

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV297
NAME: Maria Ault
DATE: 28 May 2024
LOCATION: Chislehurst
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:00]

Today's the 28th of May 2024. We're conducting an interview with Mrs Maria Ault. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in Chislehurst. Can you please tell me your name and tell me when you were born?

My name is Maria Ault and I was born three, eleven, twenty-six.

And where?

In Hamburg.

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

It's my pleasure.

Can we maybe start by talking about your family background? Can tell us something about it?

Yes. Right, my father was born in – near Prague and Czechoslovakia. But he came over to England to work with some relatives and to start a business, which he did. The business being oil, he imported oil and it was made into soap. And I remember having lots of lovely smelly soaps in our house. Yes, and then he met my mother, who was Henriette Bewersdorff, who was an opera singer. Her name, her stage name was Hella Borg and she was a well-known opera singer. And she sang, mostly opera, serious opera, but also light opera. Yes, and so my – sorry, I've got to break. Is that all right? Yes, we're talking about... Yes. So, my mother, my mother married a South African who, they had a little boy. [00:02:05] And her husband had a – owned a shipyard in Hamburg. And he went on a maiden voyage across to Russia and the ship sank. And he and the captain stayed on board, and they were both drowned. But then, my mother moved out of a big sort of Castle that they lived in, to a smaller house in Groß Flottbek, where – and her neighbour was a bachelor. That was my father, and they met and they got married, very happily married. And sorry, I've broke – is it right if I break?

Yes, that's no problem.

So, when your mother had the first marriage –

Yes, my – yeah, my mother had the first marriage. And then my parents, yes, and then my parents got married. And had a very, very happy life until '38, when all the things happened in Germany. And we were brought up in a loving but a strict way, which I think was very good. Because when we came to England, there was certainly – it was a different life all together. From a very, very big house with everything that I wanted. I had skating lessons, I had ballet lessons. In fact, my ballet, I got – I passed the entrance exam to the Hamburg Opera House. And I danced on the stage when they wanted little ones. Is it all right, if I just tell you about being on the stage and what happened?

Yes, of course.

[00:04:00] Yes, the injustice that I had to go through. We had to always do an audition, if there was say, the ballet might be Swan Lake and they wanted little ones, or Sleeping Beauty.

This is the Hamburg Opera House?

This is in Hamburg Opera House, where I was about balleri – well, I was learning to be a ballerina. And yes, and one day, I did the audition and I didn't pass. And I thought, oh, I haven't done well enough. But then my – the ballerina took me aside, put her arm around me and said, 'Maria, I'm so sorry. You did pass, we're not allowed Jews.' And that was the first time that I sort of knew that I was different, because my parents didn't talk about my father being Jewish and so on. And although I lost at least twenty of my relatives in Czechoslovakia, which I think it's called something else now... Yes, so they were all in Auschwitz, they were all gassed. And so, it was the same when I went to the exam in- for grammar school. I thought I'd done all right to get into the grammar school. And again, my name wasn't read out as having passed. And again, my headmistress put her arm around me and said, 'Maria, you have, but we can't have Jews in grammar schools.' So, that sort of thing has been with me for – every now and then I think about it. I'm really a very happy bunny but... And I try not to think about these things. And we, my sister and I, when we were evacuated, my guardians were fine. [00:06:02] But when we were evacuated, we stayed with a very, very, very, very bad person who – she used to hit us. She didn't feed us properly. But who could we go to? Who could we go to in Melton Mowbray? There was no Childline. One day I was doing the vegetables, because I was used as a cheap maid and I was only twelve. And I was peeling, getting a lunch ready for a hot pot, which meant I had to peel onions and potatoes and carrots. And because I used the same knife for the potatoes and the onions, because I didn't change my knife, she hit me. Really hit me hard and said, 'I've had enough of you, get out.' And it was raining and so, I took my sister and we walked through Melton Mowbray hand-in-hand. We had nowhere to go, nowhere at all. So, in the end, we were soaked. We went back and I think she was quite pleased to see us. I didn't tell anybody, how they ever found out... I think it might have been through my headmistress who used to have me in her study to give me extra lessons. And she – I had my arm in a sling because she was so cruel to us. I had very bad abscesses under my arm and I had my arm in a sling one day. And she said, 'Maria, what's – why are you wearing a sling?' So, I told her and she just looked, she said, 'Let me look.' So, she looked and she didn't ring that person up who I was staying with, she rang the doctor and said, 'I'm taking Maria straight to the hospital.' And they said if I had – I wouldn't have lived if I had – not a few hours, because I was – it was

blood poison, you know. [00:08:01] And then, somehow or other, I don't know, I think again, I was actually staying with another vicar. And we were moved. And then, I was moved to a very nice house. But again, I was taken in as a maid. I had to leave school and taken in as a maid. And one day I thought, is this my life? Because my parents were in Sweden, we didn't even know whether they were alive. Because I think perhaps, I should have mentioned this before, I'm sorry. My father caught the last train out of Germany to Sweden, because he had colleagues there. And he had very little to eat. But because he spoke seven languages, he actually managed to get a position unofficially of the Swedish Queen. And he worked for her, because of his languages. And then my mother, my mother was called to headquarters in Hamburg one day and they had her under bright lights. And they said, 'You should be ashamed of yourself. You're German, you're a famous opera singer. You should denounce your children, divorce your husband and sing for people like Hitler and so on.' And my mother simply said, 'You can kill me now.' And if she hadn't have- escaped, she would have been killed, that's for sure. But how did she manage to escape? She was very friendly with Göring, who was very fond of music and so was his wife. And Göring also had a brother who used to say, 'Don't do these things, Hermann, I don't like it.' [00:10:00] I don't know whether you know this, that he really – he was against – the brother was very much against what they were doing to the Jews. But my mother, because of the music knew him. So, he said to my mother, 'Look, I can take you out.' The conductor, who is Jewish, Göring's conductor, so he said, 'I'll take you out with me. Göring said I could.' So, they were put in a Nazi car and driven over the border to Denmark. And that's how my mother joined my father. They had – they were very – sorry.

When was that? When did your mother...?

My mother escaped in 1940. In 1940, yes, shortly after the Gestapo interviewing her.

So, she went to the Gestapo headquarters in Hamburg?

She did.

And then –

And she sat under bright light for forty-eight hours and they tried really hard. And she, as I told you before, she knew that she was going to be killed, because she said, 'No.'

Had they put any pressure on her before? Because after Nuremburg Laws, they must have tried, you know, put pressure on her before maybe to divorce your father?

No, no, it was – only came when they somehow found out that my mother was married to a Jew, that they got her to headquarters. This was in 1941, or '40 or '41. Yes, very early on. But she managed to... And then, we sort of gave – we had a lovely house, we – they had to give it away. But they did store a lot of the furniture, which actually came over to Petts Wood when my parents came over here, which I'll tell you about in a minute.

After the war?

[00:12:00] Yes, after the war. Well, no, during the war. Now, because my brother was in the school, which it wasn't a brother school to Gordonstoun, but they knew each other.

A boarding school in Switzerland?

Yes, a boarding school in Switzerland. And so, my – yes, and because my brother sort of knew Lord Mountbatten, only because of the school. Because if you remember rightly that Charles, our king, he was at Gordonstoun. And yes, and he was very fond of his uncle, Lord Mountbatten. And so, my brother asked Lord Mountbatten whether he would help them to fly over illegally. It was still – the war was still on. And Lord Mountbatten actually got them over.

From Sweden?

No, no. Yes, from Sweden. Yes, they had to wait several times and if there was room, they would take them. And they were ready lots of times and then one day, they had room and they had to fly without oxygen. And they landed in Scotland.

So, which year was that? When did they come from Sweden?

That was in 1945, just before the end of the war. But the war was still on.

And your brother was – where was he then?

Now, my brother, yes, my brother, my older brother –

Sorry, is that the – was it the first son if your mother?

That was the son of my mother, yeah. Yeah, he –

Your half-brother?

My half-brother, yes. He came to England through France, because the Germans were waiting the other side. From Switzerland, they were waiting for him, he would have been put in the army. So, he came to England. And when they found out that he could speak fluent German and fluent English, they lent him to a company called Schäfer [ph]. [00:14:07] He was in the ordinary army first of all, and then they found out that there was a bit more to him than that. He was actually, I'm going to call it intelligence, or some people might say he was a spy for Britain. He actually went down Hitler's bunker and helped himself to two little items. I don't know what they were. But he's, I mean, he's dead now. But he's got them. Yes, his family have got them. And he had to – as part of his work, he had to go down Hitler's bunker. And he was what we call intelligence and never spoke to us. He said to me once, 'I love you dearly, but don't ask me what I do.'

So, for the British Army?

For the British Army, yes. Lent to the American army, called Schäfer [ph] or the American intelligence, called Schäfer.

So, hence he was in Berlin at the end of the war?

Yes. He was stationed – he stayed on as working for – he was at the trial of – in Nuremberg he took part in interviewing.

What was his name?

His name was Alfred Popper, because my father got his name. Yeah, he's got the same name, yeah.

And he didn't change it, that was his name?

Alfred Popper, yes.

He decided –

Well, my – no, my father changed his name from Lilienfeld, which was the first the wife who died, the captain who died.

Your mother –

Yeah, and he became the same name as mine. Yeah, but he did a lot for Britain, which I'm very proud of.

Alfred Popper?

Alfred Popper, yes, yeah.

And he was the one who knew Mountbatten?

Yes.

[00:16:00] *Right. So, he finished the schooling, did he finish his schooling in Switzerland?*

He did, yes.

And then, came to England?

Then came to England. He was eighteen when he came to England, yes.

So, which year did he come to England, your brother?

Yes, he came the same as – in 1939. Yes, because he was – his father was actually South African. But he wasn't – I don't know why. He was South African but he had a British passport. So, my brother was actually British.

Oh, I see. So, did you meet him when you were already here? Could you meet him?

Oh, my brother?

Yeah.

Oh, I used to love – he used to – he was in this lovely, smart American uniform. And one day – he used to take me dancing, because we both loved dancing in London. And then one day, we were standing on an underground station and they were two women behind me. And they said, 'You should be – you're disgusting going out with an American.' [Laughs] But it was my brother, wasn't it? Yeah, yeah. So, okay. You haven't got it on at the moment, have you?

No.

I've just got to think.

Now it's off.

Yes.

Okay. Maria, I think what we should do, let's just go back a little bit in time.

Yes.

And then come back again.

Yes, please do. Yes.

Let's go back to Hamburg. What are your first memories of growing up in Hamburg?

I was a very privileged little girl. We were brought up in a nursery with a nanny. And because of my parents, well, especially my mother, my – the house was full of music. She – obviously my father didn't really want her to work anymore for money, but she did a lot for charity. So, our house was always full of people. She had a choir and they used to meet. And the only thing I liked about that was because when they'd finished their tea up, my brother and I went down to the kitchen and took the cakes and ate them, [laughs] which was lovely. [00:18:08] But our house was just music. My father also played the violin. And I was strictly brought up, which was so good because when I came to England, there was no money. In fact, the very first memory I have of having a meal, we had – they gave us fish paste sandwiches. And both my sister and I, we looked at each other and she took my hand, and we went upstairs and cried our eyes out. Not because of the sandwiches, but because we'd just left our parents. But to cry over fish paste sandwiches, I laugh now, but I didn't laugh at the time.

No.

No.

So, you're saying it helped you that you had the strict upbringing to cope?

Absolutely. And I've always been very, yeah, I've always tried to obey.

Maria, what do you mean by strict upbringing? What do you mean?

Well, when I say strict, I don't mean we were beaten or anything. But we were brought up by a nanny. And then, because my parents had a lot of people, famous people coming to the house, then we had to change, which I didn't like and go... And in Germany, the girls curtsy. So, we had to curtsy in front of them, then we were taken upstairs again and changed again into our play clothes.

So, it was quite formal?

It was formal.

With a lot of entertainment?

Yes, but we had such a loving upbringing. And on a Sunday, we always had tea. We had a lovely balcony upstairs and we used to have tea on the balcony. And then, there'd be a plate full of beautiful cakes. But we knew that we mustn't be greedy. And what a good job we were allowed one cake and we knew that. So, it was a loving, very loving, but strict upbringing.

What nannies were there? Who were...?

She was —

What nanny did you have? Do you remember her?

[00:20:05] Her name was Elsa. She stayed with us right from when I was born. And then my brother, no, my brother was born first, then myself and then my sister, Birgit. Yes. Can I tell you something about my sister?

Of course.

She – I'm so happy and so lucky that I've got a character where I say, this is what happened to you and you get on with life. But my sister was different. When she was very happily married, they emigrated to Canada. She had two children. And one day, she obviously couldn't stand it anymore. She had memories of when she was beaten. She used to faint, when we had that awful woman looking after us in Melton Mowbray. She used to be beaten and then she'd faint and it was just awful. And so, she couldn't take it. So, unfortunately, two years ago, she wrote me a goodbye letter. We used to talk on the phone every week. We used to talk about our past and she just couldn't stand it anymore. So, she asked the doctor in Canada, you can take your own life, and she was allowed. He gave her an overdose and she passed away two years ago, because she just couldn't stand it.

And do you think because of her...?

Definitely.

Psychological –

Yeah, because when she went to the psychiatrists, the first time she did it, he said, 'It's all because of what happened to you in Melton Mowbray.' And I'm so happy and so lucky, so grateful that it hasn't happened to me.

So, she couldn't –

She couldn't.

The trauma affected her?

Exactly, yeah, and –

But she was also younger than you?

She was four years younger. But I was a sort of, tried to be a mother to her. [00:22:03] I remember when we came over with Elizabeth Howard in the – we went in the dining car to – from Harrods to – no, I'm sorry. Yes, from Harrods to Liverpool Street. We were given porridge and there's one thing I couldn't stand was porridge, and nor could she. And her tears were rolling down her cheeks. So, when she wasn't looking, I took this porridge and ate it for her [laughs]. And she said, 'I'll never, never forget it. I'll never...' I don't know how I managed to do it. I might have said, 'I like porridge, I'll eat it for you.' I don't know how it happened. But you know, it was, yeah.

So, did she have problems all her life or it came out...?

But she didn't talk about it.

Right.

I think she did, I think she did. I didn't have any problems, because apparently, we both spoke English very well after six months. And so, nobody ever knew, which was a good job because if I had been in at Queen Mary's at the hospital where I trained, I would have had a terrible time. Because it would – but nobody ever took it out of me, because they didn't know, which was – I was very... But they did know about my sister and she did have a problem at school, where they were saying, 'You're a German' and that sort of thing. And she couldn't take it, bless her.

Just to go back to Hamburg –

Yes.

So, you said there was music. What do you remember exactly? Any particular – what – did your mother have a particular repertoire of...?

Yes, she – well, she sang everything. In fact, I've got a record, which if you want to hear it afterward.

Yeah.

It's very scratchy, that's a problem because it's been – it was from the record that my mother brought over to a tape. And therefore, you will hear her voice. [00:24:00] Her voice is quite identical to Elizabeth Schumann. You could sort of tell.

She was trained, you said?

Oh, she was trained. Oh, she was trained.

Where did she study? In –

Somewhere in Hamburg, I don't know. No, I don't remember that. I was so young, wasn't I? And all I know is that our house was full of music, always.

And did she have a repertoire? What did she sing? Do you remember any songs?

Yes. Well, she – Mozart, a lot of Mozart. And, but she was – she did light opera as well, because I think, I don't know whether you saw the book that we were given when we came to...? You know, there was a page about me, wasn't there? And there's a picture of her and that was a light opera. I don't know what it was called, but that's the one that I've got of her. I mean, there were other pictures but obviously, they couldn't bring everything over. My mother just stored and it wasn't bombed in Hamburg. I don't know where they stored all the stuff.

So, she sang some operettas probably?

Yeah, well, both. If you – the one that I've got is actually Mozart. Yeah.

Okay, we'll listen to it later.

Yes.

Okay, wonderful. What other memories have you got? So, you had a little sister who was younger?

I had a little sister.

Did you share room? What...?

No, do you know, I can't sort of really understand if – I don't want to bore you. But I have – one of the things my mother brought over were photo albums. So, I've got a photo album of our house and the furniture and everything, which came to Petts Wood, yeah.

And where was that house? Tell us the –

Yes, that was in Petts Wood in –

No, in Hamburg.

Oh, in Hamburg? It was in Groß Flottbek, Groß Flottbek [00:26:03] And I'll show you the –

Groß Flottbek?

Groß Flottbek, Othmarschen. It was Groß Flottbek, Othmarschen. They sort of changed it from Groß Flottbek to Othmarschen.

Okay, and it was near Blankenese?

It was near Blankenese, yes.

So, it was a nice suburb of...?

Very nice, yes. And it's near there.

Sort of middle-class?

Yeah, very. Yes, yes.

And tell us a bit about the house, what it looked like.

Right. It was – well, of course, it's not going to help you, unless I showed the photograph.

We'll do it later.

Do it later, okay.

Just now tell us from your memories.

From my memories?

Yeah.

Right, yes. We all went – had the same nursery. We went through the nursery, one after the other, which I'll show you the pictures. But I just can't remember whether I shared a room. I must have shared a room with my sister, but my brother was at boarding school all the time.

In Switzerland?

In Switzerland, yes. First in Marienau, near Lüneburg and then, they moved. My uncle took the whole school to – over to Gland [Switzerland] on Lake Geneva, yeah.

So, tell us a bit about the school. Did your uncle own the school?

My uncle was the headmaster and he owned it.

Is this your father's brother.

It's my father's cousin.

Your father's cousin? Right.

Right, yes.

What was his name? Popper as well?

His name was Popper, yes. I'm sorry, I can't remember, no.

Don't worry, we can find it.

Yeah, yeah.

So, he founded that school, that – the boarding school?

Oh, yes. Yes, he founded Marienau, which was near Lüneburg. And then, and that was just like, exactly like Gordonstoun, the same sort of –

Philosophy?

Yes, they had to get up in the morning. In fact, we visited my brother in Switzerland once or twice and I saw the boys, they had to look after themselves. [00:28:04] They all lived in chalet, sort of chalet bungalows. And but it was a free school. In one way, it was a free school, but it was also very sporty. And yes, and my brother was very good tennis player as well. And because that's how they were brought up, that sort of school.

Yeah. So, did he have a good time? Did he like it?

He loved it, yes.

Not like Charles then, in Gordonstoun?

No, not like Charles. Absolutely, and that is how he got to know Lord Mountbatten.

So, did Lord Mountbatten come to that school? Was he involved, or...?

Yes. Oh, Lord Mountbatten went – no, he went to Gordonstoun- a lot, because Charles, King Charles was very, very fond of his uncle. I'm sure you know that.

Yes, I do know that.

He was – they were very close. Very, very close, yes. And that's, yeah, that's all I can remember really. But I do know that my brother got in touch with Lord Mountbatten and said, 'Is it possible that you could get my parents over if there's – if you're sending the planes over anyway?' I don't know, I suppose they were war planes. I don't know. I know they had no oxygen.

Okay. So, and what happened to your – that uncle who founded the school? What happened to him?

Yeah, Max Bondy, his name was. Actually –

Max Bondy?

Yes, his name was actually Max Bondy. So, he was a cousin, he wasn't a Popper. There were lots of Poppers in that family, but it was a big family. But his name was Max Bondy and he was very friendly with the headmaster of Gordonstoun. That's where –

Yeah, what's the name of the headmaster? I forgot, the headmaster of Gordon –

Yeah –

He was a refugee.

I don't –

Because he was a refugee, the headmaster of Gordonstoun.

I didn't know that.

Yes, he was. But I've forgotten his name now.

Do you know, that's now – you've just taught me something, because that's how they got together. [00:30:03] That's how my brother knew both Lady and Lord Mountbatten.

And what happened to Mr Bondy then?

Yes, he died of a natural death in Switzerland. Yes, because the whole family went over there, yes.

So, he stayed in Switzerland?

He stayed in Switzerland, yes, and died there. Yeah, because it was neutral, wasn't it?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

But my brother, yes, he had a – he was – I loved him to pieces. He was – we were so close. He was lovely, he really was lovely.

But was there – there was no idea that you would go to the same school?

No, I don't think my parents wanted that. They – it was just my brother that went, I don't know why. But I think they wanted to keep us at home. They'd sent one, hadn't they? And they probably wanted us to have a lovely family life. So, yeah, that's how that happened. But our house was just full of music and I had piano lessons. And I had – unfortunately, when we came to England, there wasn't the money for me to continue. And as well, my father had already paid into.... He'd already – we were yes, talking about my brother again. Yeah, I was so proud of him, because he did a lot for Britain in the way of being in the intelligence. And I don't know why he went down Hitler's bunker, but it was part of his job. Yeah.

Okay. And you visited him in Switzerland?

Oh, yes, yes. We actually drove, my father had only just passed his test. [Laughs] But we were all right, yes. Yeah, so we went two or three times to visit, because when we went there, of course, my – it was my uncle. Although it was his cousin, I still called him uncle, Uncle Max. Yeah, and his name was Max Bondy. [00:32:01] And he definitely was friendly with –

Okay.

Yeah.

With Lord Mountbatten, yeah.

No, not with Lord Mountbatten. He was friendly with the headmaster of Gordonstoun.

Okay, and through that –

And through that, is that my parents were able to come over before the war, yes.

That's just really –

Yes.

Amazing.

What sort of friends – do you remember any friends you had in Hamburg? And tell us about what –

Yeah.

You had lots of hobbies, activities?

Yes. Well, I went to ballet school and of course, I had friends there. And then, yes, I did have friends at school. But I can't remember, I can't remember any of them. You know, it was such a long time ago, yeah.

Yeah. And did you – you talked about this, when you found out that you were not accepted in the ballet, in the production.

Yes.

Was there any – did you have any awareness of – that your father was Jewish?

Not until then. I asked my parents and I said, 'Why? What's happened?' And they had – they sat me down. They said, 'We just wanted to tell you how it is.'

So, that was quite late? I mean –

Yes, it was in 1939.

Right, so until then, you –

I had no idea, because we weren't Jewish religion, you see. That's why, yes.

And you said your father, he converted?

He converted.

In Hamburg?

Yes, he became Luther [sic]. Yeah. So, that was our religion. Yeah.

So, were you – did you have any religious festivals in the house? Or was it just...?

No, no, we weren't – we – my parents didn't go to church every Sunday. But they did go to church, but not every Sunday. No, no. But they lead a very, very busy life because of my mother.

Yeah. So, you said there was some famous people coming to the house?

[00:34:04] There were, there were, yeah. I know, yeah.

Anyone of...?

Do you know, I just – probably, but I don't remember. I'll tell you what I do remember. I'm jumping now –

No, that's fine.

No, no, no, it was when I was in Hamburg. It was the cup final of – in Germany. 1936. And we had to do an audition again and see whether we would pass. And those of us who passed, Hitler came to Hamburg to the cup final. And we were all dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and

T-shirt and shorts, T-shirt. And I think we – I can't remember, and a tennis racket. So, we did a sort of, it was a ballet but it was with a tennis racket. And I danced for Hitler, yes.

This is a football cup final or...?

Yeah, the football.

Cup final?

Yes, football. It was 1936, was the German –

So, the year of the Olympics?

Sorry?

The year of the Olympics?

That's right, yes, yes. And there was – it was also the final of the, yeah, of the football and –

And you danced where? Where was this performance?

In a big stadium, the big football stadium in Hamburg. Yes, yes.

And do you – you remember that?

I remember it very well with my tennis racquet. And dancing and kicking, you know, it was more like a sporty ballet then.

So, it must have been quite exciting at that point for you? Or were you...?

Do you know? I sort of accepted things because of the music and because of the way I was. I suppose the way I was brought – I don't know. To me, I didn't think oh, I'm famous. No, I just knew that Hitler was there.

But at that point, you said you didn't know you were Jewish. So, there was no...?

[00:36:02] No, no, absolutely not.

It was no problem at that point?

There was no problem, no, at that point, because I did – at that time, Hitler allowed Jews in. So, because it was thirty – yeah, thirty-six. I was quite young, actually.

What about joining the BDM or, you know, the Hitler Youth kind of thing?

We didn't do that. We didn't have to. No, we didn't have to for some reason or other. This was when Hitler was making up his mind as to what he was going to do with the Jews. And my mother stayed up with my father three nights running during Kristallnacht. But they didn't fetch him. I had an aunt and an uncle who lived in the same road and they knew what was going to happen. And they just took an overdose and held each other's hand and went to sleep. And took their own life, rather than being put into a concentration camp.

This is your father's relatives?

This is my father's relatives, yes, yeah.

So, I was going to ask, Maria, what about your father's parents? Do you have any contact with the Jewish family?

Well, yes. Well, they did – yes, we went to – in fact, I've got a photo of it. We went to my grandmother's fiftieth. My grandma and my granddad in Czechoslovakia, we went to their – by train, we went to their fiftieth wedding anniversary, yeah. So, I knew them not so well as I

did my other ones, because they were in Czechoslovakia. I did have my father's brother, who was very well off in Czechoslovakia. He managed to come over, because my father, my parents were waiting for their visa. That was the problem, they didn't get the visa in time. And that was the – that's why they couldn't come with us, otherwise they would have done. [00:38:02] But my uncle who lived in London, he was already there. And he took my father, he took my father in with him. And my father opened a branch and he sold Nottingham lace. And how my father did it, I do not know. But he managed to buy a house within two or three years of them being over here. He managed to buy a house in Petts Wood.

So, when he came, he had a brother here?

He had a brother who took him under his wing. Yes, yeah. And he managed to come, yeah.

What about, Maria, your grandparents? Your maternal grandparents? Were they in Hamburg?

Oh, my – yes. I only knew my grandmother. The others had died. I do remember my granny well. Yes, she was lovely.

What was her name?

Oh, her name was Bewersdorff, which was the name of my mother. Yeah.

Yeah, and first name First name?

I'm sorry, I've forgotten.

What did you call her?

Omi.

Omi?

Yes, yes. She was lovely. She – I remember her so well. She had always had a black dress with a white lace collar, and a bun, you know, like they dressed. But when I – of course, you know that in Germany we – I think we had schooling until about half-past-one or two and straight through. And so, I had to get on a train to get back to Othmarschen. And then, my granny knew what time I would come home. And she always did me a lovely, a typical German fry-up, which is potatoes, onions and egg, all in the same pan. And she always had that ready and that's what I remember about her. She was just so lovely.

But did she live with you?

[00:40:00] She did for time. I don't know why, but she did for time, yes.

And did your mother have siblings in Hamburg as well or...?

Yes. Now my mother had a brother, who obviously was German. But they weren't Nazis and they'd gotten into trouble because they wouldn't put the swastika flag out. But he said, 'Well, I just don't want to put a flag out' and I think they let him off. I still talk to my cousins. I have cousins in Germany and I have to speak German [laughs].

You still speak German?

I do, yes, yes, because I speak to my cousins. I've got two cousins there. And yes, we have lovely conversations and you know, they're my family. Yeah. And I also belong to – we've got a friendship club with – in Neuwied. And Bromley and Neuwied are twinned and I belong to that. I went over to Germany the first time with Charles. And they were two English teachers that we stayed with, because we used to visit each other as a group- You know, the – I don't know whether you know of the, yeah, various Germany and France have those –

Twinning?

Twinning, twinning. Yes, so we became very, very good friends with the couple that we stayed with. And because we were such good friends, we used to visit each other and I went to their daughter's wedding. And one day, my – the daughter of my friends, she was over here and we were sitting in the chair. And she looked at me and tears were rolling down her cheek, and she said, 'Maria, why are you so nice to me? Why are you so friendly?' [00:42:05] And I said, 'Why should I not be friendly?' 'Well, look what we did to you.' I said, 'Were you born?' I said, 'Were you there?' But she said, 'I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed to be a German', which I couldn't make out at all. You know, we're all people, aren't we?

Yeah.

Yeah, so.

So, it must have come quite as a shock to you then when you couldn't – when you realised that, for example, you couldn't go to the gymnasium?

It wasn't nice, it wasn't nice. And I don't know whether I'm muddling all this up, but there was another time when – I call it being used. When I was in the private school in Beckenham when we first came, and they took us for nothing, but they did let us know that we were there for nothing. And they were all rich children from Beckenham. And they had – the parents had to pay for extra for ballet lessons. And I remember the first time I went into the ballet room with the all the other little dears and she said, 'You, you sit there, you sit down. You don't belong to this class.' So, I said, 'All right then.' And so, I had to sit and watch. And then one day when I didn't think she was looking, I was doing a little dance in front of the glass. And she saw me and she said, 'Come here.' She said, 'I didn't know you could dance.' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'Well, tell me all about it.' So, she said, 'Dance for me.' And the next thing, they were doing a parents – they were having a parents' day. And we were – they were practicing for the Peer Gynt Suite. And she said, 'Oh, I want you to be the head.' Now, that was using me. I didn't – I wasn't proud of it. I wasn't going – that – she was just using me because it looked good. [00:44:03] So, I had the principal part of the Peer Gynt Suite. And that to me, I feel very strongly about being used by people. I really do.

Because you felt it wasn't to help you, but to make the school look good?

That's right and I didn't like it.

Again, before coming to England, what were your experiences then in the private school in Hamburg?

Yes, I think there were quite –

And there were other Jewish children?

There were other Jewish children there.

So, was it the first time you met other Jewish children?

Yes. But you see, I didn't know, because at that time, my parents hadn't told me that I was different. So, I was just at a private school and I knew that we had to wear pinafores. They were pretty, but we had to wear pinafores. Because they – one thing the school said was just because your parents had money, that doesn't mean that you come here in your best outfits. And we wore very pretty ones, but most unusual to wear a pinafore.

Was it a girls' school?

A girls' school, yes.

What was it called, do you remember?

Mit – oh, yes.

Mädchenschule?

No, no, no, no, sorry. I'm getting mixed up with the one in Beckenham. Do you know? I knew, but I've forgotten.

Don't worry.

No, it was in a part of Hamburg. Yes, yes.

And so, how long did you go to that school?

I went to that school from the age of ten 'till twelve.

So, thirty –

So, I had a little English when I came over. But my guardians, they did say, 'Please, do not speak German on the street, because it's – we're near a war and it's dangerous.' So, my sister and I, amongst our tears and there were many, we just had each other, you know, we spoke to them. And then, but we did learn English very quickly.

[00:46:06] *Yeah. Maria, but just in in Germany, so when was the first time you heard that there's a plan that you would go to England?*

Yes, my parents sat us down one day and they said, 'Look, this is what's going to happen. Your father is Jewish, as you know now, we've got to get out. So, we're going to send you to some nice people who've offered to have you. Be good girls.' And so, that's the first time that I sort of knew, yeah.

And was it for the plan that you would go by yourself, or with your sister?

Yes. Well, actually, no. My sister was chosen by somebody else in North London. But then, my – because she was only eight my parents said, 'Could you possibly take the two of them?', so that I could be a mum to my sister. And they said yes. But the people in the church actually paid for our upbringing, paid for our food. But of course, once I started nursing, the

hospital in those days, you had to live in. You mustn't be married and we had to live in. But I could have stayed there for my holidays and everything. So, but if I tell you that I earned twenty-four pounds a year, that was my first.... And when I did my nursery nurse's training, I was – I had a pound, of which my guardian took fifteen shillings, but that's fine.

Yeah. So, your parents wanted to send both of you?

They wanted to send my brother as well. My brother had an awful time. He came with 100 other Jewish children, because people in England mostly wanted girls. [00:48:06] So, the girls always got a home. And you probably know this through your interviews, that the girls always got a place, because very often they were also used as help, as maids.

Domestics, yeah.

And I was certainly used.

Yeah, we'll talk about it in detail.

Yes, yes. Sorry, yes.

But so, what happened to your brother? So, that was your brother who went to Switzerland?

Yeah, no, no, no, that was my – that was John.

Okay. So, you had a – you haven't mentioned a John.

Oh, I'm so sorry. He came over with 100 Jewish children. He went to Barnardo's home and the children in Barnardo's treated him really badly. The first day he was there, they took all his belongings out of the case and sold all this stuff. I don't know what they dressed my brother in. But then –

So, was he younger than you, your brother?

No, he was fifteen months older.

Okay, so your parents had – your mother had –

Three children, yeah.

A son from the first marriage? And then –

And then, three children. Yeah, and John and my brother.

Okay. And your brother and you and...?

Yes, yes. Can I talk to you about my brother then for a minute?

Yes.

All right.

Because we haven't mentioned him?

No, I know. I'm so sorry, I'm muddling it all up, aren't I?

No, no, that's why I'm here. I'm helping. Tell us about him.

Yes, okay. Yes, my brother, John, he was very, very clever. Very clever. He was composing when he was ten years old, he was actually composing pieces of music. He played the piano like really, really well and he was also very clever. And when he came to England, he was put in Barnardo's home. But then one of the people in our church in Beckenham, heard about him being there and they took him. They took him and became his guardians. So then, he had a really nice time. [00:50:00] And he actually was a medical student in Edinburgh, took his first MB. And then, he thought he'd be helpful to England and joined the army, silly Billy.

And instead of him being put in the medical corps, they just put him anywhere. But made him a lieutenant and what did he know about? Nothing. He fought in Burma and he had – he was lieutenant. They made him lieutenant straight away, because of being in the university. And he had snipers all around him. It was really, really bad. Really, really bad. When he came home, he was a different John. He didn't want to live. He couldn't get – he couldn't lose the memories that he had, the friends that he left, that he lost. And so unfortunately, he did go to St Thomas' to do his second MB, but couldn't do it. It was just too much for him. But he then met a nurse. They got married and they emigrated to Australia, where they had a nice big family. Yes, yes. Sorry, John, I left you out [laughs].

So, did he come first on the Kindertransport? Or was it after you had already left?

He came after. He came after, yes.

So, the two of you were first?

First, yes, yeah. Birgit, my sister, and myself, we came and went straight to our guardians.

And then, he came?

And then, he came but then he had an awful time. But they did in our church then, somebody from our church took him in, yes.

So, Maria, just tell us, you mentioned that your father wasn't arrested on Kristallnacht. Do you remember Kristallnacht at all? Where were you?

Oh, Kristallnacht?

Yeah.

Sorry, I don't remember because my mother didn't tell me. [00:52:02] I know that she stayed up with him three nights running and waited. We think, or yeah, we presume that it was

because my mother was well known. I think people in Hamburg did sort of stand up for people who were well known. So, they made it difficult, so they didn't fetch my father. But they did fetch, well, they did go to the house of my uncle, but they'd already committed suicide. Yes.

And you, Maria, do you have any memories of Kristallnacht? Did you see anything?

No, because I didn't know anything about it. My mother just stayed up with –

Where were you?

In bed. Yeah, asleep.

So, you didn't see any – you didn't...?

I saw nothing. No, no, absolutely nothing.

And I assume until then you'd never been to synagogue, or you didn't know...?

No, I knew nothing about the Jewish religion whatsoever. No, no, I don't know why my father, I don't know why he became a Christian. I just don't know. But we were Lutherans.

So, do you think did he convert before he met your mother, your father?

No, no, no. No, he was converted before he met my mother. Yes, yes, yes. And they were neighbours, he was a bachelor and they married. And they had such a happy marriage. They were just – they went through, what they went through... When I think of the – when I think of how they lived in Germany. But you know, we were never to be allowed to be greedy or show off. In fact, I thought as a little girl that we all lived in big houses and had servants. It was to me- I knew nothing else. And then going to private school and couldn't quite understand, couldn't quite understand it. [00:54:02] You know, I have actually learned more since I've been in England than I did then, because my parents didn't talk about it.

Yeah. And how did – when they told you that you should go away to England, what did you feel when they told you that? Do you remember?

Yes. You know, when you're twelve years old, I didn't cry or anything. My mother was too upset to go to the Hamburg – the station in Hamburg. They – my father brought me and I – my sister and I often used to talk about it. And when I think back how much he had felt, how much my mother had felt to say goodbye to your children. And you know, we were – well, I mean, obviously my – not my Czech family. My Czech family, none of them were saved. And are often wonder whether, if you remember, the last train from Czechoslovakia wasn't allowed to leave, was it? I often think to myself, were any of my relatives on that train? We'll never know, will we? But I know they were all – they all went afterwards and were gassed, yeah. And I think I'm very, very lucky to sit here and talk to you and be alive. I've tried to really be – I've tried very hard to pay Britain back. That's why I joined the Civil defense and I learned to drive ambulances. And we used to go on exercises and stuff. And I'm doing, well, not now too much, but I do quite a lot in my church.

You feel grateful to Britain?

I'm very grateful, because without my guardians, without Britain, where would I have been?
[00:56:00] Probably not alive. So, yes, I call myself a happy bunny [laughs].

So, tell me a little bit about the trip. I don't know what – whether you can remember.

Yes, I certainly can.

Going to the station or –

Yes, my –

What did you take? What were...?

Just one case and a doll each, a doll each. And then Elizabeth, we went – we were very lucky, we went – she obviously went first class, so we went first-class, which obviously my father paid for.

Tell us who Elizabeth is.

Elizabeth Howard is a Quaker lady. She is very – was very involved bringing children over from Germany to England. And it just so happened that she was in Hamburg and how my father found out, I do not know. And he said, ‘Could you possibly take my two little girls?’ So, I was very lucky, not like my brother.

So, you – just the two of you went with her? Or with other children?

Only – no, just two, just the two of us. Yes, I remember standing –

You travelled – sorry to interrupt. So, you travelled first-class?

I did.

[Laughs] So, you were one of the few people in first class on the Kindertransport?

Exactly. And when I think of my poor brother, John... Yes, we did and this is where the porridge comes in. And we went into the first-class dining car. And she put this – it wasn't much, this porridge in front with sort of a lovely cream on it. And my sister looked at me and tears were rolling down her cheeks. And I just said, ‘Look, you know, I'd like to have another helping’, I think I said. I didn't like porridge either, but she was younger. So, I ate the porridge for her [laughs], which she often reminded me of.

So, your father took you to the station?

Yes, he took me to the station. And I remember standing there with our dolls, clutching our dolls and our case. [00:58:02] And Elizabeth Howard, have you heard of her?

Yeah, I think I have.

Yes, yes. There's a book called 'And the Policeman Smiled', I think.

Yeah, by Barry Turner. Barry Turner wrote that book.

Yes, I think so. I've still got it, yes. Yes. And yes, she's definitely in that, because she was responsible. She brought a lot of – it's the Quakers, isn't it, that brought the children over?

Yeah.

Yes.

So, you came with her?

I came with have just privately.

So, your father sort of handed...?

Yes, we said, 'Bye, bye.' And they said, 'Be good girls and we'll see each other soon', which of course we didn't. Seven years, that was hard. Those seven years was – that was hard to have no parents. And little memories like when I first went to Queen Mary's at Carshalton, all the parents were there. I'm not saying that my guardians were horrible. Not those guardians, but they just thought that I should go by myself. And there was I by myself and you don't forget those things. I had to bring myself, you know, because that's what they wanted me to do, is to grow up and be independent. And I'm sure it was kindness rather than... But as a child, or as well, as a seventeen-year-old, you – it's not nice when these things happen. But apart from that I've really – I consider myself very fortunate.

And Maria, so you travelled? Any your memories from the journey actually?

The journey, yes. We went by train, first-class, and then we were transferred to a ship in Harwich. And I think we had our own cabin, my sister and I, but she was next door.

[01:00:02] But she looked after us beautifully. And then, we had this breakfast, this porridge.

But it was on the boat?

No, not on the boat. It was breakfast from Harwich to Liverpool Street.

Okay, you were already in England?

I was in –

The porridge was English?

Porridge was English, definitely.

[Laughs] *Yeah.*

I actually like porridge now. If I may just tell you, you can take it out if you wish. When I was in – we – our hospital was evacuated to Durham, because we were on the direct line to – direct line, the doodlebugs, the flying bombs. And they used to come over a lot and some of our wards were actually bombed. So, the government, I came on duty, I was night duty and I came on duty one day. And Matron came out and said, ‘You’re going to bet now, all of those of you who are night duty. And then, you’re going to be evacuated to Durham.’ Half went to Durham, half went to Yorkshire, the hospital. It depended what ward you were on. So, we had to put all the children into blankets and label them. And then, I went to bed. And then, I was – we were fetched in an ambulance and we were brought to Kings Cross station, where the children were already on it. And we went by train up to Durham, where the people in Durham were told that they were going to get paid just for a room. But again, I was so lucky, I had the most wonderful par – not parents. But we stayed with – he had a chemist shop in Durham and they treated me like a daughter. They were so nice. And then, on – it was a military hospital that we shared and they had a prisoner of war ward. And one day I was sent

down there, because nobody knew that I was still German at the time. [01:02:04] And I was giving out the breakfast and this little – they were all little boys of fifteen and sixteen at the end of the war, crying for their mothers. And I gave him his porridge and he said, ‘*Nein, nein.*’ And I said to the staff nurse, ‘Why does he not want his porridge?’ And he said, ‘You’ve got to eat it for him.’ Because he’d been told that when he came to England, if he was ever prisoner, that we would poison him. So, I had to eat this porridge. It was the second time in my life to do with porridge.

[Laughs] *And you did it.*

I did it, yes.

And then, did he eat it?

Yes, and he said, yeah, he said...

Did you speak German to them?

No, I didn’t dare. I couldn’t, could I? Because they would have said, ‘Why are you speaking German?’ I would have loved to have done. I would have loved to have taken him in my arms. Little fifteen – it was the towards the end of the war and they were sending –

You felt sorry for them?

It was awful. I only went once and that was enough. And even when they were taken to X-ray, you used to hear the screaming. And they were told that they were going to be killed, if they had to have an X-ray. And you see hear the screaming and it was awful, really awful. And sometimes I’ll think about it and I’ll think how lucky I am now. Yeah.

Maria, when – so, after you had the porridge on the train to Liverpool Street –

Yes.

Did she drop you off there?

Yes, she dropped me off. And I had a cousin over here who actually belonged to the family of my mother's first husband who was drowned.

The South African?

The South African.

Yeah.

And she fetched us.

What was her name?

Ursula Hartleben.

Hartleben?

Yes. And we didn't really see too much of them after that, because we were living in Beckenham and yeah, and she lived...

[01:04:05] *So, she fetched you and took you away?*

She fetched – no, she just fetched and took us to Beckenham, to my guardians.

Guardians.

Yes.

And what was the name of your guardians?

Reverend Plowright [ph], Plowright, yes.

And his wife?

And his wife and we called them Mummy and Daddy Plowright. And they were very – they were strict and very religious.

Did they have children?

Yes, but one was a nurse at Barts, the other one was a doctor. And third one was, he worked – he did some social work somewhere. They were older than me.

So, when they took you in, they didn't have any children living at home?

Well, only to visit because they were already about maybe ten years older than my sister and I. Yes.

And do you know how they volunteered? How did...?

Well, yes, yes, right. The Quakers somehow or other asked English people to give a home to the Jewish children. And that's how and we had to send a photograph. And I think it was fifty pounds my father had to send. I don't know why but anyway, they did. And then after that, the people in the church paid for our keep.

So, they came forward, the Reverend?

The Reverend came forward, yes. And they were very religious.

In which way?

In a nice way, but well, in those days, you know, it was Sunday school in the morning and then Sunday, church. And then Sunday school, and then another Sunday school in the afternoon, and then church at night. But my guardians were very, very kind. Well, he preached, of course, but they were very kind. She used to bring a book that we could draw in. And we sat at the back, and she let me draw and my sister, because the evening service was just, I couldn't understand a word he was saying anyway-

[01:06:08] *And did they expect you to come with them and do everything? I mean, to practice?*

Oh, they certainly did. Yes, they certainly did. And it sort of put me off church for a long time, because I'd had enough of it. So, when I became a nurse, I didn't have to go to church. And then, it sort of only – it's only sort of since about 1990, I think, that I decided I really would like to belong to a church again. I'm not a Bible puncher, but I just loved that hour. And I often say a prayer and say, 'Thank you for bringing me over to Britain' and that. And it's – maybe it's selfish, but I like... And I just love doing the voluntary work. I'm sort of thinking I'm paying back. It makes me happy. It's not because I'm wonderful, I'm not. But it made me happy to do it.

So, you've been back to the church?

I did come back to church and I still belong.

And Maria, did you have contact with your parents after you arrived?

I'll tell you something about that, that's very close to me. When my parents came over, I was told by the matron of the military hospital that we shared, that my parents had come from Sweden. And she said, 'I'll give you a fort – I'll give you a weekend's leave. But don't forget there's a ward, so come back.' But so, I went and my parents, so I knew I was going to meet them. When I got to the station in, I can't remember, I think it was King's Cross, anyway, they were actually there. And do you know, I couldn't go, I couldn't make myself known to them. I don't know what happened. **[01:08:00]** I was so shy; I hadn't seen that for seven

years and I just couldn't do it. And I've not suffered, but I thought about it all my life. Why did I do it? So, I pretended, I went right around and they didn't see me. Why did I do it?

So, you saw them?

I saw them and I couldn't go to them. And then, I got – well, I went through this, where who do I – who am I loyal to? My parents that I hadn't seen for seven years, or my guardians that had brought me up? That was difficult.

So, you felt you had a conflict?

Yeah. And why did I not say – why did I not go and...? It was awful. It's awful, but I did. But I've spoken to people, well, not a lot, but I don't talk about it a lot. But something went – something said, 'You can't meet them', they were foreigners. I don't know.

Something stopped you?

Something stopped me and I don't feel very proud.

Did they – did you tell them, then they...? How did...?

They never knew. Oh, no, no way. No.

So, how did you meet them eventually?

Oh, yes. They took me to – they came and they stood on the plat – I saw them. But they didn't see me.

Yes, so how did you then meet them?

So then, yes, I went to the house where I was going to meet them. They were friends of – yeah, some Jewish friends that they'd got over here, who'd managed to come over before the war. Yeah.

That's interesting.

Yes.

So, you couldn't – something stopped you from...?

Yeah, I couldn't do it. It's not something to be proud of.

Well –

But I didn't – they didn't know.

Something in you –

Yeah, but and then there's conflict I had, you know. [01:10:00] Yeah, anyway.

So, the guardians, they took both of you in?

They did, yes, yes.

And was there- letters, correspondence at that point, you know, from your parents?

Well, I didn't hear from them at all.

Did you know what happened to your parents?

No, no. What actually happened, when we were evacuated to Melton Mowbray where I had that awful person, that awful, wicked person –

So, we need to talk about that. When –

Okay, sorry.

How many months before you were evacuated did you have...?

We were evacuated in September. We came in May and we were evacuated in September.

Okay, so you had let's say, four or five months there?

Yes, yes. And I went to the private school, which this is where it happened with the ballet, where I wasn't allowed to take part. Yes.

So, you felt that they treated you a little bit like a refugee or...?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, you mean with –

And your sister as well? Was your sister...?

My sister as well, she didn't have a good time either. No, no. But –

Yeah, and English, how did you manage to speak to the Reverend, to...?

Well, they said, 'You mustn't speak a word of German', which, when we were in our bedroom, we used to not speak German.

Could you manage? How was that?

Yeah, well, we used to cry on each other's arm with homesickness, you know. And then, we spoke German to each other.

Was it hard, the...?

Very hard. Very hard, yes.

And I imagine for you, in a way you had an additional burden of taking care of your sister?

I had my sister.

Because you –

Yeah, I was a mother to her. And bless her, right until the day, well, just before she died, she kept saying, 'Thank you for being there for me.' She had it slightly easier than I did, because by the time she was eleven-plus, she passed her eleven-plus and she was able to go to grammar school. And then, she went to – she became a – she went to college in Bromley and then became a teacher. And then, she met an Englishman and they got married. [01:12:00] And they moved to Canada, yes.

Yeah, so she could complete her education while you couldn't?

She did, where I couldn't. No, no, that's right.

In a way, you represented two different experiences of Kindertransport. The younger and the older.

Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely, yes.

Because you –

Because I mean, I was – I had to get up at six o'clock in the morning to do the washing.

For the...?

For the people that we lived with.

Also, for the first, for the...?

No, no, no, no, not our guardians.

The guardians, no?

No, no, no.

But then, once you evacuated?

Once we evacuated it was just awful, but it didn't last too long. It lasted about six or eight months, until I got the abscesses under my arm. And then my headmistress, bless her, they said, 'If she hadn't had those lumps then, she probably would have had blood poisoning.'

And it was just a random allocation to these people, to the people you ended up staying with?

What, the people who weren't nice to me?

Yeah.

Well, they were actually, this was the problem. He was a minister as well and it wasn't him. He was quite – he was nice. It was her. I've never met anyone so wicked, I really haven't. You know, how you can do that to children and just – and to smack me around my face just because I'd used the same knife, when I was twelve years old for onions. And it was all going in the same pot anyway.

And your sister as well? Both of you?

Well, my sister, no, because she was younger.

You got the...?

I got it, yes, yes. And my sister often used to say, 'You had it so easy.' I've- I don't look at it that way. I mean, she was also parted from her parents, wasn't she? And she had it fairly hard to Beckenham Grammar School. [00:14:00] They knew that she was German, there were some girls that weren't very nice to her. So, she –

And did she stay there at the grammar school?

Yeah, she – yeah, she finished at the grammar school. Then she went to a teacher training college in Bromley and then she married and went abroad. Yes.

And Maria, do you feel that they treated you worse because you were refugees? Or was it just random? Do you see what I mean?

I would say that was – it was the sort of person she was.

So, it's nothing to do...? Did you say that...?

Could – you see, it could be. I don't know. But you know, she was a – she should have known better. She was a minister's wife.

Unbelievable.

Who taught people to be good. It's awful how we were treated. My sister used to faint because she didn't give us enough to eat.

So, you didn't have enough food?

No, we didn't have enough food. And then, she'd smacked my sister around – to bring her back to consciousness and –

And you had to do housework?

And I had to do housework.

So, what, you had to...? What did you have...?

Everything, everything, before I went to school. But I'm sure you've heard it before. I'm sure I'm not the only one, because I've heard that people – the girls have been used.

Yeah.

You know.

We don't hear that. I think recently more some stories have come out. Some people didn't talk about it.

Okay. Well, you can leave it out if you want.

No, no, it's very important. Quite the contrary.

Oh, yeah.

I think it's a very important part of the story.

Yes, yes, yes.

That there was nobody who was doing checking or looking...?

There was no child line.

No.

Who could I go to? Nobody. We walked around Mowbray holding hands and not knowing whether we dare go back again. But then, we had nowhere else to go. I think we walked in the rain about two hours and got soaking wet.

What about telling your guardians about it?

I didn't dare, because they were friends. [01:16:00] You see, I was so scared.

So, you were in a difficult position? You couldn't complain to anyone?

No.

And there were no agencies involved?

There was no –

So, was it a privately arranged evacuation? And was it arranged through the vicar, basically?

Yes. Well, because they were friends. And because my guardians, Beckenham was getting bombed and they were – they wanted us to be safe. My guardians were very kind. But yes, you know, it's one of those things, isn't it?

I mean, do you feel that your guardians could support you as refugee children? Or did they...?

No, they used to say, 'Don't forget, you know, you're in Britain now.' They were kind. But you know, in those days, the min – well, it's the minister because it's a free church, it's like a vicar. Yes, in those days, a lot more people went to church. Although our church is always full because we've got a very, very, very good, very, very modern... Does a lot for other people. We do a lot for others, other for people who don't come to church. That's fine and that's why I love it. You know, yeah. But, obviously –

So, their attitude was just, you're here now, speak English, get on with it?

Yes, yes. Well, that's right, because you couldn't speak German when there was a war on, could you? And by the time I got to Melton Mowbray, that was only six months. Apparently, nobody knew that I was – that I wasn't English.

So, you didn't talk about your – the fact that you came from Germany?

Oh, no, no, absolutely.

So, nobody knew that?

[01:18:00] No. Well, I mean, they knew

Yeah, but the other children.

Yeah, well, the other children didn't know, no.

Or the headmistress?

The headmistress knew, but she was so lovely to me. She's the one that took me to the doctor, to the hospital.

And then, you were removed from there?

Then I was – then somehow or other I was removed. And then I went – then I became a mother's help in this very – I became a mother's help in lovely big house and they were quite wealthy. She was – they were very kind to me, both to my sister and I. My sister had it easier, because she was – she went to grammar school and she... I was maid there, but they were kind. But I was still a maid. I had to get up at six o'clock in the morning and do the washing.

And how old were you then?

Thirteen, thirteen, fourteen, yeah. But I accepted it.

But still in school or not?

Oh, no, no. You see, it was an ordinary school and you had to leave when you were fourteen. My headmistress said, 'I'm not really allowed to, but I'm going to keep you on another six months.' She was very, very kind. And she is the one I owe my life to her. And then, I think she must have said something because we were moved, both of us.

Do you think she contacted social services?

I think, well, she contacted somebody, probably through our church. Yeah and, yeah, and so, but I was still a maid.

And how long were you with that family?

Well, yeah, when – you know, one day I woke up and I think I was coming up to seventeen, and I thought, am I going to be a maid for the rest of my life? Is this my life? Where are my parents? And then, I wrote to my guardians and I said, 'Will I ever be able to do anything else?' [01:20:03] I remember sneaking out to the post box and posting it, because she wanted to keep me. She wanted to take over the guardianship, because it suited her. Although she was kind, it suited her. And just another thing, apparently a few letters got – came over from Sweden. And these other people, the ones that were kind to me but I was still a maid, they kept all the letters, they didn't show them to us. And it wasn't until two years ago, that somebody contacted the AJR and said, 'Do you know someone called Maria Ault? Because we've got some letters that belong to them.' And they said, 'No', because I didn't belong to the AJR then. So, they said, 'No, sorry.' And they actually published it in the AJR, if anybody knows. But of course, if I didn't belong... Until I spoke to Rosemary Peters.

And did to get those letters?

I got them. But do you know what? I've kept two. I've kept one of my mother's written in German, in the German writing, which I find... And then, and I kept another one from my guardian, who actually wrote to this person who was kind, but I was still a maid. And she wanted to keep me, because what a lovely, cheap maid she had. And I had sneaked letter out and posted it. And my guardian straightaway said, 'We're going to fetch you back.' And she had – and now I know this through the letter, she had quite a bad time trying to get – because they said that they were going to see whether they could become my permanent guardian. And I would have been a maid for the rest of my life. That's what –

So, let's just get this straight, so there were – your parents sent letters to...?

[01:22:00] To us in –

To you and...?

Yeah, and they got them to Melton Mowbray. They got their address, because they knew where we were staying.

And they just didn't give the letters?

And they didn't give the letters. And it wasn't until –

So, you had no idea what happened to your parents at that point?

No. And I would have known that they were alive. And I kept thinking perhaps they're not alive anymore.

Because you know, from Sweden, you could correspond with Britain.

Of course, and there were letters. But do you know what? I was so upset, I gave them all to my sister. I said, 'I can't read them anymore.' I cried my eyes out over them, especially lovely letters from my mother.

Maria, we were talking about those letters sent from your parents.

Yes.

The ones you didn't receive.

Yes.

So, what was the reason for them not giving you the letters?

I have no idea. We actually – the people, the daughter and son-in-law tried – got in touch with AJR and said that they had these letters. And they imagined that it would be connected with the Kindertransport. And nobody had heard of us, because I didn't belong. So, they live in Wiltshire and they – he brought all the letters over. And there were a lot from my parents, all – well, I say a lot, perhaps ten. And also, letters from Melton Mowbray, the woman who really wanted me to stay there so I could be her maid. She wasn't cruel to me, but she still used me as a maid. And then when I wrote to my parents, when I wrote to my guardians and said, 'Am I going to be a maid all my life? Please, can I come home?' And they said, 'We've already put you down to start as a nursery nurse anyway.' [01:24:02] So, that was good. So, they wrote to her and said- And she said, 'No, I'm sorry, but I want to keep her, I'm going to be her guardian.' And I knew exactly what that meant. They would have been kind to me, but I still would have been a maid, a maid to this day. Well, not this day, but you know, because they're dead now.

Was your sister with you? Were you together?

My sister was with me, but my sister, she had a better life because she was at grammar school. And you know, she wasn't used to – she didn't have to do any housework.

So, how long did you stay with them as a...?

About, a year- I think about two years. And then, I came –

So, in that time, sorry to interrupt you, did you not see your guardians in that time at all?

No, and they tried hard. They didn't want me to go - Beckenham was being bombed. But then of course, the bombing stopped. And then, my guardians fortunately, I went out to the post box and wrote this letter to my guardian. Said, 'Please, have I got to be a maid all my life?' And they then wrote and said, 'Well, we you're starting as a nursery nurse in a wartime day nursery.' And these people, and that was the daughter of the – yeah, where the letters went, the people who had my letters were – she was the granddaughter. And they found it in their loft, all these letters. And they were so clever to find out that the AJ – that actually, he'd written to the AJR and we're very good friends now really.

Really?

Yeah. They've been to visit us and you know, yes. So, I read all these letters and I couldn't stop crying. It was awful just to read this letter from my mum, and you know, and they thought that we'd got them. So, I don't know why they did it. I really don't, no idea.

[01:26:07] *So, then you went back to the guardians?*

I went back to Beckenham, where I started my nursery nurse's course.

And what about your sister?

My sister was – she came back and she went to grammar school in Beckenham.

At the same time or...?

No, just after. She stayed on a bit, because she was taking her O Levels there, yeah. But she came afterwards. But they didn't use her as a maid, obviously, because she was at school. No,

I beg your pardon, that's so wrong. She did come back before the – she took her O Levels in Beckenham. She did come back about a year later. Yeah, about a year later. Yeah.

And were you happy to come back to Beckenham?

Oh, yes. I was very happy, because I didn't want to be a maid all my life. They were kind to me, not like the other woman. But I was used, very much so. And I had very good food. I mean, it was a big house with a big garden. And they did treat me like a daughter, but a daughter who was a maid. Yeah. So, I was very glad to come back to Beckenham.

And did you want to become a nursery nurse? Or did you have any plans?

No, we had no choice. If you were German, or any continental, there were only two things you were allowed to be, a maid or a nurse. So, I didn't have a choice. I was told that I was going to do my nursery nurse's first and then, I would go on to children's nursing. So, I wasn't told at all, but I'm very pleased because I love it. I loved it. I would have done it anyway. It's just, you know, yeah.

And you said you started in a war nursery?

I started at a wartime nursery in Beckenham. A wartime nursery where, when the mothers had to work because of the war, they brought their children there. [01:28:05] Not to stay, but daily. Yes, and then I went to college once a week as well, up to Battersea to do the theory and –

And living with your guardians? Or where did you live?

Living with my guardians. Yes, yes, yes. And yeah –

And at that point, any contact to your parents? Or still none?

None at all. No, it wasn't until, well, it wasn't until a few years ago that we met these people who live in Wiltshire, who tried to get in contact with us through the AJR. Yeah, and they feel it's only – they found it in the loft when they were clearing out their parents' loft, because they'd both died, obviously. And tried to find us, but they did.

What's they did explanation? Why would they not show you any letters?

I've got no idea, because they were dead, weren't they? They'd died.

You couldn't ask them, yeah.

Yeah, I couldn't ask them, no. I don't know. The only thing I can think of, that some of the letters were between my guardian and my – and this lady in Melton Mowbray, talking about how much you would love to keep me there and become my legal guardian. But my legal guardian said 'No, no, no, no.' Otherwise I would have stayed there, I know. And –

So, you didn't have any choices?

I had no choice at all. I had no choice for anything. Not my nursing, nothing. But I'm happy, you know, it's fine. Yeah. And I'm very, very, very happy. I think the AJR, I owe them so much and I've made new friends. You know, I've met friends. [01:30:00] I would have loved to have known somebody who say, was in Hamburg. I just once, when went to lunch in – where we were holding the – in synagogue there. And there was a lady and she lived – we were talking to each other. And she lived about five minutes' walk from my house in Othmarschen, yeah. So, that was nice.

So, until then you didn't have any contact with other refugees?

No, none at all. No, which would have been lovely, yeah. But I have now, because when I go –

Yeah, but then in Beckenham when you did the...?

No, none at all, no. Well, my guardians, they didn't want me to be interested in the Jewish religion, which I think was silly, because would it have mattered? But then I wasn't – I was Lutheran. I wasn't Jewish anyway.

But how was that expressed that they didn't want you to...?

Well, because they just stopped me going to the – like we have the AJR now, they stopped me going to the parties and things like that. They said, 'No, no, no, it's not for you, no.' I once went in, when was it? Oh, when I was doing my nursing nurse's course, yes. I'd been here about six years and they did have a party. And somehow, I was invited to it and I don't know why. I don't know how that happened. But I was certainly, my guardians just said, 'No, no, no, no, it's not for you.' And I don't know why, I really don't. Everything was decided for me. I never – I was never allowed to view my – I wasn't ever to say, 'I believe in this' or 'I like this.' I just had to do as I was told, you know. And obviously, to be thankful to the people who looked after me.

[01:32:04] *Did you have any contact to any refugee committee or...?*

No, you see. Well, had I been allowed to stay with the AJR, I would have been. But I didn't. My guardians didn't want me to mix with the Jewish community, I guess. Well, they never said actually. But except they kept me away. They didn't say, 'You mustn't.' But they didn't allow me to come up to London and meet other refugees. So, you know, it was difficult.

And what changed when your parents came?

When my parents came? Yes, well, when my parents came over, well, I still didn't know about the AJR because it went on and on. Not until – it was really weird when I spoke to Rosemary on the phone, when she said 'Well, but you must know about the AJR' and she couldn't believe it. You know, because I would have done. I could have been, but for some reason or other, I don't know. I really don't know.

I mean, in terms of your personal situation once your parents arrived here.

Yes. Oh, right. Well, when my parents arrived here, we first of all, we lived in a tiny little room, because my father didn't have a penny when he came over. And it was when my uncle took him into his business that he started. They were able to then buy a house. I don't know how he did it, my father, how he could buy a house in Petts Wood. I don't know to this day, but he was clever and he always worked hard. And we had this – had a nice house in Petts Wood. And then, I live with my parents because the nursery – oh, yes, of course. I haven't told you about that. Once I passed my nurse's course, we moved to Petts Wood and my father bought a house. [01:34:08] And it just so happened I was looking for work and I didn't want to do hospital work anymore. For one thing, I'd slipped my disc towards the end of my training and so, I couldn't really lift patients. But there was a post as deputy matron in an English wartime – still had wartime nurseries. This was in Petts Wood, five minutes' walk from where I lived. So, I was deputy matron there. Yes, and then yes, then I got married and then I had children. So, I stopped working for a little while, yeah, until I started the phlebotomy in Bromley Area Health. Yeah.

But Maria, what was it like? You described us that when you saw your parents you didn't want to –

Oh, when –

What was it like to meet them again? I mean, you left them when you were twelve.

Yes, yes. What, I did, well, I saw them as I told you, and I'm so ashamed of it. But I went to the house where I knew they were. They were refugees who had managed to come over. They were friends, they were musical friends of my mother and father. And so, they had a nice house in Hampstead and we met there. And my father said, 'We came to the station' and I was so ashamed, but I couldn't tell him that I'd seen him. I don't know what stopped me. I don't know to this day.

And what was it like when you did see them?

When I met them? Yes, yes, it was strange, very strange. I couldn't really take it in. I felt I had my parents, but they were foreigners to me, seven years without them. And I'd become British. [01:36:01] And no, it's not a nice thing to admit. But I've got to admit it, because that's what happened. But then gradually, and as I said to you before, who was I – had to be loyal to, my guardians, or my parents?

Did you feel the guardians didn't want you to be in touch? So it wasn't-

Oh, no, no, they never – no, they never said that. And in any case, because when you know, when you're a vicar or minister, you do move. You do so many years in one place. So, they actually moved to North London anyway. I did see them sometimes, obviously. But they weren't my guardians and more. As soon as my father stepped foot in England, they became my parents again. So, they weren't my guardians. But the – my guardian who was a minister in Beckenham, he actually, he actually married me. He married – he took the marriage service, which I thought was really nice and he was so pleased. That was lovely.

And which language did you manage to speak to your parents when they came?

Well, my father always – my father, who spoke seven languages anyway, he spoke perfect English. And my mother, I think she practiced in Sweden, because they knew they were going to come over. So, she had quite a marked accent and didn't really... Well, neither of them really lost their accent. And I know my daughter, Linda, she knew that her grandparents – but she was used to them having an accent. I don't think for one minute that she – it ever occurred to her that they spoke a different, you know, with an accent, no.

And were you able to kind of re-establish a relationship with them?

Very much so. Oh, yes, very much so. [01:38:00] We just had that sadness when my brother, because of the war, I told you about the war that he fought in Burma, when he tried to take his life. We had some unhappy moments, of course. But he then, as I say, he emigrated to Australia and was happily married.

He had post-traumatic stress after...?

Yes, very, very much so. You know, he was – because he was, I think I told you that he was, even though he was a medical student, why they didn't put him into the medics, I don't know. Would have been much better. But they put him in – but he straightaway became a lieutenant, only because he'd been in university. And he – what did he know about fighting? And he was surrounded, his unit was surrounded by snipers. And when he came back, it had affected him so badly, really badly.

And how did your parents cope when they – by the time they arrived here? So, they had been in Sweden, I mean, your mother had...?

Yes, yeah. I think they had really got used to escaping and coming from one country to another. My father, actually, I really don't know why. But when he was a young man of about seventeen or eighteen, he actually came over here and went to a university over here to learn the language. So, he was in – before he was married, before we were born. So, he actually spent some time over here, about a year learning English so he could speak. My father spoke, yeah, he spoke fluently. But my mother soon learned.

But you said that your mother was affected? She had she was ill, you said, when she came?

Yeah, she caught – well, yeah, because I'm only telling you what the doctors told my parents, that when the Nazis had her in the Gestapo, they said it sort of makes sense that she became – she had breast cancer. [01:40:01] And they said that very often if you're interrogated or something really badly happens, bad happens to you, that you can get cancer and she did. Exactly the number of years that – in between. So, when she came to England, she'd already had one breast removed. And then she was very poorly, bless her, yes.

But obviously, she always –

We had –

She had still relatives in Germany?

She did, yes, yes.

So –

But you know, they became very British. I mean, you know, they were naturalised, which was good. And my father, now he did this himself, because at that time there wasn't such a thing as a German pension. My father wrote to the president called Adenauer and said, that would he consider...? My father had lost so much money, because when my father was working and had his soap business, because he was dealing with oil, they put a Nazi in his work. So, that this Nazi could learn all about how to get – where to get the oil from, obviously, for the war. So, he had a Nazi sitting in for a long time before he escaped. Yes.

And he wrote to Adenauer saying what?

And so, he wrote to Adenauer and he said, 'I've lost everything. Is there any possibility...? And I've paid into my pension' or 'I've paid a pension, a private pension, which I've lost. And is it possible to get a pension?' And Adenauer wrote back and said, 'Yes.' So, he had to pension, which was sort of unknown. [01:42:00] Yeah, so my dad get- did get a pension in the last few years of his life over here. Yeah.

And did you ever consider going back to Germany?

Never, no. I haven't minded going back to Germany at all, because my relatives, it wasn't their fault. And I was really very, very happy. It made me very happy to take my daughter and to meet the cousins and the, you know, and also Linda's late husband. It was really nice to be able to take them and we went quite a few times back. And it was okay, yeah.

And your parents? Not your parents?

My parents didn't go, no. I don't think it was because they said, 'We don't want to know', it wasn't that. They just didn't, no, no.

Were they bitter? How did they deal with it, with this history?

With the...?

With the history, I mean, with what happened.

They were so brave. I mean, when I think of a woman all by herself, sitting in the Gestapo with bright lights on her, to be told to divorce her husband and denounce her children. And, she was so brave, she said, 'You can kill me now. Do it now.' I don't know why they – well, I – we're pretty sure all of us, the whole family, my parents, they said that she would have disappeared. And it was at that time that the Göring's private conductor, who was friendly with my mother because of the music, it was at that time that he said, 'I'll bring you over with me.' And he actually asked Hermann Göring, 'Can you bring somebody over?' And he said, 'Yes.'

What was his name, the...?

Hermann Göring.

[01:44:00] *No, not Göring, because I –*

Oh, do you know, yes, it's something Kowski [ph] or something. I've forgotten, I've forgotten the name. It's something, whoever was a conductor who was – he's private. I mean, he was probably conductor for other things as well. I don't think it was just – but he was Göring's private conductor, so that if... She was very fond of music, the wife. And so, because she used to say him, 'Hermann, don't do all these things to the Jews.' But of course, he did. And I don't know whether you know that his brother actually, was against all this. And there's a book as well about it. And he was never – when they were at Nuremberg, they

let him go because he hadn't really done anything. Can you remember the name of Hermann's brother?

The brother? No. We could check it.

No, I'll check it, yes, yes. [Albert Göring]

But so, you're saying that conductor was Jewish?

He was definitely Jewish, and Hermann –

So, he said to your mother –

And he said to my mother, 'I can take you. I've asked Hermann Göring whether I can bring a friend.'

And that's how they went by car?

And that's – they put them in a Nazi car and they drove them over the German border in Denmark, and dropped them and dropped her. And the conductor, I don't know where he went. It was like a – it was a Polish name, I think he was Polish. It was either Polish or Czech, that sort of a name.

And then, your mother from Denmark went on to Sweden?

My mother? Yes, she arrived in Denmark. And my dad then had a little bit of money, not much. But he managed to get her over. Or she might even have taken some money with her, she probably did. She probably took some German money with her. Yes, I think that's probably what happened. [01:46:02] And then, but they were very poor. They used to go – they had a good – but then I think I told you, just I told you that my dad, because he spoke so many languages that the Queen... It was unofficial, it wasn't allowed, it was unofficial, that he became a secretary to the Queen, to Sweden's queen. Yeah.

So, how did they talk about that time in Sweden with you?

Yes, yes, yes. And they made friends, yes. Yes, they –

But they didn't want to stay in Sweden? They...?

Well, they wanted to come here. And you know, how lucky were they that...? It was all through, really it was all through my brother. I think it probably helped as well that my brother was in intelligence. It probably had to be- I don't know. And also, that's why he actually got in touch with Lord Mountbatten and said, 'Is it possible for you to help my parents? If there's a place in the plane, they so would like to come over to England.' And then eventually they did. Yeah, just it was about six months before the war ended.

Because when they came, the – all their children were in this country?

They were here, yes, yes.

And what was it like for your sister to see your parents again? I mean –

My sister? Yeah, well my sister had an easier life than I did, because I was the older one and they used me as a maid always. My sister, she didn't have a very good time at the Beckenham grammar school, because they found out she was German. And you know what happened, 'You're German.' So, she didn't have a very good time. And I think that all contributed towards her taking her life in the end. Yeah. She just couldn't, she couldn't do it. You know, she –

What about the parents? Because obviously, she hadn't seen them from the age of eight to fifteen.

[01:48:01] No. Well, yes. Well, of course. Yes, well, she – yeah. Well, she was the same as I was. We had to get used to our parents again. And then, it was a case of who are we loyal to, our guardians or parents?

And was it the same? Was your experience similar, the two of you, in terms of your rebuilding the relationship?

Rebuilding? Yes, it was. Yes, yes, yeah. But you know, it's very difficult when you haven't seen your parents, especially as a teenager for seven years.

Yeah, it's a long time.

It's a long time. And then, I didn't know whether my parents were alive or dead. So yes, it was –

And did she move also in with your parents, your sister?

Yes, she did. But then, she went to a college in Bromley. She became a teacher and then she met a British man. And he was an engineer and he got – he worked for Procter and Gamble, the soap people. And he was quite – he was very, very clever. And he got a – they offered him a job in Canada and that's why they moved. They had two children by then, ended up with five. And my daughter and my son are not a bit musical, not a bit. But my sister's children, they are so musical. One of them is quite a well-known film star in Canada. Another one is a well-known architect. And when I say well-known, you know who he is. He's very clever and they all play instruments, the whole lot. So, they were – lots of instruments they play, all the family and very happy. A very happy upbringing in Canada.

[01:50:03] *Where did they move to? Where did they settle in Canada?*

They settled in the Toronto area and then, they moved to Vancouver. And I have lots of cousins in both Toronto and Vancouver, and we're very close. We phone each other and you

know, and when they come over here, they've just been over here. One of them has just been over here recently. So, we're a very close family, which is nice.

And you married in 1950?

I'm met married in 1950, yes.

And how did you meet your husband?

I went to a dance and I met him there [laughs]. And my parents, really, they loved him very much. But they said, 'He's not for you. That's all we're going to say.' Yeah, she's laughing, I'm sure. And I didn't take any notice. I was too interested in the wedding that was coming up. And it wasn't his fault and it wasn't my fault. We just weren't the same background or, you know, but he did very well actually. He did very well in his business, yes. But it just, you know, he decided he wanted to marry his secretary. So, I let him [laughs], yeah.

And did you manage to – when you raised your children, did you manage to continue working or...?

Well, no, no, no. When I was expecting Linda, I stopped work quite soon in my – because I was – I had a lot of sickness and that. So, I didn't work until Linda was eleven and Alan was nine, or something like that, yes. [01:52:00] And then, my husband, who was ex-police, he – we had a driving school. And my father said to me before my husband, my – Linda's father left me, 'I'm going to die one day and I don't want you to squander it. Please, do something.' I said, 'Well, I don't know a business.' But then, I met someone who was an ambulance driver. And he said, 'If ever I had money, I would start a driving school.' And I thought, well, what better? I don't have to do it. So, we opened a driving school and we became quite well known. We had ten cars and Charles, my husband, he was an instructor but he also gave lectures. We had a classroom and all that sort of thing. So, it was quite a good business and I did all the book work. So, from being a nurse –

You became a –

[Laughs] I became that, yes. But I loved it, yeah.

A local – in this...?

In a local – yes, yes, locally.

Where was it?

In – it was in New Eltham, which is just down the road from here, in sort of Mottingham area. Yes, yes. So, I've had an interesting life, but a happy one. I've got a lovely, lovely family.

What sort of identity did you want to give to your children?

I wanted them – I knew that they were happy, because they didn't have what I had. I hope I gave them a lot of love. But my Linda, who's sitting right at the back here, will tell you that she said I was the strictest mother in the area. I don't think so. I don't think I was, but she thinks I was. [01:54:00] But then, I was strictly brought up, so I followed my parents' footsteps and that's what I'm blaming it on to. But hopefully, I was a good mother, yeah. And, yes.

And in terms of you said, religion wasn't that important for you? Only later?

No, no, religion wasn't important. I'd had enough of it, living with the vicar. Three times on a Sunday, weren't allowed to read on a Sunday except the Bible. I'd really had enough. So, when I was free and I was at Queen Mary's Hospital living in, I didn't go to church at all. And then somehow or other, I don't know, both Charles and I decided that when we sold our driving school and we didn't have to work on a Sunday anymore, that it would be nice to belong to a community. And so, we lived in Petts Wood, where I was married from anyway. And I belong to the church and have lovely, lovely, lovely friends. Really lovely friends who, you know, who are so sweet to me.

And what church did you join?

It's called a – it's called United Reformed Church. It used to be congregational. It was, I think, what they call a Free Church. We – it's all the same, except that the difference in our church is that we are more – our minister for instance, she comes in jeans and a nice top. They don't keep gabbling the same prayer all the time. She will say prayers for people that matters, like Ukrainians or... And we do an awful lot for the community, an awful lot. So, I think I told you, we – the church helps the Ukrainian families. We've got three that we're looking after. [01:56:03] And then, we've got something called Messy Church, which is, I don't know why they call it that, but it's known all over Britain. It's where parents don't have to belong to our church at all. They bring their children and they do crafts. And the children, the little ones have toys and they play. And then we have – the craft, they take home and they can give money or not give money. And then, they have a quarter-of-an-hour in the church jumping up and down. It doesn't matter and they sing happy songs. And then, what they all like, then they come running through and this is what was my job. Well, it still is, that I made the sandwiches for them all. And the most children we had with seventy-eight children and my friend and I did it. And we laid the tables, low tables, and then they sit and they eat their supper and they love that. They have a really nice supper and I love it. Yeah. And I also – I've just had to give that up, because I don't – I'm frightened I'll fall over the children. I was also doing it mother and toddler group all from our church. Yeah.

Amazing.

Yeah, I loved it.

And, Maria, how do you think has this, the experience of the Kindertransport, affected your later life or your choices?

Well, I can't stand injustice. This is why I was telling you these little stories, how I was used with – when they wanted me to be – the Peer Gynt Suite. And there was, yeah, there was another one, which I just can't remember for a minute, where I was being used. Not because

they were doing something for me, I was being used and I don't like that. And I feel very, very strongly about not using people. [01:58:02] People shouldn't use other people for their own gain, should they? No, that's very much in my mind. And hopefully I brought my children up, even though they say I was strict [laughs]. But no, I just don't like injustice. I think it goes back to when it was – there was so much injustice in Germany as well, when I was told I'd passed to go into grammar school, but we don't take Jews. I passed to go to dance on the stage for Swan Lake, but I was Jewish. And that's being used and that has always stuck with me.

And you feel that the past has come back more the older you've got?

Yes, very much so. When we were teenagers, when my parents first came over, all we – my sister and I want to know what – boys, you know, nevermind about my parents. No, I mean, we were nice to them. I mean, obviously, but my father was still very – he was very strict. He was very, very kind, but he was very, very strict. In fact, I'll remember I was twenty-one and I wasn't allowed a house key, which I really objected to. But he was a good dad, he really was. When I was at school in Hamburg, he used to – all my books, my exercise books, he would have them bound, so they looked really nice. And that's the sort of father he was and hopefully brought us up well.

But why do you think the past became more important?

Later?

Yeah.

Because I've got older and when you get older, first you have your... As I say, when they first came over, we had boyfriends and we were only interested in boys and our life and dances and things. [02:00:00] But as I've got older now, my sister and I especially, we've spoken so much. For about an hour, we were on the phone every week talking about our past. And why did we do that? And why did this happen? And why did that happen? And why didn't our parents tell us that we were Jewish? Why did we find out in such a horrible way?

You know, to be told you did past your audition to be in Swan Lake, but we can't take you because you're Jewish.

You wish your parents would have told you earlier?

I wish my parents had told me. But they wanted – all they thought about was protecting us and I regret that, yeah.

And what about now, the whole scheme of the Kindertransport? I mean, from your point of view.

Well, since I've – from my point of view, the AJR has changed my life. They are so good to me; they really are and I've made friends. I've also made friends when they come to our local tea in Bromley, and it's so nice to meet other people. And then, they've just started the lunches again. I don't know whether you're aware of the lunches.

The Kindertransport, the special...?

The luncheon, yeah, in a synagogue, yeah. And you know, it's – I feel really humbled. I mean, they pay for the taxi. And, in fact, Linda got to know quite a bit about the Jewish religion, because Linda used to come as well, she was invited. And our driver was one of Ross's friends and he knew about the Jewish religion. And she sat in the front with them and they used to talk. And he – she was very interested and she talked a lot about the Jewish religion. And she probably knows more than I do, yeah, yes. [02:02:03] So I'm, yeah, what with my church, my family obviously come first, but my church and the AJR, I'm just thankful. And one day, I won't be here anymore [laughs] and I hope my children will be happy. I'm sure they will, yeah.

What I meant to ask was about the Kindertransport as a scheme. I mean, how...?

Oh, you mean the Kindertransport, what does that mean to me?

Yeah. I mean, the fact that, you know, the children were allowed, parents were not allowed, you know?

Oh, yes. Oh, how do I feel about that?

Yeah, how...?

Well, I mean, that's a law, isn't it? I mean, my parents were waiting for a visa and they didn't get one in time. So, it's a law. So, I can't say that I think there must have – why couldn't my parents have come? I accepted it, because what else could I do? You have to have a law. You can't just have people coming over here without a visa, so I understand that. It would have been lovely to have come with my parents.

Yeah, and do you feel there should have been more care taken, in terms of where the children were going, how they were treated, that sort of thing?

Well, yeah –

Do you think it was...?

Well, right. The children, the English people were asked to take refugees. That must have been hard, especially if they were non-Jewish, because my guardians were non-Jewish. But it didn't matter to them, they didn't encourage it. That's why I stopped going to the AJR things. But yes, A) it was the law and B) that's how it was. So, I don't really think anyone's to blame. No, no, nobody's to blame.

[02:04:00] *And Maria, how would you define yourself in terms of your identity today? How would you define yourself?*

I find myself very British. Obviously, I have memories. I'll never forget that. I have memories of what happened to me in Germany, which wasn't nice. I have memories, what happened to me in English because having to leave my parents, which wasn't very nice. But I'm very

thankful that I have my life now, and that's all. And I owe such gratitude to the AJR and to Britain. And that that's why I've tried, I've tried very hard to give back, like joining the Civil defense. And I just love doing it. It's not because I think I'm a good person, because I'm not. But I've – because I just want to pay back. I don't know whether you can understand that. Yeah, and Britain has given us a home, yeah.

Did you remember when you became – when you were naturalised? Do you remember?

Yes, I went up to County Hall. And if I had done anything wrong, even if I had pinched a handkerchief from Woolworth's or something, I wouldn't have been able to be naturalised. They were very strict. I had to go to County Hall and I sat in front of a lady who was a civil servant. And she asked me all sorts of questions. And she said, 'What are your hobbies?' And at that time, I belonged to Young Conservatives in Chislehurst. I think the reason I belonged was because it was quite a nice social club. [02:06:00] But yes, so she asked me a lot of questions. She already knew that I had never been in trouble. And then I said, and she said, 'What are your hobbies?' So, I said, 'Well, I belong to the Young Conservatives and we do quite a lot of nice social life as well.' And her face, she really smiled at me. So, she obviously was Conservative, I don't know. But she said, 'Oh', she said, 'have you ever thought of becoming a councillor?' I said, 'No' [laughs], I said, 'I don't think so.' Yes, but she was very nice and I managed to... And my parents also became naturalised, which was nice.

And was it important for you at the time?

Very important. I was British. Not English, but British. Yeah, I love this country, I really do.

And what was it like for you to go back to Hamburg the first time?

Yeah, yeah. As we were coming – the first time we went, Charles and I, we went to Harwich and then with our car. And then, we went to Hamburg and how – I mean, because Charles was an ex-police driver, he was very good. And I mean, straightaway he had to drive on the right-hand side off the docks. And, but he did it. And yes, it was – do you know, I sort of felt I'm home. I don't know why. But I felt, oh, I'm home. I don't particularly think oh, you know,

I wish I was German because I don't. I'm very proud to be British. But it did give me a sort of feeling that this is where I come from. And when I saw our house, you know, it brought back lovely memories. Yeah.

[02:08:05] *Is there anything else we haven't discussed, you would like to add?*

I think you've heard enough of me [laughs]. No, no, I'm just funny, but I'm just – I'm happy. I don't know how many more years I'm going to live. I just want to go on living, because I love my children, I love my grandchildren. And we have a very – we're such a happy family, which is – you know, and friends.

And Maria, did you talk about your past, about your past to your children or to your grandchildren?

Not 'till lately. You know, it sort of reminds me of when my parents came over, I really wasn't interested in their history. I had too many other things on my mind and why should I expect my children to? But Linda especially, not my son so much. But Linda especially, is – she's made sure that the grandchildren know. You know, and the grandchildren are also very – they're also very happy that they know now. Yeah, yeah.

And just recently we had the AJR organise the Kindertransport concert in Wigmore Hall. And your story, you were featured in the programme. How does it make you feel? Was that...?

[Laughs] I was glad to help the AJR. When Ross said, 'You haven't got an interview', I was a happy bunny, I might tell you, because I didn't really want to do it. But I would never say no.

This is an ITV interview?

The ITV, yes. It was ridiculous to think that they could do an interview on the news. I think there was a couple of pictures. **[02:10:02]** They were just pictures of an elderly gentleman and a lady. They were in their own home and that's what they did and that's enough, isn't it? Because I mean, how could they ever get that in? It's just –

Maria, have you ever recorded your story before or written it down?

Yes, yes. I tell you when I started, I didn't ever talk about anything. And in fact, even now, a lot of my friends don't even know my history. And then our- I wouldn't call him a minister but like a vicar, he works for a world organisation. And he – I didn't tell them that – I didn't tell them that – where I came from, so somebody must have mentioned it. And he – and she said to me, 'Look', she said, 'My husband and I would really – he would love for his work, he would very much like to have an interview with you', which I've actually got on my iPad. And started, yeah, so they came here and did an interview with us there. And I told him the story. Not as long as yours, but sort of whatever was important. And he's doing – he's using for his work. And then, so I've done that and I've done yeah, the important ones. And then, I just – Ross asked me whether I would tell my story, nothing big. They also asked various times other people, just so that we all know each other. So, I've sort of told my story then. I've also been asked to talk to schools and things like that. And I don't really want to do it, because there's a lot of sadness. [02:12:00] If I leave out – people have got to know what happened and I've got to say that. And so, I either leave it out and make it that isn't all true. You know, but I am – but actually, my Linda's sister-in-law, she wondered whether I would go and talk to the school. And I said, 'Well, I'll do it for you, but I'm not saying that I particularly want to do it.'

I understand. You feel that is –

I fear that I'm going to make people sad.

And you don't want to do that?

And I don't want to do that and that's the only reason. But I mean, I will do it for my daughter, for my granddaughter-in-law. They go to a school in Sevenoaks, that's a lovely, lovely school they go to and I am quite happy to help them. But I'm not – when people, other people have asked me, 'Will you come to this committee or that, the mothers' union?', I'll say no.

And is it because of your experiences there in the evacuation?

It's because of my sadness, because of the sadness. Yeah, I don't want people, other people to be sad. I've seen people cry and I don't want that, because I'm a happy bunny. You know, why should people be sad? It's always what happens in the world.

Yeah, you don't want to dwell on it?

I don't want to dwell on it, no. I don't mind talking about it and I'm very, very happy to have met you and I'm very happy that I could do it. But I just hope it doesn't make feel – any anybody feel unhappy. I just don't want that.

Because it's so interesting. You know, there are some people who really love going to school and telling their story, and some people don't. And everyone is different and for different reasons.

[02:14:02] Exactly, exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Some people can't do it, they just –

Yeah. And yeah, and it's mostly because some of it is so sad. And I've seen people in tears, and I don't want that.

But is it because for you, it's you don't want to make the other people feel sad?

That's what I mean.

It's not that you –

I don't want – it's not me. No, I don't mind talking about it at all.

You don't get upset?

No, it hasn't upset me whatsoever to meet you and I'm very pleased, and thank you for coming. But no, no, I just don't want other people – why should other people be unhappy for me? It's happened, it happens all over the world. It's happening now, isn't it, in Ukraine and in Gaza and everywhere? And so, I don't want people to be unhappy for me, because I'm not unhappy. I'm not an unhappy person.

And why – what do you think gave you this, call it strength, resilience or...?

No idea.

I mean, that's the big question, isn't it, for anyone?

That's a quest –

People cope different with different experiences.

Yes. Well, look at my sister, bless her. I mean, she just didn't want to live, because she could not – what affected her, being beaten by these people in Melton Mowbray, not having enough to eat, seeing us thrown out in the rain to walk around Melton Mowbray. No Childline to go to, she couldn't take it and everybody is different, aren't they? Yeah, and I've been – I'm very blessed, aren't I- to been given a character where I can cope with it? Yeah.

I mean, in your opinion, do you think that is a lesson to be drawn from the Kindertransport for today?

Yes, I think the lesson is, don't let's have any more people like Putin and Hitler and those people who think that they are – that they can do this to other people. [02:16:03] I don't know, for instance, what the Ukrainians have ever done to the Russians. I don't know why this – I don't know whatever happened. Why did Hitler become like this? But it's happened and it's history. And it will go on, won't it? There will always be wars, yeah. And I've made a

lot of mistakes in my life. I'm not a wonderful person whatsoever. I've learned from my mistakes and I try hard.

Do you have any regrets?

My regrets are that I didn't have a normal life. I had to give up my ballet, I had to give up my piano lessons, there wasn't the money. But they're only material things, aren't they?

Do you sometimes think what would have happened to you or your life, how your life would be without Hitler, without emigration?

I've got no idea. What would I be doing? I got no idea, because it didn't happen. So, maybe I was meant to come over here and make all my lovely friends and have my lovely family. That was mapped out for me, so I just take it- with happiness. Yeah.

Okay, Maria, is there any message for anyone who might watch this video in the future, based on your experiences?

Okay, I don't hate anybody. I don't even hate Hitler. He was born into that person- that he was, it's nobody's fault. [02:18:03] I just isn't anybody's fault and it's how the world is. So, what have I learned? I try, can't always succeed, I try to be a good person, try. And sometimes I talk to myself and I say, 'You shouldn't have said that.' [Laughs] Yeah, so no, and thank you for coming to see me.

Thank you so much for sharing your story.

Yes, yes.

And we're going to look at some photos.

Yes. And if – I would be very pleased if you could take a photo with my daughter, who's been sitting quiet.

Yes, we're bringing her in in one second.

Yes.

We're just – one little bit of silence and then we're going to bring her in.

Absolutely.

[Pause]

[02:20:08] *Yes, Maria, can you please introduce the person sitting on your right?*

Yes, this is my daughter, Linda, whom I love to pieces. We get on very well and I brought her into this world and it's lovely to have her. She's very, very good to me. And although we tease each other and she's quite different from me really.

[Linda] Very.

Very, all right [laughs]. We just have different thoughts, but they're fine. And I love seeing her, just like I love seeing all my little grandchildren and I live for that. And I hope I live longer to enjoy them.

Okay.

Yeah.

Linda, you heard a little bit at the end of the interview you were sitting in.

[Linda] Yes.

So, I just wonder whether you wanted to share your thoughts on listening to your mother's story.

[Linda] Well, I think Mum's a legend and I'm very lucky to have her still alive, because a lot of my friends my age, have lost their parents. You know, ninety-seventy is quite an age. I'm very thankful to the Kinder train, because I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for, you know, the help and the Quakers and everyone bring them over. The history is fascinating. I think she's got a maybe more of an interesting history than the average, because of her mother being the opera singer and the- you know, all the history that goes with it. And yeah, she's just got to do 100 and then I'll let her go. She's – I wanted her to do a century. But so, that was the deal, wasn't it?

That's the plan?

[Linda] Yeah, the plan is you do a 100.

So, she says.

[Linda] Yeah, she will. She'll go on [both laugh].

And Linda, do you find this, your mother's history impacted your life at all?

[Linda] I've kind of taken it for granted. My friends always say, 'What an amazing history' and I've always not really questioned it. [02:22:00] But in later life with the AJR and you know, and all the films out, like The Tattoo of Auschwitz. And One Day, you know, about the man who got –

Nicholas Winton?

[Linda] Nicholas Winton, brilliant film. All these films that I'm watching which are kind of out at the moment, make me realise that that is part of Mum's, you know, history and life. And so, it's made me think a little bit more deeper of what she went through. And as you get

older, you reflect. Yeah, so yeah, I do find it fascinating and I'm just proud that she's my mum.

Ah, bless you [laughs].

Okay, anything else?

[Linda] No, not really. Just keep smiling, be positive, and it's all part of life's rich tapestry.

Okay, thank you.

[Linda] Thank you.

Thank you.

[Opera music playing]

Maria, what are we listening to?

Mozart, music by Mozart. I'm sorry, I –

An aria by Mozart?

An aria, yes, I think so. Yes, yes.

And who's singing it?

My mother. My mother's singing it.

And when was it recorded?

Sorry?

When was it recorded?

I've no idea. In the 1930s, yes.

[02:24:00]

[Music continues]

And how you feel being able to listen to this?

Sorry?

How do you feel listening to this?

I love it. I just feel that my mum is near me.

And Linda, what do you think about it?

[Linda] I'm not really an opera person. I mean, I respect that she's got a beautiful voice, it's just not by sort of sound. But it's amazing to be able to listen to my grandmother, I have to say.

And she died when you were quite young?

[Linda] I was about three, wasn't I?

[02:26:00] Yes, but you knew her.

[Linda] I did my first steps, walking steps. She was lying in the bed, obviously dying of cancer, and I did my first steps in her bedroom. Not that I remember, but I've been told, yeah.

Nearly finished.

[Music continues]

And how did you get a hold of this recording?

My mother brought it over. She brought the record, the original the record.

[Linda] Gramophone, gramophone.

Which my sister's got, or sister had, I should say.

[Linda] And they put it onto this CD.

Yeah, and then they put it on to – twice, I think. They first –

[Linda] Yeah.

[Music ends]

That's it.

Thank you for sharing this with us.

[Music starts playing]

Oh, sorry, that.... Shall I look at that, or shall I look at this?

[MS] It doesn't matter.

You're not in the picture, Maria, you can do whatever you want.

Oh, okay.

You can make grimaces, faces.

Thank you so much, yeah.

[MS] Who's in this photograph, please?

My grandmother, my Czech grandmother who lived in Poděbrady.

Thank you. Who is that on the photo?

That's my grandfather. My – yes, my grandfather. Sorry, yes.

Your father's father?

My father's father, yes.

That was my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, where we travelled by train from Hamburg to Prague, to Poděbrady. I think I'll spelled it correctly, pronounced it correctly, I'm not sure. Yes, and it was their 50th wedding anniversary with all my aunts and uncles.

[02:28:00] *And do you think...?*

And they were they were all in Auschwitz, every one of them, yeah.

So, many of the people here on this photo are...?

Yes, they would all have been relatives, no more.

And killed?

And killed, yes.

Thank you.

That was my father when he was a young boy. He is on the right-hand side of the photo, the little boy who's sitting down on the far right. And it was taken in Czechoslovakia.

With his family?

With his family, with his brothers and sisters. With –

Yes, please.

Oh, I have to say, that was my grandmother on my mother's side and we called her Omi.

And what was her name?

Her name was, I'm trying to think. Oh, I'm sorry.

We'll check it later, it's okay.

No, I'm sorry. She was Bewersdorff, that is my mother's maiden name, yes.

Oh, that was my mother when she was an opera singer and that was a light opera that she did. And she was in the middle.

And when was it done? 1916, I think it says.

1916, yes.

Thank you, yes.

What is actually written there that you want me to say?

It's your mother? It looks like a professional –

Yes, that's my mother with her own name, which was Henriette Bewersdorff. And I'm sure at that time, he was also Helga [ph] Borg, her stage name.

Thank you.

That was me when I was two years old, on the swing.

Where?

In Hamburg and that swing, when we went over to Hamburg to look at my house, the lady saw us standing in front of it. [02:30:09] And she said, 'Can I help you?' And we said, 'Well, that used to be our house.' And she said, 'Please, come in', she was so nice. And the swing was still there.

[MS] Yes, please.

That is of my mother, and my brother, and myself.

And where?

On our garden, in our garden in Hamburg.

That was my father and myself, and I think I was about three or four years old.

That is a photo of my brother, John, on the left, my mother in the middle with my little sister, I think.

Birgit?

Sorry, Birgit. Did she have a little one on her lap, I can't see it.

Yeah, she did, yeah.

Sorry, with my sister, Birgit. And I was on the right-hand side as you're looking at the picture.

And roughly 1930, was it?

Yes.

That was when I was in kindergarten and I was the little one in the middle.

Do you remember any other names?

No, I don't, no.

Thank you.

That was at a boarding school. My brother was on the right, my older brother. His name was Alfred, but we called him Abi. And he was a boarder there. And the headmaster was Max Bondy, who took the whole school to Geneva, because he was obviously Jewish. And my brother stayed on there until he left at eighteen. And that was my brother, with my brothers and sisters visiting them. [02:32:00] And the – my uncle, who was the headmaster, also knew the headmaster of Gordonstoun in Scotland, where our King was a boarder.

May, '33, this was taken in May 1933. My first day at school, where we had to, well, we didn't have to, but we carried a special cone with lovely sweets and chocolates in.

Sorry. That was taken of myself on our balcony with my dolly. I don't know whether it was a dolly that I was allowed to bring to England or not, I just can't remember.

Yeah. That was my bicycle, which my mother actually in August of '39, was allowed to come over because she was German and not Jewish. And she brought – she got someone in the harbour of Hamburg that she knew, and he was coming backwards and forwards to England. And so, she brought our two bicycles, my sister's and my own.

But this is you in Hamburg outside the house?

And that is me. That is me in Hamburg, yes.

With the bicycle?

With the bicycle.

Did she bring that bicycle here?

Yes, she did.

That was my home in Othmarschen in Ham – in the suburbs of Hamburg and that was my family home. [Laughs]

This is a nursery where I spent the first four years of my life. Correct.

[MS] Can you tell me?

[02:34:01] Just before the war. This was in June '39, when my brother had also come with Kindertransport, and my sister and myself, and somebody's dog in the garden.

This photo is of my parents in Petts Wood and they'd been here about two years when that was taken.

[Linda] You mean this one?

This was a family wedding and the bridegroom was my grandson and his wife, Leanne. And on the right-hand side facing the picture is Tom, who is the late husband of Linda's. Linda's on the left-hand side of her brother. And then Maddie is a granddaughter. And then, left, on the left-hand corner is my late husband Charles and myself.

Thank you.

This is a family photo and as far as I know, we are all on it. All my- my son, my daughter, my grandchildren and my great- grandchildren.

Taken when?

Taken –

[Linda] About three years ago.

'21?

[Linda] '21, yeah.

Yeah.

[Linda] 2021.

Doesn't matter.

Thank you.

Yeah. This was on a visit to Hamburg to my previous home, my home in Hamburg. And we were outside looking at the house, when the lady who lived in one of the flats, because it's now been converted into four flats, she said, 'Can I help you?' [02:36:00] And when I told

her all about what had happened, why we were looking, she said, 'Please come in.' And we went out into the garden and there I saw my old swing.

[MS] Yes.

This is my original birth certificate, which my parents – it came over with all the other things when they came over, all the furniture, etc., from Hamburg.

And here's your naturalisation?

Yes. This was my certificate of naturalisation.

From which year?

19 – oh, sorry I've forgotten.

'49, '49.

Would it be '49?

Yes, that's what it says.

Okay, thank you. So, are you telling me that somebody might be interested in...?

This letter was sent to me by my – no, not to me. I'm sorry, can I start again? So sorry. The people who looked after me in Melton Mowbray had a lot of letters from – between my guardian and between my parents. And then, and for some reason or other, the people that we lived with, not my guardians in Beckenham but the ones in Melton Mowbray, didn't want me to have it. And so, one day somebody found me, they'd found it in the loft. So, it was a very interesting letter which I had years and years and years after I should have done. **[02:38:04]**

Yes, in it he was telling me all about that I was going to start at the nursery nurses, to be a nursery nurse, wasn't it?

[Linda] Yeah.

Thank you.

Is that okay? My guardians in Beckenham, who were my official guardians, were very kind, very kind to me. But of course, it was only when I went to Melton Mowbray that it was – I was so badly treated. But she actually wrote me a letter and said that I was going to be trained as a nursery nurse and I was coming home, which I was very pleased about, because I didn't want to stay in Melton Mowbray as a maid.

Thank you.

Is that all right?

[MS] Perfect.

Yes, please.

This was a letter, which was sent from Sweden and my mother wrote it to me. And unfortunately, because the people in Melton Mowbray, for reasons of their own, didn't want me to see any of the letters that they sent, and this was one of them.

And when was it written?

1942.

In June?

In June 1942, yes.

So, you received it many, many, many years later?

And I received the many, many years later through a fluke. They – the grandparents of the people who kept the letter from me – no, I'm sorry. The son and daughter of the people who – of the people that didn't give me the letters in Melton Mowbray, they tried to find us through the AJR. And I don't quite know, I'm sorry. I don't quite know, can I...? [02:40:00] So, I want to get this right.

They found you and they gave you the letters?

They found me, yes, they found me.

Maria, can I ask you, do they feel sorry now they know that they...? Did they feel bad about it?

I made sure that they don't feel sorry, because this is the grandchildren of these people and I don't want – I'm still friendly with them anyway. And they are ashamed, but it was their mother and father that kept them from me, not them. And I've tried to tell them, you know, that they mustn't feel sorry, because it wasn't their fault, was it?

Maria, thank you so much for sharing your story, your photos.

Oh, thank you for coming.

And the letters and everything.

And you're sure I can't give you a cold drink or anything before you go?

[02:40:56]

[End of transcript]

