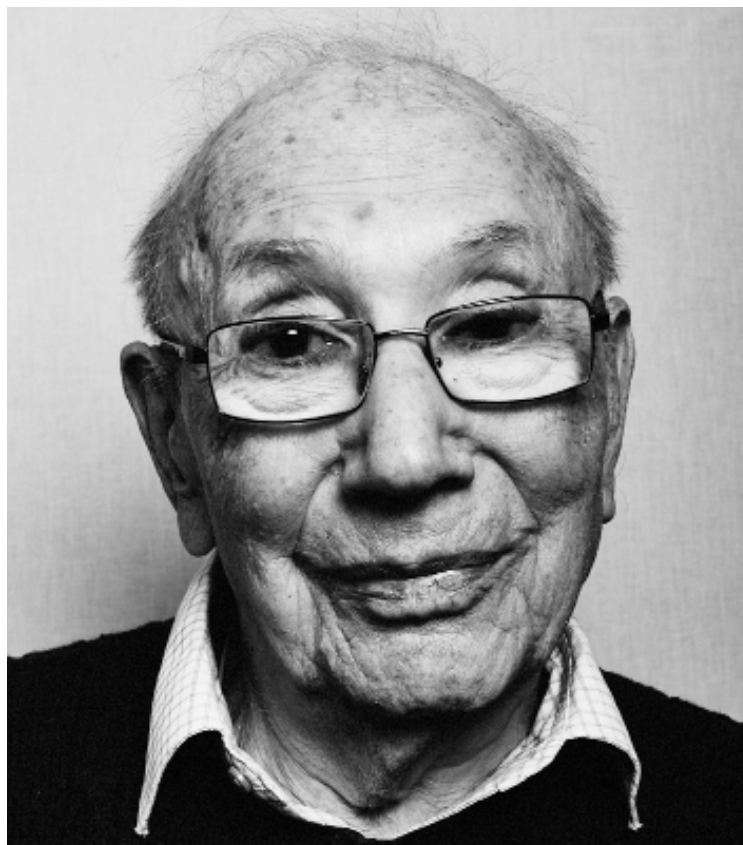


My Story

Heinz Skyte



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These are Heinz Skyte's words. This is his story.

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

Heinz was visited by Naomi Kaye during 2017 and 2018 to share his story.

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My Story

Heinz Skyte

It became very urgent to escape. I applied everywhere. It was a time when you sent out dozens of letters. We dug out forgotten relatives living in other countries and approached friends of friends. We asked them all if they could help us reach America, South America, anywhere, wherever, whoever would accept us.

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Everyone calls me Heinz

I WASN'T born here. I was born in Fürth, Germany on Valentine's Day, 1920. The official name on my passport is Henry Skyte, but that has been anglicised from the German. Everyone calls me Heinz. It is the German equivalent of Henry, which is short for Heinrich. I came to Leeds six months before the outbreak of war, when I was 19.



My father Sali, me in the middle and my brother Fritz (Frank) in Fürth around 1925

My paternal grandparents lived in a town called Kitzingen. They moved there in 1863, when Jews were given permission to live in cities and towns. Before this, the Germans forced Jews to live in village communities. My father was known as Sali, short for Solomon. My mother, Frieda, was born in Fürth and this is where we lived.

My parents married in 1912 and my brother was born a year later. I was born after World War One. When my father married my mother he also married into the family business, retail and wholesale textiles. They sold curtains, floor coverings and that sort of thing.

We lived in an apartment until the flat over my parents' textile shop became vacant. There were three partners in the business altogether: my grandfather, my father and one other. Then under Nazi rule the business shrank, leaving my father as the sole proprietor after the other two dropped out.

My father had four brothers and one sister, so I had quite a few aunts, uncles and cousins. They mostly lived in Frankfurt, which was about 100 miles away, and I would visit them by train. I usually went there at *Pesach* and my cousins came to us in October during their school holidays.



My brother Fritz and I with our parents in 1926

Fürth is in Bavaria, just outside Nuremberg, Southern Germany. There were about 100,000 inhabitants at the start of the war. Nuremberg was the base of Nazism. The *Gauleiter* (regional Nazi party leader), Julius Streicher was a blatant antisemite and published a newspaper which contained nothing but antisemitism. This encouraged much more antisemitism in the area where I lived, which happened earlier than in other parts of Germany.

Jews lived almost anywhere in the town and in my neighbourhood there was a medium sized Jewish community. We belonged to a synagogue, which in this country would be equivalent of a Reform synagogue. We would attend on most holidays and some Saturdays, but I did not live in a religious household and we did not keep kosher. ■

I always hated school

I DO NOT have many early memories. When I was very young we had a nanny and later on I remember going shopping with my mother. I did not go to nursery or kindergarten but stayed at home until I started school at six, which was the age children started school in Germany. I remember my first school day. My mother took me and I cried bitterly and I hated school ever since. I attended a boys' private primary school for four years. At the age of 10 I went to grammar school.

There was a Jewish grammar school in Fürth, but I attended the general grammar school, where there was a fair percentage of Jewish pupils. It was a very old-fashioned school with old-fashioned teaching methods. We sat in rows with our hands on the desks. We were taught virtually no science or modern languages, so my English came very much later. We were taught Latin for six years and three years of Greek. Grammar was always drilled into us. I have forgotten all my Greek but the Latin helped me with my English. We started at quarter to eight in the morning and I went home every lunchtime at about one o'clock. There was no school in the afternoon in Germany, just extracurricular activities like sport.



My sports club membership card was stamped until September 1938 after which I moved to Hamburg and enrolled in language school



I was 17 when I took part in an athletics competition at Fürth Sports Club



My sports club membership card shows my German name. After the war, during our naturalisation we were allowed to change our name. My brother had already changed his surname to Skyte so we decided to follow suit

“There was an episode when one of the Hitler Youth leaders came to us with a couple of pals and said: “It’s time you three left, we don’t want Jews here.””

When Jews were denied membership and expelled from ordinary sports clubs, Jewish clubs were formed. They were open to children from nursery age upwards. I started playing football aged about seven. I also enjoyed taking part in athletics: high jump, long jump, triple jump and short distance running, both 100 metres and 200 metres. There was also a social aspect to it as we grew older.

As time went on the number of Jewish boys in my school began to diminish. Some boys emigrated early on and some moved to the Jewish secondary school in Fürth. By about 1935 there were only three Jewish boys including myself left in my class. There was an episode when one of the Hitler Youth leaders came to us with a couple of pals and said: “It’s time you three left, we don’t want Jews here.” We went home and discussed it with our parents. We also discussed it with some of our schoolmates who were not blatant Nazis. Everyone said: “Ignore them, forget about it, stay where you are,” and that is what we did. I left school when I was 16, although my best friend, Frank, stayed on and did his A-levels in 1938. He was the last Jewish boy to leave the school.

The situation in school was tolerable as even though some teachers were Nazis, others were not. There was even one Jewish master for the first couple of years. There were obviously allusions and implications, but largely it was sufferable. ■

I become an apprentice

THE INTENTION would have been to go to university, but this became impossible under the Nazis. Jews were barred from universities in Germany so there was no point in staying on at school, especially as I had never liked it. My parents decided that I should leave and enter a commercial apprenticeship. During the apprenticeship I was contracted to work for a company for two years. I attended evening classes and received one day off a week for further education. The firm who employed me had to train me in various commercial aspects. At the end of these two years, I received my diploma.

I was with an import and export firm trading in advertising materials. They had branches in London and Scandinavia as well as other places, so it was quite interesting although, being the youngest, I had to carry out the filing and all the other menial tasks.

It was a Jewish firm, but apart from the boss I was the only Jew there. I preferred it to school. I started learning English as a condition of the apprenticeship for one hour a week involving the old method of drilling grammar and no conversational practice, which didn't help me make much progress. When I finished my apprenticeship in 1938 my English was still virtually non-existent. By that time it had become obvious that we would have to leave Germany, or certainly *I* would have to leave Germany. As I didn't have any modern languages such as English, French or Spanish, my parents decided I should take an intensive language course. In the summer of 1938, I enrolled in a language college, which was a Berlitz equivalent in Hamburg, 400 miles away from Nuremberg. ■

“By that time it had become obvious that we would have to leave Germany, or certainly *I* would have to leave Germany.”

My brother Frank leaves Germany

MY BROTHER'S name in England was Frank and in Germany it was Fritz. There were seven years and World War One between us.

My brother had to leave Germany in 1935. He had also left school at 16 and he undertook an apprenticeship in a bank and then in a department store in Cologne for a year or two. When he was about 19, he entered the family business. He became friendly with one of the staff, a non-Jewish girl, which at that time was not yet illegal but hardly tolerated. After the Nuremberg laws, this was not allowed. A girl on the switchboard overheard the Nazi staff representative speaking to the local Gestapo, telling them that Frank had this girlfriend. The switchboard girl told my father what she had overheard.

Following a quick family meeting, it was decided that Frank should disappear. He packed his bag and travelled overnight to Switzerland, ostensibly for health reasons. He spent six months in Switzerland and then he managed to get a permit to go to England. Initially he worked in Manchester in the tailoring industry and then, in 1937, the firm he worked for transferred him to their Leeds branch. My parents were sad that he was no longer with us but glad that he was safe abroad. ■

“Following a quick family meeting, it was decided that Frank should disappear. He packed his bag and travelled overnight to Switzerland, ostensibly for health reasons.”



My brother Fritz (Frank)

Kristallnacht

AS TIME passed, it was obvious that things were changing as the result of the Nazis' rise to power. Antisemitism became official policy.

I remember the Reichstag fire, which of course was the excuse for the banning of political parties, trade unions and other democratic organisations. They went one by one, first the Communist party, then the Social Democratic parties, Liberal party and so on.

People talked and wondered what was going to happen, but nobody had the faintest idea of what actually would happen in the end.

I remember exactly what I was doing on the night of 9 November 1938. I was playing Monopoly. I lived in student digs in Hamburg with five or six other people and in the evenings we would get together to play Monopoly. We also discussed current affairs of course. The German diplomat had been shot in Paris a couple of days earlier and he died of his wounds on 9 November. We knew something was going to occur, but we had no idea what. We played our board-game and went to bed about 11 or 12 o'clock. ■

“I remember exactly what I was doing on the night of 9 November 1938. I was playing Monopoly... We knew something was going to occur, but we had no idea what. We played our board-game and went to bed about 11 or 12 o'clock.”

“I went out at half past four and sat on park benches until the department stores opened and then I walked around. Whilst trying to keep a low profile, I could see the burning synagogues which had been set ablaze. There were smoke plumes everywhere and groups of Jews were being rounded up and frogmarched through the streets.”

Back home in Fürth everything happened earlier and more severely than anywhere else. The Jews of the town were rounded up in the city square. The men, including my father, were sent to Dachau and the women, children and older people were released. When my mother arrived home at about four o'clock in the morning, she phoned the digs at the language school where I was staying. In those days the landlady had the only phone in the building. She said: “Your mother is on the phone and wants to speak to you urgently.”

I said: “What, now?” and she said: “Yes!” I went with her to her phone and Mother said: “Father's gone away,” which was code for has been arrested. She said: “Get dressed and go for a walk. NOW!”

That is what I did and that is how I avoided being arrested because they did come for me, but I was not there. I went out at half past four and sat on park benches until the department stores opened and then I walked around. Whilst trying to keep a low profile, I could see the burning synagogues which had been set ablaze. There were smoke plumes everywhere and groups of Jews were being rounded up and frogmarched through the streets.

After the war, many Germans who were in Hamburg at the time of *Kristallnacht* said they had no idea of what was happening, but that was just not possible. You could not only see what was happening,

you could also smell what was happening with all the smoke. To say they did not know what was happening is just ostrich policy: they did not want to know!

I was out for about 16 hours. I was getting tired and I didn't know what to do. Our family doctor, Dr Albert Dreyfuss had retired and was living in Hamburg at the time. He had brought me into this world and was also a family friend. My parents had contacted him when I first moved to the language school and said: "Keep an eye on the lad." I rang him, and he said: "Come up, it's ok." I went to see him and he told me his story, which is quite funny.

As he was a doctor, he had automatically served in World War One as an officer and a doctor. German officers at that time had to buy their own uniforms and because he had bought his, he took it home after he was demobbed. So when there was a knock on the door, which was quite unusual in itself because the Gestapo who rounded up people didn't bother knocking they just banged the door down, he opened the door to them resplendent in his World War One uniform complete with helmet, spurs on his boots and sword. The only thing missing was his horse! They said: "We've come to arrest you," and he said: "Yes I know." They said: "Well, what's this? You can't come like this." He pulled himself up to his full five foot five and said: "I was an officer of his Imperial German Majesty. I am entitled to wear this uniform. This is how I wish to be arrested." Well this was something that had not been covered in their instructions, so the Gestapo didn't know what to do. They huddled in the corner and eventually said: "We've decided we'll leave you for the moment, but we may come back." As it happened, they never came back!

We discussed what I should do and the doctor said: "Well, go home. You're sick. You're ill." I asked: "What do I suffer from? Something that cannot be easily clinically detected?" He thought for a moment and said: "You suffer from terrible lumbago. You have backache, you can't move. Go to bed, you writhe in pain and you can't move." So, that's what I did. When I got back home, the landlady said they had come for me and they said they would come back. I stayed in bed for a few hours, but they never came back and then the whole thing blew over. It was quite a terrible experience. The day after *Kristallnacht* the college told us we wouldn't be able to attend anymore. They were instructed to discharge all the Jewish pupils. ■

My father came back a changed man

WHEN MY father was arrested in Fürth on *Kristallnacht* he witnessed Jews being abused and spat upon. The rabbi was forced to stamp on the holy *Torah*. The men were marched to a community centre, which ironically had been presented to the town by a Jewish citizen. They were kept there for a while and then sent to Dachau concentration camp, where my father was imprisoned for five or six weeks.

Something happened during that time which my father never talked about. About 50 years later, when I had returned to Fürth for a type of commemoration, I was shown a film. In the film they presented a document, which I recognised had my father's signature on it. It was a sales contract. He was some sort of treasurer for the Jewish community. Before they were sent to Dachau, the president of the Jewish community, my father and one other person, were marched to a public notary and forced to sign over the sale of all the community's assets: synagogues, cemeteries, a hospital, an orphanage, office buildings and everything for 100 marks, which at that time was the equivalent of about £5. He came back from Dachau quite a changed man and determined to emigrate. There was a time limit for emigration, which was impossible to meet as there was nowhere to go. After his arrest, he seemed to age about 20 years. He was completely introverted, he wouldn't talk about what had happened to him and was morose. That was his legacy. ■



My father

We tried everything to escape

IT BECAME very urgent to escape. I applied everywhere. It was a time when you sent out dozens of letters. We dug out forgotten relatives living in other countries and approached friends of friends. We asked them all if they could help us reach America, South America, anywhere, wherever, whoever would accept us.

The Christmas period in 1938 stands out in my memory as we had a family gathering in Frankfurt where most of my paternal family lived. I came down from Hamburg and my parents came from Fürth and discussed what could be done. My father was there along with four of my uncles. They stood out with shorn heads after having just been released from Dachau concentration camp following their arrest on *Kristallnacht*. In those days that was not a fashionable look. The fifth brother had already left for England and later moved to America.

Everybody had to try his own methods of engaging people abroad. I found an old school friend in America whose father managed to get a sponsor for me to get to America but they had a strict quota. My number was not due to come up for two or three years, so I was jolly glad when I eventually got a visa to come to Britain through my brother Frank.

Frank by this time was living in Leeds and he tried whatever he could to get me to England. He eventually succeeded in finding me a trainee post in a clothing factory. Leeds was full of clothing factories. The trainee scheme was one of only three schemes whereby people were admitted to this country. This was the trainee scheme for young men – all men, no women, between 16 and 35 years old. They were employed in order to learn a new trade in the clothing industry and this is how I came to Leeds.

One of the other schemes was for women and girls to go into domestic service and the third was for children under 16 who came with the *Kindertransport*. There was no other way to be accepted into this country. They were very, very strict in keeping their doors closed to immigrants at that time, especially Jewish immigrants. There was a wave of antisemitism evolving from high up in the Government and Cabinet. ■

I arrived in Leeds

I LEFT Hamburg by air on 23 February 1939. London airport at that time was in Croydon and my brother was there to meet me. We had some family members, uncles and aunts, already in London who we stayed with for a couple of days as we had to register with The Jewish Refugee Committee. Then we took the train to Leeds, arriving on Saturday lunchtime at Leeds Central station. The first thing we did was drop my case in the left luggage office, then we went straight to Elland Road to watch a football match before we even went home. I remember it was against Everton and they drew 1-1.

On the way to the match, I was really brought down to earth. I thought that, as the college I had attended was very good, I had learnt quite a lot of English. We were on a tram on the way to Elland Road, holding onto the straps above. In those days people wore mufflers and flat caps and I tried to listen to what they were saying but I couldn't understand one word as it was broad Yorkshire. That dialect is no longer spoken, certainly not in towns but it was spoken back then and I couldn't understand a thing. I thought: "My God, I have wasted my time at college!" I soon became used to the local dialect once I started work and talking to work mates.

“The first thing we did was drop my case in the left luggage office, then we went straight to Elland Road to watch a football match before we even went home. I remember it was against Everton and they drew 1-1.”



Me with my brother Fritz (Frank)

There were differences between life in this country and life on the continent, more than there are now. The food was different too. Frank was living in digs and I joined him there. It was in Sholebrook Avenue, Chapeltown. In those days, men did not live on their own, not like they do now. We lived in digs with a landlady who provided us with breakfast and dinner, Monday to Friday and three meals on Saturday and Sunday, so I soon got used to British food although it was a bit strange to start with. When I first arrived here in the 1930s English coffee was horrible, it was boiled milk with a bit of coffee in it!

My co-workers at the clothing factory were extremely friendly and helpful, probably more than the management. They showed us what to do, what not to do and the atmosphere there was quite happy. There were some problems with money though: the trainee grade of pay was 30 shillings, which is now £1.50 a week, on which you could just about exist with no luxuries. You could find yourself digs that usually cost about a pound or a guinea, and that left enough for tram fares and for the odd cinema visit. You didn't have enough to buy clothing or holidays. The 30 bob attracted the usual deductions such as unemployment insurance and health insurance. This brought my earnings down to about one pound and seven shillings, which was supplemented slightly by The Jewish Refugee Committee. When the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union found out about this they were not happy. The union said that The Jewish Refugee Committee were having to subsidise cheap labour, so eventually our employer agreed to pay us the full 30 shillings. That was my first encounter with the trade union and I soon became a member.

There was underlying antisemitism that was not as obvious as it had been in Germany, it was more hidden. More or less on the lines as it is now. There still is antisemitism: there is still a golf club in Leeds that will not admit Jews so it's always there. ■

Drop everything and come

WE TRIED very hard to get visas for our parents, which was not easy because they didn't fit into any of the three specific categories. You also had to provide a guarantee of £50 for each person, which at that time was a lot of money, but we somehow managed to raise it and about a month before the outbreak of war we were able to get the visas.

My brother and I would speak to our parents on the phone about once a week from a call box. During one call they said: "Oh! We've got our visas now. There's no rush, we can pack our things and everything." We said: "Look, drop everything and come, never mind packing furniture." That was the week that Russia and Germany signed the non-aggression pact. Germany thought there would not be a war but of course here we knew that there would be. So, thankfully they listened to us and arrived in England five days before war broke out, on 27 August 1939.

They were due to arrive on the Sunday morning by boat from Hook to Harwich, then train to Liverpool Street station. Frank and I went down to London on the late evening train, as we could not afford to stay in a hotel overnight. We arrived at Kings Cross station around midnight and walked from Kings Cross to Liverpool Street station making a stop at Lyons' Corner House restaurant on the Strand. When we got to Liverpool Street station on the boat train arrival platform, there were hundreds and hundreds of people waiting for their relatives to arrive too. On the departure platform hundreds of Germans who had been living and working in England were being called back to Germany for military service. They sang Nazi songs and shouted across to us, which was quite a situation!

The boat train arrived but our parents were not on it. We were very worried because at the time the Nazis dragged people out at the German-Dutch border denying them the right to continue their journey. We didn't know what happened but we were not the only ones, about half the people had been left waiting. Then there was an announcement saying that there would be a second boat train. Our parents arrived on that second train and we made our way back up to Leeds the same day. We all stayed together at the digs where my brother and I were living. ■

Refugees were not allowed to work

WHEN MY parents came over my father could not work, as refugees were denied jobs. It was not until the middle of the war, when there was a shortage of labour due to people being called up to fight, that he was allowed to work. It was down to my brother and I to work to keep the family.

My parents' maintenance had to be covered to ensure they would not become a burden on the state. My brother and I tried very hard, we combined our salaries, found a house all together and managed to live as a family.

Between us my brother and I earned £4 a week. He earned two pounds and ten shillings and I earned one pound and ten shillings, which at that time was enough for the four of us to live. It was not exactly living, rather existing, but we had everything we needed. We had a home and we had food. We didn't have money for luxuries, clothing or holidays but it was enough for the four of us.

We found a furnished house off Roundhay Road and that was our first family home in Leeds. Three months later, after the war had started, my parents' furniture suddenly arrived in a container. It was a miracle. I don't know how that happened, it was incredible and I still have some of that furniture today.

We tried to get my grandparents out but we weren't able to. They died in Theresienstadt in the Czech Republic. They weren't killed but the conditions were very, very bad. Grandfather died within a fortnight of getting there through starvation and cold and my grandmother survived him by about four months. ■

“It was not exactly living, rather existing, but we had everything we needed. We had a home and we had food. We didn't have money for luxuries, clothing or holidays but it was enough for the four of us.”



On entering internment camp 1940

Behind barbed wire

I WAS a presser for about 15 months until May 1940 when I was interned together with most Jewish refugees in Leeds. Why they interned us I still do not know because we were more anti-Nazi than most British.

On the outbreak of war a policeman came to the boarding house where we were still living and asked us to come down to police headquarters at Calverley Street, where Leeds City Library is now. We had to have our documents stamped 'enemy alien' and if anyone had cameras, binoculars and maps we had to hand them in. The government instituted tribunals, which interviewed every alien in the country and classified them into three categories. Category A were enemy aliens who were interned immediately. These were mostly German citizens who had been left behind and were potential spies. Category B were still enemy aliens but were not interned at the beginning of war and category C were called friendly aliens.

In Leeds for some reason, possibly due to an antisemitic judge, all the Jewish refugees were classified category B enemy aliens. This was not so in the rest of the country. In London, for example, most people were classified friendly aliens. Following the German invasion of Belgium and Holland in May 1940 and with the threat of invasion here, the government decided to intern all category B enemy aliens. There had been a protest about the Leeds results in Parliament and in March the government agreed to have a second tribunal in Leeds to review all the cases. They started sitting at the beginning of April and they saw people in alphabetical order. Most of the ones they saw were re-categorised as friendly aliens. They were only as far as G when my internment took place.

On 16 May 1940, the foreman came to me at work and said: "You're wanted in the office." I had never been in the office before. He said: "You'd better take your coat." In the office there were two detectives who said: "We've come to intern you." They took me home, I packed a case and then they took me to Leeds Town Hall where my father had been taken earlier that day along with my brother, who had been arrested at work too. When there were enough of us to fill a coach, we were taken to Pontefract barracks, our first internment camp, where we stayed for about a fortnight. No one had prepared for this. We slept on straw in the drill hall as there were no mattresses.

We were then taken by train to Huyton near Liverpool where people were collected from all over the country and housed in an almost completed new council housing estate, built but not furnished or finished off. The houses were there but nothing else and this was made into a temporary internment camp. From there we were marched to Liverpool docks and put on a ferry to the Isle of Man.

The Isle of Man had been an internment camp in World War One and they repeated the same thing in World War Two. A row of terraced boarding houses on the sea front in Douglas was confiscated. The landladies had to move everything out except the beds, and the block was encircled by a double fence of barbed wire. There were several other camps on the Isle of Man but ours was known as Central Promenade Internment Camp, Douglas. We were more or less left to our own devices inside the camp.

There were four or five of us to a room, 20 or so to a house. We cooked for each other and started arranging activities. There were quite a considerable number of academics, artists and professionals as well as us youngsters. They soon started giving lectures and holding discussions. You could have lectures on almost any subject. Having had office training in Hamburg and having both English and German shorthand, I was always employed in the camp office so I knew what was going on.

“They took me home, I packed a case and then they took me to Leeds Town Hall where my father had been taken earlier that day along with my brother, who had been arrested at work too.”

“We were not told where we were going and had no idea what was happening. Once we were out on the Atlantic we realised we were heading west towards Canada.”

Whilst we had been detained in the other camps in Britain, we had not been allowed newspapers or radios so we had no idea what was going on in the world. However, on the Isle of Man we did get some news. There had been an Ort school in Berlin, which aimed to teach people new trades, such as electrics or plumbing. This school had been transferred complete with its masters from Berlin to Leeds, and now around 30 of its students and teachers were interned alongside us on the Isle of Man. We all stuck together throughout. One of the lads from our group was an absolute genius in electrics and whilst captive on the Isle of Man he produced a ‘cat’s whiskers’ radio set made from silver paper and bits of wire, so we actually had news, although we were not supposed to. This news was then distributed throughout the camp by word of mouth.

When the British government decided that they could not cope with all the prisoners of war as well as internees they tried to move some into the dominions and colonies. They asked Australia, Canada and South Africa to take prisoners and internees. South Africa refused outright but Australia and Canada agreed.

After about one month, my father remained interned on the Isle of Man, whilst my brother and I, along with other internees, mostly single and aged between 16 and 60, were shipped back to Liverpool

and boarded a converted troopship called the SS Ettrick. We were delayed because a similar ship 24 hours earlier, the Arandora Star, had been torpedoed at the north end of the Irish Sea where it goes into the Atlantic. A destroyer or frigate escorted us as far as the Atlantic and then we were on our way. We were not told where we were going and had no idea what was happening. Once we were out on the Atlantic we realised we were heading west towards Canada.

The conditions on board were appalling. There were no bunks, just a few hammocks. We were all below deck and locked down during the night so if the ship had been torpedoed at night nobody would have survived. During the day we were allowed up on the deck and everybody, except for one person, was completely seasick. We arrived in Canada about seven days later, only to be received by French Canadian troops who had been told we were parachutists who had landed in England. They treated us accordingly. They robbed us right, left and centre. I think I was the only one of about six who had a watch left after we had been through that reception. Later on there was a court of enquiry on this and some of those troops were dismissed from the army.

We were stationed in a camp at the Heights of Abraham, Quebec City. It had a very beautiful view over the St Lawrence River, but that was the only thing that was beautiful. The treatment overall wasn't bad and the food in Canada was fantastic because there was no shortage there. We were there from July until it started getting cold around October. Due to the severe winters in Canada we were moved to a different camp in Sherbrook, halfway between Quebec and Montreal. It was in a completely empty disused railway engine shed of the Canadian Pacific Railway where trains thundered past the camp every couple of hours. Bunk beds and washing facilities were eventually moved into the engine sheds, which had steam heating so at least it was warm. Again, I was occupied in the camp office and overall we spent two years in Canada.

At first the only mail we received were Red Cross letters which had been allowed under the Geneva Convention. We were allowed one a fortnight but they took months and months to arrive and we struggled to communicate with our parents. We were given access to the news in this camp, so knew what was going on in the rest of the world. ■

Internment

WE FELT badly done by because obviously we had far more reasons to be opposed to the Nazis than most British people had and we were treated as if we were Nazis ourselves. In Germany we were kicked out because we were Jews, here we were interned because we were Germans, which actually we were not any longer, because our citizenships had been cancelled. There was a certain amount of resentment but also some understanding because of the situation in 1940. The Germans had invaded the Lowlands and France and then there was Dunkirk. There was panic in Britain. Churchill's famous words, quoted everywhere, when they put to him: "What shall we do with the friendly enemy aliens?" Churchill had replied: "Collar the lot!" So there was some resentment, but eventually you realised it really had been a panic reaction.

After we had been there about a year, the government sent an emissary to Canada to interview people individually and to decide whether we could come back and whether we could be released. The emissary was a prison commissioner called Alexander Paterson. I worked in the camp office as



I am back row left alongside fellow inmates at the Canadian Internment camp, Farnham 1941

the receptionist and made his appointments. He made a very good immediate impression on us. The normal practice when anybody came into the camp, such as tradespeople to do repairs, was that they were to be accompanied by a sentry with a rifle and bayonet who remained with them the whole time they were there. When Patterson came to the camp he turned to his sentry and said: “Thank you very much, I don’t need you anymore.” He came on his own across the square and that impressed us. He really was great. He restored my confidence in British democracy. He interviewed everybody and made his decision, and as a result both Frank and I were allowed to return to England.

We had to wait for transport, which was very scarce. There were convoys, U-boats and also supplies for the British armed forces from America and other countries, so shipping space was scarce and it was quite a few months before we actually came back. We returned to the Isle of Man, pending the consideration of our case. After three months I was released, returning to Leeds in August 1942 when I was 22. Frank was released about three weeks later.

My parents had also been interned. My father was interned with my brother and myself on the Isle of Man. My mother was sent some time later to a women’s camp, on the Isle of Man at St Mary’s Port, on the southern tip of the island. Eventually, a camp for married couples was established and my parents were reunited in St Mary’s Port towards the end of their internment. They were released and returned to Leeds about a year before Frank and I.

By this time we had a house in Harehills and my parents had rented off rooms until we returned home. It was a great relief to be no longer behind barbed wire but it was not really a new start, I just continued from where I had been before.

I returned to the same job, although by that time our skills turned to making soldiers’ uniforms instead of suits. I was never happy in this job. We had an option to join the Pioneer Corps, which many did, but both Frank and I felt we owed it to our parents to maintain them and look after them and an army salary wouldn’t have paid enough for this. I eventually volunteered for war work and I worked in engineering for the rest of the war. ■

My wife Thea

MY WIFE Thea was from Berlin. She arrived in England with the *Kindertransport*. She must have been one of the oldest as she was 15 when she came. She was taken in by a family in Leeds and eventually attended school for a few months. When war broke out, the school was evacuated to Lincoln. Thea said: “Well I’ve been shifted once, I don’t want to move again,” so she left school and stayed in Leeds. At one time she had an ambition to be a doctor which couldn’t be met, so she went for second best, nursing. Even that was difficult as hospitals refused to employ foreigners, but due to a shortage of nurses during the war years she was eventually offered a nursing job.

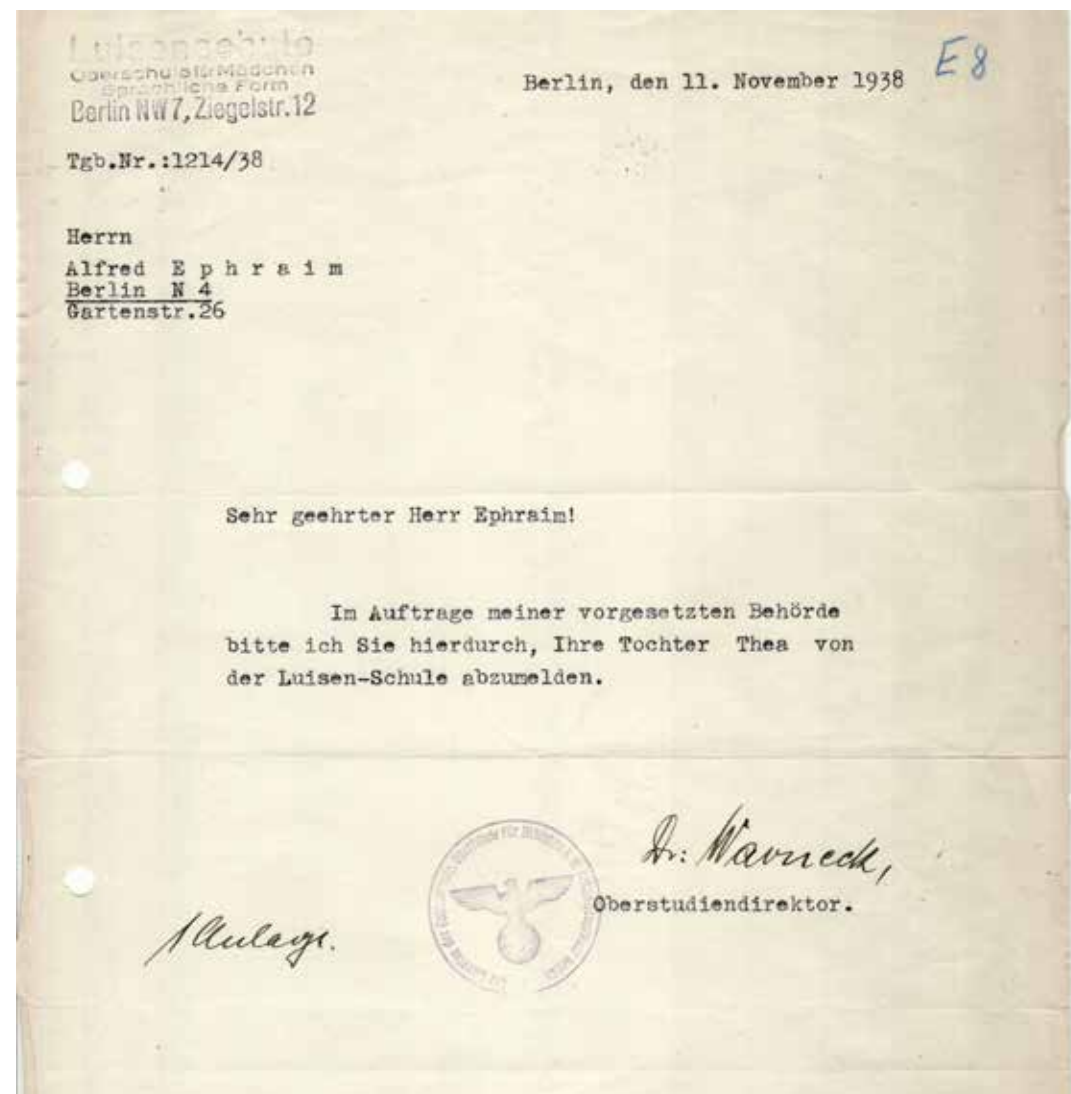
I met Thea here, not in Germany. We first met soon after I arrived in Leeds. There was a gathering of refugees and we both attended but she was only 15 and I was about 19, so I wasn’t interested in her. When I came back from Canada we somehow met again, and it went from there.

We were married in July 1945 between VE day and VJ day. In fact, we were married twice: first at the registry office and then under a *chuppah* in the garden of my wife’s guardian, just around the corner from where I live now.

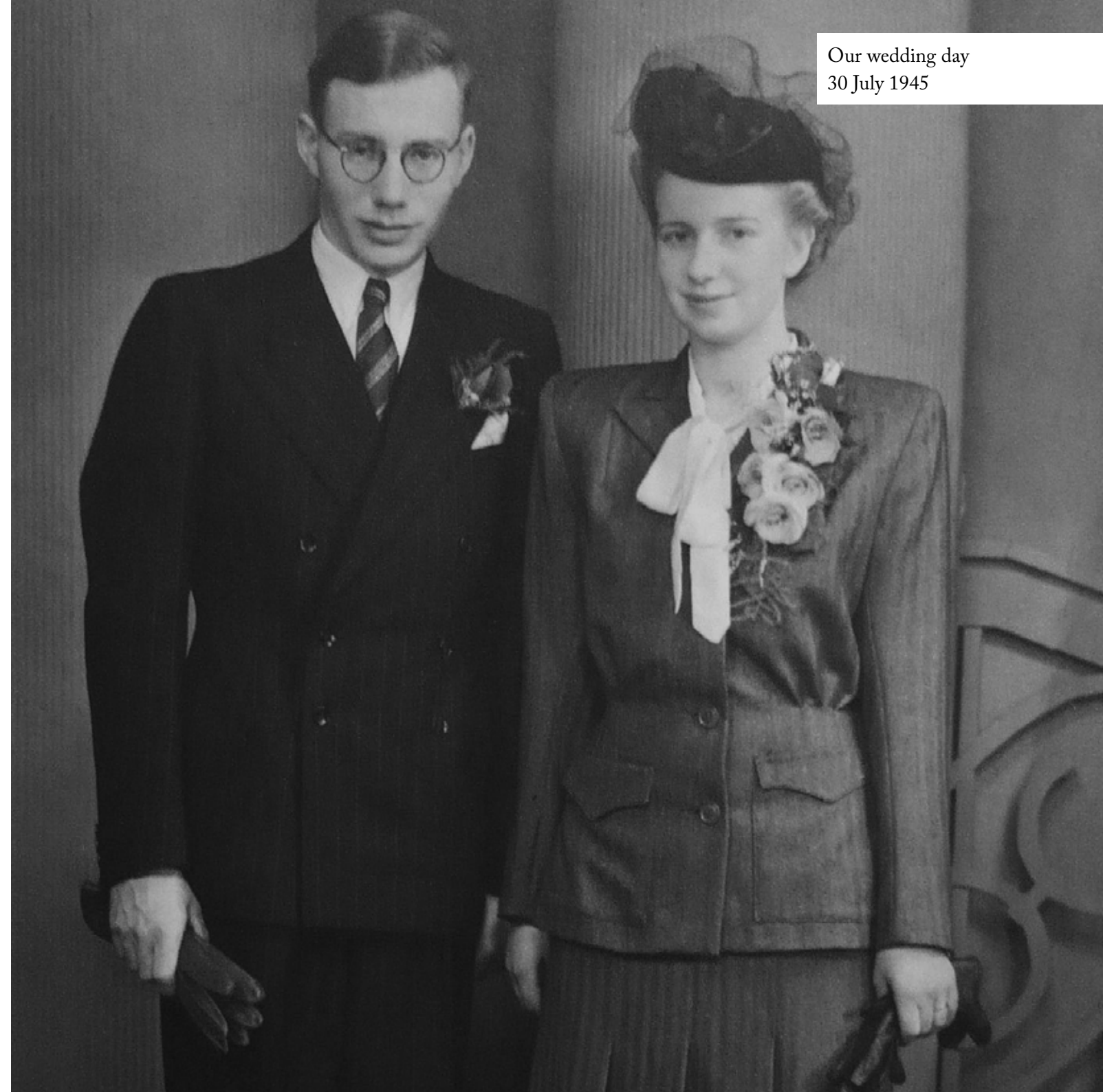
We moved out of my parent’s house two years later. We lived with them during the early part of our marriage, until Thea finished her nursing training. After that, we found our first flat, a sublet in a house in Chapeltown.

We had a living room, bedroom, shared bathroom and a makeshift kitchen, but we were only there for about three months. Then we were lucky to find an unfurnished, converted self-contained flat. By the time our youngest son Michael was born, we had our first house, the second house from the church on Stonegate Road. So, I’m an old Stonegate Roader! Where I live now was grassland, there were cows and horses here. In the winter, I used to go sledging with my kids down Queenshill Gardens. ■

Our wedding day
30 July 1945



Thea's father received this letter expelling her from school on 11 November 1938.
"Dear Mr Ephraim, On behalf of my advocates, I am hereby asking you to unsubscribe your daughter, Thea from school. Headteacher"



You can't be married and have a career

WHEN THEA was 19, in 1942, she started working as a fever nurse, a role which no longer exists, treating illnesses such as diphtheria and scarlet fever. Then she trained as a general nurse and became a senior staff nurse at St James's Hospital. In fact, she was in charge of a ward for months and months. When she said to the matron: "There's a vacant sister's post here on the ward. I'm already doing the job, can I have the post?" Matron said: "No! You can't be married and have a career." So, she left the job. You would not believe it, the funny thing is that the same matron was married herself six months later and stayed in the job!

After this, Thea worked full time in district nursing in the poorest district in Leeds, which was called New Wortley and no longer exists. The area was full of back-to-back houses between Leeds prison and the gas works. They had outside toilets, no running water and overall, dreadful conditions. That was the most satisfying nursing job she ever did and worked up until she fell pregnant with our first child.

Thea researched our family history and wrote all three volumes. She was a fantastic researcher who never let go of anything once she got hold of it. I did the donkeywork, a bit of typing! It goes back to 1650. My earliest family members originate from Southern Germany. Our family history is in The Leeds History Library and The Wiener Library. ■



Thea and I in 2003

Let our men go

THEA TRIED to bring her parents out of Berlin to England but couldn't. I wasn't involved at that time. They stayed but were not deported because Thea's mother was not Jewish although she had converted to Orthodox Judaism before she married Thea's father. In Nazi laws that didn't count as it was race not religion that the Nazis were opposed to. Mixed couples were not deported but had to carry out forced labour. Her father worked on the railways and her mother was forced to carry out labour too. As they were Jews they had a rough time, receiving much lower rations than everybody else, but they survived.

At one time, the men of mixed marriages were arrested for deportation. The women found out where they were held, which was at one of the old communal office buildings in the centre of Berlin. Dozens of women gathered outside, shouting: "Let our men go!" This has been well documented and a monument now stands in Berlin on the very spot. They were there for two or three days and this was one of the very few public protests against the Nazis where the protesters were not punished or arrested. Eventually the men were released and not deported. This story has been told in the film 'Rosenstrasse'. ■

“Her father worked on the railways and her mother was forced to carry out labour too. As they were Jews they had a rough time, receiving much lower rations than everybody else, but they survived.”

I got back into white collar work

WHEN THE war ended I tried to get into white collar work which was not easy. I must have written hundreds of applications with very little success. Eventually, a neighbour of my parents' had a vacancy and gave me a job.

I am not sure why so many refugees were drawn to work in the community but I suppose it was a sense of responsibility. Maybe it was due to the persecution we experienced in Germany. I became involved virtually by accident. I had a white collar job at a firm of furriers in Leeds and in order to make ends meet and to help with the household finances, as I was married by then, I had taken on a couple of spare time jobs. On evenings and weekends, I worked as a secretary for the Leeds Jewish Convalescent Home, which no longer exists. It was there that I was introduced to some of the people who were big shots at the Jewish Welfare Board (which at the time was called the Jewish Board of Guardians).

One fine day the president rang me at work when my boss was standing next to me. He said: "Skyte? I want you to work for the Jewish Board of Guardians." My boss heard that! I was being head hunted! I discussed it with my boss who was also a friend and he said: "Look, I can't offer you what they offer you," particularly as there was a pension involved. So, I took the job and held the role of chief executive for 34 years until 1985.

An aerial photo of the Jewish Housing Estate in the 1980s after my retirement





As chief executive of the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board

It was hard work. Working for the Jewish community in those days was a 24-hour job. The bosses would ring you at home at all hours of the day and night.

The Welfare Board started 140 years ago as a purely almsgiving organisation, dishing out money and carrying out social work. Things started to change quite considerably once I took my position. The big step was into housing, two years after I started. Then it was five years before we found some land to build on. They offered us land in parts of Leeds such as Crossgates, Hunslet or Seacroft which we did not accept.

We knew we wanted to be where the Jewish community was moving to. We were hoping for Moortown, Alwoodley or at least the top end of Chapel Allerton. We were insistent on holding out for that which was not an easy decision because it was depriving people of decent homes whilst we were waiting. However, we thought it better to wait and be in a place where we wanted to be and not isolated somewhere else in Leeds.

One day I came home and I said to my Thea: “Guess where we have just been offered some land?” It was behind our garden! Looking back, I feel a sense of achievement, but that is for others to judge. I think that by and large I did a good job but nothing outstanding. I was asked if one of the flat buildings could be named after me and I said no. I then discussed it with Thea and the kids and they thought I should, so I gave in, as usual! I don’t know why my picture is hanging in the entrance though. ■



Housing development in Leeds

I retired on the day I turned 65

I RETIRED on the day I turned 65. They wanted me to carry on. In fact the boss, Arnold Ziff, said I could go to a four day week the first year and a three day week the second year. I said no because if I went to a four day week I knew I'd be doing five days work in four days. I said no, when I'm 65 I want out!

I have done a lot of voluntary work on many committees. After I retired as chief executive of the Housing Association, I then became a committee member, then chairman for one year and now, I'm a tenant. So I've done everything. In fact, when I moved in here I wrote to the chairman and said: "I've done every job in this Housing Association. If you have a vacancy for a cleaner please let me know, that's the only job I haven't done."

Just after I retired, my wife and I went to America for the first time. We have been a few times since because we have family there. We've also travelled on the continent. We tried to have a life of our own, which is why we started caravanning and camping because we could get away from everything.

To start with, we had a frame tent, then a trailer tent, then a mobile caravan and then a static caravan. I think the best experience was the mobile caravan, we took it everywhere - France, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, even Germany, which wasn't particularly on the list but we just happened to go there. I've been around a bit! ■

“I knew if I went to a four day week I'd be doing five days work in four days. I said no, when I'm 65 I want out!”



Thea at my retirement party in 1985

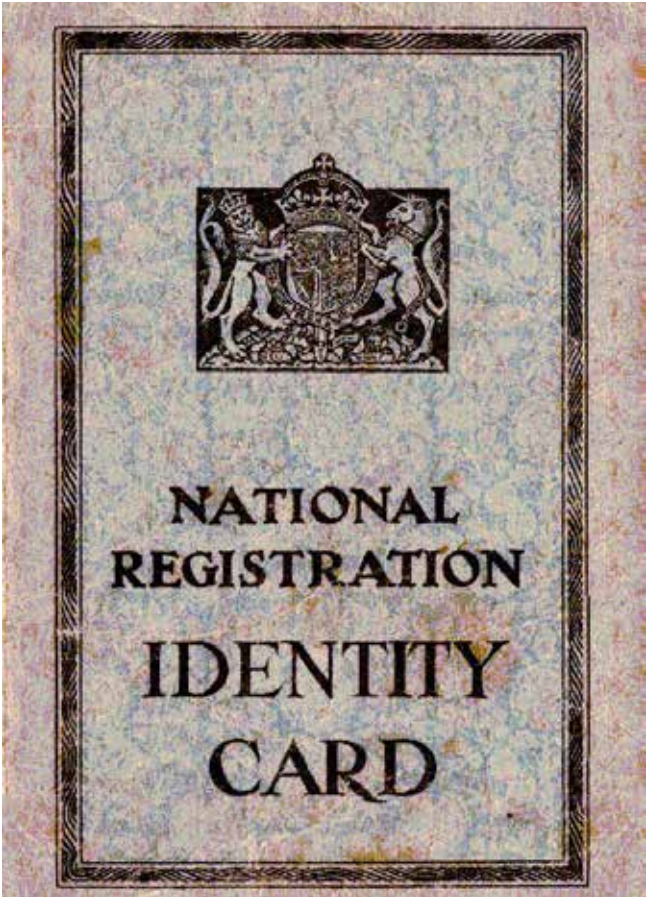
We loved this country

WE ALWAYS wanted to be naturalised because we loved this country but there were no naturalisations during the war except for service personnel. After the war, naturalisations were resumed and we submitted our applications again. There was no waiting list but the process was slow. By 1947, our turn came and we were naturalised. To us it was more than just a piece of paper, we could now vote and we received British passports.

Thea was part of this country but she somehow never felt completely settled here, or anywhere. She always said: “I don’t belong anywhere, I don’t know where I belong.” This is partly because her parents had not managed to leave Germany and information from them was so limited. Even the 25 word restriction per Red Cross letter, once every three months, was often censored so you could barely write anything except to inform that you were still alive.

After the end of the war, Thea’s parents re-established themselves after receiving help from Germany. They settled in the Eastern Soviet part of Berlin and wanted us to come back to live near them. We talked about it and visited them, but we decided that we could not possibly go back to live. We wanted them to come here but they wouldn’t have been allowed to work and didn’t want to be a burden on us so they decided to stay where they were. ■

“Thea was part of this country but she somehow never felt completely settled here, or anywhere. She always said: “I don’t belong anywhere, I don’t know where I belong.””



I received my National Identity Card in 1947



I went back to Fürth

GERMAN cities invited former Jewish residents back in small groups. Thea and I went back to Fürth on one of those schemes for about 10 days. They showed us around and entertained us.

The first time was very, very, strange, very strange. I was very reluctant to go back. Later on we returned quite a lot because we started our family research and genealogy was legwork. Back then, you had to visit the registry offices, archives and cemeteries. During those visits we met quite a few Germans of the younger generation who were entirely different from what we had known. In fact, they came to us and said: “Tell us what happened because our parents won’t tell us.” They couldn’t ask, or if they asked, their parents refused to speak about the Nazi period. They were obviously feeling guilty but the kids wanted to know what had happened. ■

“The first time was very, very, strange, very strange. I was very reluctant to go back.”

The Queen pinned the MBE on me

IN 1976 I received a letter to say that it was proposed I receive an MBE. I didn’t want to accept it but the family, my late wife and my sons said: “Oh, you must have it.” It was officially for work for the Jewish community but I do not believe in the award system anyhow.

On the day, there were about 100 of us waiting to receive our gongs. I was instructed to bow and step forward, after which the Queen would talk to me. When she reached out her hand to shake mine, that would signify the end. As the Queen pinned the MBE on me, she asked: “What is your work?” I told her but I don’t think she listened! ■



“As the Queen pinned the MBE on me, she asked: “What is your work?” I told her but I don’t think she listened!”



At the Queen's birthday honours in June 1976

My family

MY SONS Michael and Peter both won places at Oxford to study chemistry. They had a chemistry teacher at Roundhay High school who was very keen to get his pupils to Oxford or Cambridge. Mike was already determined to move to Israel so he wasn't bothered about academic achievement. He passed his degree though.



Pete and I visited Mike and his family in Israel in April 2018. I am in the middle, Pete is on my left, Mike to my right. My grandson Gilad is on the left along with my numerous great grandchildren



My eldest son Pete



My youngest son Mike

Pete stayed on at Oxford to study a PhD in Chemistry. Afterwards he worked for what was then called the Housing Corporation, which sponsored housing associations in the whole of North East England. The funny thing was that he was living in London when he saw the job vacancy, but the position was actually in Leeds!

Pete married Helen. They have two sons, Nick is 27 and studied Geography at Leeds University. He is a customer data analyst in the retail trade. Daniel is 25 and studied Economics at Newcastle University. He works in private equity. These jobs didn't exist 25 years ago. I asked them: 'What does a Data Analyst do?' I got a lengthy explanation and I was no wiser at the end.



My son Pete (middle) with his sons, Nick (right) and Dan (left)

Mike moved to Israel in 1977 with a group who had chosen to live on a kibbutz called Mishmar David. They started a printing works producing sticky labels for fruit and vegetables, which Mike was involved in. Around 2003 when the kibbutz communal lifestyle started to fade away, they continued with the printing business. He married Jill after meeting her at Habonim and they still live there today. They have two sons who both live within an hours drive of each other. Gilad is 38 and Amos is 34. Gilad works in management consultancy in social organisations. He is married to Yael and they have two sets of twins, two boys and one boy and a girl. Amos is a chef and has a son and a daughter with his wife, Inna.



This is the Israeli crew. My son Mike and his wife Jill, grandsons Gilad with his wife Yael and Amos with his wife Inna, and my great-grandchildren



Grandson Amos



Grandson Gilad

I was a season ticket holder of Leeds United until the 1990s when it got a bit rough and I stopped going. I am still interested in football and watch it on the television.

These days I enjoy a crossword, Sudoku and watching television. I go to the community centre for a couple of activities and we have a discussion group on a Friday morning. I play Scrabble on a Wednesday afternoon and bridge twice a week with two different groups.

I have learned tolerance and respect for other people's opinions and I never give advice as I don't want to impose my own views on other people.




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.



It became very urgent to escape. I applied everywhere. It was a time when you sent out dozens of letters. We dug out forgotten relatives living in other countries and approached friends of friends. We asked them all if they could help us reach America, South America, anywhere, wherever, whoever would accept us.



www.ajr.org.uk