

# Down Memory Lane

Siggy Reichenstein revisits his first UK port of call

On arrival in England in 1939, my first stop was Liverpool. There, I lived in a hostel with about 25 other boys from my class at the school I had attended in Germany and the Liverpool Jewish Community supported us financially throughout our stay. This year, Liverpool is European Capital of Culture and also hosted National Holocaust Memorial Day.

My wife, Hanna, and I were specially invited to attend a commemorative ceremony on 24 January, mounted by the Jewish community with the support of the City of Liverpool. Apparently, I am the only hostel resident still living in the UK and I was asked to give a written testimony of my time in Liverpool for display in the Library. This, with testimonies from three or four other Jewish refugees, will eventually be deposited with the Liverpool Record Office, based in the Central Library, and added to the Liverpool local archive.

That afternoon, we were invited to attend an impressive Holocaust Exhibition in the beautiful Town Hall. The exhibition, with the central theme Imagine, remember, reflect and react, took up the whole of the first floor.

There were display boards showing photographs of Auschwitz by Liverpool photographer, John Guy – a subject in which he has had a special interest since discovering his own Jewish heritage. There were photographs of survivors with Liverpool connections, accompanied by short biographies bringing their experiences to life and a continuous film showing interviews with survivors.

On the floor of a large hall where the lights had been dimmed were lines of small blue lights representing the lost souls. Using the word 'respect', the organisers created the word 'spectacles' – a link with idea of spectacles, as in glasses. There were thousands and thousands of these, heaped in piles beside the lines of blue lights, each pair of spectacles representing a life lost which should be respected. The pairs of glasses were placed tightly within a representation of railway lines, referring to the inhumane manner in which people were herded into overcrowded cattle trucks. Spectacles had also been donated by well known individuals such as politicians, actors, writers, artists, etc. Some were broken to represent those people who had been brutalised and beaten to death. The mounds of spectacles also represented those stolen from their owners when they first arrived at the camps.

Using mirrors, standing in different parts of the room, the

image of the spectacles multiplied and the reflection appeared to create a tunnel heading into the distance – 330,000 pairs of spectacles, equivalent to the number of Jews living in England at the time, who were on the Shoah list and targeted by the Nazis had they successfully invaded the British Isles. After the exhibition closed, all the useable spectacles were to be distributed to communities in the developing world where, hopefully, they would provide a lasting, albeit small, legacy of the Exhibition.

That evening we attended the City of Liverpool's Commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day in the Picton Reading Room of the Central Library. The event was compered by Professor Julian Verbov, son-in-law of Reverend Lesley Hardman, the Army Chaplain who took part in the liberation of the Belsen Camp. We saw a display of Ketubot, of some of Liverpoolians who had lived through the Holocaust as well as books and literature relating to people connected to Liverpool and the Holocaust.

After a musical performance by three children from the King David School, there were poetry readings by relatives of those who had died in Auschwitz and a dramatic presentation by a non-Jewish teenage theatre group who had recently been there.

Guest speaker John Minnion, author of Hitler's List, gave an illustrated talk about well known Jewish personalities – musicians, actors, writers, artists and much more – who had been classified as 'degenerates' by Hitler. A group of teenagers from a Catholic school, Nôtre Dame College, read accounts of survivors' experiences.

The following morning, Hanna and I

toured the spots in Liverpool that I remembered but had not visited in nearly 70 years, including the house which had been our hostel. This had, originally, been the home of a wealthy individual and, although now divided into flats, it looks much as it did all those years ago. I stood on the stairs in the same spot where I had posed for a photo as a 16-year-old.

Round the corner, the tiny post office where I used to deposit my weekly sixpence still exists. Recently, I found my Post Office savings book which showed a balance of £5. Out of curiosity, I had the interest written up for the past 60 odd years.

As well as a moving experience, it was, of course, a trip down memory lane for me.



Siggy and his classmates on the steps of the Liverpool hostel in 1939. Siggy stands front left. He was working in the kitchen when the summons to the photo-call came, thus the overall. Top right is Rolf Schild who is perhaps best remembered for being a victim of a notorious kidnapping, with his wife and daughter, by a gang while on holiday in Sardinia in 1979. He was released sixteen days later; his wife was set free in January 1980, and his daughter in March of that year. £220,000 was paid in ransom; two years later, thirteen people were found guilty of the crime and were jailed. They had thought his name was Rothschild.

## Shabbat Seudat

The summer programme of Seudat Shlishit has got off to a storming start. The first speaker, Rabbi Martin Wise, long-time friend and learning partner of the dearly loved Jonathan Collins ז"ל, spoke about whether children must keep mitzvot. Baruch Baigel blew everyone away talking about Israeli law – its tensions and relationship with Jewish law.

Professor Jonathan Webber, UNESCO Professor of Jewish and Interfaith Studies at Birmingham University and currently working on the sociology of memory concerning surviving remnants of Jewish civilization in southern Poland, gave an excellent introduction to the HGSS Poland trip. The title of his talk was Making sense of present day Poland. He drew our attention to the fact that those people who are running the Jewish sites, such as Auschwitz, are not Jewish and know nothing about Jews or Jewish customs. He arranged for the director of the Auschwitz museum to come to Hampstead Garden Suburb and spend a Shabbat with the community, an experience she thoroughly enjoyed. He outlined five things to bear in mind when going to there: aveilus (mourning), to reconnect with torah, to daven for the neshamos of those who have no one to daven for them, to realise how much of a reawakening in Jewish life and gentile interest in Jewish heritage is happening and to show gratitude to those who perpetuate the memory, virtually all of whom are not Jewish.

Rabbi Professor David Berger, Professor of History at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University, spoke on adapting halacha to the present time – not straightforward, as it must be remembered that one is dealing with divine law and hence there are limits to how far you can go.

Professor Berger also spoke both before and after a communal lunch on the same Shabbat. After the morning service he spoke on Israel as a Jewish state in which he gave a balanced view of political and religious connection to the Jewish people and how that manifests itself in government policy. His after-lunch talk was entitled Jesus in Jewish eyes – a historical account of how Jews have seen Jesus over the years and the range of opinions.

The hall was packed full with friends and families and, with entertainment for the children, a really happy atmosphere prevailed.

All these events are hugely enjoyable – coming together for a festive lunch or seeing out a long summer Shabbat in company with friends and fellow congregants, listening to interesting and thought-provoking speakers. A lot of work and thought goes into the preparation of such events and our thanks go to all those who make them possible.

## Slovenian Journey

In April, I visited Ljubljana, Slovenia, with members of the European Jewish Congress Executive. Slovenia, with a population of two million which once formed part of Yugoslavia, is the only former communist bloc country to be, at the same time, a member of the EU, the Eurozone, the Schengen area, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and NATO. It punches above its weight and seems to have a lot in common with the EJC. We had meetings with the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, President of the Parliament and First President of the Republic.

At all meetings, we raised the topics of Iran, anti-Semitism, commemorating the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, Convention of Tolerance, the Sarkozy initiative for the Union for the Mediterranean and legislation throughout Europe on Holocaust denial. The concerns on Iran were given an added urgency as during the visit it was announced that Iran had begun installing 6000 new centrifuges at its uranium enrichment plant in Natanz. A total of 3000 centrifuges is the commonly accepted figure for nuclear enrichment that is past the experimental stage and can be used as a platform for a full industrial scale programme that could churn out enough enriched material for dozens of nuclear weapons. Indeed Moshe Kantor told the PM and FM that he is certain Iran already has the nuclear weapon capability and the means of delivery.

The full delegation met Dimitrij Rupel, the Foreign Minister. He wanted to talk about the Middle East peace process, having been at Annapolis and also at Durban. He talked about the EU being prepared to speak to Syria and said the main concern was the internal Palestinian situation. When we raised the question of the ravings of Ahmedinejad of Iran, he remarked that words are not important and are "not dangerous". I reminded him that Adolf Hitler's career began with words. Mein Kampf was published in 1923 and words lead to deeds, which is why we have concerns.

At the press conference the Swiss government was condemned by the EJC for entering into a contract with Iran for the provision of a gas pipeline over 25 years to the value of 25 billion dollars. The EJC supports the Mediterranean Union initiative, and hopes it will help to regularise relations between Israel and her Arab neighbours. I was asked about levels of anti-Semitism in the UK and the rest of Europe.

The Slovenian Jewish community numbers about a hundred but, under the leadership of Andrej Kozar Beck, they are very active and have good relations with the Slovenian government. I have been considering whether we should try to twin them with a community in the UK. Although few in number and having one Rabbi, they manage to celebrate the festivals such as Purim, Pesach, Rosh Hashana and Chanukah.

I am full of admiration for the way they have survived as proud Jews – there is no kashrut, no Jewish shops, no Jewish schools, yet, despite all their difficulties, they managed to provide kosher food for all our meals, and produced a far higher standard than many communities who have much better facilities.

To sum up, the meetings were generally very useful and hopefully will be productive.

Flo Kaufmann

## HGSS Norrice Seniors



Lady Amelie Jacobovits with Esther Livingstone at the Norrice Seniors' tea party in May. Lady J opened the proceedings by asking for questions on any topic that people would like to hear about. One questioner asked about the time when the then Rabbi Jakobovits became a Lord. The story she told was that a letter arrived in the post inviting them to stay overnight for a banquet in Windsor Castle. She described how well they were treated, the great respect they were shown and the wonderful things that the Queen said about the Anglo-Jewish community. It was a most insightful speech, opening our eyes to some of the experiences which Lady J had been through as the wife of Lord Jakobovits during his Chief Rabbinate.

In June, Joy Conway spoke on her 50 years in community and communal work. On Tuesday, 29 July, Elkan Levy's subject will be They got off the boat too soon.