



# My Story

## Gabriele Keenaghan BEM



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

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

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Gabriele Keenaghan spoke to AJR volunteer Kim Johnstone to share her story.

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# My Story

## Gabriele Keenaghan BEM

“This was the first time I realised that I was different to my friends. They were sent together to a school somewhere else in the district but I was singled out and made to stand to one side. I just couldn't understand it or know what to make of it. I felt frightened and lost.”

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At 13 months, December 1927



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## Early memories

I WAS BORN Gabriele Franziska Maria Weiss on 10 November 1926 in Vienna.

I was named after three women in my family. My maternal grandmother was Gabriele, my paternal grandmother was Franziska and my great-aunt, who was also my godmother, was Maria.

My mother was Hildegard and my father, Josef. I was an only child. When I was eight months old we moved from Vienna to Berlin where my father manufactured heating stoves. His company was called 'Weifco' (Weiss Fischer and Company).

We returned to Vienna five years later. By then my paternal grandparents had died and I don't have much memory of them. I do have an early memory of visiting my great-aunt Maria at the tobacconist shop she managed. In those days these types of shops were owned by the government. I had very curly hair with one large curl on top. I remember someone touched it and I said: "Please leave *meine tolle* [my curl] alone!"

I remember that Berliners spoke more quickly and Austrian German was spoken in a slightly softer tone. People would ask me: "Are you a little Berliner?" I would reply: "No, I am Viennese."

I had toys but my favourite was my bear called 'Teddy'. He had a growling mechanism inside. I still have him but he doesn't growl now, he is too old! ■



At 10 months old with Mutti and Papa in Berlin, August 1927



In the Viennese woods with my great-aunt Maria (who was also my godmother)



I called my mother 'Mutti'

## My family

MY MOTHER WAS Christian and my father was Jewish. I later discovered that my mother's father was Jewish, so I'm not the only *Mischling* (having both Aryan and Jewish ancestry).

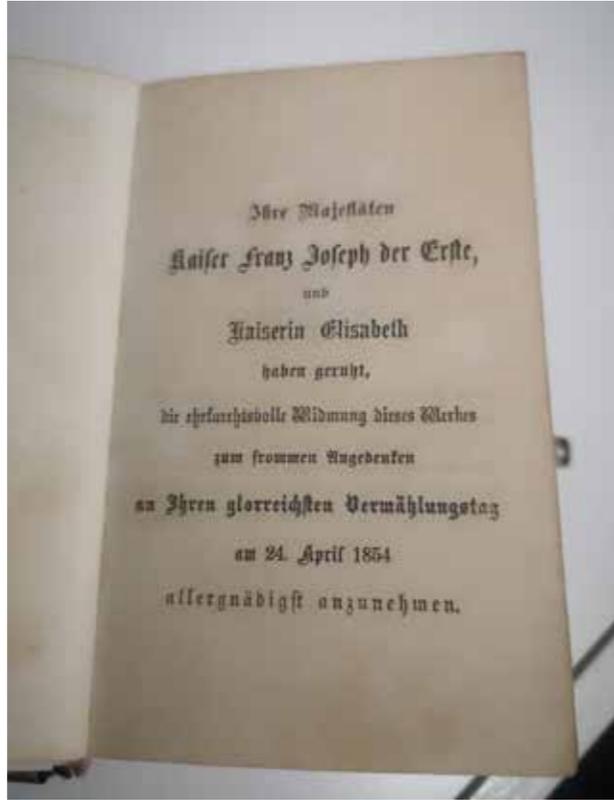
My maternal grandfather died in 1919. He was a doctor named Heinrich Pinkas. In 2019, we went to the Jewish cemetery in Vienna to try and find his grave. We did locate the plot but there was no headstone. As he died over a hundred years ago it is possible that whatever had been originally erected might have been destroyed. I found it very interesting because my grandmother had never told me that she had married a Jewish gentleman. This fact was discovered by my granddaughter while researching my family tree.

My maternal great-grandfather was an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army. On the occasion of his marriage he was presented with a prayer book on behalf of the Austrian Emperor, Kaiser Franz Josef and Empress Elisabeth. I still treasure that book to this day.

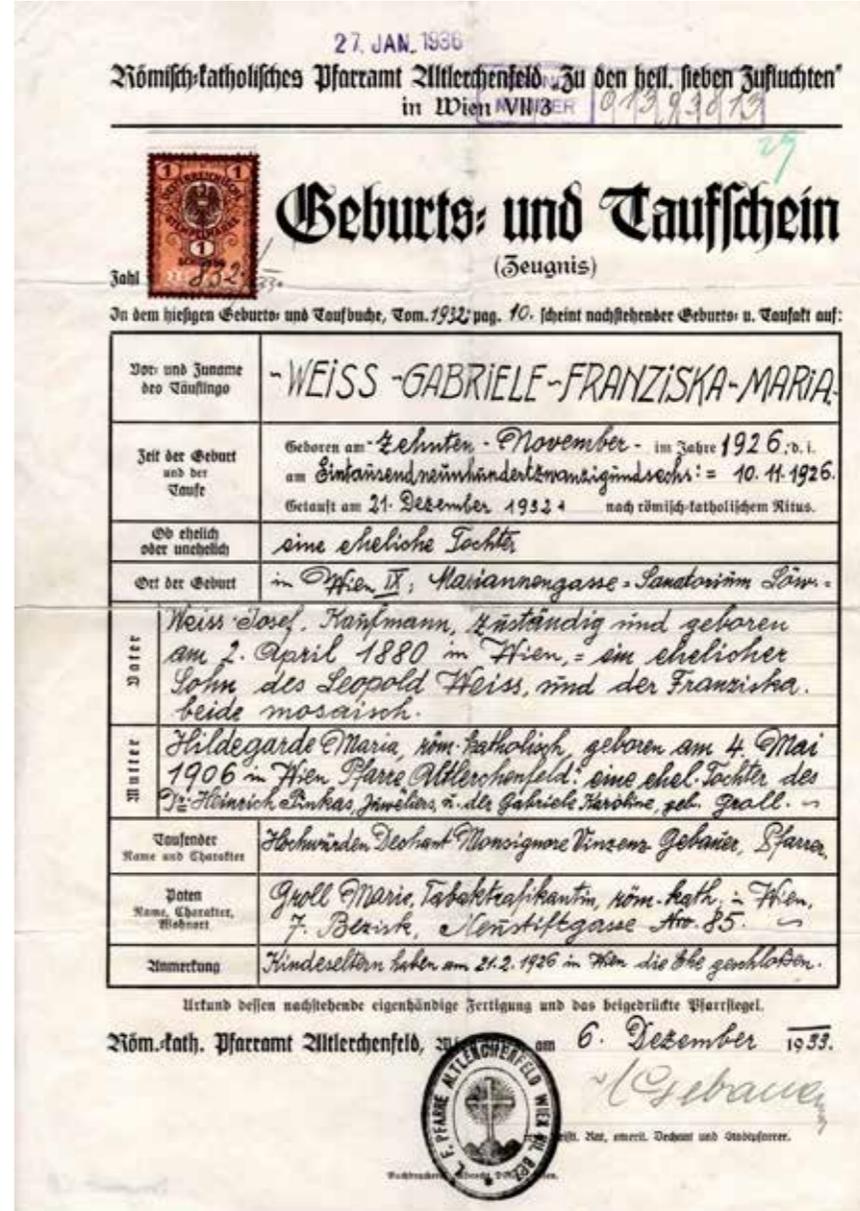
The first unhappy time in my life was when my mother died suddenly in 1935. My grandmother, Gabriele (I called her Grossmama), became my guardian, but she was such a busy lady that she had no choice but to send me to a convent school where I boarded during the week. Every weekend I would go home to my grandmother. My father would come and spend the weekend with us. Vienna is composed of 23 districts and we lived in the 9th district, my father lived nearby in the 2nd district. ■



My great-grandfather was presented on the occasion of his marriage with a prayer book on behalf of Kaiser Franz Josef and Empress Elisabeth



Ihre Majestäten  
 Kaiser Franz Joseph der Erste,  
 und  
 Kaiserin Elisabeth  
 haben geruht,  
 die ehrenvollste Widmung dieses Buches  
 zum frommen Andenken  
 an Ihren glorreichsten Vermählungstag  
 am 24. April 1854  
 allergnädigst anzunehmen.



My birth certificate



My Austrian passport, 1926

## The *Anschluss* and World War Two

IN 1938, THE *Anschluss* saw the arrival of the Nazis. *Anschluss* literally means 'union' in German and this was the political union of Austria and Germany.

I remember the time vividly. Nazi soldiers were marching down the street and people were standing and waving flags, clapping and cheering. The Austrians seemed to be welcoming them with open arms.

When the Nazis first arrived in Austria, in addition to persecuting Jewish people, they closed all the convent schools and nuns were no longer allowed to teach. The children were still allowed to live in the convent however and the local authority acquired responsibility for their schooling. I remember them coming into the convent to inform us which new schools we were going to attend. This was the first time I realised that I was different to my friends. They were sent together to a school somewhere else in the district but I was singled out and made to stand to one side. I just couldn't understand it or know what to make of it. I felt frightened and lost.

Now, as a child of 12, I found out the reason why I was different. I discovered that my father was Jewish. I was, therefore, sent to a Jewish school and made to wear a yellow star on my way to and from school. From that time onwards my journey to school was horrible. People would call me names and throw things at me. When I had been at the convent school I would go with my friends to play in the nearby park. I couldn't do that anymore because in the park were signs which said, *Jude Verboten!* (Jews forbidden). ■

## Kristallnacht

IN PARIS ON 7 November 1938, Herschel Grynzpan, a 17-year-old Jewish youth from Poland, assassinated the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath. Germany used the incident to publicise that the Jews had ‘fired the first shot’ in a war on Germany. The Nazis used this as a pretext to launch *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass) with demonstrations of revenge carried out in towns and cities all over Austria and Germany. 276 synagogues were burned and over 7,000 Jewish shops, homes, hospitals and schools were damaged or destroyed.

The night of 9 November 1938 was a dreadful night and I remember it vividly. I was still boarding in the convent at that time and we could hear the crashing of glass, shooting and screaming. We had wooden shutters on the windows which were always open, but we closed them to try and keep out the noise. We children were very frightened but the nuns were also frightened. That night nobody had much sleep.

The next day was my 12th birthday. Previous birthdays always included an outing and a delicious Sachertorte somewhere in Vienna. I don’t remember having any birthday celebrations that year and also my father never visited, which he always did. ■

Öffentliche Hauptschule für Mädchen in Wien:  
6. Dist., Stumpfgasse 56

Deutsches Reich. Zahl: 57  
Stadt Wien. Schuljahr: 19 38/39

### Halbjahrsausweis.

für *Elis Gabriele*, geboren am *16. November 1926*  
in *Wien, Deutsches Reich*, Religion *ev. kath.*,  
Schülerin der *dritten* Klasse, im Schuljahr *19 38/39*.

Verzogen: *sehr gut*  
Fleiß: *sehr gut*

Lehrgegenstände		Leistungen
A. Verbindliche Lehrgegenstände.		
Lehrerziehung		<i>gut</i>
Deutsche Sprache		<i>sehr gut</i>
Geschichte		<i>sehr gut</i>
Erkunde		<i>sehr gut</i>
Naturgeschichte		<i>gut</i>
Naturlehre		<i>gut</i>
Rechnen, Raumlehre und Geometr. Zeichnen		<i>sehr gut</i>
Freihandzeichnen		<i>gut</i>
Schreiben		<i>gut</i>
Handarbeit		<i>gut</i>
Gesang		<i>gut</i>
Religion		<i>sehr gut</i>
B. Nichtverbindliche Lehrgegenstände.		
Sprache	<i>Englisch</i>	<i>sehr gut</i>
Außere Form der Arbeiten		
Zahl der veräumten Schultage	entschuldig.	<i>4</i>
	nicht entschuldig.	<i>0</i>

Wien, am *11. Februar* 19*39*

*Prof. Max Holstein* Direktor  
*P. Stöckl* Klassenlehrer

©Verlagsdruckerei IV d. B. - Wien, 13. 1. 1939

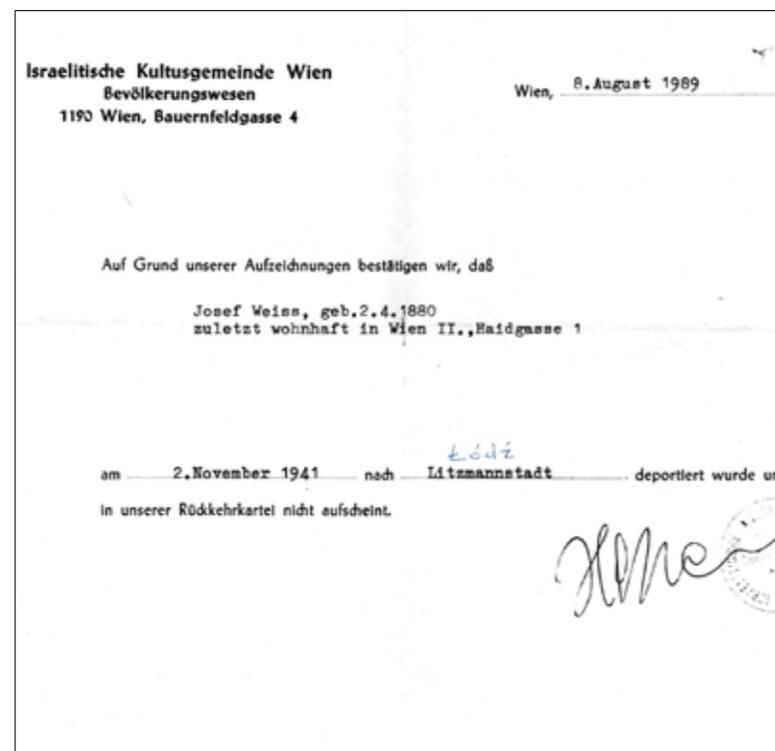
Last school report before I left for England, 1939

## My Father's story

### THE WEEKEND AFTER

*Kristallnacht* in November 1938, my father disappeared. My grandmother went to his flat to find that it had been vandalised and all his possessions destroyed. She then went to his office which was also in disarray. No one knew what had happened to him. I think that he had gone into hiding, but must at some point have been discovered and deported. I never saw him again. Much later I was sent my father's deportation letter by the Israeli Embassy. It was for Josef Weiss and dated 1941, the address given was correct and it seemed authentic. It stated that he had been deported to Litzmannstadt, the German name for Łódź, the city with one of the largest Jewish ghettos in Poland.

In 2010, I visited Auschwitz and saw photographs of people arriving at the camp on a transport from Łódź. The guide told me that when the Łódź Ghetto was liquidated, all the inmates were sent to Auschwitz. Although there is no proof, I can only assume that my father perished in Auschwitz although I truly hope that wasn't the case. In the ghetto people were starving and treated badly but to have died in the ghetto would at least mean he hadn't been sent to Auschwitz, but without evidence I will never know for sure. ■



Letter informing me of my father's deportation to Łódź Ghetto on 2 November 1941



In my great-uncle George's garden in the suburbs of Vienna, just before I left for England, 1938

## Leaving Austria on the *Kindertransport*

AFTER *KRISTALLNACHT* AND the disappearance of my father my grandmother became alarmed and made enquiries about getting me out of the country. She only ever said two things about it: that she was very glad she managed to get me out on the *Kindertransport*, and that after I left, officials, probably Gestapo, came to the house enquiring as to the whereabouts of Gabriele Weiss. My grandmother was relieved to be able to say: “She is not in the country, she is in England.”

A few weeks before I left for England my grandmother said: “Let’s go and have our photographs taken, we don’t know when we’ll meet again, how we’ll meet again or if we’ll ever meet again. Let’s have something to remember each other.” We went to a photographer in Vienna and had our portraits taken together. The memory and the photograph are still extremely emotional for me.

My photograph and all of my identification documents were sent to the Catholic Committee for Refugees who were responsible for my place on the *Kindertransport* and who kept in touch with me all the time I was in England.

*Kristallnacht* signalled that Jewish people were in immediate danger. Jewish, Catholic and Quaker communities acted quickly in organising a rescue of those in danger. A consortium of British Jews arranged for six Quaker volunteers to travel to Berlin to observe and report on the situation. Meetings were held with Jewish women’s organisations from across Germany and a joint Quaker and Jewish delegation met with the Home Secretary to try and facilitate the necessary visas for entry into Britain. These were all crucial to the success of the *Kindertransport*. The lobbying proved successful and the British Government announced that it would permit an unspecified number of children to enter the UK. I was one of the 10,000 children whose parents were either persecuted or dead, to be accepted.

The first *Kindertransport* train left Berlin on 1 December 1938, and the first train to leave Vienna was on 10 December 1938. I left along with 150 other children in April 1939.

The children were labelled as ‘trans migrants’ and a bond, which I believe was £50 (around £3,000 today), was required for each child. I honestly don’t know how my grandmother managed to find the money to secure my bond, but she obviously made many sacrifices to do this.

On the day I left I was accompanied by my grandmother and her sister, my great-aunt Maria. I remember that the station platform was absolutely crowded with people and there was an enormous amount of noise and confusion. The train was due to leave at midnight which was a very late hour for me to be up. I held tightly onto my grandmother’s hand, holding onto the warmth and security of her presence. Leaving her was so difficult and frightening for me, not knowing what lay ahead.

There were many Gestapo soldiers in their black uniforms on the platform. They held clip boards with lists of names. They would look at our labels and check them against their lists to be certain everyone was accounted for. My grandmother told me many years later that the adults had been commanded by the Nazis that there must be no emotional outbursts or scenes on the platform. She therefore appeared very positive, giving me plenty of encouragement, smiling and saying: “We will soon see each other again.” At the age of 12 I was uncertain what to make of it. I’m sure that I did feel a little excitement but mostly I felt apprehensive and sad that I wouldn’t see my grandmother again for a long time, and confused that she seemed so cheerful.

My grandmother was a level-headed lady and tried to make ordinary for me what was a truly extraordinary experience. When the signal came to board the train the windows were opened so the adults could hold their children’s hands for a few moments more. I let go of my grandmother’s hand, but she still stood there smiling. My last sight of her was of her waving at me and blowing a kiss. I still get emotional and sometimes cry thinking about it. I was very close to my grandmother; my mother had died when I was only eight and she was like a mother to me. I remember that my great-aunt Maria held back a little and stayed in the background. She was a kind lady, unmarried without children. I think she understood and respected the close bond between myself and my grandmother.

“My grandmother told me many years later that the adults had been commanded by the Nazis that there must be no emotional outbursts or scenes on the platform.”

Before the train pulled away I remember my grandmother saying: “Write to me as soon as you get there to let me know that you are safe.” It was only later that I discovered how she had helped me in that respect. I had with me only one small suitcase and we had only been allowed to fill it with clothing. We were also allowed to take one soft toy but nothing else. I worried about how on earth I was going to write to my grandmother. I had no writing materials and how was I going to be able to ask for them when I couldn’t speak English? When I arrived in England I found at the bottom of my suitcase, underneath my clothes, writing paper, envelopes and a pen. Being aware that I would not know how to ask for those things my grandmother had made certain that I would be able to sit down and write to her.

In the intervening years I have formulated my own theories regarding the *Kindertransport*. It seemed that the Austrians had initially welcomed the Nazis with open arms, believing that they would have a positive impact on the country. Almost a year into the occupation they had proven to be less than beneficial and the public were disenchanted. It’s possible that the Nazis did not want to alienate the citizens further and so allowed the children to leave, albeit arranging a midnight departure when not many people would be around and an air of secrecy could be maintained.

“I had with me only one small suitcase and we had only been allowed to fill it with clothing. We were also allowed to take one soft toy but nothing else. I worried about how on earth I was going to write to my grandmother.”



Grossmama and me. Our very special photo taken together before I left for England, April 1939

During the train journey the Gestapo boarded several times. They would search the children's suitcases. I was lucky because mine was never inspected. I feel quite sure that if it had been and they had found my writing materials at the bottom, they would have been confiscated.

The train journey seemed to go on forever. We were travelling initially from Vienna to the Hook of Holland and seemed to stop at every station along the way. I don't suppose that we actually did, but it certainly appeared that way. At each stop the Gestapo would disembark and their replacements would get on board and go, once again, through the process of checking our labels against their lists.

I don't remember too much about the children accompanying me on the transport because I was so preoccupied with my own thoughts. Some of them, however, were much younger than me. The age seemed to range from three years upwards. The very small children had older siblings with them, having someone to look after them being a condition of being accepted. I don't recall having a conversation with anybody, but I was very emotional and I may have blotted out some of the memories.

After many hours of travelling the train stopped again and the soldiers disembarked. The doors opened and we saw that we had reached the Dutch border. All trains from across Europe passed through Holland at some point and were all routed through the station at which we had stopped. I never found out its name. However, they were expecting us and laid out on tables on the platform were sandwiches, drinks and even small toys. We were taken off the train and invited to help ourselves to food and drink.

By this time some of the younger children were very homesick and crying for their parents. I myself was feeling tired and bewildered, but the civilians on the platform were so kind and tried their best to comfort us. We eventually re-boarded the train and it didn't stop again until we arrived at the Hook of Holland. We left the train and walked down to the harbour where we prepared for the next leg of our journey – by boat. ■

## Taking the boat to England

BY NOW IT was daylight and we were all frightened because there before us was the enormous expanse of the North Sea. Our destination was to be England. I had been on holiday to the Austrian Lakes and stood on the banks of the Danube, but with a lake or river you could see what was on the other side. I had never before seen such a vast stretch of water. I was scared because I couldn't see what lay on the other side or imagine what was going to happen when we arrived.

We were lucky. The North Sea can be very rough in April but that day it was calm and to my knowledge no one was seasick. We sailed across and arrived in Harwich as a large group of 150 children.

We were met by different committees comprising Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Quaker organisations. Aileen Bagot was the lady from the Catholic Committee for Refugees who came to meet me and one or two other children. I remember her well; a tall elegant lady with a kind face. She met me there at Harwich in 1939, and kept in touch with me the whole time I was in England until years later when the Catholic Committee for Refugees was dissolved.

Our whole group boarded a train for London. On arrival we would all disperse and head for different destinations. We disembarked at Liverpool Street Station, said our goodbyes to each other and went our separate ways. If you ever go to Liverpool Street Station in London you will find a very moving sculpture of a group of children carrying their toys and their cases. It depicts children like me arriving on the *Kindertransport*, and all around the base of the monument are little labels giving details of the cities from which we came. It is a beautiful monument, but of course it wasn't there when we arrived in 1939. ■

## My first home in England

AILEEN BAGOT ESCORTED me across London, she couldn't speak German and I couldn't speak English, therefore communication was virtually impossible. I felt bewildered and frightened, but Miss Bagot was kind and reassuring. She took me to another train station and put a piece of paper in my hand, upon which was written the name Aldershot, and then she left me to take the train on my own. I can still see it now in my mind's eye; it was made up of separate carriages and each one had their own door onto the platform. Once we had departed I kept anxiously looking out of the window, reading the station name each time the train stopped, to see if we had arrived at the place named on the piece of paper.

Eventually we arrived at Aldershot and my fellow passengers in the carriage indicated that I should now disembark from the train. There was hardly anyone on the platform, but there was a couple who came towards me. I realised straight away that they were the ones who were going to look after me and become my foster parents. I don't remember how I felt when I saw them, everything was strange and it was very difficult meeting new people who I couldn't communicate with.

I can still visualise my foster parents clearly; a plump lady and a man in army uniform (Aldershot is a garrison town). They took my hand and tried to make me feel welcome, although they didn't speak German and I couldn't speak English. I went with them to their home but it all felt like a dream.

The first thing that struck me about the street and the estate on which they lived was that all the houses looked exactly the same. In Vienna all the houses looked different from one another. This was all new and unique to me. I remember thinking, *how do people know where they live?*

My foster parents lived in a three-bedroom semi-detached house. They took me upstairs and showed me to a small bedroom where they put my suitcase on the bed and indicated that I should unpack. That is when I found the writing materials that my grandmother had hidden. ■

## Starting school

AFTER A FEW days settling in, my foster mother took me to school. It was a Catholic primary school but everyone referred to it as junior school. The teachers all looked kind, they were smiling and very welcoming, but no one could speak German. It was extremely unusual in 1939, for a child to arrive at a British school and not be able to speak English, unlike today when it is quite usual to find children of different nationalities speaking different languages in a school.

One of the teachers brought me a simple reading book along with an English / German dictionary. It was a thoughtful gesture, but thinking back it was probably a suggestion that I should teach myself English! To my surprise I did learn English very quickly and within two or three months I could make myself understood. I think that the greatest help actually came from my peers, the other children, who taught me a great deal.

I found myself having plenty to catch up on. In Vienna I had been taught in metric measurements, here everything was in imperial measurements: inches and yards and ounces and pounds. The monetary system of pennies, shillings and guineas was equally confusing. I had to unlearn everything I had previously learned in school. Ironically, although I learned in metric originally and we now use that system in England, I still find myself thinking in feet and inches!

“To my surprise I did learn English very quickly and within two or three months I could make myself understood. I think that the greatest help actually came from my peers, the other children, who taught me a great deal.”

From the April when I arrived in England until September all went well. My English was improving and I wrote to my grandmother every week. My foster parents were not overly affectionate but we got on reasonably and I was treated well. When the war began in September however, things changed. I could no longer receive any letters from my grandmother and my foster father, who was a regular army officer, left for an assignment at a secret destination. The atmosphere completely changed in the house and for some reason I began to be treated differently by my foster mother. I was made to do plenty of housework and I was punished if it was not done the way she wanted.

I must have confided my upset to someone, because it was reported to the school who then contacted the Catholic Committee. One day in late November (two months after the war had begun) I was called in to see the headmistress. Sitting with her was none other than Miss Bagot. She was certainly surprised to see how quickly I had settled into school and how well I was able to communicate. Although I loved that school Miss Bagot could see that I was unhappy, the main cause being my home life and the fact that I could not communicate with my grandmother. She assured me that she would try to find somewhere else for me to live. ■

## Aldershot to Ashford

IN JANUARY 1940, Miss Bagot returned to Aldershot to collect me. We travelled via London to Ashford in Kent. I was taken to The Convent of Notre Dame, a boarding school that offered places for either daily or weekly boarders. I became a permanent resident as I had no official home, staying at school with the nuns during the school holidays. The sisters who taught at the school were exceptional teachers and I received an excellent education during my three years there.

I sat the school leaving certificate the summer before my 16th birthday, in 1942. I took five subjects, English, Maths, History, Geography and Nature Study and was delighted to pass them all. Just after I turned 16, I was surprised to receive another visit from Miss Bagot. She told me to prepare for some bad news. My heart sank, fearing it was regarding my grandmother, but in actuality she had come for another reason.

According to British wartime regulations, now that I was 16, I was classified as an alien. The term alien during wartime was used to describe all foreigners. These were then further categorised as either friendly aliens or enemy aliens. Friendly aliens were those from a foreign country who had fought to retain their freedom against Nazi Germany.

Unfortunately for me I was Austrian and because the Austrian people had initially welcomed the Nazis, I was classed as an enemy alien. At that time there was great consternation that Hitler would invade England via the English Channel. Ashford being on the coast was therefore declared a restricted area. No enemy aliens were allowed to reside there and that meant I had to leave the convent.

I had hoped to be able to continue at the convent until I was 18, when I could matriculate and train to become a teacher, but now this was no longer going to be possible. The Catholic Committee met to discuss where my next move was to be, especially taking into consideration my desire to teach. Within a matter of weeks I discovered that I was moving. A place had been found for me in another convent in Mill Hill, London. ■

## Moving to London and the Blitz

THE CONVENT IN Mill Hill was run by The Sisters of Charity who also operated St Vincent's Nursery Nursing College. The plan was that I would attend for two years of training taking an additional Nursery Nursing and Montessori education course. Upon qualification I would be a nursery nurse and also qualified to teach young children the practical methods of Montessori prior to them entering mainstream school.

Although I was sad to leave the convent in Ashford, I was adaptable and settled easily into Mill Hill. I attended lectures and practical hands-on nursery training. It was necessary to learn how to bath a baby, how to change nappies and feed an infant; quite a learning curve! I also attended the Montessori lectures which was an extremely practical method of teaching children. From the age of around 18 months old we would teach them how to dress themselves, do up buttons and tie their shoelaces.

I lived in Mill Hill during the London Blitz. We spent many nights in air-raid shelters. The sirens would sound and we would sometimes spend the whole night down there, not emerging until the morning. These nights were not very comfortable and often ended up being sleepless. This was especially difficult when I had to concentrate on lectures the next day. I vividly remember one night in particular. We came up from the shelter after the all-clear had sounded and were astonished to see that the sky over London was completely red. There were so many fires across the city from German incendiary bombs that it seemed as if the whole of London was burning and the reflection of all the fires could be seen across the sky.

As an enemy alien living in Mill Hill I had to report monthly to the local police station who compiled lists of all aliens living in the neighbourhood. I became quite friendly with them during this time and they would tease me and ask me exactly what I had been up to.

The war was still on when it became time for me to sit my final written and practical exams. I passed them all and received a Nursery Nursing Diploma. I was given help to attain my first job which was with the Richardson family in Woldingham, Surrey.

Mr and Mrs Richardson were an extremely nice couple with three children. They had a big house in which I was allocated a lovely large bedroom and a charming little bathroom that I had all to myself. The Richardsons were a well-to-do family who also employed a cleaner and a cook. My role was solely to look after the children. They were very well behaved, Christopher and Elisabeth were toddlers and the youngest, Neal, was just a baby. I took them for walks and looked after their welfare. I would meet with other nannies when we went on our walks and we would chat and exchange news.

Despite being a village in the countryside, Woldingham was not always quiet and peaceful. It lay close to Biggin Hill which formed part of the British defences on the south-eastern approaches to London. Its purpose was to combat V-1 flying bombs, also known as buzz bombs or doodlebugs. We could see and hear the doodlebugs coming, as they made the most peculiar noise. The danger lay when the noise stopped and the missile could land anywhere. To counter this threat, barrage balloons were raised on heavy cables. Designed to hang low in the sky, their anchoring cables and hydrogen filling was intended to deter any low flying aircraft, although missiles would sometimes become entangled with the barrage balloons and bring them down. We became used to the sight of them hanging on the horizon. ■



After completing my nursery nurse training, Woldingham, 1942

## The end of the war

IN MAY 1945, we celebrated the wonderful news that the war was over. Everyone was given the day off work in honour of VE Day. Together with my fellow nannies I went to London for the day. When we arrived, we joined the thousands of other people who had congregated outside the gates of Buckingham Palace. Everyone was singing, dancing and cheering. The King and Queen appeared on the balcony of the Palace with Princess Elizabeth on one side and Princess Margaret on the other. They stood waving at us while we all waved back, clapped and cheered. Some people were climbing up lampposts to try and get a better view. The atmosphere was indescribable, but the closest emotion was pure joy. People were dancing and I remember that someone just picked me up and started dancing with me; it was a wonderful experience.

It was while we were on the train on our return journey that I suddenly thought of the end of the war in relation to my grandmother. I hadn't thought too much about it in the excitement of the VE Day celebrations, but now it was all I could think about. I couldn't wait to get back to the house so that I could write to her. Once the letter was written and posted I waited anxiously for a reply. When the letter was eventually returned to me stating 'not known at this address', I began to fear the worst.

I couldn't imagine what had happened to her. Maybe she was no longer living in Vienna or worse, maybe she had died during the war. When out of the blue I received a letter from her I was overjoyed. My grandmother had survived the war and had the good sense to try and get in touch with me via the Catholic Committee for Refugees. They had kept track of me and knew exactly where she could find me. So we were reunited, but only by letter.

We were finally able to write to each other with all of our news. This was initially quite strange. I hadn't spoken German for a number of years, but had to try and recall it in order to write to my grandmother who couldn't speak English. It was a little difficult but my grandmother's letters were so informative and stimulating that I found my German coming back to me. I hadn't lost it after all.

Around the same time I heard that the Red Cross had obtained lists of people who had survived the war and been released from concentration camps. The lists were kept at Bloomsbury House in London and my employers gave me a couple of days off to go there. I very much hoped to find out some

information regarding my father. When perusing the lists, I found a number of gentlemen by the name of Josef Weiss, but none of them matched the details I had for my father. I submitted to the Red Cross a list of all the people named Josef Weiss in the hope that they may be able to investigate further. I gave them my father's date of birth and his last known address in Vienna, but this was all the information I was able to provide. Weeks later I heard back from the Red Cross. They had followed up on all the names and none of them were my father. It was concluded that he must have died in a concentration camp or wherever he had been taken to. I felt extremely sad about this despite not having seen him for many years.

Now the war was over, life in the village was quiet and we no longer heard the sound of air raid sirens. It was almost as though everyone wanted to forget about the war as quickly as possible. I still very much enjoyed my employment, but the children were getting older, the big ones would soon be ready to start school and with only one little one at home I would no longer be needed and would need to find a new position.

“They had followed up on all the names and none of them were my father. It was concluded that he must have died in a concentration camp or wherever he had been taken to.”

My employers were kind and considerate people and they suggested that before I moved onto another job I should apply for British citizenship. Mr Richardson worked for the Home Office and said that he would help me. He informed me that as I was under 21 and still a minor, my citizenship would be free. He drew up all the relevant papers required for submission to a magistrate. In front of the magistrate I swore allegiance to the King and soon afterwards received a certificate of naturalisation and became a British citizen. I was extremely pleased about this as I had now lived in England almost as long as I had in Austria and knew that I wanted to remain here. I felt very anglicised and proud to call myself British.

My grandmother and I were, by this time, corresponding regularly. We both wanted to see each other but travel was difficult so soon after the end of the war and also neither of us had enough money to be able to afford the trip.

Mrs Richardson was very aware that although I enjoyed being a nanny, my ambition was to become a teacher. My circumstances as an enemy alien had forced me to move around and be unable to matriculate, but Mrs Richardson was optimistic that I could still realise my dream. Through her contacts she was able to help secure me an interview to enter teacher training college. I travelled to Newcastle upon Tyne to attend an interview and examination. These took place over two intensive days. Two months later I heard that I had been successful in gaining a place at Wynyard Hall Teacher Training College in County Durham. ■

## Beginning my teacher training

I WAS EXTREMELY sad to leave the Richardson family. I had been with them for three and a half years and felt that they had helped me a great deal in securing my future. Nevertheless I was excited about what that future held.

Wynyard Hall was a residential college so I didn't have the problem of having to find somewhere to live. I began my training which I found interesting and enlightening. I had to attend lectures and then visit different schools in the area to observe lessons and put into practice what I had learned.

I became very good friends with my roommate, Joyce Halliday. The rules of the college were quite strict and we were not allowed off the premises at weekends, however on holidays and special occasions Joyce would take me home with her to her parents' house. They lived in Wallsend on Tyne (which derived its name as the location is at the end of Hadrian's Wall) and they were extremely kind and welcoming. The Hallidays had another daughter named Isabelle who was in the RAF and didn't live at home. Apparently, I strongly resembled her and reminded Mrs Halliday of her daughter every time she looked at me. ■

## Meeting Ken

ONE WEEKEND WHEN I was staying with the Hallidays, Isabelle returned home on leave. She invited Joyce and me to join her at a tea dance being held at the NAAFI club. It was during this event that I was asked to dance by a young RAF flight sergeant. We danced all afternoon and my fate was sealed!

Ken Keenaghan was an air navigator and flight sergeant stationed in Bedford. We exchanged addresses and a few months later he was demobbed and came back to live in Newcastle taking a job at Binns Department Store as a radio engineer. We began to see each other regularly and became engaged that year, 1948. It was going to be a long engagement as neither of us had much money. However Ken was entitled to demob pay (or post war tax credit, to give it its full name) and he spent some of it on a car and the rest on an engagement ring.

I continued with my training and teaching practice and graduated from college. I was no longer entitled to accommodation after I finished college, but Mrs Halliday was tremendously generous and offered to let me live with them until Ken and I could be married. ■

## Reuniting with my grandmother

OF COURSE, BY this time Ken knew all about my background and my story. In the summer of 1951, without my knowledge as a surprise for me, he made plans to take the car and drive us to Vienna to see my grandmother. In those days travelling across Europe was no easy feat. In the immediate aftermath of the war Austria was divided into four occupation zones and was jointly occupied by the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and France. Vienna was similarly subdivided and we had to travel according to strict regulations. It was a complicated and stressful journey as we had to travel through so many different zones and submit our papers for examination on each occasion. We eventually arrived in Vienna for the much-anticipated reunion with my grandmother.

It's difficult for me to put into words the emotions I experienced when I saw her again. It was a mixture of incredible joy and also great sadness. In my mind she looked exactly as she had when she stood on the platform to see me off 12 years earlier. The lady that I remembered now looked so different, worn down by the cares of life. Nevertheless I was delighted to see her and saw that she felt the same. We were both survivors and that realisation was enormously affecting and emotional. I was very pleased to be able to introduce her to Ken, who had made it possible. I couldn't have made the trip without him. All the time I had been studying without a wage, he had been saving up out of his £3 a week wages, to enable us both to be here. I could never thank him enough for that.

“The lady that I remembered now looked so different, worn down by the cares of life. Nevertheless I was delighted to see her and saw that she felt the same. We were both survivors and that realisation was enormously affecting and emotional.”

We stayed in a hotel close to where my grandmother now lived. Her apartment was very small as she no longer lived in the one I had known so well as a child. That beautiful apartment had been commandeered by the Nazis during the war and she had been relocated to a small flat in one of the suburbs. Every morning we would collect her from her flat and take her somewhere for the day. It was a strange and quite funny situation because as she couldn't speak English and Ken couldn't speak German I had to be a constant interpreter.

Now, as a grandmother myself, I understand the fortitude and bravery she showed. To be able to place your grandchild on a train and send her off into the unknown took immense courage and I don't know if I would have been able to do the same. It must have been incredibly difficult for her during the war years, living in impoverished circumstances and not knowing what had happened to me, but she never complained about what had happened to her and how she lost everything. She was a very dear lady and I was so happy to once again be in her company. We spent a wonderful week together and then did not see each other again until 1955, when I was expecting my first child and she came to England. In fact, my grandmother lived until 1974, 29 years after the war ended. My husband and I, along with the children, would go back to Vienna each year to visit her. I have very happy memories of her and I am delighted she was able to meet her great-grandchildren. ■

## Becoming a teacher

In 1951, I began my first teaching job at Redheugh Girls' school in Gateshead. When the head teacher interviewed me for the position he asked if I was likely to understand the local dialect. Not wanting to jeopardise my chances of obtaining the post, I said that I did understand it. He made me laugh when he then replied that if that was the case then I knew more than he did!

For two years I lived with the Halliday family, who were absolutely lovely and I travelled each day to Gateshead for work. The teaching post proved to be hard work but I really enjoyed teaching and was very happy. I also started to prepare for my wedding. Ken and I had decided to get married in June 1953, by which time we hoped to have saved up enough money. ■

## Our wedding

THE WEEKS IN June prior to our marriage were particularly wet, but on the morning of the wedding there was sunshine and blue skies. We were married on a Monday morning and I woke up early, excited for the day ahead. I was feeling a little emotional as my grandmother had been unable to be there, however Mrs Halliday was there for me as I dressed in my beautiful long white gown. Before we left for church I received two telegrams wishing me happiness. One was from my grandmother in Vienna and the other was from my aunt Gisela in Zurich.

We took a taxi to Saint Columbus Catholic Church in Wallsend. I didn't have my father to give me away so Mr Halliday kindly stepped in and Ken's sister, Irene, was my bridesmaid. As I walked down the aisle on the arm of Mr Halliday, Ken half-turned and smiled at me. He was the love of my life and I felt so tremendously happy. It was a beautiful nuptial mass, with hymns and the church full of gorgeous flowers. The priest reminded us of the seriousness of our undertaking, the vow of "Until death do us part" and he wished us a lifetime of happiness.

We invited the priest, Father Tim O'Brien, to join us for the photographs which were taken in Richardson Dees Park. It was a picturesque location with the sun shining and the flowers in full bloom.

Then there was a small catered reception at the home of my brother and sister-in-law, John and Peggy, who had just built a new house in Tynemouth. We had a wonderful and memorable day, finally saying our goodbyes to our friends and family around 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

We took a week's holiday for our honeymoon, touring first in Yorkshire and then travelling around the South of England where we stayed in bed and breakfast hotels. When we returned to the North East, it was back to our own home. ■



Our small but beautiful wedding, 22 June 1953

## Beginning married life

WE HAD PLANNED to rent a home after we married but a friend of Ken's father gave us the good advice to try and buy a property if we could stretch our savings that far. Around three or four months before the wedding the same friend notified us that two suitable flats had become available. One would be suitable for us to live in and the other we would be able to rent out. I was somewhat aghast when we went to view the flats as they didn't have electricity and needed plenty of refurbishment. I wondered how on earth it was going to be possible for us to live there but Ken assured me that he would be able to tackle the work and that it would be ready for us to move into after our honeymoon. He worked extremely hard, even taking on the installation of the electrics and making ours the first house in the street with electricity. I was very excited to move into our first real home in Maud Street, Lemington.

Each day I travelled by bus to work in Gateshead. I returned to teaching at Redheugh Girls School. These days it is co-ed, but back then the girls and boys were taught in separate schools. The girls in my care were aged between seven and 14 years, although shortly after I began there the school leaving age was raised to 15. I remember this change vividly as no guidance was given in relation to the extra year the girls would spend in school and we had to virtually devise our own curriculum.

I taught at the school until 1955 and it was an extremely busy time. I had schoolwork, housework and a husband to look after. At least the installation of electricity in our home meant that I was able to have a washing machine. I had been used to taking our laundry to the launderette and having our own machine, although quite different from the standards of today, was marvellous and made life much easier.

In 1954, I became pregnant with my first child. I informed the head teacher and everyone was thrilled to hear my news, but sorry to see me leave. I was absolutely delighted when my grandmother came to visit and stayed for around two months. She got on very well with Ken, despite her not understanding English and me having to translate everything. Ken's German was improving however and although he couldn't speak it, he could understand a good deal of what we were talking about. It was lovely for both of us having her to stay and I missed her terribly when she had to return to Vienna shortly before our baby was born. ■

## The arrival of our children

OUR FIRST DAUGHTER, Pat, arrived in the middle of an exceptionally hot night in July 1955, and I was delighted that we had a gorgeous little girl. She was born in Bridge End Nursing Home, Corbridge, and unlike today, when new mothers are discharged after a day, I spent 11 days recuperating. It was wonderful as by the time I returned home I felt quite rested and more than capable of dealing with a new baby.

It wasn't all plain sailing however as we were still living in the upstairs flat and it was not terribly easy having to keep the pram downstairs in the porch. On another occasion I wheeled the pram to the local chemist, leaving it outside. When I returned home I had the feeling that something was missing and realised with shock that I had come home without the baby! I raced back to the shop to find her sitting quite happily in the pram surveying the world passing by. How on earth I missed seeing her when I left the shop is a question I often asked myself. I must have been looking the other way! Clearly I was still unused to having a baby.

I very much enjoyed being a mother and life was good. When Pat was two years old I discovered that I was expecting again and our second daughter, Christine, was born in 1958. Having two little ones in a small flat with no garden was not ideal so we started to look for somewhere else to live.

We wanted to move back to Wallsend as it was near to the coast and we were both already familiar with the area. The house we found was exactly what we had in mind; a three-bedroomed semi-detached house with a garden, open fields behind and a large green in front. Although it was a post-war house it still required some updating and decorating. We even decided to fit a new modern kitchen.

We moved into the house when Christine was eight months old and Pat was nearly four. The girls were not due to begin school until they were five which meant I continued to stay at home being a housewife and mother. As much as I enjoyed this, I was beginning to get itchy feet and needed something to occupy my mind apart from bringing up a family. Ken suggested that I enrol in evening classes. A two-year evening course in psychology seemed a good choice if I ever wanted to return to teaching. Ken looked after the children two nights a week while I attended Kings College in Newcastle and gained my diploma.



Me, Ken and Pat, 1956

Meanwhile a chance meeting gave me the opportunity to get back into teaching. I was approached by one of my neighbours, Mrs Hall, who lived across the green. She had heard that I used to be a teacher and wondered if I was interested in working again, there being a great shortage of teachers at that time. I confirmed that I was interested and shortly afterwards I received a phone call from a local head teacher. She knew I was qualified and hoped I would be available and willing to return to the classroom.

Ken was initially a little unsure about my prospective return to work. He felt that he should be the breadwinner and the one responsible for bringing a wage into the house. However, I persuaded him that teaching was my passion and my vocation; I had been out of it for five years and needed to return soon or I would lose the confidence and momentum.

My only concern was who would take care of my children. Fortunately for me, Mrs Hall was able to help me out with childcare and proved to be a real treasure; a most helpful and reliable lady. Thanks to her I was able to start at the Richardson Dees Primary School in Wallsend in time for the new term in September. Mrs Hall would come across the green to our house early and dress Christine before giving her breakfast. Life certainly changed completely. I had been at home for five years as a housewife and mother, now I was a working mum!

During all of this time I had been enjoying regular correspondence with my grandmother, but now for the first time we received a visit from her daughter, my aunt Gisela. It was wonderful to see her. She visited us many times until her untimely death in May 1972. Sadly, my grandmother didn't visit us in Wallsend. By this time she was in her 80s, beginning to feel her age and not confident enough to travel to England. Ken was now a television and radio engineer working for Rediffusion. They installed a telephone for us and as my grandmother also had a telephone we were able to keep in regular contact that way. When the children were old enough to travel, we began visiting Vienna each year on holiday.

This time of my life was extremely happy. We had made lots of lovely friends, I was very happy at the school and although I was very busy I thoroughly enjoyed being a mum, teacher and housewife. ■



As a young teacher with my class at Richardson Dees, Wallsend, 1969



On a family road trip to Vienna with Ken, Pat and Christine, 1961



On holiday with Pat and Christine, Great Yarmouth, 1963

## School twinning

AROUND THIS TIME Wallsend was twinned with a town in Germany called Rheidt. German council members would travel to Wallsend one year and the following year our council members would go on a return trip. None of the UK council members could speak German and so I was released from school to act as interpreter at these twinning events. I always very much looked forward to doing so. One particular year Wallsend opened a new sports centre and the German council members were invited to open it at an official ceremony. As the authorised interpreter I was picked up each morning that week in the Mayor's car, which attracted a lot of interest and attention from the neighbours.

During my teaching days, classes were set according to ability and streamed A, B and C. I had a great deal of success with children in the A stream and many of them did well enough to go on to Grammar School.

Several of my most memorable students from those days have still kept in contact with me. One young man went on to attend Theological College, became an Anglican priest and is now a Bishop. Another ex-pupil recently visited me with his wife. As a child he had an extended stay in hospital and he remembered that I used to visit him every week and take along 'get well' letters for him to read from the rest of the class.

“As the authorised interpreter I was picked up each morning that week in the Mayor's car, which attracted a lot of interest and attention from the neighbours.”

In 1965, I was promoted to deputy head, a position I held for four of the nine years I spent at the school. I found teaching so rewarding, I always had a good rapport with my students and still think about all those children whose lives I touched and how their lives touched me.

By the time Christine started school in 1963, we had moved house once again. Our new home was in Tynemouth. It became the house in which my children grew up and is actually not that far from where I currently live. Whenever I pass it the memories come flooding back.

I learned to drive in 1964. Carrying heavy bags loaded with school books on public transport in all weathers was not ideal and I frequently caught colds. After passing my test Ken bought me a Mini. It didn't have a synchronised gear box, meaning the clutch operated on a 'double v technique' which was a more difficult way to change gears. The extra effort required for learning this technique definitely made me a better driver.

Once we moved to Tynemouth, Mrs Hall no longer made the journey from Wallsend to look after the children. Instead we found the wonderful Mrs Humphries. She was a local lady, widowed with no children and was more than willing to get the children's tea prepared, along with making the house warm and cosy for their arrival home from school. She was a warm and friendly character who looked like a typical homely grandma and we established an immediate bond. The girls called her Auntie Polly and she referred to them as her 'bairns'. She continued to work for us until the girls were both at secondary school. Life was certainly good during this period. Ken had joined The Catenians, an association of Catholic businessmen, through which we made many friends and attended social occasions. Mrs Humphries was often on hand to babysit when we needed her. ■



Left to right: Christine, me and Pat, 1965



Left to right: Ken, Tante (Aunty) Gisela, Christine, Grossmama and me, Vienna, 1966



Left to right: Tante Gisela, Ken, Grossmama with Pat and Christine, Vienna 1969

## Changes to my teaching career

IN 1969, THE system of schooling in Wallsend changed dramatically. The traditional classification and order of schooling changed from infants, juniors and secondary to first school, middle school and high school. I had hoped to remain as deputy head in middle school as that was the age group in which my experience lay.

It transpired that there were fewer opportunities for deputy headships in the new middle school system. As one of the last deputy heads appointed I was unable to secure my position of choice and was advised that if I wanted to continue in my current role, it would have to be in a first school. This was not a satisfactory outcome for me, as I was used to educating older children.

However, before I was forced to take this path I saw an advertisement for the role of head of lower school, at Central Middle School in Wallsend. This would entail teaching nine- to eleven-year-olds which was my area of expertise. I was more than happy to accept the post which suited me very well. Within a year of taking the job as head of the lower school, I was appointed deputy head of Central Middle School.

I was extremely happy in my new post and worked hard. Our children meanwhile were growing up. Pat attended La Sagesse School, an independent school for girls that occupied Jesmond Towers, a Grade II listed building. Christine obtained a scholarship to the Sacred Heart Grammar School, Fenham.

In due course I was persuaded to apply for the headship of my school. I was delighted to be awarded the post of head teacher in 1976. My headship proved to be hard work, but I had excellent and committed staff. The previous head, Mr Snowdon, had left an outstanding legacy which I was determined to uphold and continue. I spent 10 very happy years as head, maintaining this legacy before retiring in 1986.

I was given a lovely retirement party when I left school, but once having left I very much missed the children, the staff and the sense of camaraderie I had enjoyed. I found that I was unwilling to give up completely on being an educator and in the year following my retirement I tried my hand at supply teaching. I certainly found this challenging for a variety of reasons but mostly as it was completely different from the way I was used to working. I taught supply for one year and was then perfectly happy to retire for a second time. ■



Teaching staff at Central Middle School, 1978, when I was headteacher



At my retirement party with Ken, 1986

## My expanding family

### Pat

After Pat left school she began teacher training in Durham. It meant her leaving home for the first time, spending her first year in college accommodation and then moving into digs. I'm not sure they were particularly comfortable as she would come home to us at weekends. After graduating from college she secured a teaching job in Middlesbrough where she shared a house with a couple of other teachers.

She soon became head of PE in the school in which she worked and then advanced to deputy head of Sacred Heart Secondary School. She was later promoted to head teacher.

While living and working in Middlesbrough, Pat met her future husband Walter. They married in August 1983 in Mickley, Northumberland. Before we went into church on the day of the wedding there was a tremendous downpour, but afterwards the sun came out and the rest of the day was glorious, much like it had been on the day of my own wedding. Christine was Pat's bridesmaid and they both looked absolutely beautiful.

Pat and Wally bought a house in Stockton and lived there with two kittens they bought to replace Sooty, the black foundling kitten we had adopted when the girls were still living at home. They later moved to a large Victorian house in Hartlepool where Ken and I would often go to cat-sit when Pat and Wally went on holiday.

My first grandchild, Emily, was born in 1991. Pat decided to return to work after her maternity leave and that's when Grandma stepped in. I lived with Pat in Hartlepool during the week and would return home at weekends. Emily had been born with dislocated hips and was put into plaster at six weeks. Despite this she was a joy of a baby, a gift from God and I was delighted to have the opportunity to look after her.

Emily graduated from University and followed family tradition and became a teacher. She married Nicky in 2019, and I am now 'Grossmama' to their lovely son Leo, who was born in 2020.

### Christine

From an early age, Christine developed a love of music and became a talented musician, joining a youth orchestra in Tynemouth where she played violin.

At 21, Christine landed her dream career as a flight stewardess for Britannia Airways, rising through the ranks to Coordinator at Newcastle Airport. She very much enjoyed her time with Britannia Airways and I used to love hearing stories about it. She often kept me extremely entertained telling me about the people she had met on different flights and sharing her experiences of the great British public on holiday! In 1979, she moved out of home and bought her first flat in Wallsend.

Christine and Gary married in November 1987. It was a beautiful wedding with Pat in the role of matron of honour. Gary's two little nieces were bridesmaids and looked adorable in royal blue dresses. Ken gave a wonderful speech and the memory of the day fills me with pleasure. They had a lovely reception held in a hotel in Whitley Bay and the celebrations lasted all night with friends continuing to arrive all through the evening.

Christine and Gary's first child, Harry, was born in 1992. Once again Grandma was on hand, travelling daily to their house to help out. He was a lovely baby too. As he emerged from the baby stage he always struck me as particularly inquisitive and thoughtful child. I loved looking after him.

“ She very much enjoyed her time with Britannia Airways and I used to love hearing stories about it. She often kept me extremely entertained telling me about the people she had met on different flights and sharing her experiences of the great British public on holiday! ”

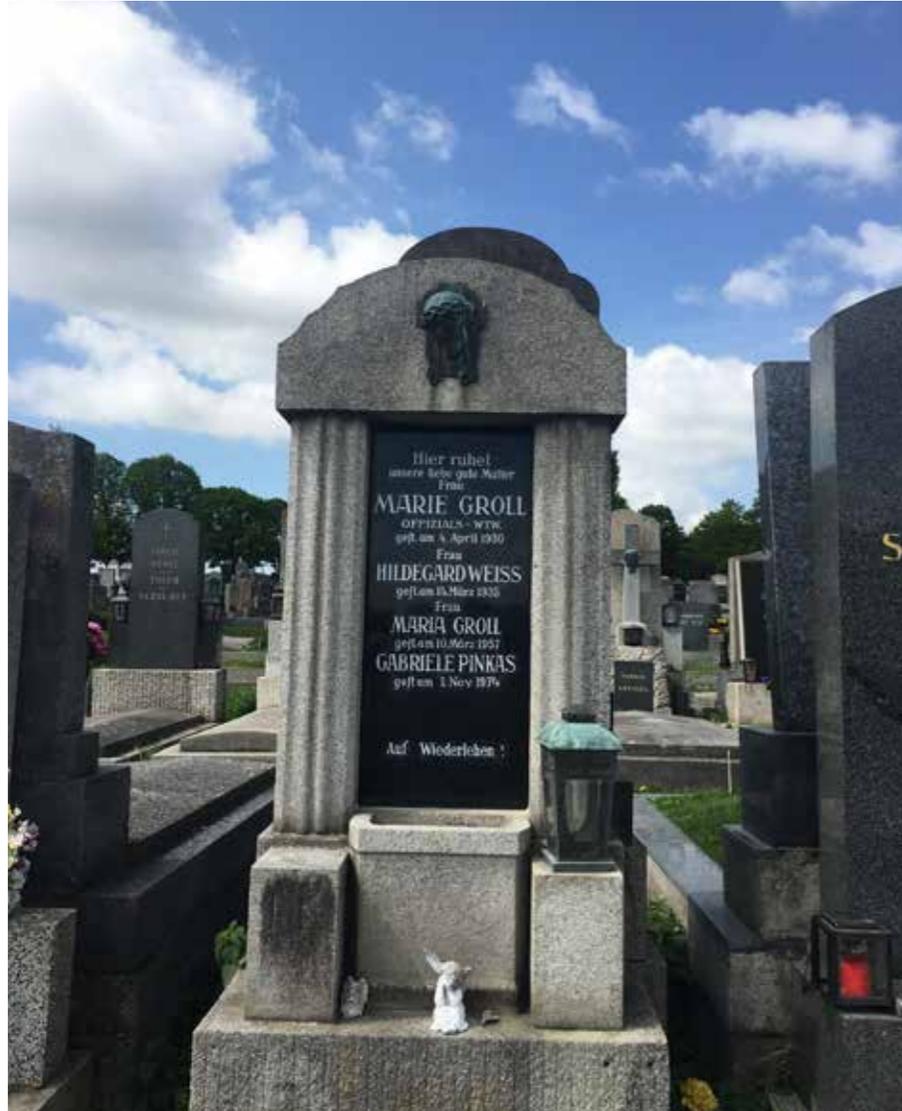
Exactly three years later, in 1995, Olivia was born. As with all the others I helped to look after her when she was young. I would take and pick her up from nursery and later collected both her and her brother from school. It was absolutely lovely to see Harry care for and interact with his baby sister. He used to say: "Where's my baby, where's my baby?" She was gorgeous, as all babies are!

Harry and Olivia grew up far too quickly and both went off to university. After graduating, Harry joined the Civil Service and Olivia became an audiologist in the NHS. I have always followed every step of my grandchildren's schooling and am incredibly proud of them all.

I often say a thank you to God that both my daughters have happy and fulfilled marriages and that my grandchildren have stable homes. When I think of their successes I am extremely proud of them. It has always been an absolute joy watching them move on with their lives, making friends, relationships and then having families of their own. I have always loved and appreciated the time I have been able to spend with them, sharing their stories and sharing their joy. ■



Left to right: Gary, me, Christine, Harry and Olivia in 2016 outside the home I lived with my mother and, later, my grandmother at Meynert Gasse 6



My great-grandmother, Marie Groll, my mother, Hildegard Weiss, my great-aunt, Maria Groll and my grandmother, Gabriele Pinkas, all share the same burial site in Ottakring, Vienna

## Saying goodbye to Ken

MY WONDERFUL HUSBAND Ken died shortly before the birth of his first grandchild in 1991.

In February of 1990, he began to look pale and peaky and feel unwell. Following a series of blood tests he was referred to a specialist for further investigations. We were devastated to receive a diagnosis of terminal liver cancer and he was given just six months to live.

Ken made every effort to beat his illness and stay alive for the imminent birth of his first grandchild, but sadly did not manage to do that. His last 10 days were spent in St Oswald's Hospice and he passed away peacefully with me and both his daughters by his bedside.

At his funeral the church was packed to capacity with standing room only. He had many lifelong friends as well as a loving family and his funeral was both a tribute to him and a celebration of his life. It emphasised just how much he had been loved and respected.

After Ken died I experienced an extremely difficult time coming to terms with his death, but fortunately my family and friends were a constant source of support and comfort. I never forgot or failed to appreciate my wonderful husband and the happy life we spent together. ■



Ken and me on holiday in Austria, circa 1970s



Left to right: Gary, Olivia, Christine, Walter, Pat, Harry, Emily and Nicky, 2019

## Re-telling my story to a new generation

AROUND 12 YEARS ago I was invited into school to tell a class of children, who were learning about the Second World War, my story. Having been a teacher for so many years, standing up in front of a class of children was not at all daunting and talking to them was a pleasure.

The session went very well, sparking the interest of both the children and the staff who were extremely receptive and encouraging. Following this I was asked to speak again and repeat my story at a local leisure centre event and the audience were once again so interested that invitations snowballed.

Since that time I have spoken at literally dozens of venues, in fact I wish I had kept a diary of them all. In each place that I speak I adapt the story to suit different age groups. On one of the first occasions I asked the children, at the end, if they had any idea who the little girl in the story may have been. To my great surprise one small boy put up his hand and said: "Yes Miss, I think it was you." I hadn't mentioned that the story was about me and I was surprised and delighted by his perception.

I have spoken to the Soroptimists (a worldwide volunteer organisation for women who work for peace), the Women's Institute, and Women's Unions, various church groups and countless primary and secondary schools.

With the benefit of visual aids I tell the audience about being born in Vienna in 1926, and having to leave home as a little girl. I tell them about my father who was persecuted by Hitler for being Jewish and about my journey from Austria on the *Kindertransport*. I show them my precious old teddy bear who made the journey with me from Vienna and a battered pre-war suitcase, that although not the original, looks very similar to the one I brought with me to England. I am always well received and feel that my audiences are able to relate to my story and appreciate the message it conveys, which is an immensely gratifying experience. I never ask for a fee. All donations that I receive I forward onto St Oswald's Hospice, who were so kind to Ken during his final days.

I was thrilled and surprised to receive a letter informing me that I was to be included in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for 2019. I would be receiving a British Empire Medal for services to Holocaust Education. I feel privileged that my adopted country should honour me in such a way.



At the Queen's Garden Party, Buckingham Palace, 2019

Prior to receiving the medal I was invited to the Queen's Garden Party at Buckingham Palace which I attended with Christine. My status as a BEM holder entitles me to attend another Garden Party, which should have taken place in 2020. This has not taken place due to Covid-19, but I very much hope that when it is possible to rearrange, I will be able to attend with Pat.

In the meantime, I was invited to the council offices for North Tyneside who hosted the investiture of the medals for locals residing in the area. I was presented with my medal by Mrs Susan Winfield, OBE, the Lord Lieutenant of Tyne and Wear. I was interviewed by my local television channel and later the presentation of the BEM was shown on the evening news.

When Mrs Winfield pinned the medal on me, I looked out at the audience and I could both see and feel the pride and joy emanating from my loved ones. Ken would have been so proud to have been in the audience and see me receive the medal. I know in my heart it would have been a great joy to him.

I sincerely hope that my talks and the telling of my story in this book will evoke kindness, tolerance and acceptance of diversity in other people, of whatever age they may be. ■



Left to right: Christine, Pat, Olivia, me, Emily and Harry at my BEM medal investiture in 2019



With my British Empire Medal and Certificate



With Robert Rinder at the Holocaust Memorial Day event in North Tyneside, 2019



Cafe Landtmann, Vienna, 2019

## 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.



Leo with his 'Grossmama'



“This was the first time I realised that I was different to my friends. They were sent together to a school somewhere else in the district but I was singled out and made to stand to one side. I just couldn’t understand it or know what to make of it. I felt frightened and lost.”

 **AJR** The Association  
of Jewish Refugees

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