

IMPORTANT

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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Forename:	Helen
Interviewee Sex:	Female
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Interviewee POB:	London

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Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
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**REFUGEE VOICES:
THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE****INTERVIEW: 44****NAME: HELEN BAMBER****INTERVIEWER: BEA LEWKOWICZ****DATE: 27 NOVEMBER 2003****LOCATION: LONDON****TAPE 1****Tape 1: 0 minute 25 seconds**

BL: Please tell me where you were born.

HB: I was born in London on 1 May 1925.

BL: Can you please tell me a bit about your family background?

HB: I am an only child. My father was an accountant. We lived together with my mother in a working class area of North London. We first lived in Amhurst Park and then we moved to Tottenham. I can't say that it was a very happy household. I don't know if it is relevant but it was not a happy marriage. My father, whose parents came from Poland and who was in fact born in America was quite an obsessive character, intelligent and learned. but very preoccupied with the rise of fascism and the kind of vision that he had of immense violence that would follow from this rise. Not only in Germany but there were Moseley's fascists in London, there were fascists rising in large numbers in other countries and in America. He was very preoccupied with this and very concerned. He read profusely. He spent most of his time trying to look at ways in which there could be some kind of political prevention. I think he also lobbied quite hard. He was not a man who had many friends but he had certain contacts who I think he joined in trying to lobby for an understanding of what was happening with the growth particularly of Nazism in Germany.

BL: You said he was born in the States and then came to England?

HB: Not directly, no. He was only a child, briefly, in the States. The family returned apparently to his grandfather's farm. I can't tell you where that is. I wish I knew. But he used to speak of the Austro-Hungarian border, he spoke about the Count Spee horses that they would sit in the trees and throw apples. I have no clear picture truly of where they actually came from. They moved about quite a bit.

Tape 1: 4 minutes 11 seconds

BL: Were your grandparents professionals?

HB: Not really. I think that when my grandfather applied for naturalisation, I believe his profession was given as a hat maker or something like that. I never saw a hat being made but I have no clear picture. It is very strange because looking back now, I have been asked so many questions and I don't know the answers. I think as a child I was brought up in a fairly hostile environment - we were Jews living in a working class area of London with high unemployment. In the schools there was quite a lot of hostility towards Jewish children and I think that like so many children, I simply did not want to be different and I didn't really want to know about these stories which now, with the little elements in it, are so interesting, but I don't really know sufficiently.

BL: Do you remember any hostilities at school, as a Jewish girl?

HB: Oh yes immense hostility. Mainly on the part of the teachers, oddly enough. I remember being hauled in front of the school because I didn't know the second verse of the National Anthem and I was told that as a Jewish child of Jewish immigrants, although of course my parents, my mother was born in London. Nevertheless I was told that I had a duty above everything else to know the second verse of the National Anthem. So all these things, not very violent, not very serious perhaps, but they left a mark. More than the school situation was the face of British Fascism that was so frightening to me, particularly with my father constantly listening to broadcasts from Germany and translating them. He spoke perfect German and nobody knows quite why or how, but he did. He was bi-lingual.

BL: What other languages did he speak?

HB: He spoke German, some French, some Polish.

BL: Did he know some Yiddish?

HB: He did not speak Yiddish, but he understood Yiddish. I understood he had a very 'Hochdeutsch'; he had a very pure German. He was very proud of it. It helped him a lot in later days when he was trying to help people to leave Germany. The sight of Moseley's Black Shirts marching through London, in particular the East End but North London as well. I mean The Nag's Head and the Arsenal area, Finsbury Park were areas where Moseley would be. The way I dealt with it was I suppose the way many children do: there was a small gang of us, and it is very interesting because one way of dealing with your fears is to become fairly - I mean we were only kids - is to become militant. We would try and break up the meetings. It sounds so ridiculous now. We would climb the trees in Finsbury Park and chant and make a lot of noise with rattles. We would try and disturb the peace and we would be chased.

Tape 1: 8 minutes 30 seconds

BL: How old were you then?

HB: I suppose about 11, something like that. We took it terribly seriously. We used to go to the River Lea which was close to my home where there was a dump and we would try to run as fast as we could, up and down this slope of this disgusting dump in order to train for whatever eventuality would occur. It's amusing now but it was very serious.

BL: But who ran this?

HB: It was a gang with a leader whose name... well, never mind. It was a gang and there were about 10 of us I think.

BL: Were there other Jewish kids?

HB: Oh they were all Jewish. In the early days I did go to a Jewish School and the main reason for that was not simply for a Jewish education. I think my father had at the back of his mind that there was going to be a war and it might be necessary for me to go to Palestine if it were at all possible. My mother had two cousins called Mendel and Heimbinder who were very much involved in helping people to leave Germany and there were books written about them and it is a story in itself. It is not the purpose of this interview, except to say they were brave and they had gone as pioneers from Germany in the 20s and lived in the kibbutz but Mendel took a very prominent role later on with this organisation that was responsible for choosing people to go. Forgive me; I have forgotten its name.

BL: For people to go to Palestine?

HB: Yes Palestine. And he was much criticised for that much later, in Palestine, in Israel because in making choices, you leave certain people out. I found this in work throughout my working life, by the way. My father began to communicate and work with these two people from what was then referred to as Palestine and my going to a Jewish school was partly his wish so that if the war came, I should leave, or if there was a sign that war was coming. It did not happen by the way.

BL: Which school was that?

HB: It was a school at Egerton Road Synagogue.

BL: How Jewish was the household?

Tape 1: 12 minutes 0 second

HB: My mother wasn't religious at all and didn't have a strong belief system. She was a very outgoing, social person who had open evenings and cooked brilliantly and made chocolate éclairs whilst my father stayed in his room thinking and worrying. It wasn't that my mother didn't worry. She did but had her own defence mechanisms for dealing with an unhappy marriage and also probably with a fear of something that was going to happen in the future because enough was coming into my household about the effects of Nazi persecution as the years went on, with the occurrence of my mother's two cousins coming frequently to the house. Also, as my father's activities increased in helping, not a large number, but in helping certain people to leave, refugees would come to my house in passing and I was privy to their stories and I was very deeply affected by this. I was a sickly child. It was later said that I had TB, I am not sure. It probably was not the case but I was not well and I certainly made the most of it. I spent a lot of time in bed and refugees from Germany would come and sit on my bed and tell me stories.

BL: Do you remember any of these?

HB: I remember there was... Oh, it was about persecution and the separation of their families and their fears for the future. I don't know how it was that I was exposed to the extent that I was as a child but it was extensive exposure, both on the part of my father and on the part of others. So that apart from being Jewish and feeling different, I actually knew differently from other children. You asked me about a story, I remember there was a pianist whom I did not like because I thought he was very pompous and very conceited who came to the house but he had suffered quite a lot but he used to play the piano beautifully. I remembered that but he did something for me that I have never forgotten. He was quite assertive and aggressive in many ways and he said to me, you know you are ill but you can get out of bed and if you want to, you can get out of bed and you can walk round the room three times and touch all the furniture and get back into bed. And I thought what a horrible man when he went out of the room but I did it. I got out of bed and I walked round the room and I touched the furniture and I got back into bed. That was the first time, I think I realized as a child, that I can take control of myself and my environment and it was a very big turning point in my life. That man I did not like showed me something about overcoming and I now wish I had said more to him and thanked him because he made a difference to my life, that man.

Tape 1: 16 minutes 25 seconds

BL: Did people stay or did they come to visit?

HB: They stayed sometimes, yes, and spoke to my father. One I think went to America and one was quite close to my father and came to my father's funeral, I remember.

BL: Were they friends of your father or did they get in touch through an organisation?

HB: I don't think there was much organisation. There were a number of people helping, not only Jewish people. There were the communists in the communist party of the day, there were the Quakers and conscientious Church people who were doing their very best. I don't know the history sufficiently but it is interesting. I work with people now who are supposed to tell their story to the home office and to immigration and who don't know everything and can't put the pieces together and are told they are not credible because they can't put it all together and I can't put it all together. Partly because I didn't want to know everything and partly because they kept quite a bit, although they told me quite a lot. My father worked for a metal supply firm with connections in Germany and I think it was through this firm that he was able to help.

BL: He worked as an accountant?

HB: Yes. I cannot say more than that. I once spoke to somebody who was in the communist party who died not so long ago. Quite a prominent person and he had helped a number of people and I said, "Why don't you write it?" And he said, "Oh no, it was not something we would talk about." So I don't know how... Money was involved, people were helped in a number of ways, sponsored. I am not talking about brave rushing in and winking people out of concentration camps.

BL: No, but you remember the house and people coming?

HB: Oh certainly I do, and the pianist.

BL: And we are talking about the mid 30s?

HB: Coming up to when things were really very bad, I suppose 1937/38, something like that. My aunt also who was killed in an air raid, whose name was Mina was very much connected with activities in the East End of London to try to avert fascist marches and this sort of thing, the famous incident that was very much glorified, the Battle of Cable Street. There were moments of people protesting at what was going on but for me it was a monumental thing, the fascists in Britain and there was violence in our street. There were houses where milk bottles were thrown through windows. There was violence.

Tape 1: 20 minutes 13 seconds

BL: Before the war broke out and when war broke out, did your father know about Kristallnacht, did your father know about it?

HB: My father knew about Kristallnacht, and I didn't know at that time I was going to marry somebody whose father had been beaten to death in the Kristallnacht when they lived in Nuremberg, but we knew, we knew a lot of what was going on, and people did. The fact that people said they didn't know, if you wanted to know, you would know and my father wanted to know. For my mother, it was hard for her. We got poorer and poorer. Probably my father's finances were involved to some extent. We didn't do awfully well. The war came.

BL: Yes, and what happened to you?

HB: Well in some ways there were good moments. I was evacuated with my school for about, well until the bombs started to come in London. I don't know why I came back then. I was evacuated to Mildenhall where there was an aerodrome, of course people know that and there was bombing of the aerodrome so in a way Mildenhall received bombs and alerts before London did in some ways. I mean not the alerts but the actual bombing, targeting. My mother brought me back and it was one of the happiest periods of my life, actually, being evacuated, because I came into my own. I thrived there. I was with a Yorkshire family who took me in. I was part of a huge family. I did well at school and became captain of something or other, I can't remember what it was, but I flourished in those years away from home and the pressures. Without my father's pressure and fears, the war didn't have that sense of foreboding that it had for me later on when the knowledge of the carnage became better known. My mother was anxious for me to return and I returned.

BL: When did you return? From when to when were you evacuated?

HB: I was evacuated when the war started and then I returned and I had some private tuition and then I did a secretarial course later, during the blitz and I took one or two jobs later on.

Tape 1: 24 minutes 0 second

I was involved in a bombing incident in Holborn doing some fire watching when the house that I was in was affected. It didn't have a direct hit but it was an old house and I was on

some steps that collapsed under me and it was a pretty frightening experience but in a mad sort of way I was taking my chances with everybody else. I wasn't being singled out personally for persecution and death. This was such a strange feeling. I had quite a bit of mad courage. I would walk home from work from the centre of London to my home in North London during the bombs and I wasn't so deeply or profoundly frightened. But my father of course became more and more depressed about what he knew to be the carnage and I was aware that people were being put into concentration camps and being eliminated and that there was massive cruelty and death and destruction and I found the latter part of the war extremely difficult to bear. My husband came, I think, on the last boat out of Germany just before the war and was briefly put on to a farm to do farm work and then interned in Australia, And I don't know how many people know about that rather infamous voyage on the Dunera Star, that affected him, I think.

BL: Was he on the Dunera?

HB: Yes he was and he was then incarcerated for several years in the desert. Oddly enough rather like my evacuation, I think that was a time of scholarship for him because he had been publicly expelled from his school in Germany and here he was at the feet of some of the most prestigious scholars of Middle Europe. Music, art, learning was all available to him and he did extremely well. So these mad happenings, like the evacuation and the incarceration in the desert in Australia were both kind of odd periods in our lives. I met him before I decided to go to Germany.

BL: Was this during the War?

HB: Yes, during the War, toward the end of the War I met him. He was employed in war work. He had been brought back from Australia to do war work. There were all kinds of strange anomalies like that and I can't actually remember where I was at the time. I think I was working for a doctor. But whatever it was, I was beginning to feel towards the end of the War such a sense of overwhelming horror of what was going on and the fact that it seemed that I was to be spared and my immediate family was to be spared, although my father was very worried about various people in Poland who were remotely connected with my family. I just felt that I couldn't actually go on without doing something and I wasn't quite sure what it was that I wanted to do but I felt an enormous urge to do something about

Tape 1: 29 minutes 0 second

If you live in an unhappy household as an only child, you are involved in reparation. You are involved in trying to make things better, and I am not pretending that everything came from a social and political sense but whatever it was, I had a certain training in bearing quite difficult situations. I found that there was an organisation called the Jewish Relief Unit that was training people to go to Germany or elsewhere immediately after the war and I joined.

BL: When did you join?

HB: I think it was about a year before I actually went. The war was still on and I asked them if they would consider me, so I was 18 or 19, something like that. We had various odd training sessions with a psychologist telling us this that or the other. Really, I think it

wasn't too bad. We went to a kibbutz in England and trained in basic relief work, learning Yiddish. I had already learned German with my father so it wasn't too difficult to try to learn smatterings of language, map reading. But there was quite a lot of mature discussion with people I now cannot remember, about what to expect and how we were going to cope and we were posed certain very difficult questions. I remember one difficult question coming up that was very important because it affects all the workers in the caring field in which I worked. Which was: what do you do in the face of people you cannot help? And not only who you cannot help and may be dying but who really were beyond it and can't accept that help. What do you do faced with that? And I remember there was a question coming round the group and I remember searching for an answer and the answer I came up with I think, and I hope I am correct, was that we had to learn that we couldn't help everybody.

Tape 1: 31minutes 51 seconds

That was a lesson we had to learn that not everybody could be helped. But maybe if we concentrated and were seen to be concentrating with those remaining children, I wasn't sure if there would be children in the camps but if we concentrated on their recovery, maybe the older people..., but this is what I came up with. I mean, I wasn't 20. It wasn't very profound. I was searching for an answer that maybe we could be concentrating on the young and be seen doing that. Maybe those people who were without hope might be an element of hope in the next generation but we have to accept that we may be finished but there is a generation to follow.

BL: This was still during the war? That's quite amazing that all this preparation was going on.

HB: Yes it was. But very quietly. Not always terribly well structured. When I say that I mean – you see I can't remember the structure for it. I remember going off with one woman in which we had to find our way through difficult areas with maps and so on. I think we were travelling to a kibbutz in Wiltshire or somewhere. We didn't do awfully well and we were reprimanded by the people on the kibbutz about our lack of prowess because we got there terribly late. But there were lots of things like that which were to do with first aid, protecting ourselves against horror, where we put our resources.

BL: Was it clear that you were to go to Germany, or what was the idea?

HB: Well some people would be sent to Holland and some people would be sent to Germany, and the majority were to be sent to Germany and I was to be sent to Germany. I went against ... Certainly, my mother was very unhappy about it and my husband to be was very unhappy about it. But I went. I went out on my own. There was a lot of preparation and a lot of disappointments. We didn't get out as early as we wanted to and I think there were various reasons why we were not allowed to go in too early. By the time I went to Germany, I was appointed to work with the director of the whole unit, Henry Lunzer, and I first went to the headquarters to work with him and we frequently went to Belsen.

BL: This was the British Allied Zone of Germany?

HB: Yes. I had to find my way to a place called Eilshausen that was in the middle of nowhere. It is in Westphalia. It was a very small village which was the headquarters of the

unit and then to make contact with whoever was there. I think Henry Lunzer came after I did and I was taken by a driver to Belsen and there was already a small team of people under the auspices of Mrs. Henriques, the wife of Basil Henriques and people were already working there and Camp 1 had been burnt down.

Tape 1: 36 minutes 30 seconds

I suppose the thing I remember most when I first looked at Camp 1 was the smell and I have never forgotten it. It was the smell of geraniums, like that sweet dank smell of geraniums and even to this day I sometimes go on my small patio and I take ..., just to smell it and I don't know what that is about. It's to make contact with one's past. and to remind oneself of the truth, and it is also something to do with memory. I don't understand why I do it but when I spoke to a group of former British Far East Prisoners of War who I work with who have been very severely traumatised and are now in their 80s and I once gave a talk to them and I told them this, an elderly man came up to me after this and he said, "I know why you smell the geraniums". I did not ask him and he didn't tell me but he knew why. So there is something almost unconscious in the way we react to very traumatic events, but the smell I have never forgotten and the mounds of the mass graves, the burials and the fact that people were incarcerated in the former SS barracks. Have you been there?

BL: Yes.

HB: It was extremely cold as the winter drew on, very, very cold.

BL: When was this?

HB: 1945, 46. You see I cannot give you the exact months. It was some months after liberation.

BL: In the winter, you said it was very cold?

HB: As the winter came, it was a cold winter. 1946 was even colder. I had a variety of tasks there. I didn't only work in Belsen. Mrs Henriques team was working in Belsen but I spent quite a long time there. I spent time talking to the people, survivors in those dark cold barracks and I have told this story so often that I am really tired and I think people must be fed up with it. When you first listen to the stories that survivors tell you, you feel overwhelmed with the enormity of what they are telling you. Mainly the losses of so many people. If my husband had done that and if only he had listened to me he would not have been killed. The kind of *if* quality. Most of the stories were around the *if*. When nothing, but nothing could have saved them and you listen knowing it.

Tape 1: 40 minutes

You felt so helpless. And then I began to feel that I had to make closer contact with them and we would sit on to the floor and people would hold on to you. They dug their fingers into your arms and I found that rocking as children who are very deprived and unhappy, rocking became the kind of mode that we adopted and we would rock and they would tell their stories and I would say that it was like a kind of vomit. They would come up like a vomit, the stories. Some were terrible and some have never really been told properly. The story of how one woman lost an eye when she was being whipped and how the women had

to stand round and watch this. Like that, that kind of story that you heard time and time again. But I began to realise something and I began to get a sense of agency. I felt that ok I am listening to this and they want me to listen so perhaps my role is to be their witness and to say to them that is my role, to say to them the truth. I can't bring those people back but I can listen and I can be your witness and I will be your witness. And I think to those people who were going to die, and there were people who were going to die and I knew that, I think it was incredibly important. And people say to me, "Why is it so important that people's story must be told?" But it is absolutely vital that their story is told and that they know that their story is going to be told and so that became in a way a role for me.

BL: You must have been a very young person?

HB: I was very young. I think the youngest member of the team, actually. I worked in another camp, and nobody could remember how and why I got there. I worked in a camp called Kaunitz where there were a lot of Hungarian women and I spent a lot of time there. I went there with a man from the Jewish Brigade who was very much connected with trying to help this group, these women in this camp. I worked in this camp as much as I worked in Belsen and I listened to the women and we tried to tell the women as their hair came back and they got more beautiful and their periods returned that they must watch themselves and not be corrupted because the women then were so vulnerable. When they were so ugly at the beginning, but there they were in the midst of this camp and so many were so lovely, I remember and I remember this man from the Jewish Brigade coming with me and talking to the people telling the women, "Protect yourselves. I think the word integrity never existed. Keep your womanhood. Don't give yourself away to people because you will be tempted now."

Tape 1: 44 minutes 0 second

I thought what an incredible young man because there were dangers. It was post-war, there were soldiers around, there were people around, there was violence, there was rape, everything going on and there were still killings. He was so keen to protect these women. I admired him very much. We had our first Pesach there in the camp in Kaunitz. We were out in the open with long tables and I remember it was such a happy occasion. We arrived late and I couldn't get to the table and I had to be carried somehow across the tables and there were roars of laughter. It was a very joyous occasion. There was lots of joy and lots of fun, I have to tell you, lots of camaraderie, when I was there. My main job there was something quite different. My main job that I was given and I don't know why they gave it to me but I think my kind of ... the way I presented myself, and perhaps the way I spoke, I don't know, they felt that I could take a conciliatory role in various situations and I had to organise the X-raying of young people and enabling them to go to Switzerland for treatment. I first had to go to Switzerland and negotiate through the auspices of a Jewish humanitarian organisation with Swiss officials for these people to be allowed to enter for treatment in Davos, which was being paid for by this Swiss Organisation and other Agencies. It was one of the first times in my life that I realised what it was like to argue for life and to be confronted with cynicism and coldness and it was very hard and I was told that, yes, a few could come. They had to be well enough to be treated, which was fair.

BL: Was this mostly for typhoid?

HB: Tuberculosis. It was in the sanatorium in Davos. That was the arrangement. They were to be treated for tuberculosis. It was rife. People were dying of typhoid and typhus. So everybody felt, lets try and get them to Switzerland because there was no treatment for them in Germany. And so I had to negotiate with the Swiss who told me they would have to return to Germany once they were treated. Interesting. There was a small handful, I have pictures of them. You can have them, or see them, of the people in the train. I had to negotiate with the British Military Government for permits. People could not travel. They had to remain where they were.

Tape 1: 48 minutes 0 second

They would not get food or not get counted if they did not stay put. I had to negotiate constantly for travel, for permits and then finally with UNRA and Military Government for a Red Cross train to come into Germany and take them into Switzerland for treatment. And the pictures show a very happy group going off to Switzerland, but right up until the end I was not sure the train would be allowed to leave because I was one permit short. I had slipped on one particular permit regarding the train and I was told quite categorically that it was my responsibility and that there was no guarantee that the train would go. So right up until the train was going, I was on tenterhooks whether that train was actually going. And that feeling was one of the few times I felt a real sense of achievement, honestly, when that train shunted out of that station which had been bombed and was hardly standing. You can see the photographs of these young people. It was pointless to say that I was happy there but I had a great sense of purpose when I was there, of engagement and involvement though people were very angry with us. And I also noticed how attitudes changed.

BL: You said people were angry?

HB: They were angry because they had to stay behind barbed wire. They stayed in Belsen, they stayed in Kaunitz. Yes, they wanted to go elsewhere. They mainly wanted to come here. They wanted to go to the UK and to America at that time but the doors were closed in the main, and very few people were able to leave and they were angry. Our job was to try to empower people and indeed, I think we were reasonably successful in doing that. Not that they could not do it themselves. But with the help of workshops and the theatre and the committees that were established for them to have their own spokespeople and kind of things that promotes some kind of creative survival we could help people to have their own voice and make their own demands. Then they became a nuisance and eventually a scapegoat and I saw compassion die as people became demanding and wanting to get out of that situation. So when I came back to this country I was disappointed by the response I got. I was asked to give a number of talks, mostly to Jewish audiences, about the work that was being done and about the displaced people whose names had been changed from victims and survivors to DPs, Displaced Persons, rather like asylum seekers today.

Tape 1: 52 minutes 0 second

They were a kind of commodity rather than individual people of flesh and blood. They had become DPs and I began to talk. I remember going to a theatre in the East End of London to try and talk to people to try and raise money because it was all a voluntary organisation etc., and I was very disappointed. I thought to myself, "Maybe I don't speak well, maybe I can't express myself". But it wasn't that at all. It was the face of denial, the face of guilt, not being able to do something., not being able to face the true horror, and facing what I

faced which was a kind of survivor's guilt, really, of having survived and done nothing and I found it quite unbearable. I found the British public on the whole, blunted by war had one kind of motive and that was to get on with life, to put the past behind you. Returning soldiers were not encouraged to speak about their experiences. So by the time the 723 children arrived in this country from, at that time I think mainly from Czechoslovakia but they had all been in the concentration camps, Auschwitz, slave labour camps, death marches, they had seen their siblings and their parents killed, they were orphans. By the time they were allowed to enter Britain, the feeling was quite entrenched that we must get on with out lives. The small committee that was established to look after them was in difficulty. Its resources were limited. It was set up to establish and help the rehabilitation of these young people. But I think, in a way perhaps, they had no alternative. They slipped into the mood and reflected the mood of the time, which was: get the young people started again, get back into life, get on with life. And we were successful, I believe, in helping the young people to study up to a point, go to school, to be apprenticed, to find jobs.

BL: What was your official role?

HB: I was a case worker for this group, one of the case workers for quite a large number, and I will tell you a story in a moment about denial. But my job was to look after their general well being, their training, their accommodation, their health but not so much their inner world. Although I was being trained at the time by the director of the organisation who was a practising psychoanalyst, the message of the day was: don't lift the lid, it is too soon, people are not ready. People are never ready in that sense. Each one is an individual. Each one who draws a picture of their home or an animal or their mother is telling you something. And I don't think that we, whilst we did a fantastic job, and I believe the people who worked with me in the early days did a remarkable job working with the young people, I don't think that we addressed their losses and their anger sufficiently or even at all. And you do pay a price for that.

Tape 1: 56 minutes 32 seconds

When I look at their wives today and the second generation, though 'the boys' as they have always been called - although there were girls amongst them - have done remarkable things, achieved so much and in social terms they have succeeded, I think there was a price to pay in terms of personal relationships and I wished that we had addressed loss, grieving and anger more than we did. In the early days the young people were isolated from the public as a whole and they resented that. They were in hostels in the country and latterly they have told me they felt that - now some of course are in their 70's and 80's - but they tell me that they felt that this was because there was a fear that if they were exposed to others, those others would feel contaminated. In the work I do today with present day survivors of atrocity and torture, we haven't understood sufficiently that component about peoples' fear of real atrocity and horror and torture and loss, and that there is that sense of: don't come too close because we will feel in some way contaminated. There is a collusion then between the people who can't tell easily, can't speak easily of what they are suffering and those people who cannot hear, and that is the price that society and the people pay for not being able to address the real effects.

Tape 1: 59 minutes 0 second

TAPE 2

Tape 2: 0 minute 15 seconds

BL: You were talking about your work with 'the boys'.

HB: Yes there was one story I want to tell because I had spoken about the climate of the day in describing it as getting on with your life and not dwelling on the past but it is deeper than that. There was a climate of denial, denial of the horror and loss and it was particularly profound when I was dealing with the outside world in relation to 'the boys'. There was one very brilliant young boy. He was incredibly bright. He is now a well-known professor I believe, of chemistry in Canada. I was to try to get him accepted in a well-known school in North London. In order to do that, I had to take him with his work before a group of headmasters. It was like a committee of headmasters who was going to interview us. We were interviewed and he was questioned and his work was reviewed and they asked me to explain a little bit about his background which I did. And in doing so, I had to tell them that of course, he had been in the camps and I explained what that was all about and I said that obviously his schooling had been severely interrupted and we had to accept that there were several years if not more of no schooling. And the Chair of the headmasters said, "But didn't they give them books to read?" Now everybody knew about the concentration camps if they wanted to. There had been quite a lot of publicity at the end of the war about the camps, films, Pathe News, all this sort of thing. It was difficult not to know that they were in the main extermination camps. Most people knew that there had been gas chambers etc. so the question about giving them books to read was interesting. I found this was rather an extreme example but I found it a lot when I was going to ask people, or ask employers if they would take an apprentice and so on, and this applied to the Jewish community I have to say in many cases, as much as anyone else. I found an element of denial of their suffering and the need for very careful and special attention. That did not happen.

BL: But he managed to get into the school?

HB: He did get into the school. He put up a very good show and is very bright. I would have been surprised if he didn't but I never forgot the question.

Tape 2: 4 minutes 6 seconds

BL: Did you have any contact with refugees who had actually come in the 30s?

HB: From Middle Europe?

BL: In these special circumstances, how did they react to you?

HB: I think it was very difficult for the refugees who had come from middle Europe before the war because many of them of course had lost close relatives in the ways that I was describing if I was speaking about, say, 'the boys'. They would have known that their families had been in concentration camps and died there. The refugees who had come- and this is my experience- before the war from Nazi Germany had learned to keep their heads down. There had been so much hostility towards them and misunderstanding about their background. The Dunera Star was an extreme example of not being able to differentiate between a Nazi German and a German Jewish refugee fleeing from persecution. There was

a lot of public hostility towards them and it is understandable that their way of coping, their coping mechanism was to draw down the hatches and get on.

BL: Was that your experience?

HB: Yes

BL: Did you have any contact with the AJR at all?

HB: Not at that stage, no I didn't. I was so very busy with 'the boys' and 'the girls'. I met people along the way,. I was still giving talks if I could. There was a feeling of: please don't tell us it is too difficult to hear. That is understandable. But for 'the boys' it was difficult and they are full of stories about the climate of denial.

BL: What happened to your private life?

HB: Well, when I came back from Germany in '47, I had some kind of reaction. I could not find a group of people who could understand any more than 'the boys' could find a group to understand. I could not find this group of people who could understand what I had seen and what I had heard. I was the contaminating force if you like, with the knowledge and information that I had, so I clammed up and didn't say very much and I found myself in a difficult place. I went to live with my husband to be and then we married.

TAPE 2

Tape 2: 0 minute 8 seconds

HB: It was, I think, a meeting of two people who found it difficult to communicate with the outside world, really, and who needed each other to somehow climb out of the pit of our distress. And that is what we did. But I have to say that my husband was a very depressed person who could not speak about his experiences over time and it was a difficulty in the marriage. The degree of his depression was hard. Eventually, after about ten years, we did separate. We had helped each other enormously through our own personal rehabilitation. Both of us had done that. But I think that in times like that you reach a point and I don't think this is platitudinous; I do believe it to be so that you need to go your own particular ways. You have helped each other enormously to resolve certain problems, even practical problems like work and all kinds of things and I think it was the right thing that we did. But you know, when you separate, when it is the right thing to do, when you are not angry, it is much easier to separate and divorce. When you are angry with each other that's when it is difficult. We were not particularly angry with each other. We were sad and it was hard, but several years later my husband married again and he began to flourish and I think his later years were very much happier. I was in some ways still a reminder of that very difficult period of our lives, of Germany, of the violence, of the death of his father. I was the container really, having been in Germany, of all that information and I think that was a problem and it was difficult. I worked with 'the boys' and I continued to work with them and it was difficult for him. I think later when he married again, he started a new life. He became a counsellor as well as carrying on with his work but I think the container for the memory was removed to some extent and that released me and I began to move on. I don't like that phrase, 'move on'. I began to develop my own particular way of working with

survivors at present day tragedies. After having several hospital posts, I joined Amnesty International finally when I was able to understand that I could not enjoy hating one particular nation and one particular people and putting all my...

Tape 2: 12 minutes 40 seconds

I think it sounds trite now but I think a lot of us do it. We project our anger and miseries about the outside world onto one particular group of people. And I was able to do that as far as the Germans were concerned because I had seen and I had understood it, I believed, and I hated the Germans and I never wanted to go to Germany again. It was when I began to understand what the French were doing in the war of liberation in Algeria, that they were torturing and that it was actually being sanctioned by the generals at the time and it was also the understanding that atrocities, torture, killings, genocide goes on elsewhere in a different form, I realized that you must not make comparisons. I have never made comparisons between one tragedy and another. It doesn't belittle what has happened to the Jewish people or the Holocaust. It doesn't belittle them at all to be working with people from Ruanda or people from Bosnia or Kosovo or with Turkish Kurds whose backgrounds are sometimes not very dissimilar. I have a great affinity with the Kurdish people because of the similarities sometimes with the persecution of the Jews. So I went into Amnesty International in that spirit and with that understanding and I grew in that organisation. It is an organisation like all organisations with many faults and there is nothing as difficult as human rights workers, a very difficult brood of people, I can tell you. But I learned a lot and it was whilst I was working with Amnesty that in the early 1970s a group of health workers, three of us, actually, set up the first medical group in the British Section of Amnesty International with a view to researching the world wide practice of torture. Torture I find particularly terrible and abhorrent. It is a dreadful crime to take a person and destroy them whilst keeping them alive. I had seen and read and heard so much in Amnesty that it seemed logical to set up a group to concentrate on the subject which is what we did. May I say we met, once we started this work in order to gain support for our work from the caring and medical professions in this country, we met denial and the same kind of arguments.

Tape 2: 16 minutes 28 seconds

People would say things like, "But surely they must have done something very dreadful to have been tortured like that". It took me back to the time in Germany where a British officer had said to me in terrible despair on surveying a group of starving people who had walked back from Poland, having been set upon when they returned and of course they had come back into Germany and were illegal and didn't have their passes and therefore couldn't have food, and so he in desperation - I was trying hard to persuade him to do something - and he turned to me and said, "My God these people must have done something very terrible to have suffered like this". And so it was that years later, even doctors would say, "What did they do to be tortured like this?", which is of course so nonsensical when torture is universally outlawed and the facts are well known. So we ploughed on and our numbers increased. Our work became recognised but it took many, many years for this to happen. Our doctors and forensic pathologists, surgeons, therapist and others became quite proficient in the taking of testimony and documenting evidence of torture. Our doctors were sent on missions abroad and their documentation was submitted to the professional bodies in this country and to the United Nations in the UN raconteur on torture. But of course while they were proficient in documenting and in understanding the

severity of what they were looking at, the monumental nature of torture and its effects on an individual and their family, they could not treat. And coinciding with the recognition of that came requests from people in this country for us to look after people who lived here who had suffered torture. And so in 1985... It is interesting because one doctor said to me at the time, "I have a group of Chilean exiles living in South London and they have all been tortured. I haven't got the time to address the variety of physical and psychological injuries. I haven't got the time to look at the effect on their families and the next generation, I haven't got the time to look at the broken marriages through torture or listen to the children who couldn't be heard. I haven't got the time to listen to the silences." And if we think about what he said he was talking about Holocaust survivors as well. Because that is exactly what I had found among Holocaust survivors and the young people who came from the camps, 'the boys'.

Tape 2: 20 minutes 0 second

So we set up the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture at the end of 1985 and reciting the usual things we have seen, over 35000 people from over 91 different countries whose experiences may have been as recent as yesterday or as long ago as the Second World War. What I find important, speaking from my Jewish background is to make links between people. Links between the British former Far East prisoners of war, the Northumberland Fusiliers who have probably never seen or hardly, when they went to war, knew a Jewish person and people from Northern Ireland who we are treating as well who suffered terrible atrocities and violence, knee capping torture killing of their relatives. I think the reason why I am often asked to go to Northern Ireland and to speak to them in those small enclosed tight communities where it is so difficult to escape violence, I think the reason people ask me to do that is because of my background in the Holocaust. Because I can speak not about the families in Northern Ireland, because it is too painful for people to hear, but the families of the Holocaust who suffered long term effects. So the way that I make links is slow but it is through others. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Looking at the world today that is something I work towards. Looking at the effects of torture and trauma, it is very destructive and you can't talk about cure you can only talk about releasing people from some sort of bondage through which the torturer ensures that his work will last over time. And with Holocaust survivors and the long history of persecution it doesn't go away. People carry a tremendous burden with them as do the people I am treating today and whilst... what can I actually say? I don't think I can actually say more than that.

BL: Do you actually treat Holocaust survivors at the Foundation as well?

HB: People don't come to us so much as Holocaust survivors but I have worked myself, personally with Holocaust survivors and with other people who suffered in the Second World War. With people who were in forced labour and who came to this country, Polish people sometimes and others, but I do sometimes work with Holocaust survivors.

BL: The emphasis is on the individual, on recovery rather than on reconciliation. Is that correct?

HB: Reconciliation is a difficult word, reconciliation and forgiveness, which is what people talk about.

Tape 2: 24 minutes 0 second

With my husband's story there was reconciliation at the end of his life, after I took his archives to Germany many years after we had separated. When from that act various young Germans came to visit him, to talk to him, to learn from him, there was reconciliation. Because that was some sort of reconciliation through the second generation coming to him, making a film, recording his story about the Kristallnacht and his life, but it took a lifetime. There was no sense of reconciliation in his middle years, or wanting even to think about a reconciliation. So reconciliation doesn't come cheaply or quickly in my view. It's about making links with other people and getting recognition. Recognition and acknowledgement of what has happened is very, very important. With torture survivors today there is very little will to recognise what happened to them. When they come to a host country they are asylum seekers and so expressions that were used in the 1930s against the German Jewish refugees are used against them: that they will affect the economy, they are bogus they should not be here etc. So my work is about reconciling with the past, with their broken bodies, with their nightmares. It is about understanding and re-asserting themselves and reclaiming the skills and that which remains that is good in them because persecution and torture doesn't necessarily produce good people. Why should it? It is a myth to think that because people have been persecuted and hurt that they are going to be naturally calm and good people and that they won't do the same to others. That isn't true. So that is where part of my work lies: in looking at anger and their sense of projection on to others for what they have suffered. So it is a different kind of reconciliation that I believe I am working with. It is reconciling the self first and then looking at the outside world.

BL: For you making those links is more it difficult for, lets say, institutions and other people actually to make those links?

HB: It is difficult. People cling to the only identity they have and in a way the world has pushed them into that identity. You are a Holocaust survivor and we didn't want to recognise you at first. And somehow, somehow again there is a collusion that somehow you are pushed into very often. You are continuously pushed into and it is difficult for people to move away and into something else and it does take a lifetime. Maybe we have to put our energies... As I said to that rather dreadful psychologist when we all sat in a row in Bloomsbury talking about what we were going to do in Germany, "Maybe we must concentrate on the next generation". And in some cases that is all we can do. There is a movement here which has been criticised, a movement that has been criticised elsewhere as well, to bring together second generation Holocaust survivors and second generation children of perpetrators and it has in many cases brought reconciliation and understanding. My son, who went to one of the meetings, said to me on one occasion, "You know it is easier to be the son of a victim than to be the son of a perpetrator." So I don't know if you want to ask me about messages or what.

BL: Speaking of the next generation, what do you think you have learned working with survivors and victims?

HB: I think that survivors whoever they are, whether they are from Turkey, Somalia or the Holocaust, British former Far East prisoners of war, can project on to their children something to do with their suffering, unwittingly. It may be about eating everything that is on your plate because you were starving, not throwing away a cigarette half smoked because you fought and longed for cigarettes when you were incarcerated. It could be a

number of things but I think it is important for survivors and their children to come together and for these things to be brought out into the open. And I attempt to do this in my work today with present day survivors.

Tape 2: 30 minutes 18 seconds.

It is not easy. There is anger floating and flying around but that is good because what happened to so many people from the past was that they had to internalise their anger. I think, bring people together, those that want to and can, and speak about those difficulties and those impositions and for the younger person to understand why. I have done it myself. I have imposed the Second World War and suffering on my children, and the Holocaust on them from time to time without using words. To speak about difficult things is the only way to get through, and to open up things is the only way, really, to save generation after generation.

BL: You have mentioned the importance of the Jewish experience, Jewish identity. How do you see it as an influence on your life and your work?

BL: I think it is my Jewish identity that has taken me all along through this, which is odd as I am not a religious person and I don't go to synagogue but I have a very strong sense of Jewish identity, of being Jewish and what that has taught me. I don't have a sense of achievement and I don't have a sense that I set out in 1945 on a path to do this that and the other because somehow it did not happen like that. But I do think that it is my Jewish identity and my horror of persecution and violence that has brought me to where I am today. I do believe that and whilst I don't always live as a Jew, I hope to die as a Jew. I don't know if it makes sense. I mean I don't believe as a Jew, I don't go to synagogue. I don't mix purely in Jewish circles although many of them are. What do I mean about dying as a Jew? I don't wish my identity not to be recognised when I die, that is what I mean. I wish to be known as a Jew. One doesn't always think these things through.

BL: Do you feel that being Jewish in Britain today; one has a responsibility towards today's refugees?

Tape 2: 34 minutes 30 seconds

HB: Oh I do, that is something that preoccupies me a lot. This house that we are sitting in today was the house of a German Jewish doctor or a doctor from Middle Europe. I am not quite sure exactly where he came from but he came here as a refugee and before he died, he and his family had heard a radio interview about our gardening project for our asylum seekers and refugees and our allotment scheme. We have allotments for people so that they can be close to mother earth because many of the people who have to the Foundation were farmers and had smallholdings and are now in the concrete jungle. So we thought that if we had allotments and garden schemes this would be a good thing to develop. This was a radio interview and they heard this and after he died, they approached us and said we could have this house as it were 'on loan'. That means that if they have to take it back they will but we can have it on loan. We have had it now for at least five or six years and the garden which is a splendid place, has been made into a garden of remembrance where people, so to speak, bury their dead. We have a lot of ceremony and prayers and ritual in the garden where a bush or a flower is planted or something is created in memory of somebody who they have not been able to bury. Burying the dead is such an important procedure. It is so

important it is part of resolution, I think. And for some of the young people, when we go back to 'the boys' who should have buried their dead, maybe they have been able to do that. There has been much ceremony since then, much recognition but for our people today, the asylum seekers, there isn't and there is very repressive asylum legislation. I have people who are homeless and in fear of being deported back to the country that tortured them. I know of bad decisions having been made, in a case that appears to me perfectly obvious that the person has been persecuted and tortured and where I may have treated them over forty different sessions. And I know what I am talking about. I do believe that the Jewish community and many have helped enormously in helping us in many different ways, with clothes, with support for the Medical Foundation.

Tape 2: 38 minutes 20 seconds

Many have shown their sense of responsibility and awareness and we are immensely grateful, and I always tell the person where it has come from and why it has been given to make that link. And I hope that the people who have given realise that because it is important to be able to say, "This is from somebody you don't know, you have no idea and will probably never meet them but they care sufficiently through their own suffering and background to want to give something, however small."

BL: So in a way, this house here because of its connection is symbolic?

HB: Yes absolutely the house is symbolic. It is a great symbol and a lovely place.

BL: Is there anything else you would like to add or any questions that I have not asked you?

HB: I don't think so. I think we have covered it. If you can think of anything, I will be very happy to answer it. I have been very moved by being interviewed.

BL: Well, thank you very much.

Tape 2: 39 minutes 30 seconds