

A surprise shared past with a Pastor

Dr Bea Lewkowicz discovered an unexpected family connection while recently recording an interview for the AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive.

In the last 30 years I have interviewed many different Holocaust Survivors and refugees from Nazism who found refuge in Britain. Sometimes the interviewees are connected to each other in different ways, through family relations or friendship, through the experiences they describe, through the same places they remember, or, a rare occasion, through a photograph. Some years ago, one interviewee showed me a photograph of herself with a group of children, captured in 1937/38 in the playground of a small Jewish Kindergarten in Berlin, and by chance I learnt that another interviewee recognised herself among the group of children.

It is less common that I find a direct personal connection between myself and an interviewee, but it sometimes happens. Kindertransport refugee Kurt Marx BEM told me how he stayed in a hostel with a Winton child, Hugo Marom, and that he was in possession of a letter written by Hugo's father. Hugo was a close friend of my aunt and mother, and I was able to send a digital copy of the letter to Hugo's daughter in Israel.

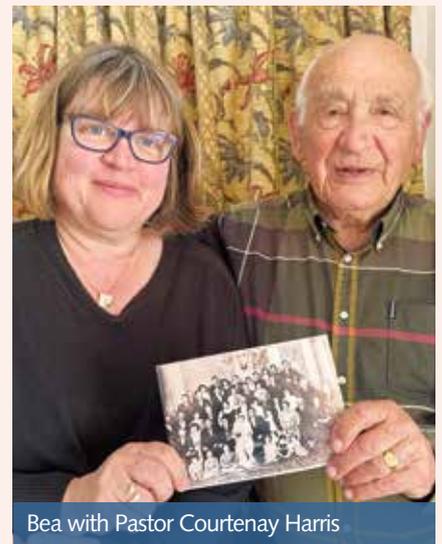
But nothing prepared me for the most unexpected connection I found when I interviewed Pastor Courtenay Harris, who came via Kindertransport in June 1939. As soon as I entered his Gloucestershire cottage I was struck by his uncanny resemblance to my father, a Holocaust survivor from Upper Silesia. During the interview I learnt that Courtenay's name at birth was

Kurt Walter Badrian and that he was born in 1934 in the Silesian town of Beuthen (today Bytom in Poland). He grew up in a Christian orphanage and the Lutheran sisters decided to save the four Jewish children in their care and send them on a Kindertransport. He was adopted by a devout Christian couple in Norfolk who renamed him Courtenay. For most of his life he knew little about his origins and biological parents. But after his adoptive mother passed in 1993, Courtenay, with the support of his wife and children, began to investigate his background. This journey led them to Michael Tobias OBE, a genealogist renowned for his meticulous research into Holocaust-era family histories.

At Tobias's urging, Courtenay underwent DNA testing. Through a combination of this DNA evidence and historical research, Tobias discovered that Courtenay's biological parents were Getzel Ulreich Elter and Frieda Badrian, not married at the time of his birth. Getzel Ulreich had been murdered in the Holocaust and his mother had died in Budapest.

I had asked for the names of Courtenay's parents at the beginning of the interview and written them down. But it was only later, when Courtenay showed me a photo of his biological father and the results of Tobias' research, that I saw the correct spelling of the Ulreich name. The name looked very familiar so I checked my father's family tree on my phone and there it was in black and white: my grandmother's maiden name was Ulreich and her family had lived in the same area of Upper Silesia as Courtenay's family.

This all seemed too much of a coincidence so I asked Courtenay if I could contact the genealogist Michael Tobias directly. He readily agreed and within a few days I managed to speak directly to Michael. As I had done a



Bea with Pastor Courtenay Harris

DNA test some years ago, Michael was able to very quickly establish a match with Courtenay. My grandmother Regina had a brother who was also called Getzel Ulreich and seems to have been a first or second cousin of Courtenay's father.

This discovery was nothing short of astonishing. I had never imagined that, while recording testimonies for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive, I would meet a distant cousin of my father. Although their lives were so different – Courtenay came as a young child to the UK, while my father survived the war in six concentration camps – their shared ancestry was unmistakably visible in their striking resemblance. At the end of the interview, Courtenay showed me a family wedding photograph he had found, which might include my grandmother or one of her siblings.

I feel deeply privileged to have met Courtenay and recorded his story and I look forward to learning more about the history that connects us.

To find out more please go to <https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/RefugeeVoices/pastor-courtney-harris->

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