



My Story

Dr Kurt Simon



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

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

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Portrait photography by Claire Bartfield

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“My most vivid memory is of the night of 9 November 1938, *Kristallnacht*. We had all stayed inside our apartment that evening. I learned later that the janitor of our building told my father not to go out that night because terrible things were going to happen.”



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Early years in Eisenstadt

I WAS BORN on 26 January 1933, in Eisenstadt, a small Austrian town south-east of Vienna. It sat on the border with Hungary, where the town was known as Kismarton.

Eisenstadt was at least 200 years old and located close to the Schloss Esterházy, the residence of the noble Austro-Hungarian Esterházy family who acted as protectors of Jews in Eisenstadt since the 17th century.

This area was a self-imposed ghetto that enabled Jews to practise their religion in peace. There was one long street, *Judengasse* (Jews Lane), which was closed off *erev Shabbat* (before the Sabbath) with a *schabboskette* (Sabbath chain) at each end until *motsei Shabbat* (after the Sabbath), to prevent the road from being used by vehicles on the Sabbath day.

I lived with my mother, father and older brother, Ernst (now known as Ernest).

My mother, Karolina (Lina) Farkas was born in Kald, a small village in Hungary near Sarvar. She was the second of 12 siblings. She trained as a kindergarten nurse and left home to work in Austria, where she met and married my father in 1928.

My father, Ludwig, known as Lajos in Hungarian, was born in 1901 in Malomhaza. When my parents married, they settled in Eisenstadt and my father found work in a leather factory called 'Deutsch', where he made handbags and shoes. He was not a particularly physical or muscular man. He was rather thin and short but was always exceptionally good with his hands. He was a true craftsman.



'Papa', my father at 20

My father's brother, Uncle Alexander (known as Sandor), also lived in Eisenstadt and he too worked in the leather business. He was married to my mother's sister, Aunt Olga, and they had one daughter, Claire.

I have no memories of my grandparents. My father's parents died in 1927, before I was born. My great-grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Yitachak Tachau, who died in 1887, followed in the rabbinical footsteps of his father, Rabbi Abraham Tachau, who had died in 1854.

My mother's parents, Herman and Mari, had six boys and five girls, and one other child who died at birth. They lived in Kald and I've been told that we visited my grandparents during the holidays every year, but I don't recall this myself as I was so young. ■

“When my parents married, they settled in Eisenstadt and my father found work in a leather factory called 'Deutsch', where he made handbags and shoes.”



'Mama', my mother at 20



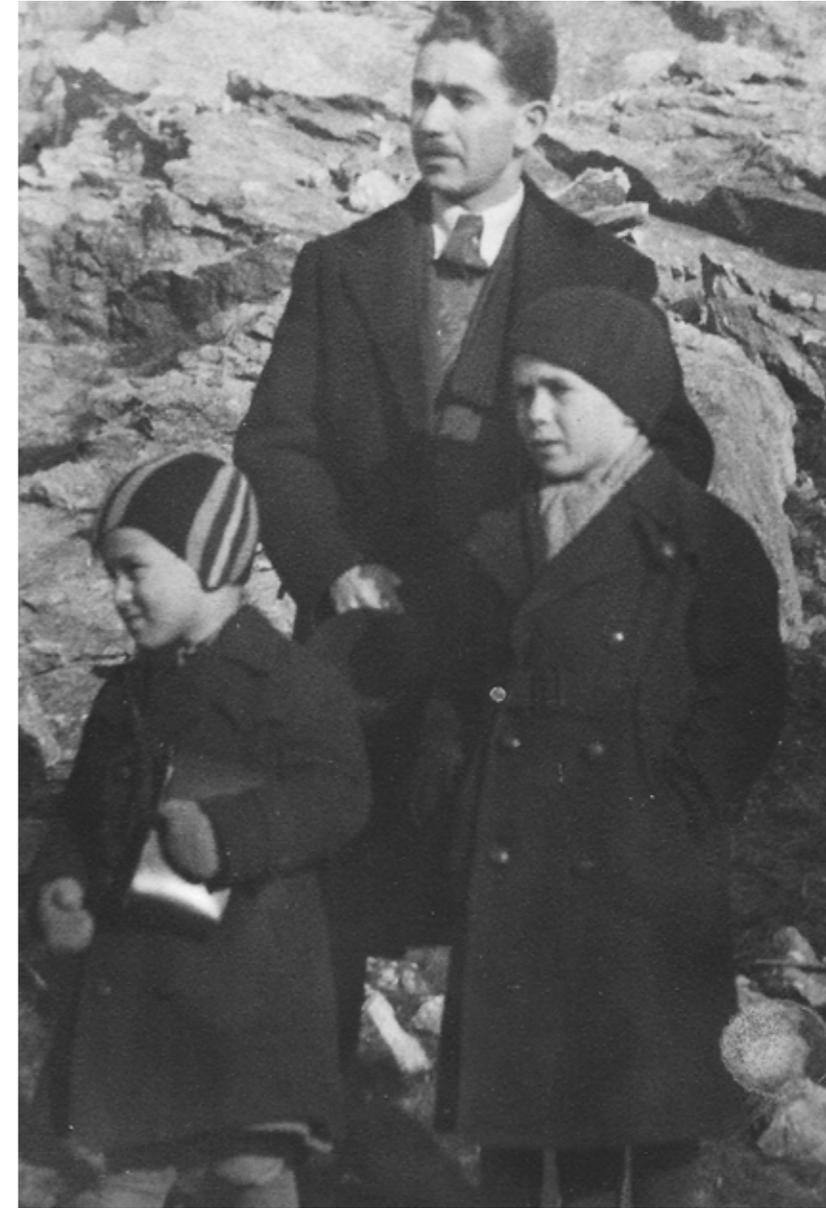
Watching my mother stuff a goose at her parents' home in Kald, 1935



In Eisenstadt, 1935



My father was a keen photographer and took this photo of Ernest and me. We were always smartly dressed. Eisenstadt, 1937



With my father and Ernest. Vienna, 1938

Life at home

MY PARENTS, BROTHER and I lived in a two- or three-storey building that overlooked a central garden. My father's sister, Aunt Gisi (Gisella), lived with us for a while. There were many Jews living in Eisenstadt and everyone was religiously observant. It was well known as one of the *Sheva Kehillot* (seven religious villages).

In our small town, Jewish households didn't cook on *Shabbat*. They would take their prepared *cholent* (stew) to the bakery on a Friday for it to be cooked: each family had their own spot in the bakery oven. The *eruv* around the village (a boundary allowing Jews to do otherwise forbidden tasks on the Sabbath) enabled us to collect our hot food the next day and carry it home for our *Shabbat* meal.

It was common for households on the borders to be bilingual. My parents spoke German and Hungarian. My brother Ernest and I only spoke German; I think our parents did not teach us Hungarian deliberately so they had a private language which we, the children, could not understand.

I don't remember much about my early life. I vaguely recall playing with other children with a bucket and spade, and I also have a slight memory of the Germans marching into Austria in March 1938, when the *Anschluss* (annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany) was signed between Germany and Austria. I remember the Germans setting up machine gun posts in one of the main streets in Eisenstadt – just the sort of thing a little boy wouldn't forget! ■



Left to right: Papa's sister Gisi, Papa and Mama outside our home in Eisenstadt, 1937



My parents had already been told to leave Austria when this family portrait was taken

Jews no longer welcome: *Kristallnacht* and beyond

JUST SIX MONTHS after the *Anschluss*, around September 1938, we were forced to leave Eisenstadt. We packed up our personal belongings and made our way to Vienna.

My father managed to find us a small flat in the second district of Vienna opposite a *shul* (synagogue), where we stayed for about six months. Again, I only have vague memories of this time like sledging in the woods. Our parents were clearly aware of our situation and kept us indoors as much as possible and started planning to leave Austria.

My most vivid memory is of the night of 9 November 1938, *Kristallnacht*. We had all stayed inside our apartment that evening. I learned later that the janitor of our building told my father not to go out that night because terrible things were going to happen. From our apartment window, I witnessed the burning of the *Sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls), but I don't remember how I felt or what was said about it at home.

My parents had applied to emigrate to Palestine, the USA and England. We were lucky in that my aunt Gisi had already moved to England and was working in domestic service in Leeds. She managed to obtain guarantors for my parents. They had to pay £50 per person, which was quite a lot of money in those days. It took some time for us to receive our immigration papers. ■



Family photo taken in Eisenstadt. Left to right: Olga, my Mama's sister, Papa, Mama, Papa's sister Gisi who left for England in mid-1938 as a domestic servant and was instrumental in finding foster parents for us in Leeds and employers for my parents, Hugo Weiss who was married to Mama's elder sister Rosa (not in the picture), holding his daughter Hannah, Olga's husband, Alexander (Sandor) who was Papa's younger brother - two brothers married two sisters. Ernest is standing at the front dressed in a white shirt with a black tie and I am in the buggy.



As a six year old, just before we left for England, 1939

Leaving Austria for England

WHILE WE WERE waiting for our immigration papers, my parents took the opportunity to send my brother Ernest, then aged eight, on the *Kindertransport*. So, in January 1939, he travelled from Austria to England on his own. I cannot imagine it was an easy decision for my parents to have sent him on whilst keeping me, two and half years younger than him, not knowing if we would ever be reunited. I don't recall if I found it difficult to see my brother leave for England. I guess I must have done, as we had always been close.

The *Kindertransport* train left from Vienna's Wiener West Bahnhof, and more children joined along the way. When they reached Holland, they were met by members of an Aid Society. They continued to the Hook of Holland, where the children crossed the North Sea by boat to Harwich, where they were again met by another group of people. My brother stayed overnight in a London hostel and was collected by Aunt Gisi, who took him up to Leeds, where she was living and working.

A few months later, in March 1939, my parents and I took the same journey that Ernest had taken with the *Kindertransport*. I can't recall the train journey, but I do remember the North Sea crossing as I was violently sick.

I have no real memories of my first impressions of England. We spent our first night in a hostel in London and then travelled straight up to Leeds to reunite with Ernest. ■

A new life in Leeds

IN ORDER TO gain entry to England my parents needed to be employed and taking on a domestic service role was one of the few ways for refugees to be admitted to the country. A married couple of veterinary surgeons in Yeadon, a small town near Leeds, agreed to employ them: my mother was classed as a cook and my father worked as a gardener and handyman.

Ernest and I were not allowed to stay with our parents so we were fostered for about six months by two different local Jewish families. My parents would visit us at weekends when they could. I lived with a family a few hundred yards from Ernest and his foster family. I remember the first time rice pudding was placed before me: I'd never seen this before, I didn't like the smell or look of it and it made me feel sick.

After six months, Ernest and I moved into a hostel for Jewish refugee children on Stainbeck Lane. We stayed there for about a year and a half. It was set up by the Leeds Committee for Jewish Refugee Children. Ernest and I were the youngest of about 50 boys. It was an orthodox hostel that kept a kosher kitchen and observed *Shabbat* and the *chagim* (festivals).

We were enrolled in Cowper Street School as soon as we arrived. It wasn't a Jewish school but had a predominately Jewish intake: most of the Jewish children in Leeds of my generation went to that school. When we first arrived, the children in school laughed at us because we wore the typical Austrian children's clothing of *Lederhosen*.

After school we would head straight to *cheder* (Jewish studies school), which was on the same street. I had never experienced school back in Austria, as children didn't begin their education there until the age of six, by which time I had already left. ■

School years

IT WAS NOT long before I could communicate in English. Being so young, I learned to speak the language quite easily and quickly.

I was a keen stamp collector and loved sports, especially tennis which I played with Ernest. We were members of Junior *B'nai B'rith* (a Jewish organisation) and were active in their charity work, through which we met lots of people with whom we are still in touch today.

Our parents were not particularly ambitious for either Ernest or me, but they did stress the value of a good education. For them it was not 'location, location, location' but 'education, education, education'. They were fortunate that both of us were keen to study, had open minds and wanted to succeed. I enjoyed school, although I can't say that my early years at Cowper Street were particularly enjoyable. They served a purpose and I met a really top class teacher there. I think his name was Mr Linley. I found him charismatic and he encouraged me to study. ■

Wartime restrictions

ONCE THE WAR began, there were threats of bombardments and it was decided that my brother would be evacuated to Branston in Lincoln. Again, I only have vague memories of this period. I don't know why I didn't go; perhaps my parents thought I was too young at six years old. I remember my mother being quite upset on one of our visits to see Ernest. He had forgotten how to speak German and my mother's English wasn't good enough to converse with him. Moreover, she was upset that he was being given non-kosher food, so she asked the authorities to return him to Leeds.

A short while after arriving in England my father was arrested as an 'enemy alien', the policy applied to all male refugees of Austrian origin at the time. Under the orders of Churchill, he was interned in the open prison at Peel on the Isle of Man for almost a year.

By that time, my mother had moved to work as a cook at the home of a family who owned a textile mill in Leeds. She struggled with her mental health. Her spoken English was not as fluent as my father's, which must have made her feel quite alone, especially as she had been separated from her husband and children. Ernest and I were unaware of her illness as we lived apart from her. Thankfully, she received medical help and made a full recovery. ■

Family life resumes

MY FATHER WAS released after a year of internment, in 1941, and returned to Leeds. My parents managed to purchase a house on Shepherd's Lane in the Harehills area of Leeds. As a child, I thought the house was very large, but in reality it was rather small.

This was the first time in almost three years that we all lived together as a family. I was a happy child and brought up in a happy household.

My uncle Sandor came to stay with us, both before he joined the Pioneer Corps and again during his leave. Soon after, my parents started taking in lodgers to make ends meet. These were Hungarian, German or Austrian young men, refugees in need of a home. I particularly remember one called Kurt Baumgarten, who was 18 and signed up as a soldier in the Jewish Brigade. Years later, I met up with him and his wife on their kibbutz in Israel, but I never succeeded in tracking down any of the other lodgers.

Our lodgers usually ate with us, almost as members of the family. There was rationing, so food was limited, but we never went hungry. My mother was a wonderful cook. The food she prepared always had a strong Austro-Hungarian flavour, which helped our lodgers feel very much at home. She was economical and managed to make a lot out of very little. I think this came from the way she had been brought up; money had been tight in her own childhood and later during the war and beyond, here in England.

I particularly remember the *palacsinta* (Hungarian pancakes) which could be sweet or savoury. Occasionally, Mother would prepare a goose like Hungarians do, and we often had goulash with rice. She was also an excellent pastry maker: her specialty was *apfelstrudel* (apple strudel). She used to stretch the dough until it was paper thin and the length of our dining table. Her strudels were works of art! ■



Aged 10, climbing the rocks at the Cow and Calf with Ernest.
Ilkley Moor, 1943

Further education – I find my calling in life

IN 1944, I had to sit the 11-plus exam to secure a place at the City of Leeds High School, also known as Central High School due to its location in Leeds city centre. Ernest went to a different high school. I remember Mr Worts, the headmaster, who was quite a character. The teaching itself at the school was not always consistent as some teachers never returned after the war. The school didn't have a sixth form, so in 1948 I moved on to Roundhay High School to study for my A-levels. They prepared me well for my exams in the sciences, which I needed to study medicine.

I decided to become a doctor at the age of 13, after being hospitalised with scarlet fever at Seacroft, a hospital for infectious diseases. The doctors there made a big impression on me and I never considered different career options. That illness also had another effect on my life: it caused a leaking heart valve, and it was Government policy that people with mitral valve disease could not be called up for National Service. Whilst Ernest carried out his duty in this regard in the early 1950s, I was exempt.

I was invited for an interview at Leeds School of Medicine on my 17th birthday. One of the interviewers who had read my CV said: 'I see that your father makes handbags and does a lot of sewing. Do you want to be surgeon?' I thought that was a stupid question. One of the standard questions asked of Jewish students applying to medical school was whether you would prefer to do dentistry. Some people I knew fell into that trap, but I stuck to my plan of studying to be a doctor.

“ One of the standard questions asked of Jewish students applying to medical school was whether you would prefer to do dentistry. Some people I knew fell into that trap, but I stuck to my plan of studying to be a doctor. ”



I am wearing my Central High School uniform, standing with Ernest outside our house at 18 Shepherd's Lane, 1945

In 1950 I was accepted at the Leeds School of Medicine with a scholarship. My parents had thought that medicine was beyond my capabilities and I shouldn't even try, but at least I saved them the worry of how they would pay for my medical school fees. I'm not sure where the money for the scholarship came from but, of course, without that financial help I would not have been able to enter medical school.

I passed all my university exams first time around and never had to repeat a course. It was a very special time. I spent an enjoyable five and a half years there, but it was hard work. We had classes every day from 9am to 4pm. There wasn't much time for doing other things, unlike student life today. There were very few Jewish students, I think probably no more than five or six in a cohort of 75. I remember only one Jewish professor from that time.

I came from an artisanal family. I cannot imagine what we might have become if we had stayed in Austria. I often wonder what we would have done and what kind of careers would have been open to us. By coming to England we gained many opportunities. ■

The war ends

I REMEMBER THE VE celebrations in our street when the war ended. Amid the joy and relief that the fighting had finished, this was also a time of great sadness. Family members who finally came to England brought news that many of my mother's relatives had died in the *Shoah*. Her parents and four siblings had perished. My grandmother, Mari, was quite old by the time war broke out and she died a natural death. I was told that my grandfather, Herman, had died on a train while being deported to Auschwitz. My mother's youngest brothers, Laszlo and Mancsi Farkas, and two of her sisters perished in the camps. Two other brothers, Sandor and Ignatz, managed to survive, but lost their wives and children.

It took several years for all the information to come out, and my mother struggled to come to terms with it. As a child, during the war years, I don't remember ever having talked about what was happening in Europe. I think my parents were aware of what was happening in general, but not necessarily what was happening to their families. We rarely spoke about the past and we did not ask questions of our parents.

“It took several years for all the information to come out, and my mother struggled to come to terms with it. As a child, during the war years, I don't remember ever having talked about what was happening in Europe.”

Happily, many of my mother's relatives did survive. In 1938, her sister Olga had been visiting her parents in Hungary with her daughter, Claire, when Austria closed its borders to Jews. Olga and Claire were stuck in Budapest, and spent the whole war there in hiding. They stayed with us when they immigrated to Leeds in 1946. Aunt Olga worked as a caterer, known to everyone as Mrs Simon. Claire married a Leeds boy and has a large orthodox family with 19 great-grandchildren. They moved to Jerusalem and we are in regular contact.

Mother's brother, Sandor (Alexander), had managed to leave Eisenstadt for England just before the outbreak of war. He lived with us when I was a teenager. He suffered from ill health; he was rather agitated and found it difficult to settle. He later decided to move to Vienna. We met his widow several times on subsequent visits there. However, she did not speak English and my German was not very good, but we managed.

My mother's cousin Ella also survived in Budapest during the war. My brother met her years later, when he was working in Hungary. Communication was not easy as they had no language in common.

In 1938, my mother's sister Rosa had moved to Palestine and later settled in Haifa. Another sister, Regina, came to live with us after the war and then moved to Israel in 1948.

Aunt Gisi eventually stopped working as a domestic and moved away from Leeds. She emigrated to Atlantic City in the United States and married Moritz Max, a distant relative. In 1956, after the Hungarian uprising, we had more family members joining us in Leeds: another brother and sister of my mother.

Amazingly, my father's family all managed to escape – though I remember my father sitting *shiva* (mourning) for his brother, Maurice, who died in Palestine after escaping there in the 1930s. ■

Life as a family in Leeds

AFTER THE WAR, we moved into a larger house in nearby Copgrove Road and continued to house lodgers to help with the family finances. My father started to develop a business specialising in leather goods. He eventually opened a shop on Chapeltown Road called 'Simon Handbag Maker', where he sold handbags and shoes that he designed and made himself. He was a highly intelligent man and although he didn't have the benefit of a lengthy education, he had good business knowledge from working as an apprentice in Eisenstadt. He studied from a set of English language books he had brought over from Austria, which enabled him to communicate well when he first arrived in England.

He mainly catered for a Jewish clientele. I used to pop into the shop after school where I would see him working with crocodile, snake and calf leather. Those were the most popular types of skin in the leather business at the time. When my mother stopped working in domestic service, she helped my father in his business but mainly took on the role of a typical Austro-Hungarian housewife. She was very house-proud.

As a little boy of six, I took my parents for granted and it is only with hindsight that I realise who they were and what they meant to me. There was a stability to my parents, they had a very happy marriage. The early years in Leeds must have been difficult for them, but I never heard them argue; they always supported each other. They liked operettas and there was always music in the house. ■

We make a brief return to Austria

IN 1950, AFTER we received our naturalisation, my parents, Ernest, my future wife, Betty, and I went on a family summer holiday to a village in the Austrian mountains near Innsbruck. We went with the Dixon family, friends of my parents who owned a handbag-making business on Meanwood Road in Leeds. We stayed in a country pub called the Aldranse Hof for a couple of weeks, just enjoying the scenery, the mountains and the good food.

We didn't really mix with the Austrians who lived there: it was only a few years since the war had ended, and all of us were conscious of the part that the Austrians had played in the Holocaust. Obviously, there was bad feeling about what had happened to my mother's family, and at times we felt uncomfortable there but we still managed to have a nice holiday and made the most of the familiar Austrian *Gemütlichkeit* (comfort). ■

“ We didn't really mix with the Austrians who lived there: it was only a few years since the war had ended, and all of us were conscious of the part that the Austrians had played in the Holocaust. ”

Religious life

WE DID NOT maintain the same level of religious observance when we settled in England. We were a typical Jewish family. Although we were not strictly orthodox, I attended synagogue every Friday night with my father until the age of 20 and would make *kiddush* (blessing over wine) at home afterwards. When I grew older, other interests started to compete with going to *shul* (synagogue).

I was *bar mitzvah* twice: once, as is typical, when I was 13 years old; I had my second one when I was 83 in the very same synagogue – though the Beth Hamidrash Hagadol Synagogue had moved from Newton Park to Street Lane in the intervening 70 years. ■

“We were a typical Jewish family. Although we were not strictly orthodox, I attended synagogue every Friday night with my father until the age of 20 and would make *kiddush* (blessing over wine) at home afterwards.”

The shock of my father's death

IN 1955, WHEN I was only 22 and studying at medical school, my father died of a heart attack at the age of just 54. It was an intensely traumatic period for the whole family. The death of my father was a great loss to all of us, and caused my mother to struggle with depression. She leaned heavily on my brother and me. We felt very responsible for her, especially as there was now no money coming in. Widowed at just 50, my mother had to start again to earn a living. My future wife's family were in the retail business and found her a position as a shop assistant.

My mother had plenty of opportunities of remarrying over the years. Ernest and I encouraged her to do so, but she just couldn't see anybody replacing our father. She was well known within the Leeds Jewish community. Everyone knew her as Auntie Lina. Her baking and her volunteering for different organisations such as the Jewish Home for the Blind were much appreciated. She was a lovely person and fundamentally quite strong. Her life had not been easy, but she was quite tough as well as being very loving, especially with her grandchildren. She related very well to the children. ■



On our wedding day, 27 June 1954

I meet Betty and married life begins

I MET BETTY White at Junior *B'nai B'rith* when I was 16 years of age. She was a pupil at Allerton High School, and a very attractive live wire, with ginger hair and freckles and a character to match. She had very strong opinions.

We were married on 27 June 1954 at Moortown Corner *shul* (which later became Shadwell Lane *shul*). It was a big gathering with a few hundred guests. Our party was held at the old Capital Ballroom on Meanwood Road. It was a popular venue, as all the girls liked to come down the grand staircase with their gowns trailing behind them. The building no longer exists: it was torn down to make room for what is now a branch of Waitrose.

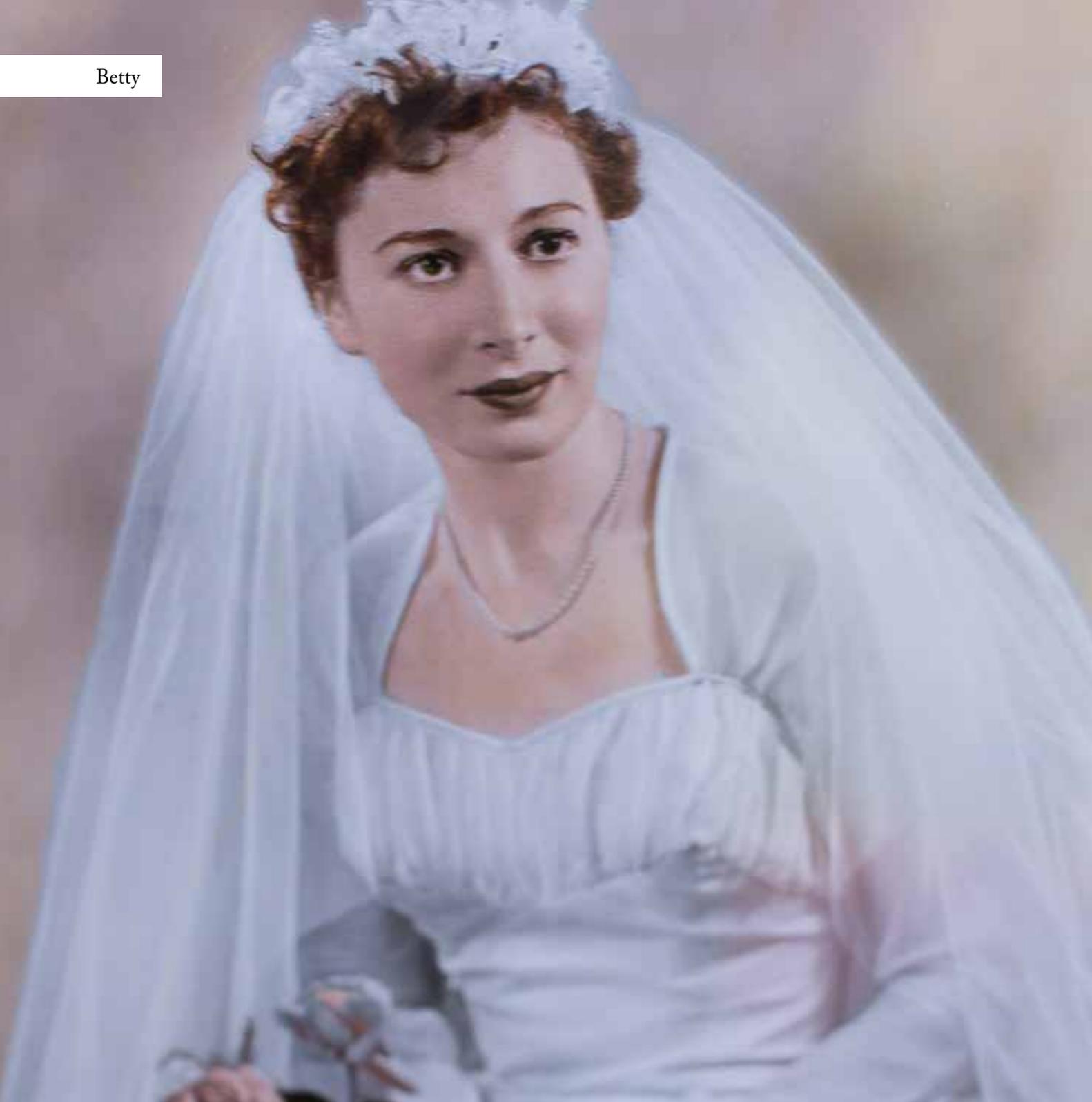
We moved in with Betty's parents for a while, until I had finished my studies and then became a resident doctor in St James's Hospital. When our eldest child Paul was born in 1956, Betty's mother helped with looking after the baby so Betty could go back to work. She was a secretary but gave this up to help run her parents' business, selling household goods such as pillows and blankets.

Qualifying as a doctor in 1956 was a very significant day for me – though, of course, not having my father there to see it was a huge sadness. In March I started working at St James's Hospital specialising in anaesthesia, but after a couple of years we found that with a growing family our finances were limited, and so I decided to become a GP.

In 1958, I was accepted on a six-month course with a group of excellent GP trainers in Hornsea. We left Leeds to move to the East Coast of Yorkshire, where I started a job as an assistant in General Practice. Betty enjoyed life in Hornsea. She built up a social circle and I particularly remember an elderly lady who lived across the road from us who liked to take our son Paul for a walk every day.

After Hornsea, we moved to Preston, where our daughter Jane was born in 1959. There were quite a few Jewish doctors working in Preston. I was offered a partnership with a Jewish doctor who was 20 years older than me and originally from Leeds. His father used to sell religious items on the Chapeltown Road. We became good friends.

Betty



Graduating from Leeds Medical School in March 1956. I don't remember this picture being taken, but I do remember that the day I qualified was much more exciting!

THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



DEGREES OF BACHELOR OF MEDICINE
AND BACHELOR OF SURGERY

IT IS HEREBY CERTIFIED THAT

KURT SIMON

WAS ADMITTED TO THE DEGREES OF BACHELOR OF MEDICINE AND BACHELOR OF SURGERY

IN THIS UNIVERSITY, ON THE TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY OF MARCH 19 56.

VICE-CHANCELLOR

REGISTRAR

My medical degree certificate

At first, alongside my GP practice, I also worked in the anaesthetic department at the Preston Royal Infirmary three times a week. But at the age of 28, I decided to give up my specialisation in anaesthesia to concentrate on my GP work. GP practice now is not what it was in those days. I enjoyed the clinical work in our close-knit community. We had a lot of personal contact with our patients and knew them all by their first names. Everyone knew everybody.

In those days, property was not so expensive and we were soon able to buy our own house. Betty stayed at home until our youngest son Neil was born in 1966, after which we invested in a travel business in Southport. We eventually owned three branches, which Betty managed.

I remember the many trips Betty and I took abroad for the purpose of the travel business. Betty often travelled on her own, too. We also enjoyed family holidays, such as farmhouse stays in Cornwall and further afield to Portugal and Spain.

We mixed with a nice crowd of people, both Jewish and non-Jewish. I became a member of the Round Table, which is a bit like Rotary Club, where younger people were involved in charitable work. I later became a Freemason like my GP partner. I felt I could not join his Lodge, which had quite a few Jewish members, as we would both have been at Lodge functions at the same time, so there would be no one available to look after the shop!

I was the first Jew to be admitted into the Lodge I joined. I enjoyed the fellowship of Masonry, meeting with people with similar views. This was to be the start of a fulfilling, lifelong membership. ■

Israel calls us

WE LIVED A Jewish life in Preston. We enjoyed *Seder* (Passover ritual) nights with friends and colleagues. We went to *shul* on a Friday night and *Shabbat* morning. The *shul* was small but the congregation of around 100 families kept it going without any rabbinic input. Later, our children went to Hebrew school in Southport on a Sunday morning. Southport had a larger Jewish community than Preston, and our eldest son, Paul, had his *bar mitzvah* there.

Betty and I visited Israel for the first time in 1966 with another couple from Southport. We returned in 1973, just after the Yom Kippur War, when we met up with a distant relative. He was an officer in the army and was being treated on a paraplegic ward. He encouraged us to think about making *aliyah* (immigration to Israel).

Then, back home, we were disconcerted when one of the neighbour's children asked our daughter, who was 13 at the time, to join them at a church dance on Friday night. We were happy in Preston, but it was important to us to bring up our children as Jews and give them the opportunity to marry someone Jewish. We certainly were keen to have Jewish grandchildren. I also felt that, having had so much *mazel* (luck) in my life, I needed to give something back.

The choice was between moving back to Leeds, which in those days still had a large Jewish community, moving to Manchester or going to Israel. Betty was a fervent Zionist, having been a member of Habonim (a Zionist youth group) in her youth, and she was the one who pushed the idea of making *aliyah*. I was not really a Zionist at first, but later, towards the end of our time in Israel, the roles reversed and I was a more ardent Zionist than her.

I did not know anyone who had made *aliyah* but we did have family in Israel. My mother's sister, Rosa, who had moved to Palestine before the war was living in Haifa with her husband Hugo and their three children. We had always remained in contact with them, but we got to know them better once we were living in Israel. ■

We make the move to Israel

WE MOVED TO Israel in the summer of 1974, shortly after our second holiday there. The children were old enough to understand why we were moving, although our eldest son, Paul, stayed behind with my mother so he could retake his A-levels.

We learnt Hebrew in an *ulpan* (Hebrew school) at an absorption centre, where we lived for six months in quite terrible conditions. The four of us lived in a tiny room. We had classes every day and lived as a community. Most of the people were refugees from Romania, others were from Russia and some from South America. Many had been professionals in their country of origin. They were doctors, teachers, dentists, accountants, but many had not much idea of being Jewish. Few could read or write Hebrew, let alone speak it.

Six months later, on 1 January 1975, I started work as an anaesthetist at the Rambam Hospital in Haifa. My Hebrew certainly was not fluent at first, but communication was easy as my colleagues all wanted to speak English. It took me a few years to get a feel for the language and to be able to communicate with ease.

The children settled in very quickly. At eight years old, Neil, our youngest, acquired Hebrew very quickly and had no trace of an English accent. When we would go to his parents' evenings at school, the teachers were surprised that we were English speakers. He was like a *sabra* (someone born in Israel).

Life in Israel certainly lived up to our expectations. There was a large crowd of English-speaking people living in Haifa who would all meet up on *Shabbat* at the beach to chat and eat large slices of watermelon. I am still in touch with some of them today, though of course quite a few have died.

Betty started working at a travel agency in downtown Haifa but she had problems with the language and found the business side frustrating. After a year she gave it up to look after the house and the family. She had a large circle of friends, none of whom worked, so it made it easy to meet up. She joined book clubs and went to coffee mornings. Most of her conversations were in English as her

friends were English-speaking and so her Hebrew did suffer a bit. English remained our language at home, except when we were visited by our children's friends who could not speak English.

In 1984 we moved to Nahariya, a small town on the coast above Haifa and close to the border with Lebanon. We started off renting a big detached house and then decided the time had come to build our own home. We found a plot and a building partner with whom we divided the plot in two. I was involved in each stage of the building of our home. We had to find builders, joiners, plumbers, electricians and so on. I would go to the builder's yard and buy concrete or cement and hoist it in the boot of my car. At each completion stage, we would have a drink and say a *l'chaim* (toast to life and good fortune). It was an exciting time and it gave me an insight into a way of life that I knew nothing about.

When we moved from Nahariya, to Kfar Vradim higher up into the western Galilee, we built another house, but I was not so involved that time. I was working further away, so I couldn't be so hands-on. Both houses were architect-designed with our input. Both had gardens with nice lawns, lemon trees, cherry trees and apricot trees. We had great crops. One year, we had so many apricots we decided to make jam – except we had no idea how to do that!

Luckily, my mum was then living nearby in a home for the elderly and she showed us how to make jam. About five years after we moved to Israel, when my mother was in her 70s, she had decided to move to Israel too. She was very easy-going and enjoyed her life there surrounded by her sisters, Regina and Rosa, and my family. Neil would often visit her after school and would be fed like a king. She continued to cook Hungarian-style, which was quite complex. I remember Betty saying: 'For God's sake, don't ask your mother to show me how to make it!'

My mother never even tried to learn to speak Hebrew. She said she spoke English, German and Hungarian and when you live in the Carmel in Haifa you do not need anything else! '*Haifa bleibt Deutsch,*' (Haifa stays German) is what they used to say. She lived until she was 99 years old, and was buried in the cemetery in Haifa, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. ■



Waiting with colleagues for casualties to arrive outside Nahariya hospital, 1981



My mother lighting the *Shabbat* candles with my granddaughter Maya, 1988

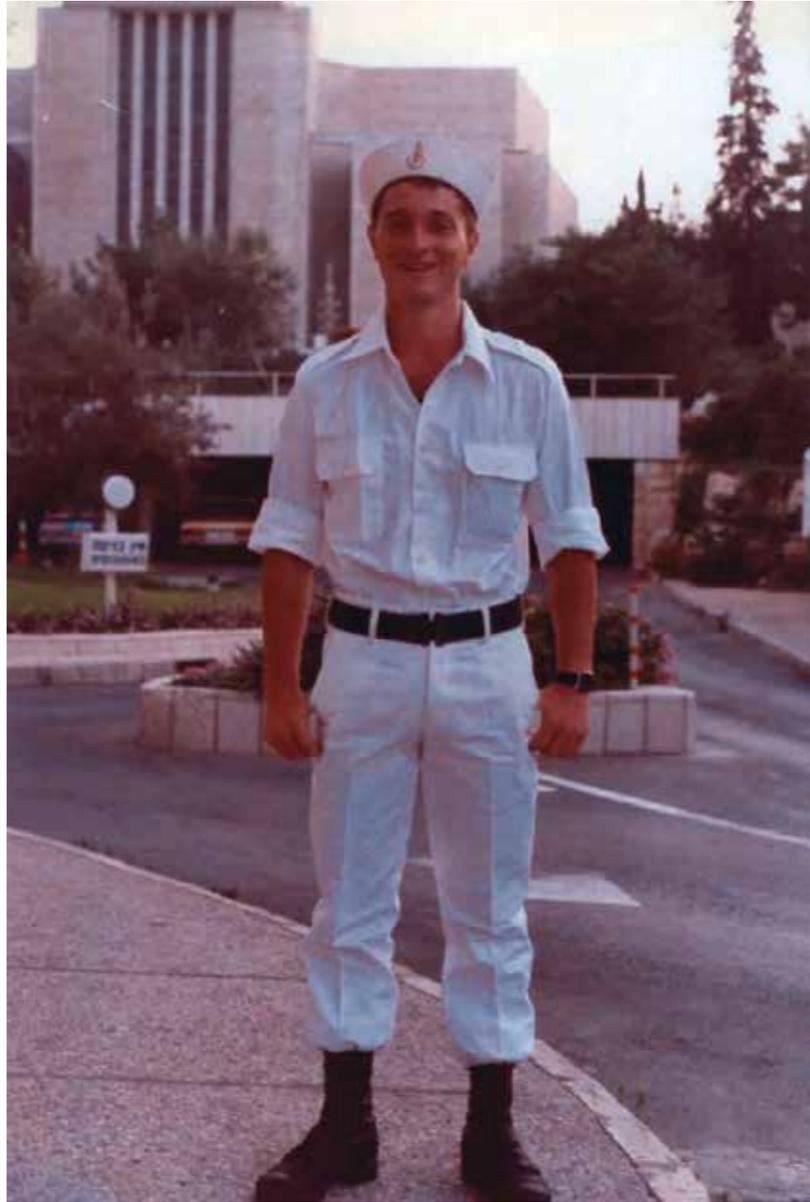
Family matters

AFTER PAUL COMPLETED his A-levels, he joined us in Israel and studied hotel management at a college in Herzliya. He needed to spend time working in various hotels, and thanks to a contact Betty had made during a flight some years previously, he secured a job at Claridge's Hotel in London. So, after only three years of living with us in Israel, just before his national military service was due, Paul moved back to England to pursue his career in hotel management.

Jane was 14 when we moved and she continued high school in Israel. At 18, she trained as a medic in the Israeli Air Force while doing her national service. Once Jane had finished her military service, we all moved to South Africa. I had been offered a six-month contract as a consultant anaesthetist at a general hospital in Durban – an offer I couldn't refuse. I was quite ambitious and was keen to gain more experience.

Whilst in Durban, one day, Neil arrived home from the gym after school accompanied by police officers who told us not to allow him to walk home alone. This was at the time of the apartheid, which was contrary to our beliefs, but we decided not to involve ourselves in politics. Though we experienced restrictions in our daily lives, I found my job very interesting, we had a good lifestyle and made a lot of Jewish friends.

By the time my contract had finished, Paul was getting married in Canada and we went over for the wedding. Back in Israel, Jane went to study physiotherapy at university and Neil was called up for military duty. He spent his time in a fighting unit in Lebanon, just as I had been. This was a real highlight for us. I always found the swearing-in ceremonies very moving. ■



Neil, 1984



I was installed as Master of the Lodge in 1980. I am standing in the middle, back row, Nahariya in Israel



My appointment as Master of the Masonic Lodge in Nahariya. I held that ceremonial office for a year. Although I'm not active now, after 50 years, Masons remain members of their craft for life.



On the evening I was elected Master of the Lodge, I took my mother to the dinner as many Lodge members were of Hungarian descent.

My Israeli career

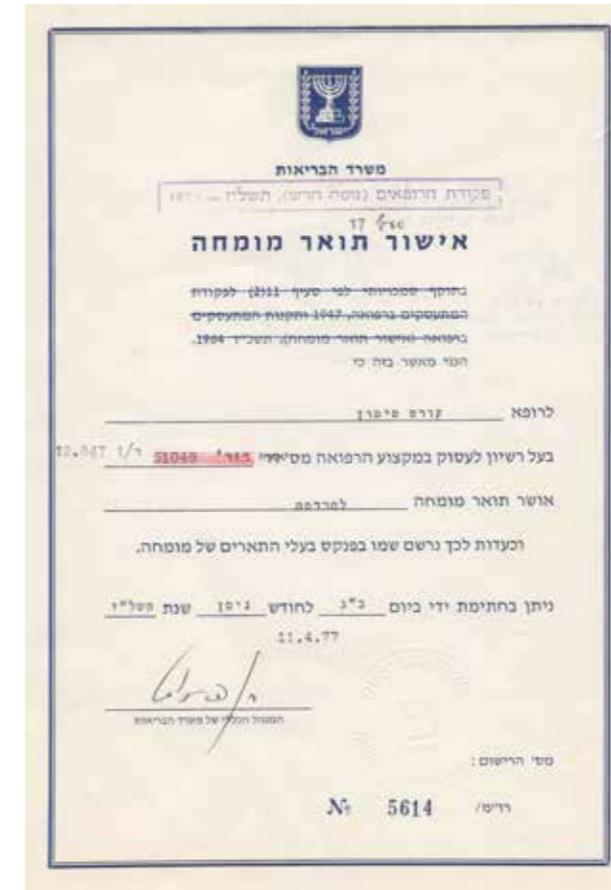
MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE was difficult at times, as I was doing what most people would normally have done in their 20s. I was in my 40s when I started my specialisation in anaesthesia. The medical system in Israel is based on the European model and not the UK model. Only one person would run a whole hospital department.

In 1984, I applied for the position of head of the department of anaesthesia at the Nahariya Hospital, which was later called the Western Galilee Medical Centre. My experience as a consultant on a six-month sabbatical in South Africa, and the published papers I had written, were considered very highly in Israel. I was successful in my application and was offered the job.

In 1989, I took a short sabbatical in the Royal Sussex Hospital in Brighton. It was very enjoyable to be back in the UK for a short spell.

In 1993, I was elected President of the Israeli Society of Anaesthesia – a position I held for three years, and a great honour that filled me with pride. Every anaesthetic department in Israel was a member, so it was a large organisation and I spent a lot of time on administration. During that time, I took another sabbatical, spending three months in Toronto. The highlight of my professional career was the international conference on anaesthesia the society organised, which was attended by more than 2,000 professionals. It was my duty as President to welcome the visitors who included doctors from my old hospital in Preston.

Young German medics would visit Israel to build strong connections within the medical field. I was always involved as I spoke German and English. It took a while before I stopped asking myself what part these keen young doctors had played in the Holocaust. When I realised that they had only been children during the war, I came to terms with it and things became easier for me. ■



Certificate qualification for Specialist in Anaesthesia, 1977



Certificate qualification for Specialist in Intensive Care, 1993

Military service memories

I WAS 41 when we moved to Israel, which meant I was called up to do reserve duty in the army. By that time, I was a specialist in anaesthesia, and this was one of the professions very much needed by the army as it involved resuscitation and keeping people alive in difficult circumstances. I was assigned to a field hospital unit. They called me up for about six weeks' active service every year. I was in a number of wars, including Beirut in 1981 and the Lebanon war in 1982. Fortunately, we did not have much work to do in the field hospital.

One *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year), while carrying out my active service in Lebanon, I wanted to phone Betty to say all was well. However, there was no connection between Lebanon and Israel at the time. I spoke to an officer in charge and asked him if I could phone Canada, where my eldest son was living. I called Paul and asked him to phone his mother to say everything was fine. Betty had no idea where I was during that time, so I was grateful I had the opportunity to let her know I was safe, albeit in a rather roundabout way!

At the age of 55, I was discharged from army duty. I had served longer than most recruits as I had professional skills that were much in demand. ■

Retirement

I OFFICIALLY RETIRED in January 1998, when I turned 65, but I took a six-month extension and continued working until August of that year, after 25 years in hospital medicine in Israel. Betty and I spent the following five years living in Kfar Vradim, a beautiful village away from the coastal plain, which had a better climate. I took up golf again after having last played in Preston. I joined the Caesaria Golf Club, which was a 100km round trip from where we lived.

My younger son, Neil, was very keen on water sports. I bought a little boat and we would go sailing in Haifa bay on Saturday mornings. We also spent time windsurfing together. I was never very good at fighting the wind and raising the sail. One time, whilst windsurfing in Eilat, I lost control of the surfboard and started to float towards Egypt! I could do nothing about it. Neil jumped in the car, drove down the road and luckily managed to get me out of the water. ■



My grandson Yoav's *Brit Milah* (circumcision ceremony)



With Neil at Yoav's *Brit Milah*, 1991



Jane with her husband, Simon



With Betty on holiday, 1999



Neil and Orit's wedding day



Paul and Jane

We return to England

THROUGHOUT OUR TIME in Israel we had stayed in contact with friends and family in Leeds and returned frequently for visits. Betty had always said that she would like to live in Leeds again one day. When she was diagnosed with cancer, this influenced our decision to return to Leeds in 2002. For a while, life back in Leeds was good. We travelled widely, renewed old friendships and supported our children as their lives moved along. In 2014, our daughter organised a cruise around Italy with all our children and grandchildren to celebrate our diamond wedding anniversary. This was no mean feat as we were spread out all over the world. Betty was not very well on that cruise, but it gave her great joy to be surrounded by her loved ones in her last days.

Betty's death was of course yet another sad period in my life. We had lived a long and fulfilling life together and she was in her 80s when she died in Leeds in 2015. We had three children and now there are six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

After his time at Claridge's, our eldest son Paul became a catering manager at Lord's Cricket Ground in London. He once served afternoon tea to the Queen! He married a Canadian girl and continued his career in Toronto. He is now living back in the UK. His daughter Aliza lives in Toronto. She is married and has a son called Liam, who is now five years old. Andrew, my grandson, lives with his partner just outside Toronto.

My daughter, Jane, lives in Leeds and works as a physiotherapist at the Spire Hospital. She has two children, Maya and Jonathan, and her husband Simon is an entrepreneur. Maya is now a teacher and lives in London with her husband, a solicitor, and two children, Jordan and Freddie. Jonathan owns a successful food business.

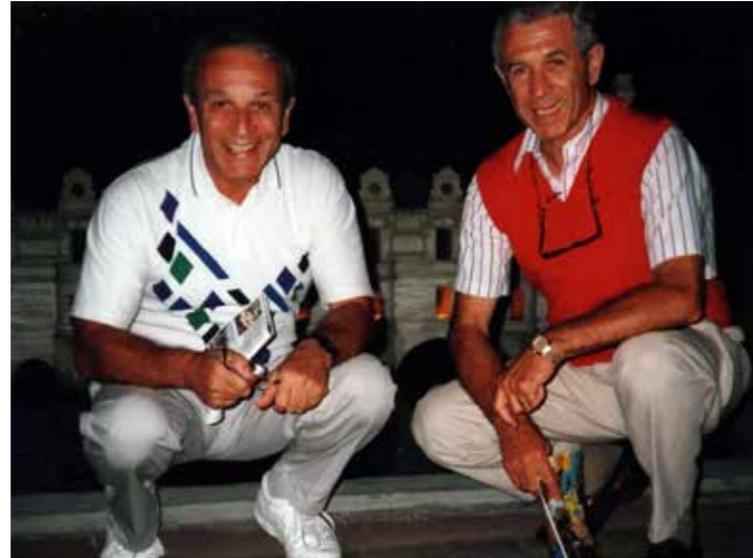
Neil, my youngest son, still lives in Israel and works as a criminal lawyer in Tel Aviv. He has two children, Netta and Yoav. Sadly, his wife, Orit, died of cancer a few years ago. His daughter, Netta, is studying to be a veterinary surgeon in Rehovot and his son, Yoav, is studying law in Tel Aviv. ■



Family cruise to celebrate our diamond anniversary, August 2014

My brother Ernest

MY STORY IS not complete without a mention of my brother Ernest. We have always been close and enjoy each other's company. He too has told his story. He has already celebrated his 90th birthday. We are lucky to still have each other. Our relationship strengthened after our father's early death, when Ernest was 25 and I was 22. We realised then, at the beginning of our adult lives, that we had to look out for each other.



When Betty and I lived in Israel, Ernest and his wife Anita would often come over and house-sit for us, so they could look after our mother while we went abroad. At other times we would stop over in Brussels, where he was working in sales for ICI, and enjoy a meal together. Our wives were close, which made it all very easy.

Ernest and Anita have had sadness in their lives. Their only son died aged 52 while waiting for a heart transplant. They have learned to live with this tragedy.

I speak with Ernest several times a week. He is involved in his *shul* and is a regular attender.

He is also a keen lifelong golfer. We have always been competitive with each other: for about 40 or 50 years I was the better golfer, but for the last 10 years he is the better player. ■



With Ernest, 1992



On a golfing holiday in Villamoura, Algarve

My Holocaust story

ERNEST IS INVOLVED in Holocaust education as he has first-hand experience of the *Kindertransport*. We both think it is strange that he was sent to England on his own while I stayed with my parents in Vienna. We don't know why or how our parents made that decision. Maybe they thought they would send one to see how that went, instead of possibly risking us both. They already knew they were planning to leave Austria. I certainly was old enough to go on the *Kindertransport* – indeed there were many *Kindertransportees* much younger than I was. It is one of those things that we never discussed at home, and I only began thinking about all of this much later in life, when our parents were no longer here to tell us their story.

I have never spoken in public about my experiences of the *Shoah* as I do not think my story was all that special. Life was not difficult for me and I did not really understand the political situation of that time. I have no bad childhood memories, even though we were forced to leave our hometown and country and make a new life in a foreign country. Whilst we had some uncomfortable times, I was just a little child. It may have affected me slightly, but I never felt I was disadvantaged in life. What saddens me most is that my father did not live long enough to see Ernest and me grow up and blossom in our careers.

“ We both think it is strange that he was sent to England on his own while I stayed with my parents in Vienna. We don't know why or how our parents made that decision. Maybe they thought they would send one to see how that went, instead of possibly risking us both. ”

That said, in 2010, I agreed to be interviewed by the Austrian TV company *Österreichische Mediathek*, who wanted to make a film about Ernest's and my childhood experiences. *Interview mit Kurt Simon* can be seen online at: <https://www.mediathek.at/oesterreich-am-wort>. A friend I had played with as a child contacted me after seeing the film on TV and we have been corresponding ever since. I have very few memories of my early years, so I don't remember him, but Peter remembered me. He remained in Austria throughout the war years, despite being half-Jewish: his father was Jewish, but his mother was Christian. He told me they managed to survive because his mother conformed to the image of the ideal Aryan woman, so they were left alone.

Peter described in an email to me the things that happened to them during the war and their difficulties during that time. But they were not sent away or forced to leave their home. Some Jewish people managed to live in Vienna throughout the war. He studied at university and is married with children. He lived in Israel for a while, but he now lives in Montpellier, France. ■

A second life in Leeds

I AM LUCKY to have a new life partner called Anita Zermansky. I had been friends with Anita's husband Victor when we were young. We had met in Junior *B'nai B'rith* but had been out of touch for more than 40 years. We met again when Betty and I returned to Leeds in 2002. Anita, Victor, Betty and I would go out together for dinner. Then Victor and Betty both sadly died, but Anita and I continued to see each other and a relationship developed. We now live together. I bless the day we made that decision. We enjoy each other's company and happily share many interests.

We enjoy classical concerts and have subscriptions to the International Concert Series at Leeds Town Hall. We walk each day, love going to the theatre and often went to the cinema before Covid-19 restrictions came into force. Anita and I enjoy travelling. We have been on a cruise to South Africa and a river cruise on the Danube. We have been to Spain a few times, the Canary Islands and Vienna. We had hoped to go to Canada and America in 2020, but of course plans changed due to Covid-19.

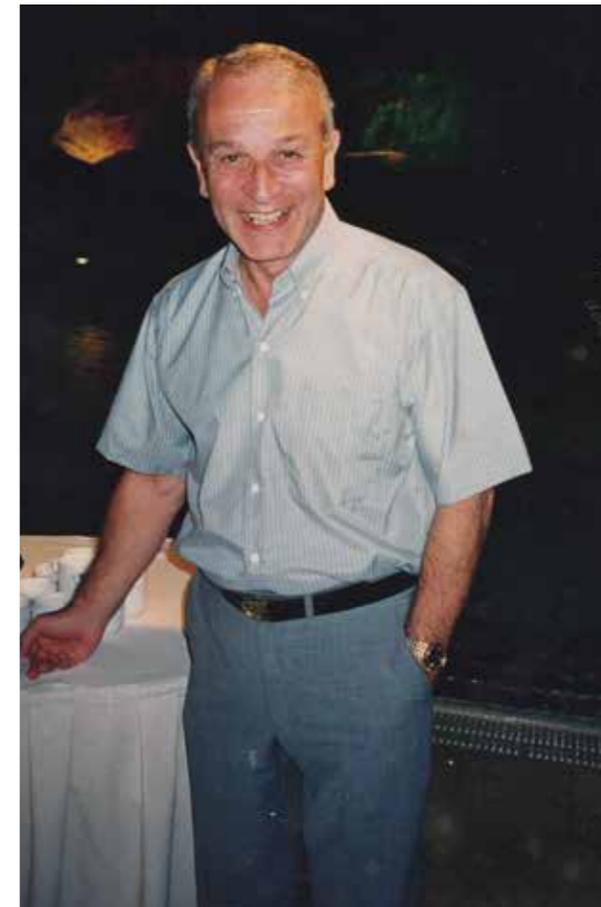
Unfortunately, Anita has no children living nearby. One of her daughters lives in London and one in Israel. I am lucky that Jane, my daughter, lives nearby and cares for our every need. ■



With Anita on the Queen Elizabeth cruise to Cape Town, 2018

On reflection

I ALWAYS FELT my story was a very ordinary story. I never experienced any suffering, nor was I treated badly because I was a Jew. I do not dwell on the past. I have always had a positive outlook on life and believed I could achieve anything. I have chosen to tell my story so that my grandchildren will know a little about what happened to me as a child. They know me as their grandfather, but they don't really know much about my early years. I should like my legacy to be for my children and grandchildren to remember me as a loving and caring man. ■





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 most vivid memory is of the night of 9 November 1938, *Kristallnacht*. We had all stayed inside our apartment that evening. I learned later that the janitor of our building told my father not to go out that night because terrible things were going to happen.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk