

Appreciation of Miss Ruth Ascher

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A much loved and respected local lady, Ruth Ascher died on 18th August 2010 at the age of 96 years. She was a professional pianist who lived in St Annes Road, Caversham for many years, and taught music at both Queen Anne's School and at Reading University over the years.

She came to England from Germany in 1933, already a promising young musician, with just one year at Heidelberg University behind her. She revealed how playing Mozart for Albert Einstein saved her from certain death in a Nazi extermination camp.

For as a Jewish teenager of 19 she had left her home in the German industrial town of Mannheim to meet the physicist, a personal friend of her uncle. Einstein was living in self-exile in Belgium and was himself an accomplished violinist. She explained: "I had a beautiful holiday on the Belgian coast, and a tea party was organised where I played Mozart's concerto in C minor for him, and afterwards he came over and kissed me. My aunt asked if he would write some letters to influential people in England, and I was able to have a new life."

While supporting herself by giving piano lessons, she met the pianist Solomon, who arranged to take her on as a pupil. She later became the first refugee student to gain a gold medal at the Guildhall School of Music. Eventually she was in a position to bring her mother over from Germany, and many of her older friends remember this lady to this day. Her father had already died, and of her two sisters, one came to live in London and later in Majorca and the other in Israel.

Soon after the War she played with Gerald Finzi at Newbury, and her career has included two appearances at the Wigmore Hall, as well as numerous other recitals.

Latterly she has been a lively member of the Reading University of the Third Age (U3A), holding regular music appreciation classes in her home for many years, where she lectured and played the piano, quite often with her good friend, the eminent violinist, Maria Lidka.

On many other occasions she gave free local recitals, and in her 90's she became involved in contributing her skills to "Singing for the Brain", a venture which is proving invaluable therapy for people with diminished mental capacity.

Her active participation in the Reading Hebrew Synagogue meant very much to her. To celebrate her 90th birthday, she delighted to give a number of cellos, trumpets and violins to the Tiberias Music Centre in Israel. Friends and ex-colleagues made a collection in her honour totalling £1,100 towards this gift.

Last year she recorded a CD with the proceeds going to a musicians' charity.

One after another of her wide circle of friends tell of the warm personal interest she showed in them, and of her essential generosity and modesty throughout such an illustrious career.

Sylvia Chumbley 20th Sept. 2010. Photograph with thanks and by permission of James Watkins