



Biography of Ernest Henry Goldsmith

by Netta Goldsmith



Ernest Goldsmith age 72, graduate ceremony 23 April 1994. On the day he received his BA (Arts) from the Open University. He had a degree in engineering and took this second degree after he retired.

(photo: private)

Ernest Goldsmith was born in Nuremberg on 19 March 1922. At that time he was known as Ernst Goldschmidt. Until he was sixteen he lived at Tiergartenstraße 66 (now renamed Parsifalstraße) in a house that his father Ludwig had had built a few years after his marriage to Sophie Friedborig. It was a large, attractive house with a balcony all the way round it. Ernest remembered the room in the roof where he and his brother Fred, who was three years older and later Harry who was born in 1928, played with an elaborate train set that was laid out there. He also remembered the conservatory because it had a Sirius which only bloomed in the dark. One night he sat up with the family for hours waiting for it to come into flower.

The Tiergartenstraße house overlooked the park where the Nazi rallies were held and from the balcony the Goldschmidts could watch and hear Hitler's enthusiastic supporters cheering themselves hoarse and saluting their leader as he stood above them on a dais, spectacularly lit by torches against the night sky, telling them (among other things) what a great nation Germany would be if they got rid of the Jews.

The Goldschmidts were Jewish but if asked would have said they were German. Their forbears had been living in Bavaria since at least the 16th century and had become assimilated. They were also secular, with Ludwig going to the synagogue only once a year on the Day of Atonement. He had fought in the Kaiser's army in WW1 and was awarded the Iron Cross. After the war he married Sophie and ran the family business making stoves, which had moved in 1897 from Neumarkt to bigger premises in Nuremberg.

Sophie had been a student at Heidelberg University but broke off her studies in 1914 to become a nurse, for which she received a medal to mark her service in a hospital throughout the war.

After going to Primary School Ernest went to the *Reformrealgymnasium* in Nuremberg. He was sometimes in trouble with his father because he was naughty and, unlike his brothers, he did not work hard at school. Nor was he encouraged to do so by his teachers who never gave Jewish boys high marks. The most they could hope for was a comment 'Satisfactory' for any written work they did. Ernest did however learn to speak some English.



Nuremberg *Reformrealgymnasium*: Ernest Goldsmith is the 4th from the left in the front row
(photo: private)

The Jewish and Aryan boys did not mix at school, partly because it was not considered a good thing to have Jewish friends and also because the social life of the young Aryans centred round the Hitler Youth, to which they were all expected to belong. Excluded from this the Jewish boys formed their own youth club where they could take up sport and go for country hikes.

Early in 1937, some time before Ernest's 15th birthday a photographer came to the school to take the annual group picture of the pupils and staff. Afterwards he asked if he could take a few pictures of two individual boys. Ernest did not realise he was selected because he was Jewish, though afterwards his father was cross that he had not been suspicious and disappeared as other Jewish boys had done to avoid being chosen. The photograph of Ernest was published in Fritz Fink's *Die Judenfrage im Unterricht* and later reprinted by Julius Streicher in *Der Stürmer* in the October 1937, no. 44. The photograph appeared alongside one of a fair, Nordic boy who, according to Streicher, represented the true German, in contrast to Ernest the alien Jew. As the newspaper had a big circulation and was posted up on street corners, Ernest was often recognised and shouted at when he went out in Nuremberg. His father took him away from school and put him to work in the stove factory.

More and more restrictions were placed on Jews during the next year. Sophie tried to persuade her husband to leave Germany, as many of their friends had done, but he shrank from the idea of beginning all over again as a refugee in a foreign country, especially as he knew the Nazis would not allow him to take any money with him. However he did send his eldest son to England after Fred was stoned by some of the boys at his school, the *Melanchthon-Gymnasium*.

One of the rules the Nazis introduced forbade Jews to employ Aryan servants. However the Goldschmidts still had their housekeeper who, being over fifty, was exempt from the embargo. She lived with her husband in a flat in the basement of the house in Tiergartenstraße. On 9 November 1938 she was woken by hammering on the front door. It was the Brown Shirts. Threatening to break the door down if she did not let them in, they entered and wrecked the house, breaking up furniture and smashing china. Many of them were young and drunk. Some amused themselves by slashing a feather bed. As they had already broken the windows, the bedroom was soon full of feathers swirling in the wind. Another boy wandered about waving a knife before cutting a deep gash in the portrait of Sophie's father. It was a terrifying experience. The next morning the SS came to arrest Ludwig but went away when Sophie told them he was not in the house. They did however arrest Sophie's brother Ernst who lived alone and had no one to lie for him. He was sent to Buchenwald where he died.

Ludwig had already decided the family must emigrate after the stove factory was Aryanised, and he had applied for visas to go to England, where he had already spent time as a young man, studying business methods. *Kristallnacht* made the matter more urgent. He sent Ernest and Harry on ahead, taking them to the station, along with the three daughters of his friend Sigmund Oppenheimer. On the platform Ludwig talked to an Englishman. He was a complete stranger but offered to keep an eye on the youngsters throughout the journey. This he did, including preventing the Customs officers at Dover strip searching the teenage girls.



Ernest centre, Fred left, Harry right at the 25th wedding anniversary party for Ernest & Netta, 1984
(photo: private)

Ernest's first years in England were not easy ones. Fred had been able to go to school and then University College London where he took a degree in Geography. After that he joined the army, in the Pioneer Corps at first as a labourer, before transferring to a combat unit. By the end of the war he had become a Major and while serving in Italy, became a life-long lover of opera. Harry aged 11 was able to go to school and eventually to Balliol College Oxford. Ernest aged 16 was considered too old however to resume his already broken education. Like anyone else who did not have a job, he was directed into war work. He was sent to a factory in Bradford, Yorkshire. There the other workers on the shop floor knew hardly any-

thing about politics. As far as they were concerned the strange newcomer was German and therefore an enemy. They gave him a hard time until the foreman, realising he was being bullied, talked to his persecutors, telling them that as a Jew Ernest had no more love of the Nazis than they had.

After the war the Goldschmidts all became British subjects and anglicised their names. Ernest knew he did not want to spend a lifetime as a manual labourer, and decided to get more education. Encouraged by a Member of Parliament Christopher Beaumont, who had befriended the family, he studied and passed examinations in the subjects that would qualify him to go to college. Then he went to what later became Loughborough University and took a degree in Mechanical Engineering. He got a First and this enabled him to work at Pera, a research establishment in Melton Mowbray. However he had long harboured a wish to be a writer, so he left Pera, took cheap lodgings and wrote stories. Sadly the money he had saved ran out before he got anything published, so he got a job as a teacher of Engineering, first a junior post at Reading University and then a more senior one at Hatfield College. There he made one of his closest friends John Flint, a linguist who liked getting to know foreigners. As it happened none of the friends Ernest made in England were Jewish, not because he avoided them but because he did not meet many.



Hatfield 1953: Ernest (2nd right) with his students at Hatfield College
(photo: private)

In the summer of 1958 he spent part of his holiday at a Creative Writing course in Buxton, Derbyshire. Netta Murray was also there and so was a large, unwieldy man whose trousers were tied up with string. He talked people to death. Added to which, for much of the night, being an insomniac, he stomped heavily up and down the corridors. The others snubbed him and he soon became the butt of jokes on all sides. However Netta noticed that a handsome man with a slight foreign accent always listened courteously to the rambling discourses of this oddball and never joined in the banter about him. She saw Ernest was kind and, when she got to know him better, realised he would never victimise anyone. When the course ended they went back to London together, where they continued to see each other. They got married the following July.

Ernest's parents did not mind their son marrying out and Netta came to like them very much for their warmth and generous ways. Ludwig had mellowed and Ernest was no longer in awe of him as he had been as a child, though Sophie was still ruled by him. Netta soon discovered Ernest's mother was a thoughtful woman who read a great deal, as well as having taught herself to be a splendid cook.



Ernest's parents Sophie and Ludwig (Louis) Goldsmith, early 1960s
(photo: private)

On coming to England, Ludwig had borrowed about £300 and had gone into business with Sigmund Oppenheimer, who had also fled from Germany. The firm imported and sold cheap toys from China. Their premises in London were destroyed during the blitz and they moved to Burnley in the north of England for the rest of the war. Here the Goldsmiths were even more of an oddity than they were in cosmopolitan London but they did their best to fit in. Ernest once caught sight of his father standing in front of the bathroom mirror, practising a particular gesture the locals used when they greeted one another.

By 1959 the toy business was doing well and Ludwig paid for Ernest and Netta to have their honeymoon in the Dolomites. Driving back from Italy across Europe, their old Morris Minor broke down in Germany. The car managed to limp to a garage just outside Nuremberg. Up until then whenever Ernest had had to speak German, he said little, haltingly. However, Netta noticed he became more and more fluent as he argued with the garage mechanic about repairing the car, until finally the man said, 'You come from round here don't you?' and it transpired that they had been at the same Primary School together. Being in Germany again made Ernest uncomfortable. He could not believe the people had changed. Sitting on the terrace of a restaurant in Nuremberg, he gazed at the passers by, wondering what those who were his own age or older had been doing in the war.

After their marriage Ernest and Netta decided to go to America for a while. They stayed nine years. Ernest got a job teaching Engineering in the University of Missouri and Netta taught English to the foreign students and embarked on a Ph.D. Their daughter Portia was born on 4 July 1960. When she was little she imagined the fireworks celebrating Independence Day were for her birthday. She developed a strong American accent, based on that of the hillbillies in the Ozarks, and started correcting her mother's pronunciation.



Portia Goldsmith, age one year
(photo: private)

Netta liked the U.S.A. much more than Ernest did. He found it difficult to acclimatise himself to yet another new country and the relaxed, leisurely pace of English life suited his personality better than the more frenetic American way. On a visit home for his father's funeral in 1968, he was offered a job at the College of Technology in Chatham, Kent. He decided to take it and so returned with his wife and daughter to England where he spent the rest of his life.

During their years in the U.S.A. Ernest and his family lived in nine different flats and houses but, after they found a pleasant, old house in the spa town of Tunbridge Wells, they did not move again. Portia passed the exam which enabled her to go to Tunbridge Wells Grammar School, while Netta got a job at the grammar school in the nearby town of Tonbridge, taking a year's unpaid leave at one stage in order to complete her Ph.D.

In 1998 Ernest was invited to Neumarkt for the centenary celebrations of the first bicycle factory *Express-Werke* in Europe which his grandfather had founded. Netta went with him, together with Portia, her husband and several other members of the Goldsmith clan. No one they met was old enough to have taken part in persecuting the Jews and were clearly embarrassed by the Nazis. They were extremely hospitable, and eager to show that Germany was now a very different country. A street sign saying Goldschmidtstraße, removed in 1938, had been replaced. The Mayor gave a speech in which he said the bicycle factory had brought employment to the town and put it on the map. Ernest gave interviews to the local television and radio stations, as well as to a schoolgirl who was writing a thesis on the Jews in nearby Sulzbürg, where his ancestors once lived. Meanwhile Netta talked in her atrocious German to three old men who had worked in the bicycle factory. They said it had been all right working for the Goldschmidts, adding they still met every month to talk, over a few glasses of beer, about their time together at *Express-Werke*. Even Ernest dropped some of his guard in the face of all the goodwill he met with on this visit.



Ernest in Neumarkt 1998 for the centenary celebration of the *Express-Werke* bicycle factory which the Goldschmidts started
(photo: private)

His childhood in Nuremberg had been happy until Hitler came to power.

He missed the country he had been born in, where the customs and food were familiar -- he loved potato dumplings though Netta did not understand why. As he and Netta drove back home across Germany, he kept on making detours to visit towns and cafes where he had once stayed or enjoyed a meal with his parents. Many of the restaurants he remembered were still there. He also took Netta to several wine cellars in Bavaria to taste the latest vintage and stock up Sophie's father had been a wine merchant and the whole family were connoisseurs.

After Ernest retired from teaching he decided to take another degree, this time with the Open University in the Humanities. It was an interesting course and Ernest graduated in 1994 when he was seventy-two. Netta started to write books after she retired. She published a couple of academic works with Ashgate, before deciding to write a novel. This became *Magda*

and the Rat Catchers and was printed by Trafford in 2008. Based on Ernest's experiences and those of other emigrants from Nuremberg, it told the story of two young people growing up in Nuremberg under the Nazis. It was aimed at teenage readers and tried to tell in an accessible way how the Nazis succeeded in taking control of Germany and why so few people opposed them. After graduating, Ernest went to History of Art courses at the Courthold Institute and elsewhere in London. One evening he came home and as usual told Netta what the latest lecture had been about. He seemed to be perfectly well but the next morning was obviously ill. He had caught a particularly virulent type of pneumonia and died three weeks later in December 2001.

Ernest made another life for himself after he went to England and was happy to be there. But he remained an outsider. As was the case with many immigrants, assimilation had to wait until the next generation. Portia, who has been educated entirely in England, now works as a Consultant Dermatologist at the London Hospital. She is completely British though her family history makes her especially interested in the patients from a score of countries she sees at the hospital in Whitechapel, some of whom are refugees.

Ernest did not live to see his granddaughters Zoë and Natasha growing up. When they were small children he enjoyed playing with them and they loved being with him. Zoë is now eighteen and in the autumn will be going to Oxford to read for a degree in Physics and Philosophy. Meanwhile she is having a gap year and may spend part of it in Germany if she can get a job there. Her written German is good but would like to become colloquially fluent. Red haired Natasha is the more volatile granddaughter. Unlike her sister she works in fits and starts. She juggles different interests, playing drums, singing in a choir and acting. At the moment she is in two school plays, one in English and the other in French. It is impossible to predict what either girl will make of her life, but Ernest would have been happy watching them develop.



Zoë (left) age 17, Natasha age 15
(photo: private)

As for Netta, she rejoices that there are still Goldsmiths in the world.

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