



My Story

Trude Silman MBE



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These are Trude's words. This is her story.

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

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Trude spoke to AJR volunteer Andrew Morris to share her story and we are indebted to Andrew for his contribution to the making of this book. Thanks also to Bett Demby, Shelley Hyams, Lauren Rosenstone and and Muireann Grealy.

Portrait photography by Mike Burton

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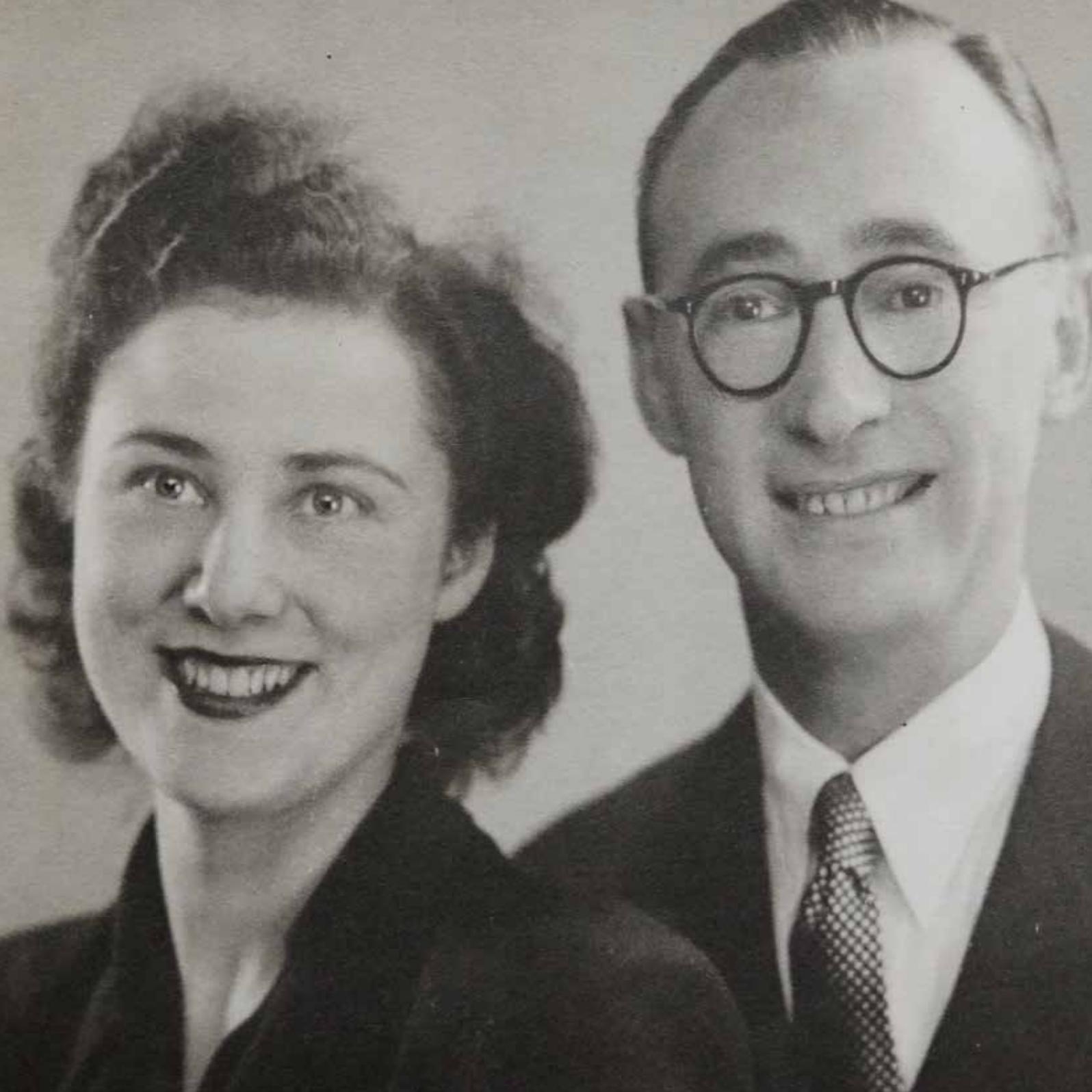
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My Story

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“... I have absolutely no memory of saying goodbye. I cannot remember whether I kissed them, whether I hugged them, or what we said to one another. This memory has been completely erased from my mind. The pain of that moment must have been so great that I have no recollection of it whatsoever.”



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My family

MY NAME IS Trude Silman. I was born Gertrude Feldmann in Bratislava in the former Czechoslovakia on 25 April 1929.

I lived with my mother, father and siblings in an old apartment on St Matthias, a very small street on the periphery of the old town of Bratislava. I was the youngest child of three. My brother Paul was seven years older than me and my sister Charlotte (known as Lotte) five years older. My earliest memories are very happy ones that revolve around spending time with my family.

My father was born Adolf Feldmann on 26 June 1887 in Korytné in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His family were farmers in a little village called Vrbové and he was the oldest of nine children. Coming from a long line of farmers, my father broke the mould when he was the first person in his family to attend university, studying economics at University of Vienna. After graduation he had barely started working when he was called up to fight at the outbreak of the First World War. Unusually, he rose to the rank of lieutenant - Jewish people were not generally made officers within the Austro-Hungarian Army.

My mother was also born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the town of Martin, which is today in Slovakia. Her circumstances, however, were quite different. She was born Alžbeta Fischer on 11 February 1899. Her name translates as Elizabeth in English, but she was always known as Elsa. She was the fourth of five children, having three sisters and a brother. Her family, owners of an ironmongery business in Bratislava, were relatively wealthy. Her brother worked in the family business while she and her sisters didn't work but were brought up as refined ladies, attending finishing school

“My earliest memories are very happy ones that revolve around spending time with my family.”



In my pram, December 1929



My father as a lieutenant in the First World War

and speaking fluent French. I remember my mother being tall, slim and elegant with short bobbed black hair, and always fashionably dressed.

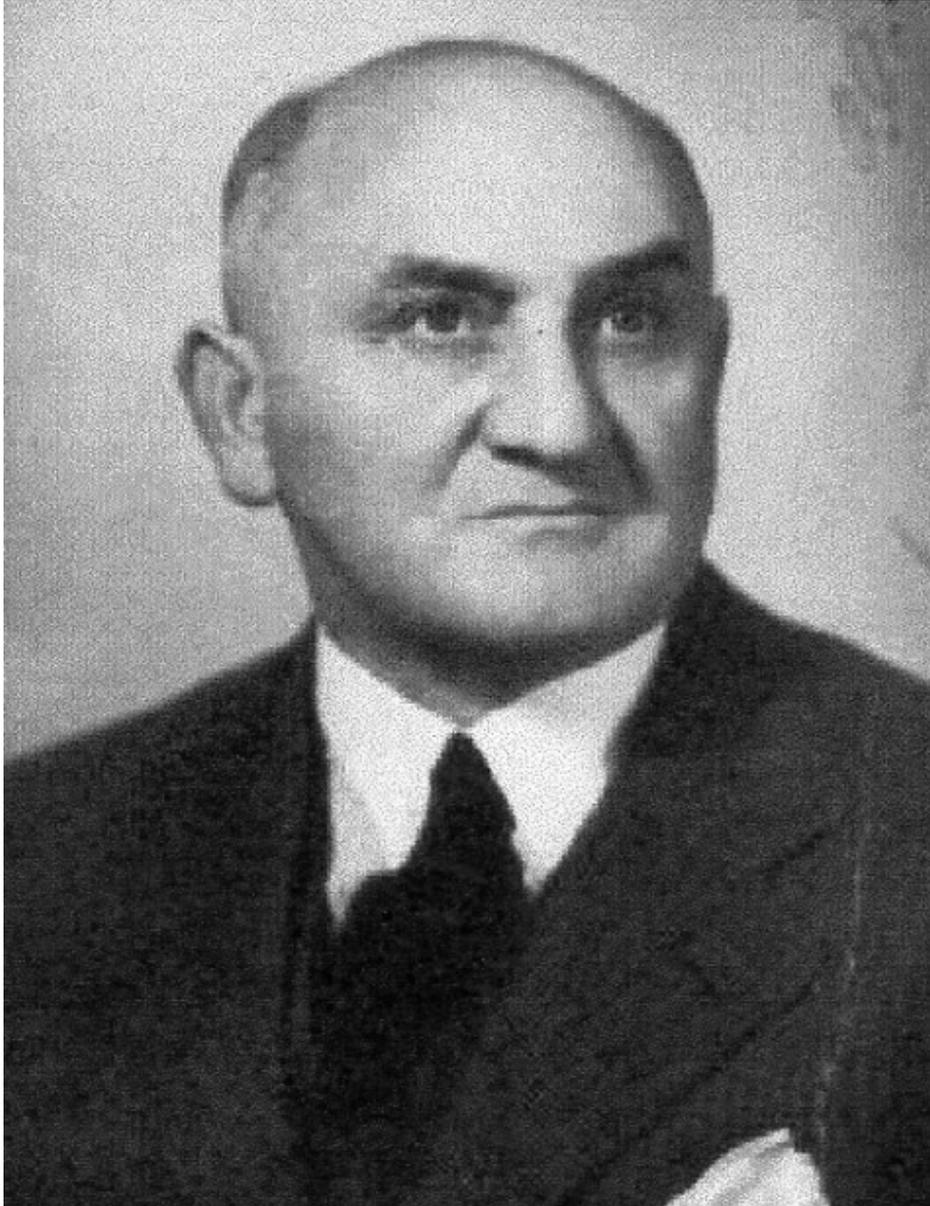
Coming from very different backgrounds, I don't know how my mother and father met but they were married around 1920. My brother Paul was born in 1922, my sister Charlotte followed in 1924, and I arrived five years later.

At the conclusion of the First World War my father and a friend established a small bank in Bratislava. Its doors opened in 1919 and for the next 10 years the pair dedicated themselves to its development. Unfortunately the post-war years were a time of hardship for many, which made running a successful bank a difficult endeavour. When the Wall Street Crash occurred in the United States in 1929, its effects reverberated throughout Europe. My father's bank, sadly, was not strong enough to survive and he was forced into bankruptcy.

My father was a well-educated man. He had a good mind and was both mathematical and able to write most eloquently. Despite this, for the next 10 years, indeed for the rest of his life, he struggled to earn a proper living. He earned some money as a journalist writing on economic matters for a newspaper in Bratislava. As this work was freelance and thus rather precarious, he took an additional job working for a friend in an estate agent's office.

My mother, like her sisters, did not work. As was the custom of that time she was a homemaker. She was not responsible for the more menial household tasks: we had a maid who took care of the washing and the cleaning. For a short time when my siblings and I were very small we also had a nanny. Mother took responsibility for running the household, looking after the children and doing the cooking. She was very house-proud and she was an excellent baker and cook. Each morning she would get up early and go to the market where she would buy fresh produce. She would then prepare the food to be ready for our midday meal. In the afternoon she would often meet her sisters for coffee in The Astoria, one of the city centre cafés.

Growing up we were relatively poor compared to my mother's reasonably wealthy family. They were not impacted by the economic downturn following the Wall Street Crash in the devastating manner experienced by my father. Mother's family were very generous so I never felt deprived. They would take



My father

us away on holiday, keep us in new clothes and would generally help us when we were in need, and I have a number of memories of being taken shopping by my aunts.

When I was about four or five years old, my family moved to Suche Myto, another part of Bratislava, into a brand new building. We lived in a flat on the third floor. Looking back, we had rather strange living arrangements. Our flat had a large, crowded room that acted as a bedroom, office and living room. It contained three beds (one for my brother, one for my sister and one for me) and a wardrobe for our clothes. It was also my father's office so it contained a very large desk where he would do his work. I remember vividly that a telephone sat on his desk, which was very unusual in those days. This room also housed a dining table and chairs and this was where we ate our daily meals.

The remainder of the flat was normal for standards of the time. There was a bedroom for my parents, a hall, a bathroom and a toilet. The kitchen had a small maid's room attached, as it was usual in those days for families to have a live-in maid. We had a large room where visiting guests would be entertained. This room contained a cabinet where Mother displayed her china, a large dining table, father's radio, and a grand piano. I distinctly remember a very large and grand oil painting of *Judith and Holofernes* hanging above the piano. Mother was an excellent pianist, and Charlotte and I were taught to play from a young age. Paul, for some reason, learned the violin.

There was another small sitting room that we called the salon which had two large wall-to-wall bookshelves containing my father's large collection of books. There were several paintings in this room of which I remember two: one was of *John the Baptist* and the other was a scene from the opera *Pagliacci*. Amazingly, as I will explain later, the three paintings mentioned above were recovered after the war. Apart from the very few items Charlotte, Paul and I managed to bring with us to England, these paintings were the only possessions from our home that were saved.

My mother's family owned a large building diagonally across the road from our flat and this was where my grandparents and my uncle lived. The ground floor housed the family's ironmongery business. My elderly grandparents occupied the first floor and my uncle, who was a divorcee, lived alone on the building's second floor. The top floor contained a number of smaller flats which my grandparents rented out to other families. Where their building used to stand there is now the Crowne Plaza, one of the biggest hotels in Bratislava. ■



My mother

A happy childhood

WE HAD A very happy family life. We may not have been well off but I never noticed. My parents' financial situation did not impact greatly upon me.

I did the normal things that children of that age would have done such as ballet, ice skating and my favourite pastime, swimming. I have enjoyed swimming since the age of two. My mother was a keen swimmer so my siblings and I were taught from a very early age. It was something that my entire family liked to do. We were fortunate to live close to the Danube in Bratislava because there were swimming pools on both sides of the river. On our side of the Danube was a swimming pool that was located in the river itself. This might seem a little curious today as this part of the river is now commercially used by a lot of shipping. Yet when I was a child this was where everyone swam. The pool was designed in a rectangular fashion with changing rooms along the sides, male and female opposite each other. There were steps leading down into the water on both sides. It was a rather peculiar swimming pool because you couldn't swim lengths there and back. Due to the current of the Danube being so strong, you were only able to swim in one direction. When you reached the end of the pool there were steps which led onto a wooden platform which would take you back around to the beginning again. I have never met anyone who has known a swimming pool quite like that. I was a strong swimmer and very much enjoyed this irregular setup. Mother often came swimming with us, but I remember my father going to the local Turkish Baths instead.

On the other side of the Danube was a big lido where we went for family days out. In the summer months we would spend lots of our time there. During the winter the Danube froze over and people skated on it. This activity was my sister's favourite pastime. Charlotte was a very good skater and she used to travel to Vienna to take lessons. She was taught at the same ice rink as the famous figure skater Sonja Henie.

Certain things stand out in my memory from this period of my life: I remember each Sunday we would go for walks together. Father, Paul, Charlotte and I would go to the outskirts of the city and we would go walking in the hills. At the end of our walk we would go to a local inn and my siblings and I would always have a bottle of 'krachel' – this was the name we had for fizzy pop – and Father would have a beer.



My parents with Paul, 1922



Standing by the River Danube, Bratislava, 1930



Standing outside Aunt Iren's villa in Bratislava, 1930



Paul (middle of the back row), Lotte (front row, right) and me (in my nanny's arms) with cousins at Grandmother's farm, Vrbové, 1931

When we arrived home we would eat a delicious meal that Mother had prepared whilst we were out. This was our Sunday tradition.

I used to love going over the road to visit my grandparents at their ironmongery shop, especially when I was allowed to go into the office with Grandma. Although the business was in Grandpa's name, it was Grandma who was in charge - she wore the trousers. I believe that my grandmother had a degree and had been one of the first women in her country to go to university. In her later years, when she became a widow, I sometimes used to go and sleep at her flat. She had a huge Bible which I loved to look at. I was told that it was created by a wonderful and well-known illustrator, Gustave Doré, and that this holy book was very rare. I believe that there were only four of this particular edition ever made. On special occasions she would take it out and we would look through it together. Unfortunately, this precious book has never been found and I assume that the Nazis took it away.

We would also visit my father's family in Vrbové. It was a relatively long way away - at least it seemed so at the time as we would have to take a train and then a taxi to get there. I don't really remember my paternal grandfather, he must have died when I was very young, but I certainly recall enjoying the company of my grandmother. She was called Fanny, but we called her 'Babka'. She was a farmer, and she and my aunt both owned farms in close proximity to one another. Our extended family used to meet at my grandmother's farm several times a year. I would meet my cousins there, some of whom came from Budapest and others from Vienna, as well as those who lived in Vrbové itself. As most of my cousins were older I don't recall playing with them a great deal.

I have a vivid memory of watching my grandmother feed the geese to fatten them to produce *pâté de foie gras*. The process would involve force-feeding the birds. I was enthralled as she sat on the back of a goose, prised open its mouth, and stuffed maize into its gullet. That was how farmers fed their geese to produce the enlarged livers which were the main ingredient of the pâté. Most people today would consider this to be a cruel practice but at that time I just accepted that this was normal. ■



Paternal family gathering after Grandfather's funeral in Vrbové. I am sitting on the bottom row, third from the left



My father's brother Sandor's wedding in 1935. My father is in the back row, second from the left. My mother is sitting at the end of the front row on the right. I am the little girl in the white dress standing in the front row. Uncle Sandor's wife perished in the Holocaust and he subsequently remarried after the war.



With my brother, Paul, on holiday in Crikvenica, Yugoslavia, 1934



On holiday in Millstatt, Austria, 1935

School days in Bratislava

MY FORMAL EDUCATION began when I was six years old, which was the normal age for starting school in Czechoslovakia. Prior to this I had been to kindergarten but I do not have any significant memories of that experience. I attended a Jewish primary school where we were taught in Slovak and in German. I was in a class with around 55 other children, which by today's standards seems very large but it was a usual size for that time. My school was situated within walking distance of our family's flat. Paul and Charlotte each went to different schools, so from a young age I would make the 10 minute journey alone. I can still vividly picture my route today.

The system of primary schooling was quite different from how it is organised here in the UK. We had a form master called Mr Neumann who was responsible for seeing our class through the entire period of elementary schooling, until we left for high school. Although I don't have many specific memories about my school in Bratislava, I know that I enjoyed my time there. I was happy. While I am unable to recall having any favourite subjects, one thing I do remember is that I was never any good at art: drawing has never been my strong point. However, apart from art I was an able student and I have always been serious about my studies. My arithmetic has always been good, which would be of great benefit when I arrived in the UK. I was also proficient at reading. Reading was something my siblings and I were always encouraged to do. Father had a large library so there were always plenty of books in our flat. I can remember Mother reading Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* to me at an early age.

During the wintertime our school playground always froze over. It would be transformed into an ice rink that the pupils were free to use. My classmates and I would skate together after school and even go there at the weekend. I had two close school friends whom I remember very clearly. One of these friends was a young girl called Šara Landesmanova. We would regularly call at each other's homes and play together. Her father owned a small bakery which I loved to visit because of the beautiful aroma of the baking bread. We had a lovely friendship. While Šara was my closest friend, my other good friend was a boy called Gaby Szas. Gaby's family were family friends and we had known each other since we were babies, when our nannies used to take us on walks together along the Danube. After I left home I never had any contact with them again. To the best of my knowledge neither Gaby nor Šara survived. ■



School photo, aged six, standing directly behind Mr Neumann, 1935

ČESKOSLOVENSKÁ REPUBLIKA.

Zem Slovensko Školský inšpektorát I. v Bratislave.
Prá triedna konkr. štá. ľudová škola v Bratislave.
 (U štát. škôl s právnou verejnosťou)

Práva vzťahujú sa na učeníka s materským vzrastom do dňa _____

Školský rok 193 35. Číslo 13.

ŠKOLSKÁ ZPRÁVA.

Gertruda Feldmannová

narodená dňa 25. apr. 1929 v Bratislave
 politický okres mesto , náboženstva žid.
 začala chodiť do školy vôbec v Bratislave dňa 1. sept. 1935
 do tunajšej školy dňa 1. sept. 1935 a dostáva v III. triede
 - oddelení (3. postupný ročník) tieto známky:

Položka	I.	II.
Chovanie	1	1
Povinné predmety:		
Náboženstvo	1	1
Občianska náuka a výchova	1	1
Vyučovací jazyk	na nižšom stupni	čítanie
	na strednom a vyššom stupni	písanie a cvičenie reči
Prvovka	2	2
Vecné náuky	vlastiveda	3
	zemepis	-
	dejepis	-
	prírodopis	-
	prírodospyt	-
Poéty a náukou o tvaroch meričských	2	1
Kreslenie	2	2
Písanie	2	2
Spev	1	1
Telesná výchova	1	1
Ručné práce chlapecké	-	-
Ručné práce dievč. a náukou o dom. hosp.	1	1
Nepovinné predmety:		
<i>Stomatológia</i>	1	1
Zovňajšia úprava písomných prác	2	2
Zameškané polhodiny	ospravedlnené	16
	neospravedlnené	24
Zpráva bola vydaná dňa	25. 9. 35	28. 9. 35
Je <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> spôsobilá <input type="checkbox"/> postupovať do vyšš		
Oradná pečiatka	Podpis	
	Prí- loh I. II.	sprav. učiteľa triedneho učiteľa rodičov alebo ich zástupcov

8. 1197. — Všetky práva vyhradené. 1937. — 106-2-712. 1/.

School report: 1 was the best score, 5 the worst

Everything changes

AT HOME FATHER would always listen to the radio. As a young child I remember hearing Hitler's speeches. I do not recall any of the specific content, but I have never forgotten his shouting. That voice is still with me today, but I am certain that I didn't understand the gravity of his words or the magnitude of the threat he posed.

It became apparent to me, at least to a certain extent, that things were changing when the Germans marched into Austria in March 1938. I had two aunts who lived with their families in Vienna. They sent word that the Nazis were persecuting Austria's Jews and that they themselves had begun to experience discrimination and had even been forced to scrub the street outside their homes. My parents were obviously alarmed by this, and they were extremely anxious for our safety because Bratislava is very close to Vienna. We children were sent away to our grandmother's farm for a short while until things appeared to settle down. We were also sent there briefly after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938.

On 28 December 1938, Father travelled to Prague with my 14-year-old sister, Charlotte, and put her on a train bound for England. Charlotte was excited about the journey as she had been told that she was going to England for a year to learn English. Father asked a woman in the train compartment to keep an eye on her, but Charlotte told me that didn't happen. She enjoyed the journey, taking part in New Year's Eve celebrations with two young male fellow travellers. There were German guards on the train but she was not troubled by them and she arrived in London safely. She went to stay with a Jewish family called the Leons who lived near Kew Gardens. They had two daughters of their own and, as well as Charlotte, they had also taken in another refugee, Joseph, who was from Germany. Mr and Mrs Leon were very active in the local community, with Mr Leon becoming Mayor of Richmond at one time and Mrs Leon keeping open house during the war for Jewish servicemen to call in for meals and company. The Leons became Charlotte's surrogate family and she lived with them for four years until she went to university, after which they continued to support her until she got married. Charlotte and the Leon family have kept in close touch ever since.



Two cousins standing either side of Paul and me, having taken refuge at Grandmother's after Austria was invaded, Easter 1938

I hadn't appreciated the full significance of my sister leaving home. I had only been told that she was going to England to learn English. While some of the danger and anxiety filtered through to me, as a child of nine it did not have the same impact as it would for an adult. It was only when I had a first-hand experience that I began to realise the severity of the situation.

On 14 March 1939, I had gone to school as normal - nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. My classmates and I had scarcely settled in our seats, ready to start the day, when our schoolmaster said to us: "We have to stop now. Go and get your coats and go home as quickly and as quietly as you can." This was, clearly, most unusual: it had certainly never happened before. I made my way home, walking alone as I had always done, when I realised there were tanks in the street behind the school. Unsurprisingly, I made it home in short order as I believed that I had seen German tanks. I discovered many years later that the tanks had actually belonged to the Czechoslovak Army. However, the Germans took control of Czechoslovakia on the next day.

For the next two weeks I never left our flat. The flat was situated in one of the busiest areas of Bratislava and its main window looked out onto a street that usually bustled with people and commerce. I spent a fortnight staring out of that window. As far as I was concerned I did not see anything untoward, except the street was unusually quiet. I do remember feeling a lot of fear at the time, however, and the stress and tension within our family home was tangible. Both Mother and Father were clearly very anxious and they wanted to get my brother and me out of the country. Looking back now I can understand how desperately worried they must have been. I recently discovered a letter that I had sent to Charlotte at this time saying: "Please, please, do something to get me to England. I'm so afraid" but I have no recollection of writing this. At the end of the two weeks my mother said to me: "Tomorrow you are going to travel to England." That was the first I knew of it. ■



My parents in Bratislava, 1939



Mother with Aunt Gita in Bratislava

Saying goodbye

MY MOTHER PACKED my bags for me; I had only two small pieces of luggage to take with me to England. Apart from a few clothes and basic necessities, I had an autograph book signed by school friends and relations, two *Dr Dolittle* books, a small toy cat, two scarves and a belt from a nightdress which belonged to my mother. I was to travel with my mother's youngest sister, Aunt Gita, and her daughter Vera, who was four years younger than me.

My aunt and young cousin arrived in a taxi on the following morning. My parents and my brother Paul put me into the car, but I have absolutely no memory of saying goodbye. I cannot remember whether I kissed them, whether I hugged them, or what we said to one another. This memory has been completely erased from my mind. The pain of that moment must have been so great that I have no recollection of it whatsoever. All I know for certain is that I was driven away by taxi after saying goodbye to my parents for what would be the final time. This was 28 March 1939 and I was nine years old. ■

“All I know for certain is that I was driven away by taxi after saying goodbye to my parents for what would be the final time.”

A precarious journey across Europe

WE TRAVELLED IN the taxi to Vienna, which was less than an hour's journey by car. Upon our arrival in the city we headed straight to the train station. Our intention was to travel on a Trans-European train which should have taken us directly across the continent. Unfortunately it didn't quite work out like that. Our journey should have taken around 24 hours. However, by the time we reached our final destination it had taken over four days.

Many of our fellow passengers, like us, were Jewish and attempting to flee from the Nazis. Our route took us through Austria and Germany, and throughout the journey the trains were repeatedly stopped and we were forced to alight. Each time the Germans took some Jewish passengers away. Perhaps they had the wrong papers or money and jewellery was found in their luggage. We were continually shunted backwards and forwards, never quite knowing where we would arrive next or whether the Germans would stop us. Navigating this dangerous journey with two small children was an immense responsibility for my aunt, made more difficult because, although I had a passport, I didn't have the correct papers.

I have a clear memory of the train station in Cologne: Aunt Gita, Vera and I sitting alone in the waiting room with seven pieces of luggage between us. This was all we had in the world. The waiting room was pitch-black and I always imagined it to be midnight. I can only assume that my aunt was desperately hoping that there would be a train in the morning. Looking back, I often consider how Aunt Gita must have felt at that very moment. In that pitch-black room she most likely had terrible thoughts running through her mind. It must have been a horrific experience for her. Fortunately, when the morning came, we were able to catch a train and continue on our way.

Eventually, after being allowed to cross the German border, we arrived in Holland on what I suppose would have been our third day of travel. Alighting from the train we were welcomed by a group of friendly Dutch women who provided us with food and drink before putting us on another train. Staring at the engine of the beautiful train we were about to board is the second vivid memory I have of this long journey. The Dutch engine was very different from any I had ever seen before. I can still clearly see in my mind's eye the shiny, polished brass-humped cap behind the engine's chimney. This train took us to the coast, where we boarded a ferry which took us across the Channel to Harwich. I had arrived in England, the country that would be my new home. ■

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BRITISH COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES FROM CZECHO-SLOVAKIA
5. MECKLENBURGH SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1
Museum 1971

We herewith confirm that we are making application
to the HOME OFFICE on behalf of

Gertrude Feldmann

and acknowledge receipt of his/her passport. No. 1000/3633/27

Signed: for Miss Feldmann
Feldmann

Date: June 26th 1939

Refugee application receipt

BRITISH COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES FROM CZECHO-SLOVAKIA

5, MECKLENBURGH SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1.

Telephone : MUSEUM 1971

Registration No. 5882 Date 18.4.39 By A. Goodwin

Name FELDMANN, Trude .

Please notify us immediately of any change of address.

Bitte geben Sie uns umgehend jede Adressenänderung
bekannt.

Prosím nezapomeňte udati změnu své adresy

Keep this card.

My refugee registration card

May we remind you that

Your seemly behaviour here helps your friends at home.
Your manners, good or bad, testify for others.

Ihr gutes Benehmen im Gastlande hilft Ihren Freunden
daheim.
Ihr Verhalten, gut oder schlecht, ist das Vorbild für andere.

Vaše dobré chování zde pomáhá vašim přátelům doma.
V dobrém jak v špatném smyslu je vaše chování
propagandou.

The underside of the registration card reminded war-time refugees of how to behave

Homesick

WE ARRIVED AT Liverpool Street Station in London around midnight on 1 April 1939. Our cases and bags were thrown out of the luggage compartment and my aunt's duffel bag containing her shoes burst open. My first memory of England is her shoes scattered across the platform.

We were met by Aunt Biba, who was my mother's eldest sister, and her husband, Uncle Gejza. They had money and contacts in England from Uncle Gejza's successful paper pulp business in Czechoslovakia which had enabled them to come to London from Bratislava in 1938. They intended to travel on to the USA but they needed to apply for visas for this. Whilst waiting for these, they worked hard to help several family members escape from Eastern Europe and get settled in safe countries. I think that they may have arranged Charlotte's journey to England and for her to be placed with the Leons. I don't know whether they had organised my train journey, but I know that they had obtained papers for me to travel to England but unfortunately there hadn't been time to get them to my parents.

Biba and Gejza arranged for Aunt Gita, Vera and me to be taken by taxi to a boarding house in Hampstead, where I remember being shocked to see mice scampering on my bedside table. We stayed there for four days, after which our small family group was split up. Biba and Gejza had found a job for Aunt Gita as a domestic servant for a family who lived in Knightsbridge. The British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia had found a family who were willing to take me in. They lived in Wallsend-on-Tyne near Newcastle, which was almost 300 miles away.

The family were named Gill and they were wonderful. Dr and Mrs Gill had two children: a son called Roger who was around 18 at the time and a teenage daughter named Joan. They welcomed me warmly into their home, but unfortunately I was not able to settle. I came from a household that spoke German, Slovak and Hungarian, but no English. As a result, I could not communicate with anyone. Can you imagine a nine year old child removed from her home, her entire family, and everything she had ever known? How would you feel? I was desperately homesick and I couldn't speak to anybody about it. In addition, I was accustomed to a modern centrally heated European flat and I suddenly found myself in an ice cold – to me at least – old-fashioned English house. Their home was on three floors which was incredibly alien to me at that time. I had never lived in a house where everything was on separate floors. Moreover, I found the English cuisine very strange and did not enjoy eating it. The



Uncle Gejza and Aunt Biba Teltsch, 1938

family also had two dogs and, never having lived with animals, I was frightened of them. It all seemed most peculiar to me and I was very unhappy.

The Gill family had welcomed me with open arms and they were exceptionally kind. They tried everything within their power to make me feel at home. Originally I was supposed to go to school with their daughter - I was even bought a uniform. However, I was so heartbroken and so homesick that I just stayed in my room and cried and cried. I imagine this situation would not have been very pleasant for the Gills either. In the end this marvellous family had no alternative but to give up on me. After six weeks they contacted the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia explaining that I was unable to settle. I was now 10 years old.

I have one lasting memory of my time with the Gills: we took a trip together to a tiny village in Cumbria called Ainstable where the family had a holiday home. Their house had a swimming pool in the garden, which was certainly a most unusual thing to have in the North of England at that time.

I didn't keep in touch with the Gills after I moved away. However, over 50 years later after I retired, I decided to try to find them so that I could thank them for their immense kindness, and apologise for being so difficult. My husband, Norman, and I visited Ainstable whilst on holiday in the Lake District and we found the Gills' house but couldn't discover any contact details for the family. However, some time later I was interviewed on the radio for a Holocaust Memorial Day broadcast in which I mentioned my search for the Gills. A friend of Roger Gill's wife heard it and contacted them. Roger and his wife obtained my details from the BBC and they kindly invited me to stay with them in their home in Northumberland. I learnt that the rest of the family had died, but Roger and his wife were very hospitable and we have remained in touch ever since. ■

C o p y .

Home Office,
Cleland House,
Pago Street,
London S.W.1.

V. 12008.

12th July, 1939.

The Under Secretary of State is directed to return the
passport of Miss Gertrude Wellmann [10/1/39].

in which the following endorsement has been made:-

" The condition attached to the grant of leave to
land is hereby varied so as to require departure
from the United Kingdom not later than 30th June, 1940. "

The endorsement in the passport must be shown at once
to the Police Registration Officer of the registration district in
which the holder is resident.

The Secretary of State for Refugees
from Czecho-slovakia,
5, Mecklenburgh Square,
W.C.1.

I was initially only granted permission to stay in the UK until
30 June 1940

My brother - an everlasting bond

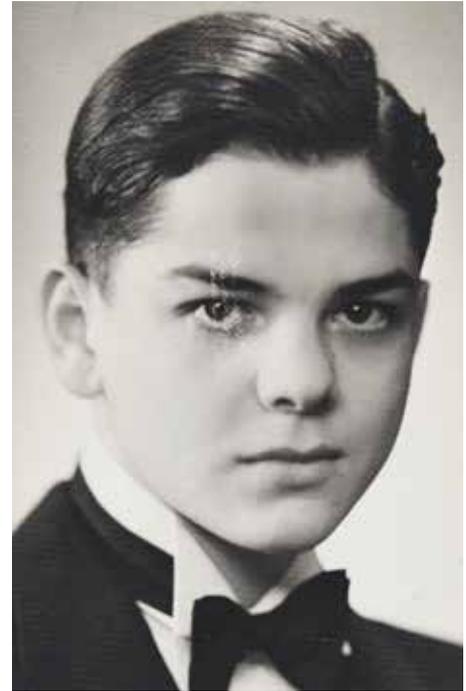
WHILST I WAS at the Gills, arrangements were made for my brother, Paul, to come to England. He had stayed at home in Bratislava until he had finished his schooling and obtained his high school diploma. Being 18 years old, he was unable to get an entry visa for the UK until he had a job, but fortunately Biba and Gejza managed to obtain a position for him with a furrier in London.

Paul arrived in London at the end of May 1939. He found a tiny bedsit and started to work for a furrier earning a very low wage. Despite this, Paul was generous and with the little bit of money that he could spare he would regularly give me pocket money. I have a small wallet fashioned from a scrap of leather that he made for me as a birthday present while he worked at the furriers.

Whilst working, Paul put himself through night school in London and gained a BSc degree. He went on to complete a PhD, and then had a successful career in academia. In addition to his academic abilities, Paul was a very gifted artist and I am the proud owner of several of his paintings. He was also a talented linguist and spoke seven languages fluently.

Before Paul left home, my father had instructed him to look after me. He took that instruction extremely seriously all his life, always making sure that I was all right. Moreover, he wrote to me every single week without fail until I was married.

I was extremely close to my brother and we had an incredibly deep bond that lasted all of his life. ■



Paul at his matriculation at the end of high school, Bratislava, 1939



Paul on a rare day trip away from London, 1941

Back to London

IN LATE MAY 1939, I was collected from the Gills by a representative from the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia and taken back to my Aunt Biba and Uncle Gejza who, at that time, lived in a small flat in West Hampstead in London. They hadn't originally taken me in as they were rather elderly and were only staying in London temporarily as they awaited visas for the United States where they intended to settle.

My aunt and uncle found a school that was close to their flat and I became a pupil at Holy Trinity Junior School off the Finchley Road. I arrived on my first day at this small school speaking almost no English whatsoever. Thankfully this soon changed. I was lucky enough to have a form mistress called Mrs Hoare, a wonderful woman whom I remember to this day. She took it upon herself to teach me English. When Mrs Hoare had a free period she would take me out of class and we would practise language skills together. It was as a result of her kindness that I was able to learn quickly. I was also fortunate that, as a result of my education in Czechoslovakia, I was ahead of my classmates in arithmetic. Each time we had a maths lesson I would be taken out to work on my English. Before long I was speaking confidently.

My time at Holy Trinity in London, however, was brief. Shortly after my arrival, the summer holidays began. During that long holiday period my aunt and uncle felt they would struggle to entertain me, so I was sent to a residential summer school near Crystal Palace. I remember very little about this experience, except that as the six weeks came to a close it became apparent that war was about to be declared. The summer school, after receiving this news, closed immediately and we were sent back to our homes. I was due to start high school the following week at Frances Holland College for Girls and I even had my uniform ready. However, I would never be a student there. Immediately upon my return to Hampstead my aunt and uncle received word that the government was recommending that London's children should be evacuated due to the potential threat of bombing by the German Luftwaffe. They decided that for my own safety I should leave London. ■

Evacuation

ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1939 Holy Trinity Junior School was evacuated from London to Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire. Our small school was one of the first to leave the city. Within the span of six months I had become both a refugee and an evacuee.

Along with hundreds of other children I waited at the train station with my fellow classmates, carrying my gas mask and my little case, wondering what was going to happen next. After a relatively short journey we arrived in the town of Rickmansworth. Alighting from the train we pupils were met by a group of ladies. Each woman took responsibility for a group of children. Our group was walked through the small town until we reached a street called West Way, which was where we were to be billeted.

The system of how we were placed was very simple: the lady leading us would knock on each door and say: "Here we have evacuees from London. Could you take a child or more than one child?" They were also asked whether they wanted a boy or a girl. We went to every single house on the street and she would say the same thing. I remember that everyone had been placed and I was the odd one out, the absolutely last child to be found a family. I was getting rather desperate, fearing that I would be left out completely.

Eventually we reached number 15 West Way where the Pavlow family agreed to take me in. They were an unusual family. Despite being of military age Mr Pavlow was not in the armed forces because he had a problem with one of his legs which made him walk with a limp. He was, however, in the auxiliary fire service. Mr Pavlow was of Russian origin while his wife, Germaine, was Swiss. They had a very beautiful and glamorous 18-year-old daughter called Muriel who was an actress. When I arrived at the Pavlow's she was appearing in a play called *Dear Octopus* with John Gielgud at the Queen's Theatre in London. Muriel Pavlow became very well known in the UK, appearing on stage, television and in films over the course of many years. Her most famous films were *The Malta Story* with Alec Guinness, and *Reach for the Sky* with Kenneth Moore.

Despite having a relatively small house I was not the only evacuee this generous family took in. In addition to myself, another lady and her daughter from Croydon shared their living space. I slept in Muriel's bedroom, while Mrs Niece and her daughter Wendy stayed downstairs in the dining room, where they had some sort of makeshift folding bed.

I lived in Rickmansworth for over a year. During this time my life began to feel more settled. I went to school every day with my classmates from Holy Trinity. We attended a senior school called Mill End, but we were kept apart from the senior school students. Our original class stayed together retaining our own teachers and being taught in our own classrooms. I remember enjoying both my schoolwork and the company of my classmates. During my free time I used to occupy myself by going for walks and swimming at the town's open-air swimming pool. I also remember going to the Odeon on Saturday mornings to the children's film matinees.



Swimming certificate



Rickmansworth School photo, 1940. I am standing in the back row, second from right

When I first arrived in Rickmansworth it was the period known as the Phoney War. The Blitz didn't begin in London until a year after the declaration of the war, but I remember very clearly seeing soldiers and huge military lorries passing through the main street of the town, presumably heading towards the ports on their way to France. The air raid warnings would sound when the Blitz eventually began, at which point the Pavlows and I would seek shelter under their staircase where we would spend the night. Fortunately no bombs were dropped on Rickmansworth while I was there. We could, however, see the night sky lit up from the German bombing raids on London.

I was happy enough living in Rickmansworth, but after just over a year I was on the move again. ■

A move to boarding school

IN AUTUMN 1940 my Aunt Biba and Uncle Gejza were granted their visas for the United States. At this time a discussion arose as to whether I should join them. My aunt and uncle felt it prudent that I should go with them and they had even managed to obtain a US visa for me. However, my brother Paul strongly disagreed with them. The voyage across the Atlantic was risky at that time as convoys were being torpedoed by German U-Boats, and he also did not want our family to be broken up any further. He persuaded them that I should remain in the same country as my brother and sister. I don't remember what I thought about this at the time, or whether I was even consulted, but I feel that Paul's opinion was correct.

With this decision made, somewhere permanent had to be found for me to live. My brother earned very little and he lived in a small bedsit, so somebody else would need to take responsibility for me. My aunt and uncle approached the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia for assistance. The Committee found a girls' boarding school called Kingsley which was located in the village of Bossiney next to Tintagel in North Cornwall. It had originally been located in Belsize Park in North London, but the onset of the war in 1939 had necessitated its evacuation. The school had been set up in 1915 by four women. They were dutiful and dedicated Christians who strongly believed in education and the principles of the League of Nations to produce a tolerant, peaceful and better world. When I was at Kingsley, two of the original founders, Miss Shepherd and Miss Gavin, had been joined by two other principal teachers, Miss Edwards and Miss Leach. These four women were inspirational. They aimed to deliver a well-rounded education and high moral standards to all pupils regardless of abilities and background. As a result of their values and kindness I was given a place at this marvellous school. I stayed at Kingsley for four wonderful years and my education and board were completely free of charge.

Shortly after I moved to Kingsley, I remember travelling up to London to say goodbye to Aunt Biba and Uncle Gejza before they left for America. We stayed together at the Strand Palace Hotel and while we were there an air raid siren sounded and we went to seek safety on the ground floor. The hotel had a direct hit and we later discovered that some people on the top floors had been killed. Although I heard other air raids during the war, mainly when visiting my brother Paul in London, this was the only direct hit that I experienced.



KINGSLEY SCHOOL
FOR THE DAUGHTERS OF GENTLEMEN AND DOCTORS.

Number 46 Belsize Park. This was the first Kingsley home

Miss H. Gavin,
PRINCIPAL



Miss L. Stebbing



Miss Helen Stebbing.

The four friends who bought
Kingsley School in 1915.



Miss V.S. Shepherd.

The original Kingsley School in London before evacuation to Cornwall

Gejza Teltsch,
11, West End Court,
Priory Road,
London, N.W.6.

The American Consulate General,
38, Grosvenor Street,
London, W.1.

4th September 1940.

Dear Sirs,

I am taking the liberty of enclosing the application form for an immigration visa for my niece, Gertrude Feldmann, and would like to give you some informations about her, if I may.

My little niece, Gertrude Feldmann, is 11 years old and is at present in Rickmansworth, where she has been evacuated at the beginning of the war.- She came over to England in March 1939, and as both her parents are still in Czechoslovakia I took full responsibility to take care of her and give the little girl all the support.- She, as well as both her parents have registered for emigration to the U.S.A. with the American Consulate in Prague over to England and as her papers are still at the American Consulate in Prague, I would ask you very much to be good enough as to have her papers transferred here.- Her family has been registered in Prague by her father Adolf Feldmann, Bratislava, Suchbátův Mlýn, which application also includes my niece.

My wife, Bianca Teltsch and myself have registered with the American Consulate General in London on 6th December 1938 and I have already forwarded to you our affidavits, as well as a confirmation of my Bank of my assets, which I can take out of this country on leaving for the U.S.A., enclosed to the letter 811.11- FWC/rg of 30th August, I have sent to you.

We shall be emigrating to the U.S.A. as soon as we get our visas and as the little girl is here alone, we would like very much to take her with us.- We will, of course, take responsibility of fully supporting her in the U.S.A., and may I here again refer to the confirmation of my Bank that I shall be in the position of supporting my little niece.

Out of the above given reason I would beg you to be so kind and have her papers transferred here from Prague and I would be ever so grateful to you, if you would do it as soon as possible, as we would like to take our little niece with us to the U.S.A.

Application for my USA visa written on my behalf by Uncle Gejza



At Kingsley School in Cornwall, 1942. Standing outside Bossiney Lodge where this group of us slept. In the back row, I am at the end on the right and my best friend, Ariane, is second from the left.

Kingsley took children from the age of three until they reached what we used to call Higher School Certificate at the age of 18. This school provided a fantastic education with excellent teachers and very small classes. The main building was called Tremorab, where Miss Shepherd, the headmistress, and the other three principals lived. It also housed a kindergarten and dormitories for the younger children and a dining room where we would take our meals together. There was a large garage attached to Tremorab which was divided into three classrooms where we had our lessons, and there was another building containing the kitchen and the laundry.

Although it was a boarding school it was rather peculiar in that there wasn't room to house all the students. Rather, most of the pupils slept in a variety of locations around Bossiney and Tintagel, such as farms and private houses, but regardless of where you stayed it was only a short walk to Tremorab.

Tintagel was an idyllic location as well as being a very safe place to live during the war. In addition to the beautiful countryside we were lucky enough to have three beaches situated in and around the village. In the summer my classmates and I would head down to one of the beaches to swim. The beach where I would spend much of my free time was Tintagel beach which contained Merlin's Cave, located just below the remains of the legendary King Arthur's Castle. It was also a prime location to spot marine life including seals. In the middle of the bay there was a large rock called Centre Rock and my friends and I would dive off the rocks on the beach and swim over to it. That was something we did for fun but it was certainly good exercise too.

All the pupils at Kingsley got plenty of exercise, which suited me because I was very much into sporting activities. In addition to swimming, which was my strongest sport, I used to enjoy tennis and netball, which we would play on the courts at Tremorab, and we played hockey and other sports on Butts Field, which I believe was Tintagel's football ground.

I received an excellent education at Kingsley. I was a hard worker and enjoyed learning. We were expected to do lots of homework which would take up most of our free time, but I never minded and even enjoyed it. I always tried to do my best in my studies, which is something that was instilled in me from a very young age by my father. He always told me and my siblings that if we were educated and got some qualifications, we would have something to fall back on. I knew that I had to strive because at this stage I aspired to become a doctor.

Towards the end of my time at Kingsley, my Aunt Gita who had brought me over to England was briefly given a post at the school as an assistant matron. Until very recently I had thought that her daughter, my cousin Vera, had stayed in London with her mother when she went into service and had only come to Kingsley at this point. I am still in touch with Vera, and only a few months ago she told me that, despite being only five years old, she had been sent to boarding school in April 1939 because Gita wasn't allowed to take her child with her into service. This boarding school was Kingsley, and Vera had been evacuated with the school from London to Cornwall. Although, because of the age difference, we would have been in different sections of the school, it seems unbelievable that neither of us remembers the other being there.

Shortly after Aunt Gita came to Kingsley, she managed to get American visas for Vera and herself and they left England and went to live in the USA. ■



My school friends standing to the right of Miss Hughes, my Latin teacher, during 'haymaking' in North Cornwall during the war years, 1942

War work

LIFE AS A pupil at Kingsley was more than just studying and trips to the beach. As it was wartime my classmates and I were expected to do our part and help in any way we could. Across society women had replaced the men who were serving in the British Army, assuming their roles and carrying out their previously held jobs. As a result of this, the school's older pupils became responsible for much of the work formerly performed by the school's domestic staff and the local farm workers.

The senior girls were placed in a group called 'The Squad' which would take responsibility for housework. I became an expert at cleaning during this period as a result of our extremely fussy Latin and History mistress who would meticulously inspect and supervise the quality of our work. She was a fastidious lady who had the ability to notice even the slightest speck of dust. Members of 'The Squad' would have to continue until every surface was sparkingly clean. These high standards were ingrained into me, and my daughters probably feel that I exercised the same methods and standards of supervision when I asked them to do housework.

We carried out a variety of jobs contributing to the war effort. Each morning we would go to Bossiney church hall to attend our assembly, during which we would be assigned our work for the day. One of our jobs was working on a local farm. Our responsibilities included milking the cows, plucking chickens and working in the fields, where we would help with planting crops, haymaking and harvesting.

The older girls were also responsible for making camouflage netting. Sitting on the tennis courts we would thread green, brown and fawn coloured tape into giant pieces of netted material to create the patterns characteristic of military camouflage. These camouflage nets were used to hide the anti-aircraft guns used by the British Forces.

To aid the war effort the school would also put on pageants for the local community. The headmistress was an expert at directing these events and we raised money during Army, Navy, and Air Force Weeks. I clearly remember at one of these concerts standing on the stage in front of everyone, singing a song in Slovak. While I have long since lost the ability to speak Slovak, I can still remember the song today. It was about merrymaking on Mount Krivan in the High Tatras. As with my studies, I enjoyed all these jobs and activities and always worked hard, developing plenty of new skills along the way. ■

Making a lifelong friend

DURING MY TIME at Kingsley I met a girl who, nearly 80 years later, remains my best friend.

Pupils at Kingsley were housed together based upon their age: the youngest children slept in Tremorab, the 11-13 year olds would stay together in one house, 13-15 year olds in another and the 15-18 year olds somewhere else. While there was the odd single room, this was the exception not the rule, with the bulk of pupils sleeping in dormitories with four or five girls. In my first dormitory there were three single beds and one double bed. This is where I met my best friend Ariane Shepherd. Ariane and I shared the double bed with a bolster down the middle. This may seem somewhat peculiar today, but that was the way things were.

Ariane was the niece of the school's headmistress. We were practically the same age: only three weeks separated our birthdays. We quickly became best friends. In some ways, however, we were natural rivals. She and I were always near the top of the class and we would always try to outdo each other to see who could achieve the top marks.

During the school holidays boarders would go home to their families but, as a refugee, I had nowhere to go. Ariane's family was very thoughtful and invited me to stay at their home in Cardiff. I stayed with them four or five times during the course of the war. I didn't just stay for two or three days, I was there for the entire duration of the holidays. Ariane's family consisted of her older brother called Rolf, her father who was a doctor, and her mother who was a well-read Norwegian with an incredible sense of humour.

I enjoyed my time immensely with the Shepherds and they included me completely in their family life. They were enthusiastic bridge players, so I learned to play the game myself at the age of 12. They were also great readers. Staying at their home I was surrounded by books so I was never short of reading material. We went for walks in the woods together and I remember picking bluebells with them in the spring. We made regular trips to the theatre and the cinema which we all enjoyed. In those days the cinemas were crammed full. There would always be two films; a main feature and a short feature, separated by a full newsreel. As you might imagine, with the war in full swing we were all keenly interested in the news.



Me with Ariane - still best friends (after 80 years)

I was very fortunate. Without the generosity of the Shepherd family I would have spent the long summer holidays alone waiting for the new school term to start. They were extremely kind to me and treated me as a full member of the family. These times meant a great deal to me.

Nearly 80 years later Ariane remains my best friend. Although she married a Finnish man and has lived in Finland throughout her adult life, we have shared several holidays over the years and remain in regular contact. We speak on the phone every week and, although we are unable to travel now, we have started using the internet for video calls so that we can still see each other occasionally. ■



Paul and Charlotte in London, 1941

Messages from home

I HAD BEEN desperately homesick when I first arrived in England but this lessened while I was at Kingsley. I was busy with my studies and enjoying being with friends. However, every single night before going to sleep I would say a silent prayer hoping that my parents were safe and that we would be reunited as a family soon.

My connection to home came mainly through the letters that my father sent. I think he wrote a letter every single week to at least one of his children, although sadly we didn't receive all of them. As a result of the war, his correspondence would arrive sporadically. Letters could take months to reach us and their chronology was often incorrect; whether or when we received them was pot luck. I have never been sure how he got the letters to us. I have a feeling he sent them to his youngest sister who lived in New York, who would duly send them on to the UK. He would also sometimes send postcards provided by the Red Cross which would contain a maximum of 25 words.

Paul, Charlotte and I had a system: whoever received a letter would read it and then send it to one sibling, who would read it and then send it to the other sibling. In this way the letters were passed around and we all had the opportunity to read them. In his correspondence father would tell us his news but never really explained a great deal about the situation at home. Looking back, I think that Paul probably received additional letters from father with more details about the true situation in Czechoslovakia. I presume that father wanted to protect his young daughters from the full knowledge of what was happening.

Father wrote the most beautiful letters to us right up until he was transported to Auschwitz in April 1942. Whilst he wrote predominantly in German, after his children left for the UK he taught himself English in order to correspond with us in our new language. I received a letter from him for my 12th birthday in April 1941 that was written entirely in English. I have kept this letter as a treasured possession.

I actually received very few letters from my mother and only four Red Cross postcards. I don't know why she didn't write more. ■

My Dearest Ferdinand!

7.11.11

I got a letter from my English teacher, so free to write I chose for it a letter to you in English. I have to write without any helps, as dictionary or a grammar book, so that she may see my progress. I hope you'll be also satisfied with my knowledge too.

I think, that this letter will reach you before your birthday, yet, I wish you all the best, you may become a beautiful girl and a joy to me. I'll pray for your other successes in your life.

How something about my every-days life: for I am sure it will be interesting to you. I live a very quiet life now, one day flies as the other, without troubles without work, I haven't to care for anybody. I am sorry, but the days, when I receive your letters is as a holiday for me. As you know I had to leave my last beautiful place and now I am living with my old school fellows.

Unless it happens anything during the days I am sleeping very well, at the morning I get up I half past eight. Dressing and washing takes half an hour and then I am going to the coffee park, where I take my breakfast in company of my old child-friends. We change here our news not least. A short walk and the right time with the best appetite for the lunch is there. I take my lunch lunch in the various restaurants. After the lunch I learn English at home or I write my letters. Then I am going to see my mother at Gwilt's, chatting with her half an hour. At half past four in the afternoon (an other party of my friends) we meet us in a little coffee on the edge of the city. Here we discuss all the questions and news sitting there till seven o'clock. On the way home, in the dumb-street there are a grocer and a butcher shop where I buy my butter, ham, tomatoes and other things for my supper. After eight o'clock we must be at home.

Chatting with my landlady and his wife it gets time to retire in my room. Reading a good book or learning my English lesson thinking of my children, I fall asleep. Every second once I go to the window, I see the street to you and Kate, his regards, and every four or five I am a customer in the kitchen, for we haven't all to go in the kitchen (at the crossing). It happens some I meet your mother, in his cases I always think on my children. Kissing you, your dad
in
one old photo I send to you for your birthday

The letter I received from by my father for my 12th birthday, written in English

7.3.1941.

LETTER WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

My dearest Trudinka!

I got a task from my English teacher, a free copie. I chosed for it a letter to you in English. I have to write without any helps, as dictionary or grammar book, so that she may see my real progress. I hope yhou'ss be also satisfied with my knowledge too. I think that this letter will reach you before your birthday yet. I wish you allthe best, you may become a beautiful girl and a joy to me. I'll pray for your other successes in your life.

Now for something about my every-days life: for I am sure it will be interesting to you. I live a very quiet life now; one day flies as the other, without troubles, without work. I haven't to care for anybody, I am sorry. Only the days when I receive your letters is as a holiday for me. As you know I had to leave my last beautiful flat and now I am living with my old school fellow ? ;it happens anything; during the days I am sleeping very well. At the morning I get up at half past eight. Dressing and washing takes half an hour and then I am going to the Caffé's Park where I take my breakfast in Company of my old Club-friends. We change here our news we heard. A short walk and the right time with the best appetite for the lunch is there. I have my lunch in the various restaurants. After the lunch I learn English at home or I write my letters. Then I go to see my mother at Zwickel's, chattering with her half an hour. At half past four in the afternoon (an other party of my friends) we meet us in a little caffé on the end of the city. Here we discuss all the questions and news sitting till seven o'clock. On the way home, in the Danube street there are a grocier and a butcher shop where I buy myh butter, ham, lemons and other things for my supper. After eight o'clock we must be at home. Chattering with my landlord and his wife it gets time to retire my room. Reading a good book or learning my English lesson, thinking of my children, I fall asleep. Every week once I go to the hairdresser Muska (he sends to you and Lotte his regards) and every fortnight I am a customer at the Heilbad, for we aren't allowed in the Swedish bath (Grossling). It happens some I meet your mother, in this cases I always think on... children.

Kissing you your Dady

An old phto I send to you for your birthday.

A typed version of the letter I received from my father

After Kingsley

AFTER FOUR YEARS at Kingsley I obtained my school matriculation certificate in December 1944 with eight subjects: biology, French, German, Latin, history, maths, English literature and English language. Unfortunately, because the school did not have a laboratory, they could not offer courses in physics or chemistry. I needed both these subjects to pursue a career in medicine, so I was forced to go elsewhere to acquire the necessary qualifications. In January 1945 I left Tintagel and Kingsley and moved to a new school in Devon.

As it would transpire, my stay at Blatchington Court School in Devon would only be a short one. The school had claimed they would be able to offer me both physics and chemistry up to Higher School Certificate level, the equivalent of today's A-Levels, but I arrived to discover they did not have their own laboratory either. I stayed there for six months and I was able to take my matriculation examinations in physics and chemistry with the kind help of my science mistress who drove me each week to Bishop Blackall Boys School in Exeter to use their laboratory.

That summer I packed up my belongings again and moved to Reigate County School for Girls in Surrey where I would spend the next two years completing my Higher School Certificate.

“ I would spend the best part of two years living with this kind and friendly family until I finished sixth form and was awarded my Higher School Certificate. ”



Reigate sixth form school photo, 1946. I am sitting in the middle row, fifth from right

Arriving in Reigate, I initially stayed as a lodger with a lady named Mrs Mundy. This proved to be another brief stay. Mrs Mundy was a young mother with two children under five whose husband was serving in the armed forces. She lived a significant distance away from my school, which made the walk to lessons both difficult and time-consuming each day. I would also discover that living with two small children was not conducive to studying. Upon hearing about my situation one of my new school friends, Ruth, asked her mother if I could stay with their family. Her mother generously agreed and I moved in with the Haslers, where I shared a room with Ruth and her elder sister, Daphne. I would spend the best part of two years living with this kind and friendly family until I finished sixth form and was awarded my Higher School Certificate.

Oath of Allegiance.

I, GERTRUDE FELDMANN

swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty,
King George the Sixth, His Heirs and Successors, according to law.

(Signature) *Gertrude Feldmann*

Sworn and subscribed this 5th day of July 1947, before me

(Signature) *Harold Parker*

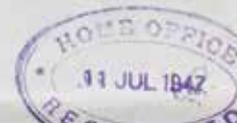
M Justice of the Peace for

A Commissioner for Oaths.

Address

61 High St., Newport

Unless otherwise indicated hereon, if the Oath of Allegiance is not taken
within one calendar month after the date of this Certificate, the Certificate shall
not take effect.



Confirmation of my Oath of Allegiance to King George on becoming an official
British citizen

Certificate No. **CZ 1299**

BRITISH NATIONALITY AND STATUS OF ALIENS ACT, 1914.

CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION GRANTED TO A MINOR.

Whereas an application has been made to one of His Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State for the grant of a Certificate of Naturalization to

Gertrude Feldmann

a minor, alleging with respect to the said *Gertrude Feldmann* the particulars set out below :

And whereas the Secretary of State is satisfied that such a Certificate may properly be granted :

Now, therefore, in pursuance of the powers conferred on him by the said Act, the Secretary of State grants to the said

Gertrude Feldmann

this Certificate of Naturalization, and declares that upon taking the Oath of Allegiance within the time and in the manner required by the regulations made in that behalf she shall, subject to the provisions of the said Act, be entitled to all political and other rights powers and privileges, and be subject to all obligations duties and liabilities, to which a natural-born British subject is entitled or subject, and have to all intents and purposes the status of a natural-born British subject.

In witness whereof I have hereto subscribed my name this 19th day of

June 1947

Under Secretary of State.

HOME OFFICE,
LONDON.

PARTICULARS RELATING TO APPLICANT.

Full Name	<i>Gertrude FELDMAN.</i>
Address	<i>"Brookfield", The Chase, Reigate, Surrey.</i>
Trade or Occupation	<i>Student.</i>
Place and date of birth	<i>Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. 25th April, 1929.</i>
Nationality	<i>Czechoslovakian.</i>
Names and nationality of parents	<i>Adolf and Alsbeta FELDMAN. (Czechoslovakian).</i>

(For Oath
see overleaf.)

I was one of a small group of about 280 child refugees who received British citizenship as a minor



Visiting Mr and Mrs Hasler and their son, Christopher, in the garden of their house 'Broomfield' in Reigate. Back row, left to right: me, Mrs Hasler, Christopher, my husband Norman and Mr Hasler. Front row, left to right: Elizabeth Silman (my niece), my daughters Judith and Ruth, 1961

Tragically, in her first year of university Ruth caught an infectious disease and passed away suddenly. I did, however, remain in touch with her family for very many years.

While I only needed to take three subjects to reach university, I decided to take four. I studied chemistry, physics, maths and biology. My results were good enough to be eligible for a County Major Scholarship. This award entitled a student to both their university fees and living expenses. After an interview, Surrey County Council awarded me a scholarship. This, in addition to an annual allowance of £100 from my aunt and uncle in the USA, and a little pocket money from my brother, Paul, meant my education was fully paid for. Leaving Reigate in 1947, I travelled to Leeds to go to university and this city has been my home ever since.

Despite my family circumstances, my time at school, and particularly at Kingsley, had been very settled and happy. During my adult life I had always wanted to return to Kingsley and Tintagel but didn't do so for over 70 years. In 2017 I went on holiday there with my daughter Judith and her husband. We looked round my old haunts and we particularly enjoyed visiting the old school building which had become the Bossiney House Hotel. We were warmly welcomed by the hotel owners who had compiled a scrapbook about Kingsley School and we spent a wonderful time exchanging information and memories. ■



My sister on her graduation in Leeds, 1947

Welcome to Leeds

INITIALLY I HAD wanted to study medicine at university and become a doctor. My Aunt Biba and Uncle Gejza, who were my official guardians, would not agree to this as they felt that the course was too long. Having looked around for an acceptable alternative, I discovered that the University of Leeds was offering a new course, a four-year special honours in biochemistry. And so, in September 1947, I began my undergraduate degree.

There were five of us on the course and I was the only woman. There was one other teenager, a young man named Allen who was, like myself, 18 years old. My other three classmates were ex-servicemen who had just left the armed forces after the war. The bulk of the first year was theory oriented and we studied the basics of chemistry, physics, zoology and botany. It was during the second year that things started to become more practical and medically focused but, for reasons which I will detail later, I wasn't to see a great deal of that academic year.

Upon my arrival in the city I was reunited with my sister Charlotte who had just qualified as a doctor at the University of Leeds. Charlotte had done very well at school and had been awarded a scholarship by the British Council and a grant from the Czech Government. These, together with the stability and support offered by her 'family', the Leons, enabled her to complete the long medical training.

“Upon my arrival in the city I was reunited with my sister Charlotte who had just qualified as a doctor at the University of Leeds.”

I moved into the same lodgings as Charlotte, living with an elderly Jewish widow named Mrs Friedman. She was a wonderful cook who always made sure that we were well fed. She had a lovely family who would visit every Saturday and I am still in touch with them to this day.

This was the first time that I had lived under the same roof as my sister since 1938. Charlotte was working as a junior doctor and also studying for her membership of the Royal College of Physicians. She would sit in her room and work into the middle of the night, sometimes as late as four o'clock in the morning, studying medical texts. Charlotte was very ambitious and was determined to make rapid progress in her medical career.

Whilst Charlotte was extremely busy, I, on the other hand, was finding the first year of my course relatively easy and was able to enjoy the social aspect of university life. I belonged to the Jewish Students Society and we would go out as a group in the evening and at weekends to the Student Union. In those days there were no late-night buses in the city so we used to walk the three miles from the university to Moortown without batting an eyelid. ■



With Norman on our engagement, September 1948

A difficult decision

AT THE BEGINNING of my second year at university I was faced with a decision; one that would turn out to be life-changing.

I had recently met a lovely man named Norman Silman, the man who would ultimately become my husband. I was first introduced to him through my sister. When Charlotte had arrived at Leeds to go to university she had been introduced to the Silman family who were acquaintances of the Leons. She had become friends with, and later married, Julius Silman who was Norman's first cousin. It was during a visit to Julius's family home that Norman and I met for the first time.

At the time of our initial meeting Norman was not long out of the army. During his military service he was initially in the Pioneer Corps, after which he had trained as an interpreter and had spent 18 months learning to speak Japanese. After this training he was deployed to interrogate Japanese prisoners of war in the Far East. He had just been transported as far as India when the war ended. He was offered the opportunity to sign up as an interpreter with the army for three more years but he decided to return home to be with his family and to help manage the family business. He therefore never used his newly acquired language.

Norman's family part-owned and ran a men's clothing factory in Leeds. Norman was the youngest of four siblings: his eldest brother Lewis was a solicitor in London, his other brother Harry and his sister Miriam lived in Leeds and were a doctor and homemaker respectively. This left Norman to go into the family tailoring business which he managed for most of his working life.

Norman was born in 1915 which made him 14 years my senior. When we met, he was in his thirties and keen to settle down. He told me that he wanted to marry immediately and didn't want to wait until I finished my studies. Both my brother and sister counselled against this. They felt I should not get married at that stage but should finish my degree first. In those days a married woman was expected to stay at home and be a homemaker, so I was faced with this very difficult decision: continue studying at university or get married. I could not do both.

At that time I had an extremely strong urge to settle down and Norman was a very eligible bachelor. I had been on my own since I was 10 years old and I felt that I needed some stability in my life. I wanted, more than anything, a home of my own. After much soul-searching I decided to give up my studies. I continued my course right up until I was due to be married and I completed my final end of term exam one week before my wedding day. I had no money at that time but I was very fortunate that my sister's guardians, the Leons, who were in the ladies' clothing trade, very kindly provided my wedding dress and flowers.

On 23 December 1948, aged 19, I married and became Mrs Trude Silman. As it would transpire, Norman would prove to be a very good husband and we were happily married for 56 years. ■



Our wedding day

Adapting to married life

AFTER OUR WEDDING Norman and I went to Torquay for our honeymoon and then moved in with his parents while we searched for a place of our own. This three-month period was one that I found quite challenging. The Silmans were a relatively Orthodox Jewish family, which I was not accustomed to. I had come from a secular Jewish household in Czechoslovakia and since arriving in the UK I had lived with non-Jewish families and attended non-Jewish schools. While Norman's parents were very kind, I found the close-knit nature of their family life difficult. Similarly, the family struggled with the fact that I wanted to be an independent person. I had been, for the most part, on my own for the previous decade and I did not want to depend on a husband. They could not understand why I wanted to study or go out to work, as they believed in a more traditional marital situation with the wife as homemaker. I just could not settle with the Silman family so I was relieved when Norman and I found and bought our own home, a four-bedroomed detached house on Scott Hall Road in North Leeds.

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After moving into the house on Scott Hall Road and spending a short time sorting out our new home, I realised that I really wanted to become a scientist. Fortunately, Norman agreed that I could consider returning to university. Initially I took an unpaid position at the department of chemical pathology in the school of bacteriology at the University of Leeds. Whilst voluntary, this role allowed me to be where I wanted to be: in the laboratory. I wasn't studying in a traditional sense, but I felt it allowed me to keep a hand in with my subject. I remained in a milieu where one needed some scientific knowledge. The work itself involved decanting patients' samples into test tubes and performing various tests. A qualified scientist would then make a judgement on whether a person had a particular condition. I enjoyed the role and it was a positive experience.

My idea of returning to university had to be postponed when I fell pregnant with my daughter Ruth, who arrived on 6 April 1950. My second daughter, Judith, was born three years later on 25 February 1953 and I happily dedicated the next few years to looking after my young girls. ■



With Judith in 1955

Something missing

DURING THIS TIME I looked after Norman and the girls and kept house. I was always busy. While I was able to adapt to that situation, I lived with an underlying feeling that something was missing. I loved my children and I loved my husband, but I realised this feeling was caused by my ambition to become a scientist. I also had the voices of my father and brother Paul in my head saying: “You should get a qualification. If anything happens you need something to fall back on to support yourself.”

I made the decision to go back to university and complete my special honours degree. Returning to study with two young children at home may not sound out of the ordinary today, but in the 1950s it was a highly unusual situation.

In those days it was still difficult for women to gain entry into universities, but I managed to convince the biochemistry department at the University of Leeds to allow me to return. Rather than repeating the first year I was permitted an exemption and started back at the beginning of the second year. I did not, however, retain my County Major Scholarship because, as one would perhaps imagine, Surrey County Council had not been pleased when I had ended my studies three months into the second year. Fortunately Norman was happy to support me and he paid the fees, which I think were about £10 a term.

In September 1955 I embarked on what would turn out to be a very strenuous course. Anyone studying a practical science at that time was expected to spend long days in the laboratory and even return in the evening to continue with their experiments. You were required to do a significant amount of practical work before you could take your exams.

I returned with a new cohort of students. This time there were 10 of us and, yet again, I was the only woman. At 26 years old I was a mature student, while most of the intake was 18 years old. We studied chemistry, physiology and biochemistry. Our lectures began at nine o'clock each morning and we even had classes on a Saturday. It was hard work balancing these very demanding studies with two young children and the upkeep of a home. My long-suffering husband remained very understanding regarding my long hours at the university. My classmates were also very helpful and they supported me throughout the course. If I had family responsibilities which prevented me from attending a lecture,



Family group photo taken in Leeds, 1955. From left to right: Reg Glick, Jules Naftalin, Cecily Glick, Ruth, Miriam Naftalin (Norman's sister), Norman holding Judith, me with my niece Dian (my brother Paul's daughter), Dorothy Silman (Norman's sister-in-law) with her daughter Jackie



Me (and Judith), Paul, and Aunt Aurelia (my father's youngest sister from the USA) in Leeds, 1956

someone would always let me use their notes, or if I had a problem in the laboratory, someone would always be there to help.

At that time I was extremely lucky to have found a most fantastic person, Mrs Korosi, who agreed to come and look after Ruth and Judith in my absence. She was an artistic and educated lady from Vienna who, like myself, was a refugee, having fled Austria with her husband and two children. Mrs Korosi would collect the girls from nursery and school, give them a snack and keep them occupied until I

returned home. She had a wonderful way with my girls and they loved her. She would often get them to help her bake Viennese style cakes and biscuits and they particularly enjoyed licking out the mixing bowl. Not only did she look after the children, she became a very dear friend to me. I almost considered her an older sister, despite her being almost my mother's age. We stayed very close right up until she passed away. She was an absolute treasure.

I was very grateful for all the help and support I received whilst I was studying, and in 1958 I obtained my BSc, graduating with special honours in medical biochemistry. ■



Biochemistry department University of Leeds 1961. I am in the second row, fourth from the right



My graduation, 1958

Rising to challenges

IN THE JEWISH community in which Norman and I lived, most of the women stayed at home. Although many of them had had a good education, most did not have a career. These women were housewives and in their spare time they would have coffee mornings to raise money for charity and they would meet up to socialise or play bridge. This was the norm. That, however, was not for me and I made the decision to go back to university with the aim of doing a PhD.

I had to complete a Master's prior to moving on to a PhD. I embarked on this course and received a grant to complete some research in the biochemistry department. Unfortunately I was placed with a supervisor who did not like to have a married woman with children working in the lab with him. As a result, at the end of my first year he refused to renew my bursary and replaced me with a male student. While things are not perfect now, it is certainly better than it was: at that time women often experienced a lot of discrimination. Unsurprisingly I was extremely disappointed, but fortunately the university did allow me to continue, although without any further payment. Not wanting to give up, I completed my Master's degree with no financial support.

This process was extremely hard going. For anyone who is not a scientist it is difficult to appreciate the hours that one is required to spend in the laboratory getting to grips with the practical side of things, in addition to the countless hours spent reading. My schedule was incredibly full. I would get up at four o'clock in the morning to complete my theory work and I would go into the laboratory after Ruth and Judith had gone to school. Thankfully, Mrs Korosi would collect the girls and look after them until I arrived home at around half past four. I would then spend some time with Ruth and Judith before preparing a meal for the family. The day did not end there however. After the girls went to bed I would head back to the laboratory to continue my work. My workday would finally conclude around 10pm when Norman would pick me up. I would go to bed, and get ready to do it all again the following day. It was a strenuous routine but luckily I didn't need much sleep.

When I finally received my Master's degree, I was exhausted and run down by the whole experience. I really couldn't cope with anything else save running my home for the next couple of years and I never returned to study for a PhD.

After an extended break I returned to the university to work as a research assistant in the chemical pathology department. I later moved to the dermatology department, where I worked as a research assistant for a medical doctor who tasked me with the responsibility of completing all of his practical work. He would arrive at the laboratory once a month and hand me a list of all the things he wanted doing, which I duly completed. Yet when he wrote his thesis there was no acknowledgement of the work I had done for him. It was very upsetting, but this sort of thing was very common: women were often not given any recognition for their work.

Whilst I had enjoyed working in a laboratory, this incident made me decide to change the direction of my career and I became a lecturer. ■



With Mrs Korosi, 1994

A fulfilling career

I BEGAN MY lecturing career by taking a part-time job at the Leeds College of Technology – an institution known today as Leeds Beckett University. Initially I was responsible for teaching basic science to catering students who required a foundation level of understanding about hygiene and food chemistry. This particular role was not overly satisfying for me as I really wanted to teach biochemistry. Fortunately this aspiration was realised within a relatively short period of time, when in 1968 I was appointed as a full-time lecturer in the biology and chemistry department. From that point onwards I was able to teach my specialist subject and supervise research, which I found personally gratifying.

A large part of my work was teaching biochemistry to dietetics students and laboratory technicians. When I first arrived at the college dietetics was only a diploma qualification and I became heavily involved with the establishment of both a degree-level and MSc course in dietetics. My teaching also continued to evolve and I taught post-graduate students and supervised them through to the completion of their PhDs. As well as trying to find time for my own research, I ensured that I kept abreast of the latest research within my area. The bulk of my time at the college was spent at a senior lecturer level, but I did eventually become principal lecturer prior to my retirement.

In addition to my teaching responsibilities I took on a significant amount of extra work, both inside and outside of my department. I was the staff representative on the college's board for many years and I was also on several exam boards. As a refugee myself, I felt it important to ensure that overseas students were fully supported, so I became the secretary for the Overseas Students Association. I found all of my work at the college interesting and stimulating and I enjoyed it all.

My father had instilled a strong work ethic in all of his children and we all worked hard and had fulfilling careers. Paul became a professor of metallurgy at Brunel University and Charlotte became a consultant rheumatologist at a large London teaching hospital. ■

Married life and children

I HAD A very supportive husband in Norman, to whom I must give credit. It must have been very difficult for him to have a wife who didn't conform to the typical Jewish wife and mother. We came from totally different backgrounds and were completely different people, but we had a stable and loving relationship.

Norman spent most of his working life running a men's clothing factory which belonged to his father and a business partner. In his spare time he did a lot of charitable work, played golf and bridge, and was a keen supporter of Leeds United. He was always very active, still playing golf into his mid-80s.

From my point of view, and hopefully from his, we had a happy marriage. We had our own interests and we allowed each other the freedom to pursue them. We had been married for 56 years when he passed away in 2004 after a period of ill health.

Norman and I made a stable home for our daughters, Ruth and Judith, and despite our very busy working lives we always tried our best to ensure that all their needs were met. As a family we would enjoy doing things together, especially at the weekends.

On Saturdays Norman would take the girls to the synagogue in the morning, and in the afternoon we would all go to Norman's parents' house for a big Silman family get-together. We would have tea round their huge dining table with Norman's parents, his brother Harry, sister Miriam, and their families, and afterwards Ruth and Judith would play with their cousins in the garden. On Sundays we'd have a family lunch at home and I would cook a joint of meat with all the trimmings. In the afternoon, weather permitting, Norman would drive us into the Yorkshire countryside to go walking, or we would go to Roundhay Park where the girls could ride the donkeys or go boating on the lake. When the weather wasn't good enough we'd stay in and play games together such as cards, Scrabble or chess.

We always encouraged the girls to work hard at school and we tried to foster a love of music and the arts by taking them to concerts, ballet and the theatre. We also encouraged them to play the piano and they both took piano lessons from the age of five until well into their teens.

Every summer we would go on holiday together. When the girls were young we used to visit northern seaside resorts like Blackpool and Filey. As they got older we went abroad and had lovely holidays together where we would relax on the beaches, swim in the sea and do lots of sightseeing. I have always been interested in seeing ancient sites and historic buildings and the family often joked that I dragged them to see lots of 'old stones', but I know that these were precious family times.

I am proud of both my daughters and of what they have achieved in their lives. They attended the local schools in Leeds - Moortown County Primary School and Allerton High School - and then they both went on to university and had professional careers: Ruth became a teacher and Judith a pharmacist.

Ruth married an American and lives in Florida. She has three children, Jacqui, Samantha and Brett, and two grandchildren, Emily and Lilly. Despite Ruth being in Florida I see her every day via a video call, and I occasionally have the pleasure of virtually 'seeing' my grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well.

Judith has two sons, Robert and Paul, and she and her husband, Brian, recently moved to Harrogate to be nearer me. Judith visits me regularly to help with day to day tasks which I now find challenging after suffering two strokes in 2016. ■



My American great-grandchildren, Emily (left) and Lilly, 2021



Ruth and Judith, Roundhay Park



With Ruth, Judith and Norman in Roundhay Park, 1959



Our first holiday abroad in Belgium, 1957



On holiday in Venice with Ruth and Judith, 1959



Family day out at Gordale Scar, Malham, 1959



With my grandsons Paul and Robert, 2007



Granddaughter Jacqui's wedding in Florida, 2011



Norman and me visiting our American grandchildren, Jacqui, Brett and Samantha, in Florida, 1989

Retirement?

AFTER A TEACHING career that lasted over 20 years I retired from full-time lecturing when I was 60, but I continued to work part-time for a further four years, organising short courses and exhibitions for nurses and other healthcare professionals. I retired from paid work at the end of 1994, just after my 65th birthday. This may be the time when some people start to slow down, but that was not for me. Even in retirement I was busy all the time. There was still important work to be done.

After I retired I took a voluntary position with a body called the Community Health Council. The Council worked with various branches of the Health Service and my focus was on the hospital sector. My colleagues and I would visit hospitals to make sure that their services met the required standards. It was a very interesting job which I continued to do until the Council was, unfortunately, wound up by the government.

Around this time I joined the Labour Party. I had always been politically left-leaning, perhaps due to the influence of my brother Paul who was, in his youth, a member of the Communist Party. I became involved at a local level, helping with leafletting and canvassing. I expanded my voluntary work by becoming the Labour Party representative, and later the Holocaust Survivors Friendship Association (HSFA) representative, on the board of the Leeds Older People's Forum. This organisation works to improve the welfare of older residents of the city and I am still involved with it today.

I have enjoyed all of my voluntary roles, yet the most important has been my work with the HSFA. When I made the decision to join the HSFA in 1996, the group had only just been formed. Holocaust survivors and refugees who lived in the Leeds area would meet monthly, sharing stories over a cup of tea. I found, at long last, people who had similar backgrounds and, like me, had arrived in the UK as refugees. We quickly became friends and we all supported each other. I became heavily involved in the group, taking on the role of secretary and later becoming the chair when the original chairman of the organisation, Heinz Skyte, retired.

In the late 1990s more and more people within our group began to speak about their experiences: of the concentration camps, of becoming refugees, of leaving their homes and being split from and losing their families. Up to this point many of us had either been too traumatised or too busy looking after

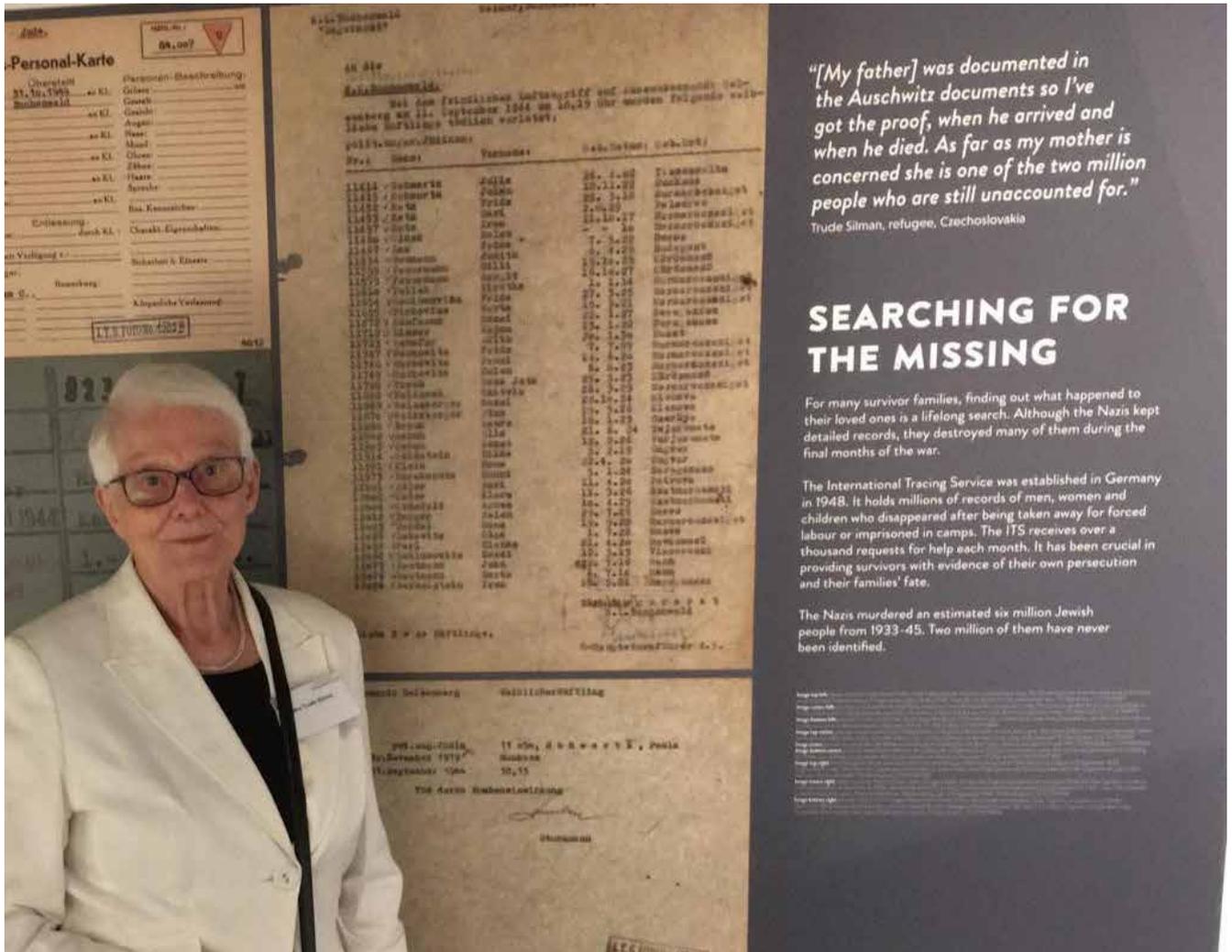
our own families to speak openly about these experiences. During each meeting one of the survivors would tell their story to the group. As a result of my background in education I saw the value in this and I realised that there was an opportunity to start a programme where we could go out and deliver these talks to the wider community. About 25 of us were given some special training by one of the London-based Jewish organisations and from then on we all started giving talks, visiting schools, universities and Holocaust exhibitions to tell our stories.

I began telling my story in 2000 and I have spoken publicly ever since. After I had been giving talks for a short while, I was invited to join the pool of survivor speakers at Beth Shalom in Laxton, Nottinghamshire. Beth Shalom was set up by brothers Stephen and James Smith, supported by their parents, Marina and Eddie. This inspirational and tireless Christian family created the first dedicated Holocaust Exhibition and Education centre in the UK, which has now become the National Holocaust Centre.

Inspired by Beth Shalom, the HSFA has recently set up a Holocaust Education Centre and Exhibition at Huddersfield University, the only such centre in the north of England. The centre officially opened in September 2018. The exhibition tells the stories of 16 Holocaust survivors, including myself, who settled and made their lives in Yorkshire. In addition to the exhibition an extensive archive has been set up. Many educational visits and events are held at the centre, and survivor speakers and various teaching resources are supplied to schools and colleges. I was involved in the planning of the centre, but this major project was mainly initiated and overseen by my dear friend Lilian Black OBE, whose father, Eugene, a camp survivor, was a very active speaker for the HSFA for many years. Lilian supported her father in his talks and became heavily involved with the organisation, eventually becoming a wonderful chairperson for the HSFA. Her drive, enthusiasm, and hard work have been crucial in setting up the centre at Huddersfield and developing the organisation. Tragically, Lilian died from Covid-19 in October 2020.

I am an honorary life president of the HSFA and have been very pleased and proud to see the organisation go from strength to strength and, in the Holocaust Centre in Huddersfield, leaving a permanent legacy for future generations. It was a very pleasant surprise when in 2020 I was awarded

an MBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours List for my work in Holocaust education. My investiture should have taken place at Windsor Castle in April 2020 but unfortunately has been postponed due to the pandemic. ■



Standing by my exhibit at the Holocaust Exhibition and Learning Centre at Huddersfield University, 2018



Judith joined me at Buckingham Palace's garden party in 2008 when I was invited for my voluntary work in Holocaust education, 2008



I was awarded the Yorkshire Women's Lifetime Achievement Volunteer Award in December 2020



Speaking at the official opening of the Holocaust Exhibition and Learning Centre at Huddersfield University, 2018

1945 - News about my parents

RETURNING TO MY youth and news from home, most communication about my parents and from my remaining family came via my brother Paul. He was usually the first to know anything. While he kept me broadly informed, he tried to shield me from a lot of grief by keeping some of the information to himself. I wish he had told me everything, but he didn't.

Paul wrote to me with news about our parents shortly after the end of the war in 1945. He told me that, as far as he knew, both our parents were dead. Initially there had been a hopeful message about our father. A family friend had come through the concentration camps and thought that he had seen father alive somewhere. This flicker of hope was soon extinguished when our cousin Mancie, who had survived Auschwitz, reported with certainty that our father was dead. He had been killed in Auschwitz. There was no news of our mother, who was one of the two million people who remained missing and presumed killed. By the time this information reached me in late 1945 I had lived away from my family and my home for so long that I had few expectations: nothing could shock me any more. It is very difficult to remember accurately how I felt upon receiving the news. Looking back, however, the hurt was a little less than one may imagine because I was almost



My paternal grandmother 'Babka' after the war, 1950

prepared for it. I say almost because one always tried to have hope.

I now realised that there was nothing to go home for: there was nothing left there. Most of my family had been killed or had been scattered around the world, and there wasn't anyone left in Bratislava.

I discovered that my paternal grandmother was the only member of my immediate family to survive the war in Czechoslovakia. I believe that she had been hidden by local villagers near her farm. One of my father's brothers, Sandor, had also survived, having fought with the Czechoslovak section of the Russian army. He returned to his home in Senec and took in my grandmother to live with him. He managed to retrieve my father's three paintings mentioned in chapter one, which I believe may have been hidden with my grandmother. Sadly his wife and daughter had been killed by the Nazis, but he restarted his life as a doctor. He eventually married his nurse, Magda, whose husband had also been killed. Many years later, after Sandor had died, my sister Charlotte and I visited Magda and she agreed that we could have the paintings. We arranged for them to be shipped to us in England and they are precious reminders of our parents and our original home. ■



Uncle Sandor with his second wife, Magda, circa 1950

Saying goodbye to my father

IT WAS A long time before I knew the full details of my father's fate. I found out much of it through my own research which I conducted following my retirement. As I would discover, in 1940 my father was living separately from my mother, who had returned home to tend to her own ailing mother. Father lived in a small room on his own until he was taken on 19 April 1942 during one of the earliest mass transports of Jews to Auschwitz, which had become an extermination camp as part of the Nazis' Final Solution. He arrived there towards the end of April 1942 and was sent to his death in the gas chamber around two weeks later, on 8 May. My father was 54.

In September 2005 I travelled to Poland to visit Auschwitz. During this visit I found myself completely alone on the camp's railway track, which was strange given the number of people there that day, yet I could not see another soul. The sun was shining; it was the most beautiful day. As I walked along the track I felt a very peaceful feeling. Peace was certainly not something I ever expected to feel in that place. It was a very peculiar but amazing sensation as at that moment I knew I had laid my father to rest.

Many years after the war I discovered that Uncle Gejza and Aunt Biba had offered to try to get jobs in England for my mother and father so that they would be able to get visas to come to the UK. Sadly, my father refused this offer as he felt he was too old to come to a new country and take a job in domestic service and, being an eternal optimist, he hadn't appreciated how dangerous life would become in Czechoslovakia. This was a tragic misjudgement and by the time the full gravity of the situation became clear it was too late to be able to get out. ■

Still searching for Mother

SINCE MY RETIREMENT I have spent a great deal of time investigating what happened to my mother. It has been a long and painstaking process and I have had great difficulty finding anything that could lead to a definitive conclusion. She remains one of the two million missing.

Her story, from what I have been able to piece together, is rather complicated. Following the departure of her children she became a nurse at the Jewish Hospital in Bratislava and she moved into her ailing mother's apartment to look after her. My mother remained there until, I surmise, her mother was taken away to a concentration camp in 1942. Sometime after this, my mother's brother was also taken away and killed. Decades later my brother Paul told me that Mother had divorced our father in 1940 and he thought that our grandmother had been very influential in persuading our mother to do this.

I also discovered that after her mother had been taken away, my mother got baptised into the Evangelical Church and in July 1942 she married an old family friend called Ludovit Pasztor, who was 26 years her senior. They clearly hoped that doing these things would increase their chance of safety and help them to escape the transports. They were forced to report daily to one of the town's police stations but when the situation worsened, they went into hiding somewhere in Eastern Slovakia. They remained free until December 1944, when they were rounded up and taken to Sered Concentration Camp which was located close to Bratislava. They arrived at Sered together on 16 December 1944. I have found records showing that Ludovit Pasztor was transported to Sachsenhausen, where he died on 27 December 1944.

“I have had great difficulty finding anything that could lead to a definitive conclusion. She remains one of the two million missing.”

I have been unable to find any record of what happened to my mother after she entered the camp. From the time she arrived at Sered until the conclusion of the war there were five transports that left the camp destined for Auschwitz. Four transports arrived at Auschwitz but there is no record of my mother being on these. There has never been any documentation discovered for the fifth transport. At the beginning of 1945 the Germans, not wanting to leave any traces of their heinous crimes, led the remaining occupants of the concentration camps out on a series of death marches heading towards Germany. While most of the marches contained male and female prisoners, there was one that set off from Schlesiersee in Western Poland which was made up entirely of women. This march zig-zagged across eastern Europe, picking up women from various camps along the way. Mother, I have reasoned, may have been on this women's-only death march. During the bitterly cold winter some 1500 women were forced onto this march. Many died of starvation, exposure or disease, and anyone who couldn't keep up with the march was brutally killed. When the war ended this march had covered 800km and had reached the Czechoslovakian town of Volary on the border of Germany and Austria. Of the women that set out I believe that fewer than 350 survived.

I have found the name Pasztor on a list of women buried at Volary and wondered whether this was my mother, but the details do not match. I have also found a scrap of evidence about a woman matching my mother's description being in Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany early in 1945, but there was no name to confirm her identity. Did my mother die there? Did she die at Volary? Was she shot on a death march? Did she die of starvation or disease? While there currently remains no finality to my mother's story, I still have hope of finding out her fate and being able to get closure on her sad and short life. She would have been 45 or 46 when she died.

Researching my mother's fate led me to discover the camp at Sered. The Slovak National Holocaust Museum has been set up in the former camp in Sered and I have developed close links with Dr Martin Korcok, the director of the museum. My mother's story is included in the exhibition and I was privileged to attend the opening of the museum in 2016 with my daughter Judith and my sister Charlotte's daughters, Elizabeth and Rachel. ■



Celebrating my 80th birthday with both daughters and all grandchildren, 2009

On reflection

I HAVE BEEN thinking about writing this story for the past 50 years, but I was never able to find the time to put it into words. I thought I would complete my memoir after I retired, but I threw myself into voluntary work which consumed most of my time. I felt that I owed a debt to the country that took me in, and that I should give something back. This was very important to me. As a result I kept putting off writing my story. You think that you are here forever, but you are not. I have been nurturing my story all these years so that my children and grandchildren can understand my background.

In spite of the circumstances and the tragic events that coloured the early part of my life, I have been fortunate in many ways. My father believed very strongly in education and he saw its intrinsic value. He instilled in me intellectual curiosity and a strong work ethic that has never left me. Furthermore, from my arrival in the UK as a refugee, I received an excellent education and much kindness and generosity from many people. Many other children who fled Nazi persecution were not so lucky. Moreover, I was blessed with the most fantastic brother. Paul never forgot the promise he made to our father and he always offered unequivocal support and kindness to me. I was also very lucky to be able to remain in touch with, and be in the same country as my older sister, Charlotte. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our parents who had the foresight, strength, and courage to send their children away alone to a foreign land and an unknown future.

In adulthood I was very lucky to have a kind and supportive husband who allowed me the freedom to follow my ambitions, and with whom I had two daughters and a stable and happy family life. Each of these factors shaped me as a person and allowed me to go on to lead a good and productive life.

“ Furthermore, from my arrival in the UK as a refugee, I received an excellent education and much kindness and generosity from many people. Many other children who fled Nazi persecution were not so lucky. ”



Family party in 1998. On the back row, my sister Charlotte is fourth from the right and Liesel, my brother Paul's wife, is 2nd from the right. I am second from the left.

One only has to look at the current state of the world to conclude that lessons have yet to be learned from the suffering that befell my family and countless others. With that being said, one must still have hope. I hope for a world where people no longer define themselves by their differences. I hope that people of all nationalities, creeds and colours are able to peacefully coexist. I hope that governments will encourage people to support themselves through productive work but will provide sufficient means to adequately assist those who are unable to support themselves, so that all people can live dignified lives.

Above all else, I hope that my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have peaceful, happy and satisfying lives. ■



With Judith and Ruth



With the family at my 90th birthday party



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 have absolutely no memory of saying goodbye. I cannot remember whether I kissed them, whether I hugged them, or what we said to one another. This memory has been completely erased from my mind. The pain of that moment must have been so great that I have no recollection of it whatsoever.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk