

# My Story

## Sidney Mayer

 **AJR** The Association  
of Jewish Refugees



*My Story*  
*Sidney Mayer*



These are Sidney's words. This is his story.

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

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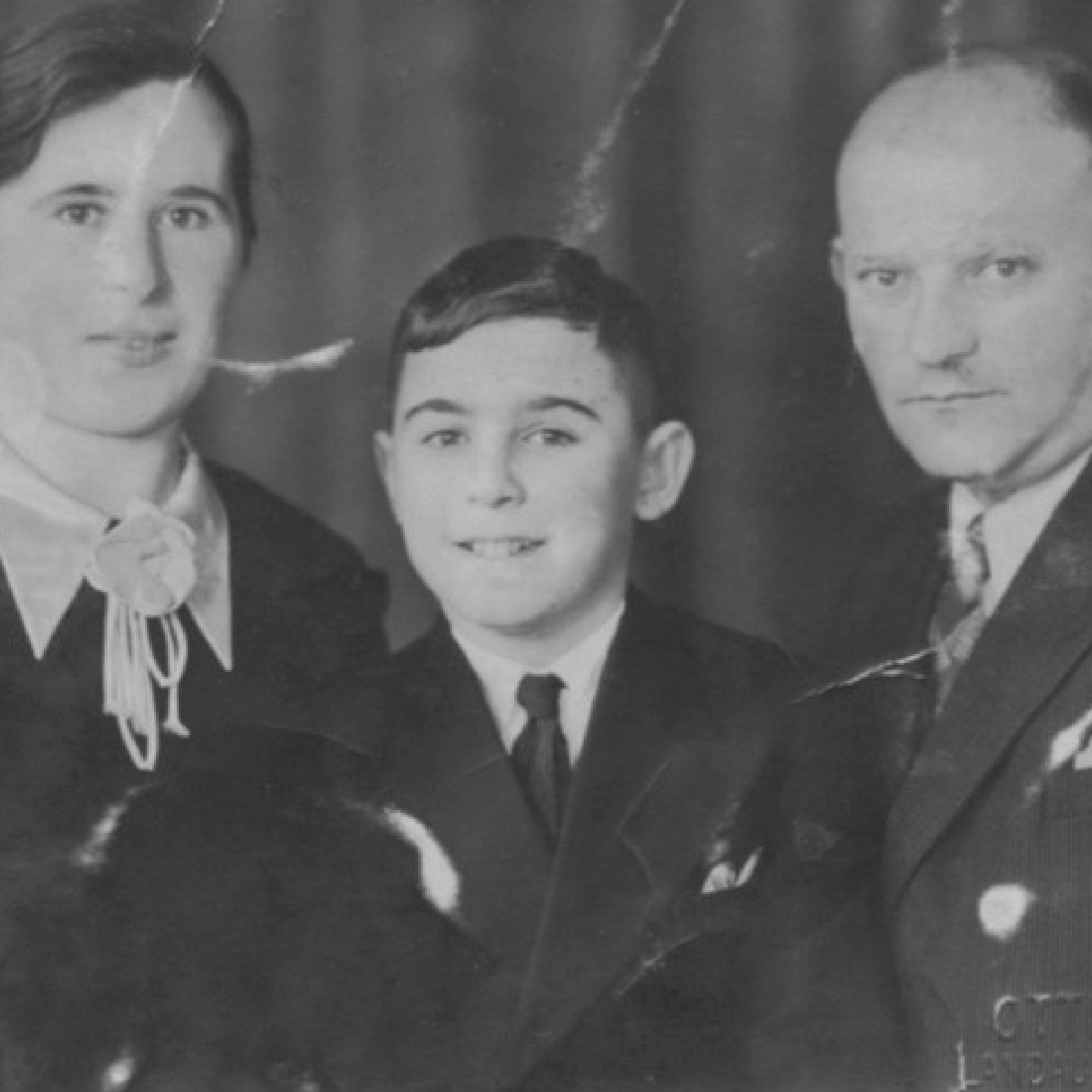
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# My Story

## Sidney Mayer

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## Introduction

I WAS BORN Siegfried Mayer on 20 October 1925, in the German village of Böchingen, near a great wine-growing metropolis called Landau an der Isar. My family lived in a village of 700 people. My paternal family history in that village went back to the 1200s when about 250 Jewish families lived there.

The next town along was Landau, with about 40,000 inhabitants. It's in one of the biggest wine-growing areas of Germany. It's quite near the French frontier, about 30 kilometres away. You can get there in half an hour.

16 Jewish families lived in the village. Most of them were either cattle dealers or wine growers and worked in the fields.

My father's name was Herbert. My mother's name was Mina, her maiden name was Loeb. Her family came from a much bigger village about 50 kilometres away. My parents worked together as wholesale cattle dealers and ran the family's vineyard which had been owned by my grandmother and passed to my father. We had a farm. We had cattle. We had chickens. We had goats. You name it. Eventually, these were all taken by the Nazis.

“ 16 Jewish families lived in the village. Most of them were either cattle dealers or wine growers and worked in the fields. ”



My mother (far right) with the French soldiers who were billeted with my grandparents (front middle) after World War One





My maternal grandmother (middle) with my parents at my grandmother's house



My parents (back left), maternal grandparents (middle) and my mother's sister with her husband (back right)

# Geburts-Urkunde.

(Standesamt Böchingen \_\_\_\_\_ Nr. 2/1896. \_\_\_\_\_)

Herbert Israel M a y e r \_\_\_\_\_

ist am 2. Februar 1896 \_\_\_\_\_

in Böchingen, Landkreis Landau in der Pfalz, \_\_\_\_\_ geboren.

Vater: Sigmund Mayer, Handelsmann, wohnhaft in Böchingen  
\_\_\_\_\_, israelitisch. \_\_\_\_\_

Mutter: Berta Mayer, geborene Mayer, wohnhaft in Böchingen  
\_\_\_\_\_, israelitisch. \_\_\_\_\_

Änderung der Eintragung: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Böchingen, den 8. Juni \_\_\_\_\_ 19 39.



Der Standesbeamte:

*[Handwritten signature]*

Gebühr: 0.60 R. Mark,

Geb.Reg.No 47.

My father's birth certificate was re-issued 43 years later in June 1939 and stamped with a swastika as mandated by the Nazi regime.

Ours was just like any other regular Jewish home. My father used to feed the cattle on a *Shabbos* (the Sabbath day of rest) morning and then he would get changed and go to *shul* (synagogue) and that was life.

My father had a sister, who lived not too far away. She was married and had one daughter. That was about the size of the families.

My paternal grandparents were Sigmund and Bertha. My grandfather died around the time I was born. I was named after him. He was buried in the modern cemetery alongside my great-grandfather.

My maternal grandfather was Max and my grandmother was Melanie. They had two daughters – my mother and another daughter, who lived not far away in another village with her son, Claude. They also had two sons. One son, my uncle Fritz, emigrated to North America, while my grandparents and their other son, my uncle Berthault, emigrated to Buenos Aires, South America in 1938 as they could no longer make a living in Germany. They were very lucky to get away just before the war. The rules were that anybody over 16 and under 60 needed permission to leave Germany. ■



Me and my parents before the war

## Growing up in the village

THE REDUCTION IN population of my village Böchingen, happened in the 1920s. A lot of people moved into the cities, away from the smaller villages during the depression and antisemitism that followed World War One. Some left Germany altogether; others moved to Israel.

Growing up I felt a part of the village. I attended the village school. Children would play together, neighbours got on, and life was good.

I would hear my parents talking but being an eight-year-old, it didn't sink in. When the Nazis started to get a proper hold, it wasn't very pleasant. It wasn't very pleasant at all. We started to notice a big change. The only Jewish boys of my age were my cousin, Claude and my good friend, Helmut. Other children refused to play with us. We were harassed and beaten up, all sorts of things. We felt like outcasts. It was terrible but there was nothing we could do about it. So the three of us just held together.

It was around 1935, when we three Jewish boys, and two local Jewish girls, were no longer allowed to attend the village school. We had no choice but to go school in Landau, the county town, which was five kilometres away. We were taught in a class by one teacher with pupils from the age of six to 16.

By this time my parents had to give up their business because the Nazis had encouraged the boycott of Jewish businesses and nobody would buy from them. It was a very bad time for us. A childhood friend of mine said to be a good Nazi you had to be stupid, and the more stupid you were the better a Nazi you were. That was his definition of the Nazis.

I was one of the last Jewish boys to have a *bar mitzvah* (13-year-old boy's rite of passage) in the synagogue before it was destroyed. It was a beautiful, stone-built synagogue. I remember we celebrated at our house; Mother killed a couple of chickens which we had for dinner. ■



Me as a young boy outside my house in Böchingen

## A nasty incident with a local boy

WE HAD TWO cellars in the house. One where the wine was kept, and the other at the top of the yard near the road, where my mother would keep potatoes and foodstuffs.

One day, my mother said she was going to get potatoes and asked if I would help her. We went over the yard and unlocked the door. As we went down the steps a boy ran up and spat in my mother's face and ran away.

I still had the key in my hand and I ran after him. I didn't have to run a long way to catch him because I was a very fast runner, and he was half-crippled. He didn't get very far.

I caught him and struck him on the head with the key and he dropped to the floor. I just left him lying there. He was a couple of years older than me and probably from a poor family. These poor people had nothing, and were very nasty. I went back to my mother and said: 'It's okay, don't worry about it.'

Half an hour later, the police turned up and asked why I had assaulted him. I told the policeman: 'The boy spat in my mother's face, what would you have wanted me to do? I won't allow anybody to do that.' That was the last time that happened. He never did it again. ■



## Life in the village becomes more difficult

IN NOVEMBER 1938, on *Kristallnacht*, violence erupted all over Germany. The violence was just against the Jews. A Polish Jew living in France had shot a German diplomat in Paris and because of this, Goebbels gave the Nazis a free night to do with Jewish property what they wanted with no repercussions. They took advantage of that across the whole of Germany.

Older Jewish people's homes in villages were targeted as the Nazis assumed there would be money to steal and no one to fight back. I went the day after *Kristallnacht* with my mother to visit some Jewish ladies. The Nazis had broken everything in their homes – cabinets, crockery, china, glasses, everything of value. They either stole it or smashed it.

The Jaegers lived across from our house; a non-Jewish German family. Kost Jaeger was a hunter who would shoot deer and boar in the forest. When they heard someone breaking into a neighbouring house, Kost and his son came out with guns and told the Nazis to go before they started to shoot. He'd have shot them, no doubt; he'd have put a bullet in them without hesitating. This incident never came to anything because the Jaegers stopped it. If the Nazis had gone on to other houses, Kost would have shot them. The Jaegers were good neighbours.

“The Jaegers lived across from our house; a non-Jewish German family. Kost Jaeger was a hunter who would shoot deer and boar in the forest. When they heard someone breaking into a neighbouring house, Kost and his son came out with guns, and told the Nazis to go before they started to shoot.”

Synagogues were burnt down in the cities but I think there was concern that it would set the whole village alight if they did the same in Böchingen, so they tore ours down instead.

On the same night my father was rounded up, along with other Jewish men from the village. They confiscated Jewish businesses, arrested the men and threw them into Dachau, one of the original concentration camps. My father was there for six weeks, from November to December.

The day after *Kristallnacht*, the police came and told us that we had to leave the village because the *Gauleiter* (regional leader of the Nazi party), wanted our area to be the first in Germany to be *Judenfrei* (free of Jews).

I travelled with my mother and paternal grandmother, Bertha, to a different county, across the Rhine to Mannheim. We were there for about two or three days until we were forced to leave. We had no money so we took a chance and went back to our village.

My mother worked hard to have my father released from Dachau. He had been awarded the Iron Cross first class medals after serving in the infantry as a 17-year-old in World War One. She showed these medals to have my father released and six weeks later he came home. ■

## Arriving in the UK on the *Kindertransport*

DURING MY FATHER'S imprisonment, my mother could see there was no future for children in Germany and managed to secure a place for me on the *Kindertransport*. I was the only one from my village who went to England. The other Jewish children from our area were sent off to France. Their parents didn't want to send them to England, but my mother knew what she was doing. I had no say in the matter. That's where I was going. My cousin Claude was later smuggled into France and was hidden there throughout the war. His parents did not survive.

Three weeks after my father's release from Dachau, on 5 January 1939, my parents took me to a city called Ludwigshafen which is on the River Rhine, just down from Mannheim. That's where the train left for the Hook of Holland, and from there we took the boat to Harwich.

My first thought when leaving was: 'Thank God I'm getting away from Germany', which was a terrible place for Jews. As a boy of 13 leaving his parents it felt like a great thing at first; I didn't mind, although in other ways I wasn't glad. ■

## Meeting the Goldwaters

I ARRIVED IN Harwich, Essex, on Friday and was taken to Dovercourt. This was a holiday camp that was closed during the wintertime, but the owners had lent it to house refugee children until April, when it would be opened again. People came from various parts of Britain to pick children up to offer them a home.

I remember my mother saying: 'Now, whatever they give you to eat, eat! Don't not eat things you don't like, just eat and don't ask any questions.' I remember othey asked us whether we wanted fish or meat for breakfast. I said fish – well, I knew what fish was like, but I'd never heard of a kipper before! I screwed my face up at this kipper but I ate it, because my mother had told me to. I didn't enjoy it but I ate it. I did, however, feel lucky to have a chalet next to a shower room as the hot running water would heat the room up through the walls.

One of my favourite foods was veal chops and my mother had cooked and individually wrapped about 10 of them to take with me. I saved them until I reached the camp and shared them with my pals; we ate them all, in double time.

“I said fish – well, I knew what fish was like, but I'd never heard of a kipper before!”

On the Sunday, it was...well, you know what January is like on the British coast. The other refugee boys were going to play football, and I wanted to join them. I was very small for my age, I still am small, but when I was 13 I looked a lot younger. They wouldn't let me play, because they said I would sink into the mud, so I was sent back to the hall.

As I ran back, I accidentally bumped quite heavily into a lady. I apologised and didn't know whether I hurt her or not so I ran to other side of the huge hall and hid behind one of the three stoves that stood in the middle. I could see the lady speaking to one of the attendants of the camp and they pointed to me, at which point I said to myself: 'That's me in trouble.'

This lady was Mrs Goldwater. She approached me and asked if I would like to go to Glasgow. I asked where Glasgow was and whether I'd have to go on another boat. Mrs Goldwater said: 'No, you'd go by train.' So I said I would go.

The hostel supervisor told Mrs Goldwater that they couldn't have me because I had only been there two days, and there were boys who had been there a lot longer who were looking for a home. Mrs Goldwater said: 'If I can't have him, I'll take nobody!'

So, they got me. And what a prize!

I had arrived in England on the Friday, was picked on a Sunday, and left for Glasgow on the Tuesday. ■

## Getting used to new surroundings in Glasgow

I HAD NEVER seen a big city before and Glasgow impressed me very much. I arrived at Ben and Annie Goldwater's house in Nether Auldhouse Road, Merylee, and was welcomed by their two children: 16-year-old Bertie, and their nine-year-old adopted daughter, Ruthie. Ruthie had been taken in when her mother, Mrs Goldwater's sister, had died giving birth to her. The Goldwaters said they picked me because I had a resemblance to the family. I looked like some of them, so that was it. That was my luck.

After about two days, I got homesick. Mr Goldwater, who mostly worked in the evenings as a bookmaker, was free during the day. He would take me to the picture house every day. I noticed there were a lot of them in the city. I had only been to the cinema once in my life in Germany and here I was visiting a different one every day. My English skills were zero and the cinema really helped me to learn. All I could say was yes and no. But within a week or two, I was able to speak a little and I improved constantly. Before I knew it I spoke English without an accent. Nobody could understand how I could speak so quickly without anybody knowing that I was German.

Mr Goldwater said: 'You can't call yourself Siegfried, you must change it to Sidney.' I would have preferred if he'd have called me Fred instead but I didn't know what to say so I said: 'Okay.' I had my name legally changed to Sidney Mayer by deed poll.

I was a good boy. I assimilated and mixed with the family; I was like one of them. I didn't make any demands, and I was very appreciative of being taken in by a Jewish family. I was brought up Yiddish, we were religious – not Orthodox, but religious. An awful lot of children were not taken in by Jewish families, and I would not have liked that.

The Goldwater's were fond of children and I got on very well with them. I called them 'Aunt' and 'Uncle'. It was like being at home. There was no difference shown between me and their other children, in fact, I think I got more privileges than the others. ■

## Writing to my parents in Germany

ON THE FIRST day I arrived in Glasgow I wrote to my parents. They had heard no information about how I was doing. It wasn't in their wildest dreams that I'd be taken in by a good family and a good home. That was their worry.

I would often write and receive letters from my grandparents in Buenos Aires and kept up the writing to my parents regularly. I know the letters I sent were opened and read due to the postal censorship during the war, but it was to be expected as Germany was an enemy country. But there were no repercussions because there was nothing detrimental in the letters to cause anybody any concern. I wasn't a spy.

I was able to keep in touch with my parents from 1939 until 1942 but when I stopped getting letters the writing was on the wall. After the war the agencies in London wrote and told me what happened to them. They were deported from Germany to a camp in France called Gurs in 1940, along with my paternal grandmother and her son and daughter-in-law. In 1942, the French gave them up to the Germans, and they were sent to Auschwitz death camp on different trains. My parents were both exterminated within hours of arriving there. ■

“ I was able to keep in touch with my parents from 1939 until 1942 but when I stopped getting letters the writing was on the wall. ”



Me at work



## The early days of work

UNCLE BEN TOLD me I didn't have to attend school until after the winter holidays so it was February when I started at Langside School in Tantallon Road. It wasn't long before war started and barrage balloons were put up in the playground as protection from any bombs. School relocated to people's houses, we would learn in a different house every day. When August came I asked the headmaster if I could leave as I was almost 14 and he said 'yes.'

I found a job working for a fellow called Huddleston. He had a son called Charlie who was a speed skater in Crossmyloof Ice Rink. Huddleston had a warehouse in the Gorbals, Glasgow. He would buy huge packs of number eight batteries that we would break up and wrap in paper. It was such a dirty job. I would get home at night covered in tar; all over my shirt down to my underwear. There was tar all over the house. Uncle Ben said: 'We can't have that' so I had to chuck it in.

I found a job at Gerber Brothers as a messenger boy. They were a wholesaler and had a warehouse underneath St Enoch's Station, between Argyle Street and Maxwell Street and employed all the Jews in Glasgow!

“When August came I asked the headmaster if I could leave as I was almost 14 and he said 'yes.'”

One day, I got the opportunity to accompany a driver as a 'van boy'. This suited me fine because I was always interested in cars. The van was an Austin 12 and the fellow driving it was a really bad driver. I told him: 'That's a terrible way to drive a car.' He said: 'Why? Can you do better?' I said: 'Of course I can do better!' So he said: 'Well, you do it then. Drop me here and do the deliveries and meet me back here at 4 o'clock. Don't go back without me; we'll go back together.'

So, at 13 years old, I drove the van all the way to Clydebank and back again, and did the deliveries. Everything was fine and Gerber Brothers never found out. Later, the van driver got the sack, but I was too young to get his job.

Eventually I got promoted to the clock department and put in charge of the clock-stop room. I didn't really know what I was in charge of, other than a lot of clocks! I worked there for about a year.

One of the bosses, Sammy Gerber, stocked ladies' handbags and stored them in the room with all the clocks. I opened them up and found a small mirror in each one, so I gave them out to all the girls at Gerber Brothers. I thought nobody would miss them. I had to do some mischief!

Upstairs there was the clock repairer who would fall asleep after his lunch with a clock in his hand. When I walked past and saw him sleeping, I would open the door and push the light on. When he woke up and there was nobody there he would go mad. I did that every time.

After about six months, Uncle Ben opened up a tool shop in Saltmarket and asked me to work for him. I left Gerber Brothers and ran that shop at the age of 15 on my own. I enjoyed learning about the tools and it was interesting. I made a good job of it. ■

## The war years

I HAD JUST turned 17 and was eager to assimilate and contribute to British life. They wouldn't take me in the army, because I was an enemy alien. The only thing they would offer me was the Pioneer Corps and I didn't want to do that. I enquired about ARP (Air Raid Precautions) and was told I could join and I was accepted.

I went to the ambulance depot at Maxwell Road, near Eglinton Toll, and asked if I could be an ambulance driver. The fellow said: 'Yes, yes, that'll be fine. Have you got a driving licence?' I told him I couldn't get one because I was an enemy alien and I needed to prove I could get a job as a driver before I could get a licence.

He said it didn't work like that. They couldn't give me a job as a driver until I had a licence because they didn't know if I could drive. I said: 'Well I'm telling you I can drive!' He said: 'Well, you telling us that doesn't answer any questions, we've got to be able to see.' I said: 'Well, that's the chicken and the egg. I can't get a licence until I can get a job and I can't get a job until I get a licence.' So, I kept telling him that I could drive and he kept telling me that he couldn't take my word for it. Eventually, I broke him down. He said: 'If you can drive this 1928 Humber, and go through the gearbox without crunching the gears, I'll give you a job.' I said: 'Right, I'll do that, providing you show me first, if it can be done.' He said: 'What do you mean?' I said: 'Well, maybe, there's a fault in the gearbox and it won't change without a crunch, so if you can do it, I can do it. That's fair enough, isn't it?'

So he drove it and then he gave it to me and said: 'Right, now you do it.' I drove the Humber without crunching the gears and he said: 'Good, now I know you can drive I'll give you a job.' He gave me a letter, which I took up to Bothwell Street and they gave me a licence and that's how I came to drive ambulances and how I got a driving licence. It was a provisional licence, but it did the job and allowed me to drive and that's all I was interested in.

Everyone who worked in the ambulance depot was Jewish apart from this one lad, Gordon Gunn. He was asked if he wanted to join another depot because of being the only non-Jew and he said: 'No, no. It'll do me fine. I was the only non-Jew in my class at school, so I'll just carry on like that.'



Gordon and I were the only two drivers in the depot and there were two ambulances. Gordon got the Sunbeam Talbot conversion which I wanted to drive but Gordon said: 'Well you *cannae* have it, I've got it!'

The ambulance I drove was a 1914 four-cylinder Rolls-Royce. It was three times the size of the Talbot and had been converted from a general's car in World War One. It was beautiful, not a drop of oil anywhere to be seen, but it wasn't a self-starter. There was a handle to start it, but it took four of us to do so, it was quite a job. The good thing about the Rolls Royce was when the engine was warm, you didn't need to wind it up, you just shook the trembler coil and it would start.

The gear change was on a running board and every time I changed gear I looked down to find the gear stick and couldn't watch the road. Subsequently, I mounted the pavement and managed to knock down all the railings of the gate to Maxwell Park but it never even scratched the paintwork! Nobody ever said anything about the matter.

“The ambulance I drove was a 1914 four-cylinder Rolls-Royce. It was three times the size of the Talbot and had been converted from a general's car in World War One. It was beautiful, not a drop of oil anywhere to be seen, but it wasn't a self-starter.”

This job brought some dangers along the way. One time, I nearly killed Gordon. We were on practice one day; he led the way in his ambulance and I was following him in mine. He ended up in a ditch, I couldn't stop and just about managed to avoid him. I finished up with the ambulance in a stream. Gordon shouted: 'What the heck are you playing at?' Fortunately I managed to get it out and there was no damage done. Despite that we became firm friends and stayed friends ever since.

We practised in fields but we weren't really taught anything. All the crew would sit in the back of the ambulance and they would shout and bawl as we drove through the streets. The depot was managed by a *yiddishe* (Jewish) fellow, Solly Abrahams. He was a nice man. He said that if we were ever called out to an emergency, we wouldn't even know where the hospital was.

After a while, I was transferred from driving an ambulance to driving a decontamination bus in case of a gas attack. It was a Leyland bus that had a wheel on one side of the bonnet and nothing on the other half. I did this for about six months until the end of war and then the service wasn't needed anymore.

I loved driving. Uncle Ben would work away some weekends and I would use this as an opportunity to have some fun. I would persuade a pal to accompany me on joyrides in Uncle Ben's car and I got away with it for a while, until there was an accident. I was only a young teenager and had still to grow to full height so I was at a disadvantage when looking through the windscreen over the dashboard. I damaged the car and was so worried about the ensuing consequences, that I ran away for quite a few hours, returning in the late evening, cold, hungry and tired, not to mention, apprehensive. It seemed my luck was in and Uncle Ben did not punish me harshly, but I was left knowing in no uncertain terms, that it must never happen again. ■

## Getting a British passport

IN 1949, I made my first visit to my grandparents and Uncle Berthault (my mother's brother) on their farm in Argentina. By this time my uncle was an established gaucho cowboy.

My experiences while travelling to Buenos Aires left me not wanting to travel abroad again. On the ship, British citizens were separated on the port side from the rest of the travellers. I was a British resident but not a citizen, so I wasn't entitled to a dark blue British passport. I shared a cabin with three other men, actually they were boys, and they called me 'Jock'. They did not know that I was German and I didn't let them know. Anytime we went ashore and had to hand our passports in to the purser I would make an excuse and say: 'I must go back, I've forgotten something' so I could hand in my green, stateless passport when no one else was around. I felt horrible, so when I returned to Scotland I decided I must apply for British citizenship. I didn't want to live in this country as a foreigner.

I never told anyone I was German because I was ashamed about what they did during the war and the countries they occupied. The Nazis were terrible. I had always been good at evading questions about where I came from, because I didn't speak with an accent. Everybody thought I was born here. That saved a lot of embarrassment. I felt that if the British knew I was a foreigner, then they'd think I was nothing. In fact, because I hadn't mixed with any Germans for 10 years, I had virtually forgotten the language and couldn't speak any German with my grandmother and uncles when I arrived to visit them.

“ I never told anyone I was German because I was ashamed about what they did during the war and the countries they occupied. ”

When I returned home I told Gordon that I would never ever go abroad again. He said, 'Oh, why is that?' I said: 'They treat you horribly, when the British know you're not British, you're nothing, so I ain't leaving this country again as a foreign national.' Gordon said he would put my name forward as a citizen, which he did within weeks. He went in front of a judge, and they asked him why he was vouching for me to become a British citizen. He told them, and I got it.

Once I had my British passport I had no more problems travelling, it was easy to go abroad. After making contact with my childhood friend Helmut, he came to visit me and I would often visit him in New York and at his holiday home in Florida. He fled our village after I had left and ended up in France. He wasn't there very long when Germany occupied it. He was helped onwards to Switzerland by the Rothschilds, wealthy German bankers who assisted him onto America. ■



## Hitting the road

AFTER I RETURNED from Buenos Aires, I decided, having worked in the shop with Uncle Ben for over 10 years, I couldn't do it any longer. Bertie Goldwater had come out of the army and joined me in the shop but he was impossible to get on with. I said to Uncle Ben: 'Look, I can't work with Bertie anymore, I'll kill him! Or he'll kill me, one or the other!' It got to the stage that if I didn't leave, one of us would have finished up in hospital; we were working with tools, hammers, chisels, saws. Bertie wouldn't have been frightened to use one of them on me.

Uncle Ben said: 'So, what do you want to do?' I said: 'I want to carry on working with tools, but I'd like to go on the road and sell tools, that way I'd be out of the shop and Bertie and me won't be fighting.' Uncle Ben said: 'Sounds good to me.'

So, we bought a van and loaded it up with tools and I set off on the road and travelled around Scotland and northern England, selling to garages and farms. Anything I could get my hands on I would sell: shirts, wheels, tyres, axles. Uncle Ben took a note of the stock I had and at the end of each week I would square him up for what I sold and keep the rest. I made a living, he made a good living, so everybody was happy. ■

## Getting married

I WAS ON the road until I married. In those days people would spend a lot of their time in cafés. On Sundays, we would go to an Italian café, and that was where I was introduced to a local Jewish girl from Glasgow, Mae Cohen. She had two sisters, Minnie and Lily, and one brother, Sidney.

We married in 1952 at Giffnock Hebrew Congregation. It wasn't a big *tzimmes* (fuss).

At first we found a flat in Waverley Gardens. Then we moved to 95 King's Park Avenue. After that we moved into 37 Hathaway Drive. I was 28 when we started a family together. We had two children. Our daughter, Lorraine, was born in 1952 and our son, Alan, in 1954. Alan went to Belmont School in Newton Mearns, and Lorraine went to Broomlea School, also in Newton Mearns.

I joined the local JLGB club (Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade) in about 1952.

Some years later I joined Bonnyton Golf Club. I was what you would call an average player. I met friends and won a few competitions. Life wasn't bad. ■



My first wife, Mae and me



Alan and Lorraine

## Starting a company

IN 1952, I told Uncle Ben that there wasn't much sense in carrying on with all the travelling I was doing as I was never at home, and he accepted this. I started a business manufacturing and selling raincoats with my brother-in-law, Hymie, the husband of my wife's oldest sister, Minnie. He was in the tooling business and he wanted a business partner. I didn't know anything about the trade. All I knew was that I wanted to make things and sell them so, as I was experienced in sales, I took on the role of salesman, and he ran the factory as a technician. We found premises on Bell Street and called ourselves S Mayer and Company.

We found manufacturing difficult until we bought a machine to make buttonholes. It was a German machine – a good machine, but it was expensive. I bought it on the never-never, where we would pay it off in instalments with interest included. It worked well.

We were struggling a bit for work and a fellow I knew put me in touch with a big company in Glasgow; Edward MacBean and Company Limited, who were looking for people to make trousers for them. I went to see them, and I was impressed with the size of the factory. They were the biggest waterproof manufacturers in Britain. The whole set-up appealed to me.

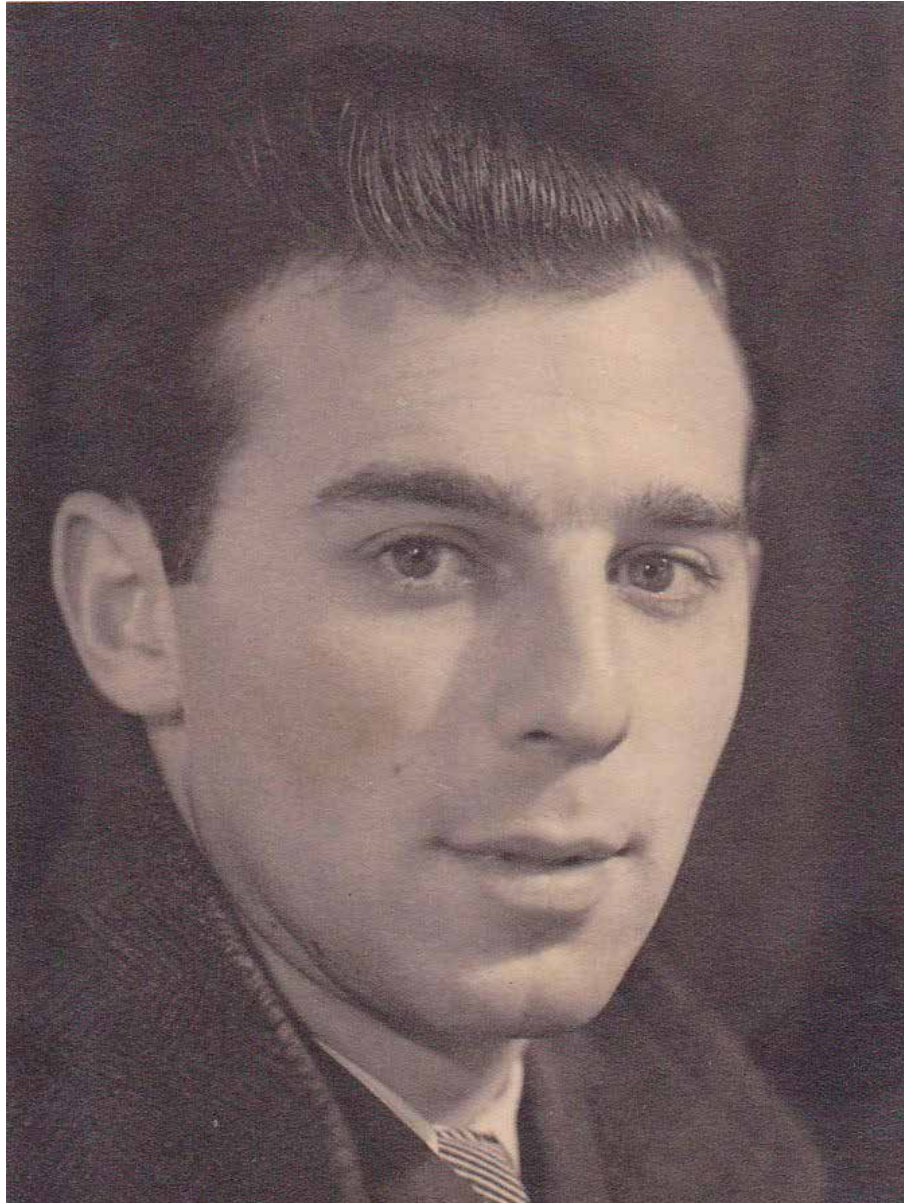
“ I started a business manufacturing and selling raincoats with my brother-in-law, Hymie, the husband of my wife's oldest sister, Minnie. ”

I took them a sample and said: 'Let's make this.' MacBean said: 'How much do you make from this? You cannae make a living from that. We won't do that.' I persuaded MacBean to do it and from there we started with half a dozen seamstresses making 2,000 different-sized items for the Admiralty. I don't know how long it took but we made them. When the order was complete the admiralty's accountants said they owed us two shillings a pair, which made up a fair bit of money. With that money, we bought cloth and could afford to buy the machinery that MacBean had previously loaned us. I built up a good relationship with them; they liked me.

The managing director, Cameron, was a gent. When I went to the races, he would always stop and talk to me. Every two or three years, the MacBeans changed their cars. I said that I knew about cars, and Cameron asked if I could sort him a deal on one. He gave me a finder's fee which made me quite a profit.

Once or twice a year I'd go around all the department stores and take orders for garments we made from the cloth I bought from MacBean. My biggest customer was Millet's on Union Street, Glasgow. Our account with them was huge; they had 28 stores.

MacBean found out from a salesperson that they had stopped ordering from him as they were buying from me instead. Millet's told Cameron that if MacBean stopped supplying me cloth then they'd get their account back. Cameron said: 'We've been in business 150 years, Sidney's been in business five minutes – if he takes business from you, that tells me he's a better salesman than you.' ■



The working years

## Selling the business

IN 1959, MACBEAN bought a new factory. They received a good grant for it, but had nothing to put in. Cameron said to me: 'If I get run over by a bus, someone would take over who doesn't know you as well as I do. To ensure you have continuation of business we'd like to buy 10 per cent of your company. Do you want to sell it to us?'

I asked Hymie what he thought and we agreed to sell MacBean 10 per cent for £2500, which Hymie and I split down the middle.

After a couple of years, Cameron said to me: 'How would you like us to take you over completely? We'll give you £25,000 for the rest of the shares.' That was a lot of money in those days. We agreed and sold to them. Hymie and I then went our separate ways, and I continued to work with MacBean. ■

## Leaving the company and starting a new one

MACBEAN WERE VERY good to me. They let me buy and make a deal on my own car, which I made money on, and they paid me £100 a week. This sounds a lot of money for those days but I was gambling at the time and it wasn't enough. Each time I went to the casino I would lose about £130 which was more than I was earning.

I used to gamble all night and go straight to work the next morning. I would look for food left around the big offices we had in Port Dundas and then fall asleep at my desk. Cameron came into my office one day and I was sound asleep. He woke me up and asked: 'Are you not feeling well, Mr Mayer?' I said: 'No, I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well last night.' He said: 'You're no use to us like this, go home and get some sleep.' When he took ill I visited him with a bottle of whisky. He didn't need me to buy him whisky, but he appreciated it. He thought I was a great fellow. He really liked me.

I got on very well with MacBean to start with, but one day they said: 'We don't know what we're employing you for, Sid.' I said: 'You're employing me to keep me out of your head. As long as you're employing me, I'll sell for you, not against you. If you sack me, I'll go on my own and I'll sell against you.'

So, Cameron said: 'I think that's what we'll do. We'll sack you.' I had already done very well out of my shares. They paid me out and I was happy to go it alone. ■



## Another new start

MACBEAN HAD LOTS of reps, but one fellow, Graham Wright, wanted to be an agent working more with the client rather than a rep tied to a company. He said to me: 'I want to leave MacBean because they won't give me an agent role.'

They were happy with him; he was a good worker. I said: 'Why don't you work for me? I'm making most of the stuff you're selling with MacBean anyway.' He thought that was a good idea, and he became my agent.

MacBean were eventually taken over by English Sewing. Although Cameron was a managing director, it was only on paper; they soon brought in their own and gave Cameron his notice.

I had already opened a factory in Muirkirk, Ayrshire, at this point, making stuff solely for MacBean. Graham Wright did the direct selling to them. At the peak we had 80 staff. I looked after the workforce. We had one manageress, Isobel, who became the forewoman when the manager, Harry Sterson, left.

We were doing really well, and I secured some very good accounts. We carried on like that for over thirty years. We just grew and grew and grew. Graham stayed working with me until he died. But nothing lasts forever. By 1995, things had started going downhill. What with the trouble from Thatcher and all the unions and the customers buying cheap stock from abroad, business had changed and I had to say bye-bye to the company. ■

## Relationship with Germany

I'VE BEEN BACK to Germany a number of times. In May 1950, I first went back to Böchingen, the village where I grew up. My pal Gordon came with me in a van – that was quite a how-do-you-do! We drove down to Dover and caught the boat across to France, and went to Paris. From Paris we went to look for my cousin Claude in Strasbourg.

Once in Strasbourg, I learned Claude was living in Paris so we never got to see him. I visited again at a later date when my uncle came over from Buenos Aires and I went to meet them both for a reunion.

I had mixed feelings about going back to Germany the first time. I didn't want to go. When we arrived at the frontier and I saw the Germans in their customs uniforms, I said: 'This is as far as I'm going.' Gordon said: 'What? Do you mean you're not going?' I said: 'No, I'm frightened.' He told me: 'You don't have to be frightened, you're a British citizen.' So I went.

But the fear was there. The uniforms brought it all on. They were very nice to me, but once they saw my passport, with it saying I was born in Germany, I thought they knew who or what I was.

I had planned to meet an old family friend, Annie, who had survived the war and had two sons, Franz and Hans. She helped me to claim back what my family had lost. The Nazis had confiscated whatever the Jewish people owned: properties, houses, land. In 1953, my uncle had told me about *Wiedergutmachung* (reparations) which the German government was offering to direct survivors.

I was offered my family's house back on the condition that I found accommodation for the family who were currently living in it. Well, I had no way of doing that so I couldn't get the house back. Eventually, somebody in the village who knew me, wrote and said she knew someone who would buy the house and rehouse the family living in it. I was given the house back and able to sell it but got very little; the equivalent of £400. By this time, my family's vineyards had been split up and sold off to several people so I wasn't able to pursue any reparation for those. ■

## Tragedy in life

IN 1971, TRAGEDY struck when my wife Mae passed away at the young age of 42, after a short illness.

I was however fortunate to remarry two years later. I married Marlene Sloane, a divorcee with a daughter, Jayne. However, in 2003 Marlene had a tragic accident when she was run over by a lorry on the Ayr road.

There was much sadness in my life but I am happy to have my two children, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

I am a proud father. My son Alan, having initially embarked upon a career within the family business, he sought a different path in life as a Glasgow Hackney Cab driver, a career spanning over three decades. He married Roma Vitale and they had three children. His eldest daughter Paola now lives in Standsted and runs her own successful catering business. His second daughter, Simone who is based in Glasgow, also works within the catering industry currently setting up her own eatery in Glasgow's south-side. Simone has two sons, Sam and Peter.

Alan's youngest child Tony, works within Education; he is currently a Deputy Head Teacher within Renfrewshire Council. Tony married Beatrice in 2005, and they have a daughter, Angelica. Beatrice is from the Transylvanian region of Romania where they visit frequently as well as Italy where Tony has family. Alan and Roma divorced in 2004. Alan is now in a happy partnership with Karen, residing in Rutherglen, Glasgow.

My daughter Lorraine married Nigel. She had two children from a previous marriage; Michelle and Richard. Michelle works in HR and has a busy life. She married Warren and they have two children; Maya and Ethan, and live in London. I have spent a lot of time over the years with my grandson Richard; we are very close. He was married in Glasgow but unfortunately the marriage did not survive. They had no children and he now lives in Portugal. ■



**Me with Maya and Ethan**



**Alan (second from left) with Karen (far right) surrounded by his children and grandchildren**



**My daughter Lorraine and her husband Nigel**



**Grandson Richard with my granddaughter Michelle and her husband Warren**



**My great-grandchildren Maya and Ethan**

## New relationships in Germany

IN 1999 MY friend Helmut and his wife Inga came to Glasgow from New York for a visit and we all went on to Germany together as Helmut and I wanted to visit our childhood homes.

I stopped at the house next door to where I lived with my family. It originally belonged to the Rummels', a family of butchers, but the new owners, the Kolbs, welcomed me in and that was it; it wasn't even five minutes before the whole village was in the house, wanting to see me, because I was what you call a '*well-kent*' (well-known figure) in the village. I became very friendly with these people, Heinz and Monika Kolb. Their daughter, Simone, teaches and speaks perfect English and is married to Jochen whose family name is Loeb, very similar to my maternal family name Loeb, which was a common Jewish name at the time. Funnily enough, his name, Loeb, is the most unusual non-Jewish name in Germany.

I carried on visiting Germany on average two or three times a year, each time staying with my new friends, the Kolbs. Once I started to make frequent visits my German started to come back and I speak it like a local now. This relationship with the Kolbs became very close and we still phone each other every week.

One wonderful event the Kolbs arranged for me was during a visit to Böchingen with my children, when we went to see my family home. It's difficult to put into words my feelings on entering the house after more than 70 years but I remembered everything. I even wanted to go and see if any of my mother's *Pesach* (Passover) crockery would still be in the loft but of course it wasn't there.

“It's difficult to put into words my feelings on entering the house after more than 70 years but I remembered everything.”

Around 2010, the Kolbs organised four *Stolpersteine* (memorial stones) to be placed in front of the family home and my children and grandchildren came with me to lay the stones for my mother, father, grandmother and myself. My family were the first in the village to get one. Now, all the Jewish families who were forced to leave the village in 1939 have a stone outside their house. That day became a major event in the village and there was a huge crowd including local dignitaries, the local press and radio. During the ceremony my son-in-law recited *Kaddish* (mourner's prayer). That evening the village laid on a party and everyone from the village came and I spoke to everybody. This became a very important day in my life, which I will always remember. ■



Driving a tractor around Böchingen with my childhood friend, Heinz

## Fun and enjoyment

I REALLY LOVED cars but sometime in the 1970s I decided to buy a boat. I had no knowledge of boats, stretches of water, or indeed the possibility of coming into near contact with other boats. On one or two outings, I might have had a 'small refreshment', but in no way did it impair my navigation skills. I wouldn't say I got lost but I did make a particular point of befriending the harbourmaster, an ally not to be taken for granted.

I retired at the age of 70 when I closed my business. I spent my time working my way up to a very respectable handicap in golf. I won quite a few monthly medal competitions and the Seniors Cup in 1994. After 40 years of continuous membership, Bonnyton Golf Club made me a lifelong member because I couldn't play golf anymore after losing my eyesight to macular degeneration.

Over the years, I've driven Jaguars, Rovers, Stags, and then Fords and Vauxhalls. The Jaguar was my favourite. Knowing how much I enjoyed cars, my grandchildren bought me a drive in an Aston Martin for my 93rd birthday, down in middle England. I was joined by my granddaughter Michelle and her husband Warren, at a disused RAF aerodrome, where I drove around a track in the five-litre sports car at 90 miles per hour. That was nice.

I took up indoor bowls at the Maccabi Centre and won several medal competitions there also.

In 2018, I was very pleased to be invited for the second time to a lunch reception hosted by Prince Charles at St James's Palace. This time it was to mark the 80th anniversary of the *Kindertransport*. ■



I am standing by the Bonnyton Golf Club honours display, for the M Latter Seniors Cup, which I won in 1994. I won a number of monthly medal competitions at Bonnyton, but my success in this annual event was the one I was most proud of. Photo taken in 2016





After driving the Aston Martin



Meeting Prince Charles

## On reflection

PROPAGANDA MADE THE Germans believe lies. All of a sudden Jewish people went from being good people to bad people, virtually overnight. The Nazis treated anyone who they saw as the enemy the same, Jewish or not. That sort of thing had never happened in the world before.

I have been both unfortunate and fortunate in my life. The fortunate aspect was that I was taken in by a very nice family, the Goldwaters. They helped me a lot. I grew up like one of them and I couldn't have wished for a better home. The fact was that I didn't have one; I lost my own parents and they made up for it.

My whole life in Scotland has been a high point. I love the place. I've always loved it and have got on very well with the Scottish people. It's just...it's my home. I'm not orthodox but I was born a Jew and I will die one. ■



Outside my family home in Böchingen on one of my return visits



CLARENCE HOUSE  
LONDON SW1A 1BA

From: Miss Claudia Spens M.V.O.  
The Office of HRH The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall

**Private and Confidential**

14th December, 2020

Dear Mr. Samuels,

The Prince of Wales has asked me to thank you for your letter of 9th November in connection with the loss of your dear friend, Mr. Sidney Mayer.

His Royal Highness is most grateful to you for taking the trouble to let him know of the passing of Sidney and would have me pass on his sincere condolences. He was touched to be reminded of Sidney's visits to Clarence House and hear more about Sidney's extraordinary life, his commitment to the Association of Jewish Refugees, an organisation close to his heart, and his loving family.

Thank you, once again, for writing as you did. The Prince of Wales has asked me to send you his very best wishes at this difficult time.

Yours sincerely,



Claudia Spens

Mr. Francis Martin Samuels

Sadly, Sidney passed away on 18 September 2020, before his book was completed. AJR volunteer, Francis Samuels, interviewed Sidney and felt compelled to write to Prince Charles to inform him of Sidney's passing. He received this letter in return.



## About the AJR

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

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

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



“My first thought when leaving was: ‘Thank God I’m getting away from Germany’, which was a terrible place for Jews. As a boy of 13 leaving his parents it felt like a great thing at first; I didn’t mind, although in other ways I wasn’t glad.”

 **AJR** The Association  
of Jewish Refugees

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