

Meet Our Congregation Ernie & Linda Hirsch

It is difficult to realize that Ernie and Linda Hirsch only came into our community eight years ago. They have made themselves an indispensable and highly valued part of it in that short time span. Like a volcano bursting onto the local scene, their multi-faceted talents and personalities have been revealed in many spheres. Despite their atypical backgrounds, they emanate exuberance, grit and determination as they exude enthusiasm for whichever cause they undertake and are currently pursuing.

As he so aptly demonstrated at the special General Meeting at which he was elected chairman, Ernie is an extremely competent multi-linguist with an in-built flair for repartee and a natural comedian. The reason behind his linguistic skill was more often than not self-preservation. He was born in Hamburg in 1935, the only son of the second marriage of his father, a widower with three daughters, who married, at the age of 54, a widow twenty years his junior. She also had a daughter, so Ernie had four half-sisters - the age gap meant that two of them were already married with children, living in London. There is still a very close bond as they live in Jerusalem - although both in their mid-nineties k.n., they are still in full possession of all their faculties. It is from them that Ernie has clarified many details of his childhood.

His father was one of five brothers who were seemingly prosperous in business. His grandfather and an uncle were both in the medical profession. By 1936 his father was sufficiently worried about the rise of Nazism to move the family (temporarily he thought) to Belgium where they lived for four years. When the country was invaded, they tried to board a boat



from Dunkirk to England but civilians were not accepted and they had no option but to return to Antwerp. Although they paid for passports and entry visas to Mexico, they were cheated, had all their luggage

stolen on the morning of their supposed departure and were trapped.

A neighbour, Madame Vernier, alerted them that they were in imminent danger of arrest. She rented a house in the countryside for them, and obtained false papers and rationing cards under the name of Glorieux. They were hidden there for four years throughout the war- his mother, who did not look particularly Jewish, used to go out to buy provisions. Ernie did not go to school but had informal lessons in maths (still one of his best subjects) and geography from an uncle, who was also in hiding with them. He recalls that he spent his days trying to grow and build things

in the big garden. During this time Ernie had to be taken to hospital as he suffered an appendicitis attack - although the staff must have seen that he was Jewish, Madame Vernier told them he was her grandson and no one betrayed them.

In 1992 Madame Vernier was officially recognized as a Righteous Gentile. A devout catholic, she lived to be over 100 years old. Ernie and Linda went to her birthday celebration and she died shortly thereafter.

At the end of the war, the family returned to Antwerp. For a short while in 1945/6 Ernie attended the Technion school and Helene Opolion, recalls that they were in the same class. Throughout the war, Ernie's sisters in England were unaware of the fate of the family. With the outbreak of the Korean War, his father was terrified that World War III was about to commence so they went to live in England in Golders Green in 1951. As a non-English speaking teenager, Ernie had great difficulty fitting into the Hasmonean school. He was offered a job as an electrician's mate which lasted for three months until his employer emigrated to Canada without prior notice and without paying wages.

Recognizing his skill with his hands, Ernie was given an introduction to a firm of German refugees in Hatton Garden where he trained as a goldsmith.

In 1956 he decided to take a break and go to Israel with two friends during the Sinai Campaign. The original plan was to go to Kibbutz Sa'ad but they were sent to Kibbutz Karmiya, a non-religious kibbutz on the border. There he

often did guard duty in the Gaza Strip. It was a very unhappy and unfulfilling experience and he returned to Hatton Garden where he worked his way up to a qualified goldsmith becoming a working director of the firm for thirty-five years. Nevertheless when the next generation took over the running of the company, he was no longer required. Yet when one door closes, another often opens. He received a call from a bullion dealer in Germany, who had a department dealing with precious alloys used by dental technicians. Ernie became their English representative until his retirement.

Linda's childhood was also unusual, although she was born and brought up in Manchester. The dominant influence on her upbringing and education was her grandfather. Her paternal grand-parents were among the many immigrants from Europe who boarded a ship for the "New World" and were told that they had reached it when the ship docked in Hull, where to her surprise she recently discovered her father had been born. It appears that a number of her relatives are buried there. Her mother was born in Riga, part of a large family with six other siblings and two other cousins, all of whom lived with her grandparents.

The family moved to Manchester at the beginning of the twentieth century and settled in Lower Broughton where there was an active Jewish community at that time. When her grandmother died, Linda's parents moved into her grandfather's home, Most of the Jewish community gradually started moving towards the suburbs, so

there was little Jewish company for Linda and her older sister, Fay. She attended a Church of England school where she was the only Jewish child and also Rebbe Balkind's cheder classes, where the girls sat at the back of the room. At the age of eleven Linda won a scholarship to a grammar school but her grandfather would not allow her to travel there. He wanted her to go to a new comprehensive school across the road from their home.

When she did not turn up at the designated school for three weeks, the truancy officer came to investigate. Much to his surprise her grandfather insisted that she should go to the school across the road and his request was acceded to. She won many prizes, became the head girl of her school, was in the school choir and in amateur dramatics. She left school at the age of sixteen and completed a two year course at Loreburn Secretarial College. Her grand-father was instrumental in obtaining her first job at a rain-wear manufacturing firm, where her cousin was in charge of the office.

At the age of 19 when her sister married, she found two new Jewish friends who introduced her into an interesting social scene and to charitable fund-raising committees. She started working for the boss of a chain of dance halls in Manchester, including the Ritz ballroom. There she met many stars and famous personalities, including Jimmy Saville. Her finances improved radically and she was able to indulge in her love of fashion and jewellery.

The Manchester Knights of Charity committee used to organize

an annual Xmas dance. At this event in 1957 she met Ernie, who had been visiting his friends from Israel for a few days. Although each of them had gone with other escorts, they soon found that they were compatible both on and off the dance floor.

Ernie became a frequent visitor to Manchester at week-ends until it was decided that Linda should move to London. She managed to get a transfer of her job to Mecca. They used to stage the annual Miss World competition at the Lyceum, where her boss was Eric Morley. She later worked for Granada TV and subsequently for a channel producing a documentary on mental hospitals.

Ernie and Linda married in July 1959 and had two children, Sandy and Benjy. Whilst both working, at first full time and then part-time for Linda, they were involved in many communal activities. Linda was drawn into Emunah and Amateur Dramatics (she had wanted to go to RADA but this was vetoed by her family).

The biggest change in their lives occurred in 1979 when Linda was asked by the Jewish Agency to visit Russia as a tourist on a Thompson trip, to give assistance to Soviet Jewry. Although she had initially unhesitatingly agreed, when confronted with the reality of the weather at that time of the year, she felt obliged to decline. Ernie offered to go as her replacement and this was the beginning of a cathartic experience for him. He came back as a man possessed by demons.

Almost immediately he was transposed into a lone promoter,

raising money from wherever he could to finance the cost of a monthly trip for two men or women to the Soviet Union. These volunteers were instructed to meet refuseniks, to deliver needed goods for their own use or resale, to give shiurim and to help in whatever way they could to give moral and physical support. For the next ten years their home was to become a place for parlour meetings for fund-raising and for storing food and goods; a centre for briefing the next travellers or de-briefing returning ones. Ernie persuaded many distinguished rabbanim, community leaders, as well as students and youth leaders, to go on these journeys. He and Linda also went a number of times until both were refused entry visas. It is little wonder that Ernie has become an icon in the eyes of the former refuseniks. This work continued until Glasnost at the end of the 1980s. There have been many articles written about him in Russian testifying to his outstanding involvement in the Free Soviet Jewry movement.

Ernie was invited to join the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London and was appointed a Freeman of the City of London - a very distinctive honour.

It was not long after making aliyah in 2000 that they began to get involved in organizations in Israel, having first spent time with their family here. The aliyah of their son and his family fairly recently has completed their happiness and they now have constant access to their six grandchildren.

One of Ernie's hobbies is taking photos which he has used for his own and the shul's benefit. There are no name places when they entertain, which they do frequently, but one's place is designated by an enhanced photograph. This skill was also employed for a Purim party and to display members' photos in the shul hall and on the staircase walls. He has been an excellent gabbai for three years and a one-man house committee always fixing improvements and additions as needed. His instinct to step in to fill a vacuum was timely and very welcome.

This is shared by Linda who is now joint chairman of the Emunah group, where she shows the same tact and creative thinking that Ernie displays. Together they make a wonderful team.

As well as being devoted to the shul, Ernie is on the board of She'arim (the Monday concerts), This Land is Mine and the Association for the Welfare of Israeli Soldiers. In addition to his repertoire of languages, he is currently learning Russian.

Both Ernie & Linda create a lasting and meaningful impression, inspiring confidence and admiration. May they continue to enjoy nachat from each other and from their family, as they look forward to their Golden Wedding, and also be a source of inspiration and leadership to everyone.

נִסְגָּדוֹל הִיא פֶּה



R. W.