

William Hurwitz

A Life



For Anita and Helen

Prologue

This pamphlet began its life when Jane handed me a bundle of papers found in her father's house after his death. She said I might find them of interest. So one day shortly afterwards I sat down at my kitchen table and spread the papers out and began to read. I was immediately captivated by the fascinating story of William Hurwitz, Jane's, Laura's and Shelley's grandfather. I made notes and then began to write this story of his life. Of course I quickly realised there were lots of gaps and things missing. I made several trips to talk to Anita, William's daughter and the only person who had known him when he was alive. Others were very helpful, including of course Shelley, who provided some of the photos as well as much else. I then began to talk to others, such as the renowned genealogist David Jacobs, the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen, and the Association of Jewish Refugees, Southwark Archive and the London Archive. I visited some of the places where William had worked. The result is this. It is not complete and there are gaps I cannot fill. But it is still a remarkable story of a remarkable man. I am very glad that Anita saw it before she died. It meant a lot to her.

Nigel Thorpe

William Hurwitz

William Hurwitz was Anita and Helen's father, and the great-grandfather to Ed and Sam, Charles and Ali, Adam and Zoe. He was a very considerable figure. Tragically he was lost at sea in September 1940. This is his story.

What's in a Name?

The name of Hurwitz is a story in itself. It is a common Jewish name with many variations. The name probably originated among Sephardic Jews, who were all expelled from Spain in 1492, when the rulers of Castile and Aragon ordered all practising Jews to leave



Horovice in Bohemia, now Czech

the country. Some of the exiled Jews settled in Horovice in Bohemia and adopted the name of Horowitz. They then spread all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There is evidence of settlement in Svensien

(in what is now Lithuania but then Tsarist Russia) by one Rachmiel Gurvits. There are so many people with names like Horowitz, Horwitz, Gurwich, Gurvits etc, that there is a Horowitz Family Association.

The Family Background

We know little of the origin of William's father's side of the family. But his mother, Fanny, was the daughter of Estelle and Lazarus Rabinowitz, a distinguished family that lived in Moscow and then Grodno in Tsarist Russia, and this is significant since at least part of the time they lived outside of the Jewish Pale of Settlement established to restrict the area that Jews could inhabit in Russia in the 19th Century. Estelle and Lazarus had eight children, Fanny being the eldest daughter. She was born in Grodno, now in Belarus. She married Isaac Hurwitz in Russia and they then came to England. There is a suggestion that in fact they eloped here. This was the time of the emigration of over 130,000 Jews from Russia to England, fleeing pogroms and discrimination. Fanny and Isaac settled in London. Fanny's younger sister Ann joined them in 1902.

William Hurwitz was born on 26 June 1894 in London. He had two brothers, Max or Mark, born in 1896 and Lazarus or Leslie (Lazarus was the name of Fanny's father, so it may have come from him), born in 1898. The family lived at 4 Red Lion Street in Shoreditch. They later moved to Nottingham where Isaac was a lace dealer. William went to



William Hurwitz

school in Nottingham – Queen's Walk Council School and then Mundella Grammar School, and then became a Student Teacher for the Nottingham Education Committee. He then came to London to go to university to read English. However by this time Isaac's business had fallen into difficulty and in November 1913 he, Fanny and Leslie went to the USA, landing in New York in November that year and settling in Chicago where Isaac became a real estate dealer.

The First World War

This was in the year before the outbreak of war in Europe. Max and William remained in England, and both joined the armed forces. In 1914 Max lied about his age and joined before being 18. William curtailed his university degree. William had been in the Officer Training Corps at University and joined the Prince of Wales Volunteers (the South Lancashire Regiment). He served in France and was wounded (shrapnel in the head, of which he complained to his daughters after the war) but from 1916 appears to have served mainly in the Middle East. William was commissioned as second Lieutenant in 1916 and a Lieutenant in 1920. His brother Max/Mark was in France as a private with the Sherwood Foresters. He must have been wounded as he was on a Red Cross hospital ship, the HS Anglia, returning to England on 17 November 1915, when the ship hit a mine laid by a German U-boat and he was drowned. There is a plaque commemorating Max at the Hollybrook Memorial Commonwealth War Graves in Southampton.

William remained in the army throughout the war and there are letters from him to his aunt Ann from Salonika (now Thessalonika in Greece) where he was serving in March 1918, complaining about “this God-forsaken place” and talking about his unsuccessful romance with a

young woman in England, possibly named Iona though the handwriting is hard to decipher. Ann was fifteen years younger than Fanny and was like a sister to William, with only two years between them.

William returned to England in 1918 or early 1919 and was stationed at Orford Barracks in Warrington in Lancashire. He was the deputy commander of the barracks and his letters record his regret at sometimes not being able to take leave because the Commanding Officer was away. There are a number of letters written to



Renee Goldberg

Renee Lilian Goldberg, at first as a friend and then, after a gap in correspondence, as his lover, addressing her as 'Darling' and also "Girly". They had met at a friend's wedding. She was the daughter of a successful family of timber merchants. Like the Hurwitz family the Goldbergs had come from Tsarist Russia. Renee's father Harris Goldberg was born in 1866 in Riga, now Latvia but then in Tsarist Russia. It is not known when he came to England, but he married Yetta

Febland in 1890 at the Princes Street Synagogue in Spitalfields. Renee was born in 1898. The timber business was called Y Goldberg and Sons and founded in 1896.

Marriage

William wrote frequently to Renee, sometimes almost every day, especially as their romance blossomed and they were clearly planning to get married. Occasionally he is able to escape to London to see Renee and by the beginning of 1920 they plan to announce their engagement at a party in London on 29 February. William sends Renee a cheque for £150, a considerable sum in those



William and Renee Hurwitz

days, to buy a diamond for her ring, with clear advice as to whom to buy this from. The engagement is apparently a big surprise to some of the relations, as they had not appreciated that this long-distance affair was moving so strongly towards marriage. But it was, and they married

on 14 June 1921 in the Stoke Newington Synagogue. Their daughters Anita and Helen were born in 1925 and 1929.



William and Renee with Renee's parents, Harris and Yetta Goldberg

The Inter-War Years

At some point in 1920 William left the army, perhaps because the war was over and the very large British armed forces were being demobilised, but there is also the suggestion that Renee's father thought she could



17 Leather Market Street

not become a soldier's wife. William's letters in 1920 talk of his determination to go into business. There is some suggestion in his letters that the business would be the Goldberg timber company (Y Goldberg) but this is not what happened and in 1920 his letters talk of meetings with tanners, suggesting that the leather trade was to be his profession. William apparently had a friend in this trade and this may have been the key to his choice of career. We know that this was indeed what happened - his marriage certificate states that he was a Leather Merchant, in which capacity he travelled widely in Europe for

his business. He had his own company – W. Hurwitz and Co, Wholesalers and Distributors of Upper Leathers, and premises, firstly at 154 Bermondsey Street near London Bridge and from 1930 just around the corner at 17 Leather Market Street SE1. William’s business partner was Stefan Demut. The business specialised in exotic leathers, some procured from West Africa. For example, he traded with a British businessman in Nigeria (then of course a British colony) who supplied William with cured crocodile skin.

William was not only an active and successful businessman but also an important actor in the Association of Jewish ex- Servicemen (Ajex). The first chapter of Henry Morris’s book “The Ajex Chronicles” states:

Ajex had its beginnings at a meeting in London in 1928 - an impressive Armistice Service was organised jointly by the Jewish Legion (Ajex) and the National Remembrance Committee, at the Great Synagogue in Dukes Place in November 1929. The organiser was Lt William Hurwitz.

William was very committed to Ajex and became the Hon. Organiser of the Jewish ex-Servicemen’s National Remembrance Service. He organised the annual march past the Cenotaph in Whitehall, and the

service which took place on Horse Guards Parade. By 1940 William was also the Hon Secretary of the Jewish War Services Committee. He appears to have been more widely active in the Jewish community as well.

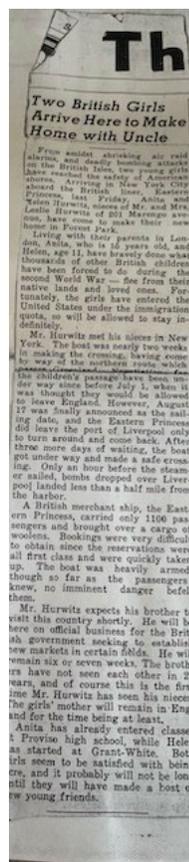
He showed considerable concern for the development of antisemitism in Germany in the 1930's and engaged in a vigorous correspondence with Sir Ian Hamilton, a very senior British Army officer who had been Commander Home Army and later Scottish President of the British Legion and Chair of the Anglo German Association. It was probably in the latter role that Sir Ian was entertaining "German delegates" in January 1936, which caused William to write to him to urge him to protest at the treatment by the Nazi regime of German Jewish ex-servicemen. Sir Ian declined, arguing that to do so would do no good. After a fierce exchange Sir Ian wrote to say that continuation of the correspondence was clearly pointless. It is not clear that William shared this view as his final remark was that he awaited the result of the exchanges with the German delegates.

William's concern at developments in Germany led him to help some German Jews, whom he seems to have met through his business, to escape to England. His daughter Anita remembered people staying at the family home before moving on. She said that William met the

expense of all this, including arranging visas for them. He also brought to England valuables belonging to German Jews, which they were unable to bring with them when they finally escaped. He would keep such belongings until their owners arrived safely to retrieve them. We know the names of two German Jews who stayed at the Hurwitz's house: Walter and Ernst Mayerfeld.

The SS City of Benares

William was so alert to the dangers the Nazi regime posed to Europe's Jewish population that when war broke out in September 1939 he was very concerned at the prospect of a German invasion of Britain and the consequences for British Jews. It was this which led to the decision to send Anita and Helen to Chicago, initially to stay with William's brother Leslie. They left on 17 August 1940, travelling on the "Eastern Princess" with Renee's brother Saul and his wife Rema and their two children Pamela and Henry. William had planned to accompany the girls, but the family was looking after a German refugee called Hilde who had just received a visa to go to New York to join

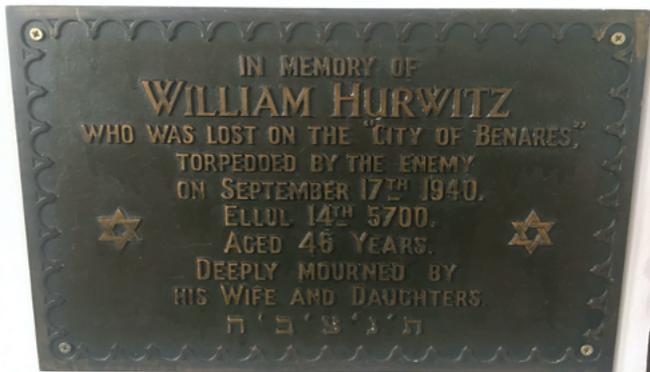


her fiancé. William gave up his ticket so that she could do this. Hilde was also given Renee's fur coat but in New York she disappeared with the coat., abandoning the girls. Fortunately William's brother Leslie was there to look after them. There seems to have been a plan that William and Renee would in any case follow Anita and Helen to Chicago and find somewhere for the whole family to live. In the event William travelled alone (perhaps because Renee was not well enough to travel) a month later, on the SS City of Benares. This carried 406 passengers and crew and sailed from Liverpool on 13 September 1940 as part of Convoy OB-213. Late at night on 17 September the ship was attacked by two torpedoes from German U Boat 48, but they missed. Sadly, a third torpedo hit the ship and it sank within 30 minutes. A total of 248 passengers and crew died, among them William. A passenger who survived, Roderick Maher, told Renee how William had given him a coat to help him as the ship sank. William was 46 years old.

This terrible tragedy is graphically described in "Children of the Benares," a book by Ralph Barker, published in 1987. It was one of the worst passenger shipping disasters of the War. Survivors kept in touch with each other for many years and on 17 September 1995, the 55th anniversary of the sinking, a Memorial Service was held at the Church of the Annunciation in North Wembley.

Renee received many letters of condolence after this tragedy, all reflecting the esteem in which William was held by the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen, the British Legion, the wider Jewish community, business colleagues and of course friends and family. The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen wrote to Renee to say that the Association's Executive had given thought as to how William's work could best be perpetuated. They suggested the formation of a special fund for assisting distressed Jewish Ex-Servicemen who could not be helped elsewhere, and so they had decided to inaugurate the "William Hurwitz Memorial Fund". They asked Renee to be Patron. There is no evidence that anything ever came of this initiative.

A Memorial Service for William was held on 13 October 1940 at the Hampstead Synagogue. There is a memorial plaque to him at Willesden Jewish Cemetery in North London. Renee, who died in 1951, is also buried there.



Mr William Hurwitz Obituary

From the Jewish Chronicle (4 October 1940)

Organiser of Ex-Servicemen's Parades: News having come to hand of Mr. William Hurwitz, who was a passenger on the ill-fated City of Benares, it is feared that he must be regarded as lost. Mr Hurwitz's work as organiser of the annual-Jewish Ex-Servicemen's March past the Cenotaph and Service on the Horse Guards Parade is familiar to many thousands of Jewish veterans of the last war and their relatives, both in London and distant parts of Great Britain. The great crowds who assembled yearly in the Whitehall district found the event an inspiring one and one which seemed to gain in impressiveness with the years. Now its organiser has, it is feared, lost his life at the hands of the unspeakable enemy he fought in the last war. Mr Hurwitz was giving his services to the Community in the present war, having been elected in February to the position of Hon. Secretary of the Jewish War-Services Committee. Interviewed at the time by a JEWISH CHRONICLE representative, he said that there was no area in England with an organised Congregation which had not formed its Hospitality Committee with the Committee's approval and, when necessary, guidance. This was the result of the hundreds of circulars which were addressed to Congregations, organisations, and important individuals

in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, by Mr. Hurwitz, who was invited to undertake the hospitality side of the Committee's activities for the welfare of Jewish members of H.M. Forces. Mr. A. Gordon, Secretary of the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen, writes: The death of William Hurwitz is a tragedy that will be felt by every Jewish Ex-Servicemen in Great Britain. As a rank and file disabled ex-Serviceman in a Ministry of Pensions Hospital his "good works * penetrated to my bedside as early as 1929 and I know that his interest in his Jewish comrades dates from years earlier, in my official capacity at the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen, I am aware of the time and devotion that William Hurwitz gave to the welfare of Jewish ex-Servicemen. He was one of the first to appreciate the value of a National Remembrance Service and Parade, and as its Honorary Organiser since its inception, has rendered invaluable service to the Community. It is known that his work for the Remembrance -Day each year commenced when the previous one was completed, and throughout the whole year William Hurwitz devoted his time to helping Jewish Ex-Servicemen." "If in trouble, ask William Hurwitz," was a phrase that was heard among both ex-Servicemen and organisations. The growth of the Jewish Ex-service movement in England and the support of its members for the British Legion, are in a large measure due to his indefatigable efforts



*From top left: Lazarus and Max;
William on Salisbury Plain with
the Officer Training Corps;
William as a Second Lieutenant.*



William with Helen and Anita in Torquay, April 1940

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