

Bob Narev

Bob Narev (1935 -) and his parents were arrested and sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, in August 1942, when he was seven years old. Bob's father died in Theresienstadt; he and his mother, Gertrud, remained there for two-and-a-half hungry years until February 1945, after which they were sent to Switzerland. The rest of their immediate family perished in the Holocaust. Bob and Gertrud immigrated to New Zealand in 1947. He went on to study law and complete a degree. Bob is a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit and serves on a number of Holocaust charitable trusts. He and his wife Freda, also a survivor, are actively involved in Holocaust education.

As every adolescent does, I once had a hundred dreams of possible careers which might earn me fame and fortune in the then remote world of grown-ups. Perhaps my favourite hope was that I might one day become a world-renowned novelist, a writer of historical epics and family sagas which would bring my name to the shelves of every bookshop and library in the world.

Success seemed to be a simple matter of hitting upon the right combination of the ingredients which can be found in any work of this genre – romance, intrigue, suspense, tragedy, triumph, far-away places, amazing coincidences, the timely intervention of fate, ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, all set against and influenced by a background of a tumultuous period in history.

My aspirations to international literary superstardom have faded somewhat over the years, but now I find myself presented with the opportunity to tell a story which contains all of the above elements, with the addition of one feature whose importance far outweighs that of any of the others – the saga is the true story of my own family.

Erich Narewczewitz was born in 1893 in Eschwege, about 200 kilometres north-east of Frankfurt. His parents, Emma and Nathan, were German Jews of Polish ancestry, who ran a small business. It was Nathan's second marriage, since his first wife Mathilde had died giving birth to their son Georg, who was two years older than Erich. A third son, Albert, was born in 1895. The Narewczewitz family was orthodox and well-respected. When Nathan died in 1918 the Chief Rabbi of the district referred to him in his eulogy as an ornament of the community and an exemplary model of a true Jew.

After attending the local school, Erich went on to University in Berlin and Göttingen. The First World War interrupted his studies and he served in the German Army for four years, and was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class. Subsequently he qualified as a High School Teacher of Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics. He returned to the Friedrich-Wilhelm School in Eschwege as a teacher in 1926, some 15 years after leaving there as a pupil.

In December 1934 Erich married Gertrud Dalberg, the youngest daughter of Moritz Dalberg, a merchant in Kassel, and his wife Agnes. The Dalberg family had been in Germany for several generations and considered themselves as German as any of their non-Jewish neighbours. Moritz was a Cohen, but the family had no strong religious tendencies and little, if any, Jewish observance was passed on to the two daughters.

Gertrud attended a German Jewish Youth Group but was not actively involved in the Jewish Community, apart from occasionally lending her singing talents to assist in fund-raising functions. She trained at the Conservatorium of Music in Frankfurt, going on to perform with the Frankfurt Opera. At the age of 30 her family and friends began to wonder whether she

would ever settle down and so a meeting was arranged with Erich, then a bachelor at 40. The introduction was a success and the couple married.

Robert Narewczewitz was born in 1935. His early years coincided with a period of increasing difficulty for his parents and for German Jews in general, as progressively harsher restrictions were placed on their activities. By the end of 1935 Erich was no longer permitted to work at the Government run school. His military service entitled him to a pension, but the town of Eschwege grew more reluctant to pay him as time went on. Early in 1936 the family moved to Frankfurt, where Erich was able to acquire a position at a Jewish High School, the Philanthropin. In September 1942, the Eschwege Town Council was advised by the Police Department of Frankfurt that it could discontinue its pension payments, as on 18 August 1942 the Jew, Erich Narewczewitz, had been “evacuated”.

By 1939 various members of the family were making plans to leave Germany. Gertrud’s sister Alice, with her husband Ernst Rothschild and their young daughter Ellen, selected a destination where cousins of the Rothschild and Adler family had preceded them, but about which they knew little – a small country called New Zealand that was the furthest point on earth from Hitler’s Reich.

Marga Narewczewitz, the daughter of Erich’s older brother Georg, was working as a housemaid in London. Her parents and sister managed to join her a matter of days before war broke out in September 1939.

For the rest of the family there was no escape. Erich and Gertrud, together with six year old Robert and his two elderly grandmothers Agnes Dahlberg and Emma Narewczewitz, were sent to Theresienstadt Concentration Camp in Czechoslovakia in August 1942. Once again, Erich’s military service affected their fate as Theresienstadt was kept by the Germans as a “Model Concentration Camp” to be shown to the Red Cross as evidence that Concentration Camps were not Death Camps, when in fact it was a transit point to the gas chambers and crematoria. Agnes died in 1942, Erich aged 50 and his mother Emma, aged 90, in 1943.

It is not known what happened to Erich’s younger brother Albert and his family – records at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem list them simply as “Verschollen” – missing, presumed dead. According to the town historian from Stolpersteine, Albert studied law, had a doctor’s degree in law, lived in Berlin, with wife Edith (*1907) and son Hans-Werner (*1931) were taken to Auschwitz on March 12, 1943 and presumably were murdered.

Three months before the end of the War, the Red Cross arranged an exchange of German prisoners-of-war for 1200 inmates of Theresienstadt. Nine year old Robert’s enthusiasm for a train ride overcame the doubts of his mother, who knew only too well the dangers of a long journey to an uncertain destination. The mother and son arrived safely in Switzerland in February 1945.

Robert spent the next two years in an orthodox orphanage near Vevey, while Gertrud contacted and corresponded with her brothers-in-law Georg in England and Ernst in New Zealand. Ellen Rothschild, then still a teenager but with a command of English which belied her origins, presented herself as a spokesperson to the Immigration Authorities and after several trips to Wellington arrangements were completed. In September 1947, Gertrud and Robert departed by sea in the Tidewater, a converted troop carrier, for Auckland via Suez, Aden, Colombo, Melbourne and Sydney. With them they took two young orphans, who were safely delivered to their adoptive families in Australia.

To make life easier for both themselves and locals, speedy name surgery reduced Narewczewitz to Narev, as Gertrud and Robert found their first New Zealand home on the chicken farm owned by Ernst and Alice Rothschild at Howick.

Gertrud initially earned a modest living as a decorator of chocolates at Heards factory, her lack of English severely restricting her initial employment options. As her command of the language improved, she was able to return to her true vocation by teaching piano at St Cuthbert's College and singing to private pupils, including the now well known operatic contralto Heather Begg. Auditions and performances on radio followed and re-established her reputation as a fine musician.

Robert, meanwhile, attended Howick District High School and proceeded to Auckland Grammar. His daily trip by bicycle and bus to school was much shortened when he and his mother moved to Mt. Eden. Robert won a University Junior Scholarship, at his first attempt, as well as the school's Churchill Prize for English. He continued at Auckland University, with Law and Arts Degrees, including the award of a Senior Scholarship in Languages.

We must return to Europe, to the Polish shtetl of Widze, near Vilna, where we find Jacob Malacki, son of the chasid Itzchak Malacki and his wife Taube.

The history of Freda Malacka's family is difficult to assemble as an uncle in England was the sole survivor of her parents' generation. Her older sister Liza's childhood memories were restricted by the fact that she was away at boarding school in Warsaw from her eleventh year to the outbreak of War and all town records were destroyed by fire.

As was common in Orthodox families, Taube ran a business – in this case selling footwear – to provide an income while her husband studied with the Rabbi.

Jacob Malacki, after an early cheder education, attended secular secondary school and thus avoided yeshiva, evidence no doubt of a practical mother rather than an absentee father. In due course he took over the family business and in the early 1920s he married Kreina Flexer, one of six children of a flax merchant, Shmuel Flexer, and his wife Freide. Kreina had been denied admission to secondary school because the Jewish quota had already been filled. She was educated in Vienna by her older brother and returned to teach languages at the local high school. The Malackis were not enthusiastic about a union between their only son and a blue-stocking who engaged in such immodest activities as riding a bicycle. Their worst fears were no doubt realised when the young couple acquired the first wireless radio set in Widze.

The Malackis had three daughters; Liza, Esther and Freda who was born in or about 1937. All records had been destroyed and as Liza had been away at school at the time of Freda's birth, the precise date could not be ascertained.

Liza was educated in a Polish secondary school in Warsaw. Attendance on Shabbat was compulsory, but the chasid's granddaughter did not take notes or carry her books on that day. In 1939 Esther went to stay with the Svirskis family in Ponevez, Lithuania. Her cousin Sonia had just married Bezalel Svirskis, who left later that year for New Zealand, there to be joined by his bride in 1941. The fate of the other members of the family who remained in Ponevez is not known.

When Hitler and Stalin divided Poland between them, Widze was briefly occupied by Russia. Capitalists like the Malackis were evicted from their homes and relegated to more humble accommodation. The family business was confiscated and Jacob supported the

family by working as a bookkeeper in a nearby town. Kreina took in a Polish woman friend, Karlovichova, and her son. The woman's husband, a landowner, had been deported.

When the Nazis occupied Widze in 1941, Jacob Malacki was shot along with other leading men of the Widze Jewish community. Karlovichova offered to hide the remaining family members on her farm, but Kreina believed that a flaxen haired, blue eyed four year old was less likely to be detected. Freda was despatched with a promise that she would be handed back to any family member who might return to claim her. Fella, as she was called for security reasons, the "niece" from Warsaw, lived on the farm as a practising Catholic for three years. The remaining members of the Widze Jewish community, including Kreina and Liza, were sent to the ghetto in nearby Vilna, from which Kreina was deported in 1943 to Keiserwald Concentration Camp in Kloge, Estonia. The camp was set alight as the Russian Army approached in 1944 and there were no survivors.

Liza Malacki escaped from the ghetto in 1943, on the night of her marriage to a young student of politics by the name of Itzchak Porus. The couple were separated during their escape and Liza joined a local band of guerrilla fighters. The group was supported by the Russians in daring endeavours to thwart the progress of the German Army. Liza was decorated by the Russians for her activities, although she came close to death first from serious wounds and later from typhus.

In 1944 Liza, the only surviving family member, went to collect her younger sister Freda from Mrs Karlovichova's farm. The woman had looked after Freda for the past three years and was understandably reluctant to entrust her charge to the care of an 18 year old girl, but family ties prevailed. Freda attended school in Russian occupied Poland until 1945, when Liza was at last reunited with her husband Itzchak. With Itzchak's sister Bronia Chosid and her family they wandered deeper into Poland and then through Displaced Persons' Camps of Germany, ending up in Landsberg in 1946. The Landsberg camp had a Jewish day school, where lessons were conducted in Hebrew because a new common language was needed to enable Jewish children from all over Europe to communicate.

Liza and Itzchak were both working and also taking advantage of the opportunities provided within the camp for learning new skills. The family belonged to a Zionist group, whose activities increased their interest in making Aliyah.

However, the Porus family's plans to emigrate illegally to Palestine were postponed when Freda contracted an ear infection. A different opportunity presented itself shortly thereafter, when word was received from the Svirskis family in Auckland that permission had been granted for them to sponsor the immigration to New Zealand of Liza, Itzchak and Freda.

This time there were no unforeseen setbacks and the cousins were united in Auckland in time for Pesach in 1949. Freda acquired an instant group of younger "brothers" in the Svirskis boys, Eric, Zelwyn and Willie, soon to be followed by baby Harry. All attended the nearby Bayfield School, where there were a number of other Jewish pupils, due no doubt to the popularity at the time of Herne Bay as a district for Jewish families.

Freda went on to Auckland Girls' Grammar where she became a prefect in her final year. Liza worked in a knitwear factory until the birth of her first son Jack in 1952. Itzchak was employed by Bezalel Svirskis in his Pacific Chemicals factory and eventually became foreman there. Before long, the family had saved up enough money to allow them to move into their own home in Howick in 1954. Fate then again proved cruel when Itzchak was killed in an industrial accident in December 1964.

Freda joined Habonim shortly after her arrival in New Zealand and later became one of its leaders. It was here that she met Robert Narev.

In March of 1957 the couple became engaged. Freda was by this stage working as a bacteriologist for the Auckland Hospital Board, while Robert was a law clerk in the legal firm of Glaister Ennor & Kiff, completing his studies part-time.

In January 1959 Freda and Robert were married. In 1962, the first of the new Narev generation, daughter Kim, was born on Kreina Malacki's birthday. Eric, known as Rick, was born in 1964 and Ian in 1966.

The activities of the Narev family in both the Jewish and general communities continued to expand during these years. Robert was at various times President of the Auckland Zionist Society, Treasurer of the Jewish National Fund and B'nai Brith, Treasurer and President of the Zionist Federation of New Zealand, and member for many years of the Board of Management of the Auckland Hebrew Congregation and Treasurer of that body for two terms, as well as serving on the Auckland Hebrew Congregation Trust Board, the Bernard Goldwater Educational Trust Board and the Auckland Jewish Youth Centre Trust Board and acting as Honorary Solicitor for a number of Jewish organisations. He became a partner with Glaister Ennor & Kiff in 1963 and a Notary Public in 1969, later serving on the Executive Committee of the Society of Notaries and also as a Director of various public and private companies.

Freda was a member of WIZO and the Synagogue Guild, assisted with synagogue lunches and participated in many community musical productions. Once Ian started school, she began part-time University studies, gaining a B.A. in Education in 1981. She became involved in voluntary work for the Marriage Guidance Council in the early 1970s, mostly as a Counsellor, but also as a Supervisor and for some time as a member of the Committee. Her counselling skills later led her to become a member of the Life-line Crisis Team and of the Family Courts Association, where she served as a member of the Executive Committee. On completing her degree, she worked part-time as Counselling Co-ordinator for the Society for the Protection of Home and Family for four and a half years before setting up her own counselling practice in 1986.

Ian was a foundation pupil at Kadimah College in 1972, constituting one-fifth of the school roll in that year. Kim, Ian and Rick all had distinguished careers at school and university. At the same time they all played a prominent part in Jewish youth movements. From 1979 until 1988 there was always at least one B'nei Akiva leader by the name of Narev, and often two.

As our recital of events reaches the present day, it is perhaps appropriate to take stock of the successes, the losses and the lessons which emerge from this saga. Remnants of a German and of a Polish family having, in many respects miraculously survived one of the darkest periods in Jewish history, have come together in New Zealand, where they sought and found a new and better life.

But the decimation of their members and the irreparable losses of vital portions of their heritage are only too apparent – the unfillable gaps in family history, the absence of memories of contact with, and anecdotes from, grandparents, the lack of photographs, books and religious objects from the family home will leave not only present but also future generations permanently the poorer.

Undoubtedly the temptation for the Holocaust survivors is to consign the pain to distant corners of memory, to shelter their children from all knowledge of the tragic fate of their

families and to submerge themselves anonymously in their adopted new environment. But this would fail to recognise the sacrifices made by those who either perished, as did so many of our two families, or exposed themselves as did Liza, Itzhak and Karlovichova, to great personal danger to thwart the murderous designs of the Nazis.

In endeavouring to answer the almost unanswerable questions of why my parents were spared, sense can only be made of a reply which postulates a duty not to forget, not to allow others to forget or to deny the Holocaust and to ensure once more in the long history of our people that we retain and strengthen our identity, our traditions and our commitment to the moral and spiritual fundamentals which have contributed to the survival of the Jewish people through the ages.