



My Story

Tom Egri



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These are Tom'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

Tom Egri was visited by AJR volunteer Helen Shapiro during 2017 to share his story.
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“You can put so many things down to chance, but what you might think was pure chance, to me was a miracle: that I survived, that we were not deported to Poland when I was a baby. I didn't know what was happening, but that was a miracle because we would have died in Poland, there is no question about that. We survived the Holocaust. People helped us and gave us food and sheltered us and even people who were arrested who knew we were Jewish didn't give us away, and that was a miracle.”

Contents

06	A warm welcome for Tamas Elfenbein
08	War begins and we are imprisoned
15	Life in the 'Jewish House'
17	The day my life changed for ever



Contents

20	New identity, new religion
22	Sheltering in the bunker
26	I start school
27	A letter from America
28	Peace and childhood memories
30	Hungary becomes a Communist satellite state
31	The Orphanage years
35	On the move to further education
41	My mother re-marries
44	Revolution and my life turns upside down
47	Time to escape to the West
49	My second bid for freedom
51	I arrive in England
52	I begin my working life
58	Marriage – and Michelle arrives
60	I meet Sue
63	I go back to Hungary
65	Health problems
69	Dedication

A warm welcome for Tamas Elfenbein

I WAS BORN in Budapest on Friday 7 April 1939, five months before the Second World War started. My mother had tried for two years to become pregnant but nothing worked until, by some miracle, I came along. Her diaries show how desperate she was to have a child to strengthen the bond between her and my father. For reasons unknown, my father's close-knit family didn't think that my mother was good enough for him. They couldn't even get married until his mother had passed away. When I was born my name was Tamas Elfenbein. After the war Mother changed our family name from Jewish-sounding Elfenbein to the Hungarian name of Egri.

The family consisted of Zeida (my father's father, Lipot Elfenbein), Aunt Elisabeth (nicknamed Pici-Nèni), her husband Eugene (Jeno), their son Victor (Viki) who was eight years older than me, my parents and me, seven of us in a three bedroom flat. We also had a large house in Felsőgöd, about 10 miles from Budapest, which was being modernised and to where the whole family was going to move as soon as it was ready. Thank God we didn't move, because few Jewish families living outside Budapest survived the Holocaust. ■

“My mother had tried for two years to become pregnant but nothing worked until, by some miracle, I came along.”



War begins and we are imprisoned

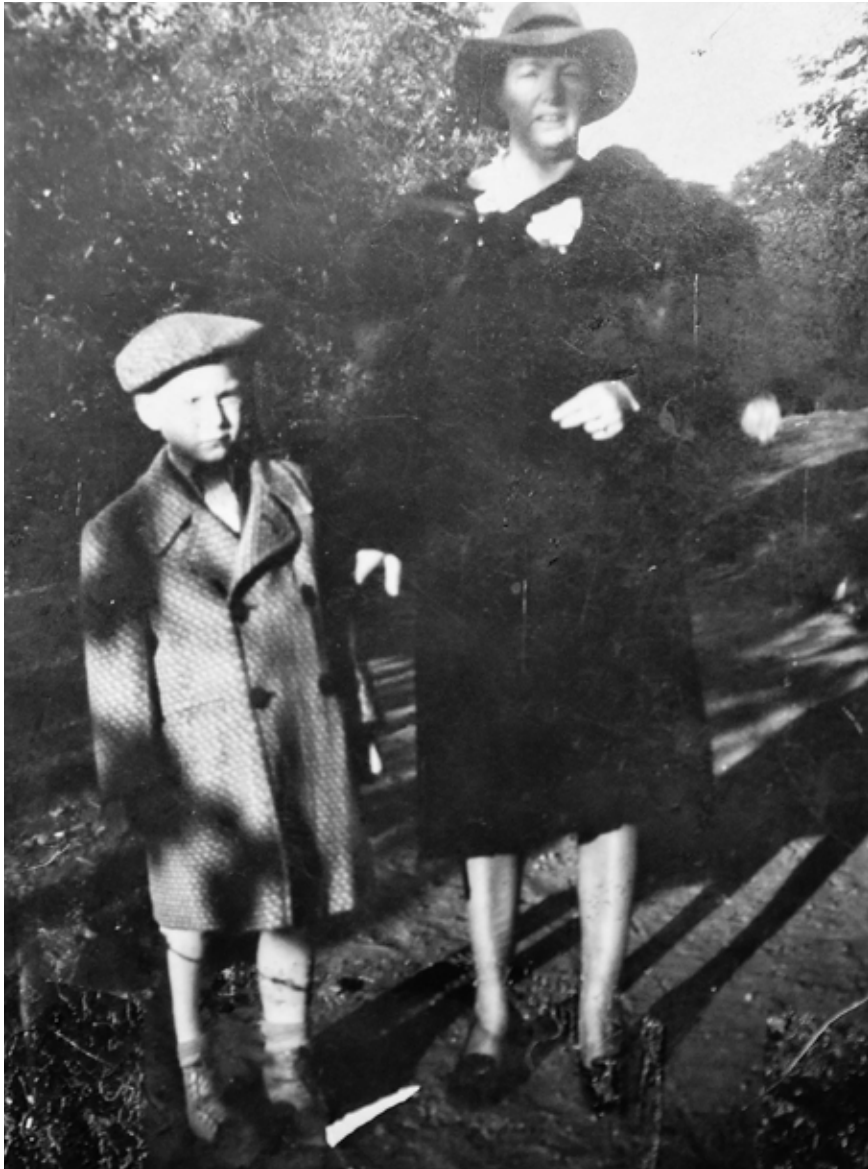
WHEN THE war began Hungary became an ally of Nazi Germany. Germany attacked Poland and the Hungarian Government decided to send all Poles and their descendants back to Poland. Although my father was born in Hungary his parents were born in Poland, so we were all declared 'enemy aliens'. I was two years old when Zeida, my parents and I were arrested and put into prison awaiting deportation in 1941.

Eventually friends and family found someone in authority who could be bribed to destroy all our papers and we were released from the Toloncház prison (House of Deportation). I cannot remember any of this, but my mother spoke about it and of the difficulty of trying to feed and keep a crying child clean in prison. She told me that among the prisoners was a gypsy girl who helped her by holding me and singing to me. My mother never forgot her kindness.

My father had a paper business, but new laws effectively prevented Jews from having a normal life. Dad was called up to do forced labour for the Hungarian army (*Munkaszolgálat*) and was taken away. I have many of the heavily censored postcards which he had been allowed to send. Jews were badly treated and many died during this time. The only fortunate thing was that, as Germany's ally, Hungary was not initially occupied by German troops. That came much later.

The war progressed. The Germans had been stopped at Stalingrad and suffered a crushing defeat. In March 1944 the Regent of Hungary, Admiral Horthy, declared that Hungary was now neutral, but he was arrested and the country occupied by German soldiers. The Germans imposed a puppet government headed by Ferenc Szálasi, head of the fascist Arrow Cross party. The deportations from Hungary were restarted with Adolf Eichmann in charge. By then, most of the Jews living in the countryside had been arrested for 'resettlement' and ended up in Auschwitz. The Jews in Budapest lived in what were called 'Jewish Houses' or in the Ghetto and they were next on the list. ■





With Aunt Pici (Elisabeth).



Shortly after Horthy's declaration in 1944 my father returned home from forced labour. I remember it even though I was only five years old. He picked me up and kissed me. I noticed that he smoked, which he had not done before.

My father took me to see what had happened to his business which had been in a basement shop in Rumbach Utca, opposite the synagogue which was being used as an assembly point for orthodox Jews living in that district prior to deportation. In front of the building were police vans, and out of the synagogue came a single file of old men in dark coats, most with long beards and side-locks. They climbed slowly into the vans. This sight stayed with me for the rest of my life. I could not have understood at the age of five what was happening, but my father must have reacted so as to bring home to me that his heart was breaking.

Sadly, I have few memories of my father. After D-Day 6 June 1944 British and American planes bombed Budapest several times. One memory of my father was that during an air raid when everyone went to the shelter he and I stayed near the entrance with some other Jewish neighbours to see if we could spot the planes. I am sure the bombing meant to him that the war against Germany was soon going to succeed. He must have felt that the British planes would never hurt us Jews, as they were trying to save us. Perhaps he wanted to show me that there was hope. I didn't realise until many years later what a risk he had taken. Perhaps he believed that the nightmare of our persecution was coming to an end, but he did not live to see it. ■

“ Shortly after Horthy's declaration in 1944 my father returned home from forced labour. I remember it even though I was only five years old. He picked me up and kissed me. ”




With my mother after the war.

Life in the 'Jewish House'

THE APARTMENT building where we lived on Alsoerdösor Utca 12.II.20 had been declared a 'Jewish House', so there was a large yellow Star of David on the front gate. We had to wear a yellow star on our clothes and were only allowed to go out for an hour to buy food.

After another air raid, someone told the Gestapo that signals were being sent to the enemy planes from our 'Jewish House'. The Gestapo raided and searched every apartment for evidence of this. I am sure my mother tried to shelter me from them. It helped that my parents could speak German. The Gestapo turned everything inside out, but found nothing. What they left was the memory engraved in my five-year-old head. I still associate power with uniforms. It turned out the person who reported us to the Germans just wanted to accuse the 'Jewish House' for fun! ■

“The Gestapo turned everything inside out, but found nothing. What they left was the memory engraved in my five-year-old head. I still associate power with uniforms.”



The last photo of my father from 1944.

The day my life changed for ever

CERTAIN DAYS in one's life change it forever. Short glimpses are stored in my memory. One is of fascists from the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party coming to our 'Jewish House' early one morning. They ordered all Jewish males between the ages of 16 and 65 to be ready within 20 minutes, to be taken for 'Defence Work'. They must bring food for three days, and only such clothes as would fit into a rucksack. The flats were built in a square, three floors high. At the bottom of the building stood some of the Arrow Cross men with guns, checking that no-one left the apartments or tried to escape. I remember mother having a painful attack of gallstones and trying to cover up the pain, while getting the food and clothes ready for father.

When the 20 minutes were up, one of the thugs came to the flat and told my father to follow him. As he was going down the stairs, the Arrow Cross turned towards us and said: "Don't worry, he'll be back. He's a strong man." That was the last time I saw my father. My mother turned to me and said: "We are not staying here, they will come back for us, if not today, then tomorrow." Her decision probably saved our lives. My mother was right, they came back the next day to collect the women, the children and the old to be deported.

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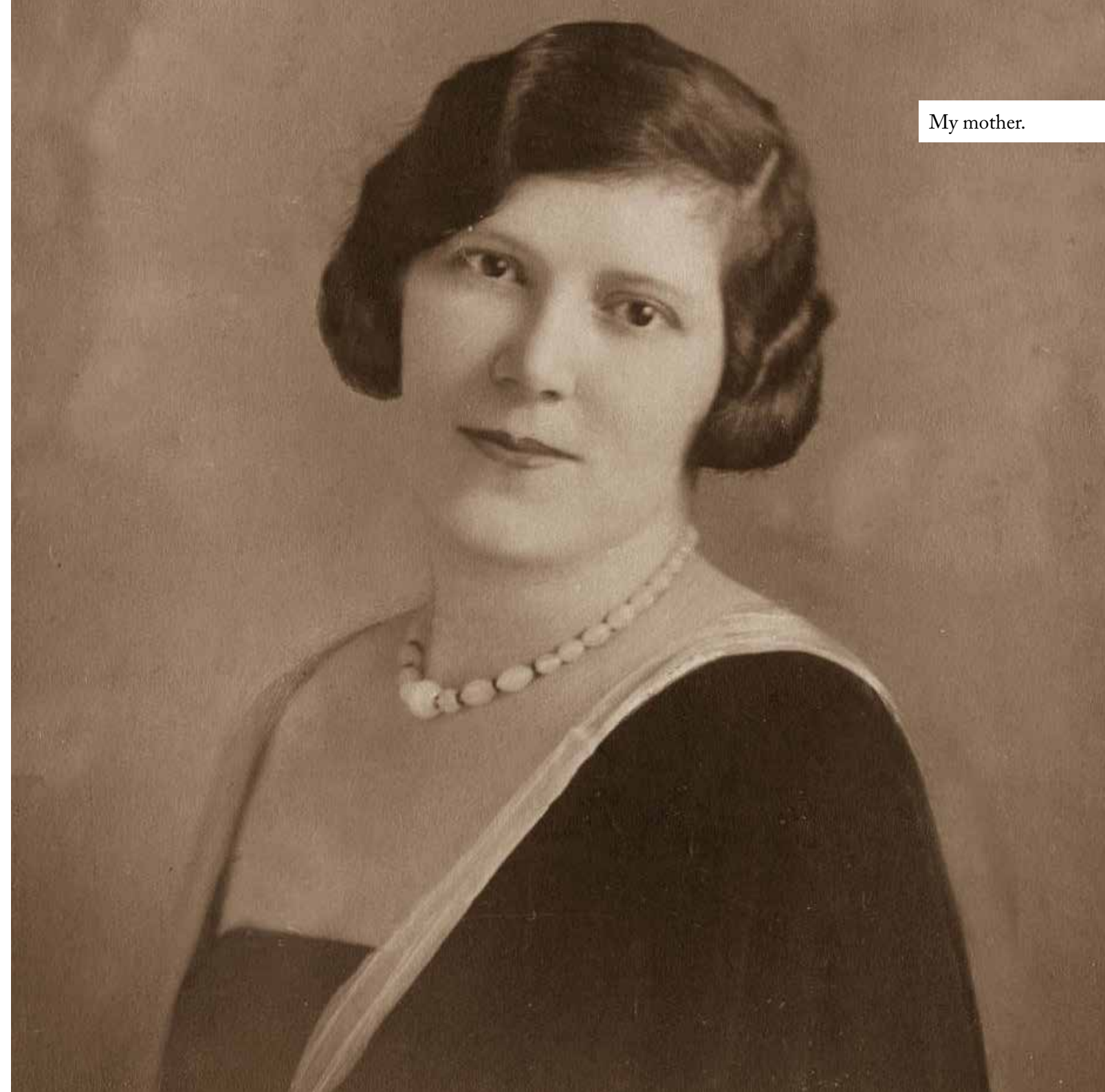
I find it difficult to talk about the day they took my father away. I have a few more memories of my father, but apart from the day when he was taken from us by the Nazis, these are just like a silent film without subtitles. By autumn 1944 the Red Army was within 100 miles of Budapest. The capital was liberated by the Russians on 15 January 1945. Three months earlier and he would have survived. I could have had my father, whom I have missed all my life.

Mother and I went to see her aunt Hermina Neni, who had converted to Catholicism when she married her husband Rudolf Ehler. He was a difficult man and gave his wife a very hard time. They had three children: Rezo, the oldest son; Pani, the middle daughter; and Oscar, the youngest son. Because they were all brought up as Catholics, no-one suspected that their mother was of Jewish origin, so they were safe.

Pani was married to Mr. Goldstein, who had somehow obtained a document giving him a special status from other Jews. I have no idea who had issued this, but there had to be some German authority behind it. He was a well-connected man. It was decided that I should stay with Mr. Goldstein and Pani, but in order to do so I had to have a new identity. With the help of a Catholic priest, my mother and I received new birth certificates and documents. ■

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My mother.



New identity, new religion

I WAS FIVE when I was told that Tamas Elfenbein did not exist anymore and my name was now Tamas Hetenyi. I was now Catholic and, accordingly, I had to learn the Lord's Prayer and how to cross myself. Once Aunt Pani and Mr Goldstein were satisfied that I had adopted my new persona, they were to take me. I had to say goodbye to my mother, but not for long. They lived in a flat at no. 3 Damianovics Utca 3, in a 'posh' part of Budapest. Here I felt safe - all the neighbours seemed calm and did not have the constant fear I had witnessed in the eyes of my family. We could go out at any time. Aunt Pani took me to a cinema for the first time.

To my delight, after a few days my mother came to see me. She had decided that she could not be apart from me and was trying to make some arrangement with Mr. Goldstein. After the war, I found out that he had agreed for my mother to stay after he was given substantial gold and jewellery, almost everything she had.

Many years later, my synagogue in Alyth Gardens, London, asked me to recall the tragedy of our Holocaust survival during a remembrance service. I held up my false birth certificate in front of the congregation and said: "This piece of forged document most probably saved my life." ■

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My mother.

Sheltering in the bunker

MY NEXT ‘memory picture’ started when the Red Army was closing in, encircling Budapest and we all moved down to the air-raid shelter. I was the lucky one because at night there were two small armchairs which were pushed together and made me a comfortable bed to sleep in.

During the day there was the almost constant sound of artillery fire moving closer with louder explosions, but at times there was silence and during one of these ‘ceasefires’ my mother and I left the bunker. It was November 1944 and snow was covering the ground. I remember the sun shining and other children being around with their parents, enjoying the silence, the sun and the snow. After just a few minutes my mother went to go back down the steps to the bunker. She called me and I was following her when suddenly the house next door received a direct hit. The blast lifted me up and pushed me through the bunker entrance. I rolled down the stairs. At the bottom I heard my mother screaming: “Oh God, where is my son?” I replied at her feet: “Mum, I’m here. I’m OK!”

She reminded me for many years that being an obedient son and following her when she called me had saved my life. If I had stayed to play a little bit longer, the blast could have killed me.

We stayed in the bunker for a few more weeks. One day, so my mother told me, an Arrow Cross unit came and started checking documents, looking for deserters and Jews. They found two young men whose stories they did not believe and were about to take them away as deserters when someone called out the name of Mr. Goldstein. The Nazis stopped and wanted to know who Mr. Goldstein was,

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knowing that was a Jewish name. Mr. Goldstein produced all his exemption documents, which had kept him safe in the past, but this time it did not help him. The Russian army was only a few miles away and the Arrow Cross men ignored the documents. Mr. Goldstein was taken away and the two young men who were previously accused of being deserters were ignored and left behind. Before the Nazis left, they said they would return the next day to carry out a full investigation on everybody.

Our problem was that Mr. Goldstein knew we were Jewish and while he was in the hands of the Nazis, anything could happen. As it happened, although unknown to us at the time, Mr Goldstein had been shot dead straight away, outside the house.

My mother recalled many times what happened in the following 24 hours. The two young men left behind by the Arrow Cross were indeed deserters and decided to make a run for it. They waited until the evening and made their move. They could not have been away for more than an hour before they returned saying it was impossible to go anywhere. At one end of our road were the Russians and at the other end the Germans. Any movement anywhere and one side or the other would shoot you. My mother prayed all through the night.

The morning came and it was quiet. The bunker door opened and, to our relief, Russian soldiers came in, with their machine guns, looking for Germans. One of them, a tall thin soldier, stopped by me and my mother. He picked me up high and gave me a biscuit. We were saved from the Nazis just in time, and the Russians gave new life to us. We stayed in the bunker for a few more days and then we decided to go home. As we went home, we saw a dead horse in the middle of the road and people were cutting it up for food. The buildings were bomb-damaged and it looked as if there had been heavy fighting which left everything in a shambles.

Our block of flats, by a miracle, was not damaged. However, when we got to our flat, it was occupied by another family. For a few days we shared the flat with them until they moved out.

Aunt Pici came home with Victor, but there was no sign of the menfolk except for Zaida, who survived in the ghetto. He was 80 years old and came back, which was a miracle in itself and gave me the chance at least to know the only grandparent I had left. I can only recall him once when we were standing next to each other in the flat, warming our hands by a wood burning fire heater and Zaida kept saying to me

in half-Yiddish “*Bissel warm, bissel warm*”. The experience he suffered in the Ghetto left him a broken man. He kept telling everyone not to leave the flat. I don’t think he realised that the war was over. He died at the age of 82. His funeral was the first one I ever attended. I wish I knew more about him. I was probably seven years old when Zaida died. I say *Kaddish* for him.

Now there were only four of us left in the flat: Aunt Pici, Victor, my mother and me. Mother and Aunt Pici tried to get information about the whereabouts of their husbands. As soon as someone returned from deportation, they went to see him. “Have you seen our husbands? Were they alive? Do you know anything?” The answers were vague and the horrific story of the Holocaust started to emerge.

According to someone who came back, the last sighting of my father was at Hamburg Railway station, where he was working as a slave labourer. Dad survived until the Americans liberated Hamburg, but died soon after of exhaustion and typhoid. My mother kept on hoping, but as time went by we knew he had perished and would not come back. I missed him all my life. He was a hard-working, generous, kind man who harmed no-one. Dear God, I love you, but I cannot understand why he was taken... ■

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I start school

WHEN I was six I started Jewish elementary school in Weselenyi Utca, approximately a 20 minute walk from home. My teacher was Mr. Kolman. Mother would walk me to school and then go to work trying to restart Dad's old business together with her cousin Oscar. They rented a basement in Dob Utca, shared with a furrier. I remember little of my early school days, except that we had to sit still, with our hands behind our back, chest pushed forward. School was from 8am to 1pm and then we went to a day centre for lunch and played in the afternoon. My mother collected me in the evening. I remember two things about the day centre: first, I must have been the youngest there; and second, one day they gave us chicken for lunch, which looked inedible and I refused to eat it. I still dislike chicken. ■

“ I remember little of my early school days, except that we had to sit still, with our hands behind our back, chest pushed forward. School was from 8am to 1pm and then we went to a day centre for lunch and played in the afternoon. ”

A letter from America

ONE DAY we received a letter from the United States. It was hand-written in English with a photograph of a plump young girl. No one in our flats spoke English - it was a mystery! My mother had a friend called Aunt Ida whose sister Iren spoke English, and the mystery was solved. I hadn't remembered, but one of the Jewish Agencies had taken my photo as a 'war orphan' and sent the picture to America, where it ended up on the wall of a girls' school, asking the students to befriend the young boys who had survived the war.

The girl who picked my picture was Ruth Lubin and she had written the letter with her mother Ann. This was the start of a friendship which lasted a lifetime. Every so often they sent us clothing and food parcels. I remember that we had to pay import duty on each parcel, and my mother had to sell some of the clothing from the parcels to pay it. But when we opened them, it was so exciting, like winning the lottery. I can only remember two items from these packages: an American Army cap, and a box of jellies. We had no idea what to do with the jellies! Not until I came to England many years later did I realise they should be dissolved in hot water. ■



With Ann Lubin (left) and my mother (right) in London circa 1964.

Peace and childhood memories

FROM 1945 to 1948 life was peaceful and my mother was successfully running dad's old business. I was well behaved in school, but could not get more than average marks. I disliked being a child, I wanted to grow up quickly.

My mother and Aunt Pici decided to sell our country house at Felsőgöd and share the money. I have no idea how much they got for it but my mother bought an upright piano and I had to start taking piano lessons. My teacher was called Ilonka; she had a grand piano in one room and an upright in a smaller room, where pupils practised. I was not blessed with natural talent and had to work hard on my scales, which was boring. My greatest achievement was learning Schumann's The Homecoming Farmer. This was my exam piece which I had to perform in front of our small family and friends at The Liszt Academy of Music. It was my first public appearance and I was nervous. To cut a long story short, halfway through the piece I made a mistake and never recovered!

Viki, my cousin, was apprenticed to an optician. One afternoon his boss gave him a pair of glasses to be delivered to someone working at the circus. The recipient had promised Viki two entry tickets when the glasses were delivered and Viki decided to take me with him. The circus was in the same park as a fun-fair and next to the Budapest Zoo, and the world famous Gundel Restaurant (it must have been in 1946 or 47 when I was 7 or 8). My visit with Viki to the circus was an eye opener, a new world. The clowns made me laugh. The wild animals scared but fascinated me. The whole thing transported me to

“The wild animals scared but fascinated me. The whole thing transported me to an unknown universe where nothing was real, life without fear, only fun. It was heaven on earth. This wonderful experience was the temptation which caused my downfall and heartbreak a few months later.”

an unknown universe where nothing was real, life without fear, only fun. It was heaven on earth. This wonderful experience was the temptation which caused my downfall and heartbreak a few months later. What I did broke my mother's heart and taught me a lesson for life.

The next door flat belonged to two middle-aged Jewish sisters, Miss Marton, a spinster, and Aunt Baby, who lost her husband during the Holocaust. She had a son called Joco, a boy maybe a year younger than I. He was my first friend. One room in Miss Marton's flat was let out to a family called Pillinger who had a daughter of Joco's age called Aniko. None of us had toys, and in the afternoons the three of us made up games to play. Hide and seek was our favourite: Aniko and I would hide under the bed and Joco would try to find us. One day Joco and I were in their flat looking for something to play with. After opening some drawers, we found a spectacle case which seemed very heavy. When we opened it we found five Florint silver coins. These were Miss Marton's savings and to Joco and me it was treasure.

The temptation was too strong. We decided to take just one coin and go to the funfair in the park. We bought raspberry soda, went on rides and when asked where we had been we replied: "just a stroll in the park." Joco and I were partners in crime. We had a secret and as no one noticed the disappearance of one coin, the decision was made to take another and repeat the trip to 'paradise'. Days went by, and still no one noticed the money disappearing. So we went and bought some toys. I bought a travel chess set and pretended it had been lent to me. The spectacle case got lighter and lighter and eventually Miss Marton realised that someone was taking her money. Joco was first to admit that it was us. My mother was called and when she returned to our flat, she was crying. She did not shout or spank me; she just cried and cried. It would take her a long time to repay what I had stolen. I have never forgotten her tears. I learned my lesson. I felt that I must never give my mother reason to cry again: no more giving in to temptation. Mum, I hope you have forgiven me. Rest in peace. ■

Hungary becomes a Communist satellite state

FROM 1945 until 1948 Hungary had a multi-political party system, which was agreed, I believe, at the Yalta Conference where the Allies decided which parts of the re-occupied territories each one was to control. Hungary was in the Soviet Union's zone and under the control of the Red Army. Then Moscow decided that the countries occupied by the Red Army should become satellite states of the Soviet Union. The political power in Hungary was transferred to the Communists, who swallowed up the Socialist Party and renamed itself the People's Party.

My mother was a Social Democratic and after the change-over she was invited to join the new People's Party. What she was doing in any of these political set-ups is still a mystery to me. As a new party member she had to attend seminars at least twice a week after work in the evenings. This meant that I was put to bed and then she went out. I was on my own and although Aunt Pici was in the next room to ours, I could never fall asleep. I felt frightened. I heard people coming and going. I would lie in bed thinking: "what will happen to me if she doesn't come back like my Dad?" When I heard her footsteps and the key in the lock I was in heaven, my mother was back, I was safe. I would fall asleep in seconds. All through my life I have worried about people being late. If my mother said: "I will see you in an hour," and she was not back in time, my old insecurity would return. ■

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The Orphanage years

THE FOLLOWING years were not only hard, but dangerous. From 1948/49 the whole structure of the state changed. It became a dictatorship underpinned by the State Security force. Anyone who got out of line faced prosecution, detention, or torture. All businesses were nationalised, even my mother's minute business was taken over. She was given a job, but the wage she earned was below subsistence level. By the middle of each month she ran out of money, and had to sell something to survive.

We couldn't go on like that and my mother decided to put me into the Jewish Orphanage. Somehow, the Jewish Orphanage and Jewish Gymnasium (Secondary School from 14 to 18 years old) were allowed to exist, supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. All other schools with religious affiliation were closed or taken over by the state. I became a weekly boarder and went home every weekend.

There were serious problems at home. My aunt Pici had a stroke and was rushed into hospital. For a few days it was unsure whether she would live or die. Viki, my cousin, came home from the hospital crying. He was about 19 years old at the time. He kept repeating: "My Mother is going to die." I had to say something before he became hysterical. I have no idea where the words came from, but I burst out: "Viki, don't bury someone who is still alive!" He stopped crying. Somehow this outburst of mine stayed in my memory and I have often repeated these words. Aunt Pici lost her ability to speak and had to learn almost like a child, but she lived on for many years. She remains in my memory. I was her brother's son, and she loved me.

When I tell people that I spent years in the Orphanage, they usually feel sorry for me, but I only have good memories. What helped was Mr. Gala, the teacher in charge of my group, who was the kindest, most understanding man. He promised my mother that he would take care of me and he did. Early in the morning, during school term, he walked into our dormitory with his usual wake-up call: "Good morning housewives!" We assembled for Hebrew prayers, after which we had breakfast, which consisted of bread and jam with coffee. Then we were lined up and walked to school, which took us 20 minutes. School finished at 1pm, when we boys were collected by Mr. Gala and we strolled back to the Orphanage for lunch.

In the afternoon we had to do our homework, made easier by the fact that we could always ask Mr. Gala or another teacher for help if we got stuck. Mr. Gala asked me what grade I got before coming to the Orphanage, and the answer was grade 3. Grades went from 1 to 5 and if you got 1, which was the lowest, you had to repeat the year. Mr. Gala assured me that with his help, I would go up from 3 (average) to 4 (good). Actually, within a year, I got to the top grade 5.

After homework, it was time for play. The Orphanage was situated near the city park, in the fashionable part of the town. There was a theatre in the building and a small football pitch in the garden. Nobody wanted to be goalie so, as the new boy, I became the goalkeeper. I was quite good with high balls, but anything on the ground passed me by. In time I improved, but not a lot. I enjoyed the boys' company and the guidance of the teachers. I was also taught to read Hebrew and started to prepare for my *Barmitzvah*.

I began to make new friends and adjusted to my new circumstances. Most boys in the Orphanage had lost both their parents and I felt lucky to have my mother to go home to at weekends. She also used to visit me during the week at school in between lessons. I think she felt guilty for having placed me in the Orphanage, but I was content and understood she had chosen the best option for me. I finished class seven in 1952 at the age of 13 and my grades had improved.

Then came the big bonus. During the summer break the Orphanage moved to its holiday camp in Tahi Tothfalu, a village by the River Danube. Not only did we have the river to swim in (which I could not do at age 13), but it had a basketball pitch, table tennis and a volleyball court. I was introduced to these wonderful new sports although I was still the resident goalkeeper! I most enjoyed table tennis, but I tried them all. The only bad memory I have from that summer is one day I ate a plum from one of the trees in the garden which was not ripe yet. It made me really ill and frightened. The other thing which upset all the kids was that after lunch we had two hours of *siesta* when we had to go to bed. We all thought it was a waste of good play time.

The summer ended. On our return to Budapest, we were welcomed by bad news. Our Orphanage building had been taken over by the State and we had to move to new premises in O-Buda. We had lost all the wonderful facilities. The building we moved to was much smaller, it had no grounds or theatre. It was old and in bad condition. We were crammed into much smaller dormitories. We had

to change school and it was a long way away from the family home on Alsoerdösor Utca. I could walk home from the old Orphanage which was in the Fásor, but from O-Buda one had to take the tram. However, two minutes away from the new building we had the most magnificent synagogue. Before the war O-Buda must have had a large Jewish community. In front of the synagogue there was a large garden, which became our new football pitch. This was the synagogue where I had my *Barmitzvah*. The rabbi lived in the same building as ours. He was small and looked exactly as one would imagine a rabbi should look.

For my *Barmitzvah* I think I got a second-hand camera from the Orphanage - it lasted for a month before it stopped working! Viki, my cousin, was called up to the *Bimah* during my portion and as he could not read Hebrew for the blessing he pretended to murmur something under his breath. I felt embarrassed, but the thought of his self-confidence and pretence of knowing what he should be doing makes me smile even today.

The new school accepted us without any problems and I started my last year, year eight, before going on to the Jewish Gymnasium for four more years and, I hoped, on to university. My last year at school produced my best results and I went from grade 4 to grade 5 (very good). The teacher who made an everlasting impression on me was our history teacher. He had to keep to the Communist text book, but somehow he was able to tell us about history as it must have happened. We all looked forward to his lessons and he opened up a new world to us. He was an entertainer, and helped me love history.

You could only stay at the Orphanage until you were 14, after which you could start work, learn a trade or (like me) go on to further education. At the end of the last term, Mr. Gala asked me if I would join him as an assistant teacher taking the children to Balaton Szanszo, where they rented a large house for the summer break. That summer of 1953 was the first time in my life when, at the age of 14, I said goodbye to my childhood and became almost an adult.

I was happy that summer. ■



On the move to further education

FROM THE Orphanage I moved into the Rabbis' College campus, which was at 21 Jozsef Boulevard, in the centre of Pest and next door to the Jewish Gymnasium, together with the other boys from the Orphanage who continued their education at the Gymnasium. We shared the campus with student rabbis who came from all over Eastern Europe. Under the communist system in Eastern Europe the Rabbis' college in Budapest was the only place where they could be trained.

I was always hungry. I was growing, at least six feet tall and thin. On Friday nights we were given a feast with *challah*, after which I went back to my mother's flat for the weekend.

At the Gymnasium there were only 10 students in our class. That meant we could not hide. For the first year our headmaster, Fulop Grunwald, was in charge of our class. He taught history. He had the absolute knowledge of an historian but, while I loved the subject, his presentation was dry, with dates upon dates of events and hardly any story or entertainment. He had been a University lecturer before the war, but after being dismissed from the Professorship by the anti-Jewish Laws in 1939, he vowed never to teach at the universities again, and so he became the Headmaster of the Jewish Gymnasium. What I did not know was that, during the war, when the deportations had started, he organised a demonstration in Budapest of Jewish children and their parents with the slogan "If you want to kill us, kill us here in Hungary where we were born, and don't send us to Poland". He was a brave man to do this. I heard this story in England many years later. Today, I am very proud that he was my headmaster.

We also had another professor, Benő Straszner who taught us Maths and Physics. He had also been a university lecturer before the war, until he was dismissed by the anti-Jewish Laws. He was a friend of Einstein with a brilliant mathematical mind. His love of the subject inspired all of us.

His son also taught the same subjects but with a lot less knowledge; however, he was also our P.E. teacher, which suited him better. He was a promising tennis player, but a serious leg problem stopped him playing the game. I had met him before when he came to the summer camp of the Orphanage as a sports instructor.

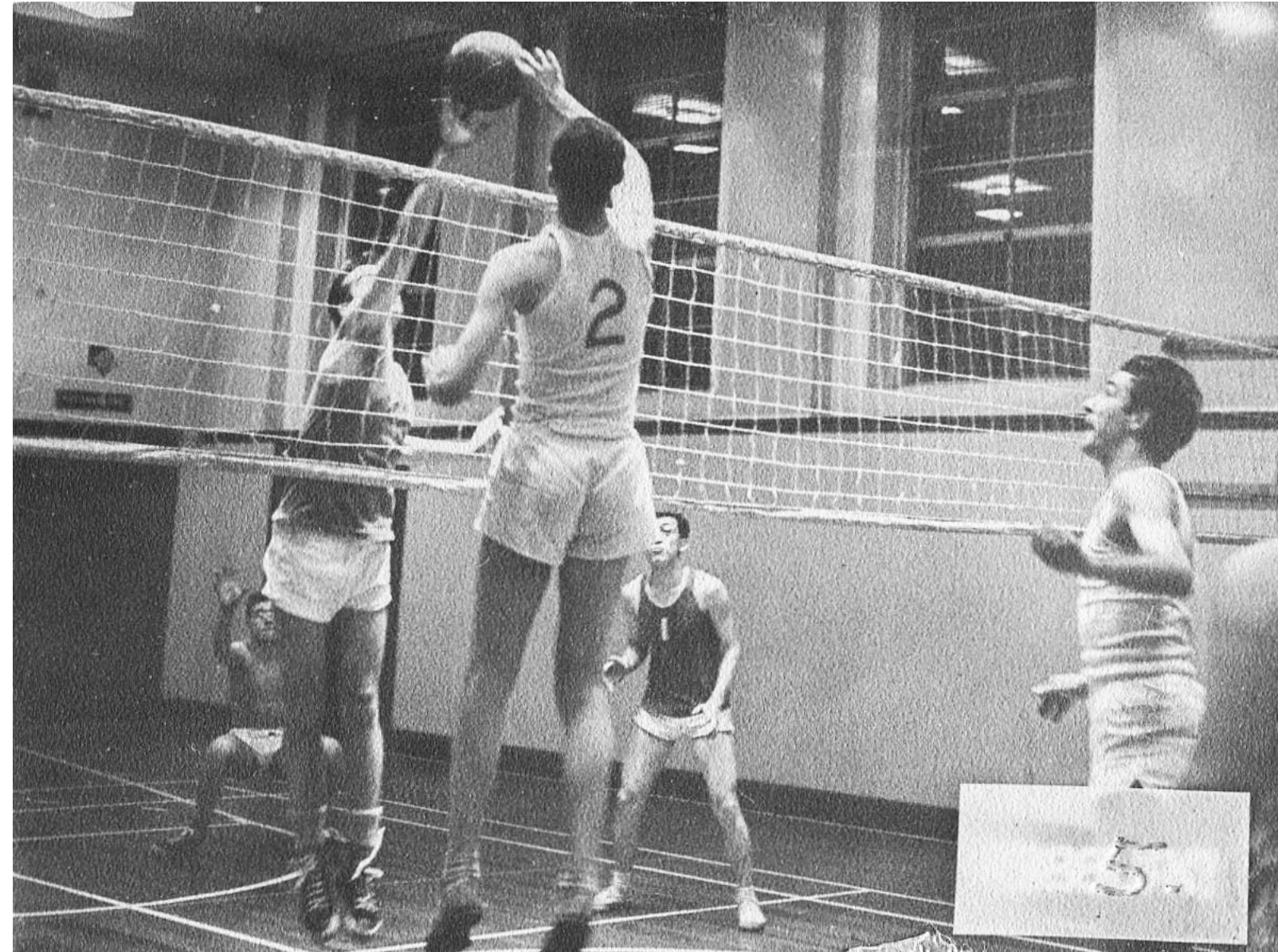
I believe that thanks to him the boys of the Gymnasium were allowed to use a local sportsground, where he was training volleyball teams of factory workers. We used to go and watch his teams play in the District League. During one of these matches, he called on me because their opposition had a very tall player who was striking the ball hard. “Tamas, you go in and block him,” he ordered me. It was more by luck than judgment that I went in and was able to block the guy and so I became part of his team ‘Tusped’.

From then on, volleyball came first. At last I had found something at which I was better than average due to my height, and I was not going to let it go. Someone saw me play and asked me to go for a trial for the junior side of a national division team, the Red Flag club. My P.E. teacher was not happy when I left his team.

Mr. Bajnanszky was the trainer and manager of the Red Flag club teams. During one of the seniors matches I was sent in for the last few points. I did not do anything outstanding, yet the next day my name appeared in the match review of the Sports newspaper stating: “Egri had an outstanding game.” I was not sure if I deserved such praise, but I was proud and showed those few lines to everybody.

I was doing all right at the Gymnasium, but the highlights of my youth were volleyball and summer holidays. For the summer holidays I was appointed as an assistant teacher back at the Orphanage, taking care of the youngest during the summer trip to Balaton Szarszo. The years passed and my exam results were good but not top grade and for a place at university you needed the best, or for your parent to be a factory worker. ■

“Mr. Bajnanszky was the trainer and manager of the Red Flag club teams. During one of the seniors matches I was sent in for the last few points. I did not do anything outstanding, yet the next day my name appeared in the match review of the Sports newspaper.”



Playing No.2 at the European Championships.



5 How to beat a block without spiking. The Japanese player has dumped the ball over the block set up by the A.V.A. Selected Team during their match against the Japanese National Team in 1962 at the United States Air Force Base, South Ruislip, Middlesex. The player nearest the camera is Tom Egri of the London Academicals.

I was featured in a book about volleyball.



At about 21 years old. I didn't smoke before I was 21!



My mother in Budapest 1960.

My mother re-marries

THEN SOMETHING very special happened; my mother met Mr. Pataki. I have no idea where they met or were introduced, but for the first time after the war she became a happy woman in love. Mr. Pataki was a widower, with two grown up sons. He had been a scales manufacturer before the war. I assume that after 1948 his factory had been taken over by the new Communist regime. He lived on the Buda side on Freedom Hill with his elder son and his wife and her mother, in a house with a large garden. Mr. Pataki's villa was next door to the residence of the U.S. Ambassador and from his balcony you could see most of Budapest.

He asked my mother to marry him and she was the happiest woman in the world. He was a quiet man, and I am sure she made him happy. They decided to exchange our flat at Alsoerdösor Utca for a shop near the Garai Ter market, assuring me that after finishing school I could move in with them on the Hill. They wanted the shop in order to start a scales repair and second-hand business. He must have had good connections to get permission to start a private business.

I was not invited to the wedding, or if I was I cannot remember, but I do remember being very happy for my mother. After years of struggling with little reward for her hard work, her prayers had been answered. The mental and physical pressures were taken away from her. She was as if reborn. We said goodbye to our old flat and my mother moved into his villa, where there was also an extra room reserved for me. There was tension at the new place, as Mr. Pataki's family needed time to accept the new arrivals. Apart from a few nights, I did not stay there but slept at the Gymnasium, even at weekends as I usually had volleyball matches. During the week, after school, I used to pop into the new shop where I was fed and my mother enjoyed being part of the business. Sometimes I helped, collecting large scales for repair or delivering others.

Time moved on and I was in my final year at the Gymnasium. I was worried because all subjects became much harder and I did not spend enough time on studying or on homework, only volleyball. My coach Mr. Bajnanszky had left the Red Flag Club and asked me to join his new team sponsored by the State Bus Company, which I did. I was also selected to play for the Hungarian Junior Side, and played for them (very badly) at the National Sport Centre. Wearing the nation's kit was a proud moment, but losing the match showed how much we had to learn.



Cast from a play put on at the Jewish Gymnasium theatre in 1953. I am on the right.

It was 1956 and I was 17. During the summer I cycled from Budapest to Lake Balaton with friends, a wonderful holiday before the year of final exams which awaited us when we returned to the Gymnasium in September.

However, by October things changed. Stalin had died in 1953 and at the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, Khrushchev denounced Stalin as a dictator and murderer. People were hoping for things to change for the better and for a short while they did. Khrushchev promised more freedom and a new start. Some people were rehabilitated and more films from the West were allowed into Hungary. Things were looking up.

But things often seemed to change for the better, only to be followed by more restrictions, trials and imprisonment. Initially the old regime was sacked and more moderate communists were put in charge. Khrushchev chose Imre Nagy, a moderate communist who came from a peasant family, to replace Matyas Rakosi and Hungary felt a new and better life would follow. You were able to start small privately owned businesses and peasants were able to sell their own produce. Hungary took a deep sigh of relief, but it did not last. Khrushchev did not like the fact that Hungary was trying to turn into a 'western democracy'. Imre Nagy was sacked by Moscow and replaced by Gerö, a friend of Rakosi. The brakes were put on and the country moved towards a revolution for independence. ■



Class of 1956 from the Gymnasium. I am the tallest in the back row next to Prof. Straszer. Lazlo Klein is front row centre. All the boys in this photograph left Hungary.

Revolution and my life turns upside down

ON 23 OCTOBER, 1956 my whole life was turned upside down. It was Tuesday, a sunny Autumn day which started as any other. We put on our *tefillin* for the morning prayers in our synagogue and had our usual breakfast of coffee and a slice of bread with jam (no wonder I was always hungry!). After breakfast it was time for school, year 4 of the Jewish Gymnasium, the last year before we had to apply for a university place. One needed grade 5 or 4 to go to university. I wanted to be a chemical engineer or an archaeologist. I always finished each year with grade 4, but this year I found that I had been concentrating on volleyball much more than my studies. On the way to school I noted a most unusual sight. Young university students were wearing a *Kokarda*, a small Hungarian flag, attached to their coats with a pin. This *Kodarda* was only worn once a year on 15 March in remembrance of the 1848 Revolution against Hapsburg Austria and Kaiser Franz Joseph. What was going on?

University students decided to have a peaceful demonstration later in the day in favour of freedom of speech and free press. They wanted Imre Nagy, the former prime minister, to take over the government, because he had a reputation of standing up to the Russians for more independence within a Communist state. Since 1948, when the Communists took power supported by the Red Army, a dictatorship had been established. If you said or even thought anything against the regime, you would most likely disappear to who knows where. There were agents everywhere and you could trust no-one. We listened to the radio but there was no indication of anything unusual happening until much later in the day. Then we received news that the students were going to march peacefully to the statue of Alexander Petöfi, a poet and hero of the 1848 Revolution.

There were Red Army Troops stationed in Hungary and it was inconceivable that they would just stand by doing nothing. The students were joined by factory workers demanding a change of political direction, which included freedom of the press, release of political prisoners, less control from the Soviet Union, and the return of Imre Nagy to replace Prime Minister Gerö.

Gerö spoke to the demonstrators on the radio, saying: “No compromise. No talks. Stop the demonstration. Go home because the majority of our homeland will not stand for it.” His speech had the effect of pouring petrol on to fire. The demonstration changed direction. “Let us speak! Let us broadcast! Hear our demands!” Their demands became braver: “Russian troops, leave Hungary to be a

neutral country. More political parties, not just communists. Free elections, free press, freedom!” The crowd started to move towards the radio station in Brody Sandor Street, but their route was blocked by the AVO (State Security Police) armed to the teeth.

Our college dormitory overlooked the side street leading to the radio station. From our third floor window we could see the demonstrators trying to get into the street, but they were stopped by the AVO, who threatened to shoot. The stalemate lasted for about an hour, then there was a shot and one of the demonstrators fell to the ground. Someone from the crowd wiped the blood from the pavement on to a white piece of paper, held it up and there came the voices shouting: “Look! You are killing your brothers, your fellow countrymen.” There was more shooting and we moved away from the windows to safety.

I don’t think that anybody slept on that night of 23 October. The following morning we had no breakfast because the canteen stayed closed. No teachers turned up at the Gymnasium. What should I do now? My mother and her husband had a telephone and I had to get in touch with them because I knew they would be worried, so I went to my friend Robbie Csiki who lived in a flat only a few minutes away from our College. He and his family were wonderful to me; they invited me to stay with them until my mother was able to collect me.

Nobody knew what was going to happen. We were all expecting the Russian army to come in and put the revolution down in hours, but it didn’t happen. The Russian army didn’t come in and we had a government with a new Prime Minister chosen by the revolutionaries, Imre Nagy, and a Hungarian officer made Minister of Defence. It seemed that the revolution had succeeded! Newspapers were allowed to print without any check on them. There were discussions between Khrushchev and the new Hungarian government and they decided that everything is fine, you can have your parties, you can have your freedom. We were absolutely astonished.

Our priority was to get some food, so Robbie and I went down to a bakery – the food queue was as long as you could imagine – but we bought some bread and then went home and waited. Two days later my mother came to the flat and said there was now some public transport and we could try to go back to their house in the hills. I spent the following week there, queuing for food and listening to the news on the radio.

The new government said it was going to be neutral, not part of the Warsaw pact or Nato. Janos Kadar, a Communist who wanted to start an independent Communist party, suddenly disappeared. Then on 4 November the Russian tanks moved in and Janos Kadar with them. They had decided enough was enough, there wasn't going to be a revolution or independence or a new country. You heard calls for help on the radio – “Help us, we're being attacked!” If anyone shot at the Russians they shot back from their tanks and destroyed whole buildings. So it was only a matter of days before it was all over. Everyone was very disappointed. We thought we would get our freedom, be able to travel and do what we liked. Now it was a question of how hard were they going to hit us. The new government including Imre Nagy and the Defence Minister went to the Yugoslav Embassy for safety, but were later moved and arrested. The Russians took control and people stopped shooting at the tanks knowing that they would shoot back.

We listened to Radio Europe from the West and they were telling us that there were 10,000 people crossing the border one day to Austria, then 20,000 the following day. People were escaping. When things calmed down a classmate of mine, Lazlo Klein, and his little brother and I went back to the Gymnasium. We met the headmaster Philip Grunwald and he looked at us and said: “What are you doing here?”

“We want to know when the school will re-open.”

“There is no school, most of the students have already left the country. You are the few who are still here. Take my advice, get out as quickly as you can. Don't wait!” ■

“We thought we would get our freedom, be able to travel and do what we liked. Now it was a question of how hard were they going to hit us.”

Time to escape to the West

MY MOTHER had re-married so she was safe. I discussed it with her and we came to the conclusion that I might have a better future in the West. Lazlo and I got out our school maps to see how we could get to the Austrian border and as we were planning it people started to join us. We started two of us and suddenly there were about ten of us ready to escape.

It was coming to the end of November and we found that there would be a train from the West Station to near the Austrian border and that's what the people who were escaping were using. I said goodbye to my mother and friends and we caught the train. As the train left Budapest everyone got maps out - it was obvious that everyone was escaping!

People told us not to go to the main town because you had more chance of getting arrested there, but if we stopped before the main town there was a little train which goes parallel with the border which we should catch and it would take us as near to the border as possible. We took the advice and we spotted on the map a little village called Csorna, which is where we got off the train.

We were looking for contacts. Some people told us: “We can take you. We know where the border is. Come with us and there will be no problem.” We thought that was the easiest thing ever and we went with them. Their name was Kiraly which means King in Hungarian. We didn't know if we could trust them but we didn't have much alternative.

They told us we wouldn't need our Hungarian money because we would be crossing the border, so asked us to leave it behind. We arrived at Csorna at night and stayed with them the following day. That night they said: “We're going.” We started walking. It was cold and snowing. Everything seemed ok, we didn't encounter any Russians or any Hungarian army. We just walked and walked and walked.

After many hours we got to a small stream and they said: “We're here, at the border. Within every half an hour there is a Russian patrol in a jeep which goes past on the other side of the stream and once they go past you go across the stream and you will be within 100 yards of Austria. We can't stay with you, we have other people to help.” So they went back and we waited there. It was freezing.

The sun started to come up and there had been no Russians, no-one on the other side of the stream. Suddenly we realised that the stream had a little bridge about 100 yards away which we hadn't been able to see in the dark. The guides had told us to walk through the water. I thought: "That is very odd. Why didn't they tell us to cross the bridge?" So we crossed over the bridge, walked up the hill and on the other side of the hill there was another river. There was no way we could cross that river. It was freezing cold and had ice. Further on from the river there were some flares going up, far away. We thought that must be nearer to the border but we couldn't cross the river. All ten of us decided it wasn't going to work unless we could find a way to cross the river.

We decided to return and get our money back. We suspected that the guides would think we would get arrested by the Russians and keep the money we left with them. We had some tough boys with us. We went back but the guides had not returned yet so we waited. We had no money, we couldn't go anywhere. Eventually the guides did come back. They said they couldn't understand why we hadn't crossed to Austria! We got enough money back from them to get the train back to Budapest. Our first attempt had been a complete disaster.

Some of our group of ten decided not to try again, but the rest of us said that because of the flares we now knew approximately where the border was, on the other side of the river further on. We bought three lorry inner tubes, a pump and ropes. One of us would swim across the river with the inner tubes and the ropes and then bring over rest of us, pulling us forward and back until we had all crossed. That was the plan.

I had lost my shoes on our first attempt. I had returned to Budapest in tennis shoes and you couldn't walk in the snow in Budapest in tennis shoes. I needed new shoes. My mother and her husband stood outside their shop, watching people walk by, looking out for someone who had big feet – I was a size 12. The only one they could find was a man in a wheelchair and they said: "Look, sorry to disturb you, the truth is my son is trying to escape but he hasn't got a pair of shoes. The shops are shut, we can't get any shoes. Have you got any you could sell him?" And he did. Those are the shoes I started my second journey in. ■

My second bid for freedom

WE BOUGHT the rail tickets again, we knew we had to get off at Csorna, we knew how to get to the little stream: we didn't need any help. There were about seven of us. Others had joined us including a Hungarian army officer. He was a good leader, which we needed because we were all young. We walked to the little stream at night time and on to the icy river and we saw the flares. They must have been, I don't know, 10 or 20 miles away, but we knew the direction. We pumped up our inner tubes, tied them together to fashion a little boat and tied it up with a big rope. One of us swam across and we started to pull the little boat across, then the next one went and so on. When it was my turn and I was about three-quarters of the way across I fell in. It was freezing. I hung on to the inner tube and got pulled to the other side.

We all got over, left the boat and started walking, following the flares. It was freezing cold, we got very tired and decided to rest somewhere. We found a little tent-type structure made of wheat which the peasants built and we rested in it for a few hours. Then we carried on, walking through forests as much as possible because we had heard that the Russians kept to the main roads. We walked for two days, a long, slow walk in the snow, freezing cold, and then we got to another river. We were absolutely exhausted. The only food I had left was a few lumps of sugar. On the other side of the river we could see the red, white and red Austrian flag. But that was on the other side of this new river and we had left our boat at the first river. We had no energy, we were freezing. We tried to keep each other awake because we thought that if we fell asleep we would freeze to death.

Nevertheless we did cross the border the next day, 1 December, 1956. I was in a daze by then and I can't remember who it was, but somebody took us in a proper boat across the river. I don't know whether they were Austrian or Hungarian, I don't remember anything except that we were in Austria. My first emotion was relief that we had made it! I saw a man driving his tractor, not very far away, I didn't speak much German but I went to him and asked him "What time is it?" in German and he replied in German and I thought: "thank God we're in the right place!" He told us to go to Andau, the first village in Austria, where there was a centre for refugees.

We got our second wind, got to Andau and had a hot coffee. I lay down on one of the camp beds and fell asleep. I was woken up an hour later to be told they needed the beds for women and children,

so I got up and went to sleep on some straw instead. We were given some documentation and then we were taken from there to Linz, to a place I am almost certain had been a concentration camp during the war. We were handed a piece of paper which said: “If you are Roman Catholic see Father X at ... If you are Protestant see If you are Jewish, this is the address you should go to for help.”

Lazlo Klein, his younger brother and I went to the address we had been given which was for the Jewish Agency. It was quite an eye opener! We told them that we had been at the Jewish Gymnasium. They asked us a couple of questions like “Have you been *barmitzvah*?” We said “Yes” and they said “OK, you are staying with us.” But there were about a dozen other people pretending to be Jewish who replied: “I’m not very religious.” They were asked to say anything in Hebrew, any prayer, but they couldn’t, so they were told: “We would like to help you but unless you can prove that you are Jewish we can’t.” That was the first time in my life when I saw people pretending to be Jewish to get help!

The people from the Jewish Agency were absolutely wonderful. They put us up in a hotel. I had a hot bath. After all that we’d been through I will remember that hot bath for the rest of my life: it was luxury, unbelievable luxury! They gave us 10 Austrian *schillings*, some of which I used to buy oranges. I ate so many oranges that I was almost ill. I had never seen an orange, so it was quite an exciting thing to do. They told us they were coming back the next day to take us shopping. They asked us where we wanted to go and what we wanted to do. Lazlo and his brother wanted to go to Israel and they left the following day. I said I wanted to go to London where my mother had a second cousin.

The following day the Jewish Agency people took me to one of the stores in Linz and bought me a coat, shoes, everything I could think of. And then the news came that we were going to London. We were taken to Vienna, straight to the airport, and there was a BOAC plane. It was the 7 December, the first time on a plane in my life. ■



Tom’s train ticket from Budapest to near Austrian border.

I arrive in England

WHEN WE got to London the first thing we noticed were the double-decker buses and I became quite emotional. There were a lot of other people on the plane, only a few of us were from the Jewish Agency. I had all my belongings in a rucksack. We got off the plane and on to a coach. The driver told us to put all our luggage at the back of the coach, which we did, and then they drove us to an army camp outside Aldershot. At that time the British army was in Suez fighting for the Suez Canal. As we got off the coach I stood and waited for my rucksack but someone had stolen it. It really broke my heart, all that lovely stuff they had bought for me. Not only that, some of the other passengers realised that we were Jewish and as we got off the coach I heard comments like: “Bloody Jews, you started the revolution.” I thought: “Thank God I am out of that country!” It was really heart-breaking to hear these people.

I dropped a postcard to my mother’s second cousin, Auntie Sari, to say that I was in Aldershot, could they come and get me or get in touch. By this time I was very ill, both mentally and physically, from my experiences crossing the border. I was exhausted. I couldn’t get out of bed, I didn’t eat anything, I was really in a bad state. Auntie Sari turned up with her husband. They had a little car and said: “You are coming back with us.” I was very grateful. On the way back they stopped to take me to Lyon’s Corner House. I was completely exhausted and I wasn’t hungry but I didn’t want to be rude. Then we went to their very small two-room flat in Westminster. It was a Peabody house, very cheap with no bathroom and an outside toilet.

They were very kind to me. Within days they realised that I was very ill and they called the doctor. He said that I was mentally and physically exhausted, but if I didn’t get up and start living I could die. So they got me up. I thought they were really cruel. The first day was terrible, all I wanted to do was go back to bed. The second day was a little better. The third day I had something to eat. The doctor had been right and I came back to life again.

I had to register with the police. I had a document which they had given me at Aldershot and I had to take it to the police every time I changed my address or job. ■

I begin my working life

MY AUNT'S cousin's husband was working for a very big construction company called Trollope & Colls. One of the things they did there was to cut enormous stones into smaller ones in their factory and these were then chiselled into smaller shapes. He got me a job there. I had to clean the sand which came off the stones as they were being treated and put it in a big container. The people there were very friendly. They came and asked me if I was married and I told them I was from Budapest. That was all I could say to them. I didn't understand what they were saying! They had a very left wing manager there. He called my name and, as I turned around, I accidentally hit him and I got the sack. So my job lasted for four days!

The Jewish Agency found me a job working in the kitchen of the Academy Cinema restaurant on Oxford Street. It was called The Pavilion. The restaurant was on the first floor and the kitchen was in the basement. It had a big club called The Marquee. It was owned by a Jewish Hungarian, Mr Ashby. I was told of an address in West Hampstead where someone had a flat to let. I was going to earn £5 a week working in the kitchen and I went to West Hampstead with Auntie's husband. I knew very little English and could hardly speak to the Jewish owners of the flat, but they welcomed me. They had a ground floor flat and there were two rooms on the 2nd floor and they would be delighted to let me have that for 30 shillings a week. Fine, I thought, I could afford that and I would travel to work on the Underground.

I worked in the Pavilion restaurant and that was hilarious because of my lack of English. If they asked me "Have you got the saucepan?" I recognised the word sauce which is similar in Hungarian so I would reply "chocolate sauce?" I went to evening school in Soho and started to learn English. The teacher would say: "This is a window. This is a book." I just couldn't put two and two together, I couldn't get the language. I could do bits and pieces but nothing clicked for about six months. And then the little words, like 'can', started to click. "I can go. I cannot go. I can understand." That little word suddenly put the language in a new perspective and within months I was able to communicate.

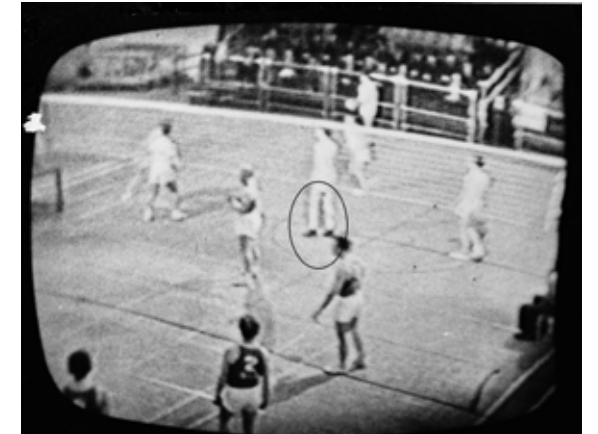
My job was very simple: I had to carry trays from the kitchen up to the restaurant on the first floor. I carried the salads, eggs, quiches, and everything else and helped out generally. I made my own lunch - I had so many omelettes which were my favourite at the time. I learnt the language and slowly I learnt





how to cook. Apart from the owner, Mr Ashby, there was one other chef who taught me some cooking skills. When that chef left I helped in the kitchen making things like quiche Lorraine and stroganoff. I started serving customers in the restaurant although my language was still not great. If they asked for a quiche Lorraine I could serve them. One day somebody rushed in and asked me something. I had no idea what he was saying. I knew that whenever anyone came in they were told: "please sit down and the waiter will serve you," so I said that. He looked at me as if I were a lunatic. He was looking for the toilet! In the evenings after working late in the restaurant I could go and watch films in the cinema, which also helped me in learning English. I worked there for quite a few years and finished up as one of their chefs.

One day in 1957, after the Olympic games had taken up volleyball as a new sport, the BBC was looking for volleyball players to make a small film about the sport. I don't know how they found me but they came to the restaurant and asked me to take part. We were taken to an air-force base in Stanmore to play volleyball in front of the cameras. Peter Dimmock was the presenter. When Mr Ashby's younger daughter Susan found out that I was going to be on television she thought it was wonderful. I think she had a crush on me. This was the first time I played volleyball in England. I had black tennis shoes and everyone else had white tennis shoes. As it was black & white TV you could really see the difference.



I had written to the Lubins in America telling them where I was and they got in touch with Lou Rose, a friend of theirs in England, to tell him I was in England and to say they would appreciate it if he could keep an eye on me. Lou Rose came to the restaurant and introduced himself and invited me to his house in The Bishops Avenue. He didn't tell me there were no house numbers in The Bishops Avenue. He told me the address was Arlington House and to arrive about 7pm. They were lovely to me, absolutely charming. Mr Rose told me: "Learn the language and we'll get you a job. It may take a little time but let's see how it goes." He gave me a £5 note, which was the same as my weekly salary, then

Messing around in the Academy Cinema restaurant.



his son Derek drove me home. Mrs Rose wouldn't let me go without giving me bananas. It was really a wonderful evening.

I was still working at the Academy Cinema and one day a friend came in and told me there was a job available in another restaurant where I could triple my salary. I wasn't quite sure but I thought I would try. My mother – I don't know how – was sending me some English money and I had saved a few hundred pounds. Mr Ashby was having money troubles so I had lent him some money, and I knew I had to get that back before I left the job. I told Lou Rose about it, he had a word with Mr Ashby and I got my money back. The following week I gave in my notice.

I started to work in a coffee bar in Woodstock Street, Le Mazot owned by a Jewish couple, an American who married an English girl. They trebled my salary or more to about £20 a week but I only had two afternoons off, working seven days a week. The coffee bar was very popular. There was an Austrian waitress and a Hungarian waitress, we were like a little family.

I quite enjoyed it and stayed for a few years until I got a call from Mr Rose to say: "If you are ready, you can come and run my canteen." They had a big factory in Stoke Newington, about 150 girls sewing pyjamas and shirts. I took the job because it was five days a week earning the same money and I hadn't had a day off in I don't know how long. A girl working at the Le Mazot came with me. She became the cook and I became the manager and we did very well. Apart from our salaries we made a profit out of the canteen.

I was now living in Agamemnon Road in Hampstead in a house shared by two Jewish brothers. They had both married out: they were in the British army, met German girls and brought them back to England. One brother lived on the ground floor, the other on the first floor and I had the room on the top floor. Then one brother decided to go back to Germany with his wife, so I rented the whole flat on the first floor. It had a kitchen, bathroom, two bedrooms and a lovely big garden to share. I let out one of the rooms to the waitress from Le Mazot, Maria Lakotos, and she moved in with her daughter, Marcsi. Marcsi ended up marrying my friend Stephan Szabo who I met at Le Mazot. Stephan and I had our first holiday in the Lake District – we shared the driving, this was years before motorways were built! ■

Marriage – and Michelle arrives

MR ROSE’S company was called Bonsoir, a large well-known manufacturing business. “I want you to take over a job in the office controlling the fabrics coming in,” Mr. Rose told me. I wasn’t quite sure about the job but I took it. The company had days out, it would hire a coach and we would go to Margate, for example. On one of these trips I found myself sitting next to a tiny girl, blonde hair, blue eyes, very pretty. Her name was Julia Freeman and she was a machinist at Bonsoir. I wasn’t ready to get married, but slowly our relationship developed. We would go to see a film, or for a drive in a car. Eventually at the age of 29 I got an ultimatum: “What are we doing? Are we going to get married or is this just going to go on and on because if it is then we should break up.” I wasn’t sure which way it should go but I thought: “I’m 29, it’s about time I settled down, let’s get married.”

I’m going to say little about the marriage. The greatest thing I got out of the marriage is my daughter Michelle, who is absolutely wonderful, and I love her dearly, but the marriage went wrong from day one because my mother didn’t want it. I said: “Look, I am getting married, not you” but my wife found out that my mother objected to our marriage and she never forgave her. And that was the first barrier in the marriage. So let’s just say on a sunny day at Stoke Newington Register Office we got married and we rented a little flat and we started our married life. We were married for six or seven years.

One day the cloth buyer at Bonsoir, Sidney Jones, who worked from Manchester, had a heart attack and had to retire. Mr Rose said: “You are dealing with cloth, I will send you to Sidney and he will tell you about cloth buying. I want you to take over from him and we will run the cloth buying from London.” That was the big break I was hoping for. That was a major job. I met with Sidney and he was absolutely charming. We went to all the mills and finishing works where he introduced me and explained everything they do to the cloth. It was all new to me, but I learnt it step by step. I was really very happy - for the first time I had a trade in my hands. There were some changes at Bonsoir at that time - it was bought out by a big holding company. Mr Rose was still in charge but now he had somebody over him.

Eventually Mr Rose had to retire. He wasn’t very happy about it and neither was I, but he started a small pyjama manufacturing company instead.

I was made an offer by a textile company in the West End called A. Beckman Ltd. I told them that I knew a great deal about fabrics but I was not a salesman. They assured me that they didn’t want a salesman, they wanted an assistant for the owner. So I left Bonsoir after many years. I was sad to leave it, that’s where I started, where I made my way.

Meanwhile my marriage started to break up. We grew apart. My wife stayed in the house – she moved to the flat downstairs with Michelle our daughter and I stayed upstairs. It was the best thing for all of us. I was there on my own and I felt really lost. But I knew that if I ever got married again I would never ever marry out. ■



My mother with Michelle.

I meet Sue

I BECAME a member of the Alyth Garden Synagogue in Golders Green and started to go every Saturday. I was welcomed by Rabbi Marmur. Alyth had an organisation called ‘The Umbrella’ for single parents with children who want to go out swimming, to the theatre and so on, which I joined. One evening I was going to play kalooki and Sue, who had lost her husband a year earlier, was going to play bridge but, for one reason or another, the card games were cancelled so instead we both went to a lecture where we started talking to each other. That’s how we met and the friendship developed. We went out together and it seemed to work. I was introduced to her children. We took the children out together. I had met some Jewish girls before. They were divorced and although they were friendly enough they always had a chip on their shoulder. Sue wasn’t like that. Her husband had died of cancer and she was left with three young children. She had carried on with her life. In my mind I always missed my father and in a way it was God’s way of telling me: “You could be the father of three children who need one.”

One day Sue and I were driving from Hampstead Garden Suburb to the West End. We had Sue’s three kids in the back of the car, Charles (7), James (5) and Laura-Jane (she was 2 or 3 years old). They were talking. Laura-Jane said: “When are they getting married?” and James said to Laura: “Shh, he hasn’t asked her yet.” Laura looked up and said to him: “Why doesn’t she ask him?” Then I said to Sue: “I think we had better get married!” I went to ask for her parents’ permission. Her parents were lovely and my mother was in seventh heaven.

The summer of 1976 was hot. Sue’s parents had a gorgeous flat in Bournemouth. She took the children there for the whole summer. At the weekends I brought Michelle down. It was a wonderful summer and at the end of that year we got married at St John’s Wood *shul*. I sold my house in Highbury and I made sure Michelle’s mother had enough money to buy a little house for them both. Every weekend I would pick Michelle up and she stayed with us.

When we started married life I moved into Sue’s house in Hampstead Garden Suburb and I continued working for Beckman. As time passed I found business more and more difficult and they decided to get in with some of the big boys like M&S. I knew there was no way M&S would buy from a wholesaler. If they needed anything they bought it themselves from the mills. I felt this was the end of that story, but I had options. ■



With all the children in Bournemouth shortly before I married Sue.



Our wedding with the kids (Michelle, James and Laura), Sue's dad and my mum.

I go back to Hungary

IN 1989 THINGS had started to change in Hungary. The Berlin wall came down, Hungary became an independent state and capitalism started to take off. The big companies like Tesco and M&S moved in. I thought there might be an opportunity there.

Some years earlier Sue and I had met a couple at a dinner party who had started a mail-order catalogue business supplying dentists. Within years they became very successful and sold out to an American company called Henry Shine. That story stayed in my mind. I thought if it worked in England perhaps it would work in Hungary. It was business. I never cared a great deal about Hungary. I didn't know what to expect when I went back, but I felt there was a chance that, if I could build a company that Henry Shine would eventually want to buy out then I would have made it, I could retire. That was behind the dream. So I went back to Hungary.

I was introduced to some very nice people who helped me find a warehouse. A lawyer helped me get established and we started to produce a catalogue. Henry Shine was supplying us all the goods from the UK at a special price so we could give them a good price in Hungary. I have a second cousin in Hungary who, with his wife, joined us to build a company and started to work for us. We had a warehouse, we had the products, the catalogue and initial orders. We employed two dental nurses and it seemed to be doing better and better every year. I had to be in Hungary for two weeks in every month and that was very hard. I was missing England. I felt lost in Hungary but it was part of the dream.

The biggest problem was that Hungary was so corrupt that it was impossible to do normal business because everyone wanted a cut. We grew to a certain extent and then things became tough. It was difficult to grow without bribing more people. By that time some people in Hungary were interested in buying the company and I said to Sue: "Let's get shot of it." Two Hungarians bought it. That was the end of it.

I came home from Hungary. Meantime the children were growing up. Charles went to UCS then Cambridge University, James to City of London School then the University of Canterbury. Charles is now a doctor, Laura a teacher and James works in films. They all did pretty well.

Michelle has been happily married to Colin for many years now. They have two sons, one has finished university and the other is doing carpentry. ■



Some of the grandchildren with their mothers.

Health problems

SLOWLY over 20 or 25 years my kidneys deteriorated and I had to go on to peritoneal dialysis at home on a daily basis. By doing this I am able to lead a near normal life. Thank God for the National Health Service; it is unbelievable.

My mother was a tremendous believer in God. I've had my ups and downs and I've had my doubts and my worries, but my greatest concern was when James told me that he didn't believe in God. I said: "That's terrible; we haven't done a good job, something's gone wrong." He believes in tradition, he loves the tradition of *Rosh Hashana* for example, but he doesn't believe that God exists. Laura asked me: "Dad, why do you believe in God?" I once wrote a letter to Laura to say that I believe in God because of the things which have happened to me in my life.

You can put so many things down to chance, but what you might think was pure chance to me was a miracle: that I survived, that we were not deported to Poland when I was a baby. I didn't know what was happening but that was a miracle because we would have died in Poland, there is no question about that. We survived the Holocaust. People helped us and gave us food and sheltered us and even people who were arrested who knew we were Jewish didn't give us away, and that was a miracle.....

“Thank God for the
National Health Service; it
is unbelievable.”

I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to all the wonderful people who helped me to write this book.

Without the help of the AJR it would never have happened. For many years I rejected the idea of telling my story until my children kept on and on.

“We want to know what happened to you.”

At last I gave in saying “I am not the hero of this story. I was a small child who survived the Holocaust with the help of other people and the courage of my mother. To some it will appear to have been luck which saved me. To me it was God’s miracle.”

I am very grateful to AJR’s volunteers for all their hard work. Helen Shapiro became part of our family during the interview process and is now a life-long friend.

Last, but not least, I am saying thank-you to Sue, my wife. We have been married for 42 years and she is the greatest miracle to have happened to me. Good times, bad times – Sue was by my side. Darling, I love you. You will have to ask Sue to write the next book!

Finally thank you to the wonderful people who helped me in England to get established. Now you have read the story you will know who they are. May God bless them all. They all live on in my heart. ■

“You can put so many things down to chance, but what you might think was pure chance to me was a miracle: that I survived, that we were not deported to Poland when I was a baby.”



Michelle and her family.



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.



“You can put so many things down to chance, but what you might think was pure chance, to me was a miracle: that I survived, that we were not deported to Poland when I was a baby. I didn’t know what was happening, but that was a miracle because we would have died in Poland; there is no question about that. We survived the Holocaust. People helped us and gave us food and sheltered us and even people who were arrested who knew we were Jewish didn’t give us away, and that was a miracle.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk