My Story

Irene Brauner

AJR The Association of Jewish Refugees

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These are Irene's words. This is her story

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

If we don't bear witness to what took place, those we loved die twice over.

Contents

My family

I WAS TWO years old when the Germans advanced on Poland at the beginning of September, 1939. My name is Irene Brauner and I am the only offspring of Hela and Willy Hauser. I was born Irena Hauser in October 1937 in Krakow, Poland, where we lived in a fancy first-floor apartment in the good part of town, if you could call it that. I was told there was a pot plant on the balcony of the flat and when I was a toddler I threw it off, narrowly missing a baby in a pram in the street below!

My maternal great-grandmother's name was Irena. She lived in a small town in Poland called Rzeszow, which was where my mother was born. Leon Koch was my maternal grandfather, married to Karolina. It was not a happy marriage as they were forced to wed when Leon's first wife, Karolina's sister, died in childbirth. It was then the custom among Jews that if a woman died leaving offspring, it was the duty of the next sister to marry the widower.

My grandparents ended up having three children: Adolph (always known as Dolek), Joseph (Joe) and Helena (Hela, my mother). Dolek was the eldest, the son of Karolina's sister. As a child, Dolek was quiet and well behaved, as was Hela. Joe, however, was often in trouble both at home and in school - his mother would use a carpet beater to discipline him. Dolek and Joe were unable to study for their respective professions in Poland because of the numerus clausus against Jews. Dolek obtained his doctorate in Padua, Italy, specialising in dermatology. Joe went to study in Strasbourg, France.

Grandfather Leon was a professional soldier and had been a captain in the army. When part of Poland regained independence after being annexed from Austria, the Poles didn't accept Jews in officer ranks.

“Leon Koch was my maternal grandfather, married to Karolina. It was not a happy marriage as they were forced to wed when Leon's first wife, Karolina's sister, died in childbirth.”

My parents' wedding. Hotel Bristol in Vienna, 27 November, 1936

URZĄD METRYKALNY ŻYDOWSKI
W KRAKOWIE
L. 910/49

Kraków, dnia 17 czerwca 1949 r.

WYCIĄG Z KSIĘGI URODZIN

Urzędu Metrykalnego Izraelickiego w Krakowie z roku 1937 str. 296 L. p. 887

Irena Amita Hauser syn/córka Wolfa
Hausera i Heleny z d. Koch

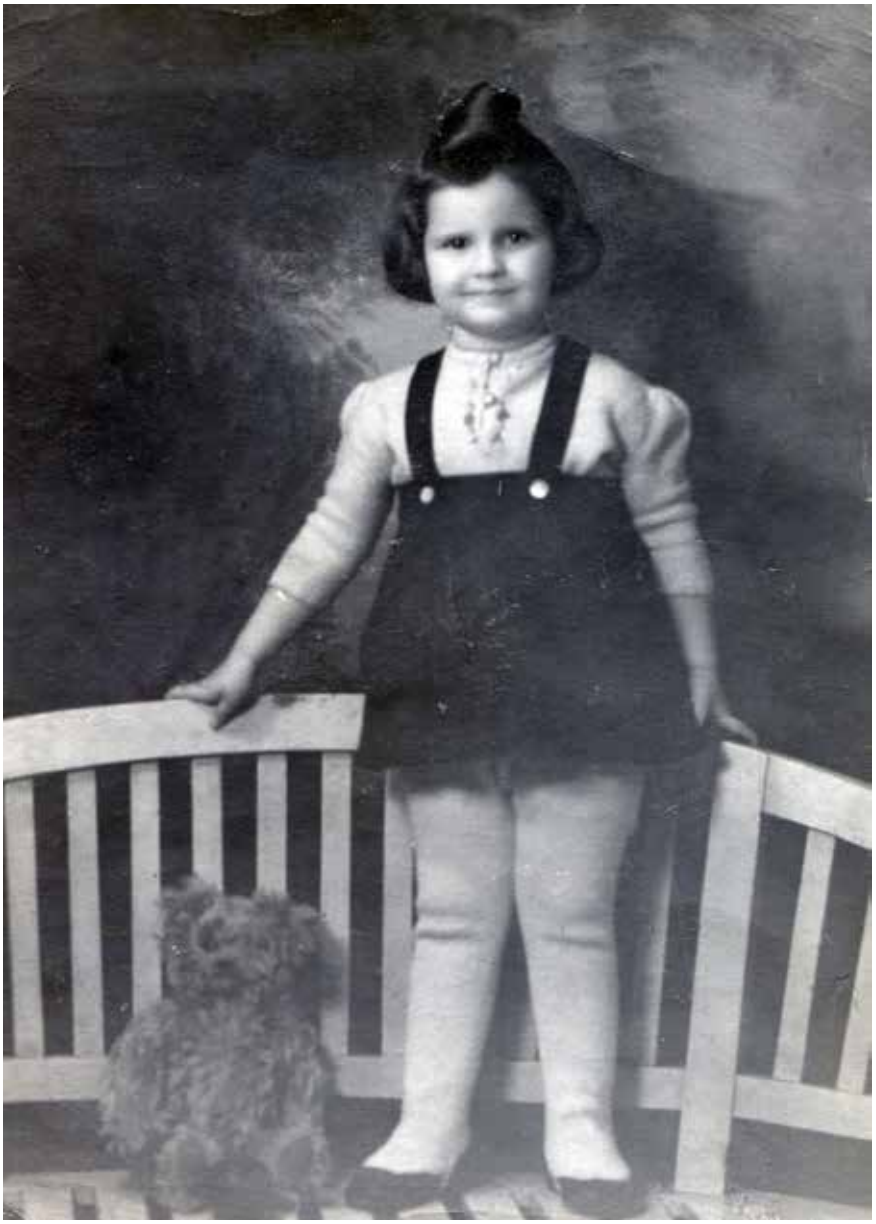
urodził(a) się dnia 25 października 1937 (jedenastego) w Krakowie.

Prowadzący Metryki Żydowskie

My birth certificate

However, they made an exception in Leon's case, as he was considered 'a good sort'. The family were not well off, but as a military officer Leon was assigned a batman who did a bit of housework, albeit with bad grace. As a boy Leon had learned tailoring from his father, whose métier it was. This sewing skill was passed on to his daughter, my mother. Leon spent the Second World War in Romania. I never asked how or why. He was, of course, too old by then for the army.

Mother was born in 1913. Before she met my father, Mother had one romance. He was a Catholic boy in her town, Rzeszow. When my parents got together (I'm not sure if they were already engaged or just 'keeping company'), they went to the cinema. As explained, it was a small town and Mother's ex managed to follow them. When the film ended, he confronted the couple with a pistol. Mother, with great presence of mind, simply told him not to be so silly, whereupon he turned and walked away.



Me as a young child

With my father and a children's entertainer in Planty, Krakow

Der Jude H a u s e r Wolf
hat Erlaubnis die Strassen in
Przemysl - Stadtzu passieren.-
Gültigkeitsdauer bis 15.8.42
Reg. Nr. .....
Przemysl, den 14. Juli 1942

Gültigkeitsdauer verlängert bis
zum 1. Oktober 1942.
Przemysl, den 15.8.42.

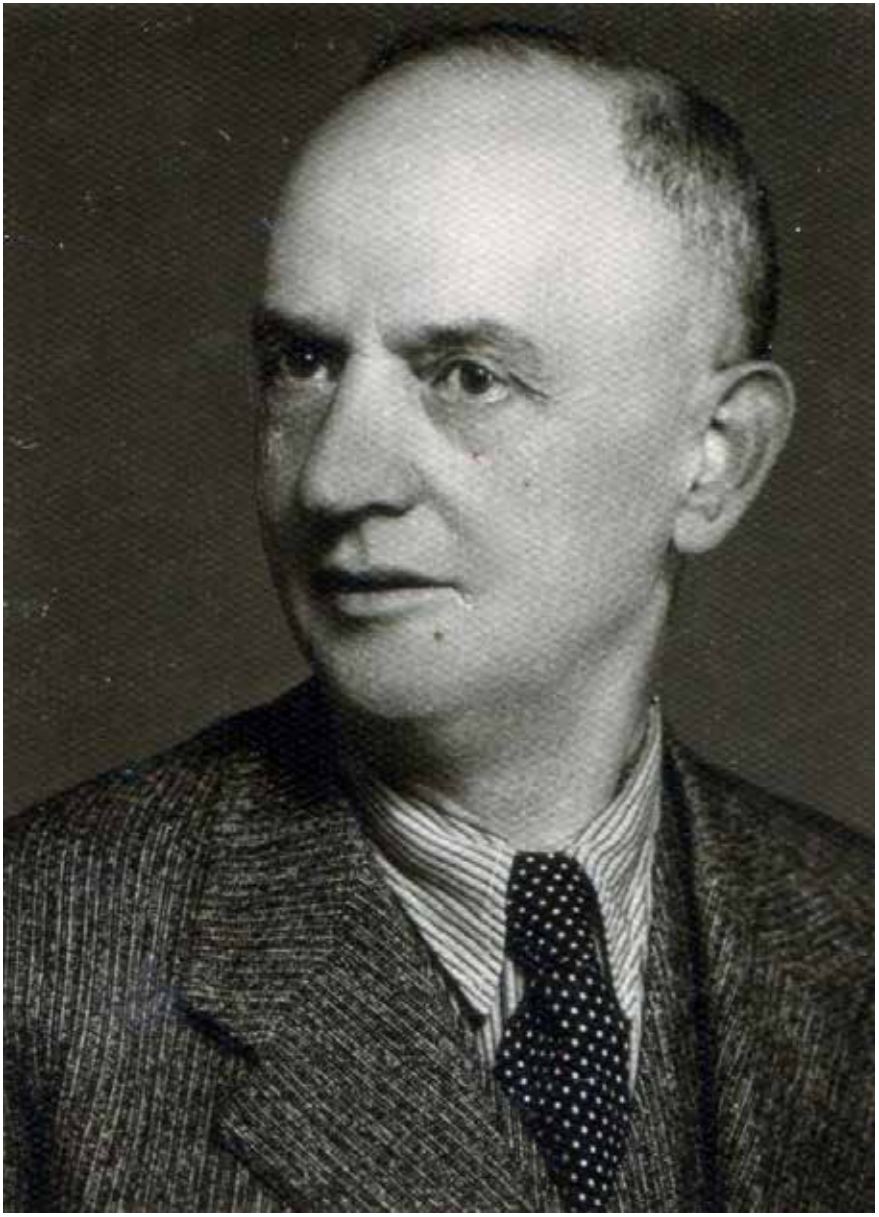
GENERALGOUVERNEMENT
Distrikt Krakau
Der Kreishauptmann
in Przemysl
ARBEITSAMT REICHSHOF
NEBENSTELLE PRZEMYSL

ARBEITS-AUSWEIS
für jüdische Angestellte.

Der Jude H a u s e r Wolf
aus Przemysl Strasse Jagiellonen lo
geboren am 12.11.1912 in Nieko
ist beim Arbeitsamt Reichshof
Nebenstelle Przemysl
als Bürokraft
beschäftigt und darf von anderen Dienstellen nicht in Anspruch genommen werden. Er darf zur Ausübung seiner Tätigkeit den jüdischen Wohnbezirk verlassen.

Father's work permit

My great-uncle, Edzui Rubinbfeld (Karolina's brother), was a doctor and his wife, Ediza, was a bacteriologist.During the war, when still in Poland, Edziu and his family were saved by a German officer. He had approached Edziu with a plea to save his young son who was seriously ill. "If you save my son, I will save you and your family." This, as well as several other incidents in my story, may sound far-fetched, but they are all true. Edziu was able to make the boy well and the German, true to his word, hid the family in his own house, and thus they survived the war. After the war, the Rubinfelds lived in Paris for a while, before emigrating to Israel. Edzia, who was several years younger than her husband, worked in the *Kupot Cholim*, Israel's equivalent of the National Health Service. Their only daughter, Irena (the Hebrew version is Yaira) is still there, now living in Tel Aviv. She became a gynaecologist, married Danny, a urologist and they have one daughter, Yaeli.



Grandfather Leon

Grandfather's military ID

Mother's work permit

Father was born in November 1912. Though named Wolf, he was always known as Willy, a name which in Germany is as common as James in England. The letter 'W' is pronounced as a 'V' in both Poland and Germany, thus Father was actually called Villy! He was the managing director of a timber yard. He was an absolutely lovely, gentle man and I adored him. I remember him playing a game with me where I would go into a corner of the room and wouldn't come out until he said, "Come out little mouse." Then I'd come out and get a hug.

My paternal grandfather, Frederick Hauser, was quite a wealthy man and had property both in Poland and Germany. He also owned a large villa in Merano, north Italy, surrounded by its own orchards. The villa was confiscated during Mussolini's reign, but I did manage to get a glimpse of it on one of my trips to Italy in the 50s. My paternal grandmother's maiden name was Betty Haftel. Sadly, I know little about that side of the family and am not in touch with any relations, although I know that Betty had a brother called Meier Haftel whose daughter, Martha Schlamme, became quite a well-known folk singer in New York, post-war. ■

My maternal grandmother Karolina

Uncle Joe in Poland, pre-1939

Uncle Joe in Palestine, 1940

Germany invades Poland

IN 1939, WHEN 'the clouds were gathering', my father's family left for the US, but he chose to remain in Poland, where he and Mother had a large circle of friends, both Catholic and Jewish.

As I said, I was two years old when the Germans advanced on Poland at the beginning of September 1939. Grandmother Karolina (Gran) often came to stay from Rzeszow and she was with us at this time. Mother, Father, Gran and I ended up in the Krakow ghetto. Many Jews fled east and sought refuge in the ghetto of Przemysl, a town on the border between the Soviet and the German-occupied zones of Poland. For reasons I am not sure about, but probably fearing for his life, my father was one of the Jews who fled. However, he was eventually sent off to the Crimea as forced labour.

I don't remember much about being in the ghetto. I do know that we had roll call every morning. I was cold and scared; scared because I could tell Mother was scared and, of course, I took my cue from her. She was very careful that I had my rag doll, which she had made, with me at all times. Although I didn't know it at the time, Mother had sewn her jewellery into the doll.

While in the ghetto, Mother was approached by a German officer who asked what she was doing there. When she replied that she lived there, he said that she didn't look Jewish and advised her to get out while she could. "*Für die Juden kommt nichts gutes!*" 'Nothing but trouble is due for the Jews!' Mother decided to apply for an exit visa from the ghetto. One could get these from time to time, if the excuse was good enough. She contacted one of Uncle Joe's Catholic girlfriends, gave her some of her jewels and pleaded for her to get false papers for my mother, my gran and me, whilst keeping some money for herself. This she managed to do and one day, around May 1940, the three of us left the ghetto on a pass and simply never returned.

"I don't remember much about being in the ghetto. I do know that we had roll call every morning; I was cold and scared; scared because I could tell Mother was scared and, of course, I took my cue from her."

At first, we stayed in one room with the girlfriend who had helped us. Mother and Gran looked for work. Gran found work cleaning and washing dishes in a restaurant but Mother had a problem. There weren't many people looking for housekeepers or seamstresses in wartime. She decided to look in offices – perhaps someone would want a dogsbody. She had no luck until, walking into a large office block, she came face to face with a German officer. Making an about-turn, she was almost out of the door, when he called her back. He asked what she wanted and Mother mumbled an apology, explaining that she was looking for work. "What sort of work are you looking for?" he asked. "Anything," replied Mother. "Can you cook?" he asked. Well, the good news was that here was the perfect job for my mother, the bad news being that she would be working for a German officer. But, of course, she had no choice. He gave her the name and address of his 'wife' and told her to report for work the next morning. His mistress, for that is what she was, the wife being back in Germany with the children, was pregnant. She came to treat Mother like a friend and chat to her constantly. I, meanwhile, was put into a nursery, run by nuns. They used to hit us children over the head with their fists. That is all I remember from my time there.

A couple of incidents during this period are worth mentioning, since they are rather telling. I don't recall either of them and only know what Mother told me. When we left the ghetto in possession of our false papers, Mother told me that we were trying to pass for Catholics. She urged me to be aware of how dangerous it would be if we were found out to be Jewish. I learnt a number of prayers and how to cross myself, and I wore a crucifix around my neck. This might sound over the top, but the Poles were, and are, a very religious people. When coming across a nun, little girls would curtsey and say, "Blessed be Jesus Christ," and the nun would reply, "For ever and ever, amen." I would be surprised if this custom didn't continue still. Although I felt slightly guilty about it, I secretly enjoyed going to church, which we did regularly. I loved the smell of incense and the festivals of Easter and Christmas are pretty irresistible to a little girl.

But I have wandered off from my tale. The first incident took place one day when I was out with Joe's girlfriend, in whose room we were staying. She was holding my hand as we walked along, when a man she knew stopped to chat to her. He glanced at me and asked, "Who is this? She looks like a little Jewess." Typical Pole! At this remark, I dropped her hand and ran. It took a while for her to catch up with me.

Great-Uncle Edziu with his wife and daughter, 1947

The second incident concerned my gran. It was a Saturday morning and the three of us went to the market. The market square in Krakow is the largest in Europe. Farmers would come into town to sell their produce. It was taken for granted that you'd never accept the initial price quoted for an item. However, when Gran began to haggle over the price of an egg she was trying to buy for me, the market trader shouted at her, "You're haggling like a Jewess!" and called to a nearby uniformed German. At this, Mother grabbed me and ran off in one direction, removing her red scarf as she ran, while Gran ran off in the other direction. Luckily, the square was very crowded with shoppers and we were able to get away. The Poles, not surprisingly, hated the occupying Germans, but they hated the Jews even more.

Back to Mother's job, where one day, her employer asked if, after cooking dinner for a party of several people, Mother would stay to serve and wash up afterwards. Naturally she agreed. When the time arrived and Mother went in to serve the meal, who should be one of the guests but a Pole whom she knew. Mother tried to keep calm and avoid eye contact with the man. He, though making no comment, watched her.

Next morning, with some trepidation, Mother went in to work. The German officer and his mistress were at the breakfast table, he behind his newspaper, as usual. She said, "Oh Hela, you know Mr. So-and-So, who was here for dinner last night? He said that he knows you and that you are a Jewess." Mother blushed in spite of herself. "What nonsense! Do I look Jewish?" she asked, knowing that with her blue eyes, blond hair and straight Aryan nose, that she didn't. "Well, I told him, I don't care if you are Jewish or Chinese. You're a great help to me and I'm very fond of you," said her employer. From the German officer – no reaction.

Sometime after, Mother went in to work to find her employer reading a letter with tears running down her face. "Whatever is the matter?" Mother asked. "This is from my parents back home. Their street was bombed by the allies and razed to the ground. Their house was the only one left standing. I'm convinced that God spared them because they were always good to the Jews." Once again, difficult to believe, but true.

Mother was given a silk German flag by her employer. "Here, Hela, make Irena something out of this," she was told. "But I can't possibly use the German flag for that," Mother said. "Nonsense!" was the reply. "Just cut out the Swastika."

Hedwig Kretchmar

As soon as she got this job, Mother went looking for somewhere to live. Once more, I don't know how, but she ended up in a flat owned by a Polish friend, Piotr Witkowski. He, in common with many Poles, had been sent off on forced labour. His sister, Hedwig Kretchmar, occupied a flat on the floor above, and Mother paid the rent to her. Hedwig was a *Volksdeutcher* – the name given to Poles living on the border between Poland and Germany. It was a way of saying German by adoption. Also, she had married a German, hence the name. She and Mother got on very well.

I don't know how long this state of affairs, for want of a better expression, continued but after a period, around mid-1943, Hedwig called Mother up to her flat. She had some bad news. Her brother, who like my father had been sent off to the Crimea as forced labour, had got in touch to say that my father had been executed by the Gestapo. Trying to cope with this awful news, Mother's one concern was for me. What if the Gestapo now came looking for us? For the first time since leaving the ghetto, she was at a loss. Hedwig tried to calm her. "Don't worry. I'll think of some way to help you," she told Mother.

Hedwig found a solution. She would arrange for Mother, Gran and me to go to Germany, to relatives of hers. Many people from the occupied countries were sent there on forced labour, replacing their young men who were in the army. In no time, the three of us were on a train to Germany. ■

We find safety – in Germany!

IN SEPTEMBER 1943, Mother and I went to a farm in Göda, a little village in Eastern Germany. Now, to some extent, the pressure was off. We were just *Polaks*, sent there as labourers. The work was physically very hard indeed for Mother, an urbanite having to deal with farm work. She did everything on the farm - cleaned the horses and mucked out the pigs. All the same, it was a tremendous relief for her to feel relatively safe and she had never shied away from hard work. Gran, meanwhile, was in a restaurant in Bautzen, a small town seven kilometres away, once more cleaning and washing dishes. She wasn't old, she was robust and quite able to work.

The farm was on a little hill: a courtyard with a stone trough, buildings on three sides and a small stream running down. There was the *Frau*, large and fat, with a small, thin husband – a creep with wandering hands, whom mother had to keep constantly at bay, without offending him. They had a son in the army and a daughter living and working in Frankfurt who visited from time to time. There were cows, pigs, geese, chickens, pigeons, two oxen and two horses, a bay and a grey. The geese were horrible! They used to chase me and nip my legs. Sometimes I was asked to help look for eggs because the hens would lay them in strange places, so I would find them and bring them back to the barn.

I never felt scared at all: it felt like a perfectly normal ordinary time to me and it came naturally to speak in German. Apart from Mother and me, there was a young Polish woman and a couple from Yugoslavia with two girls, smaller than me, who I would play with. There was a little stream running near to the farm and one day I was pulling the girls on a sledge nearby. It suddenly veered off and went straight towards the stream and they both fell in. It was very scary and I felt terrible as it was winter and very cold. Luckily, they were fine as the water was only about four inches deep.

These 'foreigners' were genuine forced labour workers. We were all treated well and fed adequately. The Yugoslav had been a baker in his previous life and, once a week, he was allowed to bake for us. Thus, every seven days I was given a freshly baked roll, with a little butter and a smidgeon of jam. I can still smell that roll and almost taste it. Indeed, I was lucky because now and again I was given some stolen goodies. Gran had one day off every month. She would walk over to us, from Bautzen, with a couple of oranges secreted in her bloomers. As well, Mother sometimes managed to swipe an egg and would make a *kogel mogel* for me - an egg yolk, beaten with a bit of sugar. Yummy!

During our stay at the farm, the foreign workers got some unexpected additional help. A French soldier and a young Russian were sent over from a nearby prisoner-of-war camp. The Frenchman appeared very old to me. He had a perpetual dew-drop threatening to fall from his nose, though it never did. The Russian was dark, with black hair and eyes and the Gestapo decided that he was a Jew. They carted him off, beat him up and dumped him back in the yard, some hours later. Mother was allowed to do her best to patch him up. The POWs were given lunch while working on the farm. Once a week, a beer soup with croutons was on the menu. Not surprisingly, I hated it, but was too hungry to go without. When the Frenchman was there, however, I would give him my soup and he gave me his croutons. 'Fair exchange is no robbery'.

Mother and I slept in a tiny room above the cow shed. I remember at night the noise of the cows banging against the troughs would scare me; I didn't know what it was and I was too scared to ask. There was a small round metal heater, the kind you see in the barracks of POW films. One time, when Gran was with us, we were all sleeping when I leaned over from my little bed, half-awake, and vomited. This woke Mother, but when she tried to get up she found it difficult to move; her limbs felt like lead. Realising what had happened, she dragged herself out of bed, lifted me out of mine and out of the room, and then went back to help Gran up and out. The flue of the little stove had become blocked and was spewing carbon monoxide. It was a lucky escape, one of several during those years, a fact which has contributed to my becoming a great fatalist. ■

"I remember at night the noise of the cows banging against the troughs would scare me."

With my mother and the other children on the farm in Germany

The Russians are coming!

I WAS SIX years old and had spent two years on the farm. One day I was in my favourite hiding place, the hay loft above the cow shed, when I saw a black car approaching up the hill. All cars were black then, of course. I felt sure that I knew why it was coming. God had answered one of my prayers. Ever since Mother had told me that Father had been killed, I had been praying for one of two things. Either, that there had been some mistake and that Daddy was alive after all, or that the war should end now. I asked for one or other prayer to be answered, because I did not want to be greedy. I knew that in war-time there would be very many prayers offered up to God, and He could not be expected to answer them all.

There had been whispers among the workers that the war was coming to an end. We had heard distant 'thunder', which seemed to be coming closer. Perhaps the black car was coming to tell us the war was over. In fact, it had come from the town to tell us that the Russians were advancing and to get the hell out. When the car left, the farm owners told the foreign workers to let all the animals out of their enclosures, then took the two horses and departed, leaving us to our own devices. The Yugoslav baker harnessed the two oxen to a covered wagon, loaded it with supplies of food and water, put his two daughters and me inside, and with the adults on foot, he led the wagon out of the farmyard and down the hill. The group of adults were the Yugoslav couple, the young Polish woman, Mother, and Gran who joined us on our exodus soon after the black car left.

They had no destination in mind. The aim was to get away from the bombing. On our way, we passed farm after deserted farm. The German farmers had dropped everything and made a run for it. At some stage in our wanderings, we were caught in an allied bombing raid. We quickly stopped and entered an empty farmhouse. It didn't offer much protection, but it was better than a wagon. A lone plane, flying low, decided to jettison its one remaining bomb. It fell just outside the farmhouse. As there had been heavy rain recently, the ground was soft and very muddy. The bomb slid along and came to a standstill, without exploding. We hightailed it out of there!

The next incident involved another bombing raid. This time, we found ourselves outside a large and very fancy mansion behind a big cobbled courtyard. Whenever there was a momentary hiatus in the bombing, we would dash across the courtyard, in twos and threes, and dive into the cellars. The minute

Mother and I on the train back from Germany to Poland. My dress is hanging up to dry behind us

we were all safely inside, a bomb fell and exploded the low wall along which we had been crouching.

Some days later the bombing subsided. Still travelling aimlessly, we came across a platoon of Polish soldiers. They were making their way home, looting and driving herds of cattle along with them. They advised us all to join them on their journey, since the Russian soldiers, according to them, were raping everyone in sight. We joined the platoon and were glad to have protection. The Polish soldiers were all very friendly, but of course, they didn't know we were Jews. Mother had taught me the Catholic prayers and I wore a cross, so naturally the soldiers thought we were Catholic. It was a long and laborious trek which took four months even though we weren't that far from the Polish border. I had a great time! The captain, who didn't seem to have much to do, let me hang around. He had picked up a German Shepherd dog, which he found tied up somewhere, and I had found a wonderful friend. At some stage, the whole platoon, plus the cattle, were loaded onto a train. Being meant for goods or cattle, the train had no compartments. One day, when we were stationary, I was playing a tug-of-war with Prince, the dog, when I fell out of the wagon, onto the rails. Though not knocked unconscious, I was a bit stunned and a train engine was making its way towards me. If Prince had not been barking frantically, I might not have been found in time. ■

Back to Poland

ON OUR RETURN to Poland, the three of us left the soldiers and made our way to Krakow. Mother found us a small flat with two rooms, a tiny kitchen and bathroom. Small houses, such as we have in England, do not exist on the Continent. People live in flats with balconies, usually found in large blocks, built around a central courtyard. We were advised by a Jewish friend to keep our false papers since the Poles were attacking the few remaining Jews in pogroms. I went to school. The other children called me Nazi because I only spoke German and didn't remember any Polish. A boy who sat next to me knew German, so he helped me. I went to that school for one year. Gran would drop me off and pick me up at the end of the day.

Sometimes, in the evenings, Mother would go out with friends, leaving me with Gran. On those nights, I never slept till she got back, always scared that something had happened to her. Post-war anxiety, I suspect.

The soldiers had given Mother plenty of clothes and dress material from their looted possessions, which was a godsend when we got back to Krakow, as selling it kept the three of us going until she was able to find work. Firstly Mother asked in offices, but had no luck. When mentioning this to her Jewish friend, (the one who had warned her about keeping our false papers), this lady said that she might be able to get her some work in her office. This she did, and Mother ended up an office dogsbody. Badly paid, but enough to keep us afloat, together with Gran's money from the restaurant where she had found work. ■

“Sometimes, in the evenings, Mother would go out with friends, leaving me with Gran. On those nights, I never slept till she got back, always scared that something had happened to her. Post-war anxiety, I suspect.”

With my mother in Krawkow

On the road again – bound for Italy

WITH THE WAR ended, Mother set about trying to find out if her brothers Dolek and Joe were still alive. Through the Red Cross, she discovered that they had indeed survived the war and were in Italy, with the section of the Polish army under British command (the Eighth Army). She was soon in correspondence with them, and they were able to get us out of Poland. They paid a great deal of money to some man who was smuggling Jews into Palestine. He agreed to let us join the party and be 'dropped off' in Italy. This man came to our flat and told us to be ready the next evening. We were allowed to only take a small suitcase. As none of the three of us had more than a few items of clothing, this was not a problem. We had very little, an extra dress for me and some underclothes. I do remember taking with me the rag doll that my mother had made.

We left the next night, with around 20 others who were going to Palestine. When we came to a forest, on the Polish-Czech border, I was very scared. I knew that the woods were full of robbers. As it happened, there was something much scarier to worry about. The border guards began shooting at us. Luckily, it was dark and very densely wooded. We managed to get safely across. The journey, via Innsbruck and Salzburg, was fairly uneventful, and we finally arrived in Italy. It seemed to me that we were in the Garden of Eden. From the dull greyness of post-war Poland, to a land full of sunshine, 'a beaker full of the warm South'. All the food we wanted: bananas, ice-cream! I couldn't remember having ever tasted them before.

"From the dull greyness of post-war Poland, to a land full of sunshine, 'a beaker full of the warm South'. All the food we wanted: bananas, ice-cream! I couldn't remember having ever tasted them before."

Uncle Joe

Uncle Dolek

Uncle Dolek, Italy

Best of all, Mother no longer had to cope on her own; no longer having to support us on her meagre earnings. We no longer had to pretend we were Catholics. We were no longer limited to dull post-war food. There's a saying in Polish: 'the food was truly awful but, at least, there was very little of it.' Where did the army get all those chickens from? I ate as I had never eaten before. The result was that I ended up with frequent tummy ache. But it was worth it!

We remained in Italy for four months, in Ancona on the Adriatic coast to begin with and then we moved to another small place but unfortunately I don't remember its name. I had a glorious time. In the evenings they showed films in open air cinemas. They were the latest Hollywood productions, provided for the US armed forces, passed on to the British, who then passed them on to the Poles. I watched, entranced. Needless to say, I understood not a word, however, the slapstick in the black and white comedies needed no translation, while the musicals and swashbucklers had little dialogue.

Mother had a whole new wardrobe made for her. The cost to my uncles, was minimal. I, too, was not forgotten, though I had little interest in clothes at that age.

At the end of the four months, the British and Polish armies, under the command of General Anders, plus the 'hangers-on', were loaded onto trains, bound for England. The Jews in the Polish army were allowed to bring along any relatives who had survived the Holocaust – hence the 'hangers-on'. ■

"Mother had a whole new wardrobe made for her. The cost to my uncles, was minimal. I, too, was not forgotten, though I had little interest in clothes at that age."

We arrive in foggy England

ENGLAND WAS A SHOCK after sunny Italy. Foggy, cold, grey. Moreover, the food was no better that it had been in Poland. There was no sign of fresh food, chicken or anything else. I remember powdered soup and powdered egg (disgusting!), corned beef, equally horrid, and nothing much else.

The Polish army was dispersed to camps all over England. Mother, Gran and I followed Uncle Joe to a camp in Tilshead, a small village in Wiltshire. We slept in a Nissen hut, on iron army beds with thin khaki blankets in the very cold winter of 1945-6. At bedtime, when the blankets were pulled back, a carpet of earwigs would scatter. My great phobia of insects might have sprung from that time. The latrines also were pretty awful, surrounded by thick mud.

I was put into the local school although I don't remember much about it. The teacher, a young woman with a cold that never seemed to leave her, used to keep her hankie up the sleeve of her jumper - a habit I picked up from her, sad to relate. Not knowing one word of English, I spent my time there making miniature sofas and armchairs out of matchboxes.

Eventually, Mother, Gran and I came to London. We found a room in Orsett Terrace, behind Paddington station. The landlady of the house kept fourteen cats - the smell was quite potent. There were a couple of sisters across the landing from us who made flowers, the artificial ones that people pinned onto their dresses. There were many single women left after the war. At Christmas, everybody dressed up but I had nothing to wear, so Mother made me a dress, a beige coloured thing made of sackcloth. It looked presentable thanks to a borrowed corsage from the sisters.

“The Polish army was dispersed to camps all over England. Mother, Gran and I followed Uncle Joe to a camp in Tilshead, a small village in Wiltshire. We slept in a Nissen hut, on iron army beds with thin khaki blankets in the very cold winter of 1945-6.”

With Mother and Great-Uncle Edziu post-war

Once back in England we identified as being Jewish, but we were not in any way observant. Our Judaism was always an ethnic belief rather than a religious one. I was sent to school straight away. Solomon Wolfson was a Jewish School but they had non-Jewish children attending too. Gran once again would come to collect me. I was embarrassed that my grandma picked me up, in case the children thought she was my mum. I was put next to a Polish boy, who spoke perfect English and Polish and he helped me out because I spoke only German and Polish. I remember that we had little bottles of milk at break time. If you wanted another bottle you were told to stand on your chair. I followed everyone else who stood on chairs and then asked why we were doing so? After being told that it was for another bottle of milk, I said, "But I don't want any more milk!"

One day I was slapped by the teacher. I came out of school at the end of the day with a red cheek and when my grandma asked what had happened, I told her that the teacher slapped me because she thought I was talking. I wasn't, it was the person sitting next to me. Gran rushed in to see the headmaster and accosted him in Yiddish, complaining bitterly about what had happened. Of course he called in the teacher and asked her to explain. He must have given her a telling off as the next day in class when the teacher boxed the ears of another pupil for talking, she asked me, "Are you going to complain to your grandmother about this too?" It made me feel terribly embarrassed.

I stayed at the school until my 11 plus. Taking that exam was very strange for me. I had only recently learned the language. One of the questions was to describe a trolleybus and I didn't know a trolleybus from a fire engine - I'd never seen one. Another question was to select the odd one out and to explain why. The choices were a cat, a dog and a radio. I answered 'a radio' as it's an object. Surprisingly that was wrong: the correct answer was a cat as you needed a license for a dog and a radio. Not something I would have known.

I went to the North West London Jewish Day School in Willesden. My new school friends and I used to play acting games during break, re-enacting scenes from films. I remember once being cast as a boy because I had wellies on and all the other girls had shoes. I didn't mind.

Mother found work in the garment business which she could do at home. She was given pieces of knitting to be sewn together, to make up jumpers and cardigans, and also metal buttons, around which she would wind plastic string, like so much black spaghetti. When I think back over my dramatic

Uncle Joe and Gran

childhood, I am full of admiration for my brave mother. A young woman from a small town, looked after first by her parents, then by a loving husband, who was thrown into the horrors of the Holocaust and was able to survive and save herself, her little daughter and her middle-aged mother, through sheer guts.

My uncles Dolek and Joe had also come to England with the Polish army and when they were demobbed they began to work in their respective medical professions; Dolek as a GP, and Joe as a dentist. They had little in common, apart from their passion for Bridge and their good nature. Dolek was quiet and sober, Joe was boisterous.

Life became much easier. Mother, Gran and I moved into two rooms and a kitchen in Maida Vale, then into the first floor of a small house in Cricklewood. I shared a bedroom with my grandma and Mother had her own bedroom. There was no indoor toilet; the outside toilet was at the back of the garden and I was petrified of going there at night because of the creepy crawlies. I preferred to pee in a pot! ■

“When I think back over my dramatic childhood, I am full of admiration for my brave mother. A young woman from a small town, looked after first by her parents, then by a loving husband, who was thrown into the horrors of the Holocaust and was able to survive and save herself, her little daughter and her middle-aged mother, through sheer guts.”

Mother re-marries

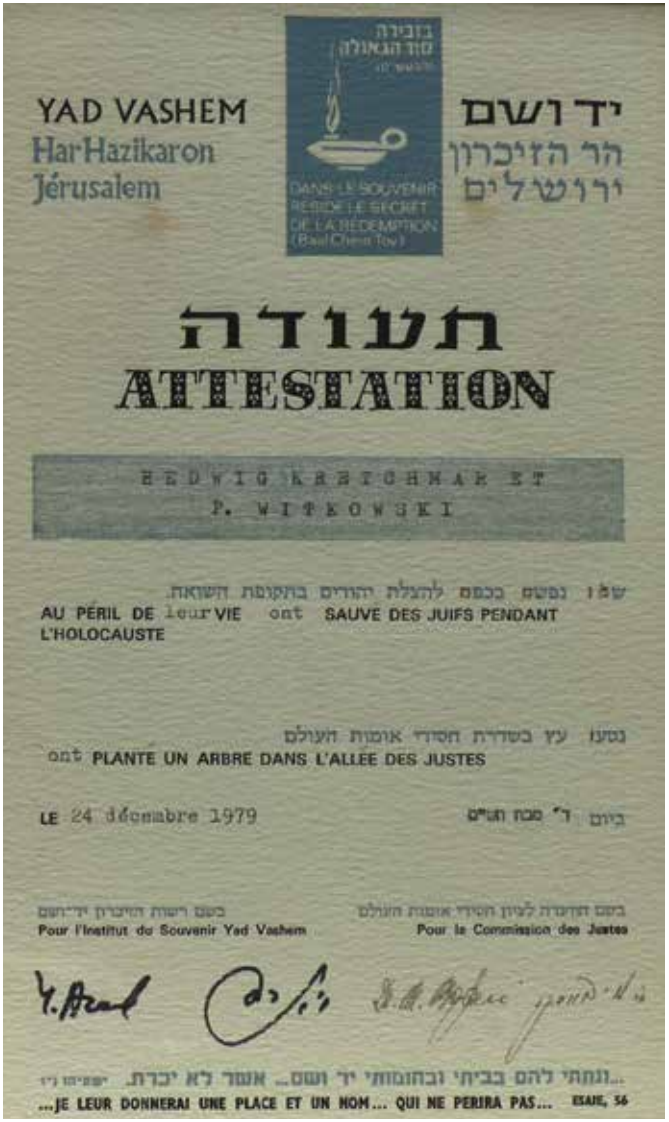
MOTHER CONSIDERED her future. Without a passport, or indeed any official documents, she decided to take four years off her age. She was very pretty but there wouldn't be many men willing to take on a widow with an eight-year-old daughter: she felt she had a better chance of remarrying if she were younger. She changed her year of birth to 1917.

My mother met my stepfather, Simon Frisner, when she was in her early thirties. He was older than her, maybe by six or seven years. He was a colleague of my Uncle Joe, who had introduced them. He had arrived in the UK from Poland in the same manner as my uncles, via the Polish Army. They were dentists in the army together and were demobbed at the same time. Expats all socialized together. There was a Polish Jewish Ex-Servicemen's Association and they all regularly met up for teas and dinners.

When Simon asked my mother to marry him and she decided to accept him, she asked me if I would mind. I appreciated her asking me and, of course, I said it was fine by me. I remember the wedding because I went around finishing everyone's drinks. I was around nine years old and I got somewhat squiffy. It was a civil wedding so Mother wasn't wearing a traditional wedding dress. I think she wore a black coat and hat. I don't remember any other details of the day.

Unfortunately, I never took to Simon, not initially and not in later life. He was pleasant enough outwardly, but I think because my mother and I were so close he was a bit jealous of our relationship. He was controlling but he genuinely loved Mother and was kind to her. In 1979 Simon registered Hedwig Krechmar and her brother Piotr Witkowski as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, for having helped Mother, Gran and me during the war.

After the wedding we moved from the house in Cricklewood into a grand and spacious corner house on Shoot Up Hill. There was a dining room which led into the large kitchen, complete with built-in cupboards (unheard of in those days but the house had previously belonged to an architect). From the kitchen, one door led to a bathroom and a toilet, and another door led into an interior paved courtyard. There was also a very large conservatory, which was bright but not sunny. It had wooden shelves all


YAD VASHEM
Har Hazikaron
Jérusalem

יד ושם
הר הזיכרון
ירושלים

DANS LE SOUVENIR RESIDE LE SECRET DE LA REDEMPTION (Baal Chem Tov)

תעודה
ATTESTATION

HEDWIG KRECHMAR ET
P. WITKOWSKI

שלו נפשם בכפם להצלת יהודים בתקופת השואה.
AU PÉRIL DE leur VIE ont SAUVÉ DES JUIFS PENDANT L'HOLOCAUSTE

נטעו עץ בשדרת חסידי אומות העולם
ont PLANTÉ UN ARBRE DANS L'ALLÉE DES JUSTES

LE 24 décembre 1979 ביום ד' טבת תשם

בשם רשות היזכרון ידושם
Pour l'Institut du Souvenir Yad Vashem

בשם הוועדה לעצון חסידי אומות העולם
Pour la Commission des Justes

...ונתתי להם בביתי ובחומותי יד ושם... אשר לא יכרת. ישעיהו נ"ו
...JE LEUR DONNERAI UNE PLACE ET UN NOM... QUI NE PERIRA PAS... ESAIE, 56

Yad Vashem attestation in memory of Hedwig Krechmar and her brother Piotr Witkowski

around and black and white stone tiles on the floor. There was a large garden with lovely fruit trees: a well-established pear tree, along with apple and plum trees.

My stepfather had his dental practice in the house and Uncle Dolek had his GP surgery there too. When you entered the house there was the waiting room and the two surgeries, and doors leading into the private part of the house, our home. These doors were kept locked so patients wouldn't wander in. They had not been locked initially, but this changed after Simon's dark room under the stairs (which he used to develop the dental photographs) was broken into. My mother gave up her job as a seamstress and acted as a dental nurse, receptionist and secretary.

I had my own bedroom for the first time. It was a little room between the main bedroom and the second bedroom - I think it was supposed to be a dressing room. I was scared to sleep on my own, even though I was 12 years old. I remember one time I was sitting on the bed, reading. Mother and Simon were in their bedroom and the doors were open. Suddenly a spider crawled out from under my bed and I let out a loud shriek! I was scolded for scaring them.

Once there was a fire in the house across the road. Shoot Up Hill was an extremely busy road and there was always traffic noise, but it didn't bother me: I was used to it and hardly noticed. One night I was woken up by a different sound, it was the crackling of the fire. It's funny, the noise of the traffic was louder, yet the crackling woke me because it was a different kind of sound.

Mother and Simon were secular and did not attend synagogue. I didn't have a *bat chayil* but I think that I must have attended some religious study classes on a Sunday. We didn't do too many family activities at the weekend because my stepfather was often working. I spent time with school friends. I was something of a tomboy really - I used to play football with the boys in the street. I was given special dispensation for being a girl! I was also a very good sprinter. I was hopeless at things like netball, but I liked to run.

My passion was going to the cinema. In the 1950s, Simon managed to get my grandfather Leon to England and he lived with us until his death. He often took me to the cinema, usually to see cowboy films on a Saturday morning. I loved going to the cinema with him. We preferred adventure films, but often there would be romances as well. There were two film magazines called Picturegoer and

My maternal grandfather Leon in Shoot-up Hill

With Juno

Picture Show. I would cut out pictures of movie stars and put them on the wall. I especially liked Tyrone Power; he was so good looking. I wasn't allowed to put the pictures up on the walls of my bedroom. I used to go up to the attic, which was a large space and put the pictures up there. I still have some of them.

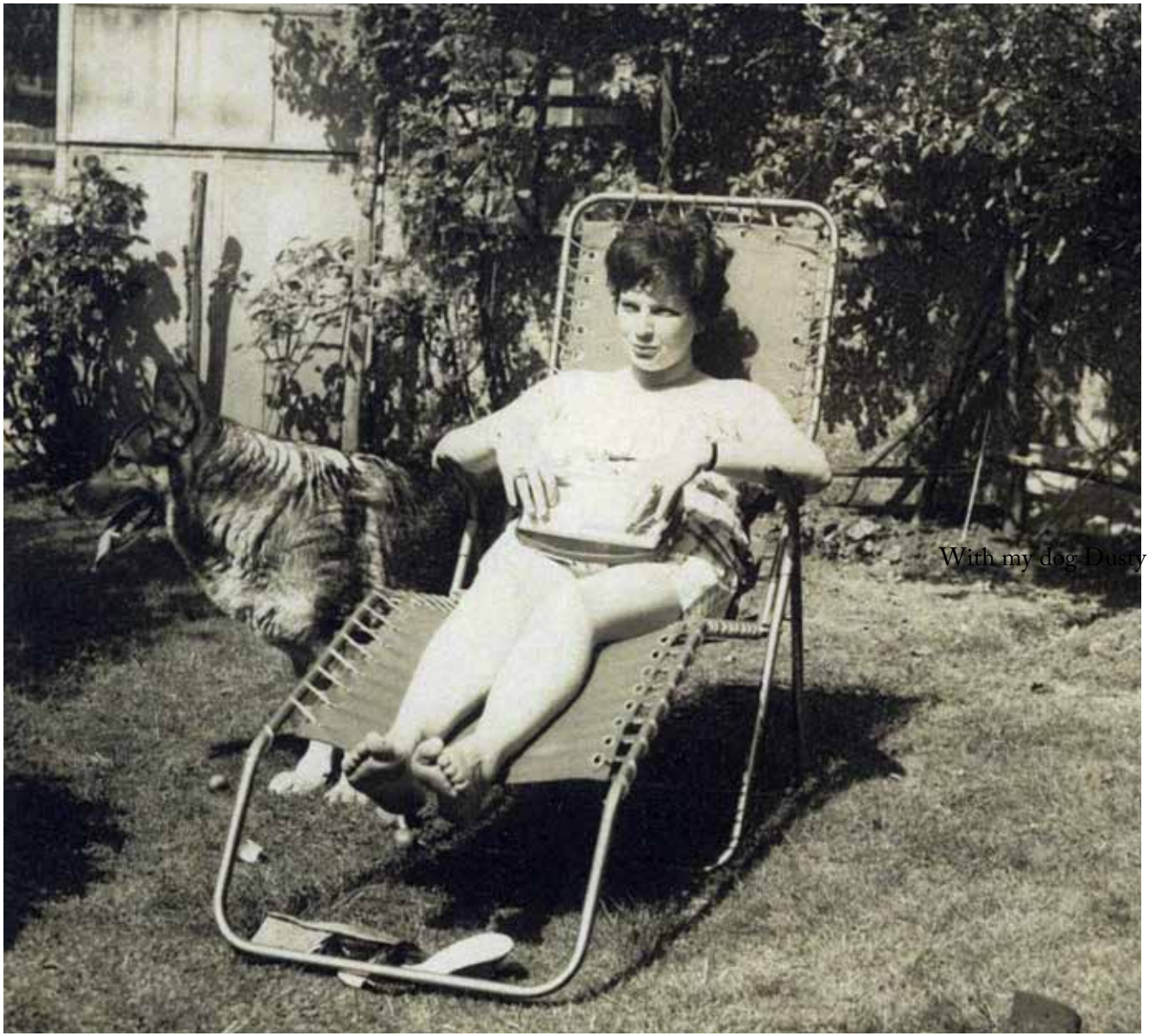
Grandpa seemed very old when he came to live with us, but I was only twelve at the time and when you're that age all grown-ups look old, don't they? I spoke to him in Polish, I don't think he spoke any English. There were a number of Jewish people in the area, a Polish Jewish community and they would speak Polish and Yiddish to each other.

Gran lived with my Uncle Joe, who never married. Gran was Leon's wife but my grandparents never spoke to each other once they were both in England. I never bothered to find out why. I was just into my teens then and too wrapped up in myself.

When we lived at Shoot Up Hill we had dogs. I've always loved dogs. Juno was a beautiful Alsatian bitch. We also had Dusty, he was my mother's dog. He loved going on buses and whenever someone left the door ajar he dashed out of the house. The local police got to know him; they used to ring up Simon and say, "Your dog's here, come and get him."

When I was twelve I changed schools. Our school in Willesden closed down; the boys were sent to Hasmonean Boys and the girls to the girl's school in Hendon. I loved my old school and did not care for Hasmonean. There were Hebrew lessons and almost everybody went to synagogue on a Saturday, apart from me.

I failed some of my O Levels - maths was the subject that I found most difficult. Even so, I stayed on at school to take A Levels, but when I was in my final A Level year, Mother was confined to bed for four months with lumbago and sciatica and I was forced to abandon my studies to look after her and cook for the family. Eventually, I became a freelance interpreter and that is the work I did till I married. ■



With my dog Dusty

(Left to right) Me with Aunt Edzia and Mother, 1961

I meet and marry Jacob

I MET JACOB at a party in Israel when I was 21 and he was around 28. I was in Israel with Mother and Simon and the party was for the son of a friend of theirs. I remember that Jacob and I just sat in the corner and chatted for hours. He was working as an engineer at the MOD, having already completed his army service. I was in Israel for around two months and we met again at other parties and the cinema.

It was a whirlwind romance and we became engaged in Israel after only a couple of months. After Jacob proposed I told him that I wanted him to come to England for a year because I was keen to live there. I said that if he hated it then I would return to Israel with him. But, fortunately, he didn't hate it and we were married in London on 26 January, 1962.

Jacob already spoke good English, as did everybody that I met in Israel. His first job in England was with a Polish man who was a friend of Simon. He had an engineering workshop behind Kilburn Station and Jacob used to come home smelling of oil. After that he worked for 15 years for the large English company Thorn Electrical, which manufactured TVs, fridges and cookers. He was responsible for an innovation that vastly improved the performance of electric ovens, enabling them to cook more evenly. During the 80s various parts of the business were closed and Jacob became self-employed. He began a consulting business, testing household appliances. It involved plenty of travelling to Japan, Korea, Germany and Italy. I was also working, as an interpreter. I belonged to an agency who would regularly request my translation services. Often the jobs were in grand locations such as smart hotels in Sloane Square. I was young and it was fun.

We were lucky enough to be able to buy our own house after we were married. I had received restitution compensation payments from Germany and that money helped us to buy a house in Kingsbury. It was a nice area and the house was within our budget. It was a semi-detached with pretty coloured stained glass in the door. Kingsbury was more of a Jewish area than we had expected. We were on friendly terms with our neighbours and still kept in contact with the Polish crowd. Family, however, remained a constant in our lives.

Jacob

Our engagement party in Israel

Our children arrived quickly. Jonathan was born in Central Middlesex Hospital in 1962. My life changed overnight. Jonathan had his own little bedroom and I kept going in to see if he was breathing. I remember I had a fancy pram for him. Kingsbury was very green belt at that time and there was no pavement, just the road and grass verges on either side. I had to push the pram on the road and dodge the cars. Due to our proximity to green open spaces we often had a different type of 'visitor' entering the house – creepy crawlies. I used to make Jacob check the house for things crawling around and remove them.

(Left to right) Cousin Irka, Uncle Joe, Gran, me, Mother, step-father Simon, my mother-in-law

With my mother-in-law, Lusia

With Jonathan

My son David with his wife, Anne

My grandson Joe

When Jonathan was a toddler he had a little rocking horse on which he loved to sit. One day I was in the kitchen cooking and he was rocking. He was positioned between a wall on one side and the glass door on the other, he pushed his hand against the wall and the rocking horse toppled over. The head of it broke the glass which came whooshing down like a guillotine! It was sheer luck it didn't cut his head off.

My granddaughter Jessica

Jonathan was four when David was born in 1968. Jonathan was wonderful with him: he didn't show any jealousy, he has always been a very gentle soul. They both got on well and have always been close. When the boys were small, we often took them on holiday to Italy. I adore Italy. My favourite city is Florence. How can you not love Florence? We sometimes went to Israel, but I think Jonathan was 11 when we went last with the children. Despite Jacob being from Israel we don't go back there so much

anymore. He no longer has any close family there, only distant relatives. His mum was from Tel Aviv. She would often come over and stay with us for a few months.

Jonathan studied Pharmacy at King's College London. He is now in Oxford working as a pharmacist. His hobbies are wildlife and he does work for a wildlife charity.

David studied English at Cambridge. He is now a Professor of contemporary literature at Reading University. He's very much into art. David's lovely wife Anne also used to lecture at Reading, though now she teaches English in a top independent school. They have two children, my pride and joy, Joey and Jessica, and I reserve the right to call them 'gorgeous'!

When the children grew up and left home we had time to indulge our hobbies. Mine is art, I mean looking at it, not doing it. My favourite gallery to visit is probably the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and my favourite paintings are by the Impressionists. Jacob comes along but he has different taste to me. He likes the Impressionists but is also fond of modern and experimental art. We both like the cinema and theatre, but don't go very often. However, we did go and see the matinee of Warhorse. I came out of there crying my eyes out. It was quite embarrassing walking along the road with tears pouring down my face.

My children and grandchildren have certainly been curious about their backgrounds. They wanted me to write everything down so that there would be a record of it. So this account of my life is written mainly for them, but also because:

If we don't bear witness to what took place, those we loved die twice over. ■

Jonathan, Jacob and David

AJR The Association of Jewish Refugees

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.

If we don't bear witness to what took place, those we loved die twice over.

AJR The Association of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk