

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Forename:	Benno
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Interviewee POB:	Essen, Germany

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**REFUGEE VOICES**

Interview No. RV180
NAME: Benno Stern
DATE: 28th June, 2016
LOCATION: London, UK
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

Today is the 28th of June, 2016. We are conducting an interview with Mr. Benno Stern. My name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we are in London.

Can you please tell me your name?

Benno Stern.

And when were you born?

In January 1935, in Essen, Germany.

Thank you very much Mr Stern for agreeing to be interviewed for Refugee Voices. Can you please tell me a little bit about your family background?

Like what?

Go on, you tell me.

Well, I lived in Germany with my mother and father. After Kristallnacht they saw the- they saw the writing on the wall. And they made arrangements to come to England. My mother had a brother who lived in England. He'd emigrated in the – in the 1920s. And he sent a man over to facilitate getting a visa. And we ended up in...in London.

Let's talk a little bit about your time pre-emigration. If you could, tell us a little bit about your grandparents. And your parents, and what their- where they lived and...?

Right. I didn't know either of my grandparents. I was really too young, although I am told that - that I did meet them. But I certainly don't remember. But I have a good long-term memory. I remember our flat in Hachestraße, and it was quite a big flat. I had a little electric train set. My sister had a dolls' house which had electric lighting, which was quite an innovation in those days. And my father had a business underneath where our flat was. He sold men's ...suits material.

[0:01:50]

And, on your mother's side? What was your mother's...?

Well, my mother was born in Poland, in Wielun. And she knew my father from - from Poland. My father was originally born in Warsaw, but how they met, I don't know. But presumably he went to Wielun at some time, and met her. And... Then he - he fled Poland to escape conscription in the - in the Polish Army, and he went to Palestine. And he worked on a kibbutz for two or three years. And then, his best friend wrote to him and said, "Come to Germany. I'm living in Germany. And Germany is the civilisation of Europe." And it was, in those days. "And we'll have a wonderful life here and we'll open a business." And that's exactly what happened. And then after a year or two, my father called Poland for my mother to come over. And they got married. She was ten years younger than he was. So, she was no more than nineteen when she got married. That's what I remember.

And why- so why Essen? Was it because his friend...?

That's where the friend was, in Essen. And that's where they opened their business.

What languages did your parents speak?

My parents spoke Polish, and German... how well they spoke German I don't know. And Yiddish. It was always a bone of contention to my sister and myself that when they said something really interesting, they switched to Polish, which neither of us understood. So... But Yiddish we could understand.

And what papers- what nationality did they have in Essen? When they lived in Essen?

[0:03:44]

My father, by a very good stroke of fortune, was made stateless by Poland because he'd fled the country. And so, they made him stateless. When he was in Germany, he was stateless; he never took German citizenship. When Germany sent the...the Polish Jews back to Poland, he was not sent back, because he was stateless. When we arrived in England, my father was not interned in the Isle of Wight because he was stateless. So... it just worked to our advantage.

Mn-hnn. And your mother anyway, as the wife of...?

Well, she was the wife, so she took the same status as my father.

Tell us a little bit more about Essen and the shop. I mean, you were very young when you came but do you have any memories of it?

The only memory I have of the shop is that occasionally I would go down the stairs and go into the shop. Which was really a wholesale place. It was just full of shelves with bales full of cloth, different cloth. It wasn't sort of like a retail shop at all. But people came in and bought - bought material.

And based on what your parents told you, what life- who did they mix with and what were their friends and...?

I really don't know anything about that, but my father was pretty well-to-do for those times, in Germany. The flat was a very nice flat, and he had, I think, quite a large circle of friends

from what they told us. And it was comfortable. It was a shock to come to England, where he did manual work in a- in a factory making instrument panels for Spitfires. So, he worked in the war effort during the war. But he became a manual labourer rather than able to do, you know, what he was doing in Germany.

Yeah. And Essen was a smaller place. Was there contact between Jews and non-Jews?

That I can't – I can't tell you.

No.

No. I was really too young to be aware of those sorts of social conditions.

Yeah. And you have a sister?

I have a sister.

And she's older than you?

She is six years older than me.

[0:06:02]

So, did she go to school in Germany?

She did, yes.

And what sort of school was it?

She went to a – a primary school. I really know nothing about ...what she did there. There are some photographs of her with the typical German cornucopia, which she's holding in her arms like a baby. And a few pictures of my sister around, but I can't tell you much about her life.

And tell us a little bit about your, the religious life. How religious were your parents?

Both my parents were extremely Orthodox. My... My maternal grandfather was a Chassid. And he didn't work, but the mother worked. She had a shop. I can't really tell you about my paternal grandfather. But... they kept strictly kosher at home; that I do know.

In your home?

In our home...

Yeah.

... and out. They were, they were very Orthodox Jews.

Do you remember going to synagogue in Essen at all?

No.

No.

No.

And you mentioned Kristallnacht. So, what happened on Kristallnacht to...?

Well, don't forget once again, I was really too young. All I know is that one day we – we upped and left. And the story went that my father came to England with my... sister and myself. My mother stayed on for a week. Why, I've never really been able to fathom. She did tell us. I've never seen a good reason for it. They thought it was safer to travel separately rather than together. And she stayed on for a week. The tragedy of that particular case was firstly, the Gestapo came for my father. He wasn't there. And they said, "Where is he?" And she said, "He's gone to Berlin or wherever it was, to get visas. And he won't be back till Monday." And they said, "If he's not," – this was I think a weekend – "If he's not back Monday, we'll take you instead." She tells us she had the forethought to... throw her passport out of the window into the courtyard. You know, they lived in a flat; it was common

to have a back courtyard. Yeah, she threw her passport out. And they searched for the passport and said, "Have you got a passport?" And she said, "No, I haven't got one." And then they went. After they came and went, she literally closed the flat up, and left in the clothes she was wearing. Stayed with some friends and then came on. But the other tragedy was that when she got to England, she telephoned her mother who was living in France at that time. And ...No, I'm sorry. It wasn't her, it was my father who telephoned the mother to say that you know he and the children had arrived safely. So... the mother said, "Well where's Esther?" He said, "Well she's on her way. She's – she's OK." And her, her mother said, "No I don't believe you. You never would have left Germany without Esther." And she had a stroke while he was on the phone to her, and she never spoke again after that. So that was a tragedy. But my mother did arrive. I don't remember her arriving, but she did arrive.

[0:09:30]

And how come your grandmother was in France? When...?

They had relatives in France. I don't, I don't know. Maybe even they had moved to France. But we have a French connection 'cause a lot of my mother's brothers and sisters lived in France. So, there was a French connection there.

And did she survive, your grandmother?

No.

What happened to her? She had a stroke...?

She's the one who had the stroke. Well, she died a little while later. Funny what you remember as a child. The rabbi, our local rabbi came to see my mother and broke the news to her. I can remember my mother crying. Sad days.

Mnn. Also, if you could just tell us the dates. So, when - when did you leave with your father?

We left in September '38. I can't tell you the exact date but that's when it was, September '38. And my mother arrived very shortly afterwards. So...

Can I just ask; it was September '38? But Kristallnacht was in November '38. So...?

Then maybe it was actually in November. I mean I've always thought it was September, but maybe it was November. It was definitely after Kristallnacht.

Right. So, it must be...

...Which was the impetus. It may have actually also have been in '39.

So that's my question to you; maybe it was in '39.

Maybe it was.

We can establish it. Was it summer or winter, when you came? Was it hot or was it warm?

It was... I think it was approaching winter. It wasn't warm. It wasn't in...I don't... I wasn't in summer clothing.

So, you never established exactly. And you don't have any papers, or...?

Not of when we came, no.

What about your parents' passports? There must be a stamp in it?

I don't see my – my parents' passports.

[0:11:28]

Anyway, so you know for sure that...?

I'm not sure that they ever had a pass- I mean I don't know; I've never seen my parents' passports.

No, you said your mother threw her passport out...?

Yes, she obviously did have a passport. I've, I've never seen it.

And she must have had a visa. She must have had something in there.

She must have done.

And that's why she threw it out of the window.

Yes, but I've not... You're asking questions which I haven't been asked before.

I understand, so all we know it's post-Kristallnacht. And Kristallnacht...

Yes. So, I was always led to believe-

...was in November '38.

Yes. So, I've been led to believe that we came after Kristallnacht.

Mn-hnn. And you don't know the details about how your father managed to get- whether your uncle in fact was a guarantor?

He must have been a guarantor; he must have sent a letter of invitation. He must have guaranteed support – living support. He did whatever was necessary to get us out.

But you said there was a person sent?

He had what he called a 'Secretary'.

Right?

He was a jeweller. I don't know why he had a secretary, but he had a secretary. I remember him. He was a very gaunt man. Mr Thornton. And very English. And he obviously went

around and - and facilitated the, you know, the departure. A lot of this I've heard third hand. I wasn't really there at the time.

Sure. But what about the you said there was that one-week gap which seems an interesting thing...? Was there any reason?

I've never- I- only that my mother said that they thought it was safer for my father to travel with the children. And she to travel alone. And she had quite a horrendous journey in the train. She said that she only had ten marks and nothing else. At the border, the police collected all the passports and they didn't return them until the very last moment. And that people were shouting and screaming, saying, "Where are our passports? Where are our passports?" And in the end, they literally threw all the passports through the open window of the- of the train. People were treated very badly. They took her money; she arrived penniless. But she didn't have much anyway.

[0:13:43]

They took those ten marks.

They took the ten marks.

So that's my other question: did your parents manage to bring anything out?

Nothing. There are the odd - I don't know – odd bits of...a crystal bowl arrived. I don't know how they got them out, or why, or where. So, I really can't say.

And also, what happened to the business? You said your father had a partner...

Yes.

The name was?

Neudorf. Herman Neudorf.

Yes, so what happened...?

I can't tell you. He never had any money though, my father. So presumably he never got any of the money out. It was acquired probably by the Germans.

But you don't know any...?

I don't know any details.

And afterwards was there ever any court case to...for compensation?

Yes, my- there wasn't a court case. My father applied for reparations. But unfortunately, he died in England while reparations were still in the process of going on. And one of the reasons he - he died, was probably by the trauma which he had suffered all his life by the thought of what went on in Germany, and what happened subsequently. And my mother went to Germany by herself, and managed to get a pension for herself, which was very brave of her. I was at school at the time; I really didn't know an awful lot about it. But she did receive a small pension from Germany. But not a great deal.

And I also wonder whether on Kristallnacht your father's business was ...damaged or what...?

Probably. It did have a frontage to the street, although it wasn't what I would call 'your normal retail shop'.

But your parents- they didn't speak about that?

Not really. When we came to England, there was a great aversion to speaking the German language. And my parents tried very hard to... speak English, and integrate themselves into the life. And on the whole, they managed very well. I myself arrived speaking only German. And at some point, before I went to school, I was speaking English. I had local friends. And they spoke English and I spoke German. But gradually I...I acquired English without ever being aware that I - I, I did so.

[0:16:21]

Yeah. You were young.

Yes.

And do you remember at all your first impressions? Do you remember the journey at all?

Yes. Very well. I've got good long-term memory of the things that happen to me. Well, we left Hachestraße at - at dawn. Light was just breaking. And I remember that I had a particular blanket, which I see in retrospect was a comforter. Comforter blanket. The station was immediately opposite our flat, so we had a very, very short walk. The train journey is vague, but I remember ...coming over on the ferry. And I was one of the few people who was not sick. The sea was rough and I saw everyone else being sick and I couldn't understand why.

[recording break]

Yes, please, your journey.

I remember leaving at the crack of dawn. We went to the railway station. And I don't really remember the train journey, but I remember the crossing, which was rough, very rough. And I was the only one who was not sick. We then arrived by car to Ealing, in the evening. I remember lights. My uncle had a huge dog, which I now know was a border collie. I was so frightened of this dog, whose name was Dinkie. I was ...so scared. And I could only speak German. And they offered me some lemonade which I'd never seen before. Coloured lemon-lemonade. And that was, that was what I remember.

Yeah. And what – what was his story? How did he get here, your uncle?

He emigrated in the 20s. He left Germany very - very young. I think he was- I'd heard he was twelve or thirteen. But anyway, he came to England. Whether he had himself had some other relatives, I, I - I don't know. But he established himself in England; he became a jeweller. And he had successful business.

And you said his name was Thornton, so what was his...?

Thornton was his - his secretary. His, his general factotum, I think.

I see, sorry, so what was his name?

I only know his surname, which was Thornton.

But...?

My uncle? He was Yedwab which he changed to Edwards.

I see.

Right? So, he was Mr. Edwards.

Right. So, Yedwab to Edwards?

Yes.

Yeah. That's interesting. And so, did you move in with him?

Initially, yes. And then we rented a little house, very tiny little house, in Derwent Road in Ealing.

And he'd settled in Ealing, your uncle?

My uncle lived in Ealing for as long as I can remember.

Yes. So that was the reason why... you initially went to Ealing.

Yes, that's right. Yes.

And then you said, so you stayed there. And then your mother came a week later.

Yes.

And do you remember that as well?

[0:19:18]

No, I don't remember her arriving. As- I've only learnt these things subsequently.

And on your journey, you don't remember, there was no problem actually leaving Germany?

I, I- There's no interval in my mind between getting on the train and getting on the ferry. I don't remember anything about it between that.

So how did you then- what happened to you once you arrived in England?

Well, I mean I lived with my parents. And... I didn't go to school; I was still too young to go to school. And life was very hard as far as I remember it. You know, we didn't have any- much in the way of material things. And my mother used to say that every Shabbos a miracle occurred. She used to find half a crown, which was two and sixpence, in the back yard, which was enough to buy a chicken or half a chicken to make Shabbos dinner. She said, I don't know how it got there, but there always seemed to be half a crown lying around. You can draw your own conclusions about that. My mother was a very superstitious lady. Very, very superstitious.

In which way?

She believed in the spirits. She believed her - her parents were watching over her. And, she was very religious. Often very frightened to do anything which was... irreligious, if you like. Unfortunately, her children were... were not of that persuasion. I mean I remained religious for ...quite a long time, but gradually I stopped being religious in the true sense of the word. But what I did have in England, and that's going on, when I was eight years old, I had a stomach ache. And I had a stomach ache for a week. And it turned out to be an undiagnosed appendicitis, which ruptured before I got to hospital. And they cleaned me up and after that I

had complications. I had something called 'empyema'. And I was in hospital a year. There was no penicillin, certainly not for any civilians. And I- don't ask me how I survived, but I remember being in an oxygen tent. And, I remember the school inspector coming to see me very regularly because he thought I was playing truant, until he saw what I was rigged up to in the hospital. But I caught up. That's about it. But I was very lucky to survive.

In that hospital. When- which year was that?

This was when I was eight, which was 1943, '44.

In the war?

Yes. Hospital Ward G3, West Middlesex Hospital, Isleworth. I remember a lot about that.

Yeah. And your parents, so they were stateless. So, they were not considered enemy aliens, your father was not?

No, he had to- he had to report to the police every week, but he was not interned. And in 1949 he applied for naturalisation which he got. And so, I'm naturalised as a result of his naturalisation.

[0:22:38]

And did they in fact, because they could I guess see themselves as Polish if they wanted to? Do you see what I mean? Did they, in this situation...?

Yes. ...I can't remember if that really used to come- I used to think of them as being German...

Right.

... but of course, they were not German, they were Polish.

How long were they in Germany? For how many years, your father?

Well, I think my father arrived there also in the 20s, so they may have been there fifteen years or so. No. ...It's- it's difficult to say, because my, my sister was born in 1929, in Germany. So...maybe they were married for a year before she became pregnant and had my sister. So, she might have arrived in Germany in 1928 or so.

Yeah.

And then we left in '38, early '39.

But you said you saw them as German, not as Polish?

I – I always thought of them as being German because that's the language they used to speak. Although they tried not to speak German where possible. They - they only spoke Polish, as I said, when things got really interesting, we couldn't understand it.

Yeah. And did they have any - any friends?

Lots of friends, but mainly friends who were relatives. Cousins and things like that. So, I had a – a second cousin. She had a – a first cousin lived in Ealing. And so, they had quite a wide circle. And because they belonged to the local Ealing shul, there were quite a lot of people there they were friendly with.

And was it from your mother's side, the family, or...?

Yes, my mother's.

And from your father's side?

My father's family were, on the whole, mostly murdered. My father had two sisters who'd emigrated to the States, and married there. And so, the two sisters and my father were the only ones out of seventeen, who survived. I would say that what was lost was not just the people, but the genetic pool. My first cousin, once removed, in the States, has a Nobel Prize for medicine.

[0:25:04]

What's his name?

His name is Andrew Fire. Professor Fire. And he did work with his team on the insertion of two strands of DNA into a cell, which stops cell replication straight away, which had huge implications for cancer treatment. Where it's gone since then, I don't know.

Just to come back to the war here. What are your memories of wartime London?

Well, very vivid. I remember the bombings, woken up at night and to be taken to the shelters. We started off with a...an Anderson shelter which was one in the garden. And then after that we had a Morrison shelter, which was a big steel table, which was internal which was a lot better, 'cause it means, we didn't have to go out into the cold, dank garden. And I remember the German bombers coming over. Mainly they were tri-motor, and the motors were always out of phase. And you could hear German bombers 'cause they went: 'whoom-whoom-whoom'. They beat. And that was very disturbing; you could tell they weren't English. And then searchlights and the guns. And this went on for a long time.

And was there any discussion about you being evacuated or was that...?

My sister was evacuated... to Weston-Super-Mare. I was really too young to be evacuated.

And you were ill as well.

When I was eight, yes, I was ill in '43. And I couldn't be evacuated then. But my mother didn't want me to... She was very nervous of me being evacuated.

Yeah.

Right? And... That's what happened. I stayed in London.

And in your school, were there any other Jewish children, or what sort of school was it?

In the infant school, no; I was the only Jewish child there. In Latymer, yes, there were Jewish boys, which I was friendly. Some older, some younger. And we had some Jewish teachers who had assembly for Jewish boys in the morning. It was a very good school.

And did you see yourself as different, or did you see yourself as British at that point?

[0:27:22]

No, very different.

Different.

Yes, very different. And about the time, shortly before the State of Israel came into being, there was quite a lot of anti-Semitism because of what the gangs had done to the British soldiers. And of course, one of the major gangs was the 'Stern Gang', [half laughs] which, you know, reflected on me. And so, I did a bit of fighting. But I suppose that was – that was natural.

So, there was some anti-Semitism...

Yes, there was.

... and antagonism between...?

Yes. But I wouldn't say it blighted my life.

No, but this was experienced as - as a sort of British Jewish, not as a refugee. You...?

Yes, by that time... I could pass for British Jew...

Yes.

... because I could speak English without - without any accent really. So, they- no one could really tell I was – I was a foreigner.

Yes, so no one picked on you...

Apart from my name, but...that's...

Yeah. And you never, you didn't change your name?

No, when I was young, I didn't like Benno very much; in fact, I didn't like it at all. And I used to call myself Benny. And a lot of my friends still call me Benny, but as I've grown older, I rather like Benno. So, I, a lot of friends call me Benno as well. Benno is very good because very few people have got the name Benno in England. And it means I don't get mixed up with other people.

And you never wanted- it's Benno in your passport?

Yes.

And you never wanted to call yourself Ben or anything...?

No...no, no. Oh, I do occasionally call myself Ben to strangers, because... But that's neither here nor there.

So, you stayed in school until when – secondary...?

Well, I was in - in '46 I, I went to Latymer, and I left it '53. And by that time, I'd got a place at the University of London. And it was not common in those days, in fact, no one took a year off - a sabbatical. So, I went straight from school to college, which was a real culture shock. It was- One minute you're being orchestrated and regimented and the next minute you're on your own. And that was quite difficult for me. But eventually I got through that. And then I went to King's College to the Hospital in Denmark Hill. Which in a way, was a mistake; I picked it because it looked modern and nice. But the journey was... difficult. It was more than an hour to get there with three changes of transport.

[0:30:00]

You were still in Ealing?

I was still in Ealing at that time, yeah.

Just to talk a little bit more about your parents. And you said it was difficult for them, for your father. So how did they...manage?

My father was a very shy man, and he found it difficult to make friends and so forth. He – he probably wasn't educated wonderfully in what I call the British way. And the Arts, you know, this didn't apply. But my mother was much more outgoing. She was very sociable. She had an enchanting accent, which she always said was French rather than German. And she had a way of ...seeking business for you know, the business which they ran.

What business was that?

This was the Parisian dressmaking company, which was really basically outdoor workers. They organised outdoor workers to- well he cut the cloth, into patterns, and then the outdoor workers would make a finished article. Dressing gowns, dresses, housecoats, things like that.

And what do you mean by 'outdoor workers'?

Well, it's, he used to deliver, with my help, deliver the material. And the pattern to what to assemble, to the outdoor workers. And then he would come a week later and pick up the finished goods. So, the people worked from home.

Right.

Right? And he had one or two people who worked in our house. We had quite a large house. And...it was sort of taken over partly business and partly domestic.

When did they start that? When did they start the Parisian dress making?

[0:31:52]

It must have been shortly after the war you know when things turned rather as normal. During the war our house was requisitioned; we had a family living upstairs. And that was the norm!

Yes?

If you had a house, if you weren't fully occupying it, it was requisitioned.

And how did they manage to get the house?

They rented the house originally, and then... my father was given the opportunity of buying the freehold. Which he did. He got a loan to buy a mortgage. And the price of the house which was... on three – the house was on three floors. With an attic top. And... God knows how many bedrooms, perhaps five bedrooms I think and two reception rooms, and this, that and the other. But very Victorian. It was a very Victorian house, which was originally, originally gas-lit and that then was converted to electricity. The price was £1,000. Which was not inconsequential, considering the wages were – my father's first wages after the war were £8 a week. And on that he kept a family of four, and – and themselves, and paid off the mortgage and what have you. So, things...things were different in those days. It was manageable. They never had much in the way of holidays. They - they worked.

And how did they- did they complain? How did they manage this, their immigration, from your perspective? Do you see what I mean?

No.

Did you see them as struggling? I mean did you...?

I saw that they struggled. I saw that money was tight. There was never really a lot of money for what I call luxuries. I was twelve before we had our first black and white television. And

that was for – yeah, for the coronation of the... of Princess Elizabeth. But it was a very happy family. And... we had a very good childhood. I've got no grumble about that.

And how did your sister manage? She was older. How did she...?

[0:34:15]

Well, she managed. She went to a different school to me. She didn't- she was in a secondary modern school. And there was a huge divide between us. You know, I was four and she was ten. In those days, you know six years is - is a lifetime. She had no interest in my, in what I was doing, and I had very little interest in what she was doing. And she probably wasn't the easiest teenager in the world. And...I see in retrospect that's- and later on we became very close. And... then we had a falling out. It's a, it's a very long story. I won't go into that. But so, my sister and I are estranged, but that's life, I suppose.

Where does she live?

She lives in Ealing.

What else is there to talk about...the war. The end of the war. Do you remember that at all?

Very well indeed. I remember Victory in Europe Day when there were huge celebrations. Yes, it was, as if we were an English family really. Although, being Jews, we were always somewhat remote. But we had our, our Jewish Friends. And I remember, I was always very interested in science. I was...very interested in the atomic bombs which were dropped in Japan and the end of the war. So that part progressed very nicely.

And you said your father lost a lot of family.

Yes.

So, what- when did that come out, or when...?

Well, obviously they knew that they were- you know, what the Nazis were doing in Germany. Certainly, the Jewish population knew very well what was going on in Germany. And whether they had any message or anything I don't know. But all I know is that over time, they talked about the brothers...The brothers have got a memorial in the States. And we went to see that. It's interesting because they've got a wall in... Florida with 10,000 names on it, but not in any particular order. And as we walked past it, we saw the name of Stern and I stopped and looked and I recognised the names of all my uncles. And... I wanted to know how they got there. So, I asked my cousin, who lived in the States. He said, "We put them there." So that's how they got- but the coincidence of us walking by a wall with 10,000 names, and seeing – you know, not in alphabetical order – and seeing the names of my uncles, it was quite, quite unusual.

[0:37:00]

And did your parents, after the war, did they go to - to Essen? Did they have any interest in going? What was their attitude?

No, they...they... I'm just wondering if my father ever went to Germany. I don't think he did. But some of my family went back. My, my aunt. My mother's sister went back to Germany, because they lived in France but couldn't make any, you know economic living there. So, they went back to Germany where they had reparations, and this and that.

Where did they?

They lived in Düsseldorf. And I used to see them. My mother and her sister were very close. Certainly, sort of in middle life. Later on, as they got older, they got on each other's nerves, but... that's...

So, her sister went to Düsseldorf?

Yes.

What was her name?

Spatz – well, that was her married name. Spatz, Mary Spatz. Her her son-in-law, Mary's son-in-law was Paul Spiegel. Paul Spiegel was the head of the German Jews for quite a long time. And unfortunately, he had pancreatic cancer and he died when he was sixty-five. And he had a state funeral. I don't know if you remember that at all.

Yeah, I do.

And we were pretty close to him at that time. Very sad.

So that was her son-in-law? The daughter...?

Yes, her daughter married Paul Spiegel.

Right. And did you ever go to Germany do you remember with your parents at all?

I never went with my parents, but I went by myself with my wife. We had a friend when we were married, first married in Ealing - we had a friend who was a German Jew. Sacki, Ralph Sacki, and he had lived in the next block of the house where we were. And we went to Germany with him. But I remember my first entry into Germany after the war, I felt very, very bad. And we saw a park ranger who had the sort of- the peaked forage cap and the green uniform. And Rose and I felt really terrible. But gradually you - you get over these things.

[0:39:25]

When was that? When did you go to Germany?

I'll tell you when. We were married in '58...'59. ...Maybe 1962, '63. Something like that, we went to Germany. And... there was a tremendous animosity, we went 'cause my friend spoke fluent German and my German was never fluent. And we went to a pub to have something to eat. And they were all friendly 'Hello!' and 'Where are you from?' – things like that. And of course, he spoke fluent German so they couldn't recognise that he wasn't German. "Where are you from?" "From England." ...Wall came down. Everyone shut up. Silence. And that was that. Even before they knew we were Jewish. I think they never knew but, there was quite a lot of antagonism towards British people.

And did you go to Essen?

No, I didn't in fact go back to Essen until a long time later. I had an uncle, he was actually a cousin, but he was much older than us. And I said I'd like to go to Essen. And it wasn't that far from Düsseldorf, so he took us. And we went to see Hachestraße. The block that we lived in had been bombed. But half of it had been restored. The half where we lived in had been demolished. But the block looked identical, because all German blocks, you know, were in the same style; you cut half of it up and what was left looked like, like the first bit. And I recognised it. I recognised the station opposite. The station that I'd left in 1939. And it was quite an emotional time, but I've only been to Essen once. Rose came with me which was comforting.

And was it important for you? You wanted to go?

I wanted to go and see it. Yes. I don't hold any...particular animosity against the current group of Germans. When I see an older German, I thought "What did you do with the war?" But mostly of course they were children. Real children. Just like I was. 'Cause the others have died off. But the younger generation on the whole are very nice and very good. Obviously, there are some neo-Nazis and what-have-you. Every country has its own... people who are...stupid.

Yeah. But did your parents for example talk a lot about the past or did they kind of try to...?

They did not harp back to Germany very much. It was obviously much more traumatic for them. And it was like, it was shut out. But their experience wasn't unique. All the friends who came from abroad, had a similar experience one way or the other. And... Some of them were actually in concentration camps and were released. That was before the war. And ...you know. So, they, they- they lived in the present and not in the past.

[0:42:40]

So, when you went back it was by yourself, to Essen.

I went with my wife, yes.

Yeah. So, let's go back to the 50s when you finished school. So, then you studied. What was your profession?

I am a dentist. I qualified at King's College London – King's College Hospital, actually.

And what drew you to dentistry? What were the choices?

Like a lot of things in life, it was a bit of a coincidence. We had a family doctor who was an Austrian Jew, and...a very, very nice person. Kohn, was his name: K O H N. And he came one day to see my mother, and he said – I was twelve then – “What do you want to do, Benno?” I said, “I want to become a doctor.” He says, “A doctor? No, no, don't become a doctor!” In those days there was no NHS. Doctors did their own emergency treatment. He said, “You're up all hours of the night, you know. People get sick, they get pregnant, they get... No, no. A dentist is what you want to be. Nine to five. Close the door of the office.” So, I said, “OK...be a dentist.” And it was literally like that. And I could never tell, when I was interviewed and people said, “Well why do you want to become a dentist?” I could never tell them that story; it was just too – too silly. But I don't regret it; it was a good profession. And I was very practical with my hands, and very keen on the sciences. And dentistry I thought in the end was a better profession than medicine, where the doctors generally sit in their surgery and push out prescriptions. Whereas we were actually creating, and relieving pain. And I used to tell my patients, “A doctor- You can walk into a doctor's surgery with pain. But you very rarely walk out without pain. But you come here with acute pain; you will leave out of pain.” And you know, they were grateful.

Yeah. Yeah. But it also meant did you support your parents when, or...did they...?

Well, my father died in '62 and I'd qualified in '58. I didn't support them... My mother lived till, till '91. So, she was a widow for a very long time. And we looked after my mother. But she had some income and I, she would – never wanted for anything. So...you know, I didn't support her as such. She was self-sufficient.

And how did she manage those thirty years?

[0:45:17]

She used to upset us really, because she had many offers when my father died. He died when he was sixty-five. She was fifty-five, and she was very good looking. And after a few years... she had invitations to go out, you know, go to the cinema, go to the theatre, go this... She always refused them. "Why are you refusing to go out?" "Max wouldn't like it." I said, "Max would be only too happy to see you with your life fulfilled." But no, she lived for her children and her grand-children. And she never had another life once, once my father died.

And did she stay in Ealing?

She stayed in Ealing; she had a flat quite near the shul. And... my wife was very successful in getting her- finding the flat for her, and getting her a mortgage for her even at her age. So, she did very well and it was a very nice little flat, very close to the shul. But she did travel. She did travel. She went to America a few times to see her – her sister-in-law. And sister-in-laws - she had two there. And she used to go to Italy to Abano, to take the cures and what-have-you. One of her big problems was that she didn't play cards, of any sort. And yet she came from a card-playing family. Apparently, she said, you know, her father and my father they used to play cards –Clobyosh usually - but she didn't play cards at all. And as a result, when she went to Abano, she was, she felt out of it. Because the women used to say, "Come and join us, play Kalooki, play this..." She didn't know how to, and we did try and teach her. But she'd already reached the age where she wasn't receptive to learning anything new. Which was a shame.

And how did you meet your wife? Tell us a little bit about your own...

We met at the synagogue youth club. We met when we were fourteen. And we did go out together, in those days. But things were different in those days. ...Children were generally much less aware of what goes on...between men and women, compared to how it is nowadays where everything is open and what-have-you. And we had a wonderful time because she was very athletic and I was athletic. We had lots of friends and we used to go and make our own entertainment. Go out on picnics. Go out- you know, make- we used to have dances; we used to have quizzes. Things like that. And the truth is that of those people

we knew in those days, we still know a great number. When we were teenagers, we had a circle maybe of twenty or thirty couples – not individuals – couples, that we were friendly with. When we got married, at least twenty of those couples used to meet every week. Not all together, but generally we met. Also, of those twenty couples, not one ever got divorced. That's quite a contrast from what goes on nowadays.

[0:48:44]

So, this is all from Ealing, from the youth...?

From the Jewish youth club. Yes. That's where we met. She was introduced to it by her sister, who was also introduced to it by another girl from Ealing. And that's... a long time.

So, through the synagogue. Did you go to a youth – was there a youth movement or was that the youth movement?

It was called the Union Synagogue...the Union Synagogue Youth Society. USYS.

And did your mother stay – you said she lived near the synagogue – so she remained religious, and...?

Oh, yes, she was always very religious. She wouldn't- she wouldn't write on a Shabbos and... But she was quite broad-minded. She knew we did, and... occasionally she did because there was no...she said, "God will forgive me." And I suppose he has done.

So, the synagogue was really helpful in terms of...?

Oh, yes, we had – it was a close community.

It was...?

Yes, it was a close community.

And are you still affiliated?

Ealing synagogue has ...closed now. As far as I know. That's the United...But the congregation just sort of died out. And I'm not sure exactly what's happened to it. Once we left the United, I wasn't that interested in – in what the United did.

And when did you get married, please?

1958. So coming up for fifty-six years.

And where did you settle then?

Well, we started off in Ealing, didn't move that far. And then we moved to Northwood. Cause my wife's sister lived in Northwood, that's why we moved to Northwood. And we stayed in Northwood, albeit not the same house, for forty years. Forty years in the same house. Afterwards we moved to Moor Park, which is a very nice area in Northwood.

And where did you work?

I worked in...I worked in town for a while, then I worked in Ealing which was not successful. Somehow, I was in the wrong place; I was on the first floor and there were a lot of dentists near. And just by luck I found a place in Hayes. Rose pushed me to it, because we were parked on a bomb site and I was fed up looking for a place. And she said, "Just try one more. There's a place over there, looks hopeful." I said, "Look, it's a builders' merchants! What would they have?" "Go and try it." So, I went in and spoke to the woman, "Do you know anywhere that might be suitable for a dental surgery?" She said, "Well, we're moving next week. We haven't put it on the market yet. Probably do very nicely for you." And that's- I was there forty years. In fact, more than that. Fifty years I had my surgery there.

And it was your own- Did you work by yourself or were there other...?

No, we became a five-surgery practice. And I had a nice Jewish partner and we got on very well. And that's...

And where was that? In Hayes?

Hayes, near the airport. When I first arrived, it was a very nice middle class, upper middle-class area. Gradually it – it changed. Became very Afro-Caribbean, then Asian. And latterly...the... the people moved in who the ladies wore burkas and niqabs and... you didn't hear much English spoken. That's when I left. But it still- I mean I go back to see the people who bought it. In fact, it was our associates who bought it from us. And it's very nice. They've turned it into a really nice modern Harley Street-type practice, and really, everything is fine. And Hayes has become very, very desirable and swinging. Lots of building there. And the- It's going to be a centre for Crossrail, so you'll be able to go to the airport. ...We're getting away from ... refugees.

Yes, so let's come back to the refugee story. How do you think did your own experience as a very young child, do you think that it impacted you in later life?

It didn't blight my life, and I think it was because I was too young. And I don't really think it blighted my sister's life. It didn't leave such a trauma on us because as I told you before, we didn't suffer. Although I was a refugee, I was a refugee by proxy 'cause my parents brought us. And our experience, although we lived through the war, we shared the same experience with all the other British people around us. And we were lucky to survive the war without any, any injuries. Although I spent that year in hospital, it's got nothing to do with what went on as a refugee. So, I can't say that we really had a horrible experience in, with respect to Germany. Not personally of course, but what happened to the Jews left ...a great impression because obviously our affiliation to - to Judaism is much greater than a British person's would be.

[0:54:07]

Yeah. And how would you describe yourself in terms of your own identity?

Now? I feel very British, but at the same time my sympathies are with Israel. My sympathies are with the Jewish people, although I'm not religious. And... I find it difficult to observe the practices. The minutiae of the ultra-Orthodox, or even the Orthodox. I just find it very difficult. And... there is a story that Einstein, who wasn't very religious himself, was asked what would he say when he stood before his maker. And he said, "I would say: God, you

didn't give me enough evidence." And maybe- maybe that was it. But I do, I do find it difficult. Because I'm a scientist, I do find it difficult when you speak to an ultra-Orthodox person and you say, "Well how do you account for the age of the earth?" You know, he'll say it's 5,000 years or thereabouts. "How do you account for the - the fossils and everything else?" They say, "They were all put there by God to fool us." It's an unlikely story.

And you said you left the United and joined the Reform synagogue. Was there a particular point in your life when that happened?

Well, when we moved, when we moved to Northwood, at that time there was no United synagogue close by. And... we had a friend who actually had designed the Middlesex New Synagogue, and so we sort of went along with that. And in fact, my, my son was the first one to have his Bar Mitzvah at that new synagogue.

And you were involved – were involved in that synagogue?

We were involved in the original building project. But...I didn't particularly like going to shul, and so I've drifted in that respect.

And what identity did you want to give to your children?

[0:56:24]

I thought that we did the right thing by our children; we did attend shul and they came with us and kept all the - the Holy Days. But when they, they grew up and they moved on, I suppose each generation becomes a little less religious. Not every generation, because I see some of my friends' children become ultra-Orthodox, and won't eat in their parents' house. Well, it's ludicrous.

But in terms of your children, what did they...?

They – they are not particularly religious. They identify with being Jewish, and they certainly don't deny it. But they, I suppose, are less religious than we are. That's probably our fault.

But- we've all had a happy- we had a happy childhood in England, and I know my children had a happy childhood so we don't have any regrets in that respect.

And are they interested, your children and grandchildren in your past, or in the...?

They're always interested. My son, particularly wanted to interview me rather like you're doing. He did make a start but we didn't get too far. Certainly not the depth that you're covering.

You are not a member of say, AJR?

No...no.

Do you see yourself as a refugee at all?

I explained to you, while technically I am a refugee, my experience is not that of most refugees. Difficult to know why, but one thing is that because I could assimilate so well, it wasn't so obvious to people that I was a refugee. And I - I was always busy; I worked long hours. And I just never had any inclination to join a society. I never became a Mason, and I didn't go to the dental meetings that much. The ones which were important I went to. But otherwise, I didn't. There just wasn't enough time, and I was- I like my family and being at home. So, I didn't participate. And that really carried on; I tend not to join societies.

Do you think your life would have been different if you hadn't been forced- if your family hadn't been forced to emigrate?

Of course! I mean... If we hadn't, it hadn't been for Herr Hitler, I would have had perhaps a completely different family. I wouldn't have had the children I have now, I wouldn't have had the wife – married to nearly sixty years. Who knows? But obviously, fate is very strange and, you know, out of evil sometimes does come good.

Do you think would have become a dentist?

[0:59:16]

I can't say. I was always passionately interested in science. Passionately. And so, I would definitely have done something in the scientific field. But whether a dentist, whether I would have had a mentor who said "Be a dentist, not a doctor." Who knows?

Is there anything else we haven't talked about you want to add about anyone in your family or...?

Well, I told you about my first cousin once removed, and that particular genetic pool. My... My mother's family. A lot of them lived in France and were hidden during the war, in France, in... monasteries, in a lunatic asylum. In various places. And they survived the war. I have a French- I call him my cousin. He wasn't strictly speaking, he was a member of the family, many times removed. But I always called him my cousin 'cause I felt very close to him. He was an intellectual and he lived in Nice. And... he ran a – a women's sports outfitters. And he hated it. He hated it all his life. And because he was a – he should have been a doctor or something in the arts. He was a great philosopher. And we used to go there twice a year, stay a week, play bridge. Which they always won. And I was extremely close. Unfortunately, he- his son became a top cancer specialist and the irony of it is that my cousin developed a cancer which killed him within four weeks. And at his age, it just wasn't possible. But he had a very rare type of cancer which didn't seem to have a primary site, but he died. And I was very sad about that. But I knew, I knew most of my mother's family. In fact, all of them. My mother had a – a very eccentric older brother, who never married, but certainly had one or two mistresses.

[1:01:44]

Yeah.

And in fact, most of the men of the family had mistresses. I'm not, not like them in that respect, although I'm a Yedwab. They had wives and they had mistresses here and there and it sort of was fairly well known. And the wives seemed to put up with it generally. You know, they put up and shut up. Just one of those things. That's what the Yedwab family was like.

So, you had quite an international family?

Very, very much. When the family got together, after the war, and they used to sit around the table, they would speak at least five languages. And when they got lost on one language, they switched to another one, really without knowing it. And I used to eavesdrop on it. And I was always amazed that they would go from one to the other, seemingly without even being aware that they had spoken in another language.

Yeah. And your children today, where are they?

Right, my daughter- I told...Did I tell you that she - she married in Italy?

Go on.

Well, no, she... she always wanted to be a vet, ever since she was knee-high to a grasshopper. She wanted to be a vet. And, but unfortunately, her A-Levels were not that brilliant. So, she found out that if she went to Italy, they would accept the A-Level grades that she had. She learnt Italian. So, she went to Italy; she did that. And she enrolled in the University at Pisa. And she was on her way to becoming qualified there, but she got side-tracked. Not only did she want to be a vet, she wanted only to deal with horses. She was mad keen on horses. And she used to go to the race-track and lead in horses, and she got a bit of money for that. But eventually, she saw that she could be a better trainer than the trainers she was working for. And she became a horse trainer, with thirty horses in her stable. And she trained for Robert Sangster, who was a- you know, had a big stable in England. And... then, then she married. She met someone at the university and she married - against our advice. We said Italians do not make particularly good husbands. And never a truer word was said. However, she's got two wonderful children and she never regrets it. And the children are close to their father, so that's fine. So, the children ended up speaking fluently- they're bilingual but mainly they've lived in England. I can't remember if I told you about my grandson?

[1:04:35]

Go on.

My grandson, who is absolutely brilliant. I mean, he is a genius in his own way. He wanted to become a doctor. And he always had a thing, he wanted to make Aliya. He went to Israel, and learnt Ivrit in three months. In fact, used to go back to Italy and teach Hebrew in Italy. But then he was on a kibbutz living, and he was singing in the shower; he's got a magnificent voice. And someone heard him, and said, "You should get your voice trained, and I know just the teacher." So, he started to get his voice trained. And one thing led to another. And he enrolled in the university of Tel Aviv in the, in the... music department. And he did three and a half years there, studying to become an opera singer. He's a baritone. But they taught him all they could, and then they said, "You've got to improve- you've got to further your education. You've got to go to Germany," - to Weimar, which is the centre of music. And so, he went to Germany. One of the conditions of getting to the German university is that you've got to speak German, to a standard, which he didn't- I mean, he didn't speak any German. He learnt German, and got into university. And the education is free, which does make a lot of difference you know, because he's twenty-six and he's still being... paid for by...his father sends him some money, we send him some money. You know he, but eventually he'll qualify and hopefully earn a living. My granddaughter, she lives in England, and she's a lovely girl. She's twenty-eight. She used to live close by, near Watford. But no, she lives in town now. And she's in marketing and advertising. Very quick, and very clever, but doesn't seem to have a lot of interest in getting married or settling down. Eventually that will come.

And how do you feel about your grandson living now in Germany?

I'm quite happy. As I said, I don't feel any ani-animosity between the present generation of Germans. You know, after the war, there was tremendous animosity. No Jewish person would be seen to buy a German car, and lots of things like that. But then they discovered that all the taxis in Israel were German anyway. If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for us. So eventually that - that went.

Yeah. And what about your son?

My son is an osteopath at the moment, well he has been an osteopath for, for many years. But he's interesting, because he thought he wanted to go in for the law. And he did. And he qualified as a barrister, but never got called to the bar, because he's- he's too sensitive and

he's too nice for the cut and thrust of being a barrister. And he decided he would like a change of profession and become an osteopath. I said, "Well, what about all the sciences?" "I'll teach myself." And he did. He re-qualified, got his A-Levels. He's a superb scientist now. And... he's a very good osteopath. So that's what he does. He was married. Is divorced; hasn't remarried. Has a son of eighteen. And... that's it.

[1:08:28]

Do you have a message for the younger generation like your grandchildren, for anyone who might watch this interview, based on your experience?

I admire young children. A lot of people think they spend their time was-wasting it, but I don't. I think they work hard. I think they do know an awful lot. You've only got to look at University Challenge and see how much young people know. They do silly things but I suppose we did in our, in our own days. You can't put an adult's head on a young children, young teenager's shoulders. But I do admire the younger generation. All the friends' children have all made it in, in the world. Very few of them have not made it and they work hard. And I think they've benefitted from the fact that their parents were refugees. It's always hard; I never think of myself as being really a refugee, although I – I am a refugee. Albeit I think of it as being a refugee by proxy.

Yeah. You are almost like a second generation...

Yes. Yes.

Because you were young enough to start school here.

Yes.

Yeah. But maybe looking at your parents' lives or anything, is there anything...?

My parents... I regretted that my father died... at sixty-five. It's a very long story, and I won't bore you with it, but he died as a result of a negligent operation. And... he'd had his, basically, he'd had his gallbladder removed seventeen years previously. But he had a

recurrence of stones. Stones in the common bile duct, caused tremendous pain. But it's a very, very difficult operation. And he wanted to have the same surgeon that operated him seventeen years previously, and I think he was past it. And regretfully, I persuaded my father to go ahead with the operation. Because he was sixty-four, I suppose, at that time, sixty-five. And he'd just been on holiday and looked very fit. And I said, "Now's the time. Don't have it when you're seventy, seventy-five." And as a result, the surgeon cut his common bile duct. And that led to his death, eventually. And... I find it hard, because that was the same surgeon who saved my life. So, what can you say to a man like that? And I said, "Look, my father is seriously ill. And... can you do nothing to save him?" He said, "Well, we all have to go at some time." He said that to me and it's like, you know, like a knife. I said, "Yes, but not at sixty-five." In the end he died. So, I have great regrets about that. Yes. But otherwise, I've, we've had a very, very happy life. It has its ups and downs, but that's - who doesn't? So, it's, it's really a happy, a happy ending with, you know, two lovely children and three lovely grandchildren. What more can you want?

[1:12:00]

OK, Mr Stern. Thank you very much for the interview, and now we're going to look at some of your photographs and documents. Thank you.

OK. How are we off for time? No, no. Plenty of time. Plenty of time. How did that go?

Perfect.

Yes? Oh, good.

One moment.

[1:12:11]

[End of interview]

[Photographs]

[1:12:28]

I point or not? OK.

Right, this is a photograph of my maternal grandmother, whose first name was Gittel, and my maternal grandfather, and I don't know his first name. I recognise my Aunt Mary, who is my mother's younger sister. She is on the left there, extreme left, standing. The others I don't recognise, and I suspect they might be my father's family, because I don't recognise them. And I knew most of my mother's brothers. It might be the family of Gittel, but I don't know. My mother is not on this photograph. And I don't know who that cheeky looking boy is, at the front. It might be her elder brother. No, it can't be an elder brother; it must be younger. I don't know.

Right, this is a photograph of my mother and father, and my sister Lily, taken in September 1933, which is a couple of years before I was born. Typical of the pose which they had in those days, the studio pose. It's extremely nice. My sister was probably... It might have been on her birthday, because her birthday is in- no her birthday is in December. She was three or four in this photograph. It was taken in Essen. That's where they were living, so I assume that that's where it was taken.

So, this is a photograph of a family group of my mother and father, my sister and myself. So, it was taken in 1935, and I look to be there just a couple of months, maybe more. Maybe four or five months. So, early in 1935, taken in Essen, in Germany.

Right, this is a picture of my mother, my sister and myself. I look to be about eighteen months to two years old there. And I was blue-eyed, I still am. Blue eyed and blond. And my mother used to say that she would get stopped in the street by various Germans saying, "You should put the boy into a Hitler Youth uniform." [half laughing] That went down really well.

This is a photograph of my sister and myself, taken in Germany. I look to be... perhaps three there. Something like that. Must be getting close to the time when we were going to leave Germany.

This is... probably taken around about the time of my Bar Mitzvah. My sister on the left, myself, my mother and my father. 1948. In Ealing... Yeah, in the Ealing synagogue.

[1:16:00]

Right, this is this is taken at our wedding reception. And from the left at the front, is Gisele Spatz who later married Paul Spiegel, the leader of the Jewish Community in Germany. My father behind her, my mother at the front. Myself and Rose. My brother-in-law Monty and my sister Lily. That was at the Majestic Rooms in 1958.

Right. This is a photograph taken at our wedding reception. It shows Rose's mother and father. Rose, myself and my mother and father on the right. Majestic Rooms, in 1958.

This is a photograph of my mother, and my daughter and son, Debra and Mark. Taken in Grange Road, Ealing, just outside the flat where she lived which was almost next door to Ealing Synagogue - United.

This is a family group. Showing my son, on the left, and his son...inset on the right. Myself, Rose, Martina, Debra, and Filippo, who are Martina's children. And it looks there as if Martina is maybe about six - six years old. Six or seven, and Filippo is a couple of years younger. That was taken in a studio. Probably in Watford, I would think. Somewhere like that; we went and had a family group done. ...Well, Martina is now twenty-eight, twenty-seven. So certainly, twenty years ago.

Mr Stern thank you very much for this interview.

Pleasure. It was great. I've discovered a lot about myself as well, so hopefully it will be of benefit to posterity, so thank you very much, Bea.

Thank you.

[1:19:00]

[End of photographs]

