

IMPORTANT

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The Association of Jewish Refugees
2 Dollis Park, London N3 1HF
Tel. 020 8385 3070

ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk

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Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	AJR Refugee Voices Archive
Ref. no:	RV313
Interviewee Surname:	Gilbert
Forename:	John
Interviewee Sex:	Male
Interviewee DOB:	22 March 1929
Interviewee POB:	Vienna, Austria

Date of Interview:	29 April 2025
Location of Interview:	Tickton, Yorkshire
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
Total Duration (HH:MM):	4 hours 24 minutes



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV313
NAME: John Gilbert
DATE: 29 April 2025
LOCATION: Tickton, North Yorkshire
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:00]

Today is the 29th of April 2025. We're conducting an interview with Mr John Gilbert. We're in Tickton, North Yorkshire, and my name is Bea Lewkowicz. Can you please tell me your name and your name at birth?

John Hans Gilbert.

And your name at birth?

Hans – I've kept Hans – Hans Goldstein.

And where and when were you born, please?

In Vienna. Neubaugürtel. That's near the centre of Vienna.

And when?

22nd of March 1929.

John, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive.

Delighted.

Tell us something about your family background, please.

Well, shall I start at the beginning?

Yeah.

Well, as I said, I was born in Vienna. My mum and dad in fact got married on the 22nd of March '28, which is exactly one year. Now, that takes some doing [laughs] to get the exact date [laughs]. And they – their only home – they had a little home before, when they first married, a little flat. In fact at a previous interview, you know here, Bernadette, found a newspaper article where the address was where my mum and dad moved in to after their honeymoon. I was born and I was spoilt rotten, being the only son, in every way. And like many Jewish families in those days it was like a status symbol, if you had a maid, you were somebody, even if you didn't have any money. The maid didn't get much money but she got full board and lodging. And Mum and Dad had a maid called Anna. [00:02:00] She was a treasure. I loved her very much. In fact after the war my mum looked her up and her husband had died at Stalingrad fighting for the Austrians against the Russians, and we met her and she used to send her money every Christmas. And she was a lovely – she used to take me in the pram originally and then she was there right until we left Vienna. She stayed loyal. She was, I think, the fifth or sixth daughter of a farming family, very, very poor, and the fifth and sixth child was usually finished up in domestic servant as a maid. Where she slept, I cannot remember. Our flat was the very top floor of this huge flat – mostly flats in Vienna – a corner, with huge windows, I remember, with shutters outside, proper double glazing, separated by this much space, not a little space for that. And we had a *Kachelofen*, which is a tile beautiful set [ph] in the corner. I remember that. So it was kind of central heating, although the bedrooms were freezing. Where Anna slept, I cannot remember. I remember we had a huge room, two rooms, but I can't remember another bedroom but I don't know where she slept but she lived in with us completely.

And what was the address, John, of this flat?

Vierundvierzig, 44, Neubaugürtel. I always remember the number because it's twice twenty-two. Whenever I bet, it's always twenty-two [laughs]. I've only won once at Las Vegas on a twenty-two, nowhere else. I lost everywhere. So –

Siebter Bezirk? 7th Bezirk [district]?

7 Bezirk. About two or three miles from the centre of Vienna. [00:04:00] Vienna's got one of the best transport systems in the world. I've been back there since – the trams – in fact, the trams in Croydon are from Vienna. I think the trams in Manchester are from Vienna as well, made. So it was a marvellous – I remember going on the trams. I also remember going – on a Sunday we used to go to the Vienna Woods or to Schönbrunn. Lots of lovely places outside of Vienna. Of course, the Prater is famous. When I was a little boy I used to like the old swings and roundabouts. In Vienna I was sent – Mum and Dad – Mum had to become Jewish to marry – to be allowed to marry my dad. Dad's father, he had a wonderful voice, a good pianist as well. He had a wonderful voice and his father wanted to become a cantor with his voice but he ruined it all because when he was fourteen, he used to play mostly with Christian boys and one day his dad caught him eating pork sausages, so that was a [laughs] blemish to start with. And he obviously mixed a lot with Christian families around there and he fell in love with my mum and she became Jewish 100%, so I was brought up – on a Saturday I used to go to synagogue, I went to *shul* there. I remember learning the Hebrew language, writing –

Which synagogue? Where was it? Do you remember?

Ah. No, I do remember. I might tell you afterwards. It's on the way to Schönbrunn. In fact, there is on the Internet – that synagogue was burnt at Kristallnacht and I was there on Kristallnacht. [00:06:01] For some reason or other, that night Dad went and I took – he took me to near the synagogue, so we watched. Now, that was a very dangerous thing to do because if people had – Dad was – looked fairly Jewish. I don't, but he did look quite Jewish. But he took a risk and I – we watched as all the books and the Torah was brought out and

burnt and the rabbi was made to, with a toothbrush, to the pavements, clean. They were kicked and screamed and then they set fire to the synagogue and I saw it burn.

You saw it.

I can always remember that. At school, when I was at school I had – 20% of the children at my school were Jewish, so automatically in the morning we went to – this rabbi came and we had prayers before school. The Christian children were separated. This was – but it was quite normal. It wasn't racist at all. We were friends, we mixed together.

In the Volksschule?

In the *Volksschule*. No –

Volksschule was about ten-minute walk. I think Siebengasse [ph]. It was only a five-minute walk and I used go on my own in fact. In Austria, in Vienna, you go to school I think when you're six or seven and you go to school at eight to one. Typically Austrian, very clever, they don't have to provide meals, do they, because they finished at one or two o'clock [laughs].

Yeah. You had lunch at home?

[Laughs] Yeah, so – and when Hitler walked in, into Vienna, the Anschluss, I shall always remember it because it was on the radio and being a boy, I was excited by the language he used. It seemed to be full of hope and determination and he knew exactly what he was doing. [00:08:04] And I was really impressed with the radio and after I heard the broadcast from the *Reichsrat* in Vienna when Hitler – when there were tens of thousands of Austrians there, I never blamed the Viennese because if you didn't join in, and you criticised that, you were sent to a concentration camp. So, how many people were forced to do it, how many people? You can't – and you certainly can't blame the current generation. You know.

But you remember your own excitement, you said?

Oh, I was excited at the time and afterwards I spoke to Mum and Dad, and they'd also listened, and I – they said. John, Hans, you've got it all wrong. The world is changing. It has changed today. You are not going to like what's going to happen. And I didn't know what the hell they were talking about. Well, I did two days later because at school, two days later, the headmaster suddenly appeared with a black shirt and a swastika. He had joined, or he was a member of the Nazi party, and he announced at the communal- in future all the Jewish children were to be totally separated from the Christian children and that when we went home at lunchtime, we were to walk on the other side of the pavement opposite the school, whichever only on the- not on the other pavement and all the Christian children were to walk on the other side. And within minutes of us walking on the other side, I had no – still didn't cotton on at all – I suddenly realised that stones and rocks were being thrown at us, bricks, anything they could their hand on, bottles. They all missed me. [00:10:00] But I looked across and they were my friends. Lots of them were my friends. So overnight, one afternoon everything changed. And when I got home, I must have had a chat to Mum. This is supposition. Memory is a strange thing. Sometimes it's what you're told becomes your memory but I remember that fairly clearly, I spoke to Mum and I said, now, I realise what you said. It's totally different. And I never went back to that school again. She decided that I wasn't going to go there. No sick note, nothing. And we moved out that – next day, we moved out to my auntie's. Mum only went back occasionally, and we went to my auntie's who was Christian, who lived near Südbahnhof and I stayed with them – we must have been there for maybe three or four months. And that's where Mum started – my dad had by this time swam across the river into Prague. And the reason he went to Prague was that his company which I'll explain just now, he was a representative. He wasn't a director but the two directors, husband and wife, they were sued with fraud and so was my dad, as their manufacturer's representative.

And the company was – what was that company?

Um, now, I'll think a bit later. [Zuckerwahn].

Zuckerwahn?

Zuckerwahn. It was named after a local area in Vienna. No, I can't remember it but it was –

We can come back to it.

A little firm employing about thirty, forty people, and Dad was their sole rep. In fact, he told one wonderful story, they also made chocolate, and one day he walked in – this was some years before – he had – he said he had three bad luck. [00:12:05] One was, I got chickenpox and he caught it from me, very seriously, he nearly died. A year later he was involved in a train accident where two or three people were killed. He got away with just scratches. And there was a newspaper article, again which Bernadette found, where my dad, Viktor Goldstein, was injured, [laughs] not very badly. And then Hitler walked in. He said, three times, bad luck, every year. My dad was also charged a fairly – he said a fairly benign, not a Nazi, a Jew – judge, and he bound them over to appear at a later date on bail and his solicitor, also Jewish, said to him, Viktor, you're going to be sent to a concentration camp if you don't get out. You're going to be found guilty, there's no doubt. So Dad skipped the country using people smugglers – he must have paid them – swam across this river – my mum said he was pulled across – and went to Prague where there were at least eighty or ninety of his family. They were all – I remember most of them were in the leather trade or shoe trade. Jewish people were – there was a lot of – leather was one of the main –

Because John, you didn't tell us, because your father was connected to Prague, so tell us about his background, because you haven't told –

Yes. Well, Dad was born in Prague, 1901. He was the youngest of seven boys and one sister and they all perished except one brother who emigrated to Australia, but we lost contact with him but it's too late now. [00:14:00] And he survived during the war because he finished up in Italy. Now, Italy didn't enforce the Jewish – against the Jewish quite as much as Germany, not till the end, and he managed to get to Australia. The other one who survived was Dad's cousin, Stenna [ph], he was the youngest judge in Prague at the time, and he came to England and had to take all his exams in England, became a lawyer. And then after the war he went back to Prague, which was a mistake because the Russians walked in and he was treated very badly but he managed to escape a second time and he finished up with a very large – he

finished up with one of the biggest law firms in the City of London, Oppenheimer, Nathan & Vandyk. I always think it's a lovely name [laughs].

So that was your uncle?

That was my dad's cousin.

Dad's cousin, hmm-hmm.

So they're the only ones who survived. No one else.

And tell us, how did your dad get to Vienna?

Vienna. He left – my granddad was a representative, manufacturer's representative. There are four generations of manufacturer's representatives in our family. I thought my grandson, Hilary's, was the third generation because that's the worst one. They usually ruin the business. I discovered I was the third one [both laugh]. Gregory in fact, is the fourth and he's also now running his own business, so it's in the blood.

Yeah. So your grandfather was already in manufacturing?

Yes, manufacturers. That's what he was in Vienna. and he –

So he moved to – from –

He moved – his – my granddad moved from Vienna – from Prague to Vienna, which is only two hours on the train. It's like Birmingham to London. [00:16:00]

And he took his children? So, he had –

Took his children with him and his wife. My grandmother, I never knew her. She died when my dad was quite young I think. She died I think when he was thirteen or fourteen, so he was

left with a family. But he was the youngest. And he retired of course, in Vienna and then Dad's first job – when he got such a bad report from his school, fours and fives, he got smacked by his dad and then he got a job, because the war was on at the time, '14-'18 war.

First World War.

The Austrians relaxed the law. There were many trades in Austria and Germany which no Jew could go in to. You could become a doctor, you could join the army. It was extraordinary. Or you become a doctor. So many of them were funnelled in to professions which they could do. I think you could be a lawyer. It's very strange, what you could and what you couldn't be. And one of the things you couldn't be, you couldn't work in a chemist or a druggist. You were not allowed to. But Dad was the first one to be allowed to work in a druggist. Now, a druggist is not one selling drugs [laughs]. A druggist is a bit like America, they are allowed to – in those days all creams, perfumes, were made by the druggist, they had recipes. So, Dad, in fact he's – I've got his book of all the recipes in it. He used that in England in fact. Beautiful writing. *Kurrent*. It was different writing. Beautiful writing in a book of all the different recipes of how to make this. And when he was – he was very – all our family, the boys tend to grow when they're fourteen. [00:18:03] They shoot up. I was quite small and he was quite small. And he had to go up ladders to get at the bottles. And one day he went up a ladder, slipped and a bottle of sulphuric acid fell over and he was badly burnt, but not too badly. He carried on working. So, he was a druggist. Then when the war finished, he decided he would like to try and be a rep, so he joined a company, a Jewish company, and they – the stories he tells me, I don't quite understand it, but they sold everything. And one of the things they sold, they were the agents for Esso Petroleum, from America. And they even sold railway lines [laughs]. Everything, you know, they – trains. And Dad somehow or other got involved with the Austrian Railway Company and he got the most enormous order, the biggest order anybody ever got, when he was nineteen. And he was on a commission basis instead of a salary because the owner thought that would be cheaper to give him commission rather than give him a salary, and he was on 10% commission. So when he got this order he thought, by God, I'm a rich man. 10% of, you know. It was like ten years' wages. And then he got his cheque and they said, oh, no, that's a special order. We're not paying on that. They said, well, that – we would give you more money than what we earn.

Dad said, well, so what? I got the order. So he left. And that's when he joined this chocolate firm. He was a bit of an entrepreneur there because they made – as well as making Manner wafer biscuits, like that – and in fact there were posters, photographs, of me with a sailor's uniform, plastered all over Vienna, eating this chocolate, this wafer biscuit.

You appeared in the ad? [00:20:08]

Yeah. It was – they had – I've seen pictures of it since. In fact, Vienna was the first place to have advertising, street advertising. They –

In the round –

Round thing with plaster. So, I was on that. And I do remember seeing it but I can't find any copies of it. And then one day he went to the factory and they said, Mr Goldstein, we've got about, you know, a couple of tonnes of chocolate but it's near the sell-by date and we haven't sold it. You know, it's a bit slow. Dad said, oh, that's a good idea. Well, can I have some of it? So, they brought it to him and he said, well, could I have a hammer? They said, what do you want a hammer for? So, he smashed the chocolate, put it in a nice bag and he said, we'll sell it, broken chocolate [laughs]. You know, if you broke it in [ph] manufacture, cheaper. And he sold the whole lot in about three weeks [laughs]. And in fact, he always said he got more for it than for the whole bars because, you know, you couldn't tell. He said it was cheaper – cheaper than what, so he was an entrepreneur, then. When this court case came, they were found guilty.

This was in '38? Or when was it?

In '38. He was found guilty but he was in Prague by this time. But the owners were both sent to a concentration camp but before she could be sent she actually committed suicide. And there is an article in Vienna papers saying that.

What was her name?

I can't remember her name. But a very sad story and it's true. But Dad always said, also when he travelled on the train, when they had this accident, he with other commercial travellers used to play cards, Remi [ph]. [00:22:11] And they were all Christians and they used to travel to all over Austria and they used to meet every few weeks on the train. And then when Hitler walked in, Dad was walking in Vienna past the opera house and not far away was an SS officer and he walked straight across to Dad, Heil Hitler. Dad looked at him. He was one of his friends playing cards. And he looked at Dad and he, said Viktor, get out, not tomorrow, today. Your life will not be worth living. Heil, Hitler, and walked away. And Dad took that as a warning, so he had two things and he – that's what made him go to Prague. So if it hadn't been for the court case, we may not be here.

And was the court case an excuse to take over the business? It was a –

Oh, yes, yes, it was fraud. And Dad was sentenced, you know, in his absence and after the war he went to Vienna, got a solicitor – but I can't find it – and he was pardoned. They –

So it was cleared.

It was cleared. Because he was always worried [laughs] if he got back to Austria he'd be arrested as a criminal, you see, [both laugh] with a record, so that's –

Yes, yes, yes. So, tell me a little bit about how – do you know how your parents met? How they – where they met?

No. Well, I think they met in the street, playing. Playing in the street as sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. They – Mum was born in '06, so she would have been twenty-two when she married, so they must have, you know. [00:24:11] And what Mum did at that time, I don't know. But she was – in Vienna, she was a housewife, with a maid [laughs] for status. And –

Yes, yes. But you said she converted.

And she insisted that – so on a Saturday, as I said, I went to synagogue, on the Monday to Friday I was sent to the convent with the nuns, and the nuns were wonderful. You know, you get some terrible things about nuns and Catholic priests and these, I won't have a word said against them. They were lovely to me in every way.

So after school you went to the convent, or –

No.

No? That was the school?

This was from three years old.

Oh, a convent school?

Kindergarten, kindergarten, till I went to the *Volksschule*. So Saturday I went there. On a Sunday we used to go to the local corner café, coffeehouses everywhere, and there were about forty, fifty Jews of all ages, some with beards, *peykeletz* [peyot] and everything, and I learned to played chess there.

Do you know the – do you remember the name of the coffeehouse? Kaffeehaus?

No. But I know exactly it was in Neubaugürtel. It was opposite Westbahnhof. It was a corner café. And to be honest, I think it was a Jewish coffeehouse. There were some coffeehouses which was frequented – because there was all Jews there, no one else would go there, you know [laughs].

So, do you remember the Kaffeehaus?

Oh yes.

You went. What did you have there? What did you eat there, or drink?

Well, I think I drank apple juice, *Apfelsaft*. I always liked *Apfelsaft*. In Austria, what I liked best of all was their *Himbeersaft* [raspberry syrup] with soda water. [00:26:05] That is the speciality. And after the war we represented German companies because Dad had got all these agencies. From that first agency which my grandfather had, we got other agencies because they were friends of friends and they said, oh, we know a good man in England, so Dad picked up other agencies. And one of the agencies was of course knives. We used to sell nearly £2 million of knives a year, catering knives. Some of them, £180 each, selling. Beautiful, beautiful knives. And I always remember that the owner was Mrs Felix. Now, her father who owned the firm, Felix, was a leading Nazi in Solingen. You know. So that's that. And Mrs Hein, who was the owner of the surgical forceps, she was left the business. She was the secretary to the owner, of Mackenbach, and when he died, he had no family and she inherited the business. But she only had it for a few months. The war broke out. They probably did munitions and they were bombed. And she – Mrs Felix, we got the agency for knives because she was a friend. And I always remember, she phoned me up one day, says, John, and Pam – because she wanted to give us something – how would you like to go to Vienna? I said, why? She said, well, we're going to the *Opernball*, the opera ball, where all the debutantes dance. You know, you see it, hundreds and hundreds of them. So, she said, and my uncle is director of Braun – Braun, the razor people – and he gets tickets for the opera ball, which is like gold dust, and I can get these tickets. [00:28:07] I said, wonderful. So, Pam and I went across and went to the *Opernball*. It's absolutely unbelievable. The richest people in the world go there. And after it, when we came out, the crush was so bad it could easily have been a Hillsborough. Everybody could have gone flying. Fur coats. It was – everybody showing off. And Pam and I were there. And we had a room in the opera house. We were there, about twenty of us, and I spoke to her, her uncle, and I said, but we're not in the opera. He said, don't worry. He said, I know everybody, I know all the porters and that, and we will simply walk in and be able to watch it from the inside. When it came to watching it, all the people who he normally knew weren't on duty. We couldn't get in. We watched the ceremony on television [laughs] in a room. But then when they finished parading, Pam and I danced, and we danced from twelve o'clock to half past six in the morning. There was one room where – a huge dance floor where we did the *Walzer*.

When was this, John? When?

Oh, twenty years ago. It was – Pam – it –

You enjoyed it?

It was absolutely fun – and in fact, I've got a film of Pam and I dancing, which they took. And we did the *Walzer*. And then there was also, what they do with the opera is amazing. It's huge. You've seen pictures of it, haven't you?

Yeah.

But behind it, the stage is as big as the opera in the front. And for the *Opernball*, they do the most unbelievable thing. They convert the back into the exact replica of the front. [00:30:02] It's an *Opernball*, and there they have jazz dancing, the quickstep and that, so we switched between the quickstep. And I met Pam at a dance in Hull University, so –

Okay, so you're both avid dancers?

We love dancing. And we used to go dancing to the Pasadena Roof Orchestra at Eastbourne. And in fact, they came to Beverley recently and we went to a concert. There were 300 people there, all white-haired, you know [laughs]. Pasadena – the 1920s music. Wonderful. And –

Yeah. So, you're still dancing today?

If I dance, I'll fall over [laughs]. And when I go around in circles, everything dances, you know [laughs]. Pam was – she said, you're a good dancer, but she said, you've got no sense of timing [laughs]. Now, how you can be a good dancer without a sense of timing, I never did know. So no, it was – that was an experience. And the extraordinary thing, Mrs Machenbach, when we used to go to exhibitions in Germany, my dad had started – well, she'd started a system whereby my dad used to be quite tired in the afternoon and she insisted that he went to bed and lay down in a bed and had a two-hour sleep, siesta, in the middle of an exhibition. I

actually [ph] think it's ridiculous. Anyhow, when Pam and I went, she insisted that I go to bed [laughs]. And Pam and Mrs Hein – she was a huge woman, about 20 stone – they didn't – they couldn't converse but Pam managed to learn German a little bit from her but they became real, true friends. And once when we went across, she gave Pam a lovely parcel. She said, this is yours. So when we went through Customs, the Customs officer said, what is that? [00:32:01] I said, now, I'm going to tell you a story. You're not going to believe it [laughs] but I haven't got a clue. We were given it. Now, they could have been drugs, couldn't they? He said, what? You don't know what's in it? I said, no, it's a present. So, we opened it and it was a Hummel figure, which we've still got. A big one. And she had a niece who – she said, when you die, please can I have that as a – you know. And one day she came and she said, where's that Hummel figure? Oh, she said, well, I'm terribly sorry, I dropped it, [laughs] as an excuse. But then one day I went there and she said, Hans, I've got a story to tell you. And she brought out some papers and she said, look at this. She said, well, you know, Solingen was a very Nazi city, very – armaments and really, you know. And she said, my father worked in the archive department of the local council. He's responsible for all the archives. And of course, he had to join the Nazi party and all that, otherwise he would have lost his job. And then one day he was looking through the archives and he came across his name and he discovered that his great-grandfather was Jewish. Now, he took those records out, took them home, and she found them ten years later. So, he- she in fact had Jewish blood in her. And I always thought to my dad – Dad always said she was a good German, you know [laughs]. She said, I'm a good German. Now, she said, I am even more so. It's extraordinary, isn't it?

Amazing. So, let's just go back to Vienna, pre-war. So, you remember the Kaffeehaus and going to school, going to kindergarten. [00:34:02] So you had a happy childhood?

Oh, very happy childhood. Very happy. And I can't remember my friends. I had lots of friends, mostly Christian friends. We used to go to the park. And an extraordinary thing, there were two main roads, the trams. I used to go to the park on my own. But then my – Alison – Hilary's sister's husband, he lived at Harrow and he went to school in Northwood and he used to go by bus from Harrow to the Harrow Underground station and he used to catch a Underground to Northwood when he was six years old. Well, you wouldn't do that now, would you? You'd be had up at social for neglect of your children.

So you were quite free in Vienna? Walking around.

Absolutely. Exactly. And –

Did you do sports? What did – did you play football, or do other –

No, in Vienna I used to kick a ball about a bit. I went ice skating. In fact I've still got them. I skated and I flew down like that [makes gesture with arms] and someone skated over it, you know [laughs]. My finger hang- so, I went ice skating and all that. Swimming, I had probably about forty swimming lessons, a fortune. Breast stroke. If anyone teaches a child the breast stroke, I will shoot them because it's the wrong stroke. You don't teach them that. And I could not swim. And all these lessons, the teacher always was outside, telling you what to do. Never got in. I went to Cornwall in the rough sea. Portreath was three mile – we used to cycle to – and my cousins got me a bike in Vienna and I was taught how to cycle when I was ten years old. That's another story I'll say. But I used to cycle everywhere, in Vienna as well.

[00:36:00] And, what was it? When I arrived at Croydon Airport – we landed at Croydon Airport because we went by plane – mum could spend the money by plane to Prague and then on to Croydon Airport. And when we got to Croydon Airport I remember, I could remember exactly where we were. We went on a bus to the Jewish Centre at Bloomsbury, on the corner there, to report that we had arrived. And when we arrived, they said, oh, to my mum – they realised she was born Christian, you know, so that was a little bit – not – the reception wasn't quite as good as I thought. I always remember something was not – they didn't treat her quite as an equal. They said, oh, your son, we want you to go with him to Suffolk. Not to Risby. And we finished up at a vicarage in the middle of nowhere, just like around here. But in a field, there was this huge vicarage, no central heating, no electric lights. Cornwall was the same. No electric lights. Candles and oil lamps. And there was just the vicar. I think he may have had a housekeeper. He was very friendly, I remember that. But it was very distant. But I was going to be left there and Mum was going to go to Cornwall. That was the arrangement. Mum wasn't happy about it but we had no choice. And that morning I came down frozen because the bed was hard. Blankets, I hated blankets and sheets, I've been used to - I've got it now, eiderdowns.

Duvets?

Duvet. And I hated the blankets. Now, I prefer blankets to, you know. I – we came down for breakfast and I could smell something awful. And it was porridge. [00:38:01] I hate porridge beyond belief. Hilary, all the family, loves it. Just the look of porridge makes me ill. We got this porridge, no sugar, no milk, just porridge, water. And I thought, well, that's – pigs eat that. That's pigswill, you know. And it was awful. And Mum was leaving in an hour and I screamed the place down. I screamed and screamed and I wouldn't stop. I was a real brat. And the vicar also said, well, you can't leave him, you know. He's in a terrible state. Mum said, no, I can't, so we went back. We went back to the Jewish – dear, oh, dear. When I walked in, what's he doing here? And I got a telling-off. You're a brat, you're ungrateful. You know, this is – when we arrived in England, in fact the first – this is the only bad experience I've ever had in my life and in Camborne. We were put in Whitechapel, into dormitories where there were fifty women with about 150 kids, all in one huge room with just bunk beds. No water, no running water, what do you call, toilets.

Was it called Rowton House? Something like that, in –

Well, it had been converted to take the Jewish refugees, just an emergency, you know. And in fact, I think now the immigrants that come to England should also – not have beautiful flats and that, you know. That's half the trouble.

So you arrived there and –

We arrived there. That was terrible. I – all I remember about it, I know it was in Whitechapel, near Tower Bridge. It – the smell is still in my – that I can smell it. It was terrible. [00:40:00] Having been in beautiful Vienna, that was my first experience of England.

Was that before Suffolk or after? Or that was –

That was right after Croydon.

Right when you arrived?

When we arrived we were put straight into there. Then we went to the Jewish and they arranged about a week later to go to there. I came back there and then Mum said, no, I want my son near me. Eventually, they found – she got this job in Truro. They found this family of missionaries in Camborne, the Walbridges. And when I arrived there, they were a strange couple. Ex-missionaries from China. And they were treated like gods by the rich people in the area. They were ex-missionaries. You know, they had a statue, helping God and missionaries, Methodists and all that. And no one realised they had about ten children there. Some must have been their own, I'm not sure, but there were ten, all my age and a bit older, so we were – I was amongst ten. We were never hit, we were never beaten. But we didn't get enough to eat. Now, in Austria I'd been taken to a dietician because I didn't eat. Mum and Dad never realised that I used to eat all the Manner, you know, the chocolates [laughs] which were lying about.

You did eat [laughs].

I did eat [laughs] but they didn't realise. So, in Cornwall we didn't get enough to eat. Every meal, they had this principle that children should get up, not full, wanting more. But it kept going on, so we got really hungry. And then Dad managed to come – get to England and he came to visit me and he – we went to the shop – he didn't have any money –and he said, can I buy you something? We were at the baker, outside. I said, well, yes, could I have three loaves of bread? [00:42:00] Dad said, what do you want bread for? I said, oh, the bread we have isn't very good, you know, like they give it to them as a prison [ph]. And Dad never believed it. He knew there was something wrong but children will never admit there's something going wrong, will they? They hide it. And when I got back, I hid the three loaves of bread in the hedge and all of us used to go there every day and had two or three slices of bread. And since then I've always said, if you have a child who doesn't eat, don't take him to a dietician. Don't do that. You know what you do? You starve the bugger [laughs]. Perfect cure [laughs]. And then I went back to Camborne afterwards, you know. It was a com – we were put on a train

when we were evacuated at Paddington station, the same station as Mum and I travelled to Cornwall. And I remember – I've got a good memory – we went through Dawlish, where the train goes by the sea, across the wonderful bridge, Tamar Bridge, a Brunel Bridge, wonderful. And I remember it. And we were put on this train and from the moment I got on the train with a gas mask, a Phoney War, I was 100% sure I would finish up with these Walbridges [ph] again. I was terrified.

You didn't want to go back there.

I didn't want to go back but I couldn't get off. And when we got to Plymouth I thought, this is again, I'm going back to Camborne. And from that onwards a carriage was taken off the train and left on the platform for distribution of the children, all English children – not refugees – evacuees, London. [00:44:00] And at Saltash, that Truro – I knew all the stations – Redruth, Camborne. The carriage was taken off and I was back in Camborne. I thought, what's the chances of finishing in the same town a second time? And I knew I would be met with the Walbridges [ph] but Mr and Mrs [inaudible] met me and they were wonderful.

So you had a very different experience, then.

Oh, absolutely wonderful.

John, I want to hear more about it but I still need to go a little bit back to Vienna. I haven't finished. A bit more questions about Vienna. Can you –

I do waffle, but I'm sorry.

No, no, that's absolutely fine. We want to hear everything, as much as you can remember. Just tell us a little bit more about the neighbourhood and some of the memories, other memories you've got from Vienna. You said –

I don't remember much about the neighbours. I remember the caretaker. Every block of flats had a caretaker on the ground floor. And I remember the – in fact now you can see it on the

internet. It is still there. And after the war when I was eighty or seventy, Pam had a most wonderful idea. She said, for your seventieth birthday, to celebrate – this was ten days before my birthday – she said, to celebrate your birthday, let's all get together, the whole family, in Vienna. Ten days before. No arrangements, nothing. Now, you know what it's like trying to get a date but for a family, it's impossible, isn't it? Anyhow, I said yes. She said, we'll get cheap flights. Well, you try to get cheap flights ten days before, you know. It was the most expensive flight I've ever had in my life, [laughs] last minute. And then Hilary's lad there, he was about seven at the time, he got like diphtheria. [00:46:03] He had a very bad throat infection and it was touch and go and he managed – they managed to get there. And he arrived and he was – he's a real hypochondriac. He was really ill. Anyway, we all went to Vienna and we got there, a fairly old hotel, it was a five-star, it's where the great tenor, the Italian tenors used to stay, near the opera house, in the old days. It's seen better days. But they treated us very well. Right – Kärntner Straße, right in the heart of Vienna. It was the most wonderful holiday.

And did you go back to your building?

And we went – and then when we were there, Alison and Hilary said, Dad, can we see where you lived, where you were born? I said no, we don't want to go there. It was cold, it was March, you know, it was a bit chilly. I don't want to go there. We want to go there. And they nagged and nagged and nagged and eventually we went by – I knew the way to Mariahilfer Straße. They went shopping there and I thought they would forget. We're going back to where you were born. And I told them that the Kaiser used to go past that. It was magnificent, you know, it was like a palace, where I lived. Anyhow, we get there and we stand there and I always remember it, we looked up and I said, now, that was my home up there. And they all burst into laughter. I said, what are you laughing at? She said, well, look there, and look there. There was a brothel there, a nightclub there [laughs]. It was – it had become the red-light district of Austria [laughs]. And the building had holes in it where the Russians when they [laughs] occupied Vienna – they hadn't even repaired it, even then. Now, it's been all repaired, it's very nice.

And that building on the ground floor?

But I always remember [laughs]. Their laughter and said, and all these stories [laughs] you've been telling us, we don't believe a word now [laughs]. [00:48:05]

And that was the building where – with the caretaker?

That was the caretaker, a bit down below. And I remember that he had enormous – the doors, I think, it was to take pianos. You see, that piano, how the hell they got that up five flights of stairs. Well, they could in Vienna because the stairs were – have you seen in Vienna?

Wide. Yeah.

They're huge, stone stairs, sort of bowed in the middle where people –

So you had a grand piano.

And the grand piano had been taken up there.

And who played the piano?

My dad. Oh, he was – he played – he couldn't read – he could read music but he never bothered. He could hear a tune, sit there and play it. And he played – he used to be away from Monday to Fridays, never – he always used to come home on a Friday. And on a Friday, as soon as he walked through the door I said, Papa, can you play *Sturm am Plattensee* [storm at Lake Balaton]? So – but he'd never even – he hadn't even taken his shoes off. He sat down at the piano and he played this ten-minute piece. I now have it, a record. It's on the internet. I've had a lady who teaches piano come here because we got the music, and she played it when we had the, you know, housewarming. She played it on that piano.

Sturm am Plattensee?

Sturm am Plattensee. It is composed by – he was the third most famous composer in Hungary. Sturm am Plattensee. And it is – starts off very quietly. Plattensee is the shallowest lake in Europe. And when there is a wind, because it's so shallow, you get waves as big – two or three times as high as this house, suddenly, *Sturm*. [00:50:04] And this music starts very quietly, you know, just the little ripples and then a bit more ripple –

And you liked it?

And I used to – he used to tell a story at the same- as he was playing in. And I can see the waves growing and then at the end there's a storm and he used to go down like that, you know [laughs]. And it is the piece I like the most, you know. And I've since heard of some – I read some lovely stories about it – it's a bit rude, by the way – that it was the favourite piece of a wonderful royal pianist. She was a pianist and she used to love this piece and people used to say to her, play it for us, you know, in a – where all the dukes and the duchesses were there and the Kaiser and – but she had one unfortunate habit. She used to break wind [laughs] and it smelled [laughs]. The whole room would – and she couldn't stop it [laughs]. And as she played, you know [laughs]. I read this story and it's wonderful. And afterwards everybody used to applaud and somebody said – the Kaiser got up and said, the only thing is, you should have the piano in a different room to this room, you know [laughs].

But that was your favourite piece?

But it's on the internet.

Sturm am Plattensee.

Sturm am Plattensee. It's lovely.

And which language did you speak to your father? German or –

Well, that's another story.

Come on, then.

I had to keep German. My grammar – I took German for university. I took it as a subject. I passed because of the oral. Oral was okay. My grammar was non-existent. I was too lazy. Why learn grammar when you can – in fact I think it's always wrong to teach people grammar. [00:52:03] Grammar's all right if you're going to become a teacher or a professor. But it puts people off learning a language. All you should be allowed to speak. I can speak any language, by the way. I can be the Danes – they're the worst ones of all. You can't understand the Danes. But I can speak with my hands, converse. When Dad came to England he and Mum learnt English, in contrast to some of the immigrants now, who stay in and speak only their own language. And Dad spoke English when he was with his customers but he had a habit of pidgin English. He always said, not with, he said *mit*. And a number of his customers, they always used to say, hello, Mr Mit, you know, [laughs] because he wouldn't say with, it was *mit*. And then I said to him one day, I said, do you know, I bet you, you can't speak German or English for one minute. Pure German, pure English. I said, first of all, we'll have you in English. Within ten seconds, *mit* or some German came in. Then he spoke German. Okay, came in, you know [laughs].

Yeah. Did he speak some Czech as well?

No.

No.

No.

So he was German.

He didn't speak Yiddish either. In fact, he – one of his first jobs in England was – he had a job and then he got a job near the East End of London in a sweatshop of a small druggist, chemist, where he used his recipes. And he went there and there were two – the directors were two Jewish people, who were never there but who got the money from it. And he said

when he walked in, they appointed him as the production manager because he knew all these recipes. [00:54:04] It was wartime, they'd lost all their- you know, laboratory people, and Dad was appointed the production manager [laughs]. He had no idea. And when he came in they said – they didn't speak very good English, they spoke Yiddish all the time – they said, you speak Yiddish? Dad said, no, I'd rather speak English [laughs]. He didn't understand a word. And then he said to them, he said, I'll take the job, I'll take it. Not a very good salary. They put him on a bonus, you know, £1 if he hit 200%, real Jewish [laughs]. They said to him – he said, well, what I want to do first of all is close for ten days. What? Close? We're going to lose all the profits. But he says, I want to clean the place. The floors were that thick with chemicals. Hadn't been cleaned [laughs] for – Dad always said it was Polish cleanliness [laughs]. Dad always said he wanted the agency for rubbish for Poland [laughs] because in Vienna they thought of the Poles as lots of rubbish, you see [laughs]. Every religion's got its – isn't it? Look down on people or up. Anyhow, they eventually agreed and he had a horse and cart, he hired it, and I think he had twenty loads of rubbish went out of that place. And when they came back and they said, we didn't know there was a floor here [laughs]. And then he – during the war you couldn't get washing powder, you know, soap, but he had a recipe for a detergent and he was the first one in the British Isles to make a detergent – before Lever Brothers, before Proctor & Gamble. [00:56:00] And he made this detergent and he called it Kingdom Washing Powder. And my friend was a design – he was an artist and he designed the first detergent package. Kingdom Washing Powder. I always remember.

Yeah. And did he patent it?

No, no, nothing. He just – they just sold it. You know, he was a production manager. And then when the war finished and rationing went off, washing powders came back, you know, Persil and that, they said, oh, well, we'll stop the manufacture. Dad said, no. He said, detergents are better than – oh, they're not better than soap powder. It's an *Ersatz* product. It's a mixture. And he left because of that. He said he could sell it. He said, you can't sell it, you can't speak English [laughs]. And he could have – so he was the first. And the strange thing is, one of my first jobs after leaving university, I joined a company called Shaw & Sons in Fetter Lane, which is Fleet Street, when all the newspapers were still there, Telegraph, all the – it was all – and it was the most wonderful – the coffeehouses, the Kardomah and that,

there were all the journalists, and I was able to go and meet them. And I got this job at £3, 5 shillings a week [laughs]. No, but I had a monthly salary. Monthly meant you were a member of staff, you were one – but it was still £3 a week. I'd just got married and I got this job and it was trainee management. They employed about 200 people and they did forms for the law. In those days, all the forms were printed. Now, you use –

Yeah, digital. [00:58:02]

Digital. But they were all forms and each form cost 5 quid, you know, if you wanted one, printed by this company. And they were also bookbinders. The most glorious, gold-plated paper. It was a centuries-old trade. It was the most mag – I watched it. It was terrific. And my job was trainee management. There were twelve departments and for twelve months I was in each department for one month, in view of becoming management. Now, you know what I learnt in those departments? How to make tea. I was the best tea maker in that company [laughs] because in four weeks the people working there, what the hell do we do with him? Oh, get him to make the tea and the coffee and the biscuits [laughs]. So that was our first. Then I left and I got an interview with Chappy's at Melton Mowbray, famous for its pies. Chappy's is part of the Mars Group, Mars Bar. And Chappy's, I went there and the produced Pedigree dog food and cat's food. I would rather eat some of that food than some of the food we get now in ready meals. It was the most wonderful hygiene you've ever seen. The meat was as fresh as can be. I thought cat food would be, you know, gone-off meat, awful. This was – and they were top. And I was – I had big ideas. Using my Bachelor of Commerce degree, I applied for the job of market research assistant and I applied for the job and I was interviewed by Dr Gordon Booth, who was the director of it, and he interviewed me.

[01:00:01] He interviewed five people, two from Cambridge, one from Oxford, [laughs] one from London and one from Hull. They all had a first-class honours degree. I had a third class pass [laughs]. I was too lazy to bother. And I thought, well, you know, go home now, it was one job. And then I was interviewed by the sales manager and he took me all over the place, fell in love with me, and he says, you're a born salesman. I said, no, my dad is. He said, well, you are. I can tell. You could [inaudible]. So I said, well, what would – he said, I'll give you a job at £6 a week, which is £1 more than the market research [laughs]. So, I said, but, you

know, what would I do? He said, well, you get a case with samples in it and you go to all the dog shops.

Yeah. Sales rep?

Yeah. I didn't like that. I didn't like the idea of selling dog food. It was beneath my university, you know. It was just mundane. So, I said, no. He said, well, I'm surprised. Anyhow, after I'd seen all the different departments – they made us very welcome – I got a train back to London, third class, they paid for that, and on the platform at the station I waited there. On walked Dr Gordon Booth. He was going back to St Albans in London. He said, oh, hello, Mr Gilbert. He said, would you like to join me? I said, join you in what? He said, well, I've got a first class compartment. I'll up you. I said, thank you very much. So, I thought, I bet you I've got the job, you know. Anyhow, we sat down and he said, I want to tell you something. He said, you are the first to know, you haven't got the job [laughs]. So, I said, oh, dear, and thought, well, that's not very nice [laughs]. That's just a sop for a start. He said, but, he said, I am thinking of starting a business on my own. [01:02:03] He said, during the war I was with Beaverbrook in the government in the Ministry of Food and I made dehydrated foods, wartime, for the army, and I'm an expert on that and I'm thinking of making my own factory. I'm having this made and I've got it ready. He said, they're in small packets and they're fishcakes, dehydrated fishcakes. I thought, well, that's worse than dog food, isn't it? [Laughs] But there was rationing. So anyhow, by the time he finished, he said, now, I can't pay you what you would have got here. He said, I can pay you £4 plus any expenses, you know, buses. No car. And you'll have a case with these samples in [laughs]. So I joined him and it was in St Albans, nice offices, Dr Gordon Booth, and I went there and he really made the job attractive. He said, you will be the first representative and you'll become the sales manager. In two years' time we'll have twenty reps and you'll be the sales manager. So, you know. [Headroom]. And I started selling. Now, I first went to four-star hotels, big hotels. Well, they said, fishcakes? God, no. The last thing we have, you know. And then I went downmarket and finished with Salvation Army [laughs] hostels, you know [laughs]. Church army barracks, canteens, Michelin in Stoke-on-Trent, I went all over. And then I discovered I could go up to Liverpool where Pam's mum and dad lived, and stay there, and then go on a bus to the cotton mills of Lancashire. In those days there were hundreds of cotton mills.

[01:04:01] And you think of cotton mills as – but they're in a field, with beautiful countryside. And I went to one cotton mill and I could see the next cotton mill two miles away across the field, so I trudged across the field and I discovered they would buy it 'cos nice and cheap, you see, and there was rationing. And I got the business nearly breaking-even point. We were still losing money and I was holding on. And then Mr Churchill de-rationed food. Now, who the hell would want dehydrated fishcakes? [Laughs] The market just collapsed. Now, dehydrated food is Pot Noodles and that. It's a huge business. But the wrong time, the wrong place. So eventually, I got my salary down to £2 and 10 shillings to hang on, and then eventually he said, look, I can't afford this anymore. We're losing money. So, I left. And Alison was expected and this was in May, I had no job. All I had was fishcake samples. I had enough for about six weeks. And we used to – Pam and I had fishcakes. And the money ran out, we couldn't pay the rent on this little house. We had – and we didn't dare tell my mum and dad who didn't have any money either, and Pam's mum and dad didn't, so we were broke. I knew – it's a good thing to be broke. Rent, didn't pay the rent. We fell behind. And I applied – started applying for jobs and got nowhere. They said, well, can you drive, you know. So, I thought, I'll have to take – start – so I had six driving lessons, just managed to spend the money on that, failed, got another one a few weeks later, no, managed to pass and that was a miracle because the chap who was my examiner said he would retire in three weeks' time, so I thought, my God, so he's going to fail me. [01:06:10] I had failed the first one. I did a few things wrong [laughs]. And I was driving and he said, stop. And I thought he meant, stop, you know, so I did an emergency stop and he nearly went through the roof [laughs]. He said, no, I want you to stop to do a reverse turn. You know, in those days. You don't do that anymore, now. So anyhow, I started backing and hit [imitates]. He hit the windscreen and I stopped. He said, get out. So, I got out. He said, now, look. So, I looked. He said, now, what's going to happen in the next second? I said, I'm going to hit the pavement. He said, and what does that mean? I said, I fail. He said, yes. You hit the pavement, you fail. He said, now, you're a good driver. Get back in and drive. So [laughs] I started going back, hit the thing. He said, you're going to do it again [laughs]. So by this time I thought, that's it, you've failed completely. And then somehow or other he told me what I was doing wrong and I went back and did – and I did everything perfectly after that. And I got out and I thought, well, I failed. And he handed me this piece of paper and he said, pass. I could have hugged him. He was the loveliest man who had ever lived [laughs]. So, I got a driving

licence. But three weeks prior to that I had an interview with a firm called Thomas Headley. Now, Thomas Headley –

[Break in recording]

Yes, let's finish the story.

So where was we?

You got your driving licence.

Oh, yeah. So, my driving licence. And this story – three weeks before that I managed to get an interview for Thomas Headley in those days, but they were already owned by Proctor & Gamble. **[01:08:08]** Now, you know Proctor & Gamble?

Yeah.

It's one of the biggest companies in the world, American [coughs]. And they had bought Thomas Headly but at first when I joined them they had left it completely to English management but typically with me, within six months the Americans took all the [inaudible]. And I had this interview and I always remember it was the Clapham – near Clapham Common, the Underground. I got out, walked through, and there was this very old, like a chapel, white building, just one storey, and inside I went, there was a waiting room and then it said, sales manager. And it was one of the Redgrave family, the cousin of the Redgraves, the great acting family [coughs]. And again, one job – or two jobs, rather, for five university graduates. Again, same story as before, Cambridge and Oxford, and me sitting there and they all boasted of their prowess, and I never said a word [laughs] where I was from. Anyhow, [coughs] I was – door opened, out came the Redgrave and the Redgrave sales manager. He said, well, gentlemen. He said, first of all, I would like you to do a short test. Will you follow me? So, we came through, five desks, and in front of us there was a paper, 100 questions. It was the first of its kind, an American idea, never been in England before – your son may even have come across it now – called an intelligence test. Now, intelligence tests and porridge are

equal, as far as I'm concerned [laughs]. **[01:10:01]** As soon as I see the word intelligence, a blank wall comes down. And there was this paper. Now, one of the main troubles with exams is I don't read the question [laughs] and I don't read the beginning, so I skipped that and went to question one. And there were 100 questions, though I didn't even know how many. I thought, well, I'll just carry on. And the first – the question was, to give you an example, two triangles and a circle. Which is the odd one out? Obvious, isn't it? Ah, not to my mind [laughs]. It's a trick question. So, I got out a – found a piece of string somewhere and I measured the circumference to see whether the triangles were different, you know, different. And I put down one of the triangles because I thought it was different to the triangle. And this went on, all very simple questions. I could see, it was – obviously they were trying to test our intelligence and I saw things which didn't exist. Half an hour, he comes in and he says, right, pens down, and I thought, oh, my God. I'd answered fifteen of 100 questions. Fifteen. I hadn't read that there was half an hour. So, I thought, well, I'll go home now. Anyhow, we sat there. He said, well, he said, now, then he comes out and he says, right, John Gilbert. So, he said, sit down, so I sat down. He said, well, I really shouldn't be seeing you at all because, he said, I – but I wanted to see which idiot had done this paper, and it's you. He said, how come you did – it's incredible. We've never had a mark like this before. **[01:12:02]** So I said, well, I'm very sorry. I didn't read the time limit. And he said, well, that doesn't worry me. He said, you got eight of the fifteen wrong [laughs]. So I got seven out of 100 [laughs]. So, I thought – I said, well, I'll go home now. He said, no, stay where you are. He said, you've got the job. I said, pardon? He said, now, don't, when you go outside, don't tell the others. Not a word. He said, but you've got the job. And I said, but how? He said, well, don't question it. [Laughs] You've got the job. And I said, but why? He said, well, he said, this is the Americans are taking us over and this has arrived from America and, he said, it is the most ridiculous test I've ever seen in my life. It is absolute nonsense. All these make no difference to a salesman. You're a salesman, you're not – your – intelligence has got nothing to do with selling. He said, you're going to be the living proof and I'll stuff it down their throats. You're going to be the most successful salesman in the company. You've got the job. And he said, and you've got a driving licence? I said yes. I didn't. And I went out and I was trembling like that. And he said, when can you start? I said, well, I've got to give notice. He said, well, I'm very pleased to hear that, that you're doing it correctly, [laughs] you know.

You made it up?

Made it up. And then I passed. And can you imagine? And I went there to collect my car. It was a little Ford car, no – there was no central heating, the window kept falling down, and I drove that car, first car I'd driven on my own, from Clapham Common to Russell Square. Now, when I got to Hyde Park Corner, it's – in those days it was the most used road in Europe – I kept to the left, but I had to turn right. [01:14:03] I couldn't turn right. I was terrified. So, I kept going left towards Kensington, going left, left, and I arrived home. It took me two and a half hours [laughs] from Clapham to Russell Square but I learnt how to drive. And again, like swimming, the way to learn how to swim is to dive in, is to go into traffic. You don't learn it on the beach, you know, traffic.

John, we're going to pick up the story and what happened to your work but I need to just go back to Vienna because it's where you've been – you need to focus on. I want to know, you described how things changed in your school and how sudden it was. How did you feel when that happened?

Well, I was devastated. It was the one – people often ask me, have you come across anti-Semitism? To be honest, I haven't. I've not looked for it either. I think if you look for it, you can always find it. I always made good excuses too. Every country's got – sorry. Every country's got its, you know, people hating each other. You know, Cornish people hate the Devon people or don't like them. I had no problem in Austria as far as I can remember until that day when the headmaster – I suddenly had an awakening how terrible it was. It was latent–

How did you feel?

In Austria it was the latent anti-Semitism. You always get it when there is a large minority. If there's a few, there's no problem. It's when you get 20%. Hungary was 30%, Budapest. No, I had a very happy life in Austria, very happy.

Were you, at that point were you scared or were you angry? How did you feel?

Well, no, I was terrified. At school, that was the most terrifying moment of my life.

[01:16:00] Also I was frightened when I went on the plane, until I arrived in Prague. I thought because at the airport they were all – the army was there, the SS was there, the brownshirts were there. You had this feeling – we were treated – thank God you were getting out of here, you know, we should really arrest you. I thought we could have been arrested at any moment. My mum was very, very brave and so was my dad to, you know, to risk that.

And you were only eleven years old?

Ten years.

Ten. And was –

Ten. I had my tenth birthday in England, in fact, so it was nice and easy.

Okay, so you just came –

Yeah. But [sighs] neighbours, I can't remember any neighbours. I must have had friends at school. I – when I used to go – I used to go tobogganing in Vienna. That's – we used to go. And we used to go to Semmering. There's a wonderful train journey. In fact, it's a World Heritage, the railway. It's got about I think 200 tunnels or something. It was – so many people died. And we used to go to Semmering. It's about an hour and a half from Vienna.

Tobogganing?

Tobogganing, yes. And I remember going for a walk once. This is in the spring. And we were walking on this and I was in front and suddenly, behind me there was a reindeer, or a deer [laughs]. In fact, yesterday when Hilary and I went to York to see my grandson, a deer went right in front of the car. But this was – we were walking and suddenly, a reindeer or a deer was behind me and I always remember [laughs] I was walking and this deer – but it's into the – my backside [laughs] and I went up in the sky and went flying down, you know [laughs].

[01:18:03] And I've always been – I was bitten when I was a little boy by a little, tiny dog. Terrified of dogs ever since, except that they've got a wonderful dog called Nala which is there, a Labrador, which is lovely, and I'm fine now.

So between the Anschluss and Kristallnacht, you said your mother moved to her sister.

Yes, that's right.

Yes. And was the idea that it's safer to be there?

It's safer there. Mum used to go – she had to go back to the flat to meet the – she took me with her, I don't know why. She didn't want to leave me on my own anywhere. She took me with me [sic] to the flat that time when the *Gauleiter* came, you know, took away the –

Tell us the story because you haven't told us yet.

Well, what happened was that we went to my auntie's to live there and something interesting happened, yes, I remember now, at the Südbahnhof. There I was known as Hans. I never gave my surname because Goldstein would have given it away. I was Hans. And I made two friends there, two boys my age, and they went to school, I didn't. They said I'd been ill. The story was I'd been ill, I was recuperating [laughs]. And we became friends and I always remember, and this is a good lesson, I walked with them to a shop. Hitler in fact made certain decisions. He changed – in Austria everything was like England, drive on the left-hand side. He changed – within a week of occupation he changed all the traffic to the right. Now, lots of people died because you've got off the tram in the middle of the road, everything was wrong, the trains were on the wrong side. [01:20:01] But in England, or Eur – democracies, that would take 100 years to change. There, he changed it within a week. That's what a dictator can do. And we were walking along and the boys said – we had a bit of pocket money – we'll go and buy some sweets. So we went into – oh, ice cream. We went into the shop, just the three of us, and behind the counter was the owner and as we walked in, Heil Hitler. And I always remember I – was with the two boys – my hand went up, Heil Hitler. I have always felt guilty about that. You know, it was an automatic, no thoughts whatsoever, but it was

automatic, and I've always felt it just shows how when you're in fear and you're trying to keep things secret, you join in, you don't want to be different. And I [sighs] walked out with the sweets and I've never forgotten that. And I said, if I had been Christian, I might have easily been in the Gestapo. It's quite, you know, it's – you're indoctrinated. This is how you become – this is like ISIS now, people indoctrinated when they're young and you can't believe it's possible, but it is possible. So that was Südbahnhof.

But John, when that happened was your father already [overtalking]?

Oh, he was already – oh, yes, he was already in Prague. This was –

So at what point did he escape to Prague, to –

He – that would have probably been about six months after the Anschluss.

Right, so March '38?

Yes, yes, yes.

So six months later.

About, yes, yes.

And just tell us again the story. He illegally left.

Oh, yes, it was – I'm sure – I don't know but I'm quite sure it was people trafficking, people who said, we know the way. [01:22:6] I mean he wouldn't have a clue how to cross the border, would he? You know, he'd walk straight into the Gestapo. They probably – bribery and corruption. They probably worked with the local party, get the money to let people cross.

And where was it? You said there was a river.

There was a river. It was somewhere on the border, Brno, or somewhere on the border between Austria and Prague. And then when he crossed the border he got a train to Prague, you see. And he had a shoe whereby his heel opened up and he put two diamond rings in there. The Jewish people always have rings and I think the reason for that is they're always ready to escape.

To leave.

To leave. And they have to have some money. Nothing better than jewellery, is there?

So he had it in his shoe and he escaped with that.

In his shoe. And that was all right. Some of the jewellery he had, the Germans took off him at the border, the Wehrmacht. He was arrested, as I said, by the Wehrmacht, and they were put into this room. He thought he was going to be shot two or three times and they took the rings off him, gave him a receipt, like my mum got a receipt, and in the next room they took the receipt off him [laughs].

But was that the second time he escaped or the –

No, that was the only time.

That was the first time?

First time. No, that's the second time. First, he was from Austria, the next time was from Prague into Kattowitz, so twice. He said whatever – and then he went – when he got the visa he went to Gdańsk, which is now a free port to Harwich, by boat.

So he took a boat.

Boat. A cheap –

From Gdańsk?

From Gdańsk to Harwich.

Okay. So can I ask you, so what – because your father was a boy when he emigrated to Vienna. Did he –

Yeah, six months. **[01:24:03]**

What was his citizenship?

Well, he was – well, it was part of the Austrian Empire, so it was Austrian. But in fact, they had autonomy, like Scotland, like Ukraine, you know, but people given autonomy, it doesn't mean anything. But the Czechs had Czech passports, although they were part of the Austrian Empire, whereas my passport is a Reich's passport, with a *Hakenkreuz*, swastika.

With a swastika, yeah. So, he had a different passport.

He had a Czech – and that's what saved him in – at Isle of Man.

Later? We'll come –

Because he proved [laughs] – he didn't tell them that Czech was part of the Austrian Republic. He said Austria occupied Czechoslovakia [laughs].

Yeah. We'll come back to his internment. Yeah, so he escaped the first time to Czech and stayed there, to Prague with relatives.

Yes, for a few months.

And then, second time? Tell us. He escaped. When did he escape from Prague to Poland?

To – it would have been in May.

When Germany walked in to –

Yes, yes, yeah, walked in to, yes. A few months after. Two or three months, 'cos they were starting to round up people then. You see, at first my cousins who were half-Jewish, half-Christian, they were all right until '43, when the Germans changed and said, if you're quarter-Jewish and eighth-Jewish, if you've got any Jewish blood, you're Jewish. And in fact, in that book which Karly [ph], my cousin, wrote about his experience, in the concentration camp when the Russians started to cross into Poland and they were coming nearer, the *Kommandant* or the overseer for him, he was a sadist, complete. He used to shoot people, strangle them, in front of everybody. [01:26:00] He had thirty young men lined up and – just lined up, and they thought they were going to be shot again and – 'cos he was there and he pointed at my cousin, Karly [ph] and he said, who is your best friend? And Karly [ph] never answered, you see. He said, well, you've got ten seconds to answer that question, otherwise I shoot. I know who your best friend is and I will shoot both of you when I say ten. And after eight seconds he pointed at his friend and he thought they would be shot, you see. He said, now, you two step forward, and he picked on about twenty of them, young men, and they were then marched out of the camp and he thought he was going to be shot again. And they were marched for about 100 miles back towards Germany to a wooded area where they built huts for the SS, hidden from the Russian advance. They had to build these – no central heating, no food. In fact, I think a third of them died there. And then one day in the middle of winter this young man arrived, you know, twenty-two, a young man and he was black and blue. His eyes, you know, everything. He'd been absolutely tortured and they just threw him into the bath and they discovered he'd been at Stalingrad, an SS officer, and just before they were encircled, his commanding officer found out that his grandfather was Jewish – SS officer – so he suddenly was stripped of his colonelship. [01:28:03] He was tortured and sent to this camp. And you know what happened to him when he got to the camp? He was beaten up again by the Jews, 'cos he was an SS officer. Now, can you think of anything – it's beyond words, isn't it?

So that was your cousin in Prague?

My cousin, Karly [ph]. And he survived. And then after the war when the Russians arrived, they let them go and they were given a horse and cart – again, this horse and cart business – and they were about 200 miles from Prague and they travelled by horse and cart in the direction in which they thought they were going. No food. But when they saw a farm they had the concentration camp clothes on. When the farmer saw them, they all ran away from their homes, so they were able to go into their homes and eat and take some food. And he got back to Prague a complete skeleton and he knew where his mother lived but he didn't dare go to his mum because he was frightened if he went there, his mother would have a heart attack. So he went to some friends, he recuperated a little bit and then he went to his mum, and the rest is history. And he died. And then he became the head under the Russian regime, the head of the repairs for the taxis in Prague, which were all owned by the city. And he was the head and he was told to join the Communist party but he wouldn't 'cos he could see what – because they were mistreating the Jews and he wouldn't join. [01:30:00] So he was very lucky. But he was such a good engineer that he kept his job.

So just to come back, John, to your father. So tell us about the second escape to Poland. How did he organise that, or –

Well, that – well, he must have – he would have gone through the same procedure, people smuggling, and it's only from what he told me. He did speak about it, my mum and dad. Some parents never spoke to their children about it.

They did speak about it?

They did speak about it. The one thing Mum – and I feel guilty sometimes. Mum and Dad in the background realised they could get compensation maybe. Mum wanted nothing to do with it after the war. She said, that's the past, I don't want the memories to come up at all. So, I felt rather guilty when I joined the AJR and I was told by whoever it was there that a social man would come and see me. I said, well, like my mum, I don't want a social serv – I've got – I'm lucky I've got a wonderful family. She said, oh, no, but you're entitled to it. And then all the family said, why not? So, I've learnt to live with it.

But you feel guilty about it?

A little bit.

Uncomfortable?

Uncomfortable, yes. A bit like when I said, Heil Hitler. These are the moments when you – the smell, of the – of that in Whitechapel, you know, that's with me.

When you arrived there?

Yes, being hungry. But swimming, you see, in Cornwall when I went to Miss Blamey [ph], I got a – we had a sort of a gang of boys and we formed the All-Year Swimming Club, all year, and we used to go swimming in the middle of the winter, except on Sunday. [01:32:04] Sunday, we went to chapel. But Monday to – we kept that going for a whole year. Every day after school we cycled to the beach and went swimming in the sea.

And did that help you, you think, psychologically or –

Oh, it made me, you know, it gave me – I ran, I did athletics at school. I always remember running in the mile when I was – I thought I was a marvellous rugby player. And the greatest achievement was we used to play at lunchtime, seven of us, six fifteen and sixteen-year-olds used to play against the twelve-year-olds. And I used to run through them and score fifty tries, you know. Came the real match, [laughs] I got walloped [laughs]. No, but swimming. When I went to Cornwall, I couldn't swim. And with the friends on the beach, we went into the sea. Saltwater helps. And they all splashed about and within three weeks I could do the crawl. So I've taught all the family how to do – Pam was a wonderful swimmer. The crawl. And it's – doggy paddle. That's what you'd want to start with. So if you want any swimming instructors at your place. And I'm renowned for teaching married women to swim, on holiday. I have taught about a dozen married women to swim. Now, they have to be married. I ask that question. And there was one lady in Majorca near where we are – we stayed at this

four-star hotel – and her son played with Richard, my son, and they used to play together, and she sat next to me. And then I saw her in the pool and she obviously couldn't swim and she was in her thirties, you know. [01:34:00] I said, you can't swim. She said, shh. No, she said, I can't. So, I said, well, I'll teach you. I said, are you married? She said, I'm divorced. I said, that's all right, then [both laugh]. So, I taught her how to float. Now, this is – married women, you teach them how to float. You've got built-in rudders [laughs]. You can – once you put your head back, you can float. She was floating within – she was thrilled after twenty minutes and I said to her – I said, now, whatever you do, please do not do it on your own at this stage. Wait for me. Next morning I come down and she's in the pool, floating. No bra on [laughs]. I'll never forget it. Franco had just died and people were running around [laughs] and – and I went to Pam, I said, this is a wonderful – oh, I'm going to become a professional teacher, you know [laughs]. She was a good-looking kid, too [laughs].

Okay. So, we'll discuss the swimming thing. But I was going to ask you, were your parents – did they ever consider divorce as an option? Because obviously for your mother, she could have stayed in Austria with you possibly, I don't know.

Yeah, but – no. No, but I would have – she was right in the sense that two years later I would have been in a concentration camp.

Yeah, but was that ever discussed?

She would have been – she – it never even crossed her mind. I'm sure of that. Not discussed. It wouldn't have crossed – she wouldn't go anywhere without her little darling little boy. I was the – I was spoilt rotten. You know, the Jewish people, they told me off for being a brat. Well, I was [laughs].

So how did your mother go about getting her domestic visa to the UK?

Well, that is a wonderful story. In 1936 we went to Rimini in Italy for the first seaside holiday of our lives. [01:36:07] Dad had always wanted to go to the sea. In Austria you had lakes, Wörthersee, the lakes. I always remember screaming – we went to Wörthersee for holidays

regularly, the lake, and there they had flying boats of the lake and I said, I want to go on that, I want to go on that. And Dad booked a ticket for me and him. Mum didn't want to go. And then when he came to it, I wouldn't go on it. I was terri – I was frightened [laughs] and he told me off in no order [ph] but I wouldn't go on the plane. I was too scared. Now, in – so we went to Italy. First place we went to was Rome – was Venice. I always – Venice was wonderful. And I always remember going to *Markusplatz*, you know, the big – have you been to Rome?

Yeah. Yeah.

Er, to Venice?

Yeah.

The square where all the cafés are. Exorbitant prices. A coffee is about 12 quid, a cake is about 20 quid, you know. And I went there after the war with Hilary and her husband, Ivan. And he was a real Yorkshireman – I do apologise – and a bit mean, you know [laughs]. A Jewish Yorkshireman [laughs]. Anyhow, and I wanted to sit and have coffee there, like I did with my mum and dad. He said, I'm not going. I'm not going to pay £30 for a coffee. I said, you are sitting there, no matter what happens. That's my experience. I want to remember sitting here. And we sat in the coffeehouse where Mum and Dad had taken me.

In '36?

In '36. And there were two huge lions outside, as big as this room nearly. Huge. And Mum and Dad picked me up and sat me – and I've got a photo somewhere, of me sitting on this lion. **[01:38:03]** When we were sitting in this coffeehouse and I said to the head waiter, you know, he came, he was – I gave him a nice – Dad always said, you tip people, not at the end, you tip them at the beginning or the middle then you get better service [laughs]. It's absolutely true. Not easy to do, but it works. Anyhow, he was very friendly [laughs] 'cos I tipped him. And I said to him – I said, about twenty yards away, where's the lion? Oh, he said, that was moved ten years ago. I said, why did they move? Oh, he said, they moved it to the museum because people were sitting their children on it [laughs].

So how did that lead to your mother getting the visa?

So, from there we went to Rimini, San Cattolica, lovely hotel. The beaches in Italy are unbelievable. You have to pay 30 quid to get a deckchair or something to sit with an umbrella. Anyhow, we hired this for a week and next to us was a young couple from England and Mum and Dad became friends with them and they were from Hampstead. Quite a wealthy couple I think. Well, they must have been, to live in Hampstead, right up on the top of the hill. And they became friends, you know, holiday friends. And they – at the end they exchanged addresses and Mum said, if you're ever in Vienna, look me up and we'll go out together. Well, they never did come to Vienna but Mum had the address. And when Hitler walked in, Mum wrote to something like thirty, forty – there were so many relatives – they were in Brazil, in Argentina, Paraguay, even in China. Mum wrote to China, to Shanghai. All over the world. Australia, New Zealand. [01:40:00] Not one reply. They were relatives or distant friends where Dad had the addresses. And then she also wrote to this couple at Hampstead, and hadn't spoken to them for three years, and four weeks later [claps hands] the visa arrived.

What were their names, do you know?

I can't remember. It's one of the saddest moments of my life. I can find the house where they lived and I've been there but of course –

Oh. What's the address?

It's right – you know Hampstead, right at the top of Hampstead?

Yeah.

There is a little lake, pond, where the people have boats going backwards and forwards. Well, just down the hill there are little roads with small houses but [laughs] £5 million each. And it's one of those houses.

Right. And they arranged a visa for her as a domestic to come to them, or –

Yes, just – no, to come to England, to – as a domest– they found this eye surgeon in Truro, at Truro Hospital.

They found the eye surgeon?

They must have – how they found him, I have no idea. They – maybe a friend, maybe an address, you know.

So got her a position and –

They got – yes. And this visa, just a letter with a visa arrived. They wrote on it, hope this helps.

But was she able then to take you as well?

No. This was – there was no – I wasn't on there.

So how did she manage that?

So we were staying with my auntie and I do remember that every day – the British embassy was about two miles away – we'd walk to the embassy and we'd be in a queue, all people queueing for visas or queries, and they didn't interview you. You went to a window, you know, where they opened, just like getting a ticket at a railway station, open, and Mum would present her visa and she says, could I – in German – could I please have a visa for my son, who's here, because I was with her. **[01:42:17]** And no, bang, close the window. And we went there I think for two or three weeks and then one day, it's a vivid memory, this man maybe he'd seen before, Mum told him the same story, took the visa, here you are. Temporary visa to England for her son. And I've still got it.

He just put it on her visa, on her –

No, on my passport.

On your passport?

I had a little passport. Incredible, isn't it?

So that one person basically decided your fate.

One person, for no, you know – there are so many of these people stories, it's not possible, is it? Having said no, it's no, isn't it? I wish that HSBC Bank would do the same. I've been to everyone, I've threatened them, I've told them I'll parade outside with a flag [laughs].

John, I think it's an amazing story. I think it's a good time now to take a break 'cos your daughter prepared something for us.

Yes. Would you like –

[Break in recording]

Okay, I think we should again go back a little bit to Vienna because you told us that your father left and how your mother got your visa. So, let's pick it up from there. What happened the minute she got the visa and also the permission from the British embassy that you could travel? What happened after that?

Well, she obviously must have got in touch with my dad, told him we'd got the visa, and he was delighted. And she then went about getting – how was she going to get to England.

[01:44:05] And Dad had the idea that she should get a plane, fly – I'd never flown before – because an air ticket was bought in Vienna, she could do that, but she wasn't allowed to take any money out of the country, £10 equivalent, and a small suitcase. So, she booked – she must have booked the tickets for both of us and that's when I said I was frightened, when we

were at the airport, because the army, the Germany army were there, the SS, brownshirts, and they made you very – made you frightened. I was frightened.

And do you remember what you took? Did you manage to take anything from your [overtalking]?

Just the clothes I was in. I know I took the camera, an Aqua [ph] camera. I've still got it [laughs]. Falling to bits now but it's still there. No, just what we stood in because we were not allowed to carry anything, you see.

And do you remember saying goodbye to anyone?

Well, I said goodbye to my auntie, my uncle, the Christians. Karly [ph] was still there. Karly [ph] and Rudy [ph], these were the half [inaudible]. And I must have said goodbye to Dad's – all Dad's relatives because at that time, people were not disappearing. But the concentration camp I know which was active at the time was Dachau, which was near Munich, isn't it? That was one of the original concentration camps.

But did – you said – did you fly via Prague?

Yes. And then Dad said –

Did you get off in Prague?

Well, we got off in Prague and we spent two or three weeks there. So I met – I had seen them before, I can't remember, but I must have seen them before 'cos we'd been there for a few days. [01:46:03] And I met some – many of Dad's relatives and they took us – took me around. I was starting getting used to being taken around factories, you know, these leatherworks. And I always remember these skins hanging everywhere. And the best leather came from India. They said India was the best –

And was your father then in Prague or was he already –

Prague.

He was.

He was in Prague.

So you were reunited.

Yes. And he was doing these certificates, you know, butler, getting certificates to be able to get to England, 'cos he had to have qualifications which – and –

Right. Yes. But he was there when you came with your mother?

When I was there, he was there. And we must have stayed with my uncles or aunts. We must have stayed with them, 'cos they were –

So did you actually fly to Prague?

Fly to Prague, we landed at Prague Airport, then we took off from Prague and landed at Croydon Airport and I can close my eyes and I can see that plane landing now. Croydon Airport, there are still – those 1930, '20, buildings are still there. The terminals are still there, although now it's an industrial estate. But those buildings are still there.

And how was the flight? I mean it was probably your first time on an aeroplane.

Yes, it was a propeller, small propeller, two-engine propeller. It was exciting. Very exciting. In fact, when you are that age you are not frightened. You get more excited, don't you? You know, when the bombs rained down when I was in London and the Blitz, it was exciting to see. I remember being – we were in Sandwich Street, which was right opposite the nurses' quarter of Great Ormond Street, huge building, and I always remember, we had the window here and where those trees are, not far away, there were the nurses' bedrooms. And they used

to have great – as a sixteen-year-old, it used to be lovely to be able to look across to these windows with the young nurses there [laughs]. [01:48:07] In fact, I went to one of the dances. And nearby also was the Foundling Hospital, the, you know, where – it goes back many centuries, where the babies used to be in the ditches and they were saved. And I remember going there and one of my first girlfriends was one of the nurses there. And I remember seeing the children because they had children who were mentally – or something wrong. I remember seeing one child with a head out here. It was frightening, terrifying.

But John, just to go back to your arrival. What were your first impressions of England? Can you remember? Landing.

Well, Croydon I liked. I liked the bus journey from Croydon to Bloomsbury. And in fact, where the Jewish Centre is where that bomb exploded there, a bomb blew that bus up. Once side is the Jewish one, opposite is the BMA, headquarters of the doctors' association.

Tavistock Square? In [overtalking].

Tavistock Square. Yes, Tavistock Square.

So that – Bloomsbury House was –

And that is where the bus stopped and that's where we got off and went to the Jewish Centre.

Is it the northern side of Tavistock Square?

Yeah. It's – if you're going towards Kingsway, that way, it was on the right-hand side, BMA was on the left and the bus stop was on the right-hand side and that's where – exactly where the bomb exploded and killed all those people.

Yeah. So, you arrived there. That was –

Arrived there. And then we were sent to that, well, the big rooms –

Hostel?

Well, it wasn't a hostel. It was a converted empty factory, you know, something that had been pulled down. [01:50:00] It was dreadful.

And how long did you stay there for?

Maybe seven, ten days. Not very long.

And you didn't like that?

Oh, that was the most horrible experience – one of the most – of my life 'cos there were all these children with just the clothes they had, like us. They were from Germany, from Austria, Pol – no, not from Poland in those days, from Czechoslovakia.

Other refugees?

Other refugees. And so it was all the languages. But –

Was there any contact with any English people?

No. No. Maybe the people who were in charge. They would have been English Jewish people.

In Bloomsbury House?

But I can't remember them at all. I just remember the people who were near us, you know. But the smell, as I said, that's –

It stayed with you?

Stayed. Even now, it's there.

And John, was it clear for your mother and for yourself that you probably had to go, that should couldn't do her job with you, that you had to go somewhere else?

Well, they – the first thing was to save our lives. This is what people don't understand. People don't cross the Channel because they want to. There is no alternative. You're trying to escape certain death. And when you're desperate, you will do anything, pay people, take risks, gamble with certain death. So she knew and she had hoped that one day we would get together again. And of course, it was Dad who made that happen because when he came and I bought those loaves of bread, he realised something was wrong and he looked – he must have looked at newspapers and he must have seen an advert for domestic servants, because there is quite a story about domestic servants. In the – up until the First World War, all the third or fourth gener – fourth child were – automatically went into service. [01:52:08] And of course they weren't allowed to marry. They were spinsters or bachelors for the rest of their lives. Some had good places, some had bad places. Some were fed properly. It was all the differences. And, [sighs] you know, and she was willing to put up with all that as long as – she mainly thought of myself. She didn't think of herself or Dad. It was me, her little boy, her darling brat [laughs].

So you arrived January '39?

'39, yes.

Yeah. So, then you were sent to Suffolk.

Went to Suffolk just for one night, when I screamed the place down, the porridge, the vicar, a charming man I think but I can't really remember him. Middle aged. I think there was a woman there. I think she was not his wife, probably a housekeeper. But I was of course used to Catholic priests. Never heard of Protestant priests. Austria hasn't got many Protestants. So that was strange. And then of course Cornwall. Cornwall is the hub of Methodism.

Yeah. But in between, you came back to Bloomsbury House and then they found another place –

Well, then when I went down to Cornwall, Dad found this, with – it was with the Byers family.

Byer?

Now, Byers, B-Y-E-R-S, which – they are part of the Cadbury family. They're a very wealthy family, chocolate.

That was the first family?

They were – that was the family in Risby. And there was a beautiful house, like a manor house, in the village. It was the house. And I always remember I got my own bedroom. [01:54:02] And it was above the garage, with a window, and when I looked down the window in the drive in the front, there was a Rolls-Royce and a Bentley. They were a very rich family. They – I – later on by accident, one of my customers, or one of Dad's customers, was in Suffolk, in Bury St Edmunds, the Luces [ph] family. They had the most wonderful china shop. In those days, china was still – you had lovely shops of china, didn't you? People don't drink out of china cups any more. Everybody drinks out of mugs these days. China is now like cutlery, it's not there anymore. And they had this beautiful house and I met this chappy on one of the federation meetings and we were on an outing to Bewley House to see the cars, all the ladies, and this gentleman, Mr Luce [ph], and his sales director, sat in front of me. And he turned around to me, because Pam I sat behind him in the bus – coach tour, and he said, John, I want to thank you for your daughter's and son-in-law's services. They had done an exhibition at Great Yarmouth for his company and they sold quite a bit and he thanked me. He said, and I do apologise because I was taking Alison and Graham out for a meal at the [ph] hotel in Bury St Edmunds. But he said, last minute I got a phone call that morning from my best friend. He wanted to see me urgently because he was an inventor. He invented the switch for swimming pools where you could turn the heating on, electric. [01:56:01] Well, of course that's dangerous, isn't it, electric and water? But he developed a

switch which was safety and he said he wanted to see me. So, we said I had to – I said I'd pay for the meal and got them to go on their own but I do apologise and he said, I had to go to Risby. I said, pardon? Risby. I said, I know where Risby is. He says, no, you don't. It's not possible. It's a little village. It's got a – an old – I said, yes, it's got a 19th Century church there. He said, no, it's not possible. So, I described to him. He said, but that is the house – it wasn't, but – he described the house and I thought that was the house where this family lived, and his friends had now bought the house and they were living there. And years later I – two years ago Pam, Hilary and I, we got in touch with them and I met somebody who went to school with me – I couldn't remember him – but he was in the little village school and in that village school – that was my first school in England – there were just twenty, twenty-five children, all ages in one class, except the senior ones. The ten to fourteen-year-olds were all in one class, with one teacher teaching all the subjects. And it was there that I misunderstood completely but after school when I went home, the children were singing, hands, knees, a-boompsy-daisy, give me an answer true. And I thought they had made up a song about Hans, hands, and I was upset because I remembered being – stones thrown at me. I thought they were bullying me. They weren't. They were singing one of the war songs, you know, which was – and it was then and there that I made my mind up that the next school I went to, I would change my name. **[01:58:12]** So it was at Risby I looked up an English dictionary, looked up Hans, and it said, Jack, John. I didn't like Jack. I decided on John.

So you decided your name change?

I decided on John but I kept the Hans. It's always been John Hans, JH, Gilbert. And my dad later on changed his name. I was never asked about religion, [laughs] whether I want to or not, and I didn't ask him about my name [laughs]. So Dad then changed the name after the war by deed poll to Gilbert, on my mum's insistence. She said, I don't want my son having the same problems as generations of Jewish people have had. Many Jews left the Jewish religion to avoid that. Some stayed true to their faith, through thick and thin and they remained Jewish completely. You've got the extremists, haven't you? All types of Jews, Orthodox, Reform, every grain [ph]. I have one friend in Liverpool, a customer, two brothers, and one of the brothers, his wife had a daughter and she went to a school but it was a Jewish school and one of their lecturers was a Orthodox Jew, ultra Orthodox, from Canada. And she

was brought up very, very Orthodox Jewish, in contrast to her parents. Her parents didn't really – she was being indoctrinated. When she was eighteen, she decided to go to a *kibbutz* in Israel and there she was introduced – because you don't in the Jewish – somebody does the marriage for you – to this Canadian Jew, who was Orthodox. [02:00:08] And how many grandchildren does she have now, do you think?

Thirty?

Grand – thirty-eight great-grandchildren and great – thirty-eight. And to top it all, after twenty years of marriage – she had one every sort of year – she divorced her husband [both laugh]. Absolute madness, isn't it?

But – so you changed your name, your first name –

So I changed my name –

Not your surname?

No, and when I went to London from Risby, Dad eventually was a city boy, he wanted a better job than a butler. In fact, Mum decided then and there that I should become Christian, so the lady who owned the house, Mrs Byers – Mary Byers – I have her Bible now. She gave me a Bible, beautiful Bible, illustrated, leather-bound, beautiful, and in front of – she says, little children, come unto me, you know – she wrote that – and to Hans Goldstein on his baptism. And then –

So you were baptised in Cornwall?

I was baptised in Risby, in that little Saxon church. It goes back 1200 years. And then somehow or other, Alison saw an article about a book published by a vicar in Risby. The vicar of Risby at the time I was there, who baptised me, had written an historical book about this – his church 1200 years old, Saxon, part of his Saxon – and he – and I – and they got the book, second-hand, paid I think £8 for it and they found it at a publisher's in Cardiff.

[02:02:08] And what do you think the name of the publishers was? Goldstein [laughs]. So they got the book from Goldstein [laughs]. And I started reading it and I read the first 100 pages and it was all about 18th Century, the Black Death, you know, [laughs] Cromwell, everything. And I thought, well, we're not – they said I was in there somewhere. So I then went to the back of the book. I thought, well, instead of starting at the front, you idiot, go to the back, work – so I went back to page 212 and there are three pages about Hans Goldstein and his family. I've got the book now.

Really?

Yes. And he said – he got some of the things wrong. He said, this, oh, what did he say? This boy, this Jewish boy, came to me to be baptised and I had to give him some lessons first. And he said, I asked him what did I know about Jesus and he said, he clicked his heels, this little scrap of humanity – that's what he called me, scrap of – it's the most wonderful thing I've ever been called – this scrap of humanity stood in front of me, clicked his heels like – he makes things up, with poetic licence – and he said, because he says we're all God's children. And he said, he gave me an answer which was far – he said, he is obviously a very – above normal intelligence – not very good in intelligence tests, but quite good at intelligence [laughs] – above normal intelligence, stood in front of me and he said he couldn't understand how a regime could persecute such a lovely little scrap of humanity and treat him in this way.

[02:04:07] And it was a lovely story. And then he said, his father was Jewish and he was the butler at this house, at the Byers' house. He said, but he had spoken with Mrs Byers and he wasn't very good at his job [laughs]. He didn't really – he wasn't really a butler. Well, he wasn't, or a chauffeur. He never drove. He was a chauffeur but he never drove those cars. Just as well, he would have crashed them. And it was a lovely article. And then he said, his mother was Polish. Well, he got that wrong, you know.

So you stayed in the same place as your father?

Oh, yes, I – Mum and Dad had their own room in the annexe.

Okay, so they both were together.

And I had this room above the garage, my own little room. And I always remember, it was extraordinary –

So sorry, just – so this is after he got you from that first family with the ten children?

That's right.

So when he realised there wasn't enough food?

That's right.

Right. So, this is –

That was our –

So how long – just again, to understand it, how long did you stay with that first –

I would have said we were only there three or four months. She must have thought we were very ungrateful, to take us in and then to leave, because Dad got a job in London. Dad was a city boy. He wanted to be back –

But I meant just from the first placement in Cornwall.

Yes.

*Also I wanted to ask you, how was your mother's first position as a domestic in Truro?
Where –*

Well, she said – I think out of eleven people, say there were twelve servants, Dad would have been Number Twelve and Mum would have been Number Eleven in the hierarchy of servants.

That was in Risby?

In Risby.

But before your father came, your mother was elsewhere, was she?

Yes, she was in Truro.

And how was that?

With the surgeon. He had a family. [02:06:01] But they did not want – she wanted them to take me, they said no, we've got our own children, we don't want – we'll have you and your husband but we don't want any children. So that door was closed. That's why Dad wanted me to be a family – who wanted us in a family. That's why he found the job at Risby.

Right. And with the Byers family?

With the Byers family.

So all the three of you were together.

Together, in that family. And the extraordinary thing is that after – just before I went to Risby I did a bit of research [laughs] and I found that the grandson now lives in Johannesburg – I've traced him, Byers, I found Byers – and I wrote to him. He said, yes, I'm the grandson. And he originally had – his mother – Byers – they had a huge estate in Kenya, Kenyatta, and that was confiscated. Do you remember Kenyatta? They confiscated – they threw all the English people out. And they were – they had all their money taken away. They were in fact – his family – Byers family, they became refugees in South Africa. They had a bit of money from somewhere. And he now said he lives with his sister and his bedroom has a window onto some cars below. So he now – so he's a man of about eighty and – fascinating.

But John, what was it – when you first arrived in Cornwall?

Yes.

I mean what was it like for you to get to Cornwall? I mean had they ever seen a foreigner before? You know, I mean –

No, no, I –

So what –

I was – must have –

Did you understand how people spoke?

Well, I must have been the first Jewish boy in Cornwall, you know.

So what reception did you get there?

Well, I've become – I, because of what I have had, I have become very adaptable. [02:08:01]
I can go anywhere and make friends. I can speak any language. I don't care if it's – I once –
we were on holiday with some Danes and no one could converse with them. I said, come and
sit with us. Within half an hour we'd be having a conversation.

I mean to me, you said you didn't get so much food there, in the first house.

No, no. I was hungry.

You were hungry. But what other things were – I mean it must have been so different from life in Vienna.

And what was different was that Camborne at that time had a huge factory making pneumatic drills. Now, there's a reason for that. Cornwall was tin mining for thousands of years in granite, so their pneumatic drills were the finest in the world. This was Holman Brothers. It was the – the greatest pneumatic drills. Then the Chinese came and they lost their jobs. And they discovered that in Austria – that's the one thing I haven't told you – I had a very good voice, a soprano. My dad wanted to be a cantor and my grandfather – but I had a lovely voice, a soprano. And in fact, in the back of my mind, and I can't prove it, but somebody has now said that it could be true, I had an interview with the Wiener Sängerknaben. Have you ever heard of that?

Yeah.

Wiener – that's the choir. What I didn't understand was how – it was a Catholic choir – how did they audition a Jewish boy? But I've since spoken with the directors of the Sängerknaben, they've checked back, and in the 1930s under the socialist regime, they tried to show that they were not anti-Semitic. They had two or three Jewish boys in the choir. And as far as I know, I was accepted to become in the choir. [02:10:02] I – would have meant living there. And then Hitler walked in, so that was it.

So did you sing when you came to England?

So when I came to England, they must have told them once I had a good singing voice and because they were with the elite, they got me to sing a solo at the chapel in Camborne where the – chapel in Cornwall, one – the main one was 1500 people and the other one was – this one was 1200, Century Chapel, upstairs, beautiful organ [coughs]. So, I sang in English a solo. I don't know what the solo was. And in front of me in the choir, the leader of the women, was the lady in front of me, and she turned around and smiled at me while I was singing. That's not the end of the story though. And I sang, huge applause, and they then had me singing in about ten different chapels all over because it was an advert for them, wasn't it? But I enjoyed it. And it was English as well, which, well, I had to learn. And then when I came back to Camborne as an evacuee, Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph], she introduced me to her sister, which was Passmore [ph], which is a real Cornish name. Edith Passmore [ph]. And as

she walked in she said, I've seen you before, and I said, I've seen you before. She was the head of the sopranos in front of me in that chapel. Eh? And he was the mayor of Camborne, her father, and he left school at fourteen. He was the most educated man I have ever met. [02:12:00] He was a liberal. He knew all the books. He read me books, got me interested in books. He was the most – so you don't have to have an education to be intelligent. Fantastic man.

And tell me, John, you said your mother decided that you should get baptised. Why did she make that decision? How did you feel about it? Did you – is that something you wanted?

What, about Christian?

Yeah.

Well, I wasn't asked. It was a decision made by my mum. It wasn't my dad.

Why did she make that decision?

Well, she made the decision I think as a – it's because she felt that generation of generation of Jewish people had been anti-Semitic, had been ostracised, couldn't get jobs, had to flee countries for their lives, and she couldn't under – that had been the pogroms in Poland and in Russia, and she wanted to end it. It's the same as the Spanish Jews, when the –

The Inquisition.

When the Inquisition came, the Queen, she made all the Jews – so she said, you either become Catholic or you're expelled. And if you become a Catholic and you're caught practising the Jew religion, you're crucified. You know. And do you know, I – when we were in Majorca, Palma Nova, a café opened, called The Cappuccino. In Majorca now there are fifteen Cappuccinos. Maybe one [inaudible]. There's certainly one in Porto now. It's a huge organisation now. And they are, a daughter and two brothers, and the daughter is my girlfriend now [laughs]. I see her every time I go over there. They're a very rich family now.

[02:14:00] I – we went to their wedding. Unbelievable. The mayor was there, everybody was there. It was wonderful. And we were treated, Pam and I, we were like their pets. Whenever they had an opening, we were invited, shown off as my – our friends. And she now has two sons, both at university. And she told me the story that her mother and her two sisters had married three brothers in Majorca. Three brothers, all with businesses. Three of them. So, they were from England, these were, but the brothers were Majorcans. And she said that they had traced their roots back, that their original family were Jewish.

Yeah, conversos.

No.

No?

They had converted but they had kept up the faith in spite of all the dangers. And she said she remembers her grandfather having a Sabbath on a Friday night, although he was Catholic.

So do you think it was your mother also wanted you to fit in? [Overtalking].

Oh, yes, yes. To stop this nonsense, you know. But I have told everybody I've met. I've not kept it a secret that my dad was Jewish, never have done, never had a problem, or people haven't said, you know. The most dangerous people are not the ones who are anti-Semitic. The most dangerous people are the ones who look at you and say, oh, you're lovely, and then when you turn your back they'll stab you in the back. They're the most – the ones whose anti-Semitic is secret. They're the most dangerous ones.

So John, in Cornwall, did you feel you had a positive reception as a refugee? [02:16:00]

Yes, from the local people, not from the people, the Walworths [ph] who I was with. But afterwards when I was with Mrs Blamey [ph], everybody treated me as their son. I was introduced as their son, you know. I was completely, completely accepted. And strangely enough, in the 19 – late 1940s somehow or other I must have seen The Telegraph or

something and there was an article about this couple who were being prosecuted by the – for maltreating their children. They had locked somebody in a cupboard or they hit them. They were, you know, for child abuse. And their name was Walbridge [ph]. To this – and they said they were missionaries. I've never proved it but once somebody's like that, they don't change, do they?

So do you think in fact that it was a case of child abuse?

No, no. I wasn't abused in any way at all, except kept hungry. But it was a good lesson to have, to know that some people are hungry, you know, and it was nice being unemployed for a bit because it shows you they – you appreciate the good fortune –

When you have – but you were happy when your father came and –

Oh, yes. Oh, very. Oh, when I saw my dad I was over the moon. We were never very, very close. When we were in business together, we often clashed. I had sort of up-to-date- he wanted to – all our invoices were written in books, challenge books, with carbon paper. And I remember when I joined him, he had a little – I've still got it – his original order book.

[02:18:00] It's a little one like that and it's got forty orders in it, some from America, 'cos he went to America to sell. It's fascinating. That was his original orders. Some of the orders were for £2, fifteen and six, you know, ten brushes. It's very, very small. Then when I joined him, we had to go to the big challenge book and our first year I went to – I called it A1 – not that A1 – A2, A3. Five years later I did a ZZZ. I'd gone through the alphabet three times. We were – we'd grown that much, you know. And then one day I said to him – in fact, it was our customer in Mollett's, of Bradford. That's near you, isn't it? Bradford?

Frank? [Laughs].

Bradford is not too far away from you, was it?

Frank: From?

From Sheffield.

Frank: No, not too far.

Well, there was a chap, the firm was called Mollett. Mollett, catering equipment. And it dated back 300 years. They were original hardware, builders' merchants. And they had a huge building, five or six storeys, in the middle of – it was a big quarry where all the horses and, you know, delivery van – the delivery horses came in. And old Mr Mollett – his son told me this – he was a man ten, twenty, years older, we got on very well – he was a total alcoholic but he was lovely when [laughs] he was sober. But he told me the story that his father was one of the original Victorian business people, tall hat. And once a month he travelled to London by train from Sheffield. And he used to come to the platform at one minute to seven to catch – or one minute past seven to catch the seven o'clock train to London. [02:20:09] He always arrived one minute late. And the station master would hold up the train until Mr Mollett came in with his entourage and got on the train [laughs]. This is the – you know, you can imagine this, can't you? Now, he was – that much respect. And he once employed a young man as an apprentice and he was sitting in his office, looking down into the square, and this young apprentice was slouching across the yard, going from one place to the other. So he called him up to his office and the young man said, yes, Mr Mollett? He said, you're sacked. He said, but why? What have I done? He said, I saw you slouching across that yard. No one in my employment slouches across that yard. They all run. Sacked him. [Laughs] That's Victorian, isn't it?

John, so your father decided that he wanted to go to London.

Oh, yes.

He didn't want to stay in Cornwall.

Yeah, yeah.

So again, after how many months then did you leave?

Well, that was about three or four months we were in Risby I think, maybe five months.

Yeah. And then where?

And then we arrived in London and in fact, that was the beginning, nearly the beginning of the war. But remember, for one year nothing happened. It was the Phoney War. And immediately the war started, everybody was evacuated because they thought the bombs were coming down. Well, after nine months, no bombs had come but Cornwall where we lived just a few miles away, bombs had been dropped by the Germans. A stray plane had dropped its bombs to get rid of them. [02:22:00] And Mum read in the paper, bombs drop in Cornwall, and she had me back in London for safety. A week later, the Blitz started.

So the – you were evacuated quite shortly after the war?

Yes.

And to the – you described the journey to Camborne.

That's right. I had gone to Mrs Blamey [ph], a lovely –

Yes, so that was the first time you arrived there, with Mrs Blamey [ph].

Yeah.

And you were relieved that it wasn't the other family.

Yeah. And she let me go home, you know. She was sorry to see me go. And then when the Blitz had been going on for three or four months, we were in the Underground and one night you could read a newspaper at two in the morning because of the light from the City of London. I saw the City of London, you know, there was that fire Blitz, non-stop, and about

fifty yards away a bomb had dropped. Bombs all around us 'cos we were right in the – we were in Russell Square.

Where did you live?

Near Russell Square. Mum – that's, do you know where the Jewish – in Bloomsbury, about a mile towards Kingsway is Russell Square. It's where the university – Senate House.

Yeah. There? You lived there?

Lived there. Russell Square. There was a street.

Did you have a room, or what did you have there?

Well, we had this flat. Mum had two rooms, a bit like Austria. First-floor flat, a Dickensian house, like Dickens.

Yeah. And how did she get that flat?

Oh, Mum and Dad lived in that flat for seven or eight years, during the war, rented it. And the rooms got lower and lower. As you were higher, went up. When you got to the top, servants lived there. The servants lived at the top, and at the bottom were the kitchens.

And did she still have a domestic job as well?

No. There, she got a job as a tailoress. She applied for a job and he said, you'll be doing sewing work. And he said, have you done it before, and she – Mum said yes, she hadn't.

[02:24:02] And –

And your father in that time?

And she made a friend there. And Mum was very strange in some ways. She never made any real friends. Strange. I used to say to her, why don't you go and see your friend? Oh, I don't want to. And this was her best friend. She didn't want to go and see her. Didn't want to go and see the people who had sent the visa to us. There was some – something had gone wrong. Maybe coming to England, you know. Anyhow, she – you know, we were there, and we used to go to the Underground.

In Russell Square?

It was strange. There was a lift in Russell Square, deep one, and people started to go there and then the police came and stopped us going in because Churchill said, I don't want people going in, I don't want people getting worried, you know. But people wanted to go in the Underground because it was safe. And after three weeks the police gave up because they realised that the Underground was the safest place there was.

So why didn't they want it in the first place?

Well, because it was accepting that Germany was winning the war.

Oh, I didn't know.

You know, people leaving their homes. There was something –

Oh, I see. So, it wasn't from the beginning?

No, MI5, something, they didn't like the idea and they stopped us. And then eventually – there were no toilets, so, you know, there was a smell again. That's the second time the smell. It was unbelievable. And then they –

So where did people sleep? Tell us what you saw. What did –

On the platform. On the platform. And then people – the train used to be there. And of course it was very draughty as the trains came through. And we used to go – the all clears used to go at five, six in the morning and then we used to go home, very early in the morning. And within about three or four weeks, everybody took their bedding down there and they left it there, so we actually had reserved places. And God behold if somebody took your place, you know [laughs]. [02:26:02] There'd be a revolution.

The three of you?

Yes.

And did you go to school during that time, or –

No. There was no school. No school, because everybody – all the children were supposed to be evacuated, you see.

Right. So after how long then did you then go back to Cornwall?

Well, [laughs] that was a daft thing. About a fortnight before the Blitz stopped, I went back to Cornwall [laughs] and then it stopped. But then of course a year or two years later, the doodlebugs started to arrive and then the worst of all, the V-2 rockets. Mum and Dad said, with the doodlebugs you could hear them [imitates], bang. V-2, you couldn't hear a thing, just one bang and, you know, hundreds of people would die. And it was all kept secret. No one admitted anybody had been killed. You see, some underground – some of the shelters were hit, direct hits. Thousands of people died. No. And I always remember seeing in – I saw the Battle of Britain over London and I saw the Spitfires and Hurricanes, just a few planes diving on these – on thirty German planes. I watched them.

And as a boy, how did you feel, seeing it?

Excited. And in the mornings, we used to pick up shrapnel, and that's the one thing I'm cross about, I can't find – I had tins of this shrapnel. I've lost the damned things. Somebody's chucked them out, you know, bits of metal, out.

Why do you want to find it? What did you want to – just look at it?

Everybody, all the boys, we went around picking up shrapnel, you know, bits of jagged metal. If they hit you, that was it. And no, it was exciting, no doubt. And then I got a train back.

So how did you feel then when it was decided that you had to go back to Cornwall?

I was quite happy 'cos I liked – I knew I was going back to the Blameys [ph] and –

So tell me about the Blameys [ph]. Who were they? [02:28:01] What sort of people were they? Why did they take you in?

Well, Mrs Blamey [ph], she had two sisters, Auntie Annie. The strange thing was, I know her sisters as Auntie Annie and Auntie Edith, and Uncle Fred. But Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph] were always Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph]. It was only later, on when I remembered, I used to call them Uncle Charlie, Auntie May. But they were always Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph]. Very strange. In fact, in business in the old days, I was always called Mr Gilbert and my dad, Mr Gilbert. And then we had a young lady join us, a nineteen-year-old. She already had two boys, very young married. And she was a good-looker, and miniskirt. I took her on when my dad was on holiday once, I needed a secretary and she was brilliant. And when Dad saw her, he said, not having her [laughs]. We clashed again and I said, well, if she leaves, I leave, you know. She was brilliant. But [sighs] and she's the first one to say – Dad said, she's calling you John. How dare she, you know. You're Mr Gilbert to her, John Gilbert. And within two years everybody was calling me – hello, John, you know. Now, everybody's Christian name in – we all work?

Yeah.

Is anyone called Mr? Chairman, called Mr?

No.

That's a big change.

But you called – the Blameys [ph], you called them Mr –

Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph].

And how old were they when they took you in?

They were poss – I think they were about five or six years older than my mum and dad.

And did they have their own children?

No. Well, this is virtually [ph] forgotten. She, oh, when she married Mr Blamey [ph], they couldn't have children and when people asked her, she always gave the answer, no, I'm waiting. My children are going to come with their boots on. [02:30:02] And what happened? I came with my boots on, didn't I? Not boots, shoes, anyhow [laughs]. But I was treated as their son, no doubt. And I always remember I – for many years their niece, Valerie, she was nearly my girlfriend. I had one or two little girlfriends down there. Sixteen-year-old, you know. And she always said, oh, Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph], Mr Blamey [ph], he's terribly backward, you know, he's living in the dark- her father was a go-getter, you know. He was chauffeur to the managing director.

And what was Mr Blamey's [ph] – what was his job?

He was a fitter, engineering. In those days you had to have a trade. Mrs Blamey [ph] could never understand that my dad never worked [laughs]. He was at home, you know, doing letters and that. What does your dad do? And then when I started, she said, well, what do you do, you know.

And were you – when you were there, did your parents come and visit you? Did you go back to London?

Maybe once a year. You see, it was a lot of money and there were still restrictions, at first, certainly. Even as friendly aliens, there were restrictions on where you could go because this was the coast, this was military areas.

Yes, Cornwall was –

Military. And of course that's where the invasion – all the Americans came there.

So you were exempt because you were under sixteen?

Oh, yes, yes.

But what happened once you turned sixteen?

Well, I – you'd only join the army when you were seventeen, eighteen. Pam's father, he joined – the First World War, he joined the army when he was fourteen. And he was accepted. Fourteen-year-old.

No, but I meant – but I meant in terms of enemy aliens. Ah, because your father at that point wasn't an enemy alien any more. [02:32:02]

I was always true – I seemed to have been exempt. I was always the – I didn't ask anybody [laughs]. I just went. They couldn't go to the nearest beach, Portreath. We had to walk two miles further and go down – well, I always remember, I didn't believe it, that my mum went down this pathway 'cos this pathway was at the side of a cliff. You know, there was a – and they walked.

So they were not allowed to go to that beach?

They were not allowed to go – they had to go to that beach, which was outside of the military area.

When was that? When you all stayed in Cornwall?

When I was in Cornwall, until the end of the war. It was restricted, there was restricted areas.

Oh, I see, not – it's nothing to do with refugees.

Nothing to do with refugees.

Nobody was allowed.

Yes, yes. No, everybody local was allowed but if you were a visitor...

Oh, interesting. And tell us, you said your father was interned.

Yes.

So he was interned from London?

Well, he was interned when I was in London with Mum. That's in the Phoney War. And he was away about, I would say, three or four months. No, two months. Only two months.

On the Isle of Man?

Yes, because he was released.

So then he showed them that he was in fact Czech.

Yeah, Czech, yes. He proved conclusively that Czechoslovakia had been conquered by the Austrians [laughs].

And was he in touch at all with the Czech Refugee Fund? Did they help him?

Yes. That's – his first flat in London was a little, tiny flat, one room and a tiny bedroom, that's all, and a tiny kitchen. And that – they rented that. And then having become Czech, he was advised to go to the Czech Refugee Fund and opposite our flat was a huge building of about – like a hotel, 150 rooms and the Czech trust fund bought that for the Czech refugees. [02:34:00] So Mum and Dad moved from the little flat to this Czech refugee flats.

And where was that?

And that was right opposite, or in that same area. It was opposite their flat and it was all in Judge Street, King's Cross, St Pancras, all in that area. And it was a modern block built maybe fifty years – nice rooms.

And that's where they lived?

But they only had one room. One room and kitchen. And then Dad got a job and he started earning a little bit of money, so he was able to buy – able to rent his own flat, so he moved out.

Right. So, the Czech trust fund helped him.

Yes, it definitely helped him then. And that's when he was the ARP warden [laughs].

The ARP warden. Explain that. What is it?

Air raid warden. And mainly they went around to make – well, if there'd been an air raid they would help in the rescue. I don't think he ever did that. But mainly at first it was to do with the Blackout. You know, there was a blackout, curtains. And people used to, you know,

there'd be a little gap, you know, by accident, and he would scream at them, you know, from down below, [whispers] put the bloody light out.

What was he screaming?

Put the bloody light out [laughs].

With an accent?

With a German accent [laughs]. And he said he was sure [ph]. I said to him, I said, well, they must have all been terrified the Germans have arrived, you know [laughs].

Did they ever have any bad experience, with being German refugees, or –

Not at all. I don't think so. They mainly mixed – they had a few English – mostly Jewish friends, 'cos that was in the – you know-

Where they were?

Not so much where they were, but their work, you know. And I think one of his bosses said – I've still got it – gave him a lovely stamp album and I worked out from Stanley Gibbons, you know, there's a book of the value of stamps and to work out that these stamps were worth about £700-800. [02:36:07] And then about twenty years ago I went up to a local fed. He said, I'll give you a fiver for it [laughs]. So, it shows the difference between [laughs] what you think it's worth and what it really is, isn't it? But, er –

So, your father came back from internment but then, by then were you already in Cornwall, or–

Oh, yes. And then – and in Cornwall, entertainment, there was no entertainment. They had no radio, electric, none, gas, one gas, you know, heater, a gas fire downstairs with filaments in it – we'd fill it up. Upstairs, no electricity, no gas. You took your candle.

What's the cottage? What sort of – where did they live?

A terraced house, granite. In Cornwall there are granite –

A granite – like a mining cottage? Mining cottage?

Yes. And that's where I got my love for gardening because he had a small garden, maybe half the length of that, not very wide, and I always remember he grew rhubarb. I'd never had rhubarb before. And Mrs Blamey [ph], they used to have a chamber pot for upstairs. They used to put wee on the rhubarb and make – she says nothing [ph]. You see, I put custard on mine and they used to put wee [laughs]. And when the horse and cart came with the milk delivery, the horse used to leave its – and they used – women used to fight, you know, that's in front of my house.

The manure?

No, it isn't, it's mine [laughs]. They used to fight over it [laughs].

This is in Camborne?

Yeah, yeah. They used – it was called tucking mill. They used to go rush down there and they used to – with a shovel and, you know, and straight onto the rhubarb [laughs].

And which school did you go to at that point? [02:38:00]

Well, most of the time I spent at this Redruth Grammar School.

Redruth?

That was – I had the most fabulous headmaster. The English teacher there was – he used to sit in the chapel – he was a Methodist – and I sat here, and in the pew behind me was – I didn't

know it – was the English master at the local grammar school. And Mrs Blamey [ph] used to – after the service she used to chat to him and he introduced me and he got to like me and he said, where does he go to school? And I took the eleven plus. Well, that was worse than the intelligence test, 'cos I had an eye test that morning, so I couldn't see, I couldn't read English, [laughs] so I must have totally, you know, failed it. And then they – he said, ah – but in those days, like dentists now, you pay. There was an A class and a B class, thirty boys in the A class, thirty boys in the B class. The A class was all scholarship boys, you know, regardless of your income, if you pass the scholarship exam – you had to be in the top 10% – you got into the A class. Then there was the B class which was the children of well-to-do parents who wanted a decent education for their kids but they weren't very bright [laughs]. So, they took an entrance exam and that meant that you had pay I think £5 a term. Now, £5 sounds nothing, doesn't it? Do you know how much you have to multiply to get today's value? By over 100. And I arrived at that through economics, you know, and you have to take my word for that because I'm an expert. I got a salary of £3, ten shillings, three and a half pounds. [02:40:01] What's the average starting salary these days? If you take somebody on at work, what's the minimum you pay them?

£35-40000? I don't know.

Eh?

£35-40000. I don't know.

Well, say, £300 a week, so that is 100 times. Houses – our first house, our first maisonette, was £1700. It is now £250,000. So you have to multiply by 100.

So who paid this for you?

Mrs Blamey [ph].

They paid for you?

I entered the entrance exam and how I passed the entrance exam, I will not know, because when it came to the English paper I couldn't even read the questions. I was good at maths and I passed and I'm quite sure this English master must have been German [laughs]. Oh, let him in. So the first term I was twenty-eighth in English. In the form I was twenty-fourth, first term. We got marks for every term. And then at the end of the year we had exam results and unknown to me, that at the end of the first year in the B class, you took your end of term exam and if you were in the top six of the thirty, you got into the A class, and the bottom six, like football is now in the league, went down. I was fifth. I'd risen, mostly because of maths, science, chemistry and physics. I was good at those subjects. Geography, my maps got me through. I drew – was able to draw maps. Anyhow, I got in the A class and I was about – in the A class I started off twenty-first. [02:42:04] By the end of the term – I was always fifth and sixth, every term. I couldn't – and there was one stupid boy who was first in everything, always, and I used to read his answers and they – I thought, well, they're no better than mine. But they were, you know [laughs]. So – and the headmaster was a fantastic headmaster, very strict. He once read out – one boy – you had mad people in those days, he was a bit mental. He put his head down on the railway, the express, and the train stopped 100 yards from where he'd put his head. And it was, you know, and he was thrown out. And then he announced one day that some of the teachers were coming to school in cars because they lived in the country, no bus service, and they got a special petrol ration just for school. And he said that it had come to his notice that some of these cars travelling through the countryside were a bit muddy and boys were scratching rude names, you know, this teacher's a wanker and whatever, you know, [laughs] something like that. And he said, this has to stop. And the next boy he came across would be expelled. And you know what happened next day? He expelled his son. His son was one of the ones. He caught him red-handed. And then a few years later he announced in – I became patrol leader, Scouts, I was a King Scout. That was fraud. I passed all the exams, except Morse code, intelligence test. I could not tell the difference between dash, dot, dash, dot, dash. Just couldn't – I'd get nought out of 100 every time. [02:44:03] And finally, the French teacher, who was the Scout master, who was gay, incidentally, we didn't know it at the time. He committed suicide a few years later, I heard. But never touched me. And in fact, I played the violin and I used to go to his home and played the violin and he played the piano. So, you know. Risky, wasn't it? But you didn't even realise. And he was the Scout master. And the headmaster said that it had come to his

notice that – he noticed that some boys were – had stayed behind at school until seven or eight o'clock, you know, Scout meetings and that, and when – you are not to get on a bike in the school premises. You had to take real notice [ph], the bike to the road outside, then get on your bike, because he said it was dangerous in the school. Anyhow, that same evening I left the Scout meeting at 7:30, got on my bike, [laughs] rode out into the track [ph], round a corner, [laughs] straight into the headmaster [laughs]. Nearly knocked him over [laughs]. And he looked at me. He said, Gilbert. He said – no, Goldstein. I am very disappointed in you. You of all people. Next day, you will come to my offices at 8:30 in the morning. You will be there. And I knew what he meant. It meant the cane in front of the whole school and three detentions. Now, detentions in those days were Saturday morning, three. So came next day, I was on the way to his office and I thought, I don't really like this idea, getting the cane. I wonder if he'll miss me. And I didn't go. [02:46:00] And I instead – I was in the sixth form by then, I was at the back, and I hid down low so he wouldn't look at me [laughs]. And I did this for eight weeks and I am sure I went through terror, far worse than the cane, 'cos I knew [laughs] one day he would say, why haven't you come to my room, you know [laughs].

And...?

He never did. And we never spoke about it.

And was that quite normal?

And he was the most fantastic man because in the First World War he was one of the few who was in the army but in the air force. You had no Royal Air Force. here was the Army Flying Corps and there was the Navy Flying Corps. Now, the Navy Flying Corps meant you experimented on taking off destroyers and they experimented by putting planks onto the gun turrets and making a runway. But the trouble was, the runway was only 100 yards and it would take half a mile to take off. So most of the planes ditched and they were killed, experimenting. And then somebody had the idea, that was a catapult, so not only did- but they catapulted them. Well, that made matters worse. And half of his friends lost their lives just- And then he was one of the first to successfully – they built an extra-long one, he managed to get off, but they couldn't land, so all of them had to ditch their planes in the sea. And one day

he ditched it and broke his skull and he had a special aluminium plate put in his head – he's the first one to have that done – or he would have died. So, he was awarded with squadron leader and he was awarded the DFC and bar, a hero. [02:48:04] And I've looked up the Internet, his name is there. It's him. And then –

What was his name? What was his name?

Wetherall [ph]. Yorkshireman, you'll be pleased to hear [laughs]. Yorkshireman. And then he – when I left school, he did me a reference, you know, in those days, a written one. And I've got it to this day. I treasure it like the Bible that I was given. And it started off – if he wrote it today, he would have been expelled from the school. He would have been blacklisted as a teacher.

What did he write?

Because he wrote, when Hans Goldstein, or John Goldstein, joined the school, I was a worried teacher because he was a foreigner. In other words, one bad apple might turn all the school. In other words. Totally racist, isn't it? He would have been expelled. But then towards the end he wrote, but I need not have worried, he was the best pupil we ever had. So, I'm more proud of that, you know.

It was honest.

Yeah, I was honoured. And yet, if you read it today, he'd be thrown out. It's crazy, isn't it? See, I inaudible racial things because fifty years ago we called people niggers and that, a terrible thing to do.

Yeah. So, he was worried by it and you were the only – first foreigner there probably.

First foreigner. But he said, I need not – at the end he said that, which was –

But did you feel – did they treat you like a foreigner? I mean –

No. No way. Not at all. In fact, being a foreigner has always been an advantage. I always turn being a foreigner – I always say, if I see, meet people now, I use age as a thing too, [high pitched] I'm ninety-six, please can you help me, you know, and I get special attention, being a bloody foreigner, you know [laughs]. [02:50:08] And when I meet somebody who's a foreigner, I say, well, you're another bloody foreigner, you know [laughs].

So in Cornwall, they didn't treat you like a foreigner?

No, in no way.

In the school, or –

No, they were absolutely perfect. And then with that, he gave me a – and the vic – the local minister, Methodist minister also wrote a reference for me, that he is a wonderful Christian boy, [laughs] to introduce me to the minister in London, who – you don't know this name, I'm sure, but he was a very famous minister – head of the Methodist Church, called Donald Soper. He was a Labour peer at the end. He became a lord. And he was the most fabulous preacher. I could listen to him. He would preach, you know, he was an orator, a wonderful –

So they introduced you?

And he used to speak at Hyde Park Corner, Speaker's Corner.

But John, I wanted to ask you, in Cornwall, did you meet any other refugees there at all?

No. The only refugees is when I first went there to Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph], two of us turned – they took in – you see, people were made to take evacuees. And Mrs Blamey [ph] asked for two girls and she got two bloody foreigners, [laughs] one boy from Berlin, and the other one [laughs].

Right. But apart – when the second time –

But then he went back to London and that was it, you see.

Because I know that, for example, in Mousehole, you know, there was the Jewish school, it was evacuated to Mousehole.

Yes. Evacuated, yes, I'm not surprised.

Jewish Free School, JFS, and they came from London and Mousehole took in – I mean a lot of children, and some refugees, mostly English Jewish kids. [02:52:00] But they – and they were quite proud of it and some people still remember that.

Oh, yeah. And they were treated you know, you see, in Liverpool there was a terrific – like in Glasgow, Protestant, Catholic, you know, were equal and that's the most dangerous, when it's fifty-fifty because they're not allowed to talk to each other even, you know.

Yeah. But in Cornwall?

No way.

Hmm.

There weren't very many of us, that's why. That's what I always think is – but –

But you said you went swimming. So, you adapted to the local life.

Oh, totally, yes. And I remember I ran the mile when I was thirteen, which was very young. And we had one – the same boy who came first in my class, he was brilliant; brilliant at athletics, brilliant – I hated him. He was brilliant at everything. And anyhow, I joined in the races, about twenty of us, and for the first two laps, there was John Goldstein, Hans Goldstein, in the lead by about ten yards. And I felt like, you know, the famous film, you know [laughs]. You know, I was elated. And then after the first two laps [laughs] I suddenly

felt my knees buckling, like now [laughs]. I was wobbling [laughs]. And I had two laps to go, and I finished the race, 200 yards behind the last one [laughs]. And Wetherall [ph], bless him, wrote in his report, 'and I did admire his plucky running in the mile'. Now, no one knows I came last, do they, you know [laughs].

The mile? Where was it? Where was it run?

At the school. He was a great athlete as well, you see. 'I admired his plucky running in the mile' [laughs]. Not a word that I was miles behind everybody. It taught me a lesson because years later my – Richard's daughter, Amelia, was a good runner, I could see it, and she joined a race, the 400 or the 200, and I said, now, Hilary, take it easy, just speed up at the last – don't do what I did. [02:54:15] Well, she went off like the blazes, right from the beginning, and won. Then she went into the 400 and won, went into the – and won that. Hilary did the same thing with swimming. I taught the – Pam and I were both good swimmers and we taught our kids to swim. And one day, somebody said to me – he said, you know, you should get – Hilary and Alison, they're both good swimmers, you should join the local swimming club. So you know Wealdstone?

Hmm-hmm.

Well, they had a swimming pool there, open-air in those days, no indoor pool, and I went down there. They said they've got a club so I went down there and they said, oh, yes, it's our swimming gala today. Oh, it's races. I said, oh, well, I'll come next week. He said, no, no, no, no, you're here now. You can join in now. Your girls can join the race. And Alison did fairly well, came second and third. And Hilary, she went and put her name down. I said, what did you put your name down for? She said, well, I put it down for the 50, 100, 220, 440, half a mile [laughs]. And the last race was against a Channel swimmer, who happened to be – he was world champion at the time [laughs]. He was taking part. So she said, well, I've just – she said, I'm not doing it unless you, Dad, join in the last race. So, she conned me in to joining this race, just three of us. She, the Channel swimmer [laughs]. The Channel swimmer finished the race, I would say forty lengths. He was – he finished up twenty lengths ahead of me, [laughs] Hilary, about ten lengths, and I came in when it was dark [laughs]. [02:56:00]

But you did it.

But she won every race, every race. And I felt terrible because I thought – I could see their mums and dad saying, this is a conman. He's brought the girl here to win all these – and they were cups, beautiful cups, because pre-war, Wealdstone was a really important – after the war, indoor pools came. But she won every race. She was an incredible swimmer.

Hmm, so – but your swimming started in Cornwall.

Yes.

So how long did you stay in Cornwall?

Six years, because I stayed on a year –

After the war.

Because the headmaster said to Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph], persuade John's parents that he could stay another year because he's now in the fourth form. In the fifth form he'll take his School Cert. And if you change school now, he may not pass his School Cert. Here, I'll make sure he passes, you know.

And that's what you did.

And he did something to me, which was cruel, but in hindsight it wasn't. I wouldn't have met Pam if he hadn't made that decision. I was always first in physics and chemistry. First. Hilary was always bottom, by the way. Is she here? No. She got 3% for her chemistry, 2% – I think she got it for writing her name and, you know [laughs]. She was terrible. But she was good at everything else. But she couldn't – and I thought, my – a daughter of mine, no good at physics. And I was good at that. I [overtalking] –

Yeah. So, what did you do?

Anyhow, that year it was the third year, I didn't know it about this at all, and I was doing Latin, which I hated. Latin and French, I – I already had two languages. I didn't want Latin or French. I failed both. And I was – I took the exams and I came out, I think I was fourteenth in Latin, or fifteenth, first in physics, first in chemistry. [02:58:10] And then the headmaster comes in and he says, well, he said, I am now allocating who will do science and who will do arts. Split, you know. They used to do this. MA. And he said, the following boys are in the arts, and I was in the arts. I didn't want to be in the arts, I wanted physics and chemistry. He says, no, you, Gilbert, you are going to do French, Latin and no physics. You have to drop physics. So he may – so I went to him and protested. I said, look, first – I was first in both. He said, no, I made a rule and told all the teachers that the first fifteen in Latin would do Latin. And he said, do you know how many people want to do Latin? None [laughs]. Everybody wants – 'cos they hated the Latin teacher. He was horrible. He used to give up [ph] – he used to get hold – it's better than a flyer, isn't it? [Laughs] No. He used to get hold of your hair and used to twist it and he used to say, say after me, boy, I'm a wriggly worm, sir. And he used to twist it and you had to say it three times and he used to scream, practically. He was a sadist. And I didn't want – and I was made to take Latin. And of course, that's why I went to economics. And then when I went to London with this wonderful CV, you know, good report, to his headmaster friend at the Westminster City School – and now, that sounds very good but it wasn't [laughs]. It sounds important, doesn't it? And I was – and he had me in and he said, you've got a very nice report from my friend, Mr Wetherall [ph], in Cornwall. [03:00:06] He said, I'm glad, welcome to the school. He said, you will be doing English, French, Latin and for English literature, Chaucer. Chaucer? [Laughs] The four subjects which I would have hated beyond all [laughs]. And I did Chaucer, you know, the Canterbury Tales. I remember doing that. And that school, underneath it was the Metropolitan line, the Circle line, which is only ten feet below the – the whole room used to sway as the Underground [laughs] went past. And I thought, oh, this is – I can't do this. So, I checked and I found out the head of the London County Council – it was London County Council opposite Parliament, you know, now a hotel?

Yeah, yeah.

Well, that was the London County Council. So, I went there, 1000, 2000 people working there, and I said – oh, yes, young man, what do you – I said, I would like to see maybe the education department, somebody who – because I want to change schools. [Laughs] He looked at me. Pardon? We've never had that request before [laughs]. It was the beginning of the term. How do you know you want to change? I said, I know. I said, I'll be a total failure. So they said, well, I'll send you to this gentleman. And he was the head of the education department of London schools. And I told him the story and he said, well, you're obviously in the totally wrong school. I said, well, what do you advise? He said, economics. So, I said, what's economics? I'd never heard of it. [03:02:00] So he told me and I was introduced, accepted, the rest is history. So, the wrong decision sometimes can be the right decision, can't it?

So it's strange, so they forced you into the languages –

Forced me. Forced me into languages. And then I did German here at university. And we did business studies which was this Dr Lindsay [ph]. Lindsay's [ph] story is – he's written a book. It's the most fantastic book. It's written by his wife. He was at Shanghai in the foreign section and he was there when the Japanese invaded. And at first, the Japanese didn't touch the foreigners because they were neutral. So, England and America were not in the war. They were at war with – and he saw the suffering of the Chinese people. And he taught Chinese people and he had a pupil in his class who was five years younger than him – she was eighteen, he was twenty-three – and they fell in love. And she was the daughter of one of the richest men in China. And they fell in love and they married. I mean, unbelievable. They were allowed to. Her father accepted him. And then Pearl Harbor came, the Japanese invaded, and America declared war and Britain declared war. And he had been helping the local communist guerrillas with medical supplies and one of his colleagues was a Jewish professor, a doctor. He was a doctor. So they worked together and they used to help the people who had been beaten up. They used to help them. He was never a communist but he helped. When they invaded, of course, he realised, like my mum, he had to get out. [03:04:04] Luckily, we weren't there, isn't it? We could have been there, Mum and I. So he got on his – he – at the age of six and seven, he could take a motorbike to pieces and put it together. He was at

Balliol College, Oxford, and he was an expert at radio communications. He rigged up antennas from one steeple to the next, he climbed all the steeples, and he was able to get radio signals from Argentina to Oxford. And the BBC came to see him, how the hell do you do this, 'cos we can't. He was advanced and he was a magician with his hands. And he realised then and there that the Japanese would immediately have him on the books, so they realised he was helping. So, he got on his motorbike and managed to go through all the Japanese lines, escaped with them chasing, managed to chase, like a film, and joined the guerrillas. And then he helped them with medical supplies from America and radio communications, very important because they were – they had the Japs between them. And of course, it's – we think of China as flat but there's mountains, isn't there? And he spent four years fighting the Japanese behind the lines. And when Mao Ts– when Jinping, the president of China, came to England, you remember? He did a royal tour with Queen Elizabeth. He was – a state visit. He was welcomed in, when we were talking to China, [laughs] not like now. He gave a speech to the House of Commons and House of Lords and he said, this Lord Lindsay [ph] was the greatest Englishman that ever lived. [03:06:00] And I did this – I told Hull University – they never knew this – so I wrote this article, the Chinese, the third biggest film company, 3000 or 4000 employees, saw the article, this young lady, and they wanted to do – my stories of what I – what – he used to tell us all the stories. Unbelievable stories.

So how did you meet him?

Well, he was my lecturer at university for three years.

At Hull?

Yeah. And he used to start talking economics and within five minutes we'd get him telling us stories about China, so – and one of the stories, and it's in this – his wife then wrote a book about their experience. But it was – you had McCarthyism, didn't you, you know. And for years they were ostracised in – but he became a professor at Harvard University. He was accepted at the end. But at the time, they thought he was a communist. So her book was never published until 1990 and I've got the book now and it's a romance, it's a historical book. And one case, the Japanese for fun, used to – commandeered an engine and fitted it with machine

guns and every Thursday afternoon half a dozen of these army people used to get on this engine and go into the countryside, about twenty miles, machine-gunning all the labourers in the fields. So he one day – he was in the guerrillas – they told him about this – he saw a bridge which this train always went over and he rigged up communications and a bomb and as the train approached, they blew it up. And he was chased – he was within inches of being captured. [03:08:01] A wonderful story.

John, just to go back to your story.

Vienna, yes [laughs]. A long way.

So your story, not – Vienna. I wanted to ask you, what was it like to be reunited with your parents? Because you left them – I mean in London.

Yeah.

What was it like? Because in a way, you hadn't been much in touch with them for four or five years.

Something which was very strange at first, you know, having been six years apart.

That's a long time, and that age.

I – Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph] had become my parents, hadn't they?

Yeah.

And I'd been – the Jesuits used to say, give us a child of ten and we've got a convert for life. It's the most impressionable years, isn't it? It took quite a while for me to adapt. And I mean I used to sleep in the main room. They – we didn't have two bedrooms, you see. So it wasn't easy. And the kitchen was, oh, about that square. And there was a geyser there. The hot water was the geyser, and it's a wonderful thing. Did you ever know what a geyser was? This used

to – as the flame started, it used to explode. It used to go, bang, you know [laughs]. I used to, I used to run out of the kitchen.

So it wasn't so easy to, in a way, with your parents –

Yes, and that's when I first made friends, lifelong friends. I'd met Johnny Cappello [ph]. I'd met him originally in my days – in my first – when the Phoney War was on. Cappello [ph], it sounds Italian. Well, his dad was born in Italy, his mother was English, and they used to have a pub. They had a pub by the Angel, the – one of the pubs, a lovely pub, and they were a lovely couple. So, I became good friends with him. [03:10:00] And then when I went back to London we became friends again, and he only died very recently. He was a few months older than me. But he was never evacuated. And then at school I met my best friend, Des, and he went to – we had a most terrible row when we were seventeen. We became friends. But we made a mistake. We went on a cycle ride to Northern Ireland, three of us. Three is a mistake. I've always been told it should be twos or fours. Three is a disaster, somebody once told me. It was. Now, the third boy was the Jewish – he was the son of our form master. We got on well together. But Des and I fell out. And what I fell out about with, I cannot remember. Can't tell you. We went to Northern Ireland and I blew my top and I said, to hell with you, and I cycled on my own, home. And that's another place where I discovered something. We cycled 2000, 2300 miles over Hadrian's Wall, and then I got as far, believe it or not, as Redcar, by Hadrian's Wall, spent the night in a youth hostel. Youth hostels in those days were youth hostels, not the luxurious places they are now. And from Redcar – and if our Hilary was here, she would immediately run away 'cos she's heard it a hundred times. From Redcar I cycled on my own to Doncaster, which was about eighty, ninety miles. But when you cycle a lot, it becomes nothing, the mileage. Beginning, fifty miles was – it nearly killed us. This was 100 miles out [ph]. And I went to youth hostel in Doncaster, Yorkshire, north of Doncaster. And in the morning, we had to do washing up. [03:12:01] We had to do something to help. And there were two girls there who had a tandem, so next morning I left with them. They were cycling down to Nottingham, so for the first sixty miles I had a pacemaker in front of me, which helped. Anyhow, to cut a long story short, 180 miles covered in fifteen hours, on my own. And again, it's about, starve the buggers. I had sixpence left in my pocket, that's all I had left [laughs] when I got as far as Peterborough, at about five in the afternoon, still sixty,

seventy miles from London. And I went into a fish and chip shop and I said, can I have a packet of chips and some bread and butter or dry bread, and can I have a glass of water? He said, why do you want a glass of water? I said, well, I've only got sixpence [laughs]. So, he gave me a bit of a fish as well [laughs]. But the secret on cycling 180 miles is, don't have any money in your pocket, and no telephone. So, I arrived back in London at Sandwich Street, this is the – opposite. I arrived back at two in the morning, woke my mum and dad and I got upstairs and I said to Mum – I said, Mum, I'm absolutely starving. I'm ravenous. And she said, well, I cooked a goulash for us tomorrow. And I ate all three meals [laughs] at half past two. I was absolutely – and yet wide awake, you see.

And John, did you stay in touch with those people in Cornwall?

Oh, yes, until they died.

Always.

Oh, totally.

And did you visit them, or –

Oh, yes. Pam and I when we first got engaged, we went down there and we stayed with them. And then one day I took Pam and Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph] down to Carbis Bay. [03:14:05]
Do you know Carbis Bay?

Yeah.

Beautiful. And we stayed in a bungalow on the bottom. I had always wanted to – I knew they did bed and breakfast there. I always wanted to stay there. And we arrived – Hilary would have been about two, Alison about three, two and a half, and we travelled all that way and they – I'd bought them plum – Victoria plums, and they'd eaten about three pounds of Victoria plums and they'd been sick twice [laughs] a few miles in the car [laughs]. It stank. Yeah. Went down below and they – she – her husband was the ex-station master of Crewe,

station master, so they were nice people. And she said, yes, we've got room. I said, well, could we have a family room, because we've got two little children? Oh, she said, I'm terribly sorry, we don't take children. My face dropped. I said, I've always wanted to stay here. And the bungalow at the back had steep steps outside because of the cliff. So as I walking up, she ran after me. She said, Mr Gilbert. I said, yes. She said, can I see the children? [Laughs] I said yes. And I ran up those steps to try and open the doors before [laughs] – and she opened – and these two faces looked out. They were angels. They were lovely. I've got a picture of them somewhere. Anyhow, but they were angels. But the smell [laughs] was terrible. And she said – she fell in love with them. She said, oh, they're lovely. Oh, she said, we've got to have them, haven't we? Come on, come on down. So that was – and next morning – Pam's mum and dad were with us as well – and her dad was a lunatic. [03:16:02] He was totally bald and he had the sun on his head. He had the most terrible blisters. The next day he was out in the sun again. I said, what are you doing? He said, well, sun does you good, you know [laughs]. Yeah, we were having breakfast – and in Cornwall, the trouble is you get lots of wind and when the wind blows across the beach, it could be winter. Out of the wind, you know. So, I dug a pit. He and I got shovels and we dug a pit nearly as deep as this, deeper. And that big. A huge pit. It took us two or three hours. And we put all the deckchairs into it and there we were out of the wind, it was summer. Well, within one day, there must have been twenty other pits on that beach [laughs]. And then next morning we sat in the – outside and having breakfast and about eight o'clock in the morning, fairly early, and we saw a family going towards our pit, with deckchairs, and they put it in our pit. And Pam's mum, she was a real – you wouldn't cross her. [Imitates] I'm not having that, I'm not having that. I said, it's a public beach. You can't own a pit. She said, yes, we can. So she and [laughs] Pam stormed over there and I'll never forget it. Within minutes, these people [laughs] were crawling out of the pit [laughs].

Yeah. So, you kept in touch with them.

Yes, we kept in touch, very much so. And then we were on that beach one day and Mr and Mrs Blamey [ph] were with us and Pam's mum and the two kids and Pam, and a fisherman came ashore with a boat, saying, anybody want a, you know, a ride out in the sea? Oh, I said, I'd love it. And the waves were about that big, you see. [03:18:00] And we – I said yes and

Pam and Mrs Blamey [ph] said no, I'm not going out in the sea, it's too rough. I said, oh, rubbish. I can swim and that. No, nice boat, you know, fishing boat. So we got out, got in it, went around the headland, went left to see the, what do they call them? No.

Seals?

The – seals. The seal colony, about ten miles up the coast, towards Land's End. So, we went up there and I noticed the wind was getting up, the tide was going out, wind blows – opposite direction, so I knew my seas, and those swells had become that big. And when we got to where the seals were, they were cleverer than us, they'd gone. They weren't going to have a rough sea [laughs]. So he said, I think we'll turn back, so we turned back, and then every minute the sea got bigger and then the waves were this high. And then as we neared the bay, we – the tide was going out, wind was blowing in, really strong wind, and the waves were twice, three times the height of this, and they were starting to break, which is the worst, you know, they'd be going over. And as we headed land, this wave, I could see it coming. It broke fifty yards away, coming straight at us. It went at the back of the boat and Hilary and – they both were thrown into the boat, no gear on whatsoever in those days, no health and safety. They could easily have gone over sea. We were very, very lucky. And he turned around and he said, well, I've been coming here for forty years. He said, I've never known the sea get up like it. [03:20:01] So as we neared St Ives, there's two fire brigade there, [laughs] three ambulances [laughs] and a crowd of about 500 people, all watching these mad people coming in [laughs]. So, we rode in a – and then we went to the harbour, everybody clapped. And as far as I'm concerned, boats and I were albatrosses. Whenever I go on a boat, there's trouble, so that was Cornwall. And that was my introduction to Pam as well. And we had our honeymoon down there, everything. We loved –

How did you meet Pam? At university?

Well, at university I was there with – we made up, my best friend. Wherever I went, he followed me. Unfortunately, he died at Tottenham Court Road, coming down – he was one of the – he joined the Air Force. I went for an interview with Hull University after I'd passed my exams, to join the air force, you know, conscription. And when I got there they said, passport.

They said, oh, we notice your father became naturalised as a British citizen but you are now twenty-one but we can't take you on conscription because you'd normally be an officer in the Royal Air Force, you know, with a degree. We want people like you. And Des was going to be an officer. And I said, well, I want to join, yes, 'cos my friend, you know. He said, well, I'm very sorry but we can't take you because you have got till twenty-four to decide whether you're an Austrian citizen. You can change back. So they wouldn't accept me. So, I said, well, can I volunteer? He said, oh, delighted. And you'll definitely be a – you'll go on officer's – definitely. I said, well, so for two years? He said no, five years. Now, would you have joined? [03:22:00] So I didn't join. And then I had a problem. Whatever job I applied, people would say, have you done your National Service? I said no. Well, we'll take you when you've done your National Service [laughs]. Again, you know, so I was – that was a handicap.

So when did you become British, then? I mean when –

Dad got naturalised in 1949. At college, I was at college when I met Pam, I was still Austrian, and Dad had changed his name as well.

And you changed your name?

And automatically my name was changed as well. And he got naturalised I think a few months before that. You know, he was – because he was an ARP warden, he was accepted. And the funny thing was, now, Pam and I, we'd met and we'd become very close and really boy and girlfriend and I was taking her to a city dance at City Hall, which was my idea. The Students' Union went bust because of me [laughs]. I worked out that I'd always believed that the city, the people of the city and universities should work together. Well, they never will. University and the ordinary folk will always be – farmers and – and people will never be friends. So, I advertised – we advertised this dance with the Squadronaires, hired the Squadronaires at something like £6000 – it was a fortune. You know, huge band, dance band. And the City Hall, we hired. And I worked out that if we charged £5 and we got 500 people, we would break even. You know, I worked – economics. I was good at that. Well, we finally got – we sold seventy tickets [laughs]. And half of those we didn't sell, they were free. [03:24:02] Mine was free, my friend, Des, was free [laughs]. And I took her to the dance and

while we were waiting for the taxi – 'cos Pam always did the hair for all her friends – she was an amateur hairdresser – we were always late. You know, I was sitting and waiting. We were – at training college we weren't allowed in the girls' quarters. I sat there and this taxi bloke comes in here and says, taxi for Gilbert, so I just sat there, you know. You know, who the hell is Gilbert? So Pam comes down, she says, isn't the taxi here yet? I said, oh, my God. He said – I – he's just been in here. It's Gilbert. I was thinking of Goldstein, you see [laughs]. So, name's can, you know.

You were not used to Gilbert.

Not used to. But we first met – the – we used to have a resident band for the university. A wonderful band. And he had a lovely daughter too, but she was divorced unfortunately. Had a little boy. But she was a lovely girl. And I had been to the dances but I was engaged to a London girl, worked at Boots, so she was sort of upper middle class, wasn't she? [Laughs] Boots, she – left school at fourteen, couldn't understand why the hell I wanted – she wanted to get married, why the hell do you want to go to university, you know. Get a job. But I went to university, then I met Pam and I took – we organised – he couldn't do the dance at the university that Saturday because he was attending his brother's wedding. He was the man. So, we said, all right. So instead, we had a dance with a radiogram at Camp Hall. That was the hall of residence, an army camp, by the way. [03:26:00] Very rough. And I took posters down to the training college, Catholic ones, and the other one, girls wanted for dance [laughs]. And Pam and her three friends turn up. And to this day I remember her standing in that corner over there, these four girls, and I thought, that's a nice one, that little one there. And the rest is history.

And when did you get married, which year?

'53. But just a few weeks before she died, she woke me up one day at about four o'clock in the morning – she always denies it – and did that to me. She said, do you know, best day of my life was when I met you, and went back to sleep. And next morning, I said, that was a lovely thing you said. She said, I never said that [laughs]. So –

John, I wanted to ask you, did your parents ever consider going back to Austria after the war? What –

Never. No, no. Not for a moment. They used to like visiting it. They used to go to Baden bei Wien.

And when did they go back first to Austria? And when did you go back for –

Now, the first visit was in '48 when the Russians were still there and it took thirty-six hours by train to get to Vienna 'cos we – you couldn't enter Vienna the normal way, you had to enter it through the British Zone and then the Russian Zone.

And what was it like for you to go back there?

Strange, very strange. And people were still hungry. There were lots of people hungry. And we lived like royalty, my mum and I, because as tourists we got food coupons which you could present in a restaurant and as soon as the restaurant saw you had food coupons, you got the most marvellous service, twice the portions. **[03:28:00]** It was fantastic. It was so cheap, it was unbelievable. But the Austrians in those days said it was nothing to do with them, you see. They all –

But what did you feel like, coming back there?

Yeah. There's one strange thing which I haven't spoken before. I occasionally in Austria when I'm in a restaurant or something, I see somebody sitting over there and suddenly that man has got an SS uniform [laughs]. He looks exactly like an SS officer. I may be doing the biggest injustice. He might be the local vicar [laughs] or the –

But in your head, in your imagination –

In my head I can see that. You see, I always remember that SS officer took the pictures and the- and, you know, Mum got it back.

Yes, so tell us. You didn't tell us the story. So your mum when she came back, on that visit, what happened?

That visit, we went – we took a taxi – I didn't know what she wanted – she said, we're going to visit the owners of this block of flats, the owner. She said, he's very wealthy, a landowner. You know, one of the aristocrats or that sort of – and we went there, a huge estate, you know, big, big acres of farmland and woodland, lakes and everything, and steps. And she went up the steps – she was only 5'2", 5'1" – and she knocked on the door – there was a knocker – and this chap comes to the door, 6'4", with Lederhosen, dressed like an Austrian, not like a German, and went pure white when he saw Mum. He recognised her instantly. And then he said the famous words, what can I – why have you come? And Mum said, you know exactly why I've come. [03:30:00] And then he said, would you like a cup of coffee? [Laughs] She was very polite. No, thank you. And she gave him the – she showed him the receipt, three weeks, back in London, the piano, and the painting.

And what did it say on the receipt? What did it say on the receipt?

Painting and piano, baby grand. It hadn't –

Taken –

Yes. No, just a receipt for these two. He'd bought them, hadn't stolen them. The receipt, isn't it?

So it came back to you. And we're going to look at the piano and –

And then Dad had the same thing on the frontier, you know, when he went across the frontier, when they gave him a receipt for his jewellery and then took it away [laughs]. Austrian and German efficiency, you know.

Yeah. So, you were happy to come back, then, from that visit in Austria back to England?

Oh, yes, yes. I enjoyed the visit very much. But Dad was always very strange. He said when he came back to England, he always wanted a cup of tea. He loved his cup of tea, which he would never have had in Germany. Germany was always black tea, wasn't it, with lemon.

So in fact, in your business you had quite a few business dealings with both Austria and Germany.

Oh, Austria, Germany, France, America.

And did you – John, did you tell people – when you met Austrians or Germans, did you tell them you were – you came from Vienna?

Oh, they all knew. All knew. In fact, we're still in contact with the great-granddaughter of the Viennese gentleman who made all the sugar dispensers. And he was – I used to shout at him 'cos he used to make things which were, you know, sugar dispensers, when you took the top off you cut your fingers because they were like a knife. I used to scream at him. [03:32:00] Oh, don't shout at me, John [laughs]. I will put it right. Next delivery, just as bad as the last one [laughs]. But his granddaughter is – she's now got two little girls. And in fact, the strange thing is that, you know Gregory's got this business, you know, with, he's got six graduates all from Hull University, all with a master's degree, first class honours, all working for him, earning a good salary. And, what was that? Yes. And he went to Vienna and he is on the verge of starting a business in Vienna with the great-granddaughter.

That's your son?

Because she's – she is a consultant in the hotel industry.

And in fact, you regained your Austrian citizenship, and your family –

Oh, yes. No trouble whatsoever. I got mine first and then –

Yeah, and why did you want to have your Austrian citizenship?

Well, I was – who told me this? Was it be – no, it was, no, I just read about it. I think I read about it in a newspaper, I saw this about that you can claim, that – the strange thing was, the socialist government who are left wing, who you would think would be sympathetic to the Jews, they always denied that they were responsible. And then a right-wing government took over, nearly neo-Nazi, and they decided to compensate the Jews. It's crazy, isn't it?

And how did you feel, getting this citizenship back, really?

Well, I was thrilled at the time, when the Austrian – I had the Austrian flag. In fact, I had it here recently but – we flew the Austrian flag in Beverley [laughs]. No, I enjoyed it, because I – my heart is still, you know, in Austria. **[03:34:06]** It is. It's – I love the mountains, I like – we loved – we went skiing there. And, you know, Hilary met her husband in Austria. He was a teacher and, from Beverley, and she worked for a company where she taught and led sixth formers on skiing holidays in Austria. You know, worked for that company. And one of the schools which came out was Beverley, led by her husband. He was quite a good skier. And here's a strange story as well, because they met, fell in love, and he was twenty-five years older than her. And when Pam's mum heard about it, she went berserk. She hated the idea 'cos her husband was six years older than she, and she thought that was terrible. She couldn't understand it. But you see, we've got a grandson now, thirty-three, a wonderful grandson. And he was a true Yorkshireman, proud to Beverley and Beverley man. And they met out there. And what she liked about him was that – they used to have boys and girls come out there and they used to run riot at night-time. They weren't told what to do. You know, they drank and they absolutely did what they wanted. In the case of Ivan, they were the best-behaved and the happiest of all the kids, 'cos he was a disciplinarian. He wanted them enjoying themselves but to learn as well. And –

And now you live here, in Yorkshire, in Beverley?

Now we're back to where we were. You see, Cottingham, where I met Pam, that's – that is the largest village in England. **[03:36:03]** It's a village officially.

And not far from here.

Three miles. And our – I came up by train, went there, and it's godforsaken. You had these Nissen huts in a field. Nissen huts. No central heating, nothing.

So John, I was going to ask you, so in terms of your identity, because you said you still feel your heart is somewhere in Vienna, in Austria. How do you – what do you define –

I feel – can I say, what I feel like is a mixed-up kid. Born from birth, Catholic, English, Cornish, Yorkshire, London. It's a mixture, isn't it?

All these different identities.

Well, Peter Puplett [ph], my best friend, who I met, he was – his father was very rich, a very rich man. In fact, he was in MI5 in the war, working with Churchill. He was the man who sent spies to work with the Maquis in France, parachuted them into France. Fancy sending people to their death, being in charge of that. And he was a lovely man, his father, and I got to like him very much. And Peter Puplett [ph], he was the most. well, conceited lad you could possibly imagine. And we got on like a house on fire. I – and he was rich, I was very poor. And we originally met – we got to like each other and he invited me to his home and when he met his future wife, he wanted me to meet her because he was Catholic and she was Protestant and he said to me, do you think that's a problem? I said, well, Mum and Dad – I said, well, I'll tell you something else, I've got another friend, Fred Lees [ph], he's Protestant and his future wife is Catholic. **[03:38:02]** I'll tell you what you do. I'll invite her over and you can change partners, you know [laughs]. That was our rel – and he was – and he only died recently. I went to his funeral. And now his daughter, who's only sixty-five, but she's got cancer, throat cancer. Sixty-five. Unfair. Could never have children, no, and – but he was a – and our relationship was most extraordinary. I had always, because I'd failed French, I wanted to go to France to learn the language, so I decided to hitch around France on my own. [Laughs] Save 30 quid for a six weeks' hitchhiking tour, on my own. I'd never been there. And I told him this at school. He said, oh. He said, well, when you're in Paris, I'll be there. I

said, well, why is that? He said, well, my dad's got an apartment in Paris. I said, oh. Oh, he said, on business, you know, it's a business. So, I said, oh, yeah. So anyhow, he said, when you're there, come and see – he gave me my – so I went to [inaudible]. Eight bedrooms, seven bathrooms [laughs] on the Avenue de Haussmann. [Laughs] It was an absolute palace. And me, and I was there for three days. He took me to the Folies Bergère and he really – he knew all the places. Paid for everything. And I said, this is not right. He said, well, you've come to hitchhike. No, go on, I want to. So, I agreed eventually. And then I was leaving on the Monday. I said, well, look, I'm going on this hitchhiking to learn French. He said, can I come with you? I said, come with me? I said, here you are in Paris in this – what do you want to go and – I said, you've been all over France. [03:40:04] I said, well – he said, well, where are you aiming for? I said, well, I'd like to get down to the Mediterranean. Oh, he said, wonderful. So, we set off and hitchhiked. And we got as far – we got right down to Nice and in Nice we found a cheap apartment, 'cos that's all I wanted, you know. He wanted a hotel. I said no. So we found this room with a double bed, no – not two singles. We were in a shared bed. It was as normal as tomorrow morning. And we spent that night, I always remember, the railway went where that patio is, that was the railway, from Marseille to Italy [laughs]. Fast trains used to go past. And we threw – we ate cherries. We had a bag of cherries and we threw the stones out of the window and I'm sure there's cherry trees growing there now. But we went there. And then next day – a couple of day we were there in Nice – he said, let's get a train to Monte Carlo. Monte Carlo? He said, well, it's only forty minutes from here by train. So we got on the train and went to the casino. Now, that casino is – the one we went to, you've got to – have you been to Monte Carlo? The casino now is down below and it's like Las Vegas, just like Nissen huts. The real casino is within the building. It's got a magnificent – as you see in pictures – a magnificent staircase opening up. And now it's £200 per person entrance fee and a minimum stake of £50, one chip. You know what it was in those days? Sixpence, [laughs] with no minimum. [03:42:03]

Did you win anything?

So, I went there and I had never gambled in my life and we went on a roulette and that was – that could have been very dangerous. And I lost 10 shillings in about three minutes. An hour later, he sat there with all these chips in front of him. He'd won £350, multiplied by 100. And

people were following what he was doing. Now, lots of people were winning because they put something on every number, you know [laughs]. Well, you're bound to win, aren't you? [Laughs] But you lose more than you win. But he then when he'd got practically – he'd hardly lost anything but he was unbelievable like- he got up and cashed in and walked out. And he said, right, we're moving to the Hotel in Cannes. The Hotel, the British Hotel, and we moved there from this hovel, and the first time I'd ever stayed in such a hotel and I've never looked back [laughs]. I got the taste. And gambling is my weakness. I could – tomorrow morning I could lose every penny I've got. I've really got to fight. I enjoy losing. That's the most dangerous of all. I get excited. Can you imagine that? Pam could never understand it. She said, it's a fool's game. And when we went to Las Vegas, I insisted on going to the tables, you see, and I took my passport and I put 100 quid in it and she said, how much money have you got with you, I said £20. [03:44:07] I had £100 in there. And I sat down and I put it on twenty-two. I never, ever won on twen – never since or before. And my first time in Las Vegas, it won. And across the table, twenty-two times, er –

Thirty-

Times thirty-six. And the croupier pushed it across to me, like that. And I got hold of about \$5 and threw it to her because I'd seen it in the films, you know [laughs].

And did you leave? Did you leave with the money, or not?

And Pam said to me – she was standing behind me – she said, now, we go. And we had a row. We had rows in every city I've ever been to. She said, now, we go. I said no, I'm staying. And I lost half of it and then managed – she conned – she just took the money [laughs].

John, because we have to take a train back soon but I was going to ask you, you said you had all these different identities. Was that ever a conflict for you to have all these different identities?

No, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. Turned it to my advantage.

So do you feel Cornish, partly? You have –

Yes, I feel Cor – when I'm in Cornwall, I feel I'm – in fact, some of the people I know down in Cornwall ever since – the daughter of Valerie, who died, she has got four girls, they regard me as uncle, you know.

Yeah. And Yorkshireman?

Yes.

Also?

Oh, yes.

Well, I'm definitely Yorkshire because I was in Hull before anybody was, you know.

When I came to Hull it had been bombed. Do you know, Hull had the heaviest air raid of any city in Britain?

Yeah. What about Jewish? Do you consider yourself at all Jewish?

No, I don't. I believe in God but no, I don't regard myself. [03:46:02] In fact, there's one lady, who was she? I think it was the Hull Jewish lady. She said – I told her this story, you know. She said, well, once a Jew, always a Jew [laughs].

Yeah. And you don't agree with it?

So I said – no. I said, well, that isn't what most people think, you know [laughs]. You may say that but –

And are you a practising Christian? I mean do –

No, not really, no.

No. So –

I like going to church, I like singing hymns, I enjoy singing.

Do you go to church today? I mean –

Well, just very occasionally, at a wedding and that. My dad did the same, you see. He only went occasionally. Not regular.

And John, you have three children. How did you want to raise your children? What sort of identity did you want to give them?

Well, the funny thing is, Hilary and Alison were both baptised Church of England. Gregory, er, Richard, because [laughs] Pam fell out with the local vicar, I always said, you should be baptised in Risby. We never got round to it. So he's the heathen in the family. I've said to him, for God's sake, get baptised, and he said, no, I'm not going to [laughs].

*And John, how do you think your experiences shaped your life or impacted your later life?
Your experiences –*

Well, I've had the most wonderful life, blessed with a fantastic family. We've had our ups and downs, with Alison – Alison, no, I'd better not say that on here.

No, don't say anything which you don't want public.

[Laughs] No, I know, because Al –

I'll stop you here.

No, because Alison will kill me [laughs].

Don't say anything.

Because she knows what I'm going to say [laughs]. I don't have to –

Then don't say it again. Don't say it because it's very difficult to take back.

She is the most lovely girl know. She ruined her sister. Her sister – whenever her sister got into trouble, it was always Alison who took the blame. And she ruined Richard. Now, she's been a wonderful mother and she's got a nice family as well, a daughter and a son, and three great-grandchildren – four. And one is twenty-three, twenty-four. [03:48:00] It's ridiculous. No –

Do you think you became – you said it, you became more adaptable. You think that, because I mean –

Oh, yes, it's – I can see the best in every religion. Every religion has its pluses and its minuses, the Jewish religion as well. I mean some of the things which happened in Israel, I can regard it as racist, practically. It's – they should – they should know more than anybody else but there is a problem, isn't there, with the Orthodox. It's always the extremes, and I always say, extremes are very strange. In fact, the very thing has happened in the Jewish parliament. You've got the right wing and the left wing forming a parliament. I've always said there's no left and no right. It's a circle. And if you go down the bottom, the extreme left meet the extreme right. And you can easily go from that side to that side and be an extremist, both sides, you know. So, it's, er, no, I can see – the Catholic religion, I disagree with lots of the things in that but they have got a faith when you are a Catholic, you've got something you really believe in and you – there is no argument. That's it, isn't it? Jews as well, the Orthodox. There is a certain thing and, you know.

Yeah. And your parents? What did they do, then, here in England?

Yes.

Did they join a church or –

No.

No.

Neither of them went to church. But Mum was buried in a Christian cemetery, my dad in a Jewish cemetery.

You felt you wanted to bury –

I always felt – and then I had misgivings afterwards, why separate them in death? But they're not separated, are they? [03:50:00] Because it's up in Heaven.

But you felt it was important to –

I think it was important, particularly –

So he is in Bushey?

Dad is the one that made me, and I'm sure that was the right decision, particularly when he called out when I went to the wrong taps [ph], you bloody fool. In fact, he often criticised me in many things and then it was strange that at the funeral we had cars. Dad never drove a car but he always had a taxi to pick up fish and chips from Jewish fish and chip shops in the West End of London. It used to arrive cold but he said there was no fish like it, you know. And he always used the chauffeur, a nice, big car, and it was one of the cars at his funeral. And when I was in that, in the leading car with him, I sat next to the driver, the chauffeur, he said to me, John, I must tell you something. He said, I took your dad to London just before he became ill and he said to me, don't tell my son this but when I'm gone, will you please tell him that I love him very much and he was right in many things and I was wrong [laughs]. After, you know [laughs]. So that was lovely. Yeah. But that happens, doesn't it? You know.

Do you think, John, your – do you sometimes think what your life would have been like if you hadn't been forced to emigrate?

No, I don't because it's supposition, it could be anything, couldn't it, you know. I've done dancing in England, I've brought the dance to England, not – you don't have to do it in Austria, do you? And I've liked visiting Austria, we skied many times in Austria.

Because you recently joined the Association of Jewish Refugees.

Yes.

Tell us a bit, why did you join it or why did you –

Well, I joined it because I was really invited to join it. [03:52:02] At that – with Mrs Herzog, Herzog [ph], diplomat, ex-diplomat, she was the – what do you call the person who interviews you?

The interviewer? On a – no, she's a – the – panel [ph], chair.

Chair, no, something else, orator. No. Anyhow, whatever it was, she – we did this together and at the end your chairman – tall – he's tall, isn't he?

Yeah. Michael, you mean. Yeah.

Got up – yes, got up, and I didn't know who he was and he said to me – he said, you were a runner – I've told them about my rugby and that, you know. And I said – he said, did you ever play cricket? And I told him the reason. I said no, it's a terrible game [laughs]. I said, I did play it once when I was sixty-five, when my son, Richard – I had a secretary who joined me at the age of eighteen and she had been to Pitman and she was the most fantastic secretary. She's now quite a wealthy woman, married to an estate agent, they've travelled all over the world. She only phoned me a few weeks ago. She was wonderful. Her husband had a cricket team in Uxbridge and they were from Mozambique, you know, Indian, but they were

quite coloured. They were sort of Indian, negro, but she was practically white. In fact, she was white. Strange. And one day I get a phone call from my son, Richard. He said, Dad, I'm playing cricket. He was a good cricket – he still plays cricket now, for his hometown, the village cricket. He's a demon bowler. Kills them with how he plays cricket. Anyhow, he phoned me. He says, I'm playing cricket for her husband's team and there's ten of us.

[03:54:01] We're a man short. Could you come over here and play? I said, well, I'm sixty-five and I haven't got any whites. He said, well, we've got some – I think I had this suit, a grey suit, you see. He said, well, that will do. He said, it's only to make up the team, you know. I said, all right, then. So, I went across, got there, all black, you see, Indian, quite dark, you know. And I joined them and I was in the dressing room and they said, right, we're fielding first, you see. So, I said, where am I fielding? He said, well, go on the wing, [laughs] go on the – furthest away [laughs]. And I caught one of the balls, five minutes and I caught one of them, right on, and they thought I was – they said, well, come in nearer, you know [laughs]. It was a fluke. Anyhow, I played and then they scored something like 120-odd runs and then our team went in and we had some good batters and I think we were 117 for ten and I was sent in, the last man. So, I'm – and it was a new over, and this tall bowler, he was a lout [ph], he was – he knocked out a couple of people I think, you know, when he heads. I'm standing there and just before I go in, one of the colleagues says to me – he says, right, put your bat – put your pads on. I said, what are pads? [Laughs] So he put – helped me on. And then he said, have you got a box? So I said, what the hell is a box? [Laughs] Do you know what a box is? Do they have boxes in Yorkshire? Do they play cricket in Yorkshire?

Frank: I don't think so.

Yeah.

The day my grandson was born, Yorkshire announced people could play for Yorkshire without being born in Yorkshire. You can play for Yorkshire now, even if you're not born in Yorkshire. They used to have a rule, you had to be born to play, which I think is right in some ways. [03:56:01] Anyhow –

So you played –

He gave me this box and I said, whose is that? He said, it's mine. I said, well, I don't know what – I'm not wearing that, I don't know where that's been [laughs]. So, he said, oh, God, you're terrible, aren't you? I said, I'm sorry. I said, that's me. Then he said, well, go in and do your best, you know. He said, you know. So I go in there and I'm standing at the wicket and taking- really professional, and this bowler is sort of vanishing in the distance, to take a run-up, you know, about 100 yards. He's going to really throw it at me and I'm petrified. Anyhow, I'm standing there with the bat in front of me and suddenly, there's a hell of a pain at the back of my knee. I've got this – like a stitch and then I suddenly realised the box had gone from there, slipped down to here, so there was nothing there [both laugh]. So I stood there with the bat, just – it wasn't covering – no, it wasn't covering the wicket but it was covering – and he bowled and it flew and I couldn't see the bloody thing. And all of a sudden, I felt this bang and it hit the bat and scurried [ph] off into the distance, a six [laughs]. And a huge- we want the match [laughs]. And I was carried off the pitch. So, I told this story, you see.

To the AJR? Yeah.

And there was an Indian lady sitting there and I said, I do apologise, you know [laughs].

So after that, you joined the AJR? Yeah.

And then – he laughed and then afterwards he said, that's a wonderful story. He said, you should join. I said, join what? I said, well –

[Break in recording]

So you joined the AJR and have you – after that and have you met any other AJR members at all, or –

No, I met two ladies in Hull, who Chris was going to visit. **[03:58:08]**

The social worker?

So I went to meet them. Now, one has been to America, I've spoken to her on the phone, never met her. The other one I met and I insisted on she comes here, which she wouldn't. She insisted I go there, and we had a meal together about nine months ago. And I phoned her recently. I said, look, where's the return visit? Oh, she said. Oh, I will.

I mean is it something you're interested in, meeting other refugees? Or is it –

Not really, no.

No.

If I meet them, I would like to, but –

It's not –

No.

You're not looking for that?

No. I've got plenty of – Hilary's got lots of friends here, and...

Yeah. Can I ask you something? Did you talk about the past to your children? Or was it –

Oh, yes.

You did.

Well, Hilary will tell you. She can tell you all the stories. She gets them wrong sometimes but – she's not got a very good memory.

But you have got a very good memory.

She hasn't [laughs].

And John, did you ever speak to schools or to schoolchildren about your experiences, or –

No. The only place I did a –

Presentation?

No, the only place I ever spoke to was at that meeting, organised for second generation. I've spoken at federation meetings. The first time I – I was the chairman of this association and I met some of them, I knew the members, so they were friends, and they said, John, we'd like you to say a few words to the American delegation – 200 of them. He said, we'd like you just to chat to them. They're here from America to attend this exhibition. And, you know, you've been in the trade a long time, we'd like you to meet them. So, I said, aye, chat to them, certainly. Anyhow, three weeks before, I get a phone call, have you prepared your speech? [04:00:00] I said, well, you didn't say a speech, you said I was going to chat to them. Oh, no, no, no, no, it's a – we'd like you speak for about twenty minutes. I'd never spoken – never. I was petrified. I can talk but I wouldn't be able – so I said to my secretary at the time, as she'd just joined me – as a joke, I said, do you know, I'm petrified. I've been invited. She said, oh. She said, well, you know, there's courses to go on to teach you how to start speaking. Oh, I said, that's interesting, yes. Good idea. Anyhow, after lunch she said, I've booked you in. I said, you've done what? Booked me in at the Institute of Directors. And at that – teaching was for a week's course, directors from Marks & Spencer, ICI, all terrified of speaking.

Yeah. But did you speak, when you spoke about your personal experience, or –

Yes. And we could speak about anything. And I found out that if – when you speak, if you can get them laughing in the first two minutes, you've got them in your hand and then you can do anything. You – because 98% of what you say is forgotten within five minutes of you sitting down. You can say anything you like, as long as you can hold their attention with

some humour. And with the Americans, you know what I did? I – it was at the Grosvenor, the big room where Churchill had spoken and that. I said, do you know, gentlemen, you're in a very fantastic – here, Churchill had spoken, we had Khrushchev here, Kennedy, all these have been speakers. You will see the list is below. And I said, do you know what? I said, Disraeli lived just up the road. [04:02:00] I said, you can go and see this on – they said, oh, that's interesting. Got them. And then I said, if you look at the list and you turn it upside down, you know who's number one on that list? Me [laughs]. And they – and then I – you can also insult your audience. They – some of them complained about the Common Market which was starting. I said, Common Market? I said, you're the most closed import – more tariffs – now, you've got it now – than any – isolationism is American word. I said, you're the ones who started it. And they –

Yeah. So, it was a good speech.

And somebody got up and said, well, Mr Gilbert – somebody said, well, that's unfair. And then – and one of the Americans got up and he said no. He said, I'd never thought of it like that. You know.

But John, did you ever think, for example, to speak to your – to the old school there in Redruth? Is it still – does it still exist?

Yeah. That's my only disappointment, that when I was doing all this research and [overtalking], I wrote to Redruth Grammar. It's no longer there. It's now a big comprehensive, a new school.

But in the same location?

The – my school has been turned into a museum. And I never got a reply. Very strange.

'Cos I would have thought that they would be interested in your story.

Yeah. You see, it's strange. Emails, many people don't open their emails, do they?

Well, I will put you in contact with people. I definitely think there are people in Cornwall who would be very interested in your story.

Well, I, you know, and Cornwall, do you know, Camborne is one of the most important cities in England? It's where the School of Mines is. The first railway engine was not Watt of Newcastle. It was Trevithick in Camborne. He got the Puffing Billy to run on the road. [04:04:02] Watt, he invented the rails. But he got the thing to travel – it had – it broke down about ten times. [laughs] But it was designed in Cornwall.

Because I learned recently that the first railway station was actually in Darlington.

Yes. Well, that's it.

Not that far from here.

Well, that's Watt.

Correct.

Yeah, that's that. And then you had the railway in Mersey, you know. And it was to carry coal. And the first railway engine, it's the same as with anything new, everybody complained that all the fields would be, you know, set alight by this horrible thing, you know.

Yeah. We need to come to an end of the interview. I wanted to ask you, have you got a message for anyone who might watch this in the future, based on your own experiences?

Well, if anyone wants to get in touch with me, I will speak to anyone but they do need to pencil in a couple of hours [both laugh] and get totally off the subject which we're talking about [laughs]. They may want to talk about apples, I'll do pears instead, you know. That fair?

That's fair. But I mean based on your experiences, you know, in life, is there anything that you reached an old age of ninety –

Well, I think, people say good fortune is luck. It's not luck. Being at the right place at the right time is not luck. You've actually got up in the morning to be there. I used to have a rep who I discovered only worked three days a week because he said Monday, no one is there, and Friday, everybody's going on holiday. Now, that means he's wasted two days, hasn't he? It's – I've been very lucky. In fact, the most extraordinary thing, if you talk to any successful person, I guarantee you within five minutes of you speaking to them, they would say, I've been lucky. [04:06:08] Any. And the ones who have failed, oh, life has been such a disappointment to me, I've had such bad luck, you know.

But you think luck, you have to make your own luck?

You have to make it. You have to be there. You actually have to give it a chance to get hold of you.

And in your own life, what was your luck, John? What do you think? How would you describe your own luck?

Meeting Pam. That was luck, wasn't it? I mean the extraordinary thing is, I nearly left her at the beginning. I had met her and I was really engaged to that London girl – Boots – and all my friends knew I had invited her up to Camp Hall on a Sunday. Now, Hull was the start – is it being – still recording?

Yeah.

Oh, dear.

Don't say anything you'll regret. Don't say anything –

No. Well, I won't. I'll be had up for all sorts of things, now [both laugh]. Hull was the start of the sexual revolution. In those days, the Catholic college, the ladies there of twenty-two, twenty-one, twenty-two, had to be indoors by half past nine on a weekday. On a Saturday, eleven o'clock. Now, you try to enforce that now. They would laugh at you, wouldn't they?

Yeah.

Well, at Camp Hall, we were already about fifty years ahead of our times and the reason for it is that at university, 80% of the students were ex-servicemen. Ex-servicemen had priority over us, justifiably so. They'd fought in the war. [04:08:01] Then there were officers, older, many of them married, many with girlfriends, with children. And the children and the wives used to come to Camp Hall. They used to stay overnight in their bedrooms, squashed up. And at the entrance to Camp Hall – you can go there now, it's an estate – it's a police station now, where the warden used to live – and there was a notice there, no girls past this – no lady – no females allowed beyond this post without first reporting. Not one female ever reported to that warden [laughs]. The circumference of that Camp Hall was about two miles.

Yeah. That was part of Hull University? Camp Hall.

It's part – it was. Hull. It's now been sold. But the principal of the university, Nicholson [ph], believed – from Cambridge and Oxford – that people should live as part of the university life, which I think is absolute – should not be in digs or a home, it should be at university, because you learn life, you meet friends, you learn life. And he believed in that. So, he had this army camp converted. Unfortunately, there were certain things basically which had a problem. The first problem was the heating. Now, we all had heaters in our rooms. They were the electric ones with an element. But if you turned it upside down you could toast on it [laughs] and cause a fire as well [laughs]. Then the first three days we were there, some of the – we were freshmen – the older member came to see us and said, look, we want to tell you the things to do. The first thing is, we want to change your electric switchboard. And they put in – they circumvented the timers, so instead of the heating going off at nine o'clock, it went off – it never went off at all. [04:10:07] So the electric was on twenty-four hours a day and Nicholson [ph] couldn't understand that the electricity bill was roughly three times what

everybody – what all the economists had estimated. Well, and whenever there was an inspection, these – some of the top lads came around and changed all the fuses so that they didn't see it. So there was no control whatsoever. And they knew –

So that was a good thing for you?

Well, yeah. Well, of course it was. We enjoyed it. It was coming from Mum and Dad into open life. We could do what we like. I never drank. In Cornwall, Methodism, not alcohol. Well, I went – first thing, I was told by the elders that I had to go to the smoker. Now, the smoker was a drinking party where you met other men. Not for sex [laughs] but for –

In Cornwall?

No, this is at university.

Oh, that's at university, sorry.

And if you didn't go and you didn't do what you were told, they would tar and feather you. Have you heard of tar and feather?

Yeah [laughs].

Well, six boys were tarred and feathered and they couldn't get the tar off for weeks. Now, this was the warning, if you didn't do what you were told – and this came to – this was my problem later on. This was established that they were the bosses. You may call it bullying but it was university pract – it's still the practice at some of the top universities. So I went down to pick Pam up on the bike, that was the plan, and as I was going to go out, my door was locked. I had a little window just to open and I started climbing out of that. [04:12:04] I was very thin. I just – and I got halfway out and they found me and they shut me – shut the thing on me. And then for an hour and a half they poured cold water over me, while my Jewish friend, Alan Price, who committed suicide later on – he was a nutcase but lovely with it – he was on a ship, hung himself on a trawler – radio operator. He went to fetch Pam. Now, he was

the original beatnik, holes in his there [ph]. He was a member of the students' union and he cut his toenails while the meetings were going on. He was a beatnik, you know. He went to pick up Pam. Pullover, all threads – he went to pick her up. He said – and he – Pam came down. He said, well, I'm very sorry but John has been delayed. And she went with him. And I've never forgiven her for that because, you know, [laughs] you can't go with somebody you don't know, can you? So, they brought her up. She said, where's John? They said, well, come round the back. And there was I, hanging out of the window with bucket. And she stood there and you know what she did? She just laughed with them and got hold of a bucket and poured that over me [laughs]. So that was my – you said introduction. That was the introduction [laughs]. I really – and then I had to change in front of her [laughs].

John, we have to finish because we want to look at some of your photos before we go. So I'll ask you, just come back to my last question, for your luck in your life. So it was meeting Pam.

Yes.

Anything else?

The kids. The family. Very, very lucky. And really wonderful friends. I've had good friends. They're unfortunately all gone, so I've outlived them all. But I would say here I've met some of Hilary's friends and they put up with me. [04:14:04] And there's one lady, Joy – that's a good name – who is ninety-five and she's a real snob [laughs]. She's from – her father used to drive around in a Rolls-Royce in Hull.

So you've got new friends here?

So various people say she's my girlfriend and whenever she hears this, she says, no, I'm not [laughs]. So, I've got nice, new friends here, yes.

Yeah, you're happy to be [overtalking].

And of course Gregory's – Emma's father and mother – they don't live – only live a couple of miles away. But Gregory's partner, he of all things went to Cambridge University and he got 100% for his Higher School Certificate in maths. Now, can you imagine that? 100%. Every – that's the opposite to me, isn't it? To get everything right in maths.

So – and do you have any regrets at all? Anything you regret?

No regrets whatsoever. Not one.

Okay. So I think that's a good place to finish the interview, to say thank you so much for sharing your life story with us. And we're going to look at some of your photographs now.

Yes. I'll get Hilary to – no, I would say, regrets, the only regret I've got is that people still haven't learnt and they will never learn. You know, people say that it'll never happen again. That's the one thing which is a fact, everything happens again. It's a circle. It's like I say, extremists, you know.

[Pause from 04:15:40 – 04:16:06]

Please tell me who is on that photo? [04:16:07]

Mutti and Papa.

And when was it taken, and where?

I would think that is about 1936, '37.

In Vienna?

Yes.

Thank you.

Frank: Okay. Yes, please.

That's my mum and myself. I think I would have been about three or four there.

Frank: So what year would that be?

'33, '3 – yeah, '33.

Frank: In Vienna?

In Vienna, yes.

Frank: Thank you.

1935, '36. The Austrian attire.

Yes, please. John, what do we see on this picture?

I think that's a clown in a school play.

And it's – when was it taken?

'38, a year after the Anschluss.

December '38?

Yes, December '38.

So that's what you looked like more or less when you arrived in England.

Yes, very much so, yeah.

Thank you.

That is one of the first pictures in England and taken at school – school photos – and as you can see, it's 1940.

Frank: Is that in Cornwall?

In Cornwall.

That's Portreath, which was three miles from where I lived in Cornwall. It was the local beach. The lady on the left became my second mother, Auntie May, Mrs Blamey [ph]. The lad on the left was my first friend in England, Johnny Cappella [ph]. And they – the others are friends of Mrs Blamey [ph].

Yes? [04:18:02]

That's the harbour wall where the waves used to smash against and, er, forty-foot waves.

Thank you.

This is dancing champions at Hendon Hotel. I would say that's when I was at Proctor & Gamble and at the Hendon Hotel for a London Master Baker's Association –

And who is on this photo? Who is it?

That's Pam.

And you.

And me, yes. Very much in love, as you can see, young, dream [laughs].

And when was that?

We were very thin. I was about ten and a half stone.

And when was that, roughly?

I would say 1956, '57.

In London?

Yes, just two or three years after we were married.

Lovely.

We had babysitters by then I think.

Thank you.

Frank: Thank you.

That's a family photo in the Peak District, where we had a weekend all together – it was a miracle to get us all together. Nearly all the family, great-grandsons, all our – my children, Pam's children, gathered in our apartment at a farmhouse in the Peak District, near Buxton. Self-explanatory.

Yes.

Self-explanatory. My birth certificate, the most important day of the last century, 22nd of March 1929, in beautiful writing of the Kultusgemeinde, which is the Jewish authority in Vienna.

Thank you. Whose passport is this? Your mum's?

My mum's passport. That – and I'm on that as well. This is the Reich's passport. The word Reich means the German – after the Anschluss, after the invasion of Austria. [04:20:01] And it's got the swastika on the front and there it says that my mum got a visa, providing she stayed as a domestic servant. She wasn't allowed any other employment. And I've got a visa as well which Mum eventually got after three weeks of calling on the British embassy. And mine is a temporary visa.

Your name is basically added on top here.

Yes.

Hans Goldstein.

Yeah. That was that stamp which – yeah.

Important, very important.

Luck, isn't it? Somebody not feeling very well that day would have...

Frank: Yes, please. What do we see here? What do we – what is this?

Ah, this is my dad's passport, very important, very lucky, and it says Czechoslovakia – that's when Czechoslovakia and – were combined – now, they're independent nations. And it shows – he's got a Czech passport because he was born in Prague in 1901 when it was part of the Austrian Empire but it still had its autonomy in the sense, although governed by Austria, it had its own passport. That passport was the most valuable thing my dad ever had because when he was interned in the Isle of Man as an enemy alien, having come from Vienna, he got the boss, the brigadier general at the camp, internment camp, to – showed him this passport and overnight he was declared a friendly alien simply because he had a Czech passport instead of an Austrian passport.

Thank you. Yes, please. Here is the picture of – it was inside of the passport.

Yeah, that's my dad, a picture of him. **[04:22:00]**

That's good, thank you. [Pause] Yes, please. It says that this is the certificate that you father became –

This is what my dad was able to get a certificate in Prague for courses he passed with distinction after three weeks of being a chef and a cook. It meant he could get a position in domestic service in England.

Thank you.

This is the address of the Czech Refugee Fund, which was a very lucky thing which our family had. Dad originally found it and he was given accommodation with my mum in a lovely little flat in Sandwich Street near Bloomsbury. And then I was lucky enough to get our first – when we came back from honeymoon, our first little furnished flat in Grove Lane – that's near Peckham – Camberwell.

Thank you.

This is one of the treasures of all the paperwork I had. It's a reference from my wonderful headmaster, Mr Wetherall [ph], a Yorkshireman, who writes that he was worried when a foreign boy joined the school. In other words, one bad apple could turn everybody. But then he writes, 'but I need not have worried because he became one of my best pupils'. It's a wonderful reference. He would have got the sack now from the education authorities, and yet this was from a war hero, a squadron leader, and the DFC and bar, a pilot in the First World War. **[04:24:14]**

John, thank you so much for sharing your story and showing us your photographs and documents.

Yes.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

[04:24:27]

[End of transcript]