

## “My special Dad on his 90th Birthday”

### The life of David Stelman by Martin Stelman



As everybody knows, my dad, David Stelman, is an interesting guy. For a start, he's the only guy I know who's got two birthdays - February 25<sup>th</sup> is his Russian-Polish birthdate, and March 7<sup>th</sup> is his British birthdate!

My dad is also interesting because, unlike most people, who are usually born in hospital or at home or in a maternity ward, my dad has to be different - he was born in a **well** (water supply) – which I assume was dry.

The well that my dad was born in was in a place called Konsk, in South-Eastern Poland; a part of Poland that had changed hands a number of times during the previous half-century – it has been part of the Russian Empire, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the time my dad was born, it was the Germans and the Russians who were fighting, and there was a full-blown battle going on during the First World War. This was the reason my grandmother thought a well was probably the safest place to have a baby.

Unfortunately, the famous well couldn't quite provide enough protection. There was shelling above, and Dad's eardrum was damaged during his birth. Thinking baby David's condition might have been treatable, the family upped sticks and headed south for Vienna in search of a doctor who could help.

In 1915, the year of Dad's birth, there was no TV, no Internet and no “Big Brother”. My dad has had a long and eventful life and he has seen many changes. In 1915, even the motor car and the aeroplane had not been around for long. Sadly, the internal combustion engine and the flying machine were mostly being used to blow up buildings and people at the time. For most people, the horse and cart were the preferred form of transport and that's how Solomon and Franz, (David's parents) and David travelled to the capital of Austria-Hungary, a distance of some 300 miles.

It was discovered from the ear specialist that the damage to David's eardrums could not be repaired. So the Stelmans decided to settle in Vienna, preferring the international atmosphere of Vienna to Polish provinces.

There were Deaf Schools in Vienna and David was soon enlisted. However, the attitude to deafness was not enlightened.

When David was 16, the Headmaster of the Deaf School said David was only be capable of doing semi-skilled work because of his deafness. When David's father said that David should take up a 5-year ap-

prenticeship as a diamond setter, the Headmaster said “Impossible!” My grandfather and Dad ignored this advice and David started his apprenticeship.

In 1934, with Hitler already in power in Germany, the Fascists were also on the rise in Austria. After a close shave with some brownshirts, or whatever colour was all the rage with the Austrian Fascists that year, my grandfather, Solomon, decided Vienna was no longer a safe place for a Jewish family. He decided to try to move his jewellery business to Britain. While he was gone, Vienna was in turmoil. The block of flats where David and his mother (Franzi) lived was hit by shells. Solomon immediately sent for Franz, David and David's little sister Truda, as civil war broke out in Austria - the civil war that came just before the arrival of the Nazis.

So, with 2 more years of his apprenticeship to go, David was now living in England, no longer an Austrian, a Polish or even a British citizen, because he was now “stateless” and would continue to be so until his situation was regularised after the war. In these early years in London, David “felt like a prisoner.” Imagine how tough it must have been for him. He had left his many deaf friends behind in Vienna, he was terribly lonely and he had no understanding of English, let alone any ability to communicate in British sign language. However, he soon started at an English evening class for deaf people and was quickly praised as being the best student - despite being the only foreigner. This is typical of my dad – determined, dedicated, like a dog with a bone – he never lets go.

Now, thankfully able to communicate, David started going to Deaf Clubs and became a fully active member of the National Deaf Club. Later, he became so integrated in the Club that he directed a number of plays, including “The Mixture”. This murder mystery won top-prize for Best Play by a Deaf Club in UK. In the 1990s, as one of the oldest surviving members of the Club, he became the Honorary President.

But let's backtrack for a moment to the fateful year, 1939. Where was my dad in the year the storm clouds were gathering over Europe? He was 24 years old, as handsome as a matinee idol, and having a whale of a time at the Deaf Olympics in Stockholm. A telegram arrived from his father telling David to come home immediately, without any reasons given.

Actually, the Nazis had just invaded Poland or Czechoslovakia, I'm not sure. So, did my dad behave like a dutiful son? No way! Not only did he decide to stay right to the end of the Deaf Olympics, by which time a second more urgent telegram had arrived ... he decided to head off with his Deaf friends to Denmark for some *more* partying! Denmark, by the way, was pretty much next in line on the Nazi's hit list. We can all sympathise - I guess he thought “I'm a big boy now, I'll do what I want.” We can also sympathise with my grandparents tearing their hair out back in London. So picture the scene, Deaf guy in Denmark – not a clue that the Second World War was about to explode. He was trying to work out why everybody in Denmark was so uptight and so down in the dumps, so he popped into the nearest newsagent and there it hit him right between the eyes - the front pages were all full of talk of war. OK, so **now** he understood the telegram!!! Off he went to the British Embassy, who put him on

the last boat to UK before Mr Chamberlain declared war on Germany. The boat that dropped him off at Harwich was attacked by U-Boats on its return to Denmark. My dad, on the other hand, was lucky to escape with no more than a stern smack in the face from my granny!

During the Blitz, David was evacuated to Leeds, where he continued to work as a diamond-setter, sending off parcels of his finished work to his father in London. While in Leeds, my dad unexpectedly found himself caught up in a *shidduch* (matchmaking) cooked up by my late Auntie Brina, a deaf woman who sung the praises of her beautiful niece Lily Nabarro. Lily was a Deaf seamstress from the East End of London. David liked the sound of this woman and when he returned to London after the Blitz, he arranged to meet Lily through her brother, Coleman, at Manor House near Finsbury Park. After half an hour waiting and kicking his heels, he thought he had been stood up. Little did he know that Lily had vowed to only go out with hearing men – maybe because she'd already been out with a couple of GIs.

Back at Lily's place, her brother was desperately trying to persuade her to meet this charming man from Vienna. Knowing Lily, and how stubborn she could be, Coleman must have done an absolutely terrific "sell" on my dad, because just as he was about to give up and go home, disappointed, she turned up for the date! They soon fell in love, despite Solomon and Franzi's initial objections. Their biggest worry was that if David married a deaf woman, their children would be deaf. Nevertheless, Lily and David were married in November 1946. So glamorous was this couple, and so special the circumstances, that a wedding photo appeared in several national newspapers, showing the two of them looking like a couple of movie stars.

My Mum and Dad lived happily together for 57 years. There were many highlights during those years, too many to recount. I'm led to believe that 1948, the year I was born, was fairly high up in the top ten! The previous year, 1947, was a pretty good year too - the jewellery industry was asked to submit a wedding present for Elizabeth II's wedding. Of the 50 entries from the industry, the future Queen chose a beautiful brooch made by David and his fellow craftsmen - a great honour! 1994 is another date that springs to mind - the year Dad became a grandfather to a baby boy called Ruben. But it's a toss-up between that and the 1997/8 football season when Arsenal won the Double! More about the Arsenal later...

Lily died in 2003 and David found himself utterly lost and alone in the flat in which he had spent all his married life.

On an outing with the Jewish Deaf Association, he was fortunate indeed to reacquaint himself with Joan Weinberg, a Deaf woman he had known on and off socially for many years. Recently widowed, Joan herself was feeling lonely too and the two of them became very attached to each other. On January 31<sup>st</sup> 2005, David moved into Joan's flat in North Wembley to start a new life at 89 years old! May they enjoy many years of happiness together.

David has always been a keen photographer, having acquired a box camera in Vienna at the age of 14.

He graduated to a Leica and then a Rolleiflex and, in the 1950s and 60s, he had a small photo studio and dark room. He supplemented his earnings as a diamond-setter with some photographic work. He won a photo competition sponsored by Kodak and the judges - photographers from the Daily Mirror - judged his photo of a street urchin in Kilburn to be the winner. He is still a fine photographer to this day, with a great eye and natural instinct for composition.

What has always been remarkable about my dad is that he has always enthusiastically embraced new Technology. My mum called it "keeping up with the Jones's" but, bless her, I don't think she quite understood that he was, and is, despite his years, a complete modernist. Single Lens Reflex cameras were brought in and he didn't mess about getting all nostalgic about his old Leica - he sold it and got a Single Lens Reflex (SLR). Digital cameras were brought in, so he chucked out the SLR and bought the Digital. Video instead of 8mm film stock? No problem ... replaced film with video. No surprise then that, in the age of the personal computer, Captain Gadget (Dad) went out and bought himself a laptop computer, went to JDA's computer classes to learn how to use it and is now as good on the computer as you could expect any 90 year old to be.

So now we come to that inevitable moment when we have to mention Arsenal, one of my dad's greatest passions. This, whether a blessing or a curse, is a trait he has passed on not only to me but to my son. My dad has been a "Gooner" (Arsenal supporter) since he arrived in the UK in 1934 - the year the great Herbert Chapman was in charge at Arsenal.

David went to Arsenal almost every Saturday afternoon for 50 years, until the 1980s when Highbury became an all-seater stadium. At 90 he must be one of Arsenal's oldest surviving supporters! David has always been a keen sportsman - tennis, badminton, table-tennis, skiing and swimming. A little-known fact - he achieved a great triumph in 1932, coming 2<sup>nd</sup> in breast-stroke in the European Swimming Championships for the Deaf.

Even at 90, swimming is still one of his favourite pastimes. I live in Spain. There, May is not a month for a dip in the sea - the warm-blooded Spanish think it's far too cold. In May, you will not find a single Spaniard swimming in the sea. But if you were to look out at the sea one May morning at our local beach, you would have seen one man, one man only swimming in the sea. Who was he? You guessed it - David, aged 88!

This is a man with an inexhaustible, remarkable zest for life – an example to us all.