

IMPORTANT

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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

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Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
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Interviewee Surname:	Simmons
Forename:	Margaret
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	22 March 1906
Interviewee POB:	Ellrich, Germany

Date of Interview:	20 January 2003
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
Total Duration (HH:MM):	2 hours 42 minutes

**REFUGEE VOICES:
THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE****INTERVIEW: 4****NAME: MARGARET SIMMONS****DATE: 20 JANUARY 2003****LOCATION: PINNER****INTERVIEWER: BEA LEWKOWICZ****TAPE 1****Tape 1: 0 minute 31 seconds**

BL: Mrs. Simmons, can you please tell me about your family background?

MS: I was born in a little town near Harz Mountains in 1906, and my father owned a textile factory, which mainly produced aprons, which he inherited from his father. My earliest memories are from the first house we lived until my grandfather died in 1909 and we moved in his house, where we stayed until the First World War and my father had to join the German Army to train recruits. I went to school first in the place where I was born and changed into the Lyzeum in Nordhausen, where we moved in 1915 after the premises in Ellrich were sold. During the war years, I stayed just with my mother and sometimes visiting my grandmother in Kaiserslautern in the Rhein-Pfalz, where my mother came from. I don't think my mother was very happy to live in such a small town and that was the reason we sold the property we had in Ellrich. My parents thought that when my father came home from the war he would be in his early forties and there was enough money for them to live quite comfortably. But it turned out quite different because, after my father came back from the war, and tried to build up the business again, which was very difficult for him, so in 1936, I think, he committed suicide. That was after I got married and moved to Cologne with my first husband, who was a legal representative of the hotels in the Rhineland.

Tape 1: 3 minutes 45 seconds

BL: Can you maybe tell me about life in Ellrich? What was life in Ellrich like?

MS: Well, I was a child then, and I was only eight years when we moved. But I had a very nice childhood there, with complete freedom. I was very mischievous and did all sorts of things, which I shouldn't have done, including walking on 'Stelzen' and hurting my lip, with blood pouring out and my mother was afraid to touch me. One day I went

into the deserted dog kennels and caught masses of fleas, and I still see myself standing in the wash-bowl and my mother washing me down with water with some vinegar in it, to get rid of the fleas. So I had a very nice childhood there. The first year I had private lessons because my mother thought I was too fragile to be sent to school at the age of six, but when I was seven I went to school there for two years until we moved to Nordhausen.

BL: Were there many Jews in Ellrich?

MS: I have many lively memories of the synagogue in Ellrich, which was in the back yard of a Christian house. We had to go through the house to get to the back yard and it was a very old building, where my mother and I had to climb up the stairs to the gallery, which was hidden from the men by a wooden trellis. And I loved to watch down and see the men in their white shirts and waited for the Shofar to be blown because that was the only entertainment I could find there.

BL: How many Jewish families were there in Ellrich?

MS: I don't know. Maybe, ten, twenty, not that many, not that many. But it was a really old building, I am sure it was from the early 18th century, or maybe even earlier, I don't know. With oil lamps. But that was the only memory I have.

BL: Was there a rabbi in Ellrich?

MS: No, not a permanent one, maybe just one came for the holidays, I don't know. I was too small, we moved away when I was between eight and nine years old.

BL: Do you remember any anti-Semitism? Did you have any bad experiences at all?

MS: No, none at all. I even had a gentile wet nurse when my mother thought I wasn't gaining enough weight as a baby.

Tape 1: 7 minutes 21 seconds

BL: How come that your parents settled in Ellrich?

MS: Well, my father inherited the factory from my grandfather. My grandfather went to America as a young man and I suppose he couldn't find a wife there. He came back to Germany and got married and produced three children. My father was the youngest and their mother died from typhoid, which was due to the bad water supply in the small town. And then my grandfather married again, the sister of a friend of his, his second marriage, and there was another son, who came later. But the second wife also died very young. And I have lots of memories of my grandfather, from whom I inherited my love of dogs. Because as a young child they took me to a lake, together with my cousin, and threw a stick in the lake, and a red setter jumped in and retrieved the stick, which was of great interest to me at the time. Well, in 1915 or so, after the factory was sold, we moved to Nordhausen and rented a big apartment on the first floor of a house, which belonged to a

doctor who lived on the ground floor and became our family doctor – ‘Sanitätsrat Stern’. And, in 1918, my father came back and part of the flat then was used for business purposes. He wanted to start from scratch again. And then I grew up. I had many friends there and joined the ski club. My father always said, ‘You never get up early in the morning except when you go out skiing, then you can get up at 6 o’clock in the morning’. Then, when I was about 18, friends invited me to come with them to Norderney. They were a young family with two little boys and they rented a house in Norderney and had a spare room there, so I went with them and enjoyed it. It was the first time I saw the sea, and there I met my first husband. And he was the Syndicus of the hotel organisation, The Rheinland. We married in ‘36 and ---.

BL: Sorry, it must have been ’26-.

MS: ‘26, sorry, ’26. And we moved to Cologne. Did I say what he was? His job?

BL: Yes.

MS: I said that. We had a very good time there. I was introduced to the carnival, which I had never heard of before, and I enjoyed it very much. Later, we - my husband was very keen to shooting - we went and built a little cottage in the district and were later joined by another family, called Riesen. Dr. Riesen became the first Nazi Oberbürgermeister of Cologne. We were sharing the district with him, where we went hunting for hare and birds and things like that. Can you switch it off for a moment? The microphone? I want to ask you something.

Tape 1: 13 minutes 0 seconds

BL: Yes, we will switch it off for a second.

[Interruption]

BL: You were talking about your life with your first husband. Maybe just to go back a tiny bit, you said your husband was Catholic, your first husband, so how did your family react when you wanted to marry?

MS: My parents were not very pleased. But I was determined. Somehow I wanted to get away. I was ready to leave my parents’ house. And my first husband was just the type I liked, sporty and enterprising, entertaining, and so I married and we had quite a - from ‘26 to ‘35 or ‘6 - we had a very nice time, a very nice circle of friends. And on one holiday we went to Bad Godesberg, to Rheinhotel Dresen, at the same time as Hitler with his crew was coming to the hotel, and young Dresen showed me full of pride the rooms and bathroom he had prepared for Herr Hitler and Goebbels.

BL: Which year was that? When was that roughly?

MS: That can be dated exactly because Hitler left the next day because of the Röhm Putsch in Munich.

BL: So it would have been 1934.

MS: Yes, 1934. And I remember the morning when Hitler came downstairs and all the guests were assembled in the hall of the hotel. I was standing in front with my little boy in his Bavarian Lederhosen, grey chequered with green cuffs and so on, and Hitler went straight to my son, touched his cheek, and said, 'Wo kommst du denn her?' And John became quite red in his face and said, "Von Köln." Then Hitler disappeared down the stairs. Shall I mention the photograph as well? And a photographer was standing outside, photographed Hitler doing his raised arm and just caught me at the steps of the hotel. Later, our manager at the hotel insisted that I had to give up the photograph, that I shouldn't keep it. For me, it was all fun, because I never thought that Hitler was anybody to be taken seriously.

BL: How did you feel at the time? What did you think of Hitler at the time?

MS: I heard stories, and I found him rather ridiculous, because all the photographs one saw at the time were rather strange and unbelievable.

BL: What was your impression when you met him? When you actually saw him, what was your impression?

MS: No! He didn't impress me somehow. He came down, very erect and stately, down the stairs, so to be noticed by everybody.

Tape 1: 17 minutes 25 seconds

BL: But, it wasn't worrying for you or scary?

MS: No, no. But, shortly afterwards, nothing to do with that, my husband lost his job as the Syndicus of the hotel organisation, and we decided to buy a lorry and get very good beer from the German-Czechoslovak frontier, not very far from Pilsen, but it was on the German side of the frontier. We got this beer to Cologne and in the cellar we bottled it and put tickets on and sold it. And Rheinhof Dresden was a very good customer of ours. Then, in 1933, I went to a carnival festivity in the Gürzenich, which is part of Cologne Town Hall, and there we met friends of ours, who had my later husband with them, and they introduced us. And, a few days later, I had a phone call from him, and asked whether we could meet, and I was rather appalled because I was married and certainly not interested in other men. And that was in 193-, the same day as the Reichstag was set in Brand by this poor Dutchman. And I didn't see him or hear of him until I really realised that I couldn't stay. I was later divorced. And one day I was thinking very hard whether I really could phone him and ask his advice because I didn't know any other Jewish men in Cologne, not one. That was after three years or four years.

BL: Your circle in Cologne was entirely not-Jewish?

MS: Well it was 'Mischehen', several, and Germans. There were two couples who were also - both had Jewish women, wives. And one, I heard later, went to the Cologne Stadtwald and hanged herself during the war. It was very sad. We tried to get in touch with the husband but he never answered back, he probably didn't want to be reminded.

BL: What was the experience like to be in a 'Mischehe' in those years between-?

MS: Well, we just didn't go to the synagogue. My mother-in-law was very religious, Roman Catholic, and influenced me a lot. And I loved her very dearly because she was a wonderful person. And she wanted me to become a Roman Catholic, and I was instructed by the Dom Preacher of the Cologne Cathedral, Father Dionysius, and went through a marriage ceremony with my husband.

BL: In the Dom?

MS: I don't know where that was, maybe a smaller church somewhere. And when my son was born, shortly after that, Father Dionysius came into the clinic, to christen the baby, and he said it was for him a special occasion because I was a converted Catholic for such a short time. I had never been to confession or anything like that.

Tape 1: 22 minutes 30 seconds

BL: So you officially converted?

MS: Officially, yes, signed by Father Dionysius. And - what else?

BL: Did you experience, or your husband, any difficulties as a result of a mixed marriage?

MS: Yeah, yeah. And, well, after, we divorced, I told that already. I phoned my husband, and the first thing he said on the telephone was, 'I am going to England in October'. And my heart sank. I thought, 'Well, he can't help me either'. 'But let us meet', he said, 'let us meet'. So I met him, that was after three or four years, and of course the result was that we decided to get married. And, in October '37, he went to England as a representative of a German firm, Brabender, who sold laboratory machines for flour mills. And I followed him after I got very nervous being interviewed by an official, who said I should come to the police station on the Saturday. That was Monday; this man came on Monday, and asked me to come to the police station on Saturday. So I got the wind up, packed my bags, and bought a ticket to London. And on the label I had the address of people in Highams Park, where my husband lodged, because he had met them already when he came to London as a student to learn English. Also Gabi's father was with these people, Finchkeit, near Walthamstow. What else?

BL: So, just to go back, because it is important, when you were married, your first marriage, was there any pressure to get divorced? How did it happen that you actually got divorced?

MS: We heard so much about Hitler and his hatred for Jews and my husband and I decided that the best to be would be to get a divorce because he had lost his job already.

BL: He lost his job as a result of marrying you?

MS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was a semi-official job. He very often went to Berlin to negotiate restitution for the German hotels, who suffered under the occupation of the Allied Armies after the First World War. So that goes back to the First World War. And he, I suppose, was very successful. Anyway, we decided on a divorce.

BL: You didn't want to emigrate together or were there any other options other than getting divorced?

MS: No. Well, the option would have been him leaving, but he was so German. He was an officer in the First World War. So for him it was not possible to emigrate. He didn't speak English, where I already had four years of English at school.

Tape 1: 26 minutes 40 seconds

BL: It was an amicable decision or were you upset about it?

MS: Very amicable. We always kept friends, and he even, after the war, visited us here with his second wife and we were always on the best of terms. But, unfortunately, I had to leave John behind, or Hans Gert as he was called at that time, which was the worst that happened to me. But in a divorce boys go with the father and the girls go with their mother, according to the German law, so I had no chance. The boy even came to visit us here in 1938, no, 1937, in the summer, during his school holidays, and, to my great joy, my mother-in-law phoned and said there was an outbreak of polio in Cologne and the schools were shut for another month, so he was here for about two months in the summer. But then he had to fly home from Croydon Airport, at that time, and I never saw him again until he was 17, after the war, when he came to England. And he stayed for the rest of his life in England, studied here at Birkbeck College and got a degree and found a future wife, who was a lecturer there at the time, and she came from Wales. But, unfortunately, he died, aged 73, last summer.

BL: That was terribly unfair to you to move in such German circles and to be forced to divorce and have to leave. How did you feel?

MS: Well, I thought, all the other Jewish families left, and I had no choice. I remember one day, we sat in deck chairs in the garden and I had been down and found a four-leaved clover and David, I wanted to give it to him, but he said, 'No, I don't want it. You keep it

for luck'. It was a superstition in Germany - when you had a four-leaved clover, it brought you luck.

BL: Where did you live in Cologne?

MS: Klettenberg, outside Cologne, in a house, with a little garden. A little garden for my animals. I indulged myself, soon after I was married, with a greyhound, a retired greyhound, and several other dogs and pigeons and a Siamese cat and all sorts of animals.

BL: Did your neighbours and friends know that you had converted? That you were born Jewish?

MS: We were never in touch with our neighbours. We didn't meet them socially or anything. No.

BL: Can you remember any hostility towards you at that time?

MS: No. I didn't meet any. I didn't know any. When I came to Cologne, that was a purely Christian environment, except the two couples we met, I don't know when and where, who were also 'Mischehe'.

Tape 1: 30 minutes 57 seconds

BL: You said you were close to your mother-in-law?

MS: Yeah, yeah.

BL: So how did she treat you?

MS: I was her daughter. She was a most lovely woman. I will never forget her. And of course she brought up my son after I left. And we met her right after the war again.

BL: Were you in touch with your parents at that time? Where were your parents?

MS: My parents were still in Nordhausen. My father died when John was two years old that was in 1928. John was born '26, my father took his life in '28. He was not even 60 then, I think, but war ruined everything for him, I think.

BL: The First World War?

MS: Yes. I loved my father dearly, but I can't say the same for my mother. And I think that was the reason I was ready to leave home.

BL: Why? You were not close to your mother?

MS: No, not really. She was an unhappy person, I think she missed her family in the Pfalz and I don't know. She had hysterical outbursts sometimes. I still remember when the order came for my father in 1914 that he had to join up, her screams, I can still hear them. Screams that my father was called up, screaming. And I am sorry to say it but I think she was a very unhappy person. My father's brother and his family lived there and my mother must have had a terrible scene with her sister-in-law and they never talked again, ever. So, I don't know.

BL: Where did your mother live after your father died?

Tape 1: 33 minutes 42 seconds

MS: She lived in Nordhausen, until she had to emigrate. They arrested her, I suppose, that was after I was in England. So of course it helped me very much that I was newly married and was very much in love with my husband. I was always lucky to get on with life. So, and when I came to England, we lived in a flat in Cable Gardens. My husband left in October and on the train he met a lady, who was a travel writer and came from Yugoslavia, and they started talking. He had his camera equipment hanging round his neck and she told him that her husband was a member of the Royal Photographic Society and they would certainly have mutual interests and invited him to come and see them. That was in North Harrow. And my husband told her that he was looking for a flat and it should be in the north west of London, because he saw the war coming and, on his travels for this, he found it safer to live in the North West rather than in the Surrey area. And she told him that there was a block of flats that were being built. After, he inspected it and asked me whether I would live near a cemetery. I said, 'No, certainly not'. He had this flat in Cable Gardens, in a block of flats, which is now under second grade building protection. And, after he left the Pioneer Corps, he was asked by the Minister of Economic Warfare to join and he was able to judge the food situation in Germany by reading the continental papers, like Swiss papers. And he stayed there until the end of the war. In the meantime, we had both been interned. And he joined the Pioneer Corps, left with the rank of a corporal. And after, at the end of the war, he was asked if he would like to become a civil servant in the Ministry of Food. He said, 'No, thank you, all of my life I have wanted to become an antique dealer, and now is my chance'. His sister, his eldest sister, was in America with her husband at the time, after they went through hell trying to get into Switzerland from Holland during the Nazi time and the Swiss refused them entry because they were already full of refugees and wouldn't take any more. So, they found their way back to Brussels, where they survived the war underground, and they were - by the time my husband decided to become an antique dealer - they were in New York, and we agreed to try and open an antique business in New York. And that succeeded. My husband was buying things and we processed them here. Some had to be repaired or cleaned and they all had to be photographed. My husband's photographic knowledge was very useful. And the business became very successful and we had a very good living. He was quite well-known in the London art market.

BL: We'll have to stop you. We have to change tapes.

MS: I have talked too much.

BL: No, you have been wonderful!

Tape 1: 39 minute 9 seconds

End of Tape 1

TAPE 2

Tape 2: 0 minute 4 seconds

BL: Let's go back to your arrival in England. What were your first impressions?

MS: I had a ticket on my luggage with the address of the people near Walthamstow and I arrived here with sixpence, because on my way out I was only allowed ten marks, and with having breakfast on the journey, I just had sixpence left. And I showed the taxi driver the address on the label and he took me to Highams Park, to the Finchkeits. And the first thing they did when they saw me was to pay for the taxi. The next day I went into London, to Upper Penn Street, to visit my husband's uncle, the brother of his mother, his late mother, who had a fur business in London and had emigrated already in 1933 or '34 and lived in a lovely flat in Putney, Heath Rise. And when I told him I had arrived, he was a very stately gentleman behind his big desk, and said, 'Erwin didn't tell me that you would arrive already now'. And I said, 'Well, I had no choice'. He had no idea what was going on in Germany apparently. So I had to ask him for money, which he gave me, and then I waited until my husband came back from Scotland, where he had been on business.

Tape 2: 2 minutes 15 seconds

BL: Were you married already at the time?

MS: Yeah, we married, I arrived in February, and we married on 22nd March, which is my birthday. The registrar asked us whether the 22nd of March would suit us, and I said, 'Yes, very well, it's my birthday'. So, and then in the meantime, I had the flat in Cable Gardens in North Harrow, and waited for a lift from Germany, with his furniture - he had rented in Germany two rooms of a flat belonging to an old lady - and I had added things to complete a household. And so we were installed in Cable Gardens. When he came back from one of his journeys and came into the flat he hadn't seen before furnished, he said, 'Das ist aber sehr nett bei euch!' Not including himself. He didn't believe that it was his. I don't know what he meant with the other part. It was very funny. So, he always managed to somehow keep in touch with the milling industry and we went to Torquay and I went with him the year after to the big meetings of the Flour Millers Association in Brighton. We had a very nice time there, we were invited by Ranks, and it was a very beautiful occasion.

BL: Why the milling industry? Is that his background?

MS: That was his background, the flour mills.

BL: You haven't explained it to us. Why? What did his parents do?

MS: Well, he was brought up being the son of an industrialist, who owned a flour mill in Neuss-am-Rhein.

BL: And the names of the mills were?

MS: Siemunds Mühlen. John, my son, came over for a summer holidays. Have I told you that?

BL: Yes.

MS: And stayed for two months.

Tape 2: 5 minutes 13 seconds

BL: How did he deal with the situation? It must have been very difficult for your son.

MS: Well, he was only eight or nine years old, and I explained to him. But we didn't talk much. He enjoyed his holiday and he had food with us, plenty of food, and he went back and he had a dreadful time in Germany. And I think he, in his heart, I don't think he ever forgave me for leaving him. He came here and studied at college and went to Canada after he married, with his young family, and then started the food department for Leeds University and he stayed there as a lecturer for the rest of his working life.

BL: When he came here in 1937, you didn't think of keeping him here and not sending him back?

MS: Well, I didn't know. But he decided for himself that he didn't want to go back.

BL: I mean, when he came as a small boy in 1937?

MS: Oh, as a small boy, I explained to him that his father wanted him back and I couldn't keep him. The first husband of my husband's sister, the older one who went to New York later, she was married to a solicitor, a lawyer, or a solicitor in Düsseldorf, and she had the exact case as I had. She was married to a German Catholic, had one son, and in her second marriage married a Jewish husband. And he guaranteed that if I wouldn't let the boy go back to Cologne, he would personally come and fetch him, so I had no choice. He lived in Düsseldorf, which is near Cologne, and they were in touch, so-.

BL: After you got divorced, did you stay in Cologne?

MS: Yes, yes.

BL: I mean, before you emigrated, there was almost two years after you got divorced before you emigrated?

MS: Was it that much, that long? Could be.

BL: Or was it a bit less?

MS: It didn't seem so long to me, no, but I might be wrong.

BL: Did you stay in your joint flat, or did you-?

Tape 2: 8 minutes 0 seconds

MS: Yeah, yeah. Well, later I went into a room in-, to be near my future husband, but I didn't spend much time in that room, I stayed mainly in his flat. And when this official came for an interview, I was in his flat.

BL: So they came to interview you about your second husband?

MS: No, my first husband.

BL: Why?

MS: I don't know, they wanted details about what his business was and so on.

BL: Because he wasn't in danger, he was divorced-.

MS: I don't know, they wanted details.

BL: So, was there a lot of bureaucracy when you left? To make it possible to leave, what did you have to do?

MS: Nothing, nothing. I just bought a ticket and I went to London. Nothing.

BL: And when you arrived? At the offices, was it a problem at all?

MS: Yes. No, because I said I wanted to get married and they laughed and made crosses on my luggage. That was before you needed a visa, before you needed a visa. After that, I helped a cousin of mine and my school friend to come to England and got them domestic jobs here, so-.

BL: So you found a family who was willing to take them as domestics?

MS: One was a teacher of Harrow School and the other one was a dentist in Northwood. But they all had to leave this district after the grouping of grades of immigrants, you know, A, B and C. So.

BL: Why did they have to leave this district?

MS: Why? They had to leave?

BL: This particular district?

MS: Because of Northwood, this was a protected area, because in Northwood there was an air force establishment, which is still there, Royal Air Force.

BL: So all the enemy aliens had to leave this area?

Tape 2: 10 minutes 48 seconds

MS: Yeah, had to leave. But they weren't interned, maybe they left shortly before they were called for an interview or something like that.

BL: Did you receive any help from any organisations when you came to Britain?

MS: Never, no, I never asked for one, I never asked for one.

BL: Did you have any contact with Woburn House or any other-?

MS: Only through Margaret Hoffman, who worked there, an old friend, and Mrs. Kahn, who later sold a piece of their garden to us. That was the only connection I had, we had.

BS: When you tried to help your friends from Cologne, did that go through-?

MS: I went to an agency, who placed domestic servants, who was local here. That is why I got the two places in Harrow and in Northwood. We were never in touch with an organisation or asked help or anything like that.

BL: Did you know many other refugees at the time?

MS: Yes, old friends, from Würzburg mainly. One wine dealer and one was an old friend of my mothers. Her husband became a waiter at Claridges, for room service only. And that was all. Much later, we met of course other people, who became very close friends. Then my husband advised lots of people about buying antiques. One very close friend, Walter Rapold, his wife became - they lived in Stanmore and came from Hamburg and my husband helped them to collect a very big collection of portrait miniatures and the collection was sold at Christies after they died, about four or five years ago. I have got the catalogue here. So, they became our closest friends.

BL: So when did you have to go to the tribunal?

MS: The tribunal must have been before we were interned.

BL: So what happened, can you please describe?

MS: There was one magistrate, whose name I have forgotten, and Mrs. Kahn, who worked in Woburn House, and somebody else, a third person, who I've forgotten. I was classified 'B', and later on Mrs Kahn told me that the magistrate asked her, 'What have the Jews done in Germany that they are so unpopular?' So that proves that they hadn't got a clue what was going on. And, a few weeks later, a policeman called at the flat and told me I had to be at Pinner Police Station at a certain time.

Tape 2: 14 minutes 43 seconds

MS: And bring enough luggage to prepare for a stay or something. The first night we were taken by coach to Fulham to some enormous hall, which was full of beds and stayed one night there. The next night we went by train to Liverpool, where the population was very hostile and threatened us as they thought we were Nazis or Germans. And then we spent the night on the ship taking us to the Isle of Man and I was approached by a very nice lady, who collected a circle around herself, a Mrs. Kauffman. And we all went to the same hotel in Port Erin. The first thing I saw when we went through that hotel was that there were double beds in the rooms and I was horrified. I didn't want to share a double bed with some stranger, so I looked quickly through the hotel and I asked the owner, a woman, whether they didn't have any single rooms, and she said, 'There is one, but it is very small', and I said, 'Never mind how small it is, I will have it', and immediately occupied the single room. It was tiny. I had to be on my knees to be able to look out of the window. But it had a bed and a washstand and that was heaven. But then I made some friends and we had quite a good time. We had very few duties, just to lay the table and to clear it and to do the washing-up that went in routine, everybody had to do it at some time. And then I stayed a very, very cold winter there, and was released on 22nd of March, after a year. That was in-. When was it? '42, I suppose, yeah. I came home and, in the flat, Mrs Kahn had looked after the flat in that year and also sent me additional clothing. And then, what to do next? Well, I went to stay with my husband in Melrose, at the borders, where the Pioneer Corps was stationed, for about six weeks. And we both decided that wasn't the life for me. I wanted to go home to the flat and look for a job. And I had drawings. Before I was interned, I went to Raimonds School, that was a school, who came from Berlin and opened a school in London for photography and window dressing and painting and all sorts of artistic activity. And I made some designs there for windows. And so I decided to go to town and look for a job. And in Oxford Street, D.H. Evans, which is now Debenhams, looked like a very nice store, so I walked in and showed my drawings and they said, 'Yes, alright, you can start on Monday, as a display artist has just been called up', and there I stayed for six years until the end of the war. Then my husband in the meantime had left the Ministry of Economic Warfare and was in the, no, had left the army and joined the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and during his lunch hour he always inspected the auction houses and antique dealers in the West End and we met for lunch. And one day he saw me kneeling in the window at D. H. Evans, picking up pins and threads, and he decided that he didn't want his wife to be there on view, in Oxford Street, and I had to resign. But that was about the time that my

predecessor came back from the war and took up his job again, so I was surplus anyway. I made £6 a week and had corporal's pay, during the Pioneer Corps time, and lived quite well. I don't know what a corporal pay was at the time, but it can't have been very much.

Tape 2: 20 minutes 37 seconds

BL: What was your husband's experience? He was also interned?

MS: Of course, he was interned about a month before me. In Douglas, Isle of Man. He said it was a very interesting time for him because there were a lot of intellectuals and lectures and one man was there, who had been interned already in the First World War, and he knew all the ropes and had made contact with Fortnum and Mason, and they sent him regular food parcels. And he met quite interesting people there. And, of course, when he joined the Pioneer Corps, he was in the army and he was trained in Melrose in the border country, where I visited him when I came out of the-. I think he was almost a year in the army until I got my release. But, of course, I had a different passport. I was Frau Jürgen Müller, mit Kind. That sounded a bit different to Mrs. Grete Simmons.

BL: Did you have any contact with your husband when you were in the Isle of Man? Did you see him?

MS: Once, we had a meeting, a big meeting, in a big hall, where we had to decide where we wanted to go. I think it was Canada at the time. And we both decided 'No we don't want to go, we want to stay here'. Both of us. I, because John was in Germany, my son, and my husband, because he loved his antiques and he wanted to go back to his own flat.

BL: How did you feel at the time? Were you upset when you were interned? Do you remember how you reacted?

MS: No, I wasn't very upset. I gave Mrs. Kahn my keys and she told me afterwards that she had never seen such a tidy flat, because I had made it tidy before I left.

BL: You didn't think it was unfair or-?

MS: No, everybody else was interned and I am not an emotional type. I don't get terribly upset or terribly joyful or anything like that. I have a good sense of humour and I take things as they come. So, what else is there to tell you?

BL: About the internment. You said you spent about a year in internment?

MS: Yes, one winter, and one nice summer. We could move about in the area and in the adjoining village as well. We bought food and had a little cooker in one of the rooms. I made friends with the postman, the man from the post office, who brought me fuel for the cooker, paraffin. And it was quite a nice summer holiday, but the winter was icy and we always tried to get near the open fire if possible.

Tape 2: 24 minutes 42 seconds

BL: Did you have contact to the local population?

MS: No. The woman who owned the hotel, she kept her distance. She cooked, but all the other things we had to do - washing up, drying up, laying the table and clearing the table. There were several people who gave lectures. I learned to make gloves and took Spanish lessons. And so there was one house for the Nazis. I think there were sisters in the hospital in London, German women, but we never met them or had any contact with them. There was a group of gardeners, which I should have joined but I never did. And, well, it wasn't boring and it wasn't terribly interesting.

BL: You said that you were known as Mrs Müller, with Kind. But by then you were married, or not?

MS: Ya, ya, of course.

BL: So how come that you were-? You said before that you were known as Mrs Müller mit Kind?

MS: Because I have been on several holidays, in Yugoslavia, in Italy.

BL: So it was the passport you kept?

MS: And we even, when the passport went out-of-date, we went to the German Embassy in London to have it extended.

BL: So you never changed your German passport to Mrs. Simmons?

MS: Not then. Later. Afterwards, I was naturalised automatically, because of my husband. Pioneers were naturalised automatically and so was I. I just applied for a passport and got it.

BL: When did you get your British citizenship?

MS: My passport? Probably after the war, when we went to Germany or Switzerland for the first time, after the war. Without any interview or anything.

BL: Did you experience any hostility coming from Germany in England? Was that difficult at all?

Tape 2: 27 minutes 28 seconds

MS: Yeah. At D.H. Evans I had the first difficulty. They didn't want to know me, the window dressers, several of them. But one was a Kindertransport girl anyway and the other was Jewish from the East End, well, half-Jewish, she had a gentile mother and a

Jewish father. And one day they didn't talk to me, and I grabbed hold of the eldest of the window dressers and explained to her why I had come to England, and from that day there was no difficulty any more. So! During the war, when the display department was on the top floor, and when we looked out of the window across to the corner of Bond Street, there was a linen firm in that house and they had a flag pole on the roof. And when there was an air raid threatening, they put up a red flag on the roof and that was the signal for us to go down all the staircase because we were not allowed to use the escalator in that case, so we went down and herded all the customers from the perfumery department, which was in the front and full of glass shelves, back on the ground floor, where all the materials were solid and that was less dangerous in case of an air raid. So we had to do that to get them out of the way in case. I arrived in the morning, I always arrived in Baker Street with the Metropolitan Line, and by the staircase, which led up to Baker Street, there was a board, on one side it said alarm, and on the other side it said something - when there was no alarm - a green one, a red one, one side a green one, the other side. And that was hanging on a nail on that staircase and every time I came, of course, I looked up, 'Is there an alarm or is this alright?' And for years afterwards, when the board was long gone, I still saw the hole where the nail was put in, I still automatically looked up there.

BL: So when there was an alarm, you wouldn't leave the station?

MS: We would have stayed down there and not gone into the street. Sometimes I would be with the other girl who came in the Kindertransport and we would rush into a house when the alarm went on and wait until the all clear came on our way home. She emigrated to Chile with her husband, who was Welsh and the son of a Welsh clergyman. She came over from Berlin with the Kindertransport and then joined together with her father in Chile. He started a clothing factory or something.

BL: During that time, did you hear anything about your son in Germany? Did you know where he was?

MS: Not during the war, not during the war, but after the first meeting with my husband and my brother-in-law, who came back to Holland after the war, I met my first husband, and John, and my sister-in-law's first husband as well, together, at the Dutch frontier. They were not allowed to be together. There was a barrier in between.

Tape 2: 32 minutes 13 seconds

BL: When was that?

MS: After the war at some time. For the first time, I think. The first thing that we heard was that my sister and brother-in-law survived the war was when the British Army occupied Brussels after the war and they lived underground and the first letter we had was from George Robinson. He was a British soldier and, as civilians, they were not allowed to correspond, but as a soldier he could write a letter to England. He was a keeper at London Zoo, in charge of the giraffes and hippopotamus, and, after the war,

when he went back to his job, we visited him and I took my two little grandchildren to meet him, we fed the giraffes.

BL: What happened to your son? What happened to him in Germany?

MS: In Germany? He stayed with his father and his family and for some time he was in the forest with some forester to be safe. And he was kicked out of school and had private lessons and my father-in-law was a teacher and helped him also. And, when he came to England, he had an American accent because he picked it up from the American Army of Occupation. He went to Crammer in Northwood, and he stayed with us when he was about 17, and then passed his matric within about a year at a college in London somewhere, and then he went to Birkbeck College, which is a college where you have to have a day-time occupation and they have evening lectures. And the last year, his fifth year, he got a grant and could complete his studies. By then, he had met his future wife, who was a lecturer at Birkbeck College.

BL: Why did he decide to come to England, your son?

MS: Because he wanted to be with me and he hated the things that happened to him in Germany. For him, he didn't even think about going back.

BL: And how did your first husband react to that?

MS: He thought he was quite right. He didn't like what happened in Germany to him either. He thought it was a better future for him to be here. Because Germany was then bombed. Before they built it all up again, it was in a terrible mess.

BL: Was he fighting? Was he in the Wehrmacht, your-?

MS: No, no, he was past that age. He was an officer in the First World War. He was a 'Fesselballon' observer. He went up in a balloon and photographed French lines. He was shot down about three times and the balloon caught fire.

Tape 2: 36 minutes 20 seconds

BL: In the First World War?

MS: Yeah, the First World War.

BL: In the Second, he stayed at home.

MS: No, no, he was too old then, I think. But they had to move out of Cologne. They bombed systematically one suburb after another and they knew when they bombed one it was time to move to the next one. So they moved to Bonn at that time.

BL: Did you ever go back to Germany after the war?

MS: Me, ja, we went on our way to Switzerland. We had photographs, my husband did, with where his parents lived, the house, before the war, and what it looked like after the war. And we stayed in a boarding house with rooms in the cellar because the first floor didn't exist any more.

BL: So it was quite shortly ---?

MS: Shortly after the war. John was here already, I think. Ja, John was here in the flat.

BL: What was it like for you to go back to Germany?

MS: We just saw the destruction and took some photographs and travelled through to Switzerland for a holiday. And there was one incident where I met some German women, I don't know the occasion, and they asked me where I lived. I said, 'In London'. And one looked at me and said, 'Aber Sie sprechen ausgezeichnetes Deutsch'. I don't think I replied.

BL: OK, Mrs. Simmons, we have to change tapes.

MS: Again? Gosh. I have been talking for hours; I want a cup of coffee now.

Tape 2: 38 minutes 33 seconds.

End of Tape 2

TAPE 3

Tape 3: 0 minute 6 seconds

BL: We were talking about the post-war situation, the situation you found yourself in, and we were just talking about going back to Germany and what it was like.

Tape 3: 0 minute 14 seconds

MS: Ya. We went back to Germany, it must have been in '46 or '47, on our way to Switzerland to a holiday, and we visited my former mother-in-law. It was lovely to see her again and I could thank her for looking after my son during the war. Her husband had died in the meantime. And we continued to drive down to Switzerland, where we spent a very nice holiday. I didn't tell you how I built the house here.

BL: Before we get to that, is there anything else you remember from your visit to Germany at the time?

MS: No, not really. We drove through, we saw my mother-in-law in Bonn and my former husband and ---.

BL: What was it like to meet after ---?

MS: It was just lovely to see them again. We were great friends. We didn't correspond, but when we saw each other, it was very nice.

BL: You didn't feel any resentment at all?

MS: No. I was very happy in my second marriage.

BL: When did you find out what happened to your mother?

MS: We didn't hear anything and I put an ad in the Nordhauser paper, with my address in London, and we had one letter. They didn't know anything either and I never answered it. Never. And later it was obvious what had happened to her. They always said they had taken her to Theresienstadt, which was supposed to be not such a severe camp, and that is all that I knew. So ---.

BL: And what about your husband's family? Your second husband?

MS: They emigrated, first to Holland, and then the Germans marched in, they tried to escape to Switzerland and through the whole of France and to the Swiss frontier. They were refused entry and they found their way back to Brussels and found a place to hide during the war. And, after the war - during the war, my sister-in-law's first husband, who was a lawyer in Düsseldorf, brought them some clothing - and, after the war, people who sheltered them were accused of receiving a German officer during the war. And it turned out that he only wanted to help his former wife. Now do you understand?

BL: Not quite.

Tape 3: 4 minutes 57 seconds

MS: He came during the war to bring my sister-in-law, who lived in hiding, some clothing, and the people who sheltered them were accused after the war, that during the war they had received a German officer.

BL: You said he wasn't in the army.

MS: Yes, he was, as a civilian. Not my husband, her former husband, he was an officer in the German Army. No, my first husband wasn't an officer in the German army. Yeah. So. We saw Cologne bombed to bits and we were glad to get out of it. What else?

BL: So when you came back to England ---?

MS: Well, he built up the business gradually and in 1955 we decided we would like to move into a house. Because my husband was already then over 50 and we decided if we didn't get it now we will never get it. And then the Kahns had the idea of offering us part

of their garden because we looked around for building plot and Mrs Kahn didn't want to lose us. So she said, 'Why didn't we take that?' And we had it priced by an estate agent and paid them, I think, £500 at the time, and had a building plot, and we started to look for a builder, which we found, a very nice, good builder, but we had to have it properly – the application made and drawing and everything through an architect. And the North Harrow architect drew the plan and the poor man died. And then the builder, whom we found, said, 'Oh, don't bother with an architect, I will build you a nice house and you don't need an architect'. So we built it without an architect and it is still standing. Then, some years later - we had 50-yard frontage, foot I mean, 50-foot frontage and 50-foot back - later, when Mr. Kahn died and she had moved into a bungalow, the whole area was divided up into 50-foot plots, because the garden went down into Oakhill Avenue. One plot next to us was left for Bertlam Jacobs, who was their son-in-law. He later became the President of the Liberal Synagogue in Northwood. He became our neighbour. And the others - And then they measured the plot from the top, that left some land over next to our garden, and my husband always regretted that we didn't get the Cypress trees in our property, so we had it right there. Well, now it is 75 foot at the back and still 50 foot at the front, and we gained some room, and it was enough to build a garage outside the house. And my husband always wanted his sister from South Africa, who stayed for quite a few times with us and for quite a lengthy period, to have a comfortable room, and so we converted the garage into a bedroom with bathroom and that is my residence now. I live like in a bungalow down here and don't even have to go upstairs if I don't want to. And a lady, through the home-share organisation, lives with me. She is busy during the week; she has a job during the week in London, and is now here at night, so that I shouldn't be on my own in the house. She has a car, occasionally I get lifts from her. And I have a Portuguese cleaner, after my home-help, after 28 years, retired. And a gardener I have had for 20 years, and somebody else who comes in every Thursday morning to do all the things I used to do in the garden, tidying up and weeding and things, and she takes me every week to Marks and Spencers to forage for my weekly supply, and that is the only outing I have.

Tape 3: 11 minutes 13 seconds

BL: Do you attend any of the AJR day centres or have any contacts?

MS: No, no. It is so difficult. Every time I have to take a taxi and then I meet people I don't know and I have no interests really with them. I read a lot. I keep the Times, which I read. While I am reading, it is great entertainment, but if you after ask me what I have read, I can't tell you.

BL: What sort of circles did you mix with, with your husband, when you lived here? What sort of friends did you have?

MS: Mostly, partly, people who were in the army with him. I am still very friendly with a lady in Hendon. And people in the antique trade mainly. After, he stopped dealing with antiques because his relatives moved to Palm Beach, and he more or less gave up the business he started here as an art consultant, and he bought for people abroad, in

Germany, Holland, America, until he finally retired in his late eighties. Then he was ill for quite some time. He stayed in the house, he stayed in that room. For me, it is ideal, otherwise I could not have stayed, I couldn't negotiate the stairs all the time. I can go up, but only occasionally.

BL: Were you looking for contact with other refugees at all?

MS: They have all gone, all gone. I have no friends left, they are all gone, all died. I have a very good friend across the road. Her husband was an Austrian and she gets an Austrian pension and every time she gets the letter from Austria, I have to translate it for her. She doesn't speak English. A very nice lady. I have friends here and there. And then, after my husband died in '92, later that year, end of '92, my grandson, who married a Yugoslav girl he met at university in Glasgow - her mother's Croatian and her father is Jewish - they are very happily married and live in Saunderstead, near Croydon. They have a son, who is now 14 years old that is my great grandson. And my granddaughter is married in Leeds and has two girls and there they are two years ago [gestures to photo on the wall]. My late son's wish was, after he was very ill, that his family should go to Germany and visit the places that were dear to him. And these are the girls Koblenz in the Deutsches Eck, where the Mosel flows into the Rhine, and sitting on that monument and being photographed by their uncle. So, three great grandchildren, two are 14 now and the one is ten, the youngest. But I don't see much of them, because they go to school, and can only come during the holidays. The ones in Saunderstead, they come regularly, they are both working. My grandson has a very responsible job with lots of travelling. He has just come back from Prague. Next month, he goes to Japan, where he lived for two years, and the month after he has to go to South Africa, and his wife is in cancer research and has a very responsible job with six people working under her in the laboratory in South Kensington.

Tape 3: 15 minutes 37 seconds

BL: To go back to your refugee experience, what about language? Did you speak German to your husband? Or did you speak English? What did you speak?

MS: We spoke German. And then we started mixing with English. And then one day he put his little foot down: 'Now look here, we have been living here for so-and-so many years, and from now on we speak English'. And I said, 'You are quite right, about time too!' And we never spoke German again. And I have a cousin in Germany, who phones me occasionally, or I phone her, and it is agony for me to have to speak in German. And she speaks equally good English, so I wouldn't like to repeat it, our conversation.

BL: Having lived here for so many years, how do you see yourself in terms of your identity?

MS: British, British. I miss the landscape in Germany, I don't miss the people. The landscape is beautiful and the country is beautiful, the Harz Mountains are beautiful. I have been to America quite a lot, when we had the antique business. There was always

an exhibition in January, antique fair, and I went over to help, but always in January, and then also to Palm Beach and visiting. End of story. I am still here. I am still alive, and this year I will be 97 in March. My father's family were long-living. His sister emigrated to America at the age of 60, and we thought, an old lady still emigrating, and his brother was killed by the Nazis. And my cousin from my mother's side also lived in South Africa. She came over, she was a nurse at Johannesburg General Hospital, and she came over to marry her old boyfriend, a doctor who has moved here before. But she died, unfortunately, and I miss her very much. She was only 56 and she had cancer of the liver. That was very sad for me.

BL: How do you think the experience of having to leave Germany and becoming a refugee influence you? How do you think it shaped your life?

Tape 3: 19 minutes 57 seconds

MS: It was not so difficult because I was so lucky, up to now, touch wood, because everything fell into place, without my doing anything about it. My husband was very successful, we had a nice home, we had very nice friends, but they have all gone. But I still enjoy life, although I am practically house-bound. I have got my little dog.

BL: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you would like to add? Or any message?

MS: Message? People shouldn't fight amongst themselves so much. My children are very nice, they phone me every week. How is grandma or great grandma doing? My grandson tells me about his journeys. I think it is rather a strange coincidence that he married a girl who is half-Jewish. Yes.

BL: Was that meaningful at all to you being Jewish? Did that play a role? Being Jewish, did that play a role at all in England? Did you mix in Jewish circles?

MS: No. We had antique dealers, who quite a few of them are Jewish. The widow or one of his army colleagues, who lived in Hendon, he died some years ago, she comes from a religious Jewish family. We talk every week, she comes from Frankfurt, and I think her father was a Rabbi. We are very good friends, we hardly ever see each other because she doesn't like to drive here and I have no means of getting there except for a taxi. And her daughter married a Jewish husband, who must be very successful. He was British-born and, according to their travels and expenses, she married very well.

BL: So, when you were in England, it wasn't important? You didn't join a synagogue or it wasn't?

MS: No, no. My husband also only had German friends, my second husband, German friends from university and afterwards we were completely emancipated, or what you call it, completely.

BL: OK. Thank you very much for this interview.

MS: Plenty to digest. I am different.

Tape 3: 23 minutes 46 seconds

BL: Yes.

MS: Gabi always went after me and wanted me to get in touch with the AJR and so on. It was very difficult for me to decide.

BL: Why?

MS: Because I am not Jewish, or only by race, and I am not religious either, in either religion.

BL: So it's not your milieu?

MS: No, no, no. All our friends here also. It is different. We were so assimilated in Germany, going shooting and fishing and doing what all the Germans did. I have photographs to prove it. I don't think there is anyone who has so many photographs throughout life from being a baby. I have a German album, which my first husband sent through John that ends with Hitler. And there is another album to start in the flat in North Harrow, or even before coming to England. That is a change of scenery.

BL: We are going to have a look at them now. Thank you very much again.

Tape 3: 25 minutes 30 seconds

Photographs

Photo 1

MS: This photograph that is my grandfather, my father's father, at the marriage of his second wife. The first wife died and left three children.

BL: What are their names, please?

MS: Myer Ballin and his wife, I would have to look at the family tree. I think it was Johanna but I am not quite sure.

BL: And roughly when were they married, roughly?

MS: When my father-. I can properly look it up on the family tree. Because it says when the mother died and when they re-married and when my father was born. All these things are all there. It is most interesting.

Tape 3: 27 minutes 23 seconds

BL: And where was it taken?

MS: In Ellrich.

Photo 2

MS: On the left is my father. He is the youngest of the three children. I think he was only three and a half when his mother died. The other boys is my Uncle Thelmar, the elder brother, and the girl is Tante Fränzchen, Franzisca. She emigrated at the ripe old age of 60 to New York and I visited her when she was in a home, but her mind was gone and she did not recognise me any more and she didn't even know that her son died before her.

BL: And what happened to your uncle?

MS: He was sent to a concentration camp with his wife and perished there. So was his younger daughter. They were all killed.

Photo 3

MS: These are my parents, Alex Ballin and Millie, and it was taken just before I got married in 1925 or 6. And my mother died in one of the camps and my father committed suicide when he was not quite 60.

BL: Where was it taken?

MS: In Nordhausen, it was taken in Nordhausen.

Photo 4

MS: The photograph is of my grandfather standing in front of the factory or business premises with a tame deer, which was brought up with a bottle by my father. The mother of the deer had been shot by a-, what do you call the people who shoot without-?

BL: Poachers.

MS: By a poacher. And his dogs, an English Setter and two Dachshunds.

Tape 3: 30 minutes 8 seconds**Photo 5**

MS: That is me at the age of, I don't know, two years or something.

Photo 6

MS: That's my parents and myself during the First World War. I must have been about ten years old.

BL: So roughly 1916?

MS: 1916.

Photo 7

[Date on photo is 1924.]

MS: This is a photo of myself with Sherry, the Dachshund, which we had for six years, and then he, then died through 'Teckelame', which is a sickness of dogs, which was difficult or not at all to cure at that time. Now they get an injection and it has practically disappeared.

Photo 8

MS: That is my first husband. Dr. Hans Müller, with myself and my son, John, when he was about a year old, taken in Cologne.

Photo 9

MS: That is myself during the Cologne Carnival, in the costume of the Rosenkavalier. From 1930 or a little later.

Photo 10

MS: That is a typical photograph of holidaymakers in the late 1920s and the last row, my husband and myself, just after we met in Nordeney.

BL: Taken roughly in 19-?

MS: 1925, '24 or '5.

Photo 11

MS: This is a photograph taken by Erwin of the two of us just before he left for England in September 1936.

Photo 12

Photo of Mrs. Simmons.

MS: That is also taken in '36. Taken in 1936 on a short holiday in Germany before we had to leave and it is a very sad picture.

Tape 3: 35 minutes 32 seconds

Photo 13

MS: I will have to look, and find out whether I am right. Yes, that is Pinner, Pinner High Street.

BL: Taken just after your arrival. It says here 1938.

MS: It is still there.

Photo 14

MS: Myself and John during his holiday in 1937.

BL: It says '38 here

MS: Oh, '38. When he was, when his holiday was extended for a month, because of an outbreak of polio in Cologne.

Photo 15

MS: That one was also taken at the same time, in 1937, during his visit to us in Cable Gardens.

Photo 16

MS: My husband. When he was in the Pioneer Corps, in '42, '43. The Pioneer Corps, yeah, in Scotland - Melrose or Galashiels, or in that area, the Borders.

Photo 17

MS: This was the lounge of our flat in North Harrow. The window, we had a very good view from the window, and when the first doodlebugs came over my husband would stand by the window with his stopwatch and when he saw a flash he would press the watch and waited until he could hear the sound and then we knew how far we were away from the explosion. That's it.

Photo 18

MS: This picture was taken in the Kahns' garden and it shows Mrs. Kahn and myself on the left and their son-in-law, Bertram Jacobs, and their two children, Teddy and Phyllis. And the others were refugees from Germany, relations of the Kahns. The little boy turning away from the camera is their grandson, Peter, and the other boy was the son of the housekeeper.

Photo 19

MS: This is John with his father on his father's visit to London. And I think to attend the graduation.

Photo 20

MS: This is my son, John, with his wife, Helen. He unfortunately died in 1901.

BL: 2001.

MS: 2001, sorry. They had two children, Robert and Katie. One lives near Croydon and my granddaughter lives in Leeds. She has two daughters and my grandson has one son.

BL: Mrs Simmons, thank you very much again for the interview.

