

THE BEGINNING OF A ROAD

One day in April this year, while randomly checking my emails, I was surprised to see a round-robin message from a cousin in New York to my entire mother's family inviting us to attend a ceremony in Germany. My mother was from Germany and her family are now scattered across the USA, Europe, South America, and Israel.

My great-uncle Jupp (Josef) Weiss, my maternal grandmother's brother, came from a small town near Cologne called Flamersheim and was born 120 years ago on Thursday 16 May. On that anniversary the town had decided to unveil the new street name sign – a new housing estate with the main street to be called Jupp-Weiss-Strasse.

This was giving me a month's notice and I had back-to-back commitments, although that actual day was free. I used the commitments as an excuse for a few days not to go to Germany and open up a very difficult part of the family history. My mother had arrived in London from Düsseldorf in 1933 and would never speak about the country of her birth. But this was ridiculous. If my Aunt Joke, the 82-year-old daughter-in-law (and stepdaughter!) of the man to be honoured, could go, so could I. She was last in Germany in 1945, when she was liberated from Bergen-Belsen. She came to the ceremony, but refused to sleep in Germany: she was driven to and from Holland on the day. If she could do that, I could make the effort to take a one-night trip to Cologne.

I flew with Germanwings, who were amazing, to Cologne and picked up my hire car. Having left home at 5:30 am, I was sitting having coffee outside Cologne Cathedral at midday. Hire car, road system, parking all easy to sort out – even though I was on my own and don't speak a word of German, and even though I had to find someone to show me how to release the hand brake and couldn't get the 'sat nav' to work And here were some of the family: Anat and Atara, two sisters and my second cousins from Israel, Anat's daughter Roni, with Hans-Dieter Arntz.

But what was it all about? Why was Uncle Jupp being honoured?

Last year a German non-Jewish historian and Holocaust specialist, Hans-Dieter Arntz, wrote a book about Jupp Weiss: *Der letzte Judenälteste von Bergen-Belsen: Josef Weiss – würdig in einer unwürdigen Umgebung* (The Last Jewish Elder of Bergen-Belsen:

A Worthy Man in an Unworthy Place) (Aachen: Helios Verlag, tel 0241-555426, 710 pp., ISBN 978-3-86933-082-2, 38 euros).

Arntz was instrumental in getting the local council of Euskirschen to name the street and to put up a plaque on the house where Jupp was born and where my great-grandparents had lived. Arntz explained that he was shocked to learn about the history of the war at school when his parents, who had clearly lived through the experience, never spoke a word about it to him. He has also written a book on Kristallnacht. He lives in the area where Jupp was born and seems to have become fascinated with the history of this one man.

In 1935 Jupp moved to Holland. He worked to get Jews out of Germany but in 1943 was deported to Bergen-



The family, with Hans-Dieter Arntz, under the new street name. Madeleine Abramson is on the far right

Belsen. There he was made *Judenälteste* ('Jewish Elder') and, unlike some of the 'Elders', he was neither corrupt nor in the thrall of the SS. He was honest and fair and did his utmost to obtain the best living conditions possible for the camp inmates, who respected him, as did the German authorities.

Our information comes from letters he wrote, from his sons, and from obituaries written by other prisoners who survived. The latter say that he was constantly trying to improve conditions and rations, lying about the numbers of inmates present to gain extra food, and keeping spirits up in various ways, such as helping people celebrate festivals and run *seders*. His rigorously when it came to cleanliness and quarantine kept the incidence of typhus down.

In April 1945 Jupp was put on a train for Theresienstadt. The train was liberated by the Russians but back at Bergen-Belsen, without Jupp's cleanliness measures, typhus took over and, by the

time the camp had been liberated, the disease had killed thousands.

Now, in Flamersheim, the ceremony was in two parts – the unveiling of the street name and then on to the old house, where a plaque explaining Jupp's connection with the property was to be unveiled too.

At the street, my aunt made a speech along with Arntz and several local dignitaries. At the house, one of Jupp's granddaughters, Atara Dayan, made a speech, as did the mayor. Some 120 people, including what looked like a local scout group, attended the ceremonies. Then there were refreshments for everyone in the church hall when we could talk to the townspeople. The Protestant lady priest was interesting. Many people had read the book about Jupp but had found it difficult reading – it wasn't easy to be faced with what had happened in their own town.

As well as attending the ceremony, we went to the local Jewish cemetery, which is small and now well kept. It had been destroyed by the Nazis and reconstituted later by the locals. Some of the headstones were upside down – the locals didn't know which way up the Hebrew letters should go. Our great-grandparents' graves were very much intact and this was a moving moment – six cousins together from three countries – and here were our common ancestors, our great-grandparents Albert Weiss and Mathilde Michel, who died peacefully in the

1920s before tragedy struck.

Back in the 1920s, the Weiss-Michel family owned several shops in Cologne, including ladies' fashion shops and a hat shop, and they gradually built up a large department store called Michel. When Jewish families were no longer allowed to own such stores, they sold it to the Jacobi family (non-Jewish despite the name). The two families were on good terms and Jupp Weiss was in charge of what would today be called human resources at the renamed Jacobi store, until forced to flee. We visited the modern store, rebuilt after being destroyed by Allied bombing during the war, and spoke to the current Mr Jacobi, who showed us some of the history of the place.

The event was well covered by local and Cologne newspapers and there was a radio item too. For me, it is the beginning of a road to discover more about my mother's family.

Madeleine Abramson