

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

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

Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
Ref. no:	154

Interviewee Surname:	Ederer
Forename:	Helga
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	2 September 1931
Interviewee POB:	Prague, Czechoslovakia

Date of Interview:	7 September 2015
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Jana Buresova
Total Duration (HH:MM):	1 hour 24 minutes



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV154
NAME: Helga Ederer
DATE: 7 September 2015
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Jana Buresova

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

The interviewee is Helga Ederer, and she's being interviewed in her home in North London, on the 7 September, 2015. Thank you very much indeed Helga Ederer for being interviewed today for AJR. And I would like to ask first of all if you could say something about your family, where your parents were born...

Well...

Your date of birth. Your parents...

Well, I was born in Prague, the daughter of Doktor Rudolf Fantl, a lawyer and his wife's Zdenka. Both of them from southern Bohemia; my father in the vicinity of Jindrichuv Hradec and my mother from Pribram. But both of them living in Prague by the time that my little self was born. My mother was married before, and so I had two half-brothers. I didn't know about the first one because that was a family secret. And the second one I didn't know he was my half-brother because my father declared him his own son. And it was only when the war broke out that my parents decided to let me know the circumstances, just in case ...some of us did not survive and some of us did, so that I should know who is who.

Could you mention the names of your two brothers?

Yes of course. The older - the older brother Honza, "Honusch" Petschau, perished in Auschwitz on the on the 7th of March, 1944. My other brother Tomas Fantl, survived. He died in Germany 2001. ...What do you want me to say now?

Could you tell us please something about your early life?

[0.02:30.6]

My early life was very early, you see, I was seven and a half when the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia. Until then I was going to the French school, so I had two years of French school. Well, that wasn't really school it was *Kindergarten* so that I should get used to the French language. But as soon as, of course, as soon as the Germans came to Prague the schools closed and that was that. I visited for a while the Jewish school but my parents were afraid of leaving me there. They thought it was too dangerous. Too many Jewish children together; it was- they were afraid that it was too easy for the Germans to pick up a lot of Jewish children at once...

[outdoor noise]

Sorry. [pause] You were saying about the Jewish school and how your parents thought it was too dangerous for you to attend...

Yes, it was too dangerous because my parents thought it was too easy for the Germans to pick up all the children in one go, and dispose of them. So I visited the Czech school but that was only for a few months. They didn't want me.

Did your family, either in the home or outside, speak Czech or German?

Both. Both. My father spoke both because although he was from Jindrichuv Hradec - where the predominant language was Czech, he studied law in Vienna. He studied and graduated in Vienna.

So he was...truly bilingual. And therefore, you know that specially when - when we children were not supposed to understand, it was spoken in German which of course we understood just as well as the Czech, because we always had German governesses and, that was a vain... But let me explain. When- when the Hitler came we were living in a very comfortable flat. And as soon as they came our very comfortable beautiful flat was immediately requisitioned for German officers. And we were put first to a small modern flat which was ok, but we were only left there for a few months. And that was also requisitioned and then we were put into one room, which was- subdivided and we had to share a kitchen with two other families. And then...my, my father and my mother's first husband reconciled, became reconciled, and we moved for a few months over to his flat. But that was also only for a few months. And then we were sent to - to Terezin. So, as soon...

[0.05:54.2]

In which year?

Hmm?

In which year?

In '42. 1942. We were so called 'Transport AAu' [Prague to Terezin]. You know... my cousin gave me the - the books which have very...have you seen them? That everyone who came from the Bohemian lands is - is recorded there. Which transport, the date of birth and where they landed. Did you see those books?

No...

You didn't?

No, I haven't seen them.

Well, I'll show them to you later.

Thank you.

They're huge. Anyway, so...as soon as we got to our - the whole thing was tragic-comedy. My mother equipped us for going to Terezin. We had sort of jumpsuits, overalls, and so on. And...We carried all the luggage in. And as soon as we arrived, everything was taken away from us. And I was stupid enough I had - you know, I had a...a brace. And the wire was gold. And that was the first thing they took away from me and I was of course stupid enough to be very pleased...which meant that ever since then I had rabbit teeth. And when we got to Terezin I was put with the girls into the girls' home, and my brother into the boys' room - boys' home - and my father with men and my mother with women. But my career in, in, in, in the girls' home wasn't very long either. Because I was constantly ill. I felt - I still feel sorry for my parents. The poor things thought I would never survive; I had one thing after another. I was really seriously ill all the time. And the people in the girls' home said, "This is enough. We, we are in - fed up with nursing that girl. Let her mother look after her." And they turfed me out. And I went to live with my mother and she had to look after me. But then we were taken to Auschwitz so she didn't have to look after me very long either.

[0.08:32.4]

Which year did you go to Auschwitz?

'43. Winter '43.

[pause] *And what did you endure there?*

I'm sorry?

What were the conditions in your particular case?

Well...our case was very...unique. We were in the *Familienlager*. We still don't know - nobody knows - what the purpose was. We- although we were not together - women were in other barracks than men. And children. But we were in one *Lager*, and our heads were not shaven, and we think that maybe the Germans intended to film us there you know the, like- as they did Terezin for, for...

Oh, for the International Red Cross?

Yeah, for the International Red Cross. We think, but we don't know. Anyway there was one transport there before us, three months before. And they had a mark: *Sonderbehandlung*. And when they were there six months...

Could you explain what that mark is, please?

We didn't know. It means "special" - special, but we didn't know why. Nobody knows to this day... and, as I told you in - in March...

May I stop you just a moment?

Sure!

[0.10:09.4]

You mentioned a mark. Was this like a tattoo or...?

No, no, no. The- the documents, you know, the Germans were meticulous in, in...in documenting everyone. Everyone had a card and everyone was documented exactly. And that transport, and our transport and the transport that came after- There were three transports and three months apart. And they all had the mark "*Sonderbehandlung*". But anyway, when the first transport, with the with *Sonderbehandlung* ...went into the gas chambers, we thought that we would do the, that our fate would be the same, after six months. And... we were also after six months the *Familienlager* was changed was- And we were ...separated totally. My mother and I went among the women to Stutthof to a work *Lager*, and my father went to a coal mine, and my brother remained there in, in...in Birkenau as, as...a...a, well he was really a...a - a runner. He ran with messages for the Nazis from one *Lager* to another. And he stayed in, he really had the hardest lot of us all, because he stayed in Auschwitz right up to the end, right up to January '45. And ended up after...after some rather bad transport he ended up in Buchenwald. So. That was my brother. My - my eldest brother was gassed as I told you once. He was gassed on the 7th March, '44. And... my mother and I, we survived the- we survived digging trenches. Tank trenches. And my father was in... in... in a - a

coal mine. And on the, on the marches... he couldn't - he couldn't walk any further because he couldn't see; he had eczema in the eyes from the coal dust. And he asked the officer in charge if he could stay behind and the officer said, "Yes, of course." And shot him on the spot. And the column was then overtaken by the American troops a day later.

[0.13:18.2]

Right...then we got...My mother and I we were in Poland and we were liberated by the Russians. And my mother quite rightly didn't trust them a bit and refused to be repatriated by them... because a friend was repatriated by them and ended up in Russia. And didn't come out till late 50s. So we, we...we stayed in Poland. We... we, ...stayed away from the transport. It wasn't- the atmosphere and the discipline wasn't very strict any more. You could hear the Russian guns. So of course the Nazis were not very strict; on the contrary, they wanted to have testimony from us that they were good - that they were not nasty to us. And anyways, so we stayed behind my mother and I and a group of women hid in a barn, while the transport marched on. And ...we stayed there and... the other women tried to be repatriated by the Russians when they came. And my mother and I we didn't. We stayed on an abandoned farm. And... the Russians pressed me into work. My mother was too ill. But I had to look after cows. I was a town child. I didn't know that cows had horns; I thought that only wolves had horns. But anyway...it was good fun. Because I had...I had a dog which the...English prisoners of war had to leave behind. They had been on that farm before, and they were repatriated to Germany proper. And they had to leave the dog behind. And nobody wanted that dog. It only...it only responded to English commands. So I had it. It was a lovely dog. And it guarded me. If any Russian came near me... it guarded me.

[0.15:44.7]

Were you ever abused or your mother, by Russian soldiers?

No. No, as I tell you, I had- I had my guard. [laughs mildly] No, what did happen was my mother of course, being my mother, was obsessed with cleanliness. And all we had, each of us, was a blanket each, a spoon each and a dish. That was all we... That was what we possessed. And of course my mother had to air the blankets in the yard. So she aired them in the yard, and I was working on the next farm. And while I was working there I saw a Russian soldier riding on a horse with our

blankets on! So I went to the officer and told him that these were our blankets! He must have picked them up on the next farm. And.. he made the, the, the soldier to give them back to me and I told my mother not to be- [laughs] not to be so clean, and that was that. Unfortunately, the officer paid for it. He was a, a...a Jew, and his soldiers knifed him to death. I hope not because of the blankets, but they did. He didn't survive the war. But not from the Germans but his own officers- his own soldiers... because he was a Jew. Anyway. So, while I was there I had to work looking after the cows. And what we did, was, the Russians... didn't... didn't look after them at night. They milked

them and left the milk and my mother and I we skimmed it at night while they were too drunk to do anything about it. And we made butter and exchanged it. And then...and that's how we gathered together enough - not money, but - somebody made us a little cart, and we couldn't have butter because it was getting warm. So we had "roux". You know what I mean by "roux"?

[0.18:58.4]

No. Could you please...?

Einbrenn. Oh...that is what you put into soup, you know that butter and flour? So we made that into pots, and took that on our journey, and we made our own way... from Poland to Prague. Partly we walked, partly we... got lifts on, on the railway. And that's how we got home.

How long did it take you?

Quite a long time; we didn't get to Prague until...I don't know, it was some religious holiday. I think it was... I think it was...what is it, what comes after Easter, the holiday?

Whitsun?

Yes, Whitsun. After Whitsun...we got. And we didn't know what to do. We got off- we got in on a railway, and we stood...there in Prague and didn't know what to do. Who survived? Where to go? So my mother went to the house...

This was - sorry - 1945?

Yes. 1945. And so my mother went to the house which belonged to - to her family. And she thought that the concierge would know who survived and where they are. But they were not at home because it was a public holiday. So we stood there on the corner of - of, of a quite important main road.

Do you remember the name of the road?

Of course! Revolucni. And we were still in prison garb! With a big red cross on - on our back. And with our little "Rolls Royce", we called it, our cart with, with the [laughs] *Einbrenn* and so on. And we said, "What are we going to do? Where are we going to go?" And the three people who survived came walking against us. My brother...and my mother's sister and her son. They came walking against us, after their lunch that...for a constitutional...

By chance?

[0.20:18.0]

Quite by chance. They went for a constitutional walk, and found us on the corner.

What help, if any, did you receive in Prague in terms of rehabilitation? Documentation?

From the Czechs?

Mnn.

Very little. My mother had to fight for everything. And she had to fight to get things returned to her. She hid quite a lot of things with, with... Aryan friends and she didn't get... more than half back. I remember going with her to - to some people who looked after the furniture of our dining room. And they said, "Yes we have it and it's very nice. But we got used to it! What are we going to do?" So my mother had to buy them new, plain furniture in order that they would, they should return her

furniture to her! I remember that one. And she didn't take me on other things. I was too young and I was also too... stormy.

Did you encounter a lot of resentment on the part of Czechs that you...?

Not a lot of resentment. But they said to me- some people welcomed us, but most of us thought "Well, why didn't- why didn't they fly through the chimney?" You know. "Why did they have to come back?" So...

Mnn. Did you manage, or your mother manage to get ration cards quite quickly? Because there was strict rationing in Czechoslovakia after...

Yeah, we did get our- we did get ration cards, yes, we got ration cards, and we got a flat fairly soon. Actually you see the same flat as we had before, only two floors up, because the flat that we had was taken over by the "Association of Political Prisoners" so we couldn't turf them out. But we got - we got the flat two floors higher up which was also occupied by German officers. So we were in that. And my mother had to fight to get- to get a business together. And... I went to school. Now that was a- that was really a horrible experience. Because I hadn't been to school. And when I went there... they put me to the- to the form according to my age. Nobody asked, "What did you do during the six years of war?" They didn't care. They put me there.

[0.23:24.4]

This was a Czech school?

Of course. There wasn't anything else after the war. And so I remember that the teacher asked me to read something. And I read it all right and she said, "Fantlova you have a funny accent. Are you Czech?" You know, she sort of... shamed me in front of the whole class that my accent wasn't right. But I was very ...very combatant I'm afraid. I didn't- I - I gave back as good as I got.

You were very resilient.

I was- I was...I was a fighter.

Did you- did you experience in that early period a lot of anti-Semitism in the school?

I don't think it was anti-Semitism. It was- just- they didn't care. I mean not even the Director would ask, "Do you need some extra help?...Do you need?" No! Nobody asked. Nobody cared. Sink or swim. Finished.

How did you manage to catch up on your schooling?

With a lot of difficulty. I never caught up, for instance, in Maths. I ...I hardly knew my tables and they were doing trigonometry! No go. So, I was always missing when there were tests. And of course my mother was too busy trying to find...found and run a business. And so I always falsified her signature. She knew it; she said, "You sign it". So I used to sign the notes for all three of us. And... that was it. Oh, I forgot to tell you who the third one was. ...My brother was one, and after the war he was in a- in a...a home - a convalescent home, my brother. And he met one of his... Birkenau boys there who was very ill. He had ...very bad...agh, what do you...sugar...

Diabetes?

Diabetes, yes, but very bad diabetes. But on top of that, he had... pleurisy and ...all kinds of things. And the doctor said the only thing that could save him would be the new-fangled things, antibiotics. But that wasn't- didn't exist in Czechoslovakia. Only abroad and as my mother had a brother in the United States, would she get it for him? So of course ...she did. She had some money hidden with brother. So she sent a cable and the antibiotics duly arrived. The boy got better and he came to say "Thank You" and stayed. My mother said, well, he came...he, he was the only survivor of his family, and she missed her older- oldest boy, so she said, "Let him stay with us". So we were three again.

[0.26:57.4]

How did she ...find work. Or how did she go about re-establishing herself in terms of employment and raising money to keep you all?

Well... she had, she had hidden a cassette of gold coins and other gold with one of her former employees. And she got it back. And she raised a loan from that, and further money from a friend. And she started a business, a very successful business.

This was the fashion business?

Mn-Hnn. Yes. She manufactured model rainwear, and so successfully that she even exported to England! She exported to Harrods and Debenhams & Freebody. And all that in a matter of... two years, because on the third year...you know, on the third year the communists took over, and she had to flee.

Do you remember any discussions about the political situation and...

Of course!

...what she might do?

No, not what she might do, but. No, no, we didn't discuss it in that way. No, but it was totally unexpected. It was one of the sub-contractors who was envious, and who was- who wanted to take over the business. So he ...he went to police- to the police and said, I don't know that, "She did black market" or something. And she just had time to grab... just, just a- a bag. And she went to the airport with her husband's air ticket, and escaped to London.

The communist coup was on the 25th of February...

That's right.

...1948...

Correct.

President Benes's government then fell, and he was obliged to resign, he was a sick man...

Yes, what about it? I was...

[0.29:28.4]

Were you fearful at all before your actual departure?

I'm sorry was I fearful of what?

Were you fearful, about the Communist regime before you...?

No, I wasn't. Because there was a...there was a very powerful propaganda in favour of Brother Russian and how they came to free us and had it been for the Russians the Nazis would never have come. All propaganda! And most people believed it, and therefore... there was no fear. It came as a total surprise, the second ...persecution. I mean there were quite a lot of Jews who came from the concentration camp who were imprisoned and some of them even hung!

Yes, because later on there was the Slánský trial.

That's right.

Yes. Could you explain please, how and exactly when, your mother and you left?

My mother left in...wait a minute, I was skiing in February '48; I wasn't in Prague. I - I gave them - I gave my mother a terrible fears because they couldn't reach me. They didn't know where I was in the mountains. So they had to wait until I returned. And when I returned of course they told me what the situation was. And I could see it when I came- There was militia ...on the railway and so on, anyway, and...But nobody said that- that we were in danger, at the time. We just thought there were revolutionary times. And... then my mother had to flee suddenly. And I followed. But I followed, I had to wait, because Aussi - that was her husband - had to get a real visa for me. Because while my mother was automatically a British subject. In those days a British, when a

British subject married, the wife was automatically British. It doesn't exist any longer but in those days it did.

In which year did she remarry?

[0.31:59.1]

She married in 19...47. ...And I teased them because they missed it - they missed by sixteen days. If they had married sixteen days earlier, I would have been under sixteen and I would have been automatically also British subject. But they married when I was already sixteen, so I wasn't a British subject. So I had to... sit it out in- in Czechoslovakia and wait.

Where did they plan to be?

I'm sorry?

Did your parents and your English step- father plan to live in Czechoslovakia?

Yes!

Or did they plan to...

Oh, no, no! They planned to live in Czechoslovakia! My mother had a very successful business and Aussi was a friend of Sir Alexander Korda [British film producer, director and screenwriter]- that doesn't mean anything to you. But he was going to start a business again in Europe for Sir Alexander, so they were determined to live in Prague. Aussi loved Prague and... you know. They were hoping to live peacefully in Prague.

What were your first impressions... on arriving in Britain? And when exactly did you arrive?

I arrived, exactly I can't tell you. I really don't remember whether it was end of June or beginning of July, 1948. I arrived in Northolt.... and it was...it was quite an exciting time because the Czechs were very, very awkward. I had to make a list of all the things I took with me, and... lots of things

were struck off. I wasn't allowed to take this, and I wasn't allowed to take that. And then I had to pack in front of the officials and my luggage was sealed. And I didn't take anything except my clothes and, and a few...records and so on, but anyway. So by the time I arrived I was a bit upset. So I arrived in Northolt, and there was Aussi, my stepfather, waiting for me with a Rolls Royce - a hired car of course. I thought I wasn't seeing right.

After the strict rationing in Czechoslovakia...

After the...?

After the all the strict rationing in Czechoslovakia, how did you react to...?

It wasn't strict. It wasn't strict.

You didn't find that?

No. Everybody swindled.

Aha.

Everybody swindled. I know that. For instance, somebody made my mother a present of a live hen - right? And we had a live chicken running around in the flat and nobody could kill it, because we didn't know how to and we, we... In the end we caught it and took it to a butcher to kill it for us. And nobody took it seriously. Everybody swindled.

And where in Britain did you first live?

Well first I...my mother and Aussi had a one room flat in the white house that was Aussi's flat during the war. And after, that was his bachelor flat. And my mother was there with him, so they didn't have room for me. So I was first with a friend. And then I was in the YMCA... and then I was in...

[0.36:04.7]

YM or the YWCA?

YW - Young Women's Christian Association.

Was that in Great Russell Street?

That's right. I loved it there, but it was very expensive. But, so... my mother found a flat or rather Aussi - you know - in someone's flat. [pause]

And...

And then they sent, Aussi sent me, which was wonderful... for a six weeks course for foreign students in Cambridge. Of course she wrote that my English was perfect and I had matriculation at University and everything. All of it a lie - you know I had hardly any schooling at all. But I had a wonderful time! And I learnt a lot about England because it was a beautiful course. They taught us about English law, and English traditions, and English history and... it was wonderful! So I enjoyed myself for six weeks in Cambridge.

And what did you do after that?

After that, my mother wanted me to become skilled in fashion. Which I never had any interest in fashion, and I had two left hands. But my mother wanted me to become a cutter, you know a designer and cutter. So I went to learn that for a year in one college and another year in another college.

What was the college? Which colleges?

One of them was a private college in... just off Bond Street... I don't remember now; it was Madame something's... I can't remember what it was called.

And the other one?

And the other was already a Council, a Council College... also of designing and cutting. And I did very well, but I didn't like it! And then I went into - into employment and again I didn't like it. And...

Where did you first work? For your mother, or elsewhere?

I'm sorry?

Where did you first work, with your mother or...?

[0.38:45.4]

No, no, no! My mother had nothing to do with it. My mother wasn't active here. I worked first for Marcus... I don't know what the exact name was. I knew the girl and her parents had a factory, a dress factory so I worked there for a while. And I didn't like it. And then I worked for...

Was that in London?

Yes, in London. And then... they sent me to a lady who...couturier because I didn't like the factory so they sent me to a couturier. I liked that even less, and in the end I said, "That's that!" And I went and took a course at Pitman's. But my mother was so cross she said, "Right. You pay for that yourself". And I did. I took a year's course at Pitman's, and became a secretary ever since. That was - that was far more what I was... meant for.

And where did you first work as a secretary?

I worked for a Hungarian inventor. And... that was quite interesting because... you had to type patent specifications. And in those days, you were not allowed to rub out. And of course I always made a mistake at the end of the page [laughs] and had to type the whole thing again. But it was

interesting! And I stayed there for quite a long time. I stayed there until ...until Aussi was ill, and died, and I went to nurse him and so on.

And in which year was that, do you recall?

I'm sorry?

Which year was that? Do you recall?

Oh...I started work in 1952. And I stayed there until '55.

And how long did you spend... looking after your stepfather?

Well, just a few weeks because my husband - I was married by then and my husband was very much against it. He said, "Why should a young girl look after an old man?" But I was very fond of Aussi and he was very good to me. So I did it very willingly. We got on very well. And my mother was a bit hysterical by then. Her nerves were giving out. She had gone through too much.

I'd like to come back to that later...

OK.

But...before that. Could you tell me please, when you got married, and when and where you met your husband?

[0.42:10.4]

Ah that's interesting, yes. I met my husband in a ...coffee place behind Selfridges. It doesn't exist any more. My friend from Prague was behind the bar there - coffee - making coffee. And she said, "Please Helga, whatever you do, don't tell anyone that we're not eighteen yet because I would lose my job". So. I didn't tell anyone and I went to see her there in the coffee bar quite often. And one of

the customers was Willy. And that's how I met- He was her boyfriend, not- not seriously but her boyfriend. And that's how I met him.

And when did you marry?

I married in 1950.

Were you already a British subject by then? Or did you...?

No, I became a British subject by marriage... marriage to Willy. Because he was a naturalised British subject.

And where was he from originally?

Prague!

Ah...And did you stop working ...then or did you continue?

No, I continued working.

You mentioned earlier that you were still working but, did you continue much longer?

I continued working right up to a fortnight before my son was born. [laughs] And I was working - that was very nice - I was working for a, a, a British Brigadier. I mean he was no longer a Brigadier. He was working for an organisation- (That's all right; it's the mail) For an organisation which used his knowledge. We were only two people in the office, he and I. And he used to come in in the morning, "Good morning Helga, how are you?" "I'm fine." "Are you sure you're all right?" [laughing] He was afraid that he would have to assist in a birth. And he couldn't find a replacement. It's not that ...I wanted to stay that long but he couldn't find a replacement. So I stayed until a fortnight before John's birth.

And when was that?

John was born - it was very easy to remember - on the 5th of August 1958, so his birthdate is five eight five eight.

[0.44:56.9]

Did you take time out or did you then continue working?

I took time out. I took time out while he was very small, and then I started working part time. So that I should, would be at home by the time school was ...finished.

Yes.

But I remember I was late once, and John had to wait for me. We were living in Fawcett Court, that's a block also - a huge block. And he was waiting on the corridor and he was bored so of course he started playing with the fire extinguisher. [laughing] And by the time I came home, he was standing in - in the corridor, but you couldn't see him. Everything was in a mist, in a fog, and a little figure in a uniform, in a school uniform in the middle of it! I shall never... [interrupts herself] No, I- I, I started working very soon after John's birth.

And then you had a second child?

Hmm? I only had one son.

You only had one son.

No, I lived with my mother-in-law. She was my second child.

And what was your husband's occupation?

My husband's occupation as I told you, he was a University student in Prague. And he came over to this country in January '39 for a term, to improve his English. And in January '39, that meant that he was here when Hitler invaded, so he never returned.

What, what was his work after?

Well his work...first he had to ...had to stay with friends and so on because he had a visa which didn't allow him to work, paid or unpaid.

That was [inaud]...

So, and he didn't take any ...help, any- from anyone. You know, any organisation. So he stayed with friends here, there and everywhere. And in the end, a friend of his grandfather met him and said, "Willy, would you like to learn diamond polishing?" And of course Willy said, "Yes!" And he got him the permission and everything. So Willy learned to polish diamonds, which he did right up to the end of the war.

[0.47:53.8]

Where did he do that? Was it Hatton Gardens?

No, no, no, he didn't polish in Hatton Garden. The, the work was in Soho... in Greek Street. ...And anyway, and after the war, diamond polishers returned to Holland and to Belgium. And the diamond polishing in this country collapsed. And Willy started dealing in diamond jewellery. Not diamonds as such, but diamond jewellery. And he hated it, right to the end of his life.

Did he feel that he had missed out in life, that...?

Yes, he, he wasn't one of these, you know...he...he took it very, very hard this, this...offering. You know this very... it's very difficult to explain to you. It's- on the one hand it's dangerous because you carry goods of tremendous value, and... you, you, you get offers for much less than you expected. And it's very tough and personal and Willy was a gentle creature. He took it very hard.

And it was not the career he'd originally wanted to pursue?

Certainly not. Certainly not. You see, he was very- people liked him very much. And when he went to a shop, he went from shop to shop buying and...And if somebody - one of the managers - wasn't

nice to him, he never returned. You know. He took offence if people didn't treat him as a gentleman.

Was it difficult for him and your family to make ends meet?

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Did he ever ...approach the Czech Refugee Trust in London?

Never...never. Never.

In terms of your own life, and your mother's, does the experience of the past in the camps haunt you?

No it doesn't haunt me.

Do you have nightmares or recurring fears?

No. No, on the contrary it – it makes me stronger because I say, “Why should I worry? I've had it worse before”. I'm satisfied with my life because I know I've had much worse before.

Would you have a message for anyone watching the film of this interview?

[0.51:27.4]

Well it's difficult to give a message. I only think that one should try to do personal good, you know, it's no good trying to, to join parties and have grand ideas. You just have to try and- and help, and be- be a useful citizen one to one, not a “great parties” or anything. And be satisfied with what you have. Because I've met people who were very rich, and very unhappy. And I have met people who were very poor and very happy. So... I think one shouldn't... shouldn't try to, to, to amass great wealth. I don't think that helps. But I'm not a socialist or anything; on the contrary. I think socialism is like Christianity. It's very good in ideas, but very bad in practice. Because it brings so much corruption. If you don't have freedom, and if you don't have... it's difficult to explain. If you

are... at the mercy of petty officials, right, who expect you to bribe them, that's socialism or communism. You must have freedom.

To what extent do you feel free in Britain...

Very.

...to either observe the tenets of Judaism, or not, or to bring up your son as a Jewish person?

I think I feel very free. And I think people exaggerate the reports of anti-Semitism in Britain. I have never come against any. All right, some people say, "Oh, he Jewed me". But that's an expression which came over from the past. They don't often mean anything by it- by saying it. All right, there is some anti-Semitism but it's, it's anti-Semitism which some people sort of suck with their mother's milk. They don't- they don't even know what they're saying. There are very few really anti-Semites who mean to murder or, or, or do anything to Jews. ...I feel very safe and very free.

In terms of your own personal identity, do you feel now, having lived in Britain many years, do you feel British, or does some part of you still feel Czech?

I feel British, no, not Czech. I feel British, not English! British. Yes. I'm totally loyal to - to Britain. But I don't imagine that anyone would say that I'm English.

Have you ever been back to Czechoslovakia?

Oh yes!

...Now the Czech Republic?

Oh yes I have. Quite often.

When did you first go back?

For restitution. You know? Not for tourism, but to try and... get – get some restitution. After the revolution of course, after, after '89.

Yes. Yes, when the Berlin Wall came down everything changed.

Mn-hnn.

So this would have been 1989...

After '89.

How did you feel going back?

[0.55:56.4]

It was most peculiar. I didn't really feel that I belonged there. I felt, you know...I saw where I grew up and all that. But it wasn't me; it was some little girl who lived there once, but it wasn't me.

Yes.

Don't forget that I wasn't anywhere very long. I was seven and a half when Hitler came and we started as I told you, being pushed from one flat to another. And in the end ended up with relatives and, and, and Terezin. And after the War, Communism. I mean. That didn't last very long. I came back from the camp in '45, and in '48 I was here already. So that's not very long. You can't...you can't really develop any deep roots.

What occurred about your restitution? Was it – was your application successful or...?

Yes, but not [laughs ironically] not, not easily. ...Our solicitor took the thing through five instances, and in the end had to go to the highest court in Brno. Although he didn't have the - really he didn't have the authorisation, but he was a very good lawyer and pleaded and said he would follow the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law.

What were you able to gain? To retrieve?

Houses. Two houses. Two houses.

And where were they? In Brno?

No, no. That was the highest court is in Brno. The houses were in Prague. And they were from the Ederer family. And then of course also I have, together with my cousin, a house in Jindrichuv Hradec ...which used to belong to our grandparents.

And did this make a substantial difference to your life here, and psychologically?

Well the two houses in Prague, yes. The houses- the house in Jindrichuv Hradec, no. It's a little house in a- in a little town, which is nothing. But the houses in Prague were substantial.

Did you feel that this was a treasure, something to be treasured? It was your family, and...?

Yes, I did and I felt very bad about selling. I mean it was John - John is really the heir. I just administered it for him, I mean, got it for him. Did, did, did the work. He doesn't speak Czech. But...I felt badly about selling it because my husband was born in the house and it was a family house. But reason dictated that we should sell; so we sold.

And... how many times have you been back to Czechoslovakia? And does your son identify with the country at all? Is he interested?

Not at all. Not at all. He doesn't speak the language, and he doesn't feel safe there...because he doesn't speak the language. And you know, in the beginning people were pretty nasty to him. Because, he was the one who was really the heir, and I had to obtain Czech, first Czechoslovak and then Czech nationality for him. And they were very, very nasty.

[1.00:25.4]

Yes, because there is a ruling that ...only Czechoslovak or Czech citizens could own property in the country. It ruled out a number of heirs.

Mn-hnn.

Yes. So that would have been a very difficult situation.

Well I got around it. I mean I didn't swindle or anything. I just said that "it was your fault that he couldn't be a Czech citizen". And they agreed and gave him the citizenship.

Does he have two passports now?

He let it lapse, the Czech one. He used it only for the restitution. But you don't have to put that in the testimony.

No. Do you feel - I'm not suggesting that you ought to - but do you feel in any way, that your own life experiences have cast a shadow on him? Or does he feel that in any way?

No, I don't think so. No. The only thing is that he insisted that his wife became Jewish, because she wasn't. Because he said if he couldn't have Jewish children then Hitler would have won. And that was a sort of... reflection from my life.

Was that very important for you, at the time?

For me, not at all. For him. As I tell you, I wasn't half as good a Jew as he is. He is a much better Jew than I am.

If I may come back to your mother...

Yes.

... and her distress. Do you think more could have been done in Britain to help refugees over the trauma – such trauma?

No. Nobody can help that. No. How can you help a woman who watches her first born son go to death? Knowing full well they all knew, they all sang the Hatikvah. No, of course not. What can you say? And, she lived in Germany afterwards. And she could - how shall I tell you - she had a

disastrous little business in Germany. And one of her employees was an ex-SS. Because I know when I visited her [half laughs] the man sort of clicked his heels, as is usual and said, “If I tell you that I was an SS, you will not want to shake my hand, Frau Ederer”. And Frau Ederer said, “Of course I will, because I appreciate your honesty”. And so did my mother.

[1.03:34.4]

When did she return to- when did she go to Germany?

Well, she went with her husband, because he started a very successful film business there. So she went with him. In which year was it? I’m trying to think. He died in ’55, so this must have been in ...no...must have been around 1950, ’51.

And how long did she stay there?

Well she stayed there ...until she was ...a widow, and then she went for ten years to Switzerland, and then she returned to a Jewish old age home in Germany. And there she died.

What are your feelings about her going to Germany? Many of the refugees...

No, that doesn’t bother me. It bothered me that ...Hmm?

Many of the refugees would still not wish to go to Germany.

I know, but I don’t think...you see, it’s mostly those refugees who never suffered too much. It’s those...I, I, I...When I could see and so on, I used to drive a, a German car. And, [imitating people

making fun of her] “OK, you drive a German car.” That was mainly those people who were here during the war, usually in the country, having a very good time. They were the ones who were most vocal in my not – that I shouldn’t have a German car.

Are you referring to the Anglo-Jewry?

Yes.

But your mother was, you feel, much more forgiving?

My mother was a realist. She knew that some people joined the SS without - without really feeling evil. They joined because they thought it was something good.

And what did the SS- former SS officer do in her business?

Oh, nothing. He had a very junior position. He joined the SS as more or less a child, towards the end of the war. No, she wouldn't have- she wouldn't have employed one of the top men, no.

No, I meant in his actual work, not his...

Yes, I know...I know.

[1.06:38.4]

Yes. Are there any other things that have come to mind as we've been discussing your life, or, that you would now like to mention?

You see, I don't think my life is all that interesting. I keep on telling people that my life is a *Massenschicksal*– that is a fate which, which... millions had. It's nothing special about it.

And yet... it is special. It's extraordinary, in that you have survived. You have come through.

Well everybody's special. Everybody's individual. But my life story is not special. If you- if you know what I mean.

You don't feel that...?

No, no unfortunately it, it – It was the 20th century Europe, but mainly Germany and Austria. But I mean the Poles were just as capable of doing that, and the Russians fifty years earlier. The Jews were a chosen nation for trouble.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that you should feel guilty.

No, I don't feel guilty! I don't feel guilty. I haven't done nothing except born a Jew!

No, but you have survived when family members have died.

No, I don't have the survivor's guilt, no. No. But that is perhaps because my older brother was the one who instructed us and told us how to survive.

Do you think of him a lot?

Yes, quite a lot. He had a – a very strong personality.

Is there anything that you miss from Czechoslovakia? The former Czechoslovakia?

[1.08:59.4]

Some good cooking.

I noticed also that you have some Bohemian glass here...

Well, that...

Personal reminders...

Yes, or course.

And mementoes.

No. I mean, Czechoslovakia is a very beautiful country. If I go for a visit in Jindrichuv Hradec, I admire it. It's a lovely place and my father was very happy there. And my cousin spends nearly half the year there – you know - he spends the summer there and the winter here. Ok, but... not for me.

You're settled here?

Yes, but I'm not settled anywhere. I mean I, I love Britain and I'm loyal to Britain, but if you put me ...somewhere else I think I would survive just as happily.

Is there anything else that you would like to say or to add?

Please don't make it, don't make it a, a, a message. There's nothing extraordinary about me. I'm just an ordinary human being whose fate was to go through this horrible period. But, the period is just as horrible for other people at the moment. Not for central European Jews. There are hardly any left. Now it's other people. Now it's the Syrians, the Ethiopians- Other people who are going through horrible times.

Do you empathise with them?

Definitely!

That has been a lasting feeling from your life this empathy for others?

Of course, this is the... Yes, of course! I don't empathise with the.... very, very harsh Muslims, no. But their victims, yes.

That's a very positive note to end on and I thank you very much indeed for so kindly agreeing to share your life experience with AJR. Thank you.

You are very welcome. [pause] And do you want to go through some of the photos if I can decipher them?

Yes, please.

[1.12:00.4]

End of interview

Photographs

[1.12:17.4]

Well it's a photograph of five children, my mother being the youngest, the smallest and the ugliest one. And there are two other sisters. The next one in age is Marta. And the next one after that, the oldest, was Olga. Olga married a non-Jew so she survived. Marta did not. Otto... died before Hitler. And...who is still on that photo? ...Otto didn't ...There's one more who died during the war, I can't recall his name now. Another brother.

It was taken in Pribram and it must have been taken when my mother was four approximately so 1904. Because my mother was born in 1900.

This is the same people as on the child photograph, only with the- with the parents. And again on the furthest left is my mother. Above her is... Oh, I think it's Otto. Then comes Grandfather...and then comes Marta, Olga, Grandmother Johanna and Richard.

In '16 again, in Pribram 1916 in Pribram. During...

[1.14:24.0]

This military photograph is my paternal family. This is my paternal Grandmother and Grandfather Fantl, taken in Jindrichuv Hradec, or as it was then known, Neuhaus, and the four sons. First there is Otto, the oldest, then comes my father, Rudolf, who was then a lawyer, Doktor Rudolf. And then

there is Josef and Richard. And they are all photographed during the First World War and all of them were killed by Hitler during the Second World War.

Right. These are the maternal uncles. In other words, uncles of my mother. Starting with great-uncle Kubik, Jacob, who was the Mayor of Pribram. And then there is Aunt Emma with her husband, Blaha. And

my Grandfather... and I don't know the others. It's written on the back. But they were all personages of Pribram. They were all important people in Pribram.

And your uncle is?

That was Kubik- Jacob, the Mayor of Pribram.

Ok, the man with the feather in his hat is Uncle Kubik, Jacob the Mayor of Pribram.

Do you know when he was the mayor?

No, I'm afraid I don't. But it's fairly late so it must have been just before the start of the Second World War judging by you know my Uncle by Aunt Emma and by Blaha.

My mother in 1941 was forty-one years old. And she realised as the transports started from Prague, that we may not all survive. So she hauled the whole family to the photographer, and he decided to make these special sort of artistic photographs of her and her husband, my father Doktor Rudolf Fantl. So once a year you were hauled to the photographer.

[1.17:29.4]

Well this is, this actually covered by the by the, by the, by the first one, you know.

All right. It's Doktor Rudolf Fantl, 1941 in Prague photographed because the transports from Prague started and my mother decided she should- we should have photographs made.

This a photograph of a happy family in deep peace, sitting together. I'm, as you can see, my father's pet on there, because I always listened to all the stories he had to tell. And I listened to Wagner together. Nobody else wanted to listen to Wagner. I did. And... This was again an occasion when my mother decided it was time to take a photograph. So this is the family Fantl in deep peace and happy together. It is in Prague, and the year would be... I'm about four... I must have been... '35, must be about 1935.

This is the photograph of my mother's three children. This is her eldest son Honza, Hanusch, Her second son, Tomas - Tomas and Helga. I think it was taken in 1939, in Prague.

This is a photograph taken on the occasion of my mother's marriage to Julius Aussenberg in 1947. You can see her, Zdenka, with Julius Aussenberg and we three children in the back. That is myself, Tomas and Pavel Korn, the boy my mother took in after he had been so very ill.

My mother married Julius Aussenberg...

No it's yours.

Oh, mine! Well, there is very little I can tell you. I met Willy in a cafe behind Selfridges where my school friend Kitty Hofberg used to make coffee behind the bar. And he went to court her, and I'm afraid I took him over, and he became my husband eventually.

Well, we married in July 1950, but I met him in 1948. But of course my mother and Aussi wouldn't hear of my getting engaged or anything serious because I was only sixteen then, so I had to wait.

In London. [We were married] In the Registry Office Marylebone in London.

[1.21:24.4]

[End of photographs]