



# My Story

Suzanne Lee



# My Story

## Suzanne Lee

In loving memory of Basil, 1932-2018



These are Suzanne'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)

Suzanne Lee was visited by AJR volunteer Jane Banham during 2017 to share her story.

Thanks also go to AJR volunteer Shelley Hyams for her editing skills.

Portrait photography by Debra Barnes.

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First published March 2018.

Designed by: Berenice Smith, MA

Printed in Great Britain by BookPrintingUK

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# My Story

## Suzanne Lee

“We weren't supposed to come to England... my aunts and uncles and cousins all went to America and that's where we were supposed to go. But then war was declared the day after we arrived so we were stuck here, we couldn't leave.

It's hard enough when you choose to live in another country. I think that's why people all crowd together in, what do you call them, ghettos? They need their culture, to hear their own language, eat their own food, to have something familiar in a strange land. But we didn't choose to come. We had no choice. And then to be treated the way we were. It has not been easy.”

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## Early years

MY NAME IS Suzanne Maria Lee. My maiden name was Straus. I was born on 7 May, 1927 in Frankfurt am Main. My mother was Elisabetha Wolf-Gardé, known as Liesel, and my father was Max Straus. My father was born in Frankfurt and my mother was from Bingen am Rhein. I had no brothers or sisters.

We were German Jews. German first, you see? Yes, we went to synagogue in Frankfurt, but it was more of a social thing than religious. And we never went to synagogue in England, they did it so differently here, it was not for us.

Earlier in the 1930s my father had been thinking we would go and live in Spain. He worked in Spain and Portugal as a salesman of optical equipment. He was fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, among several languages, and he had an apartment in Barcelona. But then the Spanish Civil War broke out and Franco came to power, so we couldn't go there.

We came to England by sheer chance. In August 1939 Papi fell ill while travelling and was taken off a boat in London. When we heard what had happened my mother and I left Germany to join him in England. We travelled by train, intending to stay with friends in Holland before going on to London, but when we arrived in Holland our friends came to the station and told us to stay on the train because borders were closing as war was so imminent. So my mother and I carried on the journey to England and arrived on 2 September. War was declared on 3 September and that was that! ■

“We came to England by sheer chance. In August 1939 Papi fell ill while travelling and was taken off a boat in London.”



‘Mein geburtsort’, the house where I was born.

I was so lucky to have my parents. Other refugee girls I met in England had come on the *Kindertransport* and never saw their parents again. It was terrible for them. They adapted, but can you imagine? Eventually, as you get older, you want to know where you came from, and they had no one to ask. But I would never have gone without my parents. I couldn't even stay more than three days at my grandmother's house without my mother and father. I went for a visit when I was aged seven or eight and I was supposed to stay for a week, but I was so homesick I came home early.

My mother's parents lived in Bingen, and my father's parents lived in Frankfurt. My mother had two sisters, Tante Maia, who lived in Leipzig and was mother of my cousins Eva and Hans, and Tante Trudel, who never married.

My grandmother had servants, but she didn't treat them as if they were inferior to her. They would do their chores and she would do hers and then they would sit together to have coffee. It's wrong to treat people as if they are beneath you just because of the job they do. That's what my experience during the war taught me. My aunts were very cultured academics - one had a doctorate, but when she got to England she had to work as a lady's maid. My mother worked as a cleaner. I don't know why some people think they are better than others; they are not better - you may be luckier but you're not better. ■



My birth was announced in the newspaper.



With my mother.





## Covert kindness from good people

WHEN I was a child in Germany everyone had to be in the Nazi Party, except the Jews of course. There was no other option and no chance of having a job if you didn't join, so I don't blame people who were in the Party. But you didn't have to be 'active', if you see what I mean. Our neighbour was in the Nazi Party, so because we were Jews he couldn't be seen to talk to us during the day. But he would tell us: 'If you need anything, just leave a little note underneath the mat outside my door and I will get it for you.' And it was interesting that when the Gestapo came to arrest my father, Papi happened to have gone out of town the day before. I often wondered if our neighbour had warned him, told him to be away that day.

In England, people haven't been in this kind of situation, where you mustn't be seen talking to your neighbour or you will get arrested. But it was like that in Germany. So you had to be careful. You couldn't be seen talking, so you found other ways; you learnt to talk while hardly moving your lips. Shops weren't allowed to serve us because we were Jews, so they would send someone round with a delivery after dark when they wouldn't be seen. I believe that was because we were German Jews, German first. We were part of our local community and our neighbours wanted to help us.

So we had a life in Germany, even under the Nazis. I remember one time going with my mother to a restaurant that was forbidden to Jews. But my mother had blonde hair and we didn't look Jewish - it was before Jews had to wear the yellow star. So we just walked into the restaurant and ordered a meal. But would you believe, my mother ordered fish and she got a bone stuck in her throat and started coughing and choking! I was so scared that we would be discovered as Jews, but luckily we weren't. ■

“Our neighbour was in the Nazi Party, so because we were Jews he couldn't be seen to talk to us during the day.”



As a young child in Frankfurt.

## Kristallnacht and terror

ONE TIME that was so terrifying, which has left me with a memory I cannot forget, was *Kristallnacht*, 9 November 1938, when the Nazis rampaged through cities in Germany breaking the windows of Jewish businesses and homes. That night is still so vivid in my mind – the noise, the fear. Our apartment was full of friends and family, sheltering together, not knowing what would happen to us. Now I am 90 I have forgotten so many things – things I wish I could remember – but *Kristallnacht* I wish I could forget, yet the memory will not leave me.

There are other shocking memories. My uncle Felix, Tante Maia's husband, was a doctor. He was arrested and, knowing he would be taken to a death camp, he gave himself a lethal injection of insulin so that he would be dead before he got to the camp. Also, a neighbour was arrested and his wife was so distraught that she killed herself. But the husband was released after a few weeks, and came back to find his wife was dead. How dreadful!

When we left Germany, we had to leave my grandparents behind, and I believe they died in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. I admit I did not like my grandfather much. I had overheard him criticising me for being vain, for thinking too much of myself, so I didn't want to say goodbye when we left. My mother made me go back and say it. ■

“My uncle Felix, Tante Maia's husband, was a doctor. He was arrested and, knowing he would be taken to a death camp, he gave himself a lethal injection of insulin so that he would be dead before he got to the camp.”

My parents circa 1925.



## Life in England as an enemy alien

YOU couldn't just come to England as a refugee, you had to be sponsored by someone who would employ you. I don't remember who sponsored us, but when we got here we were classed as 'enemy aliens'. I don't remember our arrival in England very well, probably because I was only 12 and I couldn't understand English. One of the first things I learnt to say in English was 'coppers please', when we needed pennies for the meter.

We first stayed in Willesden Green in a really ghastly room. We had lived in Frankfurt, where I was born. We lived in an apartment – you see, you didn't have houses like here, everyone lived in apartments. It was elegant, nice. We had a beautiful drawing room, all done in very good taste. When we came to England we lived all three together in one room but you wouldn't believe what my mother did with that room! She made it so elegant, you can't imagine.

My father was interned on the Isle of Man. He taught Spanish to the other internees and met many interesting people, including the musicians of the Amadeus Quartet. After some time he was released and given the choice of either joining the army or working in a factory. Working in a factory meant that he could come to London, and he chose the factory so he could be with us.

I had been sent to a refugee boarding school in Tunbridge Wells called The Beacon. I wasn't happy there. At first we had German teachers who were also refugees and were understanding and caring. One was a very good cook and she took over the hostel and made very nice meals. Like all people who have to leave their countries, you feel more at home with your own food, what you know.

Another, Alice Apt, was such an inspiring teacher - she really nurtured my love for literature, drama and the arts. I thought she was wonderful! However, when I met up with her in London a few years later, it was such a disappointment. I hoped we would talk about the theatre and books, but all she talked about was the weather and the food!



With my mother just before leaving Germany.

Once the law about enemy aliens changed, the German teachers were sent away and we had awful English women looking after us. They didn't care about us. Many of them had favourites, five or six girls out of the whole school, and those girls would get good treatment while the rest of us would be ignored or treated harshly.

Every month, the 'Lady of the Manor', who lived in the big house near the school, would invite a group of girls from our school for afternoon tea on a Sunday, and it would be down to the teachers to choose who would go. I didn't get chosen very often! When I did go, it wasn't very enjoyable. You had to be on your best behaviour. We were told: 'don't embarrass yourself' and 'don't eat too quickly'. The food wasn't great either, but our hostess behaved as if she was bestowing great charity.

You know, people always think they are doing something marvellous because they are helping somebody, but if you really want to help, you should say: 'I'd like to help you. Is there anything that I have got that you would like or is there anything that I could do for you?' not just give them what you think they should have. ■

“Once the law about enemy aliens changed, the German teachers were sent away and we had awful English women looking after us. They didn't care about us. Many of them had favourites, five or six girls out of the whole school, and those girls would get good treatment while the rest of us would be ignored or treated harshly.”



My mother, standing, with her sisters.

## I leave school and go to work

WHEN I got back to London after leaving the school in Tunbridge Wells, it was so wonderful to be with my parents again. I was so lucky to have them. I still miss them and think about them every day. I could talk to them about anything. And we would laugh! My mother was an excellent mimic. I would tell her what had happened in my day and she would shriek and exclaim: 'Ach! What kind of people do you know!' I think it's awful when people say they can't bear their parents or don't talk to their parents or that their parents were always coming home drunk. It must be terrible for them, but it's also wrong that they tell strangers like me about it. My father always used to say: 'If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything.'

If ever anyone says to me: 'Can I be honest with you?' I feel very uncomfortable. It's never going to be something nice that they want to be 'honest' about, is it? And I've had people say some awful things to me through my life. I don't know why, people seem to feel they can say what they want to me, however hurtful. Again, I think of my father, who also used to say: 'If someone is rude to you, be polite. If they continue to be rude, be doubly polite.' He was so wise... One of my biggest regrets is that my children never really knew my parents. They were so young when my parents died. They would have learnt so much from them.

“My mother was an excellent mimic. I would tell her what had happened in my day and she would shriek and exclaim: 'Ach! What kind of people do you know!'”



With my parents in London.

In London in the 1940s I met many American GIs who were stationed there. They were much more fun to go out with than English men. They loved coming to my parents' home. They were away from their country and they were homesick, so they loved having some home comforts. They had a lot of stuff, food that we couldn't get. They would bring some when they visited us and we were very grateful for it. They weren't rowdy, getting drunk and so on, they were just young guys. And you knew that when they went away anything could happen to them, so you lived in the moment and had a good time with them. You didn't make promises and neither did they: we all knew they could be dead the next week.

There were some English people who took advantage of our refugee status. One evening during the war my cousin Eva and I went out and we asked a policeman for directions because we had lost our way. He sort of walked between us and he started groping me! I said to my cousin in German: 'He's put his hand on my breast!' and she said to me: 'He's done the same thing to me.' Can you imagine! There was nothing we could do: no one would take our word against his. We were foreigners, we didn't count.

I got a very good job in Mayfair, as a manicurist and beautician. They sent me to hotels like Claridges, which was very interesting and it was fun. But, you know, none of the clients ever spoke to me when I was doing their nails. And my boss's husband made a pass at me and there was nothing I could do, because if I'd said: 'I'm going to tell your wife what you've just done' he would have denied it, and I would have lost my job. Do people still take advantage like that? It's really bad, isn't it, when you can't do anything about it, or you risk losing your job. ■

“In London in the 1940s I met many American GIs who were stationed there. They were much more fun to go out with than English men.”



## I become a British citizen

AFTER THE WAR I got my British naturalisation. I was very excited and I remember saying to someone: 'I'm British!' And they replied: 'No you're not. You can put rabbits in the oven but they don't come out buns!' They were really nasty about it. For me, it was: 'Phew, I'm British and I don't have to go back to Germany. I'm safe now.' But that comment left a nasty taste in my mouth. It reminded me that the British never really welcomed us, always treated us as foreigners, made us feel we should be grateful even when they treated us badly.

When people met me, they would say: 'You're not English, are you?' Not in an open way, to find out more about me and where I came from, but with their faces all pinched and screwed up, like to not be English was something disgusting. I always used to say to West Indian people, I was so relieved when they arrived in the UK, because life got much easier for us. When we first came here there were hardly any black people so our obvious foreignness made us targets for racists. These days there is such a mix of nationalities in London that someone like me just blends in. It wasn't like that in the 1940s. ■

“I was very excited and I remember saying to someone: 'I'm British!' And they replied: 'No you're not. You can put rabbits in the oven but they don't come out buns!'”

## I meet Basil

I WORKED as a medical records clerk and then a receptionist in the X-Ray Department at the Middlesex Hospital in Central London. I always tried to be kind to the patients because I knew they would be anxious about coming to hospital. I couldn't count the number of times in a day someone would come to my desk and ask: 'Is this the X-Ray Department?' when there was a great big sign saying just that on the wall! But I knew they were anxious, so I would reply: 'Yes! Well done! You've found us!' and try to make them feel less worried.

I met my husband, Basil Lee, at a boat race party in Oakley Street in Chelsea in 1957. The guests were all medical people. It was a ghastly party! A very boring lady was sitting next to me when this young man came over and asked me to dance and I was so relieved! I always said that if that woman had been interesting, I would never have danced with Basil, and then what? When Basil asked if he could see me again I replied: 'If I were you, I would forget about me.' And the second time we met, I told him: 'You don't know anything about me.'

For a start, I was already married. I had married my first husband when I was just 20, but I realised very early on, even as the wedding photographs were being taken, that I had made a mistake, he was not the right man for me. He had a violent temper and he treated me badly. Before long, we started leading very separate lives. He had other women and I had other boyfriends, but we stayed married. You couldn't be a divorced woman then. One time I left him and went home to my parents, but my mother sent me back. She said: 'What will you do as a divorced woman?' But by the time I met Basil my first husband and I were separated. It didn't put Basil off, nor the fact that I was five years older than him and he was still a medical student.

Basil's parents, who were very orthodox, insisted that I acquired a Jewish divorce – I had already done the civil divorce, but I had to re-approach my ex-husband to ask for a *Get*, a Jewish divorce. That was difficult, getting back in touch with him, but I did it because it was important to my mother-in-law. She was already not so keen on me: from her point of view, I was older than Basil, I had been married before and also I was a foreigner. Her father, my husband's grandfather, had come from Russia, but she had been born in England and was very English. She was not my biggest fan, and the feeling was mutual. ■

With Basil during his National Service



Our wedding day.



With my parents on my wedding day.



My parents in later life.



## Back to Germany as an army wife

WE MARRIED in 1958. In 1960 Basil qualified as a doctor and started National Service in Germany as a medical officer and so I went too. You see, we were British by that time, so it wasn't like I was a German returning, I was an army wife. But it was lovely to be able to speak German again. I feel it is very important to keep your mother tongue. Perhaps that is why I have never lost my German accent. I have always read in German as well as English, and have had friends to speak German with. I'm still in touch with my best friend from Frankfurt, Marianne, who lives in New York. We haven't seen each other for probably 40 years, but we speak on the phone every few months.

My daughter, Alexandra, was born in 1961 in Rinteln, a small town in Lower Saxony, coincidentally the same town where one of my grandmothers had been born. How ironic was that? My son, Philip, was born in Münster in 1963.

The English Army wives didn't talk to me or include me in their activities because I was German. They never invited me, but I didn't mind. I have always been an outsider, I am used to it. Basil used to be collected by his driver in the morning and then I was free to do as I pleased. I went for walks in the woods and I had local acquaintances because I could speak German. They were very nice to me, the local shopkeepers. There were wonderful woods and I would walk for hours, because Basil was away all day. I knew the markets and I knew the people there and they knew me because I spoke German. The English kept to themselves.

I met a German woman who was also out walking with her baby in a pram and we became friends. That connection lasted for maybe 40 years. We would speak on the phone regularly and they visited us in England and we visited them in Düsseldorf. But in all those years we only ever called each other 'Frau Schäfer' and 'Frau Lee' – that German formality. We never used the informal term 'Du', we always addressed each other formally as 'Sie'. I like that. I don't like the over-familiarity of young British people now, it doesn't feel respectful. If someone I've never met before calls me 'Suzanne' before I invite them to, I feel very uncomfortable. ■

Basil and I with the children in 1965.



## We return to England and Basil sets up in practice

WE CAME back from Germany in 1963, just after Philip was born, and my husband became a GP. My father-in-law was a GP in Southend. His partner had another partnership in London where there was a vacancy, so Basil took that job, working in Earls Court. That is where he worked all his life. We lived in Putney, a few miles away, and we still live in the same house we first moved into in 1963. Basil was always a GP, but he had experience of obstetrics, so he also worked in hospitals delivering babies. I worked for him one day a week, helping with the antenatal clinic. That was my only job as such – I never worked again after I was married, so I was lucky to be able to spend time with my children when they were small. ■

“That was my only job as such – I never worked again after I was married, so I was lucky to be able to spend time with my children when they were small.”

With Alexandra and baby Philip in May 1963.



## Arts, crafts and hobbies

ONCE MY CHILDREN were at school, I spent my days doing art and craft classes. I started as a potter, then I also did sculpture, in stone and wood, stained glass, glass-blowing, painting, macramé for a while, and calligraphy. You see, what you can make, what you can do with your hands, no one can take away from you. You don't need a sewing machine, a potter's wheel, you don't need anything, just your hands.

My work was quite unusual for a suburban art school, because I've always created abstract rather than figurative and representational work. That's what excites me. I did it because I enjoyed it. I never liked the art establishment, so I never had an exhibition. You do things because you want to do them. One of the first things people ask me is: 'Do you sell? Do you show?' That's all they're interested in, as if making money means the artwork is good. But it doesn't mean a thing to me, that's not what art should be about. ■

“My work was quite unusual for a suburban art school, because I've always created abstract rather than figurative and representational work. That's what excites me. I did it because I enjoyed it. I never liked the art establishment, so I never had an exhibition.”





I'm not sure where my creativity came from. My grandmother knitted and wrote poetry, so maybe it was from her. But you see, you didn't buy things back then, you baked, you made jam. I didn't know you could buy jam until I came to England. In Germany it didn't matter what kind of family you came from, whether you were poor or rich, you didn't buy jam, you made your own but nowadays, I suppose it is different in Germany, too.

I've always loved literature and the theatre, too. I went to the theatre all my life, as a very young woman, during my first marriage, and with Basil, and on my own, up until just two or three years ago when I stopped being able to go out. When the children were at school, I would go to lunchtime theatre. In our loft, we have many, many theatre programmes that I kept. They go right back to the 1940s, when I was in my teens and early twenties. I have one for *A Streetcar Named Desire* starring Vivien Leigh – on stage, before the film was made!

“ I didn't know you could buy jam until I came to England. In Germany it didn't matter what kind of family you came from, whether you were poor or rich, you didn't buy jam, you made your own but nowadays, I suppose it is different in Germany, too. ”



I have always loved culture, always going to art galleries, always the theatre. It was a big shared love between Basil and me. Sometimes I would go twice in one day – at lunchtime and in the evening! I couldn't get enough.

Now that I don't go out, though, I don't miss it. We've seen so many wonderful productions, what's the point of seeing an inferior version of the same thing? There doesn't seem to be much that's interesting now. In recent years, we often left shows during the interval – they were so awful, we couldn't face sitting through the second half! And shows today are so long... no one seems able to tell a director when they are being self-indulgent. Who needs to be in a theatre for three hours?

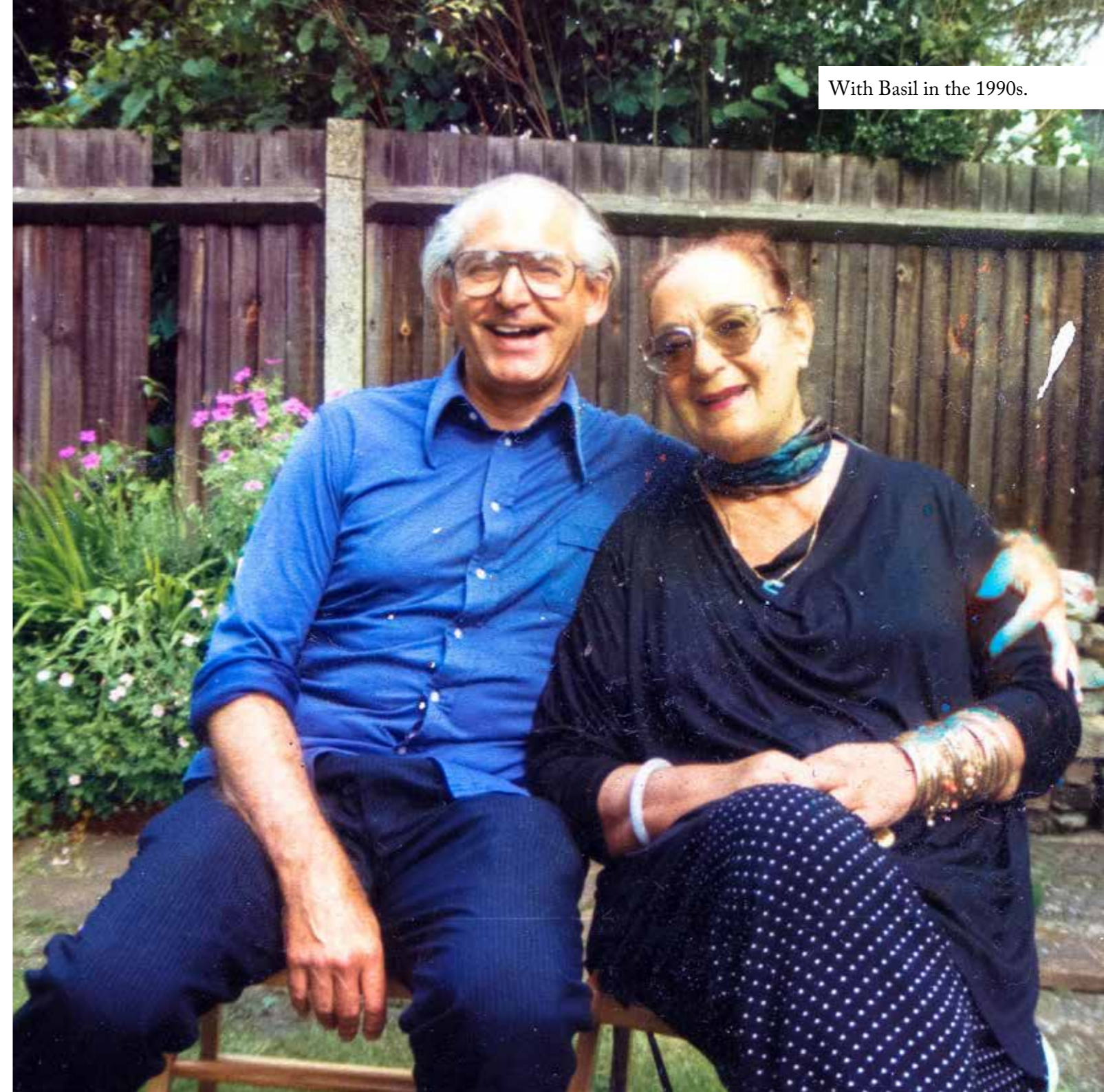
Apart from the plays, I loved meeting and chatting to other theatregoers. When I was younger, I would often go and queue for returns for shows we hadn't booked for. You would spend hours waiting for the box office to open and chat to the others in the queue while you waited. I would always talk to the people sitting next to us before the show started and in the interval, and we still have friends who we met that way. And, of course, I would talk to the people working at the theatre too, the ushers and the box office clerks – that could be very useful, because sometimes my friend who worked at the National Theatre box office would save tickets for me and I didn't have to queue!

“I've always loved literature and the theatre, too. I went to the theatre all my life, as a very young woman, during my first marriage, and with Basil, and on my own, up until just two or three years ago when I stopped being able to go out.”



These days, now I cannot go out of the house at all, I miss those chance encounters. Now, I only see people who have to come here. Before, you could be sitting on a bench and start a conversation with the person who happened to be sitting next to you. If you found you had something in common, great. If not, if you realised they were boring and had nothing to say, you could just look at your watch and say: 'Gosh, is that the time? I must be going! It was lovely to meet you,' and get away. ■

With Basil in the 1990s.



“I have always loved culture, always going to art galleries, always the theatre. It was a big shared love between Basil and me. Sometimes I would go twice in one day – at lunchtime and in the evening! I couldn't get enough.”

## Life today

TODAY I have three grandchildren and Basil and I still live in the same house in Putney we bought in 1963. I have my books and magazines in my room, and they fill any gap I might feel because I no longer leave the house. And the television! There are so many marvellous programmes that show you things you could never see if you were simply a member of the audience. The camera gets so close! And, of course, if you don't like what you're watching, you can just turn the TV off, or change the channel – much easier than dragging through traffic and crowds to get to a theatre and then find you don't like the show.

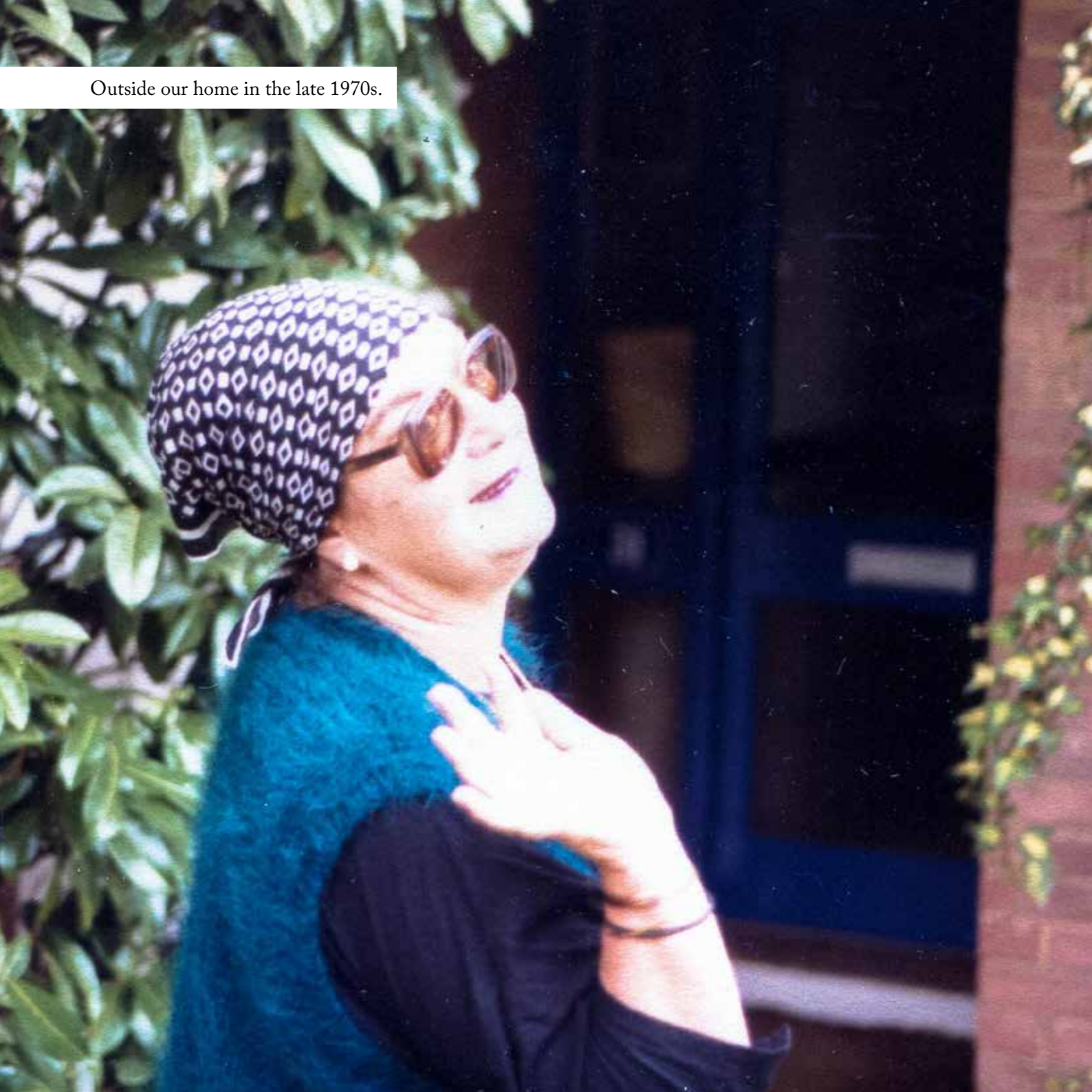
If I have one lesson to give to younger people it is: do not accumulate possessions. Keep things simple, just a few things that you really need. I think this comes from that time living in one room – we had to be very neat and tidy, everything just so, or it would have been impossible. Of course, if you look around my home now, you will see I have accumulated so much! I don't really know how it happened. We would go travelling, see something we had never seen before and would never see again and think: 'We must have that!' Now I am surrounded by so much mess, so many things I don't even remember getting... ■

“If I have one lesson to give to younger people it is: do not accumulate possessions. Keep things simple, just a few things that you really need. I think this comes from that time living in one room – we had to be very neat and tidy, everything just so, or it would have been impossible.”

With Basil in the 1990s.







Outside our home in the late 1970s.



## 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.



With my mother.



“We weren’t supposed to come to England... my aunts and uncles and cousins all went to America and that’s where we were supposed to go. But then war was declared the day after we arrived so we were stuck here, we couldn’t leave.

It’s hard enough when you choose to live in another country. I think that’s why people all crowd together in, what do you call them, ghettos? They need their culture, to hear their own language, eat their own food, to have something familiar in a strange land. But we didn’t choose to come. We had no choice. And then to be treated the way we were. It has not been easy.”

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