

From Przemysl to the Suburb (via The Hotel Adlon)

ANDREW BOTTERILL

Behind the well-mannered front doors of quiet Suburb houses there are stories to be told and the sweep of history is often so close. In the sunny garden of one such house in July, Nurith Weil was sitting surrounded by the longstanding Italian class she belonged to. They had brought a cake to celebrate her 100th birthday. She had been with her Italian teacher and later good friend, the inimitable Clara Caleo Green, since 1962.

How she escaped the Holocaust (the only one in her family to do so) and made a new life exemplifies the resilience and energy of youth – focussing on the present and the future with positivity and good humour. She was born Berta Samuely in Przemysl in present day Poland near the Ukrainian border, the family speaking German, her father in the leather business. In the early 1920s, the family moved to Berlin. 'From the frying pan into the fire in anti-semitism terms' she remarked drily. Distant schooldays recalled with the sharpness of age. Good times and not so bad times. An enforced move to a Jewish school. Awful singing teacher, another who wept every time she read Goethe (so of course the kids clamoured for more readings of Goethe). She shone at athletics, much to the dismay of local Nazis because she overturned the official theory of Aryan athletic supremacy in the same way Jesse Owens had the year before at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

She told of a morning in the mid-1930s walking down Unter Den Linden outside the Hotel Adlon. Suddenly the police stopped



Nurith Weil celebrates her 100th birthday (Photo: Sally Botterill)

everyone and Adolf Hitler walked out of the hotel right in front of her, just a few feet away. A chilling memory that's stayed with her.

In 1939, at 17 and now too old for Kindertransport evacuation, with the help of the 'Werkleute' a leftwing Zionist movement she and two friends managed to get out. First by train to Hamburg thence by sea to Harwich. The dominant memory here was being given whisky for the captain as a cure for seasickness.

Once in England (and now renamed Nurith by her friends), she lodged with a charming tailor and his family. Her job was running errands for the business which was near the National Gallery. Eventually she had to

move to Bedfordshire and worked on a farm and in a sweet factory – not such enjoyable experiences. Returning to London in 1942, after a course in nursery education (housed in the Royal Academy), she opened her own nursery school in Holland Park.

The year before, she had met the charismatic Harry Weil. Harry, a Czech, had managed to escape to England by the skin of his teeth in late 1939 via Poland, Sweden and Norway. An action-packed story of chance and hardship, danger and courage. Whilst at a concert, Nurith wondered who the handsome cellist was. Night follows day and they married on April 13th 1943.

They spoke English together but their German accents did once create a minor incident. On honeymoon in Bournemouth, Harry suggested a quick dip in the sea. A passing policeman, hearing the accented German, arrested them as German spies just landed, Harry still in his underpants. They were soon released however. 'Dad's Army' surely wouldn't have accepted *that* script.

Married life was a dream. They lived in a succession of digs and rented rooms. Nurith continued with her nursery work and Harry with his reserved occupation of precision engineering. After the end of the war he went into business as an import/export agent. Summers were spent on walking holidays in the Lake District, Tyrol and the Dolomites.

They bought a new house in 1955 in the northern reaches of the Suburb. The first 'piece of furniture' purchased was a piano (still there in the house they never left). Harry accompanied Nurith singing Schubert as well as continuing with the cello in a string quartet. Two daughters, Joanna and Monica, came along. Schools were Brooklands followed by Woodhouse and Henrietta Barnett. Harry was the king of DIY and a keen gardener, Nurith a wonderful mother. The walking holidays continued. Harry died in 2012 aged 100.

Nurith, whilst discussing her story, was sitting by the French windows looking out onto the sunlit garden Harry had created. Proud of her two daughters, three grandchildren and four great grandchildren. Still in love with the Suburb and an ardent supporter of everything British except, of course, Brexit. Always interested, positive, self-deprecating and humorous. Wholly without bitterness and wearing her heritage lightly. A clear inspiration to us all. And not a bad Italian speaker either.

An interview with Amanda Weinberg

ELEANOR LEVY

I recently spoke to Amanda Weinberg about herself and her debut novel 'The Tears of Monterini', which is an historical novel set in a small Tuscan community.

It follows Bella and Rico who are born into neighbouring families on the same day in 1921. Bella's Jewish background and Rico's Catholic heritage reflect the dual make-up of their village, but the dark forces of the 1930s and 1940s profoundly affect Monterini and its inhabitants.

This beautifully written story takes the reader on a tumultuous journey through the fascist years and beyond. It is a tale of love, betrayal, human frailty and kindness.

I asked Amanda about her own background. She was born and educated in Woodford, and went on to read French and German at The University of East Anglia. Amanda also speaks Italian, has an avid interest in European cultures, is an engaging communicator and is an obvious people person.

Monterini is the literary name she gives to Pitigliano, a medieval village, built on an Etruscan settlement. In the 16th century Jews fled to Pitigliano from the surrounding Papal States and built



Photo: Julian Weinberg

a thriving community, with a mikvah and a yeshiva. Amanda, who knows the village well, tells me her favourite place is the cave which still contains the oven which was used as a bakery for 'forno delle azzime'. That's matzo to you and me!

In the book, Villa Sophia, a disused monastery, is used to house and hide Jewish and other war-time orphans. Amanda skillfully weaves this real wartime component into her novel. In so doing, she pays tribute to the actual occupants and their protectors' hazardous daily lives.

"In reality the monastery was called Villa Emma. From July 1942 to September 1943 about 70 children lived there, cared for by partisans, who eventually helped them to escape over the border to Switzerland."

I asked Amanda about the mystical Tanaquilla, who appears fleetingly a few times in the novel. "She is the spirit of the town through the ages, who now lives on as a mystical presence, reminding us how civilisations come and go yet their essence remains."

Amanda sees her book as 'a love letter to Pitigliano'.

The Tears of Monterini, Amanda Weinberg, Red Door Press 2020, 336p, ISBN: 978-1-91306-236-1.



On holiday in the Lake District in 1943

G Cohen

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