



The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

www.heritagefund.org.uk

SYLVIA CROWN

"Let's start at the very beginning", so the song says. I was born in Croydon in Surrey. There were four of us, three girls and a boy. My parents were members of the Croydon United Synagogue: in those days there wasn't any choice of shuls. I have been told that my parents were the first couple to get married there, although the shul has been rebuilt twice since, so I doubt whether the records exist.

My brother Harold, or Hershel as my grandma called him, and I were the only ones who went to cheder, which was three times a week. We were taught to read and write Hebrew with vowels and without, and also to translate. Even as a youngster I found it very interesting: in fact, looking back I think I took more interest in my Jewish education than I did in ordinary school, as I seemed to acquire more merits at cheder! My young sister Rene did attend one class, but was so petrified to see the teacher walking about with a chair leg in his hand that she refused to go again. I was fortunate enough to be in the Rabbi's class.

My main achievement at school was a prize for French which consisted of a French calendar, torn off daily by my dear mother, who would usually ask "What's today in French, Sylvia?" Another prize I received was a needlework encyclopaedia, perhaps that is why I became a milliner. After a two year apprenticeship working locally, I felt I would like to venture farther afield, so I started work in the West End which I enjoyed. Sometimes on special occasions when we were extremely busy I helped with hat delivery. I remember standing gawping in the foyer of Claridges one day, looking at the men and women so elegantly dressed, me standing with a hat box in my hand, when a voice from the reception desk asked "Can I help you?" I told him my errand and he called a bellboy and said "Boy, take this young lady up to room so and so". The "boy" was older and taller than me! I loved the atmosphere of the West End in those days. My favourite street to walk down was Wardour Street because practically every building was associated with films, and being young and film struck I thought I might even see a famous film star one day (but never did)..

It was at this time that everyone's life was disrupted with the outbreak of the second world war, and my parents thought it best for me to work locally and



The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

www.heritagefund.org.uk

not to travel on a train for fear of air raids, so I returned to Croydon as a fully qualified milliner and worked in one of the big stores. I was very relieved not to be travelling by the time the air raids started - one had barely time to get home and change into something suitable before the air raid siren went and the family all disappeared into the Anderson shelter, armed with blankets, food and flasks of hot drinks. We stayed there all night, until the 'all clear' went in the morning, and all along the street other people were climbing out of Anderson shelters. We now know the concentration of bombing was on the docks in the East End of London, but one or two bombs did go astray and landed in Croydon.

Some of my colleagues at work were talking about volunteering for the forces, as we realised we were not in "reserved" occupations and none of us wanted to work in munitions factories. So, much to my mother's horror, I joined the ATS (my brother was already in the army). There a completely different life began. Little did I know then that I was going to spend the next four and a half years with the same group of men and girls. We were the second mixed battery of ACK ACK to be formed, after which there were many mixed batteries on gun sites all over the country. I was a telephonist and supplied the Officer in Charge of the gun site with information from H.Q. during an air raid - which planes were in the area and where located. Sometimes we learned of an enemy plane in the area and right on his tail was one of our fighter planes, so we were unable to fire.

Our first gun site was on the North East coast, and it was cold - in Winter we certainly felt the north east wind! The camaraderie was wonderful, we had all come from different walks of life and all from different parts of the country. We soon settled down and adjusted to each other. As a telephonist I sometimes had to do night duty as the phones had to be manned twentyfour hours a day. We carried out our duties in pairs. On our way to the command post we would pick up our rations from the cookhouse - this consisted of sliced bread, great lumps of butter and cheese and a jug of hot cocoa.

It was then that we started organising our own entertainment and I became a regular soloist in my concerts or singalongs. I was the only Jewish person in the battery, and was fortunate enough not to come across any anti-semitism, in fact, just the opposite. Rosh Hashana was nearly upon us and my mother



The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

www.heritagefund.org.uk

(being a typical Yiddisha Mamma), war or no war, contacted a rabbi in Sunderland and I was given two days leave to be spent with a local Jewish family, the Brewers. They "adopted" me and although the battery was posted away from the North East after two and a half years, we remained friends for many years but then lost touch until I saw in the Jewish Chronicle at the High Holy Days, under the Bridegrooms of the Law, the name Isaac Brewer Chatan Bereshit at the Cumberland Hotel. Could it be the same family? I went to the hotel, made enquiries, and found that it was a gentleman from Sunderland. He phoned me a few days later and he came to visit me one afternoon. Our memories went back to the forties and we talked and talked. He was the eldest son, so he must have been in his eighties and as he left he turned to me and said "Isn't it sad Sylvia, there is nobody left I can tell about this meeting".

At the end of the war, after five years in the services, it wasn't easy to settle back again to a "normal" life, and of course, I missed the companionship. I couldn't see myself sitting in a claustrophobic workroom making hats, I wanted to be with people, and that is how I am today. I finally got a job in the showroom of D H Evens in Oxford Street where I worked with and could meet a variety of people. I was back in the West End! After about a year as a civilian I was approached by a Jewish ex-soldier who asked me to help him form a local branch of A.J.E.X. There were four of us and we held a meeting with the Mayor of Croydon present, and so I became a founder member of Croyden A.J.E.X.

After working at D H Evans for about two years I met Dave who was to become my husband. We were married in Notting Hill shul, and lived in Bayswater. Although we were both working we eventually decided to go into business for ourselves and opened a delicatessen shop in the heart of flats and bedsits in Bayswater. From millinery to delicatessen? It can be done and I proved it! I learned very fast - even now I can more or less judge how much a food item weighs no such thing as prepacked, and we were one of the first shops to sell frozen foods in our area. Quite a few of our customers were TV artists, such as Wilfred Brambell and his agent who sent him in one day with a signed photograph of himself and Harry Corbett in their Steptoe outfits.

After we had worked hard for eight years the first supermarket opened. It wasn't in our area and didn't affect our business. In fact, in some ways it helped us as we were able to buy certain things, for example coffee, with their cut



The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

www.heritagefund.org.uk

prices cheaper than our wholesaler could supply us, and they would deliver - how cheeky can one get? Eventually other supermarkets opened which did affect our trade, and we finally had to give in and sell up. From Bayswater we went to live in Kingsbury, which was a complete change after living in a flat over the shop. We had a nice house with a garden and of course our dear cat came with us. That was all very nice, without having any business to worry about, but suddenly we found that after our busy lifestyle we had time on our hands, so we started to look around. Dave eventually got a job in an advertising firm and I took a part-time job in the Empire Pool, Wembley, in the box office. I used to get free tickets for most of the shows, and our neighbours cried when we left because I gave them lots of free tickets too! I was also in the 1966 World Cup office.

During our stay in Kingsbury we visited Bournemouth twice for our holidays which we enjoyed very much. After three years in Kingsbury we started to wonder if we wanted to live there permanently, or find somewhere else. It didn't take us long to decide, and that's how we came to Bournemouth in 1966. We were happy we had made the move. Being able to walk by the sea whenever we wanted to was a luxury. We had a house between Boscombe and Southbourne, living very amicably with our non Jewish neighbours. On one side we had Salvation Army Officers, and on the other were very religious Catholics, and our friends across the road were Protestants, and regardless of religion we were all friends.

We hadn't decided which shul to join, but a friend of ours, Alf Bemstock, suggested we attend a service at the Reform shul with him on a Shabbat morning. We enjoyed the service, but it was the Rosh Hashana service we attended that decided us to become members, hearing the organ and choir and to be able to follow a service right through from the beginning to the end, and enjoy it, this was something new to us. Little did I know then that in a few years time I would be so much a part of this shul! We were never regular shul goers in those days. We carried on living our lives day by day and enjoying our retirement. Dave loved his bridge, and eventually became a bridge teacher.

Then in 1974 our lives changed. Dave became ill and was diagnosed with a tumour on his lung. The doctors did not think it wise to tell him of the seriousness of his illness, and so it became my secret for eighteen months. He



The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

www.heritagefund.org.uk

was always under the impression he had pleurisy. As his condition deteriorated I began to worry, having no family here to help. Then one day, after Dave had finally gone into hospital, my 'phone rang and a young man's voice said "Sylvia, I'm coming to help you and make all the necessary arrangements". This was the answer to a prayer, and he was true to his word - it was Dave's nephew, Michael. I shall always be grateful to him for his kindness and support. After Dave died it was very difficult trying to make my own decisions and especially having to live on my own. My neighbours were very kind and used to visit me to make sure I was alright.

And so began another phase in my life. I started to go to shul on a regular basis on Shabbat morning, which was very brave of me because I didn't know anybody and nobody spoke to me, but still I persevered. It was about this time that other things happened. First, Michael's marriage broke up and being his only relative he would spend every weekend at my house and bring his washing! I became friendly with Rita Gordon who I met at the shul. She had also just lost her husband, and this little trio of lost souls became firm friends: Rita and I spent time together during the week and Michael joined us at weekends. After a time Rita became very discontented and decided to return to London, where very sadly she died in a road accident. Michael had finally got his divorce but I still had his company at weekends.

It was then I found I was taking a more active part in the shul I was on the Guild committee and volunteered to visit people who were housebound. I didn't have a car, but I became Welfare Officer and also joined the choir. As Welfare Officer I attended a Tea & Chatter organised by the Guild and held on the first Thursday of each month. Ray Gore, the pianist there, was playing a song and I started to sing it - she just carried on playing. She said she liked what she'd heard and that was the start of a partnership. We entertained at the Christchurch Hospital on a regular basis, we also went to Carlton Dene (a Jewish home for handicapped people), the Dolly Ross (a Jewish Home for the Blind) and the Hannah Levy Home in Westbourne. We were then joined by three Jewish men and were known as the Bournemouth Jewish Entertainers. We entertained wherever we were asked, Jewish and non-Jewish.

Somewhere in all this Michael met a very nice young lady and got married again, and is still happily married. Around the same time I was elected to the



The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

www.heritagefund.org.uk

shul Council and became Secretary, so I passed the Welfare work to Wendy Shepherd. It was during my term of office as Secretary that the extension was being built, and it was my responsibility to ensure that the invitations were sent out to local dignitaries to attend the stone laying ceremony performed by Mrs Mauray, widow of Mr Maurice Mauray, a past President and benefactor to the synagogue. The Blind Aid Committee were then in need of a Secretary and asked me to take on the job. How could I refuse? I was Secretary for the Blind Aid Society and the shul, in the choir, entertaining and at the same time deputising for the Funeral Secretary and then taking it on full-time. Was all this me? The little milliner from the West End - yes, it was!

Later I became the Hon. Secretary, then Vice Chairman and then Chairman of the Guild. With the committee I arranged tea dances, card afternoons, coffee mornings, outings, tea and chatters, kiddushim for special occasions and the first of the Interdenominational meetings. My special guests were Michael and Ann Filer, at that time Mayor and Mayoress of Bournemouth, plus the Bishop of Winchester and Canon Haslam, with ministers and leaders from various local churches.

1984 Another episode was about to take place in my life I met Alec. Some months earlier his wife had died and he appeared to be having difficulty adjusting to life without her. I don't really know how it happened, but we just became friends at first, each of us delighted to have each other to talk to. Eventually it developed into a loving partnership. Much to my surprise I found out Alec's favourite past-time was bridge. I immediately thought "here we go again". He became a shut Warden which meant that we were both closely associated with the synagogue.

During this time he had his first heart attack and realised the Warden's duty was too much for him, so he resigned. I was spending a lot of time away from Alec and being the second time around I made a decision in favour of my private life, and so stood down from Chairman of the Guild. Our lives continued, less strenuously, Alec with his bridge, and me with my entertaining, choir and now three committees.

Sadly, on Kol Nidre in 1996 Alec had a massive heart attack and never recovered. After twelve happy years our partnership was over, leaving a large



**The LivingStones Project is supported by
The National Lottery Heritage Fund.**

www.heritagefund.org.uk

gap in my life. I still have difficulty adjusting. Once again I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and returned to the shul, where I am still involved in many activities to this day.