



My Story

Anna Russell



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This book is dedicated to my dear sister Susanna (Susy), 1937 - 2020,
whose memories helped me compile my story of the war years



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

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

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Anna Russell spoke to AJR volunteer Amal Kebaïer to share her story.
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Portrait photography Debra Barnes

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“Our landlords, for fear of reprisal because we were Jews, evicted us without notice. We were left homeless and from then on, my family ran from pillar to post, in hiding. We never felt safe in one place. I was always in my parents’ arms, running somewhere. The Germans were hunting down all people of the Jewish faith.”



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Meet my family

MY NAME IS Anna Russell Galapò and I am the middle of three sisters. We were the first generation of our family to be born in Milano, Italy. Much of what is in this book comes from my older sister Susanna, who we called Susy. She was born in April 1937 and had more memories of what happened than I did. I was born in March 1941 and our younger sister Matilde (who we call Titti) was born after the war, in October 1946.

My father Yehuda (Yuda) Galapò was born in November 1908 in Turkey in Kassaba, near Smirna, which is now called Izmir. He left his country of birth because as a Jew he didn't want to go into the army. He moved to Italy, we believe, when he was in his early twenties, where no one could pronounce the name Yehuda and so he was called Yuda. I think he then adopted the name Leone (lion in Italian), which was the emblem of one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (that of Judah) established thousands of years ago in the Holy Land. There were times when we were growing up that our dad spoke French to us, which he had learnt as it was then one of the languages of Turkey. We also spoke Ladino at home which is a mixture of old Hebrew and Spanish, mixed with words from the language spoken in the country where one lives. Ladino is a vernacular language rooted in Spanish with connections to Turkish, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and other languages from the country where a person lived.

“Ninety percent of the Jewish population living in Salonica perished in the Holocaust. A thriving Jewish community was wiped out.”



Me in 1941





My mother with two of her brothers

My mother, Rosa Eshkenazi, was born in Novi-Pazar, Bulgaria in 1907 and grew up in Sofia. She was one of six brothers and two sisters. One brother died at a young age. The other five brothers, having survived the Holocaust, managed to go directly from Bulgaria to Israel between 1946 and 1948. My aunty Rachelle Salinas Eshkenazi, my mother's only sister, was quite beautiful. She was married to a travelling salesman from Salonica, named Elias Salinas. My mother and my grandmother Simcha, travelled from Bulgaria to Italy to visit my aunty Rachelle (Rachele in Italian) who had been living in Milano for some time. Eventually my grandmother returned back to her home in Bulgaria but my mother remained in Italy. She had by then married my father and my sister Susy had been born. When war broke out, Rachelle and Elias decided to return to Salonica, thinking that it would be safer there. But it was not to be; sadly Aunty Rachelle perished in Auschwitz. The fate of Uncle Elias is not known. Ninety percent of the Jewish population living in Salonica perished in the Holocaust. A thriving Jewish community was wiped out.

Our father was the only son among five sisters. All the sisters left Turkey for Israel, except for the youngest, Rosa Afnaim née Galapò, who was living in Milano which is the reason my father went to Italy when he left his native Turkey. Aunty Rosa married very young; unfortunately her husband, Nissim, was killed by a bomb during the war, leaving her a widow with two young children, Vittoria born in 1934 and Matilde born in 1941. Tragically, the three were captured and taken to Bergen-Belsen. Luckily, they survived due to Aunty Rosa having a Turkish passport, or maybe because she was considered *apolide* (a stateless or displaced person). Turkey had remained neutral in the war having signed a treaty of friendship with Germany which held until February 1945 when it entered the war on the side of the Allies. When Aunty Rosa, Vittoria and Matilde were rescued from Bergen-Belsen, they spent around two years being sent to different displacement camps all over Europe. I remember when they returned to Milano and my two young cousins came home speaking every language under the sun.

Mamma and Papà learned to speak Italian, but also knew several other languages between them, speaking Ladino, French, Turkey, Bulgarian and Greek. When the Nazis occupied Italy, and Papà was walking around with me as a baby in his arms, he used to speak in Milanese, the local dialect, pretending to be a native, and he was very good at it. Sometimes I would say “Oh Papà, why are you speaking this funny language? I don’t understand what you are saying!” I remember this quite well. Later, on occasion, he still spoke with the natives in Milanese, as a way to integrate even more. ■

“Mamma and Papà learned to speak Italian, but also knew several other languages between them, speaking Ladino, French, Turkey, Bulgarian and Greek.”



Me as a young child



My parents' wedding



Mamma and Papà on their honeymoon, Lake Como



Left to right: Susy, Mamma, Titti, Papà and me

Introduction of the Racial Laws

THE RACIAL LAWS in Italy were introduced by the fascist movement on 14 July 1938 with the publication of the infamous “Manifesto of Fascist Racism”. On 15 November 1938 this was transformed into a decree (given the force of law) and signed by Emanuele III of Savoia, then King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia, with these words: “For the grace of G-d and for the will of the Nation”. From then on Jewish students, teachers and university lecturers, were forbidden to continue their studies and teaching in state schools and the only Jewish school in Milano was subsequently closed.

These weren't the only limitations. Italian Jews were forbidden to be accepted for military service, to own land, or be proprietors of a business and many were dismissed from their employment in banks and other institutions, for example, doctors and lawyers. On 10 June 1940, when Mussolini's Italy officially entered into war allied with Germany and Japan, the situation for the Jewish population became even more critical. Thankfully, my father was for a while longer able to continue with his work by occupying a small stall in a market selling articles of men's clothing.

One other important document of fascism was “The Carta (Charter) of Verona”. This gave way, on 30 November 1943, to the arrest and internment and delivery to the Nazis of all Jewish residents of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, who were forced to hand over all their possessions. ■



My mother with Susy



My father working at the synagogue in Milano



Susy in the middle with two survivor relatives

A childhood on the run

WE LIVED IN Via Scarlatti, 7 in Milano, together with my paternal grandmother who had come from Turkey. *Nonna* Sultana (Shoshana) was blind and died of shock following the 1943 bombardment of the “Ospedale Maggiore”, a hospital where she was a patient. In that same year our landlords, for fear of reprisal because we were Jews, evicted us without notice. We were left homeless and from then on, my family ran from pillar to post, in hiding. We never felt safe in one place. I was always in my parents’ arms, running somewhere. The Germans were hunting down all people of the Jewish faith. My sister Susy remembered how we used to walk the streets for hours on end to escape capture. Susy mostly walked with Papà while I was with Mamma; we would meet up in the evening at a soup kitchen for the homeless. Susy told me that food was not always available for all four of us and our parents often went without.

When we were hiding we spent nights always in different places, sometimes with people we knew, other times kind strangers put us up. Susy recalled that we spent many nights in a derelict house in Via Leoncavallo. It had no roof or windows and she remembered the cold and having to sleep on a metal framed bed with no mattress or blankets. We had to leave most of our belongings behind and then everything we had got stolen, including what was left of Papà’s merchandise. Papà was a commercial traveller; he would sell hosiery bought from a wholesaler. He was now only able to obtain a few men’s items which he would sell from a table in a market.

“My sister Susy remembers how we used to walk the streets for hours on end to escape capture. Susy mostly walked with Papa while I was with Mamma; we would meet up in the evening at a soup kitchen for the homeless.”

At the beginning of 1943 we found refuge for a while in Via Tadino no. 13, sharing with another Jewish family named Costa. We all hid in an area no bigger than a few square metres. Papà and Mamma would walk the streets with all the risks that incurred, trying to earn some money to provide for the family. One day, the caretaker of the building was sent word of the arrival of a troop of fascists and he came to warn us. I was hidden with a Catholic family on the top floor of the block. The fascists didn't search the home of Catholic families, but if they had they would have said I was their own child. Susy was hidden for several hours in a small closet in the caretaker's lodge. The fascists arrived at our building and asked for a woman named Rosa Afnaim Galapò, our father's youngest sister. The caretaker replied: "We don't have anyone by this name."

It seemed safer for Susy and me to spend most of the time with the caretaker and his wife in their small lodge. It was for the grace of G-d and the courage of Italian folks that we survived on several occasions. One time a van of German soldiers came and pushed their way into our building. The caretakers quickly shoved Susy under their bed and placed me behind long and very heavy drapes, telling me to keep quiet. On that particular occasion the Nazis arrested the Costa family, with whom we were sharing a room. Whereas in the past the Costas had felt "safe", sadly this time their name was on the list of wanted Jews. My sister always said that made a strong impression on her. Our parents tried not to tell her too much, but she knew the Costas were Jewish and so were we and she realised they could have taken us as well.

Luckily, the Costas survived and returned to Milano after the war. During these raids the Nazis would enter the apartment, empty all the drawers, throw everything on the floor but mainly out of the window, and this is why we have no family heirlooms, except for a few photographs which we fortunately managed to save. ■

A rural retreat

AFTER THAT NARROW escape our situation became increasingly desperate and dangerous. Towards the end of 1943, Papà was approached by friends who suggested we evacuate to a community called Blevio, about 25 miles north of Milano, on the shores of Lake Como. Susy told me that we travelled there by motorboat. Blevio was quite isolated and the villagers on the boat did not realise we were refugees. We were travelling incognito, trying not to attract attention, even though there weren't any Germans there. I was a toddler, only two and a half years old, but Susy was older and she might have said something to give us away, so our parents took her down to the engine room, safely out of sight, saying to her: "Look and see how the engine works, it is quite interesting."

For years after my sister remembered the sound of the engine, but it wasn't until she was older that she realised it must have been because she had been hidden away in 'that' engine room. Mamma, Susy and I stayed in Blevio with a farmer's family while Papà, trying to earn some kind of a living, would only return occasionally to us, and only at night. Mamma and Susy were very anxious for his safety. In Blevio, Susy managed to attend a school and completed first grade. In order to integrate with the local children our father impressed upon her the need to change her name to "Gianna Galli". Papà had a flair with dialects and could change when needed, from Italian to Milanese dialect with a perfect accent. ■

Saved by the Archbishop of Milano

DURING MY MARRIED life my parents left Milano on a number of occasions to come and stay with us, but after my mother passed away, the visits from my father became less frequent. He had lost his eyesight because of glaucoma. It was during one of his visits, when it was just me and him, that I had the chance to ask him about the war. He told me about the time he was arrested because he didn't have his documents with him, although it wouldn't have made a difference if he did have his documents with him because had they seen his name they would have known he was a "wanted" person, his name already on the list of people to be arrested. He was taken to Milano Central Station and put on a train with other Jews, on the infamous platform 21 (beneath the station and still in place today), the platform from which the cattle trucks left to go to the death camps and other camps in Italy.

On this occasion, the Archbishop of Milano, Cardinal Schuster, was told there had been some arrests and went to the station. He saw Papà on the train and heard his plea: "I've left my wife and two children at home. Help!" The cardinal told the guards, "He works for me," and they handed my father over, as well as a few other people. The first thing Papà did after that was to shave his moustache off. When he got back to my mother and having to knock at the door loudly to be let in, Mamma screamed, because she thought the German secret state police (Gestapo) had come for them. She failed to recognise Papà without his moustache, he looked completely different. When I saw a photo of him years later I didn't know who he was either!

After my father told me this story, I wanted to know more about the Archbishop of Milano. The fact that he helped Jewish people wasn't actually documented. What was documented though was that he was an early supporter of the fascist party. When Mussolini introduced the racial laws, he distanced himself from 'Il Duce' not agreeing with his ideology. In later years I learnt first-hand that many Jews were helped by Cardinal Schuster. ■



My father during the war after he had to shave off his moustache

Passport problems

BEFORE THE WAR, Papà, knowing that things were becoming difficult for the Jews in Italy (before even the racial laws), applied for an Italian passport because it would have been easier to live there with one, but he was always declined. After the war, Italy finally offered Papà a passport but he refused for the simple reason of how Italy had treated Jews during the war. He told me: “I wanted to keep my Turkish passport because Turkey was very good to the Jews. I will keep it to honour the memories of our family members who died in Turkey.” Papà had to go to the Turkish Embassy once a year to renew a permit of domicile, which covered all four of us - at extra cost, of course.

At 21, I could have got my own Italian passport, but I left the country before turning 21, so I came to England on a Turkish passport. The first time I travelled to England by train. At passport control leaving Milano Central Station, when they saw my Turkish passport, they took me into a room. There were only men present, no women. I was a young girl of 19. They opened my suitcase to search it. My parents used to put sweets amongst the clothes without me knowing, a custom, so that there would always be sweet things in my life. These men opened every single sweet wrapper because they thought I was hiding drugs. Every time I returned to Italy to see my family, the same thing happened.

At Dover, the custom official behind a rather small booth would always call some other official to come over, taking turns to lean over to try to see what I was wearing, expecting to see the famous exotic *salvar* (harem pants). I had to go through all of this before they would stamp my passport and let me through. On my return to England I was always detained by customs, longer than anyone else, and they would ask me suspiciously, “What are you going to do in England?” and other questions. While I realise they were doing their job, I was probably put through all this because of my Turkish passport. ■



My Turkish passport

Our early years after the war

MILANO MAIN SYNAGOGUE, the hub of Jewish life, at Via Guastalla, 19 in the vicinity of Milano Cathedral “Il Duomo”, was built in 1852. It was severely damaged in 1943 by a bombardment after which it was reconstructed, with the work completed in 1953. At the end of the war, in 1945, premises were desperately needed to manage the Jewish community (*Comunita Israelitica*) of Milano. They set up headquarters at Palazzo Odescalchi, a noble building dating back from around the 18th century. It was rather damaged, having belonged first to a fascist group, and then for a brief period to a partisan brigade. It was situated in a narrow, but quite busy road (at the back of Il Duomo), at via dell’Unione, 5.

This was a building that my sister Susy and I remember quite vividly. It became the centre for receiving Italian and foreign survivors on their return from the camps and being in hiding. There was an immense lounge, part of which was turned into a much-needed synagogue, a meeting room, a canteen, offices and a surgery run by Dr. Cantoni, and supported by O.S.E. (a Jewish health organisation). Dr. Catoni remained our family doctor until I came to England.

“At the end of the war, in 1945, premises were desperately needed to manage the Jewish community (Comunita Israelitica) of Milano. They set up headquarters at Palazzo Odescalchi, a noble building dating back from around the 18th century.”

On the upper floors you would find a very large dormitory to receive the multitude of survivors. I remember that prior to everything being organised, sick, lost, broken people, not yet knowing the fate of their family members, would sleep on the floor of the immense courtyard, or on the large stairs of every landing. As things began to improve, gradually clothing, shoes, bedding and even mattresses were provided.

Here, at via dell'Unione, 5, the Jewish soldiers of the Palestinian division were involved with intricate secret operations finalised with the arrival of survivors from all over Europe, people whom comrades of the Jewish Brigade were directing towards the Lombardy capital, Milano. They were conducting clandestine operations to enable refugees to reach the land of Israel. This building was also for many years the headquarters of the O.R.T. school which held courses on electrical engineering and woodwork for boys, and sewing and dressmaking for girls, along with Hebrew classes.

The Jewish youth movements would also meet at via dell'Unione: Zofim and Zofot for boys and girls between the ages of 12 years to 16 years, and Solelim and Solelot for children below 12 (boy scouts and brownies). Also, extra activities and learning to prepare you to make *aliyah* to Israel. Growing up after the war we all used to go with Maccabi or Bnei Akiva (I don't remember which) to holiday destinations; a building would be rented and Jewish youth from all over Europe would meet and make wonderful friendships. We got to be in the most beautiful parts of Italy, mainly in the Dolomites with its amazing scenery, memories of which I still cherish in my heart. Via dell'Unione, 5 began its closure around 1952. We three sisters all had fond memories of that place which became like a second home to us. ■

Life in Milano after the war

WHEN WE WERE children, Mamma never spoke about the war times, except when prompted by us. She would then talk about the partisans; they were good people, they had guns and fought the Nazis and helped Jews and refugees who hid in the forest. They aided allied pilots by guiding them with lights to a secure place to land or where to parachute to safety. We learned, much later by a different source, that Mamma would go to the forest and take food to the partisans.

When the war ended we were still living in Blevio. I don't remember where we lived when we returned to Milano shortly after the war ended, but I know my mother found work as a housekeeper for an Italian Jewish family, whom she knew. They loved Mamma and they treated her like one of their own. They would invite her to eat with them, but Mamma always believed mealtimes were to be respected as a time when family got together, so she would decline and eat alone.

I remember when I was about five or six years old, we were given an apartment at Via Vincenzo Foppa, 55 that had belonged to a fascist family who ran away when Mussolini was defeated. It was a small apartment on the first floor and we lived there for a number of years. As soon as we stepped into our new "home" Mamma took a wooden spoon from the kitchen, wrapped around it a cloth doused with petrol and set fire to it. She ran it around the metal bed frame to sterilise it. I believe it was primarily for hygiene reasons, but it was also symbolic - to expunge all traces of the fascists who had lived there. The wife of the family turned up at some point and asked for the chandelier because it had been a present from her parents. Mamma told her: "Take it, I don't want anything of yours!"

As the gruesome details of the Holocaust came out, the whole world found it hard to believe. We had spent the war trying to survive; how could we possibly know what was happening in the rest of Europe? When Auntie Rosa returned from displacement camps after Bergen-Belsen she told us what she knew. After, when as young children my sisters and I were sent to a Jewish camp organised by the O.S.E. at a seaside town called Riccione, we received visits by young women who had survived the camps. I still so clearly recall some of them sitting among us on the sand and telling us about the time when their heads were shaved and other aspects of their dreadful experiences, taking consideration of the fact that they were talking to still young children. I believe now that was our first lesson about the Holocaust. In Italy we grew up with a strong knowledge of the Shoah: scenes, films and photographs,

while most people in England were less informed about what had happened to Italian and foreign Jews. We had lived through Nazi occupation and after the war many German survivors and Jewish people from other parts of Europe, came to settle in Italy, especially in Milano.

Of course, not everyone wanted to talk about what had happened, that tragic period in history. Most people wanted to get back to normal life, as we did, and we went on to have a safe life, as my parents integrated into Italian society, but keeping a home in which our Jewish and cultural traditions were observed quite strictly.

One of the things that Susy and I used to enjoy was to take turns in grinding our own coffee beans with a wooden grinder and make Turkish coffee. The lovely aroma rising from the freshly ground beans would make the chore worthwhile. We would boil the coffee on the stove and add sugar before it came to the boil; we would then take a cup of water (an espresso cup) and as soon as the coffee came to the boil we added the water, then left it to settle before drinking it. It had the most delicious smell and taste. After drinking the coffee, when we had company, the coffee cup would be turned upside down and left to rest for a few minutes. Mamma would then be asked to “read” the sediments. My mother used to watch this sort of ceremony being done by the Turkish help her family had in Bulgaria when she was growing up. Mamma would oblige to please her Italian friends. She always said she only “saw” good things. If the sediments of the coffee belonged to someone who had relatives living abroad, she would say: “You will be receiving a letter soon” and, of course, there was bound to be a letter eventually, and Mamma would be the first to be acknowledged of it having made the recipient very happy. She would always give out positive and encouraging results.

“As the gruesome details of the Holocaust came out, the whole world found it hard to believe. We had spent the war trying to survive; how could we possibly know what was happening in the rest of Europe?”



Papà when he was made *shammas* of the synagogue

Mamma had a very good voice and she loved to dance. Her friends would call her “Happy Rosica”. She would put on a good face to make her visitors comfortable, but we realised much later on that she must have been missing her deceased sister Rachelle and all her brothers. We used to enjoy hearing her sing the melodies of her country of birth and we learned a few of them ourselves. When Sephardi friends of our parents came over we all danced together. Eastern European dances are not dissimilar to Israeli *horas* and nearly always holding a scarf or hanky and moving in a circle. When we asked Mamma about her parents she would tell us about them and the life she had back home, which had been comfortable. My Nonno (grandfather) Eliezer had been a landowner with hired help.

After the war, things weren't always easy with three young children to bring up. Mamma became quite skilled with a needle and began to embroider tablecloths, some of which I still have. Like most women in those days my mother wouldn't throw anything away. She would make aprons out of Papà's old shirts; she also made skirts and blouses, all by hand. She became a member of A.D.E.I *Associazione Donne Ebee Italiane*, the Association of Italian Jewish Women, which she belonged to with pride.

Our dear father was quite strict, he had to be with three daughters, but he was also very protective. We were only allowed to go to Jewish clubs, where Papà knew most of the other young people. We would be taken there and collected. Papà was a very hard working man, loving and caring, always putting the family first, and making lots of sacrifices for us all. He was made *shammas* (official) of the main synagogue in Via Guastalla, Milano, an honour he deserved and was very proud of. He never complained about his lack of sight or let it interfere with his official duties. ■

School days

SOON AFTER VICTORY was declared, while the Jewish school was still closed, I was sent for about one year to a convent school run by nuns. They would accept you if you were Jewish but only to try to convert you. “You killed Jesus, our Christ and we forgive you,” they told me when I was only four years old! They made us learn the catechism and the prayers which we had to kneel for, prayers that stayed with me for a long time. I remember reciting them to Papà, not understanding the meaning of it, but to show how well I was memorising them, until Papà said, “No more! Those are not our prayers.”

The first, most cherished gift that our parents were able to afford was a Star of David - *Magen David* - that we three sisters were each given. They were made of gold with our names and an inscription from our dear parents. In later years, when my children were still babies, my parents made sure they were given a similar gift in the form of bracelets with their names and dates of birth inscribed. The gifts would instil into us our Jewishness, and help us never forget our roots.

We joined our Jewish school when it reopened in 1946. It was very cosmopolitan. We had refugees who had settled in Milano after the war and later on we had the arrival of Egyptian Jews who came to Italy when Nasser took control in 1956 and during the Sinai War with Israel.

It was the only Jewish school in Milano, a private establishment called “Alessandro da Fano” which later changed name to “Sally Mayer”. We were taught Hebrew, oral and written, for which I received a prize in the form a cheque. We were taught French, improved by our interaction with the Egyptian students. I still remember how eager they all were to engage us with their memories of life left behind, the sights and smells of a country which they had reluctantly been made to leave when Nasser came to power. ■



At the Jewish school in Milano. Me (front) aged 5 with Susy aged 8 behind me



Me in 1956



With Papà in Milano just before I left for England

I come to England

I LEFT MILANO and arrived in England on 21 February 1961, one month before my twentieth birthday. It was only meant to be a way to get to live in Israel in a not-so-distant future. All of my uncles and aunties had emigrated to Israel (with the exception of my father's younger sister), and my parents wanted to go too. They thought that if one of their daughters were to settle there first, then they would follow.

My cousin Matilde, who had survived Bergen-Belsen, was already in England. We were the same age and good friends. She was training to be a nurse at the London Jewish Hospital (which no longer exists) in Stepney Green, in the East End of London. When she heard I wanted to go to Israel, she said: "Why don't you come here to learn English? It is spoken in Israel and will make things easier for you." My parents allowed me to come to London by myself, after obtaining the relevant documents from the hospital, and being reassured I was going to a Jewish institution, a hospital with mainly Jewish patients. Actually, with our lack of knowledge of the English language, we mistakenly believed that I would be trained for the care of children only.

“My parents allowed me to come to London by myself, after obtaining the relevant documents from the hospital, and being reassured I was going to a Jewish institution, a hospital with mainly Jewish patients.”

There were a lot of girls from all over the world, mostly Jewish, who came through the O.S.E. to train as nurses, before going back home. I remember sitting on a train to Victoria Station when I first got to England. Looking out I could see what looked like millions and millions of small terraced houses, all the same. I thought, “Is this how London is going to be? All these houses so close to one another?” How wrong I was, but at that time I had yet to discover all that London had to offer, such a beautiful city with wonderful museums and art galleries.

On a couple of occasions when I first moved to England, Mamma sent me clothes from Italy; they were so stylish and different that at times I would be stopped and asked where I had bought them. Most of the time though I wore my nurse’s uniform. The first time I went clothes shopping in London I ended up in Harvey Nichols and bought myself a pale green light-weight jacket and skirt - something English, and it was lovely!

I was very homesick, so from time to time I used to go to the Italian district in Soho, the only place I knew where you could buy an Italian newspaper. I would sit in an Italian coffee house and exchange a few words with others in my native language. At the hospital I was the only Italian nurse, having come independently while most of the other girls came through the O.S.E. ■

Life at the London Jewish Hospital

THE NURSES LIVED at the London Jewish Hospital. There was a separate building where we were housed. I had never left home before then, never been separated from my parents. We weren't allowed to go home for a visit because the hospital feared we wouldn't come back and they were paying for most of the girls' training. It was eighteen months before I returned home - a long time. I remember my first trip back, it was in the month of August and I left a cold England wearing quite a heavy suit. When I arrived at Milano Central Station, my sister Susy said, "You make me feel hot!" She was pregnant at the time and struggling with the heat. She couldn't understand why I was wearing a heavy suit in August when temperatures were in the 90s. I hadn't been able to change clothes while I was on the train. It was a 24-hour journey and I had to sit up the whole way because I wasn't able to get a couchette.

We couldn't speak to our families easily from London because we didn't have telephones. We had to book our calls, having to go to a kind of a cellar where the porter lived, to wait for the phone operator to call and be put on the line. When the call came you had to be quick, we only had a few minutes. I remember writing home, which I did very frequently, sitting in front of the window in my room and seeing four seasons all in a short span of time. I'd write: "Woke up with the sun, now it's raining, and now snowing and then something else." And all this sometimes as late as April.

We would get up at six in the morning because we started work at seven-thirty on day duty. When we were on night duty, our shift began at eight in the evening until nine the following morning, with a break for dinner at midnight. When we came off-duty, around 9.30am, we would have to attend classes with the English tutor, an Irish gentleman called Mr. Bullock, who was also our medical teacher. We would all be falling asleep, as you would imagine. I don't remember learning too much of the English language under those conditions. When you start to learn a new language, at first you don't say a word. It happened to all of us, you are not confident enough, then suddenly it comes to you, but it took a fair length of time. To be able to communicate with one another, we spoke English in the nurses' home. We came from all over the world: Morocco (Spanish Morocco), Sweden, Persia (Iran) and Spain. I became fluent in Spanish by talking with the girls from Morocco and Spain, and also from having spoken Ladino at home. With all the other nurses I spoke English.



With another nurse from Persia

I made long-lasting friends especially with Leita (a Jewish girl from Morocco) and Carmina (a gentile girl from Spain) and though they eventually returned to their homes, we still kept in touch by correspondence and by meeting in London on occasions. When I started at the hospital, the day after my arrival in England, I was given a white uniform and put to work as an auxiliary nurse on the geriatric ward. Quite a few patients had cancer and at that time there were no proper drugs to relieve the pain. People were screaming. They spoke to me in Yiddish, but I spoke Ladino as I was Sephardi. "Sorry, no understand Yiddish," I used to say. They would reply, "You no understand Yiddish? You no Jewish!" I would get very upset that they didn't know what Sephardi meant, that we were Jews just like them and that we had suffered in the war like other Jews.

The work wasn't easy. When a Jewish patient died, it had to be a Jewish person who laid out the body. Once, very early on in my training, I was called in the middle of the night to lay-out a body. I was only 20 years old and it was the first time I had ever seen a dead person. Of course, it got easier. After 18 months, when I returned home, this was the first thing I told Papà. He said to me: "It is a *mitzvah* (religious duty - a commandment), just think of it like that. From your hand they go to *Hashem* (the Almighty)". It was a nice way to look at it. It comforted me. I always had a strong feeling of wanting to be needed and my patients needed me. I became very attached to them and I felt respected and loved.

We worked for three nights, and then we would have three nights off. When we were on day duties, whenever we could, we would gather in each other's room, or go to the cinema or go shopping in the West End. It was a very warm and friendly group. One of the funniest memories I have is of the sister in charge. Her name was Una; she was Irish Catholic and appeared to be very stern. When I first met her, having to work under her, I feared her, and I couldn't understand what she was saying with her Irish accent. Even now I have trouble understanding it, even more so with a Scottish accent. One day, all us nurses were offered tickets to the London Palladium matinee show, to see an entertainer called Bruce Forsyth, who I had never heard of. I couldn't get there for curtain up because I was working. It took me a while to find the theatre; it was a sunny day in the middle of summer, so I was wearing my tinted glasses. When I walked into the theatre the lights were dimmed because the show had already started, and I didn't realise that I still had my tinted glasses on. I was looking around in the dark, trying to find my seat without causing too much fuss because I knew the scary sister was there sitting among my friends.



In my uniform at the London Jewish Hospital, 1961

Suddenly, the man on the stage said, “Somebody didn’t realise that there is no sun in here!” or some other comment to that effect. He carried on and on while I kept my head down and continued looking for my seat. He said, “Hey! I am talking about you. You!” and eventually I realised he was talking to me. “What’s your name?” he asked, so I had to tell him my name. “Oh, what country do you come from?” he said. When I told him I was from Italy he started singing in Italian. Eventually I found my seat, right next to Sister Una, and I sat down. Immediately after he made me stand up again and he then dedicated the whole show to me. Bruce Forsyth was singing Italian songs to me and making jokes I couldn’t understand. Being rather shy, I was very embarrassed. When we got back to the hospital and to my duties, Sister Una didn’t miss any opportunity to tell every doctor there, the story about me and Bruce Forsyth. She never stopped talking about it. From then on, I was her best friend. She took me under her wing, and I couldn’t do anything wrong as far as she was concerned, and I daren’t.

All in all, it was a very happy time from which I have good memories. I lived at the London Jewish Hospital in Stepney Green for three years so I knew the area around it quite well: the shops, the market and the famous Bevis Marks Synagogue where I used to go for services whenever I could. The last time I was in the district, it had completely changed - all tall buildings, glass offices everywhere and I didn’t recognise it at all. ■

“Bruce Forsyth was singing Italian songs to me and making jokes I couldn’t understand. Being rather shy, I was very embarrassed. When we got back to the hospital and to my duties, Sister Una didn’t miss any opportunity to tell every doctor there, the story about me and Bruce Forsyth.”

I meet Stanley

ONE WEEK AFTER arriving in England, there was a dance at the hospital. A lovely and caring young man asked me out and we were courting for a time. My cousin Matilde got upset that I was spending all my time with my boyfriend instead of her, so when one evening she asked me to go out with her, I accepted. She took me to the “Whisky A Go Go”, a very popular music club in Soho which attracted lots of young Jewish people. Not long after arriving at the club, Matilde met someone there and left me on my own. I only spoke very little English, and my cousin had taken my handbag with her because she had put her wallet in it. I was left sitting there thinking: “What if she doesn’t come back and I won’t know how to get back to the hospital by myself?” It was then that a young man came over and asked me to dance. Because I was upset and preoccupied, I very nearly said, “No, thank you” but something made me get up and dance with him. We started chatting, or rather, he started chatting; his name was Stanley Russell. He noticed the *Magen David* I was wearing and asked if I was Jewish; I said “Yes” and he then told me he was Jewish too. He asked me out, and after a few dates together I had to tell the other young man I had met someone else. I remember feeling very guilty, knowing he would be hurt.

Stan and I started courting and after six months, although he wasn’t yet able to make a commitment, ours was his longest relationship. He was still studying to become a pharmacist. In the short spare time we both had, Stan would take me to see the London sights. He would make a lot of fuss of me and had a great sense of humour and made me laugh. He tried very hard for me to be less homesick. During the second year of Stan’s studies, he planned to go canoeing down the Rhône for ten days and, as I was given some holiday, I said I would go to see my parents and sisters in Italy at the same time. Stan’s parents happened to be on holiday at an Adriatic resort not far from ours and we all met up. That was when my parents first met Stan’s parents. Between the two mothers there was a fair amount of gesticulation, whilst I was the go-between for six people trying to translate. There were moments when I found myself speaking the wrong language to the wrong person! We had some nice snaps taken by a professional photographer who had been hired by Stan’s parents. Unbeknown to us, but apparently with my future husband’s blessing, those were destined to be our official engagement photographs.



Collecting shells on the beach when we were engaged

The following summer Stan joined me on holiday to meet all of my family. That's when we celebrated our official engagement. By coincidence, exactly three years to the day after we met, we got married. Stan had qualified as a pharmacist by then. My parents came from Milano for the wedding with my younger sister Titti, and stayed for a week. Unfortunately, as my older sister Susy had not long given birth to her only child Alberto, she was unable to come. Titti was a bridesmaid together with Stan's sister Valerie. I remember Papà wearing a hired tailcoat and top hat. He was very slim and tall and quite good-looking: people thought he was a film star. Papà was blind by the time I got married; he was only 56 years old. He managed very well. He was employed by the *Comunità Israelitica di Milano* (Jewish Community of Milan). He never showed any self-pity or frustration and he didn't let his disability stand in his way. Our family was well known in the community and the bulletin (*The Jewish Chronicle*) of Milano reported the wedding. My dear parents were proud of me having married within the faith to a lovely human being like Stan. ■



Messing around on the tennis court at Hounslow in 1964



With my Persian friend outside the pharmacy



Stan's mother Esther (left) and my mother at my wedding. It was the first time my mother came to England



My parents at my wedding



Stan feeling peckish at our wedding!



Early married life

I HAD NEARLY finished my training, but Stan had just qualified as a pharmacist and he said: “I don’t want my wife to be a nurse, I would like her to help me in the shop.” He was only 24 years old when he purchased his business. So I gave up nursing. For the first five years of our marriage we lived above the shop in Hounslow. I worked with Stan eight hours a day, sometimes nine to ten hours a day depending on how busy we got in the dispensary. We also had to be on rota with other local pharmacists, whereby every four weeks we had to open the shop on a Sunday as well, to handle emergencies. Sometimes we were woken in the middle of the night for small things such as a baby’s broken bottle. At the time it wasn’t unusual to ring the police to find out the nearest open pharmacy. We were robbed too because we had a small cabinet with narcotics.

We had a lovely lady called Wynn who helped us in the shop, having stayed on from the previous owner. She was very good to me, like a friend. Most of our friends lived in North West London, quite a way from where we were living. We didn’t have much time to keep in touch. On our day off we would have to catch up with the prescriptions, a lot of medical ingredients had to be prepared manually, like ointments or cough mixtures, and we also had to take stock of merchandise and reorders. At times I found it quite lonely. I was young, in a new country with a new language, new food, new everything. There was so much to adjust to. The food was one of the hardest things. I couldn’t cook the Sephardi food I had grown up with because I couldn’t find the produce to make *bourekas* (baked pastry), stuffed aubergines, stuffed artichokes and so much more. Most people living in Hounslow were English, and I didn’t know English food. After eight hours standing in the shop, I would go upstairs and start making pasta from flour, water and eggs. You couldn’t even get pasta in those times, except in special places in Soho, where one could find Italian shops and, as I would discover later, also in lovely Richmond. Still, I enjoyed making my own pasta, cutting it up in whatever shape I decided. I would also make my own sauce, a simple tomato sauce, but as I was used to the lovely sun-kissed tomatoes of Italy, the ones I would use weren’t the right ones. The tinned tomatoes weren’t very good either. Also, you couldn’t find herbs such as basil and oregano which are staples in Italian dishes. My younger sister Titti came over and stayed with us at the beginning of our marriage and I tried my best to cook the few Italian dishes I knew. She watched me preparing the food and, after tasting it, she would say: “I saw you putting your heart in your food, but I am sorry it isn’t very good.” She was being polite!

It was a very quiet area where we lived. On Sundays we would go to Richmond and Windsor, and I loved Hampton Court. Then we moved to Kenton, North West London. I never told my parents how homesick I was. They would phone me regularly and they didn't want to upset me by saying that I was very much missed. Things became easier when our children arrived and I began making new friends, when they started nursery and, later, school. As soon as we got settled in our new home, my parents would come over and stay with us. They loved London. The second time they came was when our son Daniel was a few weeks old, in 1971. Sadly, my dear Mamma passed away a few months before Daniel's *bar mitzvah* in 1984, after a long illness which required her leg to be amputated. After, Papà would come over alone or accompanied by one of my sisters. Papà lived eight years after Mamma's death. I have, among other photos, one of my father outside, or rather in front of, Number 10 Downing Street, looking proud! ■



Italian, Turkish, British, Jewish. Who am I?

WHEN I MARRIED, I automatically became British, but for it to be official I was told by the British consulate that I had to swear allegiance to the Queen in front of a justice of the peace. I put my hand on the book I was given and I began to swear the oath when my husband suddenly said: "Stop, stop! This is not the Old Testament, it is the New Testament!" They had to go and get an Old Testament bible or it wouldn't have been valid. So, three years after I first arrived in this country, I became British. I still have my Turkish passport, but I don't have dual nationality because I was warned by the British consulate that if any future conflict were to arise between Turkey and Great Britain, I wouldn't have the protection of the latter.

Now, after having lived here for so many years, I don't think I could go back and live in Italy. For me the feeling of Jewishness is stronger than any nationality, whether Italian, British or Turkish, but I have never lost a strong feeling of belonging to my place of birth, Milano, a place where I grew up with my mother and father and my two sisters, the place where my dear parents are buried in the Jewish cemetery, together with my dear sister Susy, who passed away in April 2020. My parents always felt like me, being Jewish first, but of course, after so many years of living in Italy they came to love the Italian people and their beautiful country, a country which eventually adopted them.

Now the Italian government will only give a pension to citizens who had been in the concentration camps or had an Italian passport; they do not recognise our family because we were in hiding, not in the camps, and because we weren't Italians. Years after the war, Susy and her son Alberto tried to contact the place in the countryside where we hid, to get some corroborative documents, but they got nowhere with that. The authorities just didn't want to know. Thank G-d for the good Italians who helped us survive. Whatever my sister and I get from our child survivor status, what we may be entitled to, we do it for our parents - and for our Mamma's sister Rachele who perished in Auschwitz.

In the end my parents never emigrated to Israel; they only went there to visit family. I remember Mamma going there with my younger sister Titti in 1956. They went by ship. It was 30 years since my mother had seen her brothers and the voyage took a week. The whole ship, including the captain, knew that she was going to see her brothers in Haifa after so many years apart. Everyone was in tears when they arrived. The whole family was there and they all recognised one another. Mamma and Titti stayed

70003

HOME OFFICE R, 9952A FORM R.1

NOTE: This copy of the application, when officially endorsed to show that registration has been effected, will constitute formal evidence of the applicant's citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies.

BRITISH NATIONALITY ACT, 1948, SECTION 6 (2)

APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION AS A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND COLONIES UNDER SECTION 6 (2) OF THE ACT MADE BY A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN MARRIED TO A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND COLONIES.

[This form is for the use of women who are British protected persons or aliens. Women who are already British subjects or citizens of the Republic of Ireland, but are not citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies should apply on Form R.1. Women who are citizens of the Republic of South Africa should, up to 31st December, 1965, also apply on Form R.1.]

Present name and address in full in block capitals

1. I, Mrs ANNA RUSSELL
of 99 WHITTON ROAD HOUNSLOW (Middlesex)
was born at MILANO on 16.3.1941

Delete words in () which do not apply

2. My father's full name (in ~~his~~ HEBREW) JEHUDA LEON GALAPO
and he was born at SHIRNE (TURKEY) on 29.11.1908

Delete words in () which do not apply

3. I was married at St WESTERN SYNAGOGUE on 26.7.1964
to [full name of husband] STANLEY FRANK RUSSELL
(of [late of] [husband's address or last address if deceased])

4. My husband was born at EPING, HONGKONG on 19/2/31

Delete words in () which do not apply

5. My husband's father's full name (in ~~his~~ HEBREW) PHILIP RUSSELL
and he was born at LONDON on 24/11/1913

Delete words which do not apply

6. My marriage is still subsisting
OR ~~My marriage has terminated by reason of~~ [state whether by the husband's death or by divorce]

Delete words in () which do not apply

7. My husband (in ~~his~~ HEBREW) is not a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies by reason of the fact that [Here state the grounds on which it is claimed that the applicant's husband is or was a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies] British Born

Complete either (a) or (b) or (c)

8—(a) I am an alien and a subject or citizen of the following foreign countries, that is to say, [insert name of country or countries] Notably Turkey, Citizen of Italy

OR (b) I am a stateless alien and was formerly a subject or citizen of the following countries that is to say Italy and ceased to be such by reason of the following facts: Italy [Here state the cause whereby the applicant ceased to be a subject or citizen of the countries in question, whether these are countries mentioned in section 1 (3) of the Act, the Republic of Ireland or foreign countries.]

OR (c) I am a British protected person by reason of my connection with [Here state the protectorate or other territory from which the applicant derives her status as a British protected person, and her connection therewith.]

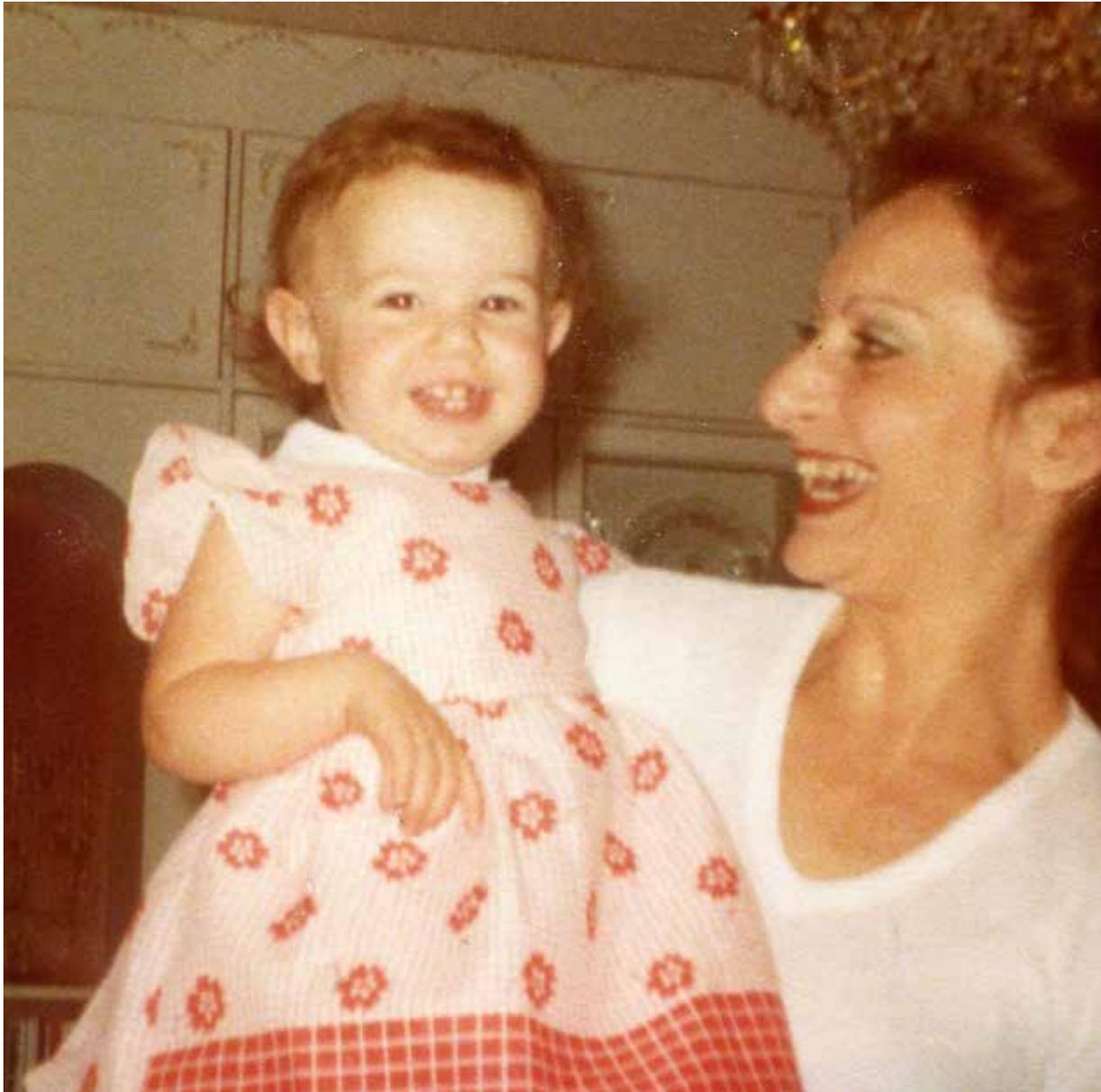
9. I have contracted the following other marriages: [Here state place and date of any other marriage whether before or after the marriage referred to at 3 above together with the name and nationality or statuses of the husband in each case.]

My application for British nationality

in Israel for six months, and they were there when the Suez War broke out. I feel very strongly about Israel. I've never lived there but I would have loved to. Stan also originally wanted to go and settle there to work the land. We had that in common but in the end it never happened. ■



With Daniel aged 3



With Rachelle



At work in the pharmacy in the 60s

Trying to discover my family history

I HAVE BEEN to Turkey to try to find out more about my father's family. My father was born in a small town called Kassaba but he grew up in Izmir, which was then called Smirna. When I was making enquiries with the very kind and helpful Turkish people about Papà's place of birth, they couldn't recognise the name. They suggested that maybe the small town had a change of name or was destroyed by an earthquake, which are common in Turkey. Papà would tell us about them, the ground beneath their feet opening and swallowing people. Prior to going to Turkey I made sure I had telephone numbers of Jewish contacts to get in touch with. I wanted to find out more as my grandfather, Avraam is buried there but I was told I wasn't going to find out because all the documentation was destroyed during a period when everything went up in flames, and the cemetery was now a car park. It makes me so very sad.

I remember my dear father often reminiscing about Turkey, this vast beautiful country; he told us about the street vendors and the wonderful food, describing it so well you could almost smell it. Mind you, it was very similar to the food we grew up with, cooked by our mother. Sephardi food at its best! My father had never been back to Turkey and by the time I made my first visit there, Papà had already passed away. I would have liked him to know that I tried.

I have never been to Bulgaria. My mother would have liked to go back for a visit, but sadly she died before she was able to. All I know is that she was born in a small town called Novi Pazar which, after the war, was taken over by communists. She used to recall the hoards of Cossacks galloping into town, and how as children they would have to hide. She grew up in Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria. She told me about the roses Sofia is famous for, and to this day the production of essential oils is still going on there. I have this beautiful photo of Mamma and my *Nonna*, Simcha who I never met, taken in Sofia, and another of Mamma playing tennis with friends. She had a good life there growing up but never returned after going to Milano to see her only sister Rachele and meeting Papà there.

One of my closest first cousins from my mother's side, Pnina, who has lived in Israel since the age of three, returned to Bulgaria and saw the place where she and her parents were born. Her father was Mamma's youngest brother, and it was nice to hear from her about their life in Bulgaria. I would have loved for us to go too, but at the time it was too hard to organise. Maybe I'll go soon, before it's too late. ■



Left to right: Mamma, a friend and Aunty Rachelle in Bulgaria

Family interests

STAN AND I sing together. He is good with music, self-taught in guitar and ukulele, and has a lovely voice. I haven't learned to play any instrument but I have a good ear for music. For a time, Stan and I were part of a ten-strong group which put on shows and concerts for charity, with changes of costumes and props. Now we sing at residential homes, which is nice. The volunteers who support the residents are great, very jolly, they help everybody participate, and even residents with Alzheimer's remember the songs and lyrics and come to life. We've always found it very rewarding. Stan also helps by compiling playlists of backing tracks for our singing group, which is now small but successful thanks to our producer Sandra. Our other interests are walking and we belong to U3A (University of the Third Age), which has many activities on offer, including opportunities to learn new things and also go on outings.

Our son Daniel, born in 1971, has a very keen ear for music, also self-taught. He played the French horn when he was around nine years old - of all the instruments he could have chosen! - although that didn't last very long. He has been composing music on the computer for many years now. Daniel is also a very good cook and a very loving and supportive son. He was for a time a DJ in France and in New Caledonia. Our daughter Rachelle, who is six years younger, is a qualified and very dedicated nanny, working with families with new-born babies. One of her first jobs was with new-born triples who already had a three-year-old sister. Another with new-born twins, also with a three-year-old sister. Her care extends to every aspect of their growing up, taking on the responsibilities of their working parents until they reach secondary school age. She is also a very good cook and enjoys replicating her grandma's Sephardi dishes. Rachelle is our wonderful daughter - and my best friend! ■



Rachelle and Simon's wedding, 2017



Susy, me and Titti at Daniel's *bar mitzvah*

My sisters

MY TWO SISTERS – Susy and Titti – and I fought a fair bit when we were growing up together as we were quite different and yet similar at the same time, but what I will always remember is the great fun we had when the three of us got together. Susy had a wicked sense of humour. She loved dancing and was very good at it. Susy and I were together during the war years and though she was only a young child herself, she had at times to take care of me. It was she who, about four years ago, took me back to show me the places where we hid from the Nazis during the terrible times. “Always remember!” she told me.

Susy was very protective of me. There was a time we were travelling on a very crowded tram to get to school and a young Susy pushed her way through the commuters shouting at the top of her voice that her little sister Anna was coming up behind her and surely no one would want to see her getting crushed. She was very outgoing when she was a teenager, bright, extremely pretty, always ready with her backpack to travel to Jewish camps to learn the survival skills to prepare her for future *aliyah* to Israel.

She became a secretary, a job she held for many years and enjoyed. She married Ennio and had her son Alberto. One of the places she enjoyed visiting was London, and she and her family stayed with us on several occasions.

Susy was always very generous to us, her sisters, and all her nephews and nieces. Unfortunately, her health began to decline after several years of taking care of her husband who had Alzheimer’s and who finally succumbed to it. As I live in England, I could only be at the end of a phone. It was our sister Titti and her husband Andrea, who also live in Milano, who kept an eye on Susy and was there for her when needed. Susy adored her only son who cared for her in her later years. She also loved her daughter-in-law Elga, and two granddaughters Stella and Gaia, very much.

Susy died in April 2020 in hospital, during the first lockdown, Covid-free, but still in isolation and alone. I was left heart-broken, not having been able to say my goodbyes. ■



Suzy and Ennio



Susy with her husband Ennio and their son Alberto



Titti and Andrea



Titti and me

Holocaust remembrance

ONE OF MY proudest moments was being invited to light a candle at the UK Yom HaShoah ceremony in Hyde Park in 2018. I was quite nervous. I had a special place to sit together with other Holocaust survivors. I felt then that my dear older sister Susy should have been there in my place. When my name was called out, I was announced as “Anna Russell, child survivor hiding in Milano.” I walked up with two other people and we each lit a candle in memory of the six million who died.

I was pleased to see a gentleman parking his bicycle next to where I was sitting. He was dressed as a cyclist in honour of Gino Bartali, a renowned champion Italian cyclist who helped to rescue Jews during the Nazi occupation of Italy, by carrying messages on his bicycle handlebars, from the partisans to the Jewish people in hiding. He never said a word about it after the war. It was discovered by his family after he died, and he is now remembered as a Righteous Among the Nations in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, an honorary title given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. ■



Stan and me in 2012



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.



“Our landlords, for fear of reprisal because we were Jews, evicted us without notice. We were left homeless and from then on, my family ran from pillar to post, in hiding. We never felt safe in one place. I was always in my parents’ arms, running somewhere. The Germans were hunting down all people of the Jewish faith.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk