

When and where were you born?

I was born on 16th September 1947 in a DP camp (displaced person's camp) in Linz, Austria. My parents came from Auschwitz concentration camp, and were waiting to get a visa for anywhere. Unfortunately my mother died five days after giving birth to me. My father went to Israel in 1948 and left me in a children's home in Linz.



Can you tell us something about your early life?

My very early life was spent being taken from Linz by the Red Cross and brought to Budapest to friends of my future parents, and later being smuggled in a suitcase across the border into Romania. I must have been about one year old when I arrived in Arad, a city in Romania near the Hungarian border, in the region of Transylvania.

I remember a very happy childhood. My (new) parents, my mother's sister and her husband adopted me. They had no other children and they were the most fantastic parents one could wish for. I grew up with lots of love, warmth, understanding, a safe environment, with parents that stimulated me in my endeavours and, above all, believed in me.

Tell us something of the history of your family before 1939 and since then.

My adoptive father was born in 1906, the only son of a well to do Jewish family in Arad. His father had a textile factory. After studies in Brno and Vienna, he became a textile engineer. While studying in Vienna, he got involved in the socialist movement. On returning to Arad, he became a member of the communist party, then still illegal.

He fought for equal rights for the minorities living in Romania and hoped that the "New Order", in accordance with its doctrine, would not tolerate the discrimination against Jews. My mother was born in 1908. She was one of six girls. They were quite poor, making a living from a kosher restaurant somewhere close to Cluj (Klausenburg) where all the girls worked from an early age, six days a week, before and after school.

What happened to your family during the war years?

During the war, all the members of both my mother and father's families were deported to Auschwitz. From my father's family he was the sole survivor while from my mother's family three sisters survived - my biological mother, my adoptive mother and my aunt in Canada.

What was it like growing up in Romania?

I grew up with the "opium" of the people and I don't mean Judaism but Marxism-Leninism. If being Jewish was mentioned at all, it was in a whisper, carefully, when no one was listening, as if they were afraid, as if it would be something bad.

Interview of our President, Erika Van Gelder

Written by B'nai B'rith Europe

At eighteen, totally disillusioned with the communist system, its lies, its terror, and wanting very much to believe in something, I made aliyah to Israel. That is when my parents told me that they had adopted me and that my "biological" father was alive and well, living in Haifa. With a letter from him saying that he wanted me, the Romanian authorities had to let me leave.

What happened to you in Israel?

We met at Lod airport at the information counter, as two strangers would, and we shook hands. We didn't get along very well, he was trying to play "daddy", much too late, and I was rejecting his efforts. The intolerance of youth (I was 19 years old)...

After three weeks I left his house and went to a kibbutz ulpan. At one point I ventured into a Synagogue. It was a very strange feeling being in a Synagogue for the first time and not knowing what to do. I decided to learn as much as I could about my roots. I wanted to know the history, philosophy, customs, traditions of my people, not so much because I was going to turn religious, but because I felt that, growing up, I was unfairly denied any choice in the matter.

After the six day war, I left Israel and went to Montreal, Canada, to my other aunt. I studied French and Russian literature at McGill University (Masters) and comparative dramaturgy at York University in Toronto (Masters).

When and where did you meet your husband?

In the autumn of 1979, while visiting Amsterdam, I met David. We were married three months later. We have two daughters Natalie and Sara and two grand children, Jishai 3 years old and Lital 6 months.

Tell us about some of your activities outside B'nai B'rith

In Amsterdam, at the Vrije University, I finished a Master degree in Cultural & Political Anthropology (specialisation in Nationalism and Ethnic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe). Eastern Europe, "the Old Country", was never forgotten. I always realised how lucky I was to start a new life.

When and why did you join B'nai B'rith?

Because I never forgot my origins I started helping the Jewish Old Age Home in my home town, Arad, Romania. The Amsterdam BB lodge asked me to become a member in 1994 and to continue my project through the lodge. Of course, I agreed.

What have been your main areas of interest in B'nai B'rith so far?

The more involved I got, the more I realised that humanitarian aid projects were needed in all the ex-communist countries and that good communication and coordination was essential for any modicum of success. With this in mind, I proposed the creation of a permanent committee for Central and Eastern Europe (at the BB Convention in 1997).

I chaired this committee from the beginning until 2004. That year I was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer, non-Hodgkin's. I had chemotherapy for one year and it took me another two years to function normally. I am extremely lucky, so for me "la vita e bella". After this intermezzo, I became more active again. I never stopped the fund raising for the projects in Eastern Europe, but I could not do more.

What do you consider to be the basic problems of our organization?

All in all, I would say that an organisation such as ours, comprising many countries and having lodges spread over a great area, needs to take into consideration the following: no two countries are the same. Some have more affinity with the neighbours than others do. Some have a common history and mentality.

Some have a big Jewish community others do not. Some communities have many Jewish organisations while smaller cities do not. Some lodges have financially well to do members others do not. In the Western world, the Jewish voice is bold and uninhibited compared to the same in the East where they are just learning to dare.

All these factors play a role in the way the lodge will function and will determine its possibilities. Beside the historical, demographical and social aspects, the human touch, the leadership, vision, the age of the lodge members, the willingness to put in the necessary time, these are the decisive ingredients that will ensure success or failure.

As BBE President, what are your main aspirations for the organisation?

As the newly elected senior vice-president, my role, as I see it, is to help our president in any and all facets of running the organisation: be it as a "think tank", operational or logistics.

What about your life today outside B'nai B'rith?

My favorite occupation is baby-sitting for my grandchildren. I love to cook, play bridge, read, write, go to classical concerts, opera, theatre, ballet, film etc. I love to learn new languages (I am dreaming of a summer course in Italy). Now I speak Hungarian, Romanian, English, French, Dutch and some Spanish, German, Hebrew and Russian.

What do you consider to be your greatest strength and greatest weakness?

My greatest strength is that I never give up. My weakness is being a perfectionist. I ask much more of myself and of others than is necessary.