

My Story

Dr Martin Kapel



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

'My Story' is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).
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Dr Martin Kapel was visited by AJR volunteer Francine White during 2017 and 2018 to share his story. Thanks to AJR volunteer Shelley Hyams for her editing skills. Thanks also to Emily Silburn and Diana Winter for transcribing the interviews.

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“...in the early hours of the morning of 28 October, the Nazis came to our flat. We had been asleep and we all had to get up and get dressed immediately. We could take only what we could grab at that moment, just one or two items. The Nazis watched us very carefully to make sure that we did not take anything of value. My mother strapped my father's watch to my wrist and I still have that watch today.”

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My father's watch

I DO NOT HAVE many possessions from my childhood. I treasure the few that I do have, but one above all, my father's watch.

In 1935, when I was five years old, my mother Dora, my father Ascher, my elder sister Elfriede and I went on holiday to the island of Föhr, one of the Frisian Islands off the German coast. One day, Elfriede and I were playing on the beach along with one or two other children. My parents were sitting a short distance from us. My father went into the sea for a swim and he drowned. I do not know what happened to him. He may have got cramp, which caused him to drown. It was terrible. That, of course, completely changed our lives.

Three years later, in the early hours of the morning of 28 October, the Nazis came to our flat. We had been asleep and we all had to get up and get dressed immediately. We could take only what we could grab at that moment, just one or two items. The Nazis watched us very carefully to make sure that we did not take anything of value. We did not actually have a lot of things of value anyway.

I sensed that we would not be coming back. I was going to lose most of my favourite possessions, toys of various kinds. I managed to take my favourite toy dog called Seppel. My mother strapped my father's watch around my wrist and I still have that watch today. ■

“ My father went into the sea for a swim and he drowned. I do not know what happened to him. ”



Leipzig life

MY EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS are of living in Nazi Germany. Only very wealthy people lived in single family houses, villas as we called them. Just about everyone else lived in a flat. We lived in Leipzig in a first floor flat of a five storey house, which had been divided into seventeen flats.

My sister and I shared a room at the end of the corridor, called the *Kinderzimmer*, the children's room, where we each had our own bed. We had many books as I liked reading and I still do. We also kept there various board games and many toys. I had my favourites at different times and remember my little penny whistle. Our bedroom had two doors. One led to the hall and the other to my parents' bedroom. In our block of flats there was a child who was somewhat older than my sister and I, and the three of us spent quite a lot of time together. Not far away, there was a very nice lady who lived with her very aged mother, and befriended us. We used to visit her and she visited us, occasionally giving presents to my sister and me. She was not Jewish but was very much opposed to the Nazis. She knew that we were Jewish and it did not matter to her. Many of the residents in our building went along with the Nazis because it was the thing to do. There was one particular family consisting of notoriously enthusiastic Nazi supporters.

I hesitate to say that our life was idyllic. We were aware of the official feeling against us. We knew that concentration camps existed. Dachau was set up almost immediately after the Nazis came to power, Buchenwald only shortly afterwards, and so on. It was a threat hanging over us but not a threat that seemed immediate - not at that stage anyway.



Der Stürmer news boards were displayed on German streets to attract the attention of members of the public 1934. Photograph courtesy of The Wiener Library

The Nazis ran two newspapers. *Völkischer Beobachter* was what we would today call a broadsheet. It was quite intellectual, but full of Nazi propaganda. There was also a scurrilous rag called *Der Stürmer*, The Stormtrooper, which was full of outrageous scandalous material. This was intended for the people of lower intellect. Along with newspapers there were posters that were used as propaganda.

After my father's death, my mother had to do something to make some money. We sub-let part of our flat and modified a few things. What had been our lumber-room soon became our tenants' kitchen. Our tenants were a middle-aged couple who were also Polish Jews, Mr and Mrs Holzsäger. They were strangers to us when they arrived but they were nice people and we soon became friendly with them. As a young child, I just adapted to what was going on and accepted it.

When I was a little boy, I was a somewhat fussy eater. I cannot say that I had a favourite food. I do not know whether there was some health problem or if it was simply my nature, but I could not eat easily. There were several occasions when I felt I just could not eat all of what was put in front of me. My sister was much the same. I was not in a position to judge whether my mother was a good cook or not. When one is a child, one has what is put in front of one. I think both my sister and I liked things like pancakes and so on.

There was not an awful lot of opportunity to listen to music. In those days not a lot of people had radios. We did have one but after my father's death we stopped using it. I think that was because my mother had to economise so much that she could not afford to pay the licence. As a young child I liked listening to music very much. I remember my father coming home for lunch and switching on the radio and we would listen to music whilst we ate. I looked forward to that. I was too young to know the titles of the pieces; it was all classical music. ■

School days

THERE IS A SAYING that school days are the best days of one's life. I cannot say that it was true for me. Almost a year after my father died, I started school. Up until that point, I had spent my days at home because in Germany the starting age for school was six.

I could already read and do simple arithmetic, having just picked it up from my parents and sister, a bit from one, a bit from the other. I found reading lessons at school boring because they did not teach me anything that I did not already know.

The standard of education in Germany was pretty high, but this was mixed with Nazi propaganda. We were taught about all the wonderful things that the Führer was supposed to be doing for the country. I don't know to what extent my teachers actually believed this.

My first teacher, Herr Gündel, was a man who must have been within a few years of retirement. A teacher had to toe the line: if one taught that Nazism is evil and so on, one would have been out of a job immediately. Herr Gündel knew that I was Jewish but he was never actively unkind to me.

The headmaster Herr Forkmann, on the other hand, appeared to be a loyal Nazi. That was the impression I got anyway. At the beginning, end and usually several times during the term, the whole school was gathered in the schoolyard for *Fahnenhebung*, honouring the flag. There would be a dais with a huge swastika at the back of it, where the headmaster would make a speech. All the children would have to raise their hands and sing Nazi songs. There were two of them. One was not written as a Nazi song as it was actually the German national anthem. It was sung under the Nazis and became a triumphant sort of rhythm although originally it was a gentle tune from a Haydn string quartet. The other song was full of Nazi propaganda, the *Horst Wessel* song. Horst Wessel, who wrote the song, was a prominent Nazi in Berlin. He was later assassinated. We were obviously supposed to sing these but I only pretended to sing them.

I was at that school for two years. Then in 1938, the law was changed and Jewish children were no longer allowed to go to non-Jewish schools. The nearest Jewish school was a long way away, which was the reason why I had not gone to it in the first place. My non-Jewish school had kept girls and boys separate but, as the Jewish school had to take in so many children, the classes had to be mixed. Throughout the school, there was this awful element of dread. We all knew that something terrible was going to happen. Awful things were already happening to some people, although not, so far, to us. For us, it was merely uncomfortable, but we all knew that things were going to get worse. Even we could not guess how bad they were going to become, but everybody knew that it was going to be bad. ■

“ I hesitate to say that our life was idyllic. We were aware of the official feeling against us. We knew that concentration camps existed.”

My father

IN THE 19th CENTURY and early 20th century, Jews in Eastern Europe were persecuted in the pogroms and many tried to leave. Some went to the United States. Others came to Britain. A favourite destination was Germany, for two reasons. One was that it was near and easy to get to, and the other was the language. It was possible for someone brought up speaking Yiddish to understand German. That is why many Polish Jews settled in Germany.

The territory from which both sides of my family originated had once been in Poland. After the dismemberment of that country in the late eighteenth century, it became part of the Austrian Empire. After the First World War, it again became part of the newly reconstituted Poland. In the meantime, my father as a young man had emigrated to Germany. Some years earlier, my mother's family had done the same. In accordance with German and Polish law, they were not permitted to take German nationality and were therefore, Polish. Therefore, my mother, although born in Germany was Polish. Years later, when I was born, the same enactment applied to me.

My mother's family eventually moved out of Germany after Hitler's first attempt to seize power, the famous Munich Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. They moved to Strasbourg. Before the First World War this area had been in Germany, but by this time it was part of France.

“ My mother's family eventually moved out of Germany after Hitler's first attempt to seize power.”

My parents had met each other by then and my father decided to visit. He stayed in France long enough to establish the residence requirement so that they could marry there. After they married in Strasbourg, my parents returned to Germany and settled in Leipzig.

At that stage, my father was a student. He was old to be a student, but had come from Poland with no money at all and, in those days, one did not have scholarships and grants. He educated himself at evening classes and saved money to become a law student at Leipzig University.

My maternal grandfather was a pedlar. By the time I knew him, he had stopped working and was being maintained by his sons. My father worked as what in German is called a *Repetitor*. Students who had changed university once or twice needed to ensure that they were up to the required standards in their field of study. This was the work of the *Repetitor*. In the Nazi period he would not have been employed, but a *Repetitor* was self-employed.

I was not a terribly happy child, living in an environment with constant threats. Probably my happiest moments were in my own thoughts. I think, however, that I have a happy demeanour now. Although I had lost my father, he remained my role model. He was kind, and although I entered a field entirely different from his, his example set me on that course. I think that, if I had had a different father, I might well have gone along a different route.

My father had educated himself under difficult circumstances. He came from an impoverished background. To him, knowledge was something that was valuable in its own right. It was not just a matter of earning money. He valued learning, he valued education and, of course, so did I. ■

“ Although I had lost my father, he remained my role model. He was kind and although I entered a field entirely different from his, his example set me on that course. ”

28 October 1938

IN THE EARLY HOURS of 28 October 1938, my mother, Elfriede and I were all sleeping in our beds when there was a persistent ringing of the doorbell. My mother got up and answered the door. The Nazis came into our flat and we all had to get up and get dressed immediately. We could only grab one or two things. They watched us very carefully to ensure that we did not take anything of value. We had to go with them not knowing where we were being taken. Our tenants, Mr and Mrs Holzsäger, were also taken.

I was eight years old, but I remember the fear, the terror. I sensed quite rightly that we were not coming back. I was going to lose most of my favourite possessions, toys and books of various kinds. As I said, we could only take what we could grab at that moment. I did take a toy, my favourite soft toy, a dog called Seppel. My mother strapped my father's watch on me. I took just one or two books and that was all. We had to go.

We were first taken to a small police station a few streets away and told to wait, but we did not really know what we were waiting for. It was a frightening experience. Sometime later a bus drew up outside and we were ordered to get on it. In Leipzig, public transport was normally by tram. A bus was a rare sight. There were other Jewish people already on the bus. Eventually, we arrived at Leipzig railway station which, when it was built, was the largest in the world. We joined a queue of Jewish people who had come from other parts of the city.

When I give talks to schools, I am often asked how many people were at the station and I find it difficult to answer, because to a child everything looks bigger. It looked like an enormous crowd, but one can get an idea from what happened next. I was familiar with the inside of that station, because I had often seen it when we visited my grandparents at *Pesach*. The place was now full of police and SS men. It was terrifying, and there was something that made it even more frightening. The German police normally carried revolvers, but on this occasion quite a lot of them carried rifles, as did the SS men. I think the rifles were there to frighten us, and they did their job.

We were put on a passenger train. All the toilets had been locked. I now think this was to stop people from going in and committing suicide. At about 11 o'clock in the morning the train departed. We had no idea where we were going. After a little while, the train stopped at a station and more people were forced aboard. In those days trains did not have open carriages as they do today. They had compartments. Someone from a neighbouring compartment came in and said: 'Do you realise that we are locked in?'

We were still at the station. Some of the people with us tried the handles to check. As they did this, the handles could be seen moving from the outside of the train. A policeman came into our carriage. I can still remember his words. He said that if we tried to escape, use would be made of the firearms. One remembers threats like that.

We continued the journey, collecting more people along the way, until eventually it became dark. We talked to some of the other passengers and I realise in retrospect that we were some of the lucky ones. Firstly, we had been taken together, as a family. Others had been taken later in the day, after husbands had gone to work and children had gone to school. Wives had stayed at home and they would have been taken separately, not knowing if they would ever meet again. The other thing was that we were neither very young nor very old, and we were in reasonable health. Some of the other people, however, were not. There were people in all sorts of conditions, including some who had been taken out of hospital beds. I was very frightened. We were not given anything to eat or drink.

Eventually, the train stopped at a station and the doors were unlocked. We were told to get out and move towards the exit. Being a child, I looked around me but I did not notice the name of the station, which I should probably have done had I been a grown-up. What I did notice was the time on the station clock. It was ten minutes to midnight. It struck me as strange because I was not normally allowed to stay up until that time. We had been on the train since before 11 o'clock that morning.

There were two rows of SS men lining the ramp at the exit of the station. We walked between them, and they formed us into rows of four, with an SS man at each end of each row. We were marched off, out of the town and into a forest. On a narrow forest path, the rows of four became somewhat ragged and it was difficult to walk on the uneven ground in the dark. Some of the SS men carried torches but, of course, they lit the way for themselves, not for us. For some, elderly or disabled people and the like, the march was very difficult indeed. It was not so easy for young people either. Some fell, because they had either stumbled or collapsed. We were not allowed to stop, so that anyone who had fallen was in real danger of being trampled.

We were only aware of our group. We did not know that in other places, other groups were doing the same thing. Various accounts that I have subsequently read give the numbers of people involved between 10,000 and 17,000. The truth is probably somewhere between those two figures. I have also read that the number of people who lost their lives that night was about 400, but I have no way of confirming the accuracy of this figure.

After several hours, we came to a railway track, where we were ordered to stop. We were told that the SS men were not going any further. From now on, we were on our own. We were warned not to walk beside the railway track, because there were ditches that we could not see in the dark, but that we should walk between the rails.

We were tired, hungry and obviously frightened. The three of us (my mother, Elfriede and I) just clung together. Walking between the rails of a railway track is not something that many people have occasion to do in the dark. It is very easy to fall over the wooden sleepers and uneven material between them. This time there were no SS men to push us on, but one cannot easily stop the momentum of a large crowd such as a whole train load of people. So again, anyone who fell was in danger not only of incurring injury in the fall, but also of being trampled by the crowd.

Expulsions took place all over Germany on the 27 and 28 October 1938. Whilst my mother, sister and I were forcefully taken by train then by foot to Katowice in Southern Poland, most people were sent to Zbąszyń. Photography courtesy of The Wiener Library



We walked on. I could not say for exactly how long but, eventually the people at the front became aware of the fact that there were lights some distance to our left, where there appeared to be some human habitation. They left the railway line to go towards the light and the rest of us naturally followed. We walked across a ploughed field and eventually reached a hamlet, a group of two or three houses. As we arrived there, I could see on the horizon the first signs of dawn. That gives one an idea of how long we had been walking.

We did not know what to do so we just sat down on the ground. We were to discover that this hamlet was in Poland. The railway line was the frontier. The SS men did not want to provoke an international incident. It would technically have been an invasion if they had moved on with us. That is the reason why they left us.

We sat there and waited. The residents of the hamlet must have contacted the authorities. Eventually men in uniform, soldiers and police, arrived and took us away. For the next two days we were shunted from one place to another. It was not organised. One night someone saw my family on the street and they took us into their home. We never saw our tenants, the Holzsägers, again. I do not know whether they survived. ■

Finding family in Kraków

THERE WERE NEGOTIATIONS going on behind the scenes. I do not know who organised it, or paid for it, but we were eventually taken to a railway station and put on a train. We were taken to Kraków, where we had relatives, my father's sister, her husband and their children as well as two of my father's brothers. They received us very hospitably but they could not afford to look after us. We were an orthodox family but all of my father's family were Chassidic and only earned enough money for a meagre living, spending the rest of their time on religious observance and study. This was considered the proper way of living. To me it was a completely different form of life and one which, as a child, I found quite attractive.

Eventually, in January 1939 we moved out into a rented room. It was not a big room and we shared it with mice! These mice were quite bold. During the day, they would come out and walk around. It was a big change to our way of life. The thing that made it bearable was the kindness of my relatives. They were very friendly, very loving and affectionate. We had not moved far from them because the Jews of Kraków mainly lived in one part of the city, Kazimierz. Kazimir had been one of the kings of Poland and one of the very few who were not antisemitic. He had allowed Jews to live in that part of Kraków.

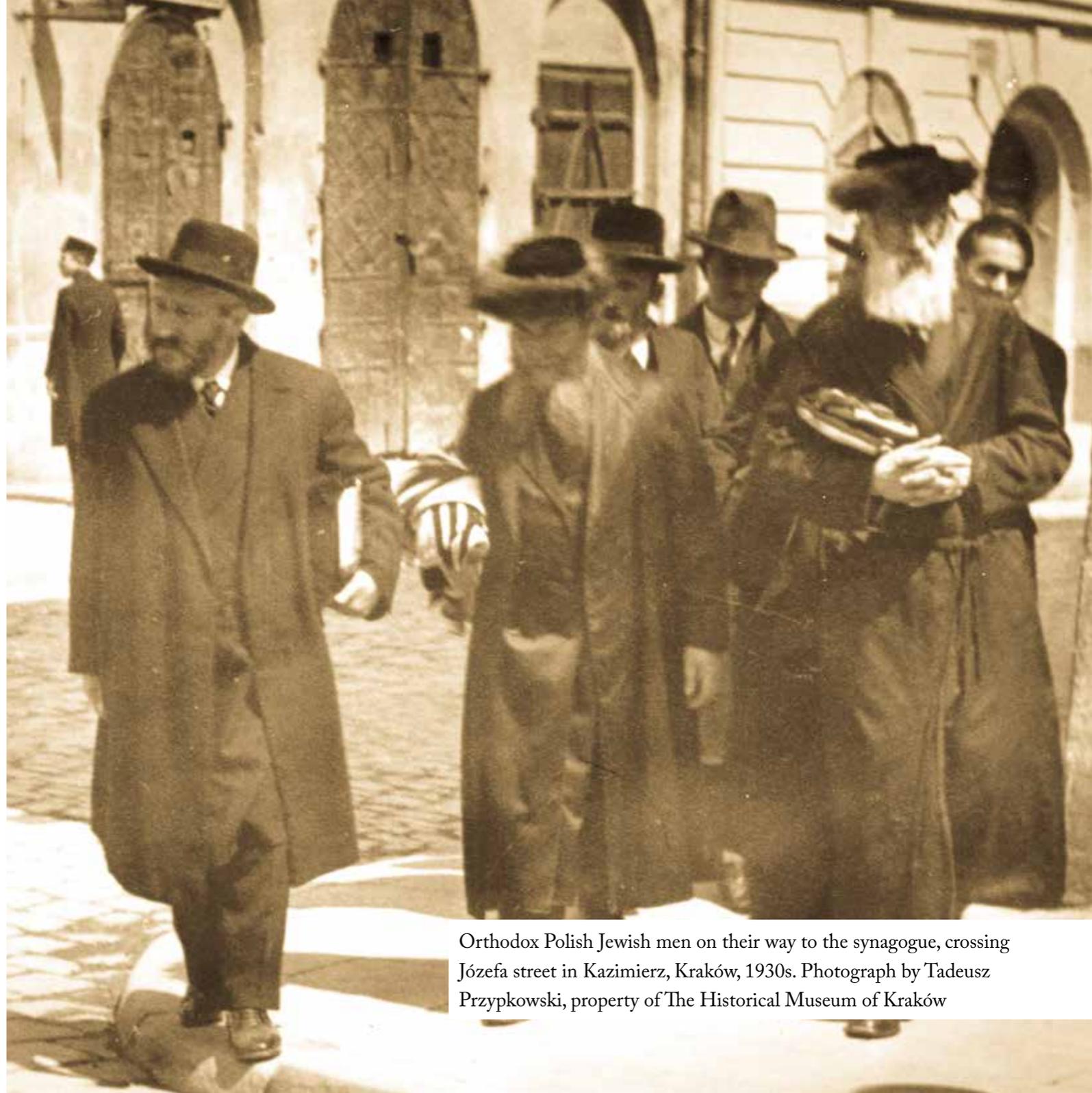
The poverty I saw around me was distressing. I have since been back to Poland, and have seen that this part of Kraków has been preserved and smartened up. Today, one does not see that 'down at heel' poverty. On the streets in those days there were piles of dirt, because there was no-one to clean it up. There were also the terrible sights of the beggars. I remember seeing one in particular who had no legs. When he moved, he just pulled himself along the pavement. He sat there every day. When it rained and there was more mud, he would use a wooden plank to pull himself along. It was no life.

In the non-Jewish part it was quite dangerous to wear *peyos* and a beard. If one went out at night one was quite likely to be attacked. We lived like that. However, there came another change that I was not used to. That was a Polish winter. Temperatures fell to a very low level.

Sometimes, when we went out, the cold weather and wind would make my face hurt. Our landlord and landlady were poor people. They could not afford to heat our room effectively, and it became very cold. We did not have much to eat either.

I caught a long succession of colds and flu-type illnesses. One night in late January, I got a terrible pain in one ear which kept me awake all night. Our landlady was actually a midwife who knew something of nursing. She told me to get my ear syringed. Of course, infected matter came out, but the ear did not get better and a doctor had to be called. We did not have money, but Jewish doctors were prepared to give their services free to people like us. I was taken to the Jewish hospital to see an ear, nose and throat specialist and was told that I had a condition called otitis media. In those days, there were no antibiotics so that the treatment was to put me on my side with the infected ear upwards and pour a teaspoon of hydrogen peroxide into my ear. This would oxidise away the infected tissue. It was not very pleasant to feel it bubbling in my ear.

After about a month, the infection had turned into mastoiditis, and I had to have an operation. The Jewish hospital gave its services free of charge, despite being poverty-stricken. I was in hospital for just over three weeks and then had to return regularly to have the dressing changed. I was out of action for about three months. I had ear problems for many years afterwards and still have tinnitus. ■



Orthodox Polish Jewish men on their way to the synagogue, crossing Józefa street in Kazimierz, Kraków, 1930s. Photograph by Tadeusz Przytkowski, property of The Historical Museum of Kraków



The mud filled streets of the Jewish quarter in Kraków, 1930s.
Photograph property of The Historical Museum of Kraków



Jewish people in the streets of Kazimierz district, Kraków (corner of Bozego Ciała and Jozefa streets), 1930s.
Author unknown. Photograph property of The Historical Museum of Kraków

My world turns upside down

IN JUNE 1939, after I recovered from my ear surgery, it was decided that we should go to live with some other relatives in a small and primitive village called Brzesko, where I had numerous uncles, aunts and cousins. People had large families in those days and they all lived together, not in a house as we know it, but in a wooden hut. The only relative who did not live in that hut was my mother's maternal grandmother, my great-grandmother, an old lady in her 90's, who lived alone in another hut.

Of course, they were Chassidic and also lived in poverty. If anything, the way of living was even more impoverished than in Kraków. There were no taps. One had to go across the fields to a pump and bring back a bucket of water. We had a big water butt with a piece of gauze on a metal frame, and one poured the water through the gauze to filter out the larger bits of impurity. One then ladled out the water. One had to be careful to always put the gauze the same way up otherwise one would tip all the rubbish back in.

There was a *mikvah* for grown-ups to bathe in. There was no bathroom, so the children had a wash down in the kitchen. In Kraków we had a proper toilet but in Brzesko we had an earth closet. I was in Poland for about eight and a half months and the last month was spent in Brzesko. There were plans to send Elfriede and me to Britain, on the *Kindertransport*. Eventually places were found for us and our lives changed again. ■

Not exactly a cruise

MY MOTHER managed to get herself a visitor's visa to go to France on the pretext of going to see her elderly father who was ill. While she was in France the war began, so there was no possibility of her returning to Poland.

Meanwhile the plans for Elfriede and me to go on the *Kindertransport* had been made and one of our relatives took us to Kraków, from where we were taken with a few other children to Warsaw. It was frightening, because we were going into the complete unknown. The man who had taken us by train took us to a house where all the children on that particular *Kindertransport* were going to gather from various parts of Poland. As far as I recall, there were twenty-one of us, all very scared. I had just turned nine. One boy was slightly younger than I. All the rest were older, but some of them not much older.

In the evening, we were taken back to the railway station again and we made another overnight journey, this time to Gdynia, the chief port of Poland. We were again taken to some kind of a home.

“... we were taken with a few other children to Warsaw. It was frightening, because we were going into the complete unknown.”

We spent the day there and in the evening we were to board a ship. It was a Friday evening and, of course, on *Shabbat* we are not allowed to board ship, so we had to board early before *Shabbat* began.

Elfriede was allocated a cabin with the girls and I was with the boys. Each cabin had six bunks, a porthole on one side and door on the other. I occupied an upper bunk, which is what I wanted. The boy who was younger than me was on the bunk below me.

We had a Friday evening service on the ship. After the service, I went up on deck to have another look at Gdynia but I could not see it – the ship had sailed while we were having our service and the shore was out of sight. By morning, when Elfriede and I met over breakfast, we were in the middle of the Baltic.

I found out years later our ship, called *Warszawa*, had quite a history. It had originally been built in Britain for the Russian merchant fleet. It was going to be called *Smolensk*, but by the time it was completed in 1915, one could not sail a Russian ship into the Baltic unless one wanted to be sunk. The First World War was on and so the Russians never got their ship. It was eventually sold to Poland and they did not want a ship called *Smolensk* so that they named it *Warszawa*, Polish for Warsaw.

The next day we awoke to see land through the porthole. We were sailing through the Kiel Canal. Later in the day, we went through the locks at Brundsbüttel Koog, and into what looked like the open sea. In fact, we had entered the river Elbe, which at that point, was too wide for the opposing shore to be visible. Another four hours or so would pass before we were in the North Sea.

On the following day, as we continued to sail through the North Sea, the weather turned against us and a storm arose. The sea became very rough, and there was thunder and lightning, but eventually the storm subsided. ■

Our first sight of England

IN THE AFTERNOON we began to see the shore of East Anglia in the distance. Of course, I did not realise at that moment what it was called, but I knew that it was Britain. In the evening we entered the Thames estuary. We had to anchor and wait for a pilot boat. There was much curiosity arising from the fact that this was a new country and also that it was a busy seaway, with other ships at anchor waiting for a pilot.

During the night we sailed along the Thames and in the morning we were tied up in the London docks, close to Tower Bridge. I knew virtually nothing about English history, so I had no idea about the Tower of London and Tower Bridge, but I remember that I saw the bridge opening. It was all very strange and new to us.

The man who was supposed to be in charge of us came on board, and he immediately discovered a snag: he could only speak English and, of course, none of us could. Eventually we were taken off the ship and waited our turn at Customs and Immigration.

We had a family friend, Dr Herling, who had arrived in England some years earlier and was coming to meet us. Dr Herling had been partly instrumental in getting Elfriede and me a placement with our foster parents. He had been introduced in some way to the people who were going to take us in, so he was going to introduce us to them. We were handed into his care, and then met the lady who was to be our foster mother and her sister. Our foster father was at work at the time. ■

My new 'family'

MRS LUMLEY, our foster mother, was 56, an age that, in those days, was considered elderly. She seemed kind but different and strange in various ways that I cannot easily define. For whatever reason I was a bit put off and my first impression of our foster family was not good. We were taken to the railway station to travel to our new home in Coventry. The journey took just over two hours.

When we arrived in Coventry, my foster father was at the station to meet us. He also seemed very strange to me. We got on a bus. I remember being intrigued by the way in which tickets were issued. The conductor had a machine that he had to dial like an old-fashioned telephone. Then he had to turn a handle, and the ticket came out!

The city looked completely different from anything I had seen before. On the continent, the vast majority of people lived in flats. Here I was amazed to see that families lived in houses. Our foster family lived in a terraced house. Most terraced houses have no dividing line, but on one side, they had what they called in Coventry an 'entry', which was a little alley. In retrospect, I think that it was not bad. I was to find out later that it was a typical working class district. This house had a kitchen, living room and what we called the front room on the ground floor. On the upper floor, there was a bathroom and there were three bedrooms. It was larger than many terraced houses.

Communication with Mr and Mrs Lumley was very difficult. Occasionally, though not very often, they would use a word that was similar to a German word or I could guess what they were trying to say from the context of what was happening at the time, but they could not

understand what I was trying to say at all and most of the time I could not understand them. Also, none of the neighbours could speak German.

Communication was rendered even more difficult by the fact that Mrs Lumley was very hard of hearing. Although the language difficulty and my foster mother's deafness were obvious sources of impairment of communication, another obstacle was much more subtle and puzzling. My foster parents were not Jewish and were both completely uneducated. As a result, my attitudes towards education, religion and other things seemed as strange to them as theirs did to me.

The food also caused me difficulty. I ate things that were unfamiliar, firstly because they were not Kosher but also, of course, because this was a different country with different habits. They gave me food, which was *treif*, and they did not know about not mixing milk and meat. In Germany I used my *kippa* in prayer and when eating. In Poland, I wore my *kippa* all the time, and I tried to do that in England. Well, it attracted a mixture of resentment and ridicule especially from my foster father. He was a man who was not just unreligious, he was anti-religious!

There was one other frightening thing. My foster parents had a dog, a fox terrier. His name was Jerry, which was apt because he was very vicious. By the time we arrived, Jerry was about 10 years old. Old age does not improve the temper of people, and it does not improve the temper of vicious dogs either. In fact, he was vicious to the point of being dangerous, and my foster parents were very much afraid that someone would report them to the police, and they would have to have the dog put down. On quite a few occasions, a postman or a dustman had to be given half a crown to say nothing because the dog had bitten him. He bit my sister very badly. He bit me several times, although not so badly. He even bit his owners! Five years later, Jerry's old age and infirmity caused a veterinary surgeon to recommend that he should be put down. Shortly afterwards my foster parents acquired a young puppy. He grew into a large dog, who was very docile and affectionate. I came to love that dog and he loved me. I have loved dogs ever since. ■

Out of the frying pan into the fire

THE GERMANS initially began bombing military installations in an attempt to invade Britain. As the year 1940 advanced, however, they realised that they could not invade before the onset of winter, which would have made invasion very difficult, so the Battle of Britain ended and the Germans began to bomb cities.

London was bombed first and then Coventry had its first air raid with the sirens sounding for the first time in July 1940. During the first few occasions, planes were simply flying over Coventry to drop bombs somewhere else. Then came a number of small raids. I did not count them, but I have since found out that there were 17 fairly small raids which among them killed about 180 people.

On 14 November 1940 came the first big raid. The sirens sounded just after seven o'clock in the evening. We were used to this, so we did not think it was anything special. There was not a shelter nearby nor did we have a cellar. The Home Office advice was that the safest place in a house was under the stairs. Under our stairs, there was a small pantry and we all crowded into that. It had the added advantage of having no windows, so that there was no danger of shattering glass. The four of us and the dog all huddled into the pantry. It was a frightening experience made even worse by the fact that, whenever a bomb came near, the dog growled!

“The four of us and the dog all huddled into the pantry. It was a frightening experience made even worse by the fact that, whenever a bomb came near, the dog growled!”

The raid began at about ten minutes past seven. The bombs soon began to fall and, of course, the anti-aircraft guns were also firing. This went on for something like eleven and a half hours! Although some of the bombs fell further away in other parts of the city, many fell in our neighbourhood. Three of them landed in our street. One was quite a way up the street, whilst the other two were almost opposite our house. Two buildings were destroyed. Later I saw two craters. Our windows were broken, our outside doors came off the hinges and part of the roof was taken away.

On the following day, we found half a paving stone in the garden, behind our house. It had been blown from the opposite side of the road over our row of houses. After this, there were to be many more raids on Coventry including two very large ones. I had left the dangers of Nazi Germany for more danger in England. ■

“After this, there were to be many more raids on Coventry including two very large ones. I had left the dangers of Nazi Germany for more danger in England.”



Bomb damage in Broadgate, central Coventry, the morning after the German air raid on the night of 14 November 1940 © Imperial War Museum (H 5600)

Life in Coventry

LIFE EVENTUALLY took on a routine. I went to the local junior elementary school. When I first arrived, my background was explained to the school. Today, I occasionally give talks to schools, and I see many children in front of me. Some of them look just like the children at my first school in England, whilst others clearly come from a variety of national, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

For a teacher to be faced with a child whose native language is not English is commonplace today, but it was not so in those days. My teachers, however, seemed to have such a good understanding of children that they coped splendidly with the situation. Strangely enough, I was not the only *Kindertransport* child. There was another boy who had come to England about a month before me. We immediately became friends.

One day shortly after I arrived, the whole school was assembled in the hall and the headmaster made a speech, which, of course, I could not understand. He kept using one word in particular. I had no idea what it meant but every time it was used, it produced a strong reaction among the boys. The word was 'holiday'. It was summer, and the school was about to break up for the summer holidays!

My foster parents could not help me with English. During the holidays, I would play with other boys and sometimes I would go to the cinema. There was a film and the newsreel, and I picked up some English that way. It was very limited, but it was better than nothing.

Friday evening and *Shabbat* just went by the board. In Coventry there wasn't a Rabbi but there was a *Chazan*, and he ran the little class to which I was sent on Sunday mornings. In retrospect, he was a very good *Chazan*, but he was not a great teacher. There was not much systematic

teaching. It was a sort of 'hotch potch'. One week we would learn one thing, and the next week we would do something completely different.

I did manage to make arrangements for him to coach me for my *bar mitzvah*. He taught me how to read my passage but did not tell me what it meant! Nothing was made of my *bar mitzvah*. My foster parents did not come and anyway not being Jewish, they would have been completely out of place. In any case, my foster father had to be at work. Due to wartime difficulties, my *bar mitzvah* was delayed by some months. It should have been in the summer but, in fact, it was on the *Shabbat* between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

I met other Jewish boys and girls, but there were not very many. It was not a big community but it meant that I was not completely isolated. Most of the children with whom I played were not Jewish because we were not living near the other Jewish families.

Two years passed, and the time came for me to change schools. In those days, there were no comprehensive schools and, to go to a grammar school, or secondary school as it was known at that time, I should need a scholarship. This raised the question whether the local authority would regard a foreigner as eligible for one of their scholarships. The matter was entirely at their discretion, and they ruled that they would regard me as eligible. Years later, they came to a similar conclusion with regard to a university scholarship. For both of these decisions, I owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude.

“ In Lincoln, I was sent to live with some thoroughly nasty people. They were very antisemitic. As far as they were concerned, all Jews were liars, cheats, profiteers and black marketeers. In those days, anyone could take in a child. ”

By the time I went to my new school, the main period of bombing, the so-called Blitz, had ended. During the Blitz, my new school had been evacuated to Lincoln, but a return to Coventry was delayed by the fact that bomb damage to the school buildings had not been sufficiently repaired. Accordingly, I had to spend a short time in Lincoln.

In Lincoln, I was sent to live with some thoroughly nasty people. They were very antisemitic. As far as they were concerned, all Jews were liars, cheats, profiteers and black marketeers. In those days, anyone could take in a child. Nowadays, if one wanted to foster a child there would be a very careful investigation.

They had a son who was a year younger than I was. He could beat me up if he wanted to, but if I laid a finger on him there would be a terrible row. They resented the fact that I was a foreigner and, even worse, a Jew. I could not hold it against the son because he was young and did what his parents told him. One could, however, blame the parents, particularly the woman, because the man was what one can only describe as a wimp. He did what his wife told him to do. He was completely under her thumb. So I really had a very bad time there, except when I was at school. At any rate, this episode lasted only a few months, and I was soon back in Coventry.

I attended the secondary school until 1948. I was happy there until I went into the Sixth Form. Then things began to deteriorate. I experienced bullying from some boys. It had nothing to do with my being Jewish. It had nothing to do with my being foreign. It was simply because we were adolescents, and some adolescent boys change in behaviour. I was small, I was puny, and I was no good at games. I was an easy target. ■

My mother

WHILST I WAS IN COVENTRY, my mother had managed to reach her family in Strasbourg. Once the Germans had occupied the whole of France, we could only communicate through Red Cross letters, in which one was only allowed to write a very small number of words. Somebody in the office would write it out again to make sure that one did not put in any coded messages. One could really only convey the fact that one was still alive and that one was reasonably well.

When the war ended, I had no real knowledge of what had happened to my other relatives, but now I could communicate with my mother in proper letters. I am afraid we had the news that of our relatives in Poland, not a single one had survived. In France, the Germans had killed one of my uncles and another uncle had died a natural death. My grandfather had also died a natural death.

My mother applied for a visa to come to Britain, but she was refused. This was not surprising because in Europe at that time there was an enormous number of people who had no country in which they were welcome. Countries would not let them in in case they could not get rid of them again.

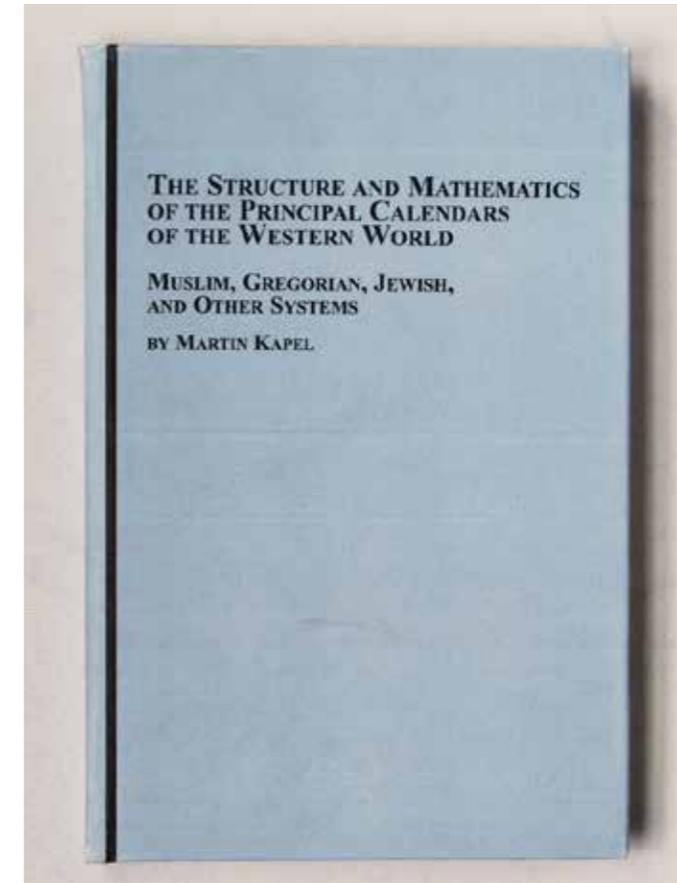
Elfriede was working by then and so managed to get a visa to go to France. I took quite a long time to get a French visa because I was not working. However, eventually I did get one and I was able to visit my mother towards the end of 1946. There followed another bad period. On that first visit, my mother and I struggled to connect. The following summer, I was able to go back for two weeks, but then I could not go again until 1949, when I had started at university and was able to go for a longer period during university vacations. At first, I thought my mother was reacting to having such a bad time under German occupation. I thought that was the reason why we could not make real contact. We could not bond now, yet we had been

close when I was very young. I am not alone in this. I believe other *Kindertransport* children whose parents survived had similar experiences. It just became impossible to get together emotionally again.

After 1950 as a post graduate I had shorter holidays and wasn't able to make long visits to my mother. There was however, no improvement. A similar problem existed between my sister and my mother. I did not resent her or feel abandoned. I fully accepted that what my mother had done was for my benefit. I never had any doubt about that at all. I cannot really give a rational reason why we could not re-establish a good relationship. I tried my best. I tried very hard but whatever I did, even if it was what she wanted me to do, she found something wrong with it. She seemed to delight in humiliating me. I could not understand it and I still cannot. So there came a point when contact with her just stopped, and neither I nor Elfriede saw her any more. We knew when she died but that is all.

Elfriede and I are close. She had lost the chance of an education and she did not have the career she wanted, but she has a happy marriage. She has children and grandchildren, and now a great-grandchild. ■

“ We could not bond now,
yet we had been close when I
was very young. ”



My first book, published in 2006

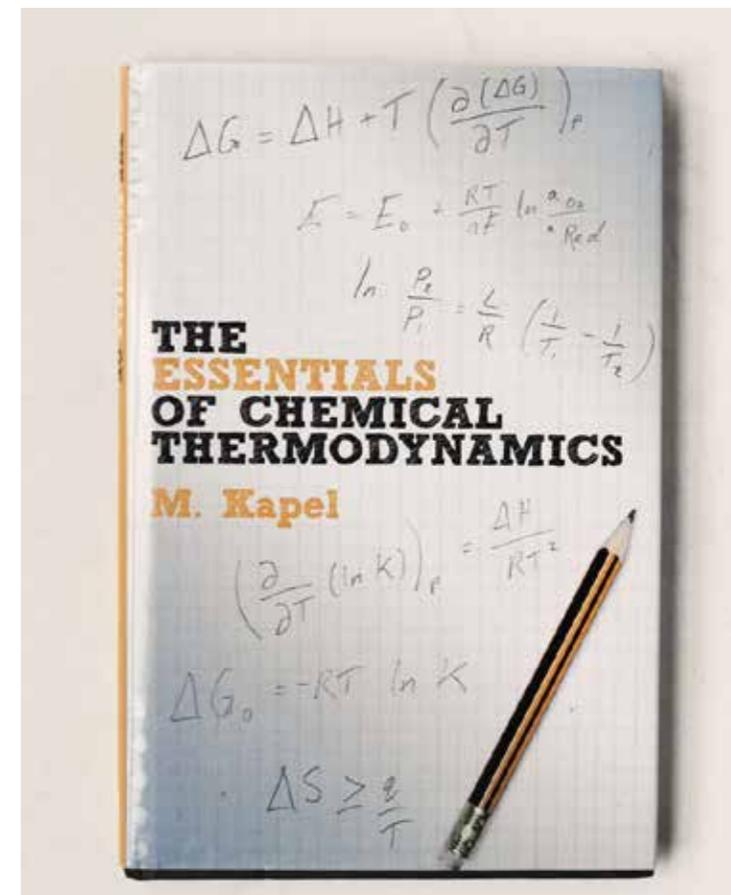
The rest of my life

I went to the University of Birmingham where I obtained a degree and eventually a PhD in Chemistry. I had a temporary job for a year at the university and afterwards I spent some years in industry. Then I got a job at Leeds University as a lecturer. A career in academia was what I wanted and what I eventually got. I stayed there for thirty-three years until I retired at the age of sixty-five. I would have gone on working if it had been allowed but, in those days, it was not. I very much enjoyed working with students. After my retirement, I wrote two books, one about the mathematics of calendars, and another about chemical thermodynamics.

I never married. It just did not happen. I loved to travel. I travelled to as many places as I could, and I have been to more than 40 countries! The last time I travelled was in 2005 when I went to Hawaii. Sadly, my health doesn't permit me to travel now.

Some years ago I went back to Leipzig for a few days. I wanted to see the place where I had lived and I wanted also to visit my father's grave. Some places were more or less as I had left them. There was a square in Leipzig called Augustusplatz. When I was a child I used to regard it as huge and when I saw it again, it looked much smaller. I went back to where our house was but it was no longer there. This was no surprise since I knew that it had been bombed. Its former place is now a car park, but the rest of the street was more or less as I remembered it. However, the important thing was that I was able to visit my father's grave.

When I first arrived in Leeds, I was not very involved with the Jewish community. There were two reasons for this. One was that I was very busy, but the other was that I felt rather inadequate. I had been separated from the Jewish community for so long that I felt that I did not know enough about it. I was unaccustomed to many Jewish ways that I had known many years earlier as a child. Then something happened by chance. A year after my retirement I received an invitation to go to the retirement party of someone whom I had known well. One of the guests there was Jewish, and we began a conversation. Not long afterwards I received



My second book, published in 2011

a telephone call from him asking if I should like to go to his house on a Friday evening. We became friends, and through his family I was introduced to other Jewish people. This got me back into the Jewish community.

Eventually, they introduced me to the Masorti community, of which I am now a member. I go to services and I do things like reading from the Torah. In fact, for a time I used to lead the Torah service but now I cannot stand for long enough to do so. When I was ill the people in the Masorti group were very good to me. They were very supportive and, altogether, it is a very pleasant environment. I began to meet other people in the Jewish community and someone introduced me to the Holocaust Survivors Friendship Association. I became a member, and I have given talks for them all over the region.

My life has gone through many changes, but some of them happened without any great effort on my part. They just happened. I became involved with things and, of course, if one gets involved with things they lead to other things. It is very difficult to know which were just down to fate and which were down to effort on my part.

One last thing. I mentioned that I had taken my favourite toy, a dog called Seppel on the day the Nazis came to take us from our flat. I kept him all the time I was fostered. Eventually my sister's children and their children had him. Do you know? I still have him today. He is a bit tatty now but I still have him. We have both survived quite a lot! ■



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.



“...in the early hours of the morning of 28 October, the Nazis came to our flat. We had been asleep and we all had to get up and get dressed immediately. We could take only what we could grab at that moment, just one or two items. The Nazis watched us very carefully to make sure that we did not take anything of value. My mother strapped my father's watch to my wrist and I still have that watch today.”