

IMPORTANT

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**REFUGEE VOICES**

Interview No. RV207
NAME: Freddie Stern
DATE: 4th July 2017
LOCATION: Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[Part One]**[0:00:00]**

Today is the 4th of July 2017. We're conducting an interview with Mr. Freddie Stern. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we're in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Can you please tell me your name?

My real name is Alfred Stern. I was born on the 9th of June 1925 in a German town called Montabaur. My family were in the leather business for generations. And... when I got to about eleven, twelve years old, my head teacher took me aside and he said, "The Nazis are starting to run, and I can't keep you anymore." And I made arrangements to go to a Jewish school at Bad Nauheim, where I was until the Kristallnacht... when the place was ransacked. And all the Torahs were thrown out and so on. And after that, I went to my grandparents who lived nearby, and I stayed there until relatives of mine got me on to a - a Kindertransport boat going from Hamburg to Southampton.

Thank you. I would just like to say first of all, thank you very much for having agreed to be interviewed for the Refugee Voices project. And before we come on to the Kindertransport, maybe can you tell us a little bit about your family background?

[0:02:28]

My family have been in the leather business since the seventeen-hundreds... at a place called Montabaur, or near there. And they were involved in processing skins and curing them and making leather of various kinds out of them. And this has been going on for many, many years.

So, did your father continue in his father's business?

Yes. He took over his father's business and... his house and content as well.

What was the name of the business?

'Willy Stern.'

'Willy Stern Leder', or 'Billy Stern'...?

Leder, ja.

Aha. And can you tell us, did you ever meet the grandfather - your grandfather whose business it was?

No, he died before I was born.

And his name was Willy Stern? What was his name, the grandfather?

Alexander. And there he was one of eight siblings - six boys and two girls.

Your father?

My father, yeah. On my mother's side, she was one of three.

And did the siblings, did they all live around Montabaur, or...?

[0:04:08]

Some of them did, and some of them moved further... towards the Dutch border.

And what are your earliest memories? What- what can you remember?

I was at school in Montabaur. I was a small child. I was there from the age of five, until the age of about twelve or so. And towards the end, the Nazis started to take over the school... made my life difficult. And I decided I could no longer live there. And I moved... to a Jewish school at Bad Nauheim.

And can you tell me a little bit before- before the Nazis came to power? What was it like to live in Montabaur? What images come to your head?

It was fine. I had everything that I needed. I had *Wipproller* and *Holländer* and all these things that children have to play with.

Tell us what that is, because not everyone will know what that is.

These are basically... run around little trucks of various kinds. And... I enjoyed playing with them. And...it was fine. But when the Nazis came to power, within two years, things started to deteriorate. The Nazis started to influence the children who were my friends. Made my life difficult. In the end I started to leave Montabaur altogether, and go to a school – shul – in Bad Nauheim.

Yeah. And before we get to that, what about your parents? Can you tell us something about your parents? How they met?

They had- they had had a very difficult time. ...They were married in 1924, and I was born in 1925. And they had a happy life up to the time of the Nazis... when things of course changed completely.

And where was your mother's family from? Where did they come from?

A place called Herborn.

And how far was that from Montabaur?

About forty miles, I would say.

And what was their business? What was her father? What was his business?

He was a kosher butcher. And my father was a... in leather.

Was that actually- when I - I read about it- was that an issue at all for anyone religious to deal with, with - with animal skins, or...?

[0:07:52]

No, they had done it for centuries, you see. These skins are pinned up on boards, and then they're treated with salts and essence and things like that and allowed to cure.

And then, once they're cured, what would happen?

They would roll them on machines and... turn them into leather.

Was it a big... big- was it a sort of small factory, or...?

No, it was a small factory. You see, Jews at that time were not allowed into the big towns. They were only allowed into small units because they were afraid of what they could do. Not the Jews, but the surrounding population.

And do you know how your parents met at all?

They met through an uncle. The brother of... Fanny Hecht, who was the mother of my late father... that is how they met. But this lady died of some disease. I don't know what it was. And eventually he remarried another woman called Fanny Hertz. And they had another four or five children.

So, he came from a very big family?

Yes, they were a close family.

[0:09:56]

So, in fact did you have many cousins when you grew up?

Yes - yes. Lots of cousins.

So, tell us a little bit about the cousins.

They were...fairly close to me. And I knew them well, and they came to stay with us and to play with us and so on.

And you didn't have any other brothers and sisters?

I had no brothers or sisters at all. Only myself. I was the only child.

And can you tell us a little bit about your- how religious were your parents? What was your Jewish upbringing?

We were Orthodox Jewish and the whole house was kosher. And there was no question of anything done kosher anywhere near the house. We were quite strictly orthodox.

And what about- was there a synagogue in Montabaur?

There was a synagogue and there was a Rabbi. And... They performed up to the time when the Nazis came and interfered and destroyed the synagogue.

What was the name of the rabbi? Do you remember it, the name?

Zeitlin, he later went to Hong Kong, and then to Shanghai and eventually to America.

And what- so did you go to sort of a religious school, or...?

It was pretty orthodox.

But did you go to like a Sunday school in the synagogue? Was there any education for the Jewish children?

There was education for them all the time. Four hours... every second day.

Aha! On top of your normal primary school?

On top of the normal school, yeah.

Yeah. And what did you learn there? Do you remember anything?

Learned about...Netanyahu and all the- the priests and rabbis of the olden times, and so on. And... we had to know it off by heart.

And how many Jews at that point were there in Montabaur?

About sixty to eighty... At the time of the troubles, it went down to fifty... forty-five, fifty.

So, everyone knew each other quite well? It was a small community...

[0:13:14]

Yes, it was a small community. But they were all orthodox and... no... non-kosher meat, or anything like that.

Where did they get the kosher meat from? Was there a shochet?

There was a kosher butcher... called Falkenstein...

Yes?

... and he provided all the meat for the whole community.

And for you what were the personal let's say, highlights, of the Jewish calendar? Do you remember Shabbat or other...?

Yes... Shabbat and the High holidays and all that was celebrated to the full.

Anything in particular you remember, or...?

We had a good time as children. They were throwing down sweets from the top floor... to us and gave us a jolly good time altogether.

And as a child did you travel to other places, or did you mostly stay in Montabaur?

Mostly in Montabaur, but I travelled with my father when he went on business. I went with him to Trier, which is a town about fifty miles away or forty miles away. And there he bought skins and that sort of thing. Also went with him to Cologne and... to Frankfurt. ...I enjoyed it!

So, did he travel quite a lot to sell the skins?

Yes - yes. He- he sold the finished leather, you see? And that is how he made his living. Now he had brothers and sisters. One brother lived two doors away. And he wasn't in leather, he was in textiles. And he sold fashion goods and all kinds of things for the ordinary local women.

And how were the relations between the Jews and the non-Jews – at that point?

It was fairly- it was fairly good. I don't remember any friction until the Nazis came.

And you said in school also it was Jewish and non-Jewish children together?

Yes.

And who were your friends in school? Do you remember some names, or...?

Yes I... remember one or two of them ...who were friends, but as soon as the Nazis came, they had to disappear. And never spoke to me again.

[0:16:45]

How did you feel about that?

It hurt me a lot. But that was the way it was, you see, at that time.

And what about your parents? They must have been also- were they integrated? ...How did they cope?

They were mostly with the community itself. Had close links with the community. My father was the head of the synagogue for quite a number of years and other people involved as well. And it was quite a vibrant Jewish Community at the time.

Yeah. But I think your father was also active in- he was a gymnast or in the Turnverein I read?

Yes - yes.

Tell us a little bit about that?

Yes, he was very fond of sports and gymnastics. He used to perform on parallel bars and rings and things like that. And he tried to encourage me to do it.

And?

I wasn't that interested, but I did a bit of it.

Do you remember seeing him perform? Or I mean, to- where- where did he do it? In the local- was it a competition?

There was a local sports hall, where all of this was done.

Did you do any sports yourself, as a child? Were you interested in a particular...?

We were not allowed. Jewish children were not allowed to swim, or to- to row or anything like that. And... so I never did any of that.

Yeah... So, when did things change for you, in your mind? When- when did you feel...?

[0:19:11]

Thirty-six, thirty-seven. [1936,1937]

And what did you feel, as a child? From a child's perspective, what could you... see, or...?

I just... I just had to take it. They didn't ask me. And they didn't tell me anything. They just behaved strangely towards me. Eventually, most of my Jewish friends left to go to America or Israel or wherever. And that's the way it turned out to be.

And in your family, did they discuss emigration? Leaving?

Yes, it was all on the cards. And... people were planning all time their exit. Some wanted to go here, and some wanted to go there and so on. It was very, very hard... when you've been for centuries at a place in a country and suddenly you are displaced; you are no longer wanted.

Yeah...

Makes things very difficult.

And were there people who didn't follow this- were there people who stayed and never left, or...?

Very few. They were numb but they had to be undercover, or they would have been damaged. They said- the Nazis said that anyone they found who was cooperating with Jewish people would be eliminated.

Yeah...

And this made them afraid obvious- obviously.

And how could your father continue his business?

He couldn't! ...They put people in front of the shop window. They daubed the back window and... made all kinds of signs- "*Juden raus*", and this sort of thing. And there was nothing that we could do to stop it. I could wipe it all off at night, and the next morning it was there again.

[0:22:04]

Did you wipe it off? Do you remember that?

Yes - Mnn.

When was that? Before Kristallnacht, or...?

Before, yeah.

Before...

After Kristallnacht, I could no longer stay there, because they ransacked the whole house.

So, you felt it very much...?

Mnn.

And you said you had to leave the school. When did you have to leave the school- the local school?

In... 1937, '38.

And what was it like to go to this- you went to school in Bad Nauheim?

Yes.

What was that called?

It was a Jewish school! And it was strictly kosher and Orthodox. And I enjoyed being there.

Was it good for you, you felt safer there?

Yes. Yes. And then on Kristallnacht they ransacked the whole place. Threw all Jewish books onto a bonfire... and the Torah and all the holy books. And made as much fire and noise as they could.

Was there any warning? Did the teachers...?

No.

Where were you, at the time? Can you...?

I was upstairs, on the fourth floor. And when it started, I had to pack my things, run downstairs and go try and get to the station. It saved my life.

What happened to the other children?

Pardon?

What happened to the other children?

I don't know. Never heard of them again.

And were there any teachers, or you were just left by yourself there?

There were Nazis front, and back and in the middle. And I was looking out for when the column had to go around the corner, where nobody could see the middle. And I escaped up a side alley. ...Went to my grandparents. ...And eventually, after months, I managed to get on to a children's transport.

[0:25:00]

So, did you stay with your- after that, you stayed with your grandparents? You didn't go back to Montabaur?

No. I couldn't. The house was ransacked. It was uninhabitable.

And were your parents- where were your parents? Did they...?

They had to come with me as well and live with my grandparents.

In...?

Yeah.

In- and where was it, in Her-?

Herborn.

Herborn.

Yeah. ...They were not as... as... ...severe as they were in Montabaur, where they were absolutely indoctrinated.

Why was it better in Herborn?

Because it was more of a country place, and this sort of live and let live.

So, what was- you were not in Montabaur at Kristallnacht, but maybe can you tell us what happened to your parents during Kristallnacht?

My mother ran upstairs; tried to protect herself. My father helped her. And then there were Nazis who were trying to get at her... and attack her sexually or whatever. And... didn't

succeed. But they were then massed together, all the Jews, and they were marched to the town hall. And... that was very difficult. Eventually, all the men were put into concentration camp. My father was in Sachsenhausen – no, in Buchenwald. My uncle was in Sachsenhausen. And... my grandfather was too old. So, they left him at home. But told him he would have to- they would have to confiscate all his knives and things, because he was a kosher butcher.

And how long were they- how long was your father in Buchenwald?

Four or five weeks.

So quite some time.

They were mistreated there. They never described to me what all happened, but they told me they were badly treated.

How did they manage- they managed to get out?

Eventually they were released, because my father had to sign a document... that he would give away all his property, and all his houses and so on. And that's how they- he was released, but only for a short while. He was rearrested a month later.

[0:28:34]

But was that already when you had left?

Yes.

So, you saw him when they- when he came out?

Yeah – yeah. ...It was a very, very difficult time for my family.

Yeah... But some of the uncles and aunts started leaving and came to England and went to other places...

Yes.

Can you tell us what- what happened?

I had six uncles and two aunts. The two aunts got into America. And... the- the male brothers, some of them were arrested and taken to Buchenwald or one of these concentration camps and disappeared - never seen again. ...One of them I think managed to get to America... ..through some deal somewhere. I don't remember exactly what it was. But... none of them survived.

And these were on your father's side, or on your mother's side?

On my father's side. On my mother's side there was an aunt called Herta. She was in England already since 1936, as a domestic servant. And she arranged to get my uncle out. And she found a couple who would guarantee fifty pounds for their exit.

[0:30:59]

And so, they came out?

Yeah.

And which- when? When did they...?

Pardon?

When did they leave?

It was in 1938, '39.

Yeah. ...And do you know who put your name or the Kindertransport, or how...? Do you know what happened? How did...?

My aunt in London did it.

She organised it?

Yeah.

And when was the first time you heard- I mean, I don't know, maybe it wasn't called Kindertransport at that time. What did you hear?

I heard that there was a possibility. ...And... I just sat it out and waited for it. There was nothing I could do.

Because by that time you were not in school anymore?

No, I couldn't go to school.

You were just at home?

Yeah.

With your grandparents?

Yes.

And who else was actually living there with you? It was your parents, the grandparents... you. Were there any other people living there?

No.

And did you want to go to England? Did you want to go on the Kindertransport?

Yes. Yes, I'm looking forward to it. ...But I had an uncle and aunt who... my uncle was mistreated in 1933 already, by the Nazis. And he got out in 1933. And... that's how I managed to get a foothold in England.

What was his name please?

Pardon?

What was his name?

Ernest Stern. And he was an economist. And he worked for a company called Union Corporation. And that is how we managed to get a start.

So, you knew when you were coming to England that there is some family.

[0:33:37]

Yes - yes.

So how much time- when- when did you learn that you- you had a place to go... on the Kindertransport?

Until I was in Margate for about six months.

No, I meant where you were still in Germany. When did you hear?

I didn't know in Germany at all.

That you could go?

No. I didn't know anything about it. I was still too small to understand.

Yeah. But who told you that you now had to pack- you had to pack? Who packed your bag? Did your mother pack your bag?

Yes.

And what were you allowed to take?

I was only allowed to take my own things: clothing, and a - a bicycle and a - a musical instrument. That was it; I wasn't allowed to take more.

What musical instrument?

It was a piano accordion.

Did you play that?

Mnn.

And you could- you brought it on the journey?

I brought it on the journey, yes. But I had to sell it afterwards, to get some liquid money.

In England?

Because I didn't have enough to live on.

Tell us a little bit about the journey please, on the Kindertransport. What happened?

We boarded in Hamburg... one evening. And the train went from Gießen to Hamburg. And there... we boarded the boat. And it was an American boat called the *SS Manhattan*. We felt already different...when we were there. American boat.

Yeah... Were you treated differently?

Pardon?

You felt treated differently on the boat?

Yes. We were well treated.

And who took you to Gießen, to the station? Did your parents take you to the station?

Yes. It was very, very, very... [breaks down]

Yeah...

I would never see any of them again.

[0:36:40]

Did you- did you think that- did you know that then? – You didn't. No.

They tried to make light of it. They said, "You know, we might come out in a few months..." and so on. Nothing happened.

So, they took you, and you went on the train in Gießen. And were you with somebody else who- whom you knew, on the train, from Gießen? Or were you the only boy...?

Didn't know any of the other children. They were mostly from Frankfurt or Cologne or so on. I didn't know them.

And were you scared? Were you...? What...?

No. I was in total shock.

How long did it take from Gießen to Hamburg?

...About seven hours.

And who- who took care of you in Hamburg then when you arrived? Who was...? Did somebody meet you there or...?

No.

How did you know what to do?

There was a guide who would take us on to the boat. [with emotion] But I didn't know any of the people.

And it was quite a long trip.

Yeah. It took three days.

[0:38:40]

So, on the boat, what- what do you remember, from the boat?

Nothing much. ...They looked after us well, the American waiters.

And the food? Do you remember the food you had- the food?

We got two eggs instead of one.

And you said you were in a cabin?

And the cabin- I shared it with another boy I didn't know.

And it was a cruise ship? Was that a cruise ship?

Yes. [pause] I think it was an old boat.

And then the boat sailed from Hamburg to where?

From Hamburg... to Southampton.

And did it stop?

And we stopped in Le Havre.

And how long did you stop in Le Havre?

A number of hours - about six, eight hours.

So where was the sort of border crossing? When- did the- the Germans come to inspect you... still on the boat, or...?

Nobody. ...They did the inspection before we ever went on.

Yes.

And they did that in Germany.

So, do you remember somebody inspecting your luggage and your papers?

Yes... Yes. A man came and looked at everything that I was taking. And then he said, "It's Ok, you can close- you can close the case now."

Did you have any valuables in your case?

No. ...I would've been killed if I'd had valuables.

[0:41:16]

And then- and you said you sailed from Le Havre to Southampton. And what was it like to arrive there in Southampton?

It was very strange, you know. Different atmosphere altogether. I liked it a lot.

In which way a different atmosphere?

Pardon?

In which way a different atmosphere?

The people were much more easy-going, friendly and so on - not regimented like the Germans.

And when you arrived, who took you in, or who- in Southampton? When you got off the boat?

It was a guide. He put us on to a train... to go to... to London. And there we changed at Liverpool Street. We changed trains and went to Margate, which is a place on the southeast coast.

And did you know you were going to go to Margate or you didn't know where you were going?

I knew nothing about Margate. But it was an Orthodox school. And... We had all the facilities there we needed.

And what were your first impressions, coming off the boat – of England?

It was relief.

[0:43:17]

Did you feel that you escaped from something?

[faintly] Yeah.

Yeah... Because you were of an age where you understood more things. There must have been smaller children on the... Kindertransport boat.

Yes. Yes. Friends of mine four or five years old. They didn't know what was going on!

But you did.

Mnn.

And was there crying, or what the atmosphere on the boat?

It was tense... Suddenly going to a strange place, you see?

And did you have any English? Did anyone prepare you? Did you speak any English?

No. After I was there for four weeks, I fell ill with this scarlet fever, which was taken quite seriously at that time. And I was taken to an isolation hospital at Ramsgate. [breaks down]
That's where I learned English.

In the hospital?

Not one person could speak German. [weeps]

So, you had to...?

I had to learn quickly.

I mean there you were without other children? Just yourself?

Mnn.

And did people come to visit you or who- or were you...?

No.

And were you in touch with your family who were in England, at that point?

Not yet.

Couldn't get any contact with them at all.

Freddie, I think we should just take a little break now, before moving on.

[sound break]

[0:45:30]

Yes so, we find ourselves now in England. And you said you had scarlet fever and you were in the hospital.

That's where I learnt all my English. [distressed]

Which words do you remember? Which words did you learn first? Do you remember... what you learned?

Don't remember anymore; it's so long ago.

Yeah... And were people kind to you?

Very kind. ...It was night and day between Germany and England.

So, you didn't mind- or did you mind being in the hospital? Did you...?

No

No. And then you came back to the school, after some time?

Yes... Of course, I was resented, because my school was... completely closed for four weeks because of this, at the time. The authorities were very strict, not allowing anybody in or out of that place for four weeks. Anyway...

And who were the other children at the school? Were they all refugees or were they...?

All refugees, yes.

[0:47:03]

So, was that in a way, easier? Was that a good thing for you?

It was... okay.

So, they taught English and...?

Taught English and other subjects as well.

And how long did you stay there?

About a year and a quarter.

So, quite long...

Then the war started. And in Margate, they were putting defences up. And they wanted us- the school was right next to the... Right next to the beach. So, they wanted us out. And my uncle from London asked me to come and stay with them.

Can I ask you, who ran the school? Do you know who- who was it run by?

B'nai B'rith.

It was run by B'nai B'rith.

Mn-hnn. And it was totally kosher.

And it was set up for the refugee children?

Yes.

It wasn't a school which had existed before?

No. It was a- an old hotel. It was worn out, and they had wanted to close it down. And they decided to use it for that purpose.

Was it only boys?

Only boys, yeah.

And how many boys were there?

About a hundred, I would say. ...Could have been more or less, but roughly that.

And what was it like for you, in that year? How did you feel? How did you...?

It was okay. Yeah. We got fairly decent food.

Did you speak English to each other, to the other children, or German or...?

We had to get used to English and it took a while. ...But I told you, I learned my English in hospital.

And by the time you came back, you spoke some English?

I spoke English, yeah. Yeah.

And the teachers, were they refugees, or were they...?

All, refugees, yeah. Yeah. One was... the daughter of a Polish immigrant, and she taught us English.

So, then the school had to be dissolved or did they move somewhere else?

They had to close it down.

[0:50:06]

And uncle came to the school, or how did you- what- were you in touch with him?

Yes, he- he told me to come to them. And he sent me the tickets. And I came to Liverpool Street, and he showed me all around London. And then he took me home... and I stayed there for a long time.

And in the time before, were you in touch with your parents? When you were in the school?

I couldn't get in touch with them very much. Through America is the only way we could communicate. Because the war was on, you see?

But before the war broke out, were you in touch with your parents a little bit?

Second-hand, yeah.

And could they send something? Did they send something for you?

They sent me some chocolate once.

Because I read in your- in your memoirs about the shoes... Can you tell us about that? A shoe, and there was a gold coin, or...?

A coin?

Yeah.

Yes. My father had a friend who was an expert shoemaker. And he inserted a couple of gold coins into the heels of my slippers. And I took them to England.

In your luggage?

Freddie nods.

And did you ever need those coins?

I gave them to my wife.

So, you moved in with your uncle. And what was your uncle- at that point, where- what was your uncle doing?

He was an economist, and he was working for a... a mining corporation in South Africa called Union Corporation. And that's... how it happened.

And he was here with his family? Did he have children?

He had two children. A girl who was near enough my age, and a boy who was...a year-and-a-half to two years younger, called Ronnie. And the girl was called Gabrielle?.

[0:53:11]

And how did they react when you joined them?

They seemed happy about it. I didn't think they were ever jealous.

And did you go to- where did they send you to school? Did you continue your schooling then, or...?

I went to a college in... ..It was in North London. And there I- I learned a few things. And then I had to start seriously. And... I took some lessons to get... to get a basis. And eventually I managed to get a job at ICI. And there I got a start. And I worked at ICI for five, maybe six years. And then I left to go to a Jewish firm in Newcastle called Commercial Plastics... run by a refugee.

What does ICI stand for?

That was after ICI.

Yes, but what does ICI stand for? What is it- is it the name of a company? ICI?

ICI was Imperial Chemical Industries.

But that was after the war.

Yes.

What about in the war when you were staying with your uncle?

I was studying. ...Because I had- didn't have any other than basic education, you see? And I had to try and get a basis.

Yes... And was there bombing when you were staying with your uncle? You were staying in Hampstead Garden Suburb?

I was bombed out twice. Once in Thornton Way where was our first house, the whole house was lifted off its foundations. And...

And, where were you?

I was sitting in the living room listening for news. And the bomb was... a yard-and-a-half outside the window. And the glass came in and shattered all over the place. And fortunately, it went through an open door and not over me. And that's how my life was saved.

Because the door was open...

Yeah...

Was there anyone else in the building or were you...?

Yes. My uncle and aunt were there, but they were in the kitchen. And my aunt was so frightened.... she jumped off the floor... And she had to be carried out. It was very, very frightening for her.

Yeah... But after bombing where did you go?

My uncle eventually managed to find a house... at a place called Ossulton Way, which was on the other side of the... the main road. And there we lived for about thirty years or so after that. And she bought- he bought the house during The Blitz for two pounds forty, I think. No... no. Two thousand pounds.

But did you stay in London throughout or did you... During the war, did you go out...?

No, I was in Shrewsbury.

And how did you get there?

I went there because I had an uncle living there. And... I went to stay with him, because my other uncle couldn't accommodate me where he was living in Berkhamsted.

[0:58:41]

So, they decided also not to stay in London, your uncle?

Yeah. He stayed in Berkhamsted.

And what was in Berkhamsted? Why- it was just outside London?

Yes.

So, did they rent some rooms, or...?

It was a country place, you see. And there was no real danger of bombing and so on.

So which uncle was that, in...?

That's the uncle that I was talking about. Ernest.

Yes. And the one who went to Shrewsbury?

Hugo.

Aha... And Hugo was related to your mother or your father?

To my mother.

And what was he doing?

He was working in a garage business.

And when had he emigrated?

He got out in 1939.

How?

Because two English people guaranteed fifty pounds for him. And that saved his life, because he was in a concentration camp.

And was he by himself or was he married?

He was married then.

And so, what were you doing? Were you doing some war work, or were you doing...?

[1:00:10] --

Yes, I was... repairing vehicles coming back from the front. Heavy- heavy transport vehicles, and I was repairing them.

And at that point you were over sixteen, so were you ever interned, or...

No.

...tribunals or anything?

No. No. I was never bothered in any way.

And did you volunteer to do the war work, or you were...?

Yes. Yes. And I was there until the end of the war. And then my uncle asked me to come back... and do some serious studying. ...Just trying to think what the place was called...

Which place?

Pardon?

Which place?

Where I was... afterwards... ..

In Ossulton Way? No.

Pardon?

In Ossulton Way you mean?

No, no. It was after Ossulton Way.

And who of your uncles- did you feel closest to Ernest and his wife? Did they...?

Yes, they were very close to me. They looked after me totally. They offered me money to tide me over, and so on. They couldn't have been better.

You told me before there was- you had to make a decision about kosher food... or...?

They were not kosher, and I couldn't- I couldn't get kosher food there at all. So, I had to compromise, I'm afraid.

[1:02:25]

Was that difficult for you? Or, was it a...?

At first, yes.

Because they were Reform, yes?

Yes.

They were members of Alyth...?

Yes... yes – yes. Alyth? Gardens. Mnn. And... But I had to come round to that.

Did you go- did you go to Alyth? Did you attend the Reform services?

Yes.

What did you- how did you find that?

I found it a bit strange, you know. And... I was with them for about four or five years I would say.

And was there not a refugee rabbi also in Alyth, at the time?

There were some refugee rabbis there, yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Do you remember anyone? What were they called?

Baeck.

Yeah.

There were few there, and they were very good rabbis. I was very impressed with them. ...All a long time ago.

Yeah.... So, did you- did you feel grateful to your uncle that they took you in- he took you in?

He really helped me.

Because you had family...?

Freddie nods, speaks with difficulty and emotion throughout the following passage

And when did you find out what happened to your- to your family? To your parents?

1942. Got a letter - they were all killed.

From whom? Who wrote the letter?

Red Cross.

[1:04:25]

And where were you when you got the letter? Were you staying with your uncle, or...?

Yes.

Yeah...

...He helped me to get over it.

What did he say to you, or what- how- how did he help you?

He said, "These are very bad people and... you can't do anything about it." ...I found it very, very hard. ...It took me a long time to get over that.

Yeah... Very traumatic for a teenager. You were a teenager and you were...

Then in 1948... I was living at my uncle's house. And they invited... a girl from Switzerland. ...That changed my life. ...We took to each other straight away, and that was it! We were married within four years. And she was always wonderful to me. ...She lived through the war in Switzerland and never had any contact with Nazis.

And did she help you to get through your experience, or...?

Yes. ...When I- when I met my girlfriend at the time... ...she gave me all the warmth... that I didn't have for years. ...And changed my life. And I was married to her for sixty years.

Wonderful woman.

[1:08:00]

Did you ever receive - especially as a teenager - did you ever receive help to- to deal with your loss?

No.

Were you ever in contact with any of the communal organisations, you know, like Bloomsbury House or any...?

Yes. Yes, I was. I was a member of these clubs, you know, in London particularly.

Yeah? Such as?

And we had a....a good time.

What were they called? Can you remember their names?

Can't remember now, but...

And did you ever go to where there were refugees - Swiss Cottage] and where...

Swiss Cottage, yeah.

Yeah?

Yeah.

And what do you remember? What places- where did you go there?

Cosmo and... there was another place there, on the other side of the road...

Dorice.

Pardon?

The Dorice.

Dorice, that's it, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah. And they were a wonderful transition you know? Because we refugees were used to a totally different kind of food... to what the English were. And they helped to bridge that gap.

Yeah. What sort of food? What did you like to eat?

Meat-based food... They did excellent dishes.

So, you would meet your friends at The Cosmo, or? Or you just would go for a drink, or...?

I went there with friends, yes.

And your friends, did you have mainly other refugee friends, or did you have some English friends? What sort of friends?

Mostly refugee friends... or members of the wider family.

Yeah. Who was there- what wider family was there? Who was here?

There were cousins and great-cousins and so on.

And did you keep in touch? Did they keep in touch?

Yes. Mnn. Yeah...

And how did your uncle do, and his children? Did they... adapt to being in England?

He... He managed to... get into the inner circle of "*The Economist*" in London. And he had quite a good career there. ...Which- with which he was able to help the family to get established.

[1:11:40]

And did you have any idea, at the end of the war, what you wanted to do with your life? Did you have any...?

I wanted to start a - a factory. And that's what I did. I... I started with- I had very limited capital only. And... that helped me just to get... initial going. And with this, I managed to set up a company that produced useful goods. And I was able to employ 320 families for some 20 years.

Fantastic... What was the name of the company?

"General". Foam

General Foam? This was here in Newcastle?

Pardon?

Here in Newcastle?

Yes.

Yeah. But this was long after you got married... and you had children.

Yes.

So, when did you get married?

In 1952.

And where?

In Geneva.

And were you ever thinking of living- going to another country to live?

No.

No. To America, or to...?

I like the English better than any other... And I never moved from here.

And when did you become naturalised?

1947.

Do you remember that? What happened?

Mn-hnn.

When did you get your- you got your passport?

Probably by 194- beginning of 1948.

And was that important for you?

Yes.

And did you want to go back to Germany at all to look for what happened? To find somebody?

No... No. I never wanted to see any of them again. ...Behaved abominably towards my family.

And did you ever go back?

No. I once took my children around, but I didn't speak to anyone.

You went to Montabaur?

Mnn.

When was that? Which year?

[1:14:50]

I took them there... Must- it must have been in the 1950s or the '60s. I can't remember exactly.

Apart from that, you've never been to Germany?

Freddie shakes his head.

And when you met your wife, she was- she was happy to move to England?

England yes. And for holidays, we went to Switzerland. She was a wonderful woman. I adored her.

And what was her background?

She was a translator. She spoke three, four languages... and could do shorthand in all of them.

And which language did you speak to each other?

Pardon?

Which language did you speak to her?

In English. ...To my parents-in-law I had to speak in German.

And did you keep your German? Did you manage to- after...?

It was a bit dodgy at first.

Yeah. And then you said you...

Her native language was French, you see?

Right.

Because she lived in Geneva.

So, when you met her, were you still- were you studying or were you working?

I was working at ICI.

And how did you get the qualifications? When did you get the qualifications to be a... what was it – your chemical... What was your profession?

Yes, chemist.

A chemist.

[1:17:08]

Mnn.

And how did you- when did you get the qualifications?

Before I was married...

In London?

London University.

But how did you- did you do some evening classes, or how did you get... Did you have to do an A-Level?

I took- I took evening classes. Yeah.

And was it- why- were you always science oriented?

Science- I was always science oriented.

And tell us how-how this move to Newcastle- what happened.

I eventually I worked for a company for twelve years...which was run by a Polish immigrant. It was part of the Wolfson empire. And when I left... I left that, I... got all the requirements from my background. I was granted twelve patents in... the time I was in work. And I created employment for 320 families for some twenty years.

And you didn't mind leaving London? You didn't mind moving to Newcastle?

[1:19:19]

No. ...I found London too difficult. It was alright when I was a young man, and the streets were reasonably clear, but when all the foreigners came in it got too difficult. And I was happy to move to Newcastle.

And was there, when you came was there a Jewish Community here in Newcastle?

Pardon?

Was there a Jewish Community here in Newcastle?

Yes, there was a Jewish Community. But... they were very conservative, you know?

So, did you join any other, the Reform or the Orthodox? What did you join in Newcastle?

I joined the Reform at first, but eventually found it too difficult and I moved back to the Orthodox.

Aha... What was too difficult... What, or, what- the people there?

Yes - yes. The rabbis were very old-fashioned and...

So, you preferred to be in the Orthodox- to join the Orthodox synagogue?

Yeah.

And you had two children?

Two children, a boy and a girl. And my son had two children and they've got two children. And my girl has got four. One of them is a rabbi. One of them is in kosher food. The other one is... ..a designer of- ... webs. And the fourth one is a girl, and she's handicapped. She's living in a home.

And when you had your children, how did you want to raise them? With what sort of identity? What was important for you?

We raised them in Jewish ways. But when they got on their own- my girl, for example, she went more Orthodox.

Yeah?

And Gerald, slightly more orthodox.

[1:22:32]

Yes. And did you talk about your experiences to your children?

Yes, they know everything.

Was that important for you to...?

Important that they know their background. ...Gerald went over to Germany, and he got them all to put plaques down for the people that were killed by them.

And how do you feel about that?

Yes. I don't ever want to see any of them again.

But you are happy that the plaques are there?

Mn-hnn.

And the Stolpersteine?

Yeah...Gerald arranged for the plaques and the Stolpersteine.

And how do you feel about Germany today?

I don't feel any better toward them. I'm still... confused about their intentions. You must know; you've been through it yourself.

Very difficult. And how do you think have your own experience affected your life?

My own experience? This is from the point of view of...?

Of the Kindertransport. Of being separated from your parents. How- how did that...?

It's been very hard for many years. But that's life. It's nothing I can do about it.

And do you think it's been hard all the time, or it's coming back more when you're older, or when...?

It's about the same, I would say.

And do you think it has affected the way you- you parented your children, or the way you...?

I'm sure I am different towards my children than I would have been otherwise. I've told them all about it. ...And Tina, my daughter, she is quite strongly Orthodox. They have a kosher house and everything.

[1:25:28]

So, you think she's continuing the tradition in that way, or...?

Yeah.

How different do you think would your life have been, if Hitler hadn't come?

If I had been non-Jewish or...?

No – no. If you'd been Jewish, but if you hadn't been forced to emigrate. If you had still been in Montabaur.

I would have been Orthodox in Montabaur. But the Orthodox Jews in Montabaur are also softening a bit. Most of them were killed, of course.

Yes... yes. Was there a post-war community in Montabaur? Did anyone...?

Mostly Russians.

Yeah. How do you feel in terms of your own identity today? How would you describe yourself?

I feel part of the English community. ...They've been very, very good to me.

And do you feel British, or do you feel...?

Yes.

And where do you think is your home today?

Pardon?

Where is your home? How do you see yourself?

My home is here.

In Newcastle?

Mnn.

And would you- would you consider moving to London?

No. It's too cosmopolitan now. But you see all the girls that I've got coming in...are all local girls. And they couldn't do more for me than they do. I find them very, very nice people. And that's all I can ask of life.

And what for you is the most important part of your... of your German Jewish heritage?

The basis of it... will always remain. That will never change.

And what- what is that basis, for you? ...What is the core?

[1:28:15]

It is Jewish! Totally Jewish. We're living in a non-Jewish community, but we are Jewish. And we will always be Jewish. That's the way it's going to be.

And is there anything you miss? I know you said you don't like going to Germany, but is there anything you miss from your youth, or...?

I don't miss, no. ...I wouldn't mind going to Switzerland now and then. But ...Germany itself, I've no liking for it at all.

Too difficult?

Mnn.

And is your- are your grandchildren interested at all in your- in their background? In their German Jewish...?

They are- they are Jewish! All of them. Although two of them have married out. Joel, the son of Gerald has married a- a non-Jewish girl. But they're happy together. They've been married for twenty, thirty years.

But are they interested in their history, or in your... in the...?

They are interested in my background, yes.

And you are a member of the AJR?

Yes.

Yes? Do you read "The [AJR] Journal"?

I'm a member of the AJR.

Yes, is that something important for you?

No, it's just a - a side show. It was once a mainstream thing, but it isn't any more now. It's slipped into sideways.

What do you think should the AJR now...? They're taking care of the refugees, but how - how do you think should it develop in the future?

It's difficult for them, because... the prime aim has vanished.

Yeah...

And they've got a hard job to keep it up. I sympathise with them.

[1:31:16]

Do you consider yourself a refugee?

Pardon?

Do you consider yourself a refugee?

Not anymore. No. ...I was a refugee when I came here. But since I became British... I've just forgotten about it all.

And do you think today, there are now- you know, with the refugee crisis there were attempts to bring more refugee children in? Do you have a view about that? Also, the Kindertransport is quoted saying that today, Britain should do the same, and bring more refugee children into this country?

I think it should be limited, because we are a small country. An island. And we can't take people on a scale that they can in Europe. But a few, I think would be Ok. But not too many... because it would change the whole character of the country.

Ok. Is there anything else which we haven't discussed which you would like to add?

I don't think so. You can ask me anything you want.

I think we've covered- covered many different topics.

Pardon?

I think we've covered most of-

I think we've covered the ground, yes.

My last question would be: Do you have any message for anyone who might watch this interview in the future?

No, it's done very well. I've no complaints about it at all.

I mean, based on your experiences, what is important for you?

That it all comes out. That the whole story is there for once- everyone to see, in the future.

[1:33:44]

You think it's important that people know?

Yes – yes.

And do you feel that Holocaust education in this country now- I mean, it's more talked about.

Yes.

Can you feel the difference, let's say, to twenty years ago?

Yes - yes. ...People have got to know what it was all about. Because once it's swept under the carpet, it will be forgotten.

And did you feel yourself that people didn't know at all the experiences of the Kindertransportees, or...? For example, did you attend the reunion of the Kindertransport, the first reunion? You know, organised by Bertha Leverton?

Yes...

Did you go to that?

I've never been to it, because I was living in Newcastle. And I've got problems with my legs; I can't get there physically.

But do you look for the company of other Kinder? Is that something important?

Occasionally I meet one or two and... I enjoy talking to them. ...It's a great experience.

Yeah – yeah. Well, we have interviewed for this archive now quite a few...

Yeah.

At least forty, if not fifty... former Kinder.

Yeah. Yeah.

And... nobody from Montabaur.

No...no. ...But it was lovely talking to you.

Thank you very much for sharing your story.

[1:35:40]

I'm afraid it was... a fairly tough story.

Yes, you had a tough experience.

Yeah... But that's how it is. You can't change it.

No. So thank you again. And we're going to look at some photographs now and some of your documents.

Yes.

Thank you very much.

Pleasure.

[1:36:30]

Freddy, could I ask you please to introduce this gentleman on your right?

This is my son. He's Gerald Stern. And he was born on the twenty-eighth of May 1955. And he is my only son and I have a daughter as well.

Thank you. Gerald, you've listened to your father's testimony. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Gerald Stern: Well just that ...growing up I suppose that this whole issue... was always the elephant in the room. We had ...grandparents on my mother's side - none on my father's side. And... I remember my Bar Mitzvah, when my father stood up to speak and became very upset, because he remembered his own Bar Mitzvah. And... I always asked about family and was told that they were all killed. So... I worked and eventually when I retired from work, when I sold my business, I had some time, and started to research the family a little. And... I found that although there were a lot of family killed, that there were- there were still members of the family alive. But I found, through a cousin who was particularly interested in researching the Holocaust, that just in my father's family around a hundred and fifty members had been murdered. And... the other thing that I might mention is that... I took my children on a- on a roots trip back to Germany. We had two very different visits. The first one was to the place where my father-in-law was born - Bamberg... where we were very openly received. And... people were very apologetic and respectful about what had happened.

[1:40:06]

And then we- we went on to Montabaur where my father lived. We were greeted very nicely by a former schoolfriend of my father's – Josef Otto Schneider, who showed us everything. But I remember getting quite a cold feeling in that town. And in 1999 when we were there with my children, the only remnants that there'd ever been a Jewish community, which had existed since the 1300s in Montabaur, were two things, actually. A plaque on a supermarket, which was the site of the former synagogue, and the Jewish cemetery, which had at one time been desecrated – had been put back together... reassembled. They thought - they hoped - that the stones in their place matched the bodies in the graves. And there was nothing else there from, you know, the small community that had existed from the 1300s. So, on my return home, I wrote to the Mayor... in '99 and I got no reply. And... I didn't do anything about it for a while. And a year or so later I decided to write again and kept writing and eventually I

did get a reply. And at first, I said that there should be some kind of memorial. I was disappointed that there were no *Stolperstein* marker stones to commemorate Jewish people who'd been taken from the town. So, we corresponded about it, and... the town I discovered had ...blocked the installation of any Stolpersteine. I also discovered that the town had actually changed the name of Judengasse and re-named it Elisabethenstraße. And apparently an initiative by a school teacher with his pupils, they had actually lobbied for it to be- to be- for the former name to be put back. So... I started writing and discussions went on and they said, well if there was to be a memorial, it should be in the cemetery. The cemetery was out of town in a locked area. And I wrote back and said that a memorial should be in a place where people could see it and remember. And so, the correspondence went on, and after quite a few years I felt I wasn't getting anywhere. And so, I wrote and said I'd like to come and have a meeting. And in 2011, I think it was the 19th of September I had a meeting in Montabaur with the then Mayor and Council. I spoke in English, but it was translated by an English teacher in the town, very well. And put forward the case. And two months later, I have to say with the help then of a different Mayor, they agreed that there should be a Jewish memorial. And in fact, it was that Mayor who could see exactly what I'd said, that the memorial should be in the centre of town. And I did the same thing in Herborn, where the Löwenstein's had lived – my father's grandparents. I have to say that they were far more amenable. And eventually in 2013, those two memorials were... unveiled. [with emotion]

Freddie Stern: And it was your effort that did it. ...It was all your effort.

Gerald Stern: [with emotion] I think we live in an age now where... unfortunately we see a lot of terrible things.

Yeah...

Gerald Stern: Not just against Jews but other people. And... I think we need to keep reminding humanity... how one should behave. ...I'm sorry.

[1:45:31]

Freddie Stern: Thank you very much Gerald.

Freddie, actually... your son mentioned the Bar Mitzvah, which is something we didn't talk about. Can you tell us a little bit about your Bar Mitzvah?

My Bar Mitzvah was in Montabaur, and it was organised by my parents and grandparents who were still alive at that time. And... it gave me a warm feeling.

And which year was that?

Pardon?

In which year?

1938.

Was it in the synagogue?

Yes.

So, it may have been one of the last...

The last.

...taking place.

The last- the very last. Yeah.

And do you remember that when- what Gerald said that when you had to talk at his Bar Mitzvah that you couldn't speak?

Yeah... yeah.

Too upsetting...

Yeah.

So, was your Bar Mitzvah the last sort of family occasion in- in Germany?

Yes - yes. In Montabaur that was.

Well, I would say it's amazing, Gerald, that you managed to get two memorials. That you managed to achieve that.

Freddie Stern: It was a tremendous achievement. [Gerald's comment inaudible]

Yeah... yeah.

Gerald Stern: Because I have to say that... the towns were a little taken aback when, you know, I first contacted them. And it did take quite a bit of persuasion.

Yeah. And why is it so important for you? Why do you think?

Gerald Stern: I just feel that you know, these things- I felt in '99 when I went back to Montabaur everything was brushed under the carpet. You know, the Jews... had been erased and forgotten about.

Freddie Stern: Yeah.

Gerald Stern: So...

Ok, well, thank you for sharing this. Is there anything else?

Freddie Stern: I think you've said everything.

Thank you.

Gerald Stern: Thank you.

Thank you - both of you. Thank you.

[1:48:03]

[End of interview]

[Beginning of photographs and documents]

[1:48:31]

Photo 1.

Here is my grandfather, and his name was David Lowenstein. And he came from a place called Langendernbach.

Photo 2.

This is my grandmother. And she was called Sarah Lowenstein, née Blumenthal. Blumenthal. Weyer: a place called Weyer. That's where she came from.

Photo 3.

This is Montabaur, the castle.

Photo 4.

These are my parents on their wedding day, ...And their name is Betty Stern née Löwenstein, and her husband is Willy Stern.

When was it?

When was it when they married in 1924...In Herborn.

Photo 5.

Yes please. What do we see on this photo?

There is Freddie, there is Hilde, there is ...what's the name of the girl? ...Can't think what it is.

When was it taken, please?

Probably in 1930, 1940.

I think it says 1928.

Yeah.

And where?

In Montabaur.

Photo 6.

This is me, five years old... [in] Montabaur.

Photo 7.

Yes... 1931.

And what do we see on the photo?

My first... school day.

And what are you holding?

I'm holding a... a satchel.

Photo 8.

That is... the Jewish school in Bad Nauheim.

Photo 9.

This is my grandparents' house.

And who took the photo?

I did, with a pinhole camera.

And when did you take that photo?

When I was about ten or eleven years old.

Thank you. Yes please.

Photo 10.

This is my parents' house and business in Montabaur.

Address?

24 Bahnhofstraße.

And who took the picture?

‘AS’ [Alfred Stern] - With a pinhole camera.

And are you parents on there?

They are upstairs, yes.

[1:52:34]

Photo 11.

Yes please...Who do we see on this photograph?

It's my father, taken in the 1930s.

Is this how you remember your father?

Yes.

Photo 12.

Yes please.

That's my mother, in the 1930s.

Photo 13.

This is me in 1938.

And is this the picture which was used on your documents?

Yes, it was used on my travel documents.

Photo 14.

Yes please...

That is Rowden Hall School in Cliftonville, near Margate.

And did you take this photo? ...Did you take that photo?

I'm not sure. I don't think so. I don't think I had a camera at that time.

Photo 15.

This was my uncle Ernest and my aunt Margaret née Frankenstein, with my cousin Gabriel Stern and myself, Alfred, or 'Freddie' Stern.

And when was it taken?

Probably in the 1940s or 50s.

And where?

In London.

Photo 16.

This is my cousin Ronnie and I on motorbikes, going... on a holiday in Devon and Cornwall.

What was his name?

Ronnie.

Photo 17.

Yes please.

This is my uncle Hugo Lowenstein [pronounced first English and then German] – Löwenstein.

And did you stay with him?

He managed to get to England. And he married a lady called ...Friedel Süßkind. And she was married to Hugo Lowenstein.

And what happened to them after the war? Did they stay in England, or...?

They stayed in England. They only met in England.

And how long did you live with them?

For about a year-and-a-half. In a place called Shrewsbury.

Thank you.

Please... what do we see there?

[1:56:15]

Photo 18.

This is...Gaby Simson and Freddy Stern, in the Alps.

And when was that?

1949.

And where?

In Switzerland.

Photo 19.

My wife, Gaby and my son Gerald. And that's me. I'm sorry to say my wife passed away in nineteen... 2012...February the 20th.

Photo 20.

Yes please... Freddie what do we see on this picture?

A lot of characters.

Gerald Stern: This is a picture taken for Dad's ninetieth birthday on the steps of the synagogue in Newcastle. It shows my sister and I and our families and my parents-in-law.

And we're all gathered together. And also, Ronnie and Gabsie are there – Ronnie and Gabriele Stern, who are like a brother and sister to Dad.

[1:57:52]

Document 1.

This is my travel document coming from Herborn to England. I travelled from Hamburg, via Le Havre to... Southampton. And that was on the 21st of March 1939.

Document 2.

Yes please. Freddy what do we see here?

This is Alfred Stern's travel document to England.

Issued by...

Issued by the city of Herborn.

Document 3.

Yes please.

This is my travel document. And it contains the data about myself for entering England.

Yeah - it's probably the file of the [Refugee] Children's Movement.

Yeah.

Which is now with World Jewish Relief.

Yeah.

Document 4.

This is my initial interview when I came to England.

This is the document obtained from the Children's Movement.

Yeah. Yeah...yeah.

When did you receive this... Gerald?

Gerald Stern: About eighteen months ago.

So, quite recent.

Gerald Stern: Yes.

Ok, I just want to say thank you very much again, for telling us your story and sharing your...

I thank- I thank you for all your patience, and all your help and all the work you've both done.

Thank you.

I'm very grateful.

Thank you.

But I'm afraid some of it...

[End of photographs and documents]

[2:00:10]