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LILLI TEMPLE

I always thought that only celebrities and famous people wrote their autobiographies. I must admit that I was quite chuffed when I was asked for mine!

I was born in Breslau, Germany (now Poland and renamed Wroslav) of Polish parents. My father was a businessman and part-time Cantor and my mother one of the great old fashioned 'balaboostas'. I had a happy childhood with maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins around. On Shabbat everyone would congregate at the grandparents house. Summer holidays were spent in Poland with my father's parents and his brothers and sister and their families. As a small child I remember even then hearing the grownups talk of atrocities and the unease creeping into everyday life. Little did I know then that I would never see any of them again.

Then came the black cloud. The Jewish school I attended was regularly vandalised and we children had stones thrown at us by the Hitler Youth so that going to school each day became filled with terror. The family started to break up, with relatives leaving for any country that would allow them entry, for most of the doors of the world were firmly shut.

The good-byes were bewildering to a child. If a family could not leave together, the man would go and work at bringing the rest over as soon as possible. In our case, my father's youngest brother who had left Poland in 1934 for France, managed to obtain a visa for my father and me on the pretext that my father was accompanying me to a boarding school in France. Although I was only ten years old, the day we said good-bye to my mother and baby sister on a station platform is very vivid in my mind and still brings up feelings of fear and insecurity which haunt me to this day.

After a short stay in Paris, we moved to Bologne-sur-Mer where I went to school. Father and I lived in an attic room. Being a religious man he waited for the Shochet to arrive in Bologne once a week when he bought enough meat and bones to make soup and a huge stew that lasted from one week to the other! I guess that as a child I thought of this period as quite an adventure.

After a few months, just as I had overcome the initial difficulties of language and making friends, I was told that an uncle of father's and his wife wanted me to live with them in Hove, near Brighton in England. Father tearfully explained it was for my own good. More good-byes and more tears. I was duly put on a boat and met on the other side by a very stern and, to a childish mind, very old man (he was probably only in his early fifties!).

My great-uncle was a renowned Osteopath and Healer who treated everyone from royalty to



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sports people. He was also a director of Millwall Football Club, which was then in the top league. Consequently there was quite a stir in the media when he 'rescued' and 'adopted' his tenth child - which was all greatly exaggerated. The media converged on the house in Hove and I had my fifteen minutes of fame! Every day there would be more news and photos in the press of 'Lilli and her new parents' and I was showered with gifts from generous, but total strangers. I was, however, very unhappy in that dark Victorian house, with strict rules and asked if I could go and live in Croydon where I knew there were more relatives with children of their own.

It was, after much nagging on my part, agreed that I would go and live with assorted cousins of father's for two to three weeks at a time. That is how I was shunted about until my mother was finally granted a Domestic permit and arrived with my little sister some few months later in March 1939. She had also, meantime, been arrested but released when permission to go to England came through.

We lived in Croydon and mother travelled to London at the break of dawn every day to line up with thousands of other people at the Home Office in order to obtain permission for my father to come to England. One day she did not return until very late because we had had a 'pea souper' fog that day. Out of sheer fear I wrote a letter to the King that night. With dictionary in hand I pleaded with him to let my Dad come here. Mother was flabbergasted when I received an acknowledgement from Buckingham Palace.

Father finally managed to get the last passenger boat to leave Bologne. That was in May 1940 after Paris had fallen and the Germans were advancing to the coast. His brother, my uncle, remained and became one of the most decorated Officers of the French forces and later of the Maquis. He is now in his nineties, living in Paris and his story is one of the great heroic war stories. In 1941 we moved to Ealing, West London, where my father got a job with the Ealing United Synagogue as Chazan, Beadle, Hebrew teacher and general factotum. We lived in a flat above the shul. I finished my education at Greggs Secretarial College and then went to work at Woburn House.

The war years were spent much like everyone else's in London. One dodged the air raids, slept in shelters and thanked HaShem each morning to be alive. Of course, there are many memories, such as the time a 'doodle-bug' demolished a great chunk of Ealing and blew out all our windows, and the time a bomb dropped on Tottenham Court Road and shook Woburn House so hard that none of us thought we'd come out alive, but I believe that, on the whole, people became quite philosophical and managed to remain fairly cheerful despite all the hardships.

It was only when the war ended that we heard how decimated the family had become. Of all the relatives in Poland none had survived. The closest ones from Germany had escaped to various parts of the world and had survived, including mother's parents who ended up in



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Palestine, but more distant relatives had not. Such news was devastating.

I met my husband, Leslie, when I was sixteen. He was the ripe old age of nearly twenty three and he told me on the day we met that I would be the girl he would marry! Of course I thought he was quite mad. Leslie had been brought up at Norwood Jewish Orphanage and had a sad family background. He was mature beyond his years. At the time we met he was on reserve war work manufacturing flying goggles as optics was his profession. He had also been a professional magician and comedian on stage for a number of years and so, in his spare time, he was with ENSA entertaining the troops. I believe that whatever he did in later life, the grease paint always remained in his blood. We were married soon after my eighteenth birthday and work took us to Scotland for a while. Our three children, Linda, Louise and Laurence were born in fairly quick succession when we returned to London. As with most families, we had our struggles bringing up and educating the children, but as a family unit we were very strong and very happy.

Leslie was the kindest, most understanding and loving father and husband. If we encountered difficulties, his humour would see us all through. In his eyes I could do no wrong. When he was suddenly taken from us at the age of forty- nine, the children and I were totally shattered. We had just celebrated our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary three weeks earlier.

There followed some years of which my recollections are hazy - I lived in a fog. The children and I coped with our grief each in our own way. Linda was already working for El Al, Louise had just started at Bristol University and Laurence was going to Cambridge the following year. It was Laurence who, at the age of eighteen, had to grow up overnight and become the man of the family. He helped me to sell the business and the family home and move to an apartment. After that I was on my own for the first time in my life and I too grew up.

I had not been in the work place for many years but now it was imperative that I earned a living. A friend who was a London Tourist Guide took me around London and taught me the rudiments of guiding. The course one had to study in order to become a badged guide was long and intense and I could not possibly have got my head around it at the time. I worked for a while as a guide and at hospitality desks at various hotels. I would bring in a coach load of tourists from the airports and I would become a 'nanny' to them, answering all their queries and ironing out their problems, booking trips and theatres. Quite a challenge to one's inventiveness and patience!

Also, about that time I learned to operate a new laser machine from the States which claimed to eradicate wrinkles and give non-surgical face lifts. It actually worked well in lessening scars. I freelanced for two cosmetic therapists who bought these machines. It was interesting because I met many celebrities in the entertainment world and heard a lot of inside gossip! To work as a freelance was essential - I was having to commute more and



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more regularly between London and Bournemouth as my parents were becoming more elderly and ailing.

My parents had retired to Bournemouth in the mid-sixties. Their names were Esther and Zygmund Aronowicz and I believe there are still some people in this community who remember my father's beautiful baritone voice at the Bournemouth Hebrew Congregation, and my mother's great baking. Theirs was an ever open door to all and sundry. The year after my father passed away in 1982 I moved mother back to London and really never dreamed that one day I would return to live in Bournemouth.

My 'baby' sister emigrated to the USA over thirty years ago and has grown up daughters of her own. My daughter Louise has been living in New York since 1980. There have been weddings and grand-children in the interim years and I have lived through many joys and tribulations, but for all of us one very vital person has always been missing.

One's life can be so multi-layered and we all go through many different learning experiences. My life gained a new dimension when my son introduced me eighteen years ago to his Sufi Master, Adnan Sarhan, who is a highly evolved man and a great teacher. He has a retreat in the States and he travels the world teaching spiritual seekers. Through various practices like meditation, chanting, yoga, drumming and dance one learns to access a deeper consciousness. Once these windows to the soul are opened, life can never be quite the same again. It is as though one gains another perspective. In particular it helped me to become a more tolerant human being.

Fate has a few funny tricks up her sleeve. After vowing never to live in Bournemouth because it has some sad associations for me, I moved here in August 1996. My eldest daughter, Linda, who has always been active in the Reform Movement, persuaded me to attend the Reform Synagogue. The warmth and friendship that instantly greeted me were something I had never encountered in other shuls.

I love my new home by the sea, but above all I am so very grateful for all my wonderful new friends.