

IMPORTANT

This transcript is copyright Association of Jewish Refugees

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

AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

AJR

Winston House, 2 Dollis Park

London N3 1HF

ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk

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

ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk

Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
Ref. no:	1

Interviewee Surname:	Lederman
Forename:	Elena
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	6 October 1917
Interviewee POB:	Milan, Italy

Date of Interview:	8 January 2003
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
Total Duration (HH:MM):	1 hour 40 minutes

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

INTERVIEW: 1

NAME: ELENA LEDERMAN

DATE: 8 JANUARY 2003

LOCATION: LONDON

INTERVIEWER: BEA LEWKOWICZ

TAPE 1

BL: Today is the 8th of January 2003, and we are conducting an interview with Mrs Elena Lederman, in London.

BL: Could you please tell me your name?

EL: My name is Elena, Elena Lederman.

BL: Where were you born?

EL: In Milan.

BL: And when were you born?

EL: 6 October 1917.

BL: OK, can you please tell me something about your family background?

EL: About what?

BL: Your family background.

EL: Well, my parents came from Turkey, they went to live in Italy, they became Italian citizens, my father went to the First World War, he was a soldier; in fact he was very ill after that, after the war, because he had the legs frozen. And he can hardly walk even after the war. My brother used to live in Italy, in Genoa, he was married, had two children. He was there until the war. I came from Italy with my parents, first we went to France, we had three years studying at school, and from there we went to Brussels, which I went to school, to finish few years of primary school, and then I started to work. I was 13½, and I went to work right away, because my parents were ruined, and I had to work.

Tape 1: 2 minutes 36 seconds

BL: Just let's go back a bit; you said your parents came from Istanbul. Why did they move to Italy?

EL: They got married in Istanbul, and they decided to go for their honeymoon, to go to Italy. Unfortunately they went by boat from Istanbul, they took a boat, it was their honeymoon. Unfortunately the boat sank. They were saved, but everything in that boat was ruined. They didn't have anything at all. So they went to Italy, they didn't go back to Turkey, because they lost everything there was in the trousseau, as we call it, and everything, so they remained in Italy. That's all that I can remember. I don't know more than that because I was then not born yet, so I don't know, but as far as I know, they came to Italy and they became Italian citizens. Then my father went to war, and I suppose in the meantime my brother – no. Then they went to visit, back on a visit to Turkey, and I believe then is when my brother was born, and then they came back to Italy and they remained in Italy for good. And I was then born in Milan, Via Valazze 51.

BL: What are your memories of growing up in Milan?

EL: Oh well, I had a wonderful family, I was a very happy young girl, very happy, we had a very happy family, every – you know, we used to go the synagogue together, the family, it was a fantastic family at the time, my parents were quite well, my father had a business of clothing, but he had a partner, and I was very, very happy, had a fantastic life, we had a maid, we had a beautiful house, that's all I can remember. And then one night my father came down, in the shop, an office, and one of his partners ran away with the money. And he lost everything. Then we had to leave, to try – we went to Paris, first, because my mother had a brother there, we went to Paris, tried to have some help; I suppose they succeeded the way she wanted, or whatever and I went to school in Paris for three years, in Montmartre, and then from there we decided to go to Brussels.

Tape 1: 5 minutes 57 seconds

We went to Brussels and then my father had to find a job, and I had to find a job; I was very young, but I had to do that. I was 13½ when I started to work. And my father was employed at the Bon Marché, as a detective. And I managed to work also in the store.

BL: Can you tell us about the store a bit?

EL: Well, the store was like Selfridges. It's a similar sort of shop like Selfridges, you know, very, very big store. We used to sell – I was in the perfumery department for a start, and then I was in the handbag department, and I was there until the war. I never stopped. And my father was also there, until the war. I met my husband then also. He was then working at the Innovation. Like you got here Selfridges and John Lewis's, they are two big stores. That was the beginning.

BL: What languages did you speak at home?

EL: At home, I used to speak French, I speak Italian fluently, and Spanish fluently.

BL: And what language did your parents speak together?

EL: Spanish. But they spoke French also, they spoke Italian, obviously, and very good memories, up to there very good memories. But then –

BL: They spoke Ladino.

EL: My parents, they spoke Ladino, yes. Very good, yes, very good.

BL: Your schooling was all in French.

EL: In French, yes, I speak fluently French, and I've got the grammar, I know everything in French, in Spanish, and in Italian, perfect; in fact, when I came to England I must tell you very quick, I used to – I was employed near Harrods: there was a film company, Columbia, and I used to work there to translate films from Italian to English. Italian – films like Silvana Magnani, all those films I had to change into English. Unfortunately, I used to type but I was not a very quick typer, I was there for a year, was a very interesting job, because I used to meet a lot of very – stars and all that. But unfortunately - I did say that - I can't type very much, so at the time they said, "We're very sorry", because they couldn't find anyone who speaks so many languages, and so – quite well, I must say, I remained in contact with them for many years, now they don't do it any more.

BL: Coming back to your family. How religious were they?

Tape 1: 9 minutes 17 seconds

EL: Very religious. My parents were very religious. My mother on Friday at 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock, she used to finish whatever she was doing, and until the end of the Shabbat, she would not touch anything. She would not do anything in the house, she would have gone up maybe to have a coffee or something, but she would not touch anything, she would not drive - well, at the time we didn't have a car anyway - and she wouldn't have done anything. And all the festivities – I remember my father at the time, I remember at the synagogue, he had already the seat for eventually his grandson which unfortunately he hasn't seen a lot, and that was – they were very, very religious, very, very religious.

BL: And which synagogue did you go to?

EL: Well it's Sephardic. But the synagogue in Belgium is combined with the ordinary synagogue, the other one. So it's all the same, one big synagogue, which is in Brussels.

BL: When did you get to Brussels, which year?

EL: Which year? Well, I was 12 when I went to Brussels, 12, 12½. So which year can that be?

BL: 1929.

EL: 1929, that's right. Very good.

BL: Can you tell me a bit more about your life in Brussels?

EL: Life in Brussels. Before the war? Well the life in Brussels was very good, I used to work, I used to go home in the evening, I used to, when I was young, enjoy myself immensely. I

love Brussels; I love it very, very much. And we had a very, very good time although I had to work, as I told you, since I was 13½, but I was pleased to help my family. And whatever I used to earn I used to leave it to my parents, and we had – we were in a way – we were not very rich but we were happy. We were very, very happy. We used to live in a flat à La Bourse, on the 4th floor. At the time we didn't mind the stairs, of course, on the 4th floor, and my brother used to live in Italy anyway, I'll explain to you in a minute, and what can I say, I was very happy until - naturally - the war. So I got – yes, I got married in Brussels, I forgot to tell you. I got married on the 24th of February, 1940. I got married during the war, and we had a Chuppah, in the hall, we didn't go to Shul, and we had a – at the Grand'Place we had dinner there, and we went to the – because Jewish people in Belgium, you still got to get married first at the *Hotel de Ville*, which is the Town Hall. You must, and then you do your ceremony, your Jewish ceremony. So at the Grand'Place, it's a beautiful place, we had the wedding, and then we had the Chuppah in the hall, it was very, very nice. But at that time when we got married, the war started three months later. And we used to live with my parents at the time, when we got married, we used to live with my parents in La Bourse, at [street name indistinct] no. 21, and then we got married.

BL: What was your husband's background?

Tape 1: 14 minutes 10 seconds

EL: My husband's background? They used to live in Breslau. And, unfortunately, his father had another woman as far as I know and François was at school. When he came home from school in Breslau, his mother was dead, she commit suicide, because she was desperate for what happened, and she left a note for her son, never to go back to his father, but to go and live in South America, to an uncle. Where he went, to South America, he was there all his young age, until he was 15. When he was 15, his father suddenly remembered him and he done everything he could to bring him back. It was terrible, but he wanted him back. Anyway he came back to his father, but there was a stepmother which was unfortunately – she had two sons, and it was terrible, the life, many times he didn't have any food, many times he went up in the – in Belgium you got rooms right on top, you call that the *grenier*, I don't know that in English, and he was very sad until he met us, and we were a very close family and we went out together and eventually we got married.

Tape 1: 16 minutes 9 seconds

BL: What are your first memories of when the war started? How do you remember it?

EL: Oh, I remember that very well. Well, one morning – I used to sleep very well, it's something I've kept even now as an old woman, I still sleep very well. And when the war start, as you probably realise, you maybe were too young, but it was full of planes, they were already sirens and bombarding as they came over Brussels. And I got up that morning in the normal way to go to work. And I could see my parents and everybody, they were on the balcony. And I said “Why you are on the balcony so early?” And everybody was on the balcony but I didn't hear anything. I was asleep, I didn't realise, there were the planes and there was the war. That's what happened on the first day of the war. Well, after that I went to work in the normal way, I'm talking before the Germans came in. I went back to work, and at the store, they called us, naturally, and they showed us the shelter, the place to go down when the sirens – which was very frightening, because we went down to see that, and they'd got cages, they had little cages, with birds inside. Right. And they said to us, “When you hear the

sirens, you must go down in the shelter and you must look at the cage. If the bird is dead, that means they started with the gas.” Well, I don’t know if I can explain that to you, the feeling of that. To know we had to look at that bird is something I can’t describe. Anyway, that was the beginning of the war. So we carry on, for a little while, and my husband was called to the army naturally and, as you probably know, Belgium resigned after a very short time, the King decided they will give up, you know, and that’s why the Germans came to Belgium, you know, because otherwise they wouldn’t. Then naturally the very sad part of everything, because as the soldiers - the German army - came to invade Brussels, in the beginning they were just trying to be very friendly and all that, and it was – I can’t describe the town, all the time full, not one German, there were armies of Germans all the time on the street, everywhere where you go, and when we used to come home we used to come home before dark, not to have lights, just blue – sheltered, anyway.

Tape 1: 19 minutes 46 seconds

But then it started with the Jews. Just before that I used to help: some hospitals, had lots of wounded people, and I used to go, to see the hospitals, to see if there’s any help to give, you know, I left work, and then I used to do that. And then they started, of course, the question of Jews. So one day, first of all, they came to my house. I wasn’t there, I was actually in the country with my baby at the time, you know. And they asked my husband to undress himself to see, you know, if he was Jewish or not. And – but – because he was in the underground, other of his colleagues knew what was going to happen, and they said that as soon as he goes, because they didn’t took him, they looked at him, in fact this was a man who was not a German, he was one of the Jewish men who was paid by the Germans – he worked with the Germans - to denounce the Jewish people, and he is the one who came to see my husband in there. So anyway, after that they called my husband, and they said “You’d better disappear, leave everything”, which we left, everything. Oh, I forgot to tell you also...

Tape 1: 21 minutes 29 seconds

BL: Who called your husband, sorry. Who called your husband?

EL: People from the underground. To tell him leave everything, now you are in danger. They came to see you, and now they come to take you and your family to Auschwitz. So of course my husband was desperate, so he phoned where I was, to tell me not to move from there for a little while, to stay there, and he will pick me up one evening, to pick up some clothes, and some things from home. That day I went home, and we were supposed to disappear in the middle of the night, but we didn’t know where to go, we didn’t know where to stay or anything at all. My husband had to join the party, but he was with me, he was afraid. So, I knew a friend at a hotel, and I went to her and I said, can we stay overnight here? And she said, well, I don’t mind. But a full hotel, is taken by the Germans, everything, all the rooms. The only thing I can do for you is one room, you know the *grenier*, the top room, the attic, you can have that room, but it’s one thing, you’ve got to come in the middle of the night, and you’ve got to leave before five o’clock in the morning. And if you come with the child, the child cannot cry, otherwise I’ll be shot, and they cannot know if somebody is there. Well, we didn’t have no other option, so that night we arrived there about 3 o’clock in the morning, with the baby, to that room, but we were in – well, I can’t explain, because we were afraid, the baby was 8 months, was crying, anyway we were up all night, the only thing we told the lady, in the room was a little hole like that painting was there, in case the Germans come in at

night and they see us, they take us, we'll put the baby inside there, and then you can save him. But thank God that night went through, we left in the morning, everything was OK.

BL: That friend of yours, was she Belgian? Not Jewish.

EL: Yes. No, not Jewish. A lot of people non-Jewish, they helped us. Anyway, the thing got worse and worse, and they started the Jewish then, they started for Jewish – so they wanted the Jewish people to wear the Star of David, and we didn't have anywhere to go any more. So the only solution which I had is to sleep in the woods. For five years, I stayed in the woods. In a part where the woods are going down like that. [Gestures downwards]

Tape 1: 24 minutes 58 seconds

Every night, the dogs, with the lights, with the Germans used to come through, to see, and I used to cover, with all the grass, and underneath I had the baby with me, with – it was absolutely terrible. For five years I was staying in the woods, I used to live with milk, and in fact that very much affected my son's health. That I can tell you, that it was terrible. So one night, I don't know how this happened, they came with the dogs, and the lights, and they saw me. I was with the baby. I had to think very quick. I was so scared I can't tell you. I can't explain to you. And just for a moment I said, I had to think fast what to do, because they're going to take me away, and I said – I spoke in Italian with them, I didn't spoke in French at all, because I was very dark of course, very dark, I was the Italian type although I was Jewish, I just – they told me, "What are you doing?" Well, I said, I lost something in the morning, I lost my ring, and I came in at night, to make sure – when there is nobody – I had to try to find something to tell them. And they said 'Is that your child?' I said, "Yes." And they said, "You're married?" "No", I said, "I'm only looking after that baby, I'm just looking, because the family is gone and I don't know where they are." I can't answer to you to that, it was OK. I managed, I managed to get out, and I carried on until the last day of the war, to be in those woods. I don't know if you can imagine what it is, to live in the woods.

Tape 1: 27 minutes 17 seconds

BL: Where was this?

EL: The woods were near – Le Bois, Le Bois de La Cambre, is a *bos*, like you got here, plenty of parks, Green Park, Hyde Park, you know it's the same thing, but it was very, very well-known, and they've got a lot of places you go down like that. So if you go right down, that time I could naturally run and all that, and then covered with grass, it is just impossible to describe what was that. I can't tell you.

BL: And it was in the same place every night?

EL: Every – the same place, because I already find a spot, which I can see when they used to come with the dogs, like that. Look, it was just prayer and luck, I couldn't tell you, I was there, my husband wasn't with me, he was in the underground, trying to help other things. And I was all on my own, I used to give milk to my son, myself, although he was already old enough to have – but I couldn't find any milk, and I used to nourish him myself, you know, breastfeeding, just to – until – I could do that, anyway. So things were a little bit better then, a family said maybe I could go and stay with them, because that life is impossible. Anyway we went with them, but they said we have to give them money, but they said, you cannot show

your face, you must stay in your room, not go out at all, they must never know there is somebody in there, so we stayed in Namur: to that family, we gave every money we had left, we gave it to them, because they took a chance, and we stayed in hiding in there until – well, I would say until nearly the end of the war. But one day I came out, I couldn't stand it any more, the boy was a baby, I had to give him some air, I came out, with a pram, and I was taken by the Germans. They – once again I said to them – “Where is your Star of David?” “Well,” I said, “I'm not Jewish”, I said. “Can we see the baby?” If you are the – I can't describe the thing, and I said all that in Italian, so I said to them: “What do you want to see the baby for?” I said, “I'm Italian, I'm looking after that baby,” I said, I don't even know— They said “Is that your child?” I had to think, I said – I had to tell them something, I said, “Yes”. “You know the father?” “No, I don't know, I never knew the father”, I was taken by a man, and I was raped. Anyway, that – I managed to get through that.

Tape 1: 30 minutes 54 seconds

BL: They didn't check the baby? They didn't check?

EL: No. I managed to speak in Italian all the time, and I told you, I had a little, a tiny bit of luck, perhaps, because I could, I was Italian, well I spoke Italian fluently, and they were friendly with Mussolini, and they couldn't do anything, they were friends of Mussolini, and you can imagine, how happy I was to tell them I'm a friend of Mussolini, I had to invent, I can't tell you, I can't describe what this was, when I think of that, I just can't explain it to you, it's just indescribable, anyway. In the meantime, they took all our houses – flats, two flats, everything which we had, everything. Anything at all, not even a pair of pants left. And after that was nearly – they were saying – oh, nearly the end of the war, and then they started with the V1 and the V2. So the first time we came out of that wood, to be able to live with those people, a V1 came, on the house. We didn't have anything at all, but the first bomb came just where that house is, where the tree is [gestures], came down. So that was the V1, take it out of there. My son has suffered a lot from breakdowns after that because has been very, very terrible the life that child – well, I tried everything I could, but it was absolutely terrible. Anyway, the war – in the meantime, the war finished, well, thank God the Germans left over there, but naturally we didn't have anything at all, I don't know if I can explain to you, but nothing, nothing at all. A lot of upsetting, and I was tired, very, very tired, I can't explain. Anyway in the meantime I said, perhaps I will have to find out about my family in Italy.

BL: Were you in touch with your family during the war at all, did you know ---?

EL: Nothing, nothing at all, nothing at all. I knew only my parents disappeared one day, they went to Italy. They were told it would be less anti-Semitism because of Mussolini. Anyway we went to Italy and we tried to find out what happened. Well, I'm going to tell you. They came – my brother used to know a girl, you know, a girl, which – she denounced my brother, she denounced him, it was just before the end of the war, before the last day of the war, when the British came to Italy.

BL: Where were they?

EL: In Genoa. In Genoa. So they went in, and they saw my father, my mother, my brother, my sister-in-law, and when they came in, the two SS, because they were bitter, they lost the war, they saw the children, one child was very ill, she had – and my sister-in-law begged them to

leave the children. They shot them in bed. The children. Both children were shot in bed. And they took all the family as hostage to shoot them publicly. My father, my mother, my brother, my sister-in-law, and the two children were dead. In Genoa they erected a monument at the entrance of the Jewish cemetery, with my parents, my mother, all the names of my family, a monument was erected to see the suffering, because the two children were shot and everybody. And this was part, really, of the sadness of the war.

[Long pause]

Tape 1: 35 minutes 49 seconds

I had terrible things. I can't tell you. I can't explain what I went through. I can't. Is no words I can explain? I don't know how I'm sane, I just don't know. We are safe but you know, then of course after that, in the meantime my husband carried on to do a lot of things, even during the war, for Britain. For the parachutes used to come down, I'm talking in the meantime what he has done, a few times he was arrested, because he had messages in the shoes, and he was arrested but he managed to escape, and we managed to survive, if you want, the war.

Tape 1: 36 minutes 40 seconds

BL: How did he become involved in the underground?

EL: Well, because we had a garden where we used to live. I'm talking – before I was hiding in the woods, and my husband was attached to the underground for Britain, what do you call it? The movement, what do you call it, the underground. And parachutes used to come down in our garden, is an incredible story, they used to come down with a little light, and they came in the garden, we used to give him clothing, false identity papers, to save him, to give him to escape, because it was – this was just towards the end of the war, but we done a lot, an awful lot for Britain, I mean my husband really, because me, I was already half-dead after all I went through.

BL: So he stayed in your house?

EL: No, no, no, he was in another house, he was where the underground movement was. He couldn't in our house, everything was taken away, I was in the woods, until the end of the war I was in the woods, I used to live in the *ravin*, it's a – you know, I went to Belgium not long ago, I went to see that place in the woods, you know, to see, it is incredible.

BL: How did you manage? During the winter...

EL: Darling, I managed with a scarf, with wool, stretched over the head of the baby, all that with a small baby. You see, when you are alone, already, well, you know what is a young baby. When you are alone already, I wasn't afraid, I said, they take me alone. But in my mind, I was still hoping for the war to be finished and all that, but they used to take – while I was in those woods, they used to take all the Jewish people, put them in – in big cars, vans, trucks, they used to put all the Jews in there, old people, young people, children, babies, I just can't tell you. The only thing that saved my life is that I was able to get myself through as an Italian. The only thing who got me through. The only thing. And when we came to England, we went to the Home Office, they knew about us, they knew, and they said – we said we want to become British if it's possible, and the – the three years, we didn't have to wait five years,

because everything we've done, which my husband explained and all that, and he was decorated actually, and we managed to escape.

BL: So out of the five years, you said you were in hiding as well, for how long were you with this family. You said you were in that room, with the family.

EL: I was in that house I would say for maximum a year.

BL: And that was towards the end of the war?

EL: Towards the end of the war. And, you know, it was even worse there. Although the wood was not very good, in there also there was a little room like that, the child could not, if he plays he should not make any noise, he should not cough, he should not cry, I don't know if you can understand that. It's a terrible thing. It was worse enough in the woods, but even that, but still at least we were sheltered and we managed to sleep at night.

BL: What did you do during the day?

EL: Nothing, I was in the room. I was not allowed to go out at all.

BL: And in the woods, during the day...

EL: I was hiding in the woods.

BL: Also during the day?

EL: During the day, yes, of course, because the Germans were everywhere, and sometimes at night they would come with the dogs, and a big torch like that [gestures], coming, you know with the boots [stamps feet], it is incredible. We used to do everything there, excuse me, you know, and the only thing I was giving is milk. Sometimes people used to bring me something, like bread, and cheese, really I can't have any food, as long as my son was alright, I only was caring about him, so I used to give him as much affection as I could. We're very close with my son, I suppose with everything we went through. You know, even to think what has happened, it's a terrible thing. It's indescribable. We've got to be thankful, because we escaped the Germans, but it's terrible, absolutely terrible, I can't tell you, absolutely incredible. You know you've got to be able to survive that to understand. It's like people been in concentration camp, seeing what has happened to them, probably a lot of people I know, quite a lot of friends, they have been taken away and all that, but when you think it's been a sad life all along, very, very sad; we could have been happy. When the war finished we didn't have anything at all, and so we had to start – and then my husband said “Maybe we should go and live in England”, and that's why it happened, because I got a good record with England and there would not be any anti-Semitism: which is wrong because now it starts, anti-Semitism, in here also, but it never was like it was in Belgium. At the end it was terrible, and then you had people, Belgian people, who were with the Germans, to track Jewish people, not everybody were very nice, and the people who help you, you have to give them all the money you had, everything, everything, a fortune, to give them, the jewellery and all that when I got married and all that, everything we gave just to try to survive, and to be able to be alive, and to be---

Tape 1: 44 minutes 24 seconds

BL: Were you in touch with your husband? How often did you see your husband when you were in the woods?

EL: I only saw him probably twice during the war. And I just saw him at the end, I just saw him at the end when the war finished, then, I just saw him at the end, twice. We didn't have no – he knew I was in the wood, we didn't have no notion together. My family, it was the same; when the war finished, I thought that's it, I'm going to see my parents, I'm going to see everybody, I remember, I kissed my baby at the time, I said, "We're going to see grandpa", and the only thing I remember, the last time I saw my parents, when we left the house, just before he took his Tallit and he took it over pole, you know, although I haven't been in the concentration camp, but I think I suffered more, than if I was in the – no, I can't say more than a concentration camp, because probably I'd be dead, but I was suffering as a young woman then, of course suffering, and I wasn't well, and then, when my son – after all that, we are here in England and all that, he has suffered a little breakdown, he had once or twice a breakdown, and then, unfortunately for the last part of my life, I know that it's not the war, but when we were here and my son got married, you know, and he went away and had a beautiful house in Radlett and I used to have the chocolate – I told you, that is another story, and one night, in the middle of the night - my son was away - and in the middle of the night my ex-daughter-in-law, with the little boy who was three, and she had one in her tummy, she disappeared with another man to Mexico. And she brainwashed the children so much they don't want to see their father, and they don't want to see us, we got two grandsons, one is 28, one is 26 and we never see them, never.

Tape 1: 47 minutes 15 seconds

That is the part of one life; and then of course I had a lot of other things happen here, when I had – I built a beautiful building, and the man was a Jewish fellow, a Jewish solicitor, who was going to buy the business, Malcolm had a brain tumour, he was very ill, and he didn't have any money, so he asked me if I can give him part of the deposit he gave us – it was for our retirement, and he never paid – he went back and he never paid anything out of the [indistinct]. That was part of another little paragraph of my life.

BL: Can we just go back to the war? Do you remember, where were you, and how do you remember the Liberation?

EL: Yes, at the Liberation I was in Brussels.

BL: And how do you remember, can you describe it?

EL: Ah, can I describe that day? Well, it was like a mad day. When I saw the – a light, they – they came to liberate and the Germans finished, they went back, I went like hysteric, we were all on the street, you can imagine, in the street, and the first – I remember the first soldier which I saw, and I ran to him to kiss him, and he had a *casque* [helmet], you know those metal – and it cut here, I was bleeding like a lunatic, it was the first kiss which I had in a – and I said "We are free", I told my son "We are free", we are going to live normal again, and all that, it was a fantastic – and then of course my husband was called, where he was working with the underground, they gave him a medal, and he got – I'll show you the book there. And then I went to see the house, where everything was stolen, I went in one day to see, they took everything, everything, everything, the only thing I found through a neighbour is that painting

which was brought by my mother, the only thing, the only thing I find. Two flats, we had just got married, we had furniture, we had jewellery, we had everything. It wasn't a very, very happy life, you know, it was very sad.

BL: And then your husband, also you met your husband ---

EL: Yes, then it's OK, then, he got – when he was finished he got the medal, he was very well known in Belgium, we used to go sometimes, after I started that business we used to go very often, to Belgium, but we haven't got anybody; everybody, all the Jewish people we knew, were all taken, and then as a matter of fact I put down for the compensation for the Holocaust, and I'm waiting. That's all I can say. I'm waiting and I can assure you it won't be ---

[Interruption. She stands up.]

BL: You can't move.

EL: I want to show you something. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry, I apologise.

BL: Can you tell me maybe again after the war, when you came to England? How did your life progress?

EL: When I came to England, well, when I came to England, my husband came before, with that company, Denfil Furs, I think I told you. They promised him if he comes to England, he will have a house, he will have this, he will have that, and he came to England two years before me. Then I came here after two years but all these promises were no good. Well, I went to stay in a house: the Jewish ambassador, who used to live in St John's Wood, I went there, and stayed with one room, and I was like a maid, you know, and I didn't speak one word of English at the time, not one word. My husband went to school but I didn't. And I used to look just the pictures in the paper, I learned by myself, everything. Then I thought, there's only one solution, I've got to work, because we didn't have hardly any money. My husband worked for that company, just enough, but it couldn't be, my son had to go to school, so I saw an advert about the translation which I already told you, and after that I had to find another job, so as – you know, to be able to have a job in London you should have a permit, of resident, and at the time, until we were British we couldn't do anything, so I went to work for a company, they were looking for a manageress, in the – to make jumpers and suits, which I'd never done this in my life, and that company was in Tottenham Court Road.

Tape 1: 53 minutes 58 seconds

So I went in and I asked for the job, so he said, "Have you done this before?" I said, "Yes, I'm a designer", which wasn't true. And when I went in, he said, "How much do you want to earn?" I'm going back a few years, you can imagine. "Well", I said, "you pay me what you think I'm worth" And he liked the answer, and he said, "Would you start now?" So I went to start, very quick, I will always remember when I went in that place, it was like a big place, and they had on the table a big material, you know, ready to cut, I mean, you've been in a factory, you know, and I went in, so – his ex-wife was working with him, and as I came in, he said to me, "Here you are, here's the scissors, I want you to make me a jumper." Well, I got in such a state, frightened, because I never cut, I never done it in my life, and the girls who were working there, they realised, you know, because they knew, only the way I was holding the scissors, they realised, and I said, I can't give up. So in a minute I was having an overall, I

had an overall with me, I went to the toilet, and I had a jumper underneath. I cut the jumper, all the sides, and I brought it down, put it over the material, and I cut. Then I asked the girls to over lock it, but obviously I cut it without leaving enough for the over lock; anyway, done that, and they all looked, they didn't say a word, the girls were not very nice, and at 5 o'clock the boss came in, and he said, "Would you come to my office before you go home?". I knew it would be a disaster, I knew, I wasn't stupid. I went in, and he said "You know what?" He said, "You know you're no good". "Oh," I said, "I know that." "You know you'll absolutely ruin me?" "Yes, I know that," I said. "And really truly I should sack you. But I tell you, I admire what you've done. I really think you have done something which I think really is courage. You need to work. And you're going to stay", and I was with them for five years and I done the most beautiful designs. It was a German, Bruno Netter, in Tottenham Court Road. And then after that I worked, after that I was a manageress, I used to speak the language a little bit better, not very well; and then after that, of course, I started to work in a shop, you know, I always worked, because it was the only way to survive, which I did. I got quite a good background in that respect, and then I used to have the shoe – I used to have – in fact before you go I must show you something. I used to work in a shoe-shop, and I liked the idea to have shoes made to measure, so when I had the shop, the first time I made shoes made to measure, and I used to make shoes for the Palladium, boots, I got to do very, very well. In the shop where I find in Edgware. And after that my husband said, why don't you do those very special chocolates from Belgium, why don't you do that? Ah, I said, "No." He said, "Come on, you'll do it." And I started. And for nearly twenty years, I introduced the Belgian chocolates, they were really fresh chocolates, which we collected every week by van, every Monday. Everything was marvellous until the time when I got that solicitor, who bought everything and ruined me, and he never paid.

BL: What was the name of that shop?

EL: Elena Chocolates.

BL: I just have to stop you here because we have to change tapes.

TAPE 2

BL: This is tape 2 and we're conducting an interview with Mrs Elena Lederman. You were just telling us about your chocolate business, and you said you were running it for 20 years.

EL: Yes, when I started the chocolate business, yes, I had a shop, you know, and I was the first lady who brought fresh chocolates - of course now they got many - but at the time, they didn't know what it means to choose the chocolate and fresh cream, they didn't know. People bought boxes which are all ready, which are – So it was quite a big job, but it was very, very exciting also, because I managed to do that very, very well. And when I first opened the shop, very, very beautiful, I thought – I had an idea. So I took a box with me and I went to Scotland Yard. That day in Scotland Yard, they were just advertising for new staff, you know, for secretaries, and I went in the queue. And when I got –

[Interruption]

Tape 2: 1 minutes 48 seconds

And when I got in the queue, my turn arrived, they said, "What job do you want?" "Well," I said, "I don't come for a job, I want to see the Queen". I must tell you; at that particular time

they thought there is something not right with me. Anyway, they called somebody, and I went to talk to him, and I said, I just started a new business, it's something which has never been in England before, and I feel the First Lady should be able to taste them, as it's so new. He said, "Hold on, listen to that." I said, "God, what are they going to do?" And I'm very natural, I don't do anything sophisticated, it's just me, you know. So he came and said, "You're going to tell me you want to see Her Majesty the Queen?" – "Well", I said, "yes, I would like her to taste the chocolate" and here is the box,. I gave it to him, he came again, and he said, "Yes, Mrs Lederman, at the [indistinct] the Queen's going to see you tomorrow morning, at 9 o'clock in the morning at Buckingham Palace." So of course, the following morning I went to Buckingham Palace, and the Master of Ceremonies was there, and I made then a much more beautiful box, very beautiful, and I went in, and he said, "Come in" and they served me tea, and he said, "Is that the chocolate?" "Yes." And so he said, "Well, I'm going to ask you a favour. Would you take one first?" I had to eat one. And in a joke I said, "Well, I know the one which is not poisoned, so I'm having that one." I made it in a very natural way. And he went, then he came back, and he said, "Her Majesty the Queen is very delighted with those chocolates, and we are going to write to you. And who gave you the idea to come?" "Well," I said, "Nobody, but I guessed, it's something completely new, and I'm in England not very long, but I'm very fond of England and all that, and I thought she should have a taste." And do you know, from that time, she used to go to Harrods, just to get the white chocolate, and then the Queen Mother – I used to go to the Queen Mother nearly once a month. And I used to ring the bell, and then one day they said, "Would you come up?" And I went up to them, and my husband was with me but he could not come, he had to wait downstairs, so I went up with them, I always remember, I saw – Lady Diana's grandmother used to be at the Court there, and it was a magnificent room. They gave me some tea, and I said to them – Lady Diana was going to get married with Prince Charles at the time and I made up a velvet box, very big, with their photo, and chocolate, and I said, "Will you allow me to present it to them?" And they said, "Certainly", we know what it's all about, yes of course you can, we will be very delighted, and she wanted to know all my life story, and she wanted to know all about the war, all what I went through, and I sat there for an hour. My husband was worried what they do to me. You know he got a little bit worried, and they had a camera in the corner obviously, you must understand, and from that time really, whenever there was something special I used to send some chocolate, or I used to go there, when Lady Diana had her first baby I went to the maternity at the Portman, and there were coming a lot of people, coming, naturally with flowers, and as I went to the door, they said, Well, you can't go in any more, it's far too many. Prince Charles came out, and he said, "That lady can go too", and immediately I went in with a basket. I used to make such beautiful things; I must show you some photos. I used to make such fantastic things, I can't tell you, until the time when my husband wasn't well, and I had to sell the business.

Tape 2: 6 minutes 45 seconds

Well I didn't want – but my husband wanted – and then it was my lawyer, who wanted to buy the business, and I lost a quarter of a million, he never paid everything. In fact, some of the shops, they were under my name, and then he left without paying the rent. And I had to pay everybody. And I remained literally without money. When I met AJR – Mrs Goodman, when I met her, I literally was without money. I still used to do – they still– I know a lot of people, they still want me to do business, because my reputation is excellent. Still, I remain with a very, very good reputation in every respect.

BL: So how did you get in touch with the AJR?

EL: One day I was— Actually, the first time I went was the Jewish Care, and I was so desperate, because things were bad, I went there to talk to them, and there was a lady, Mrs Goodman, she's now at the AJR, I don't know if you know Marcia Goodman - she know my story - and she said, 'Well, we'll see what we can do, not much we can do, but try to go to the Day Centre', and I used to do still a little bit of business, because still everybody knows me, about the chocolate and all that, and I carry on to survive. It was very, very hard without money at all in front of me. But in the meantime my son wasn't well also, and I had to make — and he's fine now, thank God, but for a few years he had some breakdown, specially when the children left, it was a terrible shock, and all that, and the poor Elena who is suffering all that to try to keep everybody above water. But it's been a tragic life, really, I can say. I had so much and losing everybody, not to have anybody to talk, except my son, that's all, and I've got friends but I don't like to talk to friends about personal things, and it's been very, very hard, and I'm just happy with the *souvenirs*, I'm happy to have done a lot of good things in my life, although in a very poor way, but I've done everything I could. And I hope one day I will get some Holocaust money. I don't know, I hope so.

Tape 2: 9 minutes 55 seconds

BL: Compensation.

EL: Well, I hope so. Yes, they promised I can have, not me alone, a lot of people, but they promised last year; now they said not before March or June, or July, and I spoke to them on the phone, I said I would like to be alive still, to see that, you know. I hope so, who knows, you know, I would like that very much.

BL: What sort of people did you mix with when you were in England, did you join a synagogue, what did you ---

EL: No, as a matter of fact through the business, I knew people, through the business, I knew people, they used to know me very well, I used to be in the limelight, because I had quite a lot of business, I was very famous, you know, and so I had quite a lot of people, and every time the AJR used to have a — not the AJR, some people of the AJR in the Jewish — whenever they used to have a charity, I used to give chocolate for the charity. When I was in business I was very well off, I used to give a lot for charity, I used to give a tremendous amount of money. At the time I was a very good — very, very well-established business, you know.

Tape 2: 11 minutes 20 seconds

BL: Where did you live?

EL: I had a house in Penshurst Gardens, in Edgware, I had to leave that, because when this happened, when they don't pay, I had to sell everything, and then she said, why don't you come here it would be better, because otherwise you have to rent, it would be expensive. I didn't want to come here at all, then at the end I said, as my husband wasn't well maybe it was a good idea. It's been very hard for me to come to a place like that. I'm just living with my memories, it's the only thing who keep me sane, because, I tell you, I think more than once I nearly lost my mind.

BL: That brings us to the next question. What impact – how did it influence your life to be a refugee? How did those very difficult years influence your life?

EL: Well, myself, I became much more depressed, very upset, specially when my son wasn't well, he had a couple of breakdowns, you can imagine, he not well, my husband with a brain tumour, he wasn't well, I had difficulty to put – after we lost everything to put money together. My husband didn't have any money because he didn't work for 25 years, so when he died just three years ago, honestly truly if I tell you I had 5 pence in my purse, you won't believe me. You will say, she's talking just nonsense, that's what you will think. I didn't have any money at all, I've got no money as we call it put by, nothing at all, because I lost everything, but I still keep the spirit. Of course I've got my pension, I'm not saying I don't – obviously I can eat, I can sleep, I keep myself in good spirits still, obviously I don't think I'm not too, too bad for the age I've got. I don't know [very big sigh], I think so, but it's been years, everything has been a battle, specially the last one, it's been a battle, the war, and that one. It was incredible. Incredible, and everybody – you lose everybody, every one of your family, you know it is terrible, it is really a terrible thing, terrible. I had a shop in America also; I had a shop in Gibraltar; in Marbella, we had a villa in Marbella, I had everything, but when this happened, I had to sell because he had some debts, that man, and I would not want to go bankrupt, you understand, and I did want to pay everybody, I want to pay everybody. He owes money to everyone and I pay everyone, I know everybody who has said hello Mrs Lederman, I don't have fear for anything, but I remain completely without money. Completely. But I'm not telling you that as a complaint, I'm telling you as a fact. I'm not complaining, I'm happy to be able to tell you my story, I'm very happy.

Tape 2: 15 minutes 20 seconds

BL: You've lived in many different places, how do you define yourself in terms of identity. How do you see yourself?

EL: Ah. Very good question. Well, how can I explain? I feel English, I feel a part of Britain, I feel I am, but my background will never die. I'm still – as I come from Italy, I'm still a different nature than an English person. I'm much more – warm, I'm different. I don't know how to explain that. It's not disrespect what I'm saying, certainly not disrespect, but I'm much warmer, I'm different in many ways. But I love England, I respect England for everything, and I'm here, and obviously – but I still think of Belgium a lot, I had the best years of my life there, I was young, I was alive; then I lost everyone, suddenly. Sometimes I go back, I used to go back to Belgium quite a lot, and – but you still feel – you reach a certain age - and you've got many many, many more years when you reach this age - you find you would like to have a little bit easy, you find, easy, you already reach – you are already going down, you know, like that, and it's still very hard, and you can't go wherever you want to go, and all that, and you know, you know your son can only do a lot for you, and it's very hard, very, very hard, but I'll tell you one thing, I'll be very happy – people have approached me to carry on to work if I want to, and I know I can do it, although I'm not young any more, but I can do it, but my son doesn't want, he says try to take it a little bit easy.

Tape 2: 17 minutes 54 seconds

BL: How often do you see your son?

EL: Yes, twice a week and he phones me three times a day. He's a wonderful son, he's a fantastic son. The photo is there, I'll show you in a minute. But I will tell you one thing. The war has marked me a lot. It's something you can never forget, what we went through, it's impossible, impossible. To say what's cold sometimes, you see I was not there just for one day, or just for one night, this went on for five years during the war. Can you visualise five years in a wood? I don't know if you can. It's, it's – And the fear. If you are in a caravan or something like that, that doesn't make any difference, that's fine, but the fear every minute you hear a dog, or – you know, they had very big dogs, those Germans, really. They used to have sometimes six dogs, you know three and three, and you know I used to go flat down, I was very petite, very slim at the time, flat down, and my baby under me, you know, just down there, not a sound, I had to really – my son funnily enough, he can sit here and he doesn't talk very much because he's sad, you know, because he went through with me all that. It is very, very, very hard. And just live from pieces of bread, and sometimes people used to bring me some cheese, and they used to bring me milk sometimes, fruit, you know, they used to. But I was always afraid, because if they would have seen the skin, if the Germans came in the wood and they would have seen the skin of an apple or something, they would immediately look, is somebody there. You see, that's why. I suppose was other people may be hiding in the woods, I don't know, because I couldn't see. I never moved from that little corner. Never. It's absolutely terrified – terrifying. And of course when staying with that family, it was also very good but very frightened also because you were there all day, and you couldn't exit. And sometimes at night I used to open the window for my son, and a little bit of fresh air, you see, and couldn't make not a sound, because they were very much afraid. This was in Namur, I don't know if you know Namur, this was in Namur, the family Dachelet. And I was afraid and sometimes they used to send me some food in the room, I must say, and they used to say, how is the baby, and they used to say, I hope he didn't make anything dirty in case somebody comes; you know they used to be afraid.

Tape 2: 21 minutes 18 seconds

But they used to get a lot of money out of that, so it was a great, great danger. And I tell you, when I think also what my husband done with the parachutes and all those things, you know, we done quite a lot in our life, quite a lot.

BL: You said you went back after the war to Italy, to find out what happened.

EL: Yes, yes, and that is where ---

BL: How did you find out?

EL: Well, I had to speak with – the house they used to live, 46 Madre Di Dio, that's the address, and when I went in I had to find out where they were, and neighbours knew – everybody knew the story, when they shot the children, and when I went to the Jewish Centre, they said, yes we know, and that's why we built a monument, an enormous monument, you will see.

BL: So when you came there was already a monument?

EL: Oh yes.

BL: So what's the date? They know exactly what date?

EL: There's no date on the monument. They put the monument – soon after the Germans left, as soon as the war was finished.

BL: But the day they were executed.

EL: The last day of the Liberation.

BL: Of the Occupation?

EL: The last day. The last day when they came to liberate Genoa. The last day of the war, they were done that. The SS came like lunatics, they were like lunatics, you can imagine, they were losing the war.

BL: Do you know the date?

EL: The last day of the war was *en quarante-cinq, dix-neuf-cent quarante-cinq, janvier*, I think it was January '45. I think so, I won't like to say for sure, I know it was the last day of the war, and they got all the documents in Italy. They also said, "We try to send you something", it doesn't go to bring my family back, but this probably will help me a little bit more, yes. That was terrible, a terrible, terrible story.

Tape 2: 24 minutes 4 seconds

BL: Do you have a message? Something you would like to say?

EL: Well, I would like the war never to come again. I don't want any new generation to know what we knew. That is a wish for everybody, and to be a lesson for the new generation not to have any other wars, because when they talk again of the war, I'm not very happy to hear that. You know, it will never be the same thing but one can bring another thing, you know, but I sincerely hope. In a way, sometimes I'm sorry, maybe I would have been taken away, I would have died, but the way I was hiding in the woods, I tell you it was as hard as anything else, and in fact it's actually amazing I don't suffer of rheumatism or anything like that. That is also a miracle, because you can imagine the dampness in the grass and that was in the Bois de La Cambre, and also in Namur before I went to these people, I was also in the woods there also, because before they accept us, I had to hide somewhere. You know, it's a terrible thing. I'm pleased to tell you that. It makes me feel – I don't know, not better, not worse, but at least I've got it out.

Tape 2: 25 minutes 55 seconds

BL: Did you talk about your experiences? After the war, did you talk about your experiences at all?

EL: Yes, in the beginning yes, but then I got so sad, because I lost so many people in all, and I know what happened in concentration camps, and all that, because some people said they had been shot in Genoa in public, in a public place, all the family, some, they said, they'd been deported. You see they all – but I know they were taken, just shot, like in Russia they used to do that also, and specially to kill the children in bed is – I'll show a picture of the child, I've got it here, and it's something one cannot understand, really. Like a young person like you,

I'm sure you'll hear a lot of stories. But – you see a film sometimes, and it's all true, it's really true, they see a film and they say "Oh well, it's just a film", but it's not an exaggeration, when you think really, can you imagine one had to put that in a film, to see a person for five years in woods and in a house. It is indescribable; I don't even know it's possible I've done it. You know, sometimes I said, something is wrong with me, how have I done that, because I'm not very courageous. But because I had a child I became courageous, because I'm not a courageous woman, I'm very scared of all sorts of things, but I don't know where the courage came in. And of course when my husband – I saw him after the war, well, when he tells you the story he had, he used to be in the trenches, people died next to him and all that, he suffered also, he was a wonderful man, he was a lovely man. A very, very nice man.

Tape 2: 28 minutes 18 seconds

BL: We've discussed many, many things. Is there anything else you would like to add which I haven't asked you?

EL: Well, I told you part of my life, really, I told you my life in France, in Belgium, I told you about my war years, which were the worst, then my work and my losing of everything. No, I'm actually very grateful to you to do that for me. And it's something, at least, I will have a memory of that, which is not a very happy one, but still I will have – maybe one day I can send that to my grandchildren, although they don't want to see, but maybe I can send it over. Maybe.

BL: Mrs Lederman, thank you very much for the interview.

EL: Thank you very much.

Tape 2: 29 minutes 19 seconds

Photographs.

1. My parents, father and mother. Beginning of their married life. Giacomo and Eleonore. My mother was Gormezano, and my father was Atias. In Turkey.

Tape 2: 31 minutes 12 seconds

2. Parents as they were when I saw them last. Taken in Brussels just before the war. Last photo before they disappeared.

Tape 2: 31 minutes 49 seconds

3. My husband and myself. First party here in England. Masonic? About 1957, '56-'57.

4. My son Paul Lederman and the secretary of the Belgian Embassy in London. Reception in Selfridges. I had the shop there at the time. Around 1984-85.

Tape 2: 33 minutes 12 seconds

5. Taken maybe before England. Special evening. Not sure it was in England. Beginning of 1955.

6. My brother and his wife on their honeymoon, must be Alger or something. Brother then lived in Genoa. Around 1930.

7. My nephew, Metto. Festivity of the grapes in Italy. He was then 10. The last and only photo I have of him. He was shot in bed, dead, in 1945.

Tape 2: 35 minutes 55 seconds

8. Photo in my shop, box with feathers made specially for the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. Took it to Buckingham Palace.

9. With Elizabeth Taylor, who loved the chocolates. I gave her a box of chocolates at the studio and they all fell out. 1978.

10. Medal + Document: Commemoration of my husband, ['Fayvel, dit François,'] and his service during the war with the underground and his liaison with England and Belgium to save as many British people to be taken by the Germans. Gave them false identities and clothing to make them free and to help to win the war with the British. Medal was given to him at the end of the war. [Medal is the Belgian 'Médaille Commémorative de la Guerre 1940-45, ruban avec 2 sabres croisés' and document is dated 27.10.1949]

11. Wide-shot with Mrs Lederman also showing 'embroidery made by my mother as a present for her fiancé. It is over 100 years old', the only item Mrs Lederman found after the war, through a neighbour. 'It represents the harbour in Turkey'. Incorporates photos of her father and mother.