



My Story

Ruth Schwiening



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

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

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Ruth Schwiening spoke to AJR volunteer Nick Lampert and we are indebted to Nick for his contribution to the making of this book. Thanks also to AJR volunteers Hannah Wilson, Matthew Figg and Muireann Grealy. This book was produced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Portrait photo by Nick Lampert

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My Story

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“I was sheltered from most antisemitism while growing up. I thought being Jewish was something good, but as time went on, I started to wonder whether it was actually a bad thing.”

Foreword

I would like to acknowledge the huge work of my husband Jürgen in helping me to set down 'My Story', devoting so much time to sorting through archives and letters and other material. He has helped me to find out who I am, to find out many things about which my parents remained silent. He has made it possible to put together the jigsaw puzzle of my life. I would like also to acknowledge my thanks to Nick Lampert for his hard work in listening to and recording our interviews and showing such an interest. Finally I would like to thank the AJR for inviting me to tell something of my own and my family's history.

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My parents: the early years

MY FATHER, LOTHAR Auerbach, was born in Reichenbach in 1903. My mother, Hilde (Hildegard) Ring, was born in Breslau in 1894. These were towns in Silesia which was then part of Germany but became part of Poland after the Second World War. Reichenbach is now Dzierżoniów and Breslau is Wrocław.

My father studied agriculture, which was exceptional in the family. He finished his *Realschule* (secondary school) in 1919 at the age of 16. He had wanted to study medicine, but the *Realschule* type of secondary school did not give him the *Abitur* qualification (equivalent of A-levels) which he would need. So he decided to serve as an apprentice on an estate near Halberstadt in Saxony. The estate was owned by a Jewish banker and trained young Jewish people in agriculture as preparation for emigration to Palestine. The Zionist movement was very strong at the time and many young Jewish people in Germany wanted to leave for Palestine. Most youngsters were ill-prepared for life in a rough country where practical, agricultural skills were needed, and there was a big effort by the Jewish organisations to train them for their future life. This was called ‘*Umschichtung*’.

In 1921 my father decided to go to Palestine on the Third Aliyah (the third wave of modern Jewish immigration from Europe to Palestine, 1919 to 1923), but he caught malaria and returned home a few months later. In 1922 he enrolled at Breslau University to study agriculture, with a grant from a Jewish welfare organisation. It was at university that he met Margot Ring, my mother’s younger sister, who was studying medicine, and it was through her that he met his future wife. My mother had been to a different type of school, gained the *Abitur*, and later became a qualified bookkeeper and shorthand-typist.

“ In 1921 my father decided to go to Palestine on the Third Aliyah (the third wave of modern Jewish immigration from Europe to Palestine, 1919 to 1923), but he caught malaria and returned home a few months later. ”



Silesia (marked out in red) between World War One and World War Two. Breslau was a major city of over 600,000 inhabitants in 1939. Reichenbach was a small town and Esdorf a village.



My father, Lothar Auerbach (right) with his sister Frieda, circa 1908



My mother, Hilde Ring (left) with her sister Margot, circa 1904



My mother aged around 20, circa 1914



My father aged 18, Palestine, 1921

I have inherited many letters that my father and mother exchanged between 1926 and 1930. From these letters we know that they were very much in love, that my mother was a very intelligent and ambitious young woman who loved organising, and also that she had a lively interest in literature and philosophy. She always worked hard, never spared herself, and still found time to write long letters which were nearly always typed, probably at the office where she worked. Sometimes she even typed her name, about which my father complained, saying ‘Can you please at least write your name in your own hand?’ His own letters were much shorter and written in what he called his *sauklaue* (appalling scrawl).

In 1928-29 my mother spent a year in Denmark, studying arts and crafts at Askov Folk High School, an adult education centre which still exists, and wrote a long report about her experience there, mostly based on the activities of one day. My father also stayed in Denmark for a few months during that period. He was based at a farm in Lundsmark, not far from Askov, and visited my mother at the high school. He had a plan to start a poultry farm in Denmark, but this did not work out and he returned to Breslau in spring 1929. My mother came back to Breslau not long after. ■

“ Sometimes she even typed her name, about which my father complained, saying ‘Can you please at least write your name in your own hand?’ His own letters were much shorter and written in what he called his *sauklaue* (appalling scrawl). ”



My mother standing third from right at the back, Askov Folk High School, 1929



My father with Peter, Esdorf, 1934

Esdorf

MY FATHER WANTED to buy land and in 1929 he obtained a loan from a Jewish organisation in Breslau to enable him to do that. A large estate in Esdorf, a small village 40 km north of Breslau, was divided up and my father bought a small plot of land, called a *siedlerstelle*, which was partly woodland, partly agricultural land. From the letters between my parents we can see that my mother played a large part in the negotiations. Meanwhile my father calculated how much land they would need and which crops they would grow, how much money was needed to buy seeds, machinery and equipment, and he supervised the building of a house, stables and barn.

My parents moved to the farm in summer 1930 and were married in October 1930 in Gross Leipe, a nearby village. We know that my mother wanted to be married according to Jewish law and was in communication about it with Rabbi Simonsohn from a reform synagogue in Breslau, so we assume they had a religious ceremony following their civil marriage, though we don't have a document for that.

My parents managed the farm very well and took on a number of *chaluzim*, young men and women who wanted to train in agriculture so that they could start a new life on farms in Palestine, which some of their *chaluzim* indeed managed to achieve. From my mother's letters we can see that she was keen not just to do the training but to provide the young people with a Jewish home.

We have several photos of people on the Esdorf farm because my mother kept a family album and this album found its way to England, we don't know by what route. These photos suggest that the house was full of life, and my father is seen in photos sitting on a horse, a very proud man.

Of the *chaluzim*, Gerhard Gadiel stands out because he was to accompany my parents when they left Silesia in 1936, although he later perished in the Holocaust. Many years on, after a long search, we found his sister in Israel. We told her that Gerhard had worked on the Esdorf farm, and she recognised him on a photo we sent. She said: 'That's him, the one with the braces! What a *mitzvah* (blessing) to hear from you'. It was a *mitzvah* for her to know that my father and Gerhard had worked so closely together.



Chaluzim, with Gerhard on right, Esdorf, circa 1934

Three children were born to my parents during their time in Esdorf; my brother Peter in July 1933, then me and my twin brother Michael in May 1935. In later life my mother told me that she wanted to have children, girls to help with running the house, and boys to help on the farm. She told me very little, but that was one thing she did reveal. ■



Members of the Esdorf community. My father (far right), my mother (third from right), circa 1935



My mother with my brother, Peter, Esdorf 1933



My mother looking after the animals, Esdorf, circa 1935



My mother with me and my twin brother, Michael, Esdorf, 1935

Moving from Esdorf to Austria

FROM 1933 WHEN Hitler assumed power, waves of legislation began to restrict the rights of Jewish citizens in Germany. This included a law of 1933 which excluded Jews from the Civil Service. Then in 1935 the Nuremberg Laws made Jews second-class citizens. The *Blut und Boden* doctrine made it impossible for Jews to be farmers, and it was this doctrine that hit our family. My parents were able to hold out for a while but eventually they had to sell the property. They got the money back, but only the amount they had originally paid, and nothing for the work they had done since then. Technically they were not forced to emigrate, but they had lost their livelihood and there was no future for them as farmers, and in 1936 they decided we should leave Germany. But where could we go? There were few countries in the world that would accept Jewish immigrants and so we settled on Austria. Austria was still an independent country, near the border of Germany, with the same language, and like many people, my parents probably thought what was happening in Germany would end, everything would be normalised, and we could then go back. It was a courageous decision, especially since my mother was quite disabled. She had polio as a child and could hardly walk without a stick.

My parents found a farm for sale in the remote hamlet of Schassbach, near Wolfsberg in Carinthia, and the contract was signed in December 1936. Land in that part of Austria was then fairly cheap. Austria had gone through a big recession, as had Germany, and so it was manageable for them. The property, called Hölzl, included a farmhouse, a barn/stable and other outbuildings, with arable land, pastures and woodland, though some of the land was of poor quality.

“The *Blut und Boden* doctrine made it impossible for Jews to be farmers, and it was this doctrine that hit our family. My parents were able to hold out for a while but eventually they had to sell the property.”

There is not much information about our time on the farm in Schassbach, and only a couple of photos survived. My parents told me very little, and unfortunately I didn't ask what life was like there and I myself remembered nothing from such a young age. But we know that it would have been very hard in rural Austria at that time, and the fact that there are so few photos from this time compared with the Esdorf period, suggests how preoccupied my parents were simply with day-to-day survival. The Austrian venture (we were in Schassbach for two years, 1937-1938) was a desperate attempt to make a new start in a new country, in isolation from family and friends and without a Jewish support structure.

And then there was the step-by-step persecution of the Jews which became even worse after the Anschluss in March 1938 when Germany and Austria were united. My parents' farm was put under administration and, as we later discovered, was sold to a farmer, Ferdinand Zacharias, at a very cheap rate. We continued living there for a few months but were soon evicted. We had been robbed. ■

“The Austrian venture (we were in Schassbach for two years, 1937-1938) was a desperate attempt to make a new start in a new country, in isolation from family and friends and without a Jewish support structure.”

Kristallnacht

AN EVEN BIGGER turning point for my parents came with *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass), the pogrom against Jewish properties and Jews carried out at the instigation of the Nazis on 9-10 November 1938, following the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a German-born Polish Jew. The name *Kristallnacht* comes from the shards of broken glass that littered the streets after the windows of Jewish-owned stores, buildings and synagogues were smashed. Thousands of Jewish businesses were damaged or destroyed, and thousands of Jewish men were arrested and taken to concentration camps.

My father was one of these, as well my uncle Erich (my mother's brother) and my uncle Herbert (married to my mother's sister Margot). One day, there was a knock on the door. The Gestapo stood there and asked my father, 'Are you the Jew 'Auerbach?'' 'Yes' 'Well, come with us.' They took him by lorry. My older brother witnessed his daddy being taken away. My mother must have been terrified, because she had no idea why he was being taken nor how long he would be away, nor whether she would ever see him again. There was no time to say goodbye to us children. It must have been awful for her.

One question which I turn over in my mind quite often, is how do you tell the children what's happened to Daddy? How do you answer the question from a child, 'Where is Daddy, and why has he been taken away?' What would I have done? How would I have tackled that question?

My father was taken away on the night of 9 November 1938, together with Gerhard Gadiel. He was taken first to prison in Klagenfurt, then to Dachau. When my mother woke up the morning after *Kristallnacht*, she found our pet dog Asta dead, and the children's bedroom windows smashed. It was devastation.

My father wrote cards to my mother, one from prison in Klagenfurt and three from Dachau. The card from Klagenfurt, dated 15 December 1938, looked positive. My father said 'Don't worry about me. I can work, can't I?' and even reminded my mother, because it was winter, to drain water from the engine. Another, from Dachau, was very worrying. In the maximum of ten lines that you were allowed he wrote: 'Sell the farm, never mind at a loss' and 'Try urgently and as fast as possible to get confirmation



The card my father wrote to my mother from Klagenfurt Prison, 15 November 1938

of English or Danish or other visa by telegram and tell me immediately.' He also asked my mother to get in touch with his mother and sister Frieda.

These cards were delayed for many days because of the censors, and by the time that card arrived, my mother had already received an Eviction Order from the police station in St. Andrä, acting on behalf of the Gestapo in Klagenfurt, dated 18 November 1938. She was ordered to either emigrate, or take everyone on the farm who was Jewish and go to Vienna, this order to be carried out by 15 December 1938. When I took up glasswork in the 1990s I expressed my feelings about what my parents went through in a number of works.



3.12.39. Meine h. Hilda u. gel. Kinder. Bin in grosser Sorge, da bisher ohne Nachricht hoffentl. ist alles gesund, ist auch. Setze dich sofort mit Mutter od. Frau in Verbindung um bis zum Erhalt des Permits dort sein zu können. Alles vorbereiten zum Verkauf auch wenn Preis niedrig ist. Schreibe an Gildemeester 4 rent Halbzeile 7 wegen Transportmöglichkeiten. Versuche dringend schnellstens Permit telegraf. Zusage od. engl. dänisches ~~Permit~~ ein anderes Visum zu erlangen od. melde Erhalt umgehend Gefangenklagenfurt am besten vllt. persönl. Vorprache mit Entgegenenden Empfehlungen. Vielleicht Fritsch u. Mutter kommen lassen ebenso Geld, du fühlst dann Sorge u. was ~~Permit~~

(Front and back of card) The card received from my father from Dachau concentration camp, December 1938



My glasswork inspired by the message on the card: 'don't worry about me, I can work, can't I?' It is influenced by the role that women played in getting their men out of camps



My glasswork with my mother and father coming out of an eggshell. It shows my parents very much in love, but love is also fragile and easily broken, like glass.



My glasswork depicting the journey from Schassbach with pony and trap

We had some good neighbours who came and said to my mother, 'We'll help you.' I was told that my mother was taken away by a neighbour on a pony and trap. She was hidden under hay and straw, and taken to the nearest station, which was actually in Yugoslavia because our farm was near the border between Austria and Yugoslavia. From there she went to Berlin, where she had contacts.

A Jewish organisation had been approaching people whose husbands were in concentration camps, and they were using the *Kindertransport* route. They got in touch with my mother and said, 'Hilde, we're going to help you, but we can't take three of your children, we can take just one, which one will it be?' Just think about that—you've got three children and you love them all, which one will you choose? I was told later that it was easier to get a girl than a boy into a foster home through the *Kindertransport*, and that was why they chose me. And yet I still ask myself why my mother gave me away and managed to keep my brothers with her. I don't know what I would have done. Would I have kept the family together or parted them? ■

“Just think about that—you've got three children and you love them all, which one will you choose? I was told later that it was easier to get a girl than a boy into a foster home through the *Kindertransport*, and that was why they chose me.”

Organising emigration

IT WAS THE Inter-Aid Committee for Children which organised the transports of children, mainly Jewish, to England. This was after the British government agreed to allow unaccompanied children into Britain on collective visas. So that was how I was going to travel.

But first I had to stay in an orphanage in Berlin, because it was easier for children from an orphanage than for private individuals to join the *Kindertransport*. Also without my father, who was still in Dachau, it would have been very difficult for my mother to look after all three of us while doing all the legwork needed to get visas. She had to queue up at embassies, get the numerous certificates and statements from police and all kinds of organisations, all this would have been extremely time-consuming and difficult.

So I was in an orphanage for a time, but we have no information about how long or which home. I then left for the Hook of Holland on 2 February 1939. I was taken direct from the children's home and an older person would have looked after me and the other children on the long train journey. Then I boarded the night ferry to Harwich. I was met there by a London couple, the Winers, who kept me for a weekend, and after that I was passed on to foster parents. I have no memory of these events, I was only three when I arrived, but I learned later what happened. ■

“ I was taken direct from the children's home and an older person would have looked after me and the other children on the long train journey. Then I boarded the night ferry to Harwich. ”

4452

This document of identity is issued with the approval of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to young persons to be admitted to the United Kingdom for educational purposes under the care of the Inter-Aid Committee for children.

THIS DOCUMENT REQUIRES NO VISA.

PERSONAL PARTICULARS.

2568

Name..... AUERBACH Ruth.....

Sex..... Female..... Date of Birth..... 15.5.35.....

Place..... Breslau/Schl.....

Full Names and Address of Parents.....

Loithar & Hilde Auerbach

Alexanderstr. 25

BERLIN C.



My identity document for coming to the UK

My father is released from Dachau and the family get visas to the UK

PEOPLE THINK THAT it was impossible to get out of a German concentration camp, that you were doomed as soon as you got there. Before the Final Solution, Hitler's plan was to get Jews to emigrate and the early arrests were partly designed to put pressure on Jews to leave. Dachau was a holding camp, and some prisoners were able to get out if they had documents showing that they would be able to emigrate, although they were forced to dispose of all their property before they could leave. The authorities apparently thought that my father had given permission for his farm to be sold, and this would have helped his case, but we discovered later that he had given no such permission.

Father was released at the end of December 1938, so he must have had a visa by then, which my mother must have queued up for. My niece heard that my mother actually went to Dachau after my father's arrest, spoke to a drunken guard and tried, unsuccessfully, to get my father released. I never heard this story myself. While it is implausible, it does reflect a truth about my mother, that she was an extremely determined person and capable of such an attempt.

We have my father's passport, which has a visa stamp for 9 February 1939. At that time Frank Foley was in charge of the visa section of the British embassy in Tiergarten Strasse in Berlin. Foley issued a lot of visas to Jews, either to travel to Britain or to Palestine, in a generous interpretation of the restrictive regulations of the British government, and it was Foley's deputy Cecil Insall who signed Father's passport. Much later we met Insall's son with his wife, both of whom were



My father's visa to the UK, signed by Cecil Insall

then working for the security services. They came to our home and showed us numerous photos of Cecil Insall.

My father was admitted, the visa says, for agricultural training. No doubt this was a cover term because he was already a farmer, he didn't need any training. My mother's passport has not survived, so we don't know what kind of visa she came on, but it would most likely have been as a domestic servant, because she later did domestic work on a farm.

After his release from Dachau my father went to the farm in Schassbach. He had sent a postcard to Schassbach, but with the censorship delays, my mother and we children had left by the time it arrived. Having failed to find us in Schassbach, Father then went on to Berlin and joined us there.

When in Berlin he received a remarkable letter from one of our neighbours in Schassbach, Johann Moser of Buchegger Farm. By then Gerhard, released from Dachau at the same time as my father, had returned to Hölzl. Moser wrote:

Esteemed Auerbach family!

Above all, we are pleased that the head of the family has returned to you from his journey [that is from Dachau, but it was safer not to mention that]. I had already heard the good news from Gerhard. For the time being Gerhard works again at Hölzl, how long I don't know. He doesn't like it any longer, he is almost a stranger, everything is locked. We are sending you only two chickens, the fox stole some of them. Instead of a third we send you some pork. We wish you all the best for the new year. We hope it will be for you also a peaceful year which is what we wish for with all our heart, dear neighbours.

Greetings from the Moser family.

After what had happened it would have required courage to write to a Jewish family in this way and to send them food.

Years later, when my father was getting old, I wanted to know more about his arrest, but I didn't know how far I could ask. He was standing at the sink and I said, 'Dad, can you tell me what it was like in

Dachau?’ He just started to sob. I thought from then onwards, I’m not going to ask any questions, I had no right. I thought, ‘Well, that’s it. It’s not for me to bring out what he obviously didn’t want to remember.’ The only thing that I did learn from him is that he was beaten, because later on you could get a certain amount of compensation if you had an illness due to your time there. One kidney had, I think, been destroyed. But that was the only time he spoke about it. Neither of my parents spoke much about their past, though perhaps if I had asked more, they would have revealed more. You might think that the six weeks he spent in Dachau was a short time, but when you look at photos of the men incarcerated there, waiting for hours at the *Appell* (roll call) you see that those six weeks could destroy a human being.

My father was the second to come to England. I was the first to arrive on 3 February. My father arrived separately on 24 February, then my mother came with my two brothers in early April, but we don’t know the exact date.

Meanwhile, my mother’s sister Margot and her husband Herbert Hoffmann had succeeded in emigrating to Palestine (we have a postcard dated 17 October 1934 which they sent from Tel Aviv to my parents in Esdorf), and later settled in America. My mother’s brother Erich managed to get to Shanghai with his family. That needed money because you could only get to Shanghai with a return ticket, but Erich was very well-off. ■



Uncle Erich

My mother conceals her age

WHEN SHE CAME to England, my mother decided that she would change her year of birth. In letters and official documents she gave it as 1903, the same as my father, who was ten years younger than her. In hindsight, this explains why no earlier documents have survived, including her passport. She had carefully removed any evidence of her true age.

The truth only came out when my mother was very old and ill, and a doctor asked her age. Peter was there at the time and said what he thought was her age. But I knew better; once when we were taking Aunt Margot to the airport after a visit from the USA, I spoke about my mother as the younger of the two, and Margot said 'No, no! Your mother is older than me, and ten years older than your father.' I told the doctor the truth at that moment because I was worried that otherwise he might give my mother the wrong medication. Later, we were able to get hold of her birth certificate, which confirmed the correct date, 1894.

I believe the main reason my mother concealed her age was that she knew that she would remain the chief breadwinner, and so as to be able to work longer and to build up some credit for pensions, she changed her birth date. That was a great risk, because the various German documents would give her real date of birth. I'm sure she did this for the family, this was one way in which she could help to secure a better future for her children. ■

Living with a foster family

TO BEGIN WITH I lived with foster parents, Mr and Mrs Hart, a middle-class London Jewish family who had one daughter, Geraldine. I stayed there for 13 months, until March 1940. They wanted to keep me, and if my mother and father had not survived, I'm sure I would have stayed with the Harts. Mrs Hart thought I would be a good companion for her daughter, and when she agreed to take me on, she didn't know that my parents were still alive. But my mother decided that she wanted me back. We've found letters which say that my mother couldn't bear to lose me again, as she did the first time when I was taken to the orphanage in Berlin.

This period with the Harts was the first time I felt secure, though whether that was really so or is something that I imagine when I look at a couple of nice photographs of me and my foster sister together, I don't know.



Me with Geraldine, circa 1939

My mother came to see me just once during the 13 months that I was living with the Harts, and that was when she came to fetch me. Apparently when she arrived she said: 'Give me a kiss, Ruth,' but I said: 'No, I mustn't. My Mummy said I shouldn't kiss strangers.' Just think about how you would have handled the situation if you were the birth mother and your daughter said that to you.

In 1999 I received a letter from Geraldine, who had emigrated to Australia. This is what she wrote:

'My earliest memory of seeing you was you dressed in a large knitted dress with what I thought was a strange pattern, and my mother undressing you for a bath. You had a corset on, black woollen stockings and boots, and my mother was horrified that such a small child should be dressed like that. One day [in March 1940] your mother came and everyone was shocked because, as I found out later, my parents had been told your mother and father were in a concentration camp and very unlikely to survive. That was when my parents wanted to adopt you. It seems that your mother arrived quite out of the blue to take you away. I remember hiding under the dining room table and crying. There was a lot of shouting. I remember seeing your mother, not your father. After you had gone my parents received a note from your mother to send on to an address in the Midlands all the clothes and toys that my parents had bought you. They parcelled everything up in a big box and then I knew you would not be coming back. My parents never heard from your parents again.'

I used to think about what happened when I arrived in Britain and I would ask myself, could I have done that, could I have separated the family by giving up one child for fostering? My parents were in a very difficult situation, but this fostering had a huge effect on my childhood, it broke the bond between me and my mother, because I could never understand why she agreed to separate the family. I couldn't bond with my mother as a daughter and mother should. I don't remember ever sitting on my mother's knee, don't remember her saying that I was beautiful. She was very strict and in fact I found her frightening. But I loved my father, who was quite different—a kind of jovial, happy-go-lucky man. ■



Mrs Hart, Geraldine and me, circa 1939

The family settles in Nuneaton

WHILE I WAS being fostered, my parents stayed for a time in Brighton. From there they went to Loughborough, and in early 1940 to Rearsby in Leicestershire, where they lived on a farm with the Spiers family and my mother worked on domestic duties. In March 1940, now with the whole family, my parents moved to Nuneaton because my father was offered work for the war agricultural committee. The five of us lived for a couple of months in one room which doubled up as living room, kitchen, bathroom and bedroom.

My father worked as a labourer on a farm in Wolvey. That was the first clear memory I have of him, on that farm. He was well qualified to run a farm of his own, but at that moment he was happy to be doing any sort of farm work. I remember sitting on this big tractor with huge mudguards and going around with him. Nuneaton is where we settled, where I and my brothers grew up.

At first in Nuneaton we didn't have our own air raid shelter. When an air raid warning went off, we would creep along the ditches to a brickworks where they had these long big chimneys, and it was warm. We stayed there until the all-clear, and then crept back along the ditches. My father would carry my mother, and the rest of us followed. Occasionally I would cry out from fear and exhaustion and my father would pick me up in his strong arms and carry both my mother and me.

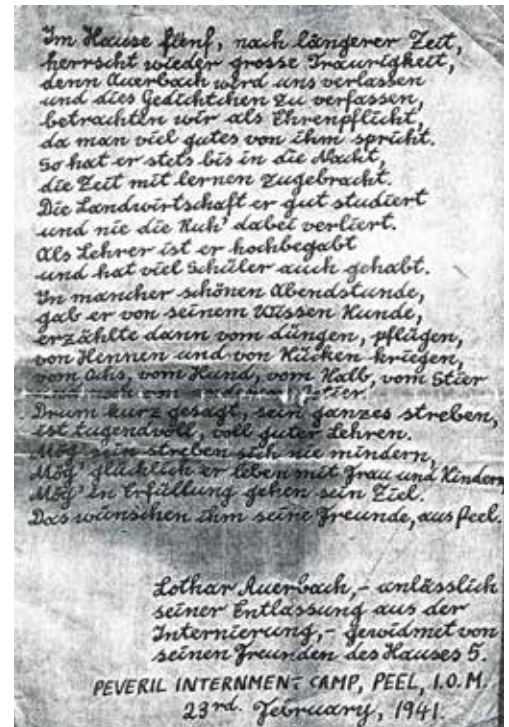
After a few months we moved to the back of a cobbler's workshop. It is now that my memory really becomes vivid. The 'downstairs' consisted of living room and small kitchen which doubled up as a bathroom. The tin bath in which we bathed appeared now and again in the middle of the kitchen and water from a kettle was poured in. The whole process was slow and arduous since we had no running hot water and the cold tap only trickled. My two brothers bathed first and then I was allowed to wash in the same water. My brothers used to wander frequently through the kitchen because it was the only way to the back yard where the toilet was, and I felt vulnerable and exposed. However for us this new home was a palace compared with the first place, despite the *bang bang bang* noise from the cobbler. ■

My father's internment

'ENEMY ALIENS' WERE interned after the start of the war and in July 1940 my father was again taken away from the family, to the Peveril Internment Camp in Peel on the Isle of Man. My mother must have been terrified. Apparently she did think that once Hitler's army was near enough to England, they would invade and that the same would happen in England as in Germany. I remember her speaking of suicide and saying that 'if they come over' she would give poison to the whole family. Many Jews did commit suicide by taking poison, so it is quite possible that she really meant it.

Although Father was separated from the family, he apparently thrived in the internment camp. He gave lectures on poultry keeping and we have his extensive notes from that time, written in English. We also have a sort of testimonial from the camp commander, and a poem written by someone in 'House Five' when he was released on 23 February 1941, which included, in translation, these words:

'He studied agriculture, never losing his patience. He is a very gifted teacher and had many pupils. During many nice hours in the evening he gave us of his knowledge, spoke about manuring and ploughing, hens and chickens, oxen, dogs and calves and bulls and many other animals. To sum up, all his endeavours were honourable and full of wisdom. May his striving never end, may he be happy with wife and children. May he fulfil his ambitions. That is what his friends in Peel wish for him.' ■



Poem about my father by an internee in House Five, February 1941

The family reunited

FOLLOWING MY FATHER'S release from internment, we were able to get together again as a family—a very poor refugee family. My mother eventually found a job at Nuneaton gasworks. She took an English exam in book-keeping, and got a job as an accountant or something similar, and my father continued for a time as an agricultural worker. My parents were already in their fifties when they came to England. My mother had been the main breadwinner and this continued in England because my father's work in agriculture was not well paid. ■

“ My parents were already in their fifties when they came to England. My mother had been the main breadwinner and this continued in England because my father's work in agriculture was not well paid. ”

Early schooling in Nuneaton

IN 1940, WHEN I was five, I went to school. This first school was not a happy experience. Later I went to Stockingford Junior, which was even worse. During the war people couldn't accept a German-Jewish child easily. We were fighting Germany, and the kids somehow got to know that I was German. That was the enemy. And I was Jewish, so I was the enemy of Christ as well. I remember having stones thrown at me. I was a bed-wetter until the war finished, and even beyond that, till I was about 12.

The teachers weren't kind either. I was a very grubby, poor child. I went to school with dirty hands and I remember having to walk from the front of the classroom to the back, showing my hands to all the children. You can imagine how embarrassed I was about that. Then I had nits, and anybody who had nits at that time was sent home. I was given a yellow card and sent home until something was done about it. It was all very intimidating.

My father cycled to work each day which was about eight miles away. I remember my mother used to come home from the gasworks smelling of gas, very tired and always with a headache. She just did not have the energy to look after us. And she had to cope with her disability; I don't know how she survived with people saying: 'Oh, look at that cripple, that German cripple.'

When I was eight, nine or 10 I was a very lonely, quiet child. I had no friends but I did have responsibilities. My mother went to work, and I would go to the bus stop to meet her and help her off the bus, when all the other children seemed to be out playing and enjoying themselves. I took that role very seriously. I was always anxious that my mother might fall, and if she did that it would be my fault.

I remember there was a long air raid shelter in the playing fields at school, and we used to practice during the day. It was a bit like a long Anderson shelter, of the kind that people had in their gardens for protection against air raids—they were made from corrugated iron covered with soil and grass, which was all the planes could see from above. We used to run to the school shelter across the field and down some steps, where there were two long benches. We had to just sit there until the teachers said to go out. We never actually used it for a proper air raid, it was only practice.

I remember also that we had makeshift camp beds. After lunch, we were all left to sleep for a while, which of course was sensible because our nights were disturbed because of the air raids. At home we went to sleep in air raid suits, a little like jogging suits. We never got undressed and had very disturbed nights, and were always tired. When the siren went off we were rushed out of bed already dressed and as quickly as we could, crossed the yard, past the outside toilet and into the garden down some steps to our own Anderson shelter. There we sat in the dark waiting for the siren to sound the all-clear so that we could creep out again and back into the house. During the raids my father would be on fire guard and I was scared that he would not come back. When we were all safely in the house my mother would share an apple giving each one of us an equal share. This I suppose was a thanksgiving, that we had survived another day.

Since my parents worked in the holidays, we were alone at home, but we could go to school for meals. We used to walk to the school and have lunch, then walk back. ■

“ At home we went to sleep in air raid suits, a little like jogging suits. We never got undressed and had very disturbed nights, and were always tired. ”

English must be spoken

WHEN WE CAME over to Britain, my parents tried to be as English as they could and insisted that we speak English at home. After being driven out of Germany, they had to make a start here under the dual handicap of being German and Jewish, and they wanted to stand out as little as possible. They only spoke German when they were saying something they didn't want us to understand. They did, though, reject the idea of changing their name. I am glad about that because Auerbach is a name with a history and there are several celebrated Auerbachs.

The use of English was strongly emphasised in a booklet given to German refugees when they arrived, entitled *Helpful Information and Guidance for Every Refugee*, published by the British Jewish Community. The booklet stressed, above all, loyalty to Britain and the British Commonwealth, and supplied a list of 'duties to which you are honour bound', which included: 'Spend your spare time immediately in learning the English language and its correct pronunciation' and 'Refrain from speaking German in the streets and in public conveniences and in public places such as restaurants. Talk halting English rather than fluent German and do not talk in a loud voice. Do not read German newspapers in public.' I'm sure my parents would have taken these instructions very seriously. ■

Pushing Jewishness into the background

MY FATHER HAD a seat in the synagogue in Coventry, but he never went there and stopped talking about his Jewishness. Whenever I mentioned it in later years, he wasn't interested. He just wanted to be British, to lead a peaceful life over here in England. In Germany, though he may have thought of himself as more German than Jewish, still he had a strong sense of Jewish identity, as we can see from his membership of a Jewish youth organisation in Breslau, his work with young people who wanted to emigrate to Palestine, and his connections with Jewish peace organisations.

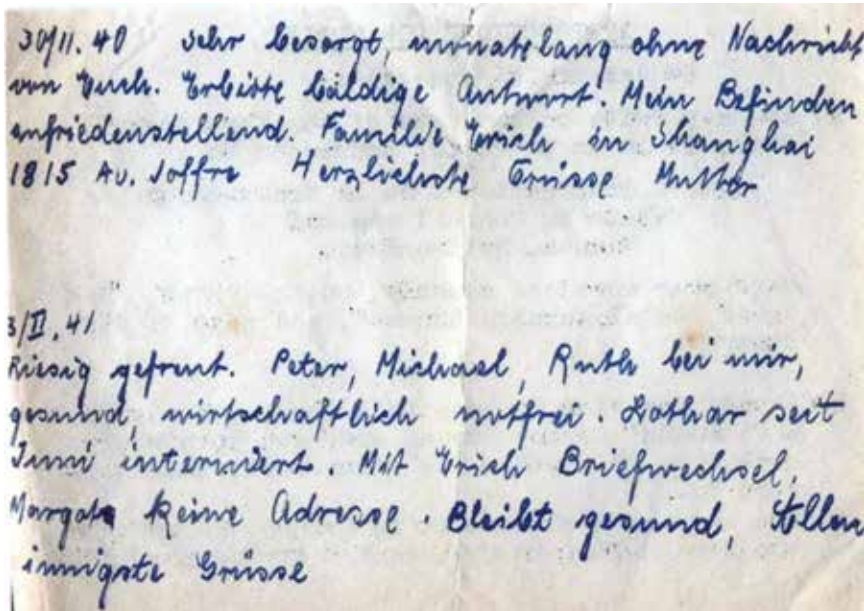
But in England all that was pushed into the background. Once, for his birthday, I gave my father a book by Rabbi Lionel Blue, whom I loved. He was a liberal Jew and a good speaker who pulled you with him, and used to be one of the contributors to *Thought for the Day* on the radio. But when I handed my father the present he said: 'What am I to do with that? Just because he's Jewish, you think I want it?' And he gave it back to me.

My mother also pushed her Jewishness into the background and tried hard to integrate. She did join the AJR (my parents must have been amongst the first members) but her main outside involvement was with the Fabian Society. That was the only social life she had, I think. In Germany she had expressed the wish to bring up a good Jewish family, but here she wanted to be more English than the English. Somebody asked her once where she came from, and she replied in a very strong German accent: 'It's none of your business, but from England, of course!' when it was obvious that she wasn't.

It did not help that my parents were isolated from other Jewish families, and that there was no Jewish support structure in Nuneaton. I do feel that the Jewish organisations could have looked after my parents better. However one thing they did do was to insist that the children would receive some Jewish education, and a member of the Jewish community in Birmingham came once a week to teach me how to speak Hebrew and to read the Torah. I have to say that I now feel more comfortable, I'm not sure why, when I'm together with people with a Jewish and continental background. There is something that we share. ■

Finding out what happened to family

MY MOTHER TRIED after the war to find out what happened to my grandmothers, Laura Ring and Henriette Auerbach. There had been a brief communication from Laura Ring dated November 1940, a letter sent to my mother by the Red Cross in Geneva which took nearly two months to arrive in England. She copied the letter and her reply because the original note from Laura, written on a card issued by the Red Cross, had to be sent back to Geneva. That was the last my mother heard from her own mother.



Laura Ring's note, dated 30 November 1940: "Very worried, no news from you for months. Please reply soon. My health satisfactory. Family Erich in Shanghai 1815 Ave. Joffre. Love, Mother."

My mother's reply: "Immensely pleased. Peter, Michael, Ruth with me, healthy, without economic worries. Lothar interned since June. Correspondence with Erich. No address from Margot. Stay well, dearest greetings to all."

We knew that both Laura and Henriette had been deported from Breslau to Theresienstadt, but we did not have evidence of their deaths. Later we obtained the documentation, because their names were published in the *Gedenkbuch* (Memorial Book for the German Victims of the Holocaust). They died in Theresienstadt in 1942 and 1943, but my parents never talked about that.



My paternal grandmother, Henriette Auerbach



My maternal grandmother, Laura Ring

My grandfathers were spared the Holocaust because they died earlier. My paternal grandfather Mannheim Menachem Auerbach died of a heart attack in 1907, and my maternal grandfather Josef Ring was killed in a cycle accident in 1929, a tragedy which my mother described in vivid detail in a letter to my father.

But my father's sister Frieda, admired as an excellent *Kindergärtnerin*, did not escape. She was deported from Breslau in 1943, most probably to Auschwitz, and was never heard of again. ■

The struggle for compensation

A HUGE AMOUNT of my mother's energy after the war was taken up with a struggle for compensation and restitution.

During this period my family's circumstances were very poor, and they were trying to recoup some of what they had lost, in particular their farm in Schassbach. My father never actually sold the farm, because it was taken over by a Nazi administrator who sold it to another farmer, who continued to occupy it after the war. Since my father had never sold the farm, he made a claim for restitution—not compensation—of his legal property. This was eventually successful, and in 1951 he sold it to Joseph and Amalia Puck. But this was only after years of letters to solicitors and various offices in Germany and Austria and going to the courts. The process of restitution took up a lot of my mother's time, my father's too, and that drew attention away from looking after the children. My mother would come home from the gasworks and would start straight away with the documents. Claims for this, claims for that, and we children were more or less neglected.

So the 1940s were a hard time both for my parents, and for us children. But we had some help from my aunt Margot Hoffman who had settled in America, and was a doctor. She had passed the American exams to qualify, but her husband Herbert didn't pass. A nurse came round to the school and I was declared physically weak and undernourished, and I think the nurse recommended a sun-ray lamp for me. Meanwhile my aunt Margot sent us vitamin pills (which I hated!) and medicines. ■

Teenage years

AS WE WERE growing up we continued to feel the effect of my parents' past. They did shackle us emotionally. I remember saying: 'Dad, why do I have to kiss you if I'm only going down the road?' He said: 'Because I'm not sure we'll ever see you again.'

The past came out in that comment. They were frightened, they had already lost their family in Germany, and they didn't want to lose me. I had very little freedom as a teenager. These days teenagers have boyfriends, and close relationships with friends. I had none of that, I wasn't allowed to go out with a boy. I remember lying to my mother, telling her I was going to school when really I was going to meet a boy.

The oldest son in the family is often the favourite, and without a doubt that was true in our family. I did wonder if things were as bad as I remembered, or thought I remembered, then in 2008 and 2009 we got letters from my cousin Eve, daughter of my mother's sister Margot, then living in the States. Eve had known of the situation at home, and she commented: 'Always felt sorry for Ruth and Michael for not receiving the proper attention and care from their mother. It was always Peter. What a toll it must have taken on them.' And again: 'Tante Hilde doted on Peter (he was her pride and joy), to the exclusion of Ruth and Michael.' ■

“ I remember lying to my mother, telling her I was going to school when really I was going to meet a boy. ”

Secondary school

MY SCHOOLING WAS very poor. In 1947 I failed my 11+, and so did my twin brother Michael. But my older brother Peter was very clever and managed to get a state scholarship between the ages of 16 and 17. My mother desperately wanted me to go to a grammar school but I couldn't because I had failed the 11+. In this case the only alternative was a secondary modern school, which was really to prepare you for shopkeeping or factory work, which my parents didn't want me to do. There was a list of schools to choose from and I remember how embarrassed I was when my mother furiously crossed out all the secondary moderns on the list. The result was that my twin brother and I were sent to a private school, though how my parents got the money for that I don't know.

We went by train every day, at the age of 11. I remember the school as very bad. I stayed there until I was 15 or 16, and left with no qualifications. I did come away though with a prize. I wasn't interested in religious education but I liked the teacher and felt sorry for him when the kids played him up. As a result he gave me a book as an award, dated 1950, the first award I had ever had at school: a history of the Bible.

We didn't learn very much at my private school but we did study something regarded as very important, which was deportment! We had to walk from one corner of the room to another with a book on our head, and more enjoyably, learned to do Grecian dancing.

From there, in 1950, I went to Hinckley Technical College where you could do your GCEs. I failed most of them, but my mother insisted on teaching me German, despite her emphasis on speaking English at home. I took German GCE in many boards, just in case, and passed every time. It was awful, my mother would come home from work, sit down with a German book, and drill me. I learnt some passages off by heart and I still remember some of the phrases. I passed my History GCE also, but I'm not sure what else.

Then at the age of 18 I went to a technical college in Coventry, where I took Maths and History and German, and did just well enough in A-Levels to get me to the University of Keele in Staffordshire. ■



My parents with me, my twin brother, Michael and Ilke Schnabel (behind my mother), daughter of a family friend, circa 1950

Keele University

I WAS AT Keele from 1954 to 1959, and studied German and History. I don't think I was university quality really, but I got into Keele because it was a new university and they couldn't be too choosy.

They had a system where if you studied the Arts, you had to do some science as well, so I did Geology as a subsidiary subject. Then I took a teaching diploma, in parallel with the other subjects. I didn't choose that, my mother made the choice for me to train as a teacher, in fact she chose almost everything in my life—except my husband. But Keele was my first taste of freedom, I was almost in control of my own life and I enjoyed that.

Nobody knew I was Jewish because I hid it, it wasn't something that I was proud of. I had very little contact with my parents during my time at Keele, and when I came home to them I really longed to be back at university. I would say that the term had started and I needed to go back, but it wasn't true. ■

“I didn't choose that, my mother made the choice for me to train as a teacher, in fact she chose almost everything in my life—except my husband.”



Me aged about 20

Meeting Jürgen

I DID A year abroad in 1957 as part of my university course. If you studied a language, you spent one year in the relevant country. I went to the Free University in Berlin, which was an interesting place to live. The Wall was not up at that time, and I often went to East Berlin, and went to the theatres. There was a sense of freedom, but I was lonely and terribly homesick, and I still didn't tell anyone that I was Jewish. I did, though, get friendly with a group of students from different countries and that was lovely. We used to meet up and go to the cinema together.

And then I met Jürgen. It was at a political meeting—not that I was interested in politics, I was just very lonely. We began to see each other, go the cinema together, and the friendship developed. We kept up with each other for a year at a distance. Jürgen wrote numerous letters, and that's why the friendship became so strong. I wrote to him saying: 'Do you realise that because I'm Jewish people might point their finger at you?' and things like that. I thought that it wouldn't be possible for us to get married.

Jürgen came to England to visit, and we weren't allowed to speak any German in the house. I felt that my parents were very negative about him because he was German, and they were afraid of losing me. My mother was especially fearful because I was her support.

“I wrote to him saying: ‘Do you realise that because I’m Jewish people might point their finger at you?’ and things like that. I thought that it wouldn’t be possible for us to get married.”

Jürgen did not feel hostility from my parents to begin with, but it changed after he told my mother that we intended to get married. She told me then that if I married Jürgen she would put her head in the gas oven, it was really the worst kind of emotional blackmail. And she never said sorry about that. She had developed a hardness which she would probably say was due to the conditions of her life, her disability and her upbringing: she had been in an orphanage for a while and for a time had lived without a father. 'Sorry' didn't come into her vocabulary.

When Jürgen and I insisted that we were going to get married, my parents said: 'If you get married, nobody in the family will come to the wedding.' So, what do you do? What could we do? I decided that if nobody was going to attend then I would leave and get married in Germany. My twin brother Michael did come, but at the time Jürgen had hepatitis and jaundice and was in hospital, and they could only wave to each other. Jürgen wasn't well at the wedding.

My parents also said that if I continued the relationship with Jürgen I would be disinherited. I wasn't very bothered because I was determined to marry Jürgen in any case. But when my parents died it turned out that I was part of the will after all, and that the children were left equal shares. Apparently my parents were advised by a solicitor to do that to avoid trouble between me and my brothers. ■

Jürgen's family

JÜRGEN'S PARENTS WERE anxious that they would lose Jürgen, their little boy, to England. His mother was very good looking, and she didn't like any girl or woman who might possibly be a kind of rival. It was very disappointing, because I didn't get on well with my own mother and I hoped that I could have a good relationship with Jürgen's. But we didn't really hit it off. However I got on well with Jürgen's father, we went walking and sailing, and would have a glass of schnapps together when he came home from work. ■

“ His mother was very good looking, and she didn't like any girl or woman who might possibly be a kind of rival. It was very disappointing, because I didn't get on well with my own mother and I hoped that I could have a good relationship with Jürgen's. ”



Our wedding, with Jürgen's father Georg on the left and his brother-in-law Willi on the right, Hannover 1961

Marriage

JÜRGEN AND I were married in Hannover in 1961. People say that your wedding is the best day of your life, but sadly it wasn't so for me. What's more it was at eight in the morning and I had an allergic skin rash from the powerful disinfectant that Jürgen's mother had put on the bedding because of Jürgen's hepatitis!

I remember many years later talking to Jürgen's sister Rosemary and having a bit of an argument with her. I told her I was proud to be Jewish, something which I hadn't admitted for a very long time. She said that was a provocation. However I must say that I am grateful to Jürgen's sister for one thing. It was she who gave me the courage to start drawing and painting. She was an artist in her own right, and she encouraged me. My mother never encouraged me. It was Rosemary who actually told me to draw and paint, and do it in my own style, and achieve a style that people would recognise. I will come back to that later. ■

Life in the 1960s and 70s

AFTER WE MARRIED, Jürgen and I lived in Nuneaton for many years, and our three children were born there, Erica in 1964, Christof in 1966, Miriam in 1967.

Both Jürgen and I had careers in teaching. Jürgen got a Certificate of Education (History, Arts and Crafts) at Coventry College of Education, and from 1965 to 1969 taught German and General Studies at Nuneaton Technical College. He also worked at the Motor Industry Research Association for three years, doing abstractions and translations, and obtained an external BA in Linguistics and German Studies at the University of London.

In 1972 we decided to spend some time in Germany, because we wanted our three children to become familiar with their German side. We lived for a year in Scherfede, near Warburg. Erica and Christof attended a Catholic primary school and Miriam a kindergarten. Jürgen and I taught English in schools in Scherfede, and I taught in Hannover as well.

We returned to Nuneaton in 1973. Jürgen was appointed Head of Modern Languages at Foxford Comprehensive School in Coventry, and in 1974 I became Head of Modern Languages at Manor Park School in Nuneaton.

In 1977 we also began to run evening classes in German at our house in Nuneaton. ■

“ In 1972 we decided to spend some time in Germany, because we wanted our three children to become familiar with their German side. ”

My parents make a living

AFTER A DIFFICULT period when they first came to Britain, my parents were able to earn a living, though with several ups and downs. As mentioned earlier, when my father was released from internment, he continued working as a farm labourer, while my mother remained the chief breadwinner with her bookkeeping job at the Nuneaton gasworks. After a few years in his farm job my father was made redundant, and had to look for other work. He was offered work as a grave-digger but my mother said no, you mustn't take that. Eventually he found a job at the Massey Ferguson factory in Coventry, which made agricultural machinery. He worked on the track there, but this was very difficult for him. The other men were much younger than him and he couldn't keep up with the speed of the track, he felt like a bird in a cage and it made him quite ill.

So he left the factory—this was in the 1950s—and returned to farming in a different way. Ideally my parents would have liked to acquire a small-holding, but they didn't have the capital to do so. My father then decided to breed chinchillas. He bred the first white chinchilla in Europe. Chinchillas look a bit like rabbits but are more closely related to rats. They have very soft thick fur and were fashionable at the time, women had these hats and coats made of chinchilla fur. However my father never killed a chinchilla—he was a very peaceful man. He bred chinchillas to improve the fur.

My parents built a huge shed for the chinchillas at the back of the garden. It was without planning permission, which led to some trouble because the council objected that you could not have such a shed for agricultural use in a residential area, but the shed survived. Various people, including other breeders, would come to look at the animals. When I was already at university, I remember coming home and seeing my mother in an apron laden with money. The visitors must have been buying the chinchillas or putting a deposit down.

After a while my father got a job as a judge of chinchillas; he travelled around the country—something that was good for his morale. Jürgen and I used to look after these creatures when my father was away—they were very quick and good at escaping! It was a lucrative business, but the project didn't last long because after a few years the market fell out of it. After the chinchillas, my father was at home for a long time, not able to earn, but he then hit on the idea of breeding chihuahuas. This was successful for a time, but the market soon dropped out of that as well. However,

my parents must have done quite well financially out of these activities because my father was able to buy a big old Jaguar.

The next project was an investment in a record shop in Nuneaton. This was in the early 1960s at the time of the Beatles. My mother ran the shop together with my brother Peter, and my father used to travel around to smaller shops in the wider area, delivering records that they had ordered and would sell on. I worked at the shop for a time. I was behind the till though I wasn't allowed to use the till itself, that was my mother's job. But I wasn't knowledgeable about the music that I was selling. Once someone came in and said 'Do you love me?' and I thought, what kind of a question is that?! Not realising that they were referring to the 1962 hit song. The business was quite lucrative, but came to an end when a number of big chains like W.H.Smith began to sell records in large quantities.

My father used to bet on football and spent a lot of time on it. He would receive numerous papers in order to study form, which drove my mother nuts. He phoned me up one day and announced: 'Ruth, we've won £75,000!' That was the largest amount you could win and I said: 'Are you sure, Dad?' and he said: 'Yes, I'm sure.' But he had confused the actual results with his forecast, and it was terribly disappointing for both of us. During the time when my father was gambling on football, my mother started putting money on horses, and I had to control myself not to get involved as well, though I did sneak into betting shops to put some money on the Grand National.

My mother remained at the Nuneaton gasworks during the 1950s and 1960s, but in the early 1970s she began to suffer with various health problems and later developed dementia. She was more or less bed-ridden in her last years (she died in 1983) and we couldn't understand anything she said. Then in the early 1980s my father had a major stroke and for a time we had a chain of carers to look after both

“ He phoned me up one day and announced: 'Ruth, we've won £75,000!' That was the largest amount you could win and I said: 'Are you sure, Dad?' and he said: 'Yes, I'm sure.' ”

parents— my brother Peter was in charge of that—so there was always somebody with them. I used to go in every day, but I was teaching and couldn't stay all day. My parents must have been quite well-off by then in order to afford all this care. They had compensation from Germany and income from my mother's work and from my father's various projects, but I didn't know the details because they didn't entrust me with information about their finances.

My father lived for six years after my mother's death. You might think that after such a long marriage, after everything they had been through together, he would never laugh again, yet he was still able to smile and chuckle. In his own way he did enjoy life, even after the big stroke which left him paralysed on one side. ■



My parents, circa 1975

Beech House and the Language School

IN 1987 WE moved to a large house, Beech House, in Market Bosworth, where we set up the Schwiening Language School, mainly for business people who wanted to improve their English. We also organised many talks, cultural events and dinners.

We put on summer courses for small groups of youngsters from Europe and in that way made many contacts in France, Denmark, Germany and Italy. It was a very rewarding time. We took the groups out, we had singing and drama sessions. I was teaching, cooking (with some help), organising activities, and I was seeing to it that the kids got on well with each other. But not too well! It was me who had to sit outside the bedrooms to stop the boys from encouraging the girls into the boys' bedrooms, and to deal with the youth who said: 'But I'm betrothed! Why can't she sleep in my bedroom?'

We had a phone call from a woman in East Germany who wanted her daughter to come over, but said that her daughter was very disabled, in a wheelchair and would we still accept her? We couldn't exclude her because of her disability, but it was a big responsibility.

The adults we had to approach in a different way. For example, I was teaching with newspapers, and one time we had two Danish men, associated with the Danish Labour Party and trade union movement. We went to a local meeting attended by a Midlands MEP who had recommended our language school to the Danes. She asked them what they were doing at the school and they said they had been reading about the Profumo affair, and had learnt all about kerb-crawling!

We stayed at Beech House for 27 years. It was a very busy and rewarding period of our lives, then in 2014 we moved to our current smaller home in Moorland Close in Market Bosworth. ■



Jürgen and me (standing at the back, middle) with some students at Beech House Summer School

The Field

IN THE 1980s we started keeping animals on rented land, and in 1992 we bought what we call 'The Field', about ten acres, with money that I inherited from my parents. We started with two Shetland ponies, then moved on to goats, then to sheep and alpacas, and this became a big part of our lives. Today the Field is less busy, but we still keep two ponies and they need daily attention.

This project was important to me because it represented a continuity with my father's love of animals, and was also great fun for our children and grandchildren. We had a discussion once with several



Jürgen and me with our Shetland ponies



Our daughter Erica with goats

grandchildren about taking on a new animal. I asked them what they would like. One said: 'We've already got goats, let's have sheep,' and another said: 'No, I don't like sheep so much!'

We have also planted many trees. My father used to plant trees on the farm in Esdorf to mark events such as births, and we did that here in England when our children were born, and also for friends when their parents died. ■

Return to Austria and discovering the family library

WHEN MY MOTHER was in Germany, she collected classical books, and also fairy stories which I love, and took them with her to Austria.

One day, I met a guy called Geoff. He told me I used to teach him. I asked him what he was doing now. He said: 'Various things, including driving people to Austria by bus for skiing.' I asked him: 'Where?' And he said: 'Klagenfurt.' This rang a bell immediately because of the connection between Klagenfurt and the story of my parents' farm in Schassbach. In 2001, Jürgen and I had gone to see the farm and met the present owner, Loretta Puck, the daughter-in-law of Joseph and Amalia Puck, to whom my father sold the property in 1951, after he had successfully reclaimed it. Loretta said she had something to show me and there in the kitchen were piles of books. This was the family library, mostly my mother's books but also my father's, which had been hidden in the attic and had been there for over 60 years. It was amazing.

Geoff was about to go over to Austria so I asked if he could bring these books back with him. He did, and as a result we now have most of my mother's books, if not all. It was a wonderful discovery because my mother referred in documents to the fact that she once had a library. In the course of the restitution proceedings after the war, witnesses testified that there had been a library, but the Gestapo had confiscated the books because they were Jewish, and my parents assumed that were lost.

The library shows the wide range of my mother's interests. There are books of philosophy and literature, and not just German literature, but also French, English and Russian literature. It was a fair-sized collection which revealed a side of my mother which we had hardly seen in England. The collection had included fairy stories, but the man who had the farm and lived there after the war, had four children, and no doubt they took those stories with them. In any case they had disappeared, which is a shame, because I am so fond of fairy stories.

In 2005 we went to Austria again, following a visit to the UK by Loretta Puck and her partner. On this occasion Loretta invited us to a service in a local Catholic church. At first I was reluctant to go because I had already attended a service, in a Baptist church, during the earlier visit, but in the end I agreed. When we arrived we met the priest and discovered that the service was being held especially

for us. It was inspired by a Christian lady in the area who had taken a special interest in the fate of the Jews, and the purpose was to ask forgiveness. Some young people who had been playing music during the service, and most of the congregation, queued up to embrace me at the end, and give me a rose. After that I thought it was only right that I should speak, and I addressed them in my faltering German. I said: ‘You have asked for forgiveness, but it is not for me to forgive because this is about my parents, and I don’t know how they would have reacted. But you don’t need to ask for forgiveness, because you have done nothing wrong. You live in a beautiful part of the country, you have your life in front of you, so be positive and look forward to enjoying it.’ That was all I could say.

Jürgen and I have proposed a memorial plaque in Sankt Andrä (near Schassbach) to commemorate my parents and Gerhard. It hasn’t happened yet but we hope that it will be possible. ■



Some of my mother’s books, now in our home in Market Bosworth



With Loretta Puck after the special service in the Catholic Church of St. Marein, Kaernten, May 2005, during our second visit to Austria. The priest, Andreas Stronski, is in the background.

Visiting Poland

WE HAVE ALSO visited Poland twice, in 2015 and 2017. Jürgen had been in touch with a teacher in my father's home town (formerly Reichenbach, now Dzierżoniów), who had researched the fate of Jews there, so we had some contacts in Poland already.

During these visits to Poland we were based in Wrocław (formerly Breslau). Here we found the house that had belonged to my maternal grandparents Josef and Laura Ring, and also my grandfather Josef Ring's tomb in the Jewish cemetery. From Wrocław we went to Esdorf, now Osolin, and were able to see the house and remains of the farm which my parents developed after they got married. They hardly spoke of it, and until these visits I knew nothing about the place where I had spent the first year and a half of my life, all I had was a picture on a postcard. For many years I had wanted to see it, so this was a big moment for me. It was very moving to see the cowshed and stables that my father had built and the well that he had dug. It brought me in touch at last with something about my family's past

A small part of the land that my parents farmed from 1930 to 1936, had been kept and was now a large garden. The young woman now living there, Elzbieta, was lovely and invited us in. Jürgen and I don't speak Polish, and she had no English or German, but we had our grandson Josh with us and he was very helpful, he managed to communicate with smiles and handshakes even without a shared language.

When my father was doing building work on the property, before my mother settled in, she would come most weekends from Breslau and my father would fetch her from the station with horse and cart. (In one letter she warned my father that she would have the dog with her and not to be late—a telling remark because he was very laid-back and always late!) During our first visit we walked along that same road from the station—a memorable moment.

On our second visit to Poland, Jürgen and I were accompanied by our grandson Max, who like Josh was very helpful, and what's more had learned a little Polish (and now has a Polish girlfriend who comes from somewhere near Wrocław!). We were again based in Wrocław and this time we met a young woman, Joanna Kaliszuk, who has a flat in the house that once belonged to Joseph and Laura Ring, and speaks some English. It was an amazing experience for me to see the house where my grandparents had lived. I rang the bell, Joanna came out and after we explained who we were, she invited us up and



My grandson Josh and me near the well that my father had dug,
Osolin 2015

gave us tea. She has a menorah, and when I asked why, since it was clear that she wasn't Jewish, she said: 'I just liked it, and bought it.' Our plan was to go to Osolin/Esdorf the next day by train, but then we received a message from Joanna asking if she could come with us, and that she had a friend with a car who would also like to come. We had been looking for an interpreter, but thought that if we couldn't find one, we would manage on our own. But now we had the good fortune of both a lift and an interpreter.

In Osolin we had tea in the garden with Elzbieta, who was again very friendly. Max was able to connect with her with his few words of Polish, and Joanna interpreted. After that we stayed in touch with Joanna, and I sent Christmas presents to her and her friend. We have invited them to visit us in



Me, Elzbieta Kotowska and Jürgen, Osolin 2015

England, but in the last two years that has been impossible because of the pandemic, and we have not heard from them for a while.

During these two trips we also visited Dzierżoniów where my father had grown up, and found the family house. We were met at the synagogue in the town, and I was asked to tell the story of the Auerbach and Ring families and my own story.

These contacts in Austria and Poland have been very important for me, and in Poland I have been struck by the fact that the people in that part of the country have suffered dislocations similar to those of my own family. These too are displaced people, pushed out of areas in eastern Poland that were taken over by the Russians, into areas that were once part of Germany and were now in western Poland.



The family house in Dzerzoniow in which my father lived as a child, and which my grandmother was forced to sell before her deportation to Theresienstadt ghetto, 2017

Although my father was keen to take on an English identity, there was a deeper place of attachment to his younger life, and these visits were for me a way of connecting with that. Once when my father was quite elderly—it was after he had a stroke and he was in a wheelchair—I took him out and when I told him it was time to go home now, he really surprised me by saying: ‘But this isn’t real home!’ So I said: ‘Tell me about home.’ He closed his eyes, appeared transported, and became eloquent:

‘Home is where the mountains are. Home is where the air is fresh, the pastures are green and wild flowers sway in the gentle breeze. Home is where I can hear the sound of the cow bells ringing in the distance, where the horses plough the fields, and in winter the children ski down the snow-covered hills, laughing and shouting. Home is where I can eat *apfelstrudel* and real bread. The *apfelwein* tastes so good and the songs of the villagers who dance and celebrate the end of harvest echo in my ears. Home is where I can speak my *muttersprach*. Home is all these things and much more. Home is where my heart and soul are and where I will find peace.’

I asked him if he would like to go there now, but he said: ‘Not yet. I’m not ready yet. I owe Britain so much and must repay my debt to a country which, without questioning, took a Jew in with his family and gave them a second chance of life. But one day I want to go home.’ Sadly he died before that dream could be realised. ■

Berlin

IN ADDITION TO the connections with Austria and Poland, we have also attached great importance to our relationship with Berlin. We have been many times, with children, grandchildren and friends, and our grandson Josh is currently living there. Josh is a runner and he has impressively set himself the task of running to all the *stolpersteine* in the city. The *stolpersteine* are small concrete blocks commemorating people who were persecuted by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945, laid into the pavement in front of the homes of victims of the Nazis, with names engraved on a brass plate on each *stolpersteine*.



Left to right: Jürgen, Josh, Calvin, Erica, me and Anna at the Neptune Fountain, Berlin



With my daughter Erica and her son Josh at the *Kindertransport* Memorial, Friedrichstrasse station, Berlin

In 2008 we were invited to the unveiling of the *Kindertransport* memorial at Friedrichstrasse station, from which I had left in February 1939, and we revisited the memorial several times.

Three years later I was also invited to the opening of the *Kindertransport* memorial in Hoek van Holland.

On one of our later visits to Berlin we were accompanied by an American cousin and were showing him the Friedrichstrasse memorial. There was a guide at the statue explaining what the statue meant,



Jürgen and me with police cadets then guarding the *Kindertransport* Memorial



At the unveiling of the *Kindertransport* memorial in Hoek van Holland 2011

and all of a sudden I was inspired to say: ‘I was one of those *kinder!*’ After that I somehow took over the whole talk. The guide just smoked and listened, apparently quite happy for me to replace him.

In Berlin we established a further connection through a Russian Jewish lady, Ella, whom we met through the *Kindertransport* events and with whom we are still in touch. She emigrated to Germany from the Crimea and runs a summer school just outside Berlin, mainly for Russian Jewish children, and also has a centre in Berlin itself. Jürgen helped her with applying for funding for the summer school. The applications had to be in English so Ella wrote them in German and Jürgen translated. I was given a job in the school, a week of talks and doing artwork with the children, with board and lodging and travel all paid for. There was dancing and singing in the courtyard before breakfast and altogether it was a great Jewish-based experience.

The most recent visit was in 2017 when the Berlin Senate invited me to spend a week in the capital, as part of a special programme for former Jewish citizens. That was a great honour. ■

“ ...all of a sudden I was inspired to say:
‘I was one of those *kinder!*’ ”

Embarking on art: *the Bloodstone of the Star*

I BEGAN TO do artwork in the 1980s. I didn't know quite where to start, or how to start, because I hadn't done anything like that before. It was just a feeling that I wanted to do something. I had been reading a lot about the Holocaust and had vivid pictures in my mind. That's what inspired me and started me off. I'm not sure exactly how it arose, but I had the idea of working with something called Artex. This isn't a plaster of Paris, it's more like concrete but not as hard as that, it's very malleable. And I began to create two and three-dimensional pictures based on the Holocaust, which looked pretty frightening.

The curator of the Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery had seen some of my work and asked me to put on an exhibition, giving me a year to prepare. And so in 1984 I put on my first show, *Bloodstone of the Star*. Bloodstone is traditionally a symbol of courage and wisdom, and the Star referred to the Star of David.

My brother Peter tried to dissuade me. When I asked why he didn't want me to do it, he said: 'People will persecute you, they will break your windows. In any case, I don't want my children to know they are Jewish or have Jewish roots.' He never spoke to me about being Jewish, nor did my twin brother Michael. Once again he wanted to filter out the past, he didn't want his children to go through what he had gone through, although Peter's son David did become interested in our family history.

That exhibition was the key to me to unlocking a cupboard to all that had happened, and the key to finding my own voice. I was saying: 'I'm going to be an individual now, I'm going to do what I think is right,' without my mother standing behind me and saying do this or that. Peter told me to think about my parents. If it wasn't my parents telling me what to do, it was Peter. But I went my own way, and it made me feel liberated. It was like a door opening wide at last. It was very therapeutic.

The exhibition started in Nuneaton in 1984, then went to different places around the Midlands, and finally in 1985 to Keele University where I had studied. I left a book for people to say what they thought, to react to what they had seen. ■



Above: This portrait was taken at around the time of my exhibition, 1984

Left: Poster for my exhibition, Nuneaton 1984



Above: Shabbat Shalom 1+2. I looked into my mother's eyes and asked her, "Where is God?" "God is within you. Chai wekajem, live my child, live forever."

Right: The Severed Dream. Upon awakening, the thorns had become barbed wire, encircling him; the doves of peace and freedom had turned into predators, waiting for the kill. The tree became gnarled, charred, its life oozing away. His beautiful dream of plenty, freedom and life was not to be.



My artwork develops

SOME YEARS LATER I decided to do an MA in Art. I needed some kind of direction, because up to then I was really just playing around. I enrolled for an MA in Art at Leicester Polytechnic, now De Montfort University, and got a degree in European Arts and Humanities in 1998. I wasn't happy with that course because it didn't give me the direction I was looking for. But it did teach me one thing. The tutor would say to me: 'Ruth, don't be so direct.' I would draw a mother waving goodbye to her children, and she would say, don't do it like that, do it more symbolically, do something else which gives the same message, and I followed their advice. If you wanted to portray loneliness, don't do it with a child all alone in the world but symbolise it, for example, with an empty attic.

Then I moved on to claywork. I liked really working with my hands, and did a number of pieces. I was especially inspired by some of the works that we saw in Germany, in particular a very moving group of sculptures, created in DDR times, depicting the Rosenstrasse protest in 1943, a protest by the non-Jewish wives of Jewish men who had been arrested, who feared that their men would be deported. ■



In clay: boat people escaping conflict and persecution



In clay: 'Empathy', inspired by the Rosenstrasse sculptures

Colour and glass

IN THE 1980s, when I was teaching some classes at our language school but also had more time for my artwork, I began to use colour. Suddenly I woke up, I decided there was more to life than grey, black and white, and charcoal. The world became much brighter for me.

In one painting, *Refugee Girl*, a little girl stands on a suitcase. She might be me or any refugee or asylum seeker. On her left is a dark past with a rootless tree. The girl is painted on a panel which can be opened, revealing the present in a mirror (where am I now?), and the possibility of entering into a brighter future, represented by colourful imagery on the right.

I started to work in glass. I took a weekend course and saw how a solid piece of glass can be melted and have colour added. It was marvellous and led me to move away from painting. I like painting because it gives you great freedom to express yourself, but I don't think I'm really good at it. I can't do 'chocolate box' pictures; I can't look at a scene and paint it. The kind of paintings I do are more from the heart, very personal.

In 2000 I had an exhibition, *Looking at the Stars*, at Leicester City Gallery, and an exhibition of ceramics, paintings and glasswork in Cambridge, jointly with Lorraine Richardson. That was followed in 2001 by a show called *Form and Fantasy*, at Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery. As I mentioned earlier, when I took up glass, I used it to show my feelings about my parents' escape from Nazi Germany and Austria, and this was a very important moment in the development of my artwork. Here are some examples which allowed me to express in glass the shattering impact of Nazism on my parents' lives:



Discovering colour



Above: Refugee girl. Opening to
the future

Left: Refugee girl

Opposite: My parents being chased
from Germany



My Story Ruth Schwiening



After *Kristallnacht*, my parents' lives were shattered



Above: Nacht und Nebel (“Night and Fog”), inspired by the arrest of Jews at night



Right: Violinist with Bird (inspired by Chagall)

At the same time much of my work is in lighter vein, simply about having fun.

In more recent years I have created a Tree of Life in four large joined glass panels for Leicester Reform Synagogue. We got to know Rabbi Irit through our friend Reni who had also been driven out of Germany. Reni was active in the synagogue and used to come to meetings arranged by the AJR for the East Midlands, which we hosted. Rabbi Irit came to our home and saw some of my artwork. She asked if I would like to make a window in coloured glass, then increased that to two and finally



Autumn colours (lit from behind)

four panels. I made it using the method where you put copper round each leaf, so that they can be joined by soldering them all together. There were hundreds of leaves involved and that was a major task.

I also made a piece in 2011 depicting the four seasons for a synagogue in Hameln in Lower Saxony, to be placed in front of the eternal light. This commission was for the first new liberal synagogue to be dedicated in Germany since the Second World War. Most of the congregation were Russian Jews who had emigrated to Germany and had settled in that area.



Tree of Life. Leicester Reform Synagogue window



Above: With the Four Seasons, Hamelin 2011

Right: Bird



Birds are special for me and often appear in my glasswork; a bird depicts freedom. I said to Jürgen that I want to be a bird one day, able to roam around and fly freely. I also often include a boat, which represents the *Kindertransport*. Another common theme is the menorah, which takes me back to my roots.

My artwork is a very big part of my life. If I didn't have it, I don't think there would be anything to replace the feeling that I get working with my hands. And the mixing of colours goes with my philosophy of life that all races are equal, and one can mix. I really love this work, though I can also get frustrated. It is de-stressing but it can be stressful as well! ■



Boat and menorah

After18 Charity

ONE OF THE effects of my upbringing and possibly Jürgen's as well, is that we are keen to help people who have been displaced in other countries. There is a Leicester charity called *After18*, which specialises in supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking young refugees who are trying to adjust to living in the UK and to prepare for their future, and provides a range of activities for young people to socialise, have fun and learn new skills. For a number of years we have been hosting *After18* groups at our home in Market Bosworth. We have shown them the Field, I have done glasswork with them, we have cooked meals, searched for Easter eggs, laughed and danced. I don't ask about their past unless they bring it up themselves, but when you do hear about it you realise what horrendous experiences they have all been through. A group of young women from Afghanistan visited us recently and I did some painting and glasswork with them and we worked on a cushion using fabric paints. ■

“ I don't ask about their past unless they bring it up themselves, but when you do hear about it you realise what horrendous experiences they have all been through. ”

The past and its impact

I HAVE BEEN thinking a lot recently about how the past affected not only my parents, but my generation as well. My parents brought their trauma with them, not on purpose, but it fell on our shoulders also, and that made us into a kind of broken family. I feel that my brothers were especially affected, though we didn't realise to what extent until we were grown up.

My twin Michael went through everything that I went through, but unlike me he has cut himself off completely from the past, which is a shame because it is part of our history. To this day, he does not want to talk about his early life at all, he has completely erased it, I think because he felt so disadvantaged. He took up boxing and boxed till he was 85. And when I asked him why, he said: 'Because I'm fed up of being shoved around.'

Peter's answer to the past was also to try and forget, he didn't want anybody to know that he had Jewish roots. But he did take his responsibility as the oldest son very seriously. He looked after our parents when they were infirm (particularly my mother when she had dementia), right up to the end, and I admire the personal sacrifice he made for that.

When Peter was on his deathbed with pancreatic cancer, I offered him my Star of David. He said: 'No, not yet.' So he hadn't rejected that side of his life altogether. I put it on his bedstead, where it stayed until he died. His son asked a rabbi to talk at his funeral, and I saw after his cremation that there was a Star of David on the casket with his ashes. Not long before, Peter had said: 'I was born a Jew, and I'm going to die a Jew.' This was the first time I remember him saying anything like that, something which acknowledged the past, which showed what had been there all the time but he was determined not to reveal to the world. That was amazing for me. ■

Jewish identity

PEOPLE WILL SAY: ‘You don’t go to the synagogue, you don’t eat kosher food, how can you say you’re a Jew?’ Yes, I’m an atheist, I don’t eat kosher food, and I denied my Jewishness when I was growing up because I wanted to be the same as everybody else. And yet now I feel my Jewishness very much, and that is because of my parents. They too rarely went to synagogue and never talked to me about being Jewish, they just carried on trying to make a good life themselves and for us. Yet as we discovered from the early letters between my father and mother, underneath it all they had a strong feeling about Jewish traditions. Although my father was not observant, he paid into the synagogue in Coventry and had a seat there, and paid for his burial there. He died in 1989 and at the end wanted to be buried in an orthodox religious place. He told me that he didn’t want to be buried next to a Christian.

I have a menorah. For a long time I didn’t even know what it was, but now it is an important part of the Jewishness that I feel. ■

Our children and grandchildren

MY PARENTS WERE very aware of the importance of family and my father would say: 'Ruth will keep the family together.' I have taken on that responsibility of keeping the memory and the heritage of the family alive, following the death of my mother Hilde in 1983 and my father Lothar in 1989.

The family as a whole has not been as unified as my parents would have wished, but Jürgen and I are blessed by being close to our children Erica, Christof and Miriam, and our eight grandchildren.

Erica's partner is Calvin and their children are Ben, Josh, and Anna. Erica is a teacher, but retired in 2021. In that year she received an award from the German embassy in London as 'one of the best and most dedicated champions of German in secondary schools in the UK.' She has now started a catering business together with her daughter Anna. During the Covid pandemic she generously donated food to people in Balsham.

Christof married Anthea. Their children are Alix, Georgina, and Max. Christof is a lecturer in Physiology at Cambridge University with particular interest in cell signalling. In December 2021, Alix gave birth to her first child, Wilfred.

Miriam married Steve. Their children are Martha and Laurence. Miriam is Assistant Professor at the University of Warwick. She recently co-authored an article entitled 'An intervention to adapt the lecture format using technology-enhanced learning'.

Sadly, Jürgen's father died in 1965 at the age of 59, too young for him to see our happiness and success in England and to enjoy Erica, Christof and Miriam. But his wife Ella softened after our marriage and took a great interest in her grandchildren. She visited us in England several times, and paid for our holidays in Germany.

My parents would see their grandchildren regularly and had a good relationship with them, especially my father who was a softie, while my mother had a more stern approach.



With our first great-grandchild Wilfred,
born 2 December 2021

I am close to my grandchildren, I feel intense love for them, and Jürgen and I are now delighted to have our first great-grandchild, Alix's son Wilfred, born in 2021. I painted a bright picture of flowers in celebration!

All this is such a contrast with my own background because I never knew my grandparents. My oldest granddaughter said to me once, 'Grinny, you're not like a proper Grandma. You wear trainers and joggers, but you should be sitting and knitting in a rocking chair!' And I thought, 'Well I've got no example of what a grandmother should do. You'll just have to take me as I am.'

The generations that follow us are not burdened by the past as my parents were, and as to some extent we have been also. Our children don't have any issues in connection with their Jewish roots. I once asked Erica what she felt about her identity, given that Jürgen was German and I was Jewish, and she just said, 'I feel British.' I never asked Christof this question, but the issue of identity came up after Brexit, because all our children wanted to apply for German citizenship.

Christof phoned me one day and said, 'Mum, how would you feel if we took on German citizenship?' For a while I was shocked and said, 'Can't you wait till I'm dead?' Maybe

it was the same feeling that my parents had experienced about losing me to Germany when I got married, I don't know. But Christof explained the reason, that they wanted to regard themselves as citizens of Europe, wanted their children to be able to travel more easily, to use the Erasmus grant to study abroad, to enrich their lives, as Josh is doing now in Berlin. I quickly realised that my initial reaction was wrong, and phoned Christof to apologise, saying that of course they should go ahead if this is what they wanted. And so Christof and his children, Erica and her children, Miriam and her children, all now have German citizenship. They could have arranged that through me, because I had been a German citizen, but in fact they did it through Jürgen, who was still a German citizen when our children were born.

Our children and grandchildren are not preoccupied with the traumas of the past, and if you were to ask the grandchildren, do they feel Jewish, they would probably say no. But they are aware of their roots in the German and Jewish traditions and have been enriched by that. Our grandson Josh, who lives in Berlin, is taking a great interest in my family and to some extent Jürgen's also.

The key thing for me, in relation to my children and grandchildren, is not academic achievement or success, though all three of my children have been successful in that way. What has mattered to me is that they would grow up with empathy and understanding of other people, would be able to get on with anyone whatever their religion or colour, and be helpful to others. And in this respect I could not have wished for more. ■



Top row left to right: Jürgen, Laurence (Miriam's son), Ruth, my son, Christof. Second row left to right: Alix (Christof and Anthea's daughter), Martha (Miriam's daughter), Calvin (Erica's partner), Max (Christof and Anthea's son). Third row left to right: Josh (Erica and Calvin's son), Georgina (Christof and Anthea's daughter), Anthea (Christof's wife), Anna (Erica and Calvin's daughter). Fourth row left to right: Jürgen and me, Ben (Erica and Calvin's son), my daughters, Miriam and Erica.

Appendix: Some stories

*The Hidden Strength (published in I Came Alone: The Stories of the Kindertransports (1990)
(Inspired by my father, Lothar Auerbach)*

England offered him a new home. It reunited him with his family. He had to learn and relearn but he was a willing pupil and he shirked no task. The work that followed helped to revitalise, broaden and rebuild his body and his mind. He gained new confidence and his gratitude to the country which had adopted him without questioning his race and religion knew no bounds. He was determined once again to stand tall and broad for England as he had in his youth for Israel. The years of unemployment and leanness did not discourage him. 'I've been through a living hell already. I'll get through this.' And he did. He, through his patience and tolerance, he, who had suffered so much because of the intolerance of others, taught Hester to be strong.

Only once had she seen him sag under the pain inflicted by her upon him. It was when she announced to him her intended marriage to a Goy. She did not look at his face as she told him. 'Father I am going to marry him. We love each other.' She watched his stance alter. He shuffled uncertainly from one foot to the other and then sat down heavily as if an invisible force had dragged him. Hester did not have the courage to face him to see his reaction—but there was no need for this. His back expressed all she needed to know. His neck muscles grew tense and she could feel the rising anger within him. Soon his shoulders dropped and his back rounded. She did not need to look at his face to know that his eyes were full of tears. His shoulders spoke his thoughts louder than any voice. 'How could you do this to me? You are betraying yourself, your fathers and forefathers'.

Hester had wanted to scream in reply, 'No father, you do me an injustice to accuse me.' She was now feeling his strength within her. 'What we are doing is good and right. We are betraying no one—least of all you, father.' Hester however remained silent. She did not after all have the strength to hurt him. Time passed and with the passage of time his children bore him grandchildren. With the grandchildren came reconciliation. He played with his children's children and gave them rides on his back just as he had once done with Hester...'

The Love Ring or How to Win at Tennis
(A story for my daughters Erica and Miriam)

An old woman often sat with her daughter enjoying her company. They shared not only their happiness but also their worries, sadness and problems. On one such occasion the daughter told her mother of the new-found passion for the game of tennis. Although she put her heart and soul in the game she often lost. She became frustrated and hit wildly at the oncoming balls. Each stroke would however take the ball into the net or out of the court. The girl became disheartened and angry and her unruly curls would fall over her eyes making it increasingly difficult to judge her shots correctly.

The mother listened with interest and concern. She then had an idea how she could help her daughter. She would knit her a 'love ring' which the girl was to wear around her head to keep her hair from falling into her eyes. She took her finest baby Alpaca wool which was as soft as down and as white as snow and concentrated on the task in hand. She knitted with purpose and determination. With each stitch she included a special ingredient, namely love, the love only a mother can have for her child. The ring grew, and as it did, so did the mother's love, to such an extent that she thought her heart would break. Her work was nearly finished to her satisfaction but not entirely, something was lacking. She went into her workshop, and from a piece of mirror glass created a brooch in the shape of a 'love bird' and pinned it onto the band. She included the following note: 'Please wear this and it will help you win your game'. This the girl did, and with each stroke the bird would sing a beautiful song. The mirror would reflect not only its happiness but also the blue sky and the sun's rays, so that her opponent would be dazzled and distracted and her shots would fall short and thus enabling the daughter to win her games.

Memories

(Inspired by my mother, Hilde Auerbach, in her last years)

Hester straightened her grandmother's sheets to make her more comfortable. Surrounded by her family they all knew her time was running out. She herself knew it. Tell us what you remember about your childhood. What was it like living through the war? Why have you never asked me before now? We did not dare. We did not want to stir up bad memories. Let me tell you now all I don't remember. I don't remember the Gestapo fetching your great-grandfather in winter at the dead of night, loading him onto the back of a lorry and then to Dachau Concentration Camp because he was Jewish. I don't remember the orphanage I was put in. The separation from my mother or brothers, the boat with the sobbing children which carried us to a country where everything was different, food, language and clothing. I can't remember my foster sister. Even my mother no longer was in my memory. Yes grandma, but what can you remember. Memory is fickle, she replied, but I do remember the air raids when the sky was on fire.

Not Permitted

(Provoked by the Nazi decree that every Jewish female who had a name that was not immediately recognisable as a Jewish one, had to adopt the name Sarah, and males the name Israel)

What is her name? Hadassa, Esther, Rebecca, Miriam? Each of those names could suit our dark-eyed child. No, let's call her Ruth. Ruth is a good name, a biblical name from the Torah. Ruth in the cornfield, standing proud, confident, an image of steadfastness, strength and serenity. That shall be our chosen name for her—seed of our love.

They then came and decreed: the name Ruth alone is not permitted. It does not identify her Jewishness. 'No', they said, 'not permitted', and they selected 'Sarah.' This will distinguish her from us, the 'Pure-Blooded Aryans' and with that name her fate was sealed.

The Well

(Inspired by a visit to the remains of the house and farm that my parents had established in Esdorf, now Osolin, where the well that my father had dug still stands)

They are behind you. Run, my child, run. Don't you hear the thump thump thump of their shiny black boots. So well-polished. Thud thud thud. Don't you see those calf-length boots? Run, my child, run faster, they are getting closer. Don't you see their boots. Run faster, faster. They are getting even closer. Surely now you see their boots. Don't you hear the crunch of those so well polished boots trampling on the souls of six million. On the souls of our people. Don't you feel their foul breath or hear their raucous laughter. Don't you hear them singing their song? Deutschland Deutschland. Run, my child. They are stretching out their iron-gloved hands. Run faster. Jump, jump my child. The voice was gentle, loving, seductive. Here is your home. Down down into the arms of my father. Here is the well I built for us. Here we are safe. Sleep now, my child. Sleep without fear. Quiet your little heart. Dream that of the innocent, that of eternity and happiness.

But Statues Don't Talk?

(Written after a visit to Vienna where the statue stands in the middle of a square)

I see an old man in the square, bent over kneeling on the ground. I rush over to help him and shout, 'Are you all right? One moment and I'll help you stand.' There I am looking, searching for a response but he does not move. In his hand he is holding a small scrubbing brush. Once again I shout, 'Are you all right? Let me help you', but no response. I bend down and look into his face. His eyes meet mine and I notice his are full of sadness. I see a tear. A tear frozen in time. His lips are tightly closed, not uttering a sound. His face is distorted with pain. Suddenly his lips do move. He looks at me and recognizes me as one of his Kind. A Jew. He recounts his story. A story of a million Jews. A story of a lost generation. A story of incredible cruelty. He tells me of how they shaved his beard and head. How they called him 'Judenschwein', how they forced him out of his house and burnt his home, fetched him in the darkness of the night. How he and his family were flung into a cattle truck to a place unknown to all. He told me how he was then parted from his family. He went to the right, they went to the left. As they parted they shouted 'We will meet again soon', but that was not to be. He worked, they beat him. He begged for mercy, they beat him. He pleaded. They beat him. He pleaded and they beat him even harder. He raised his head in the hope of finding pity in their eyes. As he did this he looked at

the skies and in the distance he saw that they were ablaze with colour. The blues, greys, yellows and reds intermingled with every shade of white. How beautiful, he thought, but then he saw the chimneys bellowing forth smoke. The smoke of the innocent, that of so many. He fell to the ground and they dragged him away to meet his destiny. I listened, unable to control my tears, tears of grief, a quiet sadness which enveloped me. A sadness for all those who were unable to say Kaddish, a sadness from which I knew that as long as I lived there would be no escape. I wanted to embrace this old man and wipe away his tear but then realized that the tear would be there for eternity. It was the tear of the millions expressed by one sole statue 'frozen in time'.

Yearning

(Inspired by my father's longing for home)

With sunken eyes and bony face he looks up for one swift moment, his withered hands free themselves from the cold cold metal on which he holds with grim determination. Tears form and then he weeps. He reaches for my outstretched hand seeking warmth and comfort. His lips part but yield no sound. I put my ear so close and smell the rancid breath of the old. I do not turn away but go yet closer. Mouth and ear meet and then I decipher what he says. At first a single word 'home' then a long lament, 'Mummy, take me home. To the Staedele where my Maedele danced and where I smelt the pure fresh mountain air.' How can I tell him, who has borne so much, that his mummy rests in Auschwitz and his house and home is no longer there? That this HOME is now forever his home.




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.



“I was sheltered from most antisemitism while growing up. I thought being Jewish was something good, but as time went on, I started to wonder whether it was actually a bad thing.”

 **AJR** The Association
of Jewish Refugees

www.ajr.org.uk