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MICHAEL AND ILSE KATZ

In January 1999 Michael and use Katz attended a Shabbat morning service at the synagogue to celebrate their 80th birthdays, and a presentation by their daughter, Ann, of a new Torah mantle specially designed for them. A few days later I went to visit them in their beautifully appointed flat in Canford Cliffs, with a panoramic view of the sea and Purbeck Hills. Their home reflects their personalities, with objects and pictures collected over a life-time, during which they have moved from being penniless refugees to large scale philanthropists.

I asked Michael to tell me their "story" and he said he was born Cologne in 1918 and grew up in the family business - a large chain of butcher shops. Even as a child he helped behind the counter when he was not at school. He said "At the age of 14 I signed on as an apprentice to my father for three years. His apprentices did well. The only two to be awarded the highest Diploma in Cologne, the Golden Steel, were my brother and my cousin. My father was a wonderful man but a hard task master. I can remember him finding me taking my tea break upstairs with my mother. He took me by the scruff of the neck to the staff canteen where belonged. I passed my exam and became a journeyman. As an apprentice I delivered the orders by bicycle."

His passing out certificate is endorsed "just passed" although he actually came top of the class. He felt this injustice keenly, although far worse was to come as anti-Semitism took hold of Germany.

"I served for a time in my grandfather's shop in Essen and learned a lot about sausage manufacturing from him. We went to market by horse and cart. I remember the horse was called Mieke and was stabled behind the shop. The evocative smell of the stable is still with me. I slept with other employees in the loft. My father was a perfectionist butcher but not a manufacturer as such which has always been my first love. After hours I concocted products which, when they turned out alright, I showed proudly to my father. He never held back his criticism but he was fair and proud of me. I had great respect for him. From 1934 onwards his shops were boycotted, yet he was forced to keep all the personnel and inevitably one shop after another had to be sold, at a fraction of their value. My elder brother fled to South Africa after striking an SS officer and I became manager of the last remaining shop at the age of 19.

After the closure of that last shop and several jobless weeks, I started work for a firm building roads and laying drains, cycling to work at 4 a.m. When I used to visit the Anuga in Cologne I liked to point out the area where I laid the drains. In the late summer of 1939 I at last received a work permit to come to England as a "trainee" and saw my parents for the last time on 14th August. Distraught, they saw me to the railway station and my father



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placed his hands upon my head and blessed me. Most of my family were later killed by the Nazis.

A few weeks before I emigrated I had met a girl called Ilse at the only remaining place where Jews were allowed to dance. She was with a boy-friend. I was (and still am) shy, but nonetheless I went to ask her for a dance. I learned that she too had a permit to work as a nurse in England. She arrived (after several hair raising experiences en route) on the 29th August. She had worked for the underground movement in Hitler's Germany and was badly beaten for her pains. She took up her position as a nurse at the Bristol Royal Infirmary."

Michael arrived in England in August 1939 with just 20 Marks in his pocket. "My first job in London at a Kosher Butcher for 30 shillings a week lasted only three days, as even then I had the urge to follow Ilse. I moved to Bristol and walked the streets looking for work. I found a manufacturing job with butcher C P Ford commencing at £2. 15s 0d a week. I lived in a boarding house and met Ilse once a week at a club for refugees run by the Rev. Loveday (later rector of St Martin in the Fields). I took my gramophone and classical records, plus sausages - we had continental Liver Sausage and Beethoven. On 12th December 1939 I arrived with a bunch of roses and under the winding staircase I proposed and we became engaged."

Ilse came from a very musical family, and she taught Michael to appreciate "good" music. When Ilse learned that her mother, who had been left alone in Germany, had committed suicide she asked the matron for a day off but she refused saying "I am not interested in the death of your mother", so she left the hospital and became a chambermaid at the Montrose Hotel in Bristol. In the summer of 1940, Bristol having become a protected area, they had to leave. They decided to get married but the Orthodox synagogue in Bristol required a fee of £20. They did not have this sort of money, so married in a registry office and took lodgings in Porchester Square in London. This experience with the synagogue turned them against organised religion for years until they had the religious marriage ceremony in the Hendon Reform Synagogue in 1959.

"After a few days honeymoon there was a knock on the door and I was taken away to be interned on the Isle of Man for five months. Our camp was on the promenade in Douglas. Part of the food was a barrel of herrings having probably been in the sea at the end of the First World War and was hard and salty. I soaked and mixed them with cooked potatoes, made them into rissoles. This was the start of the 'cafe' which continued for the duration of my stay. Ilse was allowed to stay in London and worked as manageress of a delicatessen in Swiss Cottage.

When I was released in December we intended to emigrate to the USA. However, the formalities of finger printing were so reminiscent of Germany that we decided to stay in Britain." Michael took a job as second machineman in a sausage factory and then found a



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better job with Albert Kaye in Tooting. There he was introduced to Smithfield Market for the first time.

In 1941 "Ilse and I moved into a one room flat in Belsize Grove. This was our first opportunity to live together since our marriage more than a year earlier. Like everything in life, we shared the chores and always did things together. To earn some extra money we undertook all sorts of part-time work. We would string pearls, put biro pens together, and Ilse would hem dresses. I made salami in the kitchen (after work) from beef fat and goat meat (off ration) flavoured with plenty of garlic. I minced the meat while use fed the mincer, wearing a gas mask because she was pregnant at the time and could not stand the smell of garlic. I would sleep by the cooker until the alarm went off at 1 a.m. indicating they were cooked, then we hung them up in our tiny kitchen. At 5.15 a.m. I took the first train to Tooting. Ilse delivered the salamis to selected customers in our pram that was given to us by a kind customer. People looking in the pram to see the baby got quite a shock! The first week I made salami I put £4 in the bank and £7 the second week. This was a lot of money in those days!" In 1948, after a period of poor health Michael left the meat trade for a while but returned as production manager with I W Downs and in 1950 became production manager at My Meat Products later called Farm Sausages. In 1948 he and Ilse became naturalised British citizens.

In 1958, after having worked for other people he became Managing Director of Scot Meat Products, a firm he founded in partnership with the Van Vlyman family on a 50/50 partnership basis, with £25 each from use and himself. They had a small custom built factory with seven staff, including Michael, all working as a team. They were paternalistic employers, concerned for the welfare of their staff, and determined that all their products should be of the highest quality. At first Michael mixed all the secret seasonings himself, and as the business grew Ilse took over this special task, followed by their daughter, thus keeping the recipes in the family. The business which was supposed to be a Sausage Factory turned into the most successful Ham and Cooked Meat Factory. The business prospered and expanded and by their tenth anniversary Michael had earned the reputation of being "Ham King!" He brought to the team experts in many fields but refused to compromise on quality.

After eleven years of hard work they had built the business from a very modest start to an annual turnover of £15 million, with two thousand employees. In 1971 the company "went public" and a year later merged with Bowyers of Trowbridge and became Scot Bowyer, with Michael as the Managing Director and Deputy Chairman. However, he soon found himself at odds with the rest of the board, and resigned. After his resignation in 1973 he, in due course, started a firm of Catering Butchers, a Meat Wholesale firm in Smithfield as well as 'Protecon' BV in Oss, Holland, a Food Machinery company, producing the Protecon Bone Press' which became a world leader.

In 1966, having become a Freeman of the City of London, Michael was admitted into the



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Worshipful Company of Butchers, a Livery Company of which he became the Master in 1996. Ilse had the great honour of becoming a Liveryman in 1985, the first time a husband and wife were Liverymen together in this Livery Company. They still remain very prominent members. When their company went public they put aside part of the shares into a trust they had formed in 1963 with £10 each. Ilse told me that they had made a vow in the early days, when the going was tough, that if they ever "made it" they would help other people. They have certainly fulfilled this pledge, having to date donated 20 projects in Israel. They consist of Kindergartens, Day Centres, a library in Naharia, medical equipment for various hospitals, computers for schools as well as a large Day Centre in honour of Shlomo Lahat, the former Mayor of Tel Aviv.

Locally they have contributed towards the scanner at the Royal Bournemouth Hospital, and at Poole Hospital they provided several major pieces of equipment for the cardiac department, an Endoscopy Suite as well as a Resource Centre for cancer patients and their families. They have now promised help towards a proposed new Breast Cancer Unit. At the Livery they formed an Educational Trust. In Israel they are involved in projects at Neve Shalom where Arab and Israeli children are taught together - a hope for peace now and in the future. Sharing an interest in classical music, Michael and Ilse became founder members of Glyndebourne and sponsors of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

In 1973 they purchased their present flat in Canford Cliffs as a holiday home. At this time they lived in London and were members of Hendon Reform Synagogue. They transferred membership to BRS when they moved here permanently in 1980 - when their daughter married a Jerseyman and moved to the island of Jersey. They have three grandchildren in their twenties who give Michael and Ilse much joy when they pop over to Jersey see them. They enjoy holidays in Portugal and until the Netanyahu government came to power they visited Israel every year as well as Jamaica and Switzerland for skiing holidays.

Anyone visiting them is struck by the warmth of their welcome and their charm, integrity, sense of humour and interest in others. Despite their huge business success they have remained quiet and unassuming. Michael told me that "many other people worked just as hard as we did, but didn't make it in the same way - we were just lucky, that's all". Michael insisted that the success described above was only possible with the help, closeness and through the complement with his other half, - Ilse. Quite an exceptional couple! (Ed)