

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV301
NAME: Jack Cynamon
DATE: 12 July 2024
LOCATION: London
INTERVIEWER: Tamar Barnett

[00:00:00]

Today it's the 12th of July and we're conducting an interview with Jack Cynamon in Barnet. Now, Jack, thank you so much for doing this and willing to – for us to come into your home. The idea is for you to just talk freely about your memories and I think the best thing to do is to start by telling us when and where you were born and a little bit about your parents as well, so we know a bit more about where they were from and how they came to meet.

Okay. I was born in Belgium with the name of Jacques Cynamon, not Jack as I am called today. I was named Jacques Cynamon. I was – in 1934. My mother was British-born, my father was Polish and they met by chance, I think. Well, it happened, the story goes, that they met in a restaurant. My father couldn't speak French or English and my mother couldn't speak Polish or French, and somehow or other they got together by a lottery which my grandmother held. They were in a café and my grandmother held four straws and the shortest one of all the boys that were at the restaurant could date my mother and my father happened to be the lucky person and basically they communicated I think in Yiddish, which is [laughs] how they got on. Where should I go from there? From there?

Okay. Why was your mother, if she was British-born, was she living in Belgium or why –

Yes, she went with her parents. Her parents for some reason, I never understood why, they wanted to come to Belgium. And they worked in leather goods and my mother worked with them and my mother became a milliner I believe, something like that, until war was declared. [00:02:08] But basically I was born in 1934, and not much I can remember of that obviously because being too young at the time I can't remember anything at all. My first recollection was basically [sighs] aeroplanes in the sky, in Brussels. One morning the sky was full of aeroplanes. There must have been sixty. That's about my earliest, earliest recollection that I have. We didn't know what to do, from what I understand from my mother. They packed a few things and decided to go to the railway station and for some reason or other they embarked on the train, they stayed on the train, in a cattle truck where there were straws and such like, and the train went on and on for I think five days. And they were fed by people at the station – excuse me. They were fed by people at the station, with food and water, they carried on until they reached the Pyrenees. That's where the train stopped. I understand that my father worked on a potato farm, they both did, they worked on a – picking potatoes for a farmer, stayed there for about two months as far as I know, and they returned to Brussels because they found out that things weren't as bad as originally thought. Actually, things were not so bad in Belgium until 1942. That's when the real problems started to really arise. So basically, life was all but normal in 1942. I think, and I can't recollect going to school, but I must have gone to school of some form, I don't know what. And then in 1942 things started to get really tough. [Sighs] I think we all had to start wearing, you know, a Star of David. I know that I'm registered to wear the other Star of David. [00:04:02] And my mother and father decided to try and escape. So the first place they tried to escape was to Spain. They found a guide, he took them all but at the border, and at the border decided to take their money and leave them –

So they were – how did they get from Brussels to the Pyrenees, to the border of Spain?

That I don't know. All I can tell you is it's just a smitten that I heard from my mother, that they tried to escape and they didn't make it.

And you were with them at that time?

I was with them at the time, yes. And then we came back to Belgium, and then they tried again. They tried a second time to escape to Switzerland and again the guide took their money and left them at the border. And then things in Belgium became really desperate. I believe it was the time that they decided to start going to a hiding place. My mother did tell me that the only way they had currency, she had small diamonds which she had of a shoe- a specially made shoe, and she hid the diamonds in the heel of this specially made shoe. Then they went into hiding and the person that looked after them was a guy by the name of Cnudde. He worked for my father and he was able to bring food and the likes, and he hid them in an attic, I'm not sure where, but that's where they did. And I was in that attic as well. Then they realised that they could not keep me in an attic. I was too – I obviously wanted to run and do things and be a – do what boys do. And so, one day, I remember walking along and we came along to a church and my father said goodbye to me and they left me with a priest, and that was the very last time I saw my father. [00:06:07]

So just circling back a little bit. So you were together in the attic and you were hidden by somebody who worked together with your father.

Yeah. He supplied the food, yeah.

So just – what did your father do? How did they know each other?

Well, he worked for my father.

He worked for your father.

Yeah, yeah. And my father was in leather goods, making leather goods at home, and he had a factory and he was one of his employees. Basically, he was the one that provided the food. And by the way, I also took Mr Cnudde's name. Later I had to change my name from Cynamon to Cnudde. I became Jacques Cnudde for the rest of my time in – as far as – as long as the war went on.

So, you were in the attic and obviously it was very difficult because you were young and –

I was eight years old.

And it was decided that the family had to be split up, is that correct?

Not really split up, that I had to go.

You had to go somewhere else?

I – they can't – I can't keep a boyish eight-year-old in an attic, not able to say anything, I had to keep quiet. It wasn't on. So, they had to find some place for me to be hidden, not taken or looked after.

Yes. And who found a place for you to be –

There's an organisation called L'Enfant Caché and I've got the notes of the actual organisation and they would find places for children or even for people to be hidden by gentiles, by the Church, by priests and who knows what, convents, all various people. And that's where they – they obviously – they got – contacted them and found a priest to hide me, Father André.

So did your father walk you to –

I can't remember.

You can't remember.

Remember, I was eight years old, I cannot remember, but probably. [00:08:03] Probably, because as I said, I remember saying a sort of goodbye. I vaguely remember that. And that was it. And that's the last time I – the very last time I saw my father. And I became a choirboy.

So where did – Father André took you. Where did he take you?

Well, we went to a place called Serville which – I actually have a photo, it looks a very, very lovely place now – I never remembered it as such but it was a very lovely place – with other children and I became a choirboy, with all the bells and whistles and everything else. And that I knew, from what I recollect, that I was a real choirboy, I was a Christian, or [inaudible].
[8:49]

So you blended in as a Christian.

I absolutely – yeah.

With the name of Jacques Cnudde.

Yeah, Cnudde, yeah.

And were there other – how many boys were there? Were there boys and girls? Was it just boys?

Yeah, I cannot, cannot remember. You have to remember, eight years old. It – life is confusing at that time, you know, you don't know where you are. And how much you can remember of an eight-year-old and your background of an eight-year-old, very little recollections. You can only remember specific items that happen to you. I remember being liberated, for example. I remember, for example, a few things I can remember, that the Germans used to come around occasionally looking for teachers because they wanted them to become working – working for the Germans. I also remember the day that I was liberated.

Let's – yeah, we'll come to that. So in the convent you were with other boys. Were there other Jewish boys? You didn't know them?

No, no. No idea. I take it for granted they were but I have no idea. [00:10:00] I can't recollect anybody or any of the things that I did when I was there. I was sort of in a – in a quandary. I didn't know what was what. You just go with the flow.

Do you remember being a choirboy?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I remember being a choirboy, but just about that sort of thing, you know. But the good thing from my point of view is I had blue eyes and blond hair, I never looked like a Jewish boy at all. I probably do today but –

[Both laugh] And at the time that you were in the convent, hidden by the priest, where were your parents?

Okay. My parents were still in hiding and I only know this from a tape that my daughter did, trying to recount for my mother exactly what happened. They were hiding in an attic and one day there was a bang on the door because the Germans were doing a street-to-street search, looking for Jewish people, and then house to house, if you like. And there was a banging on the door and the Gestapo came in and discovered them. My mother tells me that the very last words my father said to my mother was [gets upset] she was – it was painful. It's emotional.

Of course.

If you ever find Jackie, ensure, promise me he will be *bar mitzvahed*. I find that- excuse me. I find that emotional because imagine, two Gestapo surrounding him, being to some extent quite rough with him, being taken away and then the last thing he thought was that.

[00:12:09]

It is.

You know.

Yeah.

It's sad. It's not the sort of thing you would think about, being taken away, you know, so you would think – and I think he'd say to my mother, look after yourself, try and be – try and be strong, try and whatever, but no, that's what he said. Yeah.

So your father was taken away. Where was he taken?

He was taken to Mechelen, which is a holding camp. For people who don't know what a holding camp is, when Jewish people were taken away, they weren't just taken individually to Auschwitz or to places or to certain camps, they were taken to a holding camp where they could amass maybe up to a thousand people and then decide the train would take them away, so they had to hang around with whatever few possessions they had and wait to be taken away. But they just weren't taken away, they went to the holding camp. And Mechelen is very well-known for that. They had quite a lot of the records.

And your mother was –

My mother was British, she was British-born, and being a citizen of a country at war, she went to an intern camp. She went to Vittel initially and finished up in La Bourboule which is in the Massif Central in France, which is really, quite a nice place. And she lived on Red Cross parcels with Americans.

So she lived with – was she under the auspices of the Americans in Bourboule, or who –

The British and Americans.

British and Americans looked after her there?

Yeah, Red Cross I think basically.

Under the – yes, under the Red –

I went there. I actually went there because we – [sighs] let me get my facts right here.

[00:14:05] The Germans – I remember the Germans leaving, for example, okay. And it was followed the same day by American jeep and five or six tanks and we all ran out, the whole convent ran out and we were showered with chewing gums and sweets and whatever [laughs] and everyone was very happy. But then out of the blue, the Germans were coming back and that was the Battle of the Bulge. So, Father André had to make a decision on what to do with the children because we didn't want to go back with the Germans, so he decided to send all the children to Brussels and that's where my mother found me.

So how did he manage that? How did he – were you in a car, in a coach, in a train?

No idea. No, I'd [laughs] certainly tell you.

So there was a war raging and –

You know, kids don't remember the specifics. You can't remember the specific – at that stage I was probably nine, maybe even ten, something like that, and you can't remember the specifics, not as a grown-up. But all I know is there we were in Brussels and out comes my mother and I was, to be truthful, I was horrified because she wanted me to go back with her. I didn't want to go back with her. I wanted to stay with the church, I wanted to stay with the priest who loved me, and my mother was at stage a sort of a stranger, if you like. I hadn't seen her for two – two and a half years and –

Do you remember her reaction when she saw you?

[Laughs] Well, it must have been wonderful for her, you know, and I think the other boys obviously must have looked on enviously to some extent. But anyway, so we did go back and we went back to La Bourboule which is the most wonderful place. [00:16:05] It's a health centre. And I stayed there for about six months.

In that hotel?

Yeah, in that hotel.

And that was run – who was the hotel run by? Was it by –

Probably the Red Cross and – Red Cross, yeah. There was Americans and the British. And she then obviously had some documentation which was given to her, she obviously was – she was a very strong character, my mother, a very, very strong character, and obviously she managed to get some documentation and some passports to get back to England.

Do you remember anything from La Bourboule?

Oh, yeah, it was a lovely time. Lovely, lovely – there were some lovely photographs. I took the – I took the children there after, many years later and it was a really lovely, lovely place, right near the Mont-Dore which is a ski resort, really beautiful place and very fortunate to be there.

Yes. And what about the people? How were you treated when you were there?

Oh, lovely.

Do you remember anything about life, the day to day?

No, I only remember that we enjoyed it. There were other kids there. Whether – I don't think they were from Hidden Children but there were other French kids and such like. I remember playing there. There was just a little recollection there but it was a really, really nice place [inaudible]. It was so nice that we all went there for a holiday years later, many, many years later. Yeah. Really nice.

So that holds positive memories in your – for you.

Yeah, absolutely. And from there we – somehow or other she got documentation and we arrived at Newhaven on the 2nd of August 1945.

So you went from La Bourboule to Newhaven?

Yeah, yeah.

And do you think she by then knew what happened to your father?

No, no. She had no way of knowing anything about it. It took – you know, 1945 was straight after the war, there was very little connection, documentation that one could discover.

[00:18:04] The country was still in a somewhat – in a war stage zone, if you like. No, she didn't really know very much about it. It was only some time later that she – we managed to get some information regarding the situation.

And were there other Cynamons living in Brussels?

Yeah. Well, later on I found out when I went to – [sighs] I went back to Brussels, obviously to look at my roots and such like through L'Enfant Caché. They helped me an awful lot. And there is a memorial in Brussels for the 23,000 Jews who were sent to camps or were exterminated and there we found thirteen Cynamons, all of my family, including my father's name listed there. So, I lost every member of my family. None are left. Nothing, yeah. Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's still there. But that was a very moving moment.

Now, going back to – you were liberated, you were in France, and from there you came back to England.

Hmm-hmm.

Where did you live in England to start off with? And what was it like to be a stranger in a strange land?

[Laughs] Well, very simply I did not know a word of English, not a single word. Okay, okay, [laughs]. That's about it, something like that. But my mother was English, remember, she

was English-born. My grandparents had immigrated and they lived in London and Newington Green and that's where we stayed initially. We used – they made room for us in their apartment and we stayed with them for a couple of weeks till my mother could somehow or other find some accommodation and start looking for a job, for the two of us, you know. Yeah. And I had to go to school. [00:20:03] And a very strange experience when you go to school, you can't speak a word of English. Again, as I said, in 1945 education as such was really in a bit of a mess, so, you know, so I went to this school, words were thrown, which was probably one of the worst schools you could ever imagine. I mean it was really – all the dunces were there. To give you an idea how bad it was, in my first year I came first of the class. That's including English [laughs] which I knew very little of that.

Do you think there were other refugee children, Jewish refugee children, in your school?

No, no.

You can't remember that?

I was the only one. I'm pretty sure I was the only one.

And how did you deal with readjusting? 'Cos you were in a convent, you'd been a choirboy, and then you came back to a different country with a family that you didn't really know.

I think children adapt. I think children adapt very, very easily – very, very easily. You haven't got the world's problems on your shoulders, you haven't got responsibilities, you haven't got any of that. I think you just go on with your life. I think all kids do. You know, we seem to think too much about worrying about this but they get over it, they manage it, you know, it's only if they're – if they cry, it's only for a moment, you know. It passes by quickly and their life carries on whichever way, you know. It's – it is what – it's easy for kids.

And how do you think it was for your mother?

Ah, something else. That is something really different. That must have been absolutely horrendous, really, really horrendous. I still don't know how she coped with it all. I really don't know. She's a heroine. [00:22:00] But my story goes into much – much, much deeper about what I found out at a later stage which was –

Can you tell me something about what spurred you on to find out more? What was the catalyst?

Um, okay.

How long did you not speak about your experiences?

Sixty years. For sixty years I didn't say anything at all. I wasn't aware. I didn't concern myself with it. And then I had a friend – not a school friend, but a friend who I met – I met in Florida and he was a survivor from the Polish Warsaw ghetto. And we got together speaking and he was telling me about his experiences as a hidden person and so on and so forth and saying that he was a Holocaust survivor. So I said, well, I'm not a Holocaust survivor. He said, of course you are. 'Cos I always took it for granted that Holocaust survivors were people who went to camps. I didn't go to a camp, so I wasn't a Holocaust survivor. He says, absolutely you are. He says, I'll tell you something, he says, I want you to come to a convention with me. My wife and I, we're going to Amsterdam and we're going to the Hidden Children Convention in Amsterdam and I would like you to come with me. I was speaking to Norma about it and I thought, well, why not? Why not go? So, we went to Amsterdam to this Hidden Children Convention and, oh, there must have been a thousand people there. I thought I was the only hidden child. I couldn't believe how many people there were there. Oh, it was- And people were recanting their stories and people had written their books and now I was interested, I wanted to know a little bit about myself. So there's all different areas, different countries where there were supports for Belgians, for Dutch, for whatever countries, and I went to the Belgian area and I said – I explained who I was. [00:24:01] I was – I don't have any records of myself, I said. All I know is I have an album of the [inaudible], of the Belgian written [ph] inscription, which says to Jacques Cnudde on the occasion of winning your first star and it's in 1944. And that's about the only thing I have,

and if I send it to you perhaps you could help me, so they said yes. So, going back to England, I found the album, I sent them the photo of what I'd got, and came back the repl. I was hidden by Father André, I had a number, I had – I was hidden in Serville, I was – and various other information about myself which was something completely new. So, I think a couple of days later, I wanted to know a little bit more, so I managed to find their phone number, of L'Enfant Caché, and decided to phone them to see if the priest who saved my life, if Joseph André, was still alive. So I, with trepidation [laughs] I phoned and yes, Father André is no longer alive but his priest is still available and if you like, we'll give you his phone number and you can talk to him. Well, [laughs] I can't tell you.

Norma: Monsieur Colette.

Monsieur Colette. This is the man who saved my life, Monsieur Colette. So, I pick up the phone with trepidation, Monsieur Colette? Yes? Jacques Cnudde. He didn't know me, Jacques Cynamon, Jacques Cnudde. Oh, you were little Jackie. Wow [laughs]. Wow.

That must have been a strange feeling. [00:26:02]

[Laughs] Very, very strange, yeah.

How did you feel?

[Laughs] I can't tell you. Yeah. So we chatted for quite a while and I said I would come to him. I said we would come to Brussels. Can I have a drink?

Yes. Do you want me to –

Chat to him and I said I'll see him. So, a few weeks later we decided to go to Brussels and meet Monsieur Colette and basically L'Enfant Caché took us to his place, found out where he was, and we met and he was a wonderful man. I've got a photograph of him. He explained what happened, that he had five different books and in each book was different information. For example, your name was in one, where you were born in number two, date of birth,

number three, who your parents were, number four, and so on and so forth. So, should the Germans find any of the books, they wouldn't be able to put them together. And that's what he did for Monsieur Colette. Monsieur Colette, by the way, saved 2500 children. And the most interesting thing I found out at a later stage, his office, or his chapel, was right next door to the Gestapo headquarters, right next door, and he was never found out. He was never found out. Quite incredible, that it was right next door in Namur.

Incredible, isn't it?

Yeah, that they never found out and he saved all these children. Yeah. So we had a long chat and then L'Enfant Caché took me to the – there's a memorial in Brussels for the 23,000 Jews who perished at – for – by the Germans. [00:28:05] And it's a beautifully laid out memorial, all marble, all listed in alphabetical order, and that's where I saw thirteen members of my family, all Cynamons, who had died. And that was the first time I saw my father's name in print as a memorial.

It makes it real.

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

Now, I need to go back because there is a big important chunk that I've not asked about and that is when you arrived in England, you went to school. What did you do when you left school? And more importantly, how did you meet your lovely wife?

[Laughs]

To start with, leaving school, because you explained to me you had quite a lustrous career with lots of different jobs. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

Yeah. Well, basically when I left school, I didn't know what to do, so I went in to the leather goods, which is what my father did. I worked in a factory. By the way, the wages in those days were – I remember my first job was I think five shillings a week, which is – what is it,

about 25 pence a week, [laughs] today's rates. And carried on working in a factory until I was called up to go into the army. You had to go into the army at the age of eighteen and I had the choice of going to the Belgium army or the British Army and I chose the British Army. I did all my training in a place called Tonfanau in Wales and whilst you'd went – once you completed your training you have to – the whole regiment has to go into – be set up as a fighting unit and go in various places. [00:30:01] The whole of my regiment went to Korea. It was 1953. They all went to Korea. And I was designated to be an equipment repairer, where Chester needed an equipment repairer. My lucky day, 'cos I did not go to Korea, I went to Chester as an equipment repairer. I later found out an equipment repairer repairs the canvases on the lorries. So, when I arrived at Chester, they did not know what an equipment repairer was, or did they need an equipment repairer, so they put me in the stores [laughs]. So that was a lucky break for me. Anyway, I went on leave because my stepfather's granddaughter was getting married, and any occasion to get away from the army, so I went on leave in the army from – I went on leave and we went to – I think it was Shoreditch Church or whatever it was.

Norma: [Inaudible].

Stoke [ph].

Norma: Town hall.

In a town hall, at a wedding. And looking around – my mother was there obviously, and she tried to introduce me to this girl. I said, Mum, leave me alone, let me find my own girls. And then Norma's brother happened to be in uniform. I was in civvies at the time. And we got chatting and I said to him, who's that beautiful girl? He says to me, that's my sister. Let me introduce you. So he introduced me, we danced the night away, and that was the start of a big romance, and she took me to the station the next day. I was stationed at, um, at – taking me to Chester, she took me to King's Cross. I think it was King's Cross, she took me to King's Cross, I said my goodbye, we corresponded and – that's life. My chance. So, it's amazing how routes go. If I'd have gone to Korea I would never have met Norma, I wouldn't be in the position I am today, so, you know, it's strange, all these roads, where they take you.

[00:32:01] You're at crossroads all day long. You know, every day you're at a crossroad and you don't know which way to go, left or right and it just works out for you. So, that was how I met Norma.

And when did you get married?

We got married as soon as I came out of the army, in 1955. Lived in a one-bedroom, one-bedsit room. You know, we've known poverty. We've known real poverty during that time, really did. Norma had five jobs at one time. I was a tallyman. I don't know if you know what a tallyman is.

Yes.

I did that for fifteen years. And I really needed to get out, get out if it, but then you're going into another type of story, a completely different type of story which went from rags to riches, which is something completely different. But through Norma, you know, [sighs] she supported me all the way through in whatever I did, she supported me. As I say she had five jobs and two children, and she was still working all the time. And I became a tallyman, if you want me to carry on into that story, which is another lovely story actually.

Tell it.

Yeah. So, for fifteen years I was a door-to-door salesman and I hated it actually but I was a good salesman, a really good sale – always – whatever I did, I always came out on top. Well, even when I changed jobs, top of the company, top of the company, always. And I always – I don't know what it is. I think everybody has a gift. Most people never find their gift but you've got a gift. And Norma worked at home, sewing skirts and working for this particular boss. And in the meantime, I wanted to get out and we had looked in the newspaper, in the Standard, I remember, and for £50 they would give – you could get into a correspondence course, and during that time they would find you a job as a salesman, of your liking.

[00:34:06] A job of your liking. The first job – the first job I was offered was Dictaphone, which I refused. I didn't want that. And then they offer me a job as Movietex. Movietex is

the company that does interchangeable numbers and letters on boards. You might have seen it on notice boards and such like. And that's what they did. So, I thought, that's it, I'm going to do that. So I changed over. Within a month I became the company's top salesman and within two years I was the top of the country for that. In the meantime, Norma's boss is – Norma – boss who she was working for, his boss, wanted to start a new company in the garment industry and was looking for a salesman. I jumped at the chance. I don't know why but I said, you're given a gift and somehow, you're directed in that direction, you don't know why, you just jump, irrespective I jumped at the chance. So I went into working for him. He had no customers and I had to work on commission only. He gave me some garments to sell, which I did, and – I'm cutting a long story short – I was selling like you cannot believe. I – from earning next to nothing, I was earning up to £1500 a week and I built his business up as a salesman enormously. But he was not a nice man. He was not a nice man. He had a whole family working for him. They didn't like the fact that I was earning all this money and they weren't and so on. They thought even the fact that I was producing all the goods and I was telling him what to make and what not to make, and I had this rapport with all the customers. They liked me. [00:36:00] And I – and I'll finish, something which is very strange, he couldn't afford to pay me because he needed money to build the business. You can't keep paying all your money in commission, you need to leave some here, so he said look, I'll pay you so much a week, he said, and I'll keep some for you and you'll get it later on as the business progresses. But he was not nice at all.

Hmm, so he was a difficult – difficult.

Yeah. He became more and more difficult and more and more jealous, if you like, of what I was doing. And so I decided – and there was one of the guys we – there was a lot of factories working for him and one of the guys was a young guy, called Alan Green, and he was really very, very efficient, extremely efficient. So, I approached Alan and I said, would you like to start a business together? So – oh, he was way up for it because he just worked in a factory with nothing, you know, and I was just a salesman, and so he said okay. So the designer that worked for my original company was also very unhappy, so I called on to her, I said, would you like to come and join us? So, she said, absolutely, she'd love that. So, Norma made the samples and I went on the road with the first customer. And it's a lovely story actually

because I had all the samples in the boot of my car, just skirts mainly, and Harvey – his name was Harvey, that we met in the West End, and I parked there and I meet Harvey, he comes into the car, I start showing him the samples, and he starts writing in telephone numbers. He has eighteen shops and he's writing in telephone numbers [laughs] like you can't believe. And a traffic warden comes along and says, I'm going to give you a ticket. Forget the ticket, writing and writing and writing. And he comes again and says, there's your ticket. [00:38:00] So I said, okay. It was a £2 parking ticket. And Harvey says, I'll pay it. So, I said, no, no, Harvey. Anyway, he insisted on paying but I kept the – £2. I gave him the £2 and he gave me his two – Scottish £2 note. That £2 note has been in my office to the day I left 'cos he was the first guy. He gave me an order for 18,000 garments [laughs].

Wow. Wow. It's worth a parking ticket, isn't it?

Yeah. And that £2 note was in my office till the day I left. And from there we built and built and built and built and built. What my boss didn't realise was that the customers knew me and I was an honest boy, I made sure that they made money. And they didn't know him. Eventually my business prospered. But I never asked him for my money that he owed me. He drove around in a Rolls-Royce, using my money. I didn't care. Because what happened eventually, I took every one of his customers away. Well, if he'd offered me – he never offered to pay me back. He knew – he knew he owed me money but he didn't care. So anyway, so the business prospered and we went public and it became a big, big business.

So that's your working life, very successful. Can we go back a bit to your family life with Norma? You say you had two children.

Yeah.

Boy, girl?

Yeah. Deb – Debbie. Or Norma can probably enhance on that, can't you, Norma?

Norma: [Inaudible].

Debbie. Lovely, lovely girl who unfortunately contracted leukaemia. We had a very, very tough life we had with her, very, very tough. She was married and out of the blue – and I mean in those days we didn't even know what leukaemia was. She came home and she said, Dad, Mum, I've got leukaemia. [00:40:02] What's leukaemia, you know. And she was in the hospital for two years until the day she passed.

Did she have children?

No, fortunately, yeah. I suppose that's fortunate I suppose in some respect but it was a very, very sad time. And it got to the stage where she was in intensive care and we spoke to the nurse and she said there's not a chance and then the doctors came around and said – I said, is there any chance? They said no, after two years. And then I pulled the plug. There was no chance, you know. It's a long story but it's a very sad story.

And your other child, boy – a son or a daughter?

A son, David.

A son.

Yeah.

And he is younger than Debbie?

Yeah, four years. Yeah, four years younger.

Norma: Sixty-one.

Coming up sixty-one. The part of the story which I haven't mentioned, which is something that happened, as I explained to you, we went to different conventions. We went to Amsterdam, we went to Washington where we went to watch [overtalking].

Norma: Jerusalem.

We went to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was very, very moving. Very, very moving, of all the places we went to. We – they always had workshops. You know, we went to Yad Vashem from there. But they had workshops in Jerusalem, as they did with all the conventions. And at this particular convention there was the workshop called Lost Childhood where there was about thirty or forty people in this room and you weren't allowed to recount how you suffered during the war, what happened to you during the war. [00:42:15] They wanted to know basically what you had lost, more than anything, what affected you during the war. And there was a psychiatrist and he had an egg and he said, I'm going to pass this egg around and the person holding the egg is the only person allowed to talk. So, the first person started talking, explaining that she missed life, she – one thing and another, but she hated her mother. And the second person went around and said, I miss my childhood terribly and I blamed it all on my mother and I hated my mother. And the next person, I hated my mother. And I hated my mother. And I hated my mother. Oh, right. [Sighs] So it came to my point. Now, it's a very well-known fact from all the family, I did not love my mother. I shied away from her. If she wanted to embrace me I sort of [demonstrates]. I don't know why, I did. I didn't want to get close to her. I never did. I was a dutiful son, bought her an apartment, gave her whatever she wanted, I did my duty, but there was no love. None at all. And then the penny dropped. And that was the hard part. That's when I realised. When you consider all she went through to find me, to save me, to look after me, all through the war and whatever, and now I realised why, you know. [00:44:14] And I would say I'd love to hug her [gets upset].

Yeah. That is hard.

Yeah. You know –

But it is important that you realised why.

Yeah.

Why do you think it was? Why couldn't you hug your mum when she was alive?

I don't know. It's just – maybe that's the reason. And I wasn't alone. You know, all those children felt the same way. It's psychological, I suppose. I don't know. But we did. We did. And it was well-known by the family, you know, that – I mean I made her an eightieth birthday party at the church, I did all the things that a dutiful son would do but there was never – I know she was very proud of me, she carried on about how she was with me and my business and all that. But there was no love.

From your side?

From my side.

Yeah. There was from her side?

Oh, yeah, most definitely.

Yeah.

Yeah. And you realise – that's when I realised but she'd gone already. Too late. Yeah. Yeah. And that's the worst. That is the worst thing that affected me. Yeah.

So, is the reason why you've got a – had a disruptive relationship with your mother, is that because you were separated during the war? [00:46:02] Why do you think that was?

I'm no different to other children.

But for you, why do you think it was. Why –

I have no idea. I can't – I can't understand the – I can't understand it, why I didn't love her, because it never dawned on me how much she'd done for me, how much she'd loved me, how much – to the extent she went to find me, to look after me and did all the things that she

did. And it- you must understand, first of all, I was hidden in the first place and then this stranger comes along, which she was virtually a stranger to me, I didn't want to go with her- you know- so when you look at all that and I think about that, it's – it's not surprising really, you know.

It's understand – yes, when you look back, you realise –

That is the one big regret in life, yeah. Yeah. You know, what I mean. She went way beyond anything that mothers do, you know, way beyond. I mean she travelled through France to find me and all that and I mean it tells in her records the extent she went to, to make sure I was a British boy [laughs]. You know, there are so many instances that you can go back on now and think, all, everything that she did.

So what was life like then when you came to school? You lived with your grandparents. Did you move out? Did you live on your –

Yes. Well, again, she found an apartment, a top-floor apartment in Amherst Road in Stoke Newington and she went looking for a job and she became a really great, great salesgirl – saleswoman. Obviously I – it brushed off on me 'cos I was a great salesman too [laughs].

[00:48:01]

So what was life like when you were together? You know, as you were growing up and your mother was at home and you were at home.

Not good, not good because she married this man who I hated. I really, really hated. He was like a bully. Nobody in the family hated- but then what can you say? People often wonder, they even to this day when I speak to – the only family I've got is really from my mother's side, there's two cousins. And they wonder to this day why she married him. And it was one of the reasons why we got married early because I had to leave. I came out of the army and we got married soon afterwards, didn't we? Yeah. And even Norma's parents said at the time if that had been my real father, they wouldn't have allowed her to marry me. He was a real

bully. So that was the bad – and that also didn't help matters, if you know what I mean, because she lived with him, he was a bully. We used to fight [laughs].

So you argued back?

Pardon?

You argued back, you –

Oh, yeah, I mean we used to fight each other. I hated him in every way. In fact, when they got married, I didn't go to their wedding because I knew what he was like. That was the bad part of it.

So did you hate him because he was not a nice man or did you perhaps hate him because he was taking the place of [overtalking], did he try to take the place –

No. No, no, no, no. He was not a nice – he was not a nice man. Not a nice man at all. Not at all, in every way. Just a – just one of those things, you know, and that didn't help matters. No. Yeah.

No, so it didn't improve the relationship with your mother.

No, no. Yeah. Yeah. She was a very attractive woman and she found this man [laughs]. You can't tell. [00:50:00] So that's when we moved out and got married.

Yes, and then you got Debbie and then –

Yeah, we got married in 1955, soon after coming out of the army.

And then Debbie was born and two years later –

Norma: '58.

'58.

Yeah. Paul was born in '63, yeah. So –

And has he got – how was family life? How were you as a dad and did any of your experiences as a child –

No, I didn't see much of the children. Norma looked after the kids, I just worked day and night, didn't I? I really worked from early morning from a tally [inaudible] until late at night and I didn't see much of the kids but Norma did it all. But things changed, I tried to make things up at this stage but yeah, I missed their childhood actually. I missed their childhood, yeah.

And does he have a family?

He has family. We have three grandchildren.

Boys, girls?

Yeah, two boys and a girl. One boy, two girls. David is really extremely good. He works for Metro Bank as, high tech, he does all their high tech. Charlotte is just at Bristol University doing economics and Alisa is also at university doing social –

Norma: Social work.

Social work, yeah.

Wow. So, a proud grandfather.

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And great-grandfather. We just had a great-grandson.

Ah.

Yeah, lovely.

And he is...? How old is –

One year old.

He's one years old.

Yeah, David. Yeah. Julius. Yeah. So it's fine. It's fine.

Yes. So, is there anything that you would like to add or comment on? [00:52:01] Sometimes, you know, what is your message when you look back on your life? You know, as a young boy settling.

To be truthful, in those days, you have to understand, when we came into the country there was no social – no benefits- I mean people didn't get benefits for all sorts. We never got any benefits, nobody helped us in any way, shape or form. You had to help yourself. Came into the country, I lived with my – our grandparents who had barely had room for us to stay. I mean it was like two or three sleeping in the bed. I went to school, walked to school actually, not knowing English, but somehow or other, kids help you, you know, they – you – there's no animosity or anything like that with that, you know. They – it was quite easy. Yeah.

Did you have a religious life?

No.

Did you go to synagogue?

Not at all. No, my grandfather looked after me and he made sure that I was being *bar mitzvahed*. But I would –

Yes. Do you remember your bar mitzvah? Because that must have been quite special, considering your father.

[Laughs] Not really. Not really. Yeah, pretty sure it was nice. I can't remember it. I was thirteen years old obviously, and I can't remember what happened. It's a shame because I miss the religion. We're not at all religious. We belong to the tribe, as I say. Like many people, we belong to the tribe. I'm sure that if my father had been alive, I would have been definitely quite religious because I know that he was. And my grandfather was as well. But my grandfather was ailing by the time I arrived in England. He was already quite – he was ailing person, you know. Probably my age, as I am now [laughs].

And how did you raise your children with – did they go to – did you go to synagogue with them, did they have –

No. No.

Religious instruction, bar mitzvahs? [00:54:06]

No. My son was *bar mitzvahed*, obviously.

Norma: Paul was *bar mitzvahed*.

Yeah, yeah.

Norma: [Inaudible].

Yeah, he is still friendly with all the children. Strangely enough, at the Liberal synagogue, the three of them were *bar mitzvahed* on the same day and they're still very, very close together.

Frank: Did they go to Jewish schools?

Oh, yeah. No. No, no, no. No. No, they didn't go to Jewish schools. But –

And your grandchildren, did they go to Jewish schools or –

No.

No. So –

Norma: David got *bar mitzvahed*.

David got *bar mitzvahed* and I think he's planning – he's living with a lovely wife – obviously he got married, lovely wife, and I think that side of the family's quite religious and they're planning for Julius to go to a Jewish school.

Norma: He embraces the Jewish religion.

He embraces the Jewish religion because –

So he's come back to it.

He's married. He's married to a quite Orthodox family which he loves. He loves the Jewish religion, so he's slowly and surely moving that way, which is lovely, which is really lovely. I would have loved to have been part of it. In actual fact, it's very strange, when I gave my talk a couple of weeks ago to Nuffield Foundation School, the rabbi took us there and he introduced us there. He was such a nice man. [Laughs] I don't think – I think that I would have taken up religion if he was my rabbi [laughs]. You know, that's –

But you were married under a chuppah, were you?

Oh, yeah. Absolutely, yeah. 1955, Poet's Road Synagogue –

Norma: No.

No, Lea Bridge Road Shul, but I'd be – I went to Poet's Road Synagogue. Yeah. Lea Bridge Road Synagogue, Lea Bridge Road – yeah, it was Lea Bridge Road.

Norma: Lea Bridge Road Shul, in the hall.

Yeah, Lea Bridge Road Shul in the hall. Yeah. 1955, a long time. A lot of water under the bridge [laughs].

And still happy. [00:56:00]

Oh, yeah, deliriously happy. She makes me happy [laughs]. She's amazing. Seventy years come March.

And now, so how – when you look back, you're now a mature gentleman, you're looking back on all your life, what does war and persecution do to a human being, in short-term and long-term, if you – for you?

Okay, basically, children don't feel it. They hurt but from my own personal recollection, I've got over it and I'm sure all the children – it depends what comes after. So basically, you know, some children recover well because they have saviours, people who look after them and have very happy times. Other children I'm sure get a very miserable lifetime after that, and that can make a big, big difference. And if you have a happy – a life thereafter I think you could tend to forget very easily, you know, and I was very lucky. As I said, my mother found me, went to La Bourboule. But you go with the flow. It just – children, it just happens to you. How many – how much can you remember of what you were – when you were eight years old? What can you remember? Only specific items. Maybe you went on holiday somewhere. You can't remember the ins and outs of life. You can't remember and I can't remember very much of what happened to me. I just went with the flow. And I was very lucky. Maybe I was very strong mentally to overcome all these things. It depends. Some people are, some people can't manage it at all. [00:58:00] I've overcome to a great extent. I have regrets obviously. I'd love to hear my father's voice. And I don't know what he sounds

like. I'd love to hear his voice, you know. That's one of the things I miss. And again, I miss not being able to at this moment to go and see my mother and give her a cuddle and whatever, which means a lot. You know, a cuddle means an awful lot and that's about it, you know. But [sighs] as I said, you get over it. I've got over it completely. It's not like I wake up at night wondering about it because there's no memories of what happened, only fleeting memories of certain good things. I remember being liberated, I remember, um –

Norma: Holding your father's hand.

Yeah. I would love to hold my father's hand, you know. My father had no thumb, by the way.

How come? What happened?

Because my mother told me. He wouldn't join the Russian army so they chopped his thumb off.

And is that why he came to Belgium?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He wanted to leave Poland and he wanted to emigrate and his brother-in-law had a business in Belgium, so he was able to get a visa to go to Belgium and that's where he finished up, in Belgium. He was a Polish boy, you know. Yeah.

Now, I know I'm slightly incoherent and I do apologise, Frank, as well. Have you ever met other boys after the war who were also in the convents?

People ask me that question often. Impossible. They all – we've all gone our ways, separate ways.

But there has not been a reunion?

No, no, no, because first of all, thinking after the war, we had no emails, we had none of that, and think about 1945, there was barely a post, never mind anything else. [01:00:06] You

know, everything done by telephone – um, no, um, and I can't even remember being friendly with anybody.

And did you ever meet Mr Cnudde after the war?

No.

The one whose name you took?

No, no, I'm sure –

Did your mother stay in contact with him?

No, no, no. He was a worker obviously, not Jewish. Monsieur Cnudde [laughs] and I became Mr Cnudde, yeah.

Now, so we've discussed, you know, looking back. And looking forward, what is your message? Have you got a message? What do you find important to, you know, your wisdom, connected to your experiences?

[Sighs] What can I say? That's a very difficult one, particularly in this day and age. It's not easy. It's not easy for anybody today. It's a different world, completely, completely different world and it's all very well saying, go to work and do whatever. There's so many obstacles today compared to those days. I mean the best times we had probably were the '70s and the '80s where there was much more freedom of expression and we didn't have all this woke business and everything else that's going on. I'm finding today everything is being criticised. It doesn't matter for the good, for the better, it doesn't matter what direction you go. And I – to be quite truthful, I feel sorry for the kids today. I really, really do because in my day, you wanted a job, you were being interviewed for the job and you either had it or not. My granddaughter has just finished uni, economics, I think she's written forty letters to try and get a job. [01:02:08] Not getting the replies. It wasn't like that in those days, you know, it – I

think it's very hard for the kids today. I mean it was hard for us but I think it's much harder today, much, much harder.

You mentioned that you in to schools to speak. Is that correct?

Yeah.

Why do you do that?

[Sighs] Because –

Why is it important for you to do that?

Because there are very, very few of us left and it's something, if I'm asked, I will do it because people should know what happened from first-hand. You know, I talk to even people to – I went to a party last night, people were talking to me about – they were second-generation and third-generation and they were talking about it. And I'll you what really, really upsets me, really upsets me. I start talking about – they wanted to know what happened and I start explaining and talking about what happened. And I'm first-generation. And then they but in, oh, but my friend also did that sort of thing and then starts telling them about what happened to her friend whose like third – second-generation or third-generation. And I shut up [laughs]. They only want to talk about what they heard from somebody else. And so many people do it. You know, you start talking and then they've heard from their friend this, that and the other, so forget it [laughs].

So when you're in the schools, why – what do you want children to learn from you, or anyone who listens to you?

Well, anti-Semitism is a part of that. What have we done? Why are we so different, do we have horns and whatever? You know. [01:04:00] Anti-Semitism is rife today. What's happening in Gaza, I don't want – it's not part of my talk, it's a different situation completely. We are basically only people, we are – I may be Jew but I belong to the tribe, I'm no different

to you or to you, whatever. And you have to be – and basically, I've gone through life trying to be tolerant and understanding and when people say to me, what's the reason for your success, of your marriage? And I say, from both of us, tolerance and understanding. It's as simple as that.

That's beautiful. Is there anything else you would like to add or comment on?

Not really. Not really.

That is – Frank, is this the moment when we could get –

Frank: Okay, when you're ready.

It would be very nice if my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandson, could have a copy of that, that would be –

Frank: They will.

Really for prosperity, it would be really good.

So what is your identity? How, if somebody asks, how do you identify yourself? What would you say? Are you Belgian, are you Jewish, are you British?

No, I'm British, I'm British. Definitely B – British, a British Jew. British Jew, definitely. Belgium just happened to be where I was born. I don't feel any closeness to Belgium at all, but I do feel British, definitely close. Britain gave me a home and I'm very grateful for that. Yeah. Yeah, definitely British. British and Jewish. And you know, it's very strange because you may be Jewish in name or belonging to the tribe, as I said, but I feel towards everything to do with Jewish, Jewish people, whatever, I feel very close to it, you know. [01:06:11] And as I say to Norma, whenever there's a – if there is a charity looking for a donation, if they're Jewish, you have to give to Jewish people 'cos if you don't give to the Jews, who else will give them to them? You know. Yeah.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Intentions of going there to have a look at what Biała Podlaska looks like because it wouldn't have any meaning to me. It's just there.

Frank: Biała Podlaska is your father's home?

Yeah, that's where he lived. And, you know, if you and visit, I don't think it means anything to me. If there was some part of him there, maybe, but not otherwise. It's passé.

Are there no Cynamons left in Poland?

There's no Cy – I don't think –

Of your –

There's no Cynamons anywhere. It's great – good to keep that – the children, my grandchildren keeping the name, which is good, which is very good. I personally think that my talk has much more emphasis, doesn't it, Norma? Norma?

Norma: [Inaudible].

I said I think when I give my talk I can put much more –

Norma: Yes, because [inaudible]. He's got it written down.

It has much more input.

Norma: [Inaudible].

Particularly with the church, having hidden what we were and so on and so forth. [01:08:00]

Norma: And Father André [inaudible].

Yeah, Father André was amazing. And I give a – I finish my talk normally with the description of what Father André was and what he did. I don't know if I can read that to you.

Yes, I think that's – we just pause.

Okay. When you're ready. Yes?

Yeah.

Well, this is part of the talk that I normally give when I visit schools, synagogues, etc, etc, and I find it much more explicit to the way I feel about certain events that have occurred. So, if I can start, I was born Jacques Cynamon in 1934. I hope you'll forgive my nervousness as I recall certain emotions and certain events. I find certain events very painful but my conscience tells me these stories must be told to a wider audience because as time passes, there are less and less people to tell these horrific stories. Being so very young then and looking back now, it is almost like these stories and experiences are merely fairytales. Did I really go through this? We, the lucky – we the hidden children, were the lucky survivors thanks to the people who pulled us from the clutches of certain death and protected us. As young children at the time, many of us were raised in silence, enveloped in silence. A child not noticed might have a chance of survival. We could not draw attention to ourselves, most certainly not in that world. Of all the voices from the Holocaust, ours has been the most silent, least noticed and for good reason. **[01:10:00]** The stories we most hear about are concentration camps. These stories which are shared by millions are much more explicit and perhaps explain the depth of suffering. But we, the hidden children, represent some of the lost, unuttered stories of the Holocaust. Some of the things I've heard said to me are, you couldn't possibly remember, you were too young, and don't talk about it, just get on with your life. This is mainly from people who don't know or who don't want to hear about it, as if it never happened. But it did, and my survival is a testament of all those truly amazing people who helped saved the lives of many thousands of children. It is no wonder that the hidden

children hesitate to recall all our memories are not the privileged ones of joyous childhood. Our memories lead directly to an overwhelming combination of loss and unremitting grief. My recollections of hiding during the war are most vivid from the age of about eight. I was with some wonderful people who helped to hide me and therefore always assume naturally that every other child's hiding experience must have been much worse than mine. Let us not forget how different it was for each and every one of us. Children could not survive without hiding places or with the help of hiders. Some children were moved dozens of times from one hiding place to another and most frequently in the depth of the night. Often the accounts we hear are so terrible that they slide off the scale of human suffering. **[01:12:00]** On the eve of the Nazi invasion in 1940, Belgium was essentially a Catholic country. It counted nearly 13,000 priests and 50,000 nuns. Orphanages, health and elderly were mainly the Church's responsibility. In fact, during the war churches were by the German occupation the only institution to remain untouched, therefore many Jews at the time sought protection through the Church against the Nazis and violence. The priests and nuns were putting their own lives at risk on our behalf and no words can express my overwhelming gratitude to them. A few months after the Nazis invade Belgium in May 1940, the Gestapo began to carry out increasingly severe measures against the Jews. By 1942 they forbade the Jews access to schools and other public institutions and ordered the liquidation of all Jewish businesses. All Jews, including children as young as six years of age, are forced to wear a yellow star as soon as they appear in public. The star made surveillance and eventually round-up, a lot easier for the Gestapo to carry out. The mandatory badge is a Star of David as large as the palm of your hand and printed in black on a yellow cloth. At the centre of the badge is a J imitating the Hebrew script. Jews must obtain these yellow stars by their own means. The price of a three-star cloth strip is 75 cents. The Jews are now stigmatised and recognised to all. **[01:14:01]** For a few weeks the children concerned go to school marked by this infamy, by the sign of infamy. Reactions towards them were varied. My mother remembered the deep humiliation wearing of the yellow star caused her. We had to wear it on the left side of the shirt, jacket or coat, on a girl's blouse, dress or coat, and it was very humiliating, very humiliating. I have to say, you had to be lucky when you walked down the street, some would look at you with a smile, others would pass by, pretending not to see it. But one day I was walking and in front of me came a young SS man, a Flemish SS man. Being stubborn, I stayed on the opposite side of the road. He came straight at me, elbowed me so that I fell off the sidewalk, dirty Jew,

get off the sidewalk. It was now clear that not even women and children were safe from the Gestapo. While families were desperate to stay together, parents soon realised that this was impossible. They first sought shelter for their beloved children. The first rescuers were those parents who had made the decision to relinquish their children. They appealed to a wide range of non-Jews, friends, neighbours, acquaintances, priests and convents. These desperate parents had little option than to trust their children to total strangers, with no knowledge of where their loved ones were being taken. Catholic convents were away from the eyes of Gestapo and especially safe havens for Jewish children. [01:16:00] A large number of Belgian surviving children were hidden in Catholic institutions. I was one of them. We know that between 1939 and 1945 the Nazi Holocaust exterminated one and a half million Jewish children throughout Europe. The 100,000 children who survived came to be known as the hidden children of the Holocaust. For sixty years I did not want to remember my experiences and tried to avoid any conversation about my past, yet as time moved on I began to recall certain events and realised how much I could remember of my past. So, this is my story. I was born in 1934 with the name Jacques Cynamon. Before the war I lived with my parents, Rosie and Nico [ph], in a suburb of Brussels called Anderlecht. I recall that my father had a small leather factory making purses and ladies' handbags. When the war started, my mother's parents, my grandparents, who at the time lived in Belgium, managed to return to England. My mother, who was born in England, could have returned to England with just me, but decided to stay behind in Belgium as the British consul would not allow my father entry to England as he was Polish. Naturally, my mother wanted the entire family to stay together. I was just six years old when Germany invaded Belgium in May 1940 and there was great panic. Everyone was very scared of the advancing Germany army and what calamity they may bring. My parents decided to run away from the advancing army. We went to the main railway station in Brussels and managed to get onto a goods train, with no idea where it was going, as long as it was away from the advancing German army. [01:18:09] I remember sleeping on the straw-covered floor at each station, crowded – at each crowded station, and people would give us food and water. And after about five days and nights the train stopped near the French Pyrenees, a journey of about 700-odd miles. During our time there my parents worked as farmers, picking potatoes, and we stayed for about two months. Hearing that life in Brussels was not too bad, they made the decision to return to occupied Belgium but not really knowing what to expect. And in 1942, back in Belgium life was becoming

extremely difficult for all Jews. My parents were too frightened to go out for food and shopping in case they were recognised and arrested as Jews. They were not allowed to have a bank account. I recall my mother telling me the only thing they could use as currency was small diamonds which she hid in a specially-made shoe. We desperately needed to get away for a second time. My parents decided we should try to obtain false documents and escape to Spain. They found a guide to help us with the perilous journey and after travelling through France with the border not far away, the guide left us stranded, having taken our money. A few months later, having returned to Brussels, they found another guide. This time they were determined that we should make it to Switzerland. But again the guide, having taken our money, left us stranded and eventually we found our way back to Brussels with great difficulty. Not being able to go out for fear of being recognised as Jews, we went into hiding. [01:20:00] My father was able to get help from a previous employee, John Cnudde to run errands and bring us food. For fear of discovery, my parents decided they could not keep an eight-year-old boy hidden in an attic. I remember being constantly asked to keep very quiet and still in case I made a noise and the Gestapo would find us. They needed to find me a safe hiding place. They contacted the Jewish organisation, the CDF, the Committee for the Defence of Jews, a clandestine organisation searching for hiding places for Jews. This meant acquiring a new name, so my name was changed to Jacques Cnudde, the surname of my father's employee. The time came for me to leave. They had to give me away out of love and desperation. I was eight years old at this time. I had to say what was my last goodbye to my parents. I had never been separated before and that was the last time I saw my father. They left me with a priest near Namur in the Ardennes region, about 50 miles south of Brussels. The priest's name was Father André. I will tell you later about how this truly amazing man was eventually recognised as a Righteous Amongst the Nations, the highest accolade that can be bestowed upon those who rescued Jews from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. I was so, so lucky to be left under his care but never realised this at the time. I was too young to understand. From Namur I was sent to an orphanage run by the Catholic Church, a further 30 miles away. [01:22:04] In the orphanage I became a choirboy. I learnt a lot about the Christian religion, even taking part in various church ceremonies as an altar boy with incense and bells. These rituals became my disguise, so no one would ever guess I was Jewish. Regrettably, I have very few recollections of the two years that I spent there. But do allow me to give an idea of what we had to endure as a hidden child. Young children were separated

from their distraught parents, given new names and brought to the convent with a sense of urgency. We were plunged into a new world, very different from anything we had ever known. This meant we had to find our bearings and learn new rules very quickly. We were expected to blend in a spiritual atmosphere and were expected to recite the prayers with conviction and fervour. Then in the autumn of 1944, I remember very clearly the German army leaving, using horse-drawn carriages, pulling big guns behind them. They left me with a priest at a house near Namur in the Ardennes, about – oh, sorry, I missed a page. Where did I go? I recall very vividly that after – that same afternoon the American tanks coming into view. There were six tanks and a jeep. They showered us with sweets and chewing gum. From the joys of being liberated came the news that we had to leave as the Germans were returning. [01:24:02] This was the start of the Battle of the Bulge, a major German offensive campaign on the Western Front. It was December. During the battle, Father André sent us to a now – it was December during the battle that Father André sent us to a now liberated Belgium, or Brussels, to escape the advancing Germany army. I can't recall where we stayed but after a couple of days, my mother appeared as if from nowhere. It transpired that after taking me to the orphanage in Namur, my mother and father had stayed behind in an attic for nearly two years, never going out. Then in early 1944, my mother told me that the Germans had blocked each end of the street, searching every building looking for hidden Jews. That was how they were found by the Gestapo. They were arrested and separated at that point. I can't even begin to imagine what that moment must have been like for them. My mother told me my father's very last words to her were, if you ever find Jackie, promise he will be *bar mitzvahed*. My father, being Polish, was sent to Mechelen which was a holding camp in Belgium. At the camp the Germans would hold the Jews until they would amass about a thousand people. This was the amount required to fill the train going to Auschwitz. I later found out that my father was one of the – went onto one of the very last trains to leave Auschwitz, which left on the 4th of the fourth, 1944. So many times I wake up at 4:44 in the morning, thinking about him, a very significant number for me. I woke up this morning with the same. [01:26:00] I later found out that my mother, being British-born and a citizen of a country at war, could not be sent to a concentration camp from Brussels but could be held as a prisoner of war. That was an agreement between the German, English and Americans. She was therefore safe from going to the camps and was instead sent to Vittel, a holding camp in France, 300 miles from Brussels then on to La Bourboule where she stayed until she was

liberated and the war in Belgium was over. After France was liberated, my mother travelled to Belgium in a desperate attempt to find me and somehow miraculously, she did. I was ten years old at the time. I did not want to go with her. This must be very difficult for anyone to comprehend. I wanted to stay with my friends, I wanted to stay with the priest, and I wanted to stay with the church. I had not seen her for over two years and had a different life now. However, she took me back with her to La Bourboule where we were staying at an internment camp for British and American prisoners. We lived in a hotel with other British and American interns, and relied almost entirely on Red Cross parcels for our food. Eventually, my mother managed to arrange documentations for us to return to England. We landed in England on the 2nd of August 1945 and stayed with my grandparents until my mother could find rented accommodation and a good job. My mother had to find a school that would take me, which proved difficult as I could speak no English at the time. I was now eleven years old. I spoke only French and was known as Froggy to all my school friends [laughs]. [01:28:02] And after some time, they decided to call me Jack, as opposed to Jacques, which has stood to this day. I can't recollect any lessons at the orphanage but I must have been – there must have been great teachers. During my first year at school I came first in maths, French obviously. I did extremely well in English and came first overall in my school. With my grandparents' help and through their friends, we finally moved to a small top-floor apartment. At the age of thirteen, my mother fulfilled her promise to my father, with my grandfather's help. I was *bar mitzvahed* at Poet's Road Synagogue in Newington Green, London. Okay?

Yeah. Continue.

Some sixty years later in 2005, my good friend, Jurek, a Polish ghetto survivor who I met in Florida, asked me to attend a Hidden Children of the Holocaust Convention in Amsterdam with him. I'd never heard of this before. My first reaction was not to go. Like many other survivors it was a period of my life I didn't want to recall. I had kept the memories to myself for over sixty years. However, after many discussions with Jurek I was persuaded and decided to go along with my wife, Norma. I embarked on a journey of discovery about my hidden past which I could not or did not want to remember. On arriving at the Amsterdam convention, I was amazed at the number of people who attended. There was well over a

thousand people, all hidden children, and I thought I was alone with my experiences, hidden deep within me. But here was a thousand-plus people with whom I had an immediate connection. The next day after listening to some great but terribly sad and almost shocking speeches, I realised that like myself, many were here for the first time, not only telling their stories but hoping that they might meet someone who could remember them. [01:30:09] Survivors who were more comfortable recounting their experiences with other survivors as they know they will be believed and understood. Regrettably, there are still many people in the world who don't believe these stories of survival. Speaking to survivors, I then realised how little I could recall about my own background and that's when I started asking myself questions like, who hid me, where and why? I'd never asked these questions before. They stayed locked up deep inside me. I had no idea of names or places. I was too young at the time and could only recall a few select dramatic events that had taken place. But now my curiosity was aroused and I started making enquiries from the various information points dotted around the convention. At one of these points I was told about an organisation called L'Enfant Caché in Brussels who should be able to help me. On returning home from the convention, I remembered in a suitcase in my attic I had some memorabilia of the time. I found an old album of the Belgian Royal family, the front and back covered with paper protection. Inside the cover was an inscription in French which said, to Jacques Cnudde, my hidden name, on the occasion of winning the first prize, signed [inaudible] the 20th of February 1944. I also found a large photo of [inaudible] the Belgian Serville on the 19th of December 1943. I sent this information to L'Enfant Caché in Brussels asking if they had any information that could be useful to me. [01:32:00] In December 2005 they sent me the following information. So, we're going back 2005 now [coughs] which is just twenty years ago. Cynamon, Jacques, false name, Cnudde, born 31st of May, address Boulevard [inaudible] in Anderlecht, and it gave me a hidden code. You were sent to Father André, forty-plus [inaudible] in Namur, and I had various hidden – after that I was placed in [inaudible]. Excuse me, my drink [coughs]. Okay, well, there's not much more to go now. I imagine we're near the end. It's up to you. Wanting to know more of L'Enfant Caché in Brussels, I was told that Father André had died but his assistant, Monsieur Colette who was eighty-six years old was still alive and they could give me his phone number. With a great deal of emotion building, I eventually decided to phone him and introduce myself as Jacques Cnudde. I hovered over the phone for some time, plucking up courage before dialling. I was

completely taken aback when he said he remembered me, little Jackie. We spoke in French and I promised to come and see him in Brussels. It was some four weeks later Norma and I arrived in Brussels where I arranged to meet someone from L'Enfant Caché. Whilst we were there, they informed us of the memorial to the 23,000 Belgian Jews who had died in the Holocaust at that time. It was closed to the public because of vandalism and the damage caused. However, they would be happy to open the memorial for us the next morning. At the memorial there is a large concrete altar with large chains in the shape of a *menorah*. The interior walls are black marble with inscription of the dead in alphabetical order. [01:34:01] I found thirteen Cynamons listed on the memorial, including uncles, aunts and cousins, all of them murdered by the Nazi regime. Then I saw my father's name. It was the first time I had seen his name mentioned on a memorial. I can't begin to tell you the emotion that went through my mind. Having thanked the people of L'Enfant Caché, I explained that I would really [inaudible] see Monsieur Colette and asked if they could try and locate him for me. After many phone calls, they finally traced him to an old people's home which he had recently moved to. I managed to speak to Monsieur Colette on the phone and although he was embarrassed about his room, having just moved, we agreed to meet the next afternoon. I was very apprehensive meeting the man who helped to save my life. I shouldn't have worried. Monsieur Colette made me feel at ease immediately. He told me he speaks five languages fluently and was fully coherent. He explained to me how he kept records of all the children for Father André. He kept all the records in five books, each one carefully coded so that should the Germans come across any one of the books, it wouldn't mean anything to them. Our discussions were mainly on his work in hiding the children, for which Monsieur Colette was honoured in New York, a truly remarkable man. The following year we went to the same convention but this time it was in Detroit. Whilst we were in America we decided to go and visit the Washington – go to Washington and go to the Holocaust Museum. On the first day at the museum, after about four hours and towards the end of the visit, I came across a small photo of Father André surrounded by a large number of children. Although I could not tell if I was one of them, we decided to return the next day as by this time we were drained of emotions. [01:36:05] When we arrived the next day, I introduced myself to the desk as a survivor and enquired as to whether I could have a photo of Father André and the children as he was the priest who saved my life. They made such a fuss of us that we felt like celebrities. [Laughs] We were taken upstairs to the archives photo department where we found numerous

photos of Father André. I selected three which I printed with me and have with me today. I was disappointed I was not one of the children in that photograph. They told us that Father André had saved 2500 children and I was one of the lucky ones. We were taken to the records department where they gave us the following information about my father, which read, he was sent to Malines which was a transit camp for deportation. It took four months to [inaudible] the convoy the 15th of January '44. It was badly damaged but it showed – badly organised. It showed that the change [ph] from the Jews was continuing strongly. Transport number fourteen was the very last convoy and consisted of 625 people, including sixty-two children. The convoy arrived at Auschwitz on the 7th of April 1944. 270 died making the journey. And of the 355 who arrived, only 147 survived in 1945. My father was not amongst them. It's really quite amazing how much information the Germans left behind. So, what long-lasting effect has this experience had on my life, other than losing my father at the age of eight? **[01:38:03]** It has been no secret for those who knew me that I did not love my mother. I was a dutiful son. In my later years I took good care of her, bought her an apartment, sent her on holidays, etc. So why was that special feeling missing? Whilst we were at the Jerusalem convention in 2001 I went to one of the workshops called Lost Childhood. There were about forty people, mainly women, just a few men. We sat in a room in a circle. A psychiatrist explained that he had an egg and he would pass it around only – and only the person holding the egg would be allowed to talk. We were not allowed to talk about our wartime experiences, only what you missed as a child. The first person mentioned not having friends or toys, but he left them hating their mother as she gave me away. The next person also mentioned having hated their mother for having given her away. And as the egg was going around, more and more people mentioned the same, hating their mother. Some people expressed that they missed playing with friends, having no toys, having no fun, as a result were unable to cope with children of their own, not knowing what to do, with no reference points to work with. It was then I realised that same feeling must have been ingrained in me since those early days. I did not hate my mother, nor did I love her and now I know why. The meeting left me drained of emotions, having realised how subconsciously it must have affected my feelings towards my mother. Now, I have many regrets. She was a great lady who had the courage to hide me, found me against all odds, took me to England, raised me as best she could under very difficult conditions and was so very proud of me. **[01:40:09]** Now, I wish I could give her a big hug and tell her how much I love her,

something I never did. It's too late now. I like to end my talk by giving you a brief history of a Christian priest who not only saved my life but put his own life at risk, went to incredible lengths to save hundreds of children and hundreds of Jews, a most remarkable man, Father André. Born in 1908, Father André served as a parish priest in Namur from 1941 to 1957. He risked his life by providing shelter for hundreds of Jewish children whose families were fleeing the Nazis, saving them from certain deportation and death. Most of Father André's charges were fed with food and he was able to obtain from local villages. Over the next two years the children were found places in convents and monasteries, in farms, and to be hidden until the end of the war. Father André's home Place de l'Ange in Namur was next door to the local Gestapo headquarters and whilst there were suspicions raised at times, followed by interrogation, Father André's operation was never exposed. He travelled widely, pleading to Belgians to open their doors and institutions. The municipal government provided him with false identity cards and documents. He was hunted by the Gestapo towards the end of the war and Father André had to disperse the children and go underground until the Americans fortunately liberated Namur in September 1944. [01:42:03] After the liberation, Father André undertook the task of collecting the children and returning them to their parents, relatives and Jewish organisations. He was also instrumental in helping Jewish families cope with the difficulties of returning to normal life. He sought out an American Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Silberstein and brought him to his parish church to lead assembled children in prayer. When it came for the Jewish children to depart on October the 1st, [gets upset] Father André wearing Magen David over his black coat, embraced each one. In 1968 he was recognised by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Amongst Nations and travelled to Israel to plant his tree. When he died in 1973 [gets upset] his coffin was draped with the Israeli flag and the pallbearers of his coffin included several of his former Jewish hidden children. So that's my story. I hope you found it interesting.

Thank you very much.

Norma: [Inaudible].

Just if you can – if you mind just sitting still. [01:44:00]

[Pause from 01:44:00 – 01:44:58]

Frank: Yes, please.

Yeah. That's a photograph of my father and mother's wedding day in Belgium in 1930.

And this is a photograph sometime after when they were married in 1930s, my mother and father. Look how lovely and young they look.

That's a picture of me, two years old in 1936.

Frank: Presumably in Belgium?

Yeah, in Belgium, oh, yeah, yeah. When did you want me to say that? Yeah, yeah.

That's a photograph of my mother, my father and myself. I must have been about five, probably six years old, so it would take place around 1939 I would think, 1939, 1940.

This is a photograph taken in Blankenberge, which is a holiday resort in Brussels and very well-known, my father and myself and my mother. **[01:46:01]** I must have been about maybe four/five then, so obviously it's about 1938 I would think, 1938, 1939.

And that is a picture of La Bourboule where my mother was interned. It's a lovely town in the Massif Central.

Frank: And this is where you were hidden, did you say?

No, no, no, no, no. Nobody was hidden there. That's where they escaped. This is where they were – that's where she was interned.

This is the hotel in La Bourboule where my mother was interned with Americans, British people, and they lived on Red Cross parcels until the end of the war.

This is a photograph taken around early 1945 where my mother and myself were reunited and are now in La Bourboule, where this is taken.

And this is me, my *bar mitzvah* photo, taken in 1947, my mother having fulfilled my father's wish. Which one are we doing?

Frank: Top right.

Okay. That's me with my buddies at Saughton Camp in Chester. As you can see from the badge, I was in the Royal Artillery. That's about 1953.

This is a photograph of Father André with many of the children that he rescued. This must be about 1945, I reckon and obviously in Belgium. Unfortunately, I'm not one of the children in the photograph.

This must be around 1943. [01:48:02] It's obviously one of the places where I was hidden with many other children.

Frank: And the name is...? [Name on photo: Une entrée du Parc d'Ostemerée]

Well, we called it Serville but it had – I'm not sure what it was but basically, it's where we were hidden and that's the – that's where they gave you – they gave me this information at L'Enfant Caché. Ready?

Frank: Yes.

3rd of March 1955, our wedding day. I was twenty and Norma was eighteen.

Frank: Where were you married?

We were married at Lea Bridge Road Synagogue. It's a synagogue and hall, Lea Bridge Road in the East End.

A holiday photo of the surprise party for my ninetieth birthday party. Unfortunately, David and Danny are not there but they were there in – but not in this particular photo but – very surprise party, which was lovely, really lovely. Did I mention who's there?

Frank: Who is there?

There was Norma and myself obviously, and Susan, Paul's – Paul and Susan, my daughter-in-law, and Charlotte and Alyssa [ph], our two granddaughters, on the right.

This is a document where my father, myself and my mother had to register to wear the yellow star and it's dated the 20th of December 1940.

This is another registrar [ph] where we have to go to the town hall and register as Jews, my father, my mother and myself.

This is Convoy 24, a document which we found which an original – a copy of an original document from the German archives showing my father is on Convoy 24, which was one of the very last to leave for Auschwitz. **[01:50:10]** In fact, it was the very last convoy to leave for Auschwitz. Unfortunately, he did not make it to its end destination.

Norma: I think if you could send –

I'll try and send it to them.

Norma: Just save a copy.

Keep this out.

Norma: Nice pictures in there.

Yeah, absolutely.

Norma: [Inaudible].

This is the list of the thirteen Cynamons who were perished or were taken by the Germans and sent to concentration camps. Altogether there were thirteen Cynamons, all my uncles, aunts and cousins unfortunately, all perished.

Like another cup of tea, Frank?

Frank: No, I'm good, thank you.

You sure? This is my identity card issued to me under the name of Jacques Cynamon in 1945 when I came into the country on the 2nd of August 1945.

My identity card, 1945, showing where I lived, 302 Amherst Road, which was in Stoke Newington.

Frank: Jack, just we'd like to say thank you very much again for your time and for giving us your testimony and showing us your photographs and documents.

Okay. You're more than welcome [laughs]. Thank you for taking all this time.

[01:51:43]

[End of transcript]