

IMPORTANT

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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Forename:	Meta
Interviewee Sex:	Female
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Interviewee POB:	Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Date of Interview:	26 March 2018
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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV219
NAME: Meta Roseneil
DATE: 26th March 2018
LOCATION: London
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Jana Buresova

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

The interviewee is Meta Roseneil in London on the 26th of March 2018.

Meta, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to this interview for the AJR Refugee Voices Project. Could we start please by your saying something about your family background, your parents, where they were born, what they did?

If you can speak up a bit, it would help, because I can't see your face and sometimes my hearing isn't a hundred percent. What can I do?

Well I was- came from Frankfurt am Main, and in '39 I was eight years old. So really all this mainly affects my parents more than myself cause I was a child. It was my father and my mother and my brother. His name was Wolfgang, although when he came to England he called himself Walter. And we came on the 19th of May 1939.

Could we go back to your parents, where they were from and when they were born?

Sorry?

Could we go back to your parents-?

And when they were born?

Something about your family, your parents, when they were born and where.

Well my father was born in Czestochowa in Poland while it belonged to the Russians. So we were Russian alien- we were friendly aliens when we came to England cause Russia was on our side. And he was born in 1897, I believe. And he came to Frankfurt in 1918, because he was in danger of being called up to the Russian Army and that was nemesis for a Jewish person. And then he- he was invited to my grandparents' home. And they were called Gustav and Fanny Schwarz – S C H W A R Z - no 'T'. And they had a carpet store in Frankfurt. Did very well. And my mother was the second daughter - Ella. And she was born on the 19th of June 2000- 1901- 1901. She had an older sister called Meta who sadly died in 1919 at the age of eighteen of a brain tumour. My mother was a couple of years younger and she always said that if she had a daughter, the name would come back. And that's why I'm proud to have the name 'Meta'. In Germany it's pronounced [with short 'eh'] Meta. So when we came to England it was a case of saying [with long 'ee'] Meta or [with short 'e'] Meta, and people get confused. They sometimes say [with short 'eh'] Meta. But I- I like my name - [with long 'ee'] Meta.

And when did your parents meet and where?

You've got to speak up.

When did your parent meet and where?

[0:03:06]

Where did they live? Well, we lived in- the last address we had in Frankfurt was Baumweg- 52 Baumweg - which was a block of flats. And when I went back in 2005 I went down that road and it looked so different with all the cars. Because- obviously there were no cars in my day, or if there were, there were one or two. And it was quite strange to see the building there. I did remember it. And I wanted to go and see my grandparents' home, but the Allies had done a jolly good job. And Reuterweg where they lived, the number – it stopped at 102

and they were 164, so their house was still there, but the- the road was curtailed. I'm glad the Allies did a jolly good job on Germany- on Frankfurt.

What are your own memories of Frankfurt?

I liked Frankfurt. We- we used to go to the Main, the river. And we used to go out for tea occasionally to little places in the area. We had a jolly good time. We were happy until the Nazis came. And my mother always said it was a lovely city. She went to the opera, she went to the theatre. She- they had- led a very cultured life until 1933 when all the... prohibitions came about. And of course it got gradually worse and worse.

What are your memories about different incidents in Frankfurt? Do you have any?

Well, on the night of the Crystal Night we'd gone to my grandparents for supper. I think it was a Friday night. And there were a lot of Germans – Gestapo around. And it was quite unpleasant. But I mean, as a little girl you go with your mum and dad and you- you feel safe, don't you? But my father went into Buchenwald after *Kristall* night. They came on the Saturday to pick him up. And it was- we were lucky - it was a policeman and- and he was not a Nazi, but he had to do his job. And I was told to say that, "*Papa is not zu Hause.*" [Papa is not at home] But of course they said, "*Wo ist Mutti?*" And my- they said- he said to my mother, "If I go away without him, they'll send the Gestapo or- or the SS and they'll trash your flat. So you'd better just let me do my job." He was very sad. He was a lovely man. He gave my father good advice. He said, "Take off your Sabbath suit," - cause it was a Saturday – "put on warm underwear. Don't take a big case." Some of the Germans- Jews, you know, didn't know- they took big cases. "You'll be subjected to lots of unpleasantness. Take a little attaché case - essentials. And give your wife power of attorney so she has access to your money." He was a wonderful man. And the last thing he said was, "I won't embarrass you in front of the neighbours. I won't walk with you as though you're under a- arrest. I'll walk behind you." That was ver- he was not a Nazi. He- I don't think he survived the war.

[0:06:16]

And what did you and your mother do while your father was in Buchenwald?

Well, my other immediately set about trying to find out how to get him out. And she discovered- she didn't sit on her- on her hands. She was marvellous. She discovered that you could get out of the country if you had a visa. But nobody wanted the Jews. Everywhere there was unemployment. But eventually she found that the Panama Consulate was willing to give a visa. You had to pay for the passage to Buenos Aires, wherever. And in fact her mother who was very, very German- Jewish and very, very religious, Jewish woman, but very German- I think we go back to 1100, I don't exactly know. She said to my mother, "Why are you sending him to Panama? It's hot there!" [laughs] And my mother said, "It depends where it's hotter." And she had a lot of trouble, my mum to go and get all the legal papers. And, in those days photocopying wasn't so easy as it is today. So - but she did it. And she had two little children - my brother was ten and I was eight - to take with her every day. But eventually she got the authority. She sent it into the camp. And to this day, I wish we'd kept the reply we had from the camp. They said he would be released on a certain date - if he was still alive. We should have kept that, but I think we threw it away in disgust. And he did come back. I wrote a note about his homecoming and- in fact, it was the day that Göring was visiting Frankfurt. So again, it was a bit of a prickly situation. Because by seven o'clock all the Jews had to be off the- off the streets. And my mother was really worried sick that he- they would just send him at the time and he would be in the street. But in the event he came earlier in the day. And he looked terrible: gaunt, had his hair cut short and all that. And he had some terrible memories. And then he had to- there was no way of going to Panama. That was a ploy. And then he had to- he remembered that a...a- a vague cousin had gone to England some time in the past. And he wrote to his brother in Czestochowa - they never survived. And he said, "Can you give me the address of this cousin?" And he did. It was in Bromley, Kent. And then he had to start asking him to give us a visa. And the old man wasn't keen. He had a family of four. But he was quite well off. Anyway, one of his sons, thank goodness, was public spirited and he said, "Father, you've got to take those child- people out, or they're gonna get killed." So he- my father came over. And then he had to say, "Can I- can I bring my wife and two children?" And that was another little tussle. But eventually he did what was necessary and we came over. We stayed with them for about six weeks, eight weeks and then they put us in a- in a one-room flat in - well, couple of rooms in the East End of London.

[0:09:15]

Could I interrupt you Meta? Could we go back to your father...?

Yes.

...for a moment? How long was he...?

How old was he?

No, how- how long was he in Buchenwald?

Six weeks. I think it's marvellous that she got him out after six weeks.

And how- did he speak of his experiences?

He didn't really want to, but he had terrible dreams. My mother said he would scream at- sometimes at night. Yes. He didn't- he did once or twice say things that were very unpleasant and- it wasn't a death camp, but it wasn't a picnic either. He was in the- he was in- there were two divisions. There was what they called the *Judenhaufen* [anti-Semitic term]. They just put the Jews- left them to rot as it were, with nothing. But my father was in the- now what can I call them? He was drafted, as it were. So every day they got a- their uniform and they got a certain amount of ration and food. But they had roll call every morning at six, five o'clock in the morning. And if somebody was dead during the night, then they had to bring him out. And then they were called in the roll call. You've seen that on TV. Yeah. And so that was- he was very bad. But where my uncle was, in the other- he didn't- he nearly- he hardly survived but he had frostbite in the long run. And it took longer for my grandmother to get him out because she didn't believe in Panama.

And when did he go into- when was he taken to Buchenwald?

Sorry?

When was he taken to Buchenwald?

Well, Kristallnacht was on the 10th of November... and they came for him on the 12th, on the Saturday, yeah.

[0:10:56]

And how did your mother feel? Did she talk to you about her anxiety? Were you aware of the situation as it happened?

Well, when you're eight years old, things just sort of develop around you. I think my brother was probably, at ten years, a bit more involved than I was. Yeah. I didn't feel scared or anything. Life seemed to go on as usual. My mother had the worry. I always feel she had- she worked very hard. She was a very quiet person; my father was the boss. But when it came to the crunch, she really got up and did her thing. I have great admiration for what she did.

How would you describe your family as a Jewish family? Was it Orthodox?

Yes, we were very Orthodox. Very Orthodox indeed. And we didn't do anything on the Sabbath that wasn't permitted. We went to synagogue regularly. And- well, we had a very pleasant life. We had- I can't remember that there was any strife or anything like that. It was all just an ordinary happy little family.

Were you harassed at all by the Nazi authorities while your father was in Buchenwald?

No...no.

You- or were you required to move?

No- no. We stayed where we were. My mother had- did get a lot of stick when she went into the various buildings. They could be very rude and demanding and things. It must have been very hard for her. She didn't comment very much but I know it must have been very hard for her. Yeah.

And what about food? How did you live during that time?

[0:12:40]

I'd just started school. I was six- I was eight years old. I had started school. I was only at school for about a year. And then of course - the schools closed. I don't really remember what happened after that. I probably didn't go to school anymore. I can't remember that. But I remember the school when we had little blackboards and- and a what is called a *Griffel* [slate pencil]. It's a little thing that you write on - a slate. I don't know whether they had-

A crayon?

It wasn't a crayon; it was a pencil with the-

Chalk?

Yeah. That's right. Yeah- yeah. That was good. I liked school.

Was it a Jewish school?

Yes.

And did your brother go to the same school?

Yes, yes. Yes. And a lot of my mother's relations were teachers there.

Did that help you or- or was it a problem?

No, I don't think so. As far as I was concerned it was no problem. I don't know whether my brother had problems. I don't know. He never commented about it.

In terms of leaving Frankfurt, could we go back to that now, and the process of gradually leaving?

[0:14:00]

Well, my mother had to- do a lot of packing and we were allowed to take goods and chattels. I think only a pound or ten mark or something in money. In currency, we were allowed very little money. But we could take all our bits and pieces, you know, sheets and towels and bedding and such-like. Certain things she had to sell, obviously – beds and things like that. And there was something called a *Krankenkasse* [health insurance provider] like a national health. And I think you had something on credit, where you paid something in advance. Anyway, a lot of people left without settling her debts. But my mother made sure that she settled the debt that she had with the *Krankenkasse*. So that was a good thing. Other than that, I don't remember much- very much of a problem at all.

And how did you feel about the prospect of leaving?

Didn't mean very much to me. On the way over, we went from Flushing [Vlissingen, Netherlands] to- to Harwich. My mother said I, I said to her, "When are we going home?" [laughs] The innocence of an eight-year-old. That's all I remember. And I don't remember learning English, but it just- you know, when we came over to England we went to school. And there was one lady, one little girl of twelve put in charge of me. But I just learnt English as I went along.

So what- what was the name of the person who actually sent you the guarantee, sent your mother?

Oh, his name Kranz - K R A N Z. Can't remember his first name. K R A N Z, yes.

And you went to East London, you said?

Yes, we went- we went to Parfett Street first of all, which was next door to a stable. That was horrendous. And there were the four of us in one bed. I was at the bottom like a little bolster. But my father was very enterprising; he would go out and wash dishes or serve at tables. I don't know- whatever. He- he- there was no employment. You couldn't take employment officially. And within a couple of weeks he got us into another place in Christian Street. Two rooms. But it gradually- as the war progressed - I don't know how my father did it, but - we got another room. And eventually, it- it got much easier.

[0:16:28]

And what did your mother do?

She didn't work. She looked after us, yes. She was a housewife. And when she was a young woman, she was a nurse.

And what was your first reaction to Britain and- you and your brother?

Sorry?

What was your first reaction when you left Frankfurt and came to Britain? And were you harassed on the journey?

Was I what?

Were there problems on the journey?

No, no, no – no. Oh, I think there- I vaguely seem to remember that when we crossed the border a Nazi official said, "Are you thinking of coming back?" [laughs] Oh dear- my mother said, "No."

And were you met in London, or...?

I can't remember. I can't- oh yes, when- when we came to join my father, my father was in Liverpool Street to meet us. That's right. Yes. And that was just- or, it was in May- he came over in February and then unfortunately I, I became- came ill with scarlet fever. And they have a six week... period when you can't go- move out of the, you know, the hospital.

Quarantine,

[0:17:55]

Exactly. Quarantine. And my father kept saying, “Why are you waiting to come over? War will start and you won’t get across.” And my mother didn’t want to write and say that I was ill. Anyway it was well- by the time on the 19th of May I was well enough to come over.

And did you know any English before you came?

No. My mother had learnt English at school. And she did very well. She was thirty-nine years old. It’s amazing how she took to it. She really did; she was very good. And during the war, when she spoke with an accent, although her English was good, she was very ashamed of being German. And people said, “Are you-? Where are you from?” She said, “I’ve come from Manchester.” [laughs]

Yes. Because it must have been very difficult in Britain being a German in wartime, because people didn’t necessarily distinguish between Jewish people who’d suffered - and the Nazis.

We were in very good terms with the Cockney people around us. Very good terms. And in fact they used to come and light our fires on a Saturday, because we’re not allowed to do that. And no, we had very good relationship with our non-Jewish neighbours. They were very good to us.

Which synagogue did you go to in East London?

In East- we went to Duke’s Place until it got bombed. And there was a wonderful cantor there called Koussevitzky. He was well-known, over the years. Anyway, it was bombed in ‘43. And after that we went to the Talmud Torah in Christian Street, which is now a mosque.

Yes. Did you feel that it was a strong Jewish community then?

Sorry?

Did you feel it was a strong Jewish community?

Where?

In East London, at that time?

[0:20:00]

Well again, you know, we weren't around for long cause my brother and I were evacuated. In September, all the children, with their little labels, were sent off to the country. And we- the first time we went off to a place called Chatteris in Cambridgeshire. And we stayed there I think only six months. It was what they called the 'phony war'. Nothing was happening. And then my parents decided they'd bring us back, because it was a phony war. Obviously they missed their children. But gradually, when the war got worse, we were sent off again. And this time my mother came with us to a place called Bishop Sutton in Somerset, quite near Bristol. And that's where my mother learnt her English. She was very good. The people there were also very friendly and very pleasant. And we were there I think for thirteen months. And my father was on his own in London.

What- what work did he do at that time?

My father? Whatever came his way. Whatever came his way. I don't know the details.

When you went back to London from Chatteris-

Yes?

Did you ever go to the Yiddish theatre?

Yes, yes. We went to the- my father was very friendly with a poet called Stencl. A.N. [Abraham Nahum] Stencl. He was very well known. And he actually came from the same little shtetl that my father came from in Poland. So they were old friends. And he met him again when he was in Frankfurt. And then he met up again with him in England. And he used to stand outside the Yiddish theatre, the Grand Palais with his little leaflets, *Loshn und Lebn*.

In Whitechapel?

In Whitechapel, yes. And then as the war progressed actually we went over to the Grand Palais in the middle of the night when the sired sounded and then they had a shelter underneath. I don't know how safe it was. [laughs] So that was during the war, yeah.

[0:22:14]

And did lots of people go? Was it still very popular the Yiddish theatre then?

Oh, yes, yes. And we- managed to understand the German bits of Yiddish. Cause Yiddish is a- is a cocktail of Polish and Russian and various other languages. But my mother managed to follow it. Of course we were brought up on *Hochdeutsch* [*High German*]. We weren't allowed to speak a language like Yiddish.

And did you go- there was another small Yiddish theatre-

There was another one. We never went to the Pavilion. I know there was some- yes, we didn't go to that one for some reason. I think it was probably too far, I don't know. It's on the other side of- Stamford Hill. Yeah. We didn't go to that one.

And when you went to your school, once you were evacuated, did you stay with a foster family or were you with your mother?

We stayed with a family with my mother. My brother and I and my mother, we were billeted with this lovely family in Bishop Sutton, yeah. I can tell you a story about what happened actually. The husband of the lady who was- to whom we were billeted, he'd actually had a nervous breakdown. So he was in a mental hospital. I don't know what caused it. He had been involved in maintaining the Clifton Bridge, Clifton Suspension Bridge. And eventually he was allowed home one weekend. And my- and he suddenly had a- some- I don't know what happened to him. He'd got a gun and he went into the bedroom and he was ready to shoot, you know, his wife! My mother went in and said, "Give me the gun. Give me the gun." And he did! [laughs] She was quite a hero- a heroine.

[0:24:12]

Absolutely.

Yes. Marvellous. Marvellous.

Yes, I mean, that's very courageous.

Very courageous. Very courageous.

Do you think her nursing training helped?

Sorry?

Do you think her nursing training helped to calm him?

Yes, it's possible- maybe, maybe. That's a possibility. I hadn't thought of that. But she was very good about that. "Give me the gun", she said.

That must have been terrifying for you all.

Well, I think we were still- we were just outside the room. It was an experience, to be quite sure. Yes, yes. She took it in her stride. Marvellous. Yes, she was tremendous. Yes.

Did it- did it make you feel as though you were back in Frankfurt with the Nazis?

Sorry?

Did you feel that you were back in Frankfurt with the Nazis?

No, I don't think I associated it with Germany at all. We were in England by that time. So things were happening on the ground, as it were, here. Yeah.

How did the family cope, living in someone else's house? Especially for your mother who would have been used to being a key figure in her own home?

They had- the lady had four children. And the youngest I think must have been maybe three or four. And my mother became like a little governess to the child. In fact, I told you my [her] name was 'Gonzwa', and they called her 'Gonnie'. And I think the lady of the house was quite happy for my mother to be like a nanny to her youngest daughter. It was a lovely relationship. Very nice. When it became Passover, you know, we have strict rules. We tried to keep it up even at that time. My father brought down various bits of dishes that we used. Separate dishes. And my mother used the range and the lady of the house had her cooker. Somehow we managed to still keep up the religion at that time. I don't know how she coped but she did very well, yeah.

[0:26:26]

In the school, or outside school in general, did you experience any anti-Semitism or-?

I've never personally- I personally never experienced any anti-Semitism myself. I had lots of non-Jewish friends and I never had any problem at all. I think I chose my friends well.

And how quickly did you learn English and to cope with all the schooling in England?

It just came along easily. I love English. I don't know. I really enjoyed it. I did- I wrote essays when I was twelve or thirteen. And once she- once my teacher read one out. So it must have been quite good. Yes. I enjoyed English. I don't remember learning it.

And at what age did you leave school?

I left at fourteen.

And what did you do then?

Well, my father was very good. Most of the people who left at fourteen went into hairdressing or dressmaking or office work. My father was very good. I don't know how he managed it. He sent me to Pitman's College - Commercial College. And I was there till- I was sixteen.

And what did you study there?

It was a commercial- shorthand typing. And I even took up German because I'd never really learnt German as- with grammar and all that kind of thing.

Do you still speak German?

[0:28:06]

I do speak German but the German I speak is a little old-fashioned. They speak a lot of slang in Germany now. But when I went back in 2005 my husband had a mishap. He fell over and broke his hip- he broke his collar bone. So I had to take him to hospital and I had to- I got by with my German. Although of course they speak a lot of English as well. And then I had to find my way back to the hotel. It was a bit of an ordeal really. But anyway, after a week he came out with his arm in a sling. And it was another week of various activities we- and he joined in.

When you went to Pitman's College, was that in London?

Yes, in Southampton Row. The building is still there, but it's called St. Giles now. I don't know what they do- yes. I think languages or something.

And what was your first job? What did you do?

Sorry?

What was your first job?

Say that again?

Your first job?

Oh, my first job! My first job, yes. I'm inclined to stick in a rut, really. I found a job. My father- I went to an employment agency called the 'Sabbath Observance'. That was in

Bloomsbury somewhere. And I went to this firm called A & S Simon in Aldersgate Street. And although I came from the 'Sabbath Observance', I had to have a bit of a tussle with the Jewish man who was in charge. Cause he- he didn't like the sound that occasionally when we have our festivals, they're two days at a time. "Can't you come in on the second day?" [laughs] I had to explain to him, "I can't." You know, you come from the 'Sabbath Observance', the idea is that they should respect what you- so it was a bit of a farce. And I had to leave early on a Friday, in the winter. And he always made a big fuss about it. Anyway, I stuck it out for five years and then I decided – now that would be, I was twenty, twenty-one- I decided I'd go and get another job and I'm not going to take all those days off. My father was not very happy. Only the main ones, the New Year which is in September and the Day of Atonement. He was not very happy. But I said, "I'm not going to do it anymore." And then gradually as the years went on of course and I went to other jobs and I did flexitime and then we had a month's, four week's holiday. I went to the Civil Service eventually, and it didn't apply because I could take time off anyway.

[0:30:52]

Oh, that must have been a big- made you feel much better?

Sorry?

That made you feel much better.

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it was difficult the first few years when you only had a fortnight's holiday.

When did you join the Civil Service?

When did I join the Civil Service? Now what year was that? Let me see. I retired in six- I retired in '93 and I was there for twenty-one years, so where does that take us to? Seventy-one.

My maths are hopeless.

Ninety-three away from twenty one.

I'll work it out later.

Yeah.

And did you feel at home in the Civil Service?

Oh, very much so, yes. Yes. Lovely people. I had various bosses. All very- I had a Jewish boss at one time. He was very nice. Everyone was very nice. Like a little world on its own. And to this day, my last boss still contacts me, once a year. It's very nice, yeah.

Which department were you in?

Department of Employment and my boss was mainly concerned with the Job Centres.

Did you find that satisfying?

Very much so, yes, it was very interesting. But of course I had lots of hobbies. My- you know, I went to the theatre. I had various girlfriends and we went to the theatre. Went to the concerts. I tried to keep up a cultural life.

[0:32:40]

Do you- is that cultural life like the core of your life along with the religion?

Well, I'm not so religious as I used to be, quite honestly. I've relaxed a lot. You know, as you get older you- you think for yourself and I have a different outlook on that now. I mean, my father was very annoyed when I didn't come back- take off the days that I should have done. But eventually he got used to the idea.

Did your mother?

My mother kept everything. She got a lot of comfort from it. She did, yeah. Yeah. She was very observant, very observant.

Some people have said that English Jewry did not do as much as it could have to help refugees.

I don't know. I don't- no, I can't- I can't comment on that. I can't comment. Most people were very nice. When we first went to the East End they couldn't- the, the couple, elderly couple living in the basement of the house where we were living, they couldn't say Mrs. Gonzwa. They just couldn't get their tongue round it. So they called my mum 'Mrs. Samuel' cause my father's name was Samuel. Yeah. But they were nice, they were nice. Yeah. During the war, I must say, rationing - I think sometimes my mother got a little bit cheated. You know, when it's for one egg a week, they would say perhaps, "No, she doesn't know. There were no eggs this week." Things like that. But we didn't make too much of a thing over it.

And when did you meet your husband?

[0:34:28]

When did I meet my husband? He was my brother's friend, so that was very nice. In fact I knew him ten years before we got married. He came into the house with my- with my brother. And- but he was in the process of sorting himself out. He was in partnership with a brother-in-law and that wasn't working out very well. And he was trying to establish his own little factory. He was manufacturing of gadget bags. And there's a sort of rule unless you're established in a, in a good job, you don't get married. So he didn't- we didn't get together until he really got himself sorted out. He had a lovely little factory in Dalston. Dalston Junction. Yeah. And he did very well there.

And when did you marry?

I got married on the 27th of October 1968.

And where?

Pardon?

Where?

[0:35:38]

Oh, Dean Street Synagogue which used to house the Ben Uri Library, the Ben Uri Museum, sorry, Ben Uri Museum. And now it's a theatre.

Because the Ben Uri Art Gallery...

Yes, it's the Ben Uri Art Gallery...do you remember it? Oh, I don't know whether you remember it; it's a long time ago.

It's now near...

Now it's in, in...There's one in Camden Town isn't there? That's the museum. And there's one in St. John's Wood.

But the art gallery is near..

It's in St. John's Wood, I think yes. Yeah.

That's right.

That's right, yeah.

It's very active. Do you go there?

I've been there. I've been there. I go to everything I can go to.

It's a wonderful place.

It is. It is.

And was your husband Orthodox?

No- no. But he went along with whatever I suggested. He was quite accommodating. In certain respects we differed. He wasn't very keen on going to the synagogue. But eventually we- instead of going to an Orthodox synagogue went to something called Masorti, which is called traditional. And that was- I think in America it's called Conservative. And he was a little happier with that, but we didn't- he didn't go very often anyway.

[0:37:06]

And what did your brother do?

Sorry?

What did your brother do?

My father?

Brother-

Oh, my brother. Well it was rather unfortunate with my brother. He was very academically inclined. He, he- he could have been a doctor or somebody like that. But my father was not very much in education. He'd come up the hard way. He- he didn't go to school very much cause there was so much anti-Semitism in Poland. And he never learnt Polish, just Yiddish. And when he came to England, all the professionals as you may know – doctors, lawyers, dentists - weren't allowed to work. So they sent their wives out charring. And my father was appalled. That's not the way to treat your wife. He said, "No, you stay at home with the children. I'll go out and earn the living." So he had a biased view to education. What good did it do them? So when my brother wanted to- the headmistress of our local school in the East End said to my mother, "Send him to higher school. He's got the potential." But my father was anti. He said, "No, he's got to go out and earn a living." So that rather spoilt his life, I think. Because he's put him in a handbag factory and he was never a happy bunny after that. You know? He would have liked to have studied something. He was very good at

languages, but he never had the opportunity. And then the ladies he met, if- if they had more... what can I say? They were- he felt they were better educated than him, officially, he felt- he got a bit of a complex about it. And he always went for non-Jewish girls because they were less demanding. Jewish girls, sadly to say, the first thing they would say to a boy is, "What do you do for a living?" And he didn't want to say he worked in a handbag factory. So- it was a little bit difficult for him.

[0:39:20]

Yeah. And - he's still alive?

No, he died at the age of thirty-nine. And that was in 1967. It was just six weeks after my father.

That must have been a terrible time for you.

That was a bad year. That was a bad year for us, yes. Yeah. Well, the only good thing is that my sister had got married in '64 and she had a little baby, Mark. So that was some consolation. They lived in- in Gant's Hill. So when my- when I got married we moved over here to Buckhurst Hill. And my mother came and had her bedsit and kitchen up here, as well. So she was part of my family here. Yeah.

That must have been a devastating time.

Well, it- it- to lose two people of your family in one year. It was very- it was hard work. I don't know how my mother coped. It was hard work.

Did she ever speak to you about how she...?

Did what?

Did she speak to you about how she felt?

[0:40:33]

She always had stories about her youth. She was lovely. She was a very good- she had terrific recall. And especially poetry- she could quote Schiller and Goethe and all those people. No, she- she loved talking about the past, yes - in a nice way. Yes – yes. So I know- most of the stories I know, I know it through her.

Is that important to you as a link?

Yes. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, yeah. And I must just say I was born on the 28th of August and that was Goethe's birthday. And in Germany he was our Shakespeare, as it were and the flags would come out. And my mother used to say to me in a little joke, "That's for you."
[laughs]

Oh, that's sweet. And was your mother still working when she lived with you?

Sorry?

Did your mother work while she lived with you?

No, she never worked. No, she never worked. No. But she went to classes. [laughs] She was always determined to learn more. Oh, yes. She was always determined to learn more. Oh, yes. Definitely. She went back to- to- first she went to evening classes. And then, when she got a little older she went to day classes. Then she joined the U3A [University of the 3rd Age]. She learnt French. She went up to town, from here, to go- learn the history of London. And in the morning they had a little talk about it; in the afternoon they would go and see it. So she was very enterprising. She - always out and about.

[0:42:02]

And she still went to synagogue?

Oh, yes. Yes...yes.

How did you feel about going back to Germany to visit?

With very mixed feelings. Very mixed feelings. But it took a long time. I was on the list for a long, long time. But I was one of the younger ones, so it took a long time. In 2005 eventually we went. And my husband was allowed to come with me although he was English born. And I- I wouldn't go back again. I would never go back again.

Do you boycott German goods?

No- no, I don't. No.

And have you been to Israel?

Yes, I've been to Israel three times. I've got quite a- a few family members there.

Did you feel a close bond with them or did you feel quite distant?

I felt very much at home in Israel. It was interesting. A little unusual to see the Hebrew I'd been seeing in my prayer book, displayed above shop windows. To see the, the sacred tongue, as it were, used in a secular way. That was very intriguing. I really found that quite interesting.

[0:43:44]

Did it also seem inappropriate to you?

No, no, no! It was- it was amusing actually, more than anything, to see it all. And I said, "I can read it all" - the bakery and all the rest of it. Yes, very interesting- I'd learnt a bit of Ivrit - Hebrew - before I went. Although it wasn't necessary, they all spoke English.

And how close is your family connection?

I haven't got much family at all now. Most of the people that we knew, have passed on. I have got very Orthodox cousins, or second cousins, in Israel. They all have about fourteen

children. And for a little while I kept in touch with them. But I think they- they're getting older and I don't hear from them now. And certainly wouldn't hear from their children.

Would you like to have lived in Israel?

No, no. No. I like England.

And when did you become a British citizen?

That took a little time, because you had to have a guarantor, somebody who was a householder. And I had to wait for my compatriots – my contemporaries, friends - to get to the position of being householders and then they could vouch for me. So it took quite a while. I can't remember what year it was when I became naturalised.

Did it make any emotional difference to you?

Well, it made it easier for travelling, because I used to have a travel document which all the authorities at the various customs they used to look with suspicion. And when I was in Gibraltar, I almost couldn't get back home! They said I hadn't got a visa to come back into England. But anyway, it all got resolved eventually. So, of course it was much easier having a- a British passport.

[0:45:35]

Do you still have that travel document? Your old one?

Sorry?

Do you still have your old travel document?

No, I don't think I bothered to keep it.

Did it have a big 'J' on it?

No. no. But of course there was- I had an identity card that we came into England and it had the 'J' on it. And of course he gave all the girls- he said all the girls had to be 'Sara' and all the boys had to be 'Israel' on top of their real names. So that was added.

Distinguishing you as Jewish, yes.

Yes. Yes.

Did you dislike that? Did you...?

Didn't have much impact on me.

And in terms of your identity now, how- how do you feel? Do you-

I feel very British.

And your husband, did he feel the same way?

Oh, yes, yes. Yes... He was second generation here.

Oh, so he was born here.

Second generation, yes. His parents had come from Poland or Russia. I can't remember.

[0:47:00]

Did your mother or your father ever try to get compensation?

We- we- he left it a long time. He was very proud. He didn't want tainted money, you know, German money. Very proud. But then he got a- he had a heart attack in the 60s and he decided he had to go about it. So eventually- it took a long while because we were late in doing it. But he did get a pension eventually. And when he passed on, I was happy to say my mother still got - slightly less, slightly less - but she still got a pension. And I got compensation for loss of education. I think it was £800 - a one-off payment.

Did it seem enough to you, after all that you had lost?

I think again, I didn't pay much heed. Well, it didn't seem a lot. But we're not greedy people and I suppose we felt it was something out of- we didn't expect anything, really. It's amazing that the compensation came through. I think the people in Austria had a lot bigger fight on their hands. I know Austrian friends who took a long time until they got compensation.

And do you- do you resent what happened in the war and the upheaval of leaving your homeland?

Well I- when I went to Germany, I must say, anybody over a certain age, I could see them in jackboots. But the younger people really don't know. It wasn't taught in- in the schools for quite a number of years. I think it took ten years til they started telling the children all about the Nazis. Yes – yes. So the young people, you can't blame them; they weren't born. Yeah. But certainly the older people I could see in jackboots.

[0:49:10]

Did you hate them?

Well, I suppose in a way, yes. I resented them, yes, yes. That's true. That's true.

Do you have any special re- regrets about leaving home and coming to Britain?

Well, my life would have been completely different no doubt. But you can't tell what would have happened. I made a good life for myself here with my family. We were all content.

Is there anything that you really wish could have happened or that you had?

Well, I wished we could have got my grandparents over before the war started, but we couldn't find a guarantor for them. My mother tried very hard from May onwards. And then the war started on the 2nd of September and then of course the borders were closed and that

was the end of it. Yes. It was a big regret for all of us that they couldn't come across. Lovely people, they were.

And they were in Germany, or in Poland?

Oh, no, in Germany. Yes.

In Germany.

They considered themselves German of the Mosaic persuasion. That's how they called themselves, yes.

And you never saw them again?

No, no. It was very sad. Lovely people - full of charity. Always giving to charity. They were very, very good people.

Were you ever able to trace what happened to them exactly, and where?

[0:51:08]

Only in as much as there was a- when they went to Terezin, or Theresienstadt, a rabbi got in touch with my mother after- he survived and he got in touch with my mother to tell me when they had died. And they died- I think my grandmother- my grandfather in '42, at the end of '42, and my grandmother two weeks later in '43. So she could have- light a candle for them for the day of their death. What we call a *Yahrzeit*. Yes.

Yes. When you went to the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague, were their names on that wall?

Their names- no, their names are in Frankfurt. There's the [Museum] Judengasse where the Rothschilds used to live and all around are the names. And- and my grandparents' names are on- on there as well.

Do you feel that it's good that there's a record of them?

Oh, absolutely.

That continuity.

And they existed. Otherwise, you know, they disappeared without trace. We know at least there's a name. It doesn't help a lot but at least there's a memorial.

[0:52:22]

Absolutely.

That's right. Yes.

That they existed-

Yes.

... and acknowledged.

Exactly. Exactly, that's right. Yes.

Do you still observe the dates of your...?

Oh, yes, definitely I keep it up, yes. Yes. I do remember when they- I light the candle on the- yeah.

Is there anything else that perhaps you didn't say earlier on, that you would like to mention now?

Can't think of anything. Can't think of anything. My mother didn't seem very bitter. You know. She was sad. But I don't think she was bitter. She was- she was very complacent about things. She - you know, being Orthodox she said, "It was God's will, I suppose."

Did you feel very fortunate to have her and your father here in Britain?

Oh, absolutely.

Unlike some of the Kindertransport children.

Oh, it must have been very hard on both sides. For the parents to leave their children, and for the children never to see their parents again. Oh, I was fortunate in that respect. Definitely, yes.

You were aware of that?

Oh, definitely, yes, yes. I was very fortunate.

[0:53:53]

Something to treasure.

Yeah, absolutely. Mnn.

Do you have a special message to anybody who would be looking at the video- at the DVD of you?

Well, just to be grateful to the UK for letting us in. It was hard work getting the guarantee, but at least- they made life quite pleasant for us eventually. We never had any problem with the British as such, the English people around us. Everyone made us very comfortable. And it's nice to live in England. It's one of the better countries, I think. We can say what we like.

You value that freedom?

Absolutely, yes. Free speech. It's worth a lot, isn't it?

It is. It is... Is there anything else that you would like to add or...?

[0:55:00]

Well, I can't think of anything else. It's nice to have the opportunity to air my views and, and- and recall some of the old things. But as I say, mainly, my parents had the problems. I was a child. And I was cherished, so what could I say? You know. You, you- you feel safe when your parents are around you. And that's all I can say about that. They were very wonderful parents.

I think that's a wonderful note to end on.

Thank you.

A beautiful note.

Thank you.

Thank you very much for sharing with us your memories and your experiences-

A pleasure.

...which are so precious.

A pleasure. I wish they were happier memories.

Likewise.

Yes. Thank you.

Thank you very much Meta Roseneil.

Thank you.

[End of interview]

[0:56:05]

[0:56:12]

[Start of photographs]

Photo 1

This is Fanny Schwarz, taken in Frankfurt am Main probably around about 1938.

Photo 1 retake?

This is my grandmother. Fanny Schwarz, born- taken in Frankfurt round about 1938.

Photo 2

This is my grandfather Gustav Schwarz, I think it might have been taken in the 20s. It's certainly not a very recent one that I remember. It must have been taken in the 20s.

Photo 3

The middle one.

Is a picture of my mother [Helitta Schwarz], probably taken when she was in her 20s. I have no idea where it was taken.

Photo 3 retake?

A picture of my mother, I've no idea where it was taken but she was in her twenties at that time.

Photo 4

This is a picture of my parents' wedding [Schmuel and Helitta Schwarz]. Taken in 1928. Frankfurt. They didn't move very far away. I think they went to Bavaria for holidays. That's where they.... They never went anywhere. I think it wasn't the done thing then, was it?

[0:57:27]

Photo 5

This is me, at the age of six. On my first day of school. Taken in Frankfurt am Main.

Year?

People can work it out for themselves.

Photo 5 retake?

This is me at the age of six in 1937 on my first day at school.

Photo 6

This is my brother Walter taken round about 1960, I believe, in London.

Photo 7

This is my father. I think taken around 1960. In London.

Photo 8

This is my uncle Shalom taken in Poland probably around 1938. He'd just got married. I don't know his wife's name. But he perished in the Holocaust.

Photo 9

My aunt Sarah and her husband and their three children taken in Poland probably round about the '30s. I don't know the names of the girls but the boy's name was Wolfgang and they perished in the Holocaust.

Photo 10

My three Polish cousins, taken in January 1930, in Poland. They perished in the Holocaust.

Photo 11

This is my mother taken about 1970, in London.

Photo 12

My sister Frances and her oldest daughter Sarah, taken in London, in 1970, I think.

Thank you very much.

[End of photographs] [0:59:32]