



# My Story

## Julia and Janos Fisher



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These are Julia and Janos's words. This is their story.

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

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

Julia & Janos were visited by AJR volunteer Cynthia Zneimer in 2017 to share their story.

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Portrait photography by Paul Lang.

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# My Story

## Julia and Janos Fisher

I started to travel to London on business and it was on one of these trips that I was introduced to Julia. She came from a similar background to me and she was the prettiest girl I had ever dated. With her father's permission we soon married. That was the best thing that ever happened to me.

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# Janos's Story

## My Early Life

I WAS BORN in 1937 in a very Jewish part of Budapest which later became the ghetto. I was an only child. My father Jenó had to wait for all three of his sisters to get married before he could marry – that's why he was 45 years old by the time he married. I have few memories of my early childhood. I have photographs which show that I went to a nursery, but I don't remember anything about it.

When I was one year old we moved to a nicer part of Pest, Király Street, which was a mixed neighbourhood, mostly gentiles and a few Jews. We lived at one end of the street along with other Jewish families like us, while more religious Jews lived at the other end of the street. In our block, all the flats which had views of the street were occupied by Jewish families. The other flats, overlooking the courtyard, had no toilets of their own and were occupied by gentile families with the exception of one Jewish family who lived there.

A very rich gypsy family from Holland moved in to an apartment on the same floor as ours, with windows overlooking the courtyard. The head of the family was the leader of a well-known gypsy band. I could often hear the family arguing as they tended to leave their windows open. They had two very good-looking sons who, within minutes of moving in, had found two pretty girls who lived further up from me and I saw them kissing behind the main door of the block of flats. There was no air-conditioning, the summers were very warm and the windows wide open, so you got involved with your neighbours' lives.

When I was a young boy, about four years old, my father would tell me stories. He told me that the family owned a flour mill in a village near Baja. The only entertainment in the village would be to go to the pub where gypsies would be asked to play violin under the table; that made it harder for them to play their instruments and more entertaining for everyone else! I loved to hear these stories from my father, but there never seemed to be time for me to tell them to my own sons.



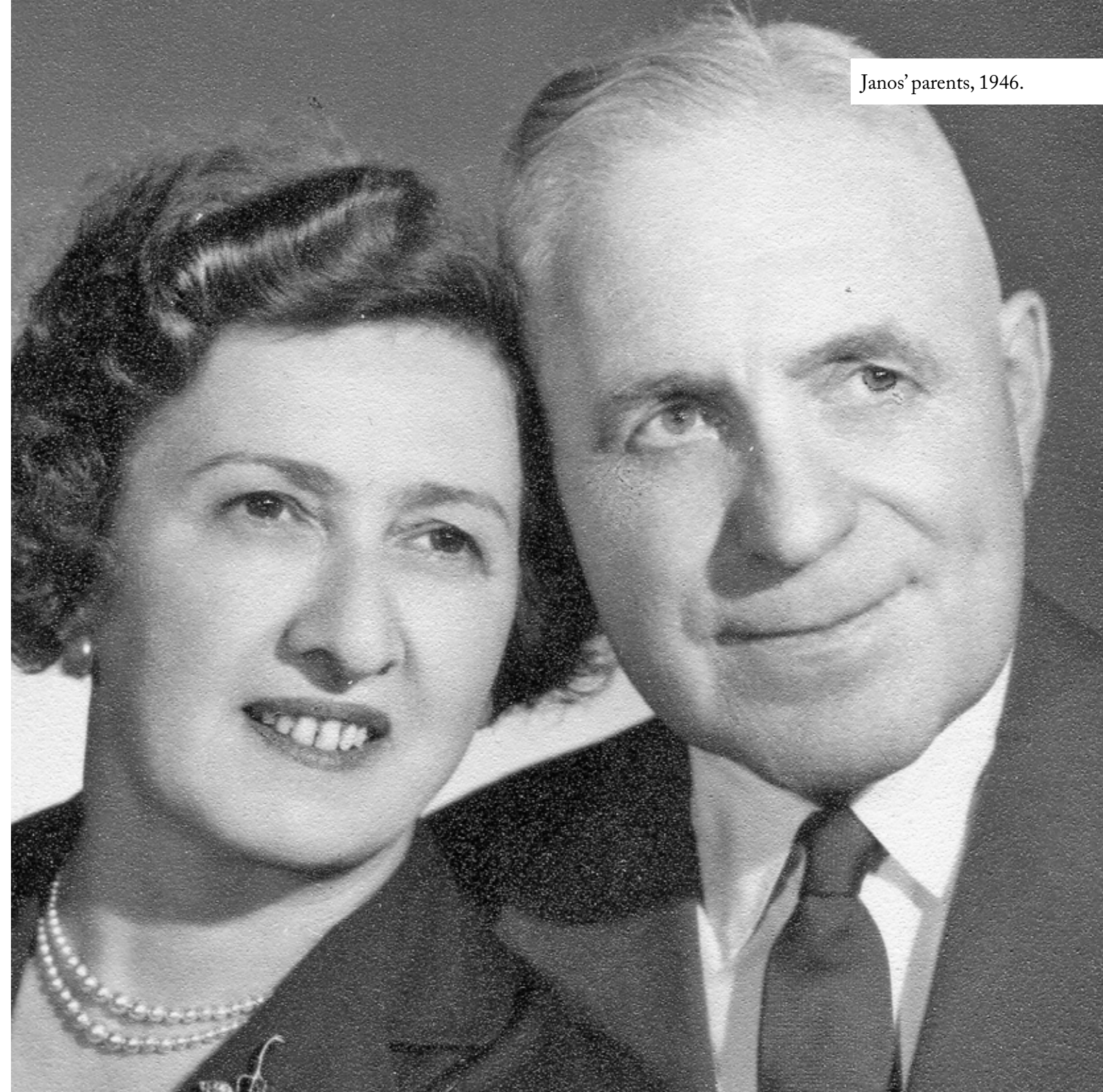
Janos in 1939.



We were a middle-class family. My father had a small business not very far from where we lived, supplying and repairing expensive coal burning decorative stoves. They originated from America and if you look you can notice them in old Western movies. The selling point was that you lit the fire in the morning and it would burn till the next morning. My father employed others to do the repair work, he never dirtied his hands. In 1943 he had to take a sleeping partner, a non-Jew, and use his name which was Nyitari. My father would carry on the business after the war and sold and maintained the stoves for many rich and famous people, like actresses and a well-known footballer, and to high class cafes. ■

“ My father Jeno had to wait for all three of his sisters to get married before he could marry – that’s why he was 45 years old by the time he married. ”

Janos' parents, 1946.



## The War Years

In 1939 the war came.

First we moved across the street. We occupied the flat where our relatives had originally lived. Then we moved to a Jewish house not far away which was protected, as far as I remember, by the Swiss government. The Swiss government protected many but became unable to cope with the numbers. The Swedish government then protected people and that was more efficient. It didn't save people, but it did help. Eventually we were sent to the ghetto with other Jews.

The terrible times were from about 1943 until we were liberated in January 1945. My father disappeared, sent to a forced labour camp. I remember walking in the street with my mother Maria wearing the yellow star, it must have been in 1944. She took me to a nearby block of flats which was overrun by children who had been abandoned. She left me there because she thought I would be safer there than with grown-ups. That was a horrible, horrible time. I remember I kept telling myself: "God will help you if you help yourself," which was, of course, nonsense. Two days later my mother decided she couldn't bear being parted from me and she came and fetched me.

I don't know how, but in 1944 Father came home and we survived the latter part of the war together, in a furniture warehouse with no food or sanitation. The last few days in the ghetto there was no food but my mother had saved some rice cooked with fruit in it and gave it to me. I slept on top of a wardrobe. I have no idea how we survived. ■

“ I remember walking in the street with my mother Maria wearing the yellow star, it must have been in 1944. She took me to a nearby block of flats which was overrun by children who had been abandoned. She left me there because she thought I would be safer there than with grown-ups. ”

## Liberation by the Russians

Eventually the ghetto was liberated by the Russians and we went back to our flat which by that time had been occupied by two spinsters. They were pretty eccentric and we couldn't throw them out, they had nowhere to go. I remember one of them used to parade about in her combinations, a short night dress, and when me or my father crossed the hall near to them she would climb into the big wardrobe and shut herself in. My father was enterprising and managed to get the unwanted occupants out of the flat eventually. He paid them to leave.

One day a relative of ours, his name was Sandor Eros, appeared with a machine gun on his back. He was a partisan, very good looking, very glamorous. It was 1945 and he had a car. He was a god! He took my parents and myself and our cousins to a very small town where he was the head of the police – how, we don't know! He was living with a non-Jewish woman who, according to my parents, was of easy virtue. They weren't very happy about his choice of partner but that was soon forgotten as he took us to stay in the village hospital where we were given all the food we could eat. It turned out that he supplied the hay for the hospital's donkey which was the hospital's only mode of transport. We had a very good stay there for about three weeks – I was even operated on for a hernia by a French professor at the hospital. Then we moved back to our flat.

I re-joined my school and then I went to what we called the *Gymnasium* which was like a grammar school, not far from where we lived. Most of the class were Jewish, although many of those were not openly Jewish. It was 1948. This was an exceptionally good school which I enjoyed going to. Eventually every subject would be taught in French and we had a very nice French professor to teach us. The Jewish boys had religious instruction by a rabbi, a very pompous man from the Jewish orphanage. I didn't like him at all. He didn't teach us much and I wasn't interested anyway. The rabbi forced us to go every Friday night to his synagogue at the orphanage. My father would go to synagogue on the high holy days but he never took me with. After about a year the French lessons and religious instruction had to be stopped anyway because of communism. ■



## Working in the Mills

For four years after attending the *Gymnasium* I went to a technical college to study flour milling and baking. Then, just before 1956 when I was 18 years old, I went to work in a modern flour mill, unique to Hungary, in Ersekvadkert. I have to say that I hated it in the village so I jumped at the opportunity when a relative managed to find work for me at a rice shelling mill in Budapest. This wasn't much better. In that factory my position was little higher than the lowest worker. They couldn't really put me higher up because I didn't have the faintest idea of the job. It was extremely hard work physically and I can't imagine how I managed to do it, work such as carrying sacks of rice up several flights of stairs when the lift broke down.

One particularly bad part was that sometimes, especially when on the night shift, I had to jump out through a window into the courtyard which was filled with rice shells up to a great height, and I had to shovel these rice shells with a heavy wooden shovel into an opening to feed the machines, which were driven, somehow, by the fire generated by the rice shells. My memory is that every time I did that it was night, it was raining, and it was dark, completely dark because there were no lights. So, on my own in this hellhole, I had to shovel and occasionally someone would shout down: "Do it quicker!" I can't forget this. I don't know how I survived it, honestly. I did this for about 18 months. It was horrible.

I kept working during the 1956 revolution. Some people didn't, some people did. Because most of us had problems getting to the mill, the shifts were 24 hours long instead of eight hours. 24 hours is far too long to be awake and some of the time there was nothing much to do. When the machines were working all right, we would sleep on top of sacks of rice. ■



Janos' graduation, 1954.



## My Swedish Friend Came To Visit!

When I had been a student in the *Gymnasium* our form master Dr Zavodszky for whatever reason had spent some time in Sweden – in fact his book, *Conversational Swedish*, is still available on Amazon. When he returned from Sweden he brought back with him addresses of Swedish boys who wanted to be pen-pals with children in Hungary. I spoke a bit of English by then so I volunteered, and I corresponded with a boy in Sweden called Ralph. One day in 1956 my parents sent me to go and buy bread. As I was going out, the little boy from next door ran up and said: ‘Your Swedish friend is here! Your Swedish friend is here!’ This young man, he was maybe a year older than my 18 years, had come to Hungary. He was a reporter and he wanted to investigate and report from Budapest on the political situation and, of course, it was convenient that he knew somebody who lived there. This was unbelievable: somebody from Sweden coming to visit in a country with completely closed borders. I remember that he stayed in the kitchen for part of the first night because my mother’s cooking obviously didn’t agree with him and he couldn’t get to sleep.

Ralph stayed with us for about two or three nights until we managed to persuade him to go home because, by that time, the Russians were coming in and we thought if they found somebody from the West, we would all be in trouble. I accompanied him to the Swedish Embassy and he managed to get on a convoy back to Austria and then home. But the friendship carried on until he died, sadly at a young age from cancer. Before that though, when Julia and I were already married, Ralph came with his wife and young son to stay with us in Wembley Park. By then he was a reporter on the television and, as I remember, he had something to do with children’s programmes as well. ■

“ Ralph stayed with us for about two or three nights until we managed to persuade him to go home because, by that time, the Russians were coming in and we thought if they found somebody from the West, we would all be in trouble. ”

## My Escape From Hungary

My escape from Hungary was so unbelievable and so complicated that I can only remember part of it. Many people just walked across the Austrian border but I and my friend Pal Partos had quite an adventure. I was 19 years old. My father paid someone to take my friend and I across the Austrian border in his car. We arrived eventually at a village near the border and our driver said to us: ‘That’s it. Thank you very much. Now you walk across from here.’ And off we went, two idiots in a peasant village holding briefcases. There were border guards and police in the village and we stuck out like sore thumbs. We had no idea which way the border was, we were two town boys. So we knocked on the door of a villager who told us: ‘Don’t go out. Stay here until the evening because during the day they will see you straight away.’ We stayed with him till the evening when he told us: ‘Well, it’s not very difficult. You go out and when you see a big tree you turn right and when you see a light on your left you turn this way and that way.’

We tried to follow his directions but after five minutes we had no idea where we were. It was the middle of December. We went on walking through fields but eventually, after falling into a stream, we decided we could not carry on. We were lost, completely lost in the fields. We couldn’t lift our feet from the mud sticking to our boots and we just gave up. We walked into the first building we came across with lights on, which was manned by Hungarian border guards and we found in there about 20 others like us with similar stories who couldn’t cross the border.

“ We were lost, completely lost in the fields. We couldn’t lift our feet from the mud sticking to our boots and we just gave up. ”

In the morning some Russians came. They were nice to us and allowed us to sit on their tanks to avoid trudging through the mud. They took us to somewhere more civilised where we were interviewed by Hungarian border guards. There were hundreds of people like us there. They told us to get on the train and go back home. So we went back home. My mother opened the door; she was very happy of course. She said: 'It's God's will, you stay with us.' But I said: 'Of course it's not, I'm going back again.'

My father got back in touch with the guide and complained that he had taken the money and let us down. The guide said he would take us again, this time to a different village and this time we left the briefcases at home! We had one pair of underpants each, that's all we carried. But it turned out to be a very similar story. We knocked on peasants' doors. Many of them were involved in smuggling people, who paid them in gold or cash. One peasant said: 'Yes, we will get you a guide, no problem. Wait for the night. Stay in the stable with the cows.' Well, the cows were very good company even though they never laid down, so there was only room for one of us boys to lie down at a time, the others had to stand.

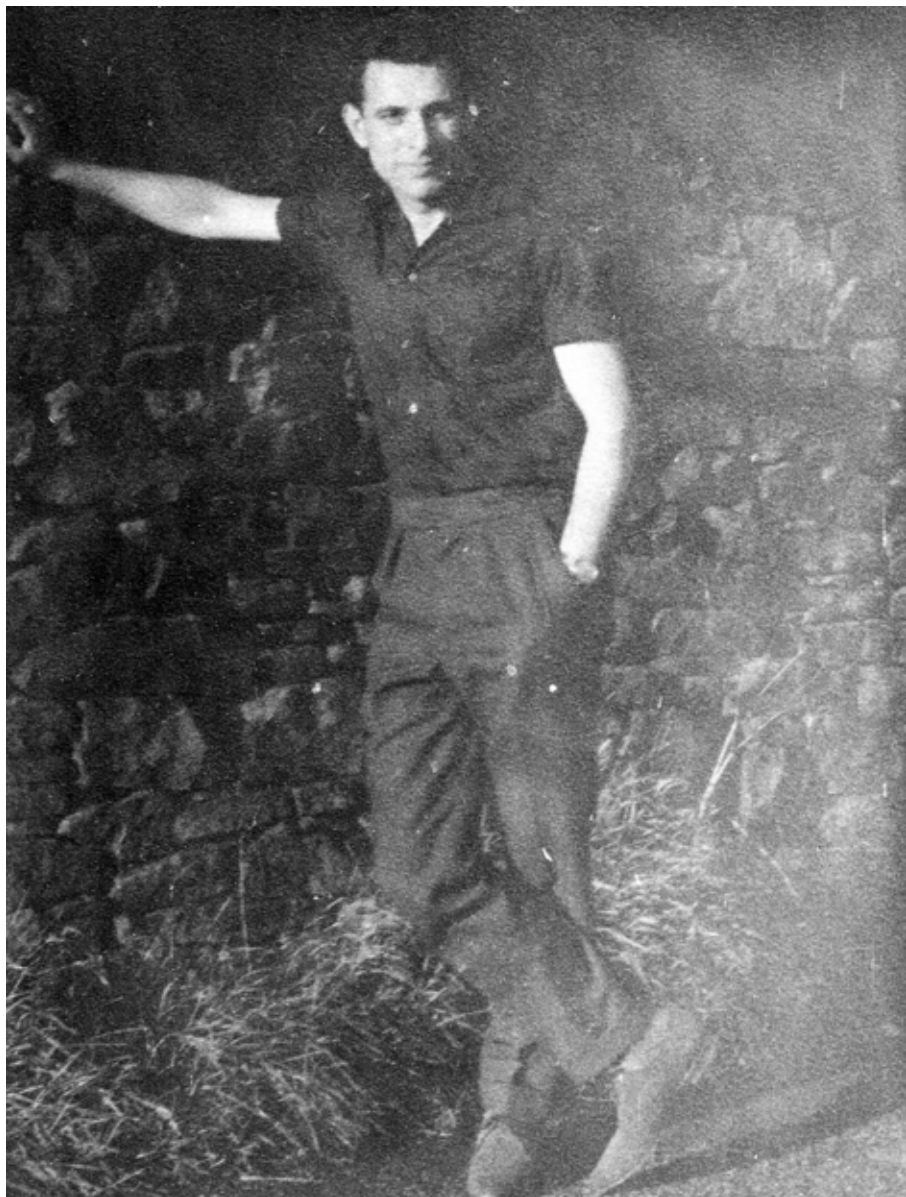
At three or four o'clock in the morning, the guide appeared with a group of about 15 including a couple with a baby. Everybody was worried that the baby would start crying and give us away but the parents assured us that the baby was sedated and would be fine so off we went. We had two guides instead of one, two brothers. Eventually we realised that they had no idea where we were. Because the group was so big they didn't take the usual route and we got lost. One of the young men said: 'One of you go in front of me, I'll go behind you with a knife. Let's go towards one of those lights we can see in the distance. If it is still Hungary you are in trouble, if it's Austria you'll be okay.' Eventually they came back; they had found a sign that read: 'Hungary this way, Austria that way'! ■

## From Austria to England

We crossed the border into an Austrian village. We were shown to a school where we could sleep but there was only straw to lie on. God knows how many of us there were there, women and men. There was a grocer in the village selling oranges. Oranges! I walked with my friend into the shop and bought oranges with a gold ring which my father had given me before we left. We ate the oranges in the dark outside the village so we didn't have to share them with the others.

We spent three days there. Then we were taken to Klagenfurt to a former prisoner of war camp, where there were still some prisoners of war living freely in wooden huts. I had always wanted to go to England. We were told that there was a group of refugees going to England who had agreed to be miners. I knew that in England they would not force us down the mine, it's a free country after all, so I said I wanted to go as a miner. They put us on trains to England. One memory of the train journey is that at Dover the Women's Voluntary Services came and gave us pies. Now pies in England are meat in some sort of pastry. This was unimaginable to anyone from Hungary. We were hungry and they handed us the pies through the windows of the train carriages. One of the boys bit into a pie and discovered it had meat in it. It was such a shock that all the pies went out of the window. We couldn't eat them. When we saw the pastry we thought it would be something sweet!

We arrived in London. We were put up in a cheap hotel in Sussex Gardens near Edgware Road. I had an uncle here, a brother of my father, who had written to say that if I managed to get to England he would look after me and help me go to university. I told the very kind lady in the hotel that I had an uncle here in London but he had no telephone and I didn't know how to get in contact with him. She sent a telegram to my uncle and, to his credit, he arrived a short time later. The hotel had a bar and I could see they had bottles of orange juice. I was dying for some orange juice but I didn't have a penny to my name. When my uncle came to see me we met in the hotel foyer. He gave me a small parcel and £1 and he said that now I could correspond with my parents for a long time. 'You are going to be a miner and you're going to get paid,' he told me. In the parcel were some of his old clothes, quite used and worn out. They went immediately into the dustbin. ■



Janos in Manchester, 1957.

## I Almost Become A Miner

We were due to be voluntary miners but that problem solved itself because the miners said they would go on strike if the Hungarian refugees were allowed to work in the mines. The leaders of the National Coal Board decided to put us 750 young men into the Lancashire miners' holiday camp. It was like a Butlin's and it was empty because it was the end of December, 1956. We stayed in huts and we were provided with meals. We played football on the beach at Skegness. It wasn't too bad there... even if we didn't know if we were drinking tea or coffee at breakfast because the tea was black and in Hungary it was light brown and served without milk of course! They quickly set up a school to teach us English, and many of the teachers were Oxford graduates.

I was the only one who spoke some English because my parents had insisted on me studying English privately so I became the interpreter to the head of the school. He was a tiny man, Dr Calder, a charming Oxford graduate, very nice but frequently drunk! It was now 1957. I went around from class to class with Dr Calder who would tell the boys: "You have to learn English. You are in a free country, you will be okay." I also interpreted in the office for the secretary. She started playing footsie with me under the desk. At the time I didn't understand what she was doing, which was just as well because she wasn't very good looking!

I was the only Hungarian there who spoke English so I was lucky, I got the best jobs. For example, I composed love letters to English girls that the Hungarian boys had met. Sometimes the girls' ex boyfriends would come and ask who wrote the letters to their girlfriends and threaten to beat me up. I had to tell them that I had no idea who their girlfriends were and I had written the letter for somebody else! The charitable ladies were nice to me because I was an easy case, able to speak English. They would invite me for dinner and let me have a bath - there was no bath in the camp.

We were at the camp for a few months while I presume that the National Coal Board tried to negotiate with the miners, but they were adamant. Eventually they had to disperse us and we never went down the mines. I had no intention of going down the mines anyway. ■



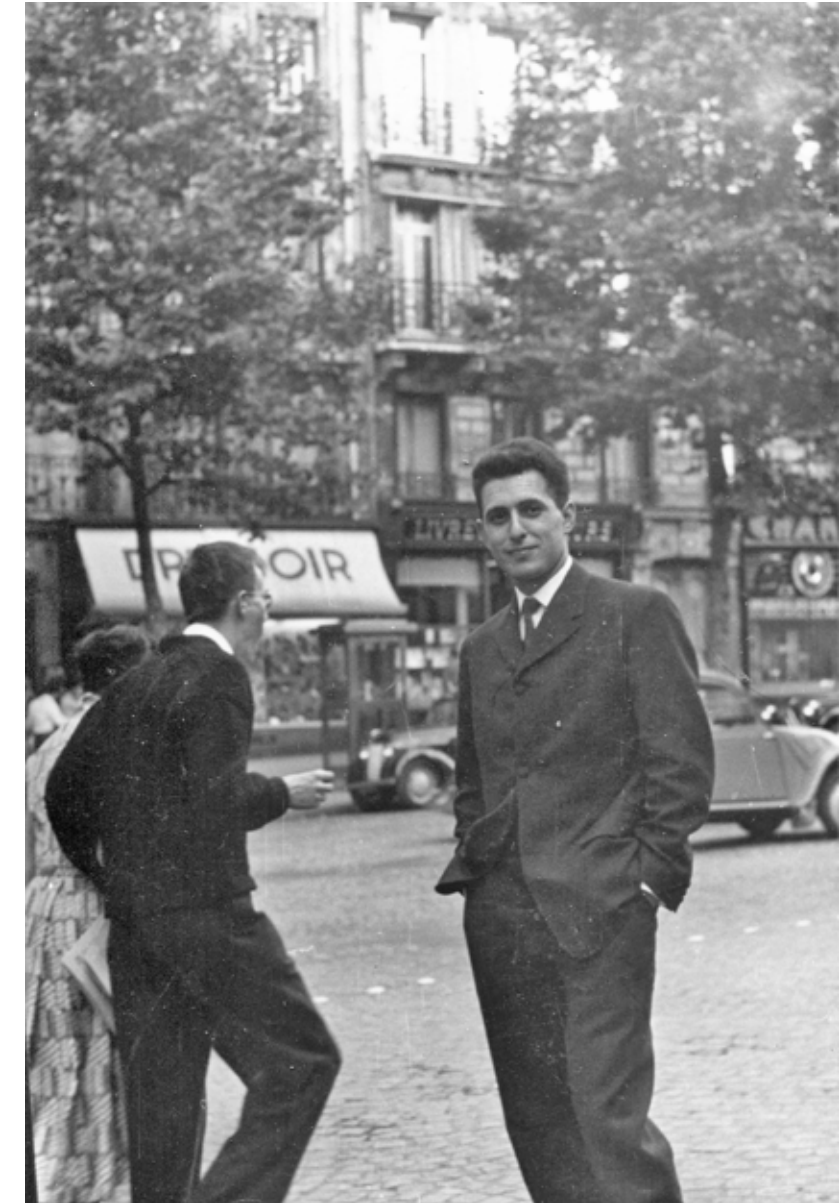
## My First Jobs in England

When I left the camp it was a very lonely time for me, a very bad part of my life. I didn't know what to do. In Hungary I had gone to a technical school which taught flour milling and baking. The teachers had no teaching experience at all so we learnt nothing from them. They were charming though, and they did everything for us. We learnt nothing but we ate very well, lots of delicious fresh bread! When I left the camp I applied to a flour mill and I told them I had a Hungarian diploma although I knew it was worth nothing.

The flour mill gave me the worst job and it really wasn't for me. I went from a flour mill in Grimsby to a flour mill in Manchester and didn't enjoy it at all. In Manchester I had really had enough when I saw an advert and started work as a door-to-door salesman. I knew some Jews had been very successful in this type of business. By the time I got involved it was passé but that was all I could do, so I joined a little sales team led by an Irish man with no respect for his role. He had a van and we worked for a company called Barons Court Electrics. We sold washing machines and sewing machines. I had never seen a sewing machine before in my life and washing machines didn't exist in Hungary. These were vertical drum washing machines, very good to sell.

We went to Moss Side because it was a bad area and it was easiest to sell to poor people on hire purchase. We used to go in the morning when the men were never at home because it was easier to sell to women. We would say: "Mrs Smith, give us your dirtiest thing to wash." Often they would give us dirty blankets which were very difficult to get clean. We would say: "Mrs Smith, don't worry. Put it in this washing machine, put the powder in and turn it on. Within five minutes it will be clean." But five minutes were not enough to clean the dirty blankets so we would position ourselves by the time switch. If you were clever you could adjust it for yet another five minute cycle with your knees! When five minutes were gone we put it on for another five minutes and then another five minutes. This was always done by the team leader who knew how to do it. Mrs Smith would say: "Hey! Isn't five minutes gone yet?" and we would say: "Oh, just one more minute," but it would really be 15 or 20 minutes. And we would take out these fluffy blankets, if you saw them they looked like a goat without hair and the fluff would stick on the top!

That Irish sales team leader let me drive his van – I had never driven a car before in my life! ■



Janos on his first holiday to Paris, 1958.

# Julia's Story

## My Early Memories

FOR AS LONG as I can remember in our house there was not much laughter. Memory is funny - you're not sure if what you remember is what you have actually seen yourself or what you've seen on television or in the newspaper.

My parents were married in 1938. I was born on 28 March 1941 in the Budapest ghetto. I had one sister, Zsuzsi, who was born in 1946. For many years my parents never spoke of the Holocaust and what we went through during the war. It was something you didn't talk about. My grandfather, Gyula Rottersmann, died during the war, we don't know whether he was beaten to death or died in the camps. He had seven sisters and only one of them survived the war.

My father's name was Andras (Bandi) Neufeld. He was in several forced labour battalions and camps. He came back in 1945. One day there was a knock at the door and there was Father. I didn't recognise him and said that he was not my father. I pointed to a photograph of him and said that was my father. He was terribly upset about it. That I remember. And my mother fainted upon seeing him.

We had no money and we were starving. My mother, Ilona (Ilonci), had sold all of my father's clothes, so he did not even have anything to wear when he came back. I remember going with him and knocking on the door of a flat, the owners of which owed us, begging for our things to be returned. I was four or five years old. The people who lived there would not open the door to us. My father was crying. During his lifetime my dad used to pick up scraps of metal, pins, nails - whatever he found on the pavement, stuffing it into his pockets because he said you would never know when it would be useful.

My father hardly ever talked about what happened, but one day when I asked him how come we hardly had any relatives, he told me that while they had been marching with the forced labour battalion they



Julia, 1942.



happened upon a clearing where he joyously recognised one of the workers as his cousin. They greeted each other and, as Father was leaving the clearing, he heard gun shots and all of those workers had been murdered by the Nazis. He was crying when he told me that. It is terrible to see your father cry.

I remember very clearly some things which had happened while my mother and I were in the ghetto. One thing is when I was a little girl my mother took me across the Lánc Bridge. It had slats and I could see dead bodies and dead horses in the water below. Because of that memory even today I don't like to go across bridges. I also remember some black-clothed people, and my mother and I running like nobody's business. Later she told me they were going to take us down to the Danube but we ran away and were saved. One day a very big machine appeared in the ghetto. It was a Russian tank with which the Russians destroyed the wall at the end of our road.

I also remember my mother telling me that we had nothing to eat. She was working in a brick factory and one day on her way home there was an air raid which bombed a chocolate factory. She put some chocolates in her apron but when she got to our front door all the chocolates had fallen out and she was very upset. Because of the starvation and malnutrition I suffered I had to have injections for five years after the war. I was only three years old when Mother went to work in the brick factory and I was left alone during the day. I learnt very early on to be silent and most of my formative life I have been very quiet and insecure. ■

“My father's name was Andras (Bandi) Neufeld. He was in several forced labour battalions and camps. He came back in 1945. One day there was a knock at the door and there was Father. I didn't recognise him and said that he was not my father.”

Julia (left) and her sister, 1947.





## After The War

My father had been a glove manufacturer employing 25 people plus outworkers. The shop he had, which was in the best part of Budapest, was taken over by a Christian as Jews were not allowed to own shops or any other businesses. After the war whoever it was who had taken over did not return the shop to them, nor did they reimburse my parents for anything. They had to start all over again, but then in 1948 or '49 everything was nationalised and they had to work in a collective. It is interesting how much pain and suffering a person can go through again and again.

We lived in our flat in Kazinczi Utca until 1948 and then we went to live in a district in Buda called Farkasret, which translates to Wolf Meadows. It was on top of the hill. My sister and I were the only Jewish children there. I was picked on continually at school because I was Jewish, particularly at Christmas and Easter and especially after the priest gave his Easter sermon. That's something you don't forget. When I was 13 years old I wrote a poem about it. My biggest problem at school was that I was so nervous in class; I got very good marks but when I would be called up to explain something I would burst into tears. That was the after-effect of the war.

I wasn't bad looking, I wasn't beautiful but I was quite presentable. There was a dance at the school, a boy came up to me and asked me to dance and all the other boys said: 'No, you can't dance with a Jew!' I didn't tell my parents what had happened because they wouldn't have been able to have coped and, anyway, there was nothing they could have done to help me. We had a dog called Lorinc – a half-breed – he was ferocious and he loved our family, especially my father. Lorinc used to walk to school next to me, which was a great comfort and also a great deterrent for the Jew haters. That dog was the only thing I regretted leaving behind when we left Hungary.

“After the war whoever it was who had taken over did not return the shop to them, nor did they reimburse my parents for anything. They had to start all over again, but then in 1948 or '49 everything was nationalised and they had to work in a collective.”

My grandfather had been a founder member of Csaky Utca Synagogue, on the other side of the Danube in Pest. My parents sent me once to the *Cheder* there. We don't know who was watching us but the following day my parents were told that if I kept going to a Jewish school there would be consequences. So I stopped. My parents were not religious at all but we used to keep Friday night. Hungarian flats had two thick windows (rather like double glazing) and very heavy shutters. Every Friday night my mother would close the shutters and light her candles. One Friday night there was a knock on the door and my grandmother got so worried that she put her hands on the candles to put out the light. I don't remember saying a prayer over the candles, I don't think we did. There was no special meal, no teaching of Hebrew, nothing like that. I remember that once we had matzah but I don't know where my parents got it from. ■



Julia's parents after their wedding, 1938.

## Not Much Laughter In Our House

We knew that we were Jewish and that was that. We knew that we were different. There was not much laughter in our house. My grandmother, who had come to live with us in Buda, was a very bitter person, very spiteful. She was very seriously diabetic. She had been in two or three camps – she returned from Dachau. All of her side of the family had died except for her sister Manci who was 20 years younger than her. Manci had been forced to marry a man she didn't like from Romania and they had a daughter called Judit. In 1944 first her husband was taken away and he died, and then she and her daughter were taken away. Judit was a year older than me, so about four years old. They were put into a truck but the mother threw the daughter out of the truck before it left the ghetto and little Judit was left walking around in the ghetto on her own. At that time her uncle, her father's brother, came from Romania looking for his family. He found the girl and took her back to Romania. She stayed with them and she survived. My grandmother's sister came back from Auschwitz but she didn't want her little girl back, she wanted to get married again and start a new life.

“ I have very bad memories of Hungary because of my religion. My husband doesn't, but I do. I had no friends in Hungary: no-one was allowed to be my friend.”

My grandmother had come from Ukraine to Hungary where she met my grandfather and got married. As far as I know my grandmother had relatives in Austria and in France. She used to send parcels to her Austrian relatives, who all died later in Auschwitz. ■

I have very bad memories of Hungary because of the antisemitism. My husband doesn't, but I do. I had no friends in Hungary: no-one was allowed to be my friend. Just before the revolution my parents sent me two or three times to a Jewish orphanage in Óbuda for Sunday afternoon activities so that I could be with other Jewish youngsters. I met a girl called 'Agi Grosz' there and she became my only friend. I know she is in Canada now and I'd like to find out where she is but I've forgotten how she spells her name.

In 1956 the Hungarian revolution started. At 5 o'clock in the morning my parents got a telephone call from somebody to say that, as Jews, our names were first on the list. My mother, who was usually a very calm, quiet person, started to scream. We left Hungary very soon after. My parents gave their house to the government in return for five passports – for my grandmother, my parents, my sister and I. Later we found out that there had been quite a few Jewish families living nearby but, as they would not associate themselves with us or wanted anything to do with us, we never realised. My parents had everything taken away. When they left Hungary they had to start again. You just got on with it. ■

“ At 5 o'clock in the morning my parents got a telephone call from somebody to say that, as Jews, our names were first on the list. My mother, who was usually a very calm, quiet person, started to scream. We left Hungary very soon after.”

## We Arrive in England

We arrived in England on 21 February 1957, just before my sixteenth birthday. My first memory of England was my mother singing the *Hatikva* in a synagogue and crying. I also recall that, sometime later when my parents got their naturalisation papers in 1963 or 1964, they both cried from morning to night, they were so happy. That was really good.

My father had a brother, Jozsi, who left Hungary in 1938 and became a circus artist. He was supposed to meet us at Victoria station when we first arrived but he didn't turn up, so there we were, the five of us standing there not knowing what to do. It turned out that my uncle was still in India and he didn't return to England until two years later! He left us stranded without a word of English between us. The only money we had was £25 which had been given to us by my father's friend who met us at the station in Zurich on our way to England. He had asked my father to stay in Switzerland but Father refused because he thought his brother in London would look after us. We were bringing a raincoat from friends of my parents to give to their son who came to meet us at Victoria station to pick it up. When we realised that my father's brother was not coming to meet us this young man told us about his aunt who had a boarding house in Richmond, which is where we first stayed. It felt fantastic to be in England.

My parents went to an organisation in Tottenham Court Road which helped Jewish refugees, and within three days they were working for some ex-refugees from Austria. Within a year they had enough money put together to buy a sewing machine and then they started to make duffle bags. I didn't speak any English when we came to England. I don't remember what that felt like, I only remember the kindness of the people. My sister and I were desperate to buy chewing gum. We went to a small sweet shop and there was a very nice lady there; we stood there pretending to chew and the poor lady showed us every single sweet in the shop until she found what we wanted. We didn't know how to ask for it. Today it wouldn't be like that, but in those days people were much kinder and more tolerant towards refugees. ■



Julia, 1964.



## I Have No Bad Memories From England

We lived in Richmond for about two years. Because the rabbi there told my parents that they would not be able to get me into a school, I went to work in a factory in Richmond putting stickers on toy aeroplanes. I told my parents ‘I have to go to school, I must have some sort of education, I can’t be a factory worker,’ and that’s how I came to go to the Avigdor school in Manor House. It was terribly far, two hours away. They wanted me to learn Hebrew but I said: “I have to learn English first.” I worked in a supermarket doing packing in the evenings. After three months at the Avigdor school I went to Kingston Polytechnic to study chemistry, physics, maths and English but I couldn’t finish my studies as I had to help my parents out. I went instead to Pitman’s College on The Strand and learnt shorthand and typing which enabled me to earn a good wage.

After college I had to go to work because my parents didn’t make much money, and then I met Janos. Our families didn’t know each other before although they had mutual friends. They said he was a nice Jewish boy from Manchester who didn’t know anybody in London so can he come and visit you and that’s how we met.

We were grateful for whatever we got. People must have been kind to me because I have no bad memories from England. We had to get on with life, there was no sentimentality, you just had to get on with it. Married life was better. We didn’t have anything; whatever we had we got for ourselves.

“We were grateful for whatever we got. People must have been kind to me because I have no bad memories from England. We had to get on with life, there was no sentimentality, you just had to get on with it.”

Janos’s Hungarian is better than mine because I have deliberately tried to forget that I come from Hungary. My father was 45 when he came here and my mother was 41 and I told them they had to learn English. They did not work with anybody who spoke English during their first year here so I made them learn it. In the end they spoke good English. Of course, my sister Zsuzsi spoke it as well; she was five years younger than me and went to school here. Her Hungarian was not very good because we spoke to each other in English and also to most of our friends who were from Hungary too.

Zsuzsi left England when she was 18 years old and went to live in Israel. She had lived a lonely life in England but she settled well to life in Israel, and went to live on a kibbutz in Hatzor. When she was 25 she married an Israeli on the kibbutz but just five months later she died. It was 1975. My lovely mother could not live without her and died just three weeks later from an aneurism and blood clot on the brain – she was just 56 years old. Three weeks after that my father’s only brother, Jozsi, also died.

That was a horrible period but life goes on. My father died eight years later. Even today there are times I forget that they are all dead and I want to phone them to download my worries... and then comes the realisation that they are no longer with us.

I just wanted to forget everything about Hungary. It is quite therapeutic to tell the story now. It’s been good to talk to somebody else besides Janos. ■

“I just wanted to forget everything about Hungary. It is quite therapeutic to tell the story now. It’s been good to talk to somebody else besides Janos.”

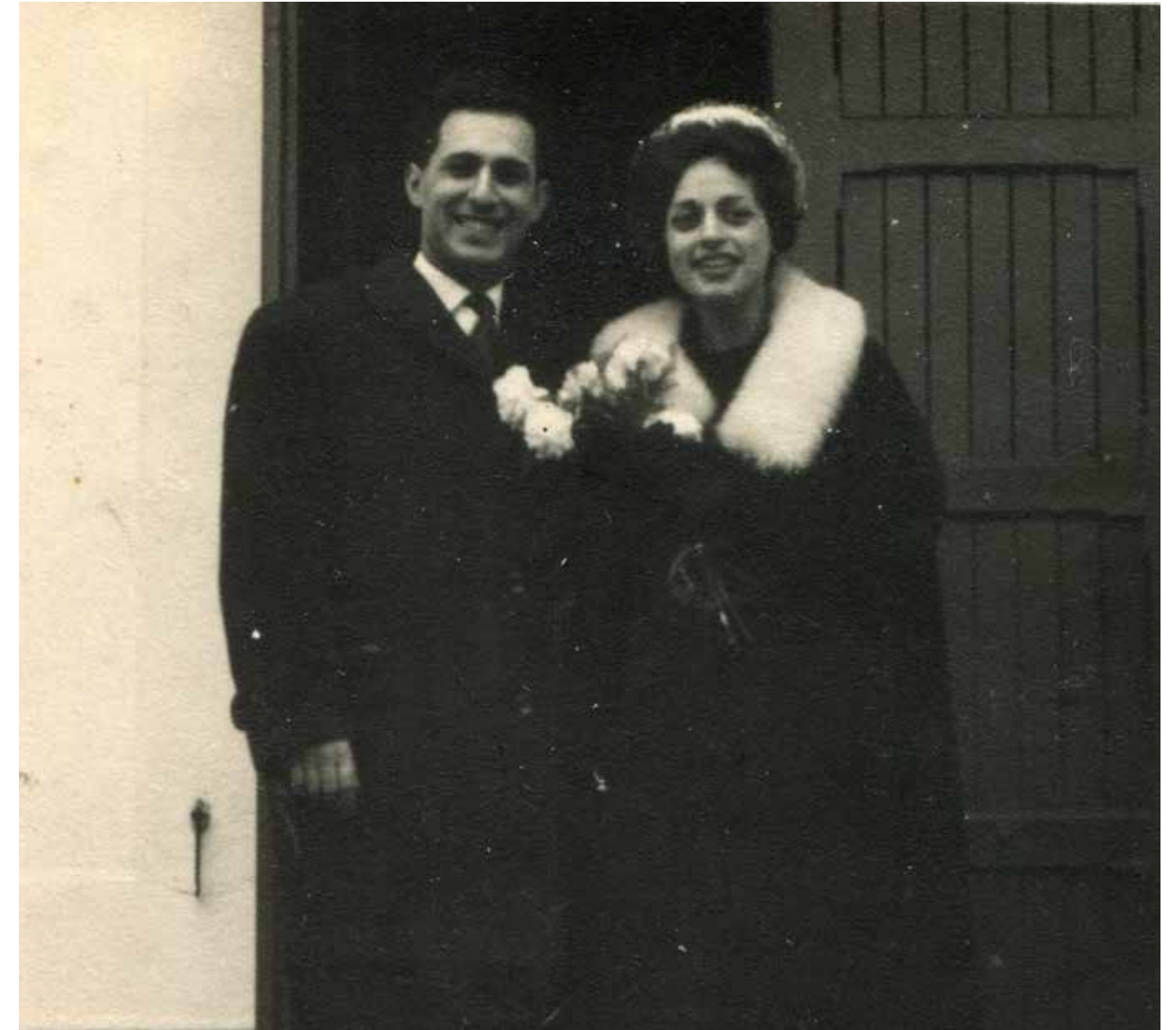
## Julia & Janos

Janos: I got to know a Hungarian family who were manufacturing leather purses in one of their bedrooms. I began to work with them, selling their purses to shops and that was the beginning of my career with leather goods. I started to travel to London on business and it was on one of these trips that I was introduced to Julia. She came from a similar background to me and she was the prettiest girl I had ever dated. With her father's permission we soon married, in 1960. We were married at Brondesbury Park Synagogue by Rabbi Melenek. That was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Julia: I was not yet 19 and he was 24. Neither of us had money so whatever we have, we got it together. I was working for Dow Chemicals as a secretary in the credit control department and Janos continued wholesaling the leather goods.

Janos: We opened our first shop on Regent Street in the West End. It was not a great success. Then we opened another shop in Queensway (Bayswater) which became very successful and had the highest turnover of Italian and French handbags of any privately owned shop in London. We also had a shop in Reading which was quite an adventure! We stocked Gucci, Dior, Fendi, Pucci and Ferre. We were the only privately-owned shop to sell Charles Jourdan handbags in London. We travelled to Italy and France frequently for business, and often added a few days' pleasure too.

We employed girls from all over the world in our shops: Italians, Spanish, Thai, Polish, Ukrainian. We even had a girl from the Galapagos Islands! Our best clients were Arabs from the Gulf, and later Nigerians. When the Sultan of Brunei had his birthday he gave students studying here a certain amount of money. They spent it with us - they were good customers. The business gave us a lot of pleasure but also a lot of headaches! Two brothers from Brazil were caught smuggling drugs in what turned out to be suitcases bought from us... with a discount and VAT refund! They were convicted and imprisoned partly on my testimony at a crown court.



Our wedding, 1961.





Clockwise top left: our first boutique 'Julie', Queensway; our first shop on Regent Street, 1965; our second upmarket boutique 'Julie', Queensway; our shop in Reading and our second shop in Queensway.

Julia: Once Emilio Pucci received us in his palazzo and put on a fashion show for us to show his collection. Even the toilets were fantastic! We went to the Dior show, to Gucci and to Fendi. That's when we thought we had arrived. Few people would have the buying power to go to these places. Except for the luggage everything in the shop was imported from Italy and France. There wasn't another handbag shop in England which turned over as many handbags as we did.

Janos: Eventually the clientele changed, the rent went up, the rates went up astronomically and the stealing by staff was on a very big scale. After having the longest surviving shop in Queensway - 30 years - we had to close as the increasing overheads forced us out. The company we sold to went bankrupt a few months later. By law we were responsible for their rents for some years, which would have been a terrible blow to us, but for some reason our landlords failed to demand this. This was a rather large blessing indeed. We stopped importing from France in 2014 as literally all my wholesale customers closed and reluctantly business had to stop. We gave our remaining stock to charity.



Julia volunteering in Israel.



Julia: Our first son Julian was born in 1967 and Daniel was born three years later. Both boys had their *barmitzvah* at the Kotel in Jerusalem. We bought our first house in Kenton in 1967, we moved within the same area in 1971 and for the past 40 years we have been living in the same house in Bushey Heath. We celebrated our 55th wedding anniversary at the end of 2016.

Janos: My parents, who never followed us to England, visited us frequently. My father passed away from a heart attack. Not long after my mother developed dementia. Two days before she died I went to see her in the Jewish hospital in Budapest. She was in a small room with another woman. My mother recognised me and said: “God be with you my darling Jancsi.” This still haunts me. It hurts as if it happened yesterday. Both my parents are buried in the large Jewish cemetery in Budapest.



Janos, 1977.



Julia, 1991.



Janos’ parents with the boys, 1973.





Us in 1987.



Family holiday in Bangkok, 1977.



Julia's sister Zsuzsi, 1974.



Julia, 1992.

Julia: I have done a lot of voluntary work and stood up for a lot of causes. It helps make me feel part of the community. I like working with Holocaust survivors and when I worked for Russian Jewry I felt good as if I were compensating for the way my parents were treated, because not many people here stood up for us when we needed it. I am a strong Zionist – Israel can't do anything wrong as far as I am concerned. If anybody says anything against Israel I can't keep quiet. Fifteen years ago I went to volunteer with the Israeli army, putting gas masks together for one week. It was the week before the Iraqi war. We had proper military uniforms and were treated like soldiers.





Janos: Like Julia I also feel like an outsider, but it does not bother me a great deal and if somebody asks me what accent I have, I don't resent it. Not in the least. There are so many foreigners here who have contributed rather than taken; many people take advantage but we never did so I am not embarrassed. We never really made long-term friendships with English Jews. We have friends who are Hungarian Jews, there is one couple we have known for 45 years or more. The only true friend I have is in Canada unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, because I am generally not easy to get on with. I see people's faults very quickly and I can't forgive their faults – which is my big fault!

Julia: We have some Israeli friends. I think we are patriotic for England. Jews, wherever they go, are law-abiding and patriotic but are always rewarded with the opposite. Unfortunately history is again repeating itself. I blame my parents in a way that they didn't see things and they didn't leave Hungary sooner. My parents had applied and received visas to go to Australia in 1938 but my father caught typhoid and when he recovered it was too late to leave the country.

My experiences in Hungary were so much worse than those of Janos. I despise it from the bottom of my heart. In Hungary there was antisemitism before the war, during and now. We always said to our staff: 'We are Jews and we are for Israel. If you have problems with that, don't come and work for us.' I was part of a counter-demonstration outside Marks & Spencer for five or six years when people from LSE and Arabs were demonstrating against Israel. My friends were absolutely flabbergasted. 'How can you do that?' they would ask me.

Janos: We got the wrong friends.

Julia: I don't know what our children felt about that.

Janos: Hopefully proud.

Julia: They knew what I was doing. Both of our children are very pro-Israel.

Janos: The younger makes a point of telling people that he is Jewish and stands up for Israel. We are extremely proud of both our sons. Julian has lived in New York for a number of years. He has three university degrees and works in risk management. Danny is a multiple entrepreneur and lives in Birmingham.



Julia: We never passed on our feeling of not belonging to our sons.

Janos: Luckily for me I don't suffer to this degree. I remember once an English man stopped at our stall, where we regularly demonstrated in support of Israel and discussed politics with me and in the end he said: 'I never ever met a Jew in my life and I am glad I met you' and he shook my hand. To me that was very rewarding. We were often joined at these demos by Gulf Arabs who praised us because they hated Palestinians more than they hated Jews.

Julia: Our son Julian works in New York. 9/11 came and we didn't think about it. We were working in the shop. The phone rang and Janos picked it up. Julian said: 'I'm alright but I'm running.' We didn't know why he was running because the phone went dead and we couldn't phone him back. He was ok but that was beside the point. He was working one block away! ■



My Story Julia and Janos Fisher

## Belonging by Julia Fisher

14 January 2012

I do not belong anywhere  
Nobody wants me anyway  
I was a Jew from Hungary  
I am a stranger in my adopted country  
I am lost without an identity.

I tried so hard to assimilate  
Without success  
Let down by my accent  
I've been an outsider for far too long  
Hoping against hope to be accepted by some  
To be just one of the crowd  
Not sticking out like a sore thumb.

I am not religious although I am proud to be Jewish  
I am not keeping kosher although I should do it  
I am in limbo – a voyeur without roots  
A stranger without hope.

I wish life would have been different  
I wish I would be like everybody else  
Not an outsider looking in but a participant.

Wishing it won't change anything  
People are people who dislike strangers  
Who feel threatened by the unknown and unfamiliar  
They cannot be charitable to one another  
So I have to resign myself that I will always be on the periphery.

My Story Julia and Janos Fisher





Clockwise top left: Julian in Israel; Julian, 1987; Julian's barmitzvah at the Kotel, 1980 and on holiday with Julian in Israel, 1969.



Clockwise top left: Danny aged 12; Danny in Morocco, 2010; Danny's barmitzvah at the Kotel, 1983 and the boys in 1973.





## 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.



“I started to travel to London on business and it was on one of these trips that I was introduced to Julia. She came from a similar background to me and she was the prettiest girl I had ever dated. With her father’s permission we soon married. That was the best thing that ever happened to me.”



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