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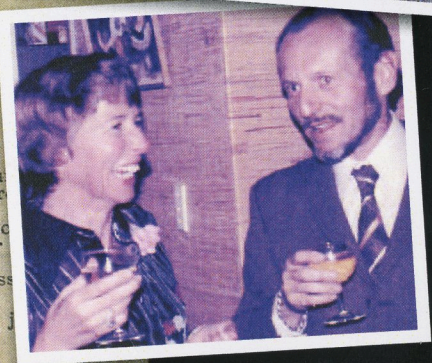
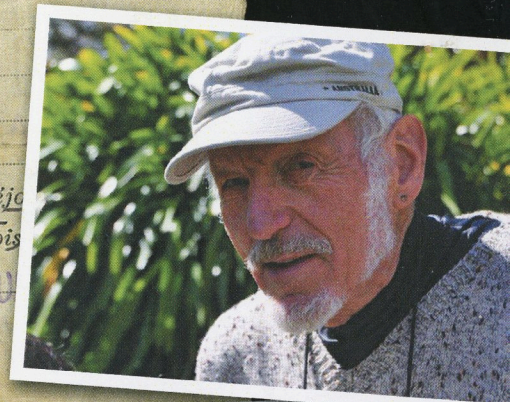
ISBN 978-0-646-90242-5



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George in Paris
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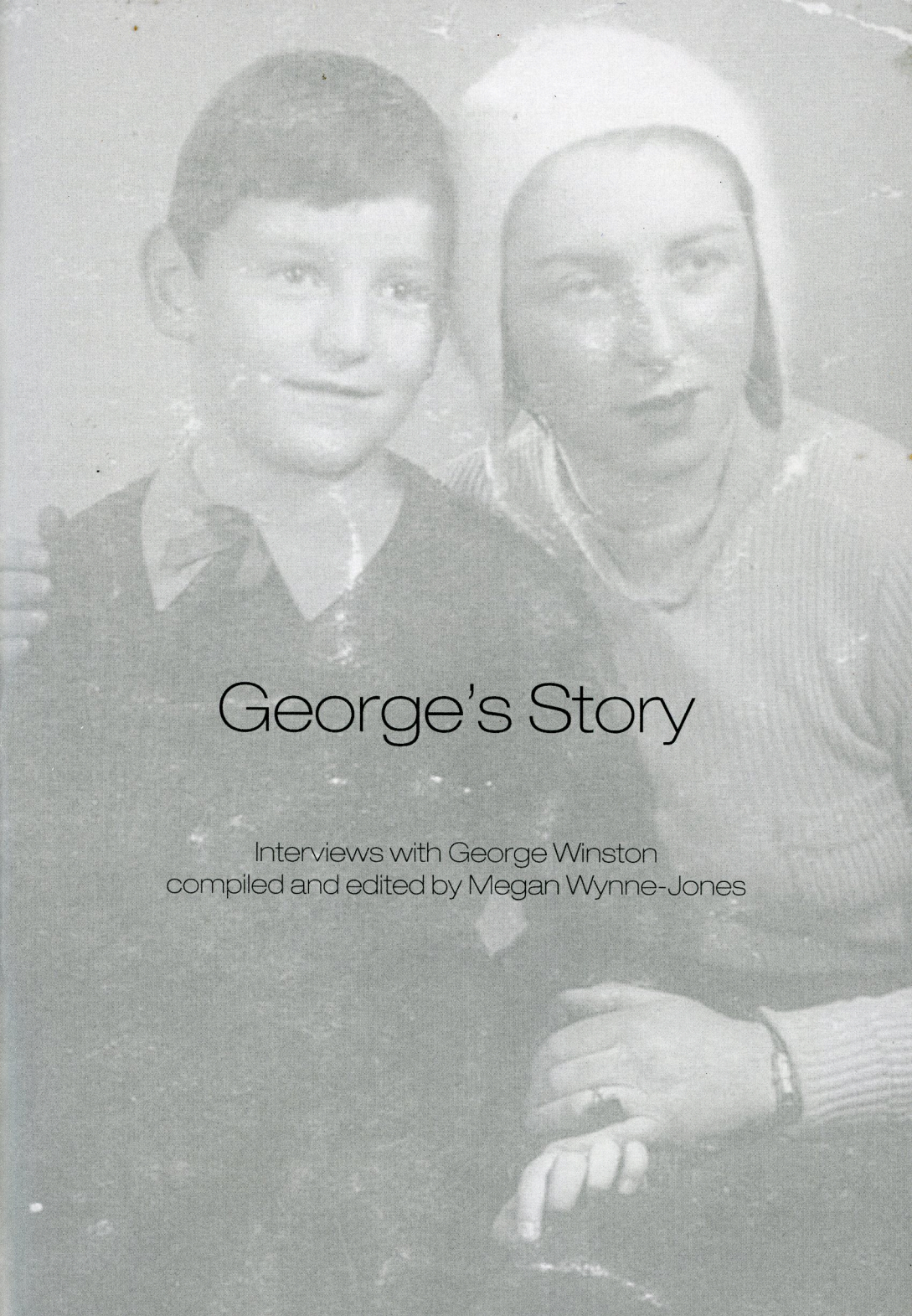
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George's Story



George's Story

Interviews with George Winston
compiled and edited by Megan Wynne-Jones

Sykstuska St

I was born Jerzy Weinberg in a town of a quarter of a million people called Lwow. It was in Poland when I was born, but after the Second World War it was taken over by the Soviet Union and became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic.

My father's great-grandfather had acquired a block of flats at number 12 Sykstuska St in 1801 and it remained in the family till the outbreak of the Second World War. It had walls of stone and enormous rooms – we called it 'Palais Weinberg'. Later my grandfather, Salomon Weinberg built a new block in Sobieskiego St.

I remember living there, and the shop downstairs. My grandparents were affluent. I remember visiting my grandfather's country property in Rusin. Potatoes were grown there, and there was an alcohol still, and about 50 horses. It had a lovely garden, and I remember summer days on the lawn with the bees buzzing around in the berry bushes and just a very peaceful lovely time.



Palais Weinberg

I don't remember what my grandmother Sabina looked like, but I know we were fond of each other. She was a non-religious Jew from an affluent family, well-educated, particularly interested in philosophy and psychology. When she was in Vienna she had attended lectures by Freud and Jung and mixed with their disciples. She was fluent in four languages. Her mother Sophie lived with us at Sykstuska St – she too spoke many languages. She was religious, and she was a good cook.

My father, Eugene was born to Salomon and Sabina in 1902. He was their only son and was given a good education. In 1914 when Russia invaded the part of the Austrian Empire that included Lwow and then occupied it for 18 months, the family had to flee to Vienna. They came back three years later. My father went on to be a sculptor with a law degree. He never practised law, he had just done it to please his father. He was a very capable sculptor, specialising in portraits. My grandmother Sabina had sent him off to Paris to learn sculpture as a way of separating him and my mother Anna Seidmann, because she was against the match.



Sobieskiego St

Everyone lived in constant fear. I remember thinking 'Where is this just and merciful God now?' It was the end of my faith.

There were numerous hiding places. A German man sheltered us on his farm in Mosztyn for a while, but as a normal eight year old boy I wanted to roam, and it became too dangerous. I remember my mother taking me to another place in the city where the woman locked me up in the flat all day with a dog which howled mournfully. I slept on a pile of carpets there. But I was seen by a neighbour so I had to leave.

Another time, German soldiers arrived at the house with a list of resident children, demanding to take me away, but Mum had seen them coming and had me taken away via the back door. After that she put me in the care of my grandmother's former cook, a gentile, who was doing it for a payment. It put her in great danger of course. Anybody caught harbouring a Jewish child could be taken to a concentration camp. She got frightened and brought me back just in time for me to see a group of people sitting on the footpath – including my Mum – ready to be loaded into a truck guarded by Ukrainian militia men and a German soldier. I went upstairs and from a window watched them all being herded into the truck and saw it drive away. I found my grandmother who had been hiding in the attic. I said to her 'I've seen mum being taken, I don't want to live, I'm going to jump out the window now', and she stopped me. Later my mother told me that when the truck came to the gates of Janowska the transit camp, she jumped over the tailboard and ran up to the officer at the gate and said in fluent German 'There's been an error. I'm a war effort worker, here's my ID, that's where I work'. He said 'OK stand over to one side'. There was another woman in a similar situation, and the two of them were ordered to wait. Everybody else was herded into the camp, and the two women were put back on the truck and driven back into town. The Ukrainian guard who had beaten them with a stick apologised to them on the way back. So I got my Mum back.

Fleeing to Romania

She then decided that there wasn't going to be another narrow escape. So with the little bit of jewellery she had left, she bought some poor quality false papers in the name of Sokolowski and paid a people smuggler with the intention of being taken across the border to Romania to rejoin my father. The agreement was that the other half of the money would be paid on delivery, by my Dad. A friend of my parents was with us as well. We boarded a train for the border and on the adjacent track in the railway station saw a long row of closed goods wagons, crammed with Jews, waiting to be transported to a concentration camp. Some were attempting to lick the dew from the bars on the small windows, others stuck their hands through the bars, begging for water and food. No one dared to respond.

My grandmother stayed behind and later we heard she had perished in a concentration camp. She had gone to Warsaw to stay with a non-Jewish friend, and we heard a story that the friend's daughter denounced her to the German authorities to get the reward.

The people smuggler told us to go to this village on the border and stay there with Mr Schapert and wait. We stayed there for 3 weeks in the middle of winter. Mr Schapert fed us on black bread and feta cheese which I thought was delightful – it was all he had. He was a nice guy. One night three people smugglers came and said 'tonight's the night'. They had chosen a really cold night, it must have been about 20 degrees below zero, so that the German guards would have been in their hut drinking coffee rather than out in the cold. It was a full moon night, I remember that very clearly, they got us to put on some white sheets or white gowns. But of course with the full moon you throw black shadows on the snow, so our camouflage wasn't all that effective. Anyway we came to this small river, with ice floes floating on top and they carried us across on their backs and deposited us on the other side of the border. There was no one around, it was totally peaceful. And then we hid with their contact on the Romanian side, a gypsy who had a goat shed. We just sat in the goat shed for the rest of the night. I remember seeing there for the first time a kerosene heater, used for cooking too – Romania was an oil-producing country and had good supplies of kerosene, even in war time.



George & mum

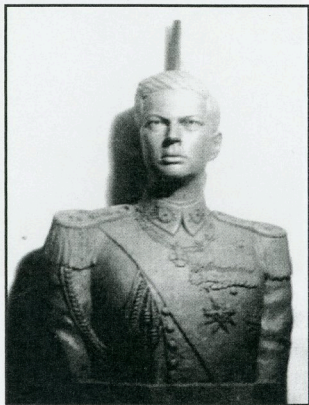
In the morning a young woman came for me and we went on a comfortable warm train to Bucharest to be re-united with my Dad. My mother had to be concealed in the middle of a huge bale of hay on a dray, and taken to the next village, because of the checkpoints in the border zone. Later she told me that they came to a checkpoint where the Romanian soldiers were sticking their bayonets into the hay, but they missed her. They were looking for contraband, they weren't even looking for people. They were looking for vodka and cigarettes and other stuff that was being smuggled.

In Bucharest

We were much safer there. The Germans were there as friends because Romania was part of the Axis, it was not an occupation. In fact, the Jews of Bucharest were almost unmolested during the entire war period and were not required to wear identifying patches or armbands. But we still felt scared. We had our false ID and we pretended to be Polish Catholics. My mother changed our name from Sokolowski to Gajewski.

Had we been discovered as Polish Jews we would have been sent straight back, that would have been the end. We lived in several different places, in one room with various landladies, and I went to a little refugee school, which had about a dozen kids, all different ages. To remain in Bucharest, my father had to pay the police a monthly bribe to extend our residency permit.

My father got a small refugee allowance from the Romanian government. The Romanian government was very kind to Polish refugees. He supplemented that with a few portraits that he did for important people: busts and heads. All the Polish refugees were being sent into country towns so my father went to see the Minister for



Portrait of King Michael

Refugees who happened to be the Minister for Arts as well. A perfect match. They both spoke French – the elite in Romania generally spoke French. He said to the Minister: 'I'm an artist and my work is in the city, if you send me to a country town I'll be useless there so maybe you could let me stay in the capital'. The Minister liked my father, he called him 'nostru simpaticu' – charming one – and he said 'Yes you can stay. I'll tell you what you can do, get a photo of the king, the young king Michael, make a bust and we'll put it at the entrance to the Ministry and you'll get commissions'. And that's exactly what happened. He didn't make a fortune but he made enough to keep us in food and a little bit of rent. Sometimes I went with him on his visits to clients, and I'd watch quietly while he modelled

their features in clay. Usually five or six sessions were enough. The likeness was always excellent.

To supplement the refugee allowance and the fees for portraits, we used to make rope soles at home, for a small shoe factory. Leather had been requisitioned by the German army and was unobtainable, so people had to use substitutes. It was hard on the hands, stitching rope onto a thick cardboard base.

In April 1944 the Allies started bombing Bucharest with the aim of interrupting military transports from the front. The British came about 11 o'clock at night and the Americans came about 11 o'clock in the morning virtually every day, blanket bombing. More than 5,000 people were killed or injured, and hundreds of buildings were destroyed. We spent that first raid sheltering under a steel garden table with the shrapnel raining down all around us. It was a terrifying experience. So my parents decided to get out of Bucharest. The very next day, they hired a little horse and cart and put our suitcases on it, and we went to live with some peasants five kilometres out of town. That was far enough away to be safe. The Germans had an excellent early warning system,

and we knew three hours ahead of a probable raid, so we used to walk away from the village, not to escape danger but to get away from the wailing, frightened peasants. Those walks in the lovely fertile Romanian countryside are one of the sweetest memories of my childhood. My parents, both very musical, taught me songs, especially rousing Soviet marching songs which would have got us into terrible trouble if anyone had overheard us! Occasionally there was the thrill of a lift on the back of a truck. I also remember resting by a quiet brook with a slice of watermelon.

It was definitely the best part of my childhood. There was no school, so with a couple of other boys who were refugees from the city, we dug make-believe air-raid shelters, collected shrapnel and flew kites which we made from reeds stolen from the village toilet walls. I remember watching horses being shod, too. It was late summer, there were all sorts of marvellous stone fruits on the trees, and it was great, we used to sneak into the orchards and steal peaches and plums and apricots!



Eugene & model

The bombing lasted from April to September and then the Red Army approached from the east. One night we heard two rifle shots and we woke up in the morning and the Germans had gone and the Soviets were there. So we were very lucky, the front had rolled over us but nothing happened where we were. It was tremendous, there was no fighting. Just at the back of the village there was a large German anti-aircraft gun which went off with a huge bang every time it fired. But nobody defended it, I think the Germans just fled.

By train to Palestine

We moved back to the city and my parents applied to the new Communist Romanian government for an exit visa, and they also applied to the British Mandate Authorities for an entry visa to Palestine. We were very fortunate because we got both of these things. Not everyone did, the entry to Palestine was very restricted, very small numbers. The illegals were taken to a camp in Cyprus, and kept there. People went by ship, it was very dangerous because German U-boats were still there and they were torpedo-ing anything that moved. The friend that had crossed the border with us from Poland to Romania went down with one of those ships. He had wanted to take me with him, and my mother had said 'no thank you, he stays with us.'

In November 1944 we joined a group of 300 other immigrants and boarded a train which was to take us to the Promised Land. I was very excited to be going to an exotic country. It took us two months to get

to Haifa, because the Soviet authorities stopped us in Bulgaria for six weeks, at a place called Stara Zagora. I remember the surroundings were stunning: towering snow covered peaks from which icy clear streams thundered down through tall pine forests. I'd learned from my mother to appreciate scenery, I was really touched by the beauty of this land.

We didn't know why they stopped us but I found out later that they suspected Jewish deserters from the Red Army on that train. In fact there weren't any on our train but there had been one or two on a previous train. I was just under ten, and there were other kids there – we played in the rail yards and we just had a lot of fun, we didn't care very



Our host – the solicitor

much. One of my jobs was to walk along the train lines picking up bits of coal that had fallen off the train so that we could keep warm – all trains were steam trains and they were all powered by coal. Our parents were worried because we could have easily been diverted to Siberia, or anywhere. But we were lucky, the local people were very kind to us and billeted us in various places, schools and private homes. We were billeted by a wonderful local small-town solicitor who gave us the best room with the best linen, a really superb family. And a refugee organisation sent food. So we dined on greasy mutton

with paprika and black bread, but it was heaven, it was great... And jam, I think I remember. Those things which now you look down on, but when it's cold and you're hungry it's good stuff.

They let us go, but stopped us again before we left Bulgaria for another two weeks, and in the end our visa for Palestine ran out. So there were some high level negotiations and the British eventually relented and extended the visa by a week so that we could still enter Palestine.

Once they released us, we were in a very old passenger train. We rolled across a corner of Greece into Turkey and when we came to the Bosphorus, the Turks herded us onto a quarantine ship and ordered everyone to strip and enter a huge shower room. Shades of the death camps! I think all of us were terrified but all they wanted was to rid us of lice and dirt. We were filthy, we hadn't been able to wash for a while. We'd spent the last two weeks in a little hut and no facilities, in the depths of winter. So we emerged clean on the other side of the Bosphorus in Istanbul in the main station. The local Jewish community somehow got wind we were there and they brought chocolate, they brought figs, they brought things that we hadn't seen for years, delicacies. It was very moving. Then they put us in a goods train with open doors and straw on the floor. We travelled through Turkey like that, and as we went it got warmer and warmer, and we became more comfortable. People on the way threw in nice things to us, dried fruit or other goodies, as we rolled past, we didn't know how they knew.

Arrival in Palestine

We went through Turkey, Syria and Lebanon into Haifa, and finished up in a British reception camp, being given comfortable beds and cups of tea – I remember tasting tea with milk for the first time – and good food. It was wonderful. We had not been treated by any authorities like that. Authorities were enemies. So it was good. It was my first view of the sea, we were right on the shore of the Mediterranean in a camp called Atlit, run by the British Army. But it was not a concentration camp, it was a reception camp. At this point we reverted to our original name, Weinberg, and my first name was changed from Jerzy to Yoram, a Hebrew name.

I got very sick there, I got a terrible flu and I was put in the camp hospital. People left the camp as soon as they could and found work and accommodation. My grandmother had sponsored two girls to emigrate to Palestine in the early 30s and we went and stayed for a couple of weeks with one of these women who had married a local farmer, an Israeli farmer called Friedman. They lived in the Galilee, in the mountains. It was really great there. I got my first taste of olives. I thought they were horrible! But I loved being around sheep and goats, I was very intrigued by them, and the mountains were beautiful.



George at 10

In Tel Aviv

We left there and went to Tel Aviv and my Dad got a factory job. He was on a repetition lathe making brass bits for the inside of electrical switches and power points. Then he'd bring a hessian bag full of these things and we would assemble them at night, in the evening, at the table. It was a little bit of extra money. I remember my father worked six days a week, twelve hours a day, so that was 72 hours a week, earning just enough to pay rent and food and a few clothes. That's how hard it was. It was hard to get accommodation, it was the end of the war, everything was in short supply, the pay was low, everything was expensive. It was tough.

Eventually my father made contact with an alderman and he made a beautiful portrait for him, and we got a council flat which consisted of one bedroom, one small sitting room, a toilet and a very tiny kitchenette. There was a communal bathroom which we used on a Saturday. Everything was terrazzo, and it was pretty spartan.



Portrait of councillor

But it was our place – though it was rented we could live there and we had privacy for the first time in years. We had no radio or refrigerator but we did have an ice box – ice was delivered daily by horse drawn cart. Next door lived a Hungarian family and the son and I became firm friends, he taught me chess and lent me his new bicycle on which I taught myself to ride. He was my only friend at the time.

A trip to the beach in Tel Aviv or the movies in Ramat Gan was a big treat for me. I hated the summer there – from May to October it was hot, dusty and often humid but it never rained. We tried to keep cool at night by lying on the terrazzo floor under wet sheets. The desert wind called khamsin brought fine sand which darkened the sky and penetrated everything. Then in November it would start to rain, and didn't seem to stop much before March.

I was ten when I arrived in Palestine, and I'd only had one year's schooling. But my mother had taught me to read and write when I was about five or six. I went to a primary school in Shehunat Borochoy, a nearby suburb. I particularly remember the English teacher there, a big jovial man, and I think that's where my affinity with the English language developed. There were some locals of course but there were huge numbers of newcomers from all over Europe. It didn't take long, I think within four months I was fluent in Hebrew and writing from right to left.

The Arab-Israeli war

In May 1948 the state of Israel was declared and the Arab-Israeli war broke out as soon as the British left, the day after. That was scary because the new state had very few resources. I remember there were riflemen on rooftops trying to shoot at planes. A joke, a sick joke. The mood was strange, it wasn't fear... People just didn't seem to be panicky even though we were in real danger of being swept into the Mediterranean sea. Whenever my parents went somewhere by bus, I'd lie in bed and I'd listen to the chatter of machine guns. I'd think 'my God, how are they going to come back?'

And I got shot at by a sniper once from a neighbouring village who was on the roof presumably with a good telescopic sight. I was 14 I think, and I heard a bullet whistle, and without any training I hit the sand like a soldier! My mother got shot at when she was hanging out the washing on the block of flats. She never went up there again because the bullets were whacking into the wall behind her. One morning we woke up to this tremendous bang, and looked out onto the balcony, there were two mortars positioned downstairs, one belonged to the Hagganah which later became the Israeli army, and the other belonged to the Irgun, which was actually a terrorist group. They were both banging away at this village where the snipers were. So the war was right in our yard.

I remember the Egyptian air force bombing Tel Aviv. There was one day when they came over 17 times. But fortunately all they had was Spitfires and small bombs they threw by hand, not real bombers with big bombs, otherwise we would have been obliterated. It wasn't much fun. But the kids, you know, we just took it... We would run out from behind sandbags and watch the dogfights in the sky and send our parents absolutely insane with worry. There were no air shelters, people just put sandbags in the entrance to the block of flats to protect us from shrapnel. But you couldn't hold the kids back.

By boat to France

The war lasted a few months. By 1949 it was over. But my mother said, 'look there's going to be a whole lot more wars here, let's get out'. Already at the age of 14 I was about to enter paramilitary training at school – called hagam. I wasn't relishing this prospect – it included military drill with sticks and simulated hand to hand fighting. My mother was determined to leave Israel. We had nothing. Even if we had, you weren't allowed to take any money out. We had one gold coin. That was our fortune. My mother went to the French Consulate, and she wheedled and cried and eventually they gave us a transit visa for France. We already had Polish passports but we had no money for fares. So my parents pretended we were going to get repatriated to Poland because the Polish government was paying fares. There was a whole crowd of Polish

people, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were going back. We got onto this stinking Italian ship that was plying the Mediterranean. It was my job to take the page out of the passport that had the French visa on it, and hide it. When we got to Naples, we peeled off from the Polish group, they went through Austria into Poland, we put the page back in the passport and got a train to France. The gold coin was hidden in the back of my father's shaving mirror. I'll never forget the enchantment of seeing the snow covered Alps in brilliant moonlight.



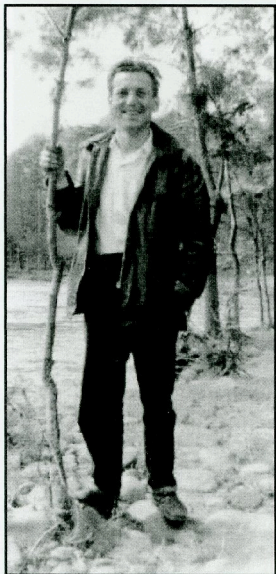
George's ID

Penniless in Paris

We had good friends in France, a cousin and some old friends in Paris who helped us with contacts and we got a very small allowance from a Jewish refugee organization called The Joint Distribution Committee, it was all rich American Jews providing money and second hand clothing.

I found Australia easy but a bit boring. It's become a lot more interesting since. My father had a job within a week of arrival. A factory job but it was alright, he was paid enough for us to eat. There was a tremendous housing shortage when we arrived, which was still left over from the war. People used to close off their verandahs and call them sleep outs and live there because you just couldn't get accommodation. We had to pay key money to rent a flat which was like a bribe paid to the outgoing

tenant. If you didn't do that you wouldn't get it. It was illegal, but we still had to do it. So accommodation was a big problem. We lived in one room for about a year, but it was a big one! Then we rented a flat in Maroubra Beach, one block back, right on the tramline.



George in Burragorang Valley

I went to school almost immediately, Randwick Boys High School. It was full of foreigners, so it was a good place in a way. School wasn't hard. We only did six subjects, whereas we had 12 subjects in France, that gives you some idea. I didn't have a lot of trouble adapting. There was no hatred, there was no persecution, there were a few snide comments about Jews and dagoes and wops, and all sorts of other people but it was all pretty harmless stuff. My life wasn't in danger, definitely not. Nobody bashed me or kicked me like they did in Israel. Israel was very aggressive. I used to come home sometimes bleeding from being attacked by other kids. It was rough. One lot of Jews attacked another lot of Jews. They were aggressive. And we were poor. If you were rich and

you went to Tel Aviv north shore, which was the moneyed part, and you went to a good private school there you wouldn't experience that. But in a rough state school where I went, we did. I was glad to leave. It was too aggressive for me. I was a softie. Australia suited me much better, it was much more civilised! Nobody hit me here.

Outside school my social life revolved around Bondi Beach. There were parties every Saturday night at a friend's place. Oh the excitement of those parties! There was dancing to Latin American records – I learned more about the rumba, the samba and the tango. It was a crowd of warm and lively young Jewish people liberated from the dreariness and poverty of wartime and post-war Europe, and making the best of life. I yearned to be like them, uninhibited and passionate, but I was really too timid and lacking in confidence.

We used trams and buses and trains, and walked. Only rich people had cars. In the summer of 1951 when I was 17 my mother and I went to Katoomba by train and took a room in a bed and breakfast. I fell in love with my first girlfriend, Sylvia Fixler, at a dance, and we were deeply in

love for three years. While I was still in high school she started studying medicine at Sydney University. I could hardly live without her and must have made it very hard for her to study.

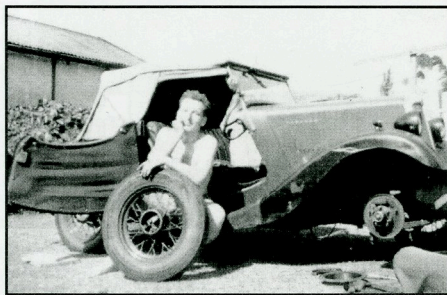
In my final year of high school a close friend, Stan introduced me and our Estonian friend Gunnar to the bush. He took us to the Burragorang valley – which is flooded now – to camp and shoot rabbits. It was my first time away from a city, under canvas and I was fascinated and a bit frightened by the absolute darkness, the sounds of the bush and the mystery of it all. I lay awake at night, gazing at a million stars which induced an inexplicable disquiet in me.

We moved around a lot in Sydney. My parents were inveterate nomads. It dawned on me later that the main reason for us always moving was my mother's paranoia – she always imagined that the neighbours were doing her some kind of harm, and by the time she retaliated they really did become hostile. My father got a job on the State Railways doing carriage maintenance, first as a painter's mate and then as a painter. My mother did piece work at home sewing for garment manufacturers, mostly Jewish. It was a hard way to earn a crust.

We didn't think much of the food in Australia. It wasn't interesting but it was nourishing. It was all available and it wasn't too expensive and if you had a job there was no problem. You could get fresh fruit and vegies and meat, and we didn't think the bread was very good, but so what? You couldn't get continental small goods or cheeses, things like that, coffee wasn't used. But we lived well and in the holidays I had jobs, I had a job before I even went to school, and earned a bit of money. That was a new experience. I was 16.

Obviously there have been a lot of changes since 1950. Gradually everybody got cars. I got my first car at 19. It was a little old bomb, but it was wheels. Technology has changed.

My parents loved classical music and they bought a mantle radio for 60 pounds. 60 pounds was four weeks wages. So today that would have been about 1500 dollars. It was the first thing they bought after beds and basics. So that's been a big change – the cost of technology and appliances was very high in relation to wages. But the cost of food was low. And there were still old-fashioned things like deliveries of milk, bread and ice which were common in Sydney, by horse-drawn cart generally. Many suburbs had dairies with cows, the milkman used to pick his milk up there early in the morning and go around with his horse-drawn cart and deliver milk to the houses. There was a big tram



George's first car (1936 Morris)

system which got ripped up in the 60s. There were trams throughout the eastern suburbs and a lot of the north shore. And of course buses, which are still there. I used to get on the bus and pay a penny because I was at school. I was already 19 but I looked about 23, and the conductor used to laugh at me. The fact is I was sporting a little moustache, but I was still paying a penny on the bus! I was two years behind everybody else because of the war.

Work as an engineer

I give my parents credit for their resilience. I suppose I had some of it as well, but I felt I had an easy ride here in Australia compared to what we'd experienced before. It wasn't hard to shine at school. It was very competitive because there were plenty of other refugees – 'reffos' we were called. But it wasn't difficult. And at that time if you were good at school you'd get a commonwealth scholarship, that meant free



George at 19

university. And you could also get cadetships, so you could get paid while you were studying. I got one of those, which helped a lot because we were still very poor, my parents and I. The university world was strange and somewhat awe-inspiring. Class sizes were enormous and lecturers were distant and impersonal.

I made one lifelong friend while I was there: Derek Hentze. And one summer Stan, Gunnar and I, friends from school, crammed a large marquee tent, clothes, rifles, food and ourselves into a tiny 1936 Morris 8 two-seater and went off to the Snowy Mountains. There followed three weeks of exciting adventure, marching through the vastness of the bush, living off the land – Stan was a crack shot – cooling off in the river and

yarning endlessly under the brilliant stars. We gathered mushrooms on the village common after rain and celebrated New Year's Eve with a duck, hare, mushroom and potato stew. It was a romantic experience of the Australian bush which made a big impression on me.

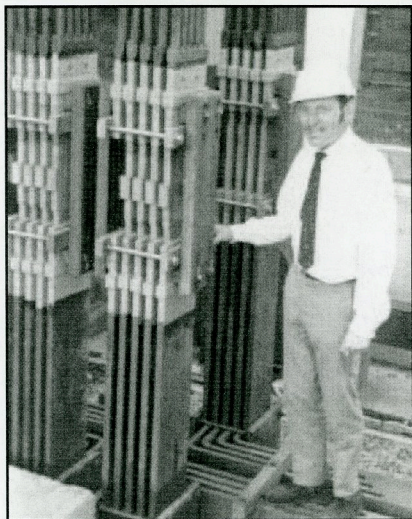
Around this time, in 1954, I changed my name to Winston. I chose it because of Winston Churchill whom I admired because he had saved Europe from the Nazis. It was later on I found out what a bastard he was! But there was a lot of prejudice in Australia against foreign names. First impressions were very important, and it could tip the balance on a job application if you had a foreign name.

As a budding professional, I was able to obtain a loan for us to build a house. We found a vacant block in Douglas Ave, Chatswood, near

a tannery whose smell made the price affordable. A Dutch builder erected a small red brick cottage and we had the pleasure of living in a brand new house!

I worked for 20 years as an electrical engineer, mainly in the chemical industry. When I started working I was bonded to the Electricity Commission of NSW for a couple of years. A senior technician and I used to make trips to country power stations where we conducted tests on generators. It was an adventure to stay in the old country pubs, drive a heavy Ford panel van and work, sometimes in the middle of the night, in the strange surroundings of cavernous, often deserted power stations. Then I was moved to the contracts section which wasn't much fun. I didn't like being a public servant so I switched to ICI which is now called Orica. I was there for 12 years.

What I enjoyed about that job was that there was a lot of new learning. It was quite an unusual plant with very heavy electrical equipment and electrolysis of salt to produce chlorine. I was the only non-Anglo engineer on the site and didn't always know how to relate to Aussie workers some of whom were rough and antagonistic. I became the site electrical engineer. But I also learned a lot about the production side because for about a year I was put in a charge of a chemical plant. This was company policy – to put people in the wrong jobs for which they were not trained. It was a steep learning curve. Then I was in charge of the design of a large plant extension for which I also had no experience, but it was exciting to learn to do design on a large scale. I realised that the job had become very stressful – it was always just outside my competence. I used to drive to work with a knot in my stomach, so I thought, 'well that's enough of that'. I decided to go to London to work, and through some contacts in ICI I got a job in a big contract firm that was constructing large plants in Europe. I actually had two jobs but the important one was with Bechtel International, an American firm. We were building an oil refinery in Belgium. They loved to have me there because of my knowledge of French and German. I was almost immediately asked to go to the continent and inspect equipment and negotiate and so on. It was very exciting, it was a great thing to be on, I did quite a bit of travelling. It was less stressful because they were highly organised – it was the best organised company I've ever come across – you knew exactly what you were doing and when. It was great.



George standing on electrical conductors in the chemical factory

First marriage



Tammy & George

By that time I had a wife, Tammy and two little girls aged five and seven. Tammy and I had met through close friends of mine who said 'we're going to look at a model home in the western suburbs of Sydney, come with us'. They had also asked Tammy, and said to her 'oh there's this guy George coming'. She was reluctant to meet men and they said 'don't worry you don't have to marry him!' Next thing we had fallen for each other. At that time she was at Sydney Uni too doing a physiotherapy course. We had got married at 24, by which time I had graduated from engineering at Sydney Uni. In those days people married very young. In 1960 Tammy's mother Ruth helped us buy a house in Dover Heights for five thousand pounds when we

knew a child was coming. We lived there happily for six years, and our second daughter Monica was born in 1961.

We enjoyed living in London. We had a very small flat and no car but it was exciting and interesting – we went to all sorts of symphony concerts and theatres and other interesting places. Our girls went to a good public school, and we made friends and had a very nice life. But towards the end of the second year we learned that my mother-in-law had cancer and it looked as if she didn't have a long life expectancy. We had had thoughts of staying permanently in England. But we decided to come back. We came back in January 1968 on a French ship which had quite a few Tahitians on board. As we steamed through the straits of Gibraltar and into the south Atlantic the weather became warmer and the Tahitians got out their guitars and their pareus and started to dance on deck. The Europeans looked on in amazement! But within two or three



In Tahiti

days the ice had broken and from then on the party was a daily event. The swimming pool stayed open all night and we danced on deck under tropical skies. The first class passengers came to slum it in the second class area to have a good time. We found we had an English lord on board as well as a chimpanzee in a tent on the top deck!

The immensity of the South Pacific was stunning. From Panama we sailed for nine days without seeing land, a ship, or for most of the time,

even a bird. It seemed we would be at sea for ever. In Papeete a cousin of my good friend Nicole, took us all over the island and entertained us in her sumptuous home in the hills. Her husband was an admiral in charge of the fleet. We also visited one of the Tahitians with whom Tammy had got quite friendly on board. He and his family lived in a small hut in the middle of a pineapple plantation near the sea. We travelled around the island in 'le truck', a windowless bus carrying locals with their pigs and chickens on the roof, stopping at many little villages. In Noumea, Tammy's mother Ruth and her husband Walter met us and we spent a few days together, returning home together on the ship.

Tammy's mother died in October. I lost a good friend of whom I was very fond. It was good that we came back. It was a major drama and it precipitated a lot of problems in our marriage. We had been happy for ten years, but it was full of problems later which I'm reluctant to talk about... I'm just very respectful of what Tammy experienced. We were never enemies but we separated after 18 years of marriage, and divorced.

Meeting Jean and self-transformation

Jean came along not long after that. As a matter of fact it was Tammy's suggestion that we go for a holiday to Bathurst and do a WEA course. She went for Chinese Civilization and I went for Psychology. In the Psychology course there were 19 of us, and Jean was present in that group. So that's where we first met. It wasn't where we fell in love, that happened a bit later. By that time Tammy and I were very much on the rocks and not very together, but still respectful of each other.

That course was quite a dramatic turn of events for me. We had a brilliant lecturer and we got so emotionally involved in the whole process. We were together the whole time, at breakfast, at lectures, at lunch, we were inseparable. So at the end of the week, we didn't want it to finish it was so brilliant. We engaged the same lecturer to give us a weekend four months later in Sydney. That's where Jean and I really touched base. It was the first opportunity that I had had of unburdening myself of a whole lot of heavy baggage which I was carrying resulting from damage from war time and from a difficult relationship with my mother – it was dragging me down to the point of depression at times. There were only half of the original group there but there was tremendous support from them. And for the first time I felt accepted by a group of people, and a group of Aussies to boot, which was very powerful. I'd been in Australia for 24 years. I'd built up a brick



Jean & George's wedding

wall around myself. And it took me 24 years to dismantle it. It wasn't the fault of the Aussies. It was what I had done. I did have a couple of Aussie friends, one in particular, Derek Hentze, a lovely friend from university who died some years ago, we were very close for 53 years. But apart from him I really didn't have Aussie friends for a long time.

I didn't want anybody to see what I was really like – I felt they'd be critical, disappointed, let's call it low self-esteem. So that's when the process started for me of becoming a normal human being. And this group made me feel that I was a normal human being, and it was such a treasure. It was dramatic.



Jean in 1974

But it was a lot more work after that. I did group work – in 1981 I enrolled in what was then called a self-transformation course, based on the EST process but more gentle. That made a huge difference for me. It was 140 people, and it was hard to do but it was worthwhile. The great thing I gained was that I don't need to hide things. I had hidden because of my low self-esteem and I had hidden my Jewish-ness early on because it was

shameful. But at the age of 40 I started to get rid of this secretiveness. And it is so nice to be open. I don't have many secrets. I haven't done anything to be really ashamed of. I've never stolen anything or cheated anybody. Perhaps apart from taking a bit of stationery home from work, which most people do! And I did lie when I was a refugee, because I had to, to save my life. After that course, I've never looked back. By that time Jean and I were married. We married in 1978. Jean was very much part of my healing.

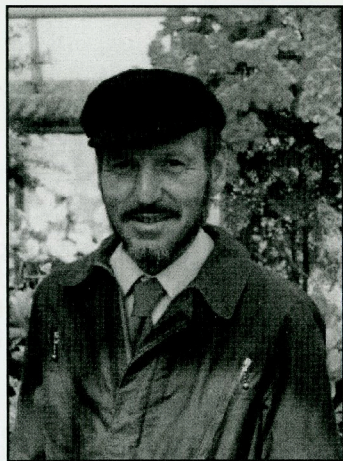
A second career

My second career setting up 'Technical Aid to the Disabled', was more important to me than my electrical engineering career. As an engineer I was a small cog in a big corporate machine. I was superficially successful. I was effective and I performed my function well but I didn't have the deep satisfaction of knowing that I was doing something really worthwhile. I was frustrated with the work I was doing. At that time I had gone back to ICI as a freelancer and I was being given work that other people didn't want to do – it wasn't very satisfying and I thought 'I'm wasting my time here. There's got to be something better.' So after hours, almost as a hobby, I started looking for ways to help people. And I thought helping people with disabilities was a good thing for an engineer to do, there would probably be a match. I didn't actually know what, it was just a hunch. It took me two years to locate my first client, Mary Case, a young woman who'd had polio and was studying librarianship by correspondence at the University of

New England. She was quite severely disabled and her mum, who was already ageing and not very strong, had to help her sit up in bed so she could study and then lie her down again, and it was heavy work. So for this girl Mary I got hold of an articulated hospital bed and I went to the Salvation Army depot at Tempe and I bought a motor gearbox from an old washing machine and we adapted that for the bed. She had push button control to sit herself up and lie herself down. It made her independent in that sense. That was my number one project and then I realised that it is possible to help people. In actual fact there were beds that did that, but they cost \$3000 and I'm talking about 1971 dollars, a lot of money then. The motor gear box cost \$8 and the rest was scrounged or donated by electrical contractors. I got the apprentices at the ICI factory involved – they did the machining and welding and fitting and all that work which I wasn't able to do because I didn't have the skills. But I designed the thing and I did the electrics. And the boys were thrilled to do something real and useful. Retired engineers are often at a loss, some of them do voluntary work, but to be able to apply their technical skills, their problem solving skills... and the special ones who are hands on, who've got their own workshops in the garage, this was an exact match for them.

The service was a direct help to people who were often deprived of work or other functions. We helped them feed themselves, communicate, move around, work, learn, study, write, photograph. Every function you can think of we were involved in, with special equipment whether it was postural devices for young children, mobility devices, hand propelled tricycles or computer aids. I had a feeling of contentment and satisfaction with that work. I've left a legacy. It would be one of the most important accomplishments in my life. We had to write 2,000 appeal letters on a typewriter to get money to keep it going, and raised \$15,000 in 12 months. After that a state government grant kept us going.

I got lots of recognition for it as well, including a Churchill Fellowship in 1979, which took me to the USA, Canada, Sweden and England, and an Order of Australia in 1985. I was delighted to be invested at Government House in Sydney. I felt I had come a long way from the poor, timid refugee who found shelter in Australia in 1950. I was also awarded a BHP Pursuit of Excellence Award in 1988 presented by Bob Hawke. TAD is still going strong, and it's going in every state in Australian except NT. The Canadians have copied the idea, and it's now spread across North America, they've got 45 branches. These were quadriplegics, they set up their own



George in Toronto

organisation with volunteer engineers, and it's big time, it's flourishing. There had been a similar organisation in England. We didn't know anything about it and actually I think it pre-dated ours. We discovered it much later. I went to England again in 1979 and I went to a couple of their meetings – it was exactly like being in Newcastle or Bathurst, our groups here, country branches. It was great, the same spirit, same idea. Yes, it was a good chapter in my life.

Parents

I don't feel any hatred towards the perpetrators of the Holocaust. It's long dead and buried. It's not a live issue for me. I've never carried hatred in my heart. Neither did my mother whose experiences were much worse. She actually had to rescue us. I was just a kid that tagged along.

But when I was working in London we went to Germany, on holidays as a family in the campervan, we did the usual: Belgium, France, Germany, Holland. There were a couple of places in Germany where I was uncomfortable – one was the public baths in Dusseldorf where I felt I was

almost in a concentration camp, with the pipes and a very stern woman in charge... but mostly I was quite comfortable, and I spoke the language reasonably well. I must admit that when we drove across the border into France though it was a relief. So there was something there, something subconscious. If I were to meet the people who were active then, I don't know how I'd feel. I think I'd probably feel hatred and fear. But they're not around, they are long dead. And the young Germans I meet

these days are absolutely delightful. I've met a lot of them and I enjoy them and I've got a couple of old German friends, I don't have any problems. Life is too short! I'm appalled by the past and it's very hard to get to grips with the Holocaust and understand how it can happen, but that's on more of an intellectual level. It's still emotional, but it's not a personal hatred.



*Anna, Eugene, Tammy with baby Monica
& toddler Sabena*

Both my parents lived to the age of 91. I was always very fond of my Dad. I give him credit for giving me a loving nature, which is a great treasure. But with my mother I didn't have a good relationship, I used to be terrified of her. She was domineering and manipulative. She had positive sides, she was courageous, determined, had a good sense of humour, but I think she wanted to have me as a lover rather than my father and that really frightened me when I was a kid. I think I became aware of something like that when I was about 10, maybe earlier, and I couldn't bear her touching me, which was very hard on her of course,

but it was hard on me too because I didn't love my Mum. The only time I loved my Mum was the moment she died. There was this great wave of warmth that came over me. I think it was the only time it was safe to love her. That's my theory.

But 17 years before she died I became determined I'd be good to her because in the self-transformation course I had seen many people who were suffering from guilt, from not having made peace with their parents, and they were trying to do it after the parents died. And I thought 'no I'm not going to do that'. I knew what she liked and I used to go out and take her for a drive which was her great pleasure, take her to the bush or to the beach and hold her hand, and she would just glow. It was hard to do, but I made myself do it and it was a good thing to do, and it became easier after a while. And it was good because when she died I had no guilt. I didn't even grieve. I think it was a relief. I'm glad I did that because I didn't want to carry guilt.

I grieved for my Dad before he died because he had some dementia in the last two or three years and that's when I really lost him. He was just a hulk then, a shell. I identified with him in many ways. He was a good man. When he worked on the railways he made friends with hordes of Italians there and he used to fill in their forms and do their tax returns, because they were illiterate. And he learned Italian so he could communicate with them. So he was a good guy. I suppose I got the altruistic impulse from my Dad.

Those early years were not easy. Tammy was not well. And my mother was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. It got worse with the years, and then it stabilized, maybe even improved a bit because her hallucinations became more positive. For many years people were sending her heat or pain or playing tricks on her. And then later on she used to say 'oh they're sending good vibes'. And I thought 'oh that's good!'. I didn't argue! It was very hard for my father to live with. The poor guy suffered for many years. He never left her. I couldn't have done that. I couldn't have been a saint like that. They were married for 65 years.

Refugee work

It was my own experience that led me to work with refugees. I'm still one of them, on a certain level. Before I retired in 1995 aged 61 I'd been planning my post retirement activities. Because I had hordes of volunteers working with me in Technical Aid to the Disabled I learned lessons from them. I observed what was satisfying, what was frustrating and certainly I could see that the lack of a meaningful activity in retirement was a potential disaster. I wanted to go into a different field, not the field of disability where I'd spent 25 years.

One day I was in Sydney and I went into one of these two dollar shops and I heard a woman say 'I want a mirror' (French accent) and I thought yes I know what she wants, a mirror, so I sidled up and said 'the lady wants a mirror', because I could hear the French accent. We fell into a conversation and she was a Catholic nun whose job it was to race around the hospitals in Sydney and find French patients and minister to them. She was an amazing person, she would start at 6 am and travel all over Sydney by public transport from one place to another. She said 'if you want to do this work just go to Prince Alfred Hospital and see the coordinator of volunteers'. So that's what I did. I had a job lined up visiting Francophone patients every Friday and I did that for a year.

But the refugee work attracted me so I went into the Australian Red Cross in the asylum seekers section and I was a volunteer receptionist there for about a year. It was interesting but it was very bureaucratic and frustrating, because they had a lot of good information there on where to get services, for example English lessons. Somebody would come in and say 'where can I learn English?' And I'd reach for this book and say 'well go to such and such a place in Blacktown'. But the case workers didn't like it because that was their job and I was encroaching.

So then I heard of the Asylum Seekers Centre in Surry Hills which was a small centre set up by the Jesuits and the Sisters of Mercy. I moved across to there and I worked with these marvellous Catholic nuns. I had a wonderful time teaching computer skills, I established a class of eight, teaching every Friday and I had people from all over the world, all the dangerous countries. It was a wonderful voluntary job. I learned a lot about their situation and their problems. They were people who had come here and had applied for protection but had not yet been processed and considered, and they had virtually no support at all in Australia. I spent five years there. I started dreaming about the Holocaust again as a result of hearing about the dreadful treatment these people were getting in Australia and particularly in the detention centres. The lack of support and the cruelty, the indefinite detention, the lack of compassion. Very cruel policies. I really identified with the people. It didn't matter where they came from. A lot of them were Middle Eastern people, there were a lot of Moslems, also South Americans, from Peru and from Colombia and so on. I got on well with all of them although they knew I was Jewish.

It reminded me of what we'd been through. They told us stories of people smugglers and being in leaky boats, and fleeing from terrible danger, from wars, and then not being very well received at this end, which didn't happen to us. We didn't have that problem. We were happy when we arrived. We were happy to have a peaceful country, work, school, plenty of food. We didn't really have any serious problems. It was semi heaven. I think my parents were very adaptable. It depends where you come from, if you come from an educated background that helps.

My father had eight languages, and English is my fifth language. We'd lived in various environments and related to all sorts of people and we didn't really feel it was a huge problem because Australia was basically friendly and we weren't treated as dirty Jews or undesirables. And the fact that we were still poor, it didn't matter because we knew that as long as work was available... And there were futures. I had a future because I knew I could go to school and then I'd get a profession. There was a bright future for young people in Australia. That included all of us.

My work with refugees continued when I moved to the Blue Mountains in 2001. Within a month there was an inaugural meeting of the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group and of course I came onto the committee as secretary and fundraiser and have never left. I've just retired from the fundraising role – this is my second attempt at retiring! But this time it's firm. I'm still the secretary. I feel we're doing a useful job for people who are desperately in need of support. A lot of my work has been indirect

but I have also done hands-on personal things with refugees. We had three families and some single people living in Katoomba, almost all of them Afghans, and we did a lot for those families. We got their kids into school, helped them with rental bonds. Jean taught one woman to drive. We were always doing things, for two and a half years. We became good friends, it was very positive for them. They knew I had been a refugee. They were very appreciative of everything we did, there was no question about that. They've been back in Western Sydney now for some years, but we still get presents and cards from them, or occasionally somebody comes up and visits or people from our group go down and visit them. The friendships continue.



Refugee demonstration

Environment

My interest in sustainability and the environment has only been recent really. I try and do a bit but I think my contribution is very tiny. I was treasurer of the local Climate Action Group for a while. I think most of us used to be oblivious to the waste and the unsustainability of our lives. I heard about the effects of what we were doing. It seemed more and more disastrous. And it became obvious to me that we're heading down a blind alley, heading for disaster. How has it changed my life? Well for many years in Sydney, I had a work car, and my wife had a private car so we were a two car family. And with Sydney's climate I put in an air-conditioner. It was not an issue. We could afford to buy the electricity so we did it. We never had an excessive house, we lived in a standard

three bedroom cottage. But all around us were people who had five bedrooms and three garages and four bathrooms, that sort of thing. I was never tempted by that. But also we never gave a second thought to getting on a plane and going to Europe if we could afford it. And we did. Jean is English and I love Europe so we went quite a few times, and also to the USA and Canada.

Now, I wouldn't do it anymore, I don't fly anymore. I walk a lot and I cycle a bit. I drive a hybrid. I go by train whenever I can. So yes there have been many changes. We don't have air conditioning. We changed to gas for our cooking, gave away the old electric hotplate.

By nature I'm a pessimist, you know. I can see humanity blindly rushing towards a precipice and that's very scary especially when you've got grandchildren. So we all do a little bit, but I don't know if we'll succeed in modifying the behaviour of the human mob. I'm not very hopeful actually, no. I've read too much. Books like 'Collapse' by Jared Diamond. There are some who are aware, but the big problem is how to make others aware, and that I think is the majority. And that's very difficult. I've tried and they don't want to listen, in general. I think the fundamental problem is people not being able to make a connection between our actions now and the results in 20 years time. If the connection was immediate, if they knew that by wasting electricity or using up petrol something terrible is going to happen this year in their own backyard or in their own family, they wouldn't do it. But because it's happening down the track and because it's the whole of humanity that counts, it's too abstract. I think we are not sufficiently removed from chimps to understand that connection, or most of us aren't. Before, we used less because we couldn't afford it, it was just not available. As soon as it became available, say in the 60s in Australia, everybody bought cars because they could. It was external restraint, not internal... Human nature is the big problem I think: 'I can afford it so I can waste... I can have my six bedroom house and my four-wheel drive and my air-conditioning because I'm making enough money to pay for it.'

I have no religion. I think religion can be used to escape from the problem by saying 'well in the next life it'll be OK, it doesn't matter what happens now'. I think a lot of people would take that escape route. If you believe in the afterlife then its easy not to worry what happens in this life. I don't have that luxury.

Regrets

Now and again I have regrets, not serious ones. I try not to think of them. I think I've been very fortunate and I've had opportunities and I've taken them, by and large. Especially the big one with Technical Aid to the Disabled. Thank you Mr Gough Whitlam. We got a one year grant

that started us off, it was an incredible opportunity. I could have been conservative and said 'No, I'm an engineer, I'll stay here, I'm too scared to branch out'. But I thought 'No, that's not how I want to live'. My Dad said 'What are you doing, you're leaving your profession. Is that what you really want to do? It may not work'. I thought 'Well if it doesn't work I can always go back and be an engineer.' I could have done that the first few years. After that you become out of date and useless. I'd be completely useless now as an engineer.

But I can teach maths in high school one to one. I do that, and I love it. I've been doing voluntary maths coaching for 40 years now. I've got a 17 year old boy in Katoomba High now whom I'm tutoring. And I teach French sometimes. I've got a new student who's starting from zero, who's aged about 60. She's very keen. Teaching one to one is a great privilege, I just love it. If people are motivated and they want to learn I find it very exciting, very rewarding. I'd hate to run a class, couldn't do it, but one to one is fantastic. I cut my teeth with my elder daughter because she found maths very hard. We used to sit down and quietly work at maths and after a couple of years she said 'You know Dad, maths is alright, I can do it!'

I had some guilt about Tammy because basically I abandoned her, but she was better off without me. We weren't fighting any more and she survived all right. She's still alive and she's now in a very good aged care facility, and she's reasonably comfortable I think. When Tammy and I split, for me it was a survival operation and I didn't give enough thought to my daughters because I was totally focused on rescuing myself. Later on I found out that it was very hard for them, and maybe I could have done that better, said 'You can come and live with me'. I just wasn't mature enough or thoughtful enough to do that. So its hindsight, and I have apologised to them, but you can't reverse the past of course.

Hopes and fears

I hope my descendants have a reasonable life without too many global cataclysms, wars or other huge catastrophes, that's the main thing. I'm not particularly optimistic about the future of humanity, so I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that they will have opportunities to lead a decent useful life without being killed or imprisoned or tortured or evicted or exiled. In other words, that they don't have the same experiences that I had as a kid. Or worse.

What's prevented me from becoming bitter? I don't know, I really have no idea. I was just not made to be bitter I suppose! A lot of Aboriginal people I believe are quite forgiving about the horrendous things that have been done. And there are a lot of Holocaust survivors who are not bitter. I don't have a faith. I have been envious of people who do have a faith, because it's so comforting. But you can't choose to have it.

and play with wonderful pianists and it's great. The only thing you're using up is a few reeds! Monica's a natural at music, she comes here and sings with Jean, plays the guitar and she's a natural harmoniser, it's so beautiful, it makes me cry when I listen to them. They're both good. I've not inherited my father's artistic talent whatsoever but she has. She can do drawings and sculptures.

My older daughter Sabena lives in Sydney and is married to Peter the Irishman who's a wonderful guy, very wise and a great sense of humour. We've got quite a good father son relationship, Peter and I, and they've got three lovely children. Sabena is now helping children with literacy in the organisation called Exodus and she enjoys that. She's also got her own sustainable garden and she's developed a public veggie garden in her local area in Sydney with other people, so she's a leader in that sense. She has worked hard for 20 years with Peter and has developed great expertise in marketing and other business skills.

I've got three grandchildren in Sydney and one in Melbourne and I enjoy them all. They are bright young people.

I think my children have got the message, because I think I've acted as a role model. The message is: work for other people. Helping others or helping the community is enormously satisfying. You don't need the words. What you say isn't very important, it's what you do that's important. That's what matters isn't it? It's very satisfying for me to think that I've passed that on.