Freddy’s Story

As told by his son, Gerald Stern
Freddy's Happy Childhood

My father, Alfred Stern, known as Freddy, was born on 9th June 1925 in the town of Montabaur situated in the Westerwald area of Germany.

At that time, the town had a population of about 6,000 and was an established small market town situated within a rural and farming area some 20 kms to the North East of Koblenz.

Jews had been resident in Montabaur on and off since 1291. In the period 1337 to 1349 they were persecuted, and the community was gradually eradicated. A Jew called Gottschalk re-established the community in 1369. Records show that a small but thriving Jewish community existed with eight families living in a single street, Judengasse, in 1777 and the community slowly expanded in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Freddy's parents were Maier Willi Stern, born 9th October 1885 in Meudt, and Betty Löwenstein, born 12th July 1896 in Herborn. Maier was Freddy’s father's Hebrew name, but it often appeared in his records.

Freddy's family were well established in this part of Germany. His grandfather, Alexander Stern and great grandfather, Isaak Stern, were both born in Meudt, a village only 5 miles or 8 kms to the North East of Montabaur.
Freddy’s grandfather, Alexander (born 1845 in Meudt but died in 1923 before Freddy was born and when Willi took over the business), had moved from Meudt to Montabaur in 1900 in order to expand his business which was founded in Meudt in 1876.

The only surviving photo of Freddy’s grandfather, Alexander Stern, with his second wife (Fanny née Herz) and family circa 1911. Back row Left to Right: Willi Stern, Adolf Stern, Max Stern, Mathilde Well (née Stern), Regina Seligman (née Stern), Galli Stern, Gustav Stern, Moritz Stern Front row Left to Right: Fanny Stern (née Herz), Hilde Seligman (daughter of Regina), Alexander Stern
Alexander was a tanner and leather merchant and it was far more practical for him to trade from a market town than from the small village of Meudt where only farmers lived. So, Alexander bought a warehouse and workshop at 24 Bahnhofstrasse, Montabaur. This ideally suited his needs having a yard and garden to the rear and also a spacious home on the first floor for his family (he had a total of eight children!). The building which stood on this site was initially used for processing hides but as the business grew, the dirty and rather smelly tanning process was moved to nearby premises in Alleestrasse.

Farming was a major industry in Westerwald and there was no shortage of animal hides available from the local farms and slaughterhouses. Montabaur was a major centre for the manufacture of footwear so there was strong demand for quality leather.

The properties in Bahnhofstrasse, Montabaur, almost all had businesses and retail premises on the ground floor with accommodation above. Freddy’s parents married in 1924 and they lived at No 24 Bahnhofstrasse.

Freddy's home at 24 Bahnhofstrasse. This photo was taken by Freddy using a pinhole camera he was given on his eleventh birthday. One can just see his parents peering out of a first floor window

Freddy's father was the youngest of five surviving children born to Alexander's first wife, Fanny née Hecht. These were Regina (married to Max Seligmann who was injured in the First World War and lived some distance away), Gustav (who had a retail clothing business two doors away), Max (who lived near the Dutch border and also ran a clothing business), Adolf (who was also a clothing retail store) and Willi, Freddy's father.

All the brothers fought in the First World War but because Freddy's father was severely injured, it was decided that he should run the family leather business and live in the family home. Unfortunately, two of Alexander's children from his first marriage, Julius and Hermann, died as infants.

Alexander’s first wife died in 1887 in Meudt, so Freddy also had two (half) uncles and an aunt from his grandfather’s second marriage in 1889 to Fanny née Herz. They were Salomon known as Salli (who lived in Montabaur and worked with Willi processing the animal hides), Moritz (who married Hilde née Stern from Bocholt near the Dutch border and was in retail) and Mathilde (who married Paul Weil who was injured in the First World War, they ran a clothing business in Büdingen. Freddy's parents were particularly close with them. Two further births from Alexander's second marriage were Herbert who died age one month and a still-born girl.

Freddy's father had to travel on business from time to time to sell his leather and purchase skins and Freddy's mother, Betty, stood in and assisted in the leather business at such times, dealing with local customers and in the administration of the business.

Although Freddy was an only child, he never felt any isolation as he was surrounded by close and loving family, many lived in the same street or nearby.

The Jewish community consisted of just under 100 people and it was a warm and friendly community. There was a small purpose-built Synagogue in Montabaur and a full-time minister, Rabbi Josef Zeitlin who was not married and was something of an academic.
He was what one would describe as 'modern orthodox' and did not have a beard or long side locks.

Freddy's father attended the minyan\footnote{Weekday services morning, afternoon and evening.} at the nearby Synagogue several times each week. It was Gothic in style with wooden bench seats and a timber gallery for the women who according to orthodox law sat separately. The ark\footnote{The focal point at the front of the Synagogue where the Torah scrolls are kept.} appeared as an impressively large wardrobe with a thick embroidered velvet curtain and the bimah\footnote{Podium.} had a lectern from where the Rabbi, who also gave lessons in Hebrew, preached. The cheder\footnote{Religion School} took place on Sundays as well as during the week for 3 or 4 hours. There were around 9 children in the cheder.

As things became more difficult for Jews in the area, Rabbi Zeitlin left for Shanghai and the part-time Rabbi from Meudt stood in and took services in Montabaur. This Rabbi was a brutal man and Freddy remembers him pulling him by his ears if he forgot something.

Freddy's parents kept a strictly kosher home and were Shomer Shabbat\footnote{Observed the commandments of the Sabbath - i.e. to rest not work, not to ride, not to create light, etc.}. Freddy recollects after his Bar mitzvah, laying tefillin (phylacteries - two small black leather boxes containing parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers) every morning.

Freddy never knew his paternal grandparents who had all passed away before he was born. However, he enjoyed a good relationship with his mother’s parents, the Löwensteins.

They lived in Herborn, situated 60 kms to the North East of Montabaur at 11 Hainstrasse in a district called Dillkreis (named after the local river Dill).
Freddy’s Uncle Leopold Hecht⁶ lived in Herborn and introduced his parents to each other. Freddy’s mother, Betty, was the eldest of three.

David Löwenstein 1866 - 1942

Freddy visited the family in Herborn two or three times a year in the school holidays. As his family did not own a car, he usually travelled by train and had to change at Westerburg. Freddy was somewhat asthmatic as a child and his parents felt that the atmosphere in Herborn was better for him than in Montabaur. His grandparents had a large house with a couple of flats they let out above and a huge enclosed garden in which he enjoyed playing freely. It was closed off from the street and considered safe.

Rosa Löwenstein née Blumenthal 1868 - 1942

Herborn was a larger town than Montabaur with a Synagogue and a larger Jewish community. Freddy recollects that his mother’s family were even more fastidious in their Jewish observance than the Sterns.

Freddy’s grandfather, David Löwenstein, was a livestock trader, although in later years when circumstances became more difficult, he became a kosher butcher. He was also a volunteer member of the local fire service.

⁶ Younger brother of Alexander Stern’s first wife, Fanny Hecht.
Freddy's mother was the oldest sibling to her brother, Freddy's Uncle Hugo. He was single and worked in nearby Siegen living there during the week and returning to Herborn at weekends. He was a gifted artist and designer and worked in retail making display sets for large scale window and store displays.

Freddy's Aunt Herta, 14 years younger than Freddy's mother, lived at the family home. It sometimes appeared to Freddy as though she was jealous of him. She had been the youngest member of the family until Freddy was born (when she was 15 years old) and for some reason she felt that he had usurped her special position at the centre of attention.
Freddy learned songs with his school mates without always understanding their meaning. On one occasion he remembers singing a song called *Waldeslust* (pleasures in the forest) after which Aunt Herta physically attacked him. One assumes she felt she was being taunted!

Herta was a retail assistant in Herborn and always had an eye for fashion. She was an attractive young lady and had many boyfriends but could never make up her mind about any of them. She was looking for perfection and those with any imperfections were always eliminated. In fact, she never married.

Freddy’s grandfather Alexander’s brother, Heimann Stern (born 1854), got into financial difficulties during a period of economic hardship and he committed suicide by jumping into the River Rhine in 1909. He ran an ironmongery and builder’s merchant business across the road from Freddy’s family home at 25 Bahnhofstrasse. After his death, the business was continued rather more successfully by his wife Klara née Simon⁷ (born 1862 in Bingen) who cleared the debts and eventually handed a thriving business on to her son, Albert Stern.

Freddy had very happy early memories of playing almost daily with Albert’s children, his second cousins, Gerti and brother Heiner (later called Henry) as well as with Hans (later called John) and Ilse (later called Helen), his Uncle Salli’s children.

Freddy and Gerti enjoyed playing across the road in their family’s builder’s merchant yard accessed through the arched gateway.

He recalls they experimented with the odd cigarette and played in the sand and cement, piled in the yard behind the house. They were a particular favourite as they doubled as a sand pit in which they would bury each other. Gerti’s family had a car which was parked on a gradient within the yard and on one occasion Gerti and Freddy were playing in the car when Freddy decided to experiment with pulling a lever (the brake!).

⁷ Klara Stern née Simon was the younger sister of Bertha Simson née Simon - later Freddy’s wife’s grandmother.
The car moved forward, fortunately it settled a few metres further down the path and did not crash. When Gerti’s father, Albert, returned, questions were of course asked!

Gerti had a *Wipp Roller* (a traction driven scooter) which was adapted to resemble a small car by putting timber boards on it. The youngsters used to delight in running this down the local hills and Heiner was usually encouraged to help push the rig back up to the top of the hill.

Freddy also remembers all the children playing together on a *Holländer* (a four-wheel traction drive car shown above). Freddy’s family weren’t wealthy, but they were comfortable and enjoyed life.

Freddy's school was 20 minutes’ walk from home, and he recalls being very happy at school up to 1933. He struggled at art and singing but enjoyed writing, composition and geography.

Maths was not such a popular subject as the teacher had a long stick and would beat the children if they could not answer a mathematical question immediately! Freddy was a good student and always behaved well at school although he had a reputation for undertaking practical jokes at home.

Freddy’s father had a quick temper. He was strong and muscular (from the physical work of carrying hides) and he sweated profusely. Willi was also Chairman of the *Turnverein*, the local Gymnastic Club which he attended regularly. He even competed and the family often had guests from other towns staying at the family home who had travelled some distance to participate in gymnastic demonstrations and competitions.
Freddy usually gave his father a wide berth and was somewhat wary of his short fuse.

He was a serious man, anxious to fulfil his role as head of the Jewish community and as a local businessman. Freddy was technically quite adept and remember on one occasion altering his father’s scales so that they were barely secured to the ceiling beam with a thin wire. His father frequently made a show of demonstrating his leather wares in front of customers and in so doing, tossed bundles of leather hides onto the scales, extolling his advantageous prices. Needless to say, Freddy made himself scarce as it did not take his father long to work out who was responsible when the rig came crashing down as he had no staff and Freddy had no brothers or sisters!

Freddy once took a door off its hinges but left it in its' frame - and again, his father came looking for him! On another occasion he experimented with the business typewriter, dismantling the major components to see if he could improve it. After re-assembly he discovered that he had far too many screws left over! Of course, this was an essential business machine and Freddy got into really big trouble. An engineer had to be called to come to re-assemble the typewriter. Freddy's father was very family oriented, however, and misdemeanours were fairly quickly forgotten!

Freddy had a very close relationship with his mother who was a wonderful homemaker, doted on him and always sought to protect him from her husband’s occasional temper outbursts.

In the centre of Montabaur stands a medieval castle on top of a hill surrounded by trees called the Tiergarten. This is where the Landrat (Head of Administration for the County) lived at that time. The path down from the castle descended through the forest and was one of the children's favourite runs on anything with wheels, ending at the Denkmahl (a memorial), and square where Freddy and his friends frequently played.

Albert Stern's granddaughter, Gabriele, known as Gabsy, who was a month younger than Freddy almost came to grief in the Tiergarten. Her parents, Ernest and Margaret Stern, lived in Berlin and Gabsy and her brother Rudolf (now Ronny) often came to visit in the holidays staying across the road with Uncle Albert and Aunt Johanna. Gabsy was small, light and dainty and one day she was playing with other children on the steep forested slopes when she lost her footing and tumbled down, hurtling uncontrollably. Fortunately, Uncle Albert had come to check on the kids and spotted the commotion of a child rolling down the hill - his granddaughter! Amazingly, he managed to scoop up Gabsy before she hit something.

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8 She was Gaby until the late 1940s when Freddy met a girl called Gabrielle (also known as Gaby) who later became his wife. Thus, the insertion of an 's' differentiated Gabsy.
The cousins all spent a great deal of time together and were great friends. They were in and out of each other’s homes, spending meal times at one or other house. Their mothers prided themselves on their cooking prowess and each competed with the other, in particular for bigger and better cakes and desserts. The cakes were baked on a large scale by today’s standards in both quantity and size up to 80cms (almost 3 foot) long and often made with yeast. This was to cater for the generally larger families and the produce of course was planned to last for several days. The kids all thoroughly enjoyed plum and apple cakes, *Streusel*\(^9\) and *Bienenstich*\(^10\). No Weight Watchers or Atkins diets in those days but of course everyone walked or cycled as very few people had access to a car. The cakes were prepared at home and then taken by the maid to the local baker’s shop where they were baked in commercial ovens (hence the ability to create such large bakes).

Freddy also recalls his mother cooking *Krautsalat* (finely shredded coleslaw), *Sauerkraut* and they regularly ate a fish called *Goldbarsch* (a golden bass). Of course everything had to be kosher. Meats and delicious sausages came from the local kosher butcher, Moses Falkenstein, whose family also came from nearby Meudt.

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\(^9\) A traditional yeast cake with a sweet crumb topping.

\(^10\) Literally ‘bee sting’ cake is a German dessert made of a sweet yeast dough with a baked-on topping of caramelized almonds and filled with a vanilla custard.
Freddy's father, Willi, his Uncle Albert, together with a cousin called Eugen Stern, were each at various times President of the small Jewish community in Montabaur. Freddy recalls his parents always being hospitable and having an open home. After most Shabbat (Sabbath/Saturday) morning services, many of the congregants would pass by Freddy’s home which was just around the corner from the Synagogue. Freddy’s mother would produce an array of cakes and coffee for everyone to enjoy. Stories would be recounted between the adults and the children played together.

Freddy’s father for some strange reason thought that Freddy was musical! He bought Freddy a small piano accordion which he eventually mastered. He then graduated to a larger model with 120 keys. Freddy’s father sent him to a man who tried to coach him. He thought that his parents felt that this investment might give him another life skill which could help him in the future – perhaps if all else failed as a busker!

Although the Sterns weren’t wealthy, they had the luxury of a maid, Lise, who lived on the top floor of the house. Freddy’s mother also had assistance from the Waschfrauen and Bügelfrauen (washing and ironing ladies).

Freddy’s mother had a large heavy-duty cooking stove which was kept alight day and night with compressed coal briquettes. Betty baked challah (special Sabbath plaited loaves) at home each Friday and a large Shabbat kettle was kept constantly warm near the stove as it was forbidden to boil from cold water over the Sabbath.

The family home at 24 Bahnhofstrasse was four storeys high as it also had a cellar which was used for storage of wine, beer, potatoes, coal and some of the supplies for Willi’s business. The ground floor housed the business premises, an office which doubled as a living room, as well as the kitchen and dining room. Central to the living room was another stove which warmed the downstairs during the cold winter months. The second floor had three bedrooms and a bathroom and there was additional accommodation for the maid on a third floor situated within the attic. Here one room was used specifically for storage and this was where Freddy’s mother kept home-made preserves of fruit in large jars as well as dried meat, sausages and fresh apples and pears laid out on trays lined with wood wool. The family also had quite a large back garden which sloped up towards the castle behind.
The family had a dog named **Landau**. The terrier had been brought in by Willi to keep any rats and mice out of the house, but **Landau** befriended Freddy and followed him around the town. The two were inseparable. Life in Montabaur had been truly idyllic and very happy - but all of this was about to change.

The first members of Freddy’s close family to sense what was to come were Albert Stern’s son and daughter in law, Ernest and Margaret Stern (Gabsy and Ronnie’s parents). Uncle Ernest (as Freddy called him) had been a senior Economist of international repute who was asked by the *Reichskreditgesellschaft AG*, an important bank owned by the Reich based in Berlin, to build and head up an economic department in 1924.

Shortly after the National Socialist Government came to power in 1933, the *Reichskreditgesellschaft* dismissed Ernest because he was Jewish. Without work, Uncle Ernest sought permission for his family to move to the United Kingdom. The move was facilitated by Sir Henry Strakosch, Chairman of the board of the *Economist* magazine and of the Union Corporation Ltd, one of the leading gold holding companies in London, who appointed Ernest as economic advisor based on his reputation.

Uncle Ernest returned to Berlin from London late in 1933 to attend to the sale of their home. On arrival he was arrested and imprisoned at Gestapo headquarters where he spent three long days during which he was beaten. He was released on the intervention of a Judge who knew him and heard of his arrest. In 1934, Uncle Ernest, previously a fit and energetic man who enjoyed sports (including ski jumping!), suffered but survived a heart attack which may well have been precipitated by his cruel treatment.

Freddy’s Uncle Salli, Aunt Else and their twin children Hans and Ilse were also anxious and left for New York two years later in 1935, encouraged and assisted by relatives who had already settled there.

In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws were issued. They not only made it lawful to discriminate against Jews but more particularly, punishable not to! Anti-Semitism became rife and was the norm.

Betty’s sister, Freddy’s Aunt Herta Löwenstein, left for London in 1936 where she became a domestic working for a Jewish couple by the name of Sluzewski, living at their home. Mr Sluzewski was a city lawyer. It was at that stage relatively easy to come to England where vacancies existed for maids and domestic helps.

Freddy’s second cousin, Gerti, was sent to spend time in London with her Uncle Ernest and Aunt Margaret and family. There she would go to school with cousin Gabsy and learn English. Her parents, Albert and Johanna, were happy that she was far from the menacing atmosphere which was brewing against all Jews in Montabaur and throughout Germany.

Gerti’s brother Heiner (Henry) and his parents, Uncle Albert and Aunt Johanna (as Freddy referred to them) left their ironmongery and builders merchant business and moved to Berlin during autumn 1938. They felt this was a bigger town where they could remain somewhat more anonymous.

Freddy’s Uncle Gustav and Aunt Friederike were initially concerned to get their three daughters to safety. In 1935 their eldest daughter Hilde went to work on a Kibbutz in Palestine. In 1936, middle daughter Edith, then 21 years of age) was able to find work in a hotel in New York. The youngest daughter, Gretel,
was initially sent to teacher training school in Berlin. They were eventually able to sell their business for a derisory price and left for England. Much later, in March 1940, they joined Edith in the USA.

Others attempted to leave Germany. Some succeeded but others did not. Freddy can remember some relatives attempting to leave through the occupied countries to Turkey but heard that they were turned back at the border and ultimately sent to a Concentration Camp. Freddy also knew that his (half) Uncle Moritz’s son, Walter Stern, hid under floorboards and in a hay stack in Holland throughout much of the war. Thankfully he survived and ended up in America after the war, although the effects of living with little daylight for several years took its toll. His skin was adversely affected for the rest of his life and he eventually contracted leukaemia which may have been connected.

Of course, no one could really predict the enormity of what would happen under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Had they done so, all Jewish people would without doubt have sought a way out at any cost.

Freddy’s father had fought for Germany and his parents were somewhat optimistic that things would eventually settle down. They could in any case not contemplate leaving Germany because they had no overseas contacts, were of limited means and because of Freddy’s grandparents in Herborn who were elderly and not terribly mobile. Betty was simply not willing to contemplate leaving them on their own. One needed a country to go to where one could live and work and also a visa to facilitate entry to the country.

**Difficult and Traumatic Times**

Freddy had clear recollections of his tenth birthday in 1935. He was given a lovely new bicycle with wide tyres which was his pride and joy. His father sold leather sewing machines as a side-line and the manufacturer, a company called Dürkopp, also made bicycles. Willi was therefore able to buy the bicycle wholesale. Initially Freddy had one or two crashes with it until he mastered balancing on two wheels!

The freedom this brought was fantastic and at last Freddy was able to venture beyond the town of Montabaur into the neighbouring countryside and other towns and villages. Cousin Gerti often accompanied him and the pair would visit Meudt where they would drink lemonade and eat sardines at a café or at a cousin’s house before returning to Montabaur.

Anti-Semitic imagery from the late 1930s showing Jews as wealthy and controlling
During 1936 the Jews experienced anti-Semitic taunting from local SA (Sturmabteilung, the Nazi Party's paramilitary 'Storm Detachment') activists who were also referred to as 'Brown Shirts'. This gradually gained momentum and eventually included the daubing of windows and walls with slogans such as Juden Raus! (Jews out!). The entire Jewish community in the town were subjected to this kind of treatment on an almost daily basis.

Men from the SA would position themselves outside Willi's business and discourage customers from entering and doing business with his father. Freddy recalls how they felt isolated and life very quickly became economically difficult. They also felt physically vulnerable. Around this time the bank accounts of Jews were frozen and brought under the control of the authorities.

Then, in 1937, Freddy's father was approached through his solicitor, by a man called Herr. Menningen. This Mr Menningen was the son of a fairly reputable businessman from a nearby village who was known to Willi.

Mr Menningen started negotiations for the purchase of Freddy's parents' business and property. This was a long and protracted affair, but his father assumed, knowing Mr Menningen's father, that his son was respectable and honourable. However, a price could never be agreed because the man offered so little money to a Jew.

At school, life for Freddy and the other Jewish children became unpleasant. Some of their school friends began chanting Nazi songs and made personal remarks. Occasionally there were even physical attacks. Freddy's parents gave him a small truncheon to carry for self-defence. These hostilities were from children with whom Freddy had previously played and they had been considered friends. Certain non-Jewish friends did not engage in any taunts and attacks but instead they distanced themselves from the Jewish children.

The Jewish children were marked in the school register with the letter 'J' set prominently next to their name. The teachers varied in their behaviour. Because Willi had been active in the local community and in particular had been friendly with many fellow gymnasts who had attended the Turnverein, the local Gymnastic Club, a few of them were well disposed towards the Stern family. Freddy remembers Herr Bayer, his maths and physical education teacher calling him to meet in his office where he urged Freddy to tell his parents to try and find a way of leaving Germany. He suggested going to England or Denmark.

In spring of 1938 the personal attacks became so severe and the Nazi laws altered so that Freddy could no longer attend his regular school. Jewish children were no longer allowed to participate in normal education.

Freddy's parents made enquiries and arranged for him to attend a residential Jewish school, the Jüdische Bezirk Schule, in the town of Bad Nauheim some 65 kms West of Montabaur. The four-storey stone and brick building, built
originally as a Jewish children’s home in 1898 served as a boarding school when Nazi legislation forced countless Jewish students out of their local German schools. Freddy’s parents continued to try and make ends meet at home in Montabaur.

Freddy returned home to Montabaur for his Barmitzvah in June 1938. By this time Rabbi Zeitlin had left Montabaur and Freddy was coached by a teacher from Meudt. He was Barmitzvah in the Synagogue in Montabaur with around 40 or 50 family members and friends present. Freddy recalls that his second cousin Gerti was in London, but he remembers that her brother, Heiner (Henry), was present with his parents Uncle Albert and Aunt Johanna. This was the last time Freddy remembers his family being all together in Montabaur.

On 9th November 1938, *Kristallnacht* (night of broken glass), the *Pogroms* (anti-Semitic riots) came to Bad Nauheim and Freddy’s school was attacked and set on fire.

Freddy was in a dormitory on the top floor when thick smoke was first detected along with the sounds of angry men from outside.

Freddy and the other children escaped down some back stairs. As Freddy reached the ground floor and ventured outside, he remembers in particular how upset he was to see the *Torah Scrolls* (the scrolls containing the five books of the *Old Testament*) being paraded around whilst they were burning. This was done to taunt and intimidate the Jewish children. These Torah scrolls had been in the Synagogue on the ground floor of the premises. The men carrying out these acts were clearly relishing the spectacle.
The children, dragging their essential belongings, were all herded by men in uniform heading towards the police station. The children were anxious and distraught. The men were extremely menacing, and Freddy truly feared for his life.

As the line of children processed along the road, Freddy saw a split second opportunity to escape. He dived into a narrow alley whilst the men at either end of the line were preoccupied. He says it was a gut reaction to try to escape and he didn't even think of the consequences. Freddy held his breath and hid for a while and then ran off. He had just enough money to jump on a train to his grandparents' home in Herborn. Somehow, he achieved this without being apprehended.

Things in Herborn were slightly calmer. The Synagogue had been severely damaged, and many Jewish businesses were also ransacked but the Löwenstein home remained intact and Freddy's grandparents were unharmed. They were all anxious for news about Freddy's parents and it was the next day when Freddy's mother eventually arrived in quite some distress.

Betty recounted what had taken place in Montabaur. A few days earlier, entry had been forced into the small Synagogue building in Montabaur where unidentified persons hauled the sacred Torah scrolls, out and defecated over them. They trashed the prayer books and smashed the pews and then left. As if this was not enough, on Kristallnacht, the Synagogue was re-entered and set alight.

Over 1000 Synagogues throughout Germany were torched on Kristallnacht and most, including the Montabaur Synagogue, were totally destroyed.

Violence broke out against the few remaining Jews in Montabaur. An old lady, Mrs Kahn, had three sons. The Brown Shirts were searching for them without success. Mrs Kahn refused to reveal their whereabouts and consequently, she was dragged screaming down the cobbled street by her long hair, never to be seen again.

The same night, Freddy's parents were at home when they heard loud banging on the door. Freddy's father sent his wife, Betty, upstairs for her own safety but as soon as he opened the door, the Brown Shirts entered and both of them were hauled outside into the street.

There they were subjected to being jeered, kicked and spat at by people they had thought of as their friends and neighbours. By any description of events that night, the townsfolk of Montabaur, were wholly complicit in this hateful and violent action.

The Jews in Montabaur were all rounded up and taken to the Town Hall (see photo on previous page). And if that wasn't enough, Willi's tannery warehouse and workshop was trashed, the windows were smashed and the home above was ransacked and rendered uninhabitable. Not all the Jewish homes were damaged but throughout Germany, 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed that night.

Accounts suggest that the actions which took place in Montabaur were particularly severe.

Few, if any, Jewish families escaped attack on Kristallnacht and one can imagine that the effects on the Jewish population must have been profound.
That same night, Freddy’s mother together with other Jewish women and children from Montabaur and surrounding towns were taken to a collection point at a Catholic Centre called Kirchühr in the Gelbach valley a few miles away.

Meanwhile though, the men were treated rather differently. Over 30,000 Jewish men were arrested throughout Germany on Kristallnacht. Willi was taken to Buchenwald Concentration Camp. The reassuring camp motto translated reads – ‘Every man for himself’!

After his arrival at Buchenwald, Willi was beaten till unconscious. It took him several hours to come around. After a week or so of similar brutal treatments he was taken to the Camp Commandant’s office. Here to his great astonishment stood Mr Menningen, the man with whom he had been negotiating to sell his business and property in Montabaur.

This same man was wearing an SS (Schutzstaffel, paramilitary political soldier) officer’s uniform. The Camp Commandant gave Willi an ultimatum. To sign over his house and business or he would never be released.

He had no alternative but to sign and was released on 13th December, just over one month later. Not only was the price he received derisory, but the funds paid over were immediately seized by the German authorities from his frozen bank account. Freddy’s father though, had bought his freedom, at least for now, and he re-joined his family in Herborn.

Save for their religion and its customs and practices, the Jews had been integrated and were pretty much part of the local community. Yet at this moment, such things counted for nothing and the apparent friendship and tolerance shown was replaced by actions ranging from prejudice and mocking to the most inhumane treatment imaginable.

These actions affected all Jews, but we should also remember that homosexuals, communists, gypsies and those with varying
disabilities were also segregated, victimised and of course ultimately put to death as part of the plan to create a pure Aryan master race.

The women were detained overnight at Kirchähr but were eventually released. Freddy's mother, Betty, did not know what had happened to her husband or to Freddy. She returned to Montabaur to discover that the family home had been completely trashed. She hurriedly gathered what possessions she could. She made her way to her parents' home in Herborn where she was reunited with Freddy and of course her parents, David and Rosa Löwenstein.

Amazingly, little had taken place in Herborn except of course that the Synagogue had been torched and the police had been through their family home searching for weapons. The police found nothing but removed a butcher's knife belonging to Betty's father who was the Kosher butcher.

The neighbours in Herborn were quite kind and concerned about the family during this very difficult period. In fact, Freddy remembers his grandparents' neighbours burying some valuables for them in their garden to help conceal them. After the war, they returned them to Freddy's Uncle Hugo, although they were quite unusable due to corrosion of the metal and silver.

Freddy's father, Willi, returned from Buchenwald in mid-December. He was changed, hugely diminished due to his mistreatment.

Although the proceeds of the sale of the Stern family home and business had been confiscated by the German authorities, Freddy's grandparents had a large garden in Herborn and grew all sorts of fruit and vegetables and so fortunately despite having no money, the family were never hungry.

Meanwhile Betty's brother, Freddy's Uncle, Hugo Löwenstein, who worked nearby in Siegen had also been taken on Kristallnacht to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. Cousin Gerti's father, Freddy's Uncle Albert Stern, who had moved to Berlin, was also taken to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. They were both incarcerated for around 3 months until February 1939.

Betty's younger sister, Freddy's Aunt Herta Löwenstein, by now somewhat established as a housekeeper in London, succeeded in finding a way to guarantee her brother, Hugo, a similar position in England. A friend of hers paid a surety bond which enabled him to come to England. On arrival, Uncle Hugo lived for some time in a hostel in London which was set up specifically for Jewish refugees.

Aunt Herta later also managed to secure a place for Freddy on the Kindertransport (the Children’s Transport) with the help of Aunt Margaret Stern and a friend of hers, Mrs Rose Battsek. Mrs Battsek worked at Woburn House, the office organising and coordinating this special Kindertransport transportation for youngsters placed in danger as a result of the Pogroms against Jews. A surety bond of 50 Pounds Sterling was payable. This was no small sum in 1939.

In response to the events of November 9th and 10th, the Kristallnacht Pogrom, the British Jewish Refugee Committee appealed to Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain and Members of Parliament and a debate was arranged and took place in the House of Commons. It was agreed to admit up to 10,000 children into England between the ages of 3 and 17. The previously mentioned bond had to be posted for each child "to assure their ultimate resettlement." The children were to travel in sealed trains. The first transport left barely one month after Kristallnacht, the last, just two days before war broke out (September 3rd, 1939), which unfortunately put an end to this
The Kindertransport was unique in that British Jews, Quakers, and Christians worked together to rescue primarily Jewish children. Although initially only temporary admission was granted, these children would never return home while Hitler was in power.

Freddy’s parents received an official letter telling his parents that he should be at the railway station in Giessen, a larger town situated around 20 kms South East of Herborn, on the evening of 20th March 1939. Here he had to meet the express train to Hamburg.

He said a final goodbye to his parents and grandparents without knowing what would happen to him. He remembers his mother being in tears and his father trying to put on a brave face.

In Hamburg, Freddy was directed to board an American ship, the SS Manhattan. He was in a group of around 120 children of ages 3 to 17 years.

The boat carried other passengers as well as Kinder. Freddy didn’t know any of his young travelling companions. The SS Manhattan sailed via a brief call at the French port of Le Havre to Southampton arriving on 23rd March.
1939. The Kinder were kept on board overnight until all of the paperwork was regulated and more importantly, the children were medically examined. They disembarked the following day.

Interestingly, Freddy's Identity Card did not have a big red 'J' stamped on for Jew or the name 'Israel' added as a middle name as was normal practice to accord with the Nuremberg Laws.

Freddy's parents packed a small suitcase as instructed with nothing but clothing. His Dürkopp bicycle, an accordion and a few other bulkier personal possessions were shipped sometime later in a large wooden crate.

One thing that the German authorities knew nothing about was that Freddy's father who supplied leather to shoe manufacturers had made him a special pair of shoes. A gold coin was hidden in each heel. The Nuremberg laws specifically prohibited money, jewellery or any assets being taken out of Germany by Jews and had these coins been discovered, there would have been serious consequences.

One of these coins was melted down, many years later, and made into a brooch as a wedding gift for Freddy's wife. The other (below) was mounted and became a pendant necklace.

On the reverse side of Freddy's Permission to Enter the UK as well as on his Passport, it does not say how long he can remain, but it does clearly state that he is not allowed to seek employment. So, this was clearly to be a temporary arrangement.

A new Country, a new Future

The first sighting of Freddy's new country was of the White Cliffs of Dover as the SS Manhattan rounded the South Eastern corner of Blighty on its route to Southampton. It was a wonderful sight. After Freddy's horrific experiences in Germany, this truly seemed like 'the Promised Land'!

Freddy described his mixed emotions – a huge sense of relief at being away from the toxic and dangerous Nazi regime in Germany – but also quite a degree of anxiety at being so far from his family - and foreboding as to the future. He was still only 13 years old. He now found himself in a strange country where everyone spoke a strange language, English!
The Kinder disembarked at Southampton Passenger Terminal and they were then escorted by train to London’s Liverpool Street Station. Here they were separated into groups. Freddy learned that he was headed for Rowden Hall School in Cliftonville, a suburb of Margate.

A group of around 100 children between 3 and 18 years of age were taken there by train and then coach. Rowden Hall School was situated in a disused hotel. It was funded and operated under the auspices of B’nei Brith (an international Jewish organization committed to the security and continuity of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, defending human rights, combating anti-Semitism, bigotry and ignorance, and providing service to the community on the broadest principles of humanity).

It seemed to Freddy like he was held in isolation for a month, although it was probably less than a fortnight! Of course, it was incredibly boring. It did, however, do wonders for developing his English language skills as no one there spoke German. He remembers receiving a box of chocolates sent by his parents whilst in hospital. Eventually, Freddy returned to school. He never learned how he had contracted Scarlet Fever and it certainly did not improve his popularity at school as no one was allowed out during the period of quarantine!

Freddy remembers that food was in short supply and the Kinder were hungry most of the time. They received a few pence of pocket money each week and Freddy recalls buying a quantity of broken biscuits from F W Woolworth & Co on a regular basis to supplement the food received at school.

Freddy received an invitation from Aunt Margaret Stern to stay with their family for Passover. He was thrilled to bits! The invitation included some money with which to buy a return train ticket. He received leave from the school and was collected at the railway station in London by Uncle Ernest with his children, Gabsy and Ronny.

First, they took him on a tour of the City of London and showed him where Uncle Ernest had his office. Then they went back to their rented home at 22 Thornton Way (see photo) in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Freddy remembers that this was a substantial and comfortable property on a corner site.
Uncle Ernest was by now well established in his position as an economist with the Union Corporation in London although he was still struggling somewhat with the English language. This was not helped by the fact that he also suffered from acute hearing difficulties. He was constantly fiddling with a variety of hearing aids which at that time were extremely large and somewhat unreliable. Freddy recalls him often shouting “hallo, hallo, hallo” in a thick German accent whilst struggling to adjust the device and then tapping it in frustration.

Aunt Margaret had English family and had visited the country already in the 1920s. Hence her language skills and accent were excellent. So much so in fact that she was a writer of children’s story books and also gave lessons in elocution. In fact, she often assisted Uncle Ernest in his work, helping him to prepare reports. Freddy also benefited from Auntie’s quintessential English skills.

Uncle and Auntie also had a refugee housekeeper called Ilse Schwabacher who later, after her marriage to Oscar Shipton, (the name was adapted from Schiff) became a family friend.

After a few wonderful days with the London Sterns, Freddy returned to school at Cliftonville.

On 3rd September 1939, war was declared between Britain and Germany. The school authorities received advice that all the children and non-essential personnel should leave the coastal areas for reasons of security.

Freddy was now 14 years of age and thus his formal schooling came to an end prematurely. It was also the case that all communication with Germany, by letter and phone, ended.

Uncle and Auntie were kind enough to invite Freddy to stay with them on a more permanent basis. However, this caused a crisis of conscience for Freddy. The London Sterns were not Orthodox. They were founder members of Alyth Gardens Reform Synagogue and did not keep a kosher household. Up to this point Freddy had endeavoured to keep kosher and so he advertised in a Jewish paper to see if I could find accommodation with kosher food but unfortunately, he received no reply.

A similar advert
So, Freddy accepted Uncle and Auntie’s offer and moved in with them accepting with good grace and gratitude that he would have to modify his religious practices.

These were quite difficult times for Freddy as he often thought about his parents and missed them terribly. He received a couple of letters from them which had been sent via relatives in America due to the fact that no postal service was operating directly with Germany any longer.

Uncle Ernest decided that it was time to think about Freddy’s future and so he searched for and found an apprenticeship for Freddy at an optical business called Newbold & Company situated at Grays Inn Road, near Chancery Lane underground station. This was an exciting development as Freddy loved technical things and was pleased to be able to learn new skills, improve his English and earn some money for the first time.

One evening after work, Freddy was sitting in the living room of the family home in Thornton Way. He was in an armchair facing the window and listening to the latest news of wartime events on the wireless. Suddenly, without warning, a Luftwaffe bomb exploded immediately outside the window.

Quite miraculously, the blast shot glass and debris past Freddy and through an open doorway into the hall and up the stairs. It was his very good fortune that this bay window had a pair of extremely heavy-duty velvet curtains and that these were closed. It was these curtains together with some curious suction effect which drew the blast through the open door so that Freddy was not hurt at all, although obviously very shaken.

A few nights later, a second bomb dropped directly onto the camouflaged roof of an air raid shelter in the small garden, totally destroying it. Thankfully no one was using the shelter at the time. These bombs quite literally lifted the Stern home from its foundations and there was substantial damage. The family could no longer live there but thankfully they all survived relatively unscathed.

The entire family relocated temporarily into a house in Frognal belonging to a friend of Uncle’s called Hans Neufeld. The house in Thornton Way had to be partially demolished and was eventually rebuilt after the war.

Aunt Margaret, now not unreasonably, felt nervous and uncomfortable living so close to London and she and Uncle Ernest decided to find rental accommodation in Hertfordshire in a town called Berkhamsted. Because of Freddy’s apprenticeship at Newbold & Co, he found a place to stay at a refugee hostel in London.

Then one morning, Freddy turned up for work as usual to find the optical business had literally disappeared. Newbold & Co had been struck by a 1000kg parachute mine, a heavy
duty bomb released from a plane with a parachute. The night watchman had disappeared, and the surrounding area had also been badly destroyed. Freddy’s job had literally disintegrated, and this created a dilemma.

Freddy recalls with huge relief each time his life was saved – in Germany and now even in the relative safety of England!

As there was no room for Freddy with the Sterns in Berkhamsted, he contacted his Uncle Hugo, who had recently married a lady named Friedel and they had settled in the town of Shrewsbury. Freddy was invited to stay with them in their small two room rental property. He describes sleeping there on bare boards with a make-shift mattress and a few blankets. This was all they could offer him.

So, from the age of 15, Freddy became an apprentice mechanic working on military vehicles. He was taught how to maintain and test a range of engines for heavy duty military vehicles. Freddy found that he had a natural aptitude for engines and all things technical and his bosses very quickly gave him increasing responsibilities despite his still relatively young age.

Of course, many of the older more experienced mechanics were called up to serve their country but Freddy was still too young and additionally, he was classified (as were all the German refugees) as an Enemy Alien!

At that time, the description ‘Enemy Alien’ was applied to all German refugees and also German prisoners of war for that matter. Even though the Jewish refugees fled Germany for their lives and regarded Britain as the safe haven, they were regarded with quite some suspicion by the British authorities simply because they were German – and Britain was at war with Germany!

Freddy was eventually put in charge of a team of five apprentice mechanics working in the military workshop.
Meanwhile, Hugo’s sister, Herta, emigrated to New York. Here she trained and worked as nanny.

As an 'Enemy Alien' refugee Freddy was registered with the police. This is how he was located by the Red Cross in 1942/1943. He was informed that his parents had died, and he received only sketchy details at first but sometime later was informed that not only his parents but also his grandparents had perished.

This was a terrible blow. Freddy never really recovered from this news. Unfortunately, sometime in the 1990s, Freddy decided to have a bonfire and destroy almost all of the paperwork in his possession including the letters received from the Red Cross and letters exchanged with his parents. He referred to his parents being murdered in Auschwitz throughout his life, but he used this as a generic term meaning a Concentration Camp or Nazi Death Camp.

Even today, we are not certain as to their exact fate, but the records shown on the German Bundesarchiv website are below.

Enquiries made with ITS (International Tracing Service of the Red Cross) in March 2010 confirmed similar information. But they also sent copies of the Buchenwald record for
Freddy’s father - and two Despatch Notes recording the shipment of goods. The goods in question were Freddy's grandparents, David and Rosa Löwenstein and the transport was their final journey from Theresienstadt to their deaths in Treblinka on 29th September 1942.

With regard to the information shown, one must bear in mind that the deportees were sent in cattle trucks with barely enough space, no seats, no heating in the cold winters and without food or sanitation. The journeys often took several days, and the cattle trucks were often left in sidings for a few days. In fact, a large proportion of the deportees died during transportation and we have no way of knowing exactly what happened to Freddy's parents or grandparents.

Had they arrived alive at their final destination, what awaited was an efficient process. The deportees had their heads shaven and their clothes and other personal effects removed. They were made to believe that they were entering shower blocks but once inside, the doors were locked and deadly gas, Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide, was pumped in through the shower heads. In a short period, everyone was dead. The bodies were then removed and incinerated in huge ovens. The entire process was usually completed within hours of arrival.

In fact, we now know that 150 cousins, uncles and aunts from Freddy's family all descended from the tiny village of Meudt were murdered in the Holocaust.

The ITS correspondence received also referred to documentation held by the Finanzamt in Weisbaden which revealed the financial constraints imposed on Freddy’s parents and grandparents.

By way of a few examples only:

- On 14.01.1939, Willi (now re-named Willi Israel Stern, the name Israel being inserted in accordance with the Nuremberg Laws) was told that they had released RM 200 per month which he could use, for living expenses. Furthermore, that he had collected RM 2,700 from debtors, as well as RM 4,800 from a cashed life insurance and that he had to pay these into to his supervised blocked account forthwith.

- On 01.02.1939 Willi, requested to be allowed to have an increased amount of
RM 500 per month, to run his own household. In the same letter he said that, in January, he has collected RM 1,002.55 owing to him, and he transferred RM 950 to his supervised blocked account having used the balance for his household. Also, that he sold furniture to the value of RM 927.60, which he had credited to his supervised blocked account.

- On 20.06.1939, he told the authorities that he had collected a total of RM 11,110, from debtors, furniture sales and another life insurance policy, which he had paid into his supervised blocked account.

- On 16.11.1939, the bank wrote to the Foreign Exchange Control department that they had received an amount of RM 1,350 which they assumed was the fifth instalment of Willi's "Jew Tax" (Judenabgabe). It is signed "Heil Hitler!"

- There is similar correspondence for Freddy's grandmother, the "Jewess Sara Loewenstein" (again, the name Sara being inserted in accordance with the Nuremberg Laws). One item, dated 18.02.1939 is the house and garden at Hainstrasse 11, HERBORN, of which she was the sole owner, was worth RM 15,500.

### Moving Forward

When the war ended, Uncle Ernest invited Freddy to return to London to stay with the Stern family. He persuaded Freddy to undertake some further studies in order to improve his employment prospects. Uncle and Auntie had returned to Hampstead Garden Suburb, this time buying a property at 32 Ossulton Way (see photo). Freddy had his own room in the second-floor attic.

Uncle Ernest investigated all the options available and because Freddy had worked for the war effort, he was given a grant to study at Battersea Polytechnic. He took a course in plastics technology and chemistry.

On successful graduation with a Diploma in Plastics Technology, Freddy looked for a job and found three alternative posts. One offer was from an oil company, another with a manufacturer of waxes and the third was with the plastics division of ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries), already a prominent and successful company in this emerging field.

Uncle Ernest discussed the options and offered Freddy his sound advice. Freddy chose to embark on a career in plastics with ICI. Freddy started work in 1947 as an Assistant in the Research and Development Laboratories of ICI based in Welwyn Garden City.

He worked under a Mr John Winfield, a co-inventor of Terylene, and Mr Edmond Williams, a co-developer of Polyethylene. Working under technologists of this calibre raised Freddy's horizons and changed his life forever.

He learned how to run experiments in plastics technology and in so doing learned a great deal about chemical mechanisms and systems.

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13 Terylene is the trade name for a synthetic polyester fibre produced by the chemicals company ICI.
Freddy on his Norton motorbike

Freddy travelled to work each day by motorbike, a distance of some 20 miles each way. Freddy and his second cousin, Ronny Stern, bought army surplus models each for £100 and this gave them some freedom to get around. The pair became good friends although Ronny was a few years younger. On one occasion Freddy remembers driving to Devon with Ronny and camping together.

At that time, food was still rationed, and the local grocery store would not accept the London ration cards proffered by the pair as they were not regulars. So, they survived on tinned Danish fishballs which they at least had the foresight to pack for the journey. These were consumed cold in their tent, but the experience did nothing to dampen their total enjoyment.

Left to Right: Fritz (Fred), Uncle Ernest’s brother, Ronny, Aunt Margaret, Uncle Ernest, Gabsy and Freddy

Gabsy worked in administration for BP (British Petroleum) at Shellmex House.

Ronny was keen to learn to fly but at this time had to make do with gliders. Freddy remembers accompanying him to an airfield in Elstree, North London, and watching him being propelled into the air by a kind of motorised catapult.

Gabsy, Ronny and Freddy went to Jewish clubs and dances. They got on well together and Freddy regarded them as the brother and sister he never had. Uncle and Auntie were also absolutely wonderful towards Freddy treating him like a son of their own and Freddy says that he can never forget how they cared for him at this difficult time in his life.
Concerning property situated at Montabaur/Westerwald/Germany.

Declaration as to property.

I, Alfred Stern of 32, Ossulton Way, London N.2. by occupation, a Student, do hereby claim restitution of or compensation for loss of the following property:-

(i) The property is situated in Montabaur/Westerwald (Hessen-Nassau).

(ii) Address of property: Montabaur/Westerwald (Germany) Bahnhof Strasse, 24.


(iv) Description of property: 2 storey house - 10 rooms.

(v) Approx. Value: House, Business and shop at 1938 Value: 50,000 - 100,000 Marks.

(vi) Original Owner: Willy Stern, Herborn (Dillkreis), Hainstrasse 13. My father has been murdered, claimant is only survivor.

(vii) Circumstances by which original Owner was dispossessed:
(a) Property taken by: G. Menningen, Montabaur/Westerwald, Bahnhof Str. 25.
(b) Grounds on which it was taken: Owner being a Jew.
(c) Payment made, but amount not known - can probably be traced through Owner's Bank account. Payment was made to: Willy Stern, Herborn/Dillkreis, Hainstrasse 13.
(d) Place at which property was taken: Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (November 1938).
(e) Other particulars of dispossession: It should be known that the sale of the above property was concluded at the concentration camp in the following way: G. Menningen appeared at the camp and apparently persuaded the guard, firstly to demand a very low price to be fixed, and secondly to utter this threat: "If Willy Stern does not sign the contract of sale now, he will stay here for ever". Consequently the Owner signed the contract of sale at the demanded terms.

(viii) Any other transaction in regard to the property since taken from Owner: Not Known.

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The above facts are to the best of my knowledge correct.
By Spring of 1949, Ronny had made the decision to leave England for America. He was extremely frustrated by the British civilian and military authorities who would not permit him to take up flying, citing problems with his eyes as the reason. It would seem that the Americans were satisfied and issued a medical waiver based on Ronny’s ‘demonstrated ability’. In fact, he went on to pursue a very successful career as a pilot after initially working for a Mr Walter H Laband, a friend of Uncle Ernest’s, in Los Angeles, California.

Freddy applied to the German government to have the “sale” of his parents’ assets to Mr Menningen annulled on the basis that this was signed under duress while he was detained in Buchenwald Concentration Camp. An annulment was duly obtained sometime later by Freddy's lawyer, Ludwig Falkenstein, a former resident and lawyer from Montabaur who had escaped to join his brother in America returning after the war to live in Holland.

Following the annulment, Mr Falkenstein found an interested party who wanted to buy Freddy’s parents’ assets. The same Mr Menningen, who had forced Willi to sell him his business and property whilst he was detained in Buchenwald, mistreated and believing that his life and his liberty depended upon it, suddenly offered to double the price! Immediately after the war property and land was relatively cheap in Germany and although the offer of double the price was very attractive, Freddy could never agree to sell his parents assets to Mr Menningen at any price!

**New Horizons**

In 1948, Freddy met a Swiss girl, Gabrielle Simson (known as Gaby). She visited the Sterns briefly and was distantly related to Uncle Ernest.

Gaby had come to England to improve her language skills and to participate in a music camp. She was a keen and talented cellist. Freddy was immediately smitten with this Swiss girl, but she soon returned home to pursue her career and Freddy had to get on with his life. They exchanged one or two letters but at that time, Geneva, where she lived, seemed like halfway to the moon.

Two years later, Freddy learned that Gaby was returning to London on an exchange basis and would be staying at Ossulton Way. Although Freddy had enjoyed the company of a series of

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14 Gaby Simson later became Gaby Stern. This caused confusion with Ernest and Margaret’s daughter also Gaby.
girlfriends, he felt deeply attracted to Gaby and it seems that she was to him!

They found much in common. Their backgrounds were similar. The couple spent a great deal of time together. Freddy delighted in taking Gaby out and showing her London. The couple were increasingly drawn together, and Freddy found that he was falling in love. In due course, Gaby’s time in London was up once again and she returned to Geneva.

In April 1951, Freddy decided to meet Gaby for a few days in Paris. He found Gaby to be a very special person. She was not only capable of speaking fluent French, German and by now passable English with typing and shorthand in all three languages, but she was very warm, and family orientated. Freddy immediately felt that she understood the deep personal issues he had to contend with following the trauma he had gone through. She gave Freddy to understand that she was committed to help build a future together with him.

After a few wonderful romantic days together, Freddy proposed, and the couple decided that they would get married.

By this time, Freddy had moved to the North of England. He recognised that the pay he was receiving as a research assistant at ICI was quite low and sought a better position. He now had a track record of working in R&D with ICI, a world leader in emerging technology.

Through Uncle’s friend, Kurt Battsek, Freddy was short listed and interviewed by a Polish Jewish refugee called Yasha Pomeranajek (known as Dr Pom) who ran a company at Willington Quay near Newcastle upon Tyne. This business, Commercial Plastics Limited, was hoping to enter new markets with PVC and polyethylene. Commercial Plastics was owned by Sir Isaac Wolfson and the company employed a number of Jewish refugees, many of whom became friends. Initially, Freddy lodged at a boarding house in Osborne Road, Jesmond, with a family called Holmes.

In order to progress his marriage plans, Freddy had to travel to Switzerland to ask Gaby’s parents for her hand in marriage. He sought a cheap flight (something of a rarity in those days) but it was a night flight which landed in Geneva at 3:00am. The temperature in midsummer was very hot on arrival, something Freddy had never experienced before.

Gaby’s father, Ernest Simson, had a number of immediate questions on meeting the man who intended to marry his daughter. Gaby was an only child and he needed to thoroughly evaluate Freddy’s background and intentions.

Fortunately, he soon discovered that Freddy was a Stern from Montabaur. Ernest remembered visiting Montabaur during childhood holidays to visit his Aunt Klara (née Simon) and Uncle Heimann Stern. He remembered playing with Freddy’s uncles when he was a child. So, Freddy was immediately warmly accepted by Ernest and Elisabeth (Lisy) – he had established his credentials!

During his first visit to Geneva, Freddy was taken to a restaurant and served a fillet steak, the biggest he had ever seen. Things in England
had not returned to normal after years of wartime rationing and Freddy was in seventh heaven!

In Geneva, Freddy stayed in the Salon, a formal music room with a couch and armchairs at the Simson apartment (at Avenue Théodore Flournoy). Lisy was cooking dinner after which she gave a piano recital. Freddy felt most welcome and being very thin at that time, Gaby was only too anxious to feed him up.

The couple decided to plan their marriage for spring 1952 in Geneva. Freddy did investigate jobs in Switzerland and even considered a job with an American company based out there. However Gaby readily agreed to move to England. Although her command of English was limited, she was keen to learn and in fact the young couple always spoke together in English.

In anticipation of Gaby coming to live in Newcastle, Freddy moved out of the boarding house in Osborne Road and rented a flat with two rooms and a kitchen in Fern Avenue, Jesmond. They didn’t stay there very long. By curious good fortune, Uncle Ernest and Aunt Margaret were on holiday in Torquay and whilst resting on a bench, they met a Jewish couple from Newcastle upon Tyne who were visiting their son who worked locally as a doctor. The Newcastle connection provoked a conversation about Freddy and his intended Swiss bride, and the couple were delighted to be able to recommend a vacant flat in their building at 3 Haldane Terrace, Jesmond. Mr & Mrs Jacobs were a charming couple who took great interest in the young couple and made them very welcome.

Freddy and Gaby were married at 11:00am on 26th Adar 5712 corresponding to 23rd March 1952 in the newly opened Maison Juive, a function room belonging to 'La Grande Synagogue' in Geneva.

The officiating Rabbi was Rabbi Alexandre Safran, the former Chief Rabbi of Romania, himself a refugee.

Ernest and Lisy were longstanding members of this orthodox congregation based at the Place de la Synagogue.
Freddy described the wedding day as a most joyous occasion after such a difficult start in life. Gaby together with Uncle and Auntie represented Freddy's family, killed in the Holocaust. Ronny was working in America and could not be present.

30 to 40 friends and relatives of the Simson family also attended. Afterwards they organised a celebratory luncheon at the Restaurant du Nord.

The same afternoon, the couple departed by train for a honeymoon in Lugano. Ernest Simson, Freddy’s new father-in-law worked in the hotel and restaurant trade and he had made arrangements with a client of his who owned a hotel situated on the lake side in Lugano.

Rather comically, it seemed like there were three on honeymoon. Gaby and Freddy together with Gaby’s cello in a hard black case which travelled with them! The three travelled directly back to England from Lugano via Paris by train.

On entering England, Her Majesty’s Customs were most interested in Gaby’s cello. Rather
bizarrely they wanted to know the age of the cello thinking that it would be more valuable if it was new. When Gaby told them that they believed the cello dated back to 1870, they waved her through with no customs charge!

Postscript

Researching what happened to my grandparents and great grandparents, I came across this document in the Arolsen Archive which chillingly demonstrates the lengths that the Nazi officials went to in order to organise the deportation of the Jews from Herborn to the death camps. The Jews had all expenses deducted from their personal assets and even the very elderly (Freddy’s grandparents were in their 70s) were forced to march from Herborn to Frankfurt, a distance of 80 kms which would take even a fit person around 20 hours:

Translation

The District Administrator of Dillenburg, Dillkreis County, June 1942

Tgb.I.No.3761

Very urgent

Mayor of Herborn

Subject: Evacuation of the Jews to the East.

I herewith attach a copy of an order from the Secret State Police in Frankfurt am Main of the above-mentioned matter for your information and for immediate action as deemed appropriate. As can be seen from the order, a further deportation of Jews to the East is planned. The transport is scheduled for Wednesday, 06/10/1942, from Frankfurt. This case is to be processed with all due speed. All Jews under the age of 65 with German citizenship (including former Polish and Luxembourg citizenship) as well as stateless Jews are eligible for evacuation. With regard to exceptions, I refer to sections 1 to 7 of the attached order. If Jews are employed in war-important industries, efforts should be made to have the Jews released by their employers. It is a priority of the regional administration leadership that the individual districts become free of Jews. To date, the Jewish Trust Authority has not yet informed me of the Jews eligible for deportation. Also, the list of their assets due to be submitted by the district office have not yet been received. I assume that the eligible Jews have since learned of the deportation.
If necessary, the resident Jewish representative is to be contacted and I am to be informed of the Jews eligible for evacuation by no later than 11:00 am on Monday, 06/08/42.

The Jews that are to be deported, accompanied by a police officer, are to march in time so that they arrive in Frankfurt am Main on March 10, 1942 at 7 pm. Regarding the route and the use of transport, I refer to the attached order. The resulting costs are to be paid in advance. On completion, a request for reimbursement can be submitted to me. The documents are required in duplicate. The travel expenses for the police officers are also reimbursed and must be reported to me along with the travel expenses. Everything else can be found in the attached order. The police officers should familiarise themselves with the instructions. The date must be kept under all circumstances. I must also be informed of the names of all eligible persons.

The order is to be treated confidentially until it is executed.

signed
Ringshausen
State Official