who went to university had to go to the army for one month each year of their university course

In October 1956, the Hungarian uprising began. It started with a student protest against Soviet-imposed policies, and this led to a major revolt. Shortly afterwards I was sitting on the steps leading down to the Danube. There was a big demonstration and people, mainly students, were walking up and down the Margaret Bridge with placards. I didn't know what was going on because I had been spending all my time studying, but there had been an invasion of Russian military and it was destroying the government. I put my book down and went the short distance home to find out what was happening. Things were boiling up but, in the end, it was all over in about three days. One night during that time I was near the main radio station that the students wanted to take over. There was a lot of shooting. Next door was a hospital, so as an almost graduate from medical school I went to help. I can't tell you how awful it was. Day and night people were brought in through the doors with horrendous wounds, without legs, bleeding or dead. This is an image I will have for life. When I returned home, I said this wasn't the place for me. My real fear was a pogrom. People were hung up on lampposts and there were Russian tanks all over.

My brother was studying engineering at a different university, but he came home to Budapest when he heard what was going on. I told him I wanted to leave Hungary. He refused to leave without the girl he loved. Her name was Hedi and they had been together for a year and a half. The problem was my brother was not very good at communicating. As I have said, he was like my father – he looked like him and behaved like him. I think my brother knew that Hedi liked him as much as he liked her, but he wanted her to say it. In the end she got tired of waiting for my brother to say something to her and she married another guy that same year. ■

I am smuggled out of Hungary

IN NOVEMBER 1956 I said goodbye to my parents. Father gave me some money and a little note which I still have which listed where Brunners were living in Europe, America and New Zealand, and who they were. I took a leather briefcase containing my underpants and left with a cousin, Pista. We got on a train for a border town which was full of people who wanted to leave Hungary. Pista ultimately settled in London, married and became an architect. He lives near me now and we are still in touch.

Nobody left Hungary unless they were prepared to be blown up. There was a strip of one or two kilometres by the border that was full of mines, but the peasants who ploughed the fields knew where the mines were. On 2 December, around a dozen of us arrived together. We saw many peasants wearing straw hats and their hands looked like they had done a lot of hard work. They motioned to us to come with them. They took us to some stables and gave us warm soup. It soon became pitch black and very, very cold. I remember that. In that part of the world, summer is very hot and winter is very cold. There is no in-between.

“Nobody left Hungary unless they were prepared to be blown up. There was a strip of one or two kilometres by the border that was full of mines, but the peasants who ploughed the fields knew where the mines were.”

Around midnight a man came and said: “Let’s go”. We went like ducks ... the mother goes ahead and we followed. It didn’t take long. I put my foot down where the person in front of me had stepped. And then we saw fires all over the place. Our guide told us they were Russian soldiers in tanks who had built fires to protect themselves from the cold. Obviously we avoided those. When we got to a large lake our guide told us which way to go because the land was not all firm, then he said: “Good luck” and we went on our way. As we were making our way around the lake, we could see the moon reflected on the water and it was quite beautiful. All of a sudden we could see lights like torches over here and over there and by then we knew Austria was very near. I chose one of the lights to follow.

Local Austrians greeted us with blankets and they took us to a school. I think I spent about three days there. At the end of this time we went to a large hall and there were desks marked Israel, Canada, America, Sweden, France, England and so forth. I went to the table marked England and queued up. I only wanted to stay in Europe, I had no interest in going anywhere else. I had to register all my details: my name, where I had come from, my address, who I left behind and so on. Eventually we were on a train bound for Calais and then a boat to Dover. I remember very clearly the first time in my life I ever saw the sea – it was when I was taken one summer to my Auntie Dora (Doricksko), who had a villa by the Black Sea. Now I was on a boat to Dover and seeing the sea for the second time in my life. ■

Life seems strange in England

THE JOURNEY FROM DOVER to Swindon was all new to me.

We were billeted in an army camp and we were well taken care of. I remember that it was, of course, raining. Unfortunately, it seemed to rain inside as well as out and people would use things to catch the water in – the dripping noise was like a form of torture! However, I was so tired that it didn’t stop me sleeping.

I have nothing bad to say about England. It turned out to be a lovely place. For my first English breakfast, which was like a big lunch, I was served sausages, eggs, corned beef (which I love - I don’t see it much nowadays) and my favourite, Heinz baked beans. Lunch wasn’t as good I queued with my plate and was served a black liquid with a pastry dome in the middle. I couldn’t make head nor tail of it. On investigation, I discovered that under the black sauce there was a little bit of almost black fatty meat, which tasted alright. And then the thing in the middle. I thought it would be something solid, like a hill of mashed potato. I took my fork and it went down and down and it turned out to be full of air – my first Yorkshire pudding!

As in every refugee camp, there was a first-aid centre looking for volunteers. Each day there were groups arriving - Church of England, Unitarian Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses. One day some Jews came. I don’t know who they were, bless them. At first I didn’t say I was a Jew because in Hungary you would do everything to hide the fact. I somehow asked: “Why do you want to know if I’m Jewish?” They explained they were here to collect Jewish people and so I ended up in a very nice place, the Bernhard Baron Settlement in the East End of London.

The future for my brother and parents

MIHALY LEFT HUNGARY shortly after I did and went to Stockholm. My parents stayed in Budapest.

I promised them that I would write a letter every day, and I did. There was plenty to write about. It was natural to me to tell them daily what was happening in my life. I was abroad and alone, not speaking English. I would write many letters and would go down and post them regularly. I received a letter from my brother saying: “You so and so, you promised you would write to Mother and Father and you haven’t.” I went down to check, and realised that I had been putting my letters in the litter box, not in the letter box. It was the most stupid thing I have done in my life!

My parents stayed in Hungary for about three years and then they were old age pensioners. They decided to go to Sweden to join Mihály. Mihály lived far out of Stockholm in a nice flat in the suburbs. Mother and Father lived near him. Father continued to practise psychoanalysis privately. He also worked in the library in the Karolinska Institute, one of the world’s foremost medical universities.

I used to visit them in Sweden and they came to England to visit us too. My children, Michael and Jackie, were very young, so they don’t have a good recollection of their grandparents. When my father died I went to the mortuary in Sweden. We were not a religious family, but I took a handkerchief and put it on my head and said the only brocha (blessing) I know – the one you say when you wash your hands before eating. I still have that handkerchief in a drawer here. Mother died a year later. ■

I am accepted to St Bartholomew’s Hospital

I HAD PROOF OF MY BUDAPEST University medical studies so I went to Senate House, the administrative centre of the University of London and was accepted into St Bartholomew’s hospital (Barts). Near the hospital, in Smithfield Market, the butchers preparing the meat would regularly cut themselves and they would often come in to be bandaged up. Barts was built in 1123 with a beautiful Roman church and a large inner courtyard with trees and a fountain. In some ways it was so posh it made me feel inferior.

Barts was a fantastic place and it was very good for me. I was treated like everyone else and slowly I made friends. At first, I spoke no English. I had read a book about cowboys and in the Hungarian translation it said: ‘Hands up’, so I that’s all I knew. When I would go home to the Bernhard Baron Settlement house in the East End, I’d pass women who would shout: “Hello love, do you want to have a good time?” I didn’t know what they wanted. I went home and asked: “What is she asking me and what is ‘good’ and what is ‘time’ and what is ‘darling’?”

My main source for learning English was the cinema. The actions would indicate what the words must mean and for sixpence I could watch two films then everyone would stand up to sing the National Anthem at the end.

Whilst at Barts, I met a professor of Hungarian and Finno-Ugrian languages who fascinated me (Finno-Ugrian is traditional grouping of all languages in the Uralic language family, of which the three most common are Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian.) He, of course, spoke perfect English, but he had lived in Hungary for four or five years and spoke Hungarian as well as I did, with no trace of an accent. He had a very deep knowledge of poetry and would recite beautifully. This friendship also helped my English to improve.

Of course I read medical books, but they were mostly in Latin, not English. The only word I understood in my pathology book was “End”. It would take me over an hour to read each page and then I would have to make and reread my notes before it made any sense at all.



My certificate of British Naturalisation

Eventually, I moved out of the settlement to Upper Fillmore Gardens, near Hyde Park in Kensington. I was given a ladies’ bicycle through the Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS) and I would cycle from Kensington to the hospital. ■

Meeting the love of my life - Vera

ONE DAY I WAS SITTING on the tube chatting to a friend in Hungarian, when I felt someone tapping my shoulder. An elderly Hungarian lady handed me a piece of paper and said: “I have a beautiful niece from Hungary. You’ve never seen anything like her. If you are feeling lonely please contact me.” I thought she was not totally with it and then the train came to a stop and she disappeared.

I kept that piece of paper. How can one not feel alone in London if they don’t speak English? I was very lonely so I rang the number on the piece of paper and we made a date to meet. The old lady explained where she lived and I arrived with a bunch of beautiful daffodils I had bought from the florist at the top of John Barnes department store. She said: “How kind, you shouldn’t have.” Really I shouldn’t have because I couldn’t afford them - it meant I couldn’t eat for a couple of days. We chatted while she arranged the flowers in a beautiful vase. After a while I asked: “Where is your niece?” There was no one else in the house. The old lady explained that now we had to go across the road to meet Vera. I wanted to say: “What about my daffodils?” but, of course I couldn’t, so I arrived empty-handed.

We went round the back of the house and Vera was waiting at the window. She was very angry. Vera didn’t like to be told what to do and I suppose, quite rightly, she felt like she was in a meat market. She didn’t like that her auntie and parents had interfered. Her mother, father and Auntie Freda (the old lady who I had met on the underground) left Vera and me alone and we talked and talked. When it was time to leave I said: “It was nice meeting you, can we see each other again?” She said that wouldn’t be possible as she had business to attend to abroad. It never occurred to me that she wasn’t telling the truth. I gave her the hospital number for when she came back and then we parted company. Weeks went by and nothing. Then one day I received a phone call at the hospital from someone who introduced themselves as Vera’s cousin. They explained that Vera had lost the phone number. So now Vera and I were in contact again and we met up at Hyde Park Corner. She was beautiful, I can tell you.



At our engagement party on 23 July 1958

No. 516. Amount paid 3/-

St. Marylebone Registration District

ERNEST F. PARSONS,
Superintendent Registrar
Telephone No.
WELBECK 7766

Register Office,
Town Hall,
St. Marylebone, W.1.

4th June 1959.

Dear Sir (or Madam),
I have received the Notice of Marriage between
Mr. P. Brunner
and M/s. V. Keve

The Marriage has been fixed to take place at
this Office on Saturday the
18th July at 11.00 a.m. and it is the
duty of the parties themselves to provide two witnesses
to be present at the ceremony.

It is particularly requested—
(a) that confetti, etc., shall not be thrown in or
within the precincts of the Town Hall; and
(b) that you and your friends will enter the building
by the Gloucester Place entrance.

If you would kindly advise your friends and seek
their co-operation accordingly, it would be much appreciated.

Yours faithfully,
E. F. PARSONS,
Superintendent Registrar

1/3a.

FM/1000/12.56/V.89

Letter from Marylebone Town Hall regarding
our wedding



Our wedding on 25 July 1959 at Marylebone Town Hall. The registry office was in the basement

The day we first met, Vera and her brother Tom were due to go to the cinema to see *Gunfight at the OK Corral*. They didn't go to the movies that day and about 15 years later I bought a copy of the film for us to watch together. Everyone shot everyone else with no apparent good reason. I didn't understand it. It's an awful film although it does have very good actors.

One of the people listed in the note my father had given me was Dr Mihály Balint. As a young man, my father had gone to him for advice when he was studying medicine. Dr Balint advised my father against marrying a girl he had met before he finished studying. I explained to Vera why I wanted to meet this Dr Balint, to ask his advice about whether or not to marry. He lived in beautiful imposing Nash buildings in Regents Park. The valet asked me to wait in the lounge. Well, I had never seen a lounge like that, or since! It was like a stately home. We sat and had a very nice conversation. It was good to talk to him about my father. I told Dr Balint that Vera and I had known each other for a few months but I had decided to wait and marry her when I qualified, as he had advised my father. But he said: "Why wait? You like her, you love her, you are a medical student, and you'll be alright. Do it now." And he gave us £20. You have no idea how much money that was. At the time, I was living on just £19 per month.

Vera and I married on 25 July 1959. We had our wedding in an underground room in the Town Hall on Marylebone High Street. The only people present were Vera's mother and father. We actually went back there a few years ago; they checked their records and let us see the room we got married in.

Life with Vera was paradise. I wanted to organise a honeymoon. In the newspaper I found a place in Bognor Regis, bed and breakfast and an evening meal too. I went to a red telephone box and booked for the end of July. The hotel was full of people visiting the nearby horse racing and when they came back in the evening that's all they talked about. They won money, they lost money. Slowly I got the idea of how English people act. Like with beans, the fork is upside down. Or when you have soup in Hungary you bend it towards yourself but in England you hold the bowl away from you. Similarly, a hand is used as a measure for horses. Nobody else has a measurement for horses. Then the English have pounds. When I arrived, everything was

measured differently, not in centimetres or Celsius. Everyone drives on the right side and here we drive on the left hand side. All this is not just that the English want to be *dafka* (different), it's just evolved that way. Every other country has a constitution, England has no constitution, and if you are in trouble there are I don't know how many books from the Domesday book onwards. These are, of course, the things that make England so special.

Back to Bognor Regis. We had a very good time. We hired bicycles and we went to the seaside but only once did we put on bathing suits and not to go in the water, it was very cold! I have a picture of us in an armchair, Vera and myself fully dressed, and it was July for heaven's sake. The English food served at the bed and breakfast was very different to Hungarian cooking. One evening Vera and I decided this couldn't go on; the portions were very small and we were both hungry. Vera stayed at the B&B and I went out and came back with half a chicken and chips. At least we were full then. Towards the end of the holiday we ran out of money so we phoned Vera's father to ask him to please send us some money, £5 was quite enough to see us through. So that was our fantastic honeymoon. ■

Honeymoon in Bognor Regis



With Vera's parents and brother Tom at our wedding



I qualify as a doctor

TO BECOME A DOCTOR, first you learn the important subjects in university and then you go to a hospital and study medicine. A letter arrived saying that my MB (Bachelor of Medicine) would be at a certain time and place. I attended the exam even though I didn't speak good enough English. When I looked at the paper it had three sections, four questions in each section. The problem was I hadn't understood that at the top it said you only had to answer one question from each section. I tried to answer all the questions and, of course, I didn't complete it properly and I failed. Until then I never knew what it was to fail. I was always absolutely distraught if I didn't get the top mark but the second. My colleagues said to me: "You are an idiot. Why didn't you wait a year or do it in six months or nine months?" But I thought: "You are the idiot that you didn't tell me that before!" Nobody told me that the exam was held every three months and you could retake it up to three times. I was very disappointed in myself but of course I couldn't say anything so I went back later and I passed.

Once I had qualified, Vera and I went to live in Smallfield in the south of England and I worked in a small hospital. I was desperate to get a new job, so I responded to an advert in the BMJ for a position in Northwood. There were 13 people applying for one job. There was a very long table full of consultants and they asked lots of questions. Afterwards I was told to wait outside with the other candidates. When the consultants came out they told us: "Actually the house surgeon has decided to change places with the house physician." In other words, none of us got the job. I was just about to leave when a door opened from the hall. "Er, Brunner, could you come in please?" This gentleman, Dr. Idris Jones, said: "I have a job for you in Harefield hospital." Why he asked me back, I don't know. He told me to go and see 'so and so' and tell him he sent me. I said: "Yes, sir" and I got that job. ■



With Vera in 1961

The next generation arrives and life changes

VERA AND I MOVED to Northwood, about three miles away from the Harefield hospital. She was pregnant with our first child and had a very large tummy. Her father was a businessman in textiles, and Vera had qualified as a textile engineer. Vera wasn't feeling very well, so she started working from home. She used an easel but she was so large she couldn't get close enough to it.

While Vera was pregnant, we had a problem with our car, a Mini. It was winter, there was high snow and because the car had front wheel drive it was going nowhere. Vera just couldn't fit behind the wheel with her tummy so I asked if she would push so I could steer. Thankfully the baby didn't come at that moment. I don't think she has ever forgiven me for that!

We named our first child after my brother Mihály. Michael was born 23 May 1963 at St Bartholomew's Hospital. I had the afternoon off and so I visited Vera in hospital when she was in labour, but I was on duty that evening so had to go back to work. Vera wasn't happy and it wasn't a nice thing to do, but I didn't want to lose my job.

I was very happy working at Harefield hospital. In those days there was a matron and as a lowly houseman I would shake when I saw her. Even the registrar who I worked for would ask: "Peter, have a look. Is she coming?" I would be in the corridor and I would say: "Yes. Yes, she's coming!" She ruled over us.

After six months at Harefield it was time to find a new job elsewhere. Every Monday local GPs would come to the hospital and we would present three different, interesting cases. Dr. Idris Jones approached me and asked: "Peter, would you like a nice Jewish GP practice?" He described the partners of the practice as "the one with the bowtie and the chap next to him". I picked them out and could tell they had a lovely practice. There was a slight reservation. I had always liked children (it was always a priority of mine to have a family) and wanted to be a paediatrician but I knew that even if I was lucky it would take 10 years to qualify. First you

had to become a registrar, then senior registrar, but to have a consultant's job you needed to have FRCP (Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians) and the pass rate then was only 15%. So I replied: "Yes sir, but can I have just a day to think about it?" I went home to Vera to make another big decision. We decided that I would visit the practice and that really was the turning point of my life.

The elder partner in the practice was David Lambert and each day he wore a different bow tie. In those days you had to wear a clean shirt, a tie and a suit. The other partner was a doctor named George Conn, whose father was from Hungary. I went to meet them and they invited me to join their practice. They offered me a contract which said there was no prospect of partnership, but I'd already made up my mind to accept anyway. Vera and I were still tenants in Northwood in an awful place, so I signed and worked very hard as a salaried doctor. I was happy at work, and Vera and I moved into the flat above the surgery in Eastcote in Field End Road.

Six months later they asked me: "Peter, what is your view of a partnership?" So I said: "David, I just signed a piece of paper and it said no prospect for partnership." He replied: "Well, you know how it is, we put that in just in case." So I was very happy. I started only being able to afford 12% of the expenditure which equated to 12% income, and it took five years for me to become an equal partner. This partnership went on for 32 years. We never ever had any problems, we never quarreled. David was meticulous; he could be brusque sometimes and occasionally he knew I wasn't happy with something. On those occasions, I might get a phone call at home to suggest we go to the theatre with him and his wife Barbara. It was a lovely partnership.

We had, of course, no computers. Everything was handwritten. For years we had no nurse. At one time we had 10,000 patients and we did everything including day and night calls. We all had private patients too. Every Tuesday we would give David a piece of paper detailing how much cash we had made from private patients that week and he would split the money three ways. I had never met their patients and they hadn't seen mine. There was a bond, so much



Our family in 1967

trust. Our wives knew one another and we would all socialise together. Through them we met our Northwood friends. There were other Hungarian refugees in that crowd, with similar stories to those of Vera and I. Every Tuesday we would play bridge together. Nowadays we still meet but just talk. To have these friendships for so many years with no acrimony is the sign of true friendship.

In those days you delivered a lot of babies at home. And then you would continue to care for that particular family and you would see the girl you helped come into this world getting married. That's the beauty of GP practice. Very much a community. It reminded me of being Jewish. It was so different from when I was growing up, when you did everything you could to hide that you were Jewish. For years we watched JW3 being built on Finchley Road as we passed on our way to town or to visit Vera's brother. There were huge letters advertising the future Jewish community centre. I didn't understand why this was necessary, but every friend I mentioned it to didn't see it as a problem.

After a while the surgery hired receptionists and Vera became our practice manager. She dealt with all the finances of a business that turned over millions of pounds, including the salary of the three doctors and the women on the desk. She hired and fired and dealt with all the maintenance. Everything in the practice was as ordered and precise as it was in the home.

Jackie was born on 7 September 1966. She was a very sedate baby, nothing bothered her. If she was ill, she would just go to sleep and wake up a day later and all was well. Uncharacteristically, one day Jackie came home limping and crying. She claimed nothing had happened in school but it was hurting. I was worried so I contacted a friend of mine who we'd been to see previously when Jackie was a baby about problems with feeding. When he came in Jackie was crying and saying it hurt when she walked. He asked if anything happened in school and she said she had fallen off a plank in school. I was so embarrassed, I thought the earth would open and swallow me up.



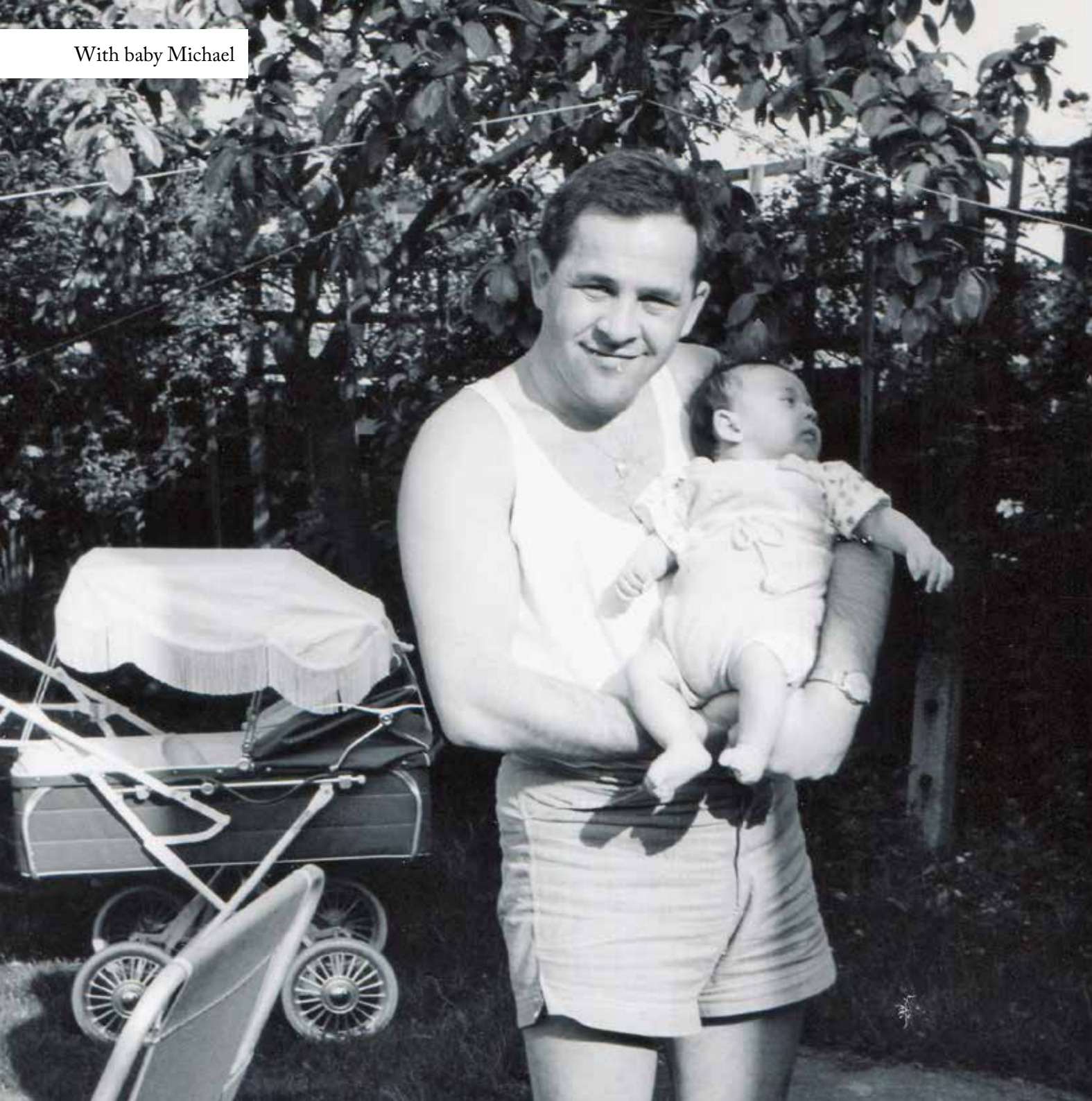
Vera's mother Rose, Vera, my mother holding Michael, and Vera's father Stephen

Michael was a very different child. For example, when Vera and I would go out an old patient of mine would babysit. Jackie would sit next to her holding hands but Michael would say, “You’re not going anywhere. I don’t want you to go!” I remember so clearly, we would go around the block twice and could see him still looking for us at the window. He had a phrase he used often, “I was minding my own business”. One day he volunteered to cut the lawn. He went one and half lengths and then the mower stopped dead and he said, “I was only minding my own business!”

Through our friends in the surgery, we made more English friends. The only thing in England I never mastered is the tuition system. We asked around our friends and everyone we knew privately educated their children. It cost a lot of money and to begin with it was very difficult. It was a big outgoing. When the children were young and school fees and tax came along, I had to remortgage the house. This happened a number of times because I didn’t have enough money to do everything at the same time. When I would go to see the bank manager around April time when the tax was due, he would always know why I was there. He would ask: “Yes Peter, how much money do you need?” And I would pay it back a few months later.

Michael went to UCS (University College School in Hampstead) and every time he had a test he would come home and say it was the very worst exam ever. He is now a consultant anaesthetist. In 2017 he got a PhD at Keele University. Michael was always interested in being a doctor and how things worked. He was married to Debra for 28 years and they have three children, Samantha (Sammy), Jacob (Jake) and Abigail. Sammy is married to Simon. She works with the youth at Alyth synagogue and her husband is a doctor. Jake works in the charity sector, and Abigail wants to compose music for films. She has already composed two pieces of music based on the bible.

Jackie went to school in Northwood and qualified in Wales as a psychologist. Now she has a private practice and teaches psychology. Jackie is married to Alan. They have two young boys called Danny and Jonah. Jackie and Michael both live a few minutes away from us now. ■



Retirement

I RETIRED FROM NHS PRACTICE when I was 60. For the next five years, and with the help of the secretaries from my NHS surgery, I looked after the employees of three large companies. I rented rooms in Mount Vernon and the Clementine Churchill and did mostly screening. At that time Vera and I were living in Northwood in a gorgeous house with very nice neighbours in a pleasant road. Vera loved that house. She used to pass it when she walked Michael to school and when the opportunity arose we bought it. The road wasn't private and as we got older we felt uncomfortable at night in the area, so we moved to our current flat in Mill Hill in 2002.

When I fully retired after 35 years in the same profession, I was devastated. I didn't know what to do with my time. I would get up and dressed at 6.30am. Slowly you get used to doing nothing. We would socialise a lot with friends and go to the theatre. We would go on regular holidays to our home in Spain or to Sweden to visit my brother two or three times a year. We were very lucky and we went all over the world, although I regret not having taken Vera to the South Pole; I would have loved that.



Our daughter Jackie at her wedding to Alan



With Michael on holiday in Italy 1976



Top left: our grandson Jacob, 2004; top right: our granddaughter Samantha in 2003.
Above: our granddaughter Abigail 2004



Michael, Debra and their kids, 2003



Top: our grandson Danny. Below: our grandson Jonah, 2003

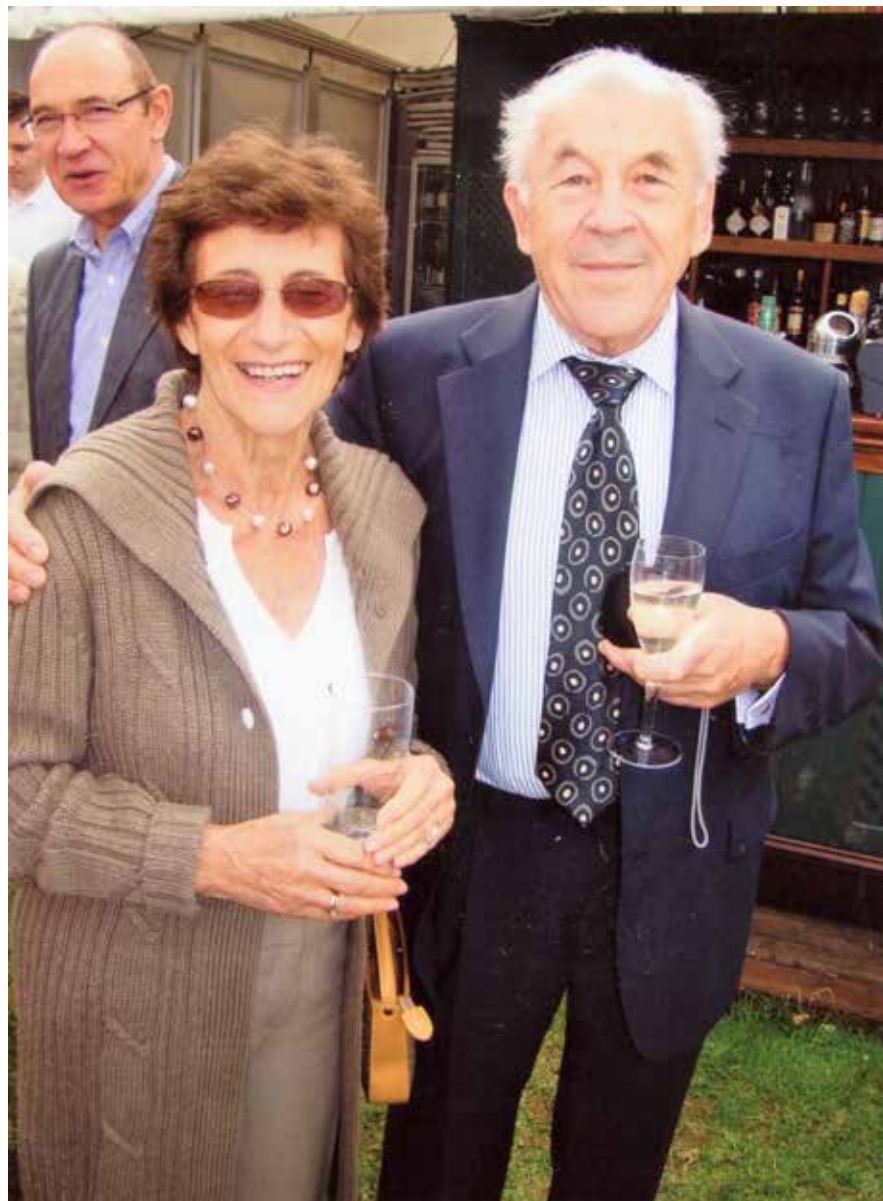
My thoughts on an unplanned but marvellous life

I HAVE ALWAYS harboured feelings of guilt. All the things which happened to me were none of my making, yet I would feel guilty that I was alive and had Vera and my work, and I had a marvellous life when all the others had perished. They were fantastic people who I looked up to, my uncles and aunties and cousins. And I still have the question, why me?

I always had the idea that I don't want anything from Germany. It is something that happened to me and my family. We are alive and all the others are dead. Father somehow came back from three concentration camps. Is this something that can be put into money? So I was always against it. My brother-in-law Tom and many other friends have applied for reparation payments. Now, at this stage of my life, I decided that I, with the help of AJR, would apply for money to help with living costs so now, every three months, Vera gets a small amount of money.

The idea for a book originally came from one of my grandchildren, Jake. He said: "Papa I don't know anything about you before you came to London." It took him over a year to get all the grandchildren together from where they live all over the place. Eventually, in our lounge, I told them my story. Afterwards, we went to a Chinese restaurant. Interestingly, since then they insist each month on having a meeting in a Chinese restaurant. ■

Now they know – and this book is for them.



With Vera in 2012

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.



“You could hear the noise of the fighting from all sides. I saw a big crater with a dead man in it. That made a huge impression on me as a child. I can still see it now, the images and the colours of the breaking dawn.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk