In 1938 10 year old Gisela Boss took the most momentous journey of her life. Leaving her parents in Breslau (now Wroclaw in western Poland) she boarded the Kindertransport train, travelling for many hours through Europe to Bremerhaven and on to London. Here she was welcomed by the Pollitzers, a young childless couple from Belsize Park in north London, who had agreed to foster her.

Early life
An only child, Gisela was born on 1 June 1928. Her parents were well respected in Breslau: her father, Leo Boss, an otolaryngologist, was a war hero, awarded the Iron Cross in the first world war. Nevertheless, as Jews in the 1930s the family were in imminent danger from the Nazis. As rumours about a new war circulated, friends urged Gisela’s mother, Grete (née Rothstein), to get the little girl away to safety in England.

Gisela quickly mastered English, attending Parliament Hill Grammar School in Hampstead, and matriculated in 1944. An influx of returning servicemen delayed her entry to medical school, so she stayed on at school for a further year, becoming head girl and captain of tennis.

She studied medicine at King’s College London, where she was one of just a handful of female undergraduates, and said it was love at first sight when she met fellow student Charles Esmond.
Langham. The couple married in 1953 and had three boys: John, Tom, and Max. After a short time in Crystal Palace, the family moved to Lewisham in south London, where Boss lived for the next 60 years. Throughout her life she had an adventurous spirit and in 1966 she and Esmond with their three sons drove to Athens and back in an old VW camper van.

Career in tuberculosis

Described as “a very discrete kind of rebel,” Boss took her own path in life, both in “marrying out” of the Jewish faith and in her career, which took her from comfortable Belsize Park to working with some of the most disadvantaged people in the grittier parts of south London.

After qualifying in 1952 she took house officer jobs at St James’ Hospital, Balham, and Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children in Bethnal Green. She met Mary Farquharson, who had set up the chest clinic at Lewisham Hospital. Here Boss found her vocation, becoming an associate specialist in charge of tuberculosis (TB) services at Lewisham and Grove Park hospitals.

In the 1950s the incidence of TB in poorer parts of London was still high and treatment was lengthy: it could take 18 months to two years to clear the infection, involving a combination of streptomycin, para-aminosalicylic acid, and isoniazid. Patients were often hard to trace—some did not speak English and many were homeless or living in hostels. As well as treating patients, Boss managed a team of health visitors and social workers who did the contact tracing. It was a job that required huge patience, but her colleague, Noemi Eiser, said, “It suited Gisela’s temperament: she ran an efficient service and was very particular and straightforward.” She also liked to keep up standards and formalities, scrupulously addressing clients by their title rather than just their first name.

During her career, she witnessed a transformation in TB treatment, with the introduction of the antibiotic rifampin (rifampicin) in the 1970s, which cut treatment time to nine months, and then the addition of pyrazinamide in the 1980s, which further reduced it to six months.

Despite Farquharson’s coaxing, Boss did not to take the membership exam to become a consultant. Apart from anything else, she was busy with her family. Her husband died suddenly in 1967, and she was bringing up her three sons as a single parent. In 1974 she married William (“Bill”) Ashton and became a stepmother to his son, David.

In 1993 she retired from the Lewisham chest clinic, but continued her career teaching the interpretation of chest x rays to students at Guy’s Hospital, where she was valued for her caring and mildly eccentric manner, remembered as keeping students standing so they kept awake and rewarding them with sweets for correct answers.

In 1988 Bill died. Boss’s final love was an old friend, John Warren, with whom, among other things, she enjoyed trips to Glyndebourne. Boss died in Lewisham and leaves her three sons, her stepson, and five grandchildren.

Gisela Boss (b 1928; q King’s College Hospital, London, 1952; MRCS Eng, LRCP Lond, DCH), died from frailty of old age on 29 May 2022.