



# Our Family

*by*

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

## THEA'S STORY: FAMILY LIFE

Heinz was appointed Secretary of the Leeds Jewish Board of Guardians, later to be renamed Leeds Jewish Welfare Board in 1951 and eventually also became Director of the Leeds Jewish Housing Association, which was formed in 1953. In the winter of 1952 we achieved our goal and managed to buy our own house at 303 Stonegate Road, next door to that of my guardians, which had been my home before our marriage. The house was detached and had three bedrooms, two of quite a reasonable size, and a bathroom and separate toilet upstairs, and two living rooms and a smallish kitchen downstairs. After having it modernised by having the very large old fashioned coal range, which occupied most of the small kitchen taken out and replacing it with an anthracite burning stove to heat the water, it left room for a refrigerator and small table. The very large overpowering fireplace in the back room, which became the family living room, was also removed and replaced by a modern one and, after having the house decorated, we moved in January 1953.



**Our house at 303 Stonegate Road**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

Michael, our second son, was born on 2 January 1954.

The house also had a nice private, even if somewhat neglected garden, the back of it going out onto large fields belonging to the Manor House in Stonegate Road, where cows and horses grazed and even some times came into the garden. In the winter we could dip under the single rail, which separated the garden and use our own private sledge run in the fields down the hill to the Moortown Ring Road.

All this, however, stopped when the Leeds Jewish Housing Association leased the land and in 1958 started to build the Queenshill Estate on it, "helped" by son Michael. Michael, then four years old, liked to watch the builders at work and visit and chat to the building supervisor, who had his hut close to the back rail of the garden. On Fridays, wage day for the builders, Michael was sent home with his "wage packet", a penny wrapped in a lovely Mickey Mouse cartoon drawn by the supervisor.

Not only had the building of the estate stopped the family's winter sports activities, but also changed our life in other ways. Instead of having visiting cows and horses in the back garden, we had now estate tenants, who did not want to go to town to the Association's offices in Brunswick Place, coming to the front door.

In the 1950s I did some market research for Gallop Poll and also for some commercial firms. Although the money it brought in was very useful, I did not like the work, some of which entailed quite personal financial questions, which I felt was prying into people's private affairs. I gave this up when I took on the job of part-time Secretary of the Leeds and District Jewish Children's Convalescent Home. This had been founded in 1926 and located in a former parsonage in Knaresborough Road, Harrogate. A large number of children were accommodated here for two week breaks during school holidays. During the war years the Home served as a Hostel for girl refugees from Germany. No longer required as a refugee hostel it reverted to its former function of Convalescent Home but accommodating children only during the summer holidays and adults for the rest of the year. The old building with its large dormitories was eventually sold around 1967. The Harrogate General Hospital now stands on the site at the corner of the Stray. A small modern Leeds and District Jewish Convalescent Home (the word "Children's" had been dropped) had been built on the ground floor under one of the wings of Donisthorpe Hall, the Leeds Home for Aged Jews. I resigned as Secretary in 1974, as the Home ran by a voluntary committee, interfered too much with our home life.

We saved up each year for a summer holiday, which was spent in different parts of Britain, from Cornwall to the Scottish Highlands, also taking in parts of Wales. At week-ends we went for walks and picnics in some of the Leeds Parks or by bus or train to places such as Otley and Ilkey.

In 1957 we managed to buy an old second hand pre-war car and could explore some of the lovely Yorkshire countryside further.

In the summer of 1961 we travelled to Berlin in the car. Although there were strict controls at the borders of West and East Germany and between East Germany and Berlin, movement between the sectors within Berlin, apart from showing passports or identity cards and the Green Card for the car, was still largely unrestricted. We had a lovely time with parents/grandparents visiting museums and old haunts in the beautiful surroundings of Berlin and get-togethers with aunts and uncles. A permit to visit Tante Anna, Onkel Fritz and cousin Christa in Frankfurt an der Oder could be obtained without a problem.

Returning from a day trip we tried to get a meal at several restaurants in Berlin. There were very long queues everywhere and the chance of being served proved nearly impossible. In East Berlin there was a great shortage of manpower in shops and especially in catering establishments. Over the previous few years many inhabitants had left their employment and the communist regime in the East and fled to make a new life for themselves in West Germany. My father got more and more annoyed and eventually told the doorman controlling the crowds that he had guests from England and "what would they think if there were unable to get a meal?" Hearing that, we were immediately taken out of the queue and marched up the stairs past the other hungry people and given one of the many empty tables in the restaurant.

Eleven years old Peter had been promised to stay on in Berlin to spend the rest of his holidays on his own with his grandparents, to which they were all looking forward. It had been arranged that at the end of his holidays his grandparents, would take him to the East Berlin airport and put him on a non-stop flight to London to be looked after by a stewardess. Cousins would meet him in London and put him on the flight to Manchester, where I would collect him. Problems were encountered when my father tried to pay for the flight in East German currency, which the travel agent refused to accept. At first my father insisted that in that case he would arrange for Peter to fly from West Berlin and only after much persuasion did he give in and allowed Heinz to pay for the flight in West German Mark.

We left Berlin with Michael on the morning of Saturday, 13th August 1961 spending a night en route to the Channel port. Only two days later during a conversation with fellow passengers on the ferry going home back to England did they learn of the complete closing off of frontiers between East and West Germany and also between the sectors of Berlin and the building of the Berlin wall. All communications between East Germany and Britain had also been cut and there was no news about Peter. So on the arranged day of Peter's return I drove to Manchester airport. The expected flight from London arrived but no Peter. Frantic telephone calls between me at Manchester airport and Heinz in Leeds followed. Heinz had been contacted by the London relatives and told that the plane, a Polish flight, had not arrived in London. Through some contacts with the London Polish Embassy they eventually learned that the plane had been diverted to Paris, but there was no passenger list. Heinz thought that I should come home to await further developments, but I felt unable to leave the airport, meeting every arriving, plane irrespective of where it came from. After some hours there was an announcement over the public address system looking for a Mrs. Skyte. Rushing to the gate a stewardess on an arriving plane informed me that they had an in-flight message that a Polish plane from Paris had arrived in London and that there was a child on board, who would be put on the next flight to Manchester. What a relief! Peter had expected that he was on a non stop-flight Berlin to London and when the plane landed presumed he had arrived. He was not feeling well and had been sick on the flight and when told that he was in fact in Paris was completely lost and burst into tears. Finally Peter arrived in Manchester. It must have been an absolutely terrifying experience for an eleven year old.

Peter's Bar Mitzvah took place on 23 February 1963 in the old Moortown Synagogue in Shadwell Lane, family and friends afterwards celebrating the event with a luncheon at the Queenshill Centre, which had been built in 1962 as a Communal Hall for Queenshill Estate tenants.

Unfortunately, what should have been a very happy occasion, was overshadowed by the death of my father, in Berlin on 8th February. We were devastated and for once sought rabbinical advice on what to do. It was decided that we were unable to leave Peter at that time and therefore did not attend my father's funeral. So a few days after Peter's Barmitzva Heinz and I travelled to Berlin to take care of family affairs there and to make arrangements for the care of my mother. The question of bringing my mother to England had been discussed with her doctor on the telephone, who was, however, of the opinion that she was neither physically nor mentally fit for such a journey or the upheaval that continuing her life in England would involve.

Berlin was then completely separated into East and West Berlin by the infamous wall. We had been in touch with the Chairman of the East Berlin Jewish Community and somehow tried to get permission to stay a few days in East Berlin. This proved impossible. Unable to afford a hotel in West Berlin, we booked into a small guest house in the Wilmersdorf district. This meant a daily bus journey to the underground station and then by underground to a station in West Berlin, where the line into the east sector was blocked. From there it was a short walk to "Checkpoint Charlie", the border between East and West Berlin, to go through repeated questioning, examination of passports, hand-

bags and belongings and at times even a physical search. There was also a compulsory exchange of currency from a certain amount of Westmark into Eastmark, which had to be spent in East Berlin and could not be taken out in the evening or re-exchanged. After all that we were finally let through the barriers and could continue our journey into East Berlin. In the evening it was a repeat performance in reverse. This went on for a couple of weeks or so.

My mother was fairly frail, especially mentally, and of course shocked by the death of her husband, who had provided support for her. My parents had employed a daily help, who continued to look after her the death of my father. Arrangements were made to settle affairs, dissolve the apartment, and for my mother's admission to the Jewish Old Age Home of the East Berlin Jewish Community in Berlin Niederschönhausen. There she had a very nice room with all her own furniture she had wanted to take from the apartment, bed, table and chairs, her own linen, crockery and cutlery. There was a small cooker with two electric rings, on which she could make some snacks, if she so wished, and also basins for getting washed and washing up. Breakfasts and suppers were brought to the room and the main lunch time meal was served in the communal dining room.

After mother was settled, came the task of disposing of the remaining furniture and belongings. With the exception of a few items relating to my parents persecution during the Nazi period, I burned all correspondence and family papers, including my father's wartime records etc., a fact very much regretted later. Anna, my mother's sister and her husband, who had lost everything during the war and lived in furnished rooms, took furniture, crockery and cutlery, including the remainder of a beautiful dinner service for forty-eight people, which had been a wedding present to my grandparents, Julius and Rosalie Ephraim, in 1873. My mother had not wished to take her television set with her to the Old Age Home and wanted her brother Max to have it. Her wishes were carried out. This caused great aggravation and furious discussions, as the domestic help insisted that my father, before going into hospital, had promised the set to her. Television sets were at that time almost unobtainable in East Berlin. Anything then remaining in the flat, clothes, carpets and so on had been promised to a charity but, when visiting the flat for the last time, neighbours had completely stripped it of carpets and all other "useful" items.

Family correspondence then grew less and less. My mother was unable to write, and her brother Max, to whom I had given power of attorney died in 1964. In view of the fact that my cousin's husband served in the East German Police Force, I broke up correspondence with my Frankfurt family, fearing they would have problems by being in contact with relatives in Britain, which proved correct.

The Old Age Home did not even inform me when my mother's condition had deteriorated dramatically and she had been transferred to an institution for incurables. Martha Ephraim died in Berlin on 30 May 1965.

Heinz and I flew to Berlin. This time we managed to get permission to stay in East Berlin. Hotels in that part of the city were very few and all fully booked at that time. We were offered accommodation on a boat on one of the many lakes on the outskirts of Berlin. The only other accommodation available was a room in an old hostel near the centre, which we took and which turned out to be quite dreadful. Martha always lived as a Jewess and was buried next to her husband on the Jewish cemetery Berlin-Weissensee. Waiting for the funeral service I found my aunt Anna and her husband, which was wonderful on such a very sad occasion. The funeral was also attended by somebody from the Old Age Home, possibly the Matron, carrying a box of family photographs, which I was pleased to take. After the funeral and a meal with aunt and uncle we left East Berlin thoroughly drained emotionally and, after spending the night in a luxurious hotel in West Berlin flew, back to England the next day.

Michael, our younger son celebrated his Barmitzvah on 7th January 1967. A Family luncheon, as for Peter, was again held at the Queenshill Centre, a place very familiar to me.

In the early days the Centre had no special staff and the care of the Centre was then part of the Housing Manager's duties. I seem to have done most jobs whenever there was a staff emergency including setting of tables for functions, cleaning the Centre and toilets, planting and looking after the flower tubs outside. In the early 1950s I had started working as a volunteer for the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board, thus resuming the voluntary work I had began as a teenager for the Jewish Welfare Board in Berlin. At first I helped to deliver Mobile Meals to people, who then lived mainly in the Meanwood, Chapeltown and Harehills areas of Leeds. I also helped with preparations for the two Welfare Board Sedorim, which were then held at the Jubilee Hall. Later I also drove the meals van when the regular driver was not available. It was an old rickety van. Meals were cooked and collected from Adelman's Hotel, a Jewish hotel and restaurant a few doors from the Board's offices in Brunswick Place. Individual meals were put into aluminium dishes, ten of these being put on top of each other in carriers which were put into metal boxes fixed to the side of the van, where they were kept warm by candles lit in the bottom of the boxes. On Fridays, when double meals were sent out, a box of fruit to serve as a sweet course for Saturdays was also put on the van. Two volunteers delivering the meals had a bench in the back. The back of the van was kept open. In those days in the back-to-back streets washing was still done mostly in dolly tubs and the washing then hung to dry on lines strung across the streets. When the high van tried to get along these streets the driver had to sound the horn and people rushed from their houses to pull up the washing lines. The roads were mostly of cobble stones and I well remembers driving the van and turning a corner when the bowls of fruit fell out of the back of the van and oranges rolling down the hill.

The Voluntary Services Committee of the Welfare Board was founded in 1964 and volunteers undertook many additional tasks. I was in charge of Hospital Visiting, visiting clients of the Welfare Board and some Housing Association tenants, in all hospitals, including Mental Hospitals in the Leeds area and surroundings or wherever patients had been sent. The Leeds Jewish Day Centre opened in 1973 and for some I took one of the classes, teaching handicrafts and jewellery making, as well as running the Day Centre Shop. For a short time on top of her work as a volunteer I was also engaged as Relief Organiser, covering Organisers holidays etc. About 1986 I resigned from Day Centre duties.

During another staff emergency, when the Housing Manager, who collected the weekly rents on the Queenshill estate, was involved in an accident, I and another volunteer collected rents for a few weeks.

Bentcliffe Court, a sheltered housing complex of the Leeds Jewish Housing Association, opened in 1978. This complex also had a common room, later to be renamed Community Centre, and I took over the running of the Centre. At first I ran weekly handicrafts and music afternoons, eventually extending the programme and also organised a shop and lending library there. Towards the end of the year 2000 I finally gave up my involvement in this voluntary project.

Between 1969 and 1999 I was also a Volunteer Adviser at the Leeds Citizens' Advice Bureau, seeing many changes in problems handled by this organisation during my time there.

As a Jewess being expelled from school in 1938 and so not finishing my education, I am basically a frustrated student. In 1984 I started intensive family research and research into some of the former Jewish Communities in Bavaria, where members of Heinz' family originated. In the process Heinz and I have explored many archives and libraries in Germany as well as in Jerusalem and New York. So far I have written six volumes on the subject, managing to trace some family branches back to

the middle of the 17th century. They are purely of personal and family interest and have not been published, but copies have been placed in some of the relevant German archives, as well as Jerusalem and the Leo Baeck Institute in New York. This research is a still ongoing and a never finishing task, now made somewhat easier by the Internet and e-mail, a great help in exchanging information with like-minded researchers. New "relatives" seem still to be crawling out of the woodwork or rather the Internet.

In 1986 Thea and Heinz assisted in establishing the Leeds branch of U3A, the University of the Third Age and were members until 1998. The Local History Group was run by me, and I did much research on two small historical areas of Leeds. This research is now in the Leeds Local History Library and in Leeds City Archives.

Peter born in 1950 and Michael born in 1954 finished their education in Leeds and both studied chemistry in Oxford. In April 1978 Michael took his BA and Peter his MA and doctorate. Peter moved to London, worked and married there. Michael had settled and married in Israel.



**Gilad Skyte, eldest grandson of Thea and Heinz celebrated his barmitzva on Kibbutz Mishmar David in 1993. From left to right: Gill and Michael Skyte, Heinz, Helen with Daniel Skyte, Peter with Nicholas Skyte, Thea, Gilad Skyte, sitting Amos Skyte**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

So after having spent 40 happy years in their house, having seen their children grow up and having left home, and as Thea and Heinz were getting older the house eventually became too inconvenient for them. There were stairs to climb and a largish garden to be looked after. So in 1993 Thea and Heinz moved to their present comfortable and convenient flat.

A very special occasion took place on a wonderful weekend of 29/30 July 1995 when the whole family, children and grandchildren from London and Israel, nephews and nieces, cousins and close friends congregated to celebrate the Golden Wedding of Thea and Heinz. As a very special and greatest surprise three cousins came from New York to help in the celebration.



**Thea with Michael and Peter, 30th July 1995**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

The one sad thing that occurred in recent years is that Peter's marriage unfortunately ended in divorce in 1998.

My present hobbies include grandchildren, stamp collecting and continued digging into the histories of the families as well as their former Jewish communities in Germany and coming to terms with computers and their idiosyncrasies.

Thea Ruth Skyte

December 2000





**Heinz and Thea Skyte, 1995**

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

PS: Heinz and I had always found it difficult to visit Germany and did so only in order to be with my parents. Neither could we bring ourselves to speak to German people at that time or about our past even amongst ourselves or with our own children. After the deaths of my parents we did not go back to Germany until 1984, when we finally started our research, digging into the history of Heinz' family. Being invited on official visits to both Berlin and Fuerth by these towns and then spending various times there for further research has, no doubt, gradually helped us to come to terms with our past and enabled us to talk about it, but not to forget it. As many people in present day Germany now say that they must no longer belong to the once silent majority and, which we also strongly believe, that

**THE HISTORY OF NAZI GERMANY AND THE HOLOCAUST MUST NEVER BE FORGOTTEN!**