



Susan Bookbinder

How Oliver changed Judith's life for ever

LAST year, I represented my great-cousin Feige Mendzigursky at the 75th anniversary of the Kindertransport in London.

Feige, who is now preparing to celebrate her 90th birthday, caught the last Kindertransport train out of Leipzig in 1939 at the age of 14 and lived in Manchester with her cousins, my great-aunts, Yetta, Blima and Sarah Bookbinder.

Through the *Jewish Telegraph* and my radio show, I was able to share her incredible story and the Bookbinder family's role.

Feige's mother and younger sister, Etti Lea, and many others, perished at the hands of the Nazis.

I was able to tell this story because of the research of her daughter, my third cousin Judith Elam.

Judith has dedicated the last six years to tracing the family history, and to remembering those taken from their homes and murdered in the Holocaust.

She started in Berlin, from where her paternal relatives were deported and murdered by the Nazis, by asking the German authorities to lay *stolpersteine*, (memory stones) in front of the

Nothing to mark they ever existed

former residences of those who died.

These glinting golden squares were to become Judith's mission to mark the lives of her family in history.

"They have no grave, nothing to mark that they ever existed on this earth. They simply vanished," she told me.

Judith was determined to change that and show the residents of today that within their homes, there had once lived a gentle, kind soul, who had lived a life like everybody else, but who was systematically murdered simply because they were Jewish.

Judith felt it was "the least I could do to honour my murdered relatives".

The 62-year-old's mission has not been easy, having had to break down some walls to honour the



MISSION: Judith Elam. Left, Oliver Geiger with some of the stolpersteine

souls of her relatives in the Berlin pavements they once trod.

Among the relatives she has traced and honoured are Lucie Weiss Fuld-Traumann, her grandfather's cousin, who was deported with her daughter and six-month-old granddaughter to Estonia and murdered in the killing fields of Reval.

Judith's great-grandmother, Julie Schwarz Hahn, who was starved to death in Theresienstadt, is remembered by a *stolperstein* outside her residence at Roscherstrasse 12.

Two years ago, Judith's mission became a movement which would forever change her life.

It has heralded an incredible unity; bringing together the descendants of Jews, who perished in the Holocaust, with the descendants of Nazis.

It was July 25, 2012. The last of the seven *stolpersteine* Judith had requested was laid in front of the house in which Walter Weisstein used to live.

Walter was the second cousin of

Judith's father, Max Nathan, a Holocaust survivor who made it to Britain.

But Walter was deported in 1943 and gassed in Auschwitz.

Two years ago, Walter's was the only *stolperstein* on a short street in Berlin called Thomasiusstraße, comprising just 27 small buildings.

But it was this stone which lit the fire of change.

TV producer Oliver Geiger, who lives in the building next door, was troubled by this stone.

He said: "I wondered if other victims had lived on the street and had been forgotten, maybe in my building or even my own apartment."

Oliver got together with other residents to find out more about other potential victims.

They agreed that they would not only do the research, but would pay for the stones to be laid for any other victims they found.

Oliver wrote to Judith in November: "We, the residents of Thomasiusstraße, are not related to Mr Weisstein and the other murdered people.

"But we've decided to bring light to the past, as we care to keep alive the remembrance of neighbours we lost in this tragic way along with the every day Jewish life in our street."

By this time, the residents had found more than 90 victims and 65 residents were involved. At the time of writing, they have found 103 victims.

Judith has been helping to find living relatives, so they can get comfort in knowing about the efforts underway to honour their family members.

Judith has found the response very moving.

"In some cases, the people didn't know these relatives even existed," she told me. "All are very touched that a group of caring Germans want to show that their former neighbours are not forgotten and will always be remembered."

Some of the relatives have already been to Berlin, many more are coming for the first of the

stone-laying ceremonies this month; some have been accommodated in the very apartment buildings where their relatives once lived.

All the residents have become emotionally vested in the victims, as they find out the heartbreaking details of their lives. Many of them consider the project the most important and meaningful part of their lives.

The most shocking, but moving, aspect of Judith's journey is that many of the residents are the children and grandchildren of Nazis and are dealing with their own demons.

"We are all dealing with our emotions and pain; me as the descendant of victims and they as the descendants of perpetrators," she said.

Oliver is one of those facing the painful truth of his past. He has been estranged from his father for many years. His grandfather was a Nazi and Oliver's father idolised him and still does.

The first group of stones will be laid on August 8, the next batch in October and the last in March.

In a beautiful dove-tailing of history; the very first stone to be laid will be Oliver's chosen victim, Lotte Klein, Walter's wife.

The stone will be sponsored by Judith and the children of the Kihei Charter School in Maui, where Judith lives today.

Judith talks to schoolchildren about what happened to her family during the Holocaust and they wanted to become involved in the project too.

"The fact that there was no stone for Mr Weisstein's wife was the catalyst which caused us to form the group," Oliver told me.

"It will not change the terrible facts, but we feel it to be an important gesture to underline that, even after all these many years, we feel it to be a loss to history that there seems to be no trace of these murdered people."

By the time all 103 stones are laid, the little street will be plastered with the stones and will attract a lot of attention with this poignant display of innocent lives lost.

It is a unique project on many levels — first because of the saturation of the stones and secondly because a whole street has joined together to memorialise its former neighbours.

The whole project has changed



UNIQUE PROJECT: The stolperstein for Walter Weisstein

Judith's perspective dramatically:

"For me personally, my tight bond with Oliver and my involvement with this project and its people have marked a milestone in my life and a new way of looking at things," she said.

Judith had told me about a visit to her father's birthplace in Germany being too painful to undertake. Now she says: "But Oliver has made me realise that I am a German Jew, as opposed to simply a Jew.

"He has made me see that with seven paternal generations buried in Berlin, I am just as German as anyone else, and so I should see the place where my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and ancestors lived."

Oliver has discovered that he too has Jewish blood in his veins and Judith has helped him to think of himself with much pride as partly Jewish, rather than the grandson of a Nazi.

He is now tracking his lineage, as he is a Goldschmidt descendant — like Judith!

These residents have been finding the victims by researching compensation claims files, claims which were made around 1957, when Germany first started restitution.

Oliver has even found files on Judith's father, mother, grandparents, great-grandmother and other relatives, one of whose grandsons is planning to meet her at the stone-laying in Berlin.

"These were very painful and emotional to read. Even my sister and I are mentioned in these files," she said.

"You can only imagine what some of the gruesome stories are like, as the surviving victims or their children give a description of their lives before, during and after the Holocaust".

Judith will be staying on

We are dealing with emotions and pain

Thomasiusstraße when she travels to Berlin in a few weeks time, spending Rosh Hashana in a Berlin synagogue with Oliver and several of the residents — it will be the first time they will hear a shofar being blown.

"It will mark not only the Jewish New Year, but the start of new friendships with my German friends and a new attitude towards today's Germans," she added.

"And all the time I will be wearing my Star of David — because I can do so with pride and dignity, not with the terror and shame my family were forced to endure.

"I realise that I have been trapped in my family's tragic past for too long, and I must move on and forward now. It is time."

Judith and Oliver hope other Germans find and honour the Holocaust victims of their street.

Oliver has compiled a list of the victims and is hoping that more living relatives might surface.

As such, Judith has already found several living relatives of Thomasiusstraße victims in the USA.

■ If you think you can help Judith's research or are related to anyone on the list, please get in touch with her at elam@hawaii.rr.com

THE LIST OF VICTIMS

Asch – Ellinor, Marta (Caminer), Simon and Werner; Badasch – Edith (Schuber); Bader – Hedwig; Birnbaum – Jadwiga, Emil Gustav and Ruth; Brenner – Paula (Nothmann); Caminer – Recha; Cohn – Julius and Margarete (Lutze); Ehrlich – Berta (Meyerhof) and Leopold; Falkenstein – Joachim and Berta (Loewenstein); Giballe – Hertha (Rothkugel) and Siegfried; Glass – Charlotte and Clara (Haase); Goldschmidt – Lola Flora (Koppel) and Joseph; Goldberg – Helene (Cohn); Goldstein – Julie (Mendelsohn) and Dr Siegfried; Grunwald – Heinrich and Lucie (Aschheim); Herrnberg – Dagobert; Herzog – Lieschen Lea (Lichtenstein), Max, Dr Joseph and Martha; Hirsch – Stephan; Hoffmann – Margarete (Kreitner), Hans and Rosalie (Krisch); Holländer – Channa Anna and Golda Rachel (Rosa); Isaacsohn – Julius; Israelski – Betty (Schragenheim); Jarotschinski – Paul and Pauline (Leiser); Karger – Georg; Kahn – Adolf and Rosa (Glass); Kaufmann – Dagobert and Rosa (Singer); Klein – Sigmund; Koppel – Margarete (Joachimsohn); Kroner – Martha and Selig; Levy – Denny, Hildegard (Marcus), Jona, Felix and Louise; Leyde – Helena (Wertheimer) and Sali; Löw – Erna/Esther (Rimalt), Liane/Lea, Nuchem and Wilhelm; Manasse – Eva; Marcus – Irma (Scheinberger) and Kurt; Markus – Clara (Grund); Mendelsohn – Leo and Martin; Nordon – Henriette (Cohn) and Berthold; Neumann – Willi; Nussbaum – Siegmund and Gisela (Gessler); Rittler – Luise, Marie (Hirsch) and Richard; Rosenthal – Charlotte (Witt) and Martin; Rosenwasser – Max Mejer, Ryfka Regina (Ritter) and Elisabeth (Levy); Rothkugel – Käte; Schragenheim – Babette (Mann) and Siegfried; Schwabe – Gustav Ludwig and Margarethe (Frankenberg); Seckelson – Elsbeth (Arendt); Silbermann – Martha (Bernstein) and Salomon; Sonnenwirth – Farkas; Strauss – Else, Moses and Anna (Sternberg); Voss – Liselotte (Katz) and Werner Willy; Weisstein – Lotte (Klein); Wiener – Julius and Martha (Schachian); Zoegall – Käthe (Böhm) and Peter Julius.