

**IMPORTANT**

**This transcript is copyright Association of Jewish Refugees**

**Access to this interview and transcript is for private research only. Please refer to the AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive, prior to any publication or broadcast from this document.**

**AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive**

**AJR**

**Winston House, 2 Dollis Park**

**London N3 1HF**

**[ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk](mailto:ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk)**

**Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it. Should you find any errors please inform**

**[ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk](mailto:ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk)**

**Interview Transcript Title Page**

<b>Collection title:</b>	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
<b>Ref. no:</b>	38

<b>Interviewee Surname:</b>	Chillag
<b>Forename:</b>	John
<b>Interviewee Sex:</b>	Male
<b>Interviewee DOB:</b>	20 April 1927
<b>Interviewee POB:</b>	Vienna, Austria

<b>Date of Interview:</b>	13 November 2003
<b>Location of Interview:</b>	Wetherby, Yorkshire
<b>Name of Interviewer:</b>	Rosalyn Livshin
<b>Total Duration (HH:MM):</b>	6 hours

**REFUGEE VOICES:  
THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE**

**INTERVIEW: 38**

**NAME: JOHN CHILLAG**

**DATE: 13 NOVEMBER 2003**

**LOCATION: WETHERBY, YORKSHIRE**

**INTERVIEWER: ROSALYN LIVSHIN**

**TAPE 1**

**Tape 1: 0 minute 40 seconds**

RL: I'm interviewing John Chillag, and today is the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2003. The interview is taking place in Wetherby, Yorkshire, and I am Rosalyn Livshin.

RL: This is tape one with Mr Chillag. If you could tell me first your name.

JC: I'm John Chillag.

RL: And do you have any other names?

JC: Paul. John Paul Chillag.

RL: Do you have any nicknames?

JC: Not really.

RL: Do you have a Hebrew name?

JC: Yitzhak Ben Shlom...

RL: Were you named after anybody?

JC: Probably not directly. I can't find any 'John' ancestors in the way normally names are allocated.

RL: Where were you born?

JC: I was born in Vienna on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 1927.

RL: And what does that make you now?

JC: Seventy-six. (Laughs)

RL: If you can just tell me first your parents' names and where they were born?

**Tape 1: 2minutes 17 seconds**

JC: My father was Joseph Csillag, and he was born in Győr in Hungary. My mother was Aranka, her maiden name was Mayer, and she came from Dunajska Streda, or Dunaszerdahely, as it is called in Czech and Slovak. It's a town that changed nationalities fairly frequently and so it is known by both those names.

RL: And staying your father for the moment, if you can tell me about his family background.

JC: In the First World War he was in the army, in the Transport Corps. And following his demob, at the end of the war, there was a revolution in most countries in Europe, and in some countries it lasted for decades in others only for hours. And when the revolution happened in Hungary, he was told well, you've been in the army, you've been in the Transport Corps, you know all about trench war, we need a Movement Officer, a glorified Stationmaster and that's what he became. And when the revolution was crushed six months later people were persecuted he thought it through and to just nip on the next train and go to Vienna. Győr is on the very western end of Hungary. Everybody speaks as much German as they speak Hungarian. Train journeys were just train journeys without any borders in those days, going to Vienna was no hardship, but he'd gone into political exile there, and eventually he met my mother. And they got married and I was born in Vienna.

RL: What do you know of your father's parents?

JC: I only knew my grandmother. She died in the end of 1943. My grandfather, her husband, died in 1911 well before my time. And in fact my grandmother set up what later became the family firm, to cover their education and later their livelihood. And it was a building material and contracting business and quite a lot of my father's brothers and sisters and near relations worked in the firm.

RL: Do you know what your grandfather had done for a living?

JC: Yes he was a, I suppose today what would be called an agricultural agent. He was the office manager of an estate and he was so liked by his master that he got paid the children's education was paid by the landowner, so they had all a good start.

RL: How many children did they have?

JC: They had seven I think it is, and four of them lived in the town we were living in, in Győr and others were scattered in various other parts of what was then Hungary.

RL: And what was the proportion of boys to girls?

JC: Four boys and three girls. And some married local and some married from further afield, but all from within the original Habsburg Empire, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

RL: What kind of education did your father have?

JC: He went to what we would call today a Grammar School, and didn't actually have any tertiary education. But in common with me in later life, it was the University of life that filled in the gaps.

RL: And what kind of religious education did he have?

**Tape 1: 7minutes 45 seconds**

JC: On my father's side, it was not a very religious family. Some brothers and sisters were more religious than others, but my father being involved in the revolution politically and all of that, came from what was the very edge of Judaism. Others were more religious and in fact I had one, actually that was an uncle-in-law so to say, one of my aunt's husbands, wrote a book on the Jews of Győr, going back to 1600s. And he was also on the local representative council, as it would be today. So he was, call it as far into religion, in the family, my fathers' family as anyone. And my mother's side that was much more religious. On my father's side I suppose they were into the Liberal end of Synagogues. My mother's side was much more religious. She actually came from a village or a town where there was the highest population percentage wise of Jews anywhere in Hungary. Something like 46% of the population were Jews, and most of those were perhaps not so much my mother's family but some of the other people were Hasidic Jews who settled, not so much moving from Pogroms from further East but lived there for centuries. In fact every so often there was a census of Jews throughout the country but I got a record of one of my mother's ancestors, who was there in the late or mid 1700s. So the family was there for a long time.

RL: Was your mother's family a Hasidic family?

JC: No they were not, but they were certainly by comparison with my father's side much more religious, and they would have been orthodox.

RL: Do you know what her parents, her father did for a living?

JC: He was a civil servant in the tax office, and he died in 1940 or thereabout. That left my grandmother and my mother's brother, was living still in the same place, in fact in the same house that they were living in since 1895 I think.

RL: Did you know that set of grandparents?

JC: Yes I knew those grandparents. Of course I was relatively young at that time, but yes, and maybe not in my first seven or eight years, but after that, we visited the grandparents quite regularly and that was easier once that part of Slovakia was ceded back to Hungary. Because the previous real journey was something like 150 miles, when the borders were opened up it was a 25 minute bus journey across the Danube.

RL: What are your memories of their home and your grandparents?

JC: They lived in a very interesting surroundings, in that village there were two large mansions and one of them was still occupied by the landowner or whatever. The other one in which they lived got subdivided into half a dozen or so flats, you could call it today, and they occupied one of those flats. Notwithstanding it was a two-storey big imposing building, and the floors on the ground floor were still dirt floors, compacted clay or whatever, but it wasn't all that primitive, there was electricity and gas and whatever. The privies were still outside but they actually had a primitive bathroom as well, so I remember that.

RL: How many children did they have?

JC: They had three children. My mother, and the brother I mentioned that lived with my grandmother, and there was also a sister, who died a few years earlier than my grandmother, in the

late 1930s and I remember meeting her, but probably not more than three or four times before she passed away.

**Tape 1: 15minutes 0 second**

RL: Had she married?

JC: No, she was a single woman.

RL: And the brother?

JC: The brother was married and divorced and he had a son just a year or so younger than myself.

RL: And what kind of education did your mother have?

JC: Not much I would think. Presumably she got into some sort of school, and she became a seamstress, and I don't think she learnt her skills in school. And when, I remember things later, after I was born in Vienna, she had a seamstress salon, making ladies' clothes for quite a number of people, some of them quite well-known.

RL: How did she meet your father?

JC: Well I suppose it's a story that happens even today a lot. I wouldn't like to say she was fed up at home, but she wanted to see the world, and the place she was living in as a youngster was about the same distance from Vienna, about 70-80 miles as where my father was a bit further and so wanted to see the world, packed her bags, first stop Vienna, met my father, never got any further, eventually got married, eventually I was born there.

RL: And when did they get married?

JC: In 1922. And I was born in 1927.

RL: Were there other children?

JC: No, I was an only child.

RL: Coming back to your father. You say that he was politically active. Can you tell me a little bit more about his political activities?

JC: It's not that easy to find out in retrospect, obviously they were call it milestones in my life when I came across people who knew my father, and that's how I managed to put a few things together, his circle in Vienna included Benedikt Kautsky, who later became Chancellor Prime-Minister in Austria. When after the Holocaust I returned to Hungary, one of the first people I came across, when this person found out that I am back and that I'm my father's son, he was the Secretary of the local Communist Party, and I got I suppose summoned is too strong a word, but he wanted to find out more about what happened and so on. He became later ambassador to Tito and eventually he got shot in 1956, after being first being imprisoned during the Slansky trials in 1952. Another one was somebody called Katz, who was a Czech emigrant to Vienna and of him I only know that he was implicated in the Slansky trials in Czechoslovakia, so there was quite a number of people who were sort of in the circle, but what they were doing in the 1920s I don't really know. Some of them emigrated to the Soviet Union. Some of them in the early years had very high positions. But in common with people who've been involved in the pre-war time Communism, finished up in prison

or disappeared or whatever.

RL What part of Vienna were your parents living in?

**Tape 1: 20 minutes 23 seconds**

JC: They were living in the 18<sup>th</sup> district, the edge of the Park, the Türkenschanzpark, but I don't have that much recollection of my Vienna days. Before we left Vienna in 1934 we had moved by then in the second district in Ausstellungstrasse opposite the Prater, the big wheel was just visible from our window. But they weren't filming yet the Third Man.

RL What recollections do you have of Vienna?

JC: Not all that much. I left Vienna when I was seven years old. I had my first primary school there, went to in today's terms a State school. Some recollections are shooting and canon fire, because Austria in the early thirties was probably the most turbulent country in Europe. And indeed that was one of the reasons my father thought well it can't be as bad in Hungary now as it is in Vienna at that time, and thought to go back to his family roots, take the family with him so in 1934 we went back to Győr

RL: What was your father doing in Vienna, what was his work?

JC: I'm not quite sure. He worked or must have worked in accountancy. What he was doing was book-keeping, or whatever, I'm not sure.

RL: You said your mother ran this, that she was a seamstress, and that she had some famous customers.

JC: Yes, I can't quite recall names on that, I know some of the composers of the thirties, their wives went there, but I know some people connected with the Dreigroschenoper, the Threepenny Opera, were here clients, but not any names I can recall.

RL: Where about was her business?

JC: In the flat. It wasn't the sort of business where you know, all that.

RL: Did you remember the move to Hungary?

JC: Not the move itself, but I know we moved in the summer, probably about August-ish, and because the school year starts in September, all over the place, and I remember starting in the Jewish Primary school, well and I also remember that by the end of that school year I was the top in Hungarian in the class and I didn't speak a single word when I went to Hungary.

RL: How did you manage learning a new language?

JC: I don't know, I suppose I had a knack for languages anyway and as a child you learn anyway very easily languages.

RL And where were you living?

JC: We were living in Győr in a flat on the second floor. And it was about three or four minutes walk away from my grandmother, two of her children and their families were living in the family

house and where the family business was.

RL: What was your father doing?

**Tape 1: 25 minutes 25 seconds**

JC: He was the accountant or book-keeper in the firm there.

RL: Did the firm have a name?

JC: Actually it was Csillag Pal, because we had the surname first and then the first name. So it was Csillag Pal building materials.

RL: And how long were you living in that particular flat?

JC: I was living right from 1934 until I was deported, when the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944, so ten years.

RL: Can you describe it to me?

JC: It probably was much smaller than I think it would be, but for a small child I think it was very large rooms, and... it was a largish flat anyway, probably in today's language it was three bedrooms plus ancillary rooms, so the flat, it was on the second floor up and down, for me it wasn't perhaps that difficult, but I suppose for older people, my parents in those days were still in their sort of forties or perhaps even less at the beginning, it was not too bad, but I can imagine that any older person at that time would have wheezed and coughed and so on. There was no lift, we were on the top floor.

RL: And were there other Jewish families in that building?

JC: There were six families in that house, two on each floor, and I think certainly four, but possibly five were Jewish, and one extremely anti-Semitic non-Jew, in one of the other flats.

RL: How did that show itself?

JC: Well I don't know, he was something Major or Colonel, and he was I think retired, and his son was no better either, but no, one had very little.... surprisingly, because people in flats, even today, know each other, certainly in the provinces, and certainly I knew most the people in the house even this particular family, but there wasn't much contact. I suppose it was sort of age-related. In three of the flats there were elderly, by that time single people, and they kept to themselves, and there was one other family in the house, they had children sort of my age and with some of them I went to the same school, not the same class, but the same school so yes I knew those people better than the other occupants.

RL: You say that this man was anti-Semitic, so how did that show itself?

JC: Not particularly, but particularly after the German occupation and we were only in that flat for about one month before we were evicted and went into a ghetto. Well I knew that there was this army Colonel or Major or whatever he was and I suppose not in the anti-Semitic or religious sense, I suppose he was a pukka Hungarian, if one can use that, or translate that term.

RL: How did you get on with the non-Jews around you? Did you have much contact?



JC: One certainly didn't have much contact until after the age of ten or thereabout, so until I left Primary school and went to a State Grammar school obviously one had contact with non-Jewish people, but presumably partly because some of the children who came to the grammar school as

**Tape 1: 30 minutes 50 seconds**

well, I had years together in the primary school as well, so you were better friends with them, not because they were Jews, but simply because it was the cliquey if I can use that term, there you had most of your friends, but by and large, certainly until sort of the early forties or even until the German occupation we got on well, or reasonably well with the non-Jewish people. Some of them lived not in the same house, but a few houses away and we had contact with them. And obviously some people kept a distance, and it was the children or their parents or both.

RL: Did you ever experience any anti-Semitism?

JC: Yes. It would be wrong to say that one didn't. I think probably the worst thing that happened, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1942, the son of the Hungarian Regent Horthy was, crashed his aeroplane. Everybody says he was dead drunk anyway, so, that's what happened. But immediately after that, the Gendarmerie, and I'll come back to that in a moment, were as unpleasant and difficult as they could be, and from that day, with some of my friends we were out of a bicycle trip near the Danube somewhere, and we got pulled up and everybody had something wrong with the bicycle, the bell wasn't ringing or the light wasn't working, or whatever, and I was summoned as a result of that, and the magistrate who himself was rather right of centre, to put it mildly, imposed a... I was not fifteen at the time, I don't know what the amount was, but I had a fine of about £250 in today's money or something like that. And so that was one thing. And once when we were out swimming I was attacked by a group of yobbos because we were Jews, but those were probably the only events that sort of I remember.

RL: And what about your parents, did they experience any trouble?

JC: No, and well maybe this is the time to bring this in, in 1938 the first of the four so-called Vienna conferences took place. I say so-called because the one in Munich is best remembered by British audiences with Chamberlain and all that. But these Vienna conferences originally were to realign the borders of, mainly Hungary and in the first Vienna Conferences the area North of Győr on the other side of the Danube was ceded back to Hungary. Now that area included where my mother was from and my grandmother and at that stage even my grandfather was living. And when things like that happen, it's really a military occupation. And that when the sort of first anti-Jewish legislation came into force that sort of affected people more than some earlier ones to which I might come back. Military Jews were also called up, but not into the army itself but into Labour Battalions. Now at that stage Labour Battalions' tasks included anything from digging trenches to pulling and pushing lorries helping with the harvest and that sort of thing. Later, during the war, the labour battalions were used as mine-clearers, meaning in practical terms, but they were forced to march through mine fields and with obvious results. But in this sort of first Labour Battalion, my father was still of military age in 1930 so he was called up. He was in a Labour Battalion, and funnily he was stationed in the small town where my grandparents lived. So yes, he was part of military discipline, but he could depart for a shower, a meal, and meet up with the family, who, the family found it much easier by that time to travel to my grandparents because we could use the bus for twenty odd minutes instead of a five or six hour train journey. So when I say it worked out well take that with a pinch of salt, but that's what happened. But when later territorial adjustments were made, Transylvania and Bosnia and so on, he was too old to be called up again, and so it didn't affect us in a family sense. Now anti-Jewish legislation as such started in a way when Admiral

Horthy took over the country in 1921. And in some ways, and I'm not talking now of legislation, but actual events, he probably was quite a good mentor to Hitler. Anti-Jewish legislation from the early twenties onwards, the main and almost only effective element in it was a numerus clausus in Universities. The percentage varied from faculty to faculty but certainly quite a number of Jewish aspirants to that particular faculty were deprived of going there because of the numerus clausus. The

**Tape 1: 39 minutes 20 seconds**

next legislative anti-Jewish legislation was aimed entirely against I suppose one could call it today refugees, people who for all sorts of reasons, whether it's political economic or religious or whatever, had moved from further East, Russia, Poland, the Bukovina and various parts of Rumania, into Hungary, and they were regarded and legislated against later, as 'bloody foreigners' in common with Gypsies and other categories but there wasn't any serious legislation apart from those until 1939-1940.

RL Did the school, the secondary school that you went to, was that a non-Jewish school?

JC: That was a non-Jewish school, very old established in the 1700s a Grammar School, and in common with English and British education today, the names and the types of schools varied every two or three years, so yes it was a Grammar School, but really it was called various things in various years. It was a Realschule, or it was a Gymnasium, or it was what translates straight as 'Grammar', and with every new Ministry the name changed and the school was still the same.

RL: And how were you treated by the teachers in that school?

JC: The majority of teachers were alright. In fact when I got to the school, some of them were actually Jews, only a small percentage, it was a big school, and we are talking about either Jews or married to Jews sort of people. Most of the others were liberal or fairly liberal. One or two of them they were, I suppose you can describe it as 'correct'. They followed instructions but not being involved at all. And there were few teachers who were very right of centre, and as I have written somewhere, I wrote quite a few things, they left Hungary at the end of the war when the Russians were coming, because they have not been very good teachers, but they were extremely good National Socialists. But there was no problem in school.

RL: Did they make the Jewish people's lives difficult in any way?

JC: Yes, one or two of these last category of teachers I mentioned they made life, difficult is perhaps the wrong word, but ridiculed, and Latin teacher, when he wanted to demonstrate his... Roman Emperor, why the Jews were ..... he was holding up his pen, quill, well not quill pen but pen in those days as the thing of authority here, and there was a bit of ridicule in there but that was about it.

RL: Did you have a Hebrew education?

JC: Well, yes and no. For religious education the class was split. Not just Jews and non-Jews, but every particular Christian group, had its separate, separate Catholic, separate Evangelical, separate Reform and so on, and at the same town the Jews had their own separate religious class. And so we had our own religious class. And in later years, sort of 1940 to 44, the new Chief Rabbi in town was giving Ivrit lessons and specifically Zionist and Israel, Palestine, Israel oriented education if you like and so it was this sort of two groups of separate Judaic education.

RL: And what was the Rabbi's name?

JC: Emil Roth, Dr Emil Roth He was very respected, he was a Chief Rabbi, I suppose in British terminology is at the top of the pyramid. He was a Chief Rabbi, although he was not covering the whole country, only call it a county if you like, and there were two or three other Rabbis and obviously a lot of lesser Rebbes around the place. And he, he finished up in Auschwitz, and in fact in the Ghetto the SS tattooed, shaved his head and tattooed a Magen David on it, and in Auschwitz

**Tape 1: 47 minutes 1 second**

he then went straight to the gas. And but he would have been an exempt person under the Kastner rescue plan in 1944 and he had a seat on this famous or infamous train that escaped to Belsen and then to Switzerland, but he chose to go with his flock to Auschwitz.

RL: Coming back to your religious education, did you have a Barmitzva?

JC: I had a Barmitzva, and though I didn't have a religious background, it was a bit of an ordeal I suppose, I can't remember that much of it, I suppose it was one form of Barmitzva, and I went to it and all the steps I did for Barmitzva and survived.

RL: Did you attend a synagogue?

JC: Yes, and I suppose by family, mainly mean parents, as I said some people in the family were more religious than others, I think my father only during the Holy Days, my mother, certainly when she was home with her parents, my grandparents, she went regularly to synagogue there, but other than that when she was in Győr I suppose she only went a couple of times a year or something like that.

RL: Which synagogue did they go to?

JC: It was a main synagogue, the Neolog Synagogue. Later, I will have a photo of that for the record.

RL: And who was the Rabbi?

JC: Rabbi Roth was the Rabbi. He was also Rabbi of a group of other synagogues in town. In fact there weren't that many synagogues in town, there were really, this big synagogue and this was a big one for about a couple of thousand people. There was also an orthodox synagogue and then there were a dozen or so different size shuls scattered throughout.

RL: What level of religious observance was kept at home, what kind of memories do you have of any kind of...

JC: Not much is I suppose the simple answer. As far as school was concerned, today there is compulsory re-education, so yes, I've done my bit as far as school religion was concerned. But beyond that very little. And of course part of school religion was that you had to go to synagogue on Friday night and Saturday morning while you were at school. The synagogue itself had a small annexe, a small synagogue, and there were separate services for all the schoolchildren. On major feasts and so on obviously one went to the main synagogue, but by and large we attended the small annexe, the children anyway.

RL: Did you belong to any clubs at all?

JC: After the war I was, well in two ways, one purely for sport events, table tennis and rowing group, and the other one was, Győr became sort of an interim shipping centre, for aliyah bet and obviously one had contact with all those youngsters who were by and large my age, and through them I was involved with Hapoel Hazioni.

RL: Before...?

**Tape 1: 52 minutes 42 seconds**

JC: Before, no clubs, no, the school itself and this is all the school, had a very large support section, it had its own rowing club, I was rowing there as well, and then afterwards, and a big tennis club and so on, I'm not good at tennis, but ice-skating and so on, but that was more part of our school activity rather than call it a club activity. My parents belonged to a rowing club and that was probably three quarter Jews. There was no law against it one way or the other but that's how it was.

RL: Did your parents belong to any other society or organisation?

JC: Not that I know of, nor that I can find out.

RL: Was your father still involved in politics?

JC: Not actively or not openly I suppose. By the time I have recollection age, eleven, twelve, I knew that he wasn't what I should say 'innocent', but to what extent he was involved I never knew. And I suppose during the war people kept these things quiet from their children and anybody who could blabber about it and cause trouble. But I know once or twice people turned up and spent a night or two there and then they disappeared again and I know one of these people was this Katz person whom I mentioned earlier and got a sticky end in the Slansky trials.

RL: What would your family do for leisure and entertainment?

JC: Leisure mainly rowing, also some not so much climbing, hill-walking, and certainly until 1938, until the Anschluss, we went every year to the Austrian Alps, walking a bit, not climbing a lot.

RL: And did you go with them?

JC: No, and that is actually quite an interesting story here. From early childhood onwards I suppose, five or six or something like that, there was a small group organised by a couple, some Montessori teachers and educators in various ways, who organised summer vacations for small children, and it was political in some sense because they were left of centre people, but it included mainly Jews but not all Jews and I remember some of those early holidays in Austria, and also one just on the side of Trieste and Grado and to that late in the story I will come back.

RL: Did your mother ever have help at home? Domestic help.

JC: No, my grandparents, this is both paternal and of my grandmother and my grandparents of my mother, they had somebody doing cooking and cleaning and whatever, I remember in my maternal grandparents' place, there was a very large table on which one ate in the kitchen, the cooking was done on it and then the eating. And the top came off, and there was a bed, and that's where the shikse lived. But... I remember, but I don't remember whether the, my grandmother in Győr whether that woman was living, you know, or coming in.

RL: And your mother?

JC: No, we didn't have any help at all. My mother employed two or three people in the sewing part of the house but not helpers or certainly not servants.

RL: She continued her dressmaking in Hungary?

JC: Yes, right to the end, she kept her sewing business. Virtually all of her Jewish clientele certainly

**Tape 1: 59 minutes 35 seconds**

in the latter part of pre-deportation days but she had one or two non-Jewish customers as well.

RL: Now this film is about to end.

END OF TAPE ONE.

**TAPE 2**

**Tape 2: 0 minute 30 seconds**

RL: This is tape two, with John Chillag. John you were just remembering something you wanted to tell me about your ancestors going back first of all on your father's side of the family.

JC: On my father's side the great, great grandparents of my paternal grandmother were living in the Western part of Hungary in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and they were both fairly prosperous and had their picture painted by, I don't the actual painter's name, but some quite well-known name, and I have in fact in the house a facsimile of those paintings which are in museums in various places, and that is not even the very beginning of what I could trace of my family. I don't know the exact relationship, but well before the time of these two couples, I know that one of my ancestors was given a letter patent in 1706 when Jews were banned from Vienna and the area controlled by it so that he could ply his trade. And he was I suppose what one today would call today an intelligence officer somewhere along the line and helped in whatever he was doing, to defeat the Turks, and because of that he got his letter patent.

RL: What was his name?

JC: He would have been a Stern, but I don't know all the details, and I've searched through various archives to find the actual letter patent, where it is but I haven't got the time to do that in other parts of the world. And it, later in sort of mid 1800s, around the time of the Hungarian revolution of 1848, my great, great grandfather, my great-grandfather was a supplier to the forces. He supplied horses and food and whatever, and to find his horses he went as far as Central Asia to get horses for the Hungarian army I suppose, so that is what the early history of my father's side I could find out.

RL: And what was this great-grandfather called?

JC: He was Joseph Csillag, same as my father actually. On my mother's side, one of the aunts of my grandmother was the wife of a Hungarian explorer, Aurel Stein, who was a linguist in the first instance, but because of his languages, geography and all that he spent a lot of his time in Central Asia. He served Her Majesty's government in the mid-1800s with great distinction in India and eventually got awarded the, he became Grand Commander of the Indian Empire, and he actually died and is buried in Kabul.

Another relative of my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, possibly his grandfather, now it couldn't be his grandfather but his grandfather's sister's husband or something, was also a linguist and explorer and his name was Armin Wanberry, he started off as Haschele Wanberger, Wanberger was Bamberger because his father came from Bamberg, who again, somehow finished up in the British Empire. He was, I suppose, a century before anybody thought of it, the head of MI5. And as such he spent most of his time in Middle East and sort of Central Asia and all that. And I wouldn't be surprised if some of his early material was till used, both in the Afghan war a couple of years ago and even in Iraq now. Not the day to day things, but the, some of the background material and he

**Tape 2: 7 minutes 45 seconds**

was a very good friend of Edward VII. And again gongs are in order and he became a holder of the, not Victoria Cross, the Victorian Order, a VCO. So it's not all from Central Europe. They started there, but they finished up in this world.

RL: Now coming forward again, we were talking about entertainment and holidays. Did you ever visit any theatres or operas and concerts or anything like that?

JC: I remember in my days in Hungary, one year, I was sort of sickish for most of the year, and I remember I didn't actually go to school for that school year, but I was in Budapest, and I remember going fairly regularly to concerts and being given, I suppose my parents bought tickets for a season of Beethoven or Mozart and that sort of thing, and every Sunday or every second Sunday I went there to the matinee, or Opera or other entertainment I can't remember much theatre.

RL: Were your parents interested in music?

JC: As listeners. Quite a number of people in the family were talented musicians. In fact, Stein or the Stein's son I think, married the sister of Joachim, and they got together because she was a musician. But other than that there are quite a number of people who for enjoyment played various instruments, and were quite good at it.

RL: What did you do when you left school?

JC: I didn't leave school. I better qualify this. When I was seventeen, in other words one year to go to matriculation, whatever, the Germans occupied Hungary, so I never went to the last class before graduating from school, certainly not before the end of the war and it came to a very abrupt end because the Germans occupied Hungary of the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1944. All the anti-Jewish legislation, they put into practise in Germany over years, and in less and less time as they occupied various countries, and by the time they got to Hungary, it worked like clockwork. And literally within a fortnight of the occupation, from the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, apart from everything else being enforced, I could no longer attend school, so that is how I finished up my school at that stage.

RL: Before we get to the German Occupation, can we sort of focus a little bit on the period before that, you know, once war had started in Europe, or possibly whether any changes were occurring in Hungary to way of life, what was happening?

JC: Well let's take, call it anti-Jewish legislation first. From the end of 1938, the first so-called Jewish law was introduced, and that affected mainly the people I referred to as foreigners early in the talk, but there were second and third Jewish laws between 1939 and 1943 and each of them restricted life more and more, but even at that stage it affected mainly professional people, by professional I mean doctors, lawyers, more than anybody else. Whilst there may have been restrictions which to this day I don't have the full details of in a practical sense, it wasn't too bad.

Then just about that time, still in school, there was a sort of I suppose the equivalent of the cadets, the school cadets, was also operating there. And of course Jews were excluded from that. They had their own equivalent Labour Battalions. And that is the only place where possibly from 1943 onwards where we went on a weekly cadet session, we had to wear a yellow armband, and again the others were practising shooting with guns and some glider piloting and that sort of thing and that was obviously not open to us, and as I said before, except for the foreign Jews who were living in Hungary some of whom actually got deported to Kamenets-Podolsk in early 1943, and there was a massacre in what is today called in Novi Sad in 1942, life for Jews wasn't that difficult unless you were in one of these categories.

**Tape 2: 16 minutes 11 seconds**

RL: Was your family business affected in any way?

JC: I suppose in economic sense it was because you probably couldn't tender full contracts, government contracts or something like that, but it may have reduced the fortune so to say but it didn't affect the family business otherwise.

RL: What social strata would you say your family belonged to?

JC: Middle class I suppose is the simple answer to that one may argue the exact position on that, but that will cover it.

RL: So that really as you say life was not too difficult at that stage for Jewish people.

JC: Yes. Well obviously for the other categories I mentioned life was difficult.

RL: How aware were you of what was going on in the rest of Europe?

JC: Very little. For two reasons. Two reasons. One, let's face it, I was a child, and the other one, it's easy today to turn on the telly, or email, or whatever. In those days it was the newspapers, and pretty lousy newspapers at that. Hungary was a backwater, they only reported major German things, international affairs. So obviously from that you knew that there was a war going on and all that, but as far as detail was concerned neither did you know that, or what is possibly worse for our futures, it then was, what went on in Germany itself. Well one knew that life wasn't that easy for Jews, but beyond that not very much. Now that opened up marginally when the Germans annexed Austria, because we were living quite close to the Austrian border, and refugees were flooding across the border. Most of them Jews, but also political opponents and so on, and they had two things in common, one of them is they came with black eyes and that sort of thing, and the other thing is they had a satchel or a small rucksack or whatever, and that was all their belongings. And they were telling fairly horrendous stories but it was put down, not knowing any better, to individual revenges and that sort of thing, rather than anything systematic or more sinister. The radios in those days weren't that efficient. Even so, I know that we listened to the BBC or Radio Free Europe or whatever, the Voice of America and so on, but that was done quite clandestinely, because you shouldn't or couldn't have done it, it was jammed a lot anyway. So one didn't have a good idea of what was going on, and I suppose that was our downfall in the time that followed.

RL: When Germany finally did come in, was this an expected thing, or...?

JC: Oh it was completely unexpected for all sorts of reasons. In March 1944 the fortunes of war had changed completely. North Africa was liberated, most of Italy was liberated, Far East, things had moved in favour of the Allies. One knew the invasion was imminent but one knew, but certainly

hoped that once invasion takes place that it's only a few weeks or days after that war is over. And it came completely out of the blue that Germans occupied Hungary then. And even today it's not all that clear why they done it. Two theories are probably more valid or certainly more plausible than some others, and one is that at the time when Europe had absolutely no food, Ukraine included in some ways, there was plenty of food in Hungary and they wanted to put their hands on that. The other reason is that with the war moving closer and closer to the German borders, country after country jumping out, Bulgaria, Rumania, Italy, Germans were afraid that Hungarians would do the same, and they probably would have, and that would have brought the war straight to the German borders.

**Tape 2: 22 minutes 33 seconds**

These are plausible possible explanations. Whether that was the reason, or whether one can say that Hitler just got fed up that the Hungarians were just shilly-shallying and not doing everything the Germans were telling them, maybe.

RL: Can you remember the day they came in?

JC: Yes, the street that we were living in was at right angle with the main Vienna-Budapest highway and from our balcony and being in the flat one could hear the roar of something heavy, tanks and so on going on that highway and from the balcony you could actually see vehicle after vehicle move there. One of my uncles had his business, transport autobus and garage business on the main highway, where all the traffic was and the few cars that existed that needed were going by. And somebody from his place alerted the family that something is amiss. And in fact I got a photo of the first motorcyclist and German troops going in front of that business. Also one of my aunts, who actually went country by country in front of the Germans, Austria to Czechoslovakia and so on, also lived in Győr and she was living sort of on the other side of this highway and she knew what was going on, she had a pretty good idea what is happening. And she alerted my parents, she came across, only about ten minutes, a quarter of an hour walk and said well, the Germans are here, I'm going. And she disappeared, and somehow she found her way to Budapest, and survived the war there then emigrated and died a few years ago. So that's how we found out that things were happening. And I suppose after the first day there were so many Germans around that everybody knew what was going on, certainly that the Germans occupied the country. What it meant in tactical terms we still didn't quite know. And then within a few days they were putting up placards with 'order this, and order that'. And obviously one was more and more affected there by these bogus instructions, 'Jews this, Jews that', and non-Jews. And right from the moment the Germans came in and established the Jewish Council and all that, there were telling through the Jewish Council and even directly, the Jewish population: 'Do not interfere, you will be moved somewhere to the East, where the more capable of you can work for German victory, families will be housed, just behave yourself'. There was no reason to disbelieve what they were saying, they were saying it every minute of the day, so, when I say we accepted it, we did. And of course it didn't go quite like that.

RL: So what did happen?

JC: Well, I think I mentioned that by the 5<sup>th</sup> of April all war legislation was in place and it was promulgated that the Jews had to hand in their valuables, and valuables included not only valuables, but anything, bicycles, radios, that sort of thing, cars were not that plentiful in those days, well it affected those but not in the practical sense, and that we could only go into town certain days of the week or certain hours of the day and the accounts were frozen, Jews could no longer practise professions or business at that stage. And that was sort of the first wave of immediate legislation, because I couldn't go to school anymore. And then just a couple of days after that Győr had its first air-raid. Of course afterwards the Jews were rounded up to clear the rubble and rescue such as it



was, because before the Germans came to Hungary, Hungary wasn't part of the war from 1939 to 1941 when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, in theory Hungary got involved on the Russian front but not anywhere else, in practical terms they didn't get involved in sort of the mine-clearing and all that until some time in 1942. War became global or Hungary became part of it, in the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. And the practical effect of the war between then and 1944 except for the Russian front which I'll leave to one side at the moment, was overflying by Allied aircraft, and in those years it was overflying, there was no bombing of Hungary, overflying through Germany, through Austria, Rumanian oil fields and so on, and because technically there was a war, there was also anti-aircraft fire, and the planes were flying in this direction, the anti-aircraft fire was directed the opposite way, so military honour was maintained, no harm was done.

**Tape 2: 30 minutes 44 seconds**

And indeed many Allied airmen shot down over any part of Europe if they found their way to Hungary they found a safe haven there until 1944 and the first bombing of Hungary literally took place ten days after German occupation.

RL: You say the Jews were rounded up to help clear up the mess. Were you involved in that?

JC: Yes. It was picking up bricks and moving them from one corner to another. It was a clearing operation, I don't think maybe half a dozen people got killed over the whole target area but a lot of damage was done.

RL: How did the Germans treat you then?

JC: They made sure that I was working hard to lift those bricks and to move them but other than that, there wasn't any, shall I say ill-treatment. I mean I can't say that nobody got side-slapped with a rifle butt or a large handle or for the silliest of reasons, but at that stage you couldn't identify a Jew, well, other than, some of them, not many, we were a fairly liberal town, some may have had some payos or something like that or a nose that only some Germans had as well, the yellow star came into being on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, and half the Jews still didn't have any on the 6<sup>th</sup>. So you know, there wasn't any mistreatment that could be visibly meted out. And of course just a couple of weeks after that, more legislation, and orders and so on, the Jews will have to move into a Ghetto. And one end of town, where many of the Jews lived, there was some more Jewish area than the average town, that was designated as the Ghetto area. And one of our tradesmen had his house in the Ghetto area. So in a way when we had to go into the Ghetto we exchanged houses but of course it wasn't as simple as that, because he lived in what is called today a two or three bedroom semi. And our family, brothers and sisters and brothers and sisters and their family and all that, and there were about thirty-five people living in about six or seven houses. And we moved into this tradesman house and he moved into the business premises of the family. So all our family was together. Extremely crowded but all together, whereas other people were just assigned a corner in a room somewhere. So in that respect we were better off.

RL: What part of town was this?

JC: It was called Sziget, Györ Sziget. And Sziget translates as island, and many years earlier a couple of the small rivers or rivulets in town had formed an island in that area but that was drained many years before that.

RL: The non-Jews who lived in that area, did they have to move out?

JC: They had to move out, but there were not all that many living in that area because as I said it

was a predominantly Jewish area.

RL: How big an area was it?

JC: Probably about a couple of square miles. I got a map to show it if it is of interest. But it was a fairly large area but there were five thousand Jews living in town so it had to accommodate, crowded or not, a fair number. And a funny thing happened at that time. When we had to move into the Ghetto area, as I was born in Vienna and spoke fluent German, the Jewish Council chose me as a messenger, a runner, or call it what you like, with the German authorities in town and so I had a pass, so I could retain my bicycle to do the job. Now big deal, this lasted for about a fortnight, but when all the others couldn't get out of the barbed wire enclosure of the Ghetto, and there was I,

**Tape 2: 36 minutes 56 seconds**

cycling in the middle of town.

RL: So was this whole area surrounded by barbed wire?

JC: Well, either by buildings, brick walls, barbed wire, timber, fences, whatever. And there was the river on one side, so there was a natural border to it as well.

RL: So how was it guarded?

JC: I don't know. Presumably it was guarded. Presumably, although I can't recollect, there was also Jewish Police around but beyond that I can't recall. And we were only there for about a fortnight, and when the SS and local Gendarmerie rounded us up the sort of central square of the Ghetto area, everyone was strip-searched and virtually everything was taken away. And we were marched off to the opposite end of town, where they established a, call it a regional or county Ghetto and there the conditions were very much more primitive and it was wooden barracks built during the First World War by Italian prisoners of war, and it was disused until the early thirties. And then Gypsies moved in and they found the conditions too primitive to be there: no water, no electricity, gas, no sanitation. And then when the Germans came in they thought 'Oh this is a good place to house all these Jews', and by that time it was not only the town Jews, but as I said, the surrounding districts as well.

RL: Was the Ghetto closed at that point? Did they empty it?

JC: Yes, well everybody was taken out of it and presumably put back into town use, a little bit after that.

RL: During those two weeks in the Ghetto, what did people do during the day?

JC: Very little. I suppose the people who were just allocated corners in rooms, first to find where the rest of their family were. We had the advantage because we were all together. But there wasn't anything to do, or anything that had to be done, or were forced to do or anything like that.

RL: What about food?

JC: For the first two days I suppose we had food that we took with us, it may not have been very much, but we did. And again, I have no recollection, but I suppose there was some sort of a soup kitchen that provided some basic food and there must have been one or two bakeries already in there, run by Jews even, in that area. And I suppose they were baking bread and giving half-loafs to

each family or whatever.

RL: When you moved to the barracks, were you allowed to take anything with you?

JC: No. No. Just the clothes we were wearing. I mean when I said no, I suppose we could take a rucksack or a satchel or something like that but no real, I mean we didn't have any real property to take into the first Ghetto either, but I mean obviously no furniture or anything like that, only a limited amount of clothes, and that was further reduced when we went into this second Ghetto.

RL: Did you have warnings that you were going to be moved, or

JC: No. Well, we had the warning, and that was repeated time and time again: 'You will be moved

**Tape 2: 41 minutes 49 seconds**

to the East', but not that we were going to be moved to another Ghetto and maybe another Ghetto after that.

RL: If you can describe conditions in these barracks.

JC: Very crowded, very primitive, as I said there was no water, electricity or gas, sanitation virtually non-existent, some outside latrines. Food was very scarce because by that time even if we had some food in the first Ghetto we didn't in that. Again, I suppose there was some sort of communal provision. I can't recollect at all what. And again, the Germans were saying 'Only a few days, then you get on', and indeed June 10<sup>th</sup> half of this area was evacuated and again, SS with dogs and pick-axe handles and all the rest of it, and the local Gendarmerie, they were sort of escorting people to the local railway marshalling areas. No I mentioned Gendarmerie a few times in my talk. Hungary had two types of Police. Police in the more sort of urban areas, and Gendarmerie in the countryside, open areas and so on. And whilst the Police was no better, no worse than the rest of the population, the Gendarmerie were sort of hand-picked yobbos and thugs with sympathies certainly as far right as Hitler, possibly further, and if anything we suffered more from even the limited contact we had with them than from the Germans at that stage. The Germans at that stage, to a large extent were Wehrmacht. Certainly there was an element of SS but the vast majority of the occupying forces were Wehrmacht people. And again, politically they may have been various shades of one thing or another. Certainly by that time when war fortunes had changed.

RL: Were there any Jews that didn't move into the Ghetto that you were aware of?

JC: Certainly I wasn't aware of it at that time. I mentioned my aunt who just faded away so to say. There were a very small number of Jews who one found out after the war, had either disappeared in much the same sort of way, finding their way to Budapest and somehow they survived. There was not more than three or four of ones I knew who actually had gone into hiding. When one sort of compares it with the Polish situation, where there were partisans and that sort of thing quite close to the Ghetto areas, some people joined the partisans. Well, Hungary at that stage, whilst it might have had some dissidents, and had even a core of what one calls partisans, but there weren't any, certainly in the Western part of Hungary.

R: It wasn't something that you or the family had considered?

JC: No, and I think the answer, and alright, hindsight is a wonderful thing, I know, but when, certainly once the Germans came in, there was no more access to British or American radio broadcasts or news from the West, but from some little bits of local or German papers that one

could see headlines of, one knew, by the time we had moved from the second Ghetto that the invasion has taken place, and even the German papers, then boasting, 'Oh we threw them all back into the sea' or words to that effect, so one knew when we were taken to the train and Auschwitz and all that, that the invasion has taken place, it is moving, how fast, nobody knew, but one knew it can only last another day, another week, maybe another month, but, life won't be that easy until then, but it's just around the corner.

RL: Can you describe what happened when you were rounded up in the second ghetto?

JC: Well we were rounded up, marched on to the railway marshalling yard, and there was a train of cattle wagons, about fifty wagons, or so, about 80 people were forced into each of the wagons. The wagons had a little barbed wire opening near the top. A bucket was put in with water, one for sanitation, the doors were sealed and trains moved on. And of course people included anything from

**Tape 2: 49 minutes 8 seconds**

infants to 100 year-old people in various states of health, middle of June, very hot during the day, quite cold during the night, but during the day extremely hot particularly with that sort of number in the carriages.

RL: Did you manage to sit down?

JC: I think everybody managed to sit down. Certainly not lie down. And sitting down and people climbing over you all the time anyway, and sanitation was non-existent anyway and a bucket of water certainly doesn't last very long for 80 people anyway, certainly not in those conditions. So it was a very difficult journey. Of course a number of people died, others were sick, faeces all over the place, and one could sort of follow the journey through the little slit, it wasn't a window, a slit. And we knew that first we went to Budapest, and from the position of the sun we knew we were going eastwards and north-eastwards, and two days later crossed the Carpathians, and the day after that we arrived at a railway siding and the train stopped. We didn't know where we were other than from the old German ... or somewhere in the East or something like that. And there was a sort of a station sign: 'Auschwitz Birkenau' so we knew that's where we were. Not a place that anybody had ever heard of before but that's where we were. The train doors were opened, we had to get off. Easier said than done, as I said a number of people died, others were sick and on the platform we had to line up and the end of the platform there were a number of SS officers and telling people 'you go that way, you go the other way'. Very soon it became evident that more working age people, mainly men, a much smaller group, and all the rest of the people, old people, children, women, and sick people, in the much larger group. With my father and one of my uncles, the uncle who had the garage on the highway, we were in the small group. We were told that the others were going off to the family accommodation, and we will meet up with them once we are taken care of and registered and all that in the country that we're going into. And one group went off one way and the other one the other way.

RL: How was the selection made?

JC: Well, literally, one knows the way it was made, that everybody who looked sort of more capable of work was in one group and the rest of the people in the other group.

RL Who was doing the selection?

JC: About half a dozen SS officers. Beyond that I can't put a name on it, I can't say it was Mengele or somebody else, and they were doing the selection and the two groups moved on. And that was

the last time I saw my mother and the other thirty members of the family. And we were taken into the other camp, into Birkenau, taken to one of the barracks. And each of the sort of barrack groups were sort of identifiable in one way or another, there was a Gypsy camp and a Czech camp and so on. We were taken to the edge of the Gypsy camp. Obviously the Jews were not the only people who were persecuted. ... and Gypsies were another big group. Taken to one of the barracks, each house was something like a thousand people. And they were fairly large barracks but for a thousand people you need something bigger than what they were. So again it was extremely crowded perhaps enough room to sit down, certainly not to lie down. And obviously there were already a lot of people in the camp who were doing daily tasks, sweeping the road, or cleaning the latrines, or whatever. And they were telling us when we would enquire, families were taken to the gas chamber, and obviously it's not something that one accepts or is willing to accept. And they were pointing out: 'we can smell the horrible smell of burning flesh, and you can see the chimneys there, in the crematorium there, and they're being burned'. And so however difficult it was we had to sort of accept the situation. And the camp itself was sort of surrounded by a double strand of

**Tape 2: 56 minutes 35 seconds**

electric wires and there were sort of subdivisions as well, but not, with double wires, and dogs running in between watchtowers with machine-guns trained on us. So there wasn't really any escape from there. So it was even more difficult to understand why there had to be a roll-call first thing in the morning. First there wasn't any way of escaping anyway. But roll-call it had to be. There wasn't all that much room between the barracks, our guards weren't exactly mathematic genius either, so counting people in a confined space in that sort of number wasn't an easy task. So we were there in the middle of the day being counted and re-counted, and re-re-counted I don't know how many times. And when roll-call started or even before there were a couple of steel containers brought along and left on the side until roll-call, and that was our breakfast. By that time whatever was hot it was stone-cold anyway. It was nothing else, it was a ladle of so-called coffee or tea. Your guess is as good as mine, what it was. So that was, call it our morning food. Then for the rest of the day we were really just milling around between the barracks. Half a dozen people were picked: you, you and you.. to clean the barracks out. But the rest of us were doing nothing. Another roll-call in the afternoon and then back into the barracks where we were given our daily food. A ladle-full of very thin cabbage soup, a slice of bread and a sliver of margarine. That was our daily diet. In the barracks there was no room to lie down, so sleeping was the best one could do, standing, sitting up, whatever.

RL: This tape is just about to end.

END OF TAPE TWO.

**TAPE 3****Tape 3: 0 minute 31 seconds**

RL: This is the interview with John Chillag and this is tape three. You were just telling me about the food and you were going to continue.

JC: The food wasn't all that much, was it, but one thing one has to remember about those times, but in Hungary we were living very well. There were no food shortages, or no real food shortages. So we had quite a bit of what I refer to as tactical reserve on us, but in Auschwitz it was very rapidly disappearing.

RL: In the barracks that you were put into, what nationalities were in those barracks?

JC: They were essentially Hungarian Jews. Of course Hungary had a very large Yiddish, many Yiddish-speaking Jewish population in the North East and half of them when they spoke Yiddish, the Western Jews couldn't understand a single word of what was going on. But a) they were all Jews, b) they were all generically speaking Hungarian Jews, plus a few of the Kapos and the barrack commandant or whatever, they were usually Poles, may have been a mixture, but I think most of them Poles, maybe one or two Czechs.

RL: So were they the people who kept order in the barracks?

JC: Well as such they were dishing out the food and cutting out the bread with a microscope, or not, as the case may have been.

### **Tape 3: 2 minutes 43 seconds**

RL: Were you given a number?

JC: Yes. And much the same as an army number, you never forget it. It's eighty-four double 'o' seven. (8-4-0-0-7)

RL: And how was that done, how were you given that?

JC: I don't know whether this is, call it a leading question, I'm not tattooed. And the reason for that is, that I have been given my number when we arrived, and into the showers and all that, and by that time the Germans were so desperate for labour that they were getting people into work situations as fast as they could. And when my father and myself and 270 others were selected to work in the Western part of Germany, in Bochum, they were so desperate to get us there that we weren't tattooed. Normally the procedure would have been to send people first to the so to say controlling camp, which in the case of Bochum would have been Buchenwald, and then be tattooed and registered and everything else there, and then moved on to the work situation, in my case in Bochum. But because of the desperate situation, the train took us straight from Auschwitz to Bochum. And for better or worse I missed out on my tattoo.

RL: How long were you actually in Auschwitz?

JC: I was in Auschwitz from the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 1944 to the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. And we probably would have been moved earlier, but some sort of illness broke out in the group, and we were put in quarantine for the best part of the month. And I presume that if the illness would have recurred, I wouldn't be here to tell you the story.

RL: Did you yourself fall ill with this?

JC: No. Some of the 270 people were selected to this group.

RL: How did you spend your time during those couple of months?

JC: Well, one was sort of playing mental games, anything from chess in your head to Bar Kochba or mental scribble, scrabble, or that sort of thing, or telling jokes, Jewish jokes, other jokes, or whatever, or anything, there wasn't much else to do. Except during the first fortnight we had one so to say job to do, send a postcard. And that wasn't from Auschwitz, but from some lakeside name, 'we are here, we are OK, the weather is good and the food is wonderful', and that sort of thing. No I don't think it said the food was wonderful, but... and just send the postcard like you would send

from Ibiza or...

RL: And who would you send the postcard to?

JC: We sent it to one of our tradesmen in Győr and afterwards we found out it actually got there, saying how wonderful life was in, not Auschwitz but wherever. But apart from that, just milling around during the day between the two roll-calls, and of course the two roll-calls took up three quarters of the day anyway.

RL: Had you been given different clothing?

JC: Yes, when we were taken to the shower block in the camp all our own clothes were taken away and we were issued with sort of prison garb, a sort of a blue and grey pyjamas type prison suit, a

**Tape 3: 7 minutes 55 seconds**

prison cap and wooden clogs. No underclothes, socks, or anything like that, and from as far as I can remember I was still wearing the same clothes, probably not washed more than once, when I got liberated in Buchenwald eight months later.

RL: What were the sanitary arrangements in Buchenwald?

JC: They weren't. There was a wash and latrine block, a long trough, about I don't know, a hundred feet or more, with a pipe running above it, through which water trickled, and that were the wash facilities. As far as sanitary arrangements are concerned the same block had latrines, open latrines, with a sort of a wooden pole to sit on, and some people tumbled over and finished up in the latrine, and that was it. Of course you couldn't just go. Groups of tens or twenties were allowed to disappear for five minutes or something like that and those were the arrangements and during the night there was a thirty-gallon keg or something like that to be the night latrine, and well if it wasn't enough, it overflowed.

RL: How did the Kapos behave towards you?

JC: In my particular case I can't complain. They shouted a lot. And some of those shouts were logical in a way, 'you must keep clean', you must not... where you got clean? There were no wash facilities. You must eat your food, because if you don't eat.. not much.... but if you don't eat you won't live, you know, logical things, but you couldn't get fat on the food either, so that was more or less the contact I had with them.

RL: Do you remember any of their names?

JC: One of them was called Janek, but beyond that... and he was well-built, a young lad, obviously he wasn't eating the same rations I was.

RL: You say that when it came to night-time there wasn't even room to lie down.

JC: No. If you were lucky you could sit down with either the side of the barrack or a vertical column or something like that against your back. If not, people were sitting back to back and that was the rest for their back.

RL: And what time were you woken up in the morning?

JC: I couldn't exactly tell you that but I guess it was six o'clock or thereabout. It was just getting light. It might have been earlier, because it was mid-summer.

RL Did you ever hear any news from outside?

JC: No. In the first few days, or maybe couple of weeks, the deportations from Hungary went on until some time in July 1944, I was by that time in the camp for a month or so, so you might have got a little bit of news from the later arrivals, although they didn't have any access to direct news either. And we didn't know what happened, but we knew that something was, how shall I say, amiss, when the attempt on Hitler's life took place. That was in the last two or three days before we left Auschwitz, and I don't think I found out until the end of the war that actually, obviously there was some sort of a flurry of activities and all that.

RL: Did you witness any executions or punishments?

**Tape 3: 14 minutes 2 seconds**

JC: Not in Auschwitz. I obviously noticed quite a number actually just died of whatever, but not actually executions. Later during my time in the camps I witnessed some, yes.

RL: Not in Auschwitz.

JC: Not in Auschwitz.

RL: How did you keep yourself going during this period?

JC: I don't really know because, as I said, there wasn't really anything to do to keep you so to say occupied. I suppose I was at an advantage, that my father was with me, there were two of us, in fact at that stage my uncle was there as well, so there were three of the family together. Whilst I can't remember what we'd been talking about and all that, obviously we had more in common than with the person next door so to say. The other thing I suppose, and this is probably more me than my father and uncle included, when you are young, you more living for the day, probably phlegmatic is the wrong word, you haven't got so much concern what might happen tomorrow, and I suppose that what kept one going.

RL: Did you know others in those barracks, were they from your home town and...

JC: Yes. The transport I was taken to Auschwitz Birkenau on had about three thousand people on it, Jewish people on it. I suppose nine tenths of them were taken to the gas chambers. And I suppose half of the survivors you knew I mean the others were living in town but you didn't know. So yes there were a number of people from your town on that transport in the barrack with you. But not that many.

RL: What number was the barrack. Did it have a number?

JC: It had a number, I'm not absolutely sure, it was in block B2B and I think, I think it was barrack number 31.

RL: You say it was near the Gypsy tent, did you have any contact with the Gypsies

JC: No. I think I mentioned that in addition to the major perimeter wire, there was also a wire dividing one row from the next, every two rows or so. And we were separated from the Gypsy



camp by one of these internal wires, not the big wire, but the small wire. And there wasn't much verbal traffic across the fence, but there was some. That was until early in August when one night there was great commotion in the Gypsy camp. And all the Gypsies, some 23,000 of them were just loaded onto lorries and killed that night. The only thing you knew next morning was that the camp was empty.

RL: Did you hear this commotion?

JC: Oh you heard... you were in the barracks, you couldn't get out of the barracks during the night anyway. But you would hear engines running and screams and whatever but you didn't know what happened but you found out the next morning. I think it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August.

RL: Did you ever leave the camp at all during this period?

JC: No. We were and by we I can't say whether it was the barrack or the whole area or what. We

### **Tape 3: 19 minutes 20 seconds**

were sort of semi-assigned by that time to go to work destinations. And we couldn't move out from that small part of the camp at all. And there wasn't... I mean you couldn't stroll along to go to the other end of the camp, but there, the people who were not assigned to an external labour situation, they... some of them worked in nearby factories or in the field, or whatever, and they went out of the camp and back in the evening, but not us.

RL: Were there any selections while you were there?

JC: The selections were.... there are two terms for selection. One is selection for a particular piece of work, yes, I, and my father and two hundred seventy other people were selected to work at the Bochumer Verein in Bochum in due time. And then there is the selection of doing away with people who are getting frail and all the rest of it. There weren't any selections in the second group I mentioned, there were two or three similar selections like the one I was selected on to go to some other German district.

RL: So there was no weeding out of...

JC: Not at that stage. Maybe we would have stayed in the camp another three months and all the tactical reserves would have gone, that may have been the case, but not in the relatively short time that I was there.

RL: Were you aware that there were medical experiments taking place?

JC: Yes. What those experiments were, obviously not. One of my relatives, who didn't live in Győr but in another town, and who was deported to Auschwitz, was a paediatrician, and I don't know... he was a research doctor in addition to being a GP type paediatrician. And the Germans knew that. And he was given a job working in the hospital, or what they called the hospital, and that was only a few barracks away from where I was. So whilst one couldn't stroll from one end of the camp to another, every so often I could sneak over to the window of the hospital block, and he gave me some food. And I knew that he was doing some sort of medical job. Whether that was treating people with coughs or anything else, I don't know. He didn't survive. I suppose he had his use for three months and after that was taken to the gas chamber. Because he knew too much perhaps.

RL: Were people who became ill taken to the hospital block?

JC: No. The hospital block was... I suppose some people must have been taken there. How they were taken there I don't know. If you could stagger on your knees or whatever, you were kicked and pushed out of the barracks, when everybody was going at roll-call and two people were holding you up at the side. So you had to be more than just sick to finish up in a hospital-like place, or call it individual selection.

RL: Did anybody attempt to commit suicide?

JC: A number of people have so to say 'escaped'. They walked straight into the electric barbed wire. It wasn't escape, it was suicide. Some people have done that. If the wire didn't get you the dogs did and if the dogs didn't the watchtowers did.

RL: Did you know any of these people?

**Tape 3: 24 minutes 54 seconds**

JC: Not really. I suppose I may have done, but not that I know of.

RL: Was there any religious activity at all?

JC: In Auschwitz perhaps there was. I mean sort of little groups of people who knew each other and perhaps had a minyan together and whatever they done, yes, there certainly wasn't encouraged. Not so much in Auschwitz, but in the later camps, it was to put it mildly, actively discouraged. If they found you out, that you practised religion you may well have been shot, hung, drawn and quartered for it, they certainly didn't turn a blind eye. They may not have seen it but they wouldn't have turned a blind eye.

RL: Were there any kind of religious items that may have been smuggled into Auschwitz?

JC: I doubt it. I can't say that the odd thing didn't find its way into the camp, but I doubt it.

We had gone into the showers, and nothing... taken from there, I doubt it.

RL: You were there till mid-August. And then what happened?

JC: Well, the quarantine period was over, we'd been told that the next couple of days we'd be taken to a destination which we didn't know at that stage where it was other than somewhere in the West of Germany, and put on another cattle train, probably a lot less cargo than the one to Auschwitz, and taken on a two-day or so journey and we arrived at the end of the journey in Bochum, which is about thirty miles to the East of the Rhine, in Westphalia. And when we got there, there were some, not quite finished breeze-block barracks and we were told 'Here is the material, finish it off, that will be your accommodation'. And after two or three days when that was done, we were taken to the steel plant, the biggest armament factory in the Ruhr, and a Krupp-Thyssen enterprise. And in the particular camp I was in, and I'll come back to why I say this particular camp, there were about 3000 people who arrived there in two or three waves, one wave before us, and one wave later. And were taken down to the steel plant, roll-called to start with, much shorter now than it was in Auschwitz, and a twenty-twenty five minute march to the plant and then a twelve hour hardship of work with half an hour break in between. And I was working on a very large steel forging press operating at 1000 degrees centigrade, very noisy, and worked with no protective clothing, which meant that lots of people got injured, even killed, working on that. And then after the twelve hour shift was over, another half an hour march to the barracks, and another shortish roll-call and then

just fell half-dead or three-quarter dead into our bunk until the next shift started.

RL Who was supervising the work?

JC: It was work that the Germans didn't relish; I don't blame them for it, but they certainly didn't relish. So the manning of the whole factory was done by a relatively small number of call it foremen or something like that, who were technically capable of supervising the job that we did. And a very much larger contingent of SS guards, some German, some Ukrainian, anyway all SS, to make sure that we've been doing what we were supposed to be doing and as I said about three thousand people from our group worked in the camp. Now in totality in the Bochum area there were some 361 camps with a total camp population of about 30,000 people. Different what shall I say, gravity of camps. Ours was an external camp of the concentration camp Buchenwald, and it was a slave-labour camp. There were other camps for people who were picked up on the street in Rostov or Paris, Copenhagen, wherever, and eventually finding their way in some sort of a camp situation. And those were prisoners but they weren't slave-labour in the same sense. There were some

**Tape 3: 32 minutes 43 seconds**

prisoners of war, mainly Russian and Polish. There were some almost volunteer refugees from the Soviet Union who'd been offered the chance of a better life and all that if they work in the German war industry. They were still behind barbed wire but they were a lesser controlled type of prisoner and there were straight-out prisoners of war, French, others.

RL: What contact did you have with these other groups?

JC: Until very recently I talked to virtually none. In the particular area of this particular half of the plant, all my fellow workers, fellow prisoners, to my knowledge, were Jews. They weren't all Hungarian Jews, they were some German Jews who were deported from Germany to Riga and from Riga to Buchenwald, and eventually one or two of them actually gone home, to Bochum, not quite home but almost. But in the larger area, or in the next whole of the plant, there were some of the other groups of people I mentioned, and in a recent book, that the University of Bochum, one of the lecturers there put together, who is particularly concerned about the story of the Ukrainian people who worked in the camp there, one of the people who wrote a piece in there or was interviewed, was saying that he worked on the large press in the hall I was working on, at the same time, so obviously there must have been people from that group. But that corroboration literally came to light only in the last year or so, and we're talking 2003.

RL: The press that you were working on, what exactly did you have to do?

JC: It was making large ship canons. And if you see a film, that, I don't know, the Scharnhorst, or whatever other, big battleship is firing guns comes off from, you can imagine their size, and see their size, and obviously they needed the pressure, the heat and the treatment that they got there, not only the canons but also the ammunition was done there, not filled there, but the actual canon shells.

RL: Were you yourself injured in any way?

JC: Minor injuries yes, I mean a splashing bit of hot metal, and burns and that sort of thing, because we didn't have any protective clothing and the worst thing you could do, and for that you got very heavily punished, is to pick up a rag or something and use it as protective clothing, so there was no protective clothing, and obviously not only others, but I got injured in some way as well. I did get injured but that was part of a conspiracy. I was one of the youngest people who survived selection

in Auschwitz and had been in the work camp. And there was one other lad, much the same age as myself, a German Jew, who done this Riga-Buchenwald-Rhine journey, and he was operating the cranes that serviced the press. We, I knew that if I would be able to be in the camp hospital for a few days it would make life a little bit easier, and we conspired that he let down the cradle of the crane very slowly onto my toe, and for that I would be having to go to the hospital and stay a few days until the blue has disappeared. Well, the load was heavier than anticipated, so it not just quashed it but actually broke it. So I had my leg in plaster for about a fortnight and I was in hospital, and that probably saved my life. So yes, injured I was, but as I said it was sort of conspired.

RL And how did that almost save your life?

JC: Well I didn't have to slog, do hard work for ten days, and maybe I got a little bit more food, because the food in Bochum was considerably better, and more, than it was in Auschwitz but of course the energy expended was still more than the calories gained so we were still on a losing field, and I suppose in the hospital it was just marginally better than it was in the camp itself. In the

### **Tape 3: 39 minutes 19 seconds**

camp by that time we were sharing four of us a loaf of bread. We were getting a bigger piece of margarine, we got once or twice a week some synthetic liverwurst or seaweed or something like that, and one cigarette a fortnight. What can you do with one cigarette a fortnight? You can smoke it. It wouldn't help you much if you were a smoker I don't think, or you can use it for bartering. You could barter your bread to get more cigarettes, and that was if not instant but certainly almost instant then, or you could barter your cigarettes for bread, and that's what I done. And whilst in itself did not save my life it was certainly a contributing factor I think.

RL: What were the sanitary arrangements there?

JC: When I say 'reasonable' that is a relative term, I know. But in the plant, there was a section put aside for the prisoners to use the sanitary arrangements there, and maybe they weren't the same top quality as the urinals or whatever for the foremen, they were quite acceptable, probably better than some of the public facilities one has in open towns anywhere.

RL: How did foremen treat the workforce?

JC: Well, they were a very mixed lot. And in detail I come back to this a bit later, but essentially Bochum is very much like an area like South Yorkshire, all coalmines, steel works and that sort of thing, which means that the workforce by and large is or was before Hitler or perhaps even after, left of centre, which meant that some of the foremen were also, in inverted commas, more human, humane, human, than some others. But it was a whole spectrum from one end to the other. Our foreman kicked us quite a lot, called us all sorts of names, every blue moon he brought in a newspaper bag, or just a newspaper wrapping of potato peels: 'Here, Jews, that's something to eat'. And it served a double purpose. It's quite delicious, potato peelings, in those circumstances, it also gave you a chance to look at the local newspapers, Bergische Arbeiter or whatever. Now one didn't expect to find anything in it that would have been earth-shattering, but one could read the headline: 'Last night in the terror attack by the RAF or the Americans, the glorious Luftwaffe shot down a thousand airplanes'. One would have thought that there were at least a thousand airplanes in the attack, so you put two and two together, which was a bit encouraging. Now whether that was the good side of a bad guy or the other thing was the bad side of a good guy, I don't know the answer. But the foreman varied from one to the next. And obviously they were all party members, and whether by design or by accident, so you didn't expect a really good life from them.

RL: And did you witness here any punishments or executions?

JC: Yes. The foreman had to report you if you didn't perform as you did, and reported you to the SS, who either bashed you up on the spot, or, when you got back to the camp you had some punishment meted out. And that could be literally anything, either, and this is not a schoolboy's thing: 'stand in the corner until told to do otherwise', to have part or all of your food rations cancelled for whatever period, which could have been a death sentence, or being lashed or sometimes executed. I watched a whole spectrum of those things, from time to time.

RL: How many executions did you witness?

JC: I suppose three or four.

There was one mass execution. Some of the French prisoners of war who were loading the railway tracks, with the ammunition, somehow managed to put some sand or something into the axels of the tracks, and they got found out, and first of all they could pinpoint the people who were working on

**Tape 3: 46 minutes 28 seconds**

that shift at that time, and they got executed, but also a number of hostages, when I say hostages, fellow-workers in the plant, were executed simply to show that discipline will be maintained.

RL: How were the executions carried out?

JC: I think that in this particular case, the people who actually done it were hung, and the larger group of about twenty or so, they were shot.

RL: Was that what normally happened?

JC: It would usually be one or the other. Or just bashed to death.

RL: Were you ever punished for anything?

JC: I was flogged once. And don't ask me what, call it my offence was. It could have been relatively serious or relatively harmless, I can't remember.

RL: And your father?

JC: I think he was flogged once as well.

RL: Were you working together at this time?

JC: Well, we started off together then for all sorts of reasons, less food, general health, the age, and all that, he was getting weaker and weaker and died in the camp in December. And life after that was obviously very difficult because we were relying on each other quite a lot. But somehow life had to go on, here I am and he isn't. His death is a separate story but it is unique in the annals of the Reich. When people died in the camp, they were just taken down in a wheelbarrow or whatever to the crematoria, the ashes scattered, turned into fertiliser or whatever, and that was the end. When after the end of the war I enquired through the Red Cross, do they know of anybody in the family, they eventually came back with an answer and said well, we could only track down two people, one is you, and of course I knew what happened to me. And one is your father and they gave the details,

and where he was and all the rest of it. And of course I knew that as well. He died of pneumonia aggravated by heart and I don't know what. And I do believe that in his case, if you can call it natural death of all the deprivations, he died a natural death. But the last line of the Red Cross statement says: He is buried in the Bochum Jewish cemetery in grave number so and so. And that is an impossible story.

And again it's only the last ten years through ... life in London, well, after a period in Australia I came back to the UK and visited Germany and yes, I went to the cemetery and found his grave there, but I didn't know the background to the story. And the story is, and there are two halves to it. One was that the RAF flattened the town, the plant, the crematoria, a few days before my father died. So the SS commandant didn't know what to do, he sent a teletype to Buchenwald to his command: 'What do I do with these dead Jews?' Back came a terse reply: 'Bury them'. So he sent them down to a local cemetery. Here the plot thickens. The cemetery superintendent, when these bodies were brought in, over a period there were 52 bodies, he and his wife took down whatever they could as far as details were concerned, a prisoner number, a name perhaps, or whatever else. And he and his wife, had arranged individual graves to be dug for these 52 people, which after the war was turned into a call it a war cemetery type cemetery or uniform graves, uniform gravestones, with names engraved, with each name, each detail, each misspell, as the SS has given it, most the people born in

### **Tape 3: 53 minutes 43 seconds**

a later year than they were actually born, the actual date, the day and month is correct, but all the people were generally making themselves younger because it enhanced life continuation. So hence the year on many, if not all the graves are wrong. And it's and how it happened. I mentioned that we are talking of an equivalent to South Yorkshire. Then, in 1933, a young socialist or communist steelworker, the day Hitler took power, joined the Nazi party. Not for ideological reasons, simply to cover his tracks, and to proceed on much the same lines, perhaps a bit more cautiously and eventually he got rewarded to become the cemetery superintendent, meaning he didn't have to die on the Russian front. He died since, but of natural death. And it shows that even in Nazi Germany certain things could be done, maybe not everything, maybe a bit more cautiously, but there it is.

RL: Was there any attempts at escape?

JC: One or two people did escape. One of them was a local Jew from that area who done a round the world journey before he got back to Bochum and he did escape. And I found out only last year that he actually died just a few months before I tried to contact him. But because he escaped, there was punishment meted out, and I don't know, 50 people got executed for it. So he was regarded by the only other survivor I know as a villain of the piece, because those 50 would have possibly been still alive if he wouldn't have escaped. Now whether that is so, who can tell now? And incidentally these three people, myself, the man who escaped and one other person are the only survivors of 1360 people in that group of the camp.

RL: What happened to your uncle?

JC: When we were selected to work in this particular plant, he was not selected, whether he didn't want to be selected, in the sense that he was sort of hidden behind somebody or what, or whether he just wasn't for whatever reason I couldn't tell. And he stayed behind in Auschwitz and I could trace him until about October 1944 and then he sort of completely disappeared. Whether he died in Auschwitz by selection, or otherwise, whether he was taken somewhere and didn't survive there, I don't know.

RL: How was this camp guarded?

JC: It still had the electric barbed wire around it. Now maybe they didn't bother so much in Auschwitz, the floodlight I mean if the Americans wanted to bomb the camp in Auschwitz so be it, there is nothing within miles of it. But when there was an air-raid the power was switched off, and I presume the power for the plants was switched off as well. But maybe it wasn't, I don't know. But we had the electrified barbed wire, the dogs, the watchtowers and all that. So from the guarding point of view it was guarded the same way as Auschwitz was, and as I mentioned earlier, ours was the most controlled type of camp. The other groups of prisoners were still guarded, but, maybe there was electric barbed wire but no dogs, maybe there was a watchtower but no fence, or something like that. We were all guarded but with varying levels of containment.

RL: Were there Kapos in charge of you this camp?

JC: Yes and no. There were sort of barrack Kapos who looked after the camp, but then they only looked after the camp. Workwise you didn't have any Kapos as such, it was foremen who had I don't know, twenty people under his control, who was fulfilling perhaps elsewhere by Kapos.

### **Tape 3: 58 minutes 23 seconds**

RL: But the Kapos who were in the barracks, how were they chosen?

JC: Well it was the same Kapos who were already there when I got there, now whether they were from previous transport or whether they were brought in as a small group from Buchenwald or somewhere else before, I'm not quite sure. The first idea on the camp, our particular camp, was only started in mid 1943, when some people went to investigate how one builds, how one guards,... how one does everything in a concentration camp. And then the camp was built, and it was first occupied in June 1944. One contingent came, a large-ish contingent, about 600 people, early in August. Then us, late in August, and then the final group in October.

END OF TAPE THREE.

### **TAPE 4**

#### **Tape 4: 0 minute 32 seconds**

RL: This is the interview with John Chillag, and this is tape four. Was there a Kommandant of the whole camp?

JC: Yes, there was. His name was Hoffman. He wasn't... again, hindsight is a wonderful thing, but he wasn't as bad as many others in his position were. He wasn't that good either, but on scale he was rather better than worse, and he had about a dozen or so lesser officers under him, some runners and whatever else. He was the Kommandant who sent the teletype I mentioned to Buchenwald, so, he was just a, maybe a little bit thick person, not knowing anything what he should know, or not doing anything without being told how to do it. But that was my comment, but whether it is correct or not I don't know. We had very little contact with him. Now something I don't know, and I don't think there is any way of finding out, the person who was doing the deportations from our area was also called Hoffmann, but it is the same thing to say there is another 'Smith', so whether it was the same person or not I don't know.

RL: You said there was a dozen or so under him, how did they treat everybody?

JC: Almost correctly. But it's just a term used, I don't mean 'correctly' by the way we speak about it. They didn't punish for punishment's sake. When they were told that well, somebody has done something wrong, they didn't investigate too much whether it was so or not, but they punished because of that. Forward orders I suppose. And some of them were almost human, one or the other, 'Do your best Jew, because it won't be long before you're either dead or you're free', type comment, so difficult to say.

RL: Did you know any of their names?

JC: Not really, it's only this Hoffman whose name I know.

RL: Did the Kapos have any privileges?

JC: I suppose they didn't have to work. When I say they didn't have to work I suppose they were doing something in the barracks I presume, they were better fed, and I suppose they could feel they had some authority, that mattered.

**Tape 4: 4 minutes 23 seconds**

RL: How did the workforce get on with each other?

JC: By and large well. It's difficult to sort of say this without offending too many people, but in today's language, most of the people were of the same background, the same social class, whatever, and possibly because of that, but there was less friction than where you departed from that norm. So we got on reasonably well together.

RL Did people try to help one another in any way?

JC: Yes they did, because there wasn't all that much one could help with. You couldn't say 'Oh have my bread you need it more than I do', but they were helping wherever they could. I don't know one case where the opposite was true, in our particular barrack or group.

RL Where there any particular occurrences that you remember, that you witnessed?

JC: Well I suppose the conspiracy I mentioned earlier may fall into this category, and the other thing is I definitely had some help and encouragement or whatever after my father died and certainly in the period immediately after that. But that's probably the things that I can recall.

RL Were there any examples of the opposite, where in fact people didn't help each other or were not good to one another?

JC: I mean there must have been and there was friction for all sorts of silly things, people in close proximity over a long time usually have good periods and bad periods. I'm sure the same can be said about my fellow prisoners in the camp.

RL: Anything particular?

JC: No, I can't put my finger on anything.

RL And I mentioned before at any attempts at religious observance, did anyone in this camp try?



JC: Here there was a definite rule. No religion. If you are found out, you cause this upon yourself. People did get when they were found out, did get punished, flogged, possibly even executed but I don't know of any particular case.

RL: What were they found out doing?

JC: Well daven or you know....I suppose they didn't fast any more at Yom Kippur than on any other day, but if they tried not to work on Yom Kippur, well then they were particularly punished for that, not just because they were not pulling their weight, but 'you know what day it was today, and you done it because of that'.

RL Were you aware of the Jewish calendar? Were you aware of when it was...?

JC: Indirectly yes. I mean essentially one knows when the days are, not in any specific detail, but notwithstanding what I said about religion, you knew that there were ten people who got together and were sort of doing something in the corner, and you said 'oh well it's mid-September so it must be Yom Kippur or whatever'. So you put two and two together but not directly. We didn't have a wall calendar with all the details on it, we didn't have a Roman, Latin calendar either.

#### **Tape 4: 10 minutes 5 seconds**

RL Did you get any day off at all?

JC: No. In the six months I was there, we had I think four 'free' in inverted commas, Sundays, and those we spent with washing our clothes, de-lousing ourselves as best we could, and if we had any spare time, we just lie down and we were lying on the ground watching overhead the planes making their trails and saying 'where are they going to drop today and how much longer will they come before the war is over?'

RL: How many air-raids did you experience?

JC: Well, what is an air-raid, to start with. The Germans got it down to a fine art, as I presume even in the UK they got it down to a fine art. That you didn't push the button for the sirens only if it was so to say significant. And it still didn't mean that whatever air-raid it was going to be it will be over your head. And that can be dangerous, because the big air-raid we had in Bochum we were just looking out the windows, or barracks or whatever, and you could see where the planes were dropping markers and whatever, and we knew that oh that is ten miles away, it's all industrial so you knew it wasn't that far away, and you knew it wasn't overhead. But of course when you were looking out of the window you could see things there, you couldn't see what was happening above you. And there was one occasion when we copped it that way and that was the big day I mentioned earlier, when everything was flattened on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1944.

RL: When did you stop working?

JC: Well I put this in two changes, and this again is partly post-war fact-finding. Obviously the area was bombed. Obviously one could see the flashes where the bombs went off and where the damage was done, but what damage was done, even from the aerial photographs the RAF had, you really couldn't tell the detail. But immediately after the war, there were some scientific teams that went with the forces to verify the aerial photos taken after the raid. And they said well, we know that this trench was bombed on that day. It wasn't filled in until three months later. That trench contained the gas-pipe to the furnaces and all that. So not until it was filled in were the furnaces operative again. So work production to a large extent finished with this raid on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of November, and

didn't resume until a week before we were evacuated from Buchenwald, from Bochum to Buchenwald in March 1945. By that time we didn't work. So production from our point of view did not resume after the bombing. But of course work did resume immediately afterwards because we were clearing the rubble and doing all sorts of things, but not actual war production.

RL: What kind of jobs were you doing?

JC: Anything from clearing rubble, loading, digging out and loading ammunition that was still usable, that sort of thing. It was as hard or harder work than the normal work, but we were kept more than just busy.

RL: And that went on for how long?

JC: That went on until we were evacuated from Bochum. The front was static for quite a while because the Rhine was in between. You could hear cannon fire in the distance from about November or December onwards. But they didn't cross the Rhine until late February, or not in that sort of area. And as they were getting closer, the Allied Forces getting closer, we were evacuated from Bochum and taken to the, so to say, the main camp the camp responsible for us, to Buchenwald.

#### **Tape 4: 16 minutes 30 seconds**

RL: How were you taken?

JC: It was some sort of railway track, presumably in similar conditions than from Auschwitz to Bochum, but I have no recall. Sometimes I think they may have been open wagons but I don't know.

RL: And what were the conditions like that met you at Buchenwald?

JC: Well it wasn't so much the conditions immediately on arrival, by that time, including myself, were getting extremely weak and I probably wouldn't have lasted very much longer. So when we got to Buchenwald, I was taken or I had to march to the small camp to the infirmary block. Now don't get carried away here, it's not Manchester General or whatever it is, but it was the block immediately adjacent to the crematoria. Hardly anyone was expected to survive. Logistically it was the best way to take us, because it was one-way traffic from the block to the crematoria. I'm here but the logistics were the other way. So when one... as you ask how did they treat you in Buchenwald or something similar. It wasn't a question of how they treated you in Buchenwald, as how you managed. And I was taken to this infirmary block which incidentally from history you will know, may know, is the same block Elie Wiesel and Max Birkauer were also in. And Elie Wiesel was on one of the lower bunks and I was on one of the higher bunks. If I could have shouted at that stage, which I couldn't at that stage, we could have shouted at each other. And there I was on the upper bunk by that time so weak that I couldn't get down for anything, food, or toilets, or anything, so you were just incarcerated on the bunk. And each of these bunks was a whole row in the barrack block, and sort of verticals to hold up the upper bunks at about meter intervals, and each of those segments had about three or four people. So from that you can work out how fit or how much fat there was on us in that small area.

RL: And how did you survive that?

JC: Well I suppose the simple answer is luck because there was nothing else to it. There was one contributing factor after the Liberation that may have helped. When the Americans liberated the

camp on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April it was the first time any of the Western Allies entered any of the larger camps. In Britain people know Bergen-Belsen, Dimbleby and all that, but Buchenwald was liberated about a fortnight before that, and it was the first camp. Nobody had any idea what the camps were like. And there were these young American GI Joes they didn't know what to do, they didn't know what to expect. They went to their pockets: cigarettes, chewing gum, Hershey bar, bully beef, whatever they had in their pockets. And the prisoners on the bunks they were reaching out trying to get some of these goodies. And of course it wasn't the sort of food or material that in our condition survived on. I was too weak to reach out for anything and that probably saved my life as well. But apart from that, luck and nothing else.

RL: Were you aware that the camp was being liberated?

JC: In a vague sort of way, yes. As I said I was in such a weak condition that the world was just going by me. On the day of Liberation one could hear a few shots fired, why they were fired, whether people were executed or what I didn't have a clue and in any case I was sort of maybe not medically but certainly in the real sense, in and out of comas at that stage. So no, not really, and I suppose the first time anything sank in was when there was more shouting and things I wasn't accustomed to in the camp at all. And then the American soldiers came in. And that was probably...

[Interruption]

**Tape 4: 23 minutes 13 seconds**

RL: How long were you lying in this area before Liberation?

JC: I suppose I was still in the infirmary block for about two days or so. By that time the Americans rushed in field hospitals and they were put in what were the old SS barracks, and I got transferred from the barrack into the, this hospital situation, and of course the first thing, they lowered you into a bath, and that was the first bath I had for over a year, and next thing they put you on the weighing machine, as they do in hospital, and that stage I weighed four stones, thirty-six pounds. And then they started pumping me full of blood, plasma, some penicillin or similar things were around, but they weren't that plentiful, and somehow, gradually nursed me back to health.

RL: How long had you actually been in Buchenwald before Liberation?

JC: I can only work this out from records that are available rather than from my own recollection. I believe that I arrived in Buchenwald on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. The camp was liberated on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April. By about the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, although I have now, since I've started talking about this, the suspicion that it was the 14<sup>th</sup> and I tell you in a moment why I think that, I was taken to the hospital, the field hospital and was in Buchenwald after Liberation until mid-July 1945 when the Americans had to evacuate that area because it was to become part of the Soviet Occupation Zone. Now I mentioned why I think it was on the 14<sup>th</sup> rather than the 13<sup>th</sup> of April. On the first day or first couple of days, all the big, big shots, the Generals coming in to see, including Eisenhower, then world press came in, and the main reporter who was reporting from Buchenwald was Edward Murrow. Edward Murrow was the wartime anchor man of all the American radio networks. Maybe there was the odd television network, I don't know, and was stationed in London. And when the invasion... he had a weekly programme, in London. And when invasion happened, he went with the forces and fought and he was the first newspaperman who entered Buchenwald and I believe his report, which I acquired very recently, a sound recording, him speaking from Buchenwald, through a landline to London and another booster line to the States, and recorded in New York and that tape was lost by all the networks, not only the BBC, but the American ones as well and only resurfaced very recently and it's his report that is probably more descriptive and more graphic than any of the others from

any of the camps.

Only last week there was a TV documentary on Dibleby and Belsen. I didn't actually hear it, but the comment was that they thought that Dibleby has gone bonkers, we're not broadcasting that. And what they did actually do in the case of Ed Murrow, they broadcast his tape over BBC and everything else on the Sunday after the 13<sup>th</sup> of April. So that's the only reason I can put a fix on the date.

RL: And when were you well enough to leave the hospital.

JC: Well as I said I was pumped full of this that and the other and nursed back to some sort of health. And I suppose by about the middle of June I was mobile again, I wasn't in good health or anything like that. By that time the Americans knew that they had to leave. And whilst they were taking care of, call it the prisoner's needs, and what they were going to make absolutely sure was that not a stone was left behind in the area they had to evacuate. And my sort of... very early in July I was well enough to supervise some local Germans to load lorries and wagons under the watchful eye of a GI Joe with a handgun, and the particular bit of loading that I supervised, was the working papers, the documentation, work processes, patents, and that sort of thing being loaded onto some lorries, and when I came to England, to this part of the world in 1963 and joined what is today the British Library in Boston Spa, my Director took me around, and said well, there's some German material here, you speak German, have a look at it, is it any use? It was part of the loot I supervised

#### **Tape 4: 31 minutes 20 seconds**

the loading of in Buchenwald in 1945.

RL: And from there, what happened to you next?

JC: Well. We were given the chance of either going back to call it homelands or move into another camp, not a concentration camp, but a civilian camp for survivors, and somewhere in the West something can be worked out. And at that stage I still hoped that somebody from the family will have survived and I went back to Hungary. And so the Americans laid on transport, escorted transport through the Russian zone right from Buchenwald through Prague, Brno, and to Budapest, and went on that and got back to Hungary. Nobody really of the family had survived, there were some distant cousins three times removed, yes. The only survivor was one of the sisters, the elder sister of my father, who lived in Budapest and survived somehow there in one of the protected houses a Swiss or, a Swedish protected house. Funnily enough, she was old, and she was in bad health, diabetic, hardly mobile, and she survived in Budapest, obviously she died not long after the war, in the early 1960s.

RL: And what was her name?

JC: She was Ilona. And her surname was Barsha. And some of the photos I will show you were photos taken by her husband who died earlier, who was a semi-professional photographer, he was a very good amateur photographer, he had about two or three Leicas in the 1930s so it just shows the kind of photos he might have been taking. But she was the only real family member who survived. Of course I didn't hear from Budapest anyway, so after a few days there, I got on a train, which was an adventure in those days anyway, and then the journey, the 130 kilometre journey in probably about three days, to Győr.

RL Did you have money for the journey?

JC: I don't think really you needed money. That was another funny thing that happened to me. When I was in Buchenwald, there were some burning old clothes, and other rubbish and all that, and there was a big wad of Hungarian money, so I pocketed that and thought it can't be worth anything. But when I got back to Hungary, I mean comparatively speaking, it was probably one tenth or one twentieth of the value the money was before, but the wad was still quite a substantial wad, but then I restarted the family business again a couple of months later, the money was still enough to buy my first railway wagon of cement for the building material business. But I don't think on the train you needed any money. I didn't need any money. And what the normal population did I don't know, but I had a proper ID and pass almost in the wording of the old British Passport, 'I command you to do that for Her Majesty or whatever'. So I had no problem with money on that journey.

RL: What happened when you got back to your home town?

JC: Well, somebody in Budapest told me that, the old Jewish community, that the Council is having an office, who was there I didn't know, and you probably make your way there first, and see whoever you see, and do whatever is right in the circumstances. So that's where I headed first. The synagogue on one side, obviously ransacked and emptied during the war, not just the German period but the Soviet occupation after. And there was one of the old rooms inhabitable, and there were some people, one or two I even knew, and 'who are you, where have you been, and which camps' and all that and what are you going to do, and giving you a hint what you should do or can do or so on. So that's where I was going to stay for a few days, they had a little hostel or whatever.

#### **Tape 4: 38 minutes 6 seconds**

Some of my similar age friends, who may have been either in the same school or in a different school, but the same age so we knew each other, came back from various camps, and they were there, and there were other people I didn't have a clue who they were, mainly because as a child I didn't know the old people anyway, and they weren't that old, they were away in the Labour Battalions and that. And I went down to where the family house and business was. All in ruins, part burned down, whatever stock there was, was long since looted. What was inhabitable was occupied by Russian troops, so there wasn't any way of doing something there, or certainly not immediately. So I went along to the flats where my parents and father was living, and that was in good nick. The present occupiers looked at me 'what's he doing here?' and there was no way of dislodging them, because although they were good Nazi sympathisers during the Nazi times, when the Communists took over when the Russians came in they became jolly good Communists, and they were protected people by the authorities so there was no way of doing anything there either. So I went back to the business premises and the basement was sort of liveable, you wouldn't live in it, but it was liveable. And that's where I set up initially home. And then a distant cousin came back who was in one of the Labour Battalions and survived that and the two of us restarted the family business, started it up again, and by the time we built it up the Communists took over and nationalised the lot and that was that.

RL The cousin who came back, what was his name?

JC: He was called George Mensel. He lived, or he and his family lived on the other end of Hungary or almost on the other end Hungary. And they survived, this is now the family as distinct from the man in the Labour Battalion, because something very strange happened during the deportations. The town we were living in was virtually on the Austrian border, and Eichmann and his henchmen had agreed that 'this transport from this place should go to the German factories in Austria because it's so close'. But the SS who was doing the deportations, were so used that all the trains go to Auschwitz, that we were literally three quarters of the way to Auschwitz before they discovered that

this doesn't say Auschwitz it says Wiener Neustadt. So a hurried exchange of whatever communication, they said 'well let that lot go to Auschwitz, and there will be another lot that we send to Austria.' And this man's family lived in the town which actually had the train that went to Austria. And that how his family survived. He was in a Labour camp, but his family survived to a large extent in Austria. They both died since. Their daughters live in Switzerland. The oldest one was just a few months or a year old and been in the camp in Austria and survived. The two younger ones were born after the war, but the youngest died but the other two are living in Switzerland now.

RL: When you came back to your home town, how many Jews came back there?

JC: Well obviously it was a trickle that never turned into a flood, but when I got back I suppose there were about thirty or forty, it was in August after the end of the war, about thirty or forty were there then and that number grew over the months or perhaps a year or so to probably about 3 or 400, and that's probably about 8% of the population, of the Jewish population.

RL: When you started the business, did you know what to do? Because you'd only been young.

JC: Well yes first of all I'd never finished my school before I went away. With the help of a couple of the teachers, .....so to say, so by September or October, I passed my exams, and I was ready to go to University, but how? No money, no anything, I had to earn my living so I restarted the family business. And technically at any rate I haven't got a tertiary education, but well, I suppose I learnt the trade much the same way as some youngsters these days, they spend the summer vacation in Dad's firm or whatever. I suppose I spent some time in the business, not as

#### **Tape 4: 45 minutes 23 seconds**

Managing Director, mind you, but spent some time there, so I knew the basics. And then this cousin had some business background so he could run the business commercial end of it.

RL: How difficult was it to build up the business?

JC: It wasn't all that difficult. Well I suppose the most difficult task was the start-up and the Buchenwald money started us up if you like. It wasn't all that much but it was enough for a start. Now in post-war devastation, or in post-war after devastation, building materials isn't a bad sort of business to be in. So there weren't any problems, in fact it was probably simpler than selling sugar or salt, although they were probably much in demand as well. So no, there wasn't any problem. The problem was to get the Russian soldiers out of the premises and the yard, the trucks in the yard, and they occupied the only liveable rooms in the house. Now Russian soldiers are very fond of alcohol. And they will drink anything, be it beer, wine, Chanel Five bottles, or methylated spirits, and somehow with the little money that we had, we got some methylated spirits that we used for bartering, and for the total cost of a 44 gallon of methylated spirit, not only did I get out a dozen or so Russians out of the house, but got a truck thrown in as well, so we got our transport for the firm as well.

RL: And how long after your arrival did that happen?

JC: I suppose it must have been very early in '46. Could have been very late in '45 but I think it was '46. So the Russians were out, the flat the habitable was inhabitable after a dozen Russians in it for I don't know how long, and anyway that was put in order and my cousin and myself moved into that, and after two or three months we renovated a bit more and his family came as well and so we were there in the house, business was thriving, certainly until we were thrown out again until nationalisation.

RL: And beside getting back on your feet in terms of your business, what else did you become involved in at that time.

JC: Very little. Because there wasn't any way of reclaiming, or even finding property. I suppose whatever non business time one had, met with friends long lost and exchanged experiences, 'do you know so and so' and that sort of thing. Social life was a half a dozen of us going down to the pastry shop and buying cakes and coffee and whatever rather than going to Art Galleries if there were any and whatever else.

RL: You have mentioned before belonging to a Zionist group. Was that at this period?

JC: That was in this period because I think I mentioned because not officially but the hostel where I started off initially when I came back to Győr was by that time turned into a transit camp or a staging post for Aliya Bet people coming from further East, mainly Rumania. But some of my local friends were also still staying at the hostel, they lost everybody, they didn't have anywhere to go, so they stayed there so I spent quite a bit of time there, not for, or not necessarily for political or Zionist or whatever reasons, simply for company, friends and so on, and there we had this table-tennis club and started doing a little bit of rowing when we found boats and they were repaired.

RL And where was the hostel?

JC: It was in the old Chevra Kadisha building, which is probably about 100 yards or so from the synagogue.

**Tape 4: 51 minutes 41 seconds**

RL: Was the synagogue still intact?

JC: Well almost intact. Internally it was fairly damaged, ripped out, and maybe not that many or certainly not that many orthodox synagogues would have organs and things like that, but that synagogue did. All the old organ pipes were ripped out and sold for metal and all the rest of it. But the shell existed. It was never turned properly into a synagogue. It was turned back in some sense into a Shul or prayer room or something like that but not as a proper synagogue. About ten years ago the few Jews who still lived there sold it, and with European Community money it was turned into an Art Centre, meeting place, something, so yes, it has been renovated, it looks like a synagogue, perhaps even they have services there sometimes but no it's not a, how shall I call it, a proper synagogue.

RL: How were you received back by the non-Jewish population?

JC: By and large, indifferently or badly 'oh, another one has come back'. By and large indifferently. They just let you get on with it. They wouldn't help you, they wouldn't hinder you, and some of them 'not another Jew'. The Hungarian population generally speaking were not that much better than the Germans, in many respects perhaps worse.

RL Were there any incidents?

JC: No.

RL: Did anybody receive you warmly?

JC: Maybe a few odd people, and some of them were more odd than others. Like much earlier I mentioned the secretary of the Communist party certain the extent of the warm welcome and all that. But. But a couple of our tradesmen they did welcome us back and in fact they worked again for the firm while the firm was there.

RL: How long did the firm last?

JC: It lasted until technically I think until about mid '49 but it was announced to be nationalised from a bit earlier some time in 1948, so in between I had another episode that fits in. I became of military age, and I was called up. So when the firm went under, so to say, I was in the army. Now having the political background my father had, not so much me because I was a child anyway, having my political background, been to the camps, not necessarily because I was a Jew, I mean in Communist liturgy people were taken into German concentration camps because they were communists, they weren't there because they were Jews, so, but anyway I was in their good books. I spoke some languages, I was politically reliable, so they put me, I suppose you can call it an elite unit. Now elite I'm not talking of SAS or anything like this but what it was, it was a radio intelligence unit where you needed languages, translate, that sort of thing, and do it politically and reliably as well, and in current Western nomenclature it would be a SIGINT unit, a Signalling Intelligence Unit. And I think it was the very first signalling intelligence Unit in the East, anywhere in the East. But I knew that either before very long I would be a general, or finish up as a either a general or on top of the gallows, or I had to get out of Hungary and very quick. And so whatever little money I had I bribed myself out of the army. In practical terms I got a year's postponement. And it meant that within that year I had to disappear, and that I did.

RL: How long were you in the army?

**Tape 4: 58 minutes 32 seconds**

JC: Oh, six weeks. I went in as a Private; I came out as a Sergeant.

RL: And where were you stationed?

JC: Oh in Budapest. What later became part of the Communist Secret Service machinery?

RL: Having bribed yourself out of the army, what moves did you make?

JC: Well first of all I scratched my head. I already knew the short answer that I should get out to the West, and I started making plans for it. I think we're out of film.

RL: This tape is coming to an end.

END OF TAPE FOUR

**TAPE 5**

**Tape 5: 0 minute 30 seconds**

RL: This is the interview with John Chillag and this is tape five. You were telling me how you had to decide what to do.

JC: Well I knew that I had to disappear in the next year, before my postponement had come to an end, and started making plans. Now when my father went into political exile in 1920, he hopped on



a train in Győr, and got off in Vienna. No passport control, no anything. Simple two-hour journey. Now when I was making plans, all the Western border of Hungary was mined, barbed wire, guard towers, soldiers and police patrolling it. And I, very close to the border, not that close but very close to the border, knew that that was the case, so I knew that was no way to go out. So how else can one leave Hungary without doing that border. By that time Czechoslovakia was still a pretty benign country as far as Jews, Jewish or Zionist movements were concerned. I was planning to go across to Czechoslovakia and from Czechoslovakia to Austria. Close to my home-town again there was the very wide Danube which wasn't that easy to cross without using the proper transport routes, so I went by train and bus virtually to the Eastern end of Hungary, about 200, 300 miles away, close to the border and literally mountaineered across into Slovakia with one of my childhood friends, his girlfriend, and a couple of other people. And we had a leader, guide, who was actually a bricha organiser, knew the route, was doing it regularly.

We got over into Slovakia, we got onto a train, I sort of very studiously was reading a Czech newspaper, I don't think I was holding upside down, got to Bratislava, got across Bratislava to the Austrian border and our bricha leader has organised a truck to take us from the border into Vienna some 30 miles away. So we got there safely, we got onto a truck, and mind you, all this, in one way or another was Soviet occupation zone, Austria more formally than the other countries but nevertheless, and somehow soon after we got into Austria we got rumbled and there were some Russian soldiers chasing this truck going towards Vienna. Anyway we managed to keep ahead of them, and we were approaching Vienna, which was at that time still one of the Four-Power controlled cities and there were Four-Power controlled Jeeps patrolling it. And they had call it power of arrest and all that, in all the zones except the international zone right in the centre of town, and for some, I suppose technical reason, the driver of the Four-Power Jeep, irrespective of which of the three others was in charge of Austria for that month, the driver of the Jeep was always the American, and when he realised what his Russian friend, colleague was trying to tell him, he

#### **Tape 5: 5 minutes 34 seconds**

intentionally mixed up his accelerator with the brakes, and well, they were just coming up at snail's pace behind us. And when we got into the centre of Vienna which was the international zone, well they couldn't do anything anyway, but the Austrian police flagged us down opposite the opera and we got fined the equivalent of I suppose 20p for exceeding the speed limit on the ring in Vienna. So then we were in Vienna and in the international zone, safe as far as that goes. But that was only the beginning of what to do next.

Many of the people who escaped various routes from Hungary and Rumania were on at that stage first on Aliya Beis and then on ....., but just as many they were going either to a known destination or to somewhere in the West. Now I didn't have any destination to go to, but how does one get a call it a receiving address? At the time the International Refugee Organisation just began. Before that it was a part of UNRRA and operated on that basis and the IRO, in common with some other organisation I'm familiar with, treated all Jewish refugees as commercial refugees and therefore they were not refugees within the meaning of. Now you needed to get an IRO passport to go anywhere under the umbrella of the IRO. Now Jews had an advantage, that there was also the American Joint, and they facilitated movement to various places, but they were torn and were in two minds on things, and said 'let's try as many as we can, of Jewish refugees who came across, to be accepted or registered by IRO, and we will hand-pick them'. People with definite political background, definite asylum seekers as distinct from commercial refugees, economic refugees, and I was picked as one of the guinea-pigs, and out of I don't know how many guinea-pigs they had, eight were actually being given an IRO passport, an IRO status. Now it wasn't an easy task for all sorts of reasons, and one the main ones was that the Chairman of the interviewing Committee or Commission or whatever it may have been called, was an old-time Hungarian landowner who fled

Hungary at the end of the war. And he fled Hungary because he was a member of the Arrow Cross party in Hungary. So you didn't expect much help from that source. But anyway I squeezed through as one of the eight people to the IRO. And they started then to sort of question further where you want to go and what they can achieve in the end. So I put down my name for Canada and the States and Australia. And in the waiting game the Australians came good first, so I finished up in Australia.

RL: How long did it take?

JC: Well I got to Vienna on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1949, I left by ship US Navy ship I think the sister ship of the one that actually berthed this afternoon in Hartlepool. And on that ship went to Australia.

RL: What date was that?

JC: Left early March 1950, yes.

RL: And what did you do in those months in Vienna?

JC: Well, I was in Vienna in the .... Now the ... was once a very well-known hospital, a very well-known hospital, the main hospital in Vienna. But after the war it was taken over as a hostel for East European Jewish asylum seekers, refugees, you name it, bloody refugees, and so we stayed there in dormitories for about a couple of months, sort of November-ish, and of course you couldn't emigrate from the Russian Zone to the West. And you had to go to the Russian Zone because Vienna was surrounded by the Russians and the International Zone, so with an American escort, we were taken to the American zone where I was in a camp in Steyer, again, a sort of a transit camp for Jewish refugees, and eventually I was summoned one day to join a train in

### **Tape 5: 12 minutes 53 seconds**

Salzburg, get on it, train was first going to Germany to pick up people there, and then across back to Austria and the Brenner down to Italy, and a short stay outside Naples in what was the Mussolini's Balilla Academy and these trainee fascists before and during the war and there waited until a ship became available to transport us to Australia, and there I went.

RL: Can I just ask you about the transit camp, how long were you there?

JC: Well there were I say about three transit camps. Steyer was the longest time, probably until about late January, then February first in Northern Italy for a few days and then in Naples or outside Naples for two weeks, three weeks, brought me to the end of February or so.

RL: How big were these camps?

JC: Well the Steyer Camp was quite manageable. And for better or worse, it was all Jews. The other ones, and from then on, I was a lone soul, or maybe there could have been another one amongst the 1500 or so passengers who became the run for the ship. I was probably the only Jew, and when we embarked or the day before we embarked they were looking for some people who sort of spoke English to sort of liaise with the plebs when they come on board, and myself and one young Czech lad about my age we were in this advance group of half a dozen people. And we were the, call it the office staff for the journey so to say, and it meant that our office was not just the office but also the living accommodation for the two of us so we had a two berth cabin, quite comfortably in size, an officer's cabin whereas all the other people, the 1500 they were down in the bowels of the ship in

large single-sex dormitories, when I say single-sex, my cabin with the Czech lad was also single-sex but that's a different story. And it meant also that we were getting the American food. Alright the food was better than it was in Auschwitz or in Bochum or wherever, but I don't think it was that hot, quality wise anyway.

RL: Could you speak English?

JC: I thought I spoke a little bit. Had you heard my carefully chosen words... Because particularly when I arrived in Australia I certainly found out within the next five minutes that I don't speak any Australian. Whether I spoke the odd word of English, maybe. I could understand quite a bit provided it wasn't some horrible accent.

RL: Where had you learnt it?

JC: I don't know, because in school, in the war years, we had German and Italian. At one stage I was very good in Italian. I was actually welcoming the son of one of Mussolini's son, when he was travelling through town, the whole class was on the platform to greet him because they were all Italian speaking, well, students, and I was given the task to welcome him. My Italian these days is not even rusty, horrible. But English we didn't have, but we didn't have any school French, I don't know whether school French is any use to English people, but I didn't even have that, but certainly no English. I picked up a little bit here, a little bit there. I was pretty good with languages, so that helped.

RL: And what was the name of the ship you were on?

JC: It was the General M. B. Stuart. Who was a civil war general. It was under US Navy command with Malayan and whatever cooks and ancillary staff, and the passengers were a very motley lot. I couldn't prove it then, I can't prove it now, I'm sure there were SS amongst it, there were all sorts of

### **Tape 5: 19 minutes 8 seconds**

Nazi party this that and the other. There were Italian fascists, Hungarian officers or ex-officers by that time, there were Yugoslavs of all shades and colour, maybe not colour they were all the same, but that lot in particular, just as more recently they were fighting with each other, there were knives thrown, people overboard and all that, and the Military Police, the US military Police, they were busy with just keeping the Yugoslav factions apart.

I didn't have much dealings with them but an SS man and a Jew may have got on quite well, but not two people from what later turned into Yugoslavia. Almost... we got as far as Colombo and we were just out of Colombo when an incident has taken place. An American plane was shot down somewhere over or near Leningrad. What it was doing there I have no clue, but anyway it was shot down. And things looked like hotting up, and there was this, by that time maybe not quite that old, Army or Navy vessel. It brought up the guns from the bowels of the ship, within a day there was an attack and everything mounted and attacks and the captain got his orders 'Proceed full speed to Sydney'. And if you watch the equivalent of anybody going down the M62 at 130 miles an hour, that was our journey from Colombo to Sydney. A journey which in those days used to take I think 13 days, we done in less than 8. Anyway we got to Sydney, we got through the first technicalities, there was a train, not a cattle wagon, a train waiting for us, and we were taken by train to Bathurst which is far in land about 300 miles west of Sydney, reputed to be the coldest town in Australia and there was a tent camp for these people who came. It was freezing cold. The Australian diet was for breakfast, lunch and dinner, lamb chop. And Kosher or otherwise, if you ever tried a lamb chop, stone cold with all the gravy or whatever fat frozen solid on it for breakfast you will understand

why since that day my mouth has not touched that.

Anyway there we were in the camp and under the immigration rules people under the IRO umbrella, and that didn't apply to the Joint ones, had to work for two years in designated work place, and it could be changed but with difficulty. And again we were waiting in the camp for the designated work place, and I said well I'm not staying here. So I got to Bathurst station, about three miles away I can't remember, got on the train, bought a ticket to Sydney with the little money I got, and somehow they understood that I wanted to go to Sydney, but I had great difficulty in town before making myself understood. And off I went to Sydney. And I knew I had to go to some directed labour place so I went to the Labour Exchange, and they got me a job in a metal factory. I suppose they had a small forge, and all that concentration camp press and all that, a good training ground, but anyway, I worked there for I suppose one year of the two year period I was supposed to work there and I then I wanted to change and done that, and for a couple of months I went to work for Nestle's, not for chocolate, for chicken noodle soup. So there was plenty of chicken to eat, cleaning up the factory floor I could also see what happens to the chocolate, and since that day I haven't eaten any Nestle's chocolate, not that the others are any differently produced, but that I have not seen.

RL: What was it that you saw?

JC: Well at that stage there was hardly any chocolate in chocolate anyway, it was all coconut husk, and whilst it wasn't declared on the packet, there was anything from rat-droppings to you name it. So anyway, and after, and that I'd done as a sort of a half-night shift job, I started at seven at night and finished at three in the morning and at the same time I'd also an open University, civil servant, cum-English type course. And with a bit of knowledge and that sort of thing in late spring that year a very large hydro electric scheme was just begun, I applied for a job there, it was a civil service job, it had to do with building, construction and all that, and I knew as much as the person next door as it were, and I got the job there.

### **Tape 5: 26 minutes 59 seconds**

RL: What year was this?

JC: That was 1952.

RL: Can I just take you back a moment, the boat trip across how long did that actually take in total?

JC: In total I was there on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, I don't the exact day I left Naples, but it was some time in March, I mean nowadays nobody knows how long ships take to go to Australia. In those days P&O liners or what took about four, five weeks. And I would have been there under normal steam conditions probably in about four, four and a half, and as things were it was just over three weeks. It was end of March, yes.

RL: And what was your impression of Australia when you got there?

JC: At that stage you didn't really have any impression, I mean the only impression you had was the vastness once you got out of the city. Here you know of the coat-hanger bridge of Sydney, but you also know the coat-hanger bridge of Newcastle, it's just a little bit bigger. Incidentally the engineer who built the Newcastle one also built the Sydney one, but the design is different so it's neither here nor there. But once you got out of Sydney itself, it became very vast. I can see the spaces in front of me, you can't see it from where you're sitting behind you, there are two or three Australian scenes there, which you can have a look at afterwards, they are very large, and all you had in the camp in

Bathurst were refugees in hundreds or thousands, and sheep in thousands and ten thousands, and few horses, few people floating around and that was it. But then within a few weeks of arriving there I was back in Sydney. And alright, suburbia varies from place to place and time to time and it was no worse where I was working than some of the perhaps most elite places of Manchester.

RL: How did you get on with the people?

JC: Oh they were alright, except understanding them communicating with them. To them anybody who spoke with an accent, and that applies to a Scotsman, an Englishman, a Tarnopol Jew or whatever, is a 'reffo', a refugee, however they got there to Australia and more often than not they were not just a 'reffo' but an expletive or three expletives and a 'reffo'. But no, that was just a manner of speaking, it was not unkind in any way at all.

RL: Where did you live in Sydney?

JC: I rented a room in a private house about a quarter of an hour away from this bolt and nut factory.

RL: Did you meet other Jews there?

JC: No. I have a suspicion that I came across a couple of Jews in the suburb I was in, they could have been Greeks or you know, or some characteristics that you may sport, but they may have been Jews. This was a part of Sydney which was probably as far from privileges you could be in any part of Manchester, so no, one didn't really expect any Jewish population as such. A couple of people who came with me on the ship, no, not on my ship but on yet another one that came a few days later, also got a job in the same place I was working and they were Jewish, so yes, that was some contact, but you had to go from one end of town to the other to get to Alwoodley of Leeds or Prestwich of Manchester or, whatever any other town.

### **Tape 5: 32 minutes 51 seconds**

RL: Besides working, did you get involved in other things?

JC: Again not that much. I'd done a sort of a building, not University thing, one of the things that one of our lesser colleges would have done in the not that recent past. So building construction, construction management and that sort of thing but after about half a year I found it too much to do that and do a job and all that so it didn't go anywhere and when I years later claimed German compensation, on educational grounds it was turned down, because they reckoned that this was not full-time education within the meaning of the German act number so and so paragraph whatever.

RL: So you had got up to the hydro electric scheme, can you tell us anything about that?

JC: The... under... when I say primitive conditions, by primitive conditions, I mean this was really out in nowhere, it could have been virtually on the moon. It was literally on top of Australia, at 5000 feet, in Australia, about 8 months of the year under 5, 6, 7, or 8 feet of snow. When the snow melted, there were a few men on horseback rounding up sheep. The total indigenous population on the 100 square miles I was in, was probably in their hundreds rather than anything more, and there they started up, I suppose you still have to call it camps or townships, with barracks, essentially built for a normal Australian climate, in other words no heat control, single windows, wind blazing through corrugated iron, but well fitted out within so it was a reasonably comfortable life. And it was three minutes on skis or on foot to the laboratories where I worked and another five miles away a jeep journey to the actual power station which was being constructed, and another five miles after

that to the actual dam site to where a major dam was being built, one of the many that was built in the years that followed. And my wife, my now wife worked at the power station. We were living in the same camp, and we met, and eventually we got married, and eventually children were born in Australia. And for five years, or four years of the five I was on the, this scheme I worked up in the mountains. Wonderful. You worked as much as you did work, after work the time was yours, there wasn't anything to do. I was skiing more than I would have on the slopes of Switzerland. To go to the outside loo you had to go on skis. To go to the canteen, to go to work, or just to go out on a Saturday or Sunday to do the hills.

RL: What did the work actually consist of?

JC: It was laboratory testing of building materials. Something I knew from childhood. And well tertiary education, the Australians weren't that worried about paper diplomas or anything like that, so I was doing the same job as a PhD, well there weren't PhDs, but BSC engineer, in the same laboratory.

RL: When you say it was there that you met your wife, will you tell me a little bit about her background and who she is.

JC: She is a Londoner who went out to Australia much the same time as I did, not with the IRO or UNRRA or anything like that, but under the assisted scheme and in a way it was similar to my mother's story, not a seamstress, but she wanted to see the world, for ten pounds you get to Australia, so she went to Australia, she worked in offices before in Sydney for a while, and she saw this advertisement, and thought I might do a bit of skiing and all that, no, she had a job not on the snow skiing, but somewhere in the mountains in a chalet, so she knew that there is snow in Australia and all that and when she knew about this job, let's go there, and she worked in the office literally opposite the power station and I was picking up my samples and taking them back to the lab, met her and that's how it went.

**Tape 5: 39 minutes 46 seconds**

RL: And what's her name?

JC: She is Audrey, her maiden name is Banham, she's a Londoner.

RL: When did you marry?

JC: We married in 1952, in December after knowing each other for six months or so.

RL: And where did you marry?

JC: We married up on the snow, in a small hall, and that is now under 50 meters of water, so it's all under the bridge, there's a bridge there.

RL: And then you say then you had children in Australia.

JC: Yes. Yes and no. While we were working in the snow, another similar scheme started in Canada, and I thought I may want to go there, and to go there I would have come via the UK. And by that time my wife was pregnant and she thought she comes ahead of me and then we meet up in England and then we go to Canada. And I needed for some time to be here, an English work permit and they didn't give me one and so that fell through so when Jonathan my son, older son was born in London, my wife came back to Australia with him and then he lived with us ever since, well, as

long as we were in Australia. And then about three years on, after being right on top, I got a promotion or maybe not even that, I got a promotion into the central laboratories in the headquarter town down in the valley 60 miles away. And in some way we thought that well with a child and the second one coming, it's closer to the hospital and all that, and it was alright in Cooma as the town was called, up on top that was called Island Bend because of the bend in the river, and it was a very regimented a very class divided town, a grade one clerk didn't speak to a grade two clerk, an engineer wouldn't talk to a clerk, it was a township of all employees of the organisation. So we were there for about a year or maybe a little bit more and then I saw a job advert in Sydney, the Atomic Energy Commission, Materials testing, so I applied, and got the job. So in 1957 we moved from the snowy area to Sydney.

RL: When were your children born?

JC: Well the oldest one was born in London, and the next one was born in Cooma still on the snowy but in the township there and my youngest one, my daughter, was born in Sydney.

RL: What are their names, and what are the dates?

JC: Laurence was born in October 1955, and Wendy was born, I say Sydney, because they all called it suburbs, differently, somebody born in Manchester or in Prestwich.... was born in Sydney in '58, in July 1958.

RL: And Jonathan?

JC: Jonathan was born in London in 1954, in March.

RL: And how did you get on in Sydney?

JC: It was fine because most my, call it European friends, by and large Hungarian, but European,

**Tape 5: 45 minutes 29 seconds**

and, or, or both, Jewish friends and were living in the cities. I was the odd one out, living in the Australian bush, and of course we had much more contact with them than with new friendships and so on. As far as work was concerned, again, tertiary education, what was that for? By that time I was doing exactly the same work that by that time PhD people were doing as well. And from that day onwards, I mean you'd done this you'd done that, and nobody asked anyway 'where is your piece of paper?' So the university of life.

RL: Did you become involved with other things in Sydney at this stage?

JC: Not really because the children were young. We were a little bit outside Sydney. By definition nuclear places aren't in the centre of town, and I was probably the closest member of staff to the Atomic Energy place, and I was living about 6 or 7 miles from there, as the road went it was about 20 miles but as the crow flies, 6 miles or even less. And being the closest member of staff, if anything ever went wrong, or whatever other time, you were the one who was called out.

RL: And how often did that happen?

JC: Luckily not very often. But it did happen.

RL: How often did you see your Hungarian friends?

JC: Usually on the weekends, whilst there was a certain amount of shift work at the Commission, it was more or less a Monday to Friday or Monday to Saturday job there, but on the weekend I met usually my friends, giving some of them English lessons.

RL: How had they made their way to Australia?

JC: Through the Joint. And in that respect their life was easier because depending on financial and other circumstances they could do what they liked, as I had to do my directed labour bit in the beginning. After that it didn't make any difference. But if you were selling cloth in Sydney you wouldn't have changed that for anything else, so...

RL: When had they arrived?

JC: Some of them much the same time as me, or because I was on the so to say the fast track, I wasn't the absolute pioneer in this Hungarian post-nationalisation group, but I was one of the earlier ones. But of course there were many people who got to Australia from various places, partly Kindertransport, emigration, normal emigration pre-war, or who finished up via the Isle of Man in Australia from whatever place. And in fact I had a letter of introduction or something, to somebody I didn't have a clue who he was or what, I remember he had a shirt factory. And we started talking. And he went to school with my father, he was actually sitting next to him for eight years in the Grammar School. But he came out as an ordinary emigrant in 1937, 1938.

RL: How big a group were they, the Hungarians?

JC: Well how long is a piece of string? The sort of big group of friends I sort of regularly circulated in were probably about 20 or 30 but you knew a matter of 500 or 1000 or, I mean everybody knew everybody else. You didn't know the Australians in Sydney, but you knew all the Hungarians...

**Tape 5: 51 minutes 4 seconds**

RL: I was going to ask 'is this the group you mixed with, socially, did you mix with a non-Jewish group as well?'

JC Well there wasn't much social mixing, but yes, I mean the pre-requisite of social mixing in Australia is spending your day and night in the pub, and I suppose it's here as well, but if you don't do that, you're lost or you're different.

RL: And how long were you in Australia?

JC: We left Australia in August 1962.

RL: And why did you leave?

JC: It's a long story. I got a disabled daughter. And in those days Australia was a barren region for that sort of situation. My wife was English, but that was not the reason, we thought National Health, and all that will make life that much more manageable over here. I suppose today you would do it the other way, but anyway that's how it went.

RL: How did the move go?

JC: It was not without problems, the actual move. We sold our house, we knew that completion was



a couple of days before the ship was sailing. Because in those days it was ship, it wasn't flying. And the ship was on its maiden voyage and still had teething problems, so it limped from one port to the next. And I suppose I'm the only person who can truthfully say that our ship wrecked in Tahiti, because on the way home the ship couldn't go any further than Tahiti and we were there for a few days until they flew out some spare parts.

RL: And what was the ship called?

JC: It was the Northern Star..... And the travel itself wasn't that easy either, the children were very small, but well we got back, we got back October 1962 to Southampton, boat-train to Waterloo, and Audrey's family was waiting at the station for us.

RL: Was that the first time that you'd got together, since you... ?

JC: Well Audrey obviously had been together with them many times, and these are Audrey's brothers, sisters, whatever. But it was the first time for me, my oldest son was a few weeks old when he went to Australia, and yes he met them but, but my younger son and my daughter didn't meet them before. And my mother-in-law had a, call it a weekender on the South Coast, so until we got settled, I got settled, we were staying there. And then the National Lending Library for Science and Technology had just been set up in Boston Spa here, and it was only about three miles from where we are now. And I applied for a job and I was turned down: 'Yes, but not at the moment'. But when we left Australia, before we left Australia, the people at the Atomic Energy Commission made arrangements that when I get to the UK there will be a job possibly in Risley or Harwell or somewhere for me, but that was the time of the recession when we got here, and the Atomic Energy Place were saying 'Yes, it was sort of arranged but now nothing doing', and in parallel with the UK AEA, was in those days the DSIR, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, and they have a joint Chief Executive, and he was rather worried that I was let down, and he was making enquiries to the DSIR station, building research and so on whether they got anything for me, so in the post I got two letters, one that turned down from the Library here, and another letter from this

**Tape 5: 57 minutes 25 seconds**

chap in London saying would I report on Monday morning to the National Lending Library for Science and Technology, there is a job for me. So I joined, I told you the story of the German documents, and I was there from 1963 until my retirement from there in 1990.

RL: And where were you living?

JC: Well to a large extent here.

RL: So just outside of Wetherby?

JC: Yes, just outside Wetherby, in a village called Bramham.

RL: So was that the same job?

JC: Yes.

RL: It was exactly the same job? One refusal and one acceptance for the same post?

JC: Yes

RL: Well this film is just about to end.

END OF TAPE FIVE

## **TAPE 6**

### **Tape 6: 0 minute 32 seconds**

RL: This is the interview with John Chillag, and it's tape six. Now what was your impression of England when you arrived?

JC: First a little bit cheased off, for two reasons. One we arrived just a few weeks before the heavy snows of 1962. Now it's alright in the mountains when you can go skiing, but when you want to move around going to job interviews and all that, miles away from where you live, it's a different proposition, so it wasn't all that easy. Anyway I got a job at Taylor Woodrow's in Southall, and first I was commuting from Brighton to Southall and then I rented a room in Southall, that was before the Library job got through, and before I actually had this Taylor Woodrow job I was unemployed, I was doing my rounds, trying to get a job and family all that, still living out of suitcases because you didn't know how long it would be to get somewhere. And you know, that was one of the difficulties and we moved up to this area and the job came through. We were living in Harrogate temporarily. The Library had a council flat allocation in Wetherby itself, so we got that for a few months and then we got here, and gradually settled down.

RL: And how did you get on with the English?

JC: Oh by that time, I mean I got to Australia in 1952, and by 1953 or 1954 everybody was asking me 'how do you spell this, how do you spell that, what's this, what's that'. And a bit later when I was at the Atomic Energy Commission, lots of colleagues including myself as well were writing technical reports, I was doing the proofreading for all of them, so no, there was no problem.

### **Tape 6: 3 minutes 40 seconds**

RL: What about the English people?

JC: Well the English people... I don't know whether you ask the right question to start with. We're not in England, are we, we're in Yorkshire. Well, no problem, but I don't know the first thing about cricket, but I couldn't play for Yorkshire even if I lived here for... I couldn't play cricket, full stop. Forty years is just a beginning. And in a way if you can put it that way, it's worse here, because this certainly was a very feudal village, we were virtually the first, and by 'foreigner' I mean not local, rather than anything more fanciful. Everybody either was the landowner, Bramham Park or working for them. And all the houses on the other side of the road here, are tied cottages and most of the village, the original village were tied cottages, and we were the only, at that stage, one of maybe three or four, houses that were so to say privately owned.

So you were not just in Yorkshire, but the landowner or whatever didn't really care about these lowly people that we were. And the people in the tied cottages thought well we can't speak to these people because they're too elevated for us. But apart from that no problem.

RL: Has that attitude changed over the years?

JC: Well the area is certainly very much watered down, I mean a much higher proportion of newcomers in the area now than the tied cottages which to a large extent are disappearing anyway.

RL: And have you been made any more welcome over the years?

JC: We keep to ourselves out of choice as much as anything else, so I certainly wouldn't like to say that we .....out for one way or another, and that well, we get on with some people and don't have much to do with others.

RL: What social circles do you mix in?

JC: Very little. My wife isn't all that well, certainly not at the moment. Until two years, three years ago, my daughter was living with us, I was involved with ..... Disability, mental handicap, not just the local sense, but certainly probably because of her, but I got involved not just locally, regionally, nationally but internationally for twelve years I was on the World Council of Intellectual Impairment and took me around to most parts of the World, so did the Library work to a large extent. But my wife is quite a private person, she's not a very socialising type, at present she isn't all that well anyway, but just getting on with life I suppose.

RL: And where did your children go to school?

JC: They started off in the local schools here then they went to a Grammar School in Carlisle surprisingly enough Social Services, thought that maybe because of my daughter they can pay the expenses of the boarding school for the boys so they went to Carlisle.

RL: So that was a boarding school? And your daughter, where was she?

JC: My daughter was at home and she went to a special school in her younger years and then to what they call a training centre, and then in the last few years and after my retirement and nothing to do with me, she had a job in the Library I worked in earlier, and now she's almost in your patch, she lives in Leyland, in a supported house there with four other girls.

### **Tape 6: 9 minutes 35 seconds**

RL: And what did your sons go on to do?

JC: one of them, Jonathan, the oldest one, he sort of messed around for a while, and he settled down as a social worker in Glasgow, although not a social worker now he's involved in social work in Glasgow in the last few years. My younger son he also sort of went to University and after that wasn't quite sure and done another degree, finished up with three degrees in the end and he's a speech therapist, again closer to you than to me, in Wigan.

RL: And are they married?

JC: My younger son is married and three grandchildren there, my older son in Glasgow he's got a partner and that's it.

RL: Are your children interested in your background?

JC: Yes, to a certain point. It's not their fault, in common with most people in this one wasn't survivors have been talking for a long time, but sort of ten fifteen years ago gradually the door opened up. By coincidence almost, not almost, by coincidence, I went to a mental handicap conference in Budapest they one of them booked a holiday in Hungary, just a holiday, and the other son also came along, and yes they came along and we visited Győr and the cemetery and family

background, the school, two of the schoolgirls in the school were taking my sons around town practising their English while I was doing interviews and whatever else.

RL: Was that your first time there since you left?

JC: Yes.

RL: And how did you feel going back?

JC: Well I had no particular wish to go back to Hungary as such, I mentioned the Hungarians weren't all that much better than their German friends, in fact, if anything, worse.

[Sound interrupts interview]

RL: We were talking about your trip back

JC: And I had to go so to say ex officio to Hungary so I went, so I took the occasion to revisit this that and the other, but without an incentive, if that was an incentive and I probably wouldn't have gone to Hungary.

[Interruption]

JC: I don't think without a sort of extra push I wouldn't have gone back to Hungary. I've been back again since, again for a conference.

RL: And how did your children find it going and seeing...

JC: Interesting I suppose, is the simple answer. Obviously much more detached and matter of fact of the visit, but a number of things I sort of published things and so on and they have copies of it and I get the odd question and all that. I'm not particularly pushing it, and every so often when they

### **Tape 6: 14 minutes 43 seconds**

come for this that and the other, on the topic, there it is. And they know my basic story, all the details nobody will anyway.

RL: When did you start telling them about the story, is it something that you always talked about or.

JC: No, I mean I can't say that it was the Hungarian trip that started it anymore than but when one says 'oh why did all the survivors start talking about things about 1990, or they say 1987, why did they? The wise guys say well, that's when Schindler's list and all the films started, and that sort of started the interest but of course it didn't happen until one or two or three years after that, and it takes more than one psychologist and psychiatrist to say why it almost takes exactly the same period of time for all of the survivors, and why not one opening up in 46, another one in 50 and another one in 60 and so on. I don't know.

RL: Do you feel your experience has affected the way you brought up your children?

JC: Not consciously. It must have. I think probably what had almost more effect, or more impinged on this is my daughter, our daughter, both of them are in caring professions, you tell me whether they gone into that because of my daughter, or whether that was anywhere in it. And I can't tell anymore whether upbringing by me had any effect on them at all or anymore.

RL: Has your experiences affected you in any other way, psychologically?

JC: When I see other survivors I think certainly by comparison I'm not affected, I shouldn't use the word 'not', but I don't feel that I am. Others might think, tell you differently. In my opinion I'm sound of mind, almost.

RL: Have you always shown interest in Holocaust things or has there been a stage when you didn't really want to see or hear...

JC: Again, after the opening up times of 1990, I mean that's not an exact date but there it was... from then on I spent a lot of time on that one way or the other. Before that I always wanted to find out more about how my father became very ill in Bochum. And again, until the mid-90s I couldn't. The facts were there, but the whys and hows and all that were just impossible to find out.

RL: When did you become involved with refugee organisations like the AJR and other bodies?

JC: What is, call it a Refugee Organisation, and I suppose we're not doing another six tapes on that, but when I got involved with disability, more specific and more general and more international than national or even just national all these things in many ways got interlocked but certainly complimented each other and there are sort of interesting sides elements in this. I didn't know Nicholas Winton, well nobody did until fairly recently, on his rescue effort. But he had a disabled son, and I knew him in the sixties on that account. And didn't get involved with him or Kindertransport or what until 30 years later. If you take the treasurer of the AJR, his father was very much involved with Mencap all his life. And I knew the family although not the actual treasurer, so things sort of interlock in various places, and a couple of times I've been on disabled business in Israel and obviously you meet people you should talk to for other reasons. So that's probably how I got more and more involved in both things.

RL: When was your first visit to Israel?

### **Tape 6: 21minutes 51 seconds**

JC: Again, not all that long ago. In 91, 92, and of course in many ways, in most ways, it was a happier time than the present time. With my involvement with the International Council, I had a United Nations passport, and I was going to and from Israel and the Occupied Territories, being welcomed and meeting people on both sides. Israeli kids in Arab schools, Arab kids in Jewish schools and so on, well whether one could do that today I'm not so sure.

RL: And how did you feel going to Israel?

JC: Well, there is an old maxim. And, not directly, but it's not that untrue: 'A good Jew is one who sends other kids to Israel'. Now I know this is not quite so, but I'm happy with Israelis and I'm happy to see them there, but I don't think it's the place for me to live in. I'm not talking of troubles, but just in normal times, if ever there were normal times in Israel.

RL: Coming back to the refugee organisations and the beginning of your involvement with them, when did you join a specific body?

JC: Not until about '95, '96 did I become a member of the AJR. For many years I consciously or subconsciously I thought that's for refugees, I'm not a refugee. Or I have been a refugee at various times of my life in lots of places, but no I'm not a refugee within the meaning of. Most of the

organisations are in London anyway, so in practical terms on any level, whether it's professional or social or whatever, cultural, it's not that easy to get involved anyway. Then in 1994ish, 95-ish, formed the Holocaust survivors friendship association in Leeds and yes I became involved with that, by which time I think Beth Shalom was always open and I think purely by accident in the sense that there was an event taking place there was something in the papers, Jewish or otherwise, and I was driving to Newark and I rang them up well: 'I'm coming tomorrow, can I drop in?' And that's how I got involved there.

RL: And what is your involvement with that project?

JC: With Beth Shalom, I'm giving a lot of talks to schoolchildren and adults, either on the premises there or on their behalf elsewhere. I'm getting quite a bit involved with the activities in Rwanda, the Aegis Trust, the sort of a separate organisation but the same organisation. And there is sort of a very strange coincidence in that. The deportation of Hungarian Jews started on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April and carried on for 100 days. The massacres, genocide, call it what you like in Rwanda, began exactly 50 years later, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, and took another 100 days. By coincidence things come together.

RL: And your association with the Leeds project, how were you involved in that?

JC: Well it's a question of how long survivors survive. And two ways how long can I continue to be involved in it anyway, or who is involved in it, and they all say 'well we can only do it for another year or so and then we cop out'. And the other thing was that trying to get the stories of as many people together, before it's too late, exactly the sort of thing that we are doing today, only I'm on the receiving or whatever end of it, and so that's how I got involved and I wish it couldn't be so, the shuttling Chair, and I was I don't know what I was at one stage, and now I'm Secretary, Trudy was Vice-Chair and now she is Chair, and so it goes on, but it's the same people, it's the same people in all organisations of any topic anywhere as you well know.

RL: And what is the group aiming to do?

JC: Well we try to get as much material as possible, archive, and at the moment it's deposited at the

**Tape 6: 28 minutes 56 seconds**

Brotherton Collection in Leeds University. We're aiming to copy that to Beth Shalom, to Imperial War Museum perhaps, the Coming Here Project, and whatever is permissible and possible.

RL: How many people participate in that group?

JC: In the actual project they have about thirty stories, together with some documents, others just the stories, one would aim for twice that number, but it's not that easy, some people are reluctant. Without any names, one of the people that you interviewed would not disclose their surname, certainly not their surname, certainly not their address or town where they lived, even today they were hesitant of giving that sort of information. Others they said well, I don't want to talk about it.

RL: How secure do you feel in this country?

JC: Secure for political reasons no problem, one knows about National Front and all that, I don't think anything worries me here. I know some people who are speakers on the Holocaust had problems with either National Front hecklers or some Arabs or whatever, I never did and I think on one or two occasions where it was going that way I managed to get back on even keel.

But I'm not secure for long because I'm going to drop off.

RL: How would you term yourself in terms of Nationality?

JC: Cosmopolitan. Going into the family history, when I talk to the kids I say I usually describe myself as a Heinz 57 varieties because the further back I go and the further I scratch the more nationalities come into it and if you want a collective term for that, 'cosmopolitan' I suppose.

RL: How at home do you feel here?

JC: Here, in this house?

RL: Well not necessarily in this house, in this country.

JC: I suppose it is my home, not waving flags or anything like that. It's certainly the country I spent most of my life, my family is brought up here so I belong here, but not for my country right or wrong or anything like that.

RL: Do you feel you have... How would you describe your Jewish identity?

JC: Very little I'm afraid. My wife isn't Jewish anyway. (To the camera: can we come back, can you cut? I have a... )

[Interruption]

RL: I was asking you about your Jewish identity.

JC: Very little. My wife isn't Jewish in any case. I told you in my story, I don't come from a religious background. I'm involved with a lot of Jewish things, but I have no call it Jewish religious activity or involvement. Perhaps on the Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur I might follow the faith. Being in the bush compared with Leeds proper, it wouldn't be all that easy, alright that that is perhaps an excuse because people overcome that sort of difficulty easily, but I identify with and I

### **Tape 6: 34 minutes 28 seconds**

with Jewishness as such but not as a practising religious person.

RL: Does the Jewish side mean anything to the children in any way?

JC: Not really. I mean they know that I'm Jewish. My oldest son is completely by whatever level Agnostic or not involved with religion. My younger son is not Jewish technically or the family isn't Jewish anyway, my daughter she probably wouldn't understand that much of it anyway, so that's how it is.

RL: What happened to the cousin that you were with in Hungary?

JC: Well he stayed there with his family until 1956 during or following the 1956 events in Italy. He has gone to Switzerland. His brother emigrated there before the war, so he had Swiss connections that made life easier to go into Switzerland which isn't that easy, other than on a tourist visa. And his family grew up there unfortunately the youngest daughter has died but the two other ones they are settled in Switzerland now. The younger one of them is married to quite, I don't know whether orthodox is the right term in his case, but certainly very moral person in Jewishness. So there they

are in Switzerland and here I am in England.

RL: How do you feel towards the Germans?

JC: It's a mixed answer. I have no problem with the younger ones. I'm there if it wouldn't be for my wife's health it would be two or three times a year, at the moment it's probably once a year or something like that. Partly to visit my father's grave, but also I'm still doing research with the University in Bochum, one of their lecturers who is involved in all this Holocaust and refugee area. And I talk in schools there, I mentioned there was a school where the kids I once addressed. And one of the schools is twinned with a school in Leeds. And the Leeds school sort of organised, started organising that I go there at one stage and I go there fairly regularly. The older generation is a different kettle of fish. And what can you say if people in sort of funny pyjamas are marched around with dogs and SS and machine guns and whatever, one direction in Piccadilly in the morning, and back in the afternoon, and nobody in the street or nobody in the shops or anywhere has seen anything. Well we have to take that with a pinch of salt. So there is this clear dividing line. With the generation in between there is a problem, and that is not call it what my relationship or possible relationship is, but they are left out. The old people won't tell their children what they've been up to. The young children, the present children, they learn all about it in the school, and they are very sincerely involved in all those things, but they can't, they haven't got enough to tell their parents, so there is the lost German population, generation in between.

RL: When did you first start going to Germany to give talks?

JC: I think one thing followed another type situation that was. I mean I've been going to Germany for a long time because of my father's grave and then early in the 90s I got involved with the University, trying to get more background information, and through that I got involved with one or two schools in the locality. Because it's not just that those particular kids learn what went on in the Holocaust, but what went on not in their backyard, in their front yard. So that's how that one started, and then this sort of twinning with local schools here, and Dortmund, which is the next town up from Bochum is twinned with Leeds in general terms so that's how two and two came together.

RL: The research that's being done at the University, how did they find you?

#### **Tape 6: 41 minutes 44 seconds**

JC: That was interesting, I don't know the exact date, I can give you the exact date if I look for it. CCJ, or CCJ members made a trip to Germany, and I read this article, and they spent quite a bit of time in Dortmund, which as I said is the next town up, sort of Salford to Manchester type thing, and it mentioned the people they met and all that. And I wrote to this bloke called Frankenthal, who died a couple of years ago, and said well I was in the next town, and I sent him some brief details of my story. I know that in some towns there is quite a bit of work done on what happened and all that, since this is virtually on your patch, can you tell me anything? And he passed on the letter to somebody at the University, to this professor, and then he got in touch with me. So it started that way and in fact the few lines I dropped to this bloke in Dortmund covered quite a number of the missing links that the person had in Bochum. And he was amazed how the jigsaw falls into pieces, into its piece. I'm still learning English.

RL: And what is the project they're doing?

JC: It's not a project as such. The project was more as I think I mentioned earlier on the coal and steelworkers that were brought in from so to say Russian territories, I mean there were Poles among them as well. And the Jewish situation was almost on the margin at one stage, now it's fifty, fifty if



you like, and some Kindertransport and people from Bochum itself who settled all over the world do regular visits to Bochum and this professor regularly visits the States so there is quite a bit of contact and more detail that way. But I don't think I can call it a project per se.

RL: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

JC: Well I'm running dry, but then various things crop up here and there that come up, and I'm sure that the moment the camera is switched off, there will be other things that could have been mentioned.

RL: There's one thing that just occurred to me, is that I never asked you any detail of the work that you were doing in the Library here.

JC: Well it has nothing to do with the German documents from Buchenwald in that sense, but I became, it's their word, not mine, a world authority on 'Grey Literature', on unpublished literature and I suppose the German documents of Buchenwald are part there of, and so for thirty odd years or twenty odd years that I was there, Grey Literature was the area I covered, and if you're looking mystified what Grey Literature is, it is in very simple terms unpublished material, anything from reports, conference papers, translations, doctoral and other dissertations, that sort of material which is probably rather difficult to track down. Now a lot of this work started in the atomic energy field which I was involved with already in Australia, and in fact over the years at Boston Spa the main contacts were internationally in that sphere, and I did quite a number of trips to the States, to Nasa and the US Atomic Energy Commission in doing some mutual help in getting material in this field, and I done that until retirement in 1990. The day I left I got headhunted by what is now Leeds Metropolitan University, and I did another three or four years there, and since then I suppose most of my work, most of my time is taken up with Holocaust matters.

RL: What were you doing at Leeds Metropolitan University?

JC: Part of Grey Literature includes European documentation, European Community Documentation and that was my area as well, and Leeds Metropolitan University needed a European Information Officer so I became that until second retirement.

### **Tape 6: 48 minutes 31 seconds**

RL: Do you receive restitution from Germany?

JC: Yes, the most basic things. I mentioned earlier that when I applied in late Australian early British times '62, '63, '64, I was turned down for any compensation because 'it's only your father who died, you didn't have any proper education for which we could pay you'. In the more recent claims conference organised restitution I got one lump sum out of the two to come, of the two that are coming, and that also got a very small amount of Swiss money tucked in with it, it's not anything that I can claim, Swiss, but that it somehow fitted into that. And I even got about £100 of Hungarian compensation. Does that make me richer?

RL: Right. If there is nothing else that you... Is there any message that you want to give?

JC: The only message, and it's almost self-evident from what I said, that the world has done many a bad thing, and it's about time that they learn from it.

### **Tape 6: 50 minutes 26 seconds**

Wide shot.

RL: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

PHOTOGRAPHS

**Tape 6: 50 minutes 50 seconds**

These are my great-great-grandparents' paintings. The one on the left was a master baker and his wife, the one on the right a butcher and this painting was done about 1840 by a well-known but to me unknown Hungarian painter. One is Jacob Ferstner and his wife, and the other one is Leopold Steiner and his wife.

And this is a mansion in Dunaszerdahely, Dunajska Streda now part of Slovakia, where my maternal grandparents lived for about fifty years from the 1890s to 1944. The mansion was subdivided in two flats and they occupied one of the flats.

These two pictures are on the right my grandfather, who actually died in 1911 but the photo was taken in 1905, the other picture is of my father as a young sixteen year old taken around 1912 in Győr in Hungary. I'm sorry, my grandfather is on the left.

A photo of my grandparents' living house and business premises in Győr in Hungary, photo taken around 1930.

My father Joseph Csillag, and his wife Aranka Csillag nee Meyer. Photo taken in 1922 shortly after their marriage in Vienna.

Photo of me John Chillag taken on a holiday in the Semmering in Austria, probably taken in 1932.

Photo taken on 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1944 the day German troops occupied Hungary and this is the advance troops taken on the highway to Budapest in front of my uncle's garage.

**Tape 6: 54 minutes 24 seconds**

This is the transport list of prisoners taken from Auschwitz to Bochum on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1944, the list includes among other 270 people, myself, Chillag, Janos, as the Hungarian first name says, and Josef Csillag, my father.

In my slave-labouring days in Bochum I worked on the heavy forge of the Bochumer Verein. The picture was an illustration of that press. Photo taken much earlier than when I was there but I was there in 1944.

A post-war photo of the camp in Bochum the slave-labour camp in Bochum where I was, I was there in 1944.

After Liberation of Buchenwald in April 1945, the US army established field hospitals and the arrow part of the photo shows me in that field hospital.

This is a photo of me in my concentration camp prison garb by the SS for their official records. Photo taken some time in 1944.

After the Liberation, the Americans issued the prisoners with ID cards and this is my Buchenwald ID card issued by the US Forces in 1945.

And when my father died in December 1944 in the camp the SS commandant didn't know what to do with the corpses because the crematoria was bombed. So this is a teletyped message he sent to his command in Buchenwald, what should I do with these bodies, my father is the first name on that list, and the camp was the KZ Bochum on the Brullstrasse in Bochum.

My wife Audrey and I under the Eiffel Tower in Paris taken in 2001.

Talking to schoolchildren in Harrogate school in 1999.

A 2002 photo of my three children. In the back is Wendy my daughter, Jonathan in the grey jumper and Lawrence in the blue shirt.

A photo of my three grandchildren. Phillip the youngest on one side, Rachel in the middle and Laura on the other side. A photo taken in 2002, probably in Wigan, in or around Wigan. (fades out).

END.