

### Member's Profile - David Stelman



#### ***Hello David***

***I think you are the oldest member of the JDA at 96. You look about 20 years younger! As we are celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, we would be interested to learn about your life and your long association with the JDA. When did you join JDA?***

I was 19 years old when I arrived in London in 1934. I had no understanding of English and I felt lonely, because I left many dear friends in Vienna. I soon started English evening classes for Deaf people. There I learnt English and was able to communicate in British Sign Language. I became a member of the JDA in 1937 and a member of the National Deaf Club as well.

***I believe you were born in an unusual place. Tell us about your birth and your childhood memories.***

Yes, I was born in a well in 1915 ... but it was a dry well!! The well was in a place called Kansk in Poland. At the time, it was a part of the Russian Empire. The Germans and the Russians were fighting each other during the First World War. My mother thought it was a safe place to have a baby!

My parents suspected that there might be something wrong with my hearing. So they took me to see the doctor in Poland, who said that it was best to wait and see. My father wasn't satisfied with this response and was worried. My parents, Solomon and Franzi, decided to travel to Vienna in Austria by horse and cart, a distance of some 300 miles. They sought a second opinion from a doctor there, who confirmed that I was deaf. He said that my deafness was caused by the blast of the bombs dropped where I lived in Poland.

It was then my family decided to settle in Vienna. I went to a deaf school there.

When I was 16, the headmaster told my parents that I was only capable of semi-skilled work because of my deafness. The headmaster said "Impossible!" when my father suggested I take up 5 year apprenticeship as a diamond setter. My father ignored his advice, and I became an apprentice at my father's jewellery business.

***How did you and your family decide to come and live in England? What was your job here?***

When Hitler rose in power in Germany and the fascists were also on the rise in Austria, my father decided that Vienna was no longer a safe place for a Jewish family. He decided to move to Britain and relocate his jewellery business there. We stayed in Austria while he was setting everything in Britain. Our block of flats in Vienna was hit by shells when civil war broke out in Austria. My dad immediately sent for my mother, my little sister Truda and me to come to Britain.

I was 19 years old then and I worked with my father in his jewellery business in Hatton Garden, London. One of our proudest moments was in 1947. We were one of the 50 jewellery manufacturers being members of the Silversmiths' Association, to be asked to submit a wedding present, a brooch for Princess Elizabeth, our future Queen's wedding. All 50 brooches were sent to Buckingham Palace and I was so proud when the future Queen picked our brooch, which was made by me and my fellow craftsmen, as the best out of the 50 brooches. She sent a letter of congratulations to my father's jewellery business.

***I believe you were a good sportsman in your younger days. Which sports did you enjoy playing?***

I enjoyed playing tennis, badminton, skiing and particularly swimming. I took part in the European Swimming Championships for the Deaf in 1932, coming 2<sup>nd</sup> in breaststroke. It is still one of my favourite pastimes and I love swimming in the sea.

In 1939, I went to Stockholm with a group of deaf people to watch the Deaf Olympics. There, I received a telegram from my father, who demanded I come home immediately. He did not give any reasons. Actually at the time, the Nazis were invading Poland. I was not a very dutiful son at the time! I decided to ignore the telegram and to stay until the end of the Olympics, when a second telegram arrived with the same message. I decided to head off with my deaf friends to Denmark, as I was enjoying my travels too much there. Denmark became gloomy with warning placards about the Nazis and the newspapers were all full of talk about the war. I realised what my father's telegrams were on about, so I went to the British Embassy in Copenhagen who put me on the last boat to the UK before Britain declared war on Germany.

# Special features

I was so lucky because that last boat, which dropped me off at Harwich, was attacked by U- boats on its return to Denmark! But I was not so lucky to escape the stinging slap on my face from my grandmother for ignoring their telegrams!

I have been a devoted Arsenal supporter ever since I arrived in Britain. I went to watch Arsenal playing almost every Saturday afternoon for 50 years, until the 1980s, when Highbury became all-seater stadium.

## ***What are your other interests?***

I have always been a keen photographer, having acquired a box camera in Vienna when I was aged 14. In the 1950s and 60s, I had a small photography studio and dark room and earned some extra money doing photographic work. I won a photo competition sponsored by Kodak and the judges picked my photograph of a street urchin in Kilburn as the winner! I was so pleased. I still enjoy taking photographs with my digital camera today.

## ***Tell me about your family.***

While I was evacuated to Leeds during the Blitz, where I continued to work as a diamond setter, my late Aunt Brina who was deaf, was praising about her beautiful niece Lily Nabarro, a deaf seamstress in the East End of London. She was hoping to cook up some matchmaking (a "shidduch"). I liked the sound of this woman. So after the Blitz, when I returned to London, I arranged to meet her at Manor House through her brother, Coleman.

Lily left me waiting for half an hour and I thought I had been stood up. Lily at first was reluctant to meet me, as she vowed only to go out with hearing men! After some persuasion from Coleman, Lily eventually turned up for our date and we soon fell in love. We were married in 1946 and lived happily for 57 years. My son Martin was born in 1948 and I became a grandfather when Ruben was born.

Sadly, Lily passed away in 2003. I felt lost and alone, until that momentous outing with the JDA to Somerleyton Hall and Gardens in Suffolk in July 2004. That day I managed to sit with Joan Weinberg on the coach and we chatted non-stop for 9 hours throughout the day! Joan, at the time, like me, was recently widowed and we knew each other on and off socially for many years. We soon became very attached to each other and, in 2005, I decided to move into Joan's flat to start a new life with her at the age of 89!

## ***What a lovely story. Thank you for sharing your life experiences with us. Lastly, what is the secret of looking so young and fit at your age? Any tips?***

Well, I have never smoked or drunk alcohol. I kept fit by playing tennis and went on rambles. I never worry too much and just be happy!