Most of the following words were provided by Sabine to my predecessor Prebendary Christopher Gower, who has, very kindly, passed them on to me. Additional information comes from those who knew and visited Sabine, including Monica, a second cousin, to whom I am indebted for shedding some light on Sabine’s late mother Laura.

Whilst the text gives a brief résumé of Sabine’s long life, it says little about the extraordinary situation in which she found herself in Berlin during the rise of Hitler and the frighteningly uncertain years leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939, nor, indeed, does Sabine say anything about her father – although, thankfully, German Wikipedia does.

Sabine’s text also says very little – indeed, nothing – about her great love for music, especially the works of J S Bach and W A Mozart, her friends, her wider family, nor her connection of some forty years to St Marylebone Parish Church where her ashes will be interred after this service.

Sabine’s mother, Laura Emilie Adelheid Charlotte, was the daughter of German tea merchant Philipp Hirschfeld and his wife, Elisabeth Borchardt. Philipp, a Chess Master, used to play chess without a chess board on the train whilst travelling in the company of friends. Philipp rose to a staggering world ranking of 4!

It was decided that the German family tea business should go international, and Philipp was dispatched to set up offices in London where all of Philipp’s and ‘Lisbeth’s six children were born, whilst Philipp’s brother, Robert, was sent to Moscow to establish the company in Russia.

Due to his poor health, made worse by the London climate, Philipp was advised to leave England, and the family moved to back to Germany in 1890.

Daughter Laura married Alfred Schiff, an eminent Jewish archaeologist in 1912. Very sadly, Laura’s mother ‘Lisbeth, was killed tragically in an accident just a few days after Laura’s wedding to Alfred, driving to visit Laura’s brother.

Sabine was born in Berlin on October 14th 1920, the Alfred’s and Laura’s second daughter. Her elder sister, Elisabeth Donata, having been born in 1918.

Professor Alfred Wilhelm Schiff, had spent more than a decade in Greece studying and excavating important ancient sites including Santorini. Not only was he an eminent archaeologist and a great
linguist, speaking German, Greek, French and Italian, he was also a keen sportsman and, at the first modern Olympic Games in Athens, Alfred Schiff worked as a referee and supervisor for the German team.

In 1904, Alfred became one of the founding members of the "German Reich Committee for Olympic Games" and was the originator of the Olympic Torch Relay.

Sabine had a very comfortable childhood. The family lived just a few minutes’ walk away from Tiergarten and ten minutes’ walk from the Zoo. As there was no garden at home, Sabine and her sister were taken for daily walks in the fresh air of the gardens where they could play with other children.

Happy summer holidays were spent at some of Germany’s grandest sporting Spa hotels and resorts. At one hotel, Sabine and her sister befriended and played with Edda, the daughter of Hermann Göring.

After three years in primary school, Sabine was allowed to skip the fourth year and go straight to the girls’ 'Gymnasium’, having passed the obligatory entrance examination. At the gymnasium, she received a thorough classical education, including Latin, French and Greek whilst also learning English at home with her mother.

In 1920, the year Sabine was born, Alfred, who had worked in various academic and sporting positions, became the Administrative Director of the University of Physical Education in Berlin, the world’s first sport’s university, founded by his great friend and patron, Carl Diem.

In April 1933, Alfred was summarily dismissed from his post because he was a Jew.

Two years later, in 1935, Sabine was confirmed by Pastor Adolf Kurtz in the local Evangelical Lutheran Church, which also served as the school chapel. (I believe that Pastor Kurtz’ wife might have been a relative of Sabine’s maternal grandmother).

Kurtz, who, at great risk to himself, would go on to set up a school for Christian children of Jewish origin who had been expelled from the public school system as "Jews" was, along with Martin Niemoeller, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, all of whom Sabine had met, one of the founders of the Confessional Church, the Evangelical Lutheran grouping of churches that resisted the Nazification of the Church in Germany.

To say that Sabine’s teenage years were not easy, would be a gross understatement and, as the political situation got more and more uncertain and dangerous, Alfred and Laura decided that she should leave school and they arranged for Sabine to go to a secretarial college to learn shorthand in German, English and French, as well as Spanish and typing which she thoroughly disliked.

In 1938, Sabine’s mother visited England to obtain a British passport. It was thought best that Sabine and her sister, Elizabeth, would go to England with their mother and, when settled, Laura Schiff would return to Germany to fetch her husband, who had always hated the idea of going to England and who, in spite of his great linguistic skills, spoke not a word of English.

However, later in 1938, Professor Schiff suffered a major heart attack and died the following January, leaving Laura and her daughters free to travel to the United Kingdom, which they did
ten days after the funeral. Sabine, her sister and her mother left the flat as if they were going away for a few days, but they were never to return.

During their first year in England, the Mrs Schiff and her daughters lived in a boarding house in Bayswater, then, for a few months, with Laura’s brother and his family in Sutton, before moving to Wembley Park in 1941.

In England, Sabine and her sister had to find work, since they had very little money, and Sabine began working for the World Council of Churches in 1939, before moving to the Society of Friends and then joining the staff of the Church of England Committee for Refugees, under the chairmanship of Bishop George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, where she stayed for eight years.

Sabine’s work for Bishop Bell, whom she always held in the very highest regard, included not only translating for the Committee, but liaising with many of the German Luthran pastors and their families forced to flee Nazi Germany.

These rescued families were settled all over the world and Sabine remained in touch with succeeding generations of those whom she had had a hand in relocating to places of safety, regularly corresponding with families as flung as Canada and New Zealand.

Sabine’s next job was with the Institute of Almoners, where she became Administrative Assistant to the Director of Studies. After 13 years with the Institute, she decided that she needed a challenge and, in 1960, Sabine began working for the Federation Dentaire Internationale which needed a secretary-cum-translator with an excellent command of German and a good knowledge of French.

Sabine was to spend 23 years with the FDI and was promoted to Assistant Executive Secretary. Although it was demanding work, it was a job that Sabine loved, not least because she was able to travel every year to the World Dental Congress which was held in a different capital city.

Sabine retired in 1983 and, for a few years, invigilated examinations for the University of London Schools’ Examination Board and for other organizations; she also continued to undertake translation work and, for 12 years, worked voluntarily, one day a week, for the Imperial Cancer Research Fund at their shop in Harrow on the Hill.

Sabine’s mother, Laura, died in 1954, having suffered poor health for many years, and Sabine’s only sister, Elizabeth, who married in 1956, died in 2002.

Since 1957, Sabine had lived alone in Wembley, latterly supported by neighbours and friends. She lived long enough to celebrate her hundredth and her hundredth and first birthdays and died peacefully having received the last rites of the Church.

May Sabine rest now in God’s nearer presence and peace; may she enjoy the new life of his Kingdom, and rise again in God’s glory. Amen.

8th February 2022