

GERSHON ISRAEL WILLINGER



I was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on September 24, 1942, to German-Jewish parents. My middle name, Israel, was given to identify me as a Jew. I have one older sister, Rita. My parents were Edith Helene Rothschild and Guido Willinger. My parents were both murdered, in Sobibor, in July 1943.

At five months old, I was taken in by a family in the resistance, living in northeast Holland. In February 1943, I was removed from my hiding place and interned in the children's home at the Westerbork internment camp. On September 13, 1944, I was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with 50 other children. However, we ended up in Bergen-Belsen for a few months, and then were transported to Theresienstadt, where we were finally liberated. I clearly remember the liberation from Theresienstadt and the long journey back to Holland in an army truck.

Upon arriving back in Holland, I was shuffled between orphanages until September 1949, when I was finally placed with a Jewish foster family. It was then that I found out I had a sister, that my parents were murdered and that I was Jewish, as until 1949, I was living with a Christian foster family and attended church. My sister, Rita, survived the war and was adopted by our paternal aunt, immigrating with her to the United States in 1951.

I immigrated to Israel in 1960, and lived on a kibbutz after which I joined the Israeli army, becoming a paratrooper. Upon discharge from the army, I studied social work in Jerusalem, specializing in juvenile delinquents and street groups.

I met my wife, Jane (née Levy), in England, and we were married in Israel in January 1970. We have three children and, to date, seven grandchildren. In December 1977, we immigrated to Canada. For the first number of years I was employed as a youth and camp director for the Hamilton Jewish community. In 1984, I joined the Children's Aid Society as a social worker, specializing in working with abused and neglected children. I retired in 2003.

I am active in the Jewish community and spend much time lecturing about my past experiences. In June 2006, we moved to Thornhill to be closer to our children and grandchildren.