

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

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Forename:	Lia
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Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV275
NAME: Lia Lesser
DATE: 25 April 2023
LOCATION: Birmingham
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:00]

Today is the 25th of April 2023. I'm conducting interview with Mrs Lia Lesser. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in Birmingham. Can you please tell me your name and where and when you were born?

My name is Lia Lesser and I was born in Sudetenland in a little town called, Teplice-Šanov on the 1st of, er, 26th of March 1931.

Thank you so much, Mrs Lesser, for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive. Can I ask you please to start with telling us something about your family background?

I was born in Teplice-Šanov and I was very happy child. I lived with my mother. My parents had been divorced. I don't remember my father ever living with us but I used to go out with him each weekend and we had a lovely time. And I can remember a little friend at school asking me 'Which of your parents do you love best?' And I thought it was a dreadful question. I said 'But of course I love them both equally.' And I was really very happy child. And I had friends but I don't remember my friends at all. I've – it's like there's a blank. I can remember my cousins but not my friends. All I do remember is when I went to school, that I did get a telling-off because I took my best coat and gave it to another little girl that hadn't

got a coat and I can remember getting into trouble. [00:02:15] But I don't remember very much about school at all. I can remember when I first started, that we were all presented with a big cone full of sweets, which was usual in continental – some continental countries. But I used to at weekends- my grandparents lived nearby and my grandfather, he had a barrel factory and he also owned or managed a nature reserve. And I used to very often go to the nature reserve and I used to love seeing all the animals. And I often had meals with – my grandmother used to feed all the people that worked my grandfather, moving the barrels. And the [shire] horses lived underneath in big sheds. And she used to feed all these people and I used to have lunch with them. I can remember that during school holidays. And I used to play with my – I had two little cousins, my cousin, Eva, and my cousin, Harry. And my mother had a sister called Editha and Eva was her only daughter. And on my father's side, my father's brother had a son called Harry and we were inseparable. [00:04:07] We used to play together an awful lot, and very sadly they all died in the Holocaust. And because my mother had the foresight to send me on Kindertransport I was the only survivor of my family. During the war years, getting on for 1938, 1939, my father married again and his wife was called Ola and she was a seamstress. And when she came out of Auschwitz, she got in touch with me and she – I visited her in Prague and she came and used to stay with my guardian and myself in England. And Naomi, my younger daughter, came with me and we visited her in Prague. I remember very little about moving from Teplice-Šanov to Prague. I don't remember any anti-Semitism. I don't remember any problems and I don't remember anything dreadful at all with – whereas other people did. I just don't know whether I've got a mental block and I don't remember anything nasty at all. But I know we moved three times and at some point, I think I had scarlet fever and know I lost all my hair and it was quite wispy and it grew again. [00:06:06] And eventually we got to Prague and I don't remember – I remember I went to school but I don't really remember very much about it at all. And the only other thing I do remember is this very sad day when we went to the main station in Prague and my parents saw me off and my father was very, very upset and he didn't want me to go. But we were – the whole platform was full of grieving parents and I wasn't – I was eight years old but there were babies in arms and the younger children there as well. And it was a devastating scene. I don't remember very much about the journey and I never knew that I'd never see my parents again, because my mother was going to follow me and we were going to go to America. That was the original plan. But of course, sadly she never made it. I think

my guardian tried very hard to get her a domestic visa but she wasn't successful. Anyway, we made the journey from Prague by road to the Hook of Holland. And I really don't remember much about the journey. We didn't have any Nazis coming round making us open our suitcases or anything like that. As far as I remember, nothing frightening happened at all.

[00:08:02] All I do remember, when we got to the Hook of Holland I just followed the other children. And what I remember was there was a very nice lady giving out strawberry jam sandwiches on white bread and it was the first time I had ever had white bread and they tasted quite delicious. And I don't remember much about the journey from the Hook of Holland to Harwich but that is the way we came. And from Harwich we – there was a railway journey to London, to Liverpool Street Station and we were all gathered in a very big hall. We all had labels around our neck with our names and destinations from where we came and who was going to come and collect us. And I was one of the last to get collected and I was getting quite anxious. But of course, my guardian, her name was Miss Florence Hall, she'd had to come all the way from Anglesey and travelling in 1939 wasn't so easy. And she had to come by train and change at Crewe and then eventually arrive in London. And she was very much a country person and she wasn't used to large cities. Anyway, eventually she arrived and she collected me and introduced herself. And she was an English mistress and as her second language – she taught English but as her second language she had learned German, so we were able to converse. **[00:10:08]** And then we had a long railway journey back to the Isle of Anglesey. And it was all a little bit bewildering but I was very tired by this time and we travelled by train and evidently some Welsh sailors sang lullabies to me and they carried me at Crewe from the London train to the local Holyhead train. I don't remember any – it's just what she told me afterwards. And we travelled and arrived at Bangor in north Wales where her brother-in-law, Rob, collected us and drove us across Anglesey to Bull Bay where she lived. And it was a beautiful moonlight night and I can remember driving along this country lane and there were just about three buildings on the way. And there were gates there to stop the cattle escaping onto the main road and we had to get out of the car and open the gates, so that we could pass through. And we arrived down at the farm, at the bottom of the field and I can remember walking up two fields in the beautiful moonlight night and I was feeling really homesick by this time. And we went up these two fields and there was a whitewashed bungalow there and we entered by the back door. It was a lot of steps. And I was feeling really tired and homesick and we opened the kitchen door and on the table was Tiger the

tabby cat and as soon as I saw Tiger, I knew that everything would be all right. [00:12:16] I'd had to leave my little pussy cat, Bambi, in Teplice-Šanov and of course I was missing her. Anyway, I went straight to bed and I must have slept. And the next morning my guardians whom I was – she told me I could call her Mouse because she'd – during the First World War she'd been a nanny to some children in Liverpool and they'd always thought she was very quiet. And so, she put me to bed and her sister was staying with her, with her eldest daughter at that time. And in the morning she came in to see me and she had white rags curling her hair all over her head. And I [laughs] thought, what on earth is this? [Laughs] Anyway, her name was Jane and we got on very well. And of course she couldn't speak Czech or German and I couldn't speak English but we got by. And that's how my life at Heather Bank began. And what happened in those days, there wasn't a local school. There were only two grammar schools on the Isle of Anglesey and over the years there were – more children were born and they had to accommodate more children, so in Amlwch, which was a village next to Bull Bay, they created a school in the local memorial hall. [00:14:21] So we used to – I went to school there but before that was built, we used to have to commute every weekend to Heather Bank from Llangefni where the- her grammar school was. And I went to the local church school to learn English, which I managed to do in a couple of months. And after that, things became a lot easier.

Thank you. I didn't want to interrupt you. So, we are going to go back now and then we will come back to where you are in this story.

Yeah, okay.

So, I just want to ask you some more question about Teplice then and what do you remember? Tell us where you lived. Do you remember at all the house where you lived?

We lived in a flat. There was no lift. And as far as I remember, it was a very nice flat. And my grandparents – I don't know whether they had given it to us for storage – there was a grand piano. And I wasn't musical. I could only assume that had we stayed there, I would have learnt to play the piano. But I can remember this grand piano. And all I can remember

otherwise is at *Pesach* time we used to have *matzo kleis* and I used to go to synagogue with my grandparents for High Holy Days. [00:16:00] I –

And was there a big synagogue in Teplice? Was it a big synagogue? What kind of synagogue?

I can't remember at all. I can't remember. But I can just remember the interior and [sighs] I suppose it was a moderate size because I don't think there was – there were that many Jews around that area.

And what were your grandparents' names?

Max was my grandfather and, um...

Don't worry, we'll come back to it. Are they your mother's parents? Those are your mother's parents or your father's?

My mother's parents. I –

Don't worry about it.

I know it quite well.

Don't worry, we'll come back to it. And the grandparents, did they come from Teplice? Where did they come from?

My grandparents lived in Teplice. I don't know where they lived prior to that. I –

Your mother's?

I imagine they were there for a lot of years, otherwise they wouldn't have had a business as they did.

The barrel business? The barrel?

Yeah. And my grandfather ran this nature reserve, yeah.

And what about your father's parents?

I never met them. I never met them. I suppose that could be because my parents were divorced. And my grandmother's name was Stepanka. Yes. And my mother had two siblings. She had a sister, Editha and a brother, Otto, who was in the army. Yes. So, we were quite a small family. [00:18:00] But I don't remember ever having met my father's parents.

But you said you met your father on the weekends. You –

Yes, every weekend. And we always had a wonderful time.

And what did you do? What did you –

We went swimming, walking, just generally enjoying ourselves. Yeah.

And Lia, tell me something about languages. What language did you speak?

Czech and German. Yes. Yeah. At school there must have been a Jewish teacher because when I came to England I've got a Hebrew – my Hebrew book. I should think it was probably a starter book. You know, it's got quite simple words in it.

Hmm-hmm. But you said you remember – you don't remember any of your friends.

I don't remember anybody, apart from my cousins. I just – I don't know why I remember so little. I can – maybe it wasn't good and I've just blotted it out. I've no idea.

But you remember your cousins and those –

I remember my cousins.

You were close to the cousins?

Yes, we were very close. Yeah. Especially Harry. Yeah.

Anything else from Teplice? Anything else you remember? Any other –

Nothing.

What was your mother's business? What did she do?

She had a haberdasher's shop. And I used to love working in it, tidying up and sorting things and selling things.

And what – such as? What did she sell?

Sewing things mainly. Needles, threads, thimbles, scissors, all sorts of things like that.

[00:20:05] And I used to like arranging them on the shelves behind the shop.

And where was the shop? Where was it?

In Teplice-Šanov.

In the main street or was it –

Yes. Yeah.

What was it called, do you remember? No.

I don't remember.

So in the centre. And so, she always had that job or when you remember she was working, she had that job?

She had this shop, yes. I don't ever remember her doing anything else, no.

And do you know at all how your parents met?

I've no idea. I've no idea. But both my father and my mother married just before the war, a second time.

So your mother also remarried.

Yes.

And who did she remarry?

His name was Igor [Turk] and [sighs] I hardly remember him. I only remember him in the flat in Prague. I don't remember him before that at all, so I think it must have been just before the war that they married. Yeah.

And did she have any more children?

No.

No. And your father? Did he have any more children?

No, because of being – before – because of the war. I don't think they lived together very long.

No. And you said you then moved from Sudetenland slowly towards Prague.

Yes.

Tell us, so when were you – you said you didn't experience any anti-Semitism. When did things change for you?

Never. I just completely – I don't know whether I blotted it out but I've never come across any anti-Semitism, not even in this country. [00:22:06]

But just tell us in terms of your journey. So, once you left Teplice, so when did you leave Teplice, do you know?

Six months before '39, so it must have been the end of October, November time 1938 'cos it was a six months' journey and arrangements had to be made. I've no idea how my mother made the arrangements. I don't know whether she actually met Nicholas Winton or whether it was Doreen Warriner. I've no idea. All I remember is going to this *Hlavní náměstí* [main square] and coming to England. I've no memory of anything else.

But in those six months, so they – your mother obviously – she left because by then Sudetenland became part of Germany, so it was –

Yes, when Sudetenland was annexed.

So how soon afterwards did you leave with her?

[Sighs] I don't really know. I suppose when it became dangerous. But I have just got a blank.

Sure. It's not a problem. And did she have any relatives in Prague? Or why –

No. No. She had no relatives in Prague. I have no idea how she heard about Kindertransport or how she heard people arranging for children to leave because of anti-Semitism.

[00:24:03] I have no idea at all.

But you said that journey, there was about six months between leaving and then getting to Prague.

Yes.

And you went to different schools. So, what does it mean? So did you stop on the way in other places?

We must have done but I don't rem – I have just a complete blank. That's why I think I'd – [sighs] in a way I'd like to know but maybe I'm better not knowing.

But was it only you and your mother in those six months?

Yes, just the two of us.

And what happened to your grandparents? Did they stay?

They perished in the same place as my mother. Yeah.

So did your mother after you left, did she return to – what did she do? Did she return to Teplice, to her parents?

No. I don't know. I really don't know where – what she did after I was- left, you know, put on the train. I have just no idea.

But you lived in Prague and you went to school in Prague. Any memories of that?

No, none.

And where did you stay in Prague?

We stayed in Biskupsky Dvur, Biskupsky Dvur. That's all I remember.

Was it a small flat or –

It was a flat. It was a second-floor flat. And interestingly enough, many years later Naomi [daughter] and I went to visit one of my old school nurses in Karlsbad [Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic] and on the way back we were wandering around the streets and we came across this block of flats. [00:26:00] We saw Biskupsky Dvur and we walked – it was a two-storey block of flats. And I had thought that it was a much taller block but it was just very run-down, near the market. And yes, we just found it. That was just by chance.

Did you recognise it at all?

Well, to a child, I had thought that it was a much taller block. I was surprised to see it was just a two-storey, yeah.

So that's what – your mother must have secured it somehow or found it –

She must have lived there but I – I really don't know what she did afterwards. Yeah.

So you don't know much about the circumstances –

No.

Either what led to you leaving or afterwards?

Well, I assume there must have been after Sudetenland was annexed that anti-Semitism must have become rife and I assume that all of them were taken to camps. And I think they went to Terezin first. But I, when I went to Prague some years later with my other daughter and John and their two boys, I can't remember the name of the synagogue now but we found where all the names are written. And we found – we found my mother and my father. And she was under Turk, her second-marriage name and he was – it – the dates of birth were correct, so we took a photograph. [00:28:05] That's when we went- we went back to the station where a

plaque, not – a memorial had been built to commemorate the courage of all the parents that were brave enough to let their children come to England. And very sadly, vandals some time later broke it. I don't know whether it was anti-Semitic or whether it was just vandals. Yeah.

And Lia, I guess at the time you didn't – nobody mentioned the name Nicholas Winton and nobody mentioned the word Kindertransport or anything like that.

I didn't know anything about Nicholas Winton till the mid-1980s when Esther Rantzen had made a film. Sadly, I wasn't – I didn't know about – I didn't know about the Czech school reunions for some years. And then one of the senior boys got in touch with me and ever after I came to the reunions and that's- I met all my school friends again and sadly, I'm sure you know Milena, don't you? Yeah. She and my friend in Canada. I don't think there are so many of us alive now, sadly. But it was very nice to meet up with them. So anyway, Esther Rantzen's film, 'That's Life', it was very moving because Nicky Winton did not know why he had been asked to come to this studio and this hall. [00:30:17] And he was asked did he know anybody there and Vera Gissing, which – who was one of – she wrote a book called 'Pearls of Childhood' – she was sat next to him. And they were introduced and Nicky was quite shocked and I think Milena was sat the other side of him. And Nicky, he was quite bewildered. And then Esther Rantzen said, 'Is there anybody else in this hall whose life was saved by Nicky Winton?' And everybody stood up. And it was very moving. But I met Esther Rantzen and Nicky and Hugo Dasch was another pupil from, at the Lime Street Studios. I can't remember what the occasion must have been but I met him, just the three of us, at the Lime Street Studios.

Later on?

It must have been later, yes.

When was that Esther Rantzen programme? In the – when was the programme, the Esther Rantzen programme?

Do you know the date, dear?

Naomi: 1988, I think.

It was 19 – er, but I can't, er –

In the late '80s.

Yeah, it was 1988 but I can't remember the exact date. No, no.

An important programme. Yeah. But at the time, Lia, you didn't know about anything. So at the time do you remember at what point it was mentioned to you that you're going to leave on a train? [00:32:01]

I must – it must have been. But [sighs] I'm just so vague about it. I think –

But you were young. You were young.

Yeah, yeah.

But you said your father, so – your father wasn't with you but came to say goodbye.

He – my mother had got in touch with him and he was on – he had to leave us because he was very, very cut up and he was just standing back a little way. But there was a lot of people, you can imagine, and people with – that actually had babies, they went and took them off the train again, then took them back and it was heart-rending, it really was. And it was difficult for everybody.

And did you know anyone on the train? Did you?

No.

No. So, what, for you as an eight-year-old at the time –

No, I don't – I didn't know anybody and I didn't subsequently meet anybody that had been on the train, no.

And what was in your luggage, Lia? What did you have?

I had two big suitcases and a label around my neck and I had a little pillow, a little blue pillow for, just a tiny one, you know, just to put your head on, I think. That's all I had, yeah.

What was in the suitcases?

Just clothes. I wasn't a very dolly person, so I didn't have any dolls.

Anything personal apart from the pillow?

Yes. Yes, I brought my schoolbooks and I've got a little photograph of Moses giving the Law on Mount Sinai. [00:34:00] Did I have anything else near me except the books?

Naomi: Your school report, your last school report.

Oh, my school report, yeah.

Yeah, we're going to look at that later. So that was all in your luggage.

Yeah. Yeah. Yes, I don't think I had – and at that stage I had a photograph of each of my parents but I didn't have other photographs which – the other photograph and jewellery, I got when I stayed with my stepmother many years later. And we went – spent thirteen days, fourteen days going round offices, banks and you couldn't get your things back and you had to give money and it was so – such a dishonest society. It was. It – you couldn't get your property back. And then my stepmother, Ola, said 'Look, she's going back to England tomorrow. Please can we have her things?' So eventually I, in a Prague bank I got what

belonged to my family, so I've got them to this day. But it was proper jewellery. People don't wear proper jewellery now.

So was it the safe in the Prague – in a safe?

Yes, it was safe. Yeah.

So your father or your mother, they must have deposited it.

My father remarried and you see, on Ola's end, she took me to school the first day I went to school. I don't remember Ola at all. I don't – I can't think that she would have told me that unless it happened. But I found it so strange because I just didn't know her. [00:36:00] And – but I wasn't going to argue after – because she came out of Auschwitz on a stretcher and she was very poorly when she first came out. Yeah. And when she was better she got in touch. Evidently a soothsayer in the camp told her 'You'll be all right after the war because you'll be able to go and see Lia.' That's what she told me. So I only know what she told me. But I don't remember her.

So she remembered you but you don't –

She remembered me. So, yeah. She was a very nice lady and she – and she was very accomplished. She – I've got all sorts of lace, things she crocheted, that she embroidered and of course, she – she was a dressmaker as well and she was very clever with her hands. And she was a very nice lady and –

Where was she from? Where did your father meet her?

In Prague, as far as I know. Not Prague, sorry, in Teplice-Šanov or thereabouts. Yeah. Yeah.

Any other people? Do you remember in Prague meeting any other people apart from your mother or – any –

No, nobody. I'm just – I wish I had some memory but I haven't.

So when do your memories, your strong memories, start, Lia? When –

I suppose when I went to Anglesey. Yeah. [00:38:00] Yeah, 'cos I've always been gregarious and I like people and I suppose because I was young and away from my family, people were very kind to me. And my guardian, she had seven sisters and a brother and I was always treated as one of the nieces, exactly the same as my two boy cousins and my two girl cousins, and we are all in touch still. And the next generation, they've stayed with us, yes.

So Lia, what was the motivation of this lady? What was her motivation to –

She was a senior English mistress, yeah. Yeah.

So she thought she could help? She – what was – how was she contacted or how – do you know any of –

She – well, she listened to the wireless. And we had a wireless with a battery and you only had it on for the news. And she heard what was happening in Europe and she decided that she wanted to help a child, so she got in touch with the Czech Refugee Trust Fund and that's how she got me. 'But she – [sighs] she was very philanthropic. On a teacher's salary, which was very small, she supported two old people and two children in Africa as well. I don't know how she did it. And I think when you took a refugee in, you had to have £50 repatriation money and I can only think that her sisters, they all helped each other, you know. [00:40:05] And I can only think because- [sighs] I don't know that she would have had that sort of money. Yeah.

Was she unmarried?

She was unmarried. And she and her next older sister, Muriel, who was a big explorer and she was a university lecturer – she and Mouse used to go on voyages. And particularly on this occasion they went to the Aran Isles off the west coast of Galway and on the pier she saw her

future husband. But it – they landed in Galway and they had to go to the Aran Isles and because the weather was so bad there weren't any sailings, so they persuaded a fisherman to row them to the Aran Isles. So, these two – they of course weren't old ladies then – I have to be careful 'cos they're my age. Yeah, they were rowed to the Aran Isles and Pat – Pat Mullen – Barbara Mullen, the actress, her father, he was there with a pony and trap and Mouse – and her sister – she saw him. And as far as she was concerned, it was love at first sight. And he was married. He was a Catholic and he'd been apart from his wife, who was in America for many, many years. So when she died, Mouse and he got married and he came to live in Bull Bay. [00:42:03] And I'll show you a photograph 'cos he was a very handsome man. And he worked very hard because of – outside Heather Bank there was a – some – a wasteland and he cultivated it all and made it into a vegetable patch 'cos on the Aran Isles you had to- there was no soil. You had to use seaweed and sand layered so that you could grow things. So, he was an expert grower and he used to grow wonderful things in the waste, yeah. But he was older than she was, and eventually Pat died.

So when you came she was – he was already there?

No.

No. So that was afterwards.

No, no, she'd, after his wife died, they got married, so, it was – it must have been in the 1940s because – or it could have been later because when I came home – I always went there when I was nursing, for holidays, you know – and he was there. And he was full of Irish blarney and a very handsome man. I'll show you a photograph. Yeah. So –

Yeah, and what were – when you arrived, you said you don't remember that much of the journey. What were your first impressions of arriving, coming to England?

Well, it was very different from what I was used to because this bungalow – I can't remember whether I told you that there was no running water. We just had one tank, one rainwater tank, and that wasn't suitable for drinking. It was just suitable for washing. [00:44:00] No gas, no

electricity, went to bed with a candle. We had an Aladdin lamp in the sitting room and one coal fire and in the winter when it was very cold we just had a paraffin heater which we used to carry around. And I went to bed with a candle, as I said. And I used to read under the bed clothes with a torch [laughs] because when it was past my bedtime. But eventually a few years back, we went back with my other daughter and family and we stayed at Heather Bank. And what had happened, I'd accidentally telephoned that telephone number because it was stuck in my mind, and I spoke to the lady that lived there. And we made quite a friendship and we met – we met her a few times and, which was very nice. But sadly, she died but she'd had all sorts of things done to the house. There was electricity, there was gas, there was running water, there was double glazing. And a few years back, the house had been sold on and Rachel had seen it advertised for holiday lets. And she said 'How would you like to go to Anglesey?' So, I said 'Oh, I'd love to.' 'How would you like to go to Bull Bay?' 'Oh, yes.' 'How would you like to stay in Heather Bank?' 'Heather Bank?' [00:46:00] Anyway, to cut a long story short, we stayed at Heather Bank and it had all mod cons, so different.

But for you it must have been quite a change from Prague to this – to Anglesey.

Yeah. But it's been sold on now. But I think we think in – the second time, Philip and I stayed in a hotel because there was only one bathroom and [sighs] one bath, one toilet, and it really wasn't enough for five of us, so we stayed in a hotel, which was much more comfortable. But they'd built extensions and it was completely different from when I was there. Yeah.

And Lia, when they took you in, did – had they ever met any Jewish –

No.

I mean let alone refugees, had they met anyone Jewish before?

No, no. No.

So how did they – was that talked about or –

Well, I was sent to Sunday school. I used to go to Sunday school and on the way back I used to stay with- for tea with a friend who was of – the friend was actually a friend of my guardian's younger sister, Dorothy. And she taught me to cook, she taught me to machine and she had two daughters and we still keep in touch, and. Yes, so I went to Sunday school and when –

Anglican?

In Amlwch.

Yes, but what – Sunday school –

Oh, Anglican, yes. Yes, yeah. And I can remember when a lot of people in my class were being confirmed and I said 'I think I'd like to be confirmed.' And she said 'No. When you grow up and you have time to think about it, if you still want to be confirmed, you can.'
[00:48:06] And of course I never was. And when I started nursing, for years I went to different denomination churches. And then one day I plucked up courage and I went to the local synagogue. Yeah. But it took me a lot of years to do that 'cos I hadn't come across any Jewish people, you see. Yeah.

Yeah, that's why I'm asking. So were you aware as an eight-year-old, nine-year-old, were you aware –

Oh, I knew I was Jewish. I knew I was Jewish. But in the little village of Amlwch there was one Jewish family called the Steins and they had – he had been a travelling salesman, I think. Anyway, they had this haberdasher's shop and we seldom went in it because it was mostly stuff that you sold to farmers' wives and long johns and overalls and things like that. But once or twice, Mouse took me and I didn't – when I was little I mean I, um, [sighs] I just liked people but I didn't know them. But evidently, Mouse had taught two of the girls and one was the most clever student she'd ever had, evidently. Sadly, she was killed in Israel. But of course, they're no longer there. I think there were three daughters and a son, and the son was

educationally subnormal. But they were always smiling and courteous and lovely. I can remember that. But I didn't know them and I must have known that they were Jewish, that was all, but there wasn't – the nearest place to worship would have been Bangor or Llandudno. [00:50:10] And there were two- Wardskis and Polikovs in Bangor but during all the time I was at Heather Bank, nobody Jewish ever came. They knew I was in a good home and nobody ever came to enquire was I okay or anything.

Nobody came to check on you?

No. No. I was – I was very good. But nobody from London, if you like, the Refugee Trust Fund –

No committee or –

Yeah.

Came, hmm.

Yeah.

Well, that's – from today's perspective difficult to understand, isn't it?

Yeah.

How the children were just, you know, kind of –

Yeah, yeah. I suppose with so many refugees – I suppose, yeah.

Hmm. But did you feel that she had – your guarantor had an understanding of your situation? Did you feel – you said you got on with her very well.

I – yes, I just – I like people and I had friends there, adult friends, school friends. And very strange in a way being taught English by my guardian. And I never had very – I never got very good marks for English. I don't know whether she was particularly strict with me or what, but I was reading one of the reports and it – I could see the word 'disappointing' [laughs].

And was she your English teacher in school?

She taught me English, yes.

I see.

Yeah. This was – it was a temporary – they had a beautiful new school built but during the war years we were in this memorial home – hall, which was the only place that had rooms, they had one main room, they had a kitchen and they had a few classrooms, rooms suitable for classrooms, yeah. [00:52:22]

And what about your mum? Was there any correspondence or anything [overtalking 00:50:27]?

We corresponded. I've got some of the letters. Both my parents, we corresponded. Some of the letters didn't get through. Then we got letters through the Red Cross and then they stopped in 1942. Yeah.

And did you talk about your parents to your guardian? Or did you try to – how did you try to adapt to this new environment?

[Sighs] Well, it was very difficult. It was very difficult and I couldn't really talk to anybody 'cos there wasn't anybody else in the same situation as me. But everybody was extremely kind to me and I made lifelong friends. And... you just have to do the best you can. Yeah. And at that time we didn't have – the place where I went to school, they didn't have education beyond the GCSE. And the day before I was due to leave, I can remember the headmaster

saying to me, 'Wouldn't you like to stay on and do your Senior School Cert?' And I said, 'But I'm starting a training.' It was the day before school was due to stop for the summer holiday. [00:54:00] And so I don't know whether I might have done medicine but I always wanted to nurse. I was very happy and I nursed for forty-five years. Yeah. But yeah, 'cos there wasn't anybody Jewish I was in touch with until I plucked up courage and I went to Singers Hill Synagogue and I spoke to one of the rabbis and he put me in touch with another nurse who was a – she was a matron actually. And I started going to synagogue every week.

But when was that?

About '68. '67, '68. Yeah.

So quite some time later.

Yeah, a lot of time later.

*So Lia, tell us a little bit, how did you then get to the Czechoslovak school from Anglesey?
How did that happen?*

How- well, my guardian – I'd forgotten Czech, I'd forgotten German, 'cos there was nobody to speak it with. And she was very good, she said 'If your parents are alive' – she prefaced everything with that – 'You need to be able to speak to them in their native tongue.' And she'd heard of the Czech school in exile and she sent me there. And I used to go on the train with my egg sandwiches and I went to school. Of course, I'd forgotten Czech and [sighs] I took to it like a duck to water and then I went home each holiday and, so it went on until the – we moved from Whitchurch to Llanwrtyd Wells in Breconshire. [00:56:05] And I went home each holiday and then the school closed in 1945, so I finished my education at the local memorial hall. And then I went and did my nurse's training because I'd wanted to be a children's nurse and I thought, well, it won't be wasted time if I know what healthy children should be like, that'll be helpful. And then my aunt, who was a health visitor – one of my guardian's sisters – she'd been a patient at the QE so I went there and did my training. And as part of that I went to the children's hospital for six months and I couldn't come to terms with

children not getting better and, you know, I had parents comforting me, [laughs] which is a ridiculous situation. But it's a very hard thing to see, you know, people that can't get better. Yeah. Yeah.

But Lia, what was it like for you? So, coming from Anglesey to the Czechoslovak school in exile, where you suddenly were thrown together with other refugees.

Oh, it was lovely. Lovely.

How was that? How did that feel?

It was lovely, you know, you straightaway had so many friends and, you know, you slept in dormitories and oh, you know what kids are like. We had a great time and we used to do bad things and [laughs] –

Could you – you said you forgot to speak Czech and German.

Yeah. The lessons were hard because the lessons were – apart from English, the lessons were in Czech. [00:58:02] So my reports slowly improved but they were pretty awful to begin with because, you know, you try, especially maths, I mean it's never been a strong subject [laughs].

And did you want to speak Czech? Did you – were you eager to learn?

Oh, yes, I – of course I did.

You were not against it.

Yeah.

I mean it didn't feel like you were thrown –

No, no, because, you know, you hoped that your parents will be alive and you'd need the language. Of course. No, I wanted to learn Czech. And we had – and of course we had a rabbi, so you had Jewish education. And I can remember we had – our Jewish education was in the pump room in the grounds, [laughs] which was a small little room and like – the rabbi was called Rabbi Stranski. And yeah. Yeah, we had a whale of a good time. And I can remember in Hinton Hall somebody got nits, so of course we all got nits. And I can remember we- in those days they didn't have things to get rid of nits, so we had paraffin and a towel put over us for the night and we all had to get up early to have our hair washed. And the water was stone cold [laughs]. The boiler must have gone out during the night and we all went [laughs] – went to school smelling of paraffin. And you can imagine what the boys were like, you know [laughs]. It was really funny [laughs]. [01:00:00] But we had- we used to have long trestle tables and the senior students used to sit at the end and serve all of us, you know, and we used to have to help. We used to have turns washing up and doing stuff. We were generally useful. Yeah. And our – when I was in the third form – this was down at – in Llanwrtyd Wells – we – our classroom was a hut in the field in front of the hotel. And there was a round stove there and we used to collect bread at breakfast and we used to make toast around this. Horrible, but we thoroughly enjoyed it.

So the other children, were there also – had they come on the Kindertransport? Or what was their situation or –

Various situations, yes. Some had come with their families before the war, yeah. Yeah, I've got quite a lot of photographs. And Nicky actually – Nicky Winton came to one of our reunions. I've got a photograph of him there. And yeah [sighs].

And who – do you remember anyone from that time, in particular from your school time?

Well, my – one of my special friends lives in Canada and we speak every Friday. And –

What was her name? What's her name?

Jana Gombaiova. It was. It's Jane Litwack. Her husband – she's a widow now – and she had two sisters and one sadly died of cancer, so she's just got one sister and her children. Yeah. [01:02:00] And she used to come over for reunions from time to time and she actually came to Prague with us on one occasion. Yeah.

So what did the school – what sort of message or identity did the school want to give the children?

[Sighs] Well, it – [sighs] we did all sorts of things. We played table tennis. We used to play hide and seek. There used to be – in Llanwrtyd Wells there were two lakes. There was one lake, sorry, and two little islands and it was out of bounds. Supposedly [laughs]. And if anybody saw a master or anybody coming, [laughs] we'd go and hide [laughs]. But we weren't supposed to go on the water in – yeah, because there might have been a tragedy. And half the boats leaked. There were – they belonged to the old hotel, yeah. And when we've been to reunions we've done the walk. Yeah. Naomi and I went – we went around, didn't we? Yeah.

Naomi: We did.

And was that a couple of years ago?

Naomi: Last year.

Was it last year?

Naomi: Last year, yeah.

Yeah. They were, you know when they were planting trees, we went down and Milena was there as well and she spoke.

Naomi: Yeah.

And Llanwrtyd Wells was twinned with a town in southern Bohemia and Nicky Winton and his wife, Grete, they came with us on one occasion and all the dignitaries from Llanwrtyd came with us as well and we stayed down in Český Krumlov in southern Bohemia.

[01:04:10] And yeah, Grete was lovely. And Nicky's – did – have you met Barbara Winton? Had you met?

Yes, I have.

Yes, yeah. Yes, I was very fond of Barbara. Yeah. We gave a talk together once. I was one of Nicky's children. Of course, I'm older than she is. Yeah, but sadly she died last year. But I met her son at – in Belsize Park, which was very nice.

And Lia, what about the teachers? Do you remember the teachers at the school?

Yes.

Who were they? Give me some names of –

Yes. They were Czech, mostly, apart from Miss McKenzie and Miss Burke, who taught English. And Miss McKenzie was really nice. Miss Burke was a bit old-fashioned. And the teachers – the headmaster, Dr Havlíček, he – they were army people who didn't believe in the regime. I think there were about four – three soldiers and they were all Czech. And then there was a teacher who married one of the nurses and I know somebody from my class and myself had to take a bouquet of flowers to celebrate the occasion. And his nickname was Mickey, er, Mickey Fried. And he was very nice. He taught English as well and I was very fond of him.

[01:06:00] And there were about three school nurses but the one that Naomi and I used to visit, and we had hoped that she would come over for the last school reunion, but she really wasn't well enough, so –

Come over from where? Where was she? Come over from..?

Karlovy Vary, Karlsbad. Yeah. Yeah, and she was lovely. She was a widow. Her husband had been a doctor and I think he was a doctor still in- when we were in Whitchurch but I don't remember him in Llanwrtyd Wells.

So how many – what – of the children and the teachers, how many were Jewish and how many were not? I mean what was-?

I should think [sighs] a small percentage were Jewish. But the others were children of people that didn't agree with the regime. Yeah.

So there were children of exiled government –

Had to get out. Yeah. Yeah.

So Lord Dubs, for example, Alf Dubs was in that school as well?

Yes. He didn't – no, he never – I don't remember him because he was a little bit – just a little bit younger. I don't think he came to Llanwrtyd Wells and I don't think he came to Hinton Hall.

He was in the primary school?

He was, er, yeah, but he wasn't in the primary school I was in. He was in the preschool I should think. Yeah. Yeah.

And Lia, what was it like for you to come from that environment to go back to Anglesey in the holidays? I mean that must have been quite interesting.

Yes, it – well, you know, it was just a way of life, you just got used to it and I saw my friends there and there were a lot of people evacuated. [01:08:05] A great friend of mine, who sadly died a few years ago, he rescued Lloyd's of London, David Rowland, and his grandparents lived in Bull Bay and his mother used to stay there during the war, and David. And we used

to – when I visited them in London, we used to go to Selfridges for ice cream. That was the highlight of my – that's when I was doing my nursery nurse's training. We used to walk from Marylebone Station down to Selfridges.

And Lia, did you ever bring friends from the school back to Anglesey? Did anyone come to visit you?

No. No. Because they all went to their families during the school holidays, yeah.

Were there any children who didn't have any parents or who didn't have anywhere to go and stay or –

I didn't know of any, no. They all had families, all adopted families that they went home to.

And were you happy to go home, so to speak, to Anglesey?

Oh, yes. Yeah. Yeah, touch wood, I've always been pretty content. You know, you fit your circumstances. Yeah. And then of course, I met Philip and, yeah, and till he became ill, we had a wonderful life. And sadly, his – he got progressive Parkinson's and he can't stand now, which is sad, and he has to be hoisted, so he couldn't – I was terrified he'd fall down the stairs. **[01:10:02]** Yeah. But we were very fortunate, it was a Jewish home, but it's just being sold off because there's so few Jewish people, and we can't afford it, so it's just being sold. But the staff are the same, so it won't affect Philip at all and we can visit ever day, which is lovely. Between us we – and we all take him treats and – yeah. When the weather's better we'll be able to take him out in the wheelchair, which will be nice. Yeah.

So when did you get married?

At Singers Hill Synagogue in 1969, 23rd Feb. Been married fifty-three years. So – it's not bad because I was a late starter because I was thirty-nine when I got married [laughs]. Yeah. So we've done very well. And we're – I'm lucky to have two daughters. They do all my donkey work [laughs].

Lia, just – I wanted to just come –

They keep me – if they disapprove they say, ‘Mum...’ [Laughs] You do, don't you?

Naomi: No.

Yes, you do-

We'll have Naomi on later and she can tell us about that.

[Laughs] No, she's more tolerant than the other one [laughs].

Naomi: This is on film. [inaudible]

This is on film. Just to switch the topic.

They are different. She takes after me. I think Rachel takes more after her dad. She thinks before she functions but we don't, we're just spontaneous [laughs].

Just to come back to you and when you then finished school, what were your options? So what did you think you wanted to do?

Oh, I – I wanted to nurse. I always knew I wanted to nurse, yeah.

And children in particular, you said.

Well, that's what I had thought until as part of my general training, you have to go to the children's hospital and I thought, it's not for me. [01:12:08] But I was very, er, really happy and I did all sorts of things. I started as a night sister then I was head of, which you would call sexual medicine now and we had ten beds so we delivered our own babies. It was a long time ago and before they realised if – if the mothers had had antibiotics they were no longer

infectious for anybody else, so yeah, so we used to deliver our own babies. Then I did, er, what did I do after that?

In Birmingham or [inaudible]?

At the general hospital. All at the general hospital. And I was casualty night sister and I was – I had a casualty ward, thirty-seven patients. And then I went and did just general surgery, which was twenty-six patients and which was very nice. And I had two very nice bosses and sadly, the younger one has just died, so – but I was very lucky. So, I did that until I got married and I did nothing for five years and I thought, oh, I've got to do something other than talk to children. And so I trained to do family planning, which I did for seventeen years, and you did that in clinics and in the community, and I enjoyed that, yeah. **[01:14:01]**

And do you think you wanted to work with children because of your own experience?

Possibly, yeah. I just – I like children. Yeah.

And could you please tell us, when did you find out post-war what happened to your family?

Soon after the war. Yeah, yeah.

And how did you find out?

By letter. Yeah. Yeah. And I suppose I was – because Mouse was very good, she used to say, 'If your parents are alive...' And I can remember I was staying with her elder sister, Glad, in Banstead, Surrey. And I opened- I think it was called the Picture Post magazine and the pictures in that were, [sighs] death camps, all the pictures. And, oh, [sighs] I couldn't eat certain things after that. It really [sighs] – I don't think that it really hit home exactly how dreadful things were. Yeah. [Pause] It's hard, hard to think that nothing's been learnt from the Holocaust, nothing. But – and a lot of it's to do with religion.

And Lia, had you thought – had you hoped that your parents were still alive or at the end of the war did you think the chances are small? What did –

Well, I – I hoped, of course, I hoped. [01:16:07] And- and then, you know, you went on hoping even though you'd been told that they weren't alive, you know, 'cos in case they'd been mistaken and then eventually you just had to accept it. And all these lovely people... And, you know, you sort of say, why me, why am I here, and it's simply because of my mother's foresight, yeah. And things – although to me they weren't bad but they must have been bad for her to move in the first place.

Yeah. And what courage to send a small child away.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

And were you with your guardian when you received that letter or when – were you with your guardian when you –

No, I was in school. Yeah.

I mean it must have been also so difficult for children your age because by that time, how much could you remember your parents. I mean, you know, six years had passed, at that age.

Yeah, I know. Well, I – I remembered them from their photographs really, you know, but apart from that you could only imagine. And, you know, it's hard for a child to think that you haven't – I believe my father gave his last bit of bread for a cigarette. [01:18:00] That's what Ola said. Yeah.

And when did Ola come and find you or when did she get in touch? Relatively soon or –

About I think 1946 'cos she wasn't well when she first came out, you see, so –

So that must have been a surprise for you.

Yes, it was because –

'Cos you said you couldn't remember her.

I had no memory of her. But I – that's why I think– I can't believe that – I can't – that I must have come across some form of anti-Semitism but I – I just – I think I blocked a lot of things out, you know.

Did she talk about her experiences?

Not much.

Did you ask her?

Yeah, and I met a friend of hers when I went to Prague as well but I don't think they really wanted to talk about it. No.

And she went back to Prague? She lived post-war and she stayed in Prague?

She lived quite near Hradčany and I know I walked there once from where we were staying and yeah, but she was- she never spoke of her – what had happened during the war. But I met one of – one – a friend that had been in the camp with her. And she wouldn't let me go over when she was ill but Philip and I went over after she died, we went to Prague and her ashes were interred in her mother's grave in a Prague cemetery, so we went there. [01:20:06] And then we went to this friend and they had a daughter and I said, you know, she'd be more than welcome but they didn't take up the offer. I didn't hear from them again.

And what did you – could you manage to find out what happened to your parents and to the grandparents?

Well, [sighs] I presume they must have been gassed but nobody's actually told me.

Lia, how – I mean that's a big question obviously. How do you think your experience impacted on your life? Your – that early separation, how did that experience of being sent away impact on your later life?

Well, it's something you just [sighs] had to accept and, you know, you felt helpless to do anything about it and you just– I've always wanted to help people, whatever their circumstances, and it doesn't matter what race or colour or anything else. And I'm really not bothered what religion people are, as long as they're good people and they help each other. And, you know, I've got friends of all creeds and colours really. And I just like people.

[01:22:00]

And what do you think helped you to cope with the situation, your situation? Did anything help you in this situation?

You mean the loss of my parents?

Yes, the separation first and then the loss.

Yeah. Well, you couldn't do anything except help other people. I think that's the only thing. And help in any way you could. Sometimes it was financial and sometimes it was physical and you just visited or listened or...And just, you know, I've still got friends from my childhood, yeah.

In Anglesey?

Yes, in Anglesey. Yeah. Yes, I've got four friends there now. Yeah.

And did they try, for example, after the war, did they ever try to adopt you or was that ever thought about?

Well, Mouse, she called me her ward. I think I was too old to be adopted by then, she said. But she's always been my family, and all her sisters. And I suppose I knew her elder sister, Glad, least well. And Aunt Hilda was in the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service], Muriel was a university lecturer, Gladys, Muriel, Hilda, then was my guardian, who was a teacher. [01:24:00] Meg was a nurse, Enid was a housewife, and her husband was a Greek and Latin master and they had two daughters. And the one that I saw most of was Dorothy, the youngest one, who lived in Bull Bay, and they had a shop in Amlwch, a shoe shop. And she was the one that spoiled me and she – I was very fond of her. Yeah.

So you considered that – you considered them your family?

Yeah. Well, I had no other family, so yes, they're my family. And we've always been close, yeah. I've been very lucky really. When you think what happened to my family, you know, you say, why me?

And what's your answer, Lia, to that question? Is there an answer?

There's no answer. There's no – it's just luck. Pure luck. Yeah. Foresight of my mother.

And Lia, did you talk about your experiences, about your background to your children at all or to your husband?

Philip knew, my – whatever they asked, I told them. But [sighs] I – you see, I didn't know that much to tell them really and truly. But I suppose we all are trying to help other people, basically and I've – I think I've passed that on anyway. And I've been so lucky in that both of them, they're very good at maths. [01:26:05] My husband was very good at maths and I said, 'Please, please can you teach me?' But he kept it close to his chest [laughs]. He didn't feel it was a ladies' thing [laughs]. And he was a lawyer.

Okay. You said you passed it on. What did you want to pass on to your children? What was important for you to pass on?

Well, what I had done with my life and they knew where I came from and where I lived, because they've both been there, they knew that there was no running water and no mod cons. And I've got a lovely picture of Rachel and Naomi, because of a shortage of water there was a bath and we had two little bowls and to have a bath they sat in these two little bowls in the bath [laughs]. And eventually the bowls were emptied into the bath and when these two dirty little girls had been washed then we'd carry another saucepan of water that had been boiling on the paraffin cookers and we'd add some more hot water and then in turn the adults would have a bath in the dirty water. And each time you added another saucepan of water [laughs]. And that's – that's how it was [laughs]. And yes, you just accepted things, you know. And there wasn't much money. With ten shillings, I used to be sent shopping a mile and a half and I used to walk. [01:28:01] Occasionally you'd meet a friend that saw you walking and would give you a lift but otherwise, you just – there weren't many buses. This was only one, you know, just one number but occasionally there was a school bus morning and evening. But see, you walked or you went on the bus or you got a lift if you were lucky.

So Lia, where do you then do the nursing training in Birmingham and not stay in, let's say, in Wales or why did –

I stayed in Birmingham. I –

Why did you choose Birmingham?

Because my Aunt Meg had been a patient at the QE and she thought it was a good hospital. And so that's the only reason that I came to Birmingham. And when I did my nursery nurse's training it was a two-year course and you are – I've got two certificates- which I attained. That was before I was old enough to nurse. And then I went straight to the QE and trained there and – yeah. I've also been a patient there. Yeah. But it was a good training school at that time.

And you trained also as a midwife?

I also did my midwifery, yes. And that was fairly local, yes. It's now a block of flats.

And you said earlier, you said it took you some time to go that synagogue here in Birmingham.

Yes.

And what made you go to the synagogue?

Well, I'd been searching for years to find where I belonged, you know, and for some reason, something held me back. [01:30:10] I'd been to the Methodist church, Congregational church, Church of England, I'd been to the cathedral, and then one day I said to myself, don't be so stupid, take yourself off to the synagogue, which I did.

And what did you feel like when you got there?

I just felt I had come home. I just – I did. I really did. [Sighs] You know, my whole body just – I just knew it was right, just straightaway, just like that. Yeah. But I was very lucky because you see, when we got married, I didn't know anybody in the community at all. And from being introduced to Ilsa then she introduced me to her friend, Helen, who lived to be 106 and lived in Moseley, quite close, I used to visit her and she used to give me lifts to synagogue. And yeah, so – and then you got involved with synagogue things and would go in different committees and you'd – you have a – it's such a – to be Jewish is such an entirely different life, you know, because, [sighs] you know, you invite people in, come and have a coffee and, you know. And [sighs] such lovely people. Yeah.

And did you meet your husband through the synagogue? Did you meet your husband through the synagogue?

No. No, I met him in a club [laughs]. That sounds bad. There was a club called Coffee Pot and they were all over the country and it was a club for professional people and there were all sorts of people there, you know, of every walk of life. [01:32:11] And we used to do things in a crowd and we used to play tennis, go to the theatre, go away for weekends. You went-

not in pairs or anything like that, just, you know. I played table tennis, and I met quite a lot of people. And I went with another nurse and because, you know, we had such funny hours, they never fitted in with normal being off at five o'clock and going off and doing this and that. And I knew Philip for quite a long time but, you know, and then suddenly there was a spark [laughs] and – yeah. Yeah. He had a very good sense – he's still got his sense of humour. Yeah. You can see the twinkle beginning in his eye and it's, he's still got his sense of humour, hasn't he?

Naomi: Very much so.

Yeah. Yeah. But his mental process is now very slow and you can see he's thinking but it's difficult for the words to come out, yeah. But we all take him nice things to eat. And we used to play table tennis 'cos he could move his arms and he was very good. He used to play tennis and he used to enjoy playing table tennis but they've changed the table now, so we can't get his wheelchair underneath for him to do it, so we're thinking of other things to do instead. [01:34:08] He likes music and we rub cream onto his hands and the boys come and play their violins to him and he loves music. He used to play the piano. Yeah. Yes, sadly when you get old your parameters get smaller and you adapt to what you're capable of doing. That's it. Yeah.

And Lia, how would you identify yourself today, in terms of your nationality or religion or anything?

Well, I suppose naturalised British. Jewish. That's it. Yeah.

And when did you become naturalised?

When did I become naturalised?

Naomi: Was it 1956?

I've got the forms. 19- what, dear?

Naomi: Was it 1956?

Thank you, dear.

Naomi: I think.

'56.

Yes.

And was that important for you to get those papers to become British?

I suppose I'd – I have to say, I just considered myself British, although we've been back to Czechoslovakia a few times with Philip and with Naomi and with Rachel, John and the boys and, yeah. I don't know whether I'll ever go again. I wouldn't like to travel on my own.

[01:36:00] I think – I'm perfectly happy doing what I'm doing, you know, as long as I meet friends and get out of the house and, I'm fortunate in that I like baking and not for myself [laughs]. I don't eat it [laughs]. But yeah, you've got to keep yourself mentally busy as well.

Yeah. And speaking of food here, is there any Czech food you cook or any food which stayed with you?

Not really, no. No. No. I liked, I do red cabbage. That's the only thing. I – interestingly enough, I met – do you know Ian Austin?

Yeah.

Yeah. Well, Ian Austin's dad, Fred, and his wife, Margaret – I went to the Progressive synagogues, they had an evening on there and I think we had a meal. And somebody said, 'There's somebody here from Czechoslovakia.' So, I said, 'Oh, yes?' So, I went over to talk to them and it was Fred, Ian's dad. And well, we became very firm friends, we did. That – he

gave me that picture. That's the two of them intertwined, Margaret and he. Yeah. Yeah. And anyway, I gave him his, a *kippah*. Philip and I gave him a *kippah*. And he had a second *bar mitzvah* at the Jewish school in Moseley and quite – he was a headmaster at King Edward's and then Dudley Grammar and quite a few of his former pupils came to his second *bar mitzvah*. [01:38:09] But – and Margaret, she was a wonderful cook and she was such a lovely lady and then she got one of these horrible illnesses and he got a huge vehicle so that he could take her wheelchair in it and he used to tether her and take her – bring her to the AJR meetings. And –

Did she cook something continental? Because I ask you about food. I ask you about food.

She – he used to do red cabbage and he gave me the recipe. I've got it in his writing in my – so I love it. And yes, I do that. But Philip was very much – just he liked English food. He didn't like curries, didn't like anything. He like custard and rice pudding and things like that. And, yeah.

And Lia, do you still feel some – a bit of Czech or do you feel –

Yes, I did relearn Czech. When Ola could no longer speak English, I relearned Czech. And I still keep in touch with the lady that taught me – relearned, retaught me Czech and –

So you forgot the Czech you'd learnt in the school, in the exiles –

Yeah. 'Cos there's nobody to – you know, nobody to speak –

And now, do you speak a bit of Czech?

I can – [sighs] *Trochu* [a bit]. Very little. And 'cos there's absolutely nobody to speak it with. And she translated some of my mother's letters and she said it was very old-fashioned Czech. [01:40:04] It was, yeah, she said it's like the Brontë period, you know. So I've a feeling that my father could have been a better scholar than she was but I really don't know. This is just, surmise really.

We're going to look at the letters in a little bit.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I've been very, very fortunate really.

And did you feel at any – I mean you came as an eight-year-old but do you feel there are any lessons from the Kindertransport to be learned for today's situation, for example?

I just think we were extremely lucky because today's refugees, it's a double whammy really. Some are economic immigrants, some are fleeing for their life and they're all being tarred with the same brush. And well, we support the, we support them. Yeah. But we – the 10,000 that would have been admitted were very lucky. Do you feel the same?

I'll tell you later, what I think about it. What – I think what's interesting for me listening to your story is that on the one hand you were fostered but then you had a communal experience as well, which is interesting because often children had either/or. [01:42:04]

Yeah.

You know, some children were kept together and some were fostered. And I wonder whether that was a good thing for you to have both these experiences.

Yeah. My guardian, Mouse, always said 'I'm not going to steal your mother's affection. That is your mother's.' She said – she told me that. Yeah. But, she was a very kindly lady, yeah.

She sounds also that she had quite an amazing understanding, you know, about the language.

Yes, yeah.

By sending you to school so that – in case that you have –

Yeah, yeah. Well, she did, you know, she thought a lot. She was a Christian but I never knew her to go to church, you know, but you don't necessarily need to go to a place of worship to be a good person. No.

Lia, how do you feel about Holocaust education today? Do you feel it's taught enough or – do you sometimes speak to children in school?

Yes. They're always very interested. Yeah. I [sighs] – they're very interested and I've had letters back from them and yeah, and they've asked very pertinent questions, yeah.

Such as?

Was it difficult to leave your parents- particularly, yeah. [01:44:00]

And is there anything else – we will come back – but is there anything else you would like to add which I haven't asked you at this point?

That happened...?

Is there anything else you want to add? Because we're going to break.

Not from that part of my life. No, I don't think so.

And Lia, do you have a message for anyone who might watch this interview in the future, based on your experiences?

Try and forgive and hope and help and be kind to one another. I think that's about it.

Thank you so much for talking to us.

Yeah. That's all you need?

At the moment.

Okay.

[Break in recording]

Lia, can you please introduce the person sitting on your left?

This is my younger daughter, Naomi Claire Lesser.

Thank you for joining us now, Naomi.

Naomi: You're welcome.

And you listened now to your mother's story and I just wondered whether you would like to add something or say something. [01:46:01]

Naomi: What would – yeah. I'd like to add that Mum will always say that she had a really, really happy childhood. But I think that's on the – but I suspect that's because she doesn't remember anything about the bits that weren't happy. And that's probably a really good thing in a coping mechanism but my guess is that she's blocked them out. And she was really fortunate when she came to this country and she had – I suppose that she was lucky she was placed with Mouse and Mouse was lovely and she was treated like one of the family straight away. And the community all – all just took you under their wing, didn't they?

Yes.

Naomi: Yeah. And that's not always the case and that wouldn't be the case for a lot of refugee children today. And when we went back to Bull Bay last year I remember asking you whether – you were talking about all the lovely people you had grown up with and their parents and the local shops and how everybody had been lovely to you. And I remember asking, well, what about the ones that weren't? And you couldn't remember anybody who wasn't at all.

No.

Naomi: You know, which is lovely.

Hmm-hmm.

Naomi, do you remember learning about your mother's past or was there any moment where you understood that she was different or her background was different?

Naomi: Yeah, I think – I remember – I think I remember you telling me that your family, including your parents, had – and you used the word ‘perished’ in the Holocaust. [01:48:04] I suppose the way we speak about it now is so different. And I didn't really know what perished meant but I didn't ask you but I just knew that meant they weren't alive. And that – I remember that and I didn't really ask any questions at all after that because they'd never been part of our family. But I did imagine what it was – I knew they were dead and I remember – this is so sad – not sad, but it makes – I might cry if I say that – but I remember sort of talking to your parents when I was lying in bed at night, like in my head, just letting them know what you were up to and I was up to and stuff. [Sounds upset] So yeah, so that was it really, now. I suppose I've always had quite a keen interest in the Holocaust generally and especially your family having died, sort of pushed to do things. And when we went to Prague or when I wanted to go to Prague and then I wanted to go to Terezin when we were in Prague and yeah.

You wanted to know more?

Naomi: Yeah, yeah.

And did you name – you said you spoke to the grandma. Did you know their names?

Naomi: I don't know if I did. No, I don't – I knew the pictures, the pictures that you brought over with you. There's one with your dad, with you in his arms, as a little girl, and one of your mum as well. But no, I don't suppose I did. No.

And Lia, are you surprised to hear this? Or did you know this about your daughter, that she spoke to –

No, I didn't know. No, I didn't know that she – she spoke to them. No.

Naomi: Yeah.

I know she's always felt very sensitive about the Holocaust, so I [sighs] – I didn't tell her very much because I know she finds it extremely upsetting. [01:50:16]

Naomi: All said I suppose, there was not much to tell you, to tell me, because you didn't know it either.

No, no.

Naomi: And then I wouldn't say things to you because I didn't want to upset you or if you have blocked things out as a sort of survival mechanism, I didn't want to the- you know, I didn't want you to sort of put those blocks down and I cause you any problems.

But do you find you are talking about it more now than before?

Naomi: Yeah. Yeah. Well, now we do that. I think I probably told you maybe I was in my early thirties and I was sort of more honest about, yeah, the impact on me [sounds upset]. And so now we – yeah, we do fine, yeah. And I think we just – it wasn't a taboo subject at all and we'd speak about it in a matter-of-fact way but that – but not in an emotional way.

No.

Naomi: And I mean you'll still say now that you – that you think that you wonder if people think you're heartless because you just talk about it matter-of-factly. And I always say that I think that that's just, you know –

Cover.

Naomi: That's cover, yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I suppose I just never wanted to – you to have to sort of remove that cover because it's last – you know, it's served you really, really well for ninety-two years. Well, not – yeah, since you came over to, you know, to the UK. And I was saying earlier that Dad – when I was in my twenties, Dad came around to see me one day and he was worried that should you experience any tragedy in your life now, or at that point or in the future, that he was concerned that it sort of might open the floodgates. [01:52:20] And I think he was worried that if anything happened to him, that yes, he wanted me to know that, just so –

'Cos he was very sensitive.

Naomi: Yeah, yeah, he was really sensitive, he – yeah, absolutely, so yeah, which was absolutely – it showed a lot of foresight, yeah.

Do you think it's a little bit because a lot of the people we do mix with in addition to other people are Jewish and we've all had the same circumstances? Well, most of us, so we all – we just know how other people feel.

Naomi: Hmm-hmm

Yeah. And you don't actually have to put it in words.

Naomi: Hmm.

And do you feel, Lia, that if something had happened that it could have opened other things for you? Or do you feel that concern your husband had?

Yeah. [Sighs] I don't know. I think there's just [sighs] – something's holding me back.

Naomi: Yeah.

Yeah. I don't know what it is.

Naomi: And it could be a really good thing that it is.

Yeah, yeah.

Naomi: And I wish I had that thing, yeah. Yeah.

And Naomi, so do you feel as a second generation, this had an impact on you?

Naomi: Yeah, definitely. And I think – I know what you're saying about the community at large but because you got married quite late and you were, you know, you were eight when you came over, that a lot of second generation are quite a lot older than me, so I didn't grow up with second generation people at all, so none of the Jewish children at my Jewish primary school were in a similar situation to me at all, which was always strange. [01:54:20]

[Doorbell rings]

[Inaudible]

Ignore it.

Can we ignore it?

Naomi: Yeah. Yeah.

Because age-wise you're somewhat between second and third generation.

Naomi: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So that was always a bit strange. And I suppose that it was one of the things that made me always feel very Jewish, the Holocaust did, whereas my

contemporaries, it wasn't that, it was the religious aspect of it. So that was a bit strange.
Yeah.

And tell us, Naomi, you are a foster parent today?

Naomi: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, a foster carer, yeah.

A foster carer. So that to me is I mean very striking.

Naomi: Yeah, similar, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Your mother came and was fostered and you foster three kids. Is there a connection?

Naomi: I wouldn't be surprised if there is some sort of connection. But saying that, if I'd had my own birth children and got married or – I may never have felt a desire to look after other people's, other people's, well, children who couldn't live with their birth families. I don't know. But something's taken me down this path now, yeah. Yeah. And the little girl I have living with me at the moment, there's people who will say, well, would you sort of – would you like to adopt her? And I've got no interest in that either because it's sort of there's something that you stay, you're Mouse's family and you all stayed together because you loved each other and you were good people and you don't need any sort of piece of paper at any point. [01:56:06] And so I sort of have no desire with her or any other child to do any more than just sort of be a good influence in her life and whatever the rest of her life brings, whether it's she remains with me or she goes on to elsewhere with or without her birth family, that's fine with me. Yeah. It's just that she needs my help here and now. Yeah.

Is that what your foster mother did?

Naomi: Uh-huh.

With you? That's what your foster mother did with you?

Yeah.

Naomi: Yeah.

Yeah, because she didn't think that she'd keep me forever. She hoped she wouldn't have to keep me forever.

So what do you – how do you feel when you now see this girl? Does it take you back to your own –

Yes, in a way, and thinking how lucky she is. And because I suppose when I was a little girl, you see, we didn't have anything like- I mean I was along a lane and up two fields and I didn't even have a friend except two miles away, you know, and there was no – we didn't have cars. I had a bicycle. And, you know, circumstances were so entirely different. But the important things, we've all got.

Naomi: Yeah.

Okay. Anything else you want to say to your daughter or you want to say to anyone?

No. I think not only is she good with children, she's good with people generally. She just knows what to say and she's equally good with old people or children, and yes. [01:58:05] She just likes people. Yeah.

Naomi: Yeah.

Do you agree with that? Yeah.

Yeah. Anything else?

Naomi: I don't think – no, I think – no, I don't. I think that, yeah, I think we're very lucky to have you as our mum and –

Oh, thank you, dear [laughs].

Naomi: Yeah. Yeah. And I'm so glad that, you know, your mum did have the foresight that she had.

Yeah, thank you, dear.

Naomi: It's just such a shame that, you know.

Yeah.

Naomi: That you are the only sort of mum that –

You know, you often wonder what if.

Naomi: Yeah.

And [sighs] of course I wouldn't have met Philip and I wouldn't have had two lovely daughters.

Naomi: Yeah, I know.

Yeah.

What do you then think, that you think what if? What would be – what would your life have been, what do you think?

Yeah, yeah. No, I – no, I'm just content with how things are.

Naomi: Mum would have died. Yeah, yeah.

And I've got two lovely grandsons and – and yes, and they're learning to – one can drive, the other's learning and yeah, and they're coming on beautifully.

Naomi: I would also say that I think Mom is – spends so much time thinking of others and doing things for others and there's some sort of payback there for, you know, for having survived. It's, you know, you'll do anything for anybody. Well, you will do, which, you know, which is an absolutely lovely quality but I just wonder if it's related to the kindness you'll have seen given to you so freely.

I don't know. I have no idea.

Naomi: Yeah, yeah. And it's – yeah.

No, as I said, people –

Naomi: Not survivor's guilt but there's something like, yeah, reparations, is it or – I don't know. Yeah.

I think most people try and help others. [02:00:02]

Naomi: Yeah.

Okay. Well, thank you.

Yeah.

Naomi: Thank you.

Thank you both for talking to us and –

Thank you for coming down and doing this interview.

Naomi: Yeah, thank you very much. Yeah.

Yes, thank you so much. And I'm sorry that you had an unfortunate experience on the way.

Naomi: Yeah, yeah.

Thank you.

[Pause] That is my grandfather, Max Fuchs and his wife, Stepanka Fuchsova. In the middle, in the first row is my Aunt Editha, Editha Bloch with her daughter, Eva, on the right, and Lia, myself on the left.

Where was it taken?

[Sighs] It was taken in Teplice-Šanov.

Do you know when, roughly?

It – I would think in 1938.

This is my father, Pawel Blum, with Lia in his arms.

And where and when?

[Sighs] I'm not sure where it was taken but I think I'm aged about two or three. [02:02:08]

So '30s?

1935 approximately. That is my Aunt Editha. And from the right is my cousin, Eva and my cousin Harry and myself. I'm not sure where it was taken but by the look of us, I should think it was about 1936.

That is my first day in school in 1935.

'37?

'37?

[Inaudible] Six years old.

1937.

And where?

1937.

And where?

It'll be in Teplice-Šanov.

On the right is my cousin, Eva, and Lia on the left. And it's probably early 1939 in Teplice-Šanov.

That is a photograph of my mother, Ida Turk. I'm not quite sure whether it was taken, I think – sorry. That is a photograph of Ida Blum, taken in Teplice-Šanov. **[02:04:06]**

And did you bring that with you?

Yes, as far as I remember.

So that came in your luggage?

As far as I remember.

This is Mrs Griffiths from Ty Gwyn Farm in Bull Bay. She was a farmer's wife in the farm where we used to collect our milk. And her sheepdog had just had puppies and I'm hugging one of them.

Two of them.

Two of them? Two of them [laughs].

And what year was this?

It would be in 1939.

This is Lia in 1939 with Tiger the tabby cat at his house in Llangefni.

Starting at the bottom, the doll, Janet, my cousin, Lia, and a friend of Janet's, at Littlefield in Llangefni.

Do you know when?

1939.

This is Lia in 1939 in Littlefield in Llangefni. And Lia has got on her national costume.

This is Mouse, now Mrs Florence Mullen, married to the gentleman next to her, Pat Mullen, her husband. [02:06:11]

Yes, please?

That is Lia with her new bicycle in the garden of Heather Bank, Bull Bay, about 1945.

This is me, third from the right in the first row, and my cousin, Harry is third from the right in the second row, at primary school in Teplice-Šanov, circa, about 1937, '38.

[Inaudible]

This is Hinton Hall, my Czechoslovak school in exile. I am in the centre with pigtails and beside me is my special friend, Jana, who is now in Canada. And we're sitting, standing behind a lovely sheepdog.

So this is the Czechoslovak school in exile?

Yes, it is.

And in this photograph the first girl on the right is Uta. Next to her is Lia. Next to her is Ruth. And lastly is my friend, Eva. [02:08:00] And this was at the Czechoslovak state school in Llanwrtyd Wells.

And what is she wearing on her head?

I think she must have had a national costume on, yeah. I never found out what happened to her when she left. No.

Yes, please.

That is a photograph of Hinton Hall and we all appeared to be trying to dance.

And where are you? Where are you?

I am over here. I'm on the – the last person on the right.

This is a photograph of the Czechoslovak state school, [*Sekonda*], the class beneath mine. I have quite a few friends there, particularly in the last row, third from the right is Peter Hall, Petr Hecht, how he was known at Czech school. And in the first row, last on the left is the sister of my friend, Jana in Canada.

And the teachers? What are they called?

The teachers. The teacher in the centre on the right is called Mr Turk and I am not certain what the other teacher's called.

Thank you.

This is following the marriage of my school teacher, Mickey Fried , to one of the nurses. And Lia, last on the left at the bottom, has just presented her with a bouquet of flowers after their wedding in 1943.

Thank you. [02:10:00]

This is Lia Blum having her schoolwork marked by Mr. Krušina. And seated alongside her is her friend, Eva, and behind her, another friend, Alina Knappova.

And where is this picture taken?

And this has been taken in Hinton Hall.

But is it from a film?

I think it was taken from a film.

Which was filmed at the time?

Yes.

Naomi: Yeah.

Thank you.

This is when I was doing my nursery nurse's training in Birmingham. I am second from the right. And the children used to come in at half past eight in the morning for breakfast prior to their day at the nursery.

Do you know where and when?

That would have been in 1949 in Solihull.

This is Lia on Ward Seven of the General Hospital, Birmingham. She is the ward sister.

This is the front of an admission booklet given to patients. The little – the girl in the bed is called Linda and Lia is the ward sister. It is actually a surgical ward but we happened to have an empty bed, so she came onto that ward.

And when was this? [02:12:00]

And this was in 1967. This is Lia and Philip on their wedding day, the 23rd of February 1969.

Where?

At Central Synagogue, Birmingham. Oh, no, sorry [laughs].

This is Lia on her wedding day at the reception with her guardian, Mrs Florence Mullen.

This is a photograph of my family. In the first row on the right is my youngest grandson, Ben. Next to him is his brother, Daniel. And I stand left of Daniel. And straight behind me is my husband, Philip. Rachel's husband, John, Rachel and Naomi.

And when was it taken?

And this was taken...

Oh, no, don't touch it. Roughly?

Um, 19 – no, 20 –

'14, maybe?

'15.

'15.

I'll turn it over in a minute. This is a photograph of Nicholas Winton, who was one of the people that rescued me from Czechoslovakia, at his 100th birthday party in London at the Czech embassy. [02:14:00]

Okay, thank you.

This is a Kindertransport afternoon tea at St James's Palace at the invitation of Prince Charles, as he then was. Next to him is my friend, Milena and myself, talking to him.

Thank you. [Inaudible].

This is the cover of my passport when I came to England on June, last day of June 1939.

Yes, please.

This is Lia with a photograph of June the 30th 1939 on her way to England.

Yes?

What do you want me to say?

Is this your passport? The third page of your passport?

Yes. This is the third page of my passport.

I forget what it is. This document is my entry visa to Great Britain.

This is an alphabetical list of the children's transport on which I arrived from Prague to England, giving the name of Miss Hall, my guarantor.

And how many children were on that train? Do you know how many children were on that list, roughly?

[Sighs] About 200 and – there were about 250 of us.

Thank you.

These are five books that I brought with me on June the 30th 1939 when I arrived in this country. [02:16:07]

And what books are they, Lia?

Some are Czech books, some are Hebrew books. And they were – one of them is covered with a tran – the original purple paper that all our schoolbooks were covered in.

And they are children's books?

They're children's books. Fairy tales and learning books.

And you kept them all these years?

I've kept them all these years.

Thank you.

This is the only little piece of jewellery I brought with me when I came to England in 1939 and it is Moses giving the Law on Mount Sinai.

And who gave this to you?

And my parents gave it to me to bring to England.

And do you think it's significant that they gave you something Jewish?

Yes. Yes. I –

What – do you remember what they said? Did they say anything when they gave it?

No. They just put it around my neck and they didn't say anything.

So when you arrived in England –

They just wanted to make sure that I knew that I was Jewish.

And when you arrived here in England, were you wearing this necklace?

Yes.

Lia, thank you so much again for sharing your story and showing us your photographs and your documents and this necklace.

Yeah. Can I give you a drink before –

Yes [inaudible].

[02:18:05]

[End of transcript]