

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

Brian Charles worked for Michael Gerson from 1968 until his retirement in December 2004. He became a Director of the company in 1975 and worked as Sales and Marketing Director, with particular responsibility for South America where he was able to use his knowledge of Spanish.

MICHAEL GERSON LTD

- 1959 Michael Gerson started work with the family firm, Pall Mall Deposit & Forwarding Company which had been founded in 1899 by his grandfather
- 1960 The company was bought by Grand Metropolitan and closed down
- 1961 Michael started his own Company, Michael Gerson Ltd, at 24 Friern Park, North Finchley
- 1970 The company relocates to 447 High Road, North Finchley, the former Finchley Dance Hall, which was then occupied by the Norvic Shoe Company
- 1971 The company builds a warehouse at Daventry
- 1978 The company buys land at the rear of A1 Dairies in Whetstone and builds two warehouses
- 1982 Two more warehouses are built at Whetstone
- 2001 The company is sold to ICM, a Swedish company (85%) and Abel (15%), and becomes ICM Gerson
- 2004 ICM sells its share to Abel and the company becomes Gerson Relocation and moves to Potters Bar

**INTERVIEW BY DAVID BERGUER WITH BRIAN CHARLES AT
68 MANOR DRIVE, WHETSTONE N20
ON 11 AUGUST 2014**

DB It is 11 August 2014 and I am talking to Brian Charles at his home at 68 Manor Drive, Whetstone.

Brian, can you tell me when and where you were born?

BC I was born in Neath in Glamorgan in 1946.

DB And you went to school in Neath?

BC Yes, my Junior School in Skirrin and my Grammar School in Neath and I had what I would call a first class education.

DB And what age did you leave?

BC I left at eighteen and I went to Wolverhampton Polytechnic where I was a language student. The Polytechnics at that time offered a different type of course to a University which meant I could really use my languages.

DB Was this business oriented?

BC Yes, as part of the course I went to work in Barcelona for six months at a company called Villiers who were based in Wolverhampton and they made single cylinder engines of all sorts including motor bikes. It was called Hispano Villiers.

DB Did you learn a lot?

BC My language was Spanish – two years in school and three years in college.

DB And you weren't speaking just Castllian Spanish....

BC That was the problem, they were all speaking Catalan and I used to say to them: "Gentlemen, can I have some Castllian please?"

DB When you came back were you with Villiers then?

BC No, it was only like a sandwich course, so I came back, finished my third year because I did this as part of my second year, and then suddenly decided I had better get a job. I looked in the *Telegraph* as one did and there was an advert from an international transport company looking for a person with initiative, knowledge of languages an asset. It was with Michael Gerson Ltd and I came to a rented warehouse and office in Friern Park at the top of a removal company by the name of Alfred Bell. I was offered the job and I started on 1 September 1968 with Michael.

DB So he was in Bell's premises?

BC Yes. Michael started Michael Gerson Ltd in 1961 and he spent his time renting out containers belonging to the family business called the Pall Mall Deposit & Forwarding Company started by his grandfather in 1899 and his father was the Managing Director and his uncle was the Sales Director and by the fifties it was the leader in overseas removals, packing, shipping, exhibitions. Their offices were in the Haymarket and the warehouses were in Barlby Road, West Kensington.

Michael left school in 1959 and went to work in the family business which was bought in 1960 by Maxwell Joseph of Grand Metropolitan Hotels and what Maxwell Joseph really wanted was the property. At the same time he bought another company called Bullens, so the Grand Met's transport arm would be Bullens and the offices were sold for development and Michael was out of a job.

He was then persuaded by Shirley to start his own business and Alfred Bell were shareholder and they offered him accommodation and throughout the mid sixties it was Michael and a handful of people operating out of Friern Park. It was 24 Friern Park and the warehouse is still there. Their offices were knocked down and there is a block of flats there now. I lived in a flat in Torrington Park and I used to walk to work.

In 1970 Alfred Bell decided that they wanted bigger and better premises so they built a warehouse in Park Royal. Their emphasis was changing from removals to distribution and warehousing.

DB You mentioned containers earlier. Were these pioneered by removal companies?

BC The history of containers is fascinating. They were used by the international removal companies at the turn of last century. There were a group of companies who had their own containers and by container I mean a box with permanent lifting rings and doors. Those were the only containers in existence and they were used all round the world until the 1950s.

DB Were they not introduced by the military?

BC No. They were started by Sealand in the United States they were 35 foot long and they went to from the Gulf Ports to Puerto Rico. The legal limit on trucks in the States at that time was 40 feet, so they could only make the trailer 35 feet long. Another company called Matson Navigation operated from the West Coast to Hawaii started with 24 foot containers.

DB And these would be loaded on normal cargo ships?

BC They had their own chassis or they would have the chassis but they would lift them off. Not really like containers as we know them today. The big change came in the mid fifties when the International Standards Organisation was born and one of things that the ISO did was to look at containers and say, hang on, you make 35 foot, Matson have 24 foot and some European companies have different sizes. They started with the width and throughout the world the maximum width of vehicles is 2.5 metres (8 feet) so that was the maximum width and the height was

8 feet and the length would be 20 feet or 40 feet. So that's where containers today came from. Some shipping companies started to design vessels to take these and then some very bright enterprising movers in New York and Philadelphia started to build these containers and lease them to shipping companies. So there were four movers who started a company called CTI, Container Transport International which was the first leasing company.

DB They owned the containers....

BC They owned them and rented them out to shipping companies. They made a mint of money and today most containers are leased. In the sixties US Lines developed ships, and P&O and the guys to Australia developed OCL and these shipping lines developed ships with cells. They started with 600 containers on a ship; today they carry 16,000 – they are enormous. Maersk is a Danish company that is very big today.

DB Going back to Friern Park, presumably Michael had to move out?

BC We had six months and Michael's big decision was whether to rent or buy. His father though he was mad as he decided to cash in everything he had, and buy premises. I had been with him for two years and the most important asset to him were the people. The Norvic Shoe Company who used to own the old Finchley Dance Hall at 447 High Road, North Finchley, opposite the open air swimming pool, decided that they wanted to move back to Norwich where they came from. So the premises came up for sale and we were able to buy it. Today it is a Big Yellow Self Storage.

We moved in in May 1970, very well positioned near the North Circular. We converted that building into a warehouse for removals. It was a very exciting time and we did some amazing things.

In 1972 there was so much storage on offer and we had no room to take it, so we had to get somewhere else. We went in a car up the M1 to find something that we could afford and the town we found was Daventry, which is 72 miles from London. We decided to buy a warehouse – at that time there was very little there and we bought a speculatively built warehouse that wasn't really ideal but we could take our storage to Daventry. We got an enterprising manager there and it turned it into not only a storage depot but into a fully operational depot with staff and vehicles. It is the centre of the UK so we could cover the whole of the country – frankly we could get from there to Manchester quicker than we could to Bromley or Croydon. So we had one branch and everything was fine for a couple of years.

By 1974 we were bursting at the seams. Michael and I had travelled a lot and we had seen a lot of new ideas on warehousing and we wanted to construct something that suited our business. There was an advert locally for a piece of land behind the A1 Dairies in Whetstone. There was an estate agent who had it all carved up – he was going to offer it to a number of people and he wouldn't even talk to Michael. The de Rivas family owned the land, because they owned the A1 Dairy and Michael did something quite unconventional – he picked up the phone and spoke

- to Derek de Rivas and explained who he was and that he couldn't get the estate agent to talk to him, we would bring employment into the area and so on and would Derek just consider us. The following day the estate agent phoned us with his tail between his legs, having been told by Derek de Rivas to contact Michael.
- DB Who was the estate agent?
- BC Not one of the local boys. Our offer was accepted and we bought the land – this was the end of 1975. So we sat down and designed it with architects and surveyors. By that time I had become a director of the company and we had about 60 staff, with 9 of them being in Daventry. We designed the place and we finally got it ready for opening June 1978 and Margaret Thatcher the local MP agreed to come and open it. Between her agreeing to do it and the actual day she became Leader of the Opposition. We vacated the previous premises which we had bought and moved in to Whetstone.
- DB So Michael was quite shrewd in buying rather than renting....
- BC Yes, so Michael became a property developer. We had the warehouse opening on the Friday of 16 June 1978 and the following week we moved in. Within two years we had filled it bit as we had only developed half the site we then developed the other half. And that was opened in May 1982 which was the day we invaded the Falklands and by that time Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and she came and opened the new warehouse. She came from number 10 and she told us that she had just given the order to invade the Falklands.
- DB Just tell me a bit about the business itself, because I got the impression that you specialised in overseas removals, is that right? Did you do domestic removals at all?
- BC No. We didn't have the vehicles for it. Our thing was overseas in both senses – packing and shipping people's personal possessions out of the UK and bringing them back in. And storage. So our local work was storage and it proved to be very beneficial because with two warehouses full that underpinned our business.
- DB Presumably the overseas business could fluctuate?
- BC Yes it could.
- DB So, how did it work? Say I have got something I want sent to, say, South America, I ring you up and say I have got machinery to send, do you come.....
- BC This was strictly household, no commercial. Let's say you were moving to New York. One of our sales representatives would come and estimate the quantity involved. His brief would be to go round the house with the lady of the house and he would look at everything that needed to be shipped. He would prepare a report with his estimate of the volume and what size of container we would need, the amount of packaging needed – furniture, glass, books, beds etc. We would then cost the packing material, cost the labour, cost of the container, the delivery at the other end and present it to you.

- DB And your guys would come into the house and pack it.
- BC Yes, the householder would have nothing else to do till they got to New York.
- DB And your guys at the other end would unpack it?
- BC Yes. Unpack it and set it up.
- DB So did guys from the UK go over to unpack it?
- BC Only in special cases. We worked with agents in other countries and part of what I did was to visit agents and see how they operated and see if they were up to our standards because our standards were extremely high. Worldwide we were known as being among the best. This was a nice feeling because we put a lot into it. If we had problems we would get to grips with them and sort them out. If we were moving the Chairman of a company – we moved the Chairman of Glaxo to New York for example – we sent down a foreman and another man to supervise the unpacking and setting up. With European work we would use our own vehicles.
- DB What happens to the container in New York once it has been unpacked?
- BC It is the property of the shipping company. In the early days we had our own containers but that only lasted a few years. In the mid sixties we started leasing them. We would pack it, load it, seal it and the shipping company would then take care of it.
- DB So you were responsible for the packing and unpacking and the bit in between was subcontracted?
- BC Yes. It's exactly the same as sending anything by airfreight. We used to use send goods by air, by sea, by rail – when I started a lot of the European business went by rail.
- DB Now you said it was domestic only. We were in Leeds a couple of weeks ago and we visited the Royal Armouries and someone told us that Gersons had won the contract to move stuff up from the Tower of London to the new building in Leeds.
- BC These are the special things that we did over the years. We packed and shipped the contents of most of the areas in the Tower of London and shipped them up to the new museum in Leeds where we proceeded to unpack them and put everything in place. We were the only company involved and the move took months. We had heard about this and went along and offered our services and we were against specialist companies who did exhibitions. We offered them a containerised service and we had 60 of them built and when we were ready we took them to the Tower and all the items were put in the container and sealed. We had a special vehicle that would go under the arch. The containers were brought back to Whetstone and stored and when they were ready they called them forward and we took them up to Leeds. We made sure that the containers were built to a size that would go into the lifts in the new building. They went into the receiving

area, up in the lift and right into the area where they were to be exhibited. They were absolutely gobsmacked - nobody had ever thought of doing this. It took us 8 or 9 months overall. They didn't tell us what the value was until it was all finished and it was £1.2 billion. And there were no damages at all: it was a quite unique experience.

DB Did you get more work as a result of this or did it just enhance your reputation?

BC It enhanced our reputation. We weren't allowed to say anything about it until afterwards. Some of the things we moved were proper armaments. All the staff were vetted and signed up. We usually had an annual conference for our overseas agents and what we did was take them up on the Orient Express to Leeds to the Royal Armouries.

In the early 1970s we had the opportunity to pack and ship a hospital to the Emirates – to Dubai and Sharjah, but these were odd projects that came up and we went for them. One of the biggest bits of publicity we ever had was in December 1990 when Margaret Thatcher had to move out of Downing Street and the papers carried photographs of one of our vans in Downing Street – it brought us a tremendous amount of publicity. Margaret Thatcher was a good customer, a genuine customer and always absolutely sure everything was paid for so there could be no comeback.

DB When did they move up to Potters Bar?

BC In 1996 Michael had heart problems and he had to have a bypass and he had to slow down a bit, He had three sons. One looked after the leasing business and the twins looked after the property. Simon was also involved with the self storage business – we also owned A1 Self Storage. In 2001 the succession came up and none of the boys wanted to be involved with the moving business so Michael took the decision to close it. Everything was going along nicely until 9/11 and then it stopped abruptly. Several companies were looking at it but it came to nothing. So after that I led a management buyout of Michael Gerson Ltd and we bought the company with the help of the Bank of Scotland. We bought the business but not the premises - Michael still held the property. So that's where we were in 2002. In 2004 due to the circumstances of my pension scheme, which was a good one, I took the strategic decision to take early retirement and I finished at the end of 2004. The business was declining – there was a change in the dynamics and a lot of business was put in the hands of relocation companies. Unilver, for example, who would have their own man to deal with us, would leave it all to a corporate company who dished it out. So the whole thing started to fall apart. I just got out at the right time.

Business conditions were extremely difficult and the backers of the business decided to divest themselves of smaller interest in lots of companies. So the company was put up for sale and 85% of the company was bought by a Swedish company with the other 15% being bought by a company called Abels who are a UK remover. ICM was the name of the Swedish company and the company was called ICM Gerson. This lasted for about two years then the Swedish company decided they would not continue with the UK company so they sold their 85% to

Abels so they could concentrate on their domestic business in Sweden. So Abels now own 100% and it is called Gerson Relocation.

DB Did they have to get Michael's permission to keep the name?

BC No, because the name came with the company.

DB So Michael still owns the land and the buildings?

BC Yes. The site consists of where the old A1 Dairy was, the A1 warehouses and the two warehouses at the bottom of the site.

DB Is A1 Storage still going?

BC Yes. And the two Gerson warehouses were let to a company for storage and distribution. I don't know much about them.

DB What was Michael like to work with – was he a slave driver or a perfectionist. Presumably he got people on side?

BC Oh, absolutely. He was what you would call a good boss. He was an entrepreneur, he could see opportunities but things had to be done the right way. He would also respect other people's ideas. If I wanted to do something he wouldn't stand in my way, but if I got it wrong I would hear all about it. He was a very good boss and he was very good with people and very demanding.

We went through a very exciting time but we wouldn't have gone through it all if we hadn't enjoyed it. We had a very good team of people. My interest was sales and marketing and we had an excellent warehouse manager. And Michael had been in the moving business all his life. Part of my interest was teaching people throughout the world. Michael would teach as well and at conferences he would get up and speak.

DB Was it a seasonal business?

BC Yes. Our busy period was from the end of May to beginning of September and in fact we did half our turnover in those months. We had to bring in extra staff and we had local subcontractors to help us and we trained them. It was really hard work, particularly at the end of June and July. We had turn business away and at the end of July would be busy every year and it would be extremely difficult when top customers said: "You've just got to move the Chairman" and we would suggest that they tried another date because we just did not have the crews available.

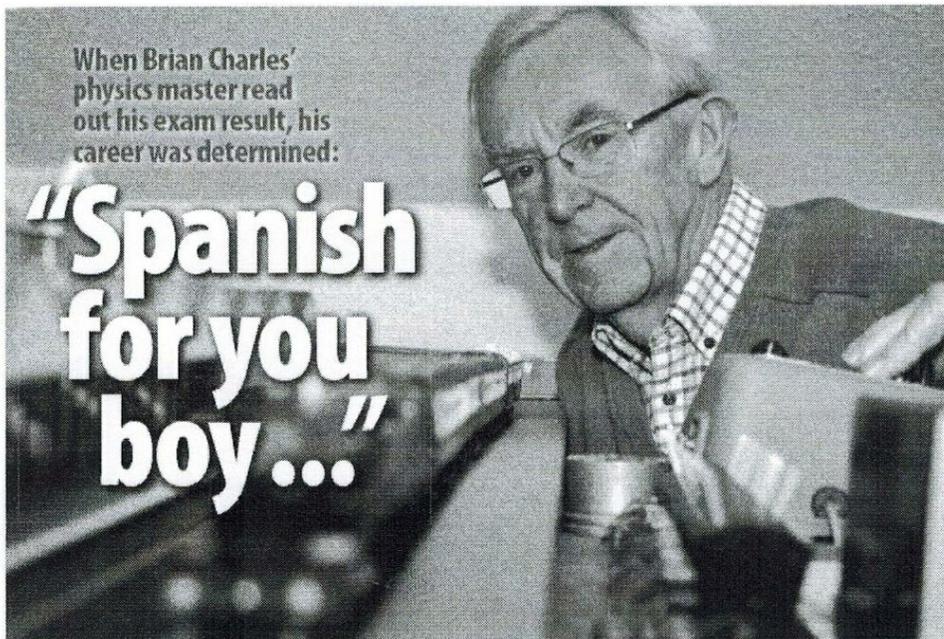
DB So you never contemplated taking on business and holding goods in store?

BC Don't forget that 90% of the work we did never came near our warehouse. The availability of staff – the right kind of staff – was the key. There would be good staff in the Midlands and often we would have the Midlands guys down here

helping us in London. Some of the things we moved were really quite amazing – Chinese beds in about 1200 pieces and so forth.

So there we are – a fascinating job really.

Transcribed by David Berguer
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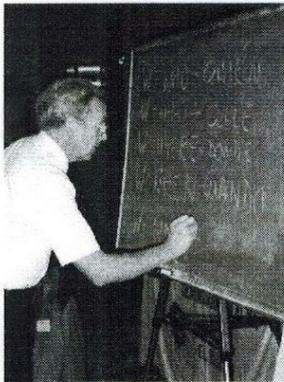
When Brian Charles' physics master read out his exam result, his career was determined:

"Spanish for you boy..."

Last October Brian Charles was enrolled into the IAM Role of Honor for his services to the moving industry. It was an appropriate, and perhaps overdue, recognition for a man who had dedicated much of his working life to training others and to improving standards in the international moving industry. Now retired, and enjoying a slightly less hectic lifestyle with his wife Carol, Brian reflected on a career that had touched many across the world.

Brian was on holiday with friends during the IAM conference so he was unable to collect the award in person. His friend and colleague Niall Mackay from ICM Gerson collected it on his behalf. Brian had been nominated for the award by his friends at LACMA for the work he had done for LACMA and FIDI over the last 30+ years. It was this recognition by his peers, perhaps more than the award itself, that touched him most. "You don't do it for honours," he said, "but to give something back to the industry." He never craved recognition, but his smile cannot disguise his joy at receiving this most precious vote of thanks.

Brian can trace his path to the international moving industry right back to his years at Neath Grammar. Brian was talented in many ways, but was not a scientist; so when his Physics master read out the exam results, his career was determined. "He went around the class alphabetically: 'Arnold, 76%; Bridgeman, 84%, Charles,' he lowered his glasses and glowered, 'Spanish for you boy - 18%'."



And Spanish it was. He has always enjoyed languages and studied French, Spanish and Latin at school. Further education was at Wolverhampton Polytechnic (now Wolverhampton University) where he studied languages in business. His second year required him to spend six months in the country of his first chosen language. He went to Barcelona where he perfected his Spanish and put his practical talents to good use repairing engines for Villiers motorcycles. He met and married Carol while in his last year at Wolverhampton.

Brian joined Michael Gerson Ltd. early in his career. He answered an advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph* for a position that would use his language ability, moved down to Whetstone in North London and never looked back. It was in 1970 that Colin Gordon was involved in training for the BAR Institute in the UK. He called Brian one day when he was due to present a course on international moving, explained that he was unable to attend and asked Brian to take his place. As Brian faced a room of 30 students, the scene was set for him to become the trusted face of training for the international moving industry for a generation.

Over the following years Brian continued to train for the Institute, was instrumental in designing the international removals course for the FIDI Academy and, through his mastery of Spanish, became a close friend to LACMA frequently delivering week-long courses in Spanish, in Miami. Brian estimates that he must have trained over 200 people at those LACMA courses. "Anyone who has done the FIDI Academy course will probably remember the fictitious family of James T. Colby III. "He was my invention," said Brian. "We also introduced warehouse visits and port visits at that time too." Brian never received or requested personal payment for any of his training services. He didn't do it for

money, he did it to give something back to the industry and to improve global standards in international moving.

Brian's course covered everything from receiving the initial enquiry to costing, warehousing, documentation, clearance, delivery right through to insurance claims. He always tried to deliver more than the basic course. He enjoyed using his experience to work with students to explore the subject and learn beyond the syllabus. "The most useful things were when I could draw on experiences," he said. "I often used to wander off. This is the advantage of being on your subject. Anyone can get the basics over but if people were interested I used to share experiences. We had evening discussion groups after dinner. We did role-play sketches with the students searching the hotel for props. People still remember them today. They were a lot of fun and got the message across too. I don't believe in teaching a subject with which I am not thoroughly conversant. You can't give the depth."



Brian noticed several differences in people's attitude to training. "In Asia and Latin America people are like sponges. They just soak up information and are continually demanding more. In the UK, however, although around 80% of people are glad to be there, 10% are only attending because their boss has sent them, and the rest would rather be somewhere else." But Brian usually won them round in the end.

Two years ago LACMA asked Brian to do another course in Lima, Peru. He had been retired for five years and it got him thinking about succession. It was important to ensure a bank of trainers that could carry on his work so Brian arranged a train-the-trainer course, delivered in Curacao, for eight people including some well-known experienced people.

This was a good turnout but Brian feels that the industry today is still in need of experienced trainers. "Maybe it's because the business is more competitive now. Or perhaps it's because there are fewer, larger companies and the managers don't have the opportunity to take time out for the benefit of others."



But for Brian the benefits were not one sided. He never intended to generate business for his company through training but it must have encouraged some people to use Michael Gerson Ltd. as a paragon of the art. Michael Gerson Ltd. always had a high quality image but Brian's training work certainly kept the company on its toes. It was a constant reinforcement of the brand. "There were intangible benefits but the real reason I did it was because I enjoyed it. It was very nice to see people making improvements. And I learned a lot myself too. There is no patent on good ideas."



Despite his high profile in the industry Brian never had any desire to hold high office. He was the Chairman of the BAR Institute in its centenary year in 2000, but he never wanted to be the president of any of the world's associations. "I had enough going on running the business and I didn't want all the politics. I was never tempted."

As Chairman of the Institute he really felt that he was making a difference. "I was very fed up when BAR disbanded the Institute. A lot of good people had put a great deal into it over very many years. But maybe BAR is right. Perhaps it's a logical progression."

Over the last 40 years Brian has trained hundreds of people the world over. He has enjoyed it but recognises that he could not have done it without the help of Michael Gerson. "I learned a lot from Michael, he is the consummate business man. He would always find some way of doing things better. I am also grateful to George Taylor the company's Operations Director who

taught me the practical side of the business."

So what does Brian do now? He's been retired, officially, since 2005 but there has never been a dull moment. As with many retired people he wonders how he ever had time to go to work. He busies himself with his family, doing voluntary work locally, swimming three times a week, working on the house and in the garden and, just occasionally, indulging his passion for trains. He's also bought a home in Javea, Spain for when he feels the need to escape the British weather and when he can leave his vegetable patch to fend for itself for a while. "I'm on the go all the time," he said. "I drive Carol potty."

Would he take another job if one were offered? Well he might be able to find the odd five minutes for an interesting project just as long as it fitted in with his new lifestyle. But he's not looking.

Brian Charles is one of a breed of statesmen with whom the moving industry was blessed for a time. I could easily run off a list of 10 or 20 of his contemporaries without whom the industry would have been much less colourful and would now be much the poorer. It does seem, however, that the motives that encouraged those characters to emerge and the working structures that allowed them the time, have changed. Training seems to be a much more regimented affair nowadays more focussed on getting certificates on the wall than improving practical skills. And the market is much tougher, faster moving with less room for traditional values perhaps. Whatever the reason, the likes of Brian et al we are unlikely to see again.

Unless you know different? Perhaps the global mobility industry is full of unsung heroes who genuinely deserve their moment in the spotlight. If there are, I'd like to know. Meanwhile, I trust you will join me in wishing Brian and Carol a very happy, healthy and lengthy retirement. My goodness they have earned it.



The independent voice of the global moving industry

▶▶ LEAD STORY

Building quality - An interview with Michael Gerson, by Steve Jordan

Dec 17, 2013

For some reason I was expecting Michael Gerson not to be working from the old company offices in darkest Whetstone when I booked the appointment for, what was for me, one of the key interviews of my journalistic life.



He sold the moving business some years ago and the company that still bears his name now operates from Potter's Bar five miles away. I had rather expected Michael to be running his self storage, investment and leasing businesses either from home or a plush, oak-lined office somewhere in Mayfair. Not so. As always, Michael is never quite what you expect him to be.



Michael started his moving company at the age of 23 in 1961. He, and his wife, Shirley, married the following year. During the 1970s and 1980s Michael, with the support of Shirley who he still calls 'the Boss', built the company into a phenomenon within the industry. He employed and trained some of the leading members of the industry; carved a niche for providing exceptional service in the corporate market; moved a long list of household names including Margaret Thatcher; performed a series of impressive relocations including the Royal Armouries (42,000 priceless items) from the Tower of London to Leeds; was delighted and proud to serve as FIDI President; and did more for the UK's international moving industry, largely behind the scenes, than probably anyone alive today. During all of this, he made money too.

In my interview I wanted to find out a little about the history and what drove him to join the moving industry in the first place, and how he had succeeded in building a culture of quality that had become the hallmark of the company and an aspiration for much of the industry. I wanted to discover what made Michael Gerson different.

The early years

Of course the story started long before 1961. It was Michael's grandfather, one of 20 children living in Germany, who started the ball rolling. He came to London in the 1870s with the intention of catching a ship to Australia. Emigration in those days was a huge decision and one that only a person of extraordinary character would even consider. While waiting for the ship that was due to sail a week later, a friend offered him a job working with a forwarding company. He never caught the ship. Like so many since, the moving business had gripped him.

"He must have been an enterprising man," said Michael. "He travelled to the USA and Canada several times gathering ideas before starting his own business The Pall Mall Deposit and Forwarding Co. all before 1900. He got some help with finance and put up a prestige building between Lower Regent Street & Haymarket in London. Can you imagine putting up a new building there now!" Michael's father and uncle were also involved



so the family business was already in the making.



It was some years later that Michael got the opportunity to branch out himself. He had been away learning the trade in France, Germany and Switzerland when the business, or rather the property it occupied, caught the eye of businessman Sir Maxwell Joseph. "He made the shareholders an offer they couldn't refuse and, quite rightly, they accepted," Michael explained. At the same time as losing his job, he proposed to Shirley, which she accepted but insisted that Michael should not work for anyone other than himself.

Michael wanted to take on the very prestigious Pall Mall company name but that proved to be impossible. Michael Gerson Limited was, therefore, born to specialise in overseas moving. "Of all the things we did at the old company, overseas moving seemed to me to be the activity which we did least well," said Michael.



Building quality

The early days, by Michael's own admission, were horrendous. The company started in an old garage in Finchley with a sloping floor and not even a nod to modern health and safety requirements. "We subcontracted everything," he admitted. "The business was probably a shambles by my reckoning."

Michael knew that he wanted to work for the multinationals because he figured that it would be less price sensitive. "Companies will usually foot the bill for sending individuals abroad, so only the best is good enough, and they don't care how much it costs." He said that many moving companies make a huge effort but make very little profit. His best piece of advice came from Joe Luxford who told him: "Michael, you can't afford to work for poor people". He kept to that advice and aimed for the top. "I realised that you normally amass the same amount of paperwork and spend just as long shipping a 40ft container as 150ft of groupage. So you might as well do the bigger jobs."

Quality workmanship and service therefore became part of the brand. Michael had already had a good grounding in the industry and, having spent time working abroad, had a good knowledge of languages, essential in those days for working in Europe. He was also a free spirit. He had seen how other companies operated across the world and wasn't hemmed in by the 'we've always done it this way' attitude.

Training had always been important to Michael. He said that the people that had most influenced him during his working life were the trainers at The Institute* - people like Ken Berger, Harold Holgate, Peter Gooding, Richard Lomath, Dennis Pearce, Sam Elliott and Geoff Pygall. These people gave their time freely and appeared to be more concerned about the future generation than their own. Many would include Michael in the same breath along with other Michael Gerson Ltd. employees such as Brian Charles and Colin Gordon who did more than their fair share to teach others.

"We didn't enforce quality with systems, box ticking," said Michael. "If something went wrong the directors got involved to find out why and how we could prevent it. We had a no-blame culture. We'd speak to the foreman first to get to the bottom of the problem, then modify our methods. That was the key to achieving the quality. We had very short communication lines; we didn't send memos to each other."

Another keystone of quality for Michael was to make sure the company was not departmentalised. "People are under stress when they move. They don't like to have to speak to lots of different people. We trained our staff so they could talk to the client about everything. The client always spoke to the same person and was not passed around or put on hold listening to music. Everyone had their own personal letterheads and almost nobody had a title. This way the customer knew you could do anything. It created real confidence."



It also created a problem. Staff would learn their trade by handling smaller accounts and then move up to larger ones. When they had built a very strong relationship with a company it was difficult to move them on. But Michael had worked out a foolproof way of doing it. "When someone was changing from one account to another we would say they had gone on holiday and the replacement took over until they got back. After a couple of weeks they were comfortable with the new person anyway."

Michael said that these relationships were very important. "I don't think people bother about these things anymore. They are more interested in systems than psychology. If you are moving top people, who are regarded as top by their employers, you ought to match the service to that."

Foremen, according to Michael, are the most important people in the company because they have to take the tough decisions on the spot. Michael empowered them by giving them the authority to negotiate with the client. He also took the unusual step of putting all foremen on salary. "If you pay people an hourly rate they complete the job and then drink tea at your expense, which is daft," he explained. "Being on salary meant that the foremen had an interest in getting the job done efficiently rather than spinning out the day. They all reacted very well."

*The Institute of the Furniture Warehousing and Removals Industry renamed The Movers Institute in 1993 and disbanded in 2008.

Specialisation

Joe Luxford gave Michael his piece of gold-plated advice, so I asked Michael what advice he would give to moving companies. "My advice would be to find a niche. It doesn't really matter what the niche is but the thought you give it in advance will eventually be reflected in your performance. Specialise in something. If you just do the same as everyone else you start selling on price. Anyone who does a specialist service, defined geographically or moving something very valuable for example, will stand a better chance than being a generalist."

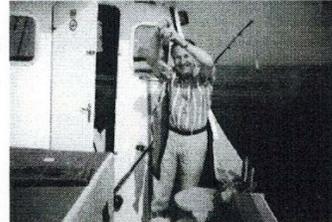
Industry work

Michael worked tirelessly with the wider industry to improve standards. His father had been the president of the National Association of Furniture Warehousemen and Removers (that became BAR in 1972) in 1939-40 and Michael is a Past President of FIDI. Although he was always keen to improve quality he was never a fan of formal Standards that he considered to be "just box ticking". "When ISO came in we got quite enthusiastic then found that we could write our own manual, so we never bothered with any of these Standards." Instead he took a more practical approach with the Michael Gerson Medal being awarded every year to the person with the highest marks in the Institute Practical Estimating examination.

Michael was also one of the instigators of the BAR's IMMI scheme, that provides a finance guarantee to cover pre-payments for overseas moves, and one of BAR's representatives to IMMI for many years. "IMMI was not for us but it did help to differentiate international movers from forwarding agents. It is a good thing for some companies, depending on how they sell it to their customers." Michael did acknowledge though that its purpose was somewhat eroded nowadays as many people pay by credit card and, therefore, have some element of financial protection.

Retirement?

At the age of 76 Michael still works from a modest office within his self storage company on the Michael Gerson Ltd site. The walls are festooned with Liz Moon original paintings and original cartoons, moving van or customer-related. His investment company still owns the buildings but they are now let to tenants. Visiting again now that so many changes have taken place seems a little eerie with the old company sign still straddling the entrance, but the moving company long gone.



For the last four years or so, Michael has been suffering from Parkinson's disease and so has begun to cut back on his time at the office. The finance side of the business is now ably run by his son, Anthony. Michael said that he had never considered retiring until now but he sometimes struggles to keep his thoughts on track. There was little or no sign of it while I interviewed him.

So as Michael prepares for his retirement and a little more time getting under Shirley's feet, perhaps it is for us all to reflect on the company he created and the lead it provided to so many would-be imitators around the world. To do the same all you need is to find a niche; have the confidence of your convictions; work hard; open your mind to what is possible; employ great people, train them, empower them and trust them; and have a fundamental understanding of the human condition. Simple really!

Photos: From the top - Now 74, Michael Gerson still works at the old offices in Whetstone; Michael speaking in 1992; With his wife Shirley during his FIDI presidency in 1982; As chairman of The Institute of the Furniture Warehousing and Removals Industry; Moving the Lord Mayor of London at Mansion House; With Lady Thatcher at Cart Marking; A successful fishing trip.

The above interviews are included on the following website:

<http://www.themover.co.uk>

