



My Story

Hanna Singer



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These are Hanna's words. This is her story

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

Hanna Singer was visited by Debra Barnes during 2018 to share her story.

Portrait photography by Debra Barnes

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My family

I WAS BORN in Erfurt in Germany on 24 May 1935. Erfurt is a lovely old town with a university where Martin Luther studied, a mediaeval cathedral and an 11th Century synagogue. This synagogue was rediscovered after the war when workmen came across a mikvah and a hoard of mediaeval Jewish jewellery concealed under a wall. For centuries the building had been abandoned and used as a grain store, but today it has been restored as a museum housing the jewels.

My father, Harry Stern, was a lawyer. He was president of the synagogue in Erfurt and very much involved with the Jewish community. He was born in Reichensachsen, a small village in Saxony. His father, Isaac, was a 'cattle Jew' or 'Vie Jude'. Dealing in cattle was a common occupation for Jews living in rural areas where they were not allowed to own land. Years later, walking in the countryside with my father, he would tell me the breed of every horse or cow we encountered. He knew them all.

My paternal grandmother, Selma Floersheim, Oma Selma, was born in Fulda. My father had two older sisters, my aunts Victoria and Hedwig. When my father was about five years old the family moved to nearby Eschwege. Soon after they arrived, his life was saved by a dairy maid who, glancing out of the window, saw him fall head first into the water butt in the yard. Screaming "der Harry, der Harry!", she rushed and pulled him out. He would tell me this story always ending with, "...but for that dairy maid YOU wouldn't be here!"

My father was the first person in his family to attend university. He studied law at the University of Marburg, graduating in 1915. World War One had started and he was called up. He served in the artillery throughout the war, including at Verdun. He was wounded when a shell exploded nearby. It resulted in deafness and he was awarded the Iron Cross. This stood him in good stead after Hitler took power.

Tanti Shüfftan, my mother, me, Oma Else in 1937



My mother, Lotte, trained as a musician. She graduated from the Conservatoire of Wurtzburg in 1924. The terrible post-World War One recession had started and times were hard for her father, so she wasn't able to follow a career as a professional cellist. Instead she gave music lessons. Her parents were Sali Loewenthal and Else (née Lay). Their families came from South West Germany and my mother was born in Heidelberg. She grew up there with her brother, my uncle Rudi. In partnership with his brother Sigmund, my grandfather owned a ladies' clothing emporium. Sigmund and Anna were childless and adopted a son. As a child my mother feared and disliked him. When Hitler came he joined the Nazi party and did nothing to save his parents who died in Auschwitz.

The Loewenthals were assimilated Jews and they were keen members of the Heidelberg rowing club. Antisemitism was rife in Germany long before Hitler, and after World War One many blamed the Jews for the situation Germany found itself in. Overt antisemitism eventually led to my grandparents resigning from the rowing club. Both my grandfathers died before I was born so I never knew them. ■



Citation for my father's World War One cross



With my mother, April 1936



My father circa 1929



Oma Selma and Oma Else, 1934

Early memories

I HAVE SOME MEMORIES of my early childhood in Germany but they are not sequential episodes, they are more like snap shots and many involve lights. On Simchas Torah in 1938 I was taken to the synagogue by two older girls, Ruth Bayreuther and Inge Goldschmidt, both of whose families later came to the UK. I remember bright lights and people dancing around and coming home with a bag of sweets which were instantly confiscated by my mother because they turned out to be liqueur chocolates and most unsuitable for a young child. On Kristallnacht the synagogue was burnt down and the Jewish community was made to pay for the clear up. Today there is a new synagogue in Erfurt serving a community of about 500 people, mostly from Eastern Europe.

In 1938 Oma Else came to live with us. She was dying of cancer and my mother nursed her together with Shvester (Sister) Helga, a Jewish nurse. My grandmother would not have been accepted in the hospital because Jews were not admitted. I can remember standing by her bed and the bunch of green grapes at the bedside. They were a luxury in those days. She died that year. Years later my mother told me that she would not have come with us to England had Oma Else lived. She could not have abandoned my grandmother. It is horrible to think about what the consequences would have been. ■

Kristallnacht and emigration

MY FATHER was arrested on Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938. I was three years old. I can see myself standing at the end of my cot and the bedroom door being open onto the hall. There was a light shining down – another memory connected to light - and I could see my mother in her dressing gown. My father was standing next to her. My parents were looking towards the front door and I could hear the voices of the men who had come to arrest my father. I suppose they had banged on the door and I had woken up. My mother turned towards me holding her finger to her lips. She was telling me to keep quiet and not make a sound. Then she shut my bedroom door.

My father was taken to a gym hall, along with many other arrested Jewish men, where they were humiliated in every possible way. My father wrote that they were made to face the wall and squat down for a long time, which was excruciatingly painful. Then they were taken individually into a room to be beaten up. He was shoved in and saw two Nazi thugs with cudgels, but he recognised one of them. He had defended this man in court and had got him off some charge. This Nazi told my father to scream, which he did, and then they threw him out of the room but they didn't beat him up.

ITS 7194566#1 (2014-07-28)		I.T.S. FOTO No. 8279	
Konzentrations-Lager Buchenwald		Distling Nr. 20603	
Familienname: Stern		Jude	
Vorname: Harry		Blut:	
geb. am 25.4.94 in Reichensachsen		Schutzhaft angeordnet:	
Beruf: Rechtsanwalt		am: durch (Behörde): Erfurt	
Religion: mos. Staat: D.R.		Bisherige Parteizugehörigkeit: keine	
verh., led., gesch. Frau Lotte St. Erfurt		Vertrafen: keine	
Kinder: 1 Hohenzollernstr. 24 a.			
Grund: Aktion Judenaktion vom 10. 11. 38.		eingeliefert: 10.11.38 erlassen: 27.11.38	

My father's registration paper for Buchenwald

The following morning my father was sent to Buchenwald. He was penned into makeshift barracks in appalling conditions along with several thousand other Jews who had been transported from towns and villages all over central Germany. The main objective for their incarceration was to intimidate them and to force them to give up their properties and other assets and to emigrate. However, more than 100 men died in the camp due to their treatment and many more died from the after-effects following their release. My mother had no idea what had happened to my father. Bravely, she went to the police station to enquire. 'Don't worry, lady,' said the man behind the desk. 'They'll be back.' But he didn't tell her where or when. My father was released from Buchenwald on November 27. Men who had been decorated in World War One were amongst the first to be let out and this is where his Iron Cross came in useful. Years later I discovered it in a drawer. When I showed it to my father he told me to throw it away. It must have evoked deeply disturbing memories about which he never spoke.

So many things were suppressed and never discussed which is why I knew little about what happened to my father on Kristallnacht and during his time in the concentration camp, until I read a deposition he wrote after the war possibly in connection with his claim for compensation from the German government. It was sent to me in 2017 by an historian, Dr Jutta Hoschek, shortly before I visited Erfurt with my son, Tom, for the first time since our departure in 1939. It is horrifying. From the Buchenwald archives I received the list of names of people who were arrested. Along with my father's, I recognised the names of many of my parents' friends, some of whom also came to London. Erfurt's Mayor at that time, Fritz Sauckel, was a committed Nazi who zealously carried out Nazi policy against the Jews. He became Gauleiter in overall charge of the whole of Thuringia. He was tried at Nuremberg after the war and hanged.

After his release from Buchenwald my father was told he had three weeks to leave the country or he would be returned to the camp. Then the pressure was on. Under the Nuremberg laws Jews had been deprived of their Reich's citizenship and were effectively 'stateless' which added to the difficulties of finding a country willing to take one in. My father's older sister, Hedwig Loewenberg, had emigrated to Brazil in 1938 with her husband, Erich, and two children, my

cousins Doris and Werner. Oma Selma was still living in Eschwege and my father was settling her affairs so that she could join the others in Brazil.

The three-week deadline was totally unrealistic. In order to get permission to leave Germany, you had to have paid Jewish taxes and made over all your assets, such as properties and businesses, to gentiles at knock-down prices. German bureaucracy being what it is, this all took a long time and then of course, you had to find a country to take you in. Even the Nazis realised that their deadline was unrealistic so it was extended to April 1939. Eventually my father managed to sell, for a pittance, my grandmother's house. Then he went to Berlin to arrange her visa and she was able to travel to Brazil to join her daughter. I have a telegram which says 'Die Mama ist gut angekommen' - 'Mother has arrived safely'. How she travelled there, I don't know. She died in Sao Paulo in 1948 and, sadly, my father never saw her again.

In Erfurt, my father was the junior partner in a law practice. The senior partner, Dr Alex Heilbron, was a bachelor and a regular guest at my parents' home. In 1937 he and my father went on a short trip to Czechoslovakia. On their return they were searched and a small bag of sweets, about which he had forgotten, was found in Dr Heilbron's pocket. A law had been passed to support German farmers forbidding the importing of any foodstuffs. For this small, overlooked trifle he and my father were fined and they were 'named and shamed' in the local paper on a list which appeared regularly of Jews who had broken the law.

The Nuremberg Laws were implemented piecemeal and region by region. They were added to as the persecution of the Jews intensified. After they were passed, Jewish lawyers were not allowed to deal with German legal affairs. I don't know exactly when my father's partnership was wound up, but eventually he carried on alone. He was then mainly occupied with the affairs of other Jews who were emigrating.

After my father came back from Buchenwald we were desperate to obtain visas to escape somewhere – anywhere! I have several letters that he wrote to friends and colleagues who had already settled in other countries, mainly Palestine. All replied sympathetically but none were able to help. ■



Inspecting Tanti Shüfftan's basket of goodies, June 1937

How we came to England

MY MOTHER had a second cousin, Erwin Feldmeier, to whom she was very close. His family owned a large factory in Plauen which was the 'Nottingham' of Germany and the centre of the lacemaking industry. Erwin had married one of the factory employees who was not Jewish. He converted to Christianity, married my Tante Hilde and they had two daughters, Renate and Ursula. In 1935 these girls were not allowed to participate in their school's sports day because Jews and half-Jews were forbidden to take part in activities regarded as 'Aryan'. This prohibition was temporarily relaxed during the 1936 Olympic Games so as to enhance Germany's image in the eyes of the world. Famously, when Jesse Owens, the great black American runner, won a gold medal Hitler could not conceal his chagrin. Erwin saw the writing on the wall and in 1936 he left Germany and took his family to England.

We were hoping eventually to join the Loewenbergs and Oma Selma in Brazil. However, we needed to leave Germany as quickly as possible so it was decided to travel to London and to await the Brazilian visas and finalise our arrangements from there. To obtain an English transit visa you had to deposit a substantial sum into a London bank, approximately £3,200 per person in today's money, to demonstrate that you would not be a burden on the state. However, you were only allowed to take 10 marks per person out of Germany. I have the letters in which Erwin wrote to a number of people, family and friends, asking for help in raising the necessary sum. Eventually the money was found and we got transit visas for England which stated 'valid for one entry and one exit only'. I still have these passports. Once the money had been deposited Erwin went in person to Woburn House where Jewish immigration matters were being handled. The place was in chaos due to the number of people applying for help, but Uncle Erwin got the necessary documents validated for us. There is no doubt that we owed our lives to his efforts.

We packed up. A Nazi was sent to our apartment to supervise and make sure we didn't take any valuables with us. However, he was just a young lad and spent much of the time playing with me. While he was distracted my mother managed to slip a number of silver items into

one of the boxes. They included a single, silver Shabbat candlestick. For ever after we celebrated Shabbat with the one candlestick. My father, observing what my mother was doing, turned white as a sheet. He had just been released from the camp and knew what would happen had she been found out. My ever-resourceful mother also unscrewed her iron and slipped a number of diamond rings inside. Now they belong to my granddaughters. Our belongings were put into huge wooden crates called 'lifts', much like the shipping containers of today. They were sent to Hamburg from where they were supposed to be sent on to England and, eventually, Brazil. My parents bought many new things for life in Brazil, including a large refrigerator and metal bedsteads, because they were told that in Brazil termites would eat our wooden bedsteads. Then the war started and the Nazis kept our packing cases and looted or auctioned off the contents. Only one arrived in England, the one containing the beds and a refrigerator amongst other things, and my parents sold the contents which sustained us for a while, although they kept the metal beds and slept in them for many years.

We left Germany for England on 7 March 1939. I remember sitting on the train with a little toy suitcase. It was made of shiny black leather with a beige trim. It had been given to me, filled with chocolate bars, by Tanti (Auntie) Schüftan, the widow of the rabbi of the synagogue in Erfurt. Tanti Schüftan lived in the apartment above ours. She was a dear old lady. I have a photograph of myself looking eagerly into a basket filled with goodies which she had lowered on a string from her second floor apartment window to the garden below where I used to play. She died in Auschwitz.

“My ever-resourceful mother also unscrewed her iron and slipped a number of diamond rings inside. Now they belong to my granddaughters.”

“ I still have a crocodile leather suitcase which belonged to my father. It’s battered but speaks volumes. ”

On the train to England my parents drew down the blinds of their compartment and sent me out to play in the corridor. I was a pretty, blonde haired, blue-eyed little girl and I didn’t look Jewish. When the Nazis came through the train looking at people’s papers they patted me on the head and didn’t bother coming in to our carriage, assuming there were gentiles inside. My mother had sewn a gold watch into my bobble hat – another instance of her resourcefulness – a fact she did not share with my father until we arrived in England! We travelled with a load of luggage – a big cabin trunk and many suitcases which we used for years after. I still have a crocodile leather suitcase which belonged to my father. It’s battered but speaks volumes.

It was night time when we reached the Hook of Holland, where we got on the boat to Harwich. My mother felt terribly seasick and I have this memory of her green face outlined against a maroon velvet banquette in the saloon where she was lying. I also remember standing on deck with my father and seeing a row of lights twinkling in the distance, and my father pointing and saying ‘Das ist England’. We arrived at Liverpool Street Station in the dark and I think Uncle Erwin met us. I remember walking up the garden path of his house in Litchfield Way in Hampstead Garden Suburb and the door opening and light flooding out, (light again!), and Uncle Erwin’s two teenage daughters peeping out at us. I also remember sitting at their round living room table with a large plate of chicken noodle soup in front of me and being too tired to eat. I was put to bed in a cot in the cut down nightie of one of the girls. ■



My mother's passport for leaving Germany - the visa was valid 'also for daughter Hanna'



My identity card for leaving Germany (back and front). Note the addition of 'Sara' to my name. Under the Nazis all Jewish women had 'Sara' added to all documents and for Jewish men it was 'Israel'

In the new country

I LIVED with Onkel Erwin, Tante Hilde, Renate and Ursula until 1942. My parents rented a room from Mr and Mrs Grabow in the house across the road. The Grabows had two sons. The younger, Tony, became my friend and playfellow. Playing with him I quickly picked up English without really being conscious of learning the new language. Tony and I still meet occasionally. Later my parents moved into the house next door as caretakers for Mrs Powell, the elderly owner who had gone to live in the country.

I remember my fourth birthday in May, two months after we arrived in England. On the window-sill of their rented room, my mother had lined up a row of chocolate Mai Käfer (May Bugs), covered in silver paper with red spots which she had thoughtfully brought from Germany knowing there wouldn't be any money for presents here.

As a refugee, my father had to register at the police station. The British had started the internment of 'enemy aliens' to the Isle of Man, Australia and Canada. It was the glorious summer of 1940 and many of the refugee men, including my father, used to go off early in the morning to Hampstead Heath where they would spend the day with a packet of sandwiches and not return before evening. Unlike the Nazis, the English police never called in middle of the night. They came asking for my father several times and, finding him out once again, they told my mother he would have to be there when they returned the following day. We were very depressed as my mother packed a small suitcase for my father. Remembering how they had starved in Buchenwald she included a salami. However, the next day the internments were stopped. The British had eventually realized that German Jews were not an enemy threat. Now my father could begin to look for some kind of work.

The first job my father found was going from door to door selling household goods. He carried a heavy suitcase full of scouring powder and brushes, but he was no good at selling and he had to look around for something else. On the corner of Hoop Lane and Finchley Road there was an Express Dairy which used to deliver milk bottles by horse-drawn milk floats. They had

their own stables and were looking for milkmen. From his youth in rural Saxony my father was accustomed to riding and driving horses. He rode to school as a boy and during World War One he served in the artillery with cannons which were mounted on horse drawn gun carriages. As he walked to the dairy to enquire about a job he overheard the foreman angrily shouting at somebody. I think that after the experience of Kristallnacht and all that followed, hearing a man shout abuse like that scared my father. He turned around and went back home. Mother was furious! She had hoped he would return having found a job.

Both my parents spoke a little English. They had taken some lessons in Germany and when they first arrived here they went to English classes at the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute. Eventually my father got a job as a carpet porter in an oriental carpet shop opposite Harrods called Perez. He had to carry and roll out carpets in front of the customers. He did this for a while until one day Mr Perez, who was Sephardi, said to him, "I have a customer who has a furniture shop in Ealing High Street. He said he is looking to expand his business and needs staff. I can give you a good reference. Here with me you will always be a carpet porter but there, if you are really lucky, you might get an office job."

And that's what happened. My father got a job at 'Lamertons of Ealing' as a carpet porter and then, in 1942, when someone in the accounts department was called up, my father was given his job. The chief accountant was very kind to my father, but then he noticed that the man was embezzling. My father was in a difficult situation. This man had been good to him but he was stealing money. Eventually, my father confronted him and the man left of his own accord and my father was given the job of chief accountant.

Lamertons was renowned for its horse-drawn removal vans. A team of greys and another of piebald ponies supplemented the motor vans when petrol was rationed. I loved visiting the stable mews behind the shop and well remember the smell and the sound of the munching horses. After the war Lamertons prospered and my father with it. He became managing director. Under his leadership the firm expanded and the company bought up other furniture stores. In 1964 the chain was sold to a larger company. My father was able to realise the

equity which, by this time, he held in the company and enjoy a comfortable retirement with my mother.

Shortly after we arrived in England my mother found work as a cleaner. She also made her renowned potato salad at the Cosmo Restaurant in Finchley Road which was much patronized by the refugee community. Her last cleaning job was at a house in Meadway, in the Suburb, working for three men who were all employed at the BBC. Their wives and children had been evacuated to the country and the men moved in together. My mother became their housekeeper and sometimes took me with her to work. They must have appreciated her because at Christmas 1942 they gave her two tickets for the pantomime at the Golders Green Hippodrome and two shillings and sixpence to buy tea afterwards. The panto was 'Cinderella' and it was wonderful! I vividly recall the lights, the lovely costumes and my embarrassment on being called up to the stage with some other children to sing a song with accompanying gestures conducted by 'Buttons'. After the blitz, when the families came back, one of the daughters of my mother's employers joined my class in school. Her face, when she realized that her classmate was the charlady's daughter, was quite a study!

Once my father had a 'proper' job my mother was able to give up cleaning and we rented a house in Leaside Crescent, where we lived for the duration of the war. It was owned by a Mr Baker who worked for the Ministry of Food. He and his family had been evacuated to Colwyn Bay. From time to time his mother, who lived on nearby Asmunds Hill, came to visit us. I suppose she was checking on the house. She had been a missionary in China and, while she drank the tea my mother offered her, she chatted to me. She gave me two Chinese painted scrolls. One of them, dating from the 16th Century, today hangs in my dining room.

My mother brought her cello to England. She played chamber music with amateur quartets and I can remember her struggling up the road to the bus stop carrying the cello in its large, black case. She used to play with a musical family who lived in Eaton Square. She said that they didn't play terribly well and her only reason for going was that they always served Fuller's chocolate cake for tea, which was delicious and a huge treat. ■

My early education

NOT LONG after we arrived in England I started at Miss Mulliner's kindergarten in Middleway. Janet Mulliner was an advocate of the Froebel system of infant education. This involved learning a lot about nature, doing crafts of various kinds, and dancing. My cousin, Renate, was also there training to be a teacher and every day we walked to school together. Renate was one of the most formative influences of my life and while I was living with the Feldmeiers we shared a room. She was a natural-born educator who became an infant school teacher and eventually an inspector of infant schools. Children, including me, adored her. I can remember so much about how and what I was taught at Miss Mulliner's. Learning to knit, I was allowed to choose my two favourite colours, blue and yellow, and using thick wooden needles laboriously knitted a dishcloth for my mother. I found it among her possessions after she died. I quickly learned to read and reading became, and remains, one of my greatest pleasures. We children helped in the garden where flower beds were edged with cockle shells. On May Day there was dancing round the Maypole and the girl chosen to be May Queen, (never me!), got to wear a long white dress which I envied hugely. Later, as a teenager, I occasionally baby sat for Miss Mulliner who now was 'Mrs ffoulkes' (spelt with two small 'ff's) which, I was given to understand, was immensely grand. Despite her kindness I was always somewhat in awe of her.

When I was seven or eight I was sent to the Henrietta Barnett Junior School (which closed many years ago). It was a fee-paying school and I don't know who paid for me to go there because my parents certainly couldn't have afforded it. Maybe they had a fund for disadvantaged children. I was there from the First Form to the Upper Third - today's school years two to six. At first I was unhappy. I was new and I had no friends.

There was one fair-haired pretty girl who had a little gang of admirers. Her name was Jacqueline. In the playground one day she called me a "dirty German Jew!" When I got home my mother noticed that I was upset. I told her what had happened and she said in her strong German accent, 'Zis is a free country. If anyone says anything like that again you give zem

what for!’ ‘What for’ was an expression she must have picked up in her efforts to learn English. The next time this child said something spiteful to me I grabbed her and shook her long and hard. The teacher in charge in the playground separated us and told me to go and stand outside the staffroom door where I waited apprehensively. When she came in she asked me what had happened, so I told her and what my mother had said. The teacher sent me back to my classroom and I was not punished. Furthermore, I never had another moment’s trouble with Jacqueline. Her remarks no doubt reflected the views of her parents and, in those days, were shared by many English people. From then on I enjoyed school and made many friends including my dear friend Shirley. We have now known each other for more than seventy years and counting! ■



With Renate when I was around four



Aged about nine, with my dog Paul at Leaside Crescent

The War

I STAYED IN London for most of the war. During the Blitz we all slept on mattresses on the Feldmeiers' dining room floor. We were squashed together like sardines and I disliked being squeezed up against my mother and the peculiar smell of a green jacket she always wore which had been given to her by one of the ladies for whom she cleaned. When the sirens sounded we all trooped out to the Anderson Shelter which Uncle Erwin had had dug in the garden. Towards the east the sky would be red with the fires burning in the East End. One night a house in nearby Ossulton Way burnt down. The next day Renate and I walked over and learned that the fire had been due to a faulty electric iron, not a bomb. The blackened roof ribs of the house stood out against the night sky. You could see them from our house in Litchfield Way. Each night they terrified me so that I hid my face as I was carried into the shelter. I hated being strapped into the top bunk in the itchy siren suit (a warm practical garment, similar to today's 'onesie', which helped guard against the damp of the shelter) that Tante Hilde had so kindly made for me. The shelter was very cramped and constantly flooded and most of the adults preferred to sit out on deck chairs watching for enemy aircraft in the searchlights. Later, when we moved into our house in Leaside Crescent, we got a Morrison Shelter which completely filled our little front room. During air raids we all crawled inside including our dog, Paul, who we had acquired by then and who was terrified of the bombs. The rest of the time the metal mesh sides were removed and the shelter served as a table. My tenth birthday party was held round it and, despite rationing, I'm sure we had a lovely tea. My mother was a wonderful cook and throughout the war she managed to produce delicious meals with the most limited resources. Some of her recipes were from World War One when German women had had to make do with far less than we had. Cabbage, I remember, played a big role.

Sometimes my mother took me to the Lunchtime Concerts at the National Gallery which were organised by the renowned pianist, Myra Hess. They took place daily, were free and lasted for one hour. All kinds of people came to listen to the music. Office workers, serving men and women in uniform, some wounded, and ordinary people like us. Some ate their sandwiches while they listened and nobody minded. The gallery was completely empty. All the paintings



my parents circa 1956

had been taken and stored for safety in some caves in Wales. Reproductions of the most famous pictures were hung on the walls. Near the entrance was 'Les Parapluies' by Renoir. How I loved looking at that picture! The pretty lady in a gorgeous outfit in the foreground and her little girl with a hoop totally appealed to my imagination.

In 1944 the flying bombs or 'Doodlebugs' started. The air raid warning would sound and one would hear the throb of their engines. When the engines cut out there would be silence followed a few seconds later by an explosion. At school we would file quickly down into the basement when the warning sounded. The Doodlebugs were followed by flying bombs that were completely silent. They fell out of the sky without warning and wreaked havoc.

My parents decided to send me to friends in Leicester for the duration of that summer school holiday. I really did not want to go. I had never been separated from my family but, most of all, I didn't want to be parted from my beloved dog. Like many little girls, I was crazy about horses and the promise of riding lessons helped resign me to my fate. In the event, the riding lessons didn't last long. At my fourth lesson, riding along a main road, an army convoy came along and my pony bolted. I clung on desperately but gradually felt myself slipping off. The pony's heels flashed by close to my face followed by the wheels of the military vehicles as I lay by the side of the road and that was the end of my equestrian career! In Leicester I stayed with a young refugee couple, Lore and Hans Rappold. In fact, Lore was pregnant and explained to me the facts of life about which I had no idea. Once I had become aware of her 'baby bump' I began to notice how many women wore the smocks which were the usual maternity wear of the times. The Rappolds were very kind to me and when the time came to go back to London I was sorry to leave.

I returned to London in time for the Autumn Term. I also started Hebrew classes at Alyth Gardens Reform Synagogue. One Sunday morning a 'doodlebug' fell while I was at class. The heavy wooden doors flew open with the blast and we were sent home to our anxiously waiting parents. My religious education was somewhat sketchy and, sad to say, I have never really caught up.

One morning in 1945 my mother came into my bedroom and announced, "der Hitler ist Todt!" Another morning, a few months later, she came in again and told me, "The war is over." My father insisted on taking me up to Leicester Square on VE night. My mother was against it fearing we might become separated but he felt it was an important experience and he was absolutely right. I have never forgotten it, the crowds, the singing and the people clinging to the tops of lamp posts. Even I could see that many of them were drunk. It was quite scary and we didn't stay long.

In 1946 our landlord returned to London and needed his house back so we had to move out. There was a housing shortage after the war and when my parents went to see a house in Golders Green they had to agree to buy it instantly whilst the next potential viewer hooted his horn impatiently outside the front door. It turned out that the 'viewer' had been planted by the agent to secure a quick sale! I lived in Alba Gardens until 1962 when I got married. ■

“My father insisted on taking me up to Leicester Square on VE night. My mother was against it fearing we might become separated but he felt it was an important experience and he was absolutely right. I have never forgotten it, the crowds, the singing and the people clinging to the tops of lamp posts.”

Senior School

1946 WAS ALSO the year that I started at Henrietta Barnett Senior School and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. On the whole we had excellent teachers and were encouraged to pursue our special interests. At HBS I found the group of lifelong friends that became my surrogate sisters and we have supported each other through thick and thin ever since. My year was the first to take O Levels as opposed to Matriculation. To create a more level playing field between Grammar and Secondary Modern schools we only took seven subjects and were not graded. I passed and went into the sixth form to study English, History and Art. I planned to go to art school and after two terms in the sixth form decided to delay no longer. Surprisingly, my amazingly tolerant parents permitted this. Perhaps they expected me to pass the time pleasantly until I got married! My art teacher advised me to go to the Chelsea School of Art where she herself had studied. I was accepted and started there in 1951.

Art school in the early fifties was very exciting. Students ranged from teenagers like myself to mature men who had been in the forces or reserved occupations such as mining; having completed National Service, they were entitled to government grants to attend university. We worked hard and partied even harder. We smoked, drank and listened to jazz, our teachers participating with enthusiasm. Many distinguished artists taught us at that time including Julian Trevelyan and Elizabeth Frink. Our two-year Foundation Course gave us a grounding both in fine and applied art. Amongst other things, we printed our designs on fabrics with linocut blocks. I really loved doing this and decided that I would become a textile designer.

In 1954 I started a three-year course at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, qualifying with Distinction in 1957. During my last year at college I won a Travel Award from the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) of £250. At the time this was sufficient for a return boat fare to America. In October 1957, together with Joan, my close friend from college, I set off for America. Joan was the daughter of Joseph Leftwich, a renowned Jewish writer and poet. He had been one of the group known as the 'Whitechapel Boys' and a friend of David Bomberg, Isaac Rosenberg, Marc Gertler et al. On Saturday afternoons, the Leftwich's held 'soirees' in their home in Highgate, where I met many Jewish writers and artists. ■

America

ON THE BOAT the night before we were due to arrive we were advised to get up early so as to be sure not to miss the first sighting of New York. That first, famous view of the skyscrapers outlined in the early morning sunshine was unforgettable, although the Statue of Liberty looked smaller than I had imagined. The quay was crowded and we were met by friends and relatives who were to put us up. Later, after we had both found jobs, Joan and I rented a studio apartment.

British designers were highly regarded in New York at that time and the RSA had given me some introductions. Quite quickly I got a job in a studio designing fashion fabrics. It was owned by a nice man called Hyman Kasanoff who was an Anglophile. There were four of us designers in the studio and I was the youngest. Hy Kasanoff was in charge of sales. He decided that he needed an assistant and hired an attractive young woman called Mary Travers. She informed us that she was a folk singer and had started a group with two friends, Peter Yarrow and Paul Stookey. Together they performed as 'Peter, Paul and Mary' and became a very famous folk singing group.

Despite my excellent training at art school I learned much about the design business during my time with 'Designs by Kasanoff' which was very helpful when Joan and I started our own studio back in London. Before going home we wanted to explore as much of America as possible, so we saved hard until we had enough funds to give up our jobs. We travelled by train across the States stopping off in Chicago and Salt Lake City where, for the first time in my life, I saw a shop freely selling guns. Our destination was San Francisco where the Hippy Movement had just begun to take off. Elvis Presley's Jail House Rock was playing in the cinemas and the famous City Lights Bookshop, founded by Laurence Ferlinghetti, was selling the works of the Beat Group writers. Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsburg would give readings in front of rapt hippy audiences. We found a cheap hotel having no idea that it was a brothel

until one day we were stopped outside by two plain clothed policemen who demanded to see our passports! This explained the rapid turnover of 'guests' and the puzzling presence of a surly man who sat in a cubby hole on the stairs checking all who came and left. Eventually, after many adventures and some terrible scrapes, (the term 'fools rush in' certainly applied to us), the time came for Joan and me to go back to New York and home to England. In October 1958 we sailed out of New York harbour bound for Southampton. ■

“ We found a cheap hotel having no idea that it was a brothel until one day we were stopped outside by two plain clothed policemen who demanded to see our passports! ”

My Story Hanna Singer

Our Wedding Day



The New Design Studio

AFTER NEW YORK, post-war London seemed desperately shabby and dirty. Sooty black buildings and empty bomb sites were still all around. I began to visit textile companies and stores such as John Lewis and Marks & Spencer with my portfolio and I started to get work as a free-lance designer. Joan and I wanted to start our own studio and eventually we were offered a cheap room in Ganton Street above a tobacconist in the heart of Soho. It was very basic with an outside lavatory and a cold tap in the yard. Soon the Carnaby Street style- explosion of the 1960s would begin but at that time Soho was still a village. There were many local residents living in quite appalling conditions without indoor running water or sanitation. From our studio windows we would watch the regulars troop into the Marshall Street Baths across the road for their weekly visit. We called ourselves the New Design Studio and began to build up a clientele. The studio prospered and by 1960 we had two people working with us. Also that year Joan met her future husband, the American writer Joseph McElroy. In 1961 they married and Joan went to live in America. I met my husband, Harry Singer, that same year and we were married on 15 April 1962. ■



In my studio in Ganton Street, 1959

Family life and a second career

HARRY'S BACKGROUND was similar to my own. A chemical engineer by profession, he was born in Bratislava. On 13 May 1939, aged 11, he came to England on the Kindertransport. Our son Tom was born on the same day and month in 1963. Happily, Harry's older brother and parents also made it to England so the family were reunited, but many of their relatives perished in the Holocaust.

Harry and I started married life in Ealing and when our son was born I gave up the studio and continued to work from home. Two years later our daughter Victoria was born and in 1967 we decided to move back to North West London so that the children could attend the excellent local schools and grow up in a more Jewish environment. For the next 12 years, like most of my friends, I was a full-time wife and mother and thought myself to be immensely busy, but when I compare my life to that of today's hard working parents I realize just how fortunate I was. Nevertheless, by 1980 my children were almost grown up and I began to long for a new career. At the same time our family circumstances changed and it became important for me to find work. Through a number of lucky coincidences, I was offered a job with the RSA, the same organisation that had given me my travel scholarship to America. I worked in the RSA Design Section, promoting the Student Design Awards. I hope I was a persuasive advocate. I certainly believed wholeheartedly in the competition which had given me my own first opportunity to make a career in Design. Many of the talented students who won RSA awards have gone on

“ I certainly believed wholeheartedly in the competition which had given me my own first opportunity to make a career in Design. ”

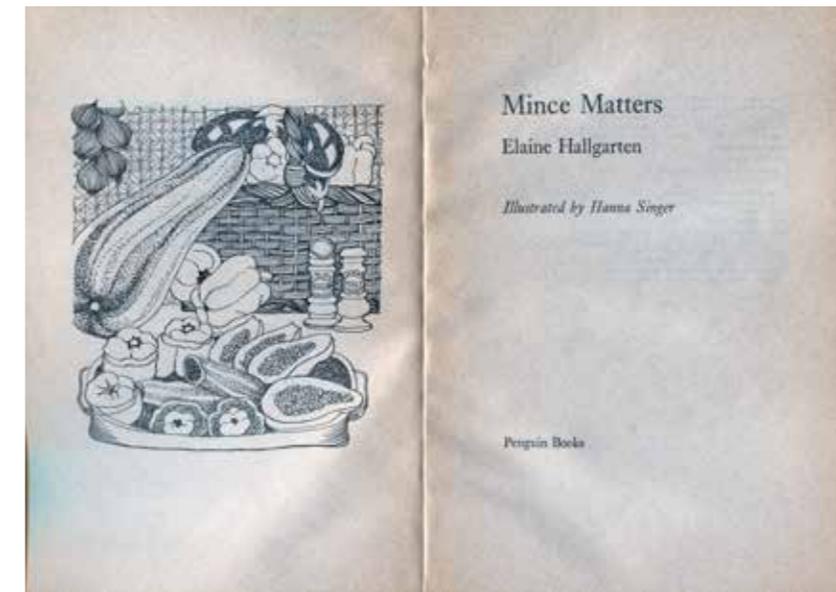


Harry

to brilliant careers. Amongst the best known must be Sir Jonathan Ive, now the Design and Marketing Vice-President of the Apple Corporation. Few individuals can have had such an influence on our daily lives as he has.

After working for the RSA and a stint at English National Opera I spent many years as a freelance consultant helping arts and design organisations to publicise their activities and raise funds for their work.

Our children went to university and then started their own careers, Tom in finance and Vicky in publishing. Eventually they married and had their own children and today I am the proud grandmother of three. Harry, too, rejoiced in his grandchildren but, sadly, he died in 2008 and did not get to see them develop as I have been fortunate to do. ■



Mince Matters, cookery book written by my friend Elaine Hallgarten and illustrated by me

Revisiting Erfurt

MY FEELINGS about Germany have always been ambivalent. For my parents it was the country of their youth with many happy memories of their lives before Hitler. Personally, I regarded it with both fascination and horror. Fascination with the 'what might have been' had my family continued to live the normal life one expects, and horror at what actually happened. For much of my life I had no wish to visit the country. In 1951 I paid a brief visit with my parents and was thoroughly disconcerted by the surreal atmosphere of the ruined cities amongst which the German post-war 'miracle' was already beginning to manifest itself. Years later I returned on business trips and, of course, all had changed and I could better appreciate the country and the people.

Until reunification Thuringia had been part of the German Democratic Republic (DDR), sealed off from the West, so there was no question of visiting Erfurt before 1990. In recent years I found myself increasingly thinking about my early childhood and feeling curious about the town of my birth. Finally, in 2017, my son Tom and I visited Erfurt together. I had been put in touch with an academic, Dr Jutta Hoschek, who is a specialist in the history of the Thuringian Jews. She sent me a lot of information before the trip and we spent a memorable day with her when she showed us around all the places she knew we would wish to visit. We saw the apartment block where I had lived, my father's former office in the main street and the art museum where a room decorated by the Expressionist artist, Erich Heckel, is being restored. It was donated to the museum by Alfred Hess, a wealthy shoe manufacturer and shop owner who was a patron of art and a client of my father's. Considered an example of 'degenerate' art, the room was boarded up and hidden during both the Hitler and the communist periods and Heckel's murals were badly damaged. It is currently closed to the public and being restored but I was allowed to see it.

The leafy area where we once lived is now shabby and run down. From the street I could see the balcony of our apartment. During the communist era the block was used by the NKVD (secret police), as a holding pen for undesirables before they were shipped elsewhere. Across the small



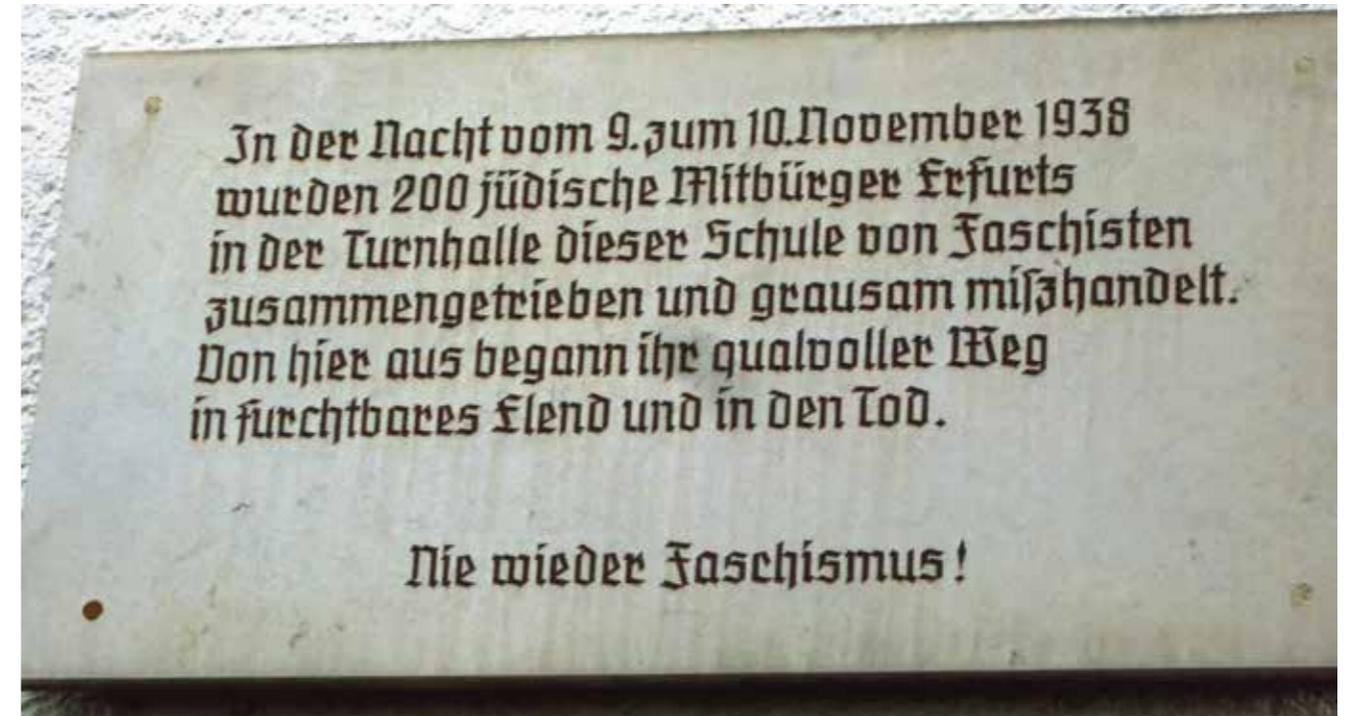
Erfurt - school with gym hall where the men were taken on Kristallnacht

park in front of the block stands a large white house which was formerly owned by a wealthy Jewish family. Here they gathered Jews for deportation. In front of the house, a dedication to those who were deported mentions, in particular, Tanti Schüftan, our former neighbour who is the only individual name on the plaque. She tried to help and comfort people right until the end. Other memorials we saw include a notice in front of the school containing the gym hall to which my father and the Jewish men of Erfurt were taken on Kristallnacht and brutalised before transportation to Buchenwald. Watching the children play I asked whether they knew what had happened on that spot and was told that they hold ceremonies of remembrance. Another notice stands outside an empty factory on the outskirts of the town. Here 'Topff und Söhne' manufactured the gas ovens for Auschwitz.

Although it is nearby, I did not visit Buchenwald. It remained a prison camp throughout the period of Communist rule and was only dismantled after reunification. The crude huts that were hastily constructed by and for the Jews who arrived after Kristallnacht are gone and Jews are not listed on the large memorial which names all those who were imprisoned under



Erfurt - plaque dedicated to Tanti Schüftan



Erfurt - plaque outside school with gym hall. 'On the night of 9 to 10 November 1938 200 Jewish citizens of Erfurt were herded, by Fascists, into the gymnasium of this school and horribly abused. From here began their painful journey to terrible suffering and death. NEVER AGAIN FASCISM!'

Communism. Most people over the age of 40 remember those times and it is this, rather than Hitler and the fate of the Jews, that still preoccupies them. The visit to Erfurt was unsettling and throughout our stay I was consumed with a feeling of profound agitation. The presence of my parents felt palpable. Outside our hotel in front of the cathedral was the marketplace where my mother had shopped for the black cherries she loved, always bought from the same peasant woman. They would have sat with their friends in the same old cafés and restaurants where Tom and I now sat. The strong local accents reminded me of the Sunday afternoons of my childhood when my parents entertained their Erfurter friends. To me, the raucous shouts of a lively group of young men sitting in the corner of a pub sounded just like the shouts my parents might have heard as the Nazis marched through the street.

These days Erfurt appears to be in decline. Apart from tourism there is little industry and young people leave for more prosperous lives in the former West. I sensed that some of the mistrust and suspicion which prevailed during the years of Communist oppression when people were encouraged to spy on family and friends still survives today. I'm pleased to have visited Erfurt but, having laid some ghosts, doubt that I will go again. ■



Outside my old apartment building in Erfurt. We lived on the first floor, centre apartment.



Plaque outside my apartment building in Erfurt. 'In this building political prisoners lived and suffered from 1945 to 1954 under the terror of the NKVD and the Secret Police. THEY WANTED FREEDOM AND HUMAN DIGNITY'



Memorial site of the former Jewish cemetery in Erfurt

Luck and fate

THEY SAY THAT people make their own luck. Whether this is true I cannot say but I have always believed that mine is a lucky family and that fate has smiled on us where others, in very similar circumstances, have not been so fortunate. For example, had my father not encountered a favourably disposed Nazi he might have been beaten to death on Kristallnacht. Had internments not been halted the day before the British police were due to arrest him, he might have been sent to Canada or Australia for the duration of the war. Had he not turned back on his way to the Express Dairy he might have ended his days as a milkman or possibly, a carpet porter. Of course, that most of my family had the good fortune to survive the Holocaust is by far the greatest luck of all.

I do sometimes wonder how my life might have turned out had we settled in Brazil. I suppose that part of me that feels steeped in 'Britishness' would have felt Latin American – hard to imagine!

It is sad that distance and the passing of time have meant that today I am only in touch with a few of my far flung relatives and that these tenuous links may not continue after I am gone. That is part of the Nazis' inescapable, on-going legacy. As a child I felt very envious when my school friends talked about Seder nights with their large families gathered around the table. It therefore makes me incredibly happy that both Tom and Victoria married into large, warm, inclusive families and that my grandchildren Ella, Daniel and Antonia have uncles, aunts and cousins galore. They are experiencing the kind of love and warm affection that families share and that I missed out on and for this I feel eternally grateful. ■



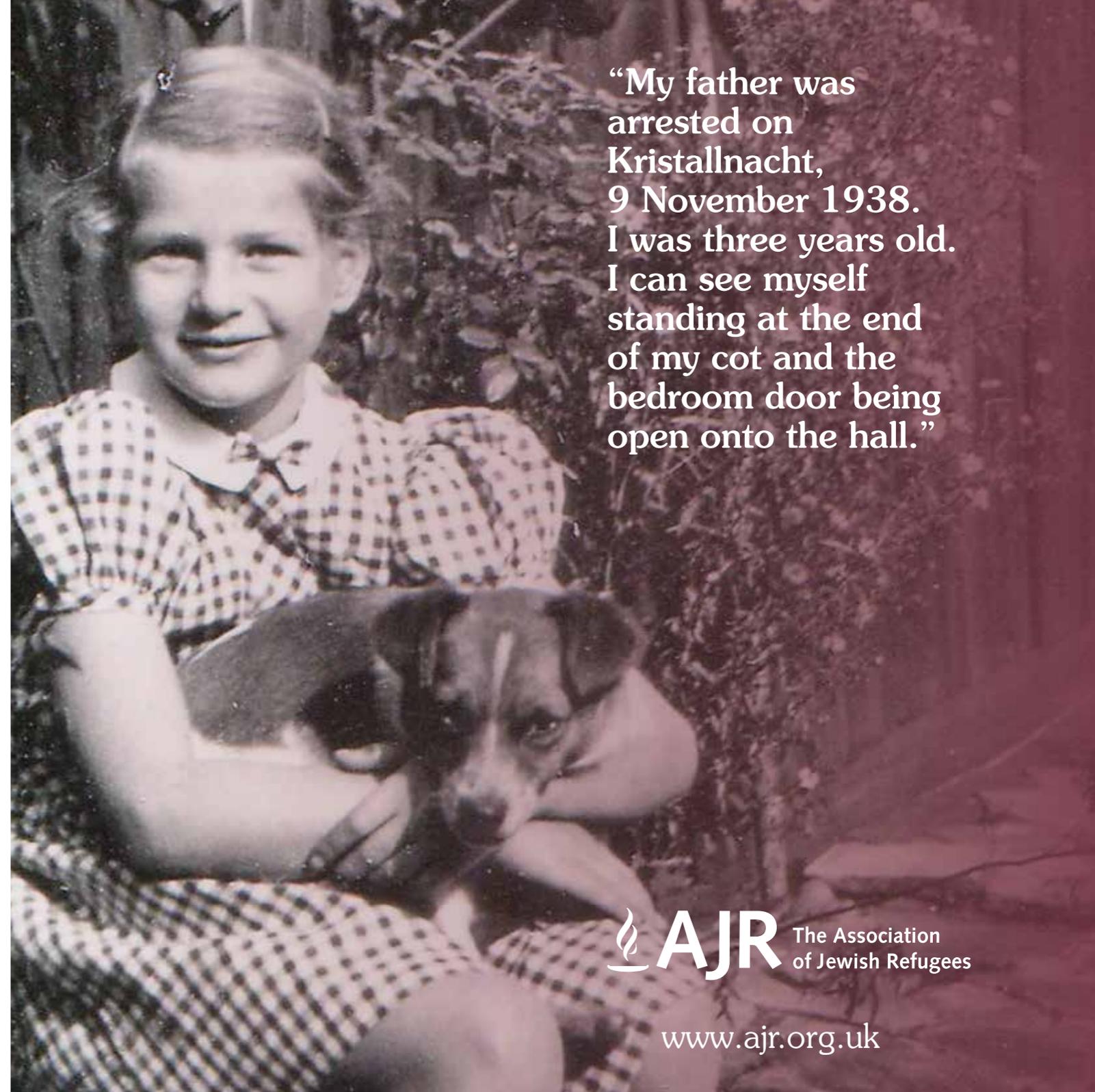


About the AJR

Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional groups offering members a unique opportunity to socialise in their local area. Members receive support from volunteers and can obtain advice and assistance on welfare rights as well as on Holocaust reparations.

The AJR is committed to the education of future generations about the Holocaust and is now the UK's largest benefactor of education and memorialisation programmes and projects which promote teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

About 70,000 refugees, including approximately 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, arrived in Great Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s. The AJR extends membership to anyone who fled a Nazi-occupied country as a Jewish refugee or who arrived in Great Britain as a Holocaust survivor. We also welcome the descendants and spouses of the refugees as members.



“My father was arrested on Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938. I was three years old. I can see myself standing at the end of my cot and the bedroom door being open onto the hall.”



www.ajr.org.uk