



Our Family

by

Heinz and Thea Ruth Skyte, née Ephraim

THEA'S STORY: EARLY YEARS IN ENGLAND

The document allowing Thea to enter the United Kingdom

Children on "Kindertransport" were aged under 16 years and were admitted into Britain without a visa. On my document my mother's name is wrongly written as Magda instead of Martha:

6525

This document of identity is issued with the approval of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to young persons to be admitted to the United Kingdom for educational purposes under the care of the Inter-Aid Committee for children.

THIS DOCUMENT REQUIRES NO VISA.


PERSONAL PARTICULARS. 2235

Name EPHRAIM THEA RUTH

Sex FEMALE Date of Birth 21-4-23

Place BERLIN

Full Names and Address of Parents
EPHRAIM, ALFRED, MAGDA
26 GARTENSTR.
BERLIN. N.



(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

On landing at Southampton the card was stamped by the Immigration Officer and "Leave to land granted at Southampton this day on condition that the holder does not enter any employment paid or unpaid while in the United Kingdom.

Nothing is remembered of leaving Berlin, saying good bye to my parents and the next couple of days are a complete blank. The train went from Berlin to Hamburg. I only remember that I had a very small and officially sealed packet in my handbag containing a few bits of jewellery including my parents wedding rings, the only valuables they possessed and a cameo brooch, given to me by a

cousin of my father, a family heirloom which had belonged to my great-grandmother. I also had the official permit with all the necessary signatures and official stamps allowing me to take it out of Germany. At the time of my leaving Germany my parents had hoped, that they might be able to get the opportunity to follow me to England at a later stage, possibly as domestics, the only positions for which working permits could be obtained, and that the sale of their rings might raise a little money if they were able to follow Thea to England in the future. I very vaguely remember that sometime on the train journey between Berlin and Hamburg Nazi guards searched all luggage and personal belongings of the children on the train and at first insisted on taking my little package. It took a lot of pleading, persuasion and tears, pointing out the legality of the covering documents again and again, until the guards finally relented and allowed me to keep my precious packet. There is a very vague feeling that I may possibly have seen members of the Hamburg branch of the family fleetingly before embarkation, though this is by no means certain.

After sailing from Hamburg on an ocean liner on its way to New York, the ship docked in Le Havre before continuing the voyage to Southampton, where I arrived completely bewildered and very exhausted and tired on the evening of 18 January 1939. Nothing is remembered of the voyage except some feeling of sea sickness. The children on the transport were taken to some hostel probably in Southampton or vicinity for the night. I only remember being given a cup with a drink, which I did not like at all. (Many years later the thought struck me that this could possibly have been English tea (or possibly coffee or Horlicks), which took her a long time to get used to.

Only at the 50th anniversary re-union of "*Kindertransports*", which was held in London on 20/21st June 1989 did I learn a few details. Apparently special coaches or compartments on the train from Berlin to Hamburg had been reserved with a Nazi guard in each compartment. The children in the group were aged between a few months and fifteen years, and were accompanied by a supervisor, the older children helping to look after the younger ones. After disembarkation from the "Manhattan" in Southampton the group was met by representatives of the Refugee Children's Movement. A label with name and a number was placed around each child's neck. The Immigration authorities stamped the Home Office permits and a Medical Officer stamped the individual labels (see page opposite). After all these formalities the group was apparently taken to halls of residence of Southampton University to spend the night before continuing the journey by train to London.

The following morning the journey continued to London, where the group was met on the station by members of the Jewish Refugee Committee. To my great delight my beloved uncle Paul Ephraim, who had himself only very recently left Germany after his release from Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg concentration camp, was also at the station to meet me. After the formalities of allocating the children to their further destinations, I was introduced to Mrs. R. N., who had travelled from Leeds to collect me. After a meal of sausages and chips (the taste for which had at that time also still to be acquired) at the Lyons Corner House in Tottenham Court Road, I bade my uncle good-bye and travelled with Mrs. R. N. by train to Leeds.

Rosa and her husband Hershel had offered me a home as a member of their family. They had two children of their own, Mottle, aged 19 years and a medical student at Leeds Medical School, and Miriam, just a year younger than me.

It was a bitterly cold day when Hershel collected Rosa and me at the old Leeds Central Station and drove them home to "Westbourne", a large house at the corner of Alwoodley Lane and Sandmoor Drive, the beautiful garden of the house bordering Sandmoor Golf course. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate of the large room, which from now on was my bedroom. The wooden crate, which had been sent by freight from Berlin was waiting in the room. This held my belongings including

books, but unfortunately not the stamp collection. This had been removed by German Customs as one of the items of value not allowed to be taken out of Germany.

Gradually I started to pick up English. At first I took my dictionary with me wherever I went. After some weeks I began attending Thoresby High School, then a girl's grammar school, in the centre of Leeds. On my first day at school, I was surrounded by girls from higher classes, who had been in Germany on exchange visits the previous summer and had acquired German boyfriends. They were keen to teach me some "useful" words and phrases, some of these shocked my guardians in the evening. School in Leeds was very different from school in Berlin. It was not easy learning subjects in a "foreign" language. In some subjects, e.g. Chemistry the class was on a completely different level, whereas in French they were far behind. In domestic science, instead of the practical approach I had been used to, I was taught how to darn a sock and had to write essays on this. Jewish girls kept themselves very much to themselves and did not mix much with others.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939 pupils of all schools in larger towns were evacuated to rural areas and accommodated there with local families. Leeds Thoresby High School pupils were sent to Lincoln. Only just having started to settle down a little, trying to get used to my new home and family, missing my parents and being desperately worried about them and the war, I felt unable to face yet another move to new, strange surroundings and people and so I left school.

Probably a day or so after the outbreak of war a male and a female police officer came to the house of my guardians to interview me. Refugees were not allowed to have cameras, maps or binoculars. I am not sure whether my camera, a birthday present from uncle Paul, was either taken then or I had to take it to the police station later. Although the police appeared very kind, I was terrified in view of the image given to German police officers during the Hitler period in the 1930s .

In September 1939 my guardian's family moved from Alwoodley Lane to "Elgan", Stonegate Road in the Moortown area of Leeds. The adjacent house 303 Stonegate Road was later to become our family home.

All attempts to bring my parents to England had proved unsuccessful. On 23rd August 1939, my mother had got a British Visitor's Visa and was preparing to come to England to visit me, when war broke out and she was unable to travel.

Shortly after the outbreak of war all aliens in Britain had to appear before tribunals. In Leeds all Jewish refugees were declared "Enemy Aliens". They had previously already been visited by the police and cameras, binoculars, maps etc. were confiscated. Early in 1940 all were called before a second tribunal in alphabetical order. I was lucky, my surname beginning with "E", I was summoned to appear before May 1940. This time I was put into the "Friendly Alien" category. The tribunal had got up to the letter "G", when there was a danger of Hitler invading Britain and all remaining refugees were rounded up, interned on the Isle of Man or shipped from there to Canada and Australia. Also on 28 May 1940 the British Government issued new "Alien Orders" imposing certain restrictions. In Leeds, as in other towns apart from London, a curfew was imposed and between the hours of 10.30 p.m. and 6 am refugees were not allowed to be away from their registered address. I remember later, when I was living away from my guardians during my training, spending much time at Leeds City Police registering each time I had a night off or had a week's holiday, and during training when I would not be sleeping in the Home or Hospital. Not being allowed to have a bicycle or car did not affect me. These restrictions were finally lifted around 1944/45.

After leaving school attempts were made to find a hospital where I could train as a nurse, but hospitals in Leeds would not accept "enemy aliens". So in 1940 I started training as a children's nurse at St Monica's Home in Bradford, a remand and maternity home for unmarried mothers and their children. At that time illegitimacy was looked upon as a sin and almost as a crime. The poor expectant mothers were strictly supervised, hardly allowed to go out, their incoming and outgoing mail restricted, opened, read and censored. They were allowed only very few visitors and male visitors were completely forbidden.

Work at St. Monica's was hard, the hours long, sometimes in excess of 16 hours a day, as there was a constant shortage of staff. It included heavy cleaning such as scrubbing floors, cooking all children's meals, and doing all babies' and children's washing by hand. The ironing was done with heavy flat irons, which were heated around a coke stove in the laundry. Each morning started with morning prayers in the chapel in the cellar, which had to be attended by all staff, children, expectant mothers and mothers. The week consisted of six and a half working days. The gross pay was £12 per annum. I had to buy and pay for my own uniform and also pay insurance contributions out of this salary. Night duty, apart from looking after the children and feeding the babies during the night, included the cleaning of the labour ward, polishing copper sterilising boilers and pasteurising milk for babies' feeds. At times, if somebody was or went into labour during the night, the nurse on duty had to wake the superintendent, who was the midwife, and also had to assist in the labour ward. Apart from this the lighting of the big stoves in the kitchen and laundry, which heated the water were also part of the duty. Often the fires in the stoves went out and no more wood to re-light them could be found, which always meant trouble! Night duty was worked as periods of a month at a time, seven nights a week. One half day a week "off-duty" was given, which meant that, after working the previous night, night nurse was allowed to get up at 2 p.m. and go out for the rest of the afternoon and early evening. After that "off-duty" work started at 9 p.m. on that day, instead of the usual 8 p.m. After a month's night duty there was one full day off!

During this time the Battle of Britain had started and there were air raid warnings practically every night. Compared with many other English towns Leeds and Bradford were lucky as not very much damage was done in either. Whenever the sirens sounded the nurses, there were only about three or four, had to get up, run along the street, from their rooms in a house a few doors away, to the Home and carry all children and babies, their beds and their cots from the second floor dormitories into the cellars and then, after the all clear had sounded, upstairs again. After some weeks of this children were at last put to sleep straight away in the cellars.

It was during this time at St. Monica's Home that I, at the age of 17 years, developed the first symptoms of gastric ulcers from which I was to suffer greatly on and off for many decades after that.

After completing my year's probationer training, I stayed on at St. Monica's for a while, as general hospitals in Leeds were still unwilling to accept refugees. At least it was a job.

Apart from being a refugee, I did not have the necessary School Certificates on which hospitals insisted. At the beginning of 1942 however, I was at last accepted as a probationer nurse at Killingbeck Hospital, a hospital for infectious diseases. After St. Monica's Home conditions here were much better. Days were worked from 8 am to 8 p.m. on a split shift system with regular two hours off duty each day, and a day and a half off one week and a day and an evening the following. Lectures had to be attended during "off duty" times. Nurses, as everywhere in those days, had to be resident and on days or evenings off had to report in at the porters lodge by 10.30 p.m.. From there it was a walk in the dark up the fairly long drive to the hospital. Most infectious diseases were far more rampant, severe and virulent then, probably due to some of the dreadful living conditions in the slums of Leeds. During my time at Killingbeck Hospital Sulphonamide treatment was intro-

duced. The results were quite amazing. Some illnesses that had been fatal in the past now miraculously responded to this "wonder drug". Some of them were completely eradicated at one time, but have re-appeared in more recent times.

On 28 April 1944 I passed the State Examination for the Fever Certificate of the General Nursing Council for England and Wales. I was now a "Registered Fever Nurse" and entitled to use the qualification R.F.N. after my name. Now followed two years general training at St James' Hospital in Leeds, the largest general hospital in Europe.

Unfortunately my gastric ulcer flared up again and I was for many weeks confined to bed in the Nurses' sick bay. At that time there was little treatment available for the condition except bed rest and a milk diet with two hourly drinks. When my condition was slow to improve I was then treated on one of the wards in the hospital, receiving stomach wash outs every morning before breakfast. After several weeks in sick bay and on the hospital ward I was discharged and went on sick leave. Shortly after my return to work I got Diphtheria and was this time confined to Killingbeck Hospital, my former training school, where I had nursed infectious diseases including Diphtheria for two years, without ever being ill.

In 1942 I met Heinz Scheidt (later changed to Skyte) again after his release from internment as an "Enemy Alien". In May 1940 Heinz had been arrested as an "Enemy Alien". His surname beginning with "S" had not reached the Leeds second tribunal. Heinz was interned first for a few weeks on the Isle of Man before being shipped to Canada and spending the next two years behind barbed wire in Internment Camps there.

We started going out together and eventually decided to get married. There were many problems as I had to obtain Matron's permission to get married and to be able to continue my training. This was at first refused and I was then twice sent away to reconsider my decision. Despite all this we were married on 30 July 1945, shortly after Germany's surrender in May of that year. World War II finally ended after the surrender of Japan in August 1945.

My guardians had wanted to make a conventional synagogue wedding for us, followed by a reception and meal afterwards. We could not face this in view that at that time we did not know what had happened to my parents.

So the Jewish wedding ceremony was held under the Chuppa in the garden of the house of my guardians in Stonegate Road, only immediate family members being present.



Heinz' & Thea's wedding photograph, 1945

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)