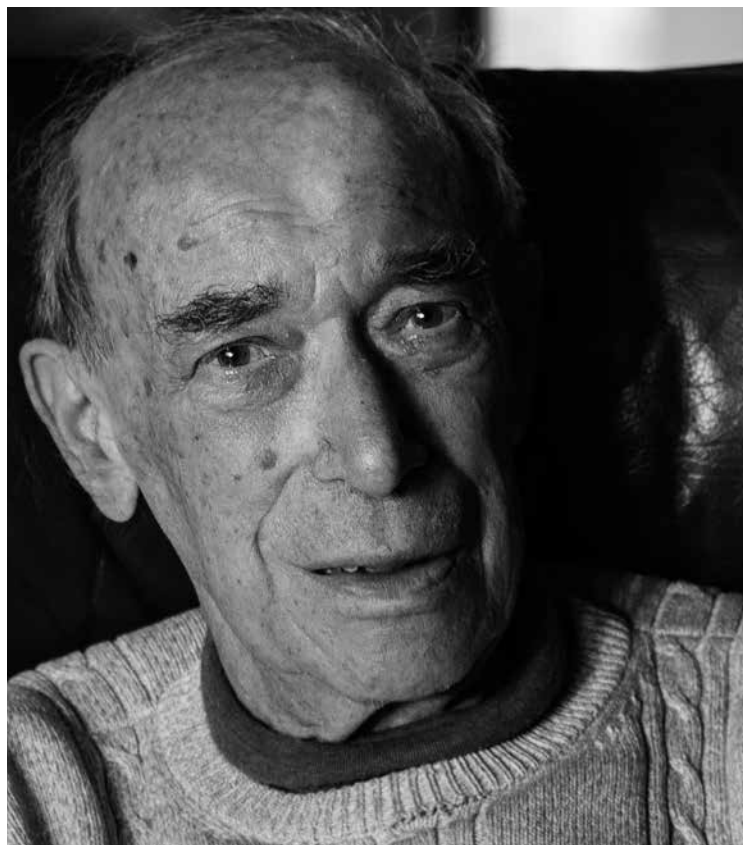


# My Story

## George Vulkan



# My Story

George Vukobratović



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

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

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

George Vulkan was visited by AJR volunteer Eric Rendel during 2017 to share his story.

Thanks also go to AJR volunteer Shelley Hyams for her editing skills.

Portrait photography by Debra Barnes.

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# My Story

## George Vulkan

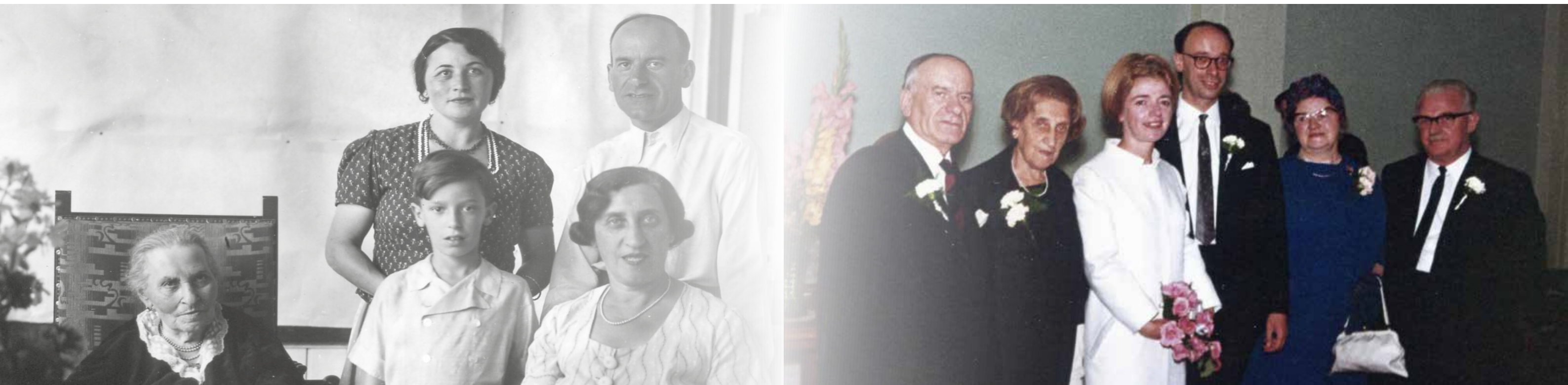
“...every time we finished school there would be a crowd of Hitler Youths outside in uniform – white shirts and brown belts and swastika armbands, waiting for us.”

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## My name changed



In 1931.

I WAS born in Vienna, Austria in October 1929. My name now is George Vulkan, but when I was born my name was actually Hans Georg Vulkan. In later life a cousin told me that her mother had suggested the name Georg as it was an international name. When I started school in London in 1940 the headmaster said that I could not have such a German-sounding name so he added an 'e' to Georg to make it George and reversed my first names. He also changed my surname to Wilkins, so at school I was George Hans Wilkins. Later, I kept the George but changed my surname back again as my father and I wanted to preserve the family name.

In Vienna I had a very happy childhood. My father was one of ten children and my mother one of six (although two of her brothers had been killed during the First World War and one sister had also died) so I had a lot of uncles and aunts and cousins. We all lived quite close to each other so there was always a lot of family visiting.

I was one of the very lucky ones who escaped to England with my parents. We actually left Vienna in September 1938 and initially went to Paris before, fortunately, deciding to move to England in February 1939. ■

“My name now is George Vulkan, but when I was born my name was actually Hans Georg Vulkan.”

## Early life in Vienna

OBVIOUSLY we were Jewish, but very much assimilated and religion played little part in my childhood, although we did belong to a synagogue. As far as friends were concerned, some were Christian, others were Jewish: it made no difference. On my father's side, his parents were religious as were others of his family. On my mother's side, her brother-in-law, my uncle Armin, was very Orthodox. He was a lovely person with a wonderful sense of humour. He really was my favourite uncle with whom I had a very good relationship.



With (left to right) my maternal grandmother Theresa Klausner, Olga, Father and Mother.



With Elsie in Vienna, 1937. Opposite: with my maternal grandfather, Klausner.

Vienna but in a different part to where we lived. We lived in the 9th District: many Jews lived there including people such as Sigmund Freud, who lived close by. My father's business was in the 2nd, the main Jewish district of Vienna.

I was doing very much the same as other children. I regularly went to playgrounds and parks; I was invited to other children's homes and they were invited to us – religion was immaterial and it was all quite normal. I thought at that time that that was how life is and how it would go on. I had no suspicion of what was to come. But even as a very young child I heard my parents talking about a man called Hitler; that he was a very nasty man but nothing to worry about because he was in Germany and we were in Austria and Austria was a very different country to Germany – but I still kept on hearing about him. ■

We lived in a very nice flat in the centre of Vienna with my maternal grandparents. We were an ordinary middle-class family and, like many families before the war, we had a cook and initially I had a nurse and then later someone I thought of as a nanny. In any case she was someone to look after me. Her name was Olga though we called her Beule. It was quite usual to have helpers like this in Europe at the time.

Every Wednesday afternoon Olga and I went on a boat trip on the Danube, which was something that I enjoyed quite a lot. The Danube and Danube Canal encircled part of Vienna, particularly the 2nd District. On Wednesday afternoons there were small pleasure cruises for children, with conjurers and story tellers. Olga did not take me there every Wednesday entirely for my benefit as the captain of the boat was actually her boyfriend!

My father had a small business, a timber yard that he owned with his brother, Leo. The business was also in





## Starting school

I STARTED school. I'm not certain when it was. I was either six or seven years old so it must have been 1935 or 1936. It was called Schottenschule, Scottish school, because it was connected to a Scottish religious order but it was not a religious school. The school had both Christian and Jewish pupils. There was another Jewish boy in my class and he and I were treated the same way as all the others. I enjoyed school very much and I still have an exercise book from that period which became quite a historic document in itself as it recorded the transition from Austria as an independent country to becoming part of Germany. On the first page of our exercise books we had to draw the national flag and the Austrian Kruckenkreuz, which is a cross with cross-bars at each point but definitely not a swastika. The Kruckenkreuz was easy to draw on squared paper. Our teachers spoke a lot about Austrian independence at that time.

As it came closer to 1937 people became increasingly worried about what was happening in Germany and I heard more stories about it. Strangely, people said that Austria was quite safe because Mussolini would not allow anything to happen to it. He was looked upon as being Austria's protector. Very strange in retrospect. I was under the impression that the Austrian government under Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg was a democracy, but found out in later life that it was actually Austrian Fascism without the antisemitic overtones of the Hitler and Mussolini regimes.

Things became more critical at the beginning of 1938 when Hitler became very aggressive in his speeches. In about February 1938 we wrote that Chancellor Schuschnigg had spoken on the radio about how he wanted peace and Austrian independence. It was said that his speech was heard all over the world, though I am sure it was not. Hitler, however, was adamant that he wanted Austria to be part of Germany. He demanded that we have a plebiscite (a referendum) on Sunday 13 March 1938. At that time most Austrians seemed to be keen on remaining Austrian, but the outcome was not certain.

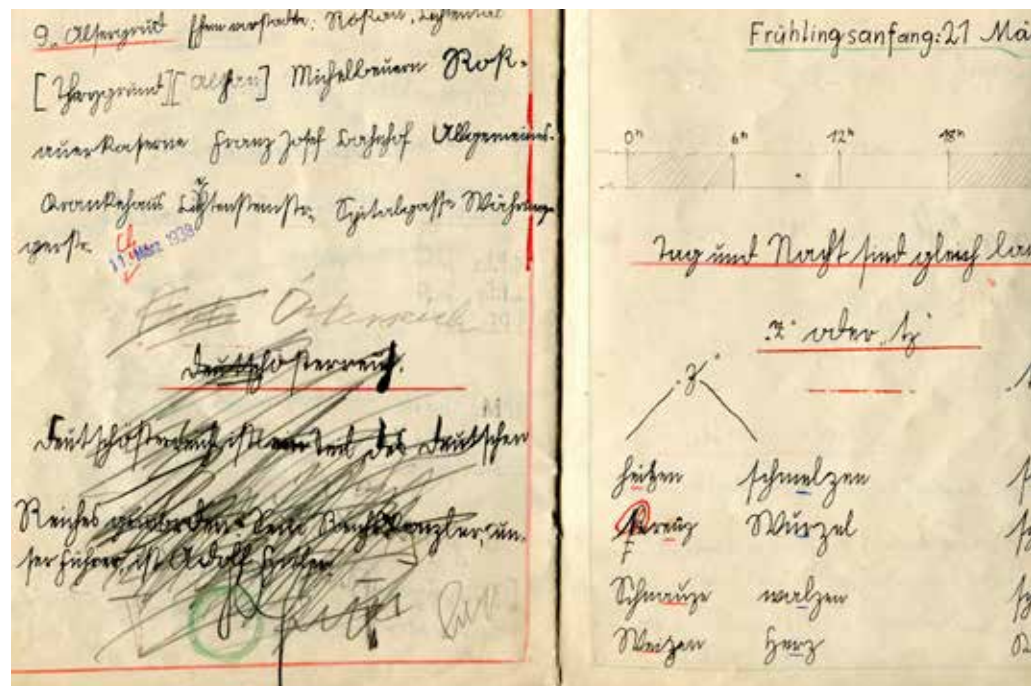
A lot of people showed their loyalty by hanging red and white Austrian flags out of their windows. In school we were given badges. I remember that there were cheaper badges and more expensive ones. I liked the cheaper badge that had a nice smooth enamel whereas the more expensive ones did not have a nice feel. ■

## Austria becomes part of the German Reich

SOMETIME in February 1938 Hitler must have realised that he would lose the referendum and he effectively insisted upon it being cancelled. One of the memories that I have – one of the most vivid memories – was on Friday 11 March. I was at home and my father said that he wanted me to stay up and listen to the radio broadcast. He said that I probably wouldn't understand what it was about but that it was going to be important. The broadcast was by Chancellor Schuschnigg, who said that the Germans had threatened that unless Austria acceded to all of Germany's demands, the Germans were going to invade. He said that this would lead to much bloodshed as the Austrian army was nowhere near as strong as the German army. He had no choice but to surrender. It was the end of Austrian independence. They then played the Austrian National Anthem over the radio and I remember my parents were very upset.

Let's not forget this broadcast took place on a Friday evening, during the Sabbath. By the time the Orthodox Jews came out of synagogue that evening most Austrian flags had disappeared and swastika flags started flying. Up until that time the Nazi party had been banned in Austria but there were many secret Nazis. Now they did not have to be secret anymore. They started yelling at the Jews when they came out of synagogue. By the following morning they were much better organised; people leaving synagogues were forced to scrub 'Vote Yes for Independence' graffiti from the pavements and Jews were being attacked in their homes.

To our surprise in the afternoon Olga's boyfriend turned up in our flat in full Nazi uniform. He had been a secret Nazi all along. Olga was Catholic from the Sudetenland. She was very loyal to our family and she was very good to us until we left. Anyway, her boyfriend warned my parents that things had changed. He said that he liked me and that he knew my parents got along well with Olga. He said he would try to make sure nothing happened to us. That was the last time we saw him. I didn't go on any more boat trips - I wouldn't have been allowed to anyway. However, Olga took me on the Monday, which was a holiday, to see the German troops marching with flags flying and military music. As an eight-year-old I was very, very impressed thinking it was great and marvellous. I remember my father saying that I might soon change my mind.



Above and opposite: my school book, 15 March 1938.

Tuesday came and I went back to school and was told to sit at the back of the class with the other Jewish boy and we were also told that we must not play with the other kids and they were told that they mustn't play with us. We had to stay in our seats during break and we had to write in our exercise books in German: 'Austria is part of the German Reich – our Chancellor, our *Führer*, is Adolf Hitler'. This was crossed out at a later stage either by father or me. I can't recall which of us did it. ■





## The Hitler Youth were waiting for us

A FEW weeks later I arrived at school one morning to be told that I had been expelled, not because of what I had done but because of what I was, and from then on I had to go to a Jewish school. This was some distance away and in a not very nice building but we had good teachers who were all Jewish and had been removed from their jobs in state schools.

We continued with our normal lessons. The problem was that every time we finished school there would be a crowd of Hitler Youths outside in uniform – white shirts and brown belts and swastika armbands, waiting for us. They were very well organised and older than us. I think that we were only between six and 12 years old. They threw stones and rotten fruit. Each time they would grab a few of us and beat us up. There would be a couple of Austrian police standing there laughing and making sure that we didn't throw anything back.

One day we saw a patrol of German soldiers coming around the corner and I was terrified. The soldiers, however, saw what was happening and shouted at the police for not stopping it. They chased away the Hitler Youth and came over to us, patted us on the shoulders and said that they would not allow this to happen to us again. These were a small minority who were still decent but they were the exception. However, the attacks didn't happen again and we were able to go home normally.

“They were very well organised and older than us. I think that we were only between six and 12 years old. They threw stones and rotten fruit.”

A few weeks later I turned up at school one day to find that it had been shut up. So I started what I thought of as a long holiday. But 'holiday' was really not the right word for it because I couldn't do anything. The parks all had notices up saying 'No Jews'. Some had notices saying 'No dogs or Jews'. Playgrounds, of course, were out of bounds. My mother, who used to go to cafés to meet friends, was no longer able to go as all cafés, cinemas and such like were banned for Jews.

Olga, however, stayed with us. Officially Christians were not supposed to work for Jews so I don't know how or why she stayed. At that time my grandfather, my mother's father, was extremely ill and Olga helped to look after him. She also took the risk of taking me out to the park. I was fair haired and didn't look particularly Jewish. I'm not sure whether this is true or not but my mother told me later that someone had once asked Olga: 'What is a Jewish woman doing looking after an Aryan boy?' Olga was very dark and looked much more Jewish than I. As I said I don't know how true this was. ■

“A few weeks later I turned up at school one day to find that it had been shut up. So I started what I thought of as a long holiday. But 'holiday' was really not the right word for it because I couldn't do anything. The parks all had notices up saying 'No Jews'.”

## A very miserable time

MY GRANDFATHER died at the beginning of August 1938. I think if he hadn't died then things would have been very different because I very much doubt if my mother would have left her 80-year-old father and we probably would have all stayed in Austria.

It was a very miserable time. Meanwhile my father's business had been taken away. He worked more on the technical side with machinery and power tools. He wasn't a businessman. He was at home, my mother was at home and I was at home. We were rather cooped up and all the time we were hearing stories about what was happening to other members of the family.

In fact the first victim in the family was Heinrich Kohn, the father of my cousin Elsie. She was six at the time. Her father was not only Jewish but he was a Socialist. He was arrested in the first week of German rule and sent to a concentration camp in Austria and then on to Buchenwald in Germany, where he was murdered in July 1940. So Elsie lived with her mother, and I shall talk more about Elsie later.

We weren't attacked, possibly thanks to Olga's boyfriend but I cannot be sure. We were left in peace but obviously very uncomfortably. We were lucky in still having a telephone. This was unusual because many Jews had their telephones taken away and my next vivid memory involved the telephone. I was at home with Olga. My parents had gone to see my aunt, my mother's sister, Mela. The phone rang and Olga answered it. She became very agitated. She told me that I had to go to bed straight away and that she would go out to fetch my parents to come home.

I was awoken very early the next morning and was told that we were going away on holiday and I was very excited about that particularly when I was told that we were going to France. I had never been abroad before. I asked what toys and games I could take with as I did have masses of playthings. My mother told me that I couldn't take any toys with me but that they would all be at home when we returned. In the end I was allowed to take one doll. My parents had two very small suitcases and we travelled by train, as did most people.

We went to the train station where our luggage was searched and my father's stamp collection was confiscated. Eventually we were allowed on the train. We finally arrived at the frontier at Strasbourg but we were taken off the train and missed our connection. However, we did manage to get another train to Paris. ■

“...the first victim in the family was Heinrich Kohn, the father of my cousin Elsie. She was six at the time. Her father was not only Jewish but he was a Socialist. He was arrested in the first week of German rule and sent to a concentration camp in Austria and then on to Buchenwald in Germany, where he was murdered in July 1940.”

## Four months in Paris

IN PARIS we had a problem - we had no money. This was September 1938. We were helped by the Jewish Refugee Committee in Paris and also my mother had a cousin there who was a banker and who helped us. We stayed in a one-star hotel. I even went to school for two weeks - not very successfully as I couldn't speak French and no-one could speak German. It was a boarding school just outside Paris and I was very, very unhappy. There was another Jewish family in our hotel with a daughter who was about 16 or 17 who came to lodge near the school to look after me. However, I refused to stay and two weeks later I came back to be with my parents.

While we were in Paris my father's brother Leo, his business partner, joined us. It had been difficult for him but he managed to get out of Austria and they discussed us all going to England. Uncle Leo had heard that England would allow people in if they could give employment rather than need employment. In North East England there were lots of areas with very high unemployment and land was available for setting up businesses. So we decided to go to England. Uncle Leo, however, said that he had to return to Vienna first to bring his wife who he had left behind. My father told him not to go as he might not be able to get out again. However Leo, who had fought for Germany in the First World War as a fighter on the Italian front and had been awarded a medal, said that he had been guaranteed safety and that we should not worry. He also said that his wife would not leave without her mother and her disabled brother, so he went back for them.

In November 1938 there was the infamous *Kristallnacht* and things became very much worse for Jews in Germany and Austria.

We stayed in Paris until February 1939 when my father said that we would leave for England and he fully expected Leo to follow, but we never saw him again. He, his wife, mother-in-law and brother-in-law were all murdered in the Shoah. ■

## I couldn't speak a word of English



As a new immigrant, 1939.

WE TRAVELLED by train to Dieppe and crossed by sea to Newhaven where we arrived in the evening. At first we were not allowed entry as we were told that we didn't have proof that we had the resources to set up a business. Eventually the officials said that we would be allowed to stay for two weeks. We went to London where the Jewish Refugee Committee in Bloomsbury House helped us. We were lucky and able to stay in the boarding house of a cousin's cousin in Belsize Park and I was sent to a local school. I couldn't speak a word of English although, by that time, I could speak a little bit of French... which I immediately forgot! My mother didn't like the school as it was very run down and seemed dirty so I only went there for two weeks.

My father heard of a Jewish school in Hove called Aryeh House School. It was a very big school although not many people seem to know about it now. I enrolled in the school which was Orthodox so I learnt a lot about Judaism. I was placed in the class for foreigners. I learnt English mainly through reading comics such as the Dandy and Beano. I really liked it there. It was a boarding school but I was a day boy, though I stayed for the evening meal. I very much enjoyed Friday evening and *Shabbat* which we hadn't kept as a family in Vienna. Now I do. I learnt Jewish songs and English songs. I also remember learning a Welsh song - Men of Harlech !

I was at Aryeh House School from early summer 1939 till about August 1940 and I feel it played a very important part in my early education and as a first stage in my transformation from being a refugee to becoming a 'British' schoolboy. This included my introduction to the concept of a school uniform!



The Headmaster, Mr Eliassoff, took a special interest in the refugee children and his mother, known as Madam, even more so. We were often invited to her flat, given an apple and she spoke to us about England and about Judaism. I remember the sad day when she died and the whole school, including myself, walked behind her hearse for some way towards the cemetery.

One activity I didn't like was swimming. We were regularly taken to the beach and the sports master tried to teach me to swim by taking me some way out and then dropping me in. It wasn't very effective though - I still can't swim! ■



In Aryeh House school uniform, 1939.

## Those left behind

IT WAS only after my father died in 1983 that I realised what a terrible period this had been for him because I came across the pre-war correspondence with the family members who had been left behind in Vienna. This related how desperate they were and accusing him of not doing enough. I found copies of his replies saying that he had been to many consulates and had also tried to get guarantors for them because to get people out there had to be a deposit of £50, a lot of money in those days. This was intended to ensure refugees did not fall a burden on the taxpayers. He spent all his time trying to help the family as well as some friends, but with only limited success.

I was shielded from everything that had been going on. In 1945 we started finding out that none of those who had remained in Vienna had survived. I have copies of the Allied High Commission and the Red Cross reports giving information on their fates. My parents didn't talk about it but I knew that they had been crying at night when the misery must have struck home. My mother was very close to her sister and never saw her again. Although my parents had survived they had also suffered and were also victims.

Originally we were only allowed into Britain for two weeks. During those two weeks my father managed to get an extension, I don't know for how long, and then another extension and another extension until war broke out and we were allowed to stay.

My father never managed to start his own business. Initially he was unable to work at all because he was an alien. Unfortunately, he never really recovered and unlike other refugees here he never managed to succeed, though he did work very hard and provided me with a good education. ■

“My parents didn't talk about it but I knew that they had been crying at night when the misery must have struck home.”

## When war broke out

WE WERE in Hove when war broke out in September 1939. In fact, my father and a cousin were on the playing fields of Aryeh House School helping to dig trenches. There we had a battery radio on which we heard Chamberlain's famous speech. My father was very worried because he had left my mother at home. We hurried back stopping a chap in a car who hadn't realised that the war had broken out so we told him the news as he gave us a lift home. We couldn't find my mother at first because she had been queuing up for gas masks.

Eventually we settled down to life under wartime conditions and experienced some of the first air raids in Britain. There were several raids on the south coast in August 1940. By that time a lot of people had left the coast and we decided to leave too and go to London.

We arrived in London in, I think, September 1940 and we stayed in a small boarding house in Swiss Cottage. I remember an unusual incident. The air raid siren came while I was walking with my parents in Buckland Crescent and a very distinguished-looking gentleman came out and asked whether we would like to take shelter in his house. His name was Gerald Wathen and he had an air raid shelter. By the time the air raid was over and we came out we had learned that Mr Wathen was headmaster of the Hall School and I was booked in as a day boy. I have no idea what arrangements had been made about paying as we had little money, but all was well and I was enrolled in the school. It was a private school and Mr Wathen was a wonderful man. He wasn't qualified as a teacher but he was an ex-Indian civil servant and he was very kind, looking after several refugee children. I really enjoyed my time at the Hall School.

Later on, around about October, the Blitz started. In our school magazine it listed the nine boys including myself who attended every day during the Blitz. Now it was a bit unfair because we lived in Adamson Road which was three minutes' walk to the school. Of those boys still living in London many had problems getting to the school because of unreliable transport and road damage due to air raids. They didn't get their names listed in the school magazine!

We stayed at the boarding house at 3 Adamson Road from late 1940 to the spring of 1945 and although we lived in one room and had to share a bathroom, life was not unpleasant. We had good breakfasts and evening meals and as there were several other refugees staying there, there was a good social atmosphere. ■



My parents in London.

## Standing for the National Anthem

I MUST have been a bit of a nuisance because every Sunday evening in the communal lounge, when the National Anthems of the Allies and occupied countries were played, I insisted on standing throughout and expected (unsuccessfully) other people to do the same! Also I was always looking for adults to play board games with me, and usually succeeded with an elderly gentleman and a young lady, Anny Rubin, who sadly died at a very early age.

My aunts also stayed in the same boarding house, and when my uncles were on leave from the army they joined us, so although much reduced, the family were again close together.

The air raids were mostly aimed at east London and the docks, so we had relatively little damage in our area, although even there quite a few houses were destroyed and people killed.

When the raids intensified we started to go to air raid shelters. We had friends staying in the Cumberland Hotel near Marble Arch and they enabled us to join them in the Quebec Restaurant which was part of Lyons Corner House below ground and served as a shelter at night. People from the hotel next door had access to that shelter. So, after about 11pm when all the restaurant guests had left we made little camps, turning the restaurant tables on their sides and we slept in the middle. Occasionally we slept in the Underground but that was very rarely. By the beginning of 1941 the raids had eased off and we didn't bother going to the shelters anymore and just stayed at home when the sirens sounded.

At school I had a friend, another refugee boy called Heinz Isaacson, who later became Henry Jackson (he's the only surviving school friend I still have). Heinz and I were very competitive as to which of us was better in English, but in a friendly way. There weren't that many people in the class, about ten – and the whole school didn't have more than thirty boys. Today the Hall School is one of the top boys' prep schools in North London.

Once war had started my father was able to find work in the timber industry and as this was war work he was able to work continuously. For some time he was a foreman. So, we managed. My mother helped out by doing paid work at home assembling pipe cleaners and later powder compacts for a

Jewish refugee entrepreneur. For two weeks she helped out at Bloomsbury House which was the main refugee centre of the Central British Fund that later became part of World Jewish Relief.

We started to invite friends home again, some from Vienna, some from Germany. My mother went out to meet friends for coffee at The Cosmo in Finchley Road. In the Swiss Cottage area there were also Jewish cabarets and the like, though my parents didn't join in much of that type of social life.

While still living in Adamson Road I started going regularly to *Cheder* (Religion School) at Hampstead Synagogue. Another good school friend, Alan Fox, also went to the same synagogue and every weekend after the *Shabbat* Service I went back to his house in Cricklewood for lunch. Often on Sundays after *Cheder* he came to us for lunch. We were both keen stamp collectors and also railway enthusiasts.

In October 1943 I celebrated my *Bar Mitzvah* at Hampstead Synagogue after being taught by Reverend Nemeth. My party was held in the boarding house lounge with kind permission of Mrs Jones, the landlady. Catering was by my mother and friends and I received presents including money totalling nearly £3. Somewhat different to present day *Bar Mitzvahs*! ■

“The air raids were mostly aimed at east London and the docks, so we had relatively little damage in our area, although even there quite a few houses were destroyed and people killed.”



## Cousin Elsie, aunts and uncles

GOING BACK to cousin Elsie. After *Kristallnacht* the British government allowed 10,000 children to come to Britain. Elsie's father, as I said, had been sent to a concentration camp and she never saw him again, but her mother decided to save six year old Elsie by sending her to Britain. She came first to London, following the usual route of the *Kindertransport* from Hook of Holland to Harwich to Liverpool Street Station. My parents and I were living in one room in Hove when she arrived. There was little we could do to help her and she was fostered by a family in Glasgow.

Three of my aunts had been able to come from Austria to England. They were my father's sisters: Regi, Aranka and Margit, and they got work as domestic servants. Two of them managed to find domestic work in Scotland not very far from Glasgow so that they could keep an eye on Elsie and occasionally visit her. They were lucky in that they were employed by a very nice lady who was very wealthy and had a brother who owned a castle nearby.

When Elsie returned to London towards the end of the war in 1944 or 1945 she never again spoke a word of German and she spoke English with a strong Scottish accent.

Two of my uncles also escaped. They managed to enter Switzerland illegally and then via Turkey and Palestine reached England where they were detained in Kitchener Camp near Dover. They were allowed to join the army, initially in the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps which consisted of non-British soldiers. One of them, Heinrich Vulkan, would come and stay at the same boarding house as us when he was on leave. He spent most of the war at Dover Castle in the Royal Engineers, and after the war he settled in Glasgow with his wife Alice whom he married in 1940 while interned in Kitchener Camp. My parents and I attended their wedding. In Glasgow after the war he opened an electrical shop and of the wider family he was the most successful in business. He had a son and daughter and five grandsons. They are the biggest branch of the family and still live in Glasgow.

My other uncle was sent overseas and had to change his name, as did all the 10,000 German and Austrian Jews who had joined the British army and were sent abroad. His name was originally Nandor Vulkan and he became Frank Vincent, born in London. This was in case he was captured by the



Left to right: Elsie, Regi Vulkan, Aranka Vulkan, Betty and Nandor Vulkan, Margit Vulkan with my parents Adrienne and Marcel Vulkan in the garden of our home at 177 Walm Lane, London.

Germans and as nominally a German citizen he would have been hanged as a traitor rather than being treated as a prisoner of war. Luckily, he wasn't captured and after the war he married another refugee, Betty, who had been a hidden child in Belgium. ■



With my parents and uncle Nandor at the wedding of uncle Heinrich and Alice, Kitchener Camp, 1940.



Age 18, 1948.

## My war injury!

RETURNING to my own story, I was at the Hall School from 1940 to 1944 and then went first to St Paul's School, which at that time had been evacuated to Crowthorne. I was very unhappy as there were air raids in London and I was worried about my parents. I was so unhappy that I refused to stay there and came back to London and joined Highgate School, where I stayed until 1947.

While at Highgate I experience my only war injury – a tiny cut to one finger from flying glass! This was caused by a Flying Bomb or V1, also known as a doodlebug. It landed in the playing fields near the building where we were about to have lunch and caused no real casualties. However, we were unable to have lunch as broken glass had got into the food before being served and we were sent home. I cycled back towards Swiss Cottage, and while in Fitzjohns Avenue I heard the frightening silence after a doodlebug cut its engine. I dived down behind a sand bin but the bomb landed some distance away. I continued cycling to where my father was working in Euston Road, told him about my experiences and then fainted!

While at Highgate I had to decide upon a career and my future. I showed an interest in science. Also my mother was very keen as she had a second cousin who had come over and who was a well-known chemist and she said that I ought to be a scientist as well. So I went to university and obtained a degree in Physics.



On the social side, whilst I was still at Highgate I joined the Jewish Circle. One day a letter arrived inviting all members of the Jewish Circle to a ‘social’. I had no idea what a ‘social’ was and I was very worried in case it included dancing as I couldn’t dance. Anyway, I did go and enjoyed it greatly. At that time I became involved in the Zionist cause. I think it was firstly with FZY. Later on, I joined Young Poale Zion. I became very active in that and was made chairman of my local group. It was a part of my life that I really enjoyed.

Throughout my life I have been involved in several organisations, committees and the like. At some point I joined B’nai Brith Youth and eventually became Programme Officer and finally President of the Otto Hirsch Chapter which was part of the Leo Baeck Lodge. I made lots of friends during that time, both male and female. Again this was something that I really enjoyed. ■

“While at Highgate I experience my only war injury – a tiny cut to one finger from flying glass! This was caused by a Flying Bomb or V1, also known as a doodlebug.”

## National Service

I HAD TO balance my time between social activities and studying, but managed to graduate in Physics and Mathematics in 1951. After I graduated and before I was called up for my National Service I had various holiday jobs including helping out at the Festival of Britain taking advance booking tickets to Town Halls all over London. I also worked in the offices of Poale Zion and later the Joint Palestine Appeal (later the Joint Israel Appeal and today the UJIA), working mainly as a filing clerk. These were paid jobs and I met a lot of interesting people along the way.

In 1947 my parents had become British citizens and as I was under age this also applied to me. When I reached 21, I had the option of remaining British which meant joining the army and I reluctantly but correctly decided that is what I would do. I was surprised at being called up because I was Grade C (not physically fit enough to join the army) but because I had a degree I was thought to be potentially useful. I joined the Royal Signals in February 1952. At first I was on an OR1 course, an officer’s training course, but I couldn’t cope with the physical side of it, assault courses and all that, and when the opportunity came up of being posted to the Army Operational Research Group (AORG) I went ‘non-desirous’ which meant I left the OR1 course. The AORG was based in West Byfleet, just outside London, and we wore civilian clothes, working 9-5 in an office. Most of my work was on statistics relating to the efficiency of weapons. This suited me much better than the officer’s training course. We were billeted in a very nice boarding house and I spent six pleasant months there.

One day two gentlemen came up and had a chat with me. I remember saying that it was surprising that, although not British born, I was still allowed to do secret work. I had, of course, signed the Official Secrets Act when I started at AORG. The next day I was asked to come to see the Commanding Officer who told me that there was a great shortage of radio mechanics in the field and I was to be posted to Colchester. The real reason was probably that as I was not British born I should never have been doing the secret work in the first place.

There was a funny incident on the way to my new post in Colchester. I was sent by train and then hitched a lift on a lorry to the Colchester army base. When I arrived, I was horrified by what I saw and the conditions. Then it turned out that this was Colchester Correctional Facility, an army prison, and I’d chosen the wrong lorry for a lift!



Anyway, I eventually arrived where I should have been and found that I had nothing to do. Some of my time I spent teaching the sergeant how to pass his exams. The only time I did anything useful at that stage was in 1953 when there were floods in Canvey Island and we were sent there to assist.

Then I was posted to Aldershot to join the Royal Signals, attached to the 47th Royal Dragoon Guards. Very impressive! There I was supposed to be repairing radios in tanks and other vehicles. The main event in 1953 was of course on the 2 June, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and we were all given very smart blue dress uniforms. We camped overnight in St James' Park and on the great day I was one of the soldiers lining The Mall. We did not hold rifles but acted as auxiliary police to hold back the crowds. After the Coronation we were given well-earned leave.

Generally, however, the two years from when I was called up in February 1952 were a waste of time. From a Jewish point of view, I never had any problems with antisemitism while doing my National Service. The only consequence of being Jewish during those two years was that on two occasions I went on ten days' Jewish leadership courses at Woburn House and we were given full time off between *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. ■

“I remember saying that it was surprising that, although not British born, I was still allowed to do secret work. I had, of course, signed the Official Secrets Act when I started at AORG.”

In military uniform with my parents, 1952.



## Looking for a real job

WHEN I came out of the army I had to start looking for a real job. I found work with London Transport in the Research Department and stayed with them for two years. It was interesting work mainly in safety and controlling the temperature in the tunnels, as well as reducing the slipperiness of platforms. There was not a lot of progression possible at London Transport so when an opportunity came up at the National Coal Board I joined their Mining Research Establishment based in Isleworth. I was there for four years during which time I went down coal mines several times. In fact, I was eventually given a certificate so that I could go down into the mines by myself, though it was something I never did. My work was on the intrinsic safety of electrical equipment and conveyor belt quality.

Following that I started what was to become my main career and joined the London County Council (LCC) in December 1959. This was just after the Windscale nuclear power station disaster and there was concern of radiation reaching London. The LCC had a Chemical Branch where they wanted to monitor radioactivity and I applied for the job as a physicist. When I joined the Branch, it became the Scientific Branch rather than the Chemical Branch. We set up a small section monitoring air activity. We also checked the free school milk given to children at the time, to make sure it was safe for them to drink.

Eventually this work lessened in importance and I became quite involved in noise and air pollution and that was really my main area of work. I was there until the Greater London Council (GLC) was abolished in 1986. By that time, I was Head of Environmental Sciences with about forty staff, nearly all of them graduates. After the abolition of the GLC the Scientific Branch continued for two years in County Hall as part of the London Residuary Body and was then privatised as the London Scientific Services (LSS). I continued to be involved in conferences and invited to write papers, mainly related to noise control. In retrospect I felt it was a very fortunate chance and decision that I had joined the Scientific Branch.

During my career I became involved with many professional and technical organisations and enjoyed meeting many interesting people on committees and conferences. My main problem, even then, was an embarrassing inability to remember names and to recognise people out of context!

I retired gradually during the 1990s, first from full time work with LSS, and then from doing a range of consultancy work for various organisations. My wife Mary and I became active in the University of the Third Age, a wonderful organisation for people who want to continue learning after they retire. I

With colleagues at the National Coal Board, 1956.





belong to the Harrow branch which has about 1,200 members. Mary and I organised tours of places of interest in London and Britain generally, as well as to cities in Europe and once in America. That took up a lot of our time. Mary was also teaching French in U3A up to the beginning of 2017. In fact, we still receive phone calls asking when she would be restarting her French classes. Unfortunately, this now seems unlikely, due to her health issues. ■



Above: measuring traffic noise for the GLC, 1966. Opposite: me (far right) protesting against the H-bomb at Greenham Common, 1960.





## Fifty happy years together

SO HOW did Mary and I meet? Well, I became very interested in politics early on and joined the Labour Party and later CND, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and took part in most of their Aldermaston marches. On one of the coaches coming back I met a very attractive girl who lived nearby and was also a member of the local CND branch. That was it. I think that was in 1964 and we have now been married for 50 years.

We married twice actually, the first time in a registry office and then in synagogue after a two-year difficult conversion course. She had to write many essays and did lots of studying both with a Rabbi and at home. Our first marriage was in 1967 and in 1968 our first son, Daniel, was born, followed by Jonathan two years later. We celebrated our Golden Wedding in August 2017.

Mary got involved in many things, though she didn't join the Labour party. She would not join any political party but she was very keen on CND. She has remained an idealist and joined in campaigns related to Apartheid, inequality and education. Even after she retired she also continued her own studies and eventually took a Masters degree and then a Doctorate in Education though she never used her title. Now, tragically, she suffers from cancer.

I decided to start giving talks in schools and that has been one of my main activities since I retired – over twenty years ago. My talks relate to my own experiences after the Anschluss and my life as a refugee, as well as speaking about the fate of many of my family in the Shoah. These talks were arranged by the London Jewish Cultural Centre and later by the Holocaust Education Trust. These have been very worthwhile experiences and always well received by the pupils.

There is plenty of stuff I have left out. I had several girlfriends before I met Mary and I even became engaged. My ex-fiancé and I are still on good terms. I have an Israeli friend who also has myeloma and she and Mary exchange information on the treatment. She's a grandmother with eleven grandchildren and lives in Jerusalem.

Life is very different now to what it was then. Girlfriends didn't mean the same as it does today. It meant going to the local Lyons for tea, maybe going to a cinema, and that was it. ■



Above and below: our wedding day, with both sets of parents.





## Bringing my story up to date



Our grandchildren Ivy and Fox aged four and half at their school in Dulwich.

Fox and Ivy, who were born in New York in 2013. Fortunately, the family recently moved back to London, having bought a house in Dulwich.

I have returned to Vienna with Mary several times in recent years and visited my family home there and am in contact with the family who live there now.

On the whole I feel that I have been very lucky and have had a good and rewarding life in spite of having been a refugee. I enjoyed my career, had many friends and above all was very lucky with my family. I had devoted, caring parents and for over fifty years have had a wonderful wife who gave us two sons of whom I can justifiably be proud. Now of course we are also very happy to have two lovely grandchildren.

September 2017

TO BRING my story up to date, our older son, Daniel, is a qualified actuary, but after working in the profession for several years found the work too boring and materialistic. Since then he has only worked in the public sector and is now doing statistical work on cancer research. He has always been closely involved with the Jewish community and was very active in Limmud, including being joint chairperson for one of the annual Limmud Conferences.

Jonathan works in the advertising industry and after working in several well-known agencies, jointly founded a new agency, 'Anomaly'. This has been very successful and from starting with a handful of people the company now employs several hundred, with branch offices in five countries. He is married to Kate Boydell and they have lovely twin children,

Our family in 1978.







Celebrating my retirement with Mary, 1992.



The family.



Celebrating my second *Bar Mitzvah* with Mary, 2012.



Above left: with President Heinz Fischer. Otto Deutsch in the background.  
Above right: outside our old apartment building in Vienna.







At the old apartment building in Vienna with the current resident Mrs Hierzer and her friends.

**I would like to dedicate this book to my family members who were victims of the Shoah:**

Abraham Vulkan

Leo and Mathilde Vulkan

Rosa Vulkan

Erna Vulkan

Heinrich and Gusti Kohn (née Vulkan)

Armin and Melanie Fischer (née Klausner)

Samu Steiner

Eva Trepper

Robert Trepper



## About the AJR

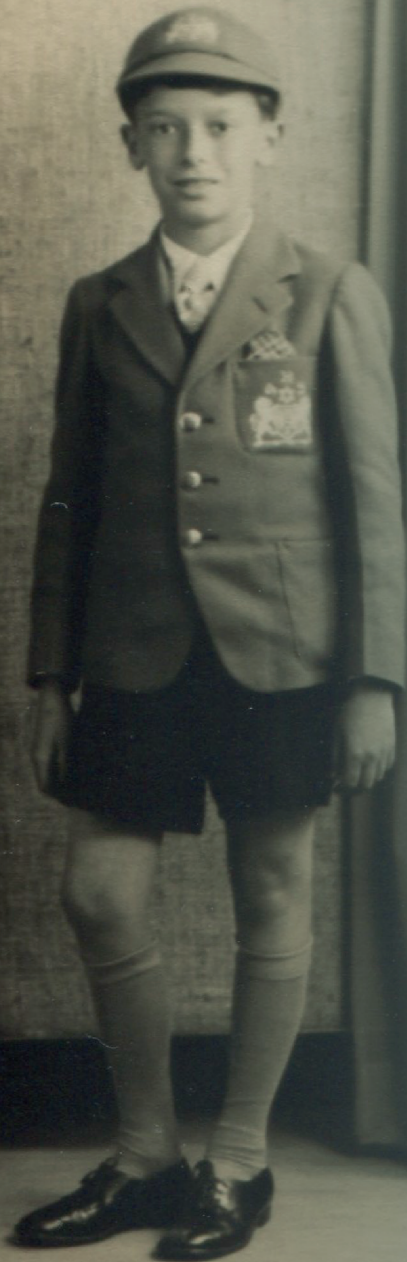
Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional 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.



“...every time we finished school there would be a crowd of Hitler Youths outside in uniform – white shirts and brown belts and swastika armbands, waiting for us.”



 **AJR** The Association  
of Jewish Refugees

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