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I was born in Leicestershire of Christian parents and was the seventh of eight children. My father was only interested in the Old Testament, which he read daily. My Mum and Dad were so different but adored each other. Home from school, on my father's knee, we always discussed what I had been reading at school (even there we always read from the Old Testament).

From the tender age of six years I was made responsible for my younger brother and all the young children in my street. Our school was a mile walk away, so I had to take them there and bring them back home. My mother was wonderful, bless her; when I think back I realise that all she had time for was cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing for ten of us! The house was always spotless.

My father also worked very hard; he rented an allotment where he dug and planted all the vegetables etc. which we had to eat daily. We still had my grandmother and uncle to look after they lived in a lovely thatched cottage about half a mile away.

One day when I was eleven years old, grandma was not well, so I had to take a day off from school to look after her until Mum could get there, but unfortunately during the day she passed away and young as I was I just knew that grandma was not with us any more. I was petrified and ran to a neighbour for help. A few months after grandma died there was a heavy fall of coal at the mine where my father and uncle worked. My uncle was killed my father was lucky.

Time passes quickly when you are young. I was bored to tears: all I did was cook, clean, and baby sit - I hated being in the country and wanted to leave home, but my mum did not wish to part with me. At last my father took over and made arrangements for me to go and live with my eldest sister. She was married with a five year old son and lived in a lovely house in Leicestershire - it was lovely to be with them! One of the first things I did was to have my hair cut, it was down to my waist - Mum was frantic when she saw it! My brother-in-law found me a job helping in a paper shop and general stores nearby. I worked



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there for a couple of years and made some good friends, then I found myself new work in a clothes shop. I also found a suitable bed-sit in a large house and it was there that I first met my Hershel. There were three young men who my landlady said were 'Jews' who often stayed there - they were buying gold and silver, etc and she introduced me to them. After three weeks they left, but he and his mates came again and again and each time we seemed to be getting a little more friendly. I told myself I would wait, he was 21 and I was 20 years old. We got a little more serious and he told me he could not marry me as he had given his father a vow that he would not marry out of the faith during his lifetime.

In 1940 he was called up and served in the forces. In August that year his father died and on his way to his family in Leeds (he was given ten days leave) he called me and told me to go to the registry office. I had a close friend, Rachael, who was not Jewish but her man was, and I told them that we were going to get married and they decided to do the same, so in September 1940 we had a double wedding.

A few weeks later our block was hit by a 'time bomb' and we and our friends each had a cat, but we could not find them as we were made to leave immediately. I rang Harry (as I called him) and within four hours he was with us. He got a large basket from the Vet and he and a friend found the cats in the cellar. He saw us onto a train to my Mum and that is where we stayed until our house was made safe. We spent some of Harry's leaves with his Mum and family in Leeds and some with my Mum and Dad - we all got on so well together.

I managed to rent a nice flat in Derby and after Harry had done six years in the forces we were at last able to settle down. I could not wait to start work with him in the antiques business and we did well together. Within a year we were able to buy a good second-hand car, so we could travel further. We went from door to door and bought anything we thought we could make money on, and once a week rented a market stall. After three years we bought a nice three bedroomed house (with a little mortgage, of course). We let two of the bedrooms so we could have a little more money. I wanted to convert to Judaism but Harry always said he wanted me to stay as I was, so eventually I stopped asking. My old friend Rachael had converted and they had a lovely



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chuppah wedding.

We later sold our house and bought a three storey - we made the two top floors into bed-sits and got good rents for four rooms. We often came to Bournemouth for a few days at a time, and Harry always wanted to live here.

We travelled on the Continent many times, we took the car on the boat and in France we went wherever we fancied for three or four weeks. Around forty years ago we sold up and came to live in Bournemouth. We lived in bed-sits until we found a flat in Canford Cliffs, and then Harry had his first cerebral haemorrhage. The doctors could not help him in Bournemouth so he was taken to a specialist hospital in London, where I was told that he had a large growth on the brain, and nothing could be done. I was told that he must not know of his condition, I was to keep a smile on my face, and keep him calm. He was told he had a bad head, but if he took the tablets daily he would soon be OK. They did not believe in telling the patient the truth in those days. Harry was supposed to stay in hospital for two months, but he said his wife would look after him, and he was back with me within a week. He started to get much better and we moved to a small flat in Bournemouth, with Jewish neighbours opposite. Nat was a gents hairdresser and he wanted to start a hairdressing business in Old Christchurch Road. He asked if I would run the ladies side, so I did as I thought Harry would not have to work so hard. I managed to get two good staff and we were doing quite well, with Harry working short hours in his business. One day he met a "friend" who taunted him about being able to laze around whilst his wife worked. I could see he was upset by it, so I sold the shop. Nat was sorry to see us go, but understood.

It was then that we found our present flat, and we worked together again. Harry had another small haemorrhage, and the doctors still said not to tell him the real situation. I found it really hard, but that's how it had to be. Harry really loved the flat, more than any other we had bought or rented, and we went to town to make it look good. Of course, 32 years ago we never got any sick pay or help with the rent, we had to live on what we had saved. Harry joined the Reform shul and whenever he wanted to go I was happy to go with him, and we made more friends.

I had always taken care of the banking and paid all the bills, including the



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Income Tax, but to me he was still the Man of the House. It became very hard to cope as he started to have a temper, through the illness. I always walked away and within five minutes he came with a kiss and a cuppa. We had a call to say that my father had died, so we both went to the funeral. My Mum only lived alone for a month, and then went to live with one of my sisters. She lived to 82 and we often visited her.

Soon after Harry's Mum died and we went to stay a week with one of his sisters. On December 22nd 1970 I went to visit a client in Christchurch whilst Harry had a rest. When I returned with the goods he was very pleased and said we would earn a good bit on it. In the hall he took me in his arms and told me how much he loved me. We kissed and he died in my arms. The shul funeral secretary, Maurice Calller came to see me: I had not met him before but he was so kind and understanding. One of my sisters came to stay for a while, and the young rabbi we had at the time came every day. I started to attend synagogue regularly and when Rabbi Soetendorp joined the congregation I told him I must be Jewish before I die (I was sure it would not be long!). He was very patient with me and I learned to read Hebrew, which I was able to pass on later to other students in a similar situation.

My friends in the synagogue were wonderful, and I will never forget them - the Batons, Wallens, Wilsons, Woudstras, Jass's, and of course, the Rabbi and Ruth and many others. I am still friends with those who remain, and the next generation of those who have passed on! Eventually the day came to go to the Beth Din in London. Rabbi David came with me, but I was still very nervous. When I passed I took the name of Chana, and later, when the opportunity arose, I went to the Mikvah. It was now time to pull myself together.

I joined the Women's Guild, the League of Jewish Women, and helped at the Day Centre. I encountered some hurtful remarks on my conversion and left the Day Centre. I also started to work part-time as a volunteer in the Imperial Cancer shop in Winton, and this became part of my life for ten years.

In 1975 I made my first trip to Israel, with my sister. It was a tour and we went everywhere - Jaffa, Jerusalem, Zaccariah's Tomb, Dead Sea Scrolls, Diaspora Museum, the Hebron Valley where David killed Goliath, Kennedy Memorial, Chagall windows.... Two years later I came into shul and a nice young man was



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sitting in the back row. I chatted to him - his name is Itzhak and he lives in Arad. We have been friends ever since - he and his family have been to stay with me and I have been to Arad and Natanya and stayed with him and his wife, and to his friends in Rehovot. They took me all over Israel and every time I go there they have more places to show me! At home I took up baby sitting, both for the very old and very young, and sometimes even for dogs and cats, and saved up for my next trip to Israel.

Last July (1998) was my 85th birthday, and a group of my friends gave me a surprise party, and it really was a surprise for me, as they kept it all a secret! I was so happy to see them all I had to cry! Some of them had taken time off work specially to be there, and the table was laden with food and a cake - I can only say I feel I am truly blessed! Croydon ♦