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IRMGARD ISACK

I was born on 25th May, 1915 in Moenchen Gladbach, a town in West Germany, near the Dutch border. I was the fifth child born to Nathan and Clara Liffmann, my youngest sister was born six years later, being an after the war (1914-18) baby. My father served in the first World War, spending most of the time in Turkey, and came home with a decoration.

He started a business buying and selling skins of all types of animals, e.g. rabbit, hare, horses, etc. We owned our own house, which was very unusual for that time. However, things went very wrong due to my father's gambling and we lost everything - the bailiffs came to the house and we moved down to the bottom of the social ladder. Being a bright and outgoing child I had passed the entrance for the Lyceum (High School), but when times became bad, because of money problems, at the age of 13 I had to leave school. By then two of my sisters and my elder brother had left home to get married, leaving my other two sisters and myself at home. Lottie and I went to work to support my parents and my younger sister, who was still at school.

First I started to work for a Jewish company manufacturing gents clothing. I was apprenticed to this firm for three years doing office duties. This consisted of running errands such as going to the bank, working from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. My employer, who was also Jewish, was a tyrant to his workers. The monthly pay was very low and I had to give the whole of it to my parents. After three years my pay was increased and I stayed on to qualify as a short-hand typist. But then came disaster in the name of 'Hitler'. The firm was taken over by the Nazis and all Jewish employees were thrown out. Very sadly I had to leave my parents' home, so I went to Leipzig to find work with another Jewish family. In those days Leipzig had a large Jewish population and the main industry was the fur trade. Here I worked as a cook/housekeeper, but this only lasted a year as the family emigrated to the U.S.A. Next I found a situation doing the same sort of work for another Jewish family. I did very menial tasks including cleaning and cooking. While I was there Kristallnacht happened (where the Nazis destroyed synagogues and any Jewish homes and businesses they could find).

The head of the household was very ill and his only child, a son, was stricken with polio. The day after the son came out of hospital, the Gestapo arrived at 6 a.m. one morning and tried to take the two men away, but we pleaded with them that the men were so ill and for once they listened and left them behind. The son was able to obtain a visa to the U.S.A. and the father died. The Nazi regime had the power to confiscate all the valuables belonging to Jewish residents, so the wife and I had to pack up all these items and take them to an allotted place, where we were given a receipt, but no money. How naive we were at that time!!



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Through an organisation I finally got a permit from Woburn House to emigrate to England and found a position as a domestic to an Orthodox Jewish family. I worked for £1 a week, doing the cooking, shopping, cleaning, and they treated me like a slave.

Through a friend of mine I had known in Germany I met my husband, Alex. As two individual lonely people coming from the same background, we decided to get married after knowing each other for only five days. Alex was in the Pioneer Corps, so he had to get permission from his Commanding Officer to get married, otherwise we would have got married sooner than that!

My husband had a very sad background. He had tried to leave Germany illegally in 1938 but he got caught carrying valuables and was sent to prison for eight months. His eventual release was only obtained by his leaving Germany somehow or other before the end of August 1939. Frantically his parents looked around and obtained a visa to Shanghai via England. Everyone in transit through England were put in a camp in Sandwich and war broke out on 3rd September 1939. One day Lord Reading visited the camp and put a proposition to the immigrants - they could join the Pioneer Corps, and he gave them a promise that they would automatically become British subjects. Alex joined this Corps on 12th December 1939 and stayed in the Army for eight years, but he lost his family in the Holocaust.

Here I would like to talk about my family I left behind. My parents and young sister, Alice, and my brother Sigmund, all went to a concentration camp and I never saw or heard of them again. My eldest sister, Betty, had emigrated to Holland with her husband and son. When the Nazis arrived there my sister and her son went into hiding, but her husband refused to do so. He was arrested and sent to a concentration camp and never seen again. Betty is 92 years of age and now lives in a Home in Holland. She was saved by marrying the man who had hidden her, and they had one daughter. The son and daughter are still living in Holland.

My sister, Edith, had married out of the faith. Her husband, despite pressure from the Party, refused to divorce her and thus saved her life. During the last year of the war she was sent to a work camp in Berlin. When the war ended it took her six weeks to reach home, where she found her husband dying of leukaemia. My sister Lottie was also able to emigrate to England and now lives in Bournemouth.

Alex and I married on 18th June 1940 in Bideford Registry Office. Later on during the war we and three other Jewish couples were able to marry again under the chuppah. We had two sons, Peter Ralph and Frank Lesley. All through the war years I lived in Ilfracombe, while my husband was posted all over the British Isles and eventually in Germany, as an interpreter in the Fourth Welsh Fusiliers until he was demobbed.



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Whilst in Ilfracombe I brought the children up on a very meagre Army income. It was a struggle but not unhappy years because one did not know anything better than this. An unhappy time came on Alex's return because it was difficult to find work and settle down in peace time. We all went to London where Alex found work as a chef at Ross' Kosher Restaurant (his background had originally been in butchery). I got myself a job as a waitress and we both worked hard to make a home for the family. In London we met up with other refugees and joined a shul where Peter had his Bar Mitzvah. At this time the boys attended the Solomon Wolfson School.

After this we moved to Sutton in Surrey to manage a restaurant for my former boss. We worked very hard there and saved up sufficient money to buy our own business in the East End of London. While we were there we joined an orthodox shul where Frank had his Bar Mitzvah. We were in Sutton four years, then bettered ourselves by buying a restaurant at Chalfont St Giles in Buckinghamshire. This business was very successful but took up all our time and energy. Unfortunately during these years of hard work and establishing ourselves we neglected our Jewish faith. Because of this our sons never came in contact with Jewish people and they both 'married out'. Frank went to University where he obtained a B.Sc. and Ph.D. and subsequently worked for Dow Chemicals and N.E.D.O. Peter left school at 16 and did not wish to go into the family business.

Alex became ill, so we had to sell the business. By sheer luck and instinct we came to Bournemouth (the result of a day trip). Moving here was a quick and good decision! We met up with a lot of people from Europe, made friends and joined the Reform Synagogue. Alex and I enjoyed our regular Friday night services.

In 1982 Alex died after a very short illness. I sold the house and moved into a flat and a new phase of my life began. I took up tapestry and threw myself into charity work including cooking for the Day Centre and working for the Guild. At 70 years of age I decided to learn to play bridge. 'joined a club near where I live and I now enjoy playing there three times a week, plus games at home with my friends. This activity has given me a new lease of life. I am happy to live in Bournemouth with my good friends, both Jewish and non- Jewish. Looking back on my life my only regret is the lack of attention we gave to our sons' Jewish education and consequently my grandchildren and great grandchildren have not had a Jewish upbringing. I do, never-the-less, look forward to their occasional visits.