

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV296
NAME: Irene Auerbach
DATE: 25 April 2024
LOCATION: London
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:00]

Today is the 25th of April 2024 and we're conducting interview with Mrs Irene Auerbach and my name is Bea Lewkowicz. Can you please tell me your name and where you were born?

Irene Auerbach and I was born in Amsterdam.

Thank you so much, Irene, for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background, please?

I don't know where to start. Well, my father came from a very Orthodox Jewish family in Hamburg that- ten children or something like that and they wanted him to become a rabbi and he couldn't even believe and so he had to break with them literally the day he came of age. He had to fight even to go to a secular secondary school. They didn't want that. And my mother, some of her background was Huguenot and so protestors I suppose, even several hundred years back, and with some roots from, well, what's now the borderline between Poland and Germany. Her father was in the merchant navy eventually – initially and fetched up as librarian in Marburg. I don't remember whether that was at university or otherwise but anyway, she was born in Marburg. And she was an only child. The first one died at birth, the second one was stillborn or something like that. She was the only surviving child, so her parents were quite old when she was born and so she grew up – when they retired, they

moved back to the area where my mother had come from. I know very little about that grandfather, apart from that he liked crafts, was good with his fingers, which – which my sister and I also could say of ourselves. [00:02:06] And so she grew up in Görlitz which is half on the – what's now Germany, again Germany, and half Polish, and went to school there and managed – she went to an unusual secondary school in that if you stayed one extra year, you were a qualified teacher as well, not – but just at *Abitur*. And after that she managed to go to university. I think she got some sort of scholarship. There was little support for a – no traditional secondary. And the sheer fact that I'm talking so much more about my mother tells you something. My father was seriously reluctant to talk about anything from his childhood. And so, she first went to Breslau University, well, what's now Wrocław or something like that [laughs] and – which was the nearest and oh, I mentioned earlier, she wanted to do a PhD on Jürg Jenatsch, the Swiss freedom fighter. You might have read the novel by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer about him and that involved the Habsburgs, so she did a year at university in Vienna and witnessed some uprising just out of poverty and that shaped her for the rest of her life. That made her a socialist. And then her lecturer, whether from her main university lecturer, whether it was from Breslau or from Vienna, I don't know, moved to Cologne. Now, she wanted to finish her PhD with him, she went to Cologne as well and joined the socialists' students' union and that's where she bumped into my father.

And when was that? When did she move to Cologne?

'26, '27, something like that.

So, she studied in the '20s.

Well, she was born in '03 and so she would have done *Abitur*, three – in '21 or something like that, including that teacher's diploma. [00:04:05] And then sometime in Breslau that year in Vienna, I don't know the date exactly, and I think they married in '28 or something like that.

And how did your father end up in Cologne?

He first studied in Hamburg but I think – oh, I think he got *Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes* [German National Academic Foundation] because yeah, his family wouldn't – well, he'd broken with him and he – they wouldn't have supported. Well, actually, no, he broke when he came of age, so he would have been a student a bit before that but they would hardly have supported him. And then Freiburg, you know, those days in Germany, you moved from university to university, not the way it's now, and not the way it's been in this country all the time. And so then to Freiburg and finally also to Cologne and that – oh [laughs]. That's a vote of confidence.

I hear some cat noise in the background, by the way.

I didn't hear the noise, that's why – I saw the movement, yes.

I can't see the cat but a cat is there.

So that's my parents. And of course, we're talking about the middle of Depression and as I said earlier on – my mother's PhD didn't happen because there was only money for one and she did all sorts of jobs to support herself. When Father then got a job in Berlin, I think she worked in department stores just in sales, just to help with family income because the – the trade unions of course couldn't pay very well either for – my father worked.

So sorry to just come back, so they got married in '28 in Cologne?

Oh, something like that. Don't quote me exactly on name – on dates.

Yeah. Probably a civil marriage?

Oh, very much [laughs]. Well, they had lived together – which in those days was probably quite brave – for quite a while anyway and [laughs] my mother said they got – the other students gave them a wedding bouquet, which consisted of carrots. [00:06:05] The lower bit were the carrots and the bouquet bits were the greenery of the carrots [both laugh]. So very much a civil marriage, yes.

Are there any photos of it? Have you got any photos?

I don't think there ever were. You see, you mention that, photos, even when I was little were a bit of a luxury. But anyway, and things got lost and as was mentioned in my email, unfortunately what I did have is also lost. No, no photos of that.

Do you know where they lived in Cologne?

No. Digs, presumably.

Yeah. So, their circle would have been their university friends?

Yes, very much so.

Because they didn't have family. Neither had family in contact –

No, my mother had to break with her family as well because she married a Jew. Only there was one very big difference, that my father's father never for – their parents, they never forgave him. When he married, well, that was just the last straw but, well, the last straw but one, or even one more, they sent Onkel Philipp, the next one down – Onkel Philipp was only sixteen months younger than my father – to try and talk him out of it, though he had long broken with the family. And my mother used to say that Onkel Philipp arrived in Cologne, said his bit and – “I've been sent to try and talk you out of getting married, and right, now I've said my bit, off we go – for a drink or whatever.” Because Onkel Philipp was the only one – the one my father was closest to and the only one who had some hope of getting through, it seemed so, and who was the only that where contact was re-established after the war.

Out of the ten siblings?

Yes. Well, not – well, some – most of them joined the boycott and with that huge family and the – when my father left home, the youngest ones were toddlers, and so there was no real relationship with the little ones. [00:08:07]

So, was he the oldest of the children?

No. No, he was number four. Number one wasn't very clever, was a boy but not terribly clever, number two and three were only girls, so they weren't candidates for being a rabbi, so my father was the first one that could be.

That's why they wanted to – expected him to –

Yes, yes.

I wonder whether he knew because, you know, I interviewed many years ago somebody called Carlebach and – that was the famous rabbi in Hamburg.

I've got books about him.

And I wonder, they must have –

That German friend whom I sent your text, she's given me books about that sort of thing and I know the name from there but – they probably knew each other.

Because Carlebach, they also had- I think- a very big family, I think nine children, eight or nine children.

Well, Orthodox Jews are as “bad” as Orthodox Roman Catholics.

Yeah, so probably they must have known the Carlebachs or were in that synagogue, I would assume.

Well, wasn't there more than one synagogue in Hamburg?

There was, but that was the sort of biggest Orthodox one. I don't know. Yeah. Interesting.

My father's – that – where they lived, I should even know but I can't think of it just now.

So, he was in touch with that one brother, Philipp.

Yes. And so that – and of course he wasn't going to be talked out of the marriage. And my mother's parents were very upset about that too but they came round. By then in – we were in Holland by then and my sister had been born. They had a GP whom they have known for ages that they loved, and he was Jewish, and when he was banned from practising, the penny dropped with my parents – with my grandparents. And contact was re-established and their – this – Ellen, who wrote the PhD initially about both brothers found perfectly friendly letters that they had sent to us. [00:10:03] I know they sent book catalogues and my parents could choose German books and they sent books to Amsterdam. I've got books from – with my mother having written a name and date in from '33, between '33 and '39 which came from – only from that source and they got pic – they got photos of my sister. And so, relations there were restored but they never saw any of us. I think they knew I was born but they – they might even have seen the odd picture but then of course, we had to relocate to – well, a polite word for fleeing again – to England. And I – well, again, I – this is hearsay, what my mother said, what I remember of that – that letters via the Red Cross and then they stopped. And where my mother got that information from, I don't know. But till my mother died, my sister and I believe that Grandfather had died of natural causes and Grandmother, alone in Görlitz, her one and only child in England, middle of a war, couldn't face life and committed suicide. And – but when my mother died, we found pictures – papers, as if it had been a double suicide. So compared with – add that to Onkel Philipp. So, we're a cheerful family. But then of course with interviews like ours, you must have come across lots of them.

Of course, yeah.

[Laughs] My parents once tried to – when I first came to Stevenage, they compared my income with D-Mark at the time and thought, good God, that girl, “*nagt am Hungertuch*” [is impoverished] and they wanted to buy me into a life insurance. [00:12:01] And to keep them happy I invited two reps from a life insurance. Two young chaps came, younger than – taller than me and younger than me – and they asked all sorts of questions and then they – and asked about suicides in the family and I said, I know of two, in that sort of tone, and they went green in the face. [Laughs] They just did not have your background and that was the end of the life insurance. But [laughs] it’s normal for the likes of us. There might be more. So –

It’s sometimes also not talked about in families or –

No, my – well, my father was so reluctant to talk about his family because he hated it so much. You know, being woken up at 5:30 in the morning to study the Torah and things like that and the compulsory element in it all.

Yeah. What did he hate about it or what was he –

I think the narrow-mindedness of it. And, well, again I’ve only got his few words about it but they do sound – did sound like a pretty narrow-minded lot.

Hmm. And he became a socialist. He was in a socialist –

Yes, yes.

What made him turn –

I don’t think I know. Maybe the general climate of Hamburg. I mean he was born in ’05, so Depression Hamburg.

How well-off was his family? Were there –

Oh, at the time they were quite well-off. They dealt in medical supplies, pharmacy supplies, cotton wool was quoted occasionally as – and Onkel Philipp then continued in that trade. He – I don't think – he certainly didn't have *Abitur* and he did a *Drogistenlehre* [trained as a chemist] and then joined up to '33 in the family firm.

And the family firm was called Auerbach or –

I suppose so. [00:14:01] And then went on – they first fled to Brussels. He was in arranged marriage and that cousin, Helen, I mentioned, the one who fetched up in America, and she's a few weeks younger than my sister, so born September '33 or something like that.

So, he escaped to Belgium.

Yes, initially to Belgium then – and then went – and then to France and they could – well, it's all in that PhD of Ellen's. They could all have escaped. Cousin Helen's mother and little Helen eventually escaped first to Cuba and then after two years, to relations in New York, which Helen hated because they were so narrow-minded and Orthodox as well. And Onkel Philipp felt his place was in Germany fighting and he ended up in Gurs or whatever, a big camp in France, and from then to Auschwitz and the saga was that he survived Auschwitz because he had that chemistry knowledge and well, the saga was that he made soap that Hitler liked. But not – definitely not a saga is that he managed to help a lot of inmates who had diarrhoea because he could make charcoal, that sort of thing, which stops diarrhoea, out of waste ingredients. And certainly, my sister, ten, fifteen – no, I was already in England, so that long – in the '60s received a letter from some stranger, are you related to Philipp Auerbach? He saved my life by providing charcoal, medical charcoal in Auschwitz. So that definitely was not a saga. [00:16:00]

So, he made schwarze Kohle, that sort of schwarze Kohle, medicinal –

Yes, whatever it is, yes, medicinal charcoal.

Really. Philipp Auerbach?

Yeah.

So that's documented somewhere.

Yes, yeah. My sister probably still got the letter. I had a copy but that copy lived in a handbag of mine that was stolen at King's, so [laughs] – by intruder.

Yeah. So that's Philipp Auerbach that –

Yes.

So, let's come back, Irene, to your father. So, he finished his PhD in Zeitungswissenschaften, you said.

Yeah.

And then from that point –

For journalism, yeah.

Yeah, journalism. What did he do –

And he got the – that job – I don't think there was anything in between – with its entire *Verband* of some *Gewerkschaft*, some trade union, in Berlin. And he lived there – so they lived there – I guess that would have been '29 or something like that – and worked there. And the blessing was – well, one of the blessings was – they must have moved house within Berlin to some slightly better flat. I mean the whole story I'm about to tell would not have worked nowadays in the age of computing. May Day was a holiday in Germany for decade – always has been. And the day after May Day '33 the Gestapo turned up at the trade union headquarters and lined up the staff alphabetically and asked who was going to cooperate and who wasn't and arrested all the ones who said no. And my father often said he was impressed

by the number of people further down the alphabet than Auerbach who also said no. And fortunately – we’ll never know why – they let them run along again after a few days. And then my parents had to decide whether to go underground and fight from inside or escape. And well, they opted for flee reluctantly because my father was six foot-something which was very visible in those days. **[00:18:09]** You wouldn't think by looking at me. But you would if you saw my sister. I'm physically very much Mother's daughter. And my mother was six months' pregnant. And so, it was my mother who applied for a visitor's visa to Holland and again nowadays with computers, they would have done cross-checks and realised that was somebody suspicious they arrested once already, plus having moved. And again, that not being – *Einwohnermeldeamt* [residents' registration officer] not being computerised. They got the visitor's – well, my mother got the visitor's visa for two and she used to say they sat in a train to Berlin and the Gestapo was walking up and down the platform looking in the compartments and they didn't know whom they were looking for. But they were – they got out. Well, then what I mentioned earlier on, first day in Amsterdam, Father trotted up to the International Transport Workers' Federation and asked whether they could employ him and they did. And they employed him all the time they were in Holland and all the time they were in England and it was that trade union network that eventually helped getting the parent – my parents back to Germany. The British Zone was- I think about – and the British Occupational Forces from what I can work out were by far the most sensitive and – well, sensitive and supportive of the occupying forces in helping rebuild a better Germany, including involving trustworthy refugees, including involving Labour and Conservative – and labour and trade union people who'd survived, in rebuilding a better Germany. **[00:20:06]** And of course, the trade union people were in touch with the international trade unions and I mean for – again it's in that – in Ellen's PhD. My father went to Germany on his own on some sort of reconnaissance mission, even earlier than October '46 and was probably handed from one trade union group to the other in between with British Occupational Forces. And then gradually self-government was gently reintroduced on the occupational zone basis. And this place called Lemgo that you'd never heard of, that became the base for the Ministry of Labour for the British Zone because it had military barracks which hadn't been destroyed. So, it just – it had the premises in which you could establish some admin and so my father became number two in the Ministry of Labour for the British Zone because of his trade union background and, well, and his education of course. So, few left-wing people had survived,

leave alone left-wing people with university education, and so people like him [laughs] were needed. So many of the trade union were very working class and never had had those chances. And then gradually, as the federal states thing got developed again under the wing of the occupying forces and Niedersachsen got established with Hanover, the capital, my father was headhunted to be number two in the Ministry of – well, it kept changes, *Sozialministerium* [ministry for social affairs] sometimes involved housing and sometimes involved health, it always involved pensions and things like that. [00:22:02] So that sort of thing became very much his focus of work for the rest of his life. And that's why Ellen called that PhD "*Sozialpolitik aus dem Exil*" [social policy from exile], my father had witnessed the Beveridge plan being developed and all that and of course witnessed it very consciously and tried to include everything that he felt was good and relevant in his plans. I think in his obituary somebody referred to him as the pope of social politics in Germany. So, you're definitely talking [laughs] to the family dunce. And so that – that's what he did first in Hanover and as he was a top civil servant, *Staatssekretär* [state secretary], he was a *politischer Beamter* [political official] and that is just one per ministry. And all the others were un-sackable. But the *politischer Beamter*, the *Staatssekretär*, the constitution felt, had to work so closely with a minister who was – of course was a political appointee, that you couldn't expect a conservative minister of social things to work with a Labour *Staatssekretär*. So *Staatssekretär* could be sent into the *Wartestand* [temporary retirement] if a new government came in and that happened to my father. It would have been about '55 or something – '54, '55, that a more right-wing government got established in Hanover and he was put in the *Wartestand* and none of the others really realised what that meant financially because all the other *Staatssekretäre* that had quietly managed to live through the Nazi times and include the right increments for their pensions and my father's pension [laughs] had started in October 1946, which was rather different. [00:24:14] And, well, a very strange quirk, the friend I mentioned to you whom I've just sent your mother's memoir, her father numerically took his place. There was a swapping-around. Her father was an agricultural specialist, like my father was a labour-relation specialist. And my – our- and we'd been friends. She had joined us – my class about two or three years earlier or something like that and my class teacher took me aside and asked whether I still wanted to sit next to her. I mean that says a lot about that horrible school. If I talk more about that school – I have nightmares to this day. And as I said, I've got *Abitur* with bells on. Well, probably because I could speak

such nice English, that – and so fortunately I was unassailable academically and also my father – my – I had parents who were prepared to complain and jolly well did so on frequent occasions. And if I hadn't had that double support, I wouldn't have done *Abitur*. It was so awful. But there we – that says a lot, that it – do you still want to sit next to her. When I said I visit her, visit – I stayed with her a fortnight ago.

Okay, so this is all post-war. We need to come back to just –

[Laughs] Oh, sorry.

The pre-war and then we'll discuss your schooling of course. So, let's just go back when they – so in a way, your parents escaped because of the Nazis and so [overtalking].

Yes, I mean Father had been arrested. It was obvious it would happen again sooner or later.

How long – do you know how long he was arrested for? He said they released them.

[00:26:00] Was it just [overtalking]?

I think one or two nights, something like that. Because again, it's what I've been told, what I remember.

Yeah. So, they realised the danger of the situation.

Yes. Yeah. Yes, my father was Jewish on top of it. At that stage it wasn't that obvious.

Yeah. So, in Holland, so they had from '33 to '39 in Holland.

Yes.

Your sister was born.

Yeah.

What – before your birth, what were – and your father worked. What did your mother – did she work as well?

No. What the – ITF [International Transport Workers' Federation] paid must have been just about sufficient.

Yeah. And what was his work there? What did it consist of, working for the ITF?

Well, he must have learnt a lot about labour relations. Well, he knew anyway from his work in Germany. But transport workers were in a unique situation. They were allowed out. German railwaymen, German merchant navy, they were allowed out. And when they were out, they could talk openly about what was going on. My father always said when Germans said, we didn't know what was going on in Auschwitz, that was a lie, it was known. Well, unless you shut your eyes and ears deliberately. And with my father's degree in journalism, he edited – well, he compiled and edited what came out via those transport workers in huge volumes. You see that green atlas there? They were exactly that shape – that's my German school atlas – like that, only burgundy-bound. We – I think we had a copy ourselves, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung got it now. And that was a compilation and that was fed to the BBC, that was fed to any willing press what was really going on in Germany. It was called *Faschismus* [fascism]. I think it must have been called in Germany – in German.

[Inaudible]

Yeah. And he compiled that. Whether that filled all his hours, I doubt it. But anyway, that was a lasting thing. **[00:28:02]**

So, it was an anti-fascist publication? I mean –

Well, not – it was just recording – recording what those railway people, drivers, sailors, said what was really going on, including of course persecution of union people. Compiling and covering and making it available to news agents, including very much the BBC.

Because it's very interesting because, you know, as I mentioned before, Alfred Wiener had also come to Amsterdam with his – at that time it wasn't called the Wiener Library – whatever it was called, looking for material and documenting anti-Semitism. So, I wonder whether they met, Albert Wiener and –

It's not a name- I'm familiar with so many of the trade union names and of course – Wiener Library now of course it's something I'm familiar with. But Oldenbrucks [ph] was a name, Kannfreund [ph] were names from the trade unions that were mentioned when I was knee-high to a grasshopper but Wiener doesn't ring a bell.

Okay. Because they just put a Stolperstein for that office in – of the Wiener Library in Amsterdam.

Oh, they're putting *Stolperstein* outside Germany?

Yeah.

That's the first I hear of that. Oh, Hansastraße was the address in Hamburg. It suddenly came in the context of *Stolperstein*, yeah.

Of the family, of his family?

Yeah.

No. So, the Stolperstein- so maybe it sounds – by the sound of it, maybe your father – that [overtalking].

But wasn't Wiener more on the religious side rath – or more on the politic side? My father was obviously not on the religious side, that they might not have overlapped. There were an awful lot of German refugees in Amsterdam, from Anne Frank downwards.

Yeah, but I don't think so many were involved in this active documentation process, that's why.

Yeah. Well, you might want to find – look in the Wiener Library's archives. [00:30:00]

Yeah, in the correspondence. There might be some correspondence. Anyway, that's for another_

But certainly, it's not a name I'm familiar with from childhood.

Okay, okay. So, there he was documenting these things and talking to people.

Yes. And carried – and the work as such carried on pretty much the same when we then moved to England.

So, when did they realise – or that that archive – not the archive, the organisation needs to leave?

Well, when the war broke out. I mean all the political ones realised it was only a question of time that the Germans would overrun Holland, they'd said so. And I mean that's why I'm sitting here and Anne Frank isn't, because they were “only” racial refugees and not politically as aware. And of course, with my parents' background, they were politically aware. And of course, their blessing was that the ITF moved anywhere, lock, stock and barrel, and so did we.

You think they were more – because they were politically involved, more politically aware of what's – of the danger?

Yes, honestly, I don't think it was a question for them that they'd – they had to get out.

And when – you were just – that's when you were born, in 1939?

Well, I was seven months old. Well, my mother said I was very useful. They landed in Gravesend and I screamed and I screamed [laughs] and they got through Customs and all that very quickly, they wanted to get rid of that baby [laughs] and its soundtrack [laughs]. Of course, my sister was six-plus, so she went to kindergarten in Amsterdam. She could speak a toddler's Dutch but our parents didn't cultivate that. They wanted a secret language. My parents had learned Dutch with difficulties, because they said the Dutch, whenever they realised that my parents couldn't speak perfect Dutch, they would switch to German or English, as so many Dutch people can. But – and my mother translated books from Dutch into German. [00:32:00] Does the word Büchergilde [Büchergilde Gutenberg] - book club, originally formed from the trade union environment, it is now a registered publishing cooperative] mean anything to you?

Büchergilde?

It's a German – it exists to this day. It's a superb book – trade union book club. It was founded – it's in Frankfurt now, founded in the '20s I think to enable uneducated German workers to educate themselves by giving them very good books. If you – I can show you some books afterwards – beautifully in linen covers, beautiful covers. And my mother translated for them from Dutch into German.

So, tell us a bit about – you said the whole organisation, they had to move, or move to Britain.

Yes.

So how was it possible for your father or for his wife and children –

Two little girls.

To come? Yeah.

Well, certainly the British government wanted to offer a home to the ITF and they wanted my father and I suppose by that time after six years of editing that “*Faschismus*”- they wanted him and the BBC made heavy use of it. I think Father was involved in broadcasting, BBC broadcasts as well.

Before he came even, or –

No, no, once he was here.

That was after.

Yes, once he was here. And – but by that time Britain was governed by the wartime grand coalition but – Churchill and the Minister of Labour was Ernest Bevin and he was a union man and so I gather that he intervened on behalf and so we all got in, not just –

First- they didn't – they only wanted your father?

Yes. And we were never interned. We first lived in Kempston and we had a lovely neighbour, Mrs Ironside, and I was in touch with her till she died. When I did odd visits from when I was living in Germany, I would try and include her and when I lived here as well. [00:34:00] She was my – one of my substitute grandmothers. My sister and I never knew our grandparents of course. I was – it was in Lemgo when I was about eight that it dawned on me that having known your grandparents wasn't the great exception. And so that Mrs Ironside, she was a lovely, unprejudiced neighbour. They could tell the difference between enemy Germans and victim Germans – well, for whatever Germans, and it carried on like that in north – when the ITF then went to London and so did we.

Anyway, just to – just to go back. So, your father basically refused to go by himself.

Yes.

And insisted that you all came.

Yes.

And then –

Got away with, [laughs] yeah.

And then Bevin- you said –

Intervened and –

Intervened and wrote a letter –

And so, we got the visas, yes, visas. How exactly it went, I don't know. And even my sister wouldn't know.

No. So, you came on – probably on his visa or –

Well, whatever. It might – there might be something in the ITF archives how that worked but it's a long time ago [laughs].

Yeah. So, it was an unusual situation, that – it sounded like, not invited but somehow –

Well, I guess could imagine the ITF was invited.

Yes, exactly.

And of course, my father had been working for them for six years by then, over six years.

Yeah. And so did – I mean you were too young to remember the journey. How did they physically come to the UK?

Well, on some ferry. Mother said three weeks later that ferry ran on a mine and sank, so an awful lot of luck's involved. Well, like your mother [laughs] had an awful lot of luck.

Yeah.

Well, and helpful people.

Yeah.

Only our helpful people weren't near to save lives. They just made life an awful lot more pleasant.

So, they arrived in the UK and then where did they go?

The ITF established itself in Kempston Hoo – must be some stately home – near Bedford, so not far from where we're sitting now at all but that's entirely coincidental. [00:36:00] And –

And they moved to...?

In '42 or '43, we're not sure, they moved to London, somewhere on the Euston Road.

That was later. So, for a few years they stayed in –

Yes. And my sister went to Bedford High School and of course I was too young for school and then when they moved to London, my sister went to Henrietta Barnett. As we ended – I don't know why ended up in north London where there were so many people like us anyway, but we did.

And what were the first – your parents' first impressions when they came to England? I mean did they have any English, for example?

My mother had to have English as well as other subjects, so her English was pretty good. And my father must have acquired some English – he certainly ended up writing impeccable English – with the most horrible accent. Whilst my mother also – but had a pretty good accent only when then decades later, after my father’s death she moved back here, [laughs] her accent had deteriorated, same as my sister’s accent’s deteriorated, which is quite shocking really ’cos my sister went to Henrietta Barnett, so she was thirteen.

And Irene, what are your first memories in – I guess growing up in England?

Well, of Kempston I remember our garden path with hollyhocks and – well, I haven’t got hollyhocks out here now because it’s got too shady with all the trees but when I first moved in here, I had lots of hollyhocks and I still very much like them. But – oh, [sighs] during the war you could get cod liver oil to fight lack of vitamins. You’ve got to say whatever time problems.

No, no.

And we had to go into Bedford for that from Kempston. [00:38:02] And whether we walked or took a bus, I don’t know, but the trip involved crossing a railway bridge which was boarded up with planks and there were holes in the planks and I loved looking down at the railway through the planks. And so – and that Mrs Ironside was a nice lady, I remember that. But I think that is just about all I can supply about Kempston, the hollyhocks, the railway bridge with the trains, and Mrs Ironside really.

And speaking German to your parents or –

I think at that stage probably – we always spoke German at home. We switched on the doorstep and that was that. And it was like one long word,

“WennderKriegerstmalvorbeistundwirwiedernachDeutschlandgehen.

[WhenthewarisoverandwearegoingbacktoGermany]. Shall I do that slowly again?

Do it slowly, yeah.

Wenn der Krieg erstmal vorbei ist und wir wieder nach Deutschland gehen- so that's –

Please translate it for somebody who can't –

When the war – when at last the war was over and we return to Germany. And so that was taken as read. If my parents ever had any doubts, they certainly didn't share them.

So that was the sort of motto. I mean the – you heard –

Yes. They wanted to rebuild a better Germany. And probably me [ph] then coming back here in the end must have been quite a blow for them, quite a blow for them, but they were more tolerant than my father's parents [laughs] and accepted it positively.

So, you grew up knowing that also you were –

Yes, that was absolutely accepted and thinking of course it – now knowing about this interview and of course I've been interviewed by Joe Cronin who's at the Leo Baeck Institute and my sister and I have done quite a lot in that sort of thing. And we never complained. I mean some things when we came back to Lemgo- were pretty grim, I mean just general circumstances were pretty grim. [00:40:05] And particularly in Lemgo, everybody else around had lived there for donkey's years and so knew people who lived in the countryside and could supply food and things, supplement food and things like that, and we hadn't. So, we really lived on rations and in the winter of '46. '47 it was so cold the ink froze in its bottles. We had ink in those days and it literally froze in the bottles. But that's just the way it was. And of course, we'd been many years drilled- and so that's – you accept it. The only thing I didn't accept was some of the treatment at – particularly at secondary school and I certainly did occasionally complain there and then my parents backed me to the hilt. My sister didn't need it. She was lucky with her teachers – luckier. She also had only two years of it and I had nine, and so she didn't need it but I jolly well occasionally needed it.

Well, you were different ages so you must have – it must have affected you differently.

Yes. And she's much more conciliatory than I am and so that would make her – would have made her life easier than mine.

But knowing obviously that you were going to go back to Germany, that probably affected also the choice of friends and which circle your parents mixed with?

You mean in Amsterdam?

No, in England.

In England. Well, very largely with the trade union people and the labour union – people. There was something called GER, German Educational something or other. They did cultural events for refugee children, so that they'd learn songs and things like that.

And were you part of that?

My parents attended them- I think for our sake. That's where we met the Bondys [ph] who were – I referred to earlier when we chatted – my – one of my substitute grandmothers. [00:42:06] And they've got a daughter called Jo who was in age exactly halfway between my sister and me, and they never intended to go back and Jo is Jo and never was more than rudimentary. But they went there and that's where we met – I gather – I was so inhibited, they actually – my parents dragged me to a child psychologist and – not that I remember anything about that. But at one of those events, those GER events, whoever was in charge started asking rhetorical questions and I very suddenly started answering all them very loudly and [laughs] so whatever the psychologist did must have worked.

GER, it was called?

German Educational Resource, and there was a chap called Erich Hirsch running it. He became a family friend.

Erich Hirsch?

Yes.

Not the Free German Youth or anything like that?

It doesn't ring a bell. But I mentioned earlier, Ernst Reuter, who became the first mayor of Berlin, who had two boys roughly our age. They lived in Richmond, not in north London. They were friends. And well, and hospitality of course, was very small anyway. There was rationing, there were air raids and so there wasn't much visiting going on. And –

Did they have any contact with any other refugee organisations or –

Not that I know of.

And you said your father wasn't interned.

No, never questioned. No. We lived perfectly normal lives and like normal British children.

And you think he wasn't interned because of his involvement with the BBC or –

Well, I think he was at – I think there was just absolutely no question that he was trustworthy and not a spy. [00:44:03] I mean a good many quite trustworthy people did a small spell in the Isle of Man. Yes, you asked about Mother and some work I've been doing. Does Hans Keller mean anything to you?

Of course.

I've done – of course [laughs] with your husband, yes. I've worked a lot on Hans Keller's papers, deciphering and helping with the translating and –

Oh, fantastic. Because I should say we interviewed Milein Cosman for the Archive. Yeah.

Well, of course and I ended up friends with Milein.

Oh, did you?

Yes, because of the word *Torte* [cake]. My main involvement with Hans Keller was his letters as a very young man from the Isle of Man and – well, he wasn't there long, fortunately. And he – well, you must be familiar with those letters, twenty-eight lines, and [] squashed and as the letter got to the end the writing got smaller and smaller and smaller. And he kept – and it always thanks- the letters always started, thank you for whatever was in the parcel and then please send me this, what I've been doing, and the fourth bit was now please do this, that or the other to try and get me out of here. And in the thanks, he kept asking for *Torte*.

The cake?

Yeah, well, not for me. For me with a northern German background, *Torte* is gateau and it doesn't – you can't post it [laughs]. Cream cakes oozing, like *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte*, you can't send that by post. But mind you, they sent eggs, but maybe they were hard-boiled before they were posted. But certainly, eggs got mentioned in those letters. And so eventually, through Alison Garnham, who must be a name for you, I got in touch with Milein to ask whether *Torte* had any special southern meaning, after all, Hans Keller was Viennese, and that's how we got in touch. [00:46:00] In her very last years, I visited Milein a couple of times to help when she was nearly blind, with her own papers. And that was a real – a real friendship. We would oscillate between German and English. And a weird coincidence, when I taught at Marienau with my second German job, one of my pupils was Marion Flechtheim. She was born in Kansas City in '46 and her parents also returned. Ossip Flechtheim became a professor of politology in Berlin and during the Cuba Crisis they exported her to West Germany to boarding school. And we made friends and I also visited her when I was in Germany [laughs]. Now they're back in Berlin. Well, they've been back in Berlin for decades. And it – she married a dyed-in-the-wool Aryan whom she met when she was studying psychology and it turned out her dyed-in-the-wool Aryan's family helped Milein's

family escape. In their house is a picture of Marion's husband, Detlef, they're all in their seventies now, drawn by Milein when she was very young.

How many –

So, it's a small world [laughs].

So, what is the name of that family who helped Milein's family?

Detlef Thimm.

Thimm?

Well, there – I think there were four brothers but the one I know is Detlef, a paediatrician, a retired paediatrician.

And they helped Milein's family to –

Yes, the Thimm family helped Milein's family escape down the Rhine. And I – and we met up again when Cologne University in its wisdom something like 2007 restored the PhDs they'd taken away. And both Ossip Flechtheim's and my father's PhD had been taken away. And well, they took a long time over it. Actually, it was – as we gathered, a student initiative that brought it about that long. **[00:48:05]** And there was hardly anybody alive and they only managed – they haven't tried very hard. They can't have tried very hard. We only heard – my sister and I only heard about it because Ellen, that PhD lady, did research in Köln University archives about my father, because he'd been to Cologne, and she happened to see it on a noticeboard and so she – by then we were in touch and so she alerted us. And anybody could find my sister if they googled my sister. She's – on German Wikipedia right, left and centre. And so, Cologne University didn't try very hard. But anyway, I've forgotten whether I then alerted Marion or whether it found her. But anyway, the three of us were the only descendants they managed to let – to lay hands on.

So, you went there to –

Yes.

Was it a ceremony or –

Very much so, yes. And I brought with – my father's PhD diploma which my parents had managed to rescue each time, knowing that your academic qualification are just about the only thing you can rescue if you're a refugee. And so, they've now got my parents' – my father's original –

Amazing. So, you're in touch with Milein –

Yes, very much so, yes. No, good- that is – that was established – does the name Christopher Wintle mean anything to you?

Yeah.

Yes. Well, he was at King's. He started at King's when I did. And of course, I think he had looked after Hans Keller's papers ever since – well, since before Hans Keller died I think, considering he died fairly young.

Yes, so he was interned when your father –

Yes, but for only – yes, it gets him back to where we actually were, sorry. That – and – but so lots of people were interned for a short time who were perfectly trustworthy, as soon as the authorities could be convinced. But my father was never, never interned.

What other circles, what other people – you said Reuter – any other names or any other people? [00:50:04]

I think –

There was somebody –

Ollenhauer, who became deputy of the SPD and Kurt Schumacher, you know, who lost one arm and one leg in a concentration camp. He was leader of the SPD after the war, and Ollenhauer was the deputy. He was in London. That's a name I was vaguely familiar with.

Are you familiar with somebody we interviewed who was – had an uncle who was sort of quite active in a trade union? His name was Benno Marx. Does that name ring a bell?

It doesn't ring a bell.

They used to – also I think in Golders Green.

Yeah. Well, as I said, there were three of us in my class [laughs]. I actually do – the little brother of my sister's best friend in her class was in my class, the Aspis – Edward Aspis, the one in my class was. But then of course they weren't all political refugees. No, it certainly gets you back to Wiener. It's – it took me years to realise that Wiener was a name, and not for the town, because of course that would have made equal sense in the context.

Yeah. And then – so you then moved to London.

Yeah.

With them. And then went – were sent to Henrietta Barnett School?

Yeah.

Yeah. And what was that like for you starting there, or what are your memories of that time?

Well, I – strangely, my parents hadn't done much to help me with my English. I'd gone shopping with my mother but really only what I could pick up there because I – that was very

little. I do remember needing to go to the loo and somehow managing to get outside the classroom and then standing in the corridor howling because I had no idea where the loo was. And fortunately, the deputy head came along, who knew about me [laughs] and helped. [Laughs] That is one of my earliest memories. [00:52:00] And – but anyway, it was also a positive, if you were wondering that the problem got solved. [Sighs] And I remember something which I didn't like. We were – my parents didn't want us to go to assembly and so always – well, that was the start of having to be different and so we sat outside till assembly was over, so we just did. And I remember a history lesson [sighs]. What *Pfahlbau* [building on stilts] in English? I don't remember. People who lived in swamps and had buildings on piles and everything made of wood. And I remember sticking matches on matchboxes to look like that, and lots of drawing. And I remember this – well, school reports, one of them said, Irene's got a lot of ideas but not always the patience to carry them through. And I think I'm now the other way around [laughs]. And I think I enjoyed singing even then, so songs we learnt there and – and my sister had great educational zeal and so whatever songs she learnt, she would shout around the house at home, so I learnt all the songs she learnt as well. And then of course our mother sang with us, and all her repertoire, we had a huge repertoire –

Tell us a little bit. We haven't discussed music in the house. Music –

Well, my mother had an instrument which was a [inaudible] between a guitar and a violin – er, and a lute. So, it only had six strings like a guitar but it had a belly like a lute. My sister's got it now. Oh, at least had it. And my mother taught my sister to play that. But otherwise, I mean money was short, we didn't – we – that – well, my sister learnt that guitar thing and we just sang but – and my mother accompanied on that guitar. [00:54:02] And we did that all the time, so I think we sang from when we could speak.

What did you sing? What – like what?

Well, folk songs, German folk songs, so my mother's entire repertoire. And then of course, that got extended by what my sister brought home [laughs] and what I brought home. The Auerbach family at Christmas, we were – when my mother lived in the flat over there, before – she insisted on having a Christmas tree. She would drop a note to the flat downstairs

saying, I hope you'll forgive us but we'll be singing Christmas carols for hours on end, we [laughs] – I've got the list. I think we've got a Christmas carol repertoire that's in three figures because [laughs] it's the Lutheran repertoire, it's anything my sis – my mother knew, and there was quite a big post-war repertoire, that semi-secular, wintery things developed during the Nazi time by people in *innere Emigration* [inner emigration] or even not in *emigration* and new carols and I think we knew the lot. So, my parents insisted, oh, well, a real carol, real candles of course, and we had thin white candles like that and we'd sing the first lot down on Christmas Eve, just singing. And my father would sit there with a blissful grin on his face [laughs] and join in with whoever sat nearest. [Laughs] His – he'd been told as a boy that he couldn't sing – criminal – and which meant he believed it. He jolly well could because he would – if we sang in parts, he would sing with whoever was closest.

So, what songs? What can you remember? Can you sing something or – not necessarily a Christmas carol, you said you grew up with folk songs – or anything?

Well, it's – sorry [laughs]. [00:56:02] This is late April. You've got to give me a moment [laughs] to get my mind on – [sighs] I'm going to cheat. Frank, you didn't knock anything off, did you? Ah, got it. No. You must have knocked something. I've got it. That's the Auerbach Family's-

Careful

Oh, I've forgotten about the microphone. Yeah.

Careful. Okay. You show it to us, to the camera. Tell us what you have.

So, it's my writing. I did it at – probably at my mother's suggestion, possibly just when our father – when she came moving here. So, the Lutheran repertoire, shepherd songs, songs in praise of the Virgin Mary, that song, which my mother and sister knew, unclassifiable, that is the post-war repertoire, a lot of non – chamber of horrors, *Stille Nacht* [Silent Night] [inaudible], which my parents despised, but there's something called "*Süßer die Glocken nie klingen*" [The bells never ring sweeter], which is really too sentimental for words. I don't

know whether you know – picked that one up. “*Leise rieselt der Schnee*” [The snow is falling silently], which is another pretty awful one. And then – then a few which only our mother knew, a few only my sister knew, then about the Three Kings, and then English ones and the final ones only I knew. And I’m just looking for a typical one that my mother taught us which nobody else knew and I just am –

Yeah. [00:58:00]

Which is one of my favourites that just now – ’cos I hadn’t expected that to come –

We can come back to it at the end.

Yes. This one, “Itz [ph] und weil ein jeder schläft. I’ve never come across that anywhere else.

Okay, why don't you read it to us? Or sing it to us, even better.

[Sings] [Itz und weil ein jeder schläft und der Stern ein [Schatten legt]. Die schwarze goldne Nacht her eilt, still der Welt zu [] and two more verses. I think it probably comes from some nativity play that my mother learnt as a schoolgirl in Görlitz. As I mentioned earlier, she had very – by those standards very good class music lessons. Yes, when we came to Lemgo then, we knew an awful lot of German songs.

So, you grew up with these songs?

Oh, very much so.

And you liked them?

Yes, liked them. Also accepting them as our background really. Only the German children knew very diff – they knew the Nazi songs, which we didn't.

Yeah. But in England, did it – was it – you said you were – your parents asked not to go to assembly. On what grounds did they not want you –

They didn't want us brainwashed, put for – crudely.

So, they were worried about sort of anti-German propaganda? Or what –

Oh, no, religiously.

Religiously? Okay [overtalking].

Oh, relig – no, religiously.

Okay, so –

No, they were – after they weren't terribly very positive about what was happening politically in England.

Okay, sorry. Sorry, yeah.

No, no, religiously.

Okay. So, were they religious assemblies in Henrietta Barnett?

I think it was compulsory. I think – on paper it still is compulsory.

Right. So, they wanted you to be agnostic, not exposed.

Yes, make up your mind later. But mind you, all this influenced and it certainly in – music played a very big part in me getting roped into Christianity in the long run after all and my mother had a big Lutheran repertoire as well. [01:00:16]

So, although she – they didn't want you involved in religion, they – you grew up with –

The cultural side, yes.

The cultural side.

Well, as I mentioned earlier, visiting churches was a part of every holiday if there was a worthwhile church. My father had been to Freiburg University and where you first could travel again after the war out of your own zone, Freiburg was in the French Zone with the Black Forest in the background, so we went there and Freiburger Münster, we looked around in great detail again and again. And so, I mean you can't – well, I suppose for you it might have been different from what I've gleaned from your mother's memoirs but certainly with my father, having broken with the Jewish side you – it's very hard to be part of European culture and escape Christianity, at least not knowing about it.

I have to say, my mother loved churches, so [overtalking].

Oh, so you had that –

[Laughs] Every holiday it was certainly –

Yes, yeah. And Cologne, [laughs] outside the Cologne Cathedral, outside the station.

Yeah, interesting. She really liked –

I changed trains there a fortnight today.

It was always an argument I remember between my parents because my father thought it wasn't necessary, my mother on every holiday went to every possible church you could visit, interestingly. But just coming back to your – so the wartime experience here in Britain. Do you know exactly what your – you said your father was involved with the BBC. Do you know exactly what he did there or what he –

I think advising by broadcasts and possibly not so much only the BBC, again underpinned by what Ellen discovered, the British government was very good even in quite early stages of the war, say, '41, '42, planning what would happen when Germany was rid of the Nazis and people like my father were roped in for that. **[01:02:19]** But there was something called “In the New Germany”, even a Penguin book, Victor Gollancz was involved. I remember my mother dragging me to Victor Gollancz’s office once. It must have been before I came to school and she couldn't leave me at home on my own, and it must have been something with a publication that she had to deal with and so I met the [laughs] great man when I was about five or something like that. But certainly, he was involved in the publication side of it and in the at whole plan, in “For a Better Germany After the World War”, which of course very much fitted in my parents’ general attitude, rebuild a better Germany.

And did your mother – how – what was she doing in England? Did she work at all or did she help your father or –

No, I mean I was too small but she did a lot of typing in – some of it in – do you know Gestetner? Before we had photocopiers, those waxy screens on which you could put into a typewriter [laughs] like paper and then you typed as usual but the keys would hit a hole in the wax. We still had those when I started in Stevenage teaching, but they went out with photocopiers of course. And my mother had a little travelling typewriter and that’s another she – thing she managed to rescue. I think she typed my father’s PhD, she typed my sister’s, actually she – I think she typed all our dissertations and [laughs] well, I guess that she must have typed those translating – those books she translated from Dutch into German.

[01:04:06] So she was a quick typist and so she did – some of those Gestetner things, she did – she was even paid for that. There was a correcting fluid for that that could restore the wax, so you could then type the correcting over it and that smell of [laughs] the Gestetner correcting fluid brings back my childhood [laughs] in no time. And so, she did that. But of course, there were air raids and –

So, was she your father’s assistant in a way?

Well, in any way – in ways, yes.

Or collaborator?

But not for – well, he did his work at the ITF independently. But this German book publisher, *Büchergilde*, that I mentioned, they had – they emigrated to Switzerland, they went on functioning and they – from – and my parents stayed members all that time.

Büchergelde?

Büchergilde. No, *Gilde*, as a guild of craftspeople.

Oh, sorry, guild, guild, Büchergilde, yeah.

Yes. It was a German printers' guild that started it.

Yeah. Sorry, I didn't hear.

And in – there was a German branch in London. It was run by my mother and that Frau Bondy [ph], my substitute grandmother, [laughs] who was actually marginally younger than my mother. And e.g. they were supplied not only refugees but sensible prisoners of war. They got parcels [laughs] from Switzerland, so production must have been in Switzerland at the time.

So, prisoners of war in England?

Yes, the sensible ones who wanted German books I suppose.

Amazing. But you said your father was also involved with prisoners of wars, or was that a bit later?

Well, that was a government thing. And Mr Bondy [ph] too was involved in that, that absolute – those he was a businessman, not a politician, that they were sent to prisoner-of-war camps to lecture the young officers – if you'd been ten in 1933, you'd never known anything else – and to brainwash them back, or undo the brainwashing. [01:06:19]

And where did he go? Did you know exactly where he went or –

No. No, I don't – what –

And what would he talk about? Do you know what he –

I think the virtues of democracy I suppose [laughs] and what the Naz – and the real crimes that the Germans had – the Nazis had committed. Whether that happened during the war or only after, I don't remember. And Jo Bondy [ph] died about eight years ago, so we can't ask her either.

So really important educational work.

Oh, yes, very. Well, it was all part of rebuilding the better Germany and starting when you got the chance even before you were in Germany.

And as a child did you pick up a sort of – did you feel at all conflicted in any way about your identity or –

No. Our parents must have been very strong people that their yardsticks were what we lived by and there wasn't anybody else, so no uncles, aunts, any – nobody around to compete with them and well, implied, enforced difference, differentness all our lives that was born then and that's the way it is. But that was part of it and so we were perfectly prepared to do – be part of that return when –

You were a strong family unit, the four of you, or –

Oh, very much so. Again, there was absolutely no competition [laughs].

What about you and your sister? [01:08:01] Because you were six years apart, so –

Yes, yes, nearly six years, yeah. Well, of course it wasn't – it wasn't the ideal gap but that's the way it happened and in some ways we didn't get on at all, in other ways I profited a great deal because she brought home – she was extremely articulate – she brought home anything that she'd encountered and I picked it up, very much including matters musical. And the Hanover Choir in which I then grew up, she was in first, and so that was so much shaping me, so in many ways she was crucial to my life. But certainly in – my mother made a basic mistake when I was born. We were both born at home. You weren't born in hospital in those days. And my mother let my sister hold me. So, there she was, five and three-quarters, with a totally helpless little thing, and it took her really till I started working with her on the translation for the International Choral Bulletin to forget that one, that she was not infinitely superior. She once said with a real tone of surprise in her voice, you are the best translator in my team [laughs] and so by which time I must have been in my early sixties or [laughs] something like that and she in her late sixties. No, our relationship now is better than it's ever been. She went into politics when she – she became a music teacher but then founded things, was a great person in music administrating, musical organisation Deutscher Musikrat, Deutscher Rundfunk, you name it, she was part of that sort of thing. And the conductor of that choir found it very difficult to distinguish between – we had – we were quite a lot of siblings in the choir – and expected the second one to be similar and that didn't work with me. [01:10:12] Actually that is why I left Hanover as soon as I got my music teacher diploma. He wanted me to go into all this – these music organisations, shaping the shape of music, and I wanted to do grassroots work. And I had a job in Hanover under his directorship and I resigned it and – because I felt that was not me, I had – I wanted to do ordinary grass works [ph] teaching with children and do better than my teachers.

*And did your sister, because she was older at the time, did she want to go back to Germany?
Because she was a teenager –*

It was never in our questions.

It was not?

No, never in question.

So, she [inaudible].

Yeah. And I'm not weeping, I've got something wrong with my nose. [Laughs] I have to keep wiping my nose.

I think what we should do, let's just come to the end of the war then we'll have a little break and pick it up from there.

Yeah. Sorry, I know I'd expect tea and biscuits. I never expected to prepare lunch. What is –

No, no, no, no, we don't need that. Let's come – that's why I looked at my watch. It's all fine. Anything else you'd like to add just before returning to Germany, just to cover the English – your first English period in that time?

We lived in digs in – well, I suppose in Bedford but I don't remember the legal side but I do know we lived in digs in somebody's house in Church Mount in Golders Green or Hampstead or whatever it comes under. They had a cat. [Laughs] Well, and cat is still important, a ginger –

So, it was your first encounter with a cat?

Yes. And my father was very, very buttoned-up but he liked the cat and all cats liked – and though he was so tall, so that could frighten a cat, but they all loved Ginger. [01:12:03] And our landlady and her husband, Herr and Frau Weiss, they had lots of visitors and I think they – they were Czech and I think they had visitors from that. And of – and it was not – well, not noisy but active and of course cats like it calm and so Ginger, the cat, would often spend her

evenings with us and my parents would have to topple a chair, [laughs] the chair on which Ginger sat, when they wanted to go to bed. So, Ginger the cat was a big, big factor.

What do you mean, your father was buttoned-up? He – so formal or –

Yes, and hardly – when he was in mount – on mountain holidays he would not wear a sort of jacket and suit and he looked utterly ill at ease, otherwise – oh, and [laughs] I remember once on a mountain holiday in a mountain hat, well, he wasn't very – he loved the mountains but he wasn't very good at it. And getting down is often harder than getting up and most of the accidents happen going down to – and the guides – you see, my parents sometimes needed to be on the safe side – they suggested he sit on a jacket and just slide down and he said, “*wenn mich meine Beamten jetzt sähen*”, if my civil servants could see [laughs] me now. And so, he was terribly conservative there in what he felt the face he should present.

So, he would normally wear a suit or –

Oh, and hat, yes.

A what?

And a hat.

And hat.

I've seen my mother brush the hat before he went, [laughs] before he left the house in the morning. No, he was definitely not a casual sort of person.

In England as well?

Oh, yes, though I think in England – we're talking '40s – I think hats were still –

Yeah, probably, yeah. [01:14:01] Hmm, interesting. So, the cat – so there was a cat. And did they rent a room or what was it, [overtalking].

I think we had a couple of rooms. One was on the ground floor and, you know, there were two shelters, Anderson or Morrison, I never remember which is which. One was very heavy and indoors, it was as big as a double bed and about that high, it stood on metal pillars and had chicken wire all around. And my sister and I slept in that anyway and if there was an air raid, my parents crept in with us. And so that was downstairs. And we had an upstairs room as well. I don't remember much detail about that.

So, you – from there you went to Henrietta Barnett? You lived –

Yes. Yes, we walked and I – do you want a demonstration? I still know what to do if there's a V-weapon warning. We learnt that at school.

One moment.

[Demonstrates] That's what you do if there's an air raid warning on the way to school.

Okay, we didn't get that on camera because we can't but – so you just made yourself – you managed to go straight to the floor and make a little –

Yes, and hide your head and hide your – keep as much a hard shell outside as you can. But again, that was normal. I remember seeing the V-weapons and I've forgotten which was which but we knew at the time. One was, by the time you heard it, you knew the danger was over. By the others, by the time you heard it, you wondered where on earth it was going to come down. I think there was some – something installed on Hampstead Heath that was trying to shoot them down and I gather that the Germans tried to hit that something in Hampstead Heath and from what I know, never quite managed. [01:16:04] Yes, we'd go blackberrying in Hampstead Heath. Blackberrying is still part [laughs] of my life. And Ginger the cat came with us and would eat the blackberries from the bottom twigs. I never

again knew a cat that liked blackberries. I'm trying to wrack my brain for anything or from – well, school was just positive [sighs] and something you did.

Anything about the – did you ever go, you know, the – all the refugee, there were sort of coffee shop and restaurants on the Finchley Road.

No, I don't think they exist. And we might have bought bread on – we did – there was a public library in Golders Green, quite near the bus stop, if I remember rightly, and we used that heavily for English books and so we would come to the shops there. But everything was on rations and points. And also, clothes, my parents refused to do all the school uniform details, saying, we need to stock up for when we go – textiles when we go back to Germany and they got away with it, the school respected it sufficiently. And so, we – everything – clothes were on points –

So, you didn't have school uniform? Do you –

Oh, we did have some but to say, it was a – we didn't have all the regulation blouses. I've forgotten whether we had ties or whatever. But certainly, some modification was made because my parents said we need to stock on clothes and because we know there won't be much of that in Germany.

And they accepted, the school accepted that?

Yes. Yes, they were certainly very supportive. Certainly, I don't know anybody from our school who went back because I mean that was a minority, the ones who did go back.

[01:18:00]

And then, Irene, how about the end of the war?

Oh, sorry, there was another cat. Near- East Finchley station was also working. That cat was white and it had a green and a blue eye. I never forgot that.

Okay, so your love for cats started then, yeah.

It started then. And if I go to East Finchley station, [laughs] I still look around.

Yeah, it seems to me this is an emerging topic. Just recently there was a conference on animals in the Holocaust in all kinds of shape and definitely in some of our interviews, animals featured. You are not the only one where, you know, dogs or cats are quite important for refugee children, you know, as –

Yes, as family substitutes.

As something, you know, as some emotional support.

Yeah. Yeah, they certainly are.

You know, in that way. Yes, so what I asked you is about the end of the war, whether that affected you, or do you remember when and where –

Well, the day I remember. At school we – they – oh, I nearly said we. They sang ‘Now Thank We All Our God’, which was the first time I heard that one. And there was suet pudding for dinner. And in those days, I wasn’t vegan, I thought that was great. But suet pudding was a rare treat at school lunch, so that was marked and I suppose what our parents did, whether that was – well, of course for them it must have been now’s the countdown for going back, whether it was deliberately discussed or just came naturally.

But it took more than a year for I guess for your parents to organise.

Well, I mean Germany was in – there was no school for a year. In this – when I came to secondary school in Hanover, we had an age range between December 1936 and May 1939 in my class. [01:20:06] And that was not because people were stupid. That was – there had literally not been any school. I mean how much do you know about the treks from East Prussia – well, of course you would know, with your mother’s background – from East Prussia. I

mean that started in January of '45 and that ended in absolute chaos and well, as I mentioned earlier on, Henrietta Barnett School thought it was premature going to Germany even in October '46.

So, tell us, just tell us –

Serious rationing –

So, what is that letter? So, your parents must have informed the school that you were going back to Germany.

Yes.

They wrote a letter or what did they do?

Well, I don't know whether we got – it's in Ellen's dissertation but that my parents wrote a letter back and say [laughs] you've got to leave that decision to us, or words to that effect.

They warned you? They said –

Yes, yes, meaning well of course. That –

Saying it's going to be detrimental to the children or –

Well, or that while living conditions were still very, very limited. I mean food was seriously rationed and people around us all had agricultural friends. We didn't. We got the odd care packet, or care parcel, but I think that went via union people in the USA. And also, Lemgo wasn't only the headquarters for the Ministry of Labour for the British Zone, it was also a CCG headquarters. Does CCG mean anything to you? Control Commission for Germany. I'd say there were quite a lot of British families and we were invited there occasionally because they were quite glad to get some English-speaking children to speak to their children, so we

were invited there occasionally. And there we got food treats we would never have seen [laughs] on our own rations. [01:22:00]

But Irene, so your parents- I assume- didn't get British citizenship [overtalking].

No.

No. So, they –

No, and the Germans took ours away, so we were stateless. I was born stateless.

So, when you returned to Germany you came as stateless citizens?

Yes, I think I actually got that wrong. Till a few weeks ago I would have said we regained it because my father became a civil servant, and a civil servant, a German civil servant is automatically German and that came up in a conversation this Easter and my sister corrected me. But certainly, we got it back at that time and well, my parents got it back and my sister and I acquired it, not having had it before. And I remember being – both my father and me being very cross – I was already teaching but still in one of my German jobs – my first German passport expired and for the new one they had – and I had to supply proof – though I already had a passport for ten years – proof of German citizenship. And the only way was my father marching along to the office with me and he resented that because he was busy and I resented that because I was an adult. I don't – it remained an issue for a while. I don't think I've got any document of German citizenship beyond old passports.

I get it. I mean it's interesting, you know, obviously because of the refugees, a small percentage went back, a few went back. But it's quite a decision to go back into that sort of situation where just physically it was difficult.

Yeah.

So, for your parents, you know, I mean I guess they could have just stayed in England if they wanted.

Oh, I'm sure they could have, yes but it – I don't think it crossed their minds. [01:24:00]
They were so steeped in German culture and German progressive politics from their young years at university and from the years of fighting Hitler. My mother went electioneering for the Labour party, so even when she didn't have a job but she was just as actively involved.

Here?

So sooner or later she probably would have been arrested too.

In Germany?

Yes. Yeah.

Yeah. So did they get involved in English politics at all when they were here, in the Labour party or –

Well, my – as observers, as I mentioned earlier, the Beveridge plan, the whole Beveridge concept of the – well, led by the health service of course but also social security and pensions, my father witnessed the discussions for that and witnessed them very consciously. But only as a witness. There might – now, I can't think of the names.

Because you – the other connection we have in our archive is Clement Atlee who took in a refugee boy. He was the then-Labour leader.

Oh, Atlee, he's a name – I didn't know. Good for him. No, but the other – my father was in – became a member of the Fabian Society and those are names I remember from childhood days as well. So, I suppose there probably were lots of other refugees affiliated to the Fabians. And he took the New Statesman right till his death and I took it over and I think I – I took the New Statesman when I was here for many, many years until I just couldn't keep up

with it and I just didn't have [laughs] the time to read it all. So, as an acute observer, they were very much involved.

Yeah. And I wonder, you mentioned this “innere Exil” before, you know, whether after the war, like your father would have then tried to get in touch with people who stayed in Germany, you know, to –

Well, there was one university friend, Rudolf Küstermeier, who was liberated from Bergen-Belsen, and they managed to re-establish contact. [01:26:12] He then became – I think it was ‘Die Welt’s’ correspondent in Jerusalem eventually. So – and [sighs] then there was Werner Milch, he was another one of our substitute aunts and unc – he in – they were university friends of both my parents. My mother knew them from Breslau and then they both fetched – knew him from Breslau. They both also fetched up at Cologne University but they emigrated. They lived in north London. [Laughs] I – and they survived by making beautiful wooden toys. I've got a couple upstairs I can show you [laughs].

Milch, Werner Milch?

Werner Milch, yes. And Werner – they went back and he became a professor of German literature in Marburg. Died quite young. He died in the early '50s. So, I think – I can't think of pre – of friends of my parents' pre-emigration, though Onkel Richard and Tante Hilda, they were neighbours in Eichwalde and correspondence picked up again after the war but of course, that then became East Germany and we never met them but they were figures – but they were unionists. Maybe it was a little union – trade union settlement in Eichwalde.

And were they at all tempted to go to East Germany, your parents?

Well, that is what Wikipedia claims and that's not true. No, because my parents – my father had no illusion that that was a dictatorship, only the other way around. And anyway, it wouldn't have occurred to him. He – they did know. He was not a communist, he was a socialist. [01:28:01] And no, those are the two things that I want to correct, that my father was interned, which he wasn't, and that he went back to East Germany. By then of course,

the German trade unions plus the British occupying forces were perfectly happy to have him in West Germany.

Yeah, because I guess some refugees went to East Germany, you know, to rebuild.

Yes. Yeah. Well, again to rebuild from the inside. It wasn't obvious right from the beginning what was going to happen in East – it was just the Russian Zone but it became – well, after the Federal Republic was founded in '49, then of course the other side got more decisive as well and it was obvious. My sister went on a – when she was at teacher training college with the college choir to East Germany. That must have – well, it was before the wall, before the wall came up, and I was already teaching when the wall went up. So, you still could but I remember my parents were very worried about it, well then, they might keep her to blackmail my father or things like that.

And Irene, tell me, because – before we go on a break, just about your uncle called Philipp who survived Auschwitz.

And was liberated from Buchenwald.

*Liberated, Buchenwald. So, did – were – was he in touch with your father after the war?
[Overtalking].*

Well, that's one of the things my sister and I would love to do. As I mentioned, my father was terribly reluctant to talk about any family-wise and we instinctively respected that and didn't push him. And I don't think he would have become choleric, we just didn't do it and so we know virtually nothing about Jewish family life, for example, e.g. whether you would be willing to come out during the Passover week, I have no idea. [01:30:00] We both regret that gap. And the other thing we both regret, we have no idea how the brothers managed to re-establish contact. They did. And again Ellen, I think she quotes that in her PhD, found – Onkel Philipp must have invited us when we were still in England initially to stay with him. And Onkel Philipp was a loyal Orthodox Jew and was instrumental in re-establishing Jewish communities in Düsseldorf where he first was and then in – very much in Munich. And in my

mother's – in my parents' papers is a letter where he said that thanks but no thanks, he doesn't want the girls influenced by religious humbug, or words to that effect. It – so he spelt that out in so many words. But how they managed to get hold of each other, we never worked – but they did.

They were in touch?

And – yes, they certainly were in touch and then when Onkel Philipp was in Munich, head of that office for restitution, there were several hostels in the Bavarian Alps where people of particularly poor health could be sent for a few weeks to be fed up and just get better air and no worries. And there was – one of those was near Tegernsee and how – well, I went – my father was such a stickler. Onkel Philipp must one way or the other have convinced our father that that was okay, or maybe my father even paid, I don't know. But anyway, we spent two Alpine holidays in Tegernsee which again shaped my sister and me, our first encounter with the Alps. [01:32:04] My father's first encounter had been similar. When he was a little, skinny post-World War One boy, he'd been sent to Switzerland for four months or so, near Lauterbach [ph] and that impressed him no end. And so – and we had Tegernsee and did Alpine holidays ever since, whenever we could [laughs].

And you think this was with an organise –

Oh, I know it was. It went via Onkel Philipp. How, whether it was legal or not, because so many of the things Onkel Philipp did were not legal, but I don't think we realised at the time. But –

We're going to talk about it after our break.

Yeah.

Probably for DPs, this – because it's Bavaria, there were so many –

Yes, all sorts, yes. Yeah.

Displaced persons that they had these- sort of I guess recuperation-

Elmau, Elmau- there was a G7 conference, a few years ago there was another one of those.

Elmau? Yeah.

And one of those two holidays, Onkel Philipp had a great, big car and loved driving it, even managed – need to go to – to all the – several of those holidays and these holiday places inspect us and so he drove us through the Bavarian Alps and I still remember that. And he once visited us in Hanover or in Lem – oh, he definitely visited us in Lemgo – that was before the D-Mark, when food was still very scarce – bringing us *mazzah* and it was the first *matzah* we ever came across, and not that we realised the religious significance but it was something nice and edible, we'd never come across it. You should ask my sister and she'll – being that bit older, she'll remember more.

What, he brought you mazzahs to – as a present or –

Well, and sorts of foodstuff and when we first got there of course, we had virtually no household, we – I can show you a saucepan that we used in Hampstead Garden Suburb, which I still use for potatoes. [01:34:08] But we were short of plates and things like that and we got some things on the trade union network and other things, Onkel Philipp managed to lay hands on. Yes, that's something I should really mention, our first German town, we went on a night boat on some military train via Harwich-Hook of Holland and so it was a night boat and the very contact was October and it was dark when we boarded the boat. And I remember even as a seven-year-old realising that that was an important moment in life, walking up that plank, gangplank, to that boat. And then, well, daylight as the train went through Holland and we went to Osnabrück and in Osnabrück we were picked up by a chap called Dürk, Herr Dürk, who was a German trade unionist. Where he got the car, I don't know of. But Osnabrück, at least what you saw from the train, was just flat, just with the odd staircase that had been reinforced sticking up here and there. Lemgo though of course, was fine again because that wasn't destroyed. But Osnabrück, none of the four of us ever forgot

that, our first German town. And of course, what that must have been like for our parents as the first German town, when we'd – we'd been under German air raids in London but again that's the way it was and my sister and I just accepted it.

What did you feel when you saw that? Do you remember that –

Well, it was just plain awful, but well- it was a big task ahead, I suppose everybody realised. [01:36:02] But seeing Osnabrück, certainly none of us ever could forget. And then when we in '49 moved to Hanover, big swathes of Hanover still looked like that again, with just the odd – like a bad tooth sticking out of otherwise flat areas. And spring in Hanover meant rubble up to first-floor level where fourth-floor flats had collapsed, and with coltsfoot flowering on it. We moved to Hanover in April and coltsfoot was flowering. I still can't see coltsfoot without thinking of Hanover. It took a long while for all that to go away.

Okay, Irene. I think this is a good time to take a break and we'll start from Germany again, in '46. Is that good?

Well, how will we –

We'll have a short break.

How are you envisaging your break, lunch-wise?

[Break in recording]

Yes, Irene, so now we're going to move to discuss Germany. But just because this came up over lunch, tell us a little bit about your father and the pseudonym he used. What was it and tell us what –

Well, I don't remember anything about – beyond the fact that he had it. Well, it – Ellen might have mentioned something but certainly as far as I was concerned, we had a perfectly normal

childhood in north London. Father went out to work in the morning, came back in the evening, did more work. I said he was a workaholic.

And what was it?

Well, this – work for the ITF?

But what was his name, his pseudonym?

Oh, Walter Dirksen.

So, he wrote as Walter Dirksen? Or what did he do with this name?

I don't think so. I don't know. I don't even remember where I picked up the fact that he had that *Deckname* [code name] for – in what function it was needed. But I do remember the topic being discussed and either my father or my mother explaining that if the pseudonym surname was a name that was – it could have been a given name, that added to any persecutor's confusion and so it helped a bit to keep anonymity. **[01:38:18]**

Because here on the Wikipedia entry, in German Wikipedia entry, it said that in spring 1940 he was put on a special list of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, a list of people who would have

–

Who would be caught if the Germans invaded, yeah.

For – if the German invaded, they would be arrested immediately. So, was he aware of this?

Oh, yes. Well, it would have been a case of third time not lucky, getting away with – from being a – getting away from the Nazis twice. Fortunately, it didn't happen.

And here it also says, Irene, that – what you mentioned, that he talked to German POWs. Here it says that he did it in 1945, 1946, that he talked about social and political issues and trade union questions in those POW –

Well, all topics that would have been new to those POWs.

Yeah, yeah. So, there is quite a long – so whoever watches this can go to Wikipedia and read this, in the German Wikipedia.

Well, but just not believe the bit about internment.

Yeah, yeah.

Certainly, if you know how to edit Wikipedia or you know someone who does, please simply take it out.

Okay, I will try.

We lived a perfectly normal life. Well, particularly – well, as far as normal can be when you've got V-1s and V-2s whizzing around [laughs].

Yes. But it did say here also that he supported various resistance activities. [01:40:03]

Well, again Ellen's PhD says more about it but those were things which I was far too young and also my parents would have deliberately kept from us, e.g. when they talked politics they never said Hitler, they said Herr Müller. So, if we talked at school, if we had blabbed at school and said, ah, Dad thinks Herr Müller is a *Mistvieh* [insult] [laughs] that would have been perfectly harmless.

Really?

Yes.

[Laughs] So Hitler was Herr Müller.

Yes.

That is funny.

Or was it Herr Meyer, but something like that, so that if we said something at school, it couldn't come back to bite us.

Because it also says here that he founded a radio station called Sender der Europäischen Revolution, a station of [overtalking].

Well, that's literally the first I hear of it. There are a few activities which Ellen found out about but which again- I was six when the war ended.

Of course, of course. Anyway, there's a lot of information here.

But anyway, I think they deliberately would – the less we knew, the less harm we could inadvertently do as children. I suppose to my sister they could have got across you mustn't talk to this with other people. But still, if you don't know it, it's even safer.

I get it. Okay, so let's go back to where we stopped, to 1946 where you saw this Osnabrück in ruins. And what happened then, after your arrival in Osnabrück?

Well, this Herr Dürk came and picked us up, so I mean October 1946 there weren't all that many cars, so whether that was a trade union car or whatever, I don't know. And I think we – did we spend the first night in Bielefeld, where he came from, I don't remember. **[01:42:02]** But anyway, we certainly very soon ended up in Lemgo and spent a few night – a few weeks in a hotel till they found us a couple of rooms. And [sighs] yes, I remember very clearly finding it impertinent that everybody spoke our family language. Because of course I was so used to German as a family language and now everybody around us spoke that and well,

impert – well, remember, I was seven. But I found it at least, putting it mildly, strange or a wee bit off-putting. And [sighs] well, and life wasn't terribly welcoming and – there were – we probably got the first of “you don't know what we've been through” and so being a refugee twice of course wasn't a walk in the park and particularly people – Lemgo had been untouched by the war, except of course, men being called up for army, so people had human losses but the little town itself was unscathed. So, we – in a way we lived of a different star and to this day my sister and I talk about Lemgo words, words that in the German language which we didn't know before. A lot of them had military connotations. Do you know what a *Henkelmann* is? You grew up after conscription, I think. A *Henkelmann* is a receptacle about that high, oval and with a curve a bit like a kidney, maybe to fit against the bottom, in which a soldier was supposed to keep a warm meal. And *Henkelmann*, because it had a – it had that and – oh, *anstellen*- sports lessons, *aufstellen* – I haven't a clue what *anstellen* was.

[01:44:05] Do you? Did they not do that to you in Köln? Well, of course ninety-six– the Nazis had been defeated only eighteen months before and that would have shown in PE lessons. *Aufstellen* means line up in size order, with little me at the bottom all my life [laughs]. And as – well, the fact that we didn't know it, and also- the others thought we should have known and not knowing, kept being interpreted as being against, which of course it – it was by no means a welcoming atmosphere. But [sighs] I don't think we expect – we accept- what we expected because we had that rock solid support of our parents that's what we're doing, and got home to books and got home to singing, got home to decent music on the radio and that was more important than what happened elsewhere.

So, was it a slightly hostile situation?

Slightly, yes.

Or you – as a child, you felt –

Well – yes, oh, you sensed that.

The environment, there was not a welcoming environment.

Yes. And linguistically, my parents had to decide whether to take me – German school started at Easter in those days and of course, and I – growing up with the school year started in – starting in autumn. And so, my parents had to decide whether to – whether I should skip half a year or lose half a year. And – they've gone for lose, and I think they were right. I was one of the youngest in the class as is, after what I was telling you earlier. And so, the – particularly in puberty the age, a huge gap would have been gaping even more. But they'd want us – *aufstellen* wasn't the only thing. It's – in that primary school we were supposed – “*zehn Worte mit M*” [ten words beginning with the letter M], so I wrote [sighs] well, they had – they all had an M in somewhere. [01:46:10] But I didn't know that, “*mit M*”, they meant beginning with M. I didn't know and so all my words were wrong [groans]. And so, opportunities were taken to dampen me, putting it politely. It wasn't too bad because at the beginning of the next school year my mother started teaching at that school and so that probably helped a bit. But lots of little things like that.

And was the name – did the name – I mean not the name – Jewish come up at all or did you actually have any – as a child, was there any awareness of that your father was Jewish or was that never talked about?

Not that I remember. I think the political side – and of course we had been – I nearly again said drilled – that we were political refugees, that father happened to be Jewish was nearly coincidental and we weren't practising in the least, we hadn't got any Jewish – well, if we had any Jewish friends, they were the same sort and they just happened to – also happened to be Jewish, like this professor Werner Milch. Hello.

And did you know that your father was Jewish? Was that mentioned or even –

I think – yes, I think we knew that but I think the full horrors of the Holocaust – [talking to the cat: *Du darfst mir auf den Schoß, komm.* [you can sit on my lap]]. Sorry, if you want to edit that out later.

No, no, it will stay all in.

He might even come on yours.

Yes, if he wants to come in, we're happy to have a cat on the picture.

Will that be a first?

We had a dog before.

Yeah [both laugh]. Sorry, you distracted me.

I said about the Jewishness [overtalking].

Yes, when there were so few Jews left. I once counted in the nineteen years I lived in Germany, I think I met six, and one of them was my father and the other – the next one was Onkel Philipp and – well, then Marion's parents and one or two in Marienau where I taught, my second school, the boarding school that belongs to the- now what's that Scottish school where Prince Charles –

Gordonstoun? [01:48:30]

Yeah, well, to that group, to the *Landerziehungsheime* [Country Boarding 'School]. There were a couple of – actually not – was it one was a return refugee and one brother had settled in Heidelberg and the half- brother, Mr Jolley [ph], he was only visiting or something like that. But in everyday life there just – so I digress. When I did teaching practice, that would have been [talking to the cat] – [talking to cat] do you know, I don't allow anybody in the house who won't like you. I had – I did teaching practice for music. That would have been 1960, I guess. And do you know what *Probeunterricht* [trial lesson] was?

Hmm-hmm.

I – in my group was [inaudible] *Probeunterricht*. They'd forgotten to warn me. So suddenly, I had only half the group and the less academically able ones. The other ones had all gone to

Probeunterricht. And I've forgotten how the – what the – well, so I had to improvise what I did with them and I've forgotten the context, how it got there, but somehow the topic of Jews came up and I was amazed. But of course, by then I was a student, I was aware of things- and I let them talk and asked them what they thought what a Jew looked like and I got the – you name it, the hook-nose, the flat feet, the smell, you name it. [01:50:04] And those kids, so six – they would have – born about 1950, they must have got it from their mums and the BDM [Bund Deutscher Mädel – League of German Girls] or something like that. And so, I let them talk, partly because I was amazed, partly because I was curious what would come. And at the end, I said, well – oh, yes, and have you ever met one? No. Well, I said, yes, you have. I'm – my father is Jewish. And I've forgotten how that ended. Well, and a week later I had the group again. This time they were all there and they start – the ones who hadn't been there – the others said your father is Jewish. That can't be true, can it? So, it had occupied them enough that they talked about it. But again, they were utterly untrammelled by anything except the standard prejudices because they'd never met any. There were hardly any left.

But you said –

Sorry, in my life, it didn't play a part either.

But you said also you were not aware of the Holocaust then [overtalking].

Well, my parents gradually introduced us, of course, and then the huge court cases came and I was an avid reader of newspapers in – as – well, from – do you know, post-war German newspapers, they consisted of two page and a third that was in that paper for proper three pages. There was a third sort of folded in and in those – particularly before the *Währungsreform* [currency reform], heating was so short in schools that – and we didn't have a regular timetable, we'd be told the day before when to come in and when we'd be out again. And so, I was often the first one home and the newspaper had been delivered and I would devour the newspaper and so things gradually grew. But e.g. that Onkel Philipp had been in Auschwitz, I think we hadn't known. [01:52:00] We'd known about the Buchen – well, my parents, i.e. my father, we knew about the Buchenwald but not about the Auschwitz and I was rather –

Philipp was somebody you met at that point?

Yes, he came and visited and when we had those two holidays in Tegernsee in the Bavarian Alps, I think both times he came and visited there. And –

And by then was he married with children? What was his situation?

Well, he was in the – in his second marriage by then. So, we met the daughter who's now in Mülheim and just become a grandmother in her olden age. We met her when she was a baby and then not of course, for absolute ages because you didn't travel that easily then, not as – the chap who wrote that book, the blames, you couldn't in the early days, you couldn't get from one zone into the other that easily. So actually, Bavaria was American Zone. How my parents or Onkel Philipp wangled those Alpine holidays, I'm far from sure. We probably had some extra permit for that.

And Irene, were you aware in a way there is your uncle and your father and of course they made very different choices, so your uncle was Jewish –

Yeah.

Also, after the war –

Oh, that we knew, yes, we respected both.

Yeah. So, did you have any exposure to that on his side?

No, and as brothers they tried to get on as close as they possibly could. I think my father met with his brother several more times. I think my father had a lot of *Dienstreisen* [business trips] and [sighs] I forget the detail, I was still so young, but certainly that was quite an amicable brotherhood again. And I assume my father was just as shocked when the court case blew up, as I don't think he had any inkling. He might have realised that – I mean my father

was a stickler for rules and if in any doubt, I mean there were – there were lawyers, and in the ministry, he would take advice. [01:54:06] Well, as I said, buttoned-up, with the suits and all that sort of thing. So, they were so different but – so my father might have seen things go on and thought, I wouldn't do that or wouldn't have done that. But I don't think he had any inside knowledge of how seriously things were going wrong there.

We'll talk about the trial in a second. What about all the other siblings? What happened? Do you know what happened to them? Did they survive?

[Sighs] Well, Mathilde, who was my father's favourite sister, perished in Auschwitz with her three youngest. She managed to send the first five out. They're in America if they're still alive. And Onkel Philipp said he saw them on their way to the gas chambers. Whether that was Onkel Philipp's fairly vivid imagination or somebody like him or whatever, but anyway, they were in Auschwitz at the same time and she perished with her younger ones. And the – I think another one perished in Latvia or something like that. And the others got out either to Israel or to the United States, one way or the other. And the – Helen, the daughter from Onkel Philipp's first marriage, she was in touch with cousins, particularly there was somebody called Ben who wrote the most dreadful memoirs which we got via her. And he became an architect specialising in buildings connected with Jews and – but was spouting the most horrifying nationalistic and prejudice generally nonsense, so my sister and I gently withdrew from contact, which had only been established through Helen anyway [sighs]. [01:56:00] And when my father died, days after – and he died quite unexpectedly – days after, my mother had a letter from one of the siblings in Israel asking whether my father had converted on his deathbed. It made my mother hit the roof, which in a way was a good thing, so she had something to rail against because it was a huge shock and – but on what grapevine that had reached, I don't know. And I've done a stint in a *kibbutz*. That was something I felt I had to get out of my system. I was already in England when I did that. And that again was probably one of the worst things I did to my parents, I ended up promising to write every single day. A) they were worried about bombs and B) Hamas and all that. And B) they were worried that I might bump into relations and emotional as [laughs] they thought I was, I might be won over to stay or something like that. Neither happened. But I'm glad I did that. And in many ways, the *kibbutz*, the simple life appealed to me greatly only even then that –

that was 1967, it was just after the Six-Day War. That was a sheer coincidence. I'd fixed it up in the winter. There'd been an advert in the New Statesman organising parties and so I fixed it up then and it had the big advantage. So, I went in the school holidays, I was teaching, and the Six-Day War had been late May, early June or something like that, and all the able-bodied young people had been away and so when we worked on the plantations that summer, it wasn't just occupational [laughs] therapy, they really needed the help and –

Which kibbutz? Where did you go?

In HaMifratz, that was working – walking distance from Akko, or Acre or whatever way you pronounce it, and a bus ride from Haifa. [01:58:00] And it was a very secular *kibbutz*, and on the Sabbath, they took us on the lorries that they normally used to take us to plantations and drew us – of course, they were madly enthusiastic themselves now – to see the areas that had from their point of view been liberated unexpectedly. But even then, it jarred on me how they considered the Arabs subhuman and even then, I thought, if anybody should know that nobody's subhuman, or got to do something to be subhuman, it should be Jews. No, it was – I had a huge advantage, it was a group – I've forgotten who organised it but everybody else were about five or six years younger. All the others were practising Jews from north London and afraid of breaking their dainty fingernails [laughs] and they could speak to the young people because they spoke English. But I could speak to both generations because the old ones [sighs] a lot of them came from Poland, of the founders, and so they would speak Yiddish to me and I could get the gist of it and I spoke German to them [laughs]. They probably shuddered but they could understand what I said. And so, I could talk to both sides. But again, they had such a low opinion of the Arabs. They'd look at the hillside and look, you can see whose fields are Arabs', they're yellow, our fields are green. But then of course, they had the subsidies from America to do irrigation and things like that, so, that bit jarred on me even then. Otherwise, I – except that I loved the simple life and the cultural evenings. They had this huge music library. I gather Israel Radio, the classical – would borrow recordings from the – I'm talking about the day of CDs – recordings from the *kibbutz* because they had such a lovely library. [02:00:03] But anyway, as far as siblings go, well, and as I said earlier on, the link with Cousin Helen, that only happened thanks to Ellen's PhD in 2005. I was

retired by then, that long ago. And her marriage lasted because she found another refugee who shared the background.

Whose?

Cousin Helen. And I think they managed sixty years or something like that. Have you heard of an American TV comedy programme, Everybody Loves Raymond?

Yeah.

That's Cousin Helen's elder son. [Laughs] You can see why I say I'm the family dunce.

So, you said they contacted your mother saying had your father converted.

Yes.

Why did they think he had converted?

No idea, particularly there – with the exception of Onkel Philipp, none – oh, no, that's not quite true. There were- an aunt, Tante Berthe, she fetched – she survived in Paris I think and ended up coming back after the war. She lived – she moved into an old people's home in Hamburg aged forty-something, or something like that, so initiative can't have been her middle name. I never met her. I recognise the handwriting if the odd letter came but my parents didn't want any contact. I think my father occa – if he had to – dealings in Hamburg anyway, you know, Hamburg's just the other end of Niedersachsen and of course my father had to travel around Niedersachsen. I think he occasionally moved in and I think occasionally he did some financial support for her as well, but in limits, same as in the limits then, which of course in 1952 when Onkel Philipp committed suicide, the limits were much tighter because still, my – he had both children still on his hands. [02:02:06] We did support – my parents did support Tante Margit, the second wife, as much as they could but that was very, very little because my father's income was very, very limited for the – because of the lack of seniority.

So, your father became a civil servant in 1948. Is that correct?

Well, I guess that even '46 would have counted as such because it was a German administration, albeit under British supervision.

Okay. Because here it says on Wikipedia, I'm just quoting, in autumn '48 Alfred Kübel asked him—

Yes, that's right, yes.

To become the secretary, Staatssekretär im Niedersachsen Arbeits- und Sozialministerium.

Yes. Yes, all that, that is absolutely correct.

So that was from '48.

Yeah. Yes, Kübel had twins, slightly younger than me. I've forgotten what concentration camp he'd – he survived but he survived in a concentration camp. He was [inaudible], lovely chap.

And then we've got again '69 to '71 he was Staatssekretär under Walter Arendt.

Yes. Yeah, with – by then – I was back in England by then. I think that was the first Brandt government. Up to then Germany, right from '49 when we had the first federal elect – sorry, I'm still saying we – well, [laughs] as we've both got dual nationality, blow it – in – it was always either CDU/CSU on its own or with the FDP and the Libs. And well, whenever it was – I was already in Stevenage when we got the first *Regierung* [government] Brandt. So that – I think that was a *Große Koalition* [great coalition] and then of course, will be the obvious [ph] thing, that Labour got the Ministry of Labour. [02:04:01] And as my father was the pope [laughs] of *Sozialpolitik*, he was the obvious person. He'd been involved in federal politics for the previous ten years if – no, twenty years because – you know how *Bundesrat*

[Upper House of the German parliament] works, as opposed to *Bundestag* [Lower House of the German parliament]?

Hmm-hmm.

And that all the *Länder* [federal states] sent reps and of course he was very often the rep for anything labour-relat – or health and care rel – anything social security related. So, my father was – you know the expression the “*wie ein bunter Hund*” [to be known all over town], in the Bundesrat for that sort of matter anyway, and so when he then ended up in – when then there was that *Große Koalition*- it – he got the dream of his life really, being able to shape legislation even more than he had managed to in the *Bundesrat* but he had shaped it then as well, to shape legislation at federal level. He passed pension age and they gave him a few extra – a couple of extra years so that he could serve a bit longer. And so, it was the same thing, the top civil servant.

How did he manage – I mean when he was there in '48 there were lots of former Nazis in the positions, so how did he manage that or cope with it? Or did he talk about that?

I don't know in – well, we'd – we had talked about it frequently, both school friends with whom I'm still in touch to this day, both of whom I saw a fortnight ago, both their parents had been high in the civil servant [sic] and you had to be a Nazi for that. Neither of them had blood on their hands and on the matter [coughs] – well, as I said, one of them was an agriculture specialist, the other one was a lawyer and they got on, on the basis we know what's happened, they – what they thought of him, you coward, you were a refugee, or something like that, we don't know. **[02:06:08]** But the father of one I bumped in quite often, the father of – the other, I hardly ever saw but the friendship was tolerated by both parents and as far as work goes – oh, after my father lost his job, at the numeric expense of my school friends, that went on for two and a bit years and then there was a *Große Koalition* in Hanover and the two of them [laughs] found themselves as colleagues. The other one stayed. My father was reinstated and again on the basis of you're an agricultural specialist and you are a labour relations specialist, they worked together. I mean my parents must have thought that through and discussed that in London, that if we go back, apart from the very top ones who

are either executed or incarcerated indefinitely, that they would have to live with that, and they did.

They accepted that.

Yeah.

So were they emotionally – well, happy may be the wrong word but they had a task and they were happy to be back in Germany, in a sense of –

Happy to do what they planned to do, yes. Yes. Social life was zilch. I went – the other *Staatssekretäre* had quite a social life mixing and my parents steered clear of all of that. It would also have involved a lot of expense that my parents would have considered a waste but couldn't have done anyway but even if they could have done, they would have considered it a waste, like fancy clothing that you'd hardly ever wear, like evening dresses and things like that. They just didn't. And –

So, they were quite frugal in that way.

Yes. Well, partly by choice, partly because they couldn't have done it anyway but probably because of motives that you just mentioned. [02:08:05] And I do remember I once asked my father why they never joined into anything like that and he said, in the middle of that I suddenly think of Auschwitz, or I would suddenly think of Auschwitz. And so, it must have been at the back – and that's one of the few conversations I remember and I would probably have been quite careful about ask – I probably wouldn't have asked, I guessed what the answer was. And so, in hospitality, it was abs – it was virtually zilch.

So, there were no guests, friends at home or anything?

No. And we weren't encouraged to bring people home either. I mean housing – well, as I kept saying, my father was a workaholic. He'd take work home and we might after supper go for a walk just for some fresh air and then he'd go back to papers he'd brought home with it,

weekend, ditto. And at weekends my sister and I would work out when we could practise without disturbing him and things like that, so Father's work came before absolutely everything else.

Supported by your mother?

Yes, she protected him - lioness as nothing. But it didn't mean much. She just knew his timetable. We saw the point, that's the way it was, Father's work was important, we had no doubt about that and so we just had to work around it.

So now let's talk about your uncle and the trial. It must have been a terrible shock to your father.

Yes.

So, tell us as we don't know anything about it. What happened?

Well, again the exact chronology is in the book. My father was on holiday on his own. Now, whether that was '51 or '52 –

Irene, if – take – please take your hand and we want to see your face. Yeah.

Oh, sorry. [Laughs] Sorry. In '51 or '52, I know if – well, summer holidays were always important, the one thing where my father was prepared to take time off work for walking in mountains and so there were those two times in Tegernsee that I mentioned, thanks to Onkel Philipp. [02:10:17] That was '47, '48, in the summers. And then '49 we'd just moved to Hanover and of course, we had no furniture whatsoever and so any money, any spare money had to be spent on that sort of thing, so we didn't go on holiday at all. And then we spent '50 and '51, we went to the Black Forest. I think I mentioned my father had been to Freiburg, which is on the Black Forest, for university and had very rosy memories and it is lovely. And did he go for another – I – it was either '51 or '52 that he'd been in Austria on his own. It was still quite difficult to get foreign currency. And we were long, long before the EU in those

days, so he would have needed Austrian Schillings and all that. Because he was so run down physically, so that would have been some medical certificate that got him that. And he was on his own and the – how the phone message, whether Tante Margit – that was Onkel Philipp's second wife – whether Tante Margit rang my mother – you know, you didn't do trunk calls easily as you do now, in those days. We'd only just acquired our own phone, I think when we had a – when we had – the first flat in Hanover was the first time we had a phone. Up to then, yes, we had [inaudible] 202 – 2002 when we lived in north London but that wasn't our number. And so, whether Tante Margit then rang my mother and my mother rang the hotel where my father was staying, but it was something like that. And yes, and I certainly – our mother then sat my sister down and said, I've got to tell you some – I've got something to tell you. [02:12:07] Because she knew with the newspapers, no way was there any way of protect us from that. And so –

So, what did she say?

Well, she probably said there's an enormous court case, he's accused of all sorts of rather horrible things and we don't know ourselves what's true and what's not true.

So, tell me what his function – what was he working at, your uncle, in the post-war time?

[Sighs] He was the boss of the – I think it was *Landesentschädigungsamt* [Bavarian Authority for reparations claims]. That was the office in Munich that dealt with all the DPs, flotsam and jetsam that had, well, like Eva Hoffman's family, drifted across, either having survived concentration camps or having been in hiding or like your grandparents tried somewhere else and come back again, and all needing some sort of help, just for the actual moment or in the medium term. And there were quite a lot of people – Onkel Philipp who was a trained – not even a university-trained pharmacist, he – in Germany, you know, they distinguish between *Drogerie* [drugstore] and *Apotheke* [pharmacy]. He was on the *Drogerie* side. Of course, there's an overlap. And as I mentioned earlier on, he learned some practical things when they had to be done. But he had no admin training whatsoever and so how he ended up – you've got to ask the American occupying forces how he did that. He'd been in Düsseldorf first, in the British Zone, and had been so wilful and unable to fit in with systems that he was sacked

there. [02:14:01] Again that's all in Herr Klares [ph] book. And I think it's also in Ellen's dissertation, that he was sacked there. How he then fetched up in München, I don't know.

So, he was in the office of reparation office –

He was the top of –

In Bavaria.

The top of the Bavarian – and of course they weren't only Bavarians, it was so much transit of DPs.

Yeah, there were other D – because they were in American Zone, there were so many DP camps.

Yes. Well, and no, Czechoslovakia was next door and so any from – anybody from there, many people from Poland, would all come through there, many not expecting to settle there either but being there. And so – and they all needed help and an awful lot of them would – he would actually meet in person and see the misery and see the need and then put need – he was accused of enriching himself and that was one of the many things he was then totally liberated from, that he hadn't enriched himself.

So, embezzlement, it was a –

Yeah, that he hadn't in the least but he was accused of that, because certainly a lot of money went missing that hadn't been used the way it was expected and he also probably trusted people working under him and that didn't deserve to be trusted and he had no way of experience of telling who could be trusted. And anyway, they were still very turbulent times. And so, my parents were in no position – well, as I said, my father might have raised his eyebrows at what he might have picked up on what went on in the *Landesentschädigungsamt* but it wasn't his position to do anything about it. [Laughs] And I couldn't imagine that Onkel Philipp would have snapped his head off if he had, because- as my father was so reserved and

buttoned-up, Onkel Philipp was a very spontaneous sort. [02:16:02] Even in size, my father was very thin at- thin and tall and Onkel Philipp was like – well, we often wondered, how could you be so overweight in such Spartan times but part of it was probably that he was ill already. But – so my – particularly, I think it must have fallen to my mother, as my father was on that health cure to Austria, it will have fallen to my mother to explain to us but more than we don't know and we just hope that he's innocent, he couldn't do.

So, he was arrested?

Yes.

Your uncle was arrested and put into prison?

Yes. And stayed there for ages. He made one suicide attempt already, so after the judgement was spoken, he should have been on suicide watch and he wasn't.

So, what was the judgement? He was declared – he was –

Oh, it says it all in the book. I don't know. I don't remember exactly. Oh, sorry, he was sentenced to two-plus years and he wrote a goodbye letter that he was innocent, that no way could he face that. But he was also much iller physically than anybody had realised. He certainly had the family heirloom of the diabetes but again. Both the books say.

I mean you sent me the article. I thought it was – what a tragic story for a Auschwitz survivor to be trialled in '51 –

Yes, and it was the biggest trial the young Federal Republic had had, and that against a practising Jew, and there were –

So do you think there was a anti-Semitic –

Oh, think? No question. And I think all the court members had a Nazi past and they sat in judgement about somebody who would have been – well, as I said, Auschwitz – who had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald. **[02:18:00]** [Sighs] But of course, again the judicial system had to use some – there weren't any – there were hardly any – innocent lawyers who were around.

And when – at what point then – so he killed himself. At what point was he exonerated or at what point did he –

I think that dragged on and some things after two years, some things after twenty-odd years or something like that. Anyway, [inaudible], you see, you get this all in that book.

So is he buried in Munich, in –

Yeah. Oh, there were huge demonstrations, Jewish, and he'd been very active in the Jewish community and demonstrations complaining about anti-Semitism.

So, this must be very well-documented in the German press.

Oh, absolutely. *Der Spiegel* made a meal of it. But then *Der Spiegel's* very good at making meals of things [laughs]. But it certainly made a meal out of that one.

And did your parents at that point think that it is a misjustice or did they think maybe there is something to it, or how did they...

I can't remember any reaction. You might ask my sister. Well, I mean I was thirteen or something like that by then but she was nineteen, so she would have taken in more. I mean he – they were brothers and he was the only brother who had not joined the family boycott, so they were fairly – as close as they could be, having been separated for decades. And, well, the PhD business, that was irrefutable- but otherwise, no, I think my father's judgement will have been [sighs], well-meaning but in the wrong job. But that shouldn't cost you your life. But it did. And for Tante Margit, of course it was an absolute catastrophe. **[02:20:00]**

Because financially she had no support once he died.

Yes. Yeah. I don't know how the first – the first wife never married again, so how she got by financially, I don't know, but they seemed to be quite a supportive clan. American Cousin Helen always said how repressive they were but repressive at least would also mean [laughs] financially supportive bec – she wanted to read law and wasn't allowed to.

Okay, Irene, let's talk now about your own life and your schooling. So, you went to Hanover to a secondary school.

Yes.

And you didn't like it. So, tell us what happened.

That is the understate – I won't talk very much because I still have nightmares to this day, it was that awful. And as I said earlier on, if I hadn't been academically-assailable and parents who were prepared to stick out their necks again and again and again – most of the other parents just thought, well, oh, well, but my parents didn't say, oh, well. And that was probably their part of building a better Germany, kicking up a fuss. “*Worüber freuen Sie sich!*” [Why are you looking so pleased] If you sat there, in a German literature lesson and some free association made you smile, that's what you get, a “*Worüber freuen Sie sich!*”. You had to account for your facial expressions. English lessons, that was in the upper school. I remember English lessons – well, of course, I was the bane of the English teacher's life because – no, we had English teachers who'd never been to England. That was quite normal in those post-war days. We also had an awful lot of them who were post-retirement age because so many of the teachers had either been killed or were still prisoners of war. I mean the last prisoners of war came back in '55, something like that. And so, we had an awful lot of very old ones and ones that had never been to England, when you didn't travel in those days, leave alone if there was a war on. [02:22:00] And so there was this kid who knew everything better in English [laughs] and so I can understand their reservations. Well, and there was one who had been a navy officer. He kept referring to herrings as the

Außenbordkameraden [outboard mates] and there are classmates of mine who till this day think he's better than sliced bread. And he would have me stand – in those days if you gave an answer at school you had to stand – and [laughs] you don't know what you missed by going to school later than I did. And he would make me – I remember one incident, I stood there and he said, say cat, or well, he would say, say “cet” [pronunciation with a German accent] [laughs] of course, and I said cat. She said – “you're saying cat. Don't you all think she's saying cat? Say cat. Cat. She's saying cat, isn't she?” And so [sighs] bullying is the word, I think. [Gets upset] And well, multiply that by nine years, and the worst – the worst, well, one was a blessing in disguise. When we were *achte Klasse*, [eighth grade] so *fünfte* [fifth], *sechste* [sixth], *siebte* [seventh], *achte* [eighth], so ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen – well, I was – the others were older of course – we got a particularly nationalistic German – teacher for German and I think history and geography as well. And he made us learn *Sütterlin*. Do you know what that is?

Yeah.

And that turned out a huge blessing but my parents complained bitterly because of the nationalistic over – after it was called *deutsche Schrift* in those days as opposed to the decadent Latin script. And it was also the end of my handwriting. I'd learnt to write in Hampstead then I had to change my handwriting when I came to Germany and learn what an “ß” [Eszett, so-called sharp s] is which I never encountered and then he made us switch to that cornery [sic] *Sütterlin*. It turned out to be a huge blessing, e.g. that's how I got involved in Hans Keller's letters because he wrote *Sütterlin* and I can [laughs] decipher it. **[02:24:11]** And when I taught at boarding school, my little charges couldn't read granny's letters and later at King's several heads of department after Curtis [ph], Larry Dreyfus was working on Hermann Levi, the conductor – oh, you know who that is, Hermann Levi? The conductor who did the first performance of Wagner's Parsifal. His letters were all – they came from the Bayerisches Staatsarchiv [Bavarian State Archive].

I know Larry.

You do?

Yeah.

Oh, of course, yes, on the Jewish Network, yes. And I could decipher Hermann Levi's letters. Oh, that was fascinating. That was in the days when the summer – life wasn't quite so busy and I had to – I would copy and translate Levi's letters. It was great. And so, it turned out very useful. But that wasn't my parents' point. He also made us learn *Weihnachtsgedicht* [Christmas poem]: "*Im Christbaum ist der deutsche Wald zu uns ins Haus gestellt*" [The Christmas tree brings the German forest into our house]. I quoted that at school friends quite recently. They still don't know what's wrong with that. They just don't – their Deutsch- "*Im Christbaum ist der deutsche Wald zu uns ins Haus-* [laughs]. I'm so – Ellen found an awful lot of copies of cross letters that my mother typed on behalf of both of them. But the worst thing was when I was about sixteen. I had just about in part- thanks to that choir I just got involved with- come to the conclusion that I could settle in Germany. And that lady took me apropos of absolutely nothing, we all trooped down for the mid-morning break down the stairs, so there were hundreds of people trooping down the stairs and for reasons I will never know, gave me a lecture that Jews might live in England or in Germany but they belong to Israel. [02:26:07] And that was the last time I cried in public. A lot of that that I'm so buttoned up is to do with that school. You learnt not to show any emotions because immediately you were either criticised or you had to justify then, and so the best thing is to show – don't show them in the first place. So that was the Wilhelm-Raabe- Schule in Hannover. Not to be recommended. And I gather it's got a very bad reputation now academically.

So, it sounds like it was quite authoritarian or – in that way, hierarchical.

I don't remember enough of a hierarchy. It was – well, it still felt even then at confused times, the headmaster was not an important presence in our thoughts. No, it – no, there –

Or just simply nasty, then [laughs].

Simply nasty and stuck in their ways and nobody – I’m not really quite convinced actually that horrible lady I just described, we heard and she was supposed to have been quite brave during the Nazi time. But there must have been mental illness at play. And we had her for three years in German, geography and history. I think that was quite a frequent combination. And the school – my parents weren’t the only ones who complained about her. Oh, people left school because of her. They just couldn’t stand her and – because she was very unfair in her judgements and she had very firm ideas about writers. There were “*sechs wahre Dichter*” [six true poets]: Hesse, Wiechert, Bergengruen, Carossa, Kluge, Wackel [ph]. I can still rattle them off. Well, Hesse –

Who, Hesse?

Hesse, you’ve probably heard of.

Yeah.

Wiechert, if you're lucky.

Hmm-hmm.

Bergengruen, if you're lucky. And apparently, he came from Est-Litauen. [02:28:01] Oh, he went quite – I know a lovely Christmas poem that he wrote. And Carosse [ph] was a very Nazi’s Nazi chap, though he wrote a few poems I liked. One called Kurt Kluge nobody’s ever heard of and Wackel was a *bayerischer Heimatdichter* [Bavarian regional poet]. Anyway, Hesse, Wiechert, Bergengruen, Carossa, Kluge, Wacker [] they were the *sechs moderne wahre Dichter* [six modern true poets]. And –

Okay, so she was certainly still quite –

Dogmatic, to a degree. And then of course there was Goethe and Schiller and that sort of thing. Well, that was never questioned.

And did your parents not consider moving you or did you not want to change school?

We tried. We tried. And we started school – I started school as three parallel forms at fifty-five each. There weren't enough teachers, there weren't enough buildings. And co-ed only started three years below me or something like that. So, co-ed wasn't an option anyway. No, we tried getting somewhere else and they were all so crowded that I had to grin and bear it. And no, awful it definitely was.

And Irene, what about your friends? Did you have – I mean you said your parents were quite isolated socially.

Yes.

What about you?

No, I made friends at school and- a lot of them were civil service friends and I don't know whether it was just Niedersachsen or the *Bund* or other *Bundesländer* but certainly there were grants – do you know what an *ausgebranntes Haus* is? It's a house that hasn't been razed to the ground, it's still standing but the inside's gutted by fire. Hanover was full of those. And there were grants to rebuild those houses on condition that they then took civil servants, so estate grants for that. And all the houses we lived in were full of civil servants, always because of that system. And so, there were – in our part of town there were lots of those, [inaudible] houses. [02:30:01] No, and we were certainly not discouraged from making friends and no, I certainly hadn't, but not encouraged to bring them home. I remember when we – I was on the Hanover-Bristol exchange – Hanover and Bristol are twinned – exchange via choir and the only way I could welcome my opposite number with whom I'm in touch to this day – they've just celebrated sixty-three on marriage or something like that – was my parents happened to be away. And – no, that wasn't a secret. They knew about it. But like that, my father and his precious working hours wouldn't be disturbed. And so – and my choir – Margaret, my choir friend, could stay with us but that was absolutely the exception to prove the rules. That only got a bit better when my parents were in Bonn. That my – that they were a bit more hospitable and my mother also got a bit more adventurous with her cookery, in my

father needed quite a strict diet and she enjoyed that 'cos when they went to Bonn, to live in Bonn, my mother – well, it said '69 on Wikipedia, didn't it? So, my mother was sixty-six already. She didn't pick up her Labour party work any – again. But apart from that, I don't think there were very many Labour party women in Bonn [laughs] to work with anyway when –

So, SPD? SPD?

Yes. And my mother had – she was out two or three times a week just working with Labour party women, who again had *Volksschulbildung* [lowest level of secondary school] at best and wanted more. Oh, she did cultural things, poetry, songs, short stories, all that sort of thing, tried to wean them off substituting the word God in poems with *Mond* [moon] or something like that. Do you know “*Ich stehe im Waldesschatten*” [I am standing in the shadow of the forest]? [02:32:00]

Hmm-hmm.

In Hanover you'd sing “*denn der Mond geht über die Gipfel und segnet das stille Land*” [because the moon travels across the peaks and blesses the quiet land] [laughs] and so my mother tried to wean them off that and had them “*denn der Herr [the Lord- meaning God] geht über die Gipfel und segnet das stille Land*”. So, she had a lot more time then. Of course, and we were off her hands as well, so they got a wee bit more sociable but [sighs] the guests actually were – well, one was certainly a very unusual one and [sighs] no – was he called Oskar? No, Oswald, Oswald von Nell-Breuning. The Nell-Breunings–

Oswald von...?

Nell-Breuning.

Nell-Breuning.

The Breunings befriended young Beethoven when he was in Bonn and needed social support. They go that far. And he was a Jesuit monk but he was very active in social politics and they hit it off. Actually, he wrote the nicest obituary of all the ones that my father got was by [laughs] Oswald von Nell-Breuning. And though of course, he'd sworn celibacy, blah, blah, blah, in – when he – he liked visiting my parents in Bonn. I think he lived in some convent in Frankfurt so it wasn't that far. Sorry, how did we get on to that?

I asked you about your parents and, you know, you said they moved to Bonn and –

Oh, socialising, yes. Yes, we certainly – my sister's – well, their school reunions have now drizzled to a halt but then of course, they have the same huge age span and so my sister who is now heading for ninety-one was one of the youngest, so they've now fizzled out. We met as a threesome a fortnight ago and so we're fizzling out but both of us were involved in that. And no, sorry, no, we were not inhibited in that. How much parents of our school friends of course said don't mix with her, that – that we'll never know. [02:34:03] But there were enough for us not to feel isolated. And of course, choir was liberating and family backgrounds hardly came into it.

Is this the Hanover choir?

Yes, Hanover. Well, *Niedersächsischer Singkreis* [Lower Saxony choir] and –

Niedersächsischer Singkreis?

Niedersächsischer Singkreis, yes. And for exchange purposes we were Hanover Youth Choir versus Bristol Youth Choir.

And you said about the exchange. Did you have any sense of sort of nostalgia to England or did you begin –

Well, I cert – that was the – in '56 that was the first time I came back and certainly that was unsettling, positively unsettling.

In which way?

Well, that I felt so much at home and at ease. And of course, both my sister and I were used heavily as interpreters. But it was the first time I came back into an English-speaking surrounding at all and surprise, surprise, I coped in spite of the big gap. It's – our parents had always made a point of- in particular for me- keeping up the English because- I had from 1946 till 1949 till I even got it at school, whereas my sister got it back straight at school when she was in secondary school when we returned. And so, they made sure we got as many English books particularly as they could lay hands on. And on a Saturday, they – we were supposed to speak English at home, just to maintain it, that I didn't slip when I came back on that.

So, when you came back you could speak it?

Yes. And as [inaudible] was a bit apprehensive how that would work out in practice but it certainly did.

So did you come to Bristol on that exchange or was that the first –

Yes. Oh, and we sang at Henrietta Barnett [laughs]. My – I think my sister had somehow – oh, we didn't only sing in Bristol, we sang in other places as well, so – or was it – I was on two such exchanges. [02:36:02] Was that the second time I – certainly we once [laughs] sang in Henrietta Barnett as well.

But when you finished school what was your plan? What did you want to do?

Well, for a long time I was toying with medicine but science teaching was absolutely hopeless. Girls-only school, it wasn't considered nice [ph]. My parents had no affinity with science either, so nothing came from home. And of course, there were no labs in – we had – do you know what *Schichtunterricht* is?

Hmm-hmm.

We had *Schichtunterricht* [lessons in shifts] till *Abitur*, that till the last year before *Abitur* we had only five days, three days in the morning, two days in the afternoon, with another school doing the other way around. For the last year that changed. My mother never got into her system [laughs]. And the sixth day in our last year, we had our lessons in Haus der Jugend [House of the Youth]. Buildings were in such short supply and of course, that meant labs or any lab work, so any marks I've got in – on my *Abitur* for physics and chemistry are ludicrous for – it's a standing joke with all my friends, my total horror and terror of electricity. [Laughs] I know it's useful for – useful and dangerous. So, my science wouldn't have been good for – good enough for medicine but probably would have – they probably had quite a lot of people whose science wasn't good enough initially. And more and more particularly with that choir business, I thought I would like music as part of my everyday life and quite a number of – in my class became teachers and if there's one thing we knew – we learnt, what not to do, to our- So we prob – [laughs] so where were we?

Yeah. I just asked you whether you had some sort of longing for England and you said you –

Well, long – it certainly was unsettling but I'm trying to remember whether that was before or after that incident, that Jews belonged in Israel and nowhere else. [02:38:10]

But also, we talked about your – you wanted to study medicine and then decided –

Oh, yes. I wanted to do music all my life and so that's what I did. It also meant I could stay in that choir.

And did you study music, then, in –

Yes.

In Hanover?

Yes, I'm a trained music teacher and I only left because of Mrs Thatcher's National Curriculum. In some ways – in modern languages the National Curriculum is much better than what it replaced.

If you move back a bit.

Oh. Oh, sorry.

Thank you.

[Laughs] Sorry.

But first in Germany, so what positions did you take? You mentioned already that you went to two schools in –

Yes. Well, it was a bit sudden. I mentioned earlier on that I had a job lined up in Hanover but because of the expectations of the choir conductor who would have also been my boss and expected me to be in all that sort of *Vereinen und Landesverbänden und Bundesverbänden* [clubs and state and federal associations], I don't know what else, which my sister flourishes on to this day. Well, my sister was- but not for me. And she mentioned a little old lady who lived on the ground floor of our block of flats – mentioned that the [inaudible] *Gymnasium* in Dannenberg [inaudible] – I've forgotten how she knew about it – needed an English teacher, I think it was. And it was [inaudible] *Gymnasium* because it was the back – *Fuchs und Hase sagen sich Gute Nacht* – is nothing. Shall I translate that? *Fuchs und Hase sagen sich Gute Nacht*, is the equivalent of the back of beyond. You know, the fox and the rabbit say goodnight to each other. It's a – it was a peninsular into East Germany. [02:40:00] There was – the river Elbe was part of the border and there was a great, big bridge with a span missing. So back of beyond is nothing. And nearly all our pupils were first-generation secondary education, never mind grammar school or something like that, so it was a lovely pioneer spirit. And we had our first *Abitur* at the end of my first year and –

Was it a residential school?

No, no, that was an ordinary state school, being built up. And single-form entry at the time, so it was idyllic, everybody knew everybody else and do you know where Dannenberg is? Well, north east of Hanover, flat.

Okay, so you could still stay with your parents?

Oh, no, no. In – I lived – I had a furnished room with a bath once a week or something like that in – with a little widow who lived near one of the stations. I learnt to bicycle. I hadn't been allowed to ride a bike. My mother was in some wise terribly overprotective, probably understandable but cycling was – cycling and swimming were very dangerous things. And so, I enjoyed doing that. The headmaster [laughs] helped me buy a bicycle and then I learnt at the backyard [laughs] of my landlady and never looked back till about two years ago. And in – but I had done teaching practice in Marienau because my choir conductor-cum-tutor had a bit of a conscience that I was doing a course where I didn't need my *Abitur*, if that was on. And I hadn't done grammar school, *Schulmusik*, so a music teacher at grammar schools. I would have found it very difficult because you needed to have piano for that and of course my – Lore and I, we started everything far too late, and Lore even worse than me. [02:42:00] And so no – I invested – we both invested so much time in the piano for so pathetic results, so I would have found *Schulmusik* very difficult. But anyway, he – I went for teaching practice in Marienau in my second year at college, loved it. That's where I met Marion, when I was teaching – doing teaching practice. Loved it so much that I did a voluntary teaching practice again the next year and they asked me to do English music as a topic, and so I did quite a lot of it then just voluntarily. And it just happened it was 30 kilometres away from Dannenberg and so my headmaster in Dannenberg, bless him, organised my timetable that on a Wednesday I was free after the mid-morning break and then I'd get on my bike and cycle [laughs] the 30 kilometres to Mariena and do music in what they called the *musischer Nachmittag* [artistic afternoon] where everybody'd – they did all sorts of music, choir – well, other music and ran several recorder groups – that's the only thing I started at the right age – and all sorts of things and stayed till after supper – this choir was after supper – and then I didn't cycle another 30 kilometres back, I cycled 5 kilometres to the nearest rail station [laughs] and took the train back to Dannenberg. And so, I had that link to Marienau anyway

and after two years in Dannenberg – oh, sorry, in Dannenberg I think I only taught English but music came up conversationally. And my headmaster was a very keen musician. His son actually became a professional violinist and music teacher. I'd had one year of violin lessons and after that one year my father lost his job in that revision that I described and I got arthritis, you would – at sixteen, you wouldn't imagine it but I did and this joint never became the same and so the combination was the end of my violin lessons. [02:44:12] But I had a working knowledge of violin and my headmaster in Dannenberg said, you got some knowledge of violin, you learnt alto clef at college, here is a viola. Sorry, do you know what that is?

Yeah.

No, I didn't know – I didn't know how much has rubbed off and of course Malcolm is a pianist. And so, I was lent a viola and I was – [laughs] and so I sat in my little hired room, open string, open string, open string, open string plus one, open string plus two, [laughs] and fingers and so I think six weeks into my time in Dannenberg we played in a beautiful ancient village church in this peninsular into East Germany. By now we're talking Cold War days. The wall had been – was built in my first summer in Dannenberg. And I was playing viola for Bach's A minor concerto and the twelve-year-old Günther [laughs] played the solo. And I've been playing viola badly, including yesterday morning, ever since. And so, there was a lot of music in Dannenberg as well but I think in the time, I might have run some clubs, I don't – oh, I definitely gave some flute lessons. The village or town doctor had six children and they all played something. One was in – the horn player was in my class. I remember him putting – what's a *Feudel* in German [Feudel is the German word]? A dish – a cloth for mopping up floors. He – whenever he started to play his horn – he was a very serious little boy – he would put a floor-mopping cloth beside him for the drips. [02:46:07] And I taught his daughter the flute, I remember that. So, I must have done some music in Dannenberg but it was probably extramural. And then after two years of being full time in Dannenberg, learning to bicycle properly and spending my summer holidays on the bicycle, Marienau needed an English teacher and of course they knew me from my teaching practice, leave alone that I was still coming there every Wednesday and they offered it to me and of course I took it. And that was definitely only music in the timetable – only English in the timetable but they did a lot of

music. And again taught – spent – I spent a lot of –forgotten- my summer holidays cycling again and still reading the New Statesman and at some stage I came to the conclusion I'd better go to England and wind that topic up on – in my summer holidays. And well, I mentioned that my father belonged to the Fabian Society and I'd been to Fabian summer schools before and I went to one of those and felt I wasn't an oddball there and so – nowadays you'd go online – I subscribed to The Times Educational Supplement. [Laughs] That was the way to do it then. And kept looking for either music or German teacher's jobs and nothing bigger than 100,000 inhabitants and of course, Stevenage was nothing like it. And as I think I mentioned I came here on a one-year contract and by Feb – and then Marienau kept my job open to me. They were very good to me.

So, what did you find? What did you come to?

Well, I – Stevenage was exactly – as it was a new town, the Nobel school where I taught, which went to two years then, was exactly the same situation, we had the first O-level at the end of my first year, so very much the pioneer spirit. [02:48:15] Oh, and the whole town had the idealistic pioneer spirit. You could cut it with a knife. It was marvellous.

And what did they – what were they looking for? A German teacher? Or a music teacher?

Well, I signed up for German and I had my interview in Boppard because they organised – their first German teacher had been to – on exchange to Mainz and thought the Rhineland was marvellous. Well, the first thing I told the headmaster that was Germans, unless they were drunk, I said did not go to the Rhineland on holiday [laughs] and nuns [ph] buy key rings with toilets on them [laughs] and that sort of thing. But – and so I weaned them off Boppard double-quick. But anyway, that was a good cheap way of interviewing me, they were in Germany anyway. And so, I went across for a night or something in a hotel somewhere. And so, between me getting the job and me actually coming, the music teacher had resigned and they'd only had – well, as I said, the school was entering its fifth year. I think the first year they didn't have a music teacher at all and then each one had only stayed a year and done their own idiosyncrasies. And I think my direct predecessor was very keen on

shows, judging by the music she left and classical records were virtually zilch. But anyway, so by the time I actually got here, the one they wanted [laughs] was a music teacher.

This was in 196 –

'65. And so – well, that was fine by me of course, and I did – the school was so small then and I did some German as well of course. [02:50:00] And then gradually as the school grew, by the time I arrived we were a five-form entry and they had started a two-form entry – by the time I arrived we were already on five-form entry and – but I – by February I knew I'd made the right decision and as I said, if it hadn't been for the National Curriculum I would have stayed there till retirement. I'm eternally grateful the National Curriculum only blew up after my mother died, because with her history, the lack of material security I suddenly had when I left – we left teaching, she would have found that dreadful, and so – and that's how she never knew about that one.

So, Irene, what – so you came, what did you – you said your parents were not so pleased that you came back to England.

No, they must have been disappointed. No, no, they fully supp – if that's what you want to do and – no, they were perfectly happy about it.

But your sister stayed in Germany?

Yes. Yes, it's strange. It should be the other way around because England shaped her much more than me. She was thirteen-plus when she first encountered Germany but that's the way the cookie crumbles.

And what do you think – when you came here, what did you like in England?

The tolerance. No question. [Sighs] I was no longer on a constant defensive. Just I mentioned earlier on, I spent about half a year of my life running school trips with Stevenage kids to Germany and of course, that was done with enormous preparation, visiting firms and all sorts

of – all done by letter with a reply-paid envelope [laughs] and that sort of thing in those days. And it just so came that we had lunch in Stuttgart in the – on the premises of Stuttgart's football ground. And there were – I wasn't the only vegetarian, there were several vegetarians amongst the children as well. [02:52:03] And I'm sure I had told them but it wasn't really catered for and whoever was looking after us from the German side suggested that we graze on the football ground. Seriously. And that would have 1978 or something like that. And that wouldn't have happened in this country, hmm. That – I did my external degree, as I said, so that I had one qualification the Department for Education can actually inspect [ph]. And for that I – of course I did a lot of reading in Senate House and they said – and I started on that I think pretty soon after I decided to stay, because of that. And the canteen in Senate House even then always had a vegetarian dish, if only because of all the com – the Indians and people like that.

When did you become vegetarian?

Oh, when I was seventeen. Well, the – when the arthritis was at last diagnosed, I was told, leave off meat for a year and I said that's what I've been doing for a year. So, it seems my body wanted it anyway but also the discrepancy of saying, oh, aren't you a pretty cow in an Alpine meadow and killing it in – I've got a dilemma now, feeding him. And so that's the combination. I've only gone vegan since deep into retirement because it used to be so difficult. It's quite easy now but in those days it would have been impossible. Sorry, how did we get – onto diets?

Because you – we talked about tolerance and in Germany there wasn't a tolerance, while here you –

Yes, yes. You're good at keeping threads [laughs]. Yes, and well, that is just an example, the diet one, that you're not in constant defensive, in a constant minority of one, and –

And did you find yourself in Germany in that minority of one? [02:54:03]

Yes, constantly.

On what topics or just –

Well, being vegetarian's a good example.

Right. And other things?

And being pushed – they think they're being funny, saying that – well, I don't drink alcohol anyway but if – beer, that yeast is little animals too, isn't it? And thinking that's funny. And supposed to do what the majority does just because it's the majority. [Laughs] Well, from what – what I described of home, [laughs] we weren't brought up like that [laughs]. Well, it's the same sticking to my principles that of course made me have to leave teaching then, which I couldn't reckon – well, I was incredibly lucky.

But that was a bit later. So, then your –

Yeah, that was about twenty-two years later, yeah.

So, your father passed away, when?

In '75.

And you said suddenly –

Yes. Yes, he didn't enjoy any retirement worth mentioning. Well, as I mentioned, it got extended so he got a couple of years more in Bonn anyway and then the trade unions kept him occupied with huge-scale fundamental planning projects and he loved it and he probably did a very good job. I can't judge. And that cut behind, that woodcut on the wall behind you, is from my father's German publisher. He would send either a book or a print or something like that every year for Christmas. And so, he did a lot of publishing in all – in that abstract world of politics.

And did he die in Bonn or –

Yes. He hadn't been feeling well but the doctor had been – he – and he'd been to the doctor, and the doctor couldn't find anything wrong and next morning my mother found him dead. And our main doctor said that can happen with heart attacks, that, so he didn't blame his colleague for not having noticed. But he smoked only pipe but still, plus being a workaholic. My mother made eighty-two. [02:56:00] And after my father died – I had just bought this house, I – he in – I bought the house- I think- in early March and he died in late March. They knew about it but he never saw it. And so, after my mother got over the initial shock – my mother was a strong person. I mean that she would probably survive him, I think she – that was a thought that would have – she was – though she was elder than him, but not much, that would – probably had crossed her mind anyway. But she then felt she could visit me and did, and she did quite soon too. I mean Father died in late March and she came sometime in late May or something like that. And I still lived in a studio flat because it took till July till I actually moved in and I thought, help, both of us in a studio flat, [laughs] that could be a bit tight. And so, I booked us to go to Keswick for half term and that was a roaring success. She loved the Lake District and we went every year she was – the ten years she still lived, we went [laughs] to Keswick in the spring half term. And when I was teaching, she also went for walks on her own. My parents were great walkers and my mother was much better at it than my father was. And I never quite worked out where she – no, it – on a map it all looks so flat here. It isn't. Believe me, if you cycle you notice. And the hills of Hertfordshire, particularly the east [ph], she must have in – she probably went out Benington way, on her own while I was at school and had some views there and that started her healing. And she liked my colleagues, she liked my friends, she liked the people in the Quaker community. She never went to the Quaker meetings. She said that was pretence. [02:58:00] But she came to socials of the Quaker meeting, like when the Quaker meeting in those days went carol singing, she would join in with the best of them. Well, she knew all the English carols from wartime. And so, she liked my surroundings and my sister was already so involved with her *Bundesverband* [federal associations] of this, that and the other, that though she lived closer, it was obvious that I – that we would have more time to spend with each other. And then flats – not these ones – flats a good kilometre up the Old Hertford Road were built and though my parents could never afford their own place in Germany – but of course, well, you will know, housing

is so much better but also so much more expensive. She could easily afford a flat in Stevenage and so she bought a flat up the Hertford Road and then these were built and of course, that was [laughs] tailor-made and so she could take her pick out of these. And it's – actually it's my nest egg. When she then died, her monetary savings were pretty to the – much to the penny, the value of that one. So, my sister got the money and I inherited the flat and I've been able to do [laughs] – do quite a good lot of – I repaired my neighbour's marriage and all sorts of [laughs] – I enabled someone to do a course, all sorts of interesting things with the flat. And –

So, your mother wanted to join you here? She liked England –

Yeah, but she chose it. Well, she was on her own in Bonn and she – well, as I mentioned, she had not been anybody in her own right in Bonn because Bonn really wasn't the place for SPD women and so there was no point in staying in Bonn. And so, it would be between joining my sister in Hildesheim or joining me in Stevenage and she just liked Stevenage. She always insisted on her own place and so moving in with me – well, she did initially of course, to sort out things, like – basically she felt, no, I don't want to cramp your style. [03:00:10]

And you mentioned that at that point you were already involved with the Quaker. Tell us a little bit how you got involved with them or –

Well, it's the pioneer spirit of the new town and Stevenage was crawling with Quakers at the time. It must have – no, building utopia must – the idea of that must have appealed to an awful lot of Quakers, so my school was full of them, and staff and children, and of course the children's parents, and I liked what I saw. And I mentioned earlier, music, you can't do German music without the church input, whether it's Mozart's masses or Bach's whatever – Bach's cantatas and so I slid into the surroundings of Christianity via music anyway and the lack of dogma with Quakers just suits me fine. And also, my parents I think, they were the happiest because of the lack of dogma and all that. Yes, I first encountered Quakers in Lemgo, *Quäkerspeisung* [Quaker feeding] Does that mean something to you? We'd be told to bring a *Henkelmann*. Do you remember what that is?

Yeah. You explained it, yeah.

We were told we would be – exactly that way [laughs]. I was being educational. In Lemgo we – again before the *Währungsreform*, we'd be told, tomorrow, bring a *Henkelmann* and then there'd be some milk soup or some other food, just a supplementary food. And that was funded by Quakers. Not all of it. And it was called *Quäkerspeisung* and that was the first I heard of them. They did a lot of post-war work, I think post-World War One as well. And a then-member - long, long dead who actually befriended my mother, she lived just a few roads up that way, had actually done post-war work in Berlin and had good German, so was very happy to befriend my mother. [03:02:12]

Because the Quakers of course also helped many of the kinder, on the Kindertransport.

Yes, exactly, yes.

Been active during the war.

Yeah.

So, you found a Quaker community here in Stevenage.

Yes. Yes, and now we're – if there are five of us on a Sunday morning it's quite a good day. But in the days when I got involved there'd be twenty-off of us.

So where are the meetings taking place?

We've got a purpose-built meeting house planned into the town. We've got – it's nearly like a knitting pattern, United Reform Church, then Quaker Meeting House, St George's which is Anglican, all on the same road, near the town centre. No, just in – I quite deliberately- when I was putting my toe in the water- took a train or cycled to Hitchin meeting because I didn't want my colleagues here to know I was thinking of it but – or not news to come back too quickly anyway, but – so [sighs] that's over fifty years ago now. I've just signalled that I

wanted to resign as treasurer. I've been treasurer since the year my father died, so getting [laughs] to forty-nine years or so, which is in very bad ordering. You normally do a Quaker job for three years and possibly another three years. But nobody else wants to do it. It's a job and you don't have to talk about your feelings, [laughs] you just get on with the figures and also it – particularly after I had to become a commuter, I could never guarantee when I would be home. [Inaudible] without meetings, I could do it at 11:30 pm, [coughs] do the books, and I refused to go to any meetings till I retired – to any financial meetings I mean. [03:04:08] There's a penance called Finance Committee of the Area Meeting.

So, you became a commuter once you resigned from your teaching job?

Yes.

Because of the Thatcher curriculum. Tell us what you mean by that.

Yes. Well, some of it might of course ring a bell, considering whom you're married to. Every German I tell the story to tears their hair as I did. Quite a lot of Brits say, why are you getting so hot under the collar about it? According to the National Curriculum you're supposed – your music teaching is supposed to be divided into three aspects, making music, in a – listening music, appreciating it, and composing. And well, the making music's fine. All my music teaching was based on singing and everybody can sing, no matter whether their parents can afford lessons or not, everybody can do that. Appreciating was what I spent the rest of the time on. But I certainly was – grew up believing that to compose anything worthwhile you need a special gift and not many of us have it. And I still don't understand why there wasn't a mass revolution of music teachers at the time when I resigned. But teaching music, particularly – we were a grammar school when I started here and we gradually became comprehensive. Teaching music in a comprehensive school against all the commercial pressures is a missionary job anyway. You can't teach something you think is rubbish. And I'm not teaching composing when I think I might have had one good musical idea in my life. And well, what do you, then? Oh, I'll write down something. Well, I'm not doing that, I'm not teaching that. [03:06:02] A minimum of composition was part of O-and A level and that's fine, they can read music, and for them it's an exercise to appreciate how hard it is. But

a kid that can't write down Baa, Baa, Black Sheep and same composing, and the way the composing was meant to happen was utterly unrealistic. And that was from age five, the composing. You were supposed to give them percussion instruments and as a group they'd work something out. As a group, can you imagine that, five – seven or eight five-year-olds? And then you tape it and then towards the end of the session you listen to each other's output. And –

So, you didn't agree with it.

Pardon?

You didn't agree with that approach?

That was putting it mildly [laughs]. No, I think it's morally and ethically wrong. And morally is a big word but it's the pretence element, that even the children who can write down Baa, Baa, Black Sheep or even – or play something quite well, enjoy music, that then they just have to write down something. That, I'm not encouraging that. I can't. And I mean if I were an inspired composer myself, I mean a few of the pupils that I taught, if – oh, it's [ph] legion the number of kids that came, Miss, I've got this tune in my head, write it down, please, or help me write it down, of course I would. The school orchestra did no number of first performances but it had to be in the kid. If it wasn't in the kid, it was pretence. And so – and the idea of doing that for the next fifteen years of my – of seventeen years I had left till retirement, that just wasn't on. And I tried to get German jobs of course but German was always the second language. No school in the area had enough work full time. Even if I'd become a German commuting teacher, there just wasn't enough German teaching in the area around. [03:08:01] And – and of – and do you know – well, that's something I didn't mention. Stevenage was built on the armaments industry. No, we've got British Aerospace to this day. Fortunately, some of it at the – now is space. We've got a proud poster in the town centre, 25% of all the satellites buzzing around this world were built in Stevenage. And Moon rovers, you name it, we build it. But in the – when I started in Stevenage the kids would constantly say, oh, my father's on montage in Saudi Arabia or something like that. And well, I wouldn't have applied to them and I would have never passed their security vetting with my

background, leave alone as a Quaker, I wouldn't have done it. And so, I really – not being able to get a German teaching job, I just had to become a commuter.

So, what did you then do? Tell us what you – after your teaching –

Of course, yes. I'm mixing up what I told you conversationally. Yes, I kept seeing adverts for German and secretarial skills and music and secretarial skills, and I had the German and I had the music and I didn't have the secretarial skills. And I first alongside teaching did a bit of an evening class at college that – and I taught for a year longer than I mean to. I had a marvellous headmaster, all those twenty-two years at Stevenage. I really wanted to resign when National Curriculum came in and it just happened that that year, nobody wanted to do O-level, or GCSE as it then became. And so – and his children had all been to our school and his daughter was actually a grade 8 viola player and married a conductor, and so he was all for music and when after looking for jobs alongside teaching for half a year I hadn't got something, he allowed me to go on for another year here and teach the way I thought right. **[03:10:04]** And when I still hadn't got anything, I had about fifty interviews or something like that – you see, well, you just admire the way I could get up and down from the floor but people who have only got your CV think at forty-eight you've got a foot in the grave, and I was forty-eight getting on for forty-nine or something like that. Well, or they said, well-presented, for which read red fingernails and the lot, neither of which was me. And so, I very soon learnt only to apply to public service, which didn't have that age prejudice and would not expect me to sit on the boss' knee and things like that or make the coffee, or both. And so, I – in the end I did a proper secretarial course. Well, no, I skipped an interesting stage. Did you know Foyles in the bad old days?

Yeah.

I got a job with Foyles and I kept it for four months and I gave notice. Normally people stayed for six weeks and Miss Foyle gave notice. I still remember my interview. I asked about holidays when it was fairly obvious, they were going to give me the job – it was Foyles who knows about music, about languages, quite useful – and about holidays, ten working days. And then I asked about union and I think there was just deafening, shocked silence. But

the [laughs] – well, I could talk for the next half – it was tragicomical, Foyles. But anyway, it was a job and I commuted. And that was before the secretarial course. And during – and the big fire at King’s Cross station was while I was at Foyles. [Laughs] I remember doing a night phone call to my sister to tell her I wasn’t in it because again in those days you didn’t do international calls that easily. **[03:12:05]** And that’s when I kept seeing the adverts when I realised staying at Foyles wasn’t a long-term proposition. She had two or three favourites and everybody else, it was like an educated youth hostel, the turnover. I was one of the older ones and [laughs] no, it was tragicomic – it’s better now, I gather. And so, I did a secretarial crash course for – in three months just from January till the end of – till Easter and about halfway through I had to start typing – applying for jobs again because the timeline there would be – and the science officer at King’s College – nowadays it’s huge, there’s a science faculty with umpteen departments – but then it was a very modest affair. Two sub-deans, one of whom I’m still in touch with now, and three administrators, and I was the junior dogsbody of those, and they were absolutely lovely. And the interview, they chucked a fistful of – well, it was UCCA forms in those days, UCAS forms now – at me and said, make them into a table and type them. And well, I knew what UCAS forms were because anyone – if anybody I was teaching, I would have to do my contribution for the careers teacher to do the UCAS form, so that the music or German part was in it. And – but the codes, I hadn’t a clue, the codes for – well, I know now music was W300, if I remember rightly. But there would be combinations of biochemistry with German or whatever, and they’d be – you will know from your children. And so, I looked at it and hoped for the best and I’d only done six weeks of typing, and it was a manual typewriter and the office was quiet, the others were working or not in, and so click, click, click. **[03:14:09]** It took ages [laughs]. And I asked afterwards – I think there was only one other applicant and – but they said, you got the table right and it was slow. I mean it was – I came to the conclusion that AC was – would come before AF and before BC or whatever it was, and then numerical, and that it was slow, and of course they knew I would have another six weeks of the course to get quicker and so I got the science job and I very humbly did that science job and I was just grateful I was amongst decent people again, I had a job again. The commuting was horrible. Oh, yes, one of my sub – it was one of my – the sub-dean I’m still in touch with, who encouraged me to ride a bike in London because up to then I’d either walk or – do you know, it was Aldwych station, that was right in King’s College, I would – that was only open at rush hour, I think. I would use that on the way home or

something like that. And so, it was very civilised and very pleasant but it didn't even cover expenses because the commuting was so expensive. Oh, yes, thank God I didn't have a mortgage because when my father died, my mother insisted on paying my sister and me what we would have asked for if we'd quarrelled. Now, we had no intention of quarrelling, not with her and not with each other. We had not expected anything, before she died as well. We both were ticking along perfectly happily. But she wanted to for some reason or other and it paid my mortgage, so I hadn't got a mor – and my German friends all said, you're stupid, you could “*von der Steuer absetzen*” [set off against tax liability] and all that and I said, I'm not in debt if I can help it. But my goodness, wasn't it a blessing that I didn't have a mortgage when I was teaching and my salary initially dropped to zilch and then to very little and then to still not covering costs with the season ticket. [03:16:10]

But you didn't consider moving to London? Or leaving Stevenage?

No, with that lovely garden and even then, I mean I was forty-nine or something like that, then being stuck in retirement in London and I'd been in that house for thirteen or fourteen years, the garden was getting where I wanted it, utterly organic, half a nature reserve with all those trees. You should have seen it [laughs] when I moved in – very, very different. Well, and whatever friends I had from teaching, from – of course I didn't part with school on bad terms. They all knew why I was leaving. And I could –

Yeah. So, you had a network here.

Yes. I put on record with – county was of course in those days, before academy was my employer. I put on record with county, why I was leaving, so that if the National Curriculum had bitten the dust before I retired, I could have come back. Unfortunately, the National Curriculum didn't bite the dust. No, and whatever friends I had and it – though my two closest friends happened to leave at the same time as I did but that didn't mean they were out of sight.

And then you started in the music department at King's?

Well, after four day – four terms in science I saw – I happened to see it on a noticeboard and – and again, science whatever ever so nice. They realised that was made for me and so I must have got decent references [laughs] and I got the job and – but I couldn't have done it without the science people because I knew how office worked by then and of course that it was the same institution, so I knew how King's worked. I think at the time King's was very multi – particularly science, we had a campus in Chelsea, there was at least one in Kensington.

[03:18:05] There was the – the van was an ever-present entity that went at eleven o'clock and took post to the – took the mail to the other campuses and of course, the science office being in the Strand and the campus – honestly there, we acquired a residential place in Hampstead, the van was all-important. Of course, when I got to – into music I didn't need it.

And then eventually you also got into translation.

Yes, translation very occasionally very happened, say, if I gave – wanted to give a German friend a book of say, English churches with lovely photos, I would translate the prefaces. Well, or the other way around, if I wanted to give the English friend a German one or that sort of thing. So, it never quite stopped. I might have mentioned that I became a member of the National – London Cycling Campaign when I was cycling. I mean cycling's been revolutionised in those decades and I don't know anybody who was not – who cycles in London and hasn't been knocked over, including myself. Fortunately, I had my viola on the back. The viola hit the back [laughs] with the ground before I did and I had a hard case. And so, I supported them. [Laughs] I even once translated for the – for Butterfly Conservation, a weird text – no, they would often in their literature just say, we get so many foreign-language stuff, can you volunteer, and I always volunteer for that sort of stuff, particularly again I can do it in the wee small hours. And there was something where the differences between the first and the second and third generation of certain butterfly, you could only sort it out by inspecting the size of the sexual organs, but inside, so you had to kill it first. [03:20:03] And so [laughs] I translated some strange things in my time. I've done conference translating for Quakers. There's a thing called the Peace Tax Campaign which [sighs] in the last two and a bit years has had an even harder time, which is very much an ecumenical thing led by Quakers, that we don't want to wiggle out of tax, we just want that bit of our tax that would go to finance killing, to be finance for peacemaking and constructive things. And every two

years they do international conferences and not so much now but in the time – I think I only slid into that after the wall came down but for many years the people from East Germany hadn't got much English and of course they were very strong in their peace movement and so they needed interpreters, so I've done live-conference interpreting. I remember needing time off from – or using some of my time [coughs]. I normally went on holiday in term time at King's in the music department but occasionally in term time, so I could do live interpreting for the Peace Tax movement.

So, you are – you consider yourself bilingual?

Yes. Nearly.

What do you prefer? Translating –

I can't – I can't do biology in English. No, *Staubgefäße* [stamens] and things like that, that floors me. Can you do that? *Staubgefäße?*

No. I don't know what- I don't know what that means in German [both laugh]. But what is your – what do you prefer, let's say if you have to translate something into, do you prefer English or German?

It makes no difference. When I first started typing, typing in German was a bit strange because I'd learned to type in English. And of course, the keyboards are different. That can – after those keyboards, those Quaker conferences, the Peace Tax conferences, there'd be a communiqué and if I was asked to type it on a German keyboard, they and I would go round the bend. [03:22:11] Those few differences in – are enough to drive you berserk. And so, in type – I can type German, on like on an English keyboard. On a German one, I can't. But otherwise, I type it equally easily. I can do umlauts on my-

What about reading? Do you prefer to read in English or German?

It's not different. Absolutely no difference. I keep asking in translating something about computers comes up and of course they weren't invented in 1965 when I came back here. I asked my sister and she – 90% of the time she says, same word, but they used the English word. But – so a few things, like computing, I can only do in English, as far as I can do. Biology, [laughs] I can only – or botany at least, I only do in German but it's – with that sort of tiny exception, it really makes no difference.

If you don't – if you have a choice to read in English or German, does –

No.

No.

And nobody in my family would recommend each other books without saying what language they were in. My – even my parents, passive English was perfectly native standard. And as – when my sister and I – well, as long as we had a home to go home to, we spent Christmas with our parents, or with my mother later and the Christmas holiday would consist of us all sitting in corners of the flat reading each other's books. We could read our own ones later because we'd [laughs] take them with us. But no, in – that's no issue with anyone in our family.

So, your sister is also bilingual or –

Yeah. Well, as I mentioned in verbal, her accent suffered something awful and she's rusty. [03:24:08] She used to translate into English and I'm afraid I took something so badly to pieces that she now – if she does it, she gives it to me for checking. She does see – accept the point. But the other way around, she's fine. Once in a blue moon, particularly for that choral magazine, their – all the authors will list all their *Orden und Ehrenzeichen* [orders and decorations] and of course that's different for every language. I don't always know what they are. So, if she translates into English, there's the odd word she might ask me but it'll be that sort of thing, or a modern term.

Which language do you speak to each other?

Oh, German. No question. That is just the home language. And I sometimes quite deliberately teach her modern slang, so words like *iffy*, she wouldn't have learnt that [laughs] at – Henrietta Barnett School, 1945, that sort of thing. We do *lang* – as we're both so language-aware, we love language jokes and comparisons or, oh, that's how it hangs together. So, her passive English is every bit as good. It's just her active English isn't quite so good.

And Irene, linked to language, how would you define yourself, in terms of your identity today?

Given up. No. [Sighs] When I was in Marienau, one of my colleagues – that sort of topic would come up – that might have been already when I was thinking of doing that goodbye visit to England which then misfired in the opposite direction. And he prophesied that I'd never marry. He was absolutely right. And also, do you know the Brahms Requiem?

Hmm-hmm.

Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt. [For here have we no continuing city,]. Better than – any time better than Auschwitz. [03:26:00] And so [sighs] I say to sir [ph] each night, we're the lucky ones, we live here in peace, we live here being able to do what we want, we're able to earn a decent living, we haven't got to worry about the V-weapon or Hamas or the Israeli army doing anything horrible to us. So, it's just where we happen to fetch up. And if that is acceptable and positive and we can do something positive there. They did – my sister turned ninety last summer and her local university put on a great, big show for her. It was really a bit funny that they did it because she was Lady Mayoress for decades and she was also in the *Landtag* [state parliament] in Hanover for eight years, so they should have done it. But anyway, the university, they gave her an honorary PhD because she once saved them from being closed and she's still very involved and so the university then invited the town and the state and all that sort of thing. And they kept quoting all the eulogies that were made. I managed to be there. I tacked it on the end of my holiday. Do you know Erich Kästner?

Of course.

Yes, it does help- [laughs]. "*Es gibt nichts Gutes, außer man tut es.*" [Nothing good happens unless you do it]. It seems my sister had used that as her motto. They kept quoting that.

Es gibt nichts Gutes, außer man tut es. That is a nice one.

It's – there's something called –

Translate it, please.

Lyrische Hausapotheke [lyrical medicine cabinet]. No, he didn't only write children's book. There is, "*Es gibt nichts Gutes, außer man tut es.*" There's nothing good unless it's – unless you do it. So don't talk about it, get on with doing it. And certainly, my sister has done that all her life. And I heard that about four or five times on that event. And my equivalent is God has no hands but my hands. [03:28:02] It boils down to the same thing. You've got to get on and do it, which is why I still do- [laughs] – stand in the street and meow for Cats Protection.

Aided and abetted.

Come here, then we see it. Otherwise, we can't see it. Yes.

My perfectly, permanently gloomy friend. I've got an even better one upstairs. I'll get it. I'll be back in two ticks. This is Smudge.

One second.

He's our chief fundraising – assistant fundraiser. He's a bit limited. He can't scratch his ear. He can do a very good line in [inaudible] and he can get very excited. And with him, I'll stand in street collections. It's such a nice way of establishing contact with people without – without them feeling accosted. And if all they do is smile and pass, that's fine. But very often they put something in our collecting box.

So, this is the Cats – this is –

For Cats Protection, yes.

Cats Protection. In the UK?

Yes, as – I've hit on the – oh, very much so. I hit on the idea, one of the groups in which I play, we do historical dance music and occasionally we get – there's a group in Cambridge that does historical dance and when they do an event, they like live music as opposed to recorded. And there's – it's called Stourbridge Fair. It's at the Leper Chapel in Cambridge. Do you know that? It's a magic little place. I love – it's always in September. I like the event. And there was a young man walking around, like this [demonstrates], dressed as a jester. And I – every time he passed me, he fooled me, I thought he had a real cat. [03:30:03] And it wasn't. I stopped him in the end and asked him where did you get your cat, your puppet, and he said Heidelberg [laughs] and [inaudible] we were in Cambridge. And so, for Christmas the – that year I asked my sister to get me a cat [inaudible] puppet. And he's unusually good, er, cat toys are very difficult, so I was very lucky with him. And my sister put him in a box without wrapping him, so when I opened the box, he was smiling at me and said he was her first online purchase. And he has earned – he must be in his third thousand at least, at –

Okay, he's earned his –

Petting pre-Covid we'd do station collections. And I do station collections for Greek Animal Welfare. Actually, that's where I got the idea of station collections. Nobody who commutes can claim that they're on the breadline. And he figures in a lot of American photo albums, so and you're now figuring in the AJR.

Yeah [laughs]. That's a first for us.

[Laughs] Yes. Yes, there's a first for everything.

Irene, I have a few more questions, so maybe you want to say goodbye to Cat [laughs] for the time being. Okay, thank you. I liked your quote. What did you say? It wasn't "eine bleibende Statt?"

That's Bible, "*denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt*". I'd have to look it up where it's from.

And do you feel – well, how does it relate to you?

Well, that you don't belong anywhere. It might be – it's – it'll be all different. You've got a husband, you've got children, and so – and of course that gives you quite different ties. I've – when I die, in my will it says, my body goes – well, I meant to – I meant really King's College but it works geographically, so it's – it'll go – it'll be Cambridge for any medical training purpose or whatever they can use, and - because there was – there won't be anybody who wants to look after [inaudible] and so there's absolutely no point in – and that's just – hello. [03:32:14] That's just the way it is. That – and I suppose whoever wrote "*denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt*" wasn't even thinking of refugees, [laughs] though mind you, there are plenty of refugees in the Bible. It's somewhere in the New Testament.

And do you feel sometimes that your parents – do you think about your parents' decision to go back to Germany, do you think that was a positive decision for you or do you think they – for them or –

At the time it was so much the accepted thing when I was a child, there's no point in – no, I think they did the right thing.

Do you sometimes think what would have happened without Hitler or, you know, if...

[Sighs] I think I'm not capable of imag – it just is. Well, can you imagine that? It was just a terribly dark time for central Europe. Well, not only central Europe. It just is. No, no point in speculating.

And the other thing I was going to ask, you said that somebody said you were not going to get married. Who said it? You said somebody predicted –

A colleague, yes. Yeah.

And why do you think did they say that, or –

[Sighs] I can't – it wasn't even somebody I knew that well. Observing, I – mind you, but he was right, and I've forgotten what I've said on the tape and what I've said in – when we were socially chatting, that of the people in my situation I know, the only one whose marriage lasted was Cousin Helen in America, who managed to find a fellow refugee, so who shared her German heritage and shared her American everyday life. **[03:34:19]** And –

Tell us a bit – I know what you mean by that. How do you relate this for yourself, the refugee-ness, let's say, to finding a partner? Just explain it a little bit more.

That if I hear Schubert songs, I know exactly what he means. And I've spent an awful lot of time explaining to other people, trying to explain to other people what Schubert or his poems rather meant. And well, I wouldn't want to be married to somebody who doesn't care about Schubert songs in the – or – as an example, in the first place. But you can only explain so far, so [sighs] and my mother was of a generation when there were too many women already because of men killed in World War One and of course, the same thing happened in – particularly my sister's generation, mainly for my sister's generation, we didn't expect automatically to get married the way – well, that is something that my mother often – that we often talked about, that if you're lucky really to find the right one, that like I did, as my mother would say, me and my parents' marriage lasted till death, they were forty-three years I think. And – but we didn't take it for granted, as people I suppose really do now, that now you're very much the exception. Not in my age group, leave alone with that split background. **[03:36:00]** So we were very deliberately expected, my sister and I, that we jolly well had to be able to earn our living. You know, in my age group, parents were still legally obliged to supply their daughters either with an education or a dowry. Whether the two friends I've been

staying with now – well, she got both in the end. But for every birthday and Christmas she would get things for her dowry, poor thing. And – sorry. That would not have occurred to my parents.

Because I think that's the other side of it, that in a way, you know, they prepared you, that the expectation is that you can support yourself.

Yes.

And can work, you know, that –

So, we grew up taking that for granted and if we didn't, well, even if we got married, we probably would have carried on with working to some degree.

Because it links into my next question, whether you think being a refugee, whether gender plays a role, you know, first of all of course in your experience but also in the, you know, in the experience of – whether how you think it shaped exile, let's say, or emigration, or remigration.

Well, not so much now but certainly for my age group, you're just that bit more vulnerable anyway. You're vulnerable as an outsider anyway, leave alone in days when equality wasn't anywhere where it's now and it's still not perfect. It makes you a degree or two more vulnerable. Otherwise, I think basically not much of a difference.

Tell me what you mean by that, more vulnerable.

Of being rejected by others.

Or exploited?

That's something I fortunately – well, possibly at Foyles but [laughs] for – but not – fortunately have never experienced. [03:38:00] But I suppose that's because I've – apart

from those few months at Foyles, I've always been in public service. Well, the school was a private school in Marienau but still, it was the public service ethos there.

But you did say that you realised that you went into public service because there was an expectation of other things in the private service –

Well, that was when I realised, I had to get out of teaching. In teaching that wasn't an issue.

No, but in the other thing that was more an issue?

Yes, only by then I'd lived in this country so long that the refugee bit, after I'd been in Stevenage for twenty-two years when I left – when I had to go out of teaching, that apart from when they looked at my funny name and heard the way I pronounced it, people would not really notice and I can very much – it's very – I'd say it's one in a hundred new people who say where are you really from, and otherwise, thanks to growing up in W3 and learning my English in W3, people don't notice. And so, I think at that stage in my late forties when I needed a new job, that wasn't an – that wasn't hardly an issue.

Not the refugee-ness but the gender maybe? I mean you said you preferred public –

Oh, yes, gender would have been a much bigger problem, yes. But that was solvable by making sure I only applied to public service jobs.

Because at that point, what I want to understand, were you aware of then – that there was a different thing between being in a public service –

Oh, by applying to jobs you very soon became aware of it. And the –

Why, the expectation was you had to look a certain way?

Well, and had to be made-up or wear high – well, that's an issue with high heels in airlines to this day, isn't it? And the way, being spoken to in – for the few interviews I got, I – before I

then [laughs] actually got the job at Foyles, it's chaps younger than me and maybe call you Irene [pronounces the English way], that sort of thing, which – well, I suppose nowadays I would even swallow but thirty years ago, that was different, and so being patronised, which I don't like. [03:40:18]

And Irene, why did you stick with – you said you pronounce your name Irene Auerbach [German pronunciation].

Yes.

Why did you stick with that or –

That was probably sheer carelessness. Our parents deliberately chose names for both of us which would be recognisable wherever we fetched up at some stage. When my parents were in Holland, South America was on the cards. And of course, I can – nothing I could do about the Auerbach but I can guess – well done, Frank – he's allowed to touch him. Maybe it happened because in the family I was never called Irene. When I was little, I couldn't say the R. I was called Inni [ph], which is what I was called and so in the family I was always Inni [ph] and even at school or choir, the people who knew me with my sister – because my sister called me Inni [ph] – knew that, so I wasn't really used to saying Irene [German pronunciation] or Irene [English pronunciation] that much. So that was – that's something I've asked myself, that was probably a careless oversight. If – and when I came to Stevenage, people were not sure whether it should be Irene-ee or Irene [English pronunciation] and so that as well, and so I almost automatically said it and I wish now I'd given it more thought. But anyway, another way the cookie crumbled.

Because, you know, most refugees, let's say, would do it the other way around, you know, anglicising their name.

Yeah.

So, it's interesting that you –

Well, the Auerbach –

Not Auerbach, the Irene.

Yeah.

But you –

I've said many times when I've spelt my name for the nineteenth time, saying, I wish I married Mr Smith, [laughs] that would have made it easier. **[03:42:06]**

But it didn't bother you when people said where are you from? But you said now people don't ask you.

Well, hardly, yes. And I very hardly meet new people now anyway in retirement. No, no, that is that comes – also comes under lest it happen again. [Sigh] In – after my mother died, I for thirty-odd – well, till really – sorry, I've been talking so much I'm spitting – till very recently I switched my holidays to going – to doing lost-distance parts in the Alps on my own and largely in the Austrian Alps and sometimes Germany, Germany Alps and sometimes Swiss Alps. But in the German Alps, particularly the Austrian ones, say, in the – if – well, my mother only died in '85 but still, so in the late '80s and in the '90s in the evenings you'd sit at the table and you wouldn't have a table, not in a mountain hut. Do you know mountain huts?

Yeah.

So, they're quite small, they're big tables and everybody shares and that sort of thing. Where are you from? England. How come you speak perfect German? My parents were refugees from Hitler. And that would usually allow me to do the rest of my preparation for the next day in icy silence, absolutely icy silence. And that went on. Then I must have gone to Switzerland for several years running and then I, after a gap I returned to Austria and it came the other way around. Where are you from? England. How come you speak perfect northern

German? [03:44:00] My parents were – had to flee from Hitler. Tell us more. And so that's what I do now, a history lesson on legs, lest it happen again. That they see, this hits ordinary people. And what the people from Gaza are going to say when peace returns to them if it ever does, I shudder to think. Sorry, of course I don't know where you stand on – but [sighs] you just don't know where to stand on anything there, on either side.

So, you – what do you do? So, you walk and you talk? So, is it organised or you just – history on leg – what did you say you call it?

Oh, do you know the Just So Stories by Kipling?

Yes.

The Cat who Always Walked by Himself.

Yes.

That's me. I'm not a groupie.

So, you walk by yourself but you're happy to talk about [inaudible].

Well, I've got the days to myself and I'm happy to talk and particularly now that that's changed because the people who provided the icy silence because they had a conscience or a prejudice or both, they were too old to – they're younger than me of course. I mean I was six when the war ended. If they're still alive, they certainly don't go in mountain huts any – well, I can't go in mountain huts any longer. And – but for the time when they had already vanished but I could still do it, it sounds in the same category as running all those school trips, lest it happen again, see the human side of what wars do. So, if somebody asks me where are you really from, I'm not in the least bit – it's normally South Africa that they guess. Maybe I sound a bit like Geraldine Auerbach [laughs].

Irene, how do you think your refugee experience has impacted your life?

Totally. My sister, I think she would not say that. But for me, totally. [03:46:00] But an awful lot better than Auschwitz. That would have been [laughs] the alternative. And thanks to my foreseeing parents it wasn't alter – it wasn't Auschwitz, so I certainly chose my parents well.

What do you mean by totally?

Well, it's never belonging, "*Denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt*". That is with me, [sighs] well, not possibly even consciously an awful lot of – but being in a fortunate position to be content where I am and –

Yeah, while not fully belonging or –

No.

No.

No, that's just – that's – a German asked me, "*Wo ist Deine Heimat?*" [Where are you at home?]. Is it okay if somebody sits – I don't know what he's sitting on but it's –

It's my jacket. It's fine.

It's getting [laughs] –

Don't worry.

You have to explain it to the dog. [Laughs] I nearly said that would make a picture but black on black would not make a picture.

Yes.

Pardon?

Not belonging.

Yeah. Well, that's just something you learn to live with and that's just – and I learnt to live with is – well, literally from the day we were born and my parents had arrived in Amsterdam three months before my sister was born, so she would have gone to kindergarten not speaking any Dutch and well, having to learn it.

But also, your parents in a way made decisions too, which got them into conflict with their parents, you know. [03:48:00]

[Coughs] Yes, and that of course was before Hitler. Long before Hitler. Yes, Father's never got a chance to sort it out if they'd wanted and my father's mother died- in I think '32. I mean I think when it says [inaudible] I think that's wrong. I think they were ten and eleven. And all those pregnancies plus diabetes. I mean those were the days when you died of diabetes, so she was only in her fifties.

Did your father have any regrets about kind of leaving the family behind or did he ever express any –

No. No, well, he wouldn't say things like they asked for it but as they would not – they did not have the tolerance to develop in the way he wanted to develop, and he was strong enough to do his own thing. That's what he had – he felt he had to do. And no, I don't think he ever had any doubts there. It's just their loss that they couldn't tolerate somebody with different views.

And do you feel you're more tolerant or more sensitive toward, for example, the wars going on today in Ukraine or in Gaza or – because of your experience?

Tolerant? No, aghast. I mean in my lifetime till the Ukraine invasion, despite Cold War and all sorts of things, I remember the Cuban crisis. I'd just stopped – I started working and as I

mentioned, in sight of the Iron Curtain, I remember sitting in a colleague's garden on a slope, looking down on the river Elbe and on the other side they were harvesting and there were more *Vopos* [Volkspolizisten – policemen in the German Democratic Republic] guarding the harvesters than there were actually harvesting. [03:50:02] And the wall could have been only weeks old, it was that recent. And – but even with that, the Cuban crisis ended peacefully. The Berlin Wall came down peacefully, though no – so things have got better and better and better and somehow people in my age group hadn't expected these dreadful backward steps with Ukraine and now – I mean Hamas shouldn't have done what they did but that – sorry, I don't know where you stand personally as a family but I can't help thinking it's an absolute ridiculous overreaction and what it does to the civilian population. I am losing- Israel and – well, Israel has been living off being a dignified victim all those years and they've lost that factor and instead stand accused themselves of things they're doing to civilians. Well, I've been flinching on what happened in the West Bank, ever since the West Bank got adopted, I've been trying to boycott oranges from the West Bank if they're recognisable. But that's child's play with what's happening now. And so, we just didn't expect war to come again. And there were the United Nations tootling away happily to themselves and now totally inefficient. And so – my closest friend is exactly my age and we just – is a Quaker – we just tear our hair at what's happening now. And he's not a refugee, though from a family that did – had refugees stay with them during the war.

Really?

Well, Quakers. Yeah.

Yeah. And he had family – he, in his family, he remembers some refugees? [03:52:00]

Yes. Yeah.

Oh, I know somebody looking for families to interview them, if he has any memories of the refugees.

Oh, yes, he has.

Oh, okay. Well, let's discuss it after the interview.

Yes.

I have colleague who is particularly looking for, you know, host families, yeah.

Yes. No, I mean his parents have long died but you see –

Yeah, yeah, but he's got some memories?

Yes. Oh, yes, very much so. We've talked – we went for a walk last week, we talked, it came up.

Okay. Irene, is there anything else I haven't asked you or anything you would like to add? We've discussed many different things.

I – well, I've no idea [laughs] what is needed. It's – there's always email if I remember something, there's something crucial. But I think you did a jolly good job without notes of –

Well, it's about you and just listening to you and –

No, but you triggered enough to get me to talk. [Laughs] I talk more than I normally talk in a month I suppose now that I'm retired.

I mean is there any message you'd like to give for anyone who will watch this in the future, based on your experiences?

Yes. This "*denn wir haben hier keine bleibende Statt*" is not a death sentence. Make the best of it. Well, of course anybody crossing the Channel in little flimsy boats do the same, they make the best of what – if – try and survive and then try and make your contribution wherever fate puts you. That might be quite a Protestant thing. [Martin] Luther said

something on those lines [sighs] but he said it in a negative way. “*Des Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich Herr Gott zu unseren Zeiten, es ist ja doch kein anderer nicht, der für uns könnte streiten*. No, that is the *dona nobis pacem* [Latin: give us peace]. There is none other who could –

Just repeat it. Just repeat it.

“*Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich*”, grant us peace in Your mercy or “*Oh Gott in unseren Zeiten*”, oh, God in our days, “*es ist ja doch kein anderer nicht*”, there's nobody else, “*der für uns könnte streiten*” who could fight on our behalf. [03:54:11] I'm just rattling off – Heinrich Schütz set it to music. I'm just rattling off the Schütz in my mind. And sorry, I've lost the thread over Schütz. Yes, and everybody stops singing it there but there's a second – *secunda pass* [ph] which Luther wrote and Schütz said but everybody feels un – well, not everybody, many people, feel uneasy that people should be content with where God placed – with their station in life, where God placed them. And which of course can be interpreted for slavery, non – apart from everything else. But for the likes of us it's a – it's not a bad motto. No, slavery, it would certainly not support.

Sort of transience, that one, that nothing is permanent. I mean, you know, the – something like that, that is not –

Yes, that where you are if – I find it very hard, I've got – particularly in Cats Protection, so many friends who've lived here all their lives and I find that so hard to imagine. I mean I'd lived in three countries by the time I was eight, not by choice, it just – it just happened and so I find that very hard to imagine and yet they feel quite fulfilled and probably hardly think about me in that case. And I'm just me and they've known me for a long while but they've not known me long enough to know about that background.

And does your sister feel similar to you or different, in terms of her own identity?

I think it's less of a factor for her. She was so involved in politics but certainly all the eulogies now and whenever she had a round birthday, whatever the local paper said, well,

they had to explain away the fact that she was born in Amsterdam, for starters. [03:56:10] So that means the likes of me couldn't even conceive it with every paper, particularly having come to it as really nothing to do with it. Amsterdam was coincidental, that my parents happened to be – our parents happened to be there. And [sighs] no, contentment is a very important factor and I'm lucky to have –

But do you feel it's a choice, contentment? Because it's something, you know, which comes up in our interviews.

Oh, well, they're – it's the glass full and the – the glass half full and the glass half empty and I suppose I am a glass half full person and it's more than half full, so no complaints. On that hairy [ph] contribution, may- [laughs] helps as well. And I have had a – in one way my sister and I have reacted exactly the same thing. She's been in Hildesheim for yonks and in that house. Well, it's her third place in Hildesheim but for yonks. Once we've got something we like and we feel satisfied with, we jolly well hold tight to it. She's also got – always had cats. So, the cats and the music are things we very much share. But no, I don't think it's that big a factor. I mean if you asked her, she would probably be willing to do a Skype interview with you. If she gets stuck with the English and you – you can switch to German exactly. When – Joe Cronin did it, Skype or telephone, I've forgotten, and that was in English but of course that wouldn't have been quite at the depth you've just been.

Yeah. [03:58:00] Why did he do the interview or why – for his research?

I think for his research, though his research particularly focuses on Danzig, on people from Danzig, but I think that is a sheer coincidence that as a fairly young student somebody from Danzig, or a descendent or somebody from Danzig, approached him with family letters, wanting to write the family history and so he got involved with Danzig. Later when he got too busy then some of the letter transcriptions landed on me.

Oh, I see, so you did some of the transcription.

Yes. Yes. Oh, that's a nice compromise. So, I do the letters, it was fascinating and again because I could read the script. And one couple, he's – he was a radiologist from Berlin and the wife was a member of the Danzig family and they – in the '30s and they kept trying to get out and they tried every – from Ecuador to I don't know what. If I hadn't known there was that they got out, I think it would have been quite harrowing just to do but I knew there was a happy ending to it. But they paid and the pay went to Cats Protection, so everybody gains and nobody loses, which is what – how I like things.

Okay, Irene. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story with us and we're going to look at – if you have any photos or anything.

That's what email's for, yeah.

We can look at that. Thank you so much again.

Yeah. Are you switching off?

Not quite yet.

Oh, I see.

We're sitting a little bit in silence just –

It suits Quakers.

[Pause from 03:48:46 – 04:00:49]

Now. Can you please tell me about this photo?

I guess this was an official photo which my father occasionally needed for newspaper articles or something like that. It was a professional photo.

And when was it taken roughly?

I guess in Hanover in the late '60s, '69, something like that.

So that was his official photo which he used?

Well, an official photo. There are others where he's brandishing his pipe [laughs]. I think my sister's got that one, or one of those, on her wall, brandishing a pipe.

Did he use his Dr. [academic title]?

Yeah.

So, he's Dr. Walter Auerbach?

Well, as Wikipedia rightly said, if my father knew that the Nazis had taken away his PhD, he ignored the fact. I'm far from sure whether he knew. But the thing about the nationality, he did know. Well, we all knew that.

That they took his citizenship away?

Yeah. We had something called a *Nansenpass* [Nansen passport]. **[04:02:00]**

Okay. Thank you.

[Cameraman] Okay, if you can just hold that here.

Just hold it a bit still. Yes, please. Who is in the picture and when was it taken?

It's my parents in the – one of the Engadin lakes in 1971. Upstairs again. I've got this *Reiseausstattung* [travel kit].

Before I open – before you open, one second. Okay, yeah. Yeah, just open it, yeah.

And I – the teddy was- and it's still here upstairs. So that is some contraption, I must – yes, definitely. Sorry, another trip upstairs is needed. So, you'll see my knitting skills of –

So, these are the teddy's clothes, I would assume.

Yes. But I'm just looking for something that was actually made by Charlotte Bondy. No, all that is my output. That is Charlotte Bondy one.

And I can see a photo in there. In the photo.

What photo?

There is a photo in there. No?

Here.

There is a photo, of a teddy bear [laughs].

Oh, that is this – I must have taken it with me on holiday. That's in the Black Forest.

[04:04:00] And that must have been a clothesline. [Laughs] I don't think I've seen that photo for ages. But sorry, I've got to go up and get actual teddy.

Okay, where you – say that – what – say that for us again. One second. Just come here.

Okay, one second. Do we need to stay [inaudible]. Oh, one moment. Oh, my God.

That is the teddy. That is Mary Plain.

One second, one second, one second. Please wait for a second.

I think Malcolm would have kittens [laughs] if you show him that [laughs].

Okay, one second. If you just stay to – this is “meine unbewältigte Vergangenheit”. Say it again when – okay. Wait. Yes, please.

Das ist meine unbewältigte Vergangenheit. [This is my past with which I have not yet come to term.]

So, who is that, please?

That is my teddy, Mary Plain who was made for me by Charlotte Bondy sometime during the war. And the knitwear, [laughs] I hope you admire the elaborateness and the fineness is my handiwork. And in Germany you say *abgelebt* [spent]. It was very furry and a lot of the fur has come – Charlotte Bondy’s trademark was the tongue. All her toys had tongues hanging out and occasionally it came off and then Mary would go back for tongue repairs.

And what is the name of the teddy?

Mary Plain, as in the books.

Mary Plain. So, it’s a female teddy?

It’s definitely a female teddy. I’d forgotten it’s even got underwear [laughs].

And what other clothes does Mary have?

Well, I’m just looking at the things. Well, feel free to rummage, a pre-war *Steiff* [stuffed animal of the Steiff brand], another cat obviously, which I was given by – I think it was a hand-me-down from the Bondys. [04:06:06] He was called *Grünaug* [green eyes] for obvious reasons.

Wow, okay. Let’s – okay. I have a –

And that was another output from Charlotte Bondy, note the trademark, and he's a – so is this. They formed a family. So, Charlotte Bondy did a good line in cats, though she always had dogs. And so, this is made by her. And well, he's Steiff and these two were made by Charlotte Bondy. Now, I'm looking for things, whether I've still got something – yes. That was *Toilettenbeutel* [toiletry bag] which – that was part of the *Reiseausstattung* when we went to Germany.

And who made that? The Reiseausstattung.

That was Frau Bondy. And I'm not – I don't even recognise this. I haven't handled this for ages. She – no, what I was looking for, she had a mackintosh this colour, the same material, with a – for – nearly like a witch's hat.

Oh, yes, Irene, please tell us what you're holding in your hand.

When I was tiny, Mary Plain's books – Mary Plain books were amongst my favourites. I owned two and got the others probably out of Golders Green library. And –

Can you show us the next page?

And so, when I was given this teddy – I never had a proper doll – there was no question that the teddy was female and would be called Mary. [04:08:00]

So, here's the teddy. And that teddy was named after ...?

Mary Plain in the book.

Okay. Do you want to hold Mary for a second?

Oh, I see. I thought you were holding it – yeah.

No, you can give me the book.

Yeah. Mary was made for me by my substitute grandmother, Charlotte Bondy, another refugee in north London.

And when did you get the teddy bear, roughly?

1943, '44, something like that. No, Charlotte made toys professionally.

And was that part of a series of teddy bears?

No, no, my first and only one. And dearly beloved, it went everywhere with me and certainly my sister and my mother had it down to a fine art to watch that I didn't lose it anywhere, if I'd lost it in the tube I would have been disconsolate. And you can tell from her bare patches that she was well-loved.

So, did Mary travel a lot?

Well, she went with – whenever we left the house, I was clutching her. Well, till I came to school of course. But say, if we went shopping.

And there are some clothes, Mary –

When we went to Germany Frau Bondy gave Mary a *Reiseausstattung*. Most of the things I'm afraid seem to have lost – got lost, so most of what you – what she's wearing now, I made as a little one. But that coat is definitely one of Charlotte's.

And it still fits.

Yes. [Laughs] Mary has not grown. There was also a raincoat in – with this o – early plastic but it must have got so sticky that over the years I had to discard it. [04:10:06]

So that was the travel clothes when you went –

To Germany, yes.

To Germany. And also, you made some – maybe tell us about this.

[Laughs] Those identity cards. Yes, and [sighs] I'd forgotten about those. You can take them out and there'd be even more.

So, when did you make those identity cards?

No, no, it's not *Beruf Kronig*, it is *König* at all. [profession is not "misspellt" but King].

Ah, König.

Yes. But for which when – oh, that's for Grünaug, the Steifftier. That is his identity card.

So, tell us about Grünaug.

Grünaug was a present from the Bondys, a Steifftier, so he's historic, he must – he must have been 1932 or something like that. Again, fairly bare for obvious reasons. All the hair got loved-off.

So that was the identity of Grünaug?

Yeah.

And here, if you put Grünaug down, here's another identity card.

That is Mary Plain's. Well, the ID card refers to her as Mary Plain-Auerbach, hyphenated. Oh, she's got a *Netzkarte* [travel] for the *Bundesgebiet* [territory of the Federal Republic of Germany] so that means I must have – *Bundesgebiet* so that must have been 1949 [laughs] or so that I did that. So *Beruf* [profession] here is *König- Hausfrau* [queen- housewife].

And there was also a case. Mary also had a case.

Yes, I think that case, I – oh, it looks – she's even got her photo inside.

Oh, there is a photo here as well.

The case is a bit dusty. What it originally contained, I can't tell. [04:12:04] I painted over it and it's got travel – lots of the travel places that were important to me at the time, Freiburg im Breisgau from Black Forest holidays, München from staying with Uncle Philipp. Oh, that's Lemgo. The Nicolaikirche in Lemgo has got a different church – two steeples and they're different, and London, and Hook of Holland.

So, Hook of Holland, you were –

We entered.

You came through Hook of Holland?

Yes. Oh, yes, Klingeles, that sticker, that was the farmer's family with whom we stayed in the Black Forest on holiday twice, the Klingeles. And of course, that was a world I hadn't encountered yet, real farmers. They were lovely people. And Tegernsee, that's even the shape of the lake where we stayed in 1947, '48, thanks to Onkel Philipp. London, where I'd been and lived. And the Luzern needs explanation. I've forgotten whether it was '50 or '51, possibly even '50, in the Black Forest, they offered coach trips just for a day into Switzerland as it's not really far. And we went on those and that was past Lake Lucerne and that was absolutely lovely. And also, for my sister and me, it – when we had to go through Zürich on those coaches, the first time we saw a town that hadn't been bombed, because of course when we saw London, that jolly well was bombed as well. So, that Luzern figure, Lake Lucerne figures so much, has its reasons.

So those are the travels you took and –

Yes. And Mary always took as well. [04:14:02] And that coat is definitely part of the original outfit.

And is it for you important that you still have Mary here today?

I think so. And if only – I mean what I'm wearing, I made, I started aged four or five with – when my mother first started me on crochet but then on knitting because you couldn't buy anything. If you wanted something like that, you jolly well had to make it yourself. And I obviously didn't expect to have enough of the pink wool for the whole thing, so some blue got mixed in. But it's not just stripes, it's zigzags, so it's Fair Isle. And if my teachers at Henrietta Barnett when – in 1944, something like that, said, she's got full of ideas but not the patience. I think by then I had the patience, if you look at the fineness of that.

It's beautiful. And what's the future for Mary? What do you think should happen to her? Have you got any plans?

No, I haven't. And she's not mentioned in my will, I'm afraid. I'm not quite sure what anybody would want to do.

Thank you so much for – again, Irene, for sharing this and for showing us.

I've forgotten how they – how that existence came up. But anyway, it is very much the link with the Bondys.

Thank you.

Yes, Mary's legs aren't – feet aren't quite the same but why fret about such a detail.

[04:15:53]

[End of transcript]

