

**IMPORTANT**

**This transcript is copyright Association of Jewish Refugees**

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

**AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive**

**AJR**

**Winston House, 2 Dollis Park**

**London N3 1HF**

**[ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk](mailto:ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk)**

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

**[ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk](mailto:ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk)**

**Interview Transcript Title Page**

<b>Collection title:</b>	AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
<b>Ref. no:</b>	203

<b>Interviewee Surname:</b>	Berdach
<b>Forename:</b>	Freddy
<b>Interviewee Sex:</b>	Male
<b>Interviewee DOB:</b>	24 October 1930
<b>Interviewee POB:</b>	Vienna, Austria

<b>Date of Interview:</b>	22 March 2017
<b>Location of Interview:</b>	London
<b>Name of Interviewer:</b>	Dr. Jana Buresova
<b>Total Duration (HH:MM):</b>	1 hour 59 minutes



## REFUGEE VOICES

**Interview No.** RV203  
**NAME:** Freddy Berdach  
**DATE:** 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017  
**LOCATION:** London, UK  
**INTERVIEWER:** Dr. Jana Buresova

**[Part One]**

**[0:00:00]**

*This interview is with Freddy Berdach at his home, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2017. Thank you very much for kindly agreeing to be interviewed for the Association of Jewish Refugees Refugee Voices Project. Could we please start with your name and something about your parents and when and where you were all born?*

My name is Freddy Berdach. "Berdach" in the old... Austrian way. And I was born in Vienna. Both my parents were Viennese. The grandparents were Viennese, but I have researched beyond that and half the family came from Hungary, and the other half from Czechoslovakia which it wasn't then of course part of Austria then- both of them. So, I could trace back to 1829 where I had a 'Karl Berdach' and traced it all the way back to me.

*And when were you born?*

I was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1930. And we lived at that time in a- in Vienna in a block of flats called Karl Marx-Hof, which was one of the latest innovations of the Viennese socialist time, where you had- Karl-Marx-Hof was a kilometre long, but had brought into sections- where the outside of one side were all the local shops and in the middle were playgrounds for children and for people to relax and so on. So, it was a very modern idea of allowing kids not to have the access to go to the outside. And there were a number of these

squares that people lived in and so on.

And could you say something about your parents, their names and what they did please?

**[0:02:47]**

My mother's name was Ella and she was a court seamstress by profession. My father Walter he was a salesman. All his life long he was a salesman. He was, it turned out, a brilliant salesman.

*In...?*

Well, he had many different things. In those days he had not found his exact metre as to what he was doing. He was selling films; he was selling cars; he was doing different things until he married. And then he became a commercial traveller in textile piece-goods. Now piece-goods were lengths of material that were going to be made into men's suits. They were three and a half yards long – just over a metre- just over three metres. And he would go to tailors all- not only all over Austria, but into Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia travelling, selling these piece goods. He'd have a swatch, a book of swatches of different materials and they would pick out what materials they wanted. And the company that he worked for...

**[0:04:12]**

Can we start again? Where was I?

*About the swatches...*

Oh, yes. That's how he sold and he travelled. And we were a happy family. We lived in this Karl Marx-Hof. We were on the first floor.

*Was it in a particular Jewish area or- or not?*

No, it was a new area called Heiligenstadt which was the 19th district which was a fairly new idea; it came up in the 20s and 30s. So, it was not particularly a Jewish area. My parents had

two children. My daughter was born in 1927. Unfortunately, she caught diphtheria when she was six years old. And in those days, they didn't recognise the illness until it was too late. And she died, unfortunately. I caught the illness too but by that time they knew what it was, and I had the right medication. It obviously shook my parents; to lose a child must be a terrible, terrible thing. And they - in their wisdom - decided, if that's what God did to them, they weren't interested in God at all. And sadly, they no longer kept anything of the faith. They knew they were Jewish but they didn't keep any festivals. No *yontevs* at all. So really, I was brought up... neither one thing or another. Until of course it came until 1938, March 1938, when the Anschluss came and then you realised you were Jewish. You knew all about it. The first thing-

*And it was forced upon you.*

Yes. The first thing that I knew was that I was thrown out of school.

*How old were you then?*

I was then seven and a half. I'd had- don't forget that on the continent they start school at six. So, I'd only been to school for a year and a half. I was thrown out and... what had taken in Germany from 1933 to '38, five years of things gradually getting worse and worse, was overnight in Austria. And the fear in the Jewish population was palpable. In fact, more Jewish people per head of population left Austria than left Germany. Cause the German Jews said, "We're German. Nothing will happen to us." But the fear in Austria was so overnight that many more people left.

*Did your parents consider leaving or did they not consider themselves Jewish at that point?*

**[0:07:35]**

They knew that they were Jewish and that they would have all the problems that the Nazis were imposing on them. One of the first things that happened to us, was that we were told by a Nazi official that we had to leave our apartment within fourteen days. That's all the notice they gave us, and they didn't provide - you know - just, 'leave'. They didn't care where. And we actually moved in with my grandparents. Now my-

*And when was this?*

This would have been... April of '38. My grandfather was called Richard and my grandmother was called Elisabeth and they had an unmarried daughter still living with them called Helene and it was a smallish flat. And suddenly three more people entering into the small flat, it... With all the tensions it really brought things to the boil. And my father, in May of '38 my father said, "I'm going to go to Switzerland to get a visa for you and Freddy." He said that to my wife- to his wife. Because already mail at that stage was being opened. And... things were not delivered. And so, he said, "That's where I'm going to go." My mother cried her eyes out. She said, "How can you leave me and your son? You're going off to Switzerland and you're leaving me here. How can you possibly do that?" My father said, "It's the only way I know how to get you out and I'm going. So that's..." My father had a very strong character and that's what he said and that's what he did.

*And did he succeed?*

**[0:09:53]**

He arrived in Bregenz on the Austro-Swiss border the following day to go to catch a train to go into Zürich. That day they had closed the border. So, my father was walking disconsolately along the... lakeside, when he was accosted by a gentleman who said, "What are you doing here?" My father said, "Who wants to know?" The gentleman turned over his collar with the Nazi insignia and said, "I'm the Gauleiter. What are you doing here?" My father said, "I wanted to go to Zürich and the border was closed, so I'm just wondering what else to do." The man said to my father, "Go back to Vienna where you come from." He had to hand over all his papers. "I want you to go back to Vienna" - the following day. My father slept the night- that day- that night in a boarding house and he decided in the morning that he wanted to speak to this Gauleiter. My father went to Nazi headquarters in Bregenz and asked the name of this Gauleiter. They told him that he wasn't coming back until six o'clock that evening. My father said, "I'll wait." My father sat there all day, waiting for this Gauleiter who came at six o'clock and when he saw my father he said, "What are you doing here?" My father said, "I want to speak to you." So, he took him into the office and he said to my father, "I told you to go back to Vienna. What are you doing here?" My father said, "Look, you want

to get rid of the Jews. That's the Nazi propaganda: Get rid of the Jews. I want to go! What are you- what's all this?" So, in the discussion the Gauleiter said, "OK. I'll tell you what. You go to the station at eight o'clock this evening there's a train to Zürich. I want you to wait just outside the barrier and I will be there in one of the corners. And when I give you the sign to go like that you get on that train there and then." Which my father did. He was there at eight- just before eight o'clock outside the barrier. The train whistle went. The Gauleiter made the sign. My father rushed on to the train. And he got to Zürich.

*So, he wasn't trapped by them.*

**[0:12:57]**

So, he wasn't trapped. In Zürich he immediately went to the synagogue there and he was told, "You must go to the police right away. If you go to the police right away, you become a refugee. If you leave it, and they find you, you're then an alien and they can deport you." So-

*Because then they consider you're there illegally.*

Yes. So, he went to the police and he registered. And at least he was able to- to stay. The following day he was at the synagogue wondering what to do, where to stay. And a fellow comes in and says - there were several young people there- cause at that stage my father was thirty-five, you know - "Is there anyone who knows anything about logging books into a library?" Nobody answered. My father got up and said, "I don't know anything about it, but I'm sure I can learn." So, the fellow said, "Right, come with me." The name of that man was Guggenheim, obviously a relative of the famous one. And at least my father got paid. He could find accommodation and he wrote to England to get a visa for my mother and I. Which eventually came with a- an allowance for a stopover for twenty-four hours in Zürich, so that we could go via Zürich. At least see my father. The problems were the many authorities we had to see to get a stamp on the passport. We had to have a new passport... with a big swastika on the front of course and so on. And there was the health immigration. There was finance. There were different- many different- and always the long queues. And-

*And did you join long queues?*

and I had to go with my mother everywhere 'cause I had to have the passport as well. So, I had to be there to be recognised and so on. Long hours- many long hours of waiting and so on.

*Were you frightened? Were you-?*

Absolutely, yes. Because there was never a kind word said, you know. You know, the Germans command: "Do this, do that – now!" You know.

*And the fear that they might refuse.*

Yes. They could always do that, of course. So, reject you, for whatever reason. Eventually we got the-

*Did you have to pay out a lot of money for the different permits, and...?*

**[0:15:55]**

It was. You had to pay out certainly money for some of these. Not the health one, but some of the other ones, to make sure that your finances were correct and that you weren't hiding money and that we were leaving money. And you- you left of your own free will and accord. You had to sign. Which is an incredible... statement to have to make. Eventually the- everything came. It was time for us to go. We said our goodbyes to our grandparents. And we got on a train to Zürich. This now was September.

*1938.*

1938. And... when we got to Zürich, we met my father. My father said, "Come you're staying with us." The- one room was big enough for- to accommodate us and so on. And I went to school because there was nothing else for me to do there. At least the language was not a problem because- Zürich was – spoke, spoke German. And we stayed... September, October – three and a half months we stayed in Zürich. And one morning we had a knock on the door. Swiss police came and said to us, to my mother and I, "If you don't leave Switzerland in twenty-four hours, we'll take you back to the Austrian border."



*Why was that?*

Cause I- we only had a visa for twenty-four hours; we'd overstayed our welcome.

*And instead of these hours you were there for-*

In twenty-four hours we had to leave. Now in those days the train journey from Zürich to... Calais, which is where we were making for, took a day and a half. I mean trains weren't as rapid or as fast. With- having to change trains and one thing and another, it was horrendous.

**[0:18:13]**

*But what a shock to you. How did you and your parents react? I mean A, by the fact of this horrible knock on the door. This frightening knock on the door. But then the shock of having to leave within twenty-four hours.*

Well, we knew, my mother knew she had to leave, so it wasn't a matter that this was unexpected, it was only when. And that was the shock, really was, to be suddenly to be told, "Leave in twenty-four hours." We didn't have much. We weren't allowed to take much out of Austria anyway. I had a little suitcase with change of underwear and change of- of shirt. And that's all we were- and my mother was allowed to take out, I think it was ten Reichsmarks. That was the amount of money that we were allowed to take out. So, the thing was restricted dreadfully. So, there wasn't a lot of luggage to take. ...Prior to us leaving Vienna, my father... got a- what do they call that? It was called "Lift", in German. It was a big box that carried all our belongings that was being shipped to England via Hamburg, where it was shipped. Of course, it never got to England, but that's another story. So, we arrived in England and the journey across the channel. It was December. We arrived in England on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December '38. The sea was- was rough.

*Were you seasick?*

And I was seasick as a dog. I really was very ill. But you know, time, how long it took, two hours. We eventually arrived in Calais and took the train to London where we were met and

taken to a boarding house in Hampstead.

*Who took you there?*

**[0:20:28]**

Yeah. It was my father's brother who was already in England.

*And what was his name?*

His name was Irvin.

*And he came to meet you?*

He came to meet us. There was no- there was no good relationship between my brother- between my father and his brother. But he did what they needed to do to help us out. And he put us up, knowing that we wouldn't be there for long. So, he paid for the boarding house.

*How did your brother- sorry, your uncle, come to be in Britain already?*

He left as soon as the Anschluss came. He had been divorced, was living with a lady... and decided that the sooner he came- the sooner he left Austria, because living with people in those days, was not thought was nice. So, he moved for England very early on. This lady was a milliner – a very clever lady. And set up business in London. And so, there was the guarantor there for my mother and I. We stayed-

*So, they both acted as a guarantor?*

As a guarantor. Yes.

*Both of them?*

No, just my uncle.

*Your uncle.*

We hardly knew the lady. And when we got to this... night abode. This- this one-night... The morning came and there was a plate of cornflakes on the table. We got up late 'cause we were obviously very tired. There was a plate of cornflakes already on the table and I had never seen cornflakes in my life before. And I wondered what this thing was. And so, I picked up one and put it in my mouth and it was hard and it was not nice. And... And it was- I didn't eat it. But there was rolls and butter and so on, and coffee. So, this was now the 21<sup>st</sup> of December. And my mother had to go to her... job, immediately after Christmas. So, a day after Boxing Day she was-

*This was a residential...?*

This was a residential...

*...domestic post?*

Yeah, domestic post. And that's when the Jewish Board of Guardians started to foster me out to non-Jewish families.

**[0:23:32]**

*Could I just ask- who arranged this for her? Did she- had she written in advance, or...*

Yes.

*... did the uncle arrange it?*

No. No, this was arranged- [sighs] This was beyond my knowledge of what it was. I really don't know who arranged it. Don't forget at that stage I wasn't aware of the details of that. I'm only knowing the outline and not the detail of who arranged-

*Sure. Do you know where she went to, in Britain?*

No, I don't even know that.

*That's fine; don't worry.*

All I know was, the first family I went to... was a family in Kent who had a little boy of a similar age. And of course, he went to school every day. But while he was on holiday, we shared toys... that was fine. But when he went to school, he always put his toys away and locked them up and wouldn't let me play with them. So, one day I got rather cross with him and I hit him. Hit him in the stomach. And must have hurt him, because his father then returned me to the Jewish Board of Guardians as being, in quotes, 'unsuitable' for whatever reason. I'm sorry I did that, obviously, but I was so frustrated that this was a natural reaction. Nevertheless, I shouldn't have done that. And I've been careful to control my temper ever since. Cause I was dreadfully ashamed.

*But it's a natural reaction, isn't it?*

Well, natural, but it shouldn't have happened. So, the Jewish Board of Guardians in their wisdom decided that three months should be long enough for my stay with families. And so, in the course of two years I was with eight different families. Some were wonderful. Some had a Rolls Royce and a television in 1939. Amazing. And others were- dreadful. Where there was a spinster – no it couldn't have been a spinster. She was a lady who had lost her husband in the First World War and still had a swagger stick. He was a sergeant in the British Army in the First World War and... she beat me with that swagger stick if I didn't do exactly as she said. So, there were good times and not so good times. And I wrote to my mother once a week. ...And that- she wrote to me once a week and that's how we kept in touch. I saw her at Christmas basically as twice only in that time. And...

**[0:27:02]**

*Just the once in two years?*

Yeah. Well, that's how it goes- you know. You-

*It must have been such a miserable and difficult time for you.*

As an eight-year-old you accept life much more that's how it is. You've got no control over yourself. What to me was far worse, was that the vast majority of these families said, "This fellow doesn't speak any English. There's no point in sending him to school." So, I missed three years of schooling. One year in Austria and one year- two years in England. So that to me was far worse, having missed out. I've got to go back a little. My father came to England. Because we were in England, we had some- he had some reason to be allowed to come in. And he arrived in August of 1939. He joined the British Army in 1940. He joined the Army.

*Was it the Pioneer Corps?*

Pioneer Corps - of course. That's the only one they were allowed. And he was sent to France with the British expeditionary force. And during the latter withdrawal of British troops in 1941, he was in Le Havre, in the port of Le Havre trying to ship goods back – this is what the Pioneer Corps was doing – was to- shipping goods back on to the ships to take back to UK, which was being bombed by the Germans. My father was injured during these bombing raids. He was brought back to England in a hospital ship. He was hospitalised for nine months in a place called Haverfordwest. We went to visit him there. He was honourably discharged for his wounds and immediately became an enemy alien. And his discharge was in a place called Taunton in 1941 – early in 1942. And this was the first time that my father, mother and I were together in, in, in- as a family since, since my father left in May of 1938.

*How did you feel about that? Did you feel estranged from your parents...*

Not at all.

*... having been away from them?*

No. Not at all. I was very- very happy to be together. My father was... quite authoritarian, but that's how he was. And...

*And it was a different time.*

It was a different time of course. And the first thing my father said to my mother: "Why isn't

he in school?" To which my mother said, "Well, the things as they were, it..." So, my father tried to get me into a school. And it was mid-term and almost impossible to get into a school. And-

**[0:30:38]**

*And this was in London?*

This was in Taunton. This was all in Taunton. And the only school he could get me into was a convent school. The most wonderful nuns you could ever imagine, helped me and taught me enough English in three months to be able to go to a grammar school in Taunton. I got an entry exam into a grammar school in Taunton. ...My father, coming from Vienna, a city of culture and music, found Taunton a backward sort of county town in England. Impossible to live with. So, he said, "I can't stay here; I'm going to London." So, he left us.

*When was that?*

This would be '42. So, he went to London to look for accommodation and to look for a job. Jobs were not difficult to get, because there was shortage of labour. The young people were all in the services. And he decided he would become a waiter, which was a job that was- didn't require a lot of language and he could easily do.

*Did- did your parents find learning English difficult?*

Yes.

*Did they have the opportunity-?*

No, my mother had a strong accent even in the latter years. And the- my children used to correct her- her English and give her the right word, when she couldn't spell it or couldn't pronounce it properly.

*Because in the early days they wouldn't have had the opportunity...*

No.

*... to go to classes.*

Absolutely not. My parents spoke to me in German; I answered them in English. Cause by that time I had learnt English, especially with those nuns helping me. They were absolutely wonderful.

*Did you keep up your German?*

**[0:33:02]**

I kept up my German but... My problem is that I speak and my German is of an eight-year-old. I don't have commercial German. So, I have a basic German knowledge without knowing- I should have done a lot more reading. I do read, but I find with the verb at the end of a sentence very difficult to- to do the reading. Let me go back.

*To the reverse.*

Yeah. Let me-

*Yes, if you'd like to go back to your father and becoming a waiter.*

He became a waiter, and it didn't take him long to... go from one job to a better job to another better job. And he finished up being head waiter at the Dorchester. But I'm sure that was mainly because there weren't enough people to fill that sort of job. And he- he was a very presentable, good-looking man and they liked that sort of thing. His English was quite good with a nice Austrian - soft Austrian - accent. The Austrian accent is much softer than the German accent which is quite hard and guttural. So- we moved into London in a- in a flat in West Hampstead. There were so many Austrian and German Jews in West Hampstead and it became known as 'British West Hampstead'. And I transferred from a grammar school in Taunton to a grammar school in London which was called 'Holloway County Grammar'. Sadly, it doesn't exist anymore. It became a- one of the large schools – what do they call those?

*Comprehensive.*

Comprehensive schools, thank you. But I did- I did all right there because I finished up with chemistry, physics and applied and pure maths in A-Levels. So, I must have caught up somewhere along... the line, somewhere.

*Were your parents- were you aware of your parents being very proud of you?*

Funnily enough my mother took more interest in- in what I did. My father was only interested in the reports that I brought back, which were never as good as he expected it to be- which is quite normal, I suppose.

*And- and what was family life like at that time? Did your father feel - despite becoming head waiter - did he at any time- were you aware that he might have felt demeaned by that? I'm not saying he should. I mean, it's an achievement to become head waiter at the Dorchester. But did he feel demeaned at any time? Were you aware of that?*

**[0:36:04]**

No. He was- he worked hard, my father, despite having shell shock, which only recently has been recognised as an ailment. But that's what the bombing gave him - shell shock. And that was one of the things that brought him to hospital.

*And what work did your mother do when you moved back to London?*

Very little. She had... occasional mending of- of other people's clothes. Shortening, dresses, trousers. That sort of thing. She got a Singer sewing machine.

*She used her skills.*

Which she used her skill as a seams- seamstress. My... ...I enjoyed my school. I can't say I didn't. I was at grammar school. 450 boys. It was a nice school. Good tutors.



*And how did the other boys in the school treat you? Were you bullied? Were you regarded as a...?*

In Taunton I was very bullied. I was bullied a lot, called 'Yid' and all sorts of other names. Not so much in- in London. I had the occasional fight which I always fought.

*But boys do fight.*

But boys do fight anyway. But under provocation I would fight, but there was far less of it in London. Don't forget Holloway was also bombed. Was not that far from the East End. There were people there from the east as well as north London and so on. But it was a very good school. And I became- I was house captain. I was captain of the school first eleven football team. You know, and- and- as I said, I enjoyed my time there. And I loved the science course. I'm going to go back to what I was doing in... I had a place at King's College to go to university... having A-levels. And in those days, they had what was called a 'Deferment Board', who decided whether you would go to university before or after university. That depended on many things. It depended on: how good were your results? Which university? How busy were they? It depended on a whole raft of different things that they- So they said to me, "What is it- Which university do you want to go to?" I said, "King's in London has a small but a very good engineering department. I'd like to go there." They said, "Well, what is it you want to study?" I said, "Well with my A-Levels, civil engineering." They said, "Fine." They huddled together and they came to me and they said, "OK. We'll guarantee you a place at King's." I had been in England- this is 1949 now. I had been in England for ten years and somebody was guaranteeing me a place in one of the most prestigious colleges in London. I said, "Where do I sign?" And they said, "No, no. It doesn't work that way. You do your National Service first. You'll be called up in February of 1950. You'll have eighteen months National Service. You'll be out in August next year, ready for your semester."

*Were you a British citizen by then? [???*

**[0:40:20]**

Yes. My parents- because my father had been in the Army, we didn't go to the Isle of Man and he was offered British citizenship in 1946. So, I- because I was underage, I automatically

became a British citizen. I was offered in 1948- I was offered whether I would want to revert to Austrian citizenship or whether I became a- and I said, "No way will I go back to be an Austrian." And-

*And your parents didn't want to either?*

No. Certainly not. No. So, I'm sorry; that was really 'past' and we need to jump on. ...So, I joined the RAF, because with my science background I came- I went into the signals section. I became a... to do with homing aircraft. It was a specialised section to do with- in those days already they had Meteors and Vampires and they could go a- a long distance. And then suddenly, when they were short of fuel, they needed to know how to steer a direct- direction back home. And there was a special course needed- a scientific course to do that. Having done science I was part of that. So, I was quite pleased to do that. ...And half-way through my National Service the Korean War started. Eighteen months National Service became two years. So, it meant that I came out in February of 1952, having lost two years and having to wait another eight months before I could start university. I had totally lost the discipline of reading. Two and a half years was just too much and I never took up my position. Which I have never regretted. Because within two months of me leaving the RAF I met a most wonderful girl which I married [laughs] and I've been married to for sixty-seven years. So, it was never a- it was never a hardship. It was never a disappointment. That made up more than anything...

*And what's your wife's name please?*

**[0:43:20]**

My wife is called Vanda. We met at... Kingsbury Synagogue Youth Club. They had a wonderful youth and sports club. Vanda was a wonderful tennis player. And we enjoyed our sports... and... we fell in love and married.

*When did you marry?*

We married in 1955. I need to go back because when I left the RAF, I had to find work. I couldn't- My parents couldn't keep me when I left the RAF. My father at that time, had

started a business of making ties. He became a...

*Was this on his own or with a partner?*

He st- he started in 1946 with a partner, 'cause you couldn't be a director of a company unless you were a British citizen. So, once he became a British citizen, he... joined on his own. He went on his own. And I joined the business then in 19- This is now 1952. [sound break?]

Can I? But ...But that was it. My parents never kept Shabbos. My parents kept no Rosh Hashanah, no Yom Kippur. It just didn't mean anything to them. Are you on?

*Cameraman: We're running now, yes.*

And when I was eighteen, I decided that I wanted to... see and wanted to feel my Jewishness. Very strange: while I was in the RAF, there was a 'moral leadership' course was offered... which was for Jewish people- young men, at Maccabi in West Hampstead. We lived in West Hampstead and I took it for no better reason that we lived two- twenty yards from Maccabi. But the moral leadership course included a rabbi who so fired my imagination about Jewishness.

**[0:46:14]**

*What was his name? Do you recall?*

I think he was- His name was [Rabbi Cyril] Harris and I can't remember his first name. He became the rabbi at Edgware Reform Synagogue. A wonderful, wonderful man. And he so fired my imagination, I said, "That's what I want to do." But already- I'm going back now.

*And it gave you- it restored your sense of identity?*

Yes. Absolutely. I... I wanted to know a lot more and, and to be part of. Now-

*Did your parents approve of that, or did they challenge you?*

My parents thought I was *meshugge frum*. [both laugh] I went to *shul*... fairly regularly. But I kept *yontevs*. I'm not- I'm not orthodox, but I'm observant.

*Yes.*

And I've been a member of the Reform movement since 1953. So, you know, I'm comfortable with the Reform movement. I'm happy with the- what they do and how they do it. I like sitting with my wife. I'm observant on *yontevs*. We keep Pesach and so on. Having- Particularly having three daughters we made sure that we kept a kosher home. Because we never knew; they might one day meet a- a *frum* boy and they need to know what was what. So, we kept a strictly kosher home.

*Did your wife come from a strict Jewish family?*

Not at all. My wife is not Jewish, but she was *megayaed*, if that's the right word; she became Jewish shortly after we met and before we married. So, we could meet under the *chuppah*... which was lovely. Now I'm going back to my father.

*Yes.*

My father, having left- he had an- a cartilage removed- injured- injury in his knee. And so he was sacked from his job as a waiter. He had the operation to have it removed and then was jobless. And my father said, in 1946, "I'm going to teach the English... how to wear a bow tie." That was his statement. So, he bought a bow tie. Of course, tie-yourself and asked my mother to take it apart. And he made a pattern of it - or she made a pattern of it. And he went to a firm that doesn't go anymore - Swan & Edgar in Regent Street - and said, "I want three yards of black satin material." And they said, "Yes, Sir. Can we have your coupons?" There were clothing coupons in those days. And my father says, "I don't have any coupons." And they said, "You don't have any material." So, my father wrote to the Board of Trade, he wrote to several different people asking for a float, so that at least he could start. Totally refused by everybody. So, he was wandering one day in the East End of London, Whitechapel High Street, wondering what he was going to do and how he was going to do it. And he came across a load of sacks of blackout material, that were being left as being

rubbish, because now nobody had blackout anymore. And all these black materials were waste. So, he went in to this guy and he said, "How much for a sack of these?" And he said, "Half a crown." And my father paid him and took home the sack, some of which material was useless but some of it was absolutely right for making black bow ties. So, my mother, having made a pattern, made a bow tie. One bow tie. You have to make it on the reverse side, you have to reverse- you have to turn it inside out, you have to sew up the ends. You have to iron it. There's a lot of things to making a bow tie. Bow ties are much more difficult to make than ties. Much more difficult. So, my father having made this bow tie... he decided he would start at the top. And he went to Burlington Arcade, to the one menswear shop called 'S. Fisher' and showed him this bow tie. And my father said, "I'm making these bow ties. Are you interested?" So, the man, Mr. Fisher himself said, "Yes, I'm interested. I want you to make me a dozen." Trying him out. At that time a lot of officers were coming back from the Army- being dischar- you know, demobbed and so on. There were a lot of parties. So black ties were well in demand. So, my father got my mother to cut out six- twelve bows and made them up in a week. They worked very- very hard you know to get these. And my father took them to Mr. Fisher. Mr. Fisher said, "That's exactly what I want. Now you've made me a dozen. Make me three dozen." And then the following- two weeks later, "Make me six dozen." You know. And so on. And then my father obviously got coupons. Because when you sold material- clothing you got coupons from the retailer. So now my father had coupons to re-

*Did they pay with coupons?*

**[0:53:13]**

No, not- no, no, no. They- they paid him, and you got coupons back from having material- having supplied them with materials. So now that my father had coupons, he could go to Swan & Edgar and buy his three yards of satin material. And then of course the quality was better. And this guy was very happy. And he would go to other people, other than Mr. Fisher. He went to a number. And he started selling ties, bow ties. And they said to him, "But we also want ready-made bow ties." So, my mother, being the textile lady that she was... my father went to find where he could get the clips to clip on and my mother sewed it on, and he could sell ready-made bow ties which was even more popular of course than the tie-yourself ties. And this is how my father started the tie business. After a while, having sold a lot of

black ties, he thought he ought to bring in fancy ties, fancy materials. So, he could buy with the coupons now being part of the almost cashflow, he could buy all- fancy materials, patterns and so on, which my mother made into ready-made bow ties and tie-yourself. And this is how the business started. And when I joined then in '52... he was only making bow ties. And I had to do something that- to add to the business. So, I said, "I think we ought to make ordinary ties as well. Not just bow ties, so- to enlarge our repertoire." And so, we bought... tie material. Very little tie material made in England. We had to go to France and... Switzerland.

*What sort of- did you- Were you seeking a particular sort of material for the ties?*

**[0:55:43]**

These were tie materials that were made specifically for ties. There were companies in, in- in- in Lyon in France, in Como in Italy and in Switzerland in Zürich. So, we had to go to these centres to the cloth manufacturers to... to buy the material. And then we used - or my father used - outworkers. You couldn't afford to keep full-time staff, so my mother used to cut out the strips and cut out the shapes and then gave them to outworkers to machine, to turn, to sew up and to iron. And to make into bow ties.

*Were they all refugees or were they English?*

No, no. No. These were mainly English ladies of... mature age, which we always called 'girls'. They were our 'girls'. And they were happy to do it in their own time. It was pocket money to them and it was good for- my father went round collecting and so on.

*Would it have been at the time when, although women took on many different jobs during the war, in many ways they were back to the home,*

Yes.

*...after the war?*

After the war. Yes.

*So, this would have been-*

They had time. But as I said, they were of- of a mature age. Most of them were past working time anyway, but they were all needlewomen because that's how they were brought up. And so, they knew about this sort of thing. And then it got to the stage where it was too much for them.

*Where were they based? Were they in the Whitechapel area, or...?*

They were based in north London. My father- it got too much for my father travelling around and doing and he engaged a man who would do that round for him and present the finished work. He would be given the cut-out material and he would cut it out and give it to the girls and he would do that job. Cause it was just too much for my father. My father was a salesman. He was a brilliant salesman. He'd been selling as you know in- in Austria. And a good salesman is a good salesman wherever. My father could sell coals to Newcastle. He could sell ice to the Eskimos. I'm a salesman. Not half as good as my father. He was a brilliant salesman. He could just shake his hand like that and he could sell. That's- they loved- he had a lovely Austro-English accent and they loved him for it. And wherever he went, he could sell.

**[0:59:04]**

*And did you enjoy the work?*

I enjoyed the work when-

*Did you find it satisfying?*

Well, not at the beginning. My father said to me, "You can go wherever you like, but you mustn't go to any existing customers. In fact, what I want you to do, I want you to go in places we haven't been to." Which was Lancashire, Yorkshire and Scotland. So that's where I had to travel. In the beginning by train, with a case in my hand and so on. And eventually my father bought me a car and then I was travelling properly. Once I had the car it was a

different story and I enjoyed it. In the beginning when I had to do all the spade work from scratch was not- not easy. It was good training though, for me.

*And when you were travelling, did you go to synagogues in the different places? Did you make contact with other Jewish people?*

No, none at all. Not at all. I was commercial then. I was going to stores and leading retailers. Going out on a- going out on a Monday returning on Friday to my wife and the family.

*No, I didn't mean in a commercial sense, but for yourself. Did- if you were- you were not away at weekends?*

No. I was always home weekends. Made sure of that. So let me go back now to where I-

*North London.*

North London and older ladies who had the skill and still wanted things to do.

*But the firm was expanding, clearly.*

The firm was expanding and we were doing very nicely. I... managed to do good business in Lancashire, Yorkshire and Scotland. My father was dealing in London and Midlands and South Wales. That's where the business was. And then in 19... '68, '9, we had a Chancellor of the Exchequer called Selwyn Lloyd – you wouldn't know that – who had a policy of stop go. One year – we had purchase tax in those days. One year the purchase tax would be twenty-five percent and the following year it went up to sixty-six and a third percent. And business just collapsed. And the next year it was on. We had a manufacturing... You couldn't run a business on those sort of things. So, we decided that we would go into export. So, we said: where do you export? And we decided we would export in the places where there were British troops. Because in those days already, at the end of a working day the British troops abroad were allowed to go out into the town and wear civvies and so on.

*How did you come to this decision? It must have been devastating.*



[1:02:50]

The decision was, because business as I said, was boom one year and nothing the next. And you can't run a- a manufacturing business like that. But... we felt that the troops would know what British fashions were like, and would therefore know our make, our brand and so on. And so we decided we would go to Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus where the troops were. And they would have menswear shops and they would buy local things. And so that's where we started.

*And how did you go about that?*

Well, we had to go and fly out there with samples and so on.

*To the men's shops.*

To the menswear shops and speak to the owner or manager, and, and- and do the selling that way.

*Was that – how hard was that?*

Well, if you're a salesman it wasn't hard, you know, if you were selling. But, yes, we were both selling and therefore... The hard bit was being away for two or three weeks. Now, in 1980, the fashion for the young people was open-neck shirts. Ties suddenly took a- sale of ties took a dive. And I decided, well my father and I decided, to sell the business. And my father retired. And that I would go into exports even more. I was in Malta when a customer of mine said to me, "Do you know something?" Across the water in Tripoli was a King called King Idris and they had found oil there and it was boom time and I should go over there. So, I flew from Malta, which is only a half-hour's flight to Tripoli. There were quite a lot of Jewish traders there as well. And from Tripoli I went to Benghazi and from Benghazi carried on to- to Cyprus. So, I had a nice little tour of Malta- of Gibraltar, Malta, Tripoli, Benghazi, Cyprus. That was a- a two-and-a-half, three-week journey.

*Did you miss your family?*

[1:05:45]

Oh, yes. Phone calls in those days were very expensive. I only phoned- I only phoned home once a week on a Friday. Friday evening, I phoned, just because it was twenty-five, thirty pounds for a phone-call in those days.

*No smart phones.*

No smart phones, no any phones. When I got to Cyprus, they said to me, “You know, there’s boom town in Beirut?” After Abdul Nasser had thrown out the King of Egypt, the big money left Egypt and went into Beirut. And Beirut became the Zürich of the Middle East.

*Because people there were very smart and fashionable.*

Yeah. Smart, fashion conscious. It was a beautiful town. It was a really lovely town. And the beauty of it was there were Jewish, Arab and English traders.

*And very westernised.*

And they were all wealthy and- the Jewish shops were closed- sorry- The Arab shops were closed on a Friday. The Jewish shops were closed on a Saturday and the English- and the Christian shops were closed on a Sunday. So, there was always some shops open somewhere. And it was very good business. It was a beautiful town. A high standard of living and- great. And they said to me one day, “You know something? There’s boomtown in Kuwait! You ought to go to Kuwait and see what’s there.” So, I foolishly went in June to Kuwait. And a temperature of 120 degrees with no air conditioning then there. There were fans in the hotels and wherever.

*On the ceilings.*

On the ceilings. That was it. But I sussed the town out and decided that the following year I would go in February when it was their winter.

*How did you feel as a Jewish person going into the Arab world?*

[1:08:12]

In those days it didn't matter whether you were Jewish or not, until after the Yom Kippur War when things changed. I had to go where there was money. And there was money in the Middle East. There was money in west Africa; Nigeria was fabulous business. And I travelled extensively. I travelled into Africa. North, east, south, west, central: I walked all over Africa. I travelled into the Middle East. I did Kuwait, Bahrain, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat, Saudi Arabia. I travelled into Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong. Canada. The Caribbean. At one time, I was away from home for twenty-six weeks in a year. I decided that was a bit too much and I cut back on that a bit. But you had to go where there was money.

*Yes. Was there a lot of competition in your field?*

There was competition. There was competition from the couture names. Pierre Cardin. Yves Saint Laurent. All those names. But I used to sell on the premise, 'This is made in England'. 'Made in England' meant something. And customers used to say to me, "Don't just bring ties. Next time you come bring shirts, bring trousers." So, I expanded my export business into shirts and trousers and eventually, pullovers. Eventually I had fifteen different companies that I was taking on my back to sell and to export for them. Those days, the English companies were too blooming lazy to get off their backsides and go out. "Oh, they'll come to us", they'd say. And I'd say, "No, they won't."

*You have to go out.*

You have to go out there and sell. And sell what they wanted, not what- I went to ask for a British company if I could take their shirts, but they had to put on a pocket. Because abroad, they didn't wear jackets. They put their cigarettes and their pen and whatever in their top pocket and that's how you needed a pocket on a shirt. "Oh, we don't make shirts with pockets." I said, "Well if you want export you have to do it." They said, "There's no call for it." So, eventually I found a company that made pockets- shirts with pockets. Good company. And I sold... their shirts very well all over. I sold pullovers. I decided there were two types of pullovers that needed to sell. The top end which were cashmere and the other end, which was the Leicester- polyester, what's the other make? The other...?

*Nylon?*

Nylons and- pullovers made of that. So that was the lower end. And that was the top end and I could sell both without being conflict of interest.

*And you could meet different needs in the-*

And in the end, I was selling- I was away four, five weeks at a time. And that was hard. Not the selling. The selling was the easy bit.

*And how long did you do that for?*

**[1:12:16]**

I did that until 1996... when I had a heart attack. And I decided the pressures of time difference... Of, of- and that, you know the pressures were obviously- my father was ailing then too. He was living on his own. He wouldn't go into a- any sort of home. And the pressures were beginning to tell and that's why I had a... a heart attack and decided that had to stop. And... I actually sold the business, you see even though I was the business, I actually managed to sell it. ...And then I wondered what to do. And with two neighbours, Jewish neighbours in these blocks of flats, we decided that we needed an old- a Jewish old people's home in Northwood. Well, we soon found that A, Northwood was too expensive an area to start looking for property and B, we needed a lot more expertise in- in the committee we formed. So, we got a lawyer and an accountant. We got a structural engineer. We got all sorts of people to help us in this project. And within- we found a property in Bushey, which was a nursing home that was being sold that had nineteen residents. How nineteen got in there I'll never know. But that's another story. But then I had to find money to buy for this. And together with the Chairman, we managed to raise 1.3 million pounds to buy the property and to spend the 400- to spend 400,000 pounds on refurbishment. Because it was in a dilapidated state and we had to make it – how shall I say - up to Jewish standards. We had to bring it up: ensuites- we went with a company called Abbeyfield who set the standards. Who had to-

*You had all sorts of regulations-*

**[1:15:16]**

Yes. Minimum standards. All sorts of lovely things. Plugs had to be waist high. Not on the floor. Doors had to be wheelchair friendly. Taps had to have lugs for arthritic hands. There were a hundred different things that they insisted on to be members of Abbeyfield. And we spent this 400,000 pounds to bring it up to standard. And we did this in- within two years- 'cause I was treasurer at that point. And within two years we'd op- we'd bought, refurbished and opened an Abbeyfield home in Bushey. It's called Abbeyfield Camden, mainly because the first of that was in Camden Town, but that was another story.

*So that was 1998?*

This was- no, this was now 2000. And we opened in 2002. 2000 we bought the property; in 2002 we opened, having refurbished.

*How did you go about fundraising? Because it's a colossal task.*

We went to Jewish charities. And the hard bit was, that not only did you have to apply to the... top people within the charity, but you had to go back. Because very often they'd say, "Well, we don't meet for another four months", "-six months." And you had to go back and remind them that this was wanted. And you wouldn't get it the first year, you'd get it the second year and so on.

*It was a lot of perseverance.*

Yes, it was hard- hard work. And... I managed to raise... 800,000 pounds through these charities. And I took 600,000 pounds on mortgage with Barclays Bank. And the Barclays charity was that they gave us the mortgage on base plus one-point-five percent, which was amazing in those days. So that was their part of the charity that... So, we opened with twelve residents. And we had room for ten studio single rooms and two double rooms. And we opened on a full house and we had a house manager. We managed- 'cause this was non-profitmaking, don't forget. We managed with a manager - house manager, a cook and a cleaner. And that's the only staff we had. But we had twenty-five volunteers. And Vanda was

the volunteer coordinator who sorted out whose- which volunteer did what and when. Cause you couldn't suddenly have twenty-five volunteers turning up. You know, you had to sort them out. And we got them at different times to talk to them, to entertain them, to play bridge with them and so on and so on. And that was Vanda's committee to deal with that. And I was treasurer for the first two years. And our chairman then left and I became chairman and ran the place very happily. And two years ago, I was getting as old as the residents and I decided it was time to call it a day.

**[1:19:36]**

*In 2015?*

So- yes. So- I decided- they made me a nice presentation of a Kiddush cup, which was very lovely - silver *Kiddush cup* – and I called it a day. But Vanda's still carried on with her committee. And she's still part of that. Although she's not chairman anymore, she's still part of that.

*That's a wonderful way to work together. But it takes a lot of commitment also, a project like that.*

Well two things. A, we had the time, and B, we had the inclination. So those were the two important things that we could have. I needed obviously something to keep me occupied. But in that time, I was also busy with freemasonry. I was secretary of that. I became treasurer of the block of flats we're living in, so I had plenty of things to do and keep me occupied.

*Did your... return to Judaism, motivate you as well, with your concerns about having an elderly people's home? Did it give you a lot of personal satisfaction to do that?*

Yes. Because it was a progressive Jewish home. And we used the word 'Progressive' in our advertising. Nevertheless, we got a rabbi to come in every Friday to make *Kiddush* for the residents. I made sure that we had four or five different rabbis that came in. They only did one Friday a month. And they did that on a regular basis. We changed everything for Pesach. We had entirely crockery, cutlery – everything changed. And we made Pesach the second day Pesach, because a lot of the residents went home to their family for first day- first night

Pesach. But there were several who didn't have family, and so we made a full Pesach for all the ten residents every Pesach.

*Where were the residents from? Were they mostly English Jewry or were they refugees?*

There was one refugee but mostly English. The main thing with Abbeyfield and our home was that these were single people who were fed up with shopping and cooking and looking after their home. And finding the ailments of running a home too much. And here they got everything; food was supplied. The washing was done. They had a comfortable home. They had company! The biggest problem for the elderly was loneliness. It wasn't ill- it wasn't ailments; it was loneliness. And this way they could have friends. They could make friends. They ate together. And they became friends together. And it was- ten was a- the whole essence of Abbeyfield is small numbers. I mean Jewish Care do a wonderful job and I'm not having a go at them, but they're an institution. Whereas Abbeyfield was small. Ten residents could get on together.

**[1:23:26]**

*This is a real service. Did you... regard it as a service to the community?*

Did I regard it?

*As a service to the community?*

Yes- yes. Yes. Very much so. We, we- we got little aids and charity from local shops and so on that helped us. When we had open days, they provided drivers. Tesco's supported us and so on. It's one of their local charities and so on. We had the Mayor of Hertsmere? Council. You know, I mean, we- we used that. We, we- we invited the local people to come in and see what we do and how we do it and so on, on our open day. So, we were very much part of the community. And most of the children of the residents were local. Not the residents themselves. The residents- residents came from Glasgow, from Bournemouth - from wherever. But the children said, "Our parent- our mother is- is on her own in Glasgow and we'd much rather her be nearer to us." So, they moved them into our places because the children were local, rather than the parents- rather than the people who were the residents.

*Was there ever an element on your part of giving something back to Britain?*

Very- not to Britain. To the- To life. [feels moved] I'm sorry. Having been so lucky and having- got out when six million didn't. Having found a wonderful partner, lovely wife. Having got children – wonderful children - I felt that I needed to put something back into life. And this was my way of- of doing something. Not just for Judaism, not just for the community, but for life in general. I felt I needed that, very much so.

*The- you haven't named your children. Perhaps you could kindly name your children? And my question then is, do they share your very extraordinary positive outlook on life?*

**[1:26:10]**

Very much so. Very much so. My eldest daughter... founded a business to do with management training. She trains-

*What's her name?*

Her name is Sheena. She trains some of the top managers of British industry. Her clientele is the top 100 British companies. The second daughter is called Gonda, which name by the way is from a... Strauss operetta. My little bit of Austria. She trained as a physiotherapist and has her own clinic in Hendon. And the youngest is Davida. We didn't get a David. We wanted a David, and so Davida was the nearest. And- and she trained as a dental hygienist.

*Did they all have a Bat Mitzvah?*

Sorry?

*Did they all have a Bat Mitzvah?*

They all had a Bat Mitzvah, yes.

*And do they individually adhere to the Jewish faith?*



Yes. I think that's one of the miracles of the Holocaust- I think, is that most of the survivors kept their religion and brought their children up in the religion. And I think that is a miracle. Cause they could so easily have walked away.

*Indeed, you could have.*

Yes. Now I made the point of not only staying but making much more of it. I mean, Vanda has kept a really lovely kosher home and two of the girls have kept kosher home. One didn't. OK, that's their choice.

*Do you feel enriched by your Jewish background...*

Yes, very much so because-

*... and culture?*

**[1:28:22]**

The culture. And what Judaism has given to the world. If you take the number of people who have won the- the prizes of the world in proportion to our- our numbers, it's just unbelievable. And especially how well the refugees who came from Germany and Austria have done in this country.

*Very enterprising.*

And enterprising. And who have given back to this country. I mean, I feel I have given back for the kindness that- that England or Britain has given to me. I'm, I'm – I'm more pro-British than the British. I, I, I get very angry that the British only get very British when there's a football team. That they should be much more British than- than they are. The trouble is with Britain- the only criticism I have is, they denigrate success. In Europe, in America, if you're successful you are lauded. Look at Trump: only because he's a successful businessman. Here, if you're successful, you're pushed down. And that's the only criticism I have. It's a wonderful, wonderful nation; it's a wonderful country. And I- I'm very happy and

pleased and glad that I came to here and- and not to Israel.

*Have you ever been to Israel?*

Many times. I have family in Israel: cousins that live in Nahariyya and we've been with them a number of- many times. They've been here. Unfortunately, Vanda can't travel now. She's restricted. And it's a ten-hour journey from start to finish and it's too much for her.

*Have you ever been back to Austria or was it too painful?*

**[1:30:48]**

No. Not at all. My mother had a sister who survived, 'cause she'd married out. She survived the things in Vienna. And because she survived, we went back many times to visit her. So going back to Vienna was not a trauma to me at all. And then when the children started to grow up and they wanted to know where I came from... I took them back, each one, to show them where I'd been and where I came from. And to show them that Vienna was a beautiful city. That I didn't like the people who lived there was another story. And then when the grandchildren came and they all visited Vienna with me- with Vanda and I. We took them, each and every one of them, back. So, I've been back a number of times. Obviously, their food I still enjoy. Vanda has learnt a lot from my mother about Austrian cooking and so on. She does many things.

Yes. And so on. And, so yes, it's not a trauma to me. As I said, without doubt Vienna is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. That people really haven't changed...

Just under the surface there is anti-Semitism. So many right-wing presidents have been and still are.

*So, you feel happier living here?*

I'm very, very happy to have come to England and not gone anywhere else. But you know, in the back of my mind, is still, God forbid, a million times, what would happen if somebody- if – if we had to leave? And in the back of my mind are two places that I would- would run to.

God forbid, I had to. One would be Vancouver where we have been to; it's a lovely city and the other would be Sydney. So those are two places we could live in – I could live in.

*Is this something that you've thought of perhaps because of your childhood and the need to escape?*

Yes, absolutely.

*That even though you're safe, there's this lingering element?*

**[1:33:22]**

Abso- absolutely. That's - God forbid, a million times, I've said it. But, but - but if I had to - and this has been in my mind a long time - the children are all grown up into very English ways and have- all the children have got good jobs, good positions. The grandchildren, apart from the youngest grandson who's still at university, they've all got excellent jobs. So, they've integrated. They are all still Jewish.

*But are still interested in your background?*

I've written my autobiography...

*I was meaning to ask about that.*

... for the grandchildren. Not for the- strangely enough, the children were not that interested, but the grandchildren were-

*[ ] that way-*

Yes, it does; I'm told that it does. The grandchildren were very interested. And I've written two- a dual part from my earliest recollections to when we got married, which means the Austrian bit. And the time I've spent here. And then from the time I was married to our golden wedding, which meant the travelling bit and so on. So, I explained where I'd been to and the many places I'd visited and so on. For instance, once I was unwell in Dubai. It was

the last day of a five-week trip and I became unwell and I phoned down. Cause every hotel has a list of doctors and so on. I said, "Get me a doctor." Doctor came and examined me and he said, I can't- I can't tell what it is without an x-ray. So, I said, "Well, where do I go?" So, he said, "I'll take you to a hospital." So, he took me to a hospital where I had - this was now in the evening - x-rays this way, that way. And at ten o'clock at night I was sitting with a senior consultant of the hospital going through the x-rays. And I said to him, "Look, I'm in a lot of pain. Give me something to quell this pain. Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock is my flight back to UK. I have all the facilities there." He said to me, "Sir, if you don't have an operation tonight, you won't see tomorrow morning."

*What was wrong?*

So, I said, "Wow, what do I have?" "You have a burst stomach ulcer. All the gunge is coming out. In three hours, you'll have septicaemia. In seven hours, you're dead. We operate now." I said, "OK." [laughing] It wasn't the time to ask him for his qualifications. So, I said, "You have to phone my wife and tell her where I am, what the hospital is and what you're doing. Cause she'll be meeting this plane tomorrow morning and I won't be on it. So, if you do that for me, get on with it." And I was ten days in hospital there. And I spent another four days finding my feet after the operation. Cause it was an opening from there down to my navel. Yes, it was...

*Did you feel that in religious terms, you'd had a second chance at life, so to speak? That life meant a lot to you? Did it make you value life all the more?*

**[1:37:10]**

After the operation or after-?

*After the operation.*

No, I'd felt that long before that. I felt that... I had been given another chance of life having left Austria. And I've always said I'm one of the lucky ones, I got out when six million didn't. To me that was my- the time that I felt that I was- I'd been given another chance. I could so easily have gone with my mother into one of the chambers. There would have been

nothing to stop us.

*Like some other members of your family?*

Yes.

*Yes. Would you like to say which members of your family you lost and who are listed in the book that you have? Like [ ] and Karl?*

Karl and Gertrude. There are a number of them that I knew. It's ...

*And perhaps you'd like to name the book that they're listed in.*

Oh, I don't know what it's called off hand. It's to do with the people who died in Theresienstadt- who were left to die in Theresienstadt. Because these were all elderly people who were- said they were in a transit camp but they never transited anywhere else. They- they all died there.

*Do you- I'm not suggesting for a moment that you should, but have you ever had pangs of guilt that you are alive and other members of your family are dead?*

**[1:39:14]**

I've thought about this... a number of times. And I wondered why I didn't have any pangs of guilt, which I thought I should have had but I never did. I've come to the conclusion life is as it is. It dishes out good for some and not so good for others and that's how life is. There are two types of people in life, I've found. Those that sit down and say, "Oh, me, oh, my. Oh, woe is me." And the other one who'll get up, and says, "I'm going to get out and go and do things." And if you're of the latter, then you don't consider the sad, bad things. You're positive. You have to think that that's the cards that life dealt you and you have to make the best of them. You're not going to be dealt four aces. You get a mixture of cards; you've got to make the best of them. And that's how life is. You- the way from the bottom. There's only one way you can go. When I arrived and I was sent to eight different families on my own, that was the bottom part of my life. It taught me that- to be self-reliant. To be able to do

things in part for myself. When I was eighteen, for instance, I knew exactly the type of girl I wanted to marry. It didn't have a picture of Vanda obviously in those days, but I knew the type of girl I wanted. I was, I was mature at eighteen for my years.

*And you wanted a family?*

And I- absolutely. I'd lost one. I didn't want two in the family. I was one of two and I'd lost my sister to diphtheria when she was six and so I wanted three as a minimum. And I've got three lovely, lovely girls.

*And you've certainly kept that wish to live life to- to give. And you've done that through the Freemasonry as well?*

Yes - yes.

*And you've built the home for people. How did you come into the Freemasonry movement?*

Basically, through a friend who joined.

*The Freemasons do so much good in the world.*

Yes, we- we- I mean charity is one of the major things. Freemasonry give more than three million pounds a year to non-Masonic charities. Every year. So, this is- we're part of a fraternity that is worldwide.

*And when did you become a freemason?*

**[1:42:55]**

I became a freemason in 1960. So, I've been a- a freemason for fifty-six- fifty-seven years. And I've enjoyed every minute of it. And I joined another lodge not so long ago who do Masonic research into Masonic history. And I've written several papers on Masonic history. And I now give lectures on those where there are lodges that don't have work that particular evening. I tell them about other bits of Masonic history. I do my bit. Again, I've been very

lucky. I've enjoyed freemasonry and I felt I needed to give something back. Giving lectures to Lodgers that don't have work is giving something back. The table collection which is traditional in- in Freemasonry; you give a table collection for a- for a lecturer. And my table charity has always been Belmont Lodge, the home that... So, I've done good in both ways. I do good to the lodge and I do good to the charity that I- we're a registered charity, so I mean it's...

*Tremendous. Is there anything else that you would like to add or to go back to? Any points that you can think of?*

Too many. I can only say that I couldn't have done what I have done without the support of Vanda. She's been a wonderful, wonderful wife and support. She brought up the family while I was travelling abroad and so on. She held the family together. And if it wouldn't be for her, I wouldn't be where I am today, without question.

*A tremendous tribute to her. Do you have, or would you like to give a- a message through the interview perhaps to family members who might look at your DVD in the future?*

No. No, I've got a- I've got a lovely poem I'd like to end up with, if I may. Often, are lonely... that I think shouldn't be lonely, that should be doing things for other people. And that way, you do two things: you make other people happy and you make yourself happy. And that's what people don't understand. In giving of yourself you can make people happy and you make- you bring your own happiness. You can't make happiness.

*No. ...But you can share.*

**[1:46:09]**

Right. I'm ...ready to- to load. Paul Wisdom, this poem.

*Qualified by being eighty, you can make pronouncements weighty*

*To make time to analyse, people think you're being wise*

*True, when you have lived so long, there's less chance of being wrong*

*Errors you remember making*  
*Risks that you remember taking*  
*Bad decisions that you've made*  
*Penalties that you have paid*  
*Things that you have said, you're sorry*  
*Things you did that make you worry.*  
*When they ask for your advice and they think you're being nice,*  
*Tell them what you really know, in an earnest voice that's low,*  
*I can't help. You're on your own.*  
*My experience has shown, you have everything it takes.*  
*You must make your own mistakes.*

*I think that is fantastic. Did you write that?*

I didn't but a friend of mine did who I served in the RAF with. We're still great friends. Two Jewish boys in a camp with 3,000 airmen. And because we were both Jewish, we became great friends. Our mothers became friends. And I'm still friendly with him now. He is a brilliant man. He was with CERN. That's the European Atomic Energy Authority in Geneva. They built this round thing that- the accelerator. He was one of the people that... brought this about. A brilliant mathematician. We were both in the RAF together as- as two- two ordinary airmen. Both of us got- we were... temporary corporals, unpaid, while we gave talks. Because I had done science I could- when I'd finished my course, I could give lectures on the second- to the next group that were coming in and so on. And we were great friends. And he's a brilliant writer as well. So, he writes different things to what I write.

*That's a wonderful end to your interview, Freddy Berdach.*

Thank you. Thank you.

**[1:49:00]**

*Thank you very much indeed.*

Not at all, not at all. It's- I'm sure I've left lots of bits out and half said things. But that's-



again, that's how things are, aren't they? It's- you never tell- you can never- unless you can sit and think you can never tell a complete story. In fact, when I was writing my autobiography there were many times when I'd gone way past and I remembered things that I should have written in. And you can do that when you're writing; you can go back and do that. Especially on the computer you can go back. When you're doing an interview like that, you can't do that. What has been said is said and can't be taken back.

*But we value what you have so kindly shared with us.*

Not at all. It's been-

*And your optimism and your generosity.*

Well, I hope that I can- I don't know. Most of the people I know who are refugees that I still know well, quite a number have obviously passed away by this time. I'm lucky to be alive at eighty- eighty-six. To have seen my children grow. To see my grandchildren grow, and I even have a great-granddaughter. To, to- to know that all this is still there. So, yes, you value life. Life is precious.

*That's your wonderful message.*

Thank you, thank you very much for filming me. Thank you.

*It's our pleasure.*

OK?

**[End of interview]**

**[1:50:50]**

**[1:50:58]**

**[Start of photographs and documents]**

## Photo 1

This is a photo of my grandfather taken in 1939. He was blinded in the First World War. And the strange thing is of course that my grandfather fought for the Austro-Germans in the First World War and my father fought for the British in the Second World War.

## Photo 2

As my grandfather was blinded in the war and he came back at the end of the war, he couldn't work. And the Austrian government who had a monopoly in the tobacco industry, offered him a shop so that he could sell cigarettes, which he knew exactly where each packet was and my grandmother took the money and put it in the till. And this is a photograph of the little shop that he ran until 1938, when the Anschluss came. In Vienna. That's all I know. Wouldn't know which street.

## Photo 2

This is a- a photo of me when I was about five. In Vienna, at the balcony of our flat which was in Heiligenstadt which is the 19<sup>th</sup> District in Vienna.

## Photo 3

This is a photo of my sister and myself taken about 1933, when she was six and I was nearly three. Unfortunately, my sister contracted diphtheria while we were on holiday. And the doctor there didn't recognise the ailment. And she died before they could give her any medication, by which time they knew what it was. And I contracted it too, but I got the medication in time.

## Photo 4

This is a photo taken at the Prater in Vienna where my mother is on the right and my- her sister on the left- together with myself in a sailor suit when I was about five, six, maybe. And my cousin, a little girl there who's a year younger than me. Good- happy times. Taken 1935-6. That sort of time.

## Photo 5

Photo of my parents taken I believe in 1972 at their golden wedding anniversary. It's a lovely

photo while they were still prime of life.

**[1:54:20]**

Photo 6

Photo of my father taken at a menswear exhibition, where we were showing off ties and bow ties, taken around 1974. I was very happy to display our- some of the ranges of our ties.

Photo 7

This is a portrait of me in 1938. Just after we came to England. I look like a nice young boy there. I think the picture flatters me, but that's what I looked like when I was eight.

Photo 8

This is me, 1948. A dapper looking young man outside the house where we lived on the corner of West End Lane and Messina Avenue in West Hampstead. I really thought I was the cat's whiskers then.

Photo 9

This is a photo of our marriage day in- 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1955. A very happy day for Vanda and myself. We were married at Alyth Gardens, Golders Green in the Reform synagogue there. And we've been happy ever since!

[You get such amazing things that-]

Photo 10

This is a family photo of Vanda and myself taken in 2013 with our three lovely daughters. Next to Vanda is our eldest daughter Sheena, next to her is our middle daughter Gonda and next to me is our youngest, Davida. As it shows, a happy family.

**[1:56:40]**

Document 1

This is a Book of the Dead of the people who were deported out of Austria into Theresienstadt, the holding camp that was made by the Germans.

#### Document 2

These are the names of the people who were transported into Theresienstadt the concentration camp and the names of the family that perished there as well- just amongst the many thousands in this book.

#### Document 3

This is a talk I'm about to- to give to our Synagogue - Kol Chai Reform Synagogue in Hatch End for Yom HaShoah about my journey out of Austria which I talk about there, and I also talk about to schools and clubs wherever people meet and they are interested enough to hear about what happened. I'm happy to tell them the- my story.

#### Document 4

And this was a card sent by Her Majesty to Vanda and myself on our Golden wedding anniversary. This is a card sent by Her Majesty the Queen on the 9<sup>th</sup>- on the 19<sup>th</sup> – actually on the day – on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June to mark the Diamond Anniversary of our wedding. And it actually came by courier, a special courier. I had to sign for that. This is a lovely, lovely photo of Her Majesty.

#### Photo 11

This is a lovely photograph of my family. When you consider that I came to England, moved about on my own. And I now have this wonderful, wonderful family of my three daughters, and of the six grandchildren are all standing there waving. It is actually Vanda's eightieth birthday photo. And it shows once more the happy family that we are.

*Thank you, Freddy.*

**[End of photographs and documents]**

**[1:59:40]**