



Short Biography

Family:

My mother, Emilie Geiger, was born on 21 December 1887 in the little village of Močovice, near Caslav, in the Kutna Hora District in the Central Bohemian Region of what is today known as the Czech Republic.

The Geiger family lived in the Prague Ghetto in 1744, when the Austro-Hungarian Empress Maria-Theresa ordered that Jews be banished from the city. They went to Močovice and established a delicatessen-general store which sold everything from butter to broomsticks; it was the only shop of its kind in the village.

Izak Ben Jacob, my great, great grandfather, received the German name of Schwenger (which means a moving object) in an edict issued by The Empress Marie Theresa in 1788. Until that time Jews did not have surnames.

In 1744 Izak Ben Jacob's family were also expelled from Prague and went to Kežlice in Pelhřínov District in the Vysočina Region. (Jews had to ask permission to buy the houses of people who had died.) My ancestor asked if he could buy a certain big house and the nobles asked what he would do there, because Jews were not allowed to own farming land. Izak had trained as a book binder and said he would bind all the books in the noble's library in fine leather and gold. His father said he would sell the beautiful wheat the noble grew and was employed as an overseer. This is how the Schwenger family became established in Kežlice.

My great-grandfather, Josef Schwenger, became a master baker in Kežlice.

Many years later my uncle and my grandfather rebuilt the original house in Kežlice and turned it into a pub and restaurant which was very successful. This is where my father, Rudolf Schwenger, was born on 4 April 1884, one of seven children.

My parents set up a textile store in Caslav and had four children: Kurt, Hana, George (me), and Milan. I was born in Caslav on 28 November 1923.

My father was well educated in Vienna, and both he and my mother spoke fluent German and Czech. However, my father was not a good salesman and their business failed. When I was around six, they moved to Karlin, a poor suburb of Prague, where my mother began selling socks in a dark alleyway during the hours it was not in use. She hung lanterns to see by and the place looked lovely. She did quite well.

In 1934, when I was eleven, my mother divorced my father who was working for a glazier. I don't remember having any kind of relationship with my father and did not see him again after the divorce. My mother opened a shop in a good area and was very successful. That year she changed our name from Schwenger to the Czech spelling, Švenger, which is pronounced similarly. My father kept his original spelling and lived separately from us.



We moved several times and I made my bar mitzvah in the Staronová (Old-New) Synagogue in Prague. Then my mother heard Hitler speak on the radio and immediately sent me to London when I was fifteen and a half years old. Hitler invaded Prague on 15 March 1939, just weeks after I left.

I never thought I would be a refugee.

My mother suddenly appeared in my secondary school at a morning interval with a 'rucksack' and said in a no nonsense command: Leave everything and come with me George!

'Where we're going mum?' 'You're going to England this minute and I have an airplane waiting!' My mother gave me an addresses in London and told me that my sister would meet me at the airport and gave me eight Pounds into my pocket.

England

In 1937 my mother decided that my sister had to learn French and she sent her to Paris as an Au Péro for two years to learn French. After she learnt French, she then went to England as an Au Péro to learn English. Later, at that time Sudetenland was taken by Germany and my mother who understood German, listened to Hitler's ranting on the radio, and wrote to my sister to stay over in England. As the war progressed, Hana joined in the war effort and worked in a munitions factory.

My mother asked her to find a sponsor for me in England. I was 15 and half by then. By luck, my sister met a nice English family somewhere on a picnic and befriended them.

Mr Lewis Simmonds, a bookseller, offered to sponsor me, to whom I am forever indebted because he looked after me like a father and taught me to think for myself. Three months later, when I could speak some English, Hana arranged an apprenticeship for me with a furrier in Hove, near Brighton.

I learned English in his historical bookshop in Essex Road. He gave me two and sixpence per week pocket money because I stayed with his family.

My little twelve year old brother Milan arrived in London via 'Kindertransport' in May 1939, thanks to Sir Nicholas Winton and the Barbican Mission. The United Kingdom took in nearly 10,000 children, most of them Jewish, from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Milan worked for the bishop as a houseboy while attending school until he was fifteen, then worked as a trouser presser.



Churchill saved the Czech army by sending ships to Algiers to collect the remaining 11,000 Czech soldiers from the French Foreign Legion to reinforce the English Army and Airforce. They fought the Germans in the Second Dunkirk. Milan had volunteered to join the army, and was sent to Dunkirk where he served in the trenches as a combat soldier, but in 1944 was wounded and sent back to England for recovery.

Both returned to Prague in 1945. We tried to find a place to live together, but that proved impossible. We went back to England separately. Milan never married but did have several girlfriends over the years. He became a tour guide and had an interesting and comfortable life until his untimely death from cancer at sixty-three.

I had been in Brighton for two years when the war started. I volunteered for the Czech army in England, which was based in Leamington Spa. It was brutal. But thanks to some good luck I was able to join the Czech Air Force, which was a lot better. We were stationed at St Athan in southern Wales.

I was the only one in my team who spoke English. I did well in tests, having learnt Morse code with the boy scouts. With my English and German language skills, led me to be able to join the Royal Air Force.

After training as a wireless operator in a school near Manchester in 1941, I was sent to the RAF Intelligence Unit in Kingsdown, Kent. I was nominated for direction finding work at a radio post disguised as a windmill in an old castle in Scarborough. Thanks to my having to wear glasses, I was not eligible to become a pilot. I was awarded with a special red ribbon for my work locating German bombers. In particular, for locating 40 in one night.

When the German bombers stopped coming, I applied to be transferred to the Czech Air Force as a radio mechanic to squadron 310. We were based, all eleven of us, in Tain, Scotland. We worked in coastal command searching the radar for submarines.

When the war ended the whole squadron flew to Prague on 6 June 1945 and we danced in Wenceslas Square to celebrate.



Outcome of my family during war:

We were all looking for our relatives, but soon learned what had happened to our families.

My mother, Emilie, was fifty-six and her eldest son, my brother Kurt, was twenty-nine when they were ordered to leave their luxurious flat in Vynohrady, Prague, and were moved to a partly built unit in the poor suburb of Nusle. The 300 Jewish families moved out of Vynohrady had to wear the yellow stars on their clothing and their rations were severely cut. Their businesses and assets were confiscated. My mother managed to leave money with her favourite butchers and bakers, which proved a great help to many other refugees.

In January 1942 my mother and my brother Kurt were transported to the concentration camp in Terezin, renamed Thereseinstadt.

My mother, together with 800 healthy Jewish women, were sent to live in huts in the forest of Křivoklát where they worked at cleaning the branches of felled fir trees. It was hard work under the supervision of Czech gendarmes, some of whom were quite decent. A baker in Prague my mother had left money with told me she sent young gendarmes to him to collect bread to distribute amongst the women in the forest.

The work lasted for six months and when the women returned to Thereseinstadt, 1,500 Czechs from Thereseinstadt were then put into passenger trains and told they were going to another work destination which took several days to an unknown destination. Transport Ba 1-9-1942, named after the date it left Thereseinstadt, arrived in Raasiku, Estonia, on 5th September.

At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, Estonia had been declared the first country to become Judenrein, free of Jews.

Some younger people were taken to the nearby Jägala concentration camp for labour. New blue buses stood ready to take the others deep into a forest where there were huge sand pits. They were surrounded by SS Estonian soldiers with guns and cudgels, ordered to strip naked and were shot into the Kalevy-Liiva sand pits. The body of a young girl who had been used for sex was thrown on top of the pile of bodies. Some soldiers attempted to remove gold teeth from living people but were stopped by their officers because the screams could be heard in the neighbouring villages. Of course, the gunshots could be heard too. My mother was fifty-seven years old.

I learned this from a testimony given by two girls in charge of the luggage who survived in Bergen-Belsen. I also spoke with a very elderly man who survived this event.

My brother, Kurt, was also shot into a mass grave in the Kalevy-Liiva sandpits, but sometime after our mother was murdered.

My father was deported to Thereseinstadt in 1942, from an unknown location. From there he was sent by cattle wagon to the Zamosc Ghetto in Poland, together with his brother, Rabbi Jindrich Schwenger, a professor at Aachen University in Germany in 1911. In April 1942 the ghetto was liquidated. The two



brothers were either shot in the ghetto, starved to death or were transported to Belzec extermination camp and murdered there. My father was fifty-eight and his brother was fifty-four years old.

My sister Hana came to Prague in September 1945 to find the family. When she heard what had happened to them her hair went white, and she was never the same again. She was 29 and I was 21 and half. It is all very, very sad.

Twenty-seven members of my family were murdered in the Holocaust.

Hana went back to England and eventually married a tall Englishman, who was kind to her. She had two sons with him. One became a Computer programmer. He went to Prague with me a few times and still goes there occasionally. Her husband, John died in 1981 and Hana tragically died in 1984 just a few days before my eldest daughter visited London for the first time. She went to Hana's funeral.

I was demobbed in September 1945 the British gave me a navy-blue double-breasted suit and 7,000 Krone.

Whilst there, I went to a top furrier and told them I had been apprenticed as a furrier in Brighton. They sent me to a special school one day a week to complete my apprenticeship, while paying me 1,200 Krone for working under a master cutter in their workshop for the rest of the week. That was a very decent wage at that time. The Brighton furrier had not taught me much and treated me poorly.

I loved working with fur. It was a magnificent trade. I was good at it and became a master cutter.

My aunt who had owned the tavern in Kejílice was murdered along with her husband and four very young children. I inherited the tavern together with a Frantiska Strakova, the daughter of another aunt who had been murdered. The communist mayor of the town wanted to buy it and I was desperate for money, so I sold it. I was trying to open my mother's old shop in Prague but knew nothing about business and the rent took all I had. There was no one to help me and it was just too hard.

The Russians had begun holding parades and we could see where the country was heading next politically.

I went back to London on a Czech passport with a British army paybook and worked in Knightsbridge for a couple of years. I studied fashion design and pattern cutting at Northampton Polytechnic and my employer appreciated my work.



Australia

In 1952 I migrated to Australia as a 'ten-pound Pom'. I avoided being sent to the Snowy River Scheme by getting a job with a furrier in Sydney who fired me at the end of my first winter.

I started up on my own business designing furs in Circular Quay with some silver foxes for a Greek fashion house. They sold well as stoles until a fireman said I could not run such machinery in the building I was renting. I had seven days to leave. I then got a job at David Jones but did not like the buyer.

As there were limited places that sold furs, I ended up working for two years for Myer in Adelaide, then managed to get a position with Mark Foys in Sydney, where I spent the next eighteen years. Their merchandising was a mess and I reorganised it completely. The bosses listened to me and appreciated me, though others were jealous or racist and bullied me. Because of that, I learned Karate and how to protect myself.

I met a Dutch girl Raymonde, in the Theosophical Society library in Sydney. As a child, she lived the war years in London and their flat was bombed during the raids there. She, her mother and maternal grandmother Leah, fled Belgium through to Calais and caught the last boat to Indonesia which was taken over by the British Military who were evacuating.

They were in the diamond cutting & polishing trade and had planned to flee Holland for Java, where they would have been interned by the Japanese. Fortunately, their ship was rerouted to England.

Albert became a captain in the Dutch army but ended up in England. He was involved in the same Dunkirk action as my younger brother Milan.

After working in London in the Netherlands Ministry of war, he came to Australia to polish diamonds. The work was dirty and underpaid so he began selling carpets in the country. His wife Suzanne was a very sweet, quiet person who also had worked as a diamond cutter in Amsterdam. On the ship out to Australia she caught tuberculosis which left her weak and years later had lung surgery in Australia. Her first child Carla, died of meningitis at eleven years of age. Her second child Raymonde, was 13 when they arrived in Sydney and she went to Dover Heights high school. She later worked as a secretary in a real-estate firm. When we met at the theosophical society, she was nineteen and I was thirty years of age. Two years later, Raymonde and I were married in the Great Synagogue in Sydney. We moved into my newly renovated flat in Bondi and we had two daughters.



Mark Foys sent me to the United States and Canada to buy raw mink fur. I spent sixteen years travelling for the company, always first class and staying in the best hotels. They had a huge fashion house of seven floors – as big as Macy’s in New York!

After seven years living in Bondi we built a weatherboard house in Gladesville for 4,000 pounds. My father-in-law helped me pay for it, but he had his own troubles – a hernia from lifting the heavy carpets he was selling. He bought a fish shop from people who cheated him and my poor gentle mother-in-law was the only worker. They gave it up after a couple of years as they weren’t making any profit. Eventually, he had better luck selling made-to-measure trousers and things improved greatly for him.

When I turned forty-six Mark Foys collapsed and was taken over and resold. My wife and I had just bought our dream home at Killarney Heights when I was offered a job in Melbourne. I did not want to take the children away from their grandparents who visited every weekend, so I initially turned them down.

My beautiful wife was then diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at the age of thirty-three.

A couple of years later, when the job in Melbourne eventually resurfaced, I took it and went there, initially without the family. My family joined me a few months later and we rented a lovely duplex flat in Kew.

We later moved to a brand new custom built house in Doncaster, with a heated swimming pool for Raymonde for physio. Her mother, Suzanne, died a few years later in Sydney from a stroke in 1982, so her father, came to live with us. He helped me with Raymonde, especially by keeping an eye on her when I had to go overseas to buy for Myer. He joined an over 70’s Club where he found good company and lots of interests in his final days. I always liked him and he helped me with Raymonde in his final two years.

Due to his hernia he went for some routine tests in Prince Henry’s hospital, where he unfortunately died due to mysterious circumstances. He was only 72.

My wife Raymonde never complained about her illness and never cried. She was cheerful and tried to manage for herself as much as she could. She died aged only fifty-seven on 5 May 1993. I eventually sold the family home and moved to a flat in Toorak.

The fur business was beset with difficulties. Two years later the store stopped selling furs completely so I retired.



In retirement

I used to go to Prague every year for a few weeks, to visit with Milan, the great-grandson of my aunt who was an editor and reporter for one of the biggest newspapers in Prague.

I began writing short stories with help from classes at the University of the Third Age. I enjoyed it very much and have written 260 stories plus a novel. Some of them are on the internet and others have appeared in the Theosophical Society journal.

At age 98 I fell over in my flat and broke my hip. Unfortunately it became necessary to leave my beautiful flat in Toorak for a nursing home in Caulfield. Until then I was still driving my car, living independently and going to monthly lunches at the Czech Club as well as regular lectures at the Theosophical Society. I am now over 100 years old.

On the 17/9/2023 I was honoured as the last military Czech serviceman to be included in the memorial service of the wreath laying ceremony at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne for Czech and Slovak Service men and women. I am the last remaining serviceman in Australia including also being one of the last WWII veterans who served in both the British and Czech army and air force.
