

## Arriving and Belonging: Stories from the St Albans Jewish Community

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*Helen Singer talks about her parents' refugee background and her involvement in the creation of the online exhibition: 'Arriving & Belonging: Stories from the St Albans Jewish Community'. Through testimonies, objects and family photographs, the exhibition reveals personal stories of migration and heritage, examining universal themes of sanctuary, courage, compassion and starting a new life in Britain.*

I have lived in St Albans since 1985 and worked at the University of Hertfordshire as a Librarian from 1996 until last year when I retired. Over the last few years, I was involved with two heritage projects at our synagogue, St Albans Masorti Synagogue (SAMS) which led to the development of the Arriving & Belonging exhibition.

In SAMS Roots ([www.e-sams.org/roots](http://www.e-sams.org/roots)) (2015-2016) we received Heritage Lottery Funding for Caroline Pearce, a biographer and member of SAMS, to interview 12 members of the community about their family stories and what brought them to SAMS. The full transcripts and audio recordings are held in the University of Hertfordshire's Heritage Hub (<https://www.herts.ac.uk/heritage-hub/oralhistoryarchive/sams-roots>). This was followed by Mapping SAMS Roots (2017 to date, [www.e-sams.org/mapping-sams-roots](http://www.e-sams.org/mapping-sams-roots)) where we received over 100 stories from community members. These are plotted onto a virtual map using software called Historypin and the collection contains stories from around the world.

With such rich material, we approached Sarah Keeling, Curator at the St Albans Museum + Gallery, and their Board agreed to an exhibition in the Museum scheduled for February - April 2021. We were fortunate to have funding, in the form of a legacy, which allowed us to employ exhibition designers and heritage professionals to design the exhibition. Devorah Moritz, a heritage consultant, helped us distil over 100 Roots stories down to 18 which represent universal themes. Simon Leach Designs worked on the visual concepts, including the artwork and fitting the objects and images to the 3D space. I was joined on the project team by Caroline Pearce and Pauline Symons, who had both worked on the previous projects. We spent over a year working with the designers and our very patient contributors to put the exhibition together. It was a massive learning curve and we were grateful to the designers for their

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professional input. Then, due to Covid, the in-person exhibition was delayed until 4 February - 15 May 2022. In the meantime, my husband Jon Meier, who is also a contributor to the exhibition, created the website for the [online exhibition](http://www.arrivingbelonging.com) at [www.arrivingbelonging.com](http://www.arrivingbelonging.com). Whilst it is disappointing that the in-person exhibition is delayed, having the online exhibition increases the reach and hopefully the impact of the featured stories.

This article focuses on the impact of using personal stories from members of a local community to illustrate universal themes. These, along with maps and a timeline showing historic moments in Jewish history aim to deliver the following key messages:

- Jewish people are part of the St Albans community
- Jewish people living in St Albans have roots stretching across time and place.

## The exhibition



From over 100 stories gathered in the previous projects, 18 were selected to represent universal themes. The Arriving section covers themes of Sanctuary, Courage and Community and in the Belonging section the themes are Setting Down Roots, Work and Community. We had the idea of introducing the contributors through the 'photography wall': photographs of the contributors outside their front doors, holding objects or images which illustrate their stories. The doorways reinforce the idea of Arriving and photographing the contributors outside was also Covid secure! The portraits are taken by Hayley Posener, a member of SAMS. Being 'greeted' by the contributors with the objects that tell their stories aims to draw the audience in by seeing them as individuals living in the local community.



Visitors will also see a world map showing that the stories come from around the world and a map showing Jewish businesses in St Albans between the 1930s and 1980s, as recollected by one of the contributors, Jennifer Taylor. The maps show both the wider stories of migration and local connections with the Jewish community. There is also a soundscape so visitors can hear some of the contributors' voices and feel that they are being directly addressed, making the stories more immediate.

The exhibition also includes a timeline of Jewish life in St Albans and England which reaches from Aaron of Lincoln who lent money for the building of St Albans Abbey, through the expulsion of all Jews from England in 1290 to Cromwell allowing them back in. One of the exhibition contributors can trace her ancestors right back to one of the earliest settlers from this time, linking an individual person to a historic fact. At a more local level, there were Jewish families working for the Nicholsons raincoat factory to the east of the city, including some who fled Russian pogroms at the turn of the century. Another contributor's grandfather worked at Nicholsons and her grandmother had a fur trimmings shop next door. The timeline also shows the founding of the St Albans United Synagogue and later SAMS. The final panel of the timeline poignantly refers to the traditional shofar, or ram's horn, being blown from the tower of St Albans Abbey at the Jewish New Year in September 2020 when Covid restrictions did not allow the congregation to gather in the synagogue. The Abbey is an iconic part of St Albans and this event demonstrates a real coming together of faiths and communities.





### Stories

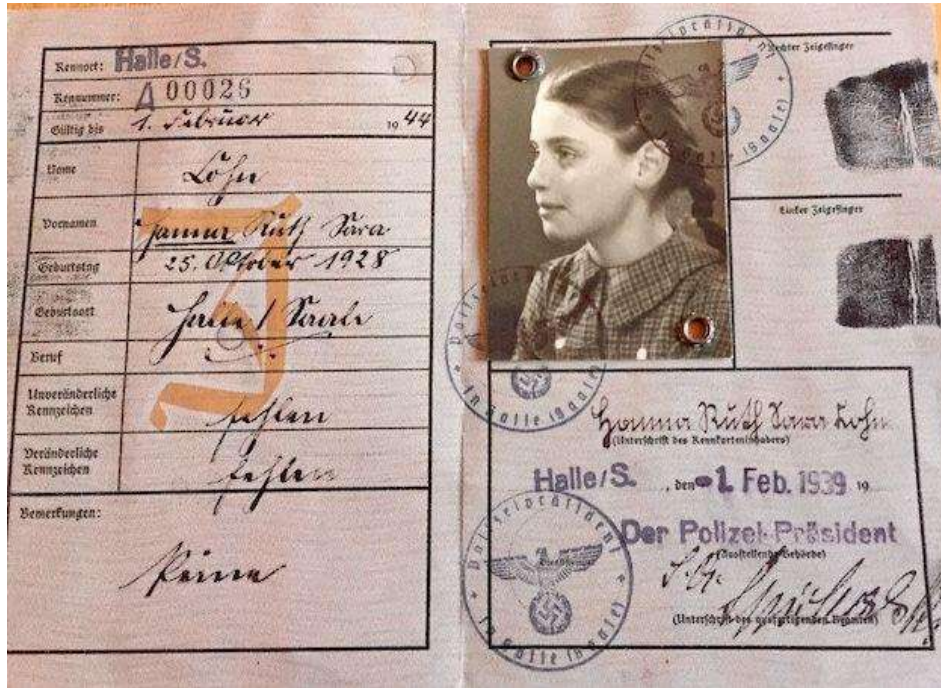
The exhibition includes some very moving and powerful stories of displacement and migration. In the *Sanctuary* theme, Andrew Hougie describes his grandparents' exile from Iraq. In the *Courage* theme, Kitty Hart-Moxon who was sent to Auschwitz at the age of sixteen, describes why she had her tattoo removed. This section also features Sylvia Schloss, whose step grandfather was Otto Frank, father of Anne Frank. Her story is about her uncle's paintings hidden under the floorboards in Amsterdam when the family were deported to Auschwitz, and how these were later found by Sylvia's mother Eva. You can see a reproduction of one of the paintings in the exhibition. In the *Compassion* theme, there is a poignant story from Evelyn Gold about her mother whose life was saved by a school friend's family in Poland. Evelyn's aunt was saved by Oskar Schindler: in the exhibition you can see a copy of Schindler's List with Evelyn's aunt's name at the top. In the *Setting Down Roots* theme, there is a naturalisation certificate signed by Winston Churchill and the story of Caroline Pearce's great-uncle who was killed in the First World War and who is commemorated at the Menin Gate. The *Community* section features the story of Darren Marks whose family originated in Spain and Portugal and came to London via Amsterdam. Darren restored furniture at Bevis Marks Synagogue, one of the oldest synagogues in London, and more recently took part in a community project cutting out wooden letters for the ark wall at SAMS.

These stories reflect the themes of the exhibition and key moments in Jewish history as illustrated in the timeline, so it is hoped that audiences will relate to the historic and geographic events through the personal stories.

### My own story

My story is one of the 18 featured in the *Sanctuary* theme of the exhibition. Both my parents were child refugees from Nazi Germany. My mother, Hanna Cohn, came here on the

Kindertransport, her life and those of her brother and sister and my grandmother saved by an English friend, Mary Caro. You can see a photograph of my mother arriving at Liverpool Street Station in July 1939 in the exhibition, along with her ID card stamped with the 'J' for Jew and middle name Sara given by the Nazis to all Jewish girls and women.



My father Peter Singer was sent to England, to Farnham Grammar School. His parents, both dentists in Nürnberg, Germany, remained behind. At Kristallnacht, my grandfather was detained in Dachau concentration camp. After that the wonderful headmaster of Farnham Grammar School, Dr Morgan, arranged for my grandparents to come to England to join my father, so their lives were saved too.





These stories highlight huge acts of kindness and sadness as my mother's father perished in Auschwitz. We are so grateful that my family found sanctuary here. After our parents died, my sister and I found many documents, with some in a suitcase you can also see in the exhibition. I used the documents to write up our grandparents' stories and we deposited the family papers with the Wiener Holocaust Library. We feel it is important to make sure their stories are not forgotten, particularly because, as we know only too well, genocide and anti-Semitism did not stop with the Holocaust. I am grateful that these stories are included in the exhibition.

My parents' refugee background has influenced me in my voluntary work with refugees. I volunteered with the Refugee Council when they set up the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in Hertfordshire, and now volunteer with Herts Welcomes Refugees. SAMS has established links with Herts Welcomes Refugees and has co-hosted family teas where local Syrian refugees have cooked together with SAMS members; last year due to Covid there was a virtual cookery swap instead. I am currently co-running an Erasmus + funded AMICI autobiographical digital storytelling course for the Jewish community and am convinced of the power of sharing personal stories to give people a voice and aid understanding. I feel desperately sorry for unaccompanied child refugees who are prevented from family reunion with relatives in this country. This stems from the fact that my parents were child refugees and found sanctuary here. My twin sister, Debora Singer MBE, has focused on human rights for many years, particularly for asylum seekers, and is an alumna of UEL. Our own family background has been a significant driver in her work.



### **Wider community**

The exhibition seeks to show that the Jewish community is involved with the wider St Albans community. The contributors are all introduced with their professions and how long they have

lived in the area so that local people find out a bit more about them. I personally love St Albans and am proud that it is home to so many diverse groups of people.

The St Albans Life section of the exhibition has photographs of involvement with the local community, for example the Mitzvah or community day work carried out by local synagogues, including tidying the local cemetery, hedgerow planting in Verulamium Park, clearing the river Ver, tree planting in Heartwood Forest, cooking for a centre for the homeless. There are also many examples of multi faith work, such as a local toddler group run at SAMS for seven years until closed due to Covid and support for the St Albans Black Lives Matter movement. These activities represent one way of belonging to one's local community.



### **Response to the online exhibition**

We wanted the stories to illustrate universal themes that apply to the Jewish community but could also apply to other groups of migrants as they settle in the UK. In addition, by telling the stories we hoped to explain a little about the Jewish experience to increase understanding and counteract prejudice.

Preliminary evaluation shows that the exhibition is well received by local people who appreciate seeing people they recognise (one contributor is a local GP) and the St Albans map. Others said that it made them appreciate the diversity that St Albans embraces. Someone else wrote that it 'underlined for me how little we know about some of the extraordinary stories behind people in our local communities', whilst another resident said 'I was fascinated to learn the moving stories and about my home town of 62 years'. Another visitor wrote 'It made me reflect

on my own family history, nowhere near so traumatic as those portrayed but still involving much change over the generations’.

As the exhibition is online it was possible to share it beyond St Albans. Positive feedback was received from those who liked the personal stories with comments such as ‘the personal stories bring everything to life and provide the link with the present day,’ ‘I like the photographs of everyone outside their homes and the way that you’ve linked through the individual stories to the wider themes’ and ‘I love the way you combined the individual stories with broader historical and geographical contextualisation’.

Several visitors found the stories affected them emotionally: ‘I was able to learn and feel so much in such a clear, simple way and, the universal themes really bring it emotionally to life.’ The positive nature of the exhibition was also appreciated: ‘some of the stories are so moving and yet the whole thing is very positive’, ‘So many incredibly moving stories, highlighting the remarkable courage and determination of people in the face of adversity.’ This visitor reflected the idea of understanding more about each other: ‘this valuable contribution will hopefully help bind our country more together.’

It is hoped that the online exhibition can be used in schools as recommended by this former teacher: ‘The website is a really valuable historical database and I can... see it being a very valuable teaching and learning resource for schools across the country.’ (The website contains links to activity sheets aimed at younger visitors, encouraging them to think about Judaism and wider issues such as migration, persecution and integration.)

The importance of continuing to share these stories was also highlighted in comments such as ‘it’s so important to keep sharing stories and history and this is such an interesting and personal way to do it’ and ‘It’s so important that we remember, and to read your story and those of others from St Albans makes the Jewish history and suffering of the 20th century so much more personal and immediate.’ A German friend wrote about the importance of ‘passing on history and stories, especially with all the terrible things that have happened. And passing on the wonderful living traditions of Jewish culture.’

A panel event hosted by the museum where 3 contributors talked about belonging was well received, with this Catholic Priest even basing his Lent sermon on the discussion:



It was refreshing, then, to hear tonight heart-warming stories related by numerous families, each of whom have good cause to be thankful for the kindness and welcome their ancestors received when they came to our shores. They show their continued appreciation by involving themselves generously in many community-building and inter-faith projects, such as working with refugees and other vulnerable people. They hold an alternative mirror up to us, showing us a better side of ourselves. As we look at that aspect of our British identity we see how important it is today to strongly reaffirm the values of tolerance, diversity and social generosity we might otherwise be in danger of losing.

For more information on the exhibition, visit [www.arrivingbelonging.com](http://www.arrivingbelonging.com)



We are grateful that the universal themes illustrated through personal stories in the exhibition seem to have resonated with the audience and hope that readers of this article will be inspired to visit the online exhibition. We feel strongly that everyone has a story and that it is important to share our stories to help us understand each other better. If you have feedback on the exhibition or would like help mapping your own community's roots with our Mapping your Community's Roots Toolkit, please contact the project team at [arrivingbelonging@e-sams.org](mailto:arrivingbelonging@e-sams.org)

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