



# My Story

## Margarete Stern



# My Story

Margarete Stern



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

'My Story' is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).  
More information at [www.ajr.org.uk](http://www.ajr.org.uk)

Margarete Stern was visited by AJR volunteer Charlotte Balazs during 2017 to share her story.  
Thanks also to AJR volunteer Shelley Hyams for her editing skills.

Portrait photography by: Debra Barnes.

©The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) May 2018.

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 May 2018.

Designed by: Berenice Smith, MA

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

## Margarete Stern

My son-in-law always told me to write a book about my life, but I said I didn't know how to. When he saw me he would ask: "What chapter are we on today?"



Contents

06 Growing up in Bavaria

13 I experience Nazism in Nuremberg

18 Our journey begins

21 First stop Czechoslovakia

25 Refugees in Yugoslavia

29 And so to England

32 War breaks out and I am evacuated to Oxford



Contents

34 Back to London, then off we go again

35 Job hunting and a testing time

36 Working for the Yugoslav Government

42 We meet the Schwarzschilds and the Sterns

44 I receive a proposal – of sorts!

46 The next generation

51 Later years





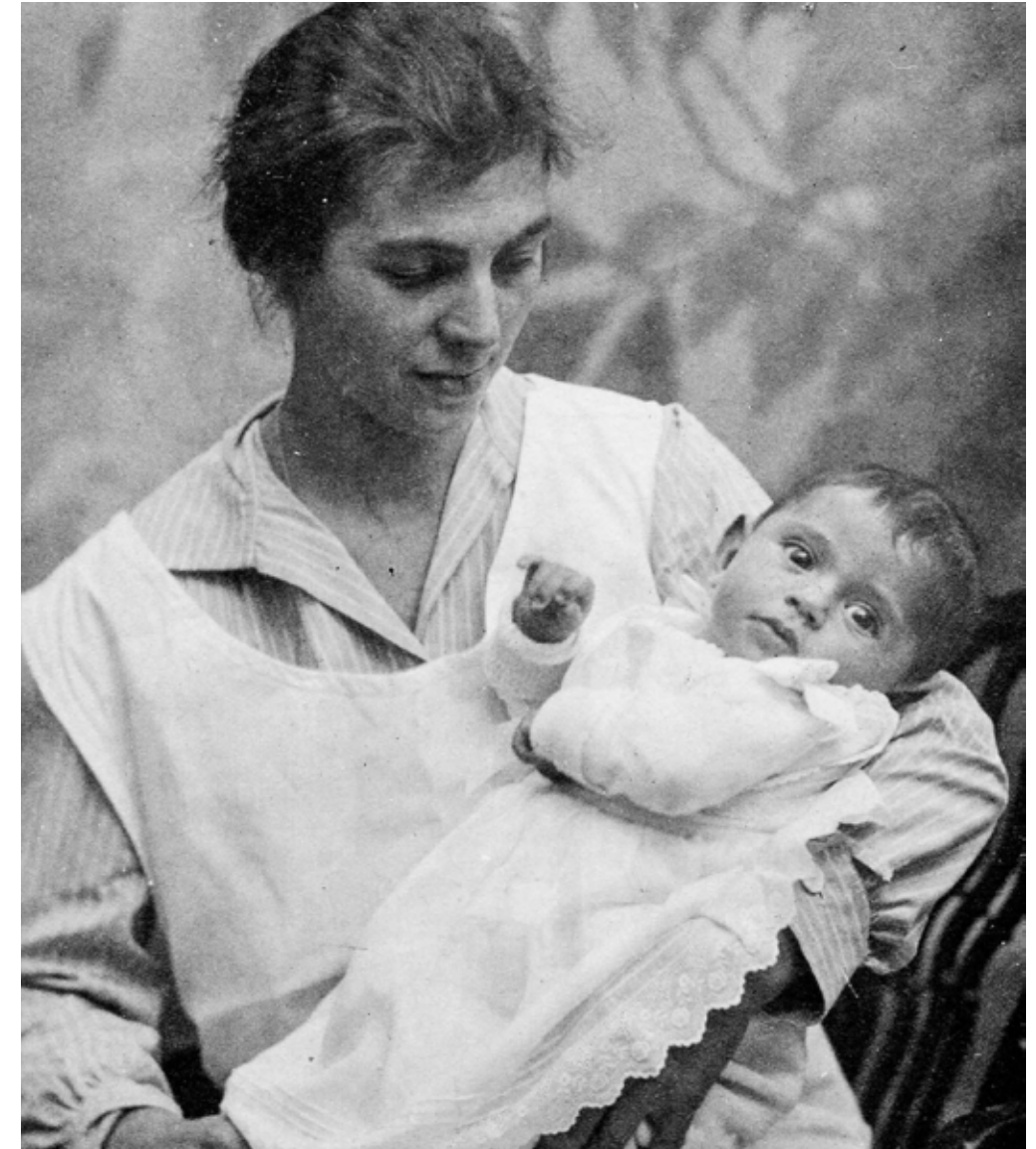
## Growing up in Bavaria

I WAS BORN Margarete Hirsch on 28 June, 1925, in Fürth, Bavaria in the comfort of my own home. The obstetrician broke the news that a second daughter had just been born, as gently as he could, to my dad who had been waiting in another room. My dad was delighted! I was the younger of two daughters: my sister Elisabeth (we all called her Liesel) was five and a half years older than me. We had a lovely childhood. I attended my first school year in Fürth in the local *Volksschule*. The school year began in April and children used to start at the age of six, but my mother waited until I was almost seven because she didn't believe in sending me to school too young. That's how I came to be one of the oldest in the class.

I was scared stiff of the headmistress because she was very strict and she didn't like my sister, who was independent, stubborn and dreamy. The headmistress told my mother about Elisabeth: "When I say turn left everyone will turn left except her, she will turn right." So when my mother brought me along she said: "I can tell, she is the quieter one."

My family were typical German Jews – very assimilated. My mother felt very German – my father less so because he had gone to Prague when he was nine years old and returned as a teenager. We didn't observe any Jewish festival or *Shabbat*. In fact we celebrated Christmas and Easter although my mother and I did play *dreidel* at *Chanukah*. Mother proudly told me that the *dreidel* had been made by her father. It was carved out of wood and I still have it. *Purim* was celebrated by the whole town when the children put on a show at a local hotel. I was in it with my gymnastics group and I was named the best

“ The school year began in April and children used to start at the age of six, but my mother waited until I was almost seven because she didn't believe in sending me to school too young. ”



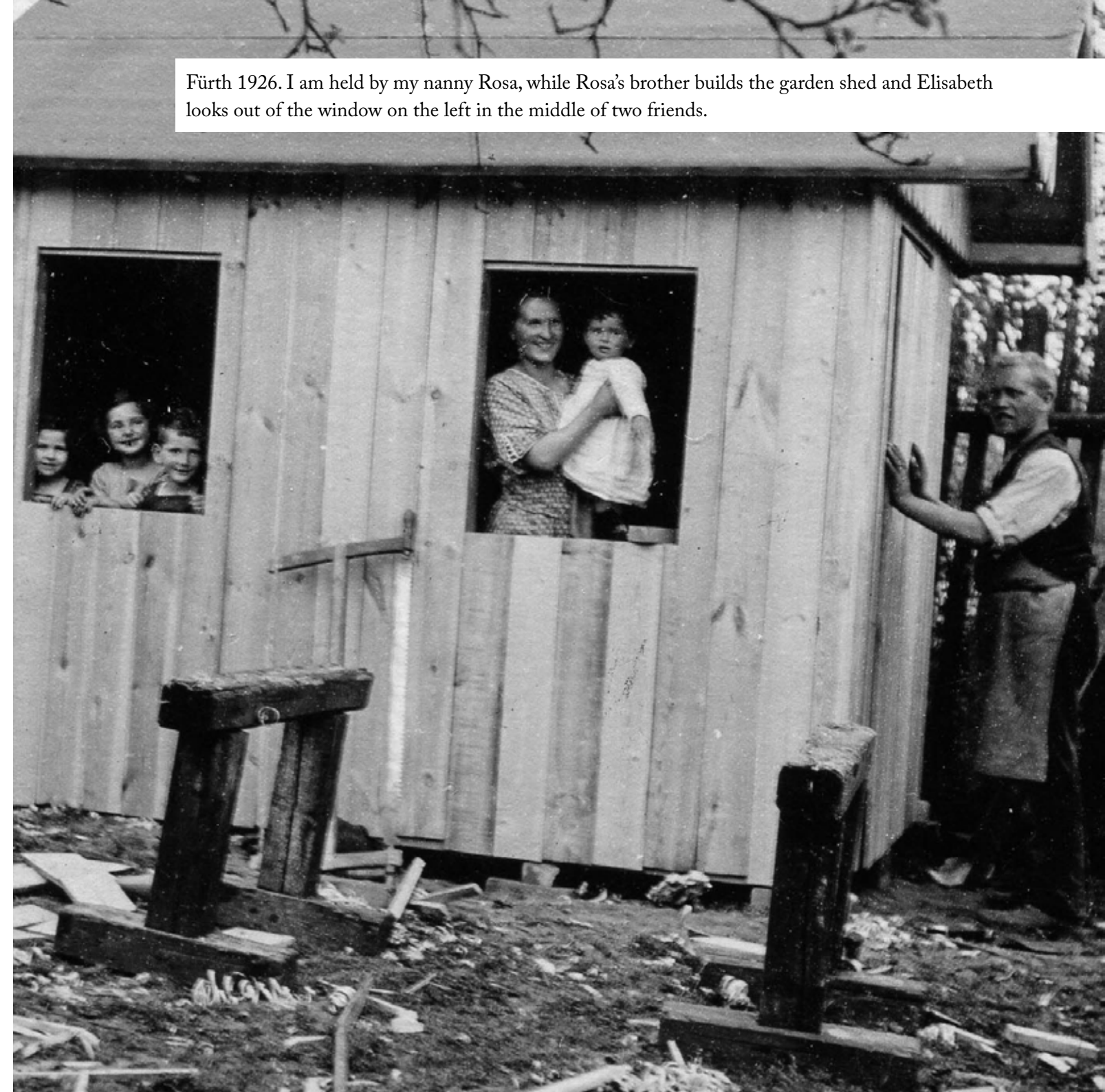
With my first nanny Kätchen, 1925.

gymnast when I was five years old. One year I also sneaked on stage when my sister was performing and recited two nursery rhymes. I remember I was wearing leather shorts at the time!

My mother used to love dressing me as a Bavarian peasant-boy when I was little. One day on holiday I was playing by the paddling pool in my leather shorts. I was the only child with a swimming doll that could actually do the crawl when wound up by its arms. I bent down too low and fell in the water. I was so stunned that I just stayed sitting in there until some lady told Elisabeth (who as usual was engrossed in a book) that her “little brother” had fallen in the water. “Little brother?” my sister was thinking. “Could she mean my sister?” I shall never forget the squelching sounds my leather boots made at each step as I was walked back to the hotel and put to bed! ■



Fürth 1926. I am held by my nanny Rosa, while Rosa's brother builds the garden shed and Elisabeth looks out of the window on the left in the middle of two friends.





With my mother.



With Elisabeth and our mother.





First year of school in Fürth, 1932 (first on left 2nd row from front).

## I experience Nazism in Nuremberg

IN APRIL 1933, when I was seven years old, we moved to Nuremberg. My father had worked his way up through the banking world and was promoted to deputy manager of Dresdner Bank. Now my parents could afford to move to a nicer, larger flat which they had redecorated and bought some new furniture. But this was 1933 when the Nazis came to power, and from the very, very beginning my mother felt that we shouldn't stay.

In Nuremberg I went to a school very close to where we lived. There were two other Jewish girls in my class. Within weeks of Hitler coming to power the school curriculum changed. In PE we would march around singing Nazi songs and we were taught about Hitler's childhood, how he used to play truant because he was busy planning how to change the world, that sort of thing. And I still remember the prayers in the morning which we had to say before lessons:

*"Schütz Adolf Hitler jeden Tag, daß ihn kein Unfall treffen mag."*

"Protect Adolf Hitler every day. So that no accident will befall him."

My mother said: "That sounds strange. Do they think someone will try to bump him off and that's why they have to pray for his safety?" My mother was quite shrewd.

We lived in a very good part of Nuremberg. There were a lot of wealthy Jewish people. It was a bit like living in St John's Wood in London today. It was a short walk home from school. We were a group of four friends, myself and two other Jewish girls and one non-Jewish girl. Her name was

“ There were two other Jewish girls in my class. Within weeks of Hitler coming to power the school curriculum changed. In PE we would march around singing Nazi songs.”



Before starting school.

Marion Heckert. She lived in the area but it was known that her father was a prominent Nazi. He owned a garage and flew a small swastika pennant on his posh car. In the summer we girls would play after school in Luitpoldhain, which was quite close to where we lived. It was a beautiful park, like Regent's Park.

One day Marion brought a lovely colourful ball to play with. It had been a birthday present from her parents. We were playing happily when Marion had to rush home for a moment. She told us we could keep playing with the ball, but to look after it for her. Then something happened which I've never forgotten. A Jewish boy we all knew from school walked past, saw the ball and asked us to throw it to him. We said: "Okay, but be sure to give it back, it's not ours and we were told to look after it." When he threw it back it landed on the grass behind us. In Germany you were not allowed to walk on the grass in the park, so no-one dared to go – we thought that a guard or policeman would get us. So we all just stood there staring at the ball. Then suddenly we saw a woman who looked poor or homeless. She walked right on to the grass, picked up the ball and walked quickly off with it. Some of the girls ran after her but they couldn't catch up with her.

“... he threw it back it landed on the grass behind us. In Germany you were not allowed to walk on the grass in the park, so no-one dared to go – we thought that a guard or policeman would get us. So we all just stood there staring at the ball.”



With Elisabeth at the end of 1932. At this time we were still living in Fürth but we would go to Nuremberg often and would have our photographs taken there.



Shortly after, Marion came back and burst into tears when she realised her ball had gone. We explained what had happened and she went home and obviously told her parents. I heard afterwards that her father went to the school and complained to the teacher about the Jewish boy as if he had committed a crime and, it may be a rumour, but I heard that they took the Jewish boy to the police station and he was locked up for some hours. The following day, as we were walking back from school with Marion, we saw the boy across the road with his father, who now wouldn't let him walk on his own. I remember the father shouted across to Marion: "I'm going to buy you a new ball" and she shouted back: "My father said not to accept anything from a Jew."

That was the beginning of it, although at the time it didn't affect me very much. I mean I took it in my stride that more and more restaurants had notices "*Juden unerwünscht*" or that people were shouting "dirty Jew" after you in the street. Anyway, shortly afterwards my parents started talking about emigrating. My father wasn't keen at first, but then he was being harassed at work in the bank. There were a number of people who coveted his job and would have relished the opportunity to get rid of him. ■

“I took it in my stride that more and more restaurants had notices "*Juden unerwünscht*" or that people were shouting "dirty Jew" after you in the street.”



## Our journey begins

I REMEMBER the day we emigrated. It was summer 1933, either the end of June or the beginning of July. We had been in that flat for some two months. My parents didn't tell me we were leaving because they wanted to keep it quiet so nothing would happen to stop us. School started at eight o'clock and I had to get up at seven every morning. It was usually our cook who would come and wake me up. Her name was Anna. She was a very wonderful person and my sister Elisabeth kept in touch with her until her death, as did my mother. On this particular day Anna came into my room and I asked if it was time for me to get up for school. She said: "No, you don't have to get up so early because you're not going to school today. You're leaving Germany." I exclaimed: "What? No-one told me!"

The next thing I remember is my father, my mother, Elisabeth and me arriving at the railway station in Nuremberg. There was a woman selling charity badges from a tray and she wanted to sell one to my mother. My mother realised they were in aid of some Nazi cause and said: "How dare you offer it to a Jewish person? Are you so poor at your racial studies that you can't differentiate between a Jew and a non-Jew?" So this woman slunk away and my father said to my mother: "Are you crazy? Don't you know what you've just done? You've endangered us!" If this woman had reported us they could have stopped us from leaving Germany and worse. Mother said: "But I couldn't help it." She was very impulsive. Luckily no-one came to stop us and we left. ■

“My parents didn't tell me we were leaving because they wanted to keep it quiet so nothing would happen to stop us.”

Elisabeth and I with our maternal grandmother Bettina Uffenheimer.





Swimming with my mother in  
Crikvenica, summer 1936.



## First stop Czechoslovakia

FIRST we went on holiday to Marienbad in Czechoslovakia. We had done this same journey the year before to go on holiday but this time, as the train crossed the border into Czechoslovakia, my mother looked out of the window and said *“Jetzt verlassen wir deutschen Boden”* - “We are now leaving German soil” and she burst into tears. She was so German, her family had been in Fürth for centuries. I looked out of the window and I was thinking: “I can’t see the difference between here and there. It’s exactly the same soil – what is she on about?”

According to my sister, my father was still dithering about whether to return to Germany. We had been able to take out most of our money but had to leave 25 per cent as *Reichsfluchtsteuer*, a tax on fleeing the *Reich*.

After Marienbad we went to Prague for the day, sight-seeing. My father’s parents divorced when he was nine and he had lived in Prague for several years. Then we went to Budapest, which I remember as a beautiful town with the Danube flowing in the middle. We went on a boat ride to an island called Margareteninsel in the middle of the Danube. ■

“...my mother looked out of the window and said *“Jetzt verlassen wir deutschen Boden”* - “We are now leaving German soil” and she burst into tears.”





Skating with a friend in Maribor. I am on the right. It was a special occasion when everyone was asked to wear fancy dress. The pond was not far from where we were living.

With my sister in Maribor.







Maribor, September 1935.

## Refugees in Yugoslavia

THEN our holiday was over and we arrived in Maribor, Yugoslavia. Even before arriving I wasn't looking forward to it, not like you look forward to going on holiday because I knew that now we were the refugees. My father's sister Paula and her husband Max lived there. Aunt Paula was very bossy to my father who was younger than her, and we were at their mercy. We still had money, that wasn't the problem, but now we, and especially my mother, felt sort of like fish out of water. My uncle came to meet us at the station and he took us to his home for a meal and then we were taken to a dreadful boarding house run by a very devout Catholic widow - she tried to convert my mother!

Shortly afterwards I was ill - I had bronchitis and the doctor said I had to stay in bed for a couple of weeks with the windows wide open. When my mother wasn't there the landlady said to me "*Du wirst sterben*" "You're going to die." Fortunately I didn't take it seriously, but, I mean, what a dreadful thing to say to a child!

One of the other lodgers at the boarding house was a professional smuggler and one day he never came back - he had been shot dead between Austria and Yugoslavia. And there was another, a young lad who wet his bed every night and his mattress was always hanging out to dry. The place was a dump, but thankfully we only stayed there for a short time and then we moved to a very pleasant apartment in a tree-lined avenue.

“One of the other lodgers at the boarding house was a professional smuggler and one day he never came back - he had been shot dead between Austria and Yugoslavia.”

I joined a primary school and for the first year I was in the section for German speakers to aid the transition. Unfortunately there were a lot of Nazi sympathisers there due to the high number of ethnic German children attending. Maribor was thirty per cent German speaking so I didn't have problems with the language at school and I could speak Slovene fluently after the first year anyway, but the antisemitism was worse than in Germany. Not from the teacher but from some of the pupils and that is why my mother decided I should move to the Slovene section of the school. There were only a very few Jewish children at the school. One girl from the German section of the school invited me to her birthday party and her home was full of swastikas and there was a picture of Hitler on her mother's dressing table. And there was one boy, also from the German section of the school, who tried to deliberately trip me up ice skating. His mother saw it and didn't stop him. After three years at this primary school I moved on to *Realna gimnazija*, grammar school, in 1936.

My father wasn't allowed to work officially, either paid or unpaid, but he took out a 17½ per cent partnership in a chocolate factory. This became very successful, it was the second-largest in the country. Five years later in 1938, when we were expelled from Yugoslavia, my father's business partner treated him very badly. My parents went to see him and he started shouting at my father. My mother said: "Don't shout at my husband!" He said: "It's my Serbian temperament!" My mother replied: "You are a reserve officer. If you stand in front of your General would you dare to shout at him or wouldn't you be able to help it because of your Serbian temperament?" That shut him up. Mother was a very brave woman and quite a character. ■

“There were only a very few Jewish children at the school. One girl in my class invited me to her birthday party and her home was full of pictures of Hitler and swastikas.”



School photo from Maribor with both Year 1 and 2 pupils. We were taught together as there were not many children in this part of the school which catered for the German minority. I am third from right in the back row. On my right is Heinz Schacherl, the only other Jewish child in my class.





## And so to England

WHEN we left Yugoslavia I was 13 years old and my sister was 18. Elisabeth decided that she wanted to go to university in Prague but my mother wouldn't let her go, saying it was too close to Germany and too dangerous. Mother had three uncles in England and told my sister that if she wanted to go abroad to study, she could go to London. Shortly afterwards, when we were expelled from Yugoslavia, we would all go to London. We had no choice.

Our last summer before coming to England was spent in Bled, a beautiful lakeside resort in Slovenia. Elisabeth was camping with her youth group in nearby Gozd Martuljek and then joined us for a few days in Bled. My sister and my mother then travelled back to Maribor from where they left for England, via Venice and Paris by train. My father, my grandmother, who had been living with us in Maribor, and I stayed on a little longer in Bled. Shortly after we returned to Maribor we received a letter from the Yugoslav government saying that our permit was expiring and wouldn't be renewed. That gave us two months in which to leave the country. When my mother arrived back in Maribor after taking my sister safely to London, my father went to meet her at the station with the letter in his hand. Mother would say: "Couldn't he have waited till at least I got home? What a reception I got. If I had known I wouldn't have bothered to come back from England!"

It was difficult to get in anywhere - no one wanted you as a Jew, a German Jew. And it wasn't easy to get into England without guarantees. Fortunately, my great-uncle in England, Hermann Loewi (my grandmother's brother), saved all his family. He was rich, a very prominent shareholder at Marks & Spencer so I was told, and he put up the guarantees for all of us. My mother, father and I left Maribor

“It was difficult to get in anywhere - no one wanted you as a Jew, a German Jew. And it wasn't easy to get into England without guarantees. Fortunately, my great-uncle in England, Hermann Loewi (my grandmother's brother), saved all his family.”



With my father in Bled.



and went to Zagreb for two days and then on to Belgrade for five days. From there we travelled by train to Ljubljana where we met up with my grandmother who had come along with my aunt Paula. The two had done the packing in Maribor. We stayed a couple of days in Ljubljana then on by train to Trieste. Then on to another train journey via Venice to Milan, where we had to get off the train at midnight and sit on our suitcases on the platform waiting for another train to take us to Switzerland. We arrived in England on 12 November 1938 by plane from Zurich to Croydon airport.

When we arrived in England my grandmother went to stay with her brother. My sister Elisabeth was already in London and living in a boarding house. She had decided not to go to university but instead she went to Mrs Hoster's Secretarial Training College in Grosvenor Place once her English was good enough. My parents and I went to the New Mansion Hotel in Lancaster Gate, W2. It was a typical small London hotel - it smelt of cabbage! We found a school for me in the very same street. It was called St Mary's and was recommended by two young Jewish sisters from South Africa who were pupils at the school and staying in the same hotel as us. It was a very good school and there were quite a number of Jewish children there. My mother spoke English but I hardly spoke any English at all, so I was put in the class of 10 year olds, even though I was 13. The headmistress thought it would be easier for me. She was very kind and even provided a private teacher free of charge to teach me English at the hotel after school.

We later moved to the West London Hotel in Kensington Gardens Square and I attended the dreadfully snobby Kensington High School, as arranged by a great-aunt. The school was part of the Girls' Day School Trust. The school uniform consisted of so many different items which you had to buy in the Daniel Neal shop but we couldn't afford to buy it all. My great-aunt arranged that as a refugee my school fees and even my school dinners were reduced by half. My mother didn't like having to take charity: she would have preferred to send me to a school which was not so expensive and pay the full fees like everybody else. ■



## War breaks out and I am evacuated to Oxford

WAR BROKE out in September 1939 and the school was evacuated to Oxford. I was in such a state because I didn't want to leave my parents. The night before I left I lay in bed in that hotel in Kensington Gardens Square praying that I wouldn't be separated from them and the following morning my parents said: "We've decided to go to Oxford as well. Of course we can't stay with you (I had to stay with a family arranged by the school) but we'll be in a hotel for the first week to see that you're settled in." My prayers had been answered!

My parents travelled to Oxford by themselves on the train, while I had to travel with my school. The journey to Oxford was paid for by various charities and it was very long. It was during the school holidays, but everyone had to come to Kensington High School to leave by train from a local station which took us to Chertsey by the Thames. There we got off the train and went to a nearby boarding school to wait for coaches. We had a packed lunch and we went for a walk along the river. Then the coaches came and took us to Oxford, where we arrived in the afternoon and were taken to Oxford High School and given tea. I remember that I wasn't given any sugar for my tea and I hated tea without sugar but I was too shy to ask.

People started arriving at the school, picking up the evacuees and taking them to their homes. Soon it was my turn. I was driven to Mrs Burkett's house. They had taken on several evacuees as well as having their own children, so it was really quite busy there. Having travelled the whole day with no warm

“I was in such a state because I didn't want to leave my parents. The night before I left I lay in bed in that hotel in Kensington Gardens praying that I wouldn't be separated from them...”

meal, all I was given was lime juice and four biscuits. I remember the lime juice – I had never drunk it before. I was new here, I didn't even know there was such a fruit as a lime. My father had given me a big salami to take with, but Mrs Burkett said: "You won't be needing that here, we all share everything." She took it from me and I never saw any of it again.

At first I was sharing a room with other evacuees some of whom were younger than me and crying for their mothers. I was the lucky one because I knew my parents were in Oxford too. Everyone who took in evacuees had to have staff because otherwise they would not have been allowed to look after the children, but Mrs Burkett had dismissed her maid. When my mother came to see me Mrs Burkett asked if she would do some of the housework for her in return for free board and lodging. My prayers were answered again because my mother jumped at the offer and stayed with me.

Meanwhile my father had to go back to London because of work. He had found another chocolate factory, this time a small handmade chocolate business called Union Chocolates at 100 Bayham Street in Camden Town. My sister by this time had finished secretarial college and was working in the Slovene section of the BBC. She used to broadcast talks in Slovene, and became well known in Slovenia.

I was only in Oxford for a couple of months. Kensington High School merged with Oxford High School. We had air-raid practice at school with sirens going off and rattles which meant a gas attack and you had to quickly put on your gas mask. It looked very spooky seeing all the children with their gas masks on, because everyone looked the same, like animals with snouts. You had to always carry your gas mask, but it was never needed. Winston Churchill threatened that if the Germans were to use gas in an attack he would retaliate. If he had threatened to do the same about the Jews being gassed at that time in concentration camps maybe the Germans would have thought twice. Going on the train you saw notices like "In the event of a gas attack do not touch the handle from the outside" because of mustard gas. It burns your hands. I haven't forgotten things like that: "Walls have ears" and "Careless talk costs lives". ■

## Back to London, then off we go again

MY MOTHER and I stayed in Oxford until the end of November 1939. I was 14 years old by this time. It was very uncomfortable and cold in the room we slept in, especially my bed which was just a camp bed. As there hadn't been any bombing yet we decided to return to London, and we spent one week in a local hotel before we left Oxford. We moved to the flat which I still live in at Northways in Swiss Cottage (actually I moved to a flat opposite – no. 38 – when I got married but moved back to my parents' flat when my mother died.) In January 1940 I started at Henrietta Barnett School in Hampstead Garden Suburb. There weren't many schools left behind, although actually South Hampstead High School had a skeleton staff and was very close, but we didn't realise at the time.

One good thing about going to school in London was that at Henrietta Barnett and South Hampstead High the Jewish girls had their own assembly and didn't have to attend Christian prayers. I'd never had so much Jewishness in my life before! It was good, I enjoyed it.

In September 1940 the Blitz started in earnest. My mother had sciatica and she was in constant agony. Doctors often had to be called during the night, so it was felt that if there were a direct hit she wouldn't be able to run to the shelters. My parents knew an actor, Frederick (Fritz) Valk. Valk gave readings in German and people would pay to go and listen, then he got work on the stage and in movies. Valk told us that we could go to his friend's place in Cow Roast near Tring in Hertfordshire. We went there but only stayed one night, then we moved to another house a few doors away for a few weeks and eventually we moved to The Royal Hotel, opposite the station. It sounds posh but it wasn't! We stayed there for three years. Funnily enough, South Hampstead High School had been evacuated to nearby Berkhamstead which was only seven minutes by train from Tring, so I went there until 1942 when I was 17 years old and got my school certificate. A British Jewish teacher called Miss Moos would take the Jewish assembly at the school, but she was a member of a Reform synagogue and it wasn't *from* enough for me. ■

## Job hunting and a testing time

WHEN I LEFT school I started at Mrs Hoster's Secretarial Training College in London, the same one my sister had gone to, commuting from Tring. They claimed it was one of the best, if not the best, secretarial college. My wealthy great-uncle paid the fees. I wanted a job at the BBC where my sister had now been for several years. She was in the Slovene section and that is what I wanted to do as well, but they didn't need additional staff there so they told me about a job in the BBC general office. It was very poorly paid, especially if you were under 18. I didn't want to apply but my sister told me I had to start somewhere and my father was also in favour.

I had several interviews, none of which went very well. My mother came with me to the typing test. I showed them my certificates from the secretarial training with my speed but I still had to take a test. The lady started dictating but in a different way than they had at college, when they used to adjust the speed to your speed – if you were slow they went slow, if you were fast they went fast! This was not the case at the BBC. The lady sat where she could not see me and just went on dictating regardless and I kept having gaps. It was a news bulletin about the war in North Africa with all kinds of foreign names in it which I didn't know how to spell – if I tried to think how to spell one she was already on to the next sentence! I felt so small when she looked at my typing and told me that I was “no way near good enough” and that I would have to go to re-training at Bedford College in Regents Park, for £2 a week pay. That would barely have covered my fares and I told my mother that I wasn't doing it, there was no incentive. She understood my point of view but no-one else did. ■

“My parents knew an actor, Frederick (Fritz) Valk. Valk gave readings in German and people would pay to go and listen, then he got work on the stage and in movies.”



## Working for the Yugoslav Government

I REMEMBER I went to the pictures with my mother and in the film the secretary married the boss. I said: "That's a film for you, it's not real life!" We got home from the cinema and there was a telephone call from my sister. She said there was a job for me at the offices of the Yugoslav government-in-exile. One of the deputy Prime Ministers had asked my sister to be his secretary. She said she was very happy at the BBC (she had prospects there, a pension and everything) but she told him she had a younger sister who was currently looking for a job. He asked her: "Does she speak our language?" and she said: "Yes, as well as I do." And that's how I got the job in the Yugoslav Ministry of Public Works. Dr Krek, the boss, seemed more interested in my old school reports from Maribor than in my achievements at secretarial college as the headmaster who had signed my reports had been one of his best friends!

I was told that everything was confidential and I was very careful. I didn't talk to my parents about my job in the street because I was told I had to be discreet. The office was in Kensington and the hours were 10am to 4pm with two hours for lunch. I never took two hours, I wouldn't have known what to do with all that time. I took sandwiches in, so I wasn't very popular with other members of staff because I was working too much. I wasn't interested in gossiping with the others. I would ask the senior secretary: "Don't you have anything for me to do?" She envied me because she typed with two fingers and I touch-typed having just learnt it, but when I was asked to change the typewriter ribbon I wasn't able to do it. She said: "Didn't they teach you how to change a typewriter ribbon in college?" She tried to do it and got her hands all dirty, so she actually sent me back to my old college to be shown how to

“I was told that everything was confidential and I was very careful. I didn't talk to my parents about my job in the street because I was told I had to be discreet.”



change a ribbon! It was very demeaning. I worked there from May to August 1943 and by this time my family had moved back from Tring to London.

In August 1943 I was very ill with an abscess on a tonsil (quinsy) and while I was off sick there were a lot of changes at the office as the end of the war was approaching. So in September 1943 I was moved to the Post-War Reconstruction Committee as a filing clerk. In August 1944 I went on holiday with my family, but my boss hadn't given me permission so I got the sack! One of the gentlemen in the office offered to blackmail the boss (who he implied was collaborating with the Nazis) to allow me to keep my job, and that seemed to do the trick so I was able to stay there.

In December 1944 I went to work at Tanjug news agency (Telegraphic Agency of the New Yugoslavia) where the boss, Mr Sudjić, was not trusted because he had changed from a royalist to a communist overnight. One day a young man arrived from Yugoslavia. Officially he was the engineer who saw to the one machine they had where news bulletins came in, but in reality people said he was sent to spy on Mr Sudjić. He was a friendly man, his name was Žika. That wasn't his real name, of course, he was a partisan and had a false identity. One day Žika said to Mr Sudjić: "The chief of the military mission needs a secretary because his is leaving and I suggested Comrade Hirsch."

"What do you mean you suggested her? You didn't ask me. She is my secretary."

“ I went on holiday with my family, but my boss hadn't given me permission so I got the sack! One of the gentlemen in the office offered to blackmail the boss (who he implied was collaborating with the Nazis) to allow me to keep my job, and that seemed to do the trick so I was able to stay there.”

"Well you don't need her full-time. It's only a few hours every afternoon."

"But still you should have asked me." He nearly exploded but there was nothing he could do so he took it out on me. "Ok, then I will deduct £5 a month from your wages."

"Excuse me, it wasn't my fault!" I said.

"Well it's not my fault either. Ask the chief of the military mission to pay you the difference!"

I did just that but the chief at the military mission said: "No, I don't have anything to do with wages."

"Who is it then?" I asked.

"I don't know."

Usually I was shy, but this time I didn't think it fair and I didn't leave it at that. Occasionally the chief would open his drawer and give me £5 and ask me: "Do you think you have deserved it?" I remember it so clearly, it was funny. I told the press attaché about the problem with my wages as I saw him crossing the road and he took out his wallet and pulled out £5. I said: "No, I'm not taking that!" I felt like a *shnorrer*. I wanted it to be official, not out of his wallet.

The military mission had a secret number code. The secretary who was there before me knew the code but I wasn't told it. The chief of the military mission was always careful to lock his cabinet before leaving the room. On one occasion he forgot and when he came back in and realised he hadn't locked it he told himself off! I could never think why it was so important – Yugoslavia wasn't like Russia, after all.

I was often sent to the West End as an interpreter for the Yugoslav soldiers and I always thought it funny when people would think we were Soviets or something because the soldiers wore red stars. Eventually I became a telephonist at the Yugoslav Embassy where I stayed for two years until 1948. The top floor of the Embassy was top secret. They didn't want an engineer to install their phone, they did it themselves.



One day, as I was about to go home after work, the head of a communist youth delegation from Yugoslavia stopped me at the door. He was very young (about 21 years old), very communist and very antisemitic. He said to me: “Comrade, sit down by the typewriter. I want to dictate a letter.”

“No, it’s home time,” I said.

“In the new Yugoslavia we believe in work!” he told me.

“In England we believe in not exploiting our workers!” I replied, and I left. I’m still proud of myself for saying that.

At that time I was getting more and more religious and I tried really hard to keep *Shabbos*. I arranged with a colleague for her to do my shift on *Shabbos* and in return I would do two shifts on Mondays – the whole day from morning to evening. I didn’t mind, I liked the job anyway. When she was away I got the office boy to do it and I paid him from my wages.

My mother was worried because she thought I was a bit of a stick in the mud. I didn’t have many friends. A few young men took me out, but I was not like my sister – she was very sociable even as a child. ■

““In England we believe in not exploiting our workers!” I replied, and I left. I’m still proud of myself for saying that.””

My mother really liked this photograph and so did my husband.



## We meet the Schwarzschilds and the Sterns

FROM 1945 people started going on holiday again. You couldn't go abroad, of course, so everyone went to the seaside and August was the busiest month. In 1947 my father booked a holiday through Thomas Cook. I had suggested Torquay because I knew there were some kosher hotels there. However, we were booked into a small non-Jewish hotel and you could only book from Saturday to Saturday. I had a bad feeling travelling on a Saturday, but my family weren't *frum* so we went. I can see it clearly, us sitting on the train. I can remember where we were sitting; there were non-Jews sitting on the other side and they started talking to my parents. "Where are you going?" "We are going to Torquay," my parents said. "And where are you staying?" They said the name of the hotel. "Oh, I know it! There is a very nice little church nearby. Don't miss it. The vicar's sermons are so interesting." I felt like I had a lump in my throat. I said: "We are Jewish, we don't go to church."

When we got to the hotel the next problem was the non-kosher food. I didn't want to eat practically anything and my father started buying tinned sardines for me to supplement my diet. For Friday night my parents booked us in to a Jewish hotel and there we met a couple from London, Mr & Mrs Ernst Schwarzschild, who were originally from Germany.

Lea Schwarzschild had four children – two sons by her first marriage (her husband died young), Erich and Günter Stern, and a son and daughter with Ernst, her second husband. She invited my mother to visit her when they were back in London. My mother told me she was a neé Hirsch from Halberstadt who owned the renowned Hirsch Kupfer company. They had copper mines and were as well known in Germany as Cadburys are in England. Apparently my father said to my mother: "And they have three sons. Who knows?" My mother replied: "Oh rubbish. I can imagine what snobs they must be like. They probably like to drive fast cars!"

This family invited me to their table to make *kiddush*. I told them about my job, how I loved it but I was not getting *Shabbos* off. Ernst Schwarzschild offered me a book-keeping job in his firm Metro Metal in the City but I didn't want it, firstly because it was working with figures, but also because he was very shrewd and he wouldn't have paid me as well. He was very friendly, a "man of the world" someone called him, but others called him a fox!

When Mrs Schwarzschild returned to London she told her children about us, and about me in particular. Apparently the eldest son, Erich, who was already in his 30s and not married because he hadn't yet made enough money, listened intently and (he later told me) fell in love just by hearing about me.

Mrs Schwarzschild invited me to her home for *Sukkos* and said: "My eldest son will walk you home the first night, he lives not far from where you live, and the second night my second son Günter will escort you home, he lives even nearer!" And that's what happened, but afterwards I didn't hear from either of them. ■

“When Mrs Schwarzschild returned to London she told her children about us, and about me in particular. Apparently the eldest son, Erich, who was already in his 30s and not married because he hadn't yet made enough money, listened intently and (he later told me) fell in love just by hearing about me.”



## I receive a proposal – of sorts!

THEN, about a year or so later, I saw Erich in my *shul*, and after *shul* I saw him on the other side of the street as we were leaving. And then he kept turning up, wherever I went he turned up. He was stalking me but I didn't realise it. Practically every day after work I saw him at the bus stop in Portman Street. He would sit on the bus with me and hand me the evening paper. I went home and told my mother. After a few times my mother said: "That is not a coincidence. I don't believe it." I said: "Yes Mother. He told me he has his supper at a restaurant in the West End and it just so happens ..." But she was convinced he was doing it deliberately, and she was right, as it turned out.

Mrs Schwarzschild phoned from time to time to speak to my mother and one day I answered the phone. I said: "I see your son Erich in my *shul*." She argued: "No, you can't. He doesn't go to your *shul*, he goes to the Federation in Finchley Road or to Munks in Golders Green." I said: "Well, he has been coming to my *shul*." He told me afterwards that he only went there to see me.

One day in *shul* he went up to my father and said: "I would like to talk to you privately." When my father told me I nearly fainted! So they had their private talk in my father's office and Erich said: "You will have noticed that I have been meeting your daughter frequently. I don't want this to continue without making clear that my intentions are serious." When my sister heard that she said: "How Victorian!" He also said: "I must tell you that I am nearly 35 and your daughter is not yet 23." Oh dear!

He left me a few days to think it over. Then, as I approached the bus stop one day, I saw him in the distance, walking briskly in the other direction away from the bus stop. I thought: "Does he intend me to run after him? No!" and I took the bus without him. He got offended and I didn't see him again for a few more days and so it went on. Well, we got engaged in April 1948 and married in July at the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute. We had *sheva brochos* but not a honeymoon, although we went away for a weekend in August to Eastbourne. He was a one-man business, he couldn't get away a lot. He tried different things. When we married he made mushroom soups, then he sold chocolates. In the end he imported plastic disposable gloves. We moved into the flat at Northways in Swiss Cottage. ■

My wedding day.



## The next generation

I WORKED part-time for my father in his office until I had my first baby, Solomon, in June 1950. Three years after that I had another son, Abraham. Three years after that in 1956 I had twins, a boy and a girl. They were premature and I lost the girl, Hannah, in the hospital. The boy is Jonathan. In 1962 I had my daughter, Sarah.

All my sons went to Menorah Jewish primary school in Golders Green, but Jonathan didn't get on there. They were very strict and he needed special attention. So they told us politely that we would have to find him another school. They would have accepted him in a local non-Jewish school, but the headmaster said he would have to attend the assembly with prayers and I said: "No way, sorry."

So then I took him to view another very strict Jewish school. The headmaster was very friendly and asked him lots of questions, but that didn't go down well and as we left the school Jonathan ran out of it as if it was on fire and refused to go back. So I took him across the road to the Zionist school, Berkley House. They were very good to him. He really liked it and he learnt a lot. They fostered his art, because he was exceptionally good at art, and then from there he went to JFS in Camden Town. The other boys went to Hasmonean Grammar School. Sarah went to North West London Jewish Day School and from there to Hasmonean Girls' School.

My eldest son, Solomon, went to Jews' College and eventually started work. However, in the mid-1970s, when he was living with a family in Stamford Hill, he was on his way home from *shul* one Saturday night when a white van stopped in the street and a youngster got out and asked him the time. He drew out a penknife and stabbed Solomon. It was an antisemitic attack.



With Solomon and baby Abraham.



His landlord called an ambulance which took him to the Prince of Wales Hospital in Tottenham. He phoned me the following morning. He said “It’s Mr Dünner. It’s about your son Solomon. He’s in hospital. It’s not serious. He got attacked last night.”

“WHAT? What happened? We’re coming.” My husband and I and Sarah, who was about 12 or so, went to the hospital. Solomon was sitting up in bed and I couldn’t see anything until he showed us the dressing. The knife had just missed his vital organs.

He wasn’t the only one attacked that day. One of the other victims, a young Hassidic boy, had memorised the number plate of the white van. There was a court case at the Old Bailey; there were several sessions and I went to one of them. There were two culprits, one of them made a nasty sign to me when he saw me. They got sent to Borstal because they were under age. They needed an interpreter for the Jews because they didn’t speak English, just Yiddish. My son was the only one who could speak English out of those who got attacked. The Counsel for the Defence said there was a discrepancy. “You are talking about a van and the others talk about a car.” But then it was pointed out that there is no difference between van and car in Yiddish. They called it “a *vite* car” instead of “a white van”.

After that Solomon decided he couldn’t stay in that place any more, and that’s when he went to Gateshead *Yeshiva*. Now he lives in America and has two children and four grandchildren.

My second son, Abraham, lives in Israel and has 11 children and 26 grandchildren. Jonathan lives in London and has five children and four grandchildren. Sarah lives in Manchester and has 10 children and 15 grandchildren. That’s if I haven’t made a mistake! ■



This was the first wedding among my grandchildren – Rochel Leah’s wedding in Jerusalem in 2000, shortly after my husband’s brain hemorrhage. The bride’s father is my son Abraham.





Holding my great-grandchild Shua. Manchester 2017.

## Later years

ERICH died in 2001 in Manchester. We used to always go up for *Sukkos* and *Pesach*. In 2000 we went up for *Sukkos*. We extended our stay, much to my husband's regret, because his health wasn't good and he wanted to get to the hospital in London for his treatment. We extended it because Sarah was expecting her ninth child and I told Erich that we couldn't abandon her now, we had to wait until she had the baby. She came home with her baby on a Friday and after *Shabbos* I started scraping her kitchen floor. My husband said: "It's late. What are you doing? Let's go to bed." I said: "It shouldn't be like that for *Pesach*" and he said: "*Pesach* is in half a year, come on."

We were going to go back to London on the Monday, but early Sunday morning in bed Erich said he was feeling very dizzy, like all the houses were spinning around. That's how it started. We phoned the doctor and when he came he said it was a virus which was going around and he prescribed something. What the doctor didn't know was that it was a stroke. It was a brain stem haemorrhage and he didn't send Erich to hospital until it got so bad that he had to be taken by ambulance and there I was told to be prepared for the worst. They told me that my husband was not going to live, and I said that I wouldn't accept that. The doctor said: "What do you mean?" I said: "I believe in miracles." And he said: "If your husband were to live it would indeed be a miracle."

Well, we had our miracle. He was in a coma for a week and then he came round. That was in October and he lived until the following May. After about six months in hospital he got discharged and sent to Heathlands, a care home in Manchester, and there he stayed for the rest of his life. I stayed in Manchester for eight months altogether and then, after the *shiva*, I returned to London. We were married almost 53 years. Even though he was so much older than I, we had a happy marriage. We had our worries, but who doesn't?

We didn't travel much because of my husband's business but we did go to Israel every few years, which I enjoyed very much. The last time I went was in March 2017 when I travelled with my daughter for my granddaughter's wedding.



I have always enjoyed writing letters to the AJR Journal. I've also had letters published in the Jewish Tribune, the Jewish Chronicle and the Daily Telegraph. I only write when I have something to say. I also like to do crossword puzzles and I have won the Jewish Tribune crossword competition five times, the most recent time being in November 2017. These days I am enjoying using my new computer thanks to SPF and AJR. I'm not an expert but these computers have been designed for people like me. I can't use it for financial transactions, which is probably a good thing. I use it for emails and I like using Google – looking up people, facts and random things. It's not always right though!

What gives me a strange feeling is when I see people I knew as babies in their prams and now I see them as elderly gentlemen, bald, bent, stooped, gentlemen – it's weird. How old must I seem then? It's so strange.

My message for young people today is ... never give up hope. My father was a great optimist up until the day he died. He was a great man.

I now have 28 grandchildren and 51 great-grandchildren. *Unfortunately we don't have space for photographs of everyone – so here is a random selection!* ■







My daughter Sarah and nine of her children at her son Dovid's wedding with her husband (5th from left). Her eldest son was not there for health reasons. New York, September 2017.





## 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 son in law always told me to write a book about my life, but I said I didn’t know how to. When he saw me he would ask: ‘What chapter are we on today?’”



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