



# Our Family

*by*

**Heinz and Thea Ruth Skyte, née Ephraim**

## **THEA'S STORY: POSTWAR YEARS 1**

On coming back from a week's honeymoon in the Lake District, I was informed that I would have to do night duty, though I had finished one of my turns on the night shift only recently. As in Killingbeck Hospital, nurses had still to be resident in the hospital, and were only allowed to sleep out if a half day or evening off duty was followed by a day off. Otherwise it was clocking in at the lodge promptly at 10.30 p.m. or it meant reporting to Matron's office for a telling off the following morning. With all these problems I was very reluctant to continue training, but due to careful persuasion by Heinz did so, passed my State Examination and was admitted to the General Part of the Register of the General Nursing Council for England and Wales on 29th November 1946. I was now a State Registered Nurse as well as a Registered Fever Nurse and entitled to use my qualifications "S.R.N, R.F.N." after my name.

Being qualified I became a Staff Nurse working on a surgical ward. After being caught twice by the Night Superintendent, having slept at home and coming into the hospital in the morning, I was at last allowed to be non-resident. As far as I was concerned it meant that I could "sleep out", but not to "live out", the difference being that I was not entitled to a living-out allowance.

Eventually I was put in charge of a medical ward but only as "Acting Sister", not being given the usual promotion and above all the higher salary going with this position. On questioning this I was then told that I "could not be married and have a career".

In 1947 I left St. James Hospital. To help financially I did some private nursing for a short time, relieving the nurse/companion of an elderly lady on one morning a week and hated every minute of it, though the weekly 10/6d I earned for this proved extremely useful. I answered several advertisements for situations as an industrial nurse. In one of the interviews for such a position, which seemed to go pretty well and when even a starting date was discussed, I was asked if I would object working for the firm, as the owner was Jewish. (He belonged in fact to a well known Leeds family). Informing the person conducting the interview that I myself was Jewish, the interview was finished. The next morning a letter arrived saying that the position was filled.

Eventually I was employed by the District Nurses Association and worked as a District Nurse in the New Wortley and Armley districts of Leeds. Again religion was brought into the interview and I was instructed not divulge to patients that I was Jewish. District nursing in those days meant walking with a little black bag from patient to patient or using the tram to patients living much further away. Tram tickets had to be saved and reckoned up at the end of each month for expenses to be

reimbursed. The streets mostly consisted of back-to-back houses, the front door leading directly into the living room. Some were one up and one down, having combined living/kitchen accommodation on the ground floor and a bedroom, but nothing else, upstairs. The shared toilets were in a yard down the street. These parts had some of the worst slum areas in Leeds and most were demolished in the early 1950s. People were either spotlessly clean scrubbing their doorsteps and even the pavements outside their houses on their hands and knees, or they were extremely dirty. Patients had to provide newspaper on a chair for the nurse to put down her coat, also a bowl and water for her to wash her hands and a clean saucepan in which she could boil the instruments, which she carried in her bag, before and after use. A separate cupboard or drawer was required in which the bowl, pan, dressings etc. could be kept. It was just the period when the National Health Service came into existence and the difference this made to patients was absolutely wonderful. They were now able to get free medicines and dressings, which some of them urgently needed, but had been unable to afford before the introduction of the National Health Service.

Weset up their first home, a bed-sitting room in the back room of the house of Heinz' parents Sali and Frida Scheidt, at 17 Avenue Crescent in the Harehills area of Leeds. In the terrible post-war housing shortage we eventually managed to rent furnished rooms in a house in Hamilton Avenue. The rooms had no heating, as was usual at the time, and were very damp. The bathroom was shared with the house owners and water had to be carried from there to the so-called "kitchen" and dirty water again to be taken and emptied in the bathroom. On the first inspection of the flat we were advised that the kitchen was still unfinished and would have a cooker and oven. The cooker and "oven" in the kitchen turned out to be a tin box on top of a gas ring.

In 1948 we managed to get a self contained flat at 45 Spencer Place. Spencer Place then consisted of some large houses standing back from the road in their own gardens and also rows of quite large three story high terrace houses. It must have been a rather prosperous area in the 1920/30s, but had gradually deteriorated as people moved further north to Chapel Allerton and new houses in Moortown. After the war the street was very run down and some of the terrace houses were bought by builders and converted into self contained flats. 45 Spencer Place was such a house. We were lucky, at that time of terrible housing shortage, to be able to rent the first floor apartment. Our own front door led up the stairs to a good sized living room and a large bedroom. The smallish kitchen had a gas cooker with oven, no tin box, running water and a gas boiler on the kitchen wall heating the water for the flat. On the half landing was a bathroom and separate toilet. What luxury! There were also two large attic rooms. Coupons were issued for furniture, which was standard "utility" with little choice. We managed to buy a sideboard, table and chairs, as well as a carpet for the living room, also a bed and wardrobe. Heinz' parents provided some of their spare furniture. Some other "furniture" was knocked together from orange boxes, these then being the usual way of delivering the fruit to greengrocers, instead of the present day cardboard containers. The bedroom floor, as well as the old linoleum in the bathroom and toilet were painted. I made curtains for the living room. Some thin interlining fabric we had been given was dyed pink to fit the "colour scheme" to provide curtains for the large bedroom window.

A lot of other houses in the street were let off as bed-sitting rooms. The house next door to our flat had seven or eight separate occupants, each of them cooking and keeping food in their room. When one of these tenants got a cat we got mice in our flat. We called in the city's pest control, who tried everything to try to get rid without success. We were finally advised that the only way to combat the problem was to also get a cat. So I went to the RSPCA to buy one. I liked cats, when other people had them, but when I got to the dog's home and saw all the lovely little dogs, I decided that I did not really want a cat in the flat and instead came home with a puppy. Though "Splash" did not do anything to control the mice, he became an important member of the family.

I left my job as District Nurse and nursing career in 1949, my gastric ulcers again causing painful problems in the early stages of pregnancy, when I was confined to bed for some weeks.

Peter was born on 11th February 1950 at the Leeds Maternity Home in Hyde Terrace. In those days it meant a hospital stay of approximately ten days. A daily home help was then provided to do the house work, washing and cooking for a fortnight. The large attic room was made into a nursery for Peter. Apart from the white cot it had more orange box "furniture". Peter was a very good and contented baby and very soon slept through the night from 10 p.m. to about 6 the next morning. Splash became quickly used to Peter and lay quietly underneath the cot whenever the baby was attended to.

Due to some skin condition Peter's brit had to be postponed. It was finally held some six weeks after his birth when the family got together to celebrate the occasion.



**Heinz with Peter, March 1945**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

Money was very tight and we were desperately trying to save up hoping to be able to afford to buy a house eventually. Heinz took on three spare time jobs doing secretarial work, doing wages and keeping books for small firms and charities at home in the evenings. I gradually learned to help with some of these tasks.