AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
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Interview Transcript Title Page

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Interviewee Surname:	Strach
Forename:	Eric
Interviewee Sex:	Male
Interviewee DOB:	21 October 1914
Interviewee POB:	Brno, Austria

Date of Interview:	2 November 2004
Location of Interview:	Liverpool
Name of Interviewer:	Rosalyn Livshin
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THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE

INTERVIEW: 81

NAME: ERIC HUGO STRACH

DATE: 2 NOVEMBER 2004

LOCATION: LIVERPOOL

INTERVIEWER: ROSALYN LIVSHIN

TAPE 1

RL: (Two-shot) I'm interviewing Erich Strach, and the interview is taking place on Tuesday the 2nd of November 2004. The interview is taking place in Liverpool and I am Rosalyn Livshin.

What is your name?

ES: Erich Hugo Strach.

RL: And do you have any other names?

ES: No. No.

RL: Do you have a Hebrew name?

ES: Oh yes. Avraham… Wait a minute. Avraham Moshe Ben Betzalel Halevi. Halevi. Yes.

RL: And where were you born?

ES: I was born in Brno or it's better known as Brünn, the capital of Moravia, in, in well, it wasn't Czechoslovakia, because at that time, in 1914, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So it was all in German, and only documents were in German, partly in German partly Czech. So I was born in Brno.

RL: And on what date?

ES: On the 21st of October 1914. Yes.

RL: Where were your parents from?

ES: My father was also born in Brno, but later…. And my mother
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was born in Austerlitz, it was well-known, only 20 kilometres

East from Brno. And my maternal grandparents lived in Austerlitz. Only later I found out that my father's ancestry also stemmed from Austerlitz. So we have special affection with Austerlitz because my grandparents lived there and I went as a boy very often over there and even right to the end of the times I was in Czechoslovakia, I often spent time with them.

RL: What do you remember about your grandparents?

ES: Well my grandparents, my maternal grandparents, they were country people. Slavkov or Austerlitz is only a small town, and most people know each other, and my grandfather was a cattle dealer, and I remember going out with him to market, to buy or sell cows, and I learnt a lot from it. And at that time of course we didn't use cars, that is well known, and that would have been when I was six or seven years old. And that was a terrible luxury which only a few people could afford. He walked to market and it meant getting up very early in the morning to go to market, and I went with him. And this is a wonderful memory I have, how he told me stories. And that was a time also when the first Crystal set of a radio came out and we had one, and we could hear as far back as Brno, and he said: 'I just don't understand, if I speak here, and I can also hear somebody speaking from Brno. How is it possible?' It was hard to explain but it was wonderful. And the holidays I had with my grandparents were fantastic. They're happy memories, they were so nice. Very often my family went over to Austerlitz just for the day, and I remember Sunday we came there and had a good meal, a good country meal, and I remember my grandfather reciting the Broche before and after the meal. They were quite religious, if not ultra-orthodox, but they kept… Now their name, my mother's maiden name was Bachrich, now I'm very interested where this name Bachrich comes from. But there is a small town on the Rhine in Germany called Bacharach. And I think that this name that my parents originated there, although I tried to find traces without success, but I'm sure…. but Heinrich Heine wrote the story of the Jews of Bacharach, the Rabbi of Bacharach, where at the… I don't know when it was, in the 18th century, there was a pogrom that planted a dead child at Seder time under the table. And they accused the Jews having needed their blood for the Seder. Of course that's all fiction but it gave rise to anti-Semitism and a lot of people emigrated then. And I think they found the way to the Austro Hungarian monarchy and settled in Austerlitz. That's my grandfather.

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Now my father's parents, they lived in Brno. I have nice memories of my grandfather Strach. And he was, he taught me how to fold a paper to make a bird out of it, and so on, and this sticks in my mind. I taught my children the same, and it went on. And there, he sadly died in 1920, 24, something like this. But my grandmother came to live with us right through, until I left. And actually she only died in 1939 under the occupation by the Germans.

RL: What did your grandfather do for a living? Your grandfather's father. What was his occupation?

ES: He had an umbrella shop. And umbrella shop. And eventually he went into partnership with my father. And I've got a picture of the umbrella shop where it says Adolph Strach and Cornelius Strach. Adolf Strach that was my grandfather, Cornelius my father. And yes, that's very interesting. We had… Grandmother lived with us and she had a special relationship to me. [Laughs]. She, for example, she gave me a ring, which is really a ladies' ring with a big diamond. She said 'You should have it'. I said 'what about my sister?' She said 'No, I want you to have it.' And I got it. And it preserved it, I gave it now to my daughter-in-law.

RL: What kind of religious upbringing did your father have?

ES: Well, that's interesting. He was again, religious and so my mother as well, and we had a Kosher household. And I only suspect that in the early, before I was born, in their early life, they lapsed. Because when I was eight months old, June 15, I had a serious abdominal operation, for what is called intususeption and in 1915 that well also they knew how to operation and I now had chloroform, that's what they tell me. And it was touch and go whether I'd survive and my parents always told me they went up and down the corridor, and prayed, and they said 'If my son survives we become again religious', well you know I did survive obviously [Laughs] and they became religious, and I never got… food was Kosher, it wasn't ultra-religious but we went to Shul, and I got Barmitzvah and all that. So this is linked. And in fact later, when I was a bigger boy, they told me this story, and that on the 21st of June they considered it was my second birthday and a good excuse to get more presents.

RL: How many siblings did your father have? How many brothers and sisters?

ES: Well, my father had four brothers and sisters. Uncles,
Tape 1: 10 minutes 43 seconds

and… you know. No, sorry, ancestry… my grandfather. My father just had one brother called Hugo. And he died shortly before I was born and to his memory they gave me his name, that's why I'm Erich Hugo Strach. And he died of appendicitis they tell me. These days. Yes.

RL: But on your mother's side, how many, what sisters did your mother have?

ES: Yes. There were four. Uncle Leo was the eldest, he lived in, by the time I got to know him, he lived in Germany, and then comes my mother the next and Uncle Paul, he became a doctor, a special… a dermatologist, and he had his surgery very near to our house, in Brno. And again, I don't know how it was, when I grew up he had a special affinity with me. He was very nonchalant, you know, forms doesn't exit, but he was a good heart. For example my father was rather strict, and when he told me off, you know, and my Uncle Paul came 'What's that, why do you tell him off?! Oh leave him alone, he's only a boy!' He always stood up for me. So that's a happy memory. And then I followed his footsteps and I became a doctor. [Laughs] Studied medicine.

It's interesting to know how I got interested in medicine. When I was fourteen or fifteen, I wanted to do chemistry, and then in our class we had a little hunchback, a lovely boy, everybody loved him. And he could climb a tree like an ape. And on a school outing he climbed a tree and he fell. And ooh, they all were there and his leg was bleeding. And I don't know why, I went forward to him, took a clean hankie and bandaged him. And he said: - "Eric! You would be a good doctor you know." And you know that must have stuck in my subconscious mind, and I became a doctor. [Laughs].

RL: Now just going back to your mother's family you say there were four, four altogether.

ES: Yes, there was the youngest was Auntie Hilda, and she was a wonderful woman. They originally lived in… went to live in Vienna, and we often went to Vienna and she had two daughters, Resie, and her, Therese, Resie, Therese. And well we were very close to them. Her husband was a strange man, but he was a bank clerk, and during the bad economic years the bank went putsch, and he went, he was without a job, and then he became a traveller and as a traveller he was away for many many months, so my auntie was on her own. So after my grandfather or her father died in Austerlitz he still had business to be looked after, the cattle dealer, and she came over to Austerlitz to the funeral, and I was there as well, and she took over the

Tape 1: 15 minutes 0 seconds

business. For a woman to do that is absolutely fantastic. And she became very popular in Austerlitz. Ah. I don't want to anticipate but I want to say that now, because she was a wonderful woman and so were her children. Her child, her eldest daughter in 1938 was a medical student, the youngest daughter was a seamstress. Anyway, she, he, more or less left her and she got, he became, her husband Alex left her, and became a stray, and she remarried. She married out, a fellow called Micha Badurer. And he was very good to her. Especially now she was in a mixed marriage but her children were fully Jewish, so when it came to the war and the restriction, there were, they were not allowed to go to school. <u>Litzie</u> was not allowed to go to University. And they heard of the possibility of a legal transport to Palestine, as it was called then, and my aunt Hilda said "What, two young girls, one eighteen, one sixteen or seventeen, you'll never do this." Anyway, they, she persuaded them to stay, stay here in the country, people look after us. When the thing came, the girl had to go to Theresien and to Auschwitz and they perished. And she blamed herself for not letting them go to Palestine as they wanted to. They would have had a chance to survive, and she never lived down to it. Well when we… Oh, I'm talking now after the war. I'm anticipating. Well, she was very popular in the country. And in the country you could get food and many other things, and she gave… she sent parcels to my parents, of course to her children first, to Auschwitz. You could still send parcels to Auschwitz. Amazing. And to, to particular to Theresien. And that helped her to survive, but not her children. Yes. But I'm out of chronology now.

RL: While we're talking about this. What happened to your mother's brothers? The two brothers, what happened to them with the war?

ES: Whilst I'm at it, well, er, my uncle Paul, he sent, he was quite well off, he had a nice villa in Brno, liked it there, often went with him, to him, and he sent his children, his wife and children to England, when it was possible, so they came here. He himself didn't want to go, or couldn't go. He carried on working as a doctor but eventually they caught up with him and he had to go to Theresien, and I know that he was, well, he, he eventually had to go to Auschwitz and didn't return. Yes. And his two boys, of course being in England at that time, one of them became a doctor, and the other emigrated to South Africa and married there. Both already died. They were rather young, but Peter was very close to me, again.

RL: And your mother's other brother?

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ES: The other brother. I'm afraid that I was about ten years old when he committed suicide. But his wife and daughter, again, they couldn't carry on in Germany so they came over to us to Prague and to Brno, and we helped them. And I know a story. His daughter, they had a daughter called Gertie, and a son called Hansie, Hansie as we called him, he's now Chanan, and Hansie, they both went to, they lived with us, but I remember when they came almost penniless to us. And Uncle Paul as well. And he said "Bring Gertie…" he said to me "Bring Gertie to the surgery". So I didn't know what it was. He was very abrupt. But a heart of gold. She went to the surgery. He said "Look here, a bundle of money". And she says… "Get out get out get out!" He can't be accepting a thanks. She was in tears. She couldn't say thank you. And I looked after her and that's Gertie. Now Gertie… his two children, they both went to, went through concentration camps. I translated his memoirs, of his wartime memoirs and I started in 1989, to translate it and it was so near to my heart, I couldn't do more than one page on one day or perhaps a bit longer, it was a copy… He lived then in Israel and he still lives there. We often see him. We went there and he came here and so on. And…

RL: Did they all survive? Did all three survive?

ES: Yes, they both, both children, Gertie and he survived. Gertie she married a doctor Kafka and they came to live in Germany. Ah that's a… He wanted, they actually wanted to come to England. First he became a consultant cardiologist in Prague, but under Dubcek, when the liberalisation started, he was asked to recant that he supported Dubcek, after Dubcek, and he couldn't do it. They said that's perfectly alright but of course you can't teach, in the teaching hospitals, we will get you a job elsewhere. So he knew what it meant, then he fled the Communist Regime and came over here. We tried to get a job here, but he would have had to do his exams again, at the age of sixty. So he went… eventually he went to Germany, where doctors were badly wanted. The last place I would have gone. But necessity was. They went to Germany. And we went to see them there, and the first time in his life he was able to afford a car. That was under the Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia as it was then. And… Yes. Unfortunately Gertie died three years ago. We went also to the funeral. And they lost also one daughter and she's lying there in the German cemetery, next to him.

RL: What kind of education did your parents have?

ES: Education. I think nothing special, nothing special. I don't know about my father. I couldn't say that. But they did

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well in the business, and they managed to have this large house in the centre of Brno. The shop has done well. They had a second shop, an umbrella shop in Prague. So when I was studying in Prague, they often came to see me, and I helped out in the shop as well. And my mother, I don't know, nothing special, but she was a driving force in our family. Well, I lost my chronology. Can I go back to the beginning?

RL: Yes.

ES: Well, as I said I was born in Brno, I studied in… I went to a Jewish Gymnasium in Brno and had many friends there, and was very happy there and after my Abitur, or Matura as they used to call, I wanted to go to University, but in Prague, not in Brno. You see Brno was bilingual. German and Czech). Our household was mainly German. My grandmother spoke German but of course they spoke Czech as well. They were really bilingual. I preferred German, I was more fluent in German because even the Jewish school, was taught in German. We had Czech of course, we learned Czech, and well, regarding my religious upbringing, I was, I was somehow left out, simply because my parents thought I was taught religion in my Jewish school, in my Jewish Gymnasium. But I didn't go to Cheder. Well I'm sure my father went to Cheder because when, after he became Frum again, he laid tephillin every morning, and he was very religious. So I went to Prague to study medicine, and towards the end of my studies I was already heard, aware of what's happening with the Nazis. Already the Nazi movement was in Prague as well. And we were bothered by the Sudeten, by the Sudeten

Germans. And of course the Czechs were very much against the Sudeten. And if they heard anyone speaking German they were furious, you know. So I remember one time when my aunt Hilda's husband Alex, who became a stray, he was found, he was in Austria and he was persecuted and he crossed the border illegally into Czechoslovakia, and we were, I was then in Brno, and my goodness me, he came up bruised, dishevelled, hungry, filthy. He came to our house, and we asked him. Well, they beat him up, both the Germans and the Czechs, because he was an illegal immigrant. Then my aunt Hilda came of course, wanted to look after him, and they would, he wouldn't get permission to stay in Czechoslovakia. It was… that was the first time I had seen first hand the result of the Nazis what they were doing. And it was 1936 or so. Then of course he became a stray and she remarried, I said that earlier.

RL: Can I ask you, just going back to your parents, how did they meet, do you know how that came about?

ES: To be honest I don't know. I don't know. But surely it
Tape 1: 29 minutes 7 seconds

must be through Austerlitz, because my, my, father often went to Austerlitz, with my parents, later on, but he had friends there, but later on I found out that an old aunt of mine, actually his aunt by marriage, also came from Austerlitz. So Austerlitz was a breeding ground for Jews. But I don't know how they met but Austerlitz I'm sure comes in. And very interesting, I'm anticipating again, very recently, in about 1998, yes, 98, we went there to Austerlitz and a friend of mine, who was cleverer than I, he looked at the old cemetery and he found two tombstones over there, where it says er Isaac and Sarah Strach. These were my great grandparents. So it's proof there were, that he also came, my father also has roots in Austerlitz, and that was wonderful. I had them re-erected, and they are standing proud now, as real…. It was wonderful. But again, I anticipated.

RL: When did your parents marry?

ES: They married in 19…. Oh my goodness me. Well, yes, it must be about 1911, you see, because I know the first child died at one month old. Alice. And with my parents we often went to the Brno cemetery and to her little gravestone, and it stands there today. I had it cleaned up, you know. It's wonderful. And I found it without any difficulty. My parents have no grave.

RL: and how many children are there in your family?

ES: Ah. My sister Ilse, who was born 1913, and I was born in 1914, 18 months after her. That's it, and so I grew up with my sister, we're very close, yes.

RL: What memories do you have of childhood at home, what kind of memories do you have, what's your earliest memory?

ES: Earliest memory. Before we lived in this house, one of the earliest memories was when I was told off as a child, for being naughty. And they said 'you must stand in the corner as a punishment'. And I said I don't mind, it's nice and warm near the stove there, and they all laughed. But what is not so, what is more serious is I remember when there were, there was unrest, people in the streets, shouting. There was, I think there was either a Communist uprising, or whatever, I don't know. It was certainly during the war, and I remember my grandmother Strach who lived with us then, to say "Eric quickly eat, before the Russians come". That was sort of a… they feared the Russians would come and would take everything away. At that time they feared the Russians more than the Germans. These are my earliest memories.

Tape 1: 33 minutes 2 seconds

RL: What happened to your father during the First World War?

ES: Well he joined the Austrian army. And we always thought, he became a sergeant, and he, I thought he would, they would take this in account, that he fought really for Germany. Not a bit of it. Not a bit of it. But throughout my first four years of life I saw my father only very, very rarely. And all I remember when war was over, he came home and he, I was a late speaker, I didn't speak much. And he thought 'Oh, a dead loss'. And my mother of course knew me and she always protected me but I had a very close relationship with my parents. When I did my Abitur, and then particularly when I studied medicine they were very proud. I only wish they could see me here. What I have achieved here. They would have been very proud. Yes. Sorry.

RL: And did your father ever tell you any stories from the First World War? Did he ever tell you what kind of things he'd done?

ES: Yes. One story he told me. He was always given, saying his morning prayer when he got up in the morning, even in the army. And he, it was a horrible day, and he could see the sun rising and it was to him a good sign that he would survive the war. Because they were killed right left and centre. And he said 'This is the sun of Austerlitz'. And later he meant also my mother. She was also born in Austerlitz, he called her: 'You are my sun of Austerlitz'. That was Napoleon's expression when he started losing battles. He said 'Where is the sun of Austerlitz?' So that is, is really an experience for him and a symbol, a symbol of beauty, efficiency, a symbol of happiness and peace.

RL: Can you describe your home in Brno?

ES: Can I remember?

RL: Can you describe your home?

ES: Yes, in the house, yes. Very well. It was a big flat. There were four other tenants, one below us. They were called *Vryzka*. A doctor, Doctor Freundlich, above, who became our family doctor, a wonderful man. And some other people above. There were four stories, and there was a cellar. And of course at the bottom of the house was my father's shop of umbrellas and he also had a umbrella factory, a small umbrella factory. They had one workman who did the rough work, the metal work, and many seamstresses. And he manufactured the umbrellas. Later on, when I was already a medical student, it was taken

Tape 1: 37 minutes 16 seconds

over by Italian, [Inaudible] wasn't there but the trade, they were producing umbrellas much cheaper than my father could produce it, you know. So, but he still carried on doing the repair of umbrellas and he insisted that I learn it. And I became what do you call, I was apprentice to the man who, the technician, Mr *Kujatko*. And again, I liked him very much and he liked me.

And I learned a lot of the mechanical things I learned to do with my hands from him. And I remember one thing, I was only six or seven, no strength in my hand. And he cut the wire like anything. And he told me: 'You cut the wire', so I took it… 'It doesn't work'. He said: 'Look. Spit on the back of your hand and then do it'. And it worked! That's psychology. If you really want to do something, it comes then. I remember this. And it's interesting. And I became apprentice and I got a certificate of being an umbrella manufacturer, worker. He said you never know, you may need it.

RL: How did your father get into that trade?

ES: Through his father. Grandfather Adolf. He first had it. And then they had it together, and eventually, of course when my grandfather died he was a solo. And the same with the house. He couldn't build the house, but he built it with his uncle Moritz who was the brother of my grandfather Strach. And eventually, it shows here in this document, he bought Uncle Moritz's share, and he began solo. Of course, that was 'Aha', he had a big position in Brno, Householder, 'he's a householder', which is quite something. At school, at school they said 'Oh Householder's son, you're right.'

RL: And did he own the whole block, or was it just his apartment?

ES: Yes we had I think, really, dining room, salon, and three bedrooms and one bedroom was where my grandmother lived, one for my parents, and one for the children, my sister and I. And I know when we grew up we had a curtain between the two, for some privacy. Ah.

RL: So he owned just that one apartment?

ES: Yes, one apartment.

RL: After the war when we went to Brno again, after the communist regime, I managed in 1989, in 1990 we went back, and looked at it. It was still standing. The house, a beautiful house, ornamented, frescoes on the side, you know. Oh. They don't build houses like this again these days.

Tape 1: 40 minutes 58 seconds

RL: Did you mother have help in the house, did she have a maid, or help, your mother?

ES: Yes. Good question. We had at one time, when I was small, we had two, the cook and the maid. The cook, they lived in the house, they were very good. I remember the household when my mother, in the morning the cook came over, they worked out the menu, what we were having for lunch. And she knew my foibles, what I liked best, and so she did things for what I wanted, and the maid as well, they were very good. And in addition we had a nurse, a nurse to look after the children. Both my parents were working, you know. My mother worked in the shop as well as my father. My father often travelled to Prague to other shops. But when we were small we had a maid. As it is, her name was Tilde, Matilda, but we called her Tilde and we also called her Titska, as a diminutive you know. She was very nice, very good. She became almost one of the family. And when we went on holiday she came with us. Of course that was in our early days, not later on. But she was German. She and her parents live in the Sudetenland, right on the Northern Border with Germany and they were so good, they even invited us to come there and of course they wanted to give us pork to eat, and we said ‘we don’t eat it’ and they tried to entice us for fun. They tried it out but we wouldn’t have any. They were very good. Her father was the director of a paper factory, in Hansdorf it’s called and there was of course paper galore. He gave us paper to draw, and colours, you know. It was very happy times there. Of course I often wondered what happened to her as a German I don’t think she could have been a Nazi, or even a sympathiser, because she was very well treated by my parents. And she really felt like a family, we treated her like family. But I have no idea, couldn’t trace her, what happened to her.

RL: How big a Jewish community was there in Brno?

ES: Yes, quite a big, I can’t tell you the numbers. I’m very bad at figures, but there were three synagogues. A big synagogue, you know, it was really quite something. Architecturally I don’t know who built it, I think a Viennese architect. But we went to this big synagogue. We called it a big Shul. And then there was a little Shul, and there was also an orthodox one. So there was quite an active community. And my father was very active in the Jewish community. And…

RL: Do you know what he did? In what way?

ES: I honestly don’t know. I honestly don’t know, because I think he gave it up later on because he was travelling a lot.
Tape 1: 45 minutes 7 seconds

He even had a branch shop in Baden, near Vienna, so we often went to Vienna as well. But coming back to my early days, whilst we had one, whilst I was studying medicine, my school friend and I had a holiday in France. I should say his parents were orthodox. They wouldn’t let him go to a University although he of course wanted to study economics. They were furriers. And he said ‘You be a furrier’. And his relations in Paris, named *Kwarratschtein,* they, he became, they taught him about furrier business. And he was very cross that his parents wouldn’t let him study whilst I was studying. Anyway we had a holiday there. And we went to Royan, in, in the South, on the West Coast in the South of France. And we met a French family whom we became very friendly with. And that, when I was a student, of course, the girl fell in love with him and he with her, and he eventually she came to see him in Prague but his parents were so orthodox, they wouldn’t hear of her. So I had to look after her whilst he was working. Anyway she went back then to France. He emigrated to Israel. Was with difficulty. But I studied medicine and kept in touch with the French family and then after I qualified they invited me to come to France for a holiday. Then it was 38, 1938, there was already the fear of war. And they hired or bought, I don’t know which, a lovely cottage in the countryside near Dreux. ‘We have a lovely place, you come and stay with us for a fortnight’. So I went. But during that fortnight the Munich Agreement was signed and I wanted to go back home, and my father and mother bombarded me with letters with phone calls: ‘Don’t come back!’ I said “I have no work permit, I’m a visitor here, I want to work as a doctor”. Ah. But they said over the phone: “You will soon find work”. And I know what he meant. He knew war was looming. And that will mean that doctors will be wanted. So I stayed in France. And the French people they were, Nantes, was their name, they were marvellous. They said look, if your parents don’t want you to come back, you must stay here. We are not rich, but the French say we always have enough food to share, and so they did. And eventually there was a general mobilisation, and their workmen who ran… they had a little cinema in the North, in a place called Drancy, which had a severe meaning later on and they didn’t know that then, but in Drancy they had this little cinema, Trianon, and he, they would have had to close the cinema. I said 'Look Gaston, teach me how to do the projection. I'll do it. I could sort of repay a debt which I owed them. And I did it. I did it for a fortnight and the cinema kept on going so they didn't lose anything through it. I am very proud of having done it.

Also Monsieur Nantes, he was an invalid of the First World War, he couldn't drive, he had a bad leg and there was no one to drive, and I drove the car. Because he had to go to Paris

Tape 1: 50 minutes 3 seconds

to get the films, and you know it was all… printers and all that you know. So I did the work of Gaston for about a fortnight. Then he was sent back, you know it was only a scare, it was after Munich, and with this, the fact that they invited me to come to France really saved my life and they insisted that I stayed there. What did I do then in France? Well I went as a visitor to various hospitals. They were very nice to me but it was not hands on. I went to various hospitals, I managed to help them with driving the car, because by then the…. And when… I did a course on physiotherapy to get another degree, because I thought it might become useful, but that wasn't right my time, I was not really fulfilled. Although I was very happy to be with the family. They introduced me to their extended family took to me, I don't know why. And when war broke out, Oh wrong. Sorry. When Czechoslovakia was occupied on the 15th of March 1939, there was another mobilisation. But this time it was serious. And I wanted to join the, I enlisted to join the Czech Army, the Czechoslovak Army in exile, so I enlisted, but they wouldn't send for me. Actually I mixed it up. Six months earlier I enlisted, after Munich. And by the time war broke out, no word to join. I wanted to join the army. I said oh blow it. I went to the French recruiting office in Dreux. And offered my services. So I came there very proud and the colonel who was sitting there in this room, sitting there in this room. He said 'I don't know, I don't think I can do that, we can't. You come from Czechoslovakia, which is occupied by Germany. I'm afraid I have to arrest you.' I said: "Here, I come to offer my services and you arrest me!"
"-Yes as an enemy alien." "Oooh gosh what have I done!?" So I said yes well, so, what be must be. I had nothing on me. Not even my toothbrush. I brought them in the little cottage… which they borrowed. And I went there. 'You give me the word of honour that you come back at three o'clock. So I gave him the word of honour. I told them. And he gave me a marvellous letter Monsieur Nantes. '*Les mutilés de guerre'* (The war invalids…), for the First World War, he granted for me that he's known me a long time, and Jewish and I'm certainly not a Nazi sympathiser of any sort. Anyway, so I went with my toothbrush and my main belongings there… When I entered even the guard on the wall he said 'Yes, the colonel is expecting you'. I said "ooh what a reception" and I went there: 'I've come to be arrested'. The colonel, as soon as I opened the door: he stood up 'Monsieur Strach!' Docteur Strach! I must give you my apologies. Whilst you were away, I rang up Paris. And since you come from Brno, and not from Sudetenland you are not an enemy alien, you are free. '-Ah, thank God for that'. – 'But I'm sorry I gave you a fright. What can I do for you?' 'What can you do? Well I want to join the French Army.' 'I'm

Tape 1: 54 minutes 51 seconds

afraid that's impossible.' I said: 'Look, I'm a doctor, qualified, but I can't do any medical work'. –'Oh that's no problem. He picks up the phone, rings up the local sanatorium, and speaks to Monsieur *Barailler*, the doctor in charge, and says 'could you do with a young doctor, a young Czech doctor? Alright, alright.' And so instead of being arrested, I went to the sanatorium in Dreux. And that is a new chapter. For the first time I could do some medical work. Also, tuberculosis wasn't my, one of my specialty, but I was a generalist, I had no specialty as it was at that time, or except, I knew I wanted to be a surgeon. It doesn't matter. I did what I could and it was a marvellous community there, they accepted me in this large hospital. I was given a bicycle, with duties other than hospital duty in the one hospital in town, in the outpatient department and there also a first aid post and the army said I must use the bicycle in the first aid post. So I soon asserted myself being more diligent that the French doctors. It's always the case you know, there is was some jealousy going on, but still, I did my work and I had lots of good friends there, and in particular in their outpatients department. There were people coming in, who needed attention, babies. I learnt how to look after babies, feeding. And I wanted the nurses… we had no scales to weigh them so I said we must weigh them. That is the best way of monitoring the progress of tiny babies. I tell you what. Go to the maternity department and they have a scale. So I did. And they had a scale. And there was a young midwife there, called Andrée Monteil. It's amazing how many babies came to be weighed. We became friends, and she was, she came from Paris and did her work there. I never knew young midwives, they were all women. But she was young and very pleasant. We had nothing serious but we did bicycle rides together.

RL: Well this film is about to end so we'll just stop.

End of tape.

TAPE 2

RL: This is the interview with Eric Strach, and it's Tape 2.
You were just telling me a story Eric about your time in France.

ES: Yes. Well, I did some work in other hospitals as well as in the sanatorium and particularly at the time when Belgium and Holland were invaded by Germany and even Northern France. There were refugees streaming south and many went through Dreux. So I went round with a sack of medicine whilst they were all assembled in the main square, and I gave medical help
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wherever I could. But at that time strange enough something happened. I was working in the other hospital in town. And out of the blue, I got… we were all in the yard, the hospital yard, it was a lovely evening sky, clear, blue, and I saw little puffs of smoke in the air, no air raid, no idea what it was, but there was a doctor who had fought previously in the Spanish Civil war, and he told us 'Everybody lie down, an air attack!'. And really I lay down next to a huge a tree, and a moment later the earth shook, they bombed Dreux. Oh my goodness! And we could see smoke coming from the town, and things on fire, and nothing happened to the hospital where I was. But I knew what I had to do. I had to take my bicycle and had to go to the First Aid post. That was my duty. When I went there, it was just a rubble of stones, it was near the hospital, and the hospital had a direct hit. I should say, at that time I already had my papers to join the Czechoslovak army in the South of France. And just before the air raid, Andrée, this young midwife came to my hospital to take leave, wished me well, and I said 'well stay a bit longer it's a lovely evening.' She said 'I can't. I've got a woman in labour, I must go back.' So after a few minutes she went back. And of course then the air raid came. And the Maternity Hospital got a direct hit. Mothers in labour, women, children, babies and the staff were injured and died. And I later learned that Andrée was killed and died. Ah. What a tragedy.

RL: Now I know that you've got quite a lot to tell me about this period, but I wanted to ask you a few more questions on your early life in Brno, even before you left for University. I'll just take you through a few of the things that I wanted to cover. First of all in Brno, how did you get on with the non-Jewish neighbours?

ES: Well in the shop for example, it was no difficulty. They were all friendly, they were all very supportive, and but on the way to school we had to pass a German school, a German gymnasium as we call it, a secondary school, grammar school. Ours was a Jewish grammar school, but we had to pass. I just didn't… we were really keeping apart, but I could hear them shouting 'Jew, Jew! Dirty Jew!' But somehow it didn't come to any frictions. But it was sort of in the background, keep away. And as it is, my mother was very friendly with Mrs *Gumnitz*, who was a widow, her dear father… her husband was Jewish, but by the time she came to us, he had died. But they had a son called Hans. And Hans went to this German school. When we were little children I played with Hans we were very friendly. He was half-Jewish but it didn't make the slightest difference to us, we were just children, like children are.

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And on a school outing, we had to wait for a train in a place called Blansko, on the way back. And I could see on the platform going the other way, there was a crowd of the other school, the German school. And they were shouting abuse at us. And do you know who the ringleader was? My friend Hans. My goodness me. What happened to Hans? He was besotted with Hitlerism, with Nazism. I have not heard from him since. But after the war, when I came back to Brno, I met his mother. She was of course a widow, she lived in a nice house and she saw somebody at the gate, and she thought it was her son coming, and she recognised it's me, she recognised… 'Oh Eric, what happened? You know Hans was so besotted with the Nazis. He joined the Force, the Army, the Nazi Army, and being half Jewish they used him as cannon fodder on the Russian Front, on the first day they sent him to the front and he was killed outright.' With tears in the eyes: 'I thought it was him coming. I'm glad you are here.' So. So that's what happened. Even a half Jew can be besotted by the Nazi.

RL: How strong was the German influence, and the Nazi influence, in your part of, of Czekos… well, of Brno let's say.

ES: I didn't quite get the question.

RL: How strong was the German influence?

ES: Well Brno, although not in the Sudentenland, had a 20 percent German population, who were declared to be German. And I know that for example there was under the Czechoslovak Democratic Republic the minorities get full cultural and political freedom. For example the big Opera House in Brno was mainly Czech, but three days a week for German, belonged to the Germans. And I went to the performances, my parents had a season ticket, but when it was Opera they wanted me to go, and it interested them more, but interested me very much, influenced my musical thing. But just to say there was absolute freedom for the Germans. But during the war, they were really taking the upper hand. I told you about the synagogue. The beautiful synagogue where I was Barmitzvahed. After the war, first time I went back to Brno, I wanted to see the synagogue. And Margaret and I… it was her first visit to Czechoslovakia. Of course I wanted to show her. So I took a taxi. He said I don't know where it is. I said 'Oh I know the way by heart. Go this way, under the bridge there.' When we arrived, it was a new estate! Buildings, with people living there. No trace of a synagogue. I then learned that the synagogue was put on fire, was demolished on the day the Germans marched into Brno.

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And it is obvious that the troops, the German troops didn't do it. They didn't know where… by the Sudeten Germans, by one of the twenty percent who burnt the synagogue. Does this answer your question?

RL: Did you belong to any clubs, or to any youth groups as a child?

ES: Yes, very much so. I was in Maccabi. Maccabi Sports club. I hear that it still exists now in a diminutive form, but we played tennis, swimming, running, jumping, and all that you know, and I was quite active in it, and later on. Mainly my main favourite sport was tennis. So. Any other group? Yes, we had a group, a semi political boys' group, you know, and we met every so often, and I remember I brought always the tea, or the coffee, and was the official spirit burner to give them a drink, you know.

RL: So what is that? You said semi political. In what way?

ES: Well it was more, I think it was slightly lefty, you know. Something, yes, yes, but not very much. I didn't go for long. I remember only snippets of it. But Maccabi was the main organisation I belonged to.

RL: Were your family interested in Zionism at all?

ES: Sorry?

RL: Zionism, Zionism. Zion.

ES: Zionism! Yes, oh yes, yes. Oh yes. As I said my father was quite active at one time, but somehow he lapsed. I don't know why. I think there were some personal difficulties with other people. So when I was older it wasn't really in the foreground. But I even found a book where there's a picture of the, of a Zionist organisation. My father was on the picture, you know, he was on the committee. But I know he stopped it because there were personal differences. It always happens, or sometimes happens. That's all I can tell you.

RL: How aware were you of what was going on in Germany. How politically aware were you of what was going on elsewhere?

ES: Yes, well, in the early days, while I was still at school, I vividly remember Weizmann coming to visit the Jewish school in Brno. Oh that was a great occasion. And we all knew about him and what he tried to do and how he… Yes, but otherwise, very little. Yes.

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RL: What about what was going on in Germany, with Hitler?

ES: Oh yes when Hitler got the power in Germany we were glued to the radio and in fact his speeches, the government; the Czech government knew that his speeches were heard all over Europe. And it was even on the Czech radio, to make it easier for them. Well, he was hypnotic. I myself I felt somehow the, being attracted by his speeches. He hypnotised, he was a mass psychologist. And that's what happened. Even to me, and I was dead against him. I could feel the elevation; now what would a German feel? Yes, and there were big rallies, and I went to Austria, and nearby there was a rally of the Nazis, and we kept well away from that. And but on the other hand we did, after our Matura, we did a holiday travelling to Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. That's hitchhiking and we met quite a number of other people there. And I remember particularly one group, where there were Germans and French, and symbolically, we all had knives, and put them in this wall: There must not be a war. They were all dead against. What help it was. But the spirit was there. Yes.

RL: And when you went to University in Prague, how did you get on there with the other students?

ES: Yes. Well in the University you moved about in cliques. We stuck together as Jewish students. There were, Germans were there who stuck together and strange enough I was a lookalike of another German. A girl came across to me and said 'Are we going out tonight?' I said well… Then she realised it was a lookalike. Anyhow we were separate. Yet we went to a concert, where Ma Vlast, 'My Country', was played by the Philharmonic. And you know, 'My country, very, very Czech nationalistic, but the music is heavenly. I noticed some of the Germans were there, the Nazis, and they were enthused by the music. And they even came to me: 'Isn't that a wonderful music?' Anyhow, music is international, like love. Like Medicine, and like Astronomy as well. It's international.

RL: Did you ever come across any trouble, any anti-Semitism at the University?

ES: No. We didn't have any trouble. We kept away from them really, and they kept away from us. And I think all they wanted is to do their degree, their work, their exams and all that. There are things that were said that one of them, of the Professors was anti-Semitic, the other was Jewish. We had an excellent Jewish Professor of Histology, who is absolutely marvellous, and they all adored him, even the Nazis. Because he could teach, he could put across. There was a German there

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who couldn't… he lived in a world of his own. That's why physiology was my poor subject [Laughs]. Anyway that's it, there was no friction, no open fighting. It was just hidden.

RL: Did you belong to any societies whilst at University?

ES: That's interesting. While I was there they actually wanted me to join the fencing society. You know. And they were fencing and the Bruderschaft, very Germanic, although Jews were in it as well. And I kept away from it. I didn't even want to… it's not my cup of tea, to fence or anything. And amazing, even Jewish people went there, even my roommate, he was all enthusiastic, but I wouldn't have anything to do with it, the Bruderschaft. If you know.

RL: Did you get to know the Jewish Community in Prague at all?

ES: In France?

RL: In Prague, the Jewish Community?

ES: No. Not really. You see, there was not very much time left. Studies were busy. I know we played. I had a girlfriend then, and in the morning, early in the morning, before the lectures we went in the summer to play tennis. That was our… But there was no really no contact, otherwise, she was Jewish. No. No.

RL: What kind of proportion, say on the medical degree were Jewish would you say. How many?

ES: A large proportion, that's all I can tell you. Because in Vienna, in Budapest, particularly Budapest, they had what was called a 'Numerus Clausus'. It means that the number of Jews admitted is restricted. A lot of, particularly from Slovakia wanted to go to University, and they spoke Hungarian, and they couldn't go to Budapest. So they applied to Prague. And Prague being democratic, they accepted them. They had to accept them and we got on very well, I had lots of friends from the Eastern part of Slovakia. That's where Hugo Green came from. Yes.

RL: Are there any interesting stories you want to tell from your University days?

ES: From my University days. Well, many of the students from Slovakia, and from Carpatho Russia which is the most Eastern part, they were fairly poor, they had not much money, but they earned the money. They were really Hebrew and religiously very

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strong. And they were invited to take services in those lesser communities where they had no rabbi. And I remember one of them he went always to Boskowitz there on the High Holidays to do the service and that was greatly appreciated and they got a bit of money for it, and food, you know, which they appreciated. But I got friendly with quite a number of them. They were very nice, although completely different from us.
But I learnt a lot from them, being Jewish.

RL: How many years were you at University?

ES: Pardon? The course is five years, five years, very intensive course. And after I qualified immediately I got a job in Brno, in the main hospital. And there, the chief of the surgical unit was a German, but he was very nice. Because he knows medicine is international. And there are no barriers. And he recognised my inclination towards surgery and after being there for about three weeks, he let me stitch up the wound at the end of the operation, which is a great honour! [Laughs] So, and when I eventually left, I only did three months of it. Mind you I didn't get any salary. There I was called an 'externist'; I had the privilege of working under the consultant. Ah. That's how it was. People were very anxious to work with the main one, but no money. The only recompense I got were the elevenses, where the nurses gave me... They knew that I was hungry, milk and bread and butter, which was marvellous. Young people get very hungry. Yes, oh yes.

RL: Where did you go after that?

ES: Oh. After that I said before, I went to France for a fortnight, but never came back, you see. I think I said it earlier, to visit my friends, and then Munich came and I stayed on. Sorry it's out of chronology but I think you understand.

RL: So what happened to your parents after Munich?

ES: Ah. Well that's very sad. The business was taken over by a caretaker, by somebody else. They put a German in it. And they were living just quietly in their own flat and had to let out other parts of the flat to other people. And my… yes. I even have a photograph there, when they were taken. My father there with a very sad face, and my mother as well. They are portraits. And I could see… My father wiled his time having **a** lathe in one of the room, and he was making things on the lathe just to be occupied.
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That's what they… I've got still some letters from my parents from the early part of the war. But. Well, better that you ask more questions.

RL: Well no, you can continue on, it's alright.

ES Yes. Well in these letters, they could send me letters, I was then already in England, and I, arriving in England, I met up with a cousin of my father who lived in Weybridge, and he sent me the princely sum of ten pounds, which was a lot of money. No. Ten shillings. Shillings. Sorry. Which was a princely sum of money in 1940 and I used it to go to the post office and send a telegram to a friend in America to inform my parents that I'm, I've arrived safely, that I'm safe in England. And the same with my sister's husband, he was also there. So that's a fantastic thing. And I could still correspond through the United States. I got my first job in Chorley, Chorley Hospital**.** It was a small hospital, after I was released from the army in 1941. And I was able to get a few letters from my parents, most of them in a code. You know, because they didn't' say names. My brother-in-law was working on a farm, so they called him 'the farmer'. But they didn't put any names in. You'd have to read between the lines. But of course when Pearl Harbour was attacked, America went to war. Finished. I didn't hear a word about it then. Sorry, you wanted to say something.

RL: So, you know, what happened to them? Did you find out what happened to them after that?

ES: What?

RL: To your parents. What happened to them after that? To your parents.

ES: To my family? Ah. Well. When, well, I was, as I said I was in the Czechoslovak army for one year. And they had too many doctors in the Czechoslovak Army. And then an officer came round and said 'You have a chance of being released from the Army if you want, or go into the British Army.' Now at the time I still hadn't had any surgical experience, apart from the first two months after qualifying. So I chose to go in hospital work. That's how I came to Chorley, and to Wigan and so on. Anyway, what was your question?

RL: I was asking you about your parents.

ES: My parents, yes. I had no idea. There were rumours about what happens in Germany. I didn't think it possible that it
Tape 2: 30 minutes 5 seconds

affects my family, particularly not the children of my sister, my nephew, my niece. So after the war, I… we were married already. I, there was an appeal from the Czechoslovak government in exile to go to Theresienstadt, Theresien, where a typhus epidemic was raging.

So fifty health workers, obviously doctors, pharmacists, nurses, went to, assembled in London to go, to be flown to Prague. When I arrived in Prague, I had to, I was given accommodation in the most prestigious hotel in Prague, Hotel Alcon, which only weeks earlier was the headquarters of the Nazis, of the Gestapo. And the waiters who served me there, they served Germans as well. It was a funny feeling. But I was prepared for the… I had a little bag of sweets for the children. And I went the same day I arrived, to my sister's flat. And… she lived in a flat where there was a caretaker. And when I arrived I rang the bell and the caretaker opened the door of the flat. She recognised me. Because I was before the war with my sister.

She said 'Ooooh Doctor Strach I'm so sorry to say. They had to leave. They had to leave in 1942, with the little children. I said 'No, it's not possible!' 'There is no hope for you seeing them again'. I said 'It's not possible! Children! Yes. She said 'I'm sorry I might as well tell you. I've heard your parents also had to go. I said 'It's impossible! So I said… No idea. We were so simple here, so naïve, during the war. But it came a big shock to me. I was, suddenly felt completely lonely. The only survivor of my close family. But I wouldn't accept it. I went to Prague. There were notices given through the Prague radio, search notices: So and so looking for so and so. Twenty four hours a day they were. So I gave a notice for my family to contact me. And eventually I went to Theresien, where I had to go. And I still wouldn't accept it. So I went to the registration. But the original German registers had been burnt by the Nazis before they left. Very clever. But the woman in charge. She remembers me. She used to be a seamstress in my family's little factory. She was Mrs Grittner. I remember her. She said 'Oh Eric, I know. Your parents have gone, your sister, and my uncle.' She knew them all. Ah.
Well. I had to carry on, I went then. And then suddenly everybody was looking for me. She looked at the register, and found a lady called Strach. And she didn't know her. She gave me the address and I went there. That is when I found my aunt Adele, my father's aunt. A great aunt of mine. Oh. She was, she was so pleased to see me. As I was, to find at least somebody of my family, or the extended family. She lived in a little room, about a third of this room with four other elderly ladies. And she was, she was always slim, tall, and very cultured. And she kept her composure. And I looked on the wall and I found a lot of bloodstains on the wall. I said

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'Auntie Adele what's this?' 'Ooooh' she said, 'these are the bedbugs. We are bothered by bedbugs every night. Well, so they like me better than anybody else, I must be a delicacy for them. But three times a night I have to get up, put the light on, and get the crawlies and sometimes I can kill them against the wall, that's where the bloodstains came from.' It nearly drove me to suicide. So anyway, I managed, by then the war was over, they had already a bit more food, but I managed to get extra food to be brought to them. In Theresien of course I had to do some work. But there's very little one can do. There were so many people dying in our hands. There were so many people coming from other concentration camps bringing lice with them and typhus. That's how the typhus started. But the main condition was starvation. They got swollen legs through starvation. Hunger oedema it's called. Tuberculosis was rampant and of course typhus. Even in our party of fifty. Two of them got typhus and died. I got fortunate even to have survived that. I had a little book on infectious diseases, and I said cleanliness is the answer to it. So I stand up, wash in the bath. There were no showers. Water was restricted. But I managed to wash every day, every morning, every night. So, I don't know whether it helped but it must have helped. So I didn't get it. But one nurse and one dentist died, from our party. And with aunt Adele, of course, she was a wonderful woman. So I wrote to Margaret, my young wife then, and she asked me, I asked her, told her about aunt Adele, she said 'Yes, do invite her, she can come and live with us!' No one else I knew of. So she came, I told her: ‘Auntie, will you come and live with us?’ She said ‘no. I’ve lived in Vienna, and when my time comes I want to be buried next to my dear husband, who died before the war.’ And I even took her to the station when she had to go, when transport to Vienna. ‘Auntie, just tell me once more, perhaps you can come, change your mind’. She just shook her head, tears in her eyes. Well, she kept on living in Vienna. Eventually she came over to us on a visit. It was a visit, provided it was a visit, together with my cousin in Weybridge, we had her here in, for about three months in 1947-48. Oh. Margaret was absolutely enthralled with this woman. She was highly cultured. Margaret was very literary, and so was aunt Adele. She quoted Shakespeare for her, in her broken English, but she spoke English, the whole family were really enthused about her. And Margaret’s sister had a friend in the States, and she told him this story, he was so taken by it, that he packed up a parcel and sent it to her. And even after she went back to Vienna to live in Vienna in a home, she was receiving parcels and had a lovely correspondence with this man. Harry Wells was his name. It’s amazing, you know, the goodness of people. She came again in 1955. That was lovely. We took her out to do the sites here,

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and of course most of our, yes, most of our children were already, yes all our children, three children we got, and I remember when she saw Helen, Helen was beautiful, they *are* beautiful… and she said ‘So was Schönes wie die Helene’ Such a beauty like Helen. [Laughs] It’s a German expression. And in 1958 we had word that she’s ill, in hospital, and they feared the worst. So my cousin and I packed up and went to see her. When we arrived, she said: ‘Eric. I’m better. You’ve come for nothing!’. [Laughs] But a year later, she really died, in 1959 at the age of 78. Quite a life. But in…, eventually I got her things together, with her diary, I think I told you about it.

RL: Tell me about this, what did you receive of her belongings?

ES: Well, they sent me her belongings, some photographs and books, and a tiny little diary. Leather-bound diary. And it was written in German. And I tried to read it. Difficult to read, to decipher. And some were crossed out, some things were crossed out, I have no idea what it was. Because she was frightened the censor would read it, so she says… at the beginning she says… that was obviously written well after the war, from Vienna, she added: This is a diary. There was a second diary, which was worse, I mean it contained even worse than what she went through, describing in the first diary, but it was lost together with all my luggage. You see when she was transported, the luggage was just….

RL: When was it written, this diary, what was its time period?

ES: Yes, ’42-’43.

RL: And where was she at that point?

ES: Theresienstadt. In Theresienstadt. She always stayed in Theresienstadt because she was so weak, she had a weak heart, she suffered from tachycardia. It means she gets attacks of the heart racing, it’s a well-known condition. Fortunately harmless, but rather distressing. But in this diary, she describes her life, how terribly she suffered. In this model camp, you know. Anyway, she describes the hunger pains she says. She was always a believer in God. Religious and all that. And she says ‘God has foresaken me. I no longer believe in him’. And next 4 days she gets one of her heart attacks. Gets better. And she thanked God again, and she believed in God again. And you know, that pervades the whole diary. The other thing that pervades it is her fear of being thrown into mass graves. Because my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was also in Theresienstadt. And she died within one month of

Tape 2: 43 minutes 37 seconds

her arrival. So they died like flies. In this ‘model camp’, what they called. Through hunger and one time she says in her diary: no chair to sit down, no table to write on. No corner to cry in. But she managed. Tiny little handwriting. So I translated it, it took me years to do it, because it was very very difficult. And then my son saw it, and he said: I can make these things legible, that they crossed out. He’s a forensic scientist and he took the diary to Canberra where he worked and had, managed to make a good copy of it so it could be read easily and then he used his modern technology, infrared I don’t know what and the whole thing became more legible. So it was very very… She also talks of meeting my parents in the camp, you know, and other relations, even uncle Paul who was there, and is sorry that some people came there and never went to see her. When she arrived she had to lie on the bare earth. There was no room. They were crowded together. That was in 1942. When my mother got to know that she was there she somehow managed to arrange for her to be put into a home for the elderly, you know, and that was heaven for her, so she did some things there. So there is a lot in the diary. But what pervades it also is her suicidal attempt. Not attempt. Thoughts. She said ‘if I were in Vienna, I would kill myself. I have tablets, and would take them’. But here the fear of being thrown in a mass grave prevents me from doing it. Of course there are also brighter moments in Theresien. They had their Judenrat who looked after them, who were sort of in charge. Mind you most of them were eventually sent to Auschwitz. But they had a cultural life. They gave fantastic performances of Verdi’s Requiem, and one of them was… the Germans wanted to keep the morale up and they came, even Eichmann came to see it. And they said ‘yes, we can perform for the Germans as well, but we will not bow to them when they clap’. So they did. And he stood up and clapped like anything, Eichmann and all his entourage. So she talked about her musical evenings they had there, and dreamt of the musical evenings they had at home and the theatre. One of my distant cousins was an actress, and she was in the theatre and did so well. And she also perished. She describes it like… I read a book called ‘Verdi’s Requiem in Theresien’. And there it says they had at the rehearsals, somebody didn’t turn up, that meant he had been sent to Auschwitz. But they soon found somebody to come to take his place. They were not short. I mean the musicians, the actors, they were all very famous people. Composers. You know. So they were not short of… of actors, musicians, and children had no schooling. Only, not officially, but they were taught unofficially.

RL: Where is this diary now?

Tape 2: 48 minutes 30 seconds

ES: Upstairs here, yes. I can show it to you if you want.

But I recently gave a talk to the AJR, and they were really interested. And now, somebody, it spread to the Wiener Library. And they keep an eye on the diary. They might want me to go there, bring the diary. I wouldn’t entrust it to the post. Like my son, he had it in Canberra. He wouldn’t send it back to me. He brought it back.

RL: Now coming back to your life story, and really we were in France, and the hospital had taken a direct hit, ES: Yes.

RL: And your girlfriend had been killed.

ES: Yes.

RL: So can you take me from there?

ES: Yes. Certainly, certainly. Well after that we had to, there were a lot of wounded, lots of people, in Dreux, mainly in Dreux. And some, most of them were transported either to the local military hospital or, particularly the women were transferred to the sanatorium. So I was asked to go back to the sanatorium and we did a lot of work there. Worked through the night, and stitched up wounds, and did what we could, put plaster on, and… ah, it was hectic. And then there were crowds of people there, they wanted to help. And then suddenly they shouted for me: Erich Strach wanted, Dr Strach, Dr Strach. So I went. And they said 'yes, up here, we have a German parachutist. And we want you to speak to him. They knew I spoke German. So I went to him. He was under guard, in the side room. But I could see he was semiconscious. I don't know whether they wanted me to get information, you know, military information or what. He was beyond help, I am sure. He had a fractured pelvis, and he was bleeding. And they treated him like they ought to treat anybody. He was beyond help. I couldn't get anything out of him. And then a call came: would we go to the military hospital? Because there a lot of people who have been wounded, admitted. So as soon as I went there, a man was lying on the floor, with a huge wound on his leg. A gunshot wound. He was bleeding like a pig. So I quickly put on a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. And then they said 'oh we have to amputate his leg'. So they put him on the table and one of the surgeons did the amputation. But they had to stop. He died in the meantime. It was too late. And then my immediate chief in the sanatorium, Dr Reynaud, he and I were together we came by car from the hospital, and he, we had to

Tape 2: 52 minutes 5 seconds

do a ward round. There was one big hall, where there were lying injured people were lying in beds, on the floor, and all over. And when we got to the room there was one man shouting his head off and in pain, in pain. So I said: 'what's the matter? I said 'let's go to him.' Of course there no light, we had candles, you know, he, I held the candle and Dr Reynaud went to him. Oh here, here, (pointing to the back of his head) and I looked and he had a wound. Only a small wound. So, my goodness me. I'm sure he had something hitting on the occipital nerve. So my chief said 'Oh, qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire? What can you do? I said: 'Look. Cheeky….. You hold the light. You hold the candle. I took my pen knife and I opened the wound widely, put in my finger, and fished out a piece of metal, a shrapnel. And the man was relieved. He said "oh, wonderful". I have the shrapnel to this day. [Laughs] So of course I knew I had to, only another day before joining up the Czech army, but I wanted to do what I could to help them. So about three o'clock I went to sleep in the sanatorium. At six o'clock a call came from my friends, from the Nantes, in the St Georgenthal from the cottage. They said 'Please can you come we have been attacked in the air raid was there at night, and there are lots of wounded in the station, a little station there. Come. So I packed up, took my bicycle, and went there. And there were about five severely wounded at the station. And again, a man, lying on a bench and saying: 'Tuez-moi! Kill me! Kill me!' In much pain. He had a huge pain in the buttock. It was bleeding profusely. You can't put a tourniquet on the buttock, you know. So the neighbour, of our cottage, she was there, doing something. So I said 'Quickly, bring me some towels!' So she ran home and brought me some towels. So I tried to pack the wound, you know, packing it, pressing to stop the bleeding. Couldn't do anything else. He died under our…. No good. So that's no good… Terrible. So then my neighbour said 'there are lots of wounded in the village. Would I take my bicycle and go round the houses. So about 8 o'clock in the morning I took my bike. And 'Docteur, docteur, come here!' And they were fortunately only minor injuries, mainly from shrapnel. And she, she had, there was an old woman who had fairly tiny wounds there (points to his lower back) and she was crying and she said 'what is it? What is it?' They were only tiny little wounds. Nothing serious. And they were happy. They were happy. You know they trusted the doctor, and I went to others and so on. And then of course during the night, there were… in the meantime the Nantes family already packed their car, because they wouldn't stay any longer with even Saint Georgenthal being bombed. So they went, they asked me would I drive them to Pornique, which is about two hundred kilometres away, on the West Coast. We went, and you know, the pictures you've seen of refugees on the road. Packed

Tape 2: 56 minutes 5 seconds

with loads and the Nazis machine-gunning them. That's all the same thing. Only down south it wasn't so bad. It was mainly in the north. So I drove, petrol was short. So to cut a long story short. It took me over twelve hours to get there, you know, in the queue, we had to queue for petrol, we had to queue for the road, there were people walking, and eventually I arrived in the early hours of the morning. I don't know how I did it, but they had fed me with coffee, to keep awake, because I couldn't fall asleep whist I driving. They also had a granny there in the car. She didn't know what to do. She had lost her mind. She wanted to get out, so she had to, they had to keep the handle of the door, they had to keep the handle safe so she didn't open the door while the car was moving. Eventually we arrived in Pornique, which was nice and peaceful. I dropped them to bed, went to sleep. The next morning it came to say goodbye to them because I was ready to take a bus to go to join the train to go down to Agde, on the south coast, to join the boat ready for us.

RL: Right, can we just stop here because the tape is about to end.

END OF TAPE TWO.

TAPE 3

RL: This is the interview with Eric Strach and its tape three. Can I just ask you what date this would have been, the bombing and the taking of the family? What date was it?

ES: It was about the 6th or 8th of June 1940. June 40. I then joined the army but had no idea what it was coming to. In the train by chance I saw one of the nurses from the sanatorium. She knew my plight. She said 'Well we live near the Pyrenees. If you want to escape the Nazis come to our house and we'll get you over to Spain, you know. And so I even bought maps of the Pyrenees, it was not far from Toulouse, and this I had an option. But of course I joined the army. When I came to Agde, Agde is on the Mediterranean, it was peaceful as the war didn't exist. They were sunbathing there, swimming. They couldn't believe what I told them I went through, a few days ago. Even my brother-in-law was there already, of course he was an old soldier. And a no uniform was there for me. They were short of everything, except food. There was plenty. And I just settled down. On the next day an officer did the round of all the newcomers. They came to me. Ah. In Czech of course,

Tape 3: 2 minutes 11 seconds

Speaking, 'Are you prepared to carry on fighting?' I said carry on? I haven't even started! I haven't even got a uniform. Well, see there were a lot of Czech people, Czech expatriates who were farmers, and they joined the Czech army. They could have gone back to their farm, or carry on fighting. That's why they asked me. So I said 'well, I don't know what I want to do, can I think it over?' Only one day. 'Alright.' They were very strict. So I said… I asked my brother-in-law. He said 'of course carry on fighting.' Because he was an old soldier. And then my luck came. There was a call for doctors for, to man an ambulance, to ambulances. There were about ten ambulances, and 'we want to have one driver and one doctor in each ambulance to go to the front line and pick up the Czech wounded,' because the battalion was already there. So I said 'That's me! I want to do medical work. I go!' So I signed my paper, I want to carry on. And somehow, some somebody found some trousers for me, but no jacket, no uniform. And soon afterwards we started moving. I said 'oh that's what I want to do'. I want to do ambulance. Because the ambulances were fully equipped with medical things. So we went for about twenty miles to Bézier. Bézier is another place not far from Agde in the South of France. There we stopped. They said 'We are on alert. We mustn't even take our boots off. We must be ready to go any moment.' That moment lasted a whole week. And we never went. And then eventually came the order. Yes move. But we didn't move to the front. We moved to another place in the South of France: Sete: S-E-T-E, which was an old harbour. And what was there? There was a big ship there, which had been requisitioned, to transfer the Czech army to Britain. Of course we didn't know this. We had no idea. But we joined this boat. And it was called Mohamed Ali el-Kebir. Very famous. Mohamed Ali el-Kebir. And I, we crowded on the boat. I was given a hammock to sleep on, which is a great thing, you know. Others slept on benches. But eventually I met other fellows there, I got friendly with them, first we were fighting to sit down, and then we had something to eat and we became the greatest of friends and we had no idea where we're going. Eventually we sailed, through, and we sailed the Mediterranean, and it was rather rough. I was given duty to be on guard. I don't know what for, and I felt sea-sick. I fell asleep. And an officer found me and said: 'Don't do that again!' Ah. I just joined the army, I don't know what to do. He said 'Never mind! You're a man. You mustn't give way to sea-sickness'. So I stood there with my gun. I had no idea about how to use it. And I went to, yes, we went, it became calm again, we enjoyed the trip, the sail… and suddenly the captain shouted: 'Man overboard! Man overboard!' And we said 'What happened?' There was, we later found out, there was a little girl whom we all played with, because civilians were on

Tape 3: 6 minutes 29 seconds

the ship as well. And the mother was a well-known woman, from an artist in Prague, from an Art School, Redditch Art School**.** And this lovely girl, she must have got on the nerves of the mother, and the mother threw her through the window into the water. She lost her mind. They threw a lifebelt in, no use. There was no, disappeared. And there were two destroyers with us, and they had to stay three hours, when man is overboard, to see whether they can rescue or … no sign of it. We went through Gibraltar. And yes, the woman was so distressed afterwards, she went to the hospital, to the ship's hospital. And we went through Gibraltar. Beautiful. We could see the rock. And one of our friends, our men, was a master swimmer. And he couldn't resist it. He jumped into the sea. He was, he got a 'CB' for it. Confined to Barracks. [Laughs] That was an offence. And then we sailed westwards. All in a convoy. We thought we were going to America. Amongst us were, of our friends, Dr Glasser, he spoke perfect English, he told us about English, and… another friend had an English Grammar, and he became a very good friend of mine, he lent me the book. He said you are on the waiting list. On Thursday, you can only have it for one day. To learn English. The English Grammar. And I had it for one day, and another, so it went round us. And we went to, trying to find out where we went, we went further North and West, but in a convoy you don't know, because, not a straight line. A fortnight later, we landed. You know where? In Liverpool! [Laughs] We landed in Liverpool. And this woman who got arrested, her husband was waiting for her. He had no idea. He was in the air force and she was very worried about him, what happened. But he pinched a French plane and went over to England with the plane, you know, and survived. And when he came his child was gone, his wife had lost her mind, with worry. One of the tragedies. There are many others. Later on, we learned, the doctor who looked after her, she had needed a years' treatment in the psychiatric hospital in Liverpool and he said 'oh, she's alright, provided there is no further stress in her life, she'll lapse again'. Yes Doctor Nussbaum, I remember her well. She looked after her. We arrived in Liverpool, I hadn't got a proper uniform, but we managed. And we went by train to Lime Street Station and there on the way people were waving to us. They could see 'Czechoslovakia' not on me, but on the other uniforms. And that was fantastic. And then we boarded the train and went as far as Beeston Castle and from there we marched. Our luggage was taken on a lorry, but we marched to Cholmondeley Castle, Cholmondeley Park. Lord Cholmondeley has given his estate to the Czechoslovak army.

Tape 3: 10 minutes 56 seconds

be used there. And we went under tents and that's how we settled down in England and we were, there were 8 in one tent and food was dished out, it was, I was sick. Funny, when I first arrived in France I was sick because the French food didn't suit me. But when I arrived in England there were sausages and I was sick. Anyway, the food was reasonably good. We, I eventually got a uniform, and I got, got to know the countryside a bit around Cholmondeley. And the people were absolutely fantastic. We stayed there for three months until we moved on. But in Cholmondeley we met a farmer, they all invited us, you know. I went to a Church Service, never heard this before, but it was completely new, but just to please them, and then Afternoon Tea, I'd never heard of Afternoon tea with cakes and all that, cottages, English life. Then I wanted to write a letter of thanks, but Doctor Glasser, he spoke good English, he drafted a letter for me, I could leave it. Ah. Of course all the time I couldn't hear anything from home, you know. I just managed. I know that Yom Kippur came, the High Holidays, and some of us got hitchhiked to Manchester, and we went to Cheetham Hill to the Shul there. We, there was great commotion when they saw soldiers with 'Czechoslovakia'. And I fasted then. After the fast they were fighting for us to come for a break of the fast. They were wonderful, wonderful. Anyway.

RL: How big was the contingent that came over from France?

ES: Yes. Three and a half thousand men. And do you know that I later found out there was a second group with whom we had no contact. They were the Communists, and do you know who was there? Maxwell. Robert Maxwell. You know, he was, he was very lefty. Look what happened to him.

I met Elisabeth Maxwell, his widow, in Beth Shalom, and she wrote a book about her husband. It's very good. And there I read that he also came on the Mohammed Ali el-Kebir. So it's genuine.

Yes, well then eventually I think you know, I was the army. The nearest I got to medical work was to drive an ambulance. I became an ambulance driver. Then in September, we were, the army was transferred to Leamington Spa. We were billeted then, not in the tents, fortunately the winter then, it was a very severe winter in 1940, and we went in barracks. And Leamington was very nice, the people were very friendly. I befriended a pharmacist there, and the family, lots of them. And we stayed in Leamington until June 41, and thus, when I was trained, I got a gun, we had very severe training, how to use a gun, and really, I already had my driving license from Cholmondeley, a

Tape 3: 15 minutes 48 seconds

perfunctory one. I just sat in a car, did one round, 'here you are'. They needed them all. And in, in Leamington, but apart from driving an ambulance, I never saw a patient. If a patient came in the army, they almost fought for it. We went in the tents, whilst in Cholmondeley, we could hear the planes coming to Manchester and Liverpool, bombing. Not a very pleasant feeling, we knew exactly where they were going. But in Leamington we went through the Coventry Blitz, and we got a big, stray bombs fell in Leamington as well and we, the army of course helped as well, to do the work during the Blitz, and I had to go as well, and they knew I was a doctor although I was not working as a doctor. And they said 'Doctor (in Czech), Doctor come here!' look, look at this. I said Oh, he's dead, I can tell you. He was buried under rubble. So, but I couldn't do any proper medical work and that's why I opted to go into a civilian hospital, that's why I linked up with Chorley.

RL: So when did you opt to do that?

ES: In June '41.

So I left the army and got training in… Of course my English was still not one hundred percent, and it's still not now. But I mean I couldn't really, my chief, who appointed me, because they couldn't get anybody else, he later told me: 'I had the choice of somebody who was a drunkard or this Czech soldier who couldn't speak English', so they appointed me. And he had no regrets. We worked and I got… he headed… he was a father figure to me, he taught me, showed me how to deal with patients, which was quite different from what we did at home.

RL: In what way was it different?

ES: Well, the approach to the patient, always honour the patient, being polite to them, even if you don't feel like it you know. Bedside manner, you know. I learned a lot from him. You see there it's more autocratic, on the continent, there you're the doctor, but here it's more democratic. If a patient wants to know something you tell him. Anyway I worked at the hospital and I was in heaven, in heaven to, to be able to… I was the only resident in the hospital. The nurses helped me. My English wasn't very good, but they helped me a lot: 'You say this and this'… you know. I learned a lot. And there were a lot of severe illnesses as well. And nearby was a munitions factory, in Euxton, what's called Euxton, we had severe casualties from there, and I did quite a lot of work there, being the only resident, and then, the porter of the hospital kept the drunkard, who was my precedent, my previous,… my precedent… was wanting to go to the rooms that were assigned

Tape 3: 20 minutes 0 second

to me, and he wouldn't let him go, so he protected me, and he wanted to explain to me how the hospital ran, because I had no idea. Ah, well he was very nice in the daytime, but I didn't like him coming at night when he was drunk. Anyway they got rid of him. And he sort of knew, I didn't know a soul there, I was completely isolated. And he said 'Look there is a family in Wigan, my daughter is married and next to her lives a Czech family, would you like to meet them?' I said 'Yes! Yes!' Anyway, I went to meet them and eventually we became good friends. And they were refugees as well and they had a little boy called Stephen and at that time he fell in love with his nursery teacher, and he asked his mother: '*Could Mith Fother come for tea pease?*' So they invited her for tea, and I got to know Miss Foster, and then Christmas came, I was then working in Wigan, and they invited me for Christmas dinner, and they told me there's a lovely girl you will like her when you come, so I was friendly with one nurse and fortunately that fizzled out, from Chorley, but I said 'yes thank you very much, I'll come'. And when I went to them I brought what's called children's cider, you know, non-alcoholic cider, children's cider, it's all I could bring them. And they introduced me. And you know who it was? Her ladyship Margaret, she was a teacher then. And through her son inviting her, we got to know each other. So I got to know her parents, and they were absolutely fantastic. Yes.

RL: What was her background?

ES: Her background? Well, her father had a grocer's shop. But he was very broad-minded. And he wouldn't believe what happened in the war, you know, they were against the war. Her brother was a conscientious objector, he had to work on a farm, but their love of loving people, and he always saw the good in anybody, you know, they opened their arms, and they really took me in and they even sheltered their… before the war, a German chap came from some kind of organisation, a Peace organisation who was obviously a spy, you know, but anyway, we actually married on the 27th of January 1945, and this date, this very date, I didn't know it at the time, on the very day Auschwitz was liberated. And we didn't know. My cousin came from; my father's cousin came from Weybridge, to see, to be at the wedding, and many doctors from the hospital, my chief of the hospital as well. I knew then that I was doing orthopaedics.

RL: Just take me through, because you were saying you were in Chorley, in the hospital there, and then….

ES: In Wigan.

Tape 3: 24 minutes 14 seconds

RL: Why did you move to Wigan?

ES: My appointment was for six months and I actually wanted to go to… I looked up the adverts and wanted to go to York, and my chief said 'what do you go to York for?' And I said 'Instead of 150 pounds a year, I get 175'. Oh. Don't do anything… I'll give you a testimonial but don't do anything in a rush. Next day they rang me up from Wigan. Would I accept a job there? Would I come for an interview, and they gave me a sort of interview. My chief appointed me to Wigan. [Laughs] That's how it was. Then eventually after six, after a year in Wigan, I went to work in Alder Hey Hospital, which was EMS, Emergency Medical Service, and the one who appointed me was Mr Montserrat, you know, and his son was Nicolas Montserrat, who wrote this book. What was it called? Anyway, a famous book. That's his father. And I did proper orthopaedic work, and I really enjoyed it.

RL: And what sort of work were you doing in Wigan?

ES: Orthopaedic work. Actually everything I did, I was House Surgeon in Wigan, and I had to do orthopaedics, accident and emergency, gynaecology, infectious diseases, children's diseases, everything, you know. One at a time, which was a marvellous education for me, and I got to know the consultant from various specialties and I got on with all of them, and the one who was the Resident Surgical Officer, he was at one time the only Englishman in the hospital. There was an Armenian refugee, there was a German refugee, Doctor Hertz, who used to be a gynaecologist in Berlin. Very funny. He, there in Wigan, they were all called Mister, because 'Mister Surgeon', you know, and he objected to it. "I was in Berlin, and I was Doctor Hertz, I want to be called Doctor Hertz". Fair enough. They still called him Mister Hertz. When I left, he went to Chorley Hospital. And they called him Doctor Hertz there. "Oh in Wigan they called me Mister Hertz! I want to be called Mister!" [Laughs] So we got, many good friends for life we got there amongst the doctors. There was an Irish doctor Dr Bell, he was very nice, he was my predecessor, and his wife was the staff nurse at the hospital. Really I enjoyed my hospital work, I got really confident at Surgery, and then it of course went on.

RL: And in Alder Hey?

ES: Alder Hey yes, Alder Hey the Children's Hospital and also the Military Hospital. EMS: Emergency Medical Services. That was just before I got married.

Tape 3: 27 minutes 47 seconds

RL: And where did you live in these different places?

ES: Oh. Resident in the hospital. In the hospital, being pampered in the hospital. [Laughs] Yes.

RL: Did you have any contact during this time with any of the Jewish community anywhere?

ES: Yes. By chance I went to a Chinese restaurant in town, and looked at one man, and "Oh, that's what's his name? Yes, you were in the army weren't you?" –"Oh I live here with a family", He was also released from the army, and he got in touch with the Brandts. They lived in, near Allerton Road, in Cumberland, no, Rutland Road, and they became very very friendly with me. That was the girl I told you about, was ten years old, only died recently, at that time. Anyway, they introduced me to the Greenbank Synagogue. And at the holidays, the High Holidays, I used to go there. With them. They sort of looked after my Jewishness. Their aim gave me as a present a Tallis, a Tallis, and a book. I still have got it, I still use the Tallis, a beautiful one, I still use it.

RL: Was this during the War years?

ES: That was during the war yes. Yes, yes.

RL: So how often did you use to go there?

ES: To the?

RL: To the Greenbank Synagogue.

ES: Oh only on the High Holidays. Occasionally on the Shabbat, I went to weddings. Oh yes. And I had a car there, I could work with a car, but from then on I was then in digs in Liverpool, near, living near them. Because I was given three hospitals to work in. Alder Hey, Smithtown Road, and … what was the third one? Forgot now. Anyway, when I came back from Czechoslovakia… Oh no, sorry, I'm getting mixed up now… In… Let me get my thoughts first. Just to stay chronological in order. Towards the end of the war, I think I told you that. We were already married. The Czechoslovak government in London asked us to, for any volunteers to join their party to go to Theresien. I think you have this story already.

RL: When did you go? When was it that you went?

ES: Well about early June 1945. I think I told you then I went back to Prague.

Tape 3: 31 minutes 14 seconds

RL: What was your reaction when you went there?

ES: I think I mentioned it, we went to a big hotel where the Nazis stayed before then I found out what happened to my family. In Prague there were also other of my relations. I for example went in a tram, and there was somebody who recognised me, and I recognised him but couldn't know it was my cousin Gertie's husband, Doctor Kafka. He was just out of the concentration camp; he was thin like a rake. I didn't recognise him. And they, I then got a job through the ministry in Usti or Aussig, where I worked as a doctor. I was supposed to do orthopaedic work. That was under the Communist regime of course, in 1945. And when I arrived in Aussig, they all welcomed me and one comes to me the Chief Porter and he said 'Mr Strach, on behalf of the Executive Committee I welcome you to this hospital'. He was a porter. I could see the hammer and sickle in his lapel. So he said 'How good of you to come to us to help us out. Thank you.' And then 'By the way, are you in the Party?' So I played stupid and said 'Which party?' 'Of course the Communist Party.' –'Well look, I've come here to do medical work, I'm not politically orientated'. So 'Oh, that's quite fine, that's alright'. The next day I was assigned to Infectious Diseases. '-Why not orthopaedics?' –'Well it's not established yet the orthopaedic department the boss is in Prague'. So I just worked in infectious diseases. So in a way they were, you get mainly tuberculosis there. In a way, well, the treatment then for tuberculosis was intravenous injection of calcium. Just to do something. Whether it was efficient or not… But there I had to carry on the treatment. And they had a German doctor before me, whom they wanted to sack, so I did the job. And ah, the patients were so loving you know, I was, I was, a young man, I was their father figure. We had a good rapport with the patients. And then eventually they said 'Doctor Strach, I'm sorry but we got word that they want to send us to Poland.' Most of them were Polish Jews. 'The last place we want to go. I have a cousin in Israel, one in Paris, one in the States, I don't want to go back'. They were ex prisoners you know. And I said 'what can I do?' I had an idea. I went to Prague, to the Joint Aid Committee, you know the Joint, and told them what happened. And 'Oh, we'll soon put a stop to it.' And they didn't go. They were so powerful. The Americans as well. Aah. So here you are. That's the best thing I could do for them, and that means a lot. Somewhere they were also dying like flies. That was there, there was a special ward for the dying. But the one in living they were fantastic. So. . .

Tape 3: 35 minutes 24 seconds

RL: How long were you in that hospital?

ES: Well, my wife was then expecting our first child and I wanted to go back because I knew I didn't want to stay under the Communists and wouldn't bring my wife here and a good thing it was. But I hadn't had the foresight to have a return visa to England. So I applied, I had a special code with my wife. I told her if I ask you 'How is Mrs Pilkin? Our former neighbour, that means I want to come back, she has to go and see the obstetrician who looks after her, and he was no less than Professor Jefcoate, with whom I used to work in Wigan. And he says he understands, you know. She sent me a telegram; no he sent me a telegram: 'Your wife is expecting a baby soon, and pelvic measurements are so that your presence would definitely be required'. So I got the visa, but you see the difficulty was the transport. The transport: I made applications, there was, I wanted by train, you know there were trains for ex-prisoners from Belgium, so I said "I'll go on the train". No. It can't be done. After a lot and lot of trouble I managed to get a flight to Frankfurt and from Frankfurt to Paris, and that was all. In Paris I managed to see my friends who survived the war, which was fantastic to see them and I said I wanted to go back to England and they understood. I went back to Orly Airport, and we hoped we had standby. And then to my luck, it came, on the loudspeaker 'the plane is ready to go to London'. Any standby passengers would report immediately'. So I reported, whilst in a freight plane. They took stoves to London. I don't know why. But it was a terrible day. It was… fortunately I wasn't sick, but most of the people, it was only a small plane, a Dakota, a Dakota, I remember. Anyway, came to London. From there I phoned. She was already in the nursing home where I used to work. And they said she started labour. Oh my goodness. Anyway, I went by train. In Crewe I rang up again: 'Yes it's alright. She's alright. We told her you're on the way.' I arrived about midnight and it was pouring with rain, and it was pouring with rain, it was terrible. And her father was at the station, and he took me straight to the nursing home where she was, so I went to the nursing home the nurse opened: "Oh she said! Mrs Strach!!" She didn't recognise me because I got so thin. "Yes! Come and have a look at your wife!" So I went in, I saw, ooh, red like anything between labour pains, of course I wasn't allowed to stay in. At five o'clock, our first child was born.
To make it on time for that was fantastic. Next day I went out to buy a pram. Her parents were wonderful. Her mother was crying when she saw me. Because I lost so much weight you know, but anyway.

RL: What was the date?

Tape 3: 39 minutes 46 seconds

ES: 27th of January… Oh no sorry, 27th of October, exactly nine months later! [Laughs] 27th of October 1945.

RL: Can I ask you, how long were you working in Theresien?

ES: In Theresienstadt. About three months. Then I was sent to Usti, to Aussig.

RL: And what were conditions like? Can you tell me a little about your time in Theresien?

ES: Theresienstadt. Well, it was under the Russian command, you know, and we were given strict duties. I looked after a hut where people were lying and the patients were lovely you know, [Laughs] I don't know if I should say this. There were also funny things, you always see the funny side. One of the patients said 'Oh, doctor I've got haemorrhoids', can you do something? So I gave anusol suppositories. Next day I come. 'Yes, I'm better, could I have some more?' I go to the next door, next ward: 'I've got haemorrhoids, can you give me anusol too?' You know what they did? Although they had plenty of food. They hoarded bread, and anusol is spread out like butter. You know, they ate it. [Laughs] Although they had enough food, but they still hoarded things. The nurse discovered that they used this to, instead of butter. But they were very trusting and you know, oh yes. But I, there was one Frenchman who had swollen legs. And obviously he was Jewish and he was pale as pale can be. And I managed to get a blood count. And it was very poor. He was anaemic to the extreme. I told my boss. He needs a blood transfusion. He said 'it's not worth it'. I said 'We must do something for him!' 'Ah, go on, give him one'. So I gave him a blood transfusion. But my chief was right. He passed away just the same. He was beyond help. You know that's… the frustration in my work was terrible. But there were some compensations you know. In Theresienstadt, I at that time of course the Germans were put in the little fortress, the prison of the camp and one particular man was, they thought he was feigning to be ill, and I had to go to the prison camp and examine him. And I looked and he had a severe tonsillitis, so I said, although he was a Nazi, you know, he has severe tonsillitis, he is really not fit to do anything until he recovers. They used him as labour. But I went to the yard outside the hospital, not in the prison camp, and there the Jews were now in power, and the Nazis had to do the work. And they had a milk crate. And one elderly Nazi, with the uniform, had to lift it on a bench and back down, up and down, up and down. And I said 'What's this for?' –'Ooooh'. I had a white coat, some authority. They took him afterwards to a room. And I could hear shouting. So I went there. I said:

Tape 3: 44 minutes 21 seconds

'Look, stop this! This won't bring back those whom they killed.' –'Oh you don't know anything about it. I lost my mother, my father.' I said 'So did I! But that won't help you'. And I managed to stop them. And the German: 'Thank you Doctor'. –'I don't want any thanks, that won't lead to anything'. This kind of scenario I saw ever so often. I mean it doesn't help. I know they suffered more than I did, but in terms of life it's terrible. So it was very frustrating on the whole.

RL: Did many die in Theresien during those months?

ES: Pardon?

RL: Repeats.

ES: Pardon

RL: Did many die?

ES: Yes. In fact I looked up some, some statistics, and they tell you how many died during this war. And the worst day was in September '42 when 151 people died on that day, not that they were shot, and not in gas chambers, but from exhaustion, starvation, or whatever. Like my grandmother, she died on the first day. But time is short. Can I tell you something else?
Because after the war, when I went back after the liberation from the Communist Regime, I went back to Austerlitz and to Prague and that was for the first time I could show my wife what, where I lived as a boy, I went to Brno, we met the daughter of my cousin who lived in Prague and I went to Austerlitz of all places. And when I went I could see, I wanted to see where my maternal grandparents lived because I had heard that the house demolished. And to my surprise it was still standing. So I showed, that's where I had my time with my dear

grandparents. Next to it, about three yards later, was the old Shul, still standing, perfect, perfectly preserved. And I looked, it was used as a furnishers' store, and when I asked, the little cobbled street, there was a woman standing there, and Margaret said: 'You better have a word with her.' So I went to tell her in Czech that we are from England now, we wanted to take photos of the Synagogue. Are there any Jews left in Austerlitz? She shook her head and said 'no there are not'. Aah. I feared so that all the Jews had to go'. Then we left. It was a miserable cold day. And then she called us back and said 'Look. Round the corner lives a woman. *Banyi Matiovska*. I think she is Jewish. Showed us where to go. We found her. We rang the bell, and upstairs the window opened, with 'Yes what do you want?!' Like the country way.

Tape 3: 48 minutes 16 seconds

('Tortzete?'-in Czech. I said '-My name is Eric Strach, and we've come…. It didn't mean anything. 'My auntie lived here, Mrs Badura. –'Badura! Oh yes! Come in, come in!' She runs down, you know, and she was there. Ruth Matiovska. And she's the only Jewish survived. She married out and she had two lovely children, and she looked after her grandchildren. Ruth was ten years old when she had to go to Theresien with her parents but her father was an invalid, he lost his leg during the war… no, in an accident. And he worked as a dental technician. In Theresien they used him to extract the gold of the teeth of the many who died there and she assisted him to do it under supervision of the Nazis, and that's how they survived. She was an only child, but both her mother, father and she survived. She has a story of her own to tell which would take another hour to… but she became our friend and our contact and she got us in touch with her former teacher, Mrs *Korkatchkaba*, Luba, who became the chronicler of the town, she wrote chronicles, and she showed us, she was very interested in racial discrimination. And **..** she described each one of the people in Austerlitz, t he Jewish people who perished in the Holocaust. When I came back to England, when we came back to England, I wrote a short, I wrote a short story of what happened, my first return to Austerlitz. So I, I showed it to a friend of mine who is a big macher in the synagogue, in the, I mean in the progressive synagogue here, and he said 'Do we publish it in the synagogue magazine, so it was published. But only the chapter about Austerlitz. 'Return to Austerlitz'. Good thing I didn't say 'Return to Slavkov,' the Czech name, nobody would have noticed. Soon afterwards I got a letter from a young man, from a man in Nottingham, and he says 'We have a Torah scroll from Austerlitz, and we are very interested in anybody who can tell us more about Austerlitz, what life was like.' 'Of course I'd like to help you. Yes, by all means.' Anyway, we met, and they took it very seriously. Right up to the present day. And we worked together. He did a lot of research, I got to the Wiener Library, and to, to the Theresienstadt and to Prague, to records and we worked together and got together really the story of the Jews of Austerlitz. And it was eventually published in a booklet: 'The Jews of Austerlitz'. We have been working together. They have now a yearly Austerlitz Shabbat. Where the… And last year they even made a play of Ruth and Austerlitz. They're very very serious. And I told them, to my friends… we went every year to Austerlitz, until recently, every year and made lots of friends, and believe me, I got for my birthday, just my ninetieth birthday, a card from the Mayor of Austerlitz and the Deputy Mayor and even from the Mayor I first met fifteen years ago in 1990. Ah. And showing appreciation for what I've done. Because we wanted to do something about the Shul. We

Tape 3: 53 minutes 9 seconds

wanted to have it repaired. And it was really important to get it done. Eventually it was used as a light builders' material deposit which is terribly out of keeping. And I told my friends and they said we must do something about it. And nothing happened. There was hope, and we got to Luba, the chronicle, the chronicler, she had access to the Town Hall meeting. There was news that somebody wants to elevate, make Austerlitz a tourist centre, but it all fell down, so I said ah, it's a big step, but why don't we start with cleaning up the cemetery and erect a memorial stone for all the Jews who lost their lives, Jews from Austerlitz. And that was the most fantastic thing. They, the Jewish council from Brno helped us design a stone, a granite stone, really beautiful, black, and I managed to provide the Hebrew, Czech, and English inscription and then came the 4th of June 1994, I'll never forget the date, when we had the inauguration. We contacted people with any Austerlitz connections. We found two in America, many in Czechoslovakia of course, the Czech Republic as it was called then, and England, Austria, France, and we had the official unveiling where the Chief Rabbi came from Prague, the Chief, the Ambassador of the State of Israel came, it was, held a fantastic speech. All I remember about his speech was… oh, my cousin came from Israel, Hansi, so it was fantastic. All I remember was 'If only the spirit would have been like this before the war many Jews would have been saved'. Anyway, this was an unforgettable experience. And I still wanted to carry on pressurising for the upgrading, for the repairing of the synagogue. The roof was faulty, the pigeons were dropping inside, pigeon dirt, you know, and I said well we must do something about it. And another, clever secretary, non-Jewish from the Jewish Council in Brno, managed to persuade the Ministry of Culture to have it restored. And it was restored and there was a similar occasion where we again, had again, twenty people came from Nottingham, and there was a big, big celebration to have it restored. Not as a synagogue, because there was only one Jew, but as an archival building. And they made a beautiful job of it. It was absolutely perfect. The local people, the younger local people had never seen it like this.

RL: Right we just have to stop here because this tape is about to end.

Tape 3: 56 minutes 59 seconds

END OF TAPE 3

TAPE 4

RL: This is the interview with Eric Strach and its tape four.

You were telling me about the project to restore the synagogue in Austerlitz.

ES: I thought that would be the final thing that they do for Austerlitz, but it wasn't. We, there is an old, the old Jewish school in Austerlitz, very near to the synagogue, and I heard there were plans to have it demolished and perhaps, we didn't know there was a, project may have been to have a play……. or something very unsuitable to erect it in its place. And we wanted to preserve the building although it was quite derelict. So one of the Austerlitz people had the idea of making the school room which was well preserved as a museum for the town, of the Jews of Austerlitz. Now in the, when we opened the synagogue we had a little exhibition in the foyer, which is very small, and not enough room for all the exhibits we have. And I thought it would be a good idea to do this, and we are working towards it. And we've done hard work.

I'm afraid in the last couple of years I was not able to go to Austerlitz, so Neil from Nottingham and other Nottingham people have taken it over, and they negotiated for the school to become a museum. And of course money is required and we all contributed some, but I think the town of Slovak gradually became enthusiastic about the project and it's now coming to fruition and the official opening will take place on the 5th of June 2005. I only got now an email from Nottingham, would they count me in to arrange travel. I had to say well I don't know, I can't plan so far ahead at my age. If I go I probably go with my son in law, who can do the driving required, not that I can't do the driving, but I always thought I shouldn't drive very much. So anyway, that is coming off. And again, they are already planning for all the people to come to, with Austerlitz connections to come to the opening.

What has transpired since is that there are many Jewish communities in the States who have also a Torah scroll from Austerlitz. I think you know that the Torah Scrolls, the Czech Torah scrolls have been bought up by philanthropists who bought them all and shipped them to Westminster Synagogue, and there from there they were distributed all over the world. But this is quite new to us, that the community in Ohio and other places in the states have also a scroll, so they're combining with the Finchley Synagogue and various other synagogues, and they firmly intend to come to Austerlitz for the inauguration of the school as a museum.

This of course is quite near to our hearts, my heart especially because my grandfather, my maternal grandfather is

Tape 4: 4 minutes 42 seconds

in a register who attended the school as a, in 1805 also, because he was then a young boy, and I know this. I think you may know Dr Kurer, Peter Kurer a famous dentist in Manchester, he has a lot of very interesting memorabilia of Austerlitz. His greatgrandfather used to live in Austerlitz and he was really the head of the Jewish community there, very important, and I'm very great friends with him. In fact I gave once a lecture at Manchester Historical society on Prague. And out there was very well received and at the end of the lecture there was question time, and the first question was a man standing up: 'Mr Strach, I think we are related!' I said 'Really? What is your name?' –'Oh, Hans Prager'. Oh yes, I remember Pragers. Actually you are related to another Doctor Strach in Austerlitz, and I remember him very well, to Ottmar Prager. Ottmar Strach. And that is true, but he and his brother in London took a very active part in all our activities and so did Mr Kurer. He came to Austerlitz as well, for all these activities.

RL: Who is the group in Nottingham?

ES: Well the Nottingham Progressive synagogue is very interested. They have got a Torah Scroll from Austerlitz. When I go there I'm given the honour of being called to say the Brocha before the Torah and after the Torah really. Erm yes. Well Neil Pike is a young man who started off all the research. But he's now orthodox. He goes to the Shakespeare synagogue. Shakespeare Street. But he is now in both because he's so efficient and so interested and it's all his life and he's very very clever in finding out things. So here you are, that's what I wanted to say.

RL: Now you were also telling me that you visited Slovakia before you left Theresienstadt.

ES: Yes. Theresienstadt yes. Well, whilst I was in Theresienstadt, I got a letter from a hospital in Slovakia, actually it was called Vysne Hagy, and saying that Kurt Radow is there a patient, and he has been wounded during the war, had a wound and is very ill. And he thinks that penicillin can help him. Penicillin was a new drug then. So I thought Kurt Radow is the brother of my brother in law, you know, of my, my sister's, I mentioned to you my brother in

law, who is my sister's husband, who went to the army and was an old soldier. But his brother joined up the Russian front, and that way he was wounded. He was so ill he couldn't write the letter, it was dictated to a nurse. So he said Penicillin can help. And we had Penicillin, the new wonder drug with us, as equipment, I knew that, but we had no use in Theresien for it.
Tape 4: 9 minutes 5 seconds

Because it doesn't help typhus, it's no good for tuberculosis, and of course no good for hunger oedema either. So I wanted to take the penicillin to Kurt Radow. Now then that's difficult. There are lot of formality required, but people were very understanding. I said 'Look, we've got it here in the fridge and it will just perish and will be of no use at all.' I have some good use, and showed them the letter and after a lot of bargaining I could leave to take it. Sending it was no use because transport wasn't normal. But I took it there, I could leave and so I took it there and it was really an epic journey. Right up to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia was easy, I arrived there, and what happened first? I had great difficulty, because I had no money. The currency in Slovakia, which was an independent state compared with the Czech Republic wouldn't accept any different currency, so I didn't know what to do, so I took one pound note and went to the best hotel and asked them something and I waved the pound note and someone said 'What is this?' –'A pound note'. –'How do I know it's real?' I showed him my passport, 'I've just arrived from there. –Can I have it?' '–Yes, if you give me ten thousand krons for it. -Oh yes!' So he gave me money and I could live for a week with it. And the same thing with cigarettes, I had some cigarettes; I could sell them at an inflated price.

Anyway I did the journey. From then onwards there was no communication. There were no trains or anything. There was a train as far as Trencin and then we had to get out and walk over broken bridges to join, with our, across the road there were horse and carts and they made a business out of it to take us wherever we wanted to go. And so it went with great difficulty it went from one broken bridge to another, because they had suffered a lot during the war, the bridges were destroyed and pontoon bridges were erected. And when we came to a place called Rosenberg, and I was on a, sitting on a wagon, a horse drawn wagon with a mother with her young child and some other five people, and suddenly a Slovak soldier came: 'Halt, what's your business?' I said 'well, I want to go to the hospital. What about you? I won't accept it!' Shot in the air. The child was crying, the woman was terrified, he was, he was a young man who was given a gun and he didn't' know what to do with it and he was playing tricks, it was terrible. But we could feel it over our heads, a good thing. Anyway, when we got to Ruzomberok I reported him. They said 'Oh that fool again!' [Laughs] They're used to it. Anyway eventually I arrived in Vysne Hagy, a little place, beautiful countryside, the Tatra Mountains, and I wanted to go to the hospital. I was given the address from a doctor, but it didn't help, he didn't turn up, he was supposed to meet me and take me there. So I had to stay in a little place, a country place.
Tape 4: 13 minutes 21 seconds

Nowhere to stay, no hotels, this was just a… So I went knocked a door, somebody… because they were Slovaks, there was one Czech man living there, he said 'I'm sure he'll find a room for you. And I was starving hungry by then. I forgot to tell you when I was in Bratislava, I told them what I wanted, the penicillin was in the fridge, to keep it cold. And the nurse there, the only bed they could give me there was a plinth in the physiotherapy department I could use it at night to sleep and on the black market I could get some food. But she gave me a crust of bread, and an onion, just to make it slide down quicker. And that was all I had. And so I came there I was really starving hungry. And this Czech man was absolutely wonderful. He said we have no room but we have food. He made me scrambled eggs. Oh I devoured them. I've never had such nice scrambled eggs before, or since.

And then he said well look, I can't put you up, but my wife she has a friend, she can go there, and if you don't mind sharing the bed with me you can stay here. So I stayed overnight and then I went by the… there is a tram, a very high famous tram to take you from one resort to the other. Vysne Hagy is a resort where there was a hospital and I went to the hospital where Kurt was a patient. I was… yes, he's there. I went to a ward, there were three patients there. I looked around and couldn't him. Until I heard a voice 'Eric!' It was Kurt. He has gone thin as a rake. He, the master swimmer of Prague Hagibor, of the swimming club. He was risen down to a skeleton, no wonder I didn't recognise him. But the way he opened his eyes, I knew it was him. So I stayed there, and oh, I did what I could, and I stayed when they dressed him and he got septicaemia, and I brought the penicillin, gave it to the doctor, but thought even that may be too late. Because his whole back was one sore, bedsore, from lying. Because any movement caused him terrific pain. He wouldn't move. Ah. And I knew, when I saw this sore, I've never seen a sore like this. The whole back was open. And well, I stayed with him, and he showed me a picture of his daughter, Mila. He has never seen her, she was born after he left. And this, the daughter, his wife came from Leicester, and she sent him the picture. He was so proud of his daughter. And well, with cigarettes I could obtain fresh cream, fruit, I picked up wild strawberries, which he liked to eat, and I made his life a bit easier. I gave him a bit of pleasure.

I also had to go to the nearest military point for his wages or whatever. Anyway, after one week he was a bit better and I had to go back. So I told him, ah yes, well it was lovely seeing you. I stayed a whole week with him, and I came back, went back to the, to Theresien. And then when I went to Usti,
Tape 4: 17 minutes 53 seconds

I got word that he died. He died of amyloidosis. This is a condition which is due to lack of proteins, through the pus coming out of the bedsores, it damages the kidney and he died, died from the bedsore. The gunshot wound was nothing much, but it would have, if he could have had the penicillin at the beginning. It was too late. But I'll never forget this journey. When I came back I went straight to Austerlitz where my aunt Hilda was there, and she looked after me. She looked after everybody. Everybody. And apparently she knew that some jewellery and personal belongings, also to me, were stored somewhere secretly, in a farm in Moravia, and she, I didn't go there, but she went to Moravia. It was a stable where first the Nazis had their horses and then the Communists had their horses there, they had no idea they were there, so they dug them up and brought me a box, and gave me some of the jewellery. They had no key, but they had to be prized open.

RL: Coming on.

ES: [Laughs]

RL: Coming on where we left off previously, your return after this to England and the birth of your first child. What was your first child?

ES: Helen. After my mother. Yes. All our family had names of my parents. Second names. The little girl, my son's daughter, is Madeleine Cornelia, instead of Cornelius and so on. And

George after, Angela's little boy is called George, and he is named after one of my nephews. Ah anyway.

Well I went of course I went there, I stayed, they fed me like anything, they gave me special things to put on weight, and I went to see my former boss, Mr Dwyer, the one who appointed me to the hospital in Chorley. And he said yes, there is work for you in Wigan to be done. We'll have you back. So I got the job back. But I only had a visitor's visa, for one month. And when one month was over, the police came to the house, apologetically said 'I'm sorry'… because they all knew me, you see with the police, the hospital, there are inquests sometimes and they knew me. And they said 'nothing to do with us', but the home office required that they made sure that I return to Czechoslovakia. –'Oh no, I can't'. Well, give us something. As a matter of fact my father in law, Margie's father advised me to see their, their Vicar, who is very clever and knows what to do. And the Vicar referred me to the MP and the MP interviewed me and said we will do all we can to keep you here. So they said 'Oh, it's a running application?!

Tape 4: 22 minutes 6 seconds

Yes, oh that's Alright, you can stay.' So they reported to the home office that I'm applying to stay and there were questions asked and when I got a letter from Chuter Ede, who was then the Home Secretary. He said 'Yes, you have permanent residence in England and if you want you can apply for naturalisation. [Laughs] Heavens! Heavens! So I applied for naturalisation and I got it, and then I came home and I said 'Margaret, you are a foreigner. She was still Czech. Because when we married she became Czech. And I was English! [Laughs] I don't speak to foreigners now. Anyway, she applied, it was just a formality, she became British again.

Well, and then I started studying for my higher degrees, and of course with a small child here, Helen was a little baby, and we lived with her parents in the house, and they were very supportive. They knew I had to study. I got my primary fellowship in surgery, and then they all helped me.

RL Where were you studying?

ES: Eventually I got a fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons. It was very hard to get.

RL: Where were you studying?

ES: Why?

RL: Where were you studying? Where, who was it under? Where did you study?

ES: Why?

RL: Where?

ES: Why?

RL: Where?

ES: In London. I had to go to the Queen's Square in London and sit their examination there. It's like a torture chamber. Very very stiff and hard. But I got it eventually. I got the primary at first shot, not the final. That was difficult. And I came to a stage when I wanted to give it up. But my chief told me don't give it up. You are made for surgery. And I made it! [Laughs] And then you are presented with a certificate at the Royal College of Surgeons. We had to go up the stairs, you were invited by all the examiners. And to me it was like a walk into heaven. Heavenly surgery. And then after that I did a further examination in the Liverpool University to be a

Tape 4: 25 minutes 14 seconds

Master of Orthopaedic surgery**,** which is a special examination, but that was easier, but I was very proud to get it and I got the first prize. [Laughs] But all that time they supported me, my, you know. It's hard work to study, and even, I was given a textbook which one of our examiners wrote, and I found many mistakes in it, and I had the cheek to write to him. And he asked me when I was in London, 'I want to thank you', I have a lot of people reading and they didn't find anything, and here you are, you found it. I was very pleased. And he was pleased. Because a mistake in the textbook is strange, you know. Anyway, I got it.

RL: So during this time, were you still working at the hospital?

ES: Yes. No. I went to Alder Hey, again. I worked in Alder Hey during the war and after the war. I became a surgeon in, I also worked in Smithtown Road Hospital and so on. But when I got the NCHO as well, I applied for a consultancy. That was in 1952, 56, Anyway, I worked in Clatterbridge but, before getting a consultancy. And in Clatterbrige I wasn't a full consultant, but was a Senior Hospital Medical Officer, which was just a low grade, lower grade. But eventually in 56 I became a full consultant in St Helen's Hospital, and this was wonderful. At the time I only was on a six sessions, instead of the nine sessions, I didn't get full pay, but it was made up very quickly with doing locum work in other hospitals. They took me even to Rhyll and Ormskirk and various other hospitals. And eventually I did work in Whiston Hospital and then I did both hospitals together and I worked there, my main, well, I had lots of interests. But I took a special interest in Paediatric Surgery.

I concentrated my work on Spin bifida children. Children born with a split spine who had difficulty walking, or couldn't walk, and through efforts I managed to get them walking and we became life friends. We are still in touch with lots of them. Yes. And I eventually retired in 1979 when I got 65 years old. But soon, even before I retired they asked me to do locum work in the Royal Liverpool Hospital, which at the time was really new. That's a teaching hospital. I was very happy there, nice to have students, and I worked there as well, well, and did some locum work. But I still did my Spin Bifida work in special schools, special schools, where we had panels, and arranged any treatment required. I was Medical Officer in a Special School. Until they found out, until I was 71 years old, they said we are not allowed to employ anyone over seventy. But they employed me, until 71. [Laughs] And then I

Tape 4: 29 minutes 43 seconds

did some work, medical legal work, in private, this I did until 1989. And I've been fully retired from that. I liked it but I was always disgusted by what I called the swingers, people who had an accident and pretended to be unable to work. So I was glad to get out of it. I don't want to be a detective, but I was one.

Anyway, that brings us up to date. I retired in 1989. I had a marvellous hobby, which is astronomy. And I do my astronomy work, which I've been doing since the fifties, but even more intensive now that I have some time. I observe the sun on any possible day, sunny day in the year. I can see up to 230 observations a year, you know, something like this. So here you are. So here you are, I think…

RL: So with your astronomy have you discovered anything?

ES: Nothing major, nothing major. I have a paper in the sideline, I found some strange darkness in the chromosphere of the sun, near the limb and it has never been described before, and I don't know whether it will be published, I submitted a paper, which is now under scrutiny. But that's one thing, you know. I like to do also imaging, imaging of what I see. And what you can see on the sun, it's just unbelievable. It's always a surprise. Whenever you open up something new comes. For example at the beginning of October, the sun looked like minimum activity, you know, solar activity goes in an eleven year cycle. And it's predicted that the next minimum will be in 2006-2007. But there were hardly any sunspots. But as it came to my birthday it became very active again, quite surprising and on the day I, last Saturday we had a celebration for my 90th birthday, together with my astronomical friends. In the morning it was clear and to my great pleasure, I was able to see an image, a solar flare, which is an exceptional thing, to be seen and the picture is really very good. So that made my day. [Laughs] Anyway. That was my birthday present from the sun. [Laughs] It was bright like anything.

RL: During your medical career, did you ever encounter any hostility or any anti-Semitism?

ES: Any what?

RL: Any anti-Semitism.

ES: Anti-Semitism. None whatsoever. None whatsoever. No. No. I was never asked my religion. Except the Professor of Liverpool, the Professor of Surgery. Because I attended a

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course of surgery in preparation for the fellowship examination. And he was the only one who asked me 'are you Jewish?' I said yes. But no anti-Semitism. He was just interested. But no one else ever asked me. But I don't… At first I didn't broadcast it, because of the innate fear of being ostracised or being sidelined as a Jew. This is a relic of the anti-Semitism during the war, but I didn't find any anti-Semitism at all. Interestingly Margaret, she's in a ladies club here, and now and then, they talked of him as a Jew-boy, or this… not anti-Semitism but stigma. And until she said '-Do you know my husband is Jewish?' –'Oooh, my best friends are Jewish!' [Laughs]. No, no, that's the only thing. But never to me directly. They didn't know I was Jewish. I didn't, I didn't hide it, but I didn't press it. But now it's quite different. In fact I managed to, I'm Vice-President, I was President, but now I'm Vice-President of the Liverpool Astronomical Society. And years ago I went to Czechoslovakia and found an astronomical society in Vlashim, which is near Prague, 100 kilometres from Prague, because the daughter of my cousin has a little cottage very nearby. So I contacted and we went there, I went there, and we talked astronomy. And we invited them over to England, and the Society, a representative of the society came here, and was it four years ago, they invited us to Czechoslovakia, and we had a wonderful time, and it's all that we, as a society are twinned with Vlashim. Yes, that's very interesting. They're very go-ahead.

RL: Have you ever been involved in any organisations in this country? Have you ever been involved with any other societies or organisations?

ES: Yes, oh, the British Orthopaedic Association. You mean Jewish?

RL: No, any.

ES: Any? Oh lots of them, lots of them. The British Orthopaedic Association, the British Medical Association. I remember there is a club in Liverpool which is called The Circle. It's an orthopaedic circle, where we meet every month. But I'm not going now. And Junior doctors have one which is called 58 Society. Which is for Junior doctors. And when we moved to this house in 1957 that was formed and they came here, the first meeting was held here in 1957,58, sorry. That's why it's called '58 Society'. And I'm involved with the Jewish Medical Society, which is a very good one. I still attend every meeting I can, because it's not far from here, Harold House they meet. I'm a member of Harold House, the Jewish Community Care, Liberal Jewish Community Centre, LCC,
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They have a restaurant there which we frequently go there and we have many friends. And oh other societies, plenty of them. I can't remember now.

RL: What about your involvement with the Jewish Community, how did that begin?

ES: the Jewish Community?

RL: Yes, your involvement with the Jewish Community in Liverpool.

ES: In Liverpool. Well, of course there, I'm in the Progressive Shul now, I used to go to the Orthodox Greenbank School, but now I'm permanently in the Progressive Shul.

RL: When did you change?

ES: I changed fourteen years ago, something like this.

RL: What made you change?

ES: Well, I wanted my wife to be accepted, fully. Although not a member, she's there and also our Rabbi Zalut, I don't know if you've heard of him. He also goes to a, a Shul in Manchester, recently, he does both Shuls. He's a great friend of ours. I used to treat his mother, who had trouble with walking. I did an operation on her. I knew his father, they were fantastic people. I occasionally look after Zalut, Norman Zalut there as well. Yes, I'm a member of this.

RL: Was it difficult being a member of the orthodox synagogue? Your wife not being Jewish.

ES: No. I wouldn't say that. But you know, after my friends from Liverpool left, who looked after me, they went to Manchester, lived in Manchester. I sort of lapsed, I wasn't a member of the Greenbank Shul, but I stopped. And then I thought I better join something. To make it easier, I joined with Margaret, to be a member of the Progressive Shul. She isn't a member, but they accept her at every service. They are so easy-going you know.

So here you are. But we, we went together to the induction, when he was made a full Rabbi, Zalut a few years ago. And he's a good… He also wants always to see Saturn, he comes here. He's besotted by Saturn, so when it's visible he comes. He wants to look at it through the telescope. And he managed, on

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several occasions, to link it to his sermons, that there must be a God, to create a thing like this, like Saturn.

RL: Has your religious beliefs changed over the years?

ES: Religious belief. Well, I must say, I lapsed a lot in my life, but at heart I always remain Jewish, you know. But I felt I ought to belong to have a bit of, I want to belong to something. That is the reason I joined the Progressive Shul. And having lapsed in the past, and not being really, really very religious, drove me to it, but my heart is there. In a way I lost out by going to the Jewish school, Gymnasium in Brno, because the religious education, and the teacher there was not a good teacher you know. And the people here who went to Cheder they knew more about religion than I, so I lost out. My parents did their best for me, they thought Jewish school should do… but he was, he was hopeless as a teacher. He was a good man, but he just couldn't teach.

RL: What did you do for your Barmitzvah?

ES: Oh, a full Barmitzvah. I had lessons by the, by the Rabbi, Rabbi Levi, in the big Synagogue and I had my Torah to read out. Yes. And there were, it was a big occasion and even my uncle Leo, my mother's eldest brother came with his family from Germany to it. That was the first time I met him, at the Barmitzvah. And my relations from Ostrava also came. That's the first time I met them, you know. Because after Hugo died, his wife remarried a man called Albus, who was very good. And he never changed the name of the shop which goes under the name of Hugo Strach. So very often when I meet somebody from Ostrava, they say: 'Oh, are you related to Hugo Strach?' –Yes, I have his name. They had two sons from the first marriage, from her first marriage, one of them perished in the Holocaust. I don't know what the other did. And they had the daughter who was beautiful, absolute beauty, and became the actress in Theresien and who has done so well, my aunt Adelie remembered her, she perished as well.

In Theresien there were little children born. I don't know whether she got a child there or not. But that was terrible. Because that was against the law to have a child. But I think over 200 children were born in Theresien. The model Camp. Yes. Ruth tells us, Ruth who was in Theresien, she remembers when the Red Cross inspected the camp, she had to play, she was only ten or eleven years old, on the swings with other children to show how happy it was. They had to scrub the floor, the pavement, to make everything look spic and span. And she, they were given a sweet just before they came, a

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sweet which she mustn't eat until they had been told, a sweet each, they went through, and when the inspector came: "Oh, you have a sweet? Who gave it to you?" –"Uncle Rahm", he was a Nazi, Nazi director of Theresien. Uncle Rahm they called him. 'He was very good to us'. When they left they had to come up and show: "Have you still got the sweet? Give it back to me." They had to return all the sweets. That's what she remembers as a child.

RL: Coming to your Jewish identity. What does that mean to you? You know, how you say you feel Jewish at heart, what does that mean to you, can you sort of describe a little bit more what Jewish means.

ES: Yes. Well, I'm, I don't go to enormous Shabbat service. I must say, if the sun is out I prefer to go to the sun. And in the winter I can only observe between ten and one. So I, I don't want to be, I don't want to be hypocritical to go there, so I just feel I and one thing as friendly as I am with the Rabbi and with other people at the Shul, they know I don't come to ordinary services, they never urged me to come, they never pressurised me. I mean on Yom Kippur, on Rosh Hashanah the house is full, you know, and even in the sermon, he welcomes us all, but he never says I wish you were like this on an ordinary Shabbos. That's what I like. I don't like to be told, you know. I mean, I'm big enough to see that I am at heart Jewish but not so much Jewish that I even must go to Shul every Saturday. Having said that, I fast. And I still fast now. This is for emotional reasons. Not just because I think what wrong I've done. But it's for emotional reasons. Because it reminds me of the time when I went with my father to Shul and his davening and myself and talking to his friends there when they shouldn't be talking. Ah, but it's just emotion. It's emotion to me. And that comes from the heart, I can't deny it. And they all said to me: Don't fast. I was nearly ninety. And you know, I fast better now than when I was young. Younger people get starving hungry. I don't. And it's, it's just, I said so long as I can I will. I only once lapsed, that's when I had hepatitis. I got it in Israel. We went to an Arab restaurant. I'm sure that's where I got it. And we had orange juice, fresh oranges. And I'm sure they handled it, you know, with the Arabs there.

RL: How do you feel towards Israel?

ES: Well, very close, very very close. Many of my school friends are in Israel. My closest school friend, or one of my closest, his birthday is on the 1st of October, mine is on the 21st, and that's when we always write letters to each other. He

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has, I don't know how many grandchildren. He has six great-grandchildren. I haven't got one. I don't envy him… And he is a great man. And my cousin lived there, with a lovely family. He's got two daughters, who are very close to me. And I met them last time at Gertie's funeral, at Hans's sister's funeral and they are very interested in the history. You see here I really delve into history and they also. They ask me about my family, and they make notes, you know, so that they know exactly how we are related, you know. That I feel is my work.

RL: When did you first visit Israel?

ES: I first went to Israel when we had a good Greek friend, she invited us to Athens where they lived. We had a holiday there, she lived here. And at the same time I got an invitation to the wedding of Hansie's daughter to Shlomo. And I was sorry, I said I'm sorry I can't come, I'm going to Athens, and I told my friends about it, the Greek friends. And they said 'Look, from here it's a short trip to Israel. Why don't you go?' I went! Unfortunately Margaret didn't go, it would have been quite impolite for her to go, but it was my first visit to Israel. And Aaah, to see Jewish inscription on the buses, to see Hebrew on the… everyone talking

Hebrew, Ivrit, you know, that meant a lot to me, yes. And to be at a Jewish wedding, at a wedding in Israel, it was quite extraordinary, that was fantastic. And I met a daughter of my cousin from Gertie's side here and we were like two, out, two, who were not really knowing Israel, or Israel habit. Oh she was lovely. And I went again when there was a conference in Israel. And three or four times I went. One time just to see my cousin, and they had only a small flat, and he put us up in Kfar Macabbia**,** I don't know if you know it. Kfar Macabbia was a very nice restaurant, a very nice place, sports place you know for functions. I was very, I felt at home there, yes. I don't know. Of course I have roots here, but I could easily spread roots in Israel.

RL: How would you describe your identity?

ES: My identity. I'm a kind of mixture between Czech, and Jewish and English. You know. And I love them all. Of course through Margaret I'm very close to her extended family as well. Her parents are dead now, her brother is dead, her sister is lingering, vegetating, she had a stroke three years ago, and Margaret goes to see her in a home, every, twice a week about, and we are close to her. But my identity well that's what it is, I'm a mixture, I'm a fair mixture. I'm Jewish of course, first, then comes English, then comes Czech, I think. I do a lot of translations. Like in this book I did a

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translation of Wartime Memoirs, but my main translation was of Wartime Memoirs of my cousin Hansi, who now lives in Israel. That was heartbreaking. But his brother in law, Kafka, Doctor Kafka, because he's a cardiologist, from the medical point of view. And this is even, it's different. And the strange thing is, although they are only in-laws, they feel like brothers. Because when Hansi was in Kaufering, that's near Dachau, Dachau interned, there was a rumour that a Czech contingent is due to arrive. And when he looked around he spotted his *Hanush* Kafka, Doctor Kafka. By chance. And two, out of millions of prisoners, of people, they moved to meet in one place. That is a wonder. And he is, and they've been together and he got typhus, our Hansi, and he was very ill with it, and Doctor Kafka helped him, for example when he recovered his mind was not all there. And Hansi was given the job to bring bread to other prisoners. On the way he started eating the bread. And they would have lynched him for that. So he saved his life and conversely *Hanush* got typhus as well and Hansi was able to look after him. But they're close. And really I feel very close, I felt very close to Margaret's brother, who was a wonderful man, and unfulfilled in some ways. But he was wonderful and I always felt he was my English brother. I never had a brother, he never had a brother, but we really had an empathy beyond, beyond just being a relation.

RL: This tape is about to end, so we'll just stop here.

END OF TAPE 4.

TAPE 5

RL: This is the interview with Eric Strach, and its tape five.

Can you tell me about your children, what children you had, and what kind of education they had, and about them?

ES: Yes. Well my eldest daughter, Helen, Helen Elisabeth, she works as a physiotherapist, and it started really in one of the schools I attended, for disabled children, and she's done very well. Bur now I'm out of it, and somehow the school work has sort of diminished and there's a lot less Spin Bifida now than it was in my time, due to prenatal diagnosis. Anyway, Helen does now care work, caring usually now for old people, elderly people in various homes and also in the hospital, in the Wirral in the Arrowe Park Hospital, so she is there as a care worker, and she's very popular because she's very caring.
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And that's her job. She's a bit of a perfectionist, very often she finds fault, things not as they ought to be, and she does not tolerate it, and she tells them. Anyway, that's that's…

RL: And where does Helen live?

ES: Oh she lives in the Wirral in Upton in the Wirral.

RL: Is she married?

ES: Yes she's married. Her husband Alan is a great friend of mine even before he met her. He's also an amateur astronomer, but he now works in the Astrophysics Department of the JMU, Liverpool, of the Liverpool, Jewish… Not Jewish…, the John Moore University, and he is now a computer expert, he's helped me a lot. And he also is involved in the running of the building of the Robotic Telescope in La Palma, the island, La Palma, and quite often he has to go there to repair or install something. It's functional now, but it took a long time to be established.

RL: Do they have children?

ES: Yes they have one daughter. Lucy, who somehow follows her mother's footsteps and she also does nursing, children's nursing, staffing, just staffing. Now the next one is Steven, named after the Steven who put us together, the Steven the boy of these other refugees who paired us together, who paired me and Margaret together. So that's why he's called Steven, with a 'v', not a 'ph', although he is a PhD in chemistry. He, for the last 25 years he has been living in Australia, particularly in Canberra. He has a PhD in molecular chemistry. And started in, work over here, in his field. The thing is, he couldn't get a job after he got his PhD. He was too highly qualified to get a job so, young people, you know they take New Scientist and go through adverts. And one he applied for was to be a scientific officer for Scotland Yard. No idea what it is, but I thought with the name of Strach, he won't go to Scotland Yard. But they appointed him and he worked there two years and did original work in handwriting and many other things and he got on well until his old Professor rang him up and said 'Steven, there's a job going in Australia. And would you consider it? Oh yes. But I need some time to get abreast with all the advances of the last two years.' So in that time he met a girl from Australia who was doing nursing in London, Tricia. And they got married and they left for his job in Australia. And they got one daughter, called Madeleine Cordelia, who is now 18 years old, she had her birthday just recently, and 18 years is now more celebrated than 21st. Is
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that here as well? And she she's doing extremely well, and she's, she wants to become an orthopaedic surgeon, like her grandfather [Laughs]. I don't know whether it's true, but she's sitting now doing her Abitur, her GCSE, and depending on that you know she will, she's going to apply for various places in Australia. I wish she would come here, but she has her sister living with her in Australia, and many other relations so I understand what it means. And Steven understands that we no longer travel to Australia. We used to go six times in the past years, since he got married, and now he comes almost every year to see us, and he left last Monday, a week yesterday. And it was nice. He came just for my birthday, and I got an email from him this morning, he's now in Los Angeles, and ready to, to fly back home. Because we were very worried, we hadn't heard from him since. So that's Steven.

Now the youngest is Angela. Angela Louise. No connection with any of my relatives, except Louise, it shows my Francophile… and she's also Francophile. Ah. Well, she did a did her GCSE and got into University, Drama and English and she married Gavin Browning, who is also a teacher of Sciences and Gavin, and they have four children. The eldest is Charlotte, Charlotte Ilse, named after my sister. And she is now, she worked as a journalist, she also has a degree in Drama and English, and she wants to work with handicapped people, with Drama and handicapped, or English. But the latest is that she was given a job… I forgot now what it is. Yes, she worked as a journalist for one of the weekly journals for young people and did very well. They sent her all over, have sent her all over, to Los Angeles, to Liverpool, and she comes and stays with us. She loves coming here to us, I don't know what it is, whether it's the shopping or what is the attraction, but she's very attractive and she's now 24 years old. She did just a world tour, with a friend of hers, she has a boyfriend, but she went with a girlfriend, because she had relations in Perth, in Australia, and she loves travelling and arranging travel.

The next one is Lawrence, Lawrence and he's now studying Marine Biology at Bangor University and he was always interested… He's a very clever boy, he's twenty. And then what we call the little boys, they are both at school, Timothy is fifteen, and he's interested in taking, at a get together he had a video, he took a video of us, and edited it on DVD. So that was his present to me. Because I stipulate: I don't want any presents. But as a present Angela wrote a poem, her husband gave an address and Charlotte made a painting of the setting sun and he did the filming of the reception for the family. And Alexander, the youngest, he will be 14 next month,

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there's only 18 months between the two of them. He's the youngest and he's very very clever as well, particularly in figures, I have no idea what he wants to do. But Timi does also the illumination at drama, you know the technical side. He, last week, just before they came over, Angela did a play, arranged a play, in which Charlotte also took part, and he did all the lights, the technical things, lighting, etc that's what he likes.

RL: Where do they live?

ES: Uxbridge, Uxbridge. Yes, far too far, I wish they would be here, but they're entrenched there, they have lots of good friends.

RL: Did you ever speak to your children much about your past?

ES: About my parents?

RL: Yes about your past?

ES: Well that's very interesting. At the beginning they were small, it wasn't mentioned. But by degrees it came out. I mean I still have an accent, and when they go to school they realise it you know, and very interesting, Charlotte, the eldest, Angela's eldest, she's very literary. She had to write an essay. And she wrote an essay. And she kept on ringing me up Grandpa, where did you live in France, what did you do? Where did you eat? How did you live? You know, that sort of thing. She realised that I had two lives and she entitled her thesis 'The Life I left behind'. Beautiful thing. She knows, she came to realise, I'm not always like I am now, but there I had a life about which, in the past, and not being talked about much. But they got the gist of it, it was put to them in simple form, you know, so much so that these pictures they all have copies in their homes of my parents and my sister and her children. And Alexander the youngest boy, of course, he mixes things up as they do "Oh isn't it a pity, Grandpa's children died". You know. It's like… a child saw the pictures and didn't explain precisely. And they were told about it in gentle terms and they came to accept it, you know.

I mean other children have grandparents on both sides, and Margaret's parents were wonderful with the children. 'Why we haven't Grandpa's parents?' So it was gently broken to them. They were never horrified, you know children aren't, at least they don't show it. And like Charlotte, which is absolutely wonderful, and in fact she heard about my address about Hunter Davis Diary she wanted to have a copy of it, because she wants it to be published in Voices, you know the second generation.

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Angela is a member of the second generation. And she once wrote an article about my life. But she wants to write this, but it's too long, so she's going to… I don't know how she's going to… I gave her the privilege of doing whatever she wants to do with them. I don't know, she'll do a good job, if she wants it to go to Voices. That's it. That's my family.

RL: Do you feel that your refugee experience on the way you brought up your children?

ES: Yes in a way, but you see Margaret is the one who really is nearest to them, I am also near, but she is the one who does the work with them, when they're little and also when they're older. She was supervising their education and all that, she knows more about English schooling than I do, having been a teacher herself, so I think in this way it had very little influence you know, I left it really to Margaret you know, all these things. But they have love from me, and more than that.

RL: Do you feel that your experiences have affected you in any way psychologically?

ES: Psychologically? I'm fortunate to say no, it has not affected me, although I know a lot of them are affected. I'm outgoing. That's why I'm talking to you. Other people won't talk about it. And I feel it's my duty. My parents can't tell what they suffered. My sister can't tell. It's my duty to tell to the world what happened. You know, that's why I do it.

RL: Have you been involved with refugee organisations?

ES: Well of course I'm a longstanding member of the Association of Jewish Refugees, the AJR, and of late a branch was established also in Liverpool, and I'm quite active in it. I gave so far two papers in my past to them, the more recent one is about the Hunter Davis Diary, but the first one was coupled with a slide show of what I went through and what I saw particularly in Austerlitz and Prague and all that. And it went down very well. And I listened to others as well. There are fantastic people there, and very sympathetic, I feel at home with them. Yes. So

RL: When did you first join, how did you first become connected with the AJR?

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ES: AJR. Well a long time ago, a solicitor wrote to me and said there's a house belonging to somebody from Austerlitz. But it's supposed that the lady, who is entitled to inherit it, lives in England and gave me the name and address. No, not the address, just the name. So I thought a lot and I asked my friend *Masaryk***,** who is a big macher at the synagogue, in, and a great friend of mine as well, the same age as I am. And he said 'Why, put it in the AJR, they have search notices'. A good idea. So I put it in, put a search notice in, and somebody wrote to me. And I somehow did it you know. And from, I saw the journal, I think the news, they are fantastic, whatever they say about Gruneberger, he's a very clever man. And I became a member since. We went even on the holiday arranged to Saint Anne's for the Northern Group, they arrange holidays for us, it's so handy for us, it's not too far, although they would be prepared to help us with transport and so on. But being on holiday together, it's easier and we fraternised with other people, we met a lot of people from Leeds and Manchester, from the north, you know. Including an old lady whom I first met when she was 91 years old, and that was the year before last, and last year we went again, no this year we went again, in June, and we saw her again, a sprightly 92 year old. She walks better than I. She's only little. And she's very little. And her hearing is better than mine. But you can't compare people.

Yes, but they're very nice people to me. And I met people who knew for example Doctor *Kiere*, I knew him and we had something in common.

RL: Do you belong… You know you mentioned some other organisations that you belong to, and that you didn't tell me before, to do with interfaith.

ES: Oh yes, yes. We know the man who is in charge of it. He is a Canon at the Anglican Cathedral. And he feels there should be more understanding between various religions, and having an open mind, we went to various meetings. Only recently I more or less cut it down, because at the meeting I usually can't hear what they're saying I can hear, but I can't understand what they're saying. But I still go occasionally. And then there is a CCJ meeting. Yes, I'm a member of the Council of Christians and Jews. Well, I think it's a good thing. They are very concerned about all the Jewish questions which come up, they are not like the newspapers do, condemning Israel for all the trouble, they, which happens, which takes place in Israel and which happens regularly. They have a much better approach.

Tape 5: 24 minutes 6 seconds

RL: Do you receive any restitution at all?

ES: Yes, I got a very meagre restitution from Germany. That was way back in the fifties, in the early fifties. I have a solicitor here. But my, as you know my father's house belonged to me, and the, under the Communist Regime they are against private property, everything should be with the state. So they raised taxes, enormous taxes. Although the house was well administered, it got involved into debts; it became so bad that they wanted me to pay the interest of the debts. I never had as much as a penny from the house and I thought it's… after the war of course the Germans returned it to me. It's in the document I showed you. Then it was said it belongs to me now, the solicitor found out. The house is worth millions. The heart of the city. And people said: 'You must try to get it back'. I said 'well, I won't live there permanently.' I like to go, but, anyway. Eventually the law became so that I could even then apply. So against my will, I carried on, through a Czech solicitor to do it, but he didn't get it. He eventually got to the point: yes, I can do this, you sue the.. in the meantime it was in debt so much, I didn't pay anything, it was taken over by the housing association, they had several flats and shops. And but I wanted to… he wanted me to reclaim it. And the first thing he said is you must demand that they leave the flats and the shops immediately. That goes against the grain. So I declined and the whole thing came to nothing. So but there was another venue too. Because I blamed the communists. They made the house, now I've got it in black and white, where they asked me to pay these duties, these interests. And I, that's why the house was financially ruined, that's why I had to give it up. And they recognised it and eventually I got some compensation for it. Of course not millions, but a few thousand pounds, which is nothing compared, but is a token, it's a token. I mean I just couldn't evict somebody from the house, it's ridiculous, I mean they wouldn't allow anyone to be evicted. Even now, under the Democratic Government. No.

RL: How do you feel towards Germany?

ES: Towards Germany I feel bitter at heart. And I can't forgive. I can't forgive. I feel the younger generation had nothing to do with it, but when I meet the younger people I can't befriend them, because I can see their Germanic strain in them, the heel clacking and bowing and all that. I know it's only external. Their heart may be alright, but to me, I don't want anything to do with it. I mean I had to go to Germany professionally. I gave a paper in Heidelberg. How nice. And one chap became very friendly with me and he was,
Tape 5: 29 minutes 0 second

very often, he didn't know I was Jewish, and I didn't let on. And he said: 'There is an idea that one shouldn't let these hopeless children live, you know, and he said of course we can't do anything, of course Hitler would have killed them, you know, they are useless citizens, you know, in cold blood, like he did with the disabled children in Germany under…' And he said 'oh we couldn't do it.' So he may be enlightened, but still I felt uneasy. He even came to Liverpool, because I devised a new operation, he wanted to see it. So I did one, and he came to our house here, I couldn't get warm to him. I know it's not his fault, he was far too young to be involved, but I read a book, about children of perpetrators, and some still have it in their heart that Nazism is still alive. And of course we see it in neo Nazis. So for me, I was once interviewed on Nottingham Television, no, Nottingham Radio. And they asked me 'Can you forgive?' I said 'no I can't, I can't. I just don't want to forgive, I don't want to forget, but I don't want to have anything to do with the Germans.' So I can only travel if it is absolutely necessary, to Germany, like I went for my cousin's funeral, to Germany, recently.

Yes, it's very hard. My wife is even worse, in this respect. When we first stayed overnight in Germany and on the Sunday we saw the ladies, the elderly ladies with their hats on, going to Church, you know. She said 'yes, they go to Church, but what did they do during the war? They are old enough to have a story to tell, you know.' And she doesn't believe that they were really genuine. So there you are. I just don't want to have anything to do with Germany.

RL: How do you feel towards Britain?

ES: Oh that's completely different. I'm completely adapted to British life, and I like it because there is not so much pretence, at least in the circles I move in, and I'm really at home here. And it helps of course to have a wife born in Britain and who also feels… she feels very much with the Royal Family, well, I follow her, to please her, I do as well to some extent, but I can't get enthusiastic about it. But it's neither here nor there. The British attitude is to me much better, much, the frankness and the there is nearer to my heart even than the American attitude, you know, so I'm a Britisher. A lot of people don't understand the difference between English and British. And I say I'm British. I can never be English. [Laughs]
Tape 5: 33 minutes 3 seconds

It's funny I went to an orthopaedic conference in Scotland. And, no. No. In America. In Washington. And we had a name plate here, and I, Eric Strach, Britain. And there was one. No, Eric Strach, England. And there was one Scottish: Mr McCulloch, England. He was furious! How can…. He was obviously Scottish, not English. Of course we cannot see, on the Continent or in America, don't see the difference, but he was very upset about it. He crossed it out and put down Scotland. Yes.

RL: How safe do you feel here?

ES: Very safe, very safe. I think the way the police treated me when they had the order to send me back to Czechoslovakia in 1945, I think that was wonderful, how they approached me; it's not their fault, it comes from higher up. I feel you have the right here, that's what I did, to go to an MP to get your right and this is wonderful, this is wonderful. I suppose it exists in other countries as well, but I've never seen it in action as well as in England. And the MP who managed to persuade Chuter Ede to keep me here, he's an outstanding example of Britishness. Yes. I like Britain and I hope Britain likes me. Well they seem to, I don't know why. [Laughs]

RL: Did you and do you feel accepted here?

ES: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I'm completely accepted, as 'one of us', they say. Look at the Astronomical Society, it's very mixed. There are postmen and workers, steelworkers, and academics as well, they're all, I'm friendly with all of them, and they accept me as I accept them. Oh yes.

RL: Was that always the case, even when you first came over?

ES: Yes, I can't find anyone who objected to my coming over here. For example when I went back to Czechoslovakia immediately after the war, people could not understand why I came, I wanted to do Orthopaedic Surgery as I told you, but I was told to do infectious disease work.. There… What was your question again?

RL: Did you always feel accepted?

ES: Yes, when I was there, my colleagues in the hospital where I worked, they thought I've come back to take the top jobs, you know, having been in England. Having had a flying time in England, and coming back and taking the best jobs. That's also one reason why I wanted to leave. Here I don't think anybody envied me for my job at the hospitals. But there it started
Tape 5: 37 minutes 12 seconds

right at the beginning. So there, in my own country of origin, I felt more of a stranger than I ever felt here. Although my accent gave me, gives me away, I never got rid of my accent.

That was different in France. When I was in France I spoke near perfect French. When I lived in the little hotel as a refugee, and a friend came to see them in Drancy, and he gave me… I would have to go home by bus, and he gave me a lift, and in the car he asked me 'which part of France do you come from?' Nobody ever asks me which part of England I come from. [Laughs] Here you are.

RL: Have you anything else that you would like to add?

ES: Ah. To ask. Who is going to read this or to look at the video? And all that?

RL: Right, well this goes into the AJR archive.

ES: Yes.

RL: Do you have any message you would like to give now at the end? Any message?

ES: A message. Well, I think the AJR are doing a marvellous job, not only because you are interviewing me, I had interviews before. But none as thorough as the one I had today, and I want to thank the AJR I'm very grateful to allow me to say a few words to them: Thank you from all my heart, AJR. That's right.

RL: Thank you.

Tape 5: 39 minutes 4 seconds

END OF INTERVIEW.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Tape 5: 39 minutes 11 seconds

1. Well here you see my sister Ilse Strach on the left, and on the right Eric Hugo Strach. It was taken in 1917 and it was taken in Brno. Well the story is that Ilse was crying whilst the professional took a photograph of her. And I said to her: Ilse, why do you cry, just watch the birdy coming out of the camera!'

2. Well this is a picture of my family, sitting on the left is my dear mother Helene Strach and to her left is her husband, my father Cornelius Strach and above him is my sister Ilse Strach and the tallest chap is me, Eric Hugo Strach when I had lots of hair. It was taken around 1931 in Brno.

3. This is a picture of my sister *Ilse Rado*, or in Czech Radovar. She is with her two children here, to her left is her daughter *Hannah Radovar*, and to the left is *Yerji, Yerji Rado*. And it was probably taken in 1941, in Prague I think, because she lived in Prague at that time. This is a particularly terrible picture for me, because all three were murdered in Auschwitz. No, in Lublin, in Lublin. I found out that they had to go to Theresien, the three of them, and within ten days, they had to leave Theresien in 1942, and were transported to Lublin. Ilse managed to

write in desperation a postcard to her cousin Gertie who lived in Prague, and she asked in this postcard ‘Why have I have to go so soon, to Lublin?’ And I didn’t know, and she poured out her tears and threw this postcard out of the window. Now this must have been found by a good Czech, because he put a stamp on the postcard so it arrived, and my cousin and her husband kept the photo for me, until themselves they were interned, and he wanted to preserve it for me, but when he arrived they searched his body and they found this postcard on him and he had to tear it up there and then. He’s lucky to have got away with it, and the Nazi who examined him said ‘I hope you got no more of such implicating letters’.

4. This is the house belonging to my father and this picture was taken by a friend of mine who went to Prague at a time I didn’t go, and she asked for the address and took this picture. It’s right in the centre of the house it was taken in 1951 when it was still under the Communist Regime in Brno, in Brno. And you can see at the corner house, on the left is the balcony that was going to the dining room, on the right is, no that was going to the lounge and to the right to the dining room. Yes, very happy times I had there.

5. Well this is my father’s shop, or was my father’s shop in Brno, I think taken in the early twenties. Because it’s still the umbrella shop belonging to Adolf Faber, Adolf Strach. He is my paternal grandfather. But in small writing is also my father’s name, Cornelius Strach. In Brno of course.

6. Well this group photograph was taken in the Sanatorium at Dreux in 1940 and in the centre of it, the man with the folded arms was my immediate superior, Doctor, his name was Docteur Raynaud. I am in the background, the second on the right and the other nurses I can’t remember their names. I think the time it was taken I said, and the town was Dreux.

7. This is part of the diary which was written in Theresienstadt by my great aunt Adele, Adele Strach. It was written in 1942-43, in Theresienstadt. And you can see the crossed out writing, which she did afterwards, for fear it would fall in the hands of the censors, who would have punished her for it, she even said it may have cost her her life for it.

8. This is a picture mainly of my aunt Adele when she came from Vienna to see us in 1948. She’s the lady in black standing at the doorway of the house. And I’m the last one on the right, next to me my wife Margaret, and the little girl is our daughter Helen. On the left side is her brother Sidney with his son Harold and his wife Dora. Sidney *Forshaw* and the Strachs on the right side.

9. This is a group photograph of of members of the Officers Training Centre in the Czech army when we were stationed in Leamington Spa. It was taken in the winter of 1941 and I’m the one, the third from the left in the middle row. And if you look closely the second from the right is *Wilhelm Talsky*, who eventually became the famous musical director.

10. This is a postcard which my father had written to a friend of his in Austerlitz, or Slavkov, and it is the last handwriting I have from my father and it written in October 1943 and as far as I know he had to go to Auschwitz in March 1944 and he did not return.

11. This is the other side of the same postcard written by my father in 1943 where he praises one of these men of the addressees’ daughter, who was very efficient at her work in Theresiendstadt. He also says they are in good health, but he writes this I’m sure with tongue in cheek. It comes from Theresienstadt and my father is Cornelius Strach.

12. This is a wedding photograph of Margaret May Forshaw, of course immediately after the ceremony Margaret Strach, my wife, and on her side is myself, Eric Hugo Strach, it was a very icy cold day, frost you can see, the date was 27 of January 1945 and the place was Wigan. We were married in Wigan.

13. This is a true family photograph, taken around 1952. I know the date because the youngest baby is Baby Angela Louise Strach, our youngest daughter, who is held by Margaret, my wife, her mother. Next to her is myself with our boy Steven James Strach, and on my right is our eldest daughter Helen Strach, taken in Wigan.

14. These are our three children. On the left is Helen Elisabeth Scott now, née Strach of course, then comes Angela Louise Browning, actually she goes by the name of Strach and far on the right is our son Steven James Strach. It was taken in North Wales after dinner about two years ago, that makes it about 2003.

15. This is a very happy gathering of my family, of our family with Margaret, I'm leaning in front, Margaret Rachel Strach, and my two children and the others in the background. It was very nice. It was taken in North Wales.

16. This is our granddaughter Madeleine Cornelia Strach, my son's daughter. And it was taken in Canberra, she started playing the violin and she has pursued her musical activities ever since. She is now 18 years old, but at that time she was 5 years old, in 1991.

17. This is the synagogue of Austerlitz, Slavkov. This is the ancestral home. And the synagogue when we first saw it was really very neglected and we had it renovated, and the town and the Ministry of culture in Prague managed to get enough funds to have it renovated and this was taken in 1994, shortly after the completion of the renovation. It's a complete change and it looks beautiful now.

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