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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee POB:	Vienna, Austria

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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV179

NAME: Dr Eva Blumenthal

DATE: 23rd June, 2016

LOCATION: London, UK

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Jana Buresova

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

The interviewee today is Doctor Eva Blumenthal. And the interview is in London on the 23rd of June, 2016. Could you please tell us your name, your date of birth and the place of your birth?

My name is Eva Blumenthal, and I was born on the 25th of June 1936, in Vienna.

Thank you very much indeed for kindly agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices project. May we start by asking when and why your name was naturalised, your surname?

My name, when I was born, was Lichtenstern. And 1948 I think or '47 or '48 I was naturalised along with my father and mother. And my father changed our name to 'Lester'. And in 1958 I married my husband, Lionel Blumenthal.

And when did you and your parents arrive in Britain?

My father came ahead of …me and my mother, and my mother's mother in – he arrived in Britain in September, 1938. And we arrived on the 19th of November, 1938.

[0:01:58]

And how did you reach Britain? What was your route?

We came by train. It was all very organised because all our furniture came as well. And I don't know how it came, but it looks very like the sort of stuff that's in Freud's house in Mansfield Gardens. And even my little child's nursery table, and little chairs were here. We came by train…and there's a strange story. Because my father came ahead, because my mother didn't really want to come. And eventually, he said to her, "Well if you're not going to come then I will go on my own." And I don't know by what route he came. But we came directly from Vienna. And my father came to meet the boat train at Victoria Station when we were supposed to arrive, and we weren't on it. And my father was extremely worried. And the next day my mother and grandmother and I arrived. And my father said, "What on earth happened?" And my mother said, "We couldn't get sleepers." …But my mother and her mother, were the only members really of that family who got out. My father's family did get out. And they ended up in America. But my mother's family in Austria and in Lvov, ended up …in concentration camps and murdered in 1942.

[0:04:13]

Had they planned this journey well in advance? Do you know?

I think, I think they must have done, because as I say, our furniture came here. …But I'm- I really don't have any recollection - I was only two - of anything before we left or the several years after I arrived.

What was your father's profession back at home?

My father was a lawyer, and he was the company secretary for *Gerngross*, which was the largest department store in Vienna. And which was in Jewish hands. And the Nazis took it over and my father lost his job.

Was he ever arrested, do you know?

No.

When you and your family came to Britain, do you know who helped them? How did they manage to come?

My mother's mother had a sister, who had come with her Hungarian husband, in 1922, from Vienna. And he had a large family over here of brothers and sisters. And my mother and grandmother I think came in as domestics to members of that family. And my father worked for my great-aunt's husband's lampshade business, as a bookkeeper.

Did they have any help from the Jewish community here at all?

I don't know. I do remember going with my grandmother to somewhere in Willesden Green… I think to collect some sort of help. But I don't really remember.

[0:07:02]

What are your earliest memories of Britain?

My…?

How were they?

I was sent to a kindergarten in Neasden, and what I remember is that they received a consignment of bananas. And the kindergarten distributed these bananas, and they were thrilled to have them. And they gave me a banana and I said, "I don't want to eat this banana", or words to that effect. And, and they made me eat it. And I was sick. And they were very cross with me. And then when I was four, in 1940, my mother and grandmother and I went to Harrogate, where my mother had a job as a pharmacist. And I stayed with my grandmother and I went then to a – a very nice little …primary school. A private one. And I have reports about myself when I was four saying, "Eva is making good progress with History and Geography." [both laugh]

What about the English?

I don't remember when I learnt English. We only spoke German at home. And I am bilingual. And I think that I must have learnt my English only from English people, because I don't have an English accent. But on the other hand, in German I only have a Viennese accent, but I don't have an English accent. And I do remember that I could speak English well, and I have a report. I think my grandmother- I don't know how she did it, but I think that I could read when I was about four. And I have somewhere some letters which I wrote to my father, who wasn't with us, in English. And that was in 1940.

[0:10:03]

Why was your father not with you?

I don't know. My father was certainly on the Isle of Man, but I don't know when, or for how long.

And do you know whereabouts in the Isle of Man? Because there were different camps…

No, I don't know anything about it. I just remember that eventually, when he came back, I didn't recognise him, and he was very upset.

Do you remember which year he came back?

No. It must have been. We, we…I don't know exactly how long we were evacuated for, but I think we came back by 1941. So…

Back to London?

Back to London, yes. And my mother then re-qualified as a pharmacist. And got a job managing a retail pharmacy in Willesden Green.

And your father?

My father worked for the same lampshade business, for a long time. I think until after the end of the war.

But he was a lawyer by profession?

He was a lawyer by profession, yes.

Was he very frustrated?

He was terribly frustrated, yes.

Because his qualifications were not accepted in Britain, as a lawyer?

[0:12:00]

I imagine so. I mean, he- I mean he was forty…he was forty-five when he came to England. And I suppose he would have had to re-qualify. And he never did.

Cause it would be very expensive.

It would be very expensive, and we were not well off.

No…no. Did you grow closer to your father in time?

In my teens, yes. But…

Because it must have been very difficult for both of you initially.

Well I don't think, I mean, I don't think that that was hangover from his internment. I think that it was – he was a difficult man, and maybe he wouldn't have been so difficult if he hadn't had such a dreadful time.

And coming back to your school days, how were you accepted by the other children? How did you get on with them?

I went to a- I was evacuated on my own in ’44, for- from June ’44, until the end of the war. And that was another little private school in Yorkshire. And…

Whereabouts in Yorkshire?

[0:13:48]

It was a little village called High Birstwith, which is outside Harrogate. The little primary school that I went to in 1940, the lady who ran that had two sisters. Mrs Ray, who ran the school in High Birstwith, which only had about eight pupils. And Miss Hannah, who took in evacuees. But I wasn’t evacuated through any organisation. My mother sent me. And that was lovely, but in between times, I went to a very rough primary school in Neasden. And I went there again, after the war. And I do remember that I was a both a ‘bloody Jew’ and a ‘bloody German’. But, I was a bright child, and my Form Master picked me out as somebody who might, for my own benefit and also for the honour of the school, be the first child from Wykeham School in Neasden to get into North London Collegiate School which was a very prestigious direct grant school. And he gave me extra lessons to help me. …I- I was terrified of him, but I suppose in retrospect I should have been grateful. [both laugh]

How did you respond to the children when you were taunted by being called a ‘bloody Jew’ or a ‘bloody German’?

I don’t think- I think I was quite a tough child.

And did you put that to the past when you moved on to other schools?

Yes.

Or did it follow you?

No, no. At North London, we were all… brought up to be very tolerant.

During this time, did you or your family members practice Judaism? Were you observant, or was it set aside?

My family were extremely non-observant. Particularly my father. My grandmother, who lived with us, had come from a moderately observant background when she was a child. But my parents kept nothing. And I kept nothing. And really knew nothing. Except that I was always excluded- my parents kept me out of Christian prayers. And at North London we had Jewish prayers, and so I went to Jewish prayers. But I was very ignorant.

[0:17:14]

Did you develop an interest in Judaism later?

I developed an interest in Israel and in Zionism. And… I went to Israel for the first time, in 1953. My grandmother's sister who had been the one who got us out of Austria, had by that time gone to live in Israel because two of her sons had married to Israel. And that family is also completely secular. And generations of them, up to now, in Israel, are completely secular. I went again, with a scheme from the Jewish Agency in 1955. The Jewish Agency had a summer school for …profession…for – for people who were studying for professions - and I was by that time at medical school - in the hope that they would introduce us to Israel. And that we would make Aliya. And on that trip, I met my husband. And my husband is very observant. And we argued for three years about… what we would do. And we have been married for fifty-eight years. And the agreement was that I would keep everything that he wanted me to keep. And so we keep Shabbat, we keep Kashrut, and we go to an Orthodox synagogue.

Which one, may I ask?

We now go to Dunstan Road… which is the Golders Green United Synagogue. …And my children, my 'poor' children, went to Jewish primary schools and were given a proper Jewish education.

Was that throughout their education?

No, only in primary school.

As a foundation?

Yes. In those days, the Jewish secondary schools were not up to the standard of- well, we thought not up to the standard of the schools that they went to.

And did they object? Did they rebel at any time?

[0:20:36]

They…they didn't. Our oldest daughter, in retrospect, although she did extremely well, says that she wishes that we had sent her to a Jewish school. But she went to live in Israel. And she became a lawyer. And I don't think it would have happened if we had sent her to what was available as Jewish girls' secondary schools in England in those days. [slight pause]

Your own education- after school, where did you go and study?

I went to the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine.

And which year was that?

1954. And I qualified in 1960.

And where did you work after that?

Mostly at the Royal Free. I married in 1958, before I qualified. I did my pre-registration house jobs and the Royal Free. And then I worked …as a Senior House Officer for a year at the Royal Free. And then I spent a year and a half at the Hammersmith Hospital. Then… in between times I had had several children. And from …I think about 1961-62, I spent about ten years doing Consultant locums. And in 19…70 I went back to the Royal Free as a part-time Senior Registrar. And in 1975, I got a job at the North Middlesex Hospital as a Consultant.

So your title would be 'Mrs', not 'Doctor'?

No. I wasn't a surgeon,

Ah.

Doctors are physicians. We never become ‘Mrs’-s again.

[laughs] No. What prompted you to become a Doctor?

[0:23:51]

When I was interviewed for places at medical school, the right answer was you wanted to help people. And I think that was part of it. But part of it also was that my mother had wanted to be a doctor, but her father had a pharmacy. And she was told that she must study pharmacy to go in and work with her father. And I think, from before I was born, she probably told me that I was going to be a doctor. So that you know, if you had asked me when I was two or three what I was going to be… My father at one stage thought that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to be a lawyer. And my mother was very insistent that medicine was a portable profession and law was not. But I mean, in retrospect it was a good decision, because after I had retired from the NHS, I went to work for the Independent Tribunal Service. And I worked then with lawyers. And they think very differently from doctors about the same problems. And I think I was more suited to being a doctor than a lawyer.

In what way did you have to deal with the problems differently?

In, in…

With the Tribunal?

I think the doctor is- the doctor is instinctive. And you know, makes fairly snap judgments. And the lawyers have to concentrate on the… minutiae of the law. Three of my children are lawyers, and… it’s quite interesting.

Did your conclusions differ considerably sometimes?

No, no. I worked there for fifteen years. And I can only remember one occasion, when I deeply disagreed with a lawyer. But lawyers always trumped doctors.

[0:26:31]

But you persevered?

Yes. No, no. I lost that.

Do you ever regret that your parents didn't speak very much, or hardly at all, about their earlier experiences in Vienna prior to the war, and leading up to it?

They did- they did - especially my mother and grandmother - did talk about how they had wonderful times when they were prosperous, middle-class…in Vienna, before the Nazis. I in a way would like to have known more, because mostly my children want to know more and I can't tell them anything. But I don't know that I would have wanted to have been burdened with what happened in the 30s.

[0:27:55]

Were your mother and grandmother nostalgic when they spoke about the past?

Very…

Did it make you feel you wished you had grown up in that environment rather than here?

No, I mean they were nostalgic, but they always said that there was anti-Semitism in Vienna, long, long before Hitler. I think they were nostalgic because they were so much more prosperous then. My father would never go back to Austria. My mother and grandmother used to go to Bad Gastein in the summer… for treatment and to meet other ex-refugees.

Would you rather, it's a difficult question, but would you rather have grown up in Vienna - even given the anti-Semitism that certainly existed in the inter-war period - rather than here? Do you feel an affinity with Vienna?

No, absolutely not. I think that in a way, I mean, you know I- I'm lucky, because I think …that life has been very good to me here. And …there were never really any disadvantages to being Jewish. Or to being not quite so rich as we would otherwise have been.

For your mother and your grandmother, in keeping up with their refugee friends in Austria, do you feel that they were trying to recreate their past at all?

I don't think so. I mean, I have to say that they always said that although they were well off, all their friends were Jewish, and although they kept nothing, all their friends were Jewish. And all their friends here were Jewish refugees.

[0:31:00]

So they had that shared experience?

I suppose so, yes.

Did they form many friends here in Britain?

Yes. We- my, my parents particularly were very keen bridge players and card players. And…

Was that just within the Jewish community, or in a wider community?

I think at first, just within the Jewish community and with, with people that they knew. After my grandmother and father had died, my mother joined a bridge club. And was in Bridge Lane, Golders Green, just by coincidence. But she very soon made friends there, and she would play with different people. She wouldn't just play with Jews. And they, they stopped going to the club. She played bridge virtually every day of her life.

Your husband Lionel, came from a family of British Jewry…

Yes.

How were you accepted as someone from- foreign, from Europe?

[0:32:38]

I think my husband was in his family so extraordinary, that- I mean everything he did was brilliant. He was the first member of his family to go to university. And… his father and his mother and he had two maiden aunts who lived with them, were just amazed at - at this wonderful boy.

It has been said that British Jewry could have helped Jewish refugees who came to Britain much more than it's claimed was the case. What was your husband's family's response?

My husband's family were so poor, that I mean, you know, they couldn't have helped anybody. And I think they were not political.

You mentioned earlier that he was Orthodox, and that you visited Israel. You were thinking of the Aliya. Why did you not ultimately go and settle in Israel?

I think there are two reasons. I mean one reason is that we were both only children. And we had mothers who were horrified by the thought of it. And I think perhaps the other is that we weren't brave enough. We went… When we both qualified in 1960, we went for six months. But 1960 was a very difficult time in Israel. And we found it very hard.

Were you afraid there?

Sorry?

Did you feel afraid?

No, I mean, we- we- we have a daughter, our oldest daughter, who went when she was eighteen and who married an Israeli and has five children. One of whom is at the moment sitting in a tank on the Golan Heights. And we have a flat in Israel. We've had a flat in Israel for many years.

[0:35:27]

In which part?

In Jerusalem. And we go three or four times a year. And we never feel afraid. We feel safer there than here. Although we, we, like everybody else, know people who have died in terrorist attacks in Israel.

Were they very close to you, those people that died?

They're – yes. Not, not - not relatives. We are both, have very few relations of any sort. But… close friends…

That must have been very hard for you, and your family?

But it's at second-hand; it's not the same.

And if you're going to family members in Israel who were not Orthodox, how did, how do you bridge the gap in terms of observance?

Well, so long as you don't go on Shabbat or on a festival, it's quite difficult not to be kosher in Israel. You have to make a special effort… And… I mean, people in Israel as here and as with non-Jews, do make the effort.

Have you made the effort to go for example to Auschwitz or to Terezin…?

No.

Is it too painful?

[0:37:35]

It's not too painful. I wouldn't go. My grandchildren in Israel, their schools always send parties of children. And my daughter has not allowed any of them to go. We don't think we need to be reminded. We don't think we need to boost the Polish economy.

Is that …a wish to move forward rather than to step back? Without neglecting of course or forgetting family members?

No, I don't think it's that. I just think that, you know…we, we don't want to forget, and we don't want to forgive. It's not up to us to forgive.

And you don't want to live in the past?

It's not something that I've thought of in those terms.

If you had a special message for your children, or your grandchildren, or someone viewing the film of this interview, what would you like to say?

I don't think there would be any point in having a special message for my children. I don't think that in all the years that I've had children, they would think it was worth accepting a special message.

Even if they were not willing to accept it, is there anything that you would particularly like to say?

My children have all grown up as decent people. And that's really…what we expected of them.

And they're looking into your family past. Do they regret that they cannot find more about the family or…having difficulty in finding out about the family?

[0:40:17]

We have four children, and two of them are interested, and two are not specially.

And do they feel themselves… to be rooted in Europe at all, or not? Is it something that is very remote to them?

I think we're all too superficial to think in those terms. Rachel, the one in Israel, certainly regards herself an - as an Israeli, and would not want to feel herself rooted in Europe. And I don't think the others think about it in those terms.

What then made you join the Association of Jewish Refugees? What prompted you to join and when did you join?

I took over my mother's subscription when she died.

So you still keep in touch?

Yes. They have been very helpful, because they inform us about sort of benefits. And I've- I now get an Austrian pension…which I was initially reluctant to accept. But unfortunately, my parents and grandmother who were the ones who should have got restitution, died before the Austrians woke up.

Did you have to fight hard for this pension?

No, no. I initially rejected it, because I didn't want to have anything to do with the Austrians. But then…people said you - you should take it. It's better that you should have it, than that they should. And…

What sort of formalities did you have to go through to obtain it?

[0:43:05]

I had to fill out a lot of forms, to which a lot of the questions I knew no answers. But I didn't have to fight for anything. And I mean at one stage with the last payment, they sent me a twelve-page form. And my answer to nearly all of the questions was, 'Don't know'. And they finally came up with a figure of 47,000 dollars which should have been paid to me. But they

said they were too poor to pay all of that, and so they would pay ten percent which was 4,700 dollars.

US dollars?

I think so, yes.

How did you feel about that?

Cynical.

And how long did it all take to finalise, from beginning to end, so to speak?

I can't remember. It's sort of been going on, I mean, I think from…

A year?

Yes, from, from when I first received a pension, I think that was about twelve years ago. And then there have been two lump-sum payments since. And I can't remember when the last one was.

Do you regard it as blood money?

I hadn't thought of it like that either. …I mean, it's called restitution, and that's of course what it is. It's – it's I'm sure much less than my parents lost. In terms of money.

And …you yourself, do you have any yen to go to Austria?

About five years ago, my children decided that they wanted to go and see the things that my mother had spoken to them about. My children were very close to my mother. And we all went, and found the house where I had been born. And my mother's pharmacy, which is still a pharmacy. And we all trooped into this pharmacy. And …

[0:46:36]

Could you just repeat the- its location?

Yes, it was the *Apotheke zur Heiligen Margarete* and it was in the *Margaretenplatz* in the 5th *Bezirk* in Vienna. And …I spoke to the assistant, and said I hoped he didn't mind us coming to look around, but this used to belong to my mother. And …he said, *"Ich muss den Herrn Chef holen."* "I have to go get the boss." And the boss came out. And I said - and it was meant innocently - that this used to belong to my mother, and he said, "That's nothing to do with me."

Was he afraid that you would want to claim the pharmacy?

I don't know what he wanted. I suppose he wanted not to be blamed for anything.

Was he gruff about it?

He was cross about it.

And where did you- where did the family live in Vienna? Where you revisited?

It's called the Linke Wienzeile, and it's a whole lot- it's, it's, it's near the Naschmarkt. And the Wienzeile is, is…it's where there's a canal, and there are beautiful houses. Art Deco houses. And …they, my parents and my grandmother, who was by that time widowed, had adjoining flats in one of the houses.

What was your response and that of the children, visiting this former home, and were you allowed to go inside?

We didn't try. We didn't try.

People meet with different responses when they try.

Yes, yes. As I said, I speak accent-less German. And… a number of people said, "How do you speak such good German?" And on one occasion I said, "Well, I was born here." And the reply was, "Why did you leave?"

[0:49:26]

What was your response to that?

What can you say?

Did you admit to being Jewish, or did you ignore the question or…?

No, no. I always admit to being Jewish.

And how did the Austrian person react then?

Yes, I mean people, people…they don't react, or at least I've found that they don't react.

Is that in a sense of hiding what they think or…?

I can't speak for them, I mean, you know, they're younger of course.

How do you feel in your heart of hearts about being a naturalised British citizen and living here?

Yes, I mean, yes, I like it here. But I'm very conscious, especially nowadays, of being Jewish and about being worried about… the rise of anti-Semitism.

Have you experienced that here in London, or in Britain?

Personally, no.

I mean, in later years?

No. I mean personally, not. We don't move in the sort of circles …where we would expect to experience it. And obviously there is no 'official' anti-Semitism. There's…

But do you feel very British, or does a part of you not feel quite British?

Oh, quite a lot of me doesn't feel very British. The time when I feel most British is when I'm in Israel.

Are you going later this year again?

[0:51:51]

Yes, yes we're going in… we're going in September. We always go for Shavuot. We always go for Pesach. …We go for Hanukkah. We go when there are exciting things happening to grandchildren.

That sounds very promising and up-beat. Is there anything else that you would like to add or to return to from our conversation?

I think I've said enough, don't you?

Thank you very much indeed for being interviewed for AJR. Thank you.

[0:52:40]
[End of interview]

[Photographs]
[0:52:56]

This is a picture of my mother as a small child, with her parents and her nanny. And she was born in 1908, so I suppose that's about 1911 or 1912 in Vienna.

Oh, sorry, this is my father's mother, Rosa Lichtenstern, who spent the war with her daughter in Switzerland. And that would have been taken in Lausanne during the war.

That's my mother, Vilma Mettal, as a young girl with her mother, my maternal grandmother, Adele Mettal. That was taken in Vienna, and it must have been in about 1930.

That's on the left, my grandmother Adele Mettal, with her two sisters, Sabine Lewin and Helena Szarvas. Taken in… I think, Lvov, in about the 1920s. My grandmother came to England. My great-aunt had already come to England in 1922. And the middle sister, Sabinchu, remained in Lvov, and was murdered in 1942 in Poland.

Those are a photo and a postcard from Franz Lehar, who was a good friend of my mother's family. And my mother used to sing at concerts that he gave.

Those are my parents Vilma and Felix Lichtenstern. They're on their honeymoon in Yugoslavia. They married in… on the 14th of September, 1935.

That's my mother and me. It must have been about the end of 1936. I was born in June, 1936.

This is my mother's pharmacy, Apotheke zur Heiligen Margarete, in Vienna, which was Aryanised after the Anschluss in 1938. I don't know who the assistants were.

[0:57:02]

This is a photo of my mother who is on the left in the front row, with her colleagues, in her pharmacy, in Vienna. Some time before the Second World War.

This is my father's passport, which he received in Austria, after the Anschluss and with which he left Austria in 1938.

[0:57:50]
[long pause]
[0:58:50]

(This is the exit visa when my father left Vienna. In September 19…can I scrub that?)

This is my father and me on my wedding day, the 14th of December, 1958, outside the Western Synagogue, in London.

This a photograph of my husband and myself and our four children on the Bar Mitzvah of our youngest, in 1983 - February 1983.

[End of photographs]
[0:59:55]