THE LEO AND BETTY GRUSS CHARITABLE TRUST

The Leo and Betty Gruss Charitable Trust was established during the lifetime of Leo and Betty to support the relief of poverty, advance the religion of the Jewish faith in accordance with Orthodox practice, advance Jewish education including Hebrew Studies, furthering higher education including textiles and fashion design, support recovery from mental ill health, support persons with disabilities and children with learning difficulties, support hospitals in Israel and such other purposes that are recognised by English law as charitable.



BETTY GRUSS 1921 - 2018
LEO GRUSS 1918 - 2020

Basia Oronovitch (known as Betty) was born in 1921 in Kaunas, Lithuania to an Orthodox Jewish family. Her mother, Mrs Rachel Oronovitch, had a dress shop in Kaunas across the road from the State Theatre which sold beautiful clothes and knitwear to the ladies of Kaunas. There was an underground workshop beneath the shop where the garments were manufactured. From the age of 15, Betty could be found helping her parents in the shop and quickly learned about fashions, knitwear and design, skills that would remain with her throughout her life.

In 1938, with the threat of war, Betty aged 17 was sent on her own to England to learn English. A year later she was unable to return to Lithuania and having some experience in knitwear from the work in her parents shop, she enrolled at the School of Textiles at what was then Leicester College of Technology.



Image courtesy of De Montfort University Special Collections, Leicester

Betty needed work to support herself and found the firm who supplied the St. Michael label (later to become M&S) and asked them for a job. For the next 2 years she worked as a blouse designer.



Image courtesy of De Montfort University Special Collections, Leicester

Betty was successful in her studies and spoke seven languages fluently. She was told about Leeds being a centre of clothing manufacturers and there was a shortage of workers as the majority of men were serving the war. She bought second-hand machinery from Leicester and transported it to Leeds. Following the Russian invasion of Lithuania Betty lost touch with her family. Her father and brother were taken away and killed and are buried in unknown graves. Betty's mother was sent to Auschwitz. She survived and in later years opened a dress shop in the new State of Israel.

Leo Gruss was born in 1918 in Vienna, Austria to an Orthodox Jewish family. Aged 19 on Kristallnacht, November 1938 he and his chassidic father were arrested, separated and Leo found himself on a train to Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany. After suffering a few rough weeks, Leo was mysteriously called out on parade on 8 February 1939, released and given a visa to Cuba.

His close friend had gone to Leeds, England to study at University and Leo decided it was the nearest and easiest place to go. Leeds had a sizeable Jewish refugee population during the war. Leo and Betty were introduced by friends. Initially Betty sold her own designs, and, wanting to impress her, Leo took ten samples of Betty's garments to London and obtained an order from Harrods.

Leo and Betty were married in 1943 and shortly after their marriage they opened their own textile factory named Dobett Ltd in Mayfair Works, Shannon Street, Leeds. Their business was fashion and knitwear manufacturer. The business grew from strength to strength. Betty would regularly visit the Paris couture shows and suppliers in Italy. She was responsible for design and manufacture, had editorial in Vogue, a Crimplene best seller and an association with Pierre Cardin. In 1972 Dobett was sold and Leo and Betty joined Pentland Industries in North London. Betty created her 'Grazia' collection, a resounding success.



Betty Gruss, Grazia



Examples of Betty's 'Grazia' Collection 1989

Sadly, Betty and Leo had no children. Music was their great love, they could often be seen at Wigmore Hall, operas at Glyndebourne or Covent Garden or at the Lucerne Music Festival in Switzerland.

This booklet has been created by the trustees of The Leo and Betty Gruss Charitable Trust. Projects supported by the trust are to commemorate the lives of Leo and Betty and memorialise their work and achievements.

Betty and Leo, and Betty's mother are buried in Holon Cemetery, Israel close to a monument to commemorate the Jews who died in Lithuania.



Examples of Betty's 'Grazia' Collection 1985