

**IMPORTANT**

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

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

**AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive**

**AJR**

**Winston House, 2 Dollis Park**

**London N3 1HF**

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

**Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it. Should you find any errors please inform [ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk](mailto:ajrrefugeevoices@ajr.org.uk)**

**Interview Transcript Title Page**

|                          |                                      |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Collection title:</b> | AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive |
| <b>Ref. no:</b>          | 40                                   |

|                             |                   |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Interviewee Surname:</b> | Robertson         |
| <b>Forename:</b>            | Francoise         |
| <b>Interviewee Sex:</b>     | Female            |
| <b>Interviewee DOB:</b>     | 10 September 1939 |
| <b>Interviewee POB:</b>     | Brussels, Belgium |

|                                |                    |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Date of Interview:</b>      | 17 November 2003   |
| <b>Location of Interview:</b>  | Edinburgh          |
| <b>Name of Interviewer:</b>    | Rosalyn Livshin    |
| <b>Total Duration (HH:MM):</b> | 2 hours 38 minutes |

**REFUGEE VOICES:  
THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE**

**INTERVIEW: 40**

**NAME FRANCOISE ROBERTSON**

**DATE: MONDAY 17 NOVEMEBR 2003**

**LOCATION: EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND**

**INTERVIEWER: ROSALYN LIVSHIN**

**TAPE 1**

**Tape 1: 0 minutes 30 seconds**

RL: This is Francoise Robertson Tape1.

If you can tell me first your name?

FR: My name is Francoise Robertson nee Herzberg

RL: Do you have any other names?

FR: Do I have any other names? Well I was born Herzberg. Born in Belgium, Brussels and then became on the first marriage Francoise Wood, then Pettigrew then Robertson and I hope I have stopped there.

RL: Do you ever have a nickname?

FR: Not a really a lifetime one, no.

RL: Or a Hebrew name?

FR: No

RL: What date were you born?

FR: I was born 10.09.1939.

RL: Where was it?

FR: I was born in Brussels. My mother was an English, an English librarian who went over to Brussels to study a new form of categorising books and it was there that she met my Belgian father and they subsequently married and I was born in Brussels, in the centre of Brussels.

RL: What were your parents' names?

**Tape 1: 2 minutes 19 seconds**

FR: My mother was Nan short for Nancybell Joseph and her mother was a Rudelsheim. My father George Herzberg and his grandmother, his parents rather, originally came from Vienna and had settled in Brussels.

RL: Staying with your father's family for the moment, if you can you tell me about his family background?

FR: Yes my knowledge is limited here, very limited. His mother my maternal grandmother was a very wonderful person, a very soft and gentle lady, a very beautiful lady, a fabulous cook and inspiration to all sorts of knowledge and a woman of great patience. She was amazing, a lovely, lovely person. He had a sister and I don't actually understand the reasons, Mart, but he and Mart didn't get on. There was great animosity, so I never knew Mart. My father was actually quite good at quarrelling with people. Mart's daughter Clare, my first cousin who as a small child, I'd idolised. Unfortunately things went wrong there to. There was another family quarrel and she helped unfortunately, much to my disillusionment she helped to cause a split between myself and my father at one point. The rest of the family I have completely lost contact with now because when I was a baby I was brought over to Britain and didn't have much reconnection with Brussels after that.

RL: Did you know your father's father?

FR: No- I never knew a grandfather.

RL: What did he do for a living? Or anything about him?

FR: What I know about him is not particularly commendable. I don't know what he did for a living. Maybe somebody could tell me but I do know that he was a great womaniser and that my father carried on in the tradition!

RL: And you say they came originally from Vienna?

FR: Yes and my grandmother used to talk to me about her early days in Vienna and that was absolutely fascinating. About the way they were chaperoned when they went out and when I walked with my grandmother and she would look at the traffic in the streets which was very little then in comparison to now, and talk about the horse and carriages and balls in Vienna and things like this and of course it was fascinating learning history from somebody like that.

RL: Why did they leave Vienna?

FR: No I don't. Maybe it was business opportunities. I don't know if there was any anti-Semitic feeling that drove them out, I don't know. The interesting thing about my grandmother, my paternal grandmother was that she said when they were required to register as Jews and wear a yellow star, because it placed such restrictions on people that they could only move in certain areas and shop in various areas and visit various areas, she did not want to do that, so she didn't and she had beautiful long blond hair and blue eyes. She didn't look Jewish and there is a little streak that has gone through

**Tape 1: 6 minutes 22 seconds**

the family like that. So she got away with pretending that she wasn't for practical convenience.

RL: Where was she at the time?

FR: That's in Brussels.

RL: What kind of education did your father have?

FR: I don't know. I can't tell you a bit. He was brought up, I can tell you a bit, he was brought up when he was young in Holland. So he spoke Dutch, Flemish, French and learned English later, some Italian and he spoke about 7 languages which he found very useful in business.

RL: So they had moved from Vienna to Holland?

FR: Yes I don't even know all the details of when and how it happened but I know he was brought up first of all largely in Holland and then over to Belgium and then of course he came over to Britain later on after he married my mother and the war was nearly over.

RL: What did he do for a living?

FR: A number of things. He was first of all in printing and because it was lamination work that was being done in printing, laminating cellophane to cardboard which was a new technique then. He then transferred from that to working with fashion fabrics and for a long time worked with a company called Lurex which you might have heard of, which was a subsidiary of a large American company and of course that involved the lamination of a kind of cellophane type material on to a gold thread. So that Lurex was the first gold thread that didn't tarnish.

RL: Was he doing that in Belgium?

FR: He would have been printing in Belgium and that came later. Yes and then after Lurex with another company making the same stuff as Lurex called Rexel using the same techniques. He then went on to antiques, later on in life which started my interest in antiques.

RL: Do you know what kind of religious upbringing he had?

FR: I think it would have been more orthodox but although he always had a very strong feeling about Judaism and right to the end remained firmly attached, was always a member of a shul. He did a lot of work for Jewish charities. For that obviously, he was very good. He had many good parts of him but as a father and husband his rating would be very low.

RL: Do you think as he grew up as a child, as for example your grandmother, do you think he had an orthodox upbringing, was your grandmother religious?

**Tape 1: 9 minutes 45 seconds**

FR: She was very kind of easy flow. I think it must have been more my grandfather who was more religious and she was certainly not fanatical or particular. I saw more of the religious side from the other side of my family in my early days because I spent more time there.

RL: We will go on to the other side.

FR: Yes.

RL: Can you tell me about your mother's family?

FR: You see when I was brought over at the beginning of the war when my mother returned, she went directly to her mother in Birmingham where there was a big Jewish community and a large family and I had very fond memories of very big Jewish family parties and celebrations. All sitting round a big old fashioned oak table and oak chairs, the kind nobody would use now and that was just lovely and being taken to shul regularly whether I wanted to go or not. So that was a much bigger influence on the Jewish side from there and then when I was 7 we moved away from Birmingham. We had regular contact with Birmingham, going back to visit my Grandmother frequently and being taken to shul there.

RL: What did your mother's father do?

FR: Ah that's interesting. My maternal grandfather set up an engineering business. That was his background and training in Wolverhampton. Maybe it started in Birmingham, I am not sure but it was in Wolverhampton by the time I knew it and my uncle, my mother's younger brother, he took over that and so there was this company in Wolverhampton which was sold in, I don't know, more recent years which had lasted for two generations and which my younger brother had he wished would have gone into. I actually secretly wanted to train and take it over myself. That would have been my ambition to be the third generation in a family business. I would have loved that but it wasn't considered the correct thing for little girls to do at that time. So that never happened but I would have loved to have done that.

RL: Where was your grandfather from?

FR: Now interestingly enough on my mother's side of the family there was an actual Dutch background. So, oh I do have family trees going back some generations and one member of the family has done a lot of work on this but I have always known that part of the family came from Holland several centuries ago. So I think that is where part of us came from.

RL: What kind of education did you mother have?

FR: Well she must have had a good education, as I say because she became a librarian and her younger sister became a well known psychoanalyst and the uncle, the youngest of the three, became an engineer. But I don't know many details of my mother's schooling or anything.

**Tape 1: 13 minutes 46 seconds**

RL: Do you know if she belonged to any clubs or societies in Birmingham when she was there? Was she involved in anything?

FR: I know that she was very sociable and I have seen pictures of her. She was very attractive when she was young, very, very attractive and I have seen wonderful pictures of her which bear no resemblance to the way she was when she was older, looking very beautiful, laughing a lot, surrounded by crowds of other young people, cousins, and family and things but I don't know about any actual clubs, I only know about things she joined later on in life.

RL: When did she go to Belgium?

FR: I can't give you a date but if you think of my age, obviously several years before that but I can't tell you the exact year that she went and met my father.

RL: When did they marry?

FR: I can't tell you that either, exactly. Sorry I haven't got information in front of me.

RL: Well, approximately how many years before you were born?

FR: I think not very long, I think probably a year or two.

RL: Are you the oldest?

FR: I am the oldest and I have just one younger brother, that's it, yes

RL: Do you know where they were married?

FR: Yes they were actually married in Birmingham. My father of course coming over, I have obviously seen pictures of their marriage but none to show you. Very difficult for my father because he spoke absolutely no English at the time. I think he must have found it very difficult to cope but he didn't really I suppose learn very good English until much later on. Yes, it must have been quite difficult.

RL: So, they married in Birmingham?

FR: And went straight back to Belgium. Yes to where they lived in Brussels. And then whenever it was, I was born.

RL: Where about in Brussels?

FR: Right in the centre, sorry I can't tell you the address but it is known. My oldest son has been to look at the house and photographed where I was born in very central Brussels and over there is a picture of a Brussels park and in another room I have a picture of the square in Brussels.

**Tape 1: 16 minutes 33 seconds**

RL: So you were born in September 1939. When was your brother born?

FR: Four years later in the October.

RL: Where was he born?

FR: He was born in Birmingham, actually in the family house in Rotten Park Road in Birmingham.

RL: So can you take me through what happened from your birth and what happened to your family?

FR: Ok. Well, obviously I can't remember what happened but can only tell you what I have been told but soon after I was born, the war came and the Germans were marching towards Brussels and it was known that they were going to take the place over. My father volunteered and joined up with the Belgian Air Force and was a pilot with fighter planes with the Belgian Air Force. During the course of the war he was twice captured by Germans and put in prison of war camps and twice escaped. On one occasion, he thinks he killed a German, knocking him off a motorbike and taking over the motorbike in order to get away. On another occasion he fought with one and got away and escaped. So he did that twice.

RL: Do you know where he was a prisoner of war?

FR: No I don't. I only know he tried to take me back to some of the prison camps when I was growing up as a teenager approximately and I wouldn't go anywhere near them. He wanted to relive old memories. I think the camps that he was in, were probably small transitional camps before going into a main camp and I think that is probably how he escaped. Because if you are in one of the big well organised ones I don't think you would have had any chance whatsoever and I think he realised that and that is why he made that effort, although it was risking his life doing it to get away. Very interestingly, it was after the war and we were living in Cambridge and he wanted to trace some of his old friends some of his fellow officers who had been camps with him and meet up with them and again strangely, he took me round with him, going from house to house looking for people and I find looking back on this it was very strange because it was very, very upsetting. Every time we got to a house at an address we would be given the man would be dead, mentally ill in a mental home as a result of his experiences or not known at all. Each time my father came away very upset and very depressed because he was the only person and he could not find another companion who had survived, so he was very tough. Towards the end of the war or at the end of the war, I am not quite sure when, he transferred, I think towards the end of the war, he transferred to the British Royal Air Force and flew Tiger Moths and then of course eventually became British.



RL: Did he remain in Belgium throughout the war?

FR: Yes I think he must have done, because my first years in Britain were spent without a father. Yes. I didn't really know my father at all until much later on which  
**Tape 1: 20 minutes 50 seconds**

made it very difficult for us to adapt to each other. Because he did not really know me and I had been brought up in a society of women and children and I didn't really know what men were all about and didn't like them. Especially this man, coming along, who seemed to have a claim to everybody's attention and was being made a big fuss of and I could not think what use he was to anybody.

RL: When he was looking for colleagues was that in Belgium?

FR: No that was in Cambridge. We were living in Cambridge for a while and that was when he was going around looking for people there in that area.

RL: Was that when he was in the RAF?

FR: No I think it was when he was in Belgium and captured. I don't know who these men were or how he found addresses or anything.

RL: That was your father, what happened to you and your mother?

FR: My mother, when she realised that the Germans were approaching and people were being rounded up and sent off. She realised that there was only one chance and that was to leave Brussels. So she had to leave the flat that they were living in empty, and she had no means of transport, and I was a small baby, so she picked me up and took with her, only one thing, which she thought might be of some value and that was her fur coat. She could not really carry anything and she set off on foot to try to get back to England. She walked for 6 weeks along the road, carrying a baby. Very, very brave and managed by walking from port to port to get on, I am told, what was the last boat that got back to England without being bombed or stopped. When she got back she was made a big fuss of and there were articles in the paper about this brave young woman who had managed to save her baby and get back to Britain. Someone, somewhere has got these things, I haven't.

RL: Do you know what date it was that she got back?

FR: No I don't, but historians would know the name of the last boat when it left and when it arrived in Britain. I know there were some problems arriving I think it had to go from one port to another but I understand she was 6 weeks on the road and the ship had some problem actually docking. I do have an account written by her, which I was so scared of. When it was given to me, I wasn't able to read it until after she had died and the only way I could approach it was I took it to the rabbi of the synagogue she had been a member of in Streatham and he very kindly read it and then read it to me. I could not actually read it myself. It was tremendously helpful of him and also very interestingly, my maternal grandfather wrote down an account as he understood it because my father's English wasn't good enough. So he wrote an

account from his view and from my father's view. So I have a two generation account and I mean to write my own sometime when I can face it. So I would like give a three generation account of our family and how we viewed this account for the Jewish Museum. That's what I want to do before I die. I am sorry I get very upset about some of this.

**Tape 1: 25 minutes 10 seconds**

RL: What happened to your father's mother?

FR: She stayed in Brussels and as I told you she refused to register as Jewish and because she had this cascading blond hair and blue eyes she could get away with it and that way, she managed to get supplies and not be rounded up. She was taking a risk there but she got away with it. My father spent all the time, as I said, fighting. What I think is interesting is my mother's journey on the road. She spent these 6 weeks walking around trying to get on a boat. Apparently there were quite a number of other people on the road trying to escape. I don't know whether they were all Jewish or what nationalities they were or anything. She never spoke about it at all and when I checked with my uncle, he had never spoken about it and she had never spoken to him about it either. It must have been very hard because she had no food. I don't think she had much money and no food and no place to hide so apparently sometimes we slept in ditches or hid in ditches, sometimes under or behind hedges. We slept sometimes in shops if somebody would give us a space under a counter or something. Apparently I was put to sleep in drawers in boxes. Apparently I was a very nice baby and smiled a lot so when she went and begged, which was what she had to do for food and shelter, they saw a smiley baby and agreed luckily. She said in the account that I was very, very frightened and that she used to put her hands over my eyes and over my ears, so that I was less aware of the bombing, which probably explains why I cannot go to a film with war in. I cannot read any books about war. I cannot have anything to do with anything about war because I am still obviously traumatised by it.

RL: What happened to her brothers?

FR: Well you see the others weren't in Belgium, they were in Birmingham so they did not have these problems.

RL: What about your brother?

FR: My brother was born later as a result of a visit that my father had, some home leave or something, I don't know, otherwise there wouldn't have been a little brother would there?

RL: Because this was still during the war?

FR: Yes and he was a very, very sickly baby and people used to peer at him in his pram and people used to say do you think you will rear him? He had a big head and a tiny body like a tadpole, he was very sickly. He wouldn't eat properly and wouldn't feed properly. He was very, very difficult.

RL: What is your earliest memory?

FR: My earliest memories of all this; I had the most dreadful nightmares as a child. I don't know if there is any memory in that I have no idea. One of the things that puzzles me, I had so many memories of Germans bursting into places with guns, searching places. I can't tell you whether I have experienced this. I was not able to

**Tape 1: 29 minutes 22 seconds**

ask my mother some of the things I wanted to ask her and she certainly did not want to tell me everything and she was probably right. I felt that she had probably gone through worse than she ever admitted to me. I think she may have been attacked or searched. I don't know, maybe raped, I don't know and nobody will ever know now.

RL: Did she ever talk about her experiences?

FR: Not really no, as I said I have this account and I have only looked at this once since she died. It sounds pathetic but that's how much it has affected me. I suppose that people don't realise. They probably think, you probably don't realise that somebody as that tiny could be deeply affected by it. People think it is strange that I am unable to face anything to do with war or fighting. I actually have to ring a cinema ahead to find out if there are scenes of violence and if there is I don't go or I walk out, which seems strange perhaps for a fully grown adult.

RL: Your grandmother did she survive the war?

FR: Yes both grandmothers survived. My paternal grandmother eventually came to live with us for a while and that was very lovely to have her with us and I said she was one of these wonderful calm people who sail through everything almost as if she wasn't affected. She was quite amazing. She had so many talents. She was fantastic at dressmaking and all kinds of needlework, an amazing person.

RL: Did she ever tell you about her experiences beside going out and looking non-Jewish? Did she ever talk about it?

FR: No, she kept quiet about it because I was quite small then. My mother used to say afterwards, one of the things she did say that when we were in Birmingham and she took me out in my pram, that she couldn't wheel me past bomb sites, of which there were quite a lot, because apparently I would burst into tears every time I saw one as a baby. Now that's strange isn't it? So she had to try and find pram pushing routes that didn't have to go past bomb sites which she found increasingly difficult. I have lots of memories, you said about my earliest memories, of being in a shelter underneath the house in Rotten Park Road. We had a kind of cellar because it was a very old, much bigger than this, very strong, stable built Victorian house with a very large shelter, well cellar basically underneath which was really meant for storing wine and coal and things like that. We used to sleep there whenever there were any air raids we were all down there. I remember being put to bed on I suppose what was I suppose a shelf and hear the bombing and the adults being told to go to sleep, hearing the bombing all around and wondering why I was told not to talk and go the sleep and the adults all seemed to be whispering all night because they didn't sleep. So that was one very early vivid memory. Very, very scared about the blackouts. This ritual of going

round the house and pulling down the blackout blinds every evening and not being allowed to look out, not being allowed a chink of light, very scared at night. I remember food parcels coming over from the States, the excitement of opening up parcels and seeing things we had never dreamt of, because obviously the shortage of food. I remember my grandmother going into shops begging and pleading for an egg or a little piece of meat or something and she was very charming and very persuasive

**Tape 1: 34 minutes 0 second**

and she would do her best to get food for us. Food was always a problem in the war. Clothes were a problem too of course. Everything was hand downs, hand made from an adult garment, so unsuitable fabrics and I remember once, a little girl coming to stay, some distant relation and she seemed to me to be dressed like a fairy and was I jealous because for some reason her family had managed to get hold of nice fabrics and things and I couldn't believe that somebody wasn't dressed in aunties scratchy woollen cast offs. Yes, clothes, food, blackout. I remember Victory day with all the tapes floating down from the sky and all the silver tapes. Very vivid was going to school carrying your gas mask and woe betide if you turned up without your gas mask. You would be sent home. So I remember the teacher reading out the roll call giving the names, Adams, yes, Gas Mask, Yes. Baker, Yes Gas Mask Yes and of course in school, very striking that I was aware even then that the schools were extremely badly equipped, the food was inedible and you had to eat it and you had to drink your milk and the teacher had nothing. I remember being in a class with 52 pupils and the teacher tried to teach us maths with a pile of matchboxes. Whereas in recent times, schools have been so spoilt with fantastic equipment and smaller classes and everything. Of course it is quite impossible for teachers to teach properly like that.

RL: What school did you go to?

FR: My first one was a ghastly ghastly place in Birmingham with hideous buildings and concrete playgrounds and not a blade of grass to be seen anywhere, noisy rowdy, very unsuitable for me, because I was very sensitive. I am trying to remember the name of it. It might have been George Dixon, I am not sure. A big horrible state primary school – enough to put any child off for life. I was terrified.

RL: How old were you when you went?

FR: I would have been five.

RL: Had the school been evacuated at all?

FR: Yes we were evacuated before then from Birmingham to, could it have been Droitwich. Yes we were evacuated out of Birmingham. My mother and two of us were sent to a more countryfied place less likely to be bombed because we were children. Actually I think one of the most important things about the stay in Birmingham was the work that my grandmother was doing. She was involved in trying to help, I can't explain this properly because I don't know the history of it, I only know what I saw. There were children who had been brought from other countries, Jewish children who had been brought from other countries to try and escape persecution, obviously. I suppose some of them may have come from

Holland, I don't know where they came from, but every now and again I would go with my grandmother to some little hut in the centre of Birmingham and I wasn't allowed to talk about it. I was told, I mustn't tell where we were going, to anybody, what we were doing and who we were bringing back from there. We would go in, a couple of adults would talk to my grandmother. There would be some papers exchanged, my grandmother would sign and we would go away with another small

**Tape 1: 38 minutes 35 seconds**

child who would be taken back to the house, kept in the house where nobody saw it. I could play with the child and then heartbreakingly just as I got used to the child, they would be moved on to another house of safety. I particularly remember one little boy. He and I blended very well and it was dreadful when he went. So this was very important actually. It had a big affect, bringing children into the house and then going and I wasn't allowed to speak I wasn't allowed to have contact and I knew I wouldn't see them again. I don't know who they were, I don't know where they came from and I don't know where they were being passed to but I know now it was to save them. After the war I was told my grandmother's name had been found on the Nazi hit list and that when they invaded Britain she was one of the top people that they wanted to arrest and kill because she had been saving Jewish children like this. What a shame you can't talk to her.

RL: Presumably you don't know any further information about these children, how it was organised?

FR: No – it was all kept terribly quiet. Somebody will now, people who know the history of the time will know, but it was in the centre of Birmingham and it wasn't far from the shul, I remember that much. And it was just a hut where we collected them from very, very anonymous.

RL: Do you remember much about your evacuation. Did you go with your mother?

FR: Yes my mother and my brother. I just remember vaguely this countrified place, the vaguest memories of a countrified place and a bit more food.

RL: How long were you evacuated?

FR: I don't know. Obviously I do remember being aware but I did not know why we were going away from Birmingham and that I was quite happy with my grandmother and the set up there. I was old enough to know it was somewhere different and I didn't necessarily want to be there but it had happened anyway.

RL: Did Birmingham suffer many air raids?

FR: I think being industrial round there and known for it, it must have done because I certainly remember the sounds of fighter planes coming over. I do remember that. I mean just the sound of planes actually. The sound of planes scared me without the fact of them bombing and the fact that my mother said that she had to try to keep me away from bomb sites because I cried so much. I suppose that is significant.

RL: What did your mother do while she was in Birmingham? Did she do anything besides looking after the children?

FR: I don't think she did. No it was only much later on I remember her working. Not till we moved to Croydon when I was 7.

**Tape 1: 42 minutes 14 seconds**

RL: So when did your father come back to rejoin the family?

FR: I suppose we weren't a proper family again until I was 7 and we went to Croydon. We bought a house in Croydon and my father was working and we took in some lodgers and soon after that, when I was a bit older my mother started teaching English to foreign students and teaching at the school that I taught at.

RL: When did your father come back to England?

FR: Well I suppose it must have been when I was about 7 because we never actually lived together for more than a very short while in Birmingham. We weren't an independent family unit until until I was 7.

RL: Why did you move to Croydon?

FR: I don't know maybe that's where there was a job opportunity for him. I really don't know so I was brought up in Croydon.

RL: Who did he work for in Croydon?

FR: I don't know how soon the Lurex, whether the printing was still going on there and the printing business and the Lurex came later. Isn't it strange that I don't know more about it but I don't.

RL: Which school did you go to?

FR: I was sent to somewhere far more suitable for me than that horrible big concrete council school where I had been deeply unhappy and would never have learned anything in because I was too scared. I was sent to Croham Hurst Girls Day School which is a Public School, largely day school but there are a few boarders. Very funny because in the description of the school it said this is a school for the daughters of gentlemen and one thing my father wasn't. As I said he had many talents but a gentleman he was not. Not many Jewish girls there, very few, I was an odd one out. Quite definitely – in appearance and everything yes. It was almost exclusively I would say little English girls from nice families with long blond plaits, which made me feel very out of it that I could not produce blond pigtailed or plaits because I looked very Jewish with very black curly hair and darker skin than most of them.

RL: How did you get on with the girls?

FR: I think I settled in fairly quickly, maybe over a few months. Yes I did. But we were not orthodox. I was brought up Liberal and there were Orthodox girls at school

but of course they stood out even more because they were constantly having days off for religious reasons or doing things which seemed very alien to everybody else, for reasons of religion. So I was kind of, yes, neither fish nor fowl, you could say, there. We didn't keep a kosher household at all. I have never been used to that. Yes, quite difficult actually because the possibility for being Jewish has always been difficult everywhere I have lived. In Croydon it wasn't easy. The Hebrew classes were very

**Tape 1: 46 minutes 16 seconds**

badly done, extremely bad but they probably are in many places so it was very difficult to learn.

RL: Which Hebrew classes did you go to?

FR: Well it was actually at the Orthodox shul there. We went to Birmingham very, very regularly, even when transport was difficult, we went very regularly on the train and so my memories of services are much more connected with the Liberal synagogue in Birmingham, which felt much better to me I suppose that was what I was used to, yes.

RL: The Hebrew Classes that you attended were in Croyden?

FR: In Croyden and they really were badly done, yes. So it was really quite a struggle and of course lots of lovely children's parties there with, you know they were making an effort with cartoons being shown and being given an orange, my goodness, in the war to be given an orange at a party was amazing beyond belief. That was like being given gold dust.

RL: At the school that you attended in Croydon, who did you make friends with? Who were you closest to?

RL: I suppose a variety of different people. I don't know is there any rhyme or reason for the ones that you make friends with. I am looking at what's happened to some of them now, the ones that I know. No there is no rhyme or reason. There was a little girl who lived a couple of houses away from me, who I was very, very close to while they were near to us and it was her father who is the artist who painted the picture I showed you of my mother. A much now appreciated German artist, but he always hated to sell his pictures and it wasn't until after his death that people appreciated him, Richard Siegler and his daughter Cornelia, who was a great friend of mine as we were growing up together.

RL: Did you ever come across anti-Semitism in that school?

FR: One incident that I remember very clearly and I have been thinking about before you came, which was horrendous. One of my friends, Monica, she was called, she and her brother were adopted. They were basically very nice children. They were unlucky to be adopted by really bitter severe parents who I think one could say were cruel. But I was friendly with Monica and one year they took me on holiday with them because they could go, they had money to go to the seaside. I remember being at the seaside with, I don't know, in a guesthouse or something and sharing a room with Monica and something went wrong, I can't remember exactly what it was, some petty

quarrel or something and Monica was in a state and I was in my bed and Monica was in her bed alongside and she was crying – don't ask me why and her mother stormed in and said "I knew this wouldn't work, you should never have brought a Jewish girl away with you." As if it was some kind of frightful blight. That was horrendous. So I was only about 8 at the time and I have never forgotten it. Specific anti-Semitism, I don't think so at school, no, because after all it was a quite refined place and I don't

**Tape 1: 50 minutes 35 seconds**

think it would have been allowed. There were odd questions, of course, obviously and this business of wanting to be excluded from religious education and at one time I didn't go into assembly either. Yes I mean it was regarded as odd but I wouldn't say anti-Semitism, there, no. Girls at that school in general, got bullied, of course because we were all beautifully dressed in lovely school uniform, very noticeable. So we sometimes met aggression and bullying from very rough children going home from school but no, that wasn't anti-Semitism, that was just typical, you know, picking on private school pupils. I can't think of coming across anti-Semitism at all when I was young, though of course, one was always very conscious of being different, very much so. Even recently in adult life I have met anti-Semitic remarks, just as one meets anti black or anti Asian or homophobic remarks. I mean I don't tolerate anything like that.

RL: Were there, were you friendly with other Jewish children?

FR: Not closely so. My main friends were my non Jewish school friends and I said the Orthodox Jewish girls were very few and far between, never in my class and led a very different life to mine. I suppose one of the things I did do which made a strong impression, I went on one of these training camps for learning what to do before you go to Israel, which I wanted to do, somewhere in the South and that was the most horrendous shock to the system for me because I suppose I was leading quite a protected life, you know, my own bedroom and nice food and proper clothes. We did not have money; we never had much money while I was growing up but at the same time, very privileged in comparison with this camp. Where about 10 or 20 girls slept on the floor together with no curtains and if the boys wanted to make a nuisance of themselves, peeping through windows or whatever, they did. Ghastly shared bathrooms, and shower rooms which I had never had before. I wasn't used to communal nudity. Inedible food cooked by other students there. Up at dawn for 2 hours working the fields before you could have your breakfast. On a tractor in a beet field or picking up things from the fields with bare hands in the cold. Forced duties like laundry, or cooking or whatever. Forced marched when you weren't allowed to stop for anything. Of course very good training if you were going to Israel but I had never met anything like this and I found it horrific beyond belief. I will never forget having to make sandwiches which I didn't know how to do properly but I helped make sandwiches for about 40 people early in the morning before they went on a forced march and then being forced to walk almost at running pace and not even allowed to stop to eat your sandwiches which gave you the most horrendous indigestion. So I think that cured any romantic thoughts I had about going to Israel.

RL: Do you remember where the camp was?



FR: No somewhere in the South of England an hour or two away from Croydon, something like that – again somebody who knows the area would be able to tell. A very, very interesting and memorable experience. (NOTE from the typist: This would almost certainly be the David Eder Farm in Horsham!!)

RL: What made you interested in going there?

**Tape 1: 54 minutes 46 seconds**

FR: I wanted to experience this. I was potentially interested. I hadn't realised obviously how protected I was. Since then I have done other things in life that have involved roughing it and enjoyed it.

RL: Were you involved in any Zionist activities before then?

FR: No – I would say that the example of my maternal grandmother looking after these children, the example of my mother who made big efforts to help Jewish children and work with Jewish Charities always and on several occasions, we had, say difficult Jewish children as friends and visitors. We had various stray lonely Jews with problems as visitors and friends in the house. My mother and both my grandmothers were very, very hospitable people. So I had an example from early on about how to be sociable, how to be hospitable, how to cook nicely, how to look after other people whose needs were greater and I am very glad that I had all that. That was very, very important. Followed by the school that I was at which had a Quaker tradition and the tradition was that you served the community and we were all pushed into going into work that involved service of the community, teaching, medical support, nursing things like that. If you became a secretary you were regarded as distinctly second best. We were given absolutely no career advice other than serve the community but I am very glad now because that served me in good stead. But this kind of background and that kind of attitude had always made me very conscious of the importance of helping others, the importance of serving the community, the importance of giving back something, that how lucky we are, those of us who have food, shelter, anything like that, so from an early age I have followed in my mother's footsteps and been involved in things like that. For instance in school I was the representative of the United Nations Association and at college I was the college representative of the United Nations and when my mother died I joined immediately in her place all the organisations that she had been involved in like WIZO, League of Jewish Women and the charities that I give to now are all Jewish Charities. My mother was very much involved in charity work and from quite early on she started giving lectures on Israel and people said she did it so well they used to rush over to her at the end of a lecture and say "that was absolutely wonderful you brought back every bit of it to me. When did you come back, was it last week, or the week before?" and she would say, "I have never been". So she didn't actually go. She didn't have the money to go, she didn't go until she was in her 60s until my grandmother took her. They travelled quite a bit together when my grandmother was older and took my mother and so on. It is quite funny that she felt so strongly that she managed to create this very good impression as if she had been.

RL: When did you visit Israel?

FR: I haven't. I haven't. I had my name down for a charity walk for water in the desert a few years ago at a time when there was a lot of conflict coming up, but that wasn't what stopped me, though it would have been not a good time to go then, but I had a lot of health problems including a knee problem and I was just due for a knee operation at the time and the knee surgeon said "no you are not walking in the desert or anywhere else". So that was that. So I still haven't been, yes, sad really. But I remember at one time when things were going very badly there and there had been a

**Tape 1: 59 minutes 3 seconds**

lot of anti-Israeli feeling and a lot of attacks and bombings and I actually said I think I should have more children so that I could send them to Israel to fight and my husband at the time said certainly not...

## **TAPE 2**

### **Tape 2: 1 minute 30 seconds**

RL: This is the interview with Francois Robertson and it is Tape 2

You know you were mentioning the different charities that your mother was involved in, which ones were they?

FR: She was very interested in WIZO and so was always involved with WIZO so that's why I, though I hadn't been member, I joined immediately. There isn't much of a WIZO movement here. It is quite a small organisation in Edinburgh. There are very few meetings, but that's one of the things I have joined. The League of Jewish Women, there is not one in Edinburgh but there is one in Glasgow but I joined just so that the organisations didn't lose out as a result of her death and I suppose anything really, the Rosh Hashanah Appeal, the Jewish Society for the Blind, anything that comes along that is a Jewish charity I support.

RL: Was your father involved in any organisations?

FR: Yes he was. I don't know the details but I know he was very keen on Jewish charity work and life in the shul, is something which I suppose which happened later on with him. You see he wasn't actually with us for very long. I told you that we didn't really become a family unit until I was 7. By the time I was 10, which was only a sniff and a cough away, he was already travelling for business. He was already having affairs. I didn't know or understand that at the time but I sensed that things were going very wrong. I never had what you would call a secure home background that is unknown to me. As I said, first of all we had this female dominated society while the war was on, which is not quite natural is it? Just a few aged uncles around, who were very odd some of them but mainly aged aunts and a largely female population. My father around for 3 years. He started, he was travelling a lot. He then went to work in Holland and we went a few times to visit him a few times in Holland, which I enjoyed and I think my brother found very traumatic and difficult to handle. He didn't travel well when he was young. Yes, it wasn't until a lot later, many many years later, that I knew quite how complicated my father was. In fact I really probably never understood it until comparatively recently. Well into adult life, I didn't understand exactly what he was like. I sensed that things were wrong but I didn't

actually know what but he had the example of his father and that's just the way he was. I don't criticise it now but I suppose it was probably difficult to understand why things were so strange at the time.

RL: Did he come back to live with the family?

**Tape 2: 4 minutes 11 seconds**

FR: When he was with us, yes but when he was with us, he was very unreliable but I didn't know why. He would go to business or be in Holland or whatever or be away, and my mother would be waiting for him to come back on Friday evening. We would have the meal ready, everything would be ready, there would be my grandmother, my self, my brother, my mother. We would all be ready waiting for him to come back with stories of his travels away. He was very good at bringing little gifts, little knick knacks for the house. There were always great excitement to see what magazines, which, of course, were a luxury then or what little knick knacks that he'd brought back or some delicacy of food that we couldn't get locally. And he didn't come and he didn't come and we would all be waiting. My brother and I would be half starved because we couldn't eat until he came back and about an hour or hour and a half after the time he had promised to come back, we would get a call to say he wasn't coming back but he would be back the next day, or something like that and we had to eat without him. There was always this tremendous build up to his return. I think my mother was at fault there. She set too much store by this, so there would be this great build up and then this tremendous disappointment. This happened again, and again and again. Once when I was certainly under the age of 11 and I do remember one incident when I was aware that something was very wrong, when he came up to my school, which was unusual because it was my mother and my grandmother who attended all school functions and not him and I was aware of the fact that there was this thing going on. We had at school a Dutch matron at one time, who I think saw herself as a bit of a femme fatale but she was really quite ugly and I thought quite coarsely spoken and she smoked like a chimney, which was very unattractive, but she really made a bid for my father, who was a very attractive man and of course they could speak Dutch together and I saw this even as a small girl I could see this outrageous flirtation going on, coming initially from her, not from him and I would imagine that was probably one of the many affairs that he had. I don't know.

RL: Did your parents stay together?

FR: No they eventually separated. My father went to work permanently in Holland and we used to visit him and that's where he met his second wife and yes, so I would say that most of my life at home was spent without a father and without a father figure, which is probably not frightfully good for anyone.

RL: Did he remain in Holland after that?

FR: Yes he stayed in Holland working for some years and then went to work in France. I don't know exactly when or exactly how but he met wife no. 2, who was fabulous when he was working in Holland and they lived in Paris together and I am still very, very fond of her. She is a wonderful person and her two daughters are like sisters to me and so there was a great deal of benefit from that. But that only

happened, you know, later on. I acquired them as family only when I was expecting number one, which is after all nearly 40 years ago and they have all been wonderful and supportive and are just a lovely lot of people.

RL: What was her background?

**Tape 2: 8 minutes 38 seconds**

FR: Janine my father's second wife, she had been previously married to a very prominent Parisian doctor who dealt with a lot of the stars. He went off, this is complicated and I think irrelevant, he was flirtatious and difficult and went off with the widow of Niachos, the shipping magnate so I know her as well because she became part of the family group. She was a lovely person, absolutely delightful. We have had very strange family celebrations in the past with Niachos's widow, my stepmother's first husband, her children, me and so on and so forth all round a table together because it was one of my stepsister's birthday's or some celebration or something. We had the most extraordinary situations there and also an extraordinary time, when my cousin, that I told you about, who was alienated from the family, came with her artist boyfriend and we were all sitting round. I couldn't quite understand this. I couldn't quite get to grips with these very strange personal relationships that were happening so politely round the table. Strangely enough even though I found it almost incomprehensible and impossible, I have taken part in the same thing myself and now can handle it perfectly, because when my middle son got married just a few years ago, I had here in this house, I entertained my daughter in law's family of course, but also the father, my first husband, the father of my son with his wife, his second wife and all her children and grandchildren from her previous marriages, plus my stepsisters from Paris, who aren't related but I think of as being related. I think this was all incomprehensible to my daughter in law's family who are very Scottish and very straightforward. So one comes to accept these things.

RL: Did you mother ever remarry?

FR: Yes she did. Very, very, good but after my father, who really was, I said he was a man of many talents, linguistically, charm laid on, a wonderful way with people, this kind of thing but as I said he was just a lousy father and husband. He was absolutely useless at it, he should never have attempted it. But she found the most wonderful man who pursued her. When I was about 17/18/19 and going to college she was pursued by this wonderful man, who was a widower and we had actually known since I was a girl, I was at school with his adopted daughter and he converted to Judaism for her. He was the most loving and caring husband that it was possible to be so her latter years were very happy, very cared for. They were a very beautiful and close relationship and to do anything for him was a most tremendous pleasure. He always would thank my mother or me if I did anything for him for any meal that was prepared, for anything that was done for him, he would be grateful, thankful, polite, gentle. He was a wonderful person and he once said to me, "you know we went to a party the other night", this was when my mother was in her seventies at least, "we went to a party the other night and I looked round the room and I thought you know, your mother is the most beautiful woman in the room". Now she certainly wasn't, she aged very badly she was not attractive when she was older but I thought it was so beautiful that he believed that she was the most beautiful woman in the room. He was

a lovely person and I was very, very sad, I was actually more upset when he died than when my father died because he had been such a good person and made my mother so happy.

RL: Where was he from?

**Tape 2: 13 minutes 14 seconds**

FR: He was English, very English a professional musician.

RL: What was his name?

FR: Don Cheeseman and he played the double base in the London Philharmonic and then freelanced as a musician and had 3 very talented children by his previous wife and one was a top Parisian model, one was a successful business man and one was an Olympic athlete. Very clever family. It was very good to see that my mother was so happy and so well looked after because she deserved it after the trauma of the war and the trauma of my father, she certainly deserved happiness in later life and she got it.

RL: Do you think the wartime experiences had affected your mother in any way?

FR: They must have done obviously but I think she was good probably at covering it. It must have done because it must have been very, very traumatic for her, very difficult, you know, to cope with all that trailing around the roads and begging and not knowing if you are going to survive from one minute to the next and not having a husband around to support her when she was bringing up small children. I think it must have been very difficult for her.

RL: Were you aware of your upbringing being different to that of your friends?

FR: I think when I was at school at Croham Hurst, yes I was aware that we were less well off than a lot of people and being Jewish makes one always feel different. I have never been fortunate enough to live in a concentrated Jewish community. I wish I had because I believe that would give a sense of security and a feeling of belonging that you don't have if you are an odd one out. That doesn't just apply to being Jewish again it would apply to being Black or being disabled or being anything else that is slightly different. It does put you to a disadvantage definitely.

RL: What schooling did your brother have?

FR: Well I told you he was quite difficult. He had poor health and he was very, very shy, quite a disturbed child and he went, first of all, Elmhurst a private Prep school, which he found difficult to cope with. He had coaching and eventually he couldn't get into any of the secondary schools, the private ones because he did not pass the right entrance exams and got sent to the local comprehensive but that was right for him. He was happy there and started to blossom there. My grandmother never accepted it. She kept saying when is Henry going to go to a proper school? She just couldn't accept that he wasn't at a private school but anyway he came into his own. It was only at the top end of the school that he gained confidence and he

became Head Boy which was amazing considering, you know, how disadvantaged he had been and then went on to architectural school. It's impossible to describe what a nervous weak little boy he was. I used to play with him a lot to try to encourage him and protect him and I remember playing with bricks with him and doing all manner of things to try and help him and I think actually that's where his interest in architecture stemmed from because I seemed to be able to get through to him with bricks, building

**Tape 2: 17 minutes 43 seconds**

houses. I remember putting the idea into his head. He has been a very successful architect and is very well known now. One thing that I remember about him was on one occasion he managed to lock himself when he was quite small, into his bedroom. This was when we lived in Croydon, and he couldn't turn the key to let himself out and the fire services had to be called. And being this little, weak, nervous, terrified, difficult child, I read him stories through the keyhole to try to calm him while my mother went to telephone for the firemen who came with ladders and rescued him from the front window and unlocked the door. Looking back on it, it was very funny. We ended up in the papers as a result of this.

RL: Did he have a barmitzvah?

FR: No. He was such, I keep going back to this, he was such a little weak scared thing, he was not capable of standing up and saying things in front of other people. Now a lot of boys find it quite a struggle even if they are very bright, confident children to do this and read in Hebrew. I mean attempts were made in that direction but he was not a child that you could push to do anything that was too much for him so it is even more amazing now that he has turned out into this, you know, strong capable architect.

RL: Where did he go to live?

FR: He's lived in London and still lives in London.

RL: So will you just take me through your education, where you went after school and what you did?

FR: After school, well I was very interested in athletics, which I was not allowed to pursue because I was very athletic when I was at school, a good runner and jumper. I was also very interested in Drama and I did speech and drama exams and got up to the highest level that I could and wanted to go to Drama college and my drama teacher was, my speech and drama teacher was very keen on the idea and was prepared to back me but at that time you couldn't go to audition unless you had parental signatures to attend the audition so I wasn't allowed to. There was kind of panic stations in the sixth form because I did not fit into the right slots. I don't know if there was any connection with my early background maybe but I have never fitted into the right slots in my life. Does early trauma bring that on? I have never wanted to conform, I have never fitted into slots, I have never done what anyone expected of me and I have never been typical of any particular group. I have always been a rebel and have always gone my own way. If people tell me to walk to the left, I will walk to the right. I have always done things that people find odd. So I was pushed by a teacher who caught me on my own to apply for something because everybody else

was getting places for things. I was pushed into applying for teacher training which I didn't want to do. I got into a teacher training college and that's what I did and went on to become a primary teacher. I specialised in drama when I was in college and enjoyed the acting there as I had done at school.

RL: Why were you not allowed to follow your athletics?

**Tape 2: 22 minutes 0 second**

FR: At that time for a middle class girl, it was considered, it sounds crazy now, but it was considered not the right thing, you wouldn't be mixing with the right people, it wasn't the right type of thing to do. My parents wouldn't allow me to. I don't think that was a matter of money. There were some things I couldn't do because we didn't have money. That I can understand. I mean I couldn't do horse riding like the other girls or ballet classes because we couldn't afford it. But there was no reason why I shouldn't have joined an athletics club. Nowadays that would be encouraged but not then. If you think of my age, this was a long time ago. We are talking about over 50 years ago, 55 years ago, you did not do that kind of thing.

RL: Which training college did you go to?

FR: I went to Maria Gray Froebel College in Twickenham, where I suppose again I found some difficulty in adjusting because having come from a fairly protected situation in school, I had probably fairly limited social background. To go into a big college, ok it was all women but it was a big situation and it did make me very nervous when I first went there. I just wasn't used to that kind of thing. So I'd say that I was quite, I did find adjustment very, very difficult, I would say, during the first term perhaps or half year, I can't remember exactly how long but I made friends, I suppose by chance more than anything. I got into a group and there were eight of us, and most of those eight are still friendly now. We have maintained contact and that is very good. One of us unfortunately died just a few weeks ago. I suppose once I got my little group and had found my niche, and so on, yes. Intellectually it wasn't very challenging but I found that I had developed a tremendous interest in very small children and so quite unexpectedly when I went in, I thought I am going to teach nice white middle class girls at a school like the one I had come from. After a very short time I realised that what interested me most was children from deprived backgrounds, children in poor areas and when I got into teaching later on, children from ethnic minorities, then particularly interested me and I think that is part of the legacy of being Jewish, having been a minority yourself. I think that is one of the reasons why I have always stood up and worked for other minorities, not just Jewish.

RL: So did you take a teaching job.

FR: Yes, so I taught not full time for very long because about three and a half years after I started teaching I stopped to have my first child so that was primary work that I was in at the time but what I liked most was nursery children because they are such fun and natural. So I suppose my subsequent teaching career I was largely in nursery and then later on also in supply work which was very interesting because it involved going to all the really bad areas and meeting the mega problems.

RL: Where were you living?

FR: Well then that was in Edinburgh.

RL: Where was your first job?

**Tape 2: 26 minutes 25 seconds**

FR: My first job was in Woolwich in London, deprived children from slum clearance, fascinating and I still remember and I still have a gift presented to me by the worst girl in the class who was quite adorable. Absolutely impossible, came from a dreadful background, and once escaped and got into a bakers van and was driven away. That's the kind of child she was, aged 3! Yes, that was interesting. Then I went from Woolwich to Hemel Hempstead where I taught primary and then Peterborough. By then I had one baby.

RL: Where were you living when it was your first teaching job?

FR: Near to Woolwich, I can't actually exactly remember where but not far from there in a kind of ghastly B & B. But I made friends with a Jewish girl who was older than me introduced by our two mothers. Her mother was a famous opera singer and she and I were both teaching at the same time in the same area. We made friends and we used to go up to London to go to the Jewish Social clubs together.

RL: Which clubs were these?

FR: We went to one attached to a Liberal Shul, I don't know the names of them now but we used to go out regularly a couple of times a week to all these Jewish social clubs. Seems funny now, looking back on it. Not that it did either of us any good at all because we didn't end up with Jewish partners although I did have a couple of offers as a result of that. When I was on my own again after the first marriage broke up, it was actually suggested, oh no it was before then. I met my first husband at University College, London at a Student Hop and we instantly fell for each other and that was that but the family was very much against it because he wasn't Jewish. Totally against it. In fact I was disinherited for marrying out of the faith and it was suggested at one point that our family group should get together and choose me somebody in an arranged match. Looking back on it, I think probably it would have been a very good idea and I think that a close Jewish community or other close ethnic communities, that can provide a meeting ground for young people, not exactly necessarily an arranged match, but the next best thing by providing you with a social environment in which you would be likely to meet the right type. I think that actually still has a very, very important part to play. Unfortunately, it was never done for me I wish it had been, because let's face it, people with the same background and views have a better chance of succeeding as a partnership. But it never happened, so there you are.

RL: Do you think that's what came away with your marriage because you weren't of the same background or was it other factors?



FR: There were other factors as well but we weren't of the same social background, we weren't of the same religious background, intellectually we had the same interests although my first husband was far more serious than I was and I think I was probably a little bit frivolous for him. No and when you have people who are also used to rearing children in a different way due to their backgrounds, and he was an only son, that makes a big difference. He wasn't used to being part of a big family

**Tape 2: 31 minutes 7 seconds**

group, but he also had some problems later on, the equivalent of a breakdown, a type of breakdown, which drove us apart.

RL: How did you feel at being disinherited by your family?

FR: I had never realised that I was due for a lot of money. I had never been told that. We had always been not particularly well off but always lived in nice houses and I wouldn't have said that I was deprived in any way at all. I was perfectly happy with what I had never felt deprived and I did not know that I was due to inherit a lot of money. So if you haven't had it and had not been expecting it, you don't miss it and the fact that I was in love and young at the time meant that I hadn't got the skills and perspective to work these things out. I was, there was a lot of money in the family. I was to have been given a house, a big wedding, a patch of land and an income which would have been a lot, by an uncle. He was absolutely furious that I wanted to marry somebody who wasn't Jewish and I had never been told anything about this until I got this interview with him and he was apoplectic. Nobody had ever said to me you have got to marry a Jewish person, you mustn't go out with non Jews or anything like that. So how was I to know? Of course if you are at college it happens to everybody, don't they, they meet people of different nationalities, of different social backgrounds, different religions and it happens more and more. Half the Jews I know have married out if not more.

RL: Was this a brother of your mother's, the uncle?

FR: No, it was a great uncle. It was from my grandmother.

RL: Brother of your grandmother?

FR: Yes. My life would have been totally different had I delayed the wedding for a year, had I become disengaged, my entire life from that point would have been totally different and really I suppose my family were at fault as well because they didn't really make an effort to get me to mix with Jewish people enough. If they had really cared enough they would have made more effort and I went through a very religious point at one point when I was growing up when I was going to the shul every week and I was attending all types of classes and I wanted a much greater involvement and I was trying to persuade my parents to be more religiously observant at home. I felt very strongly about this and they didn't co-operate which made me feel very rejected and very despairing because I couldn't produce the level of Jewish background that I wanted myself on my own. That was a great kind of alienating thing that was happening there. It was a very, very upsetting period.

RL: How old were you?

FR: In my teens at a time when people do have strong religious feelings often. So for them to turn round afterwards and say you are making a mistake not marrying a Jewish person is crazy when they hadn't made the effort to support me, to encourage me to find more Jewish young people for me to meet. You know it was their fault as well, and at college, of course, there weren't Jewish people at all, so you were mixing

**Tape 2: 35 minutes 6 seconds**

with non-Jewish people most of the time. That's what I said it was an unfortunate factor that I had so often been away from Jewish people. So when I first joined up with WIZO here and found myself in a group of Jewish people I felt so good and so happy to be in that atmosphere again. It was just lovely because there was a difference.

RL: Can you put your finger on what that is. ?

FR: I think that Rabbi Pete Tobias, who really drew me back to the Jewish faith, he was the Rabbi at Glasgow New Synagogue. I heard him give a talk on Jewish education which was a turning point for me as a result of which I joined up with this Glasgow group which has a small outpost in Edinburgh because we can't actually get to the Glasgow one – it's right on the other side of Glasgow and I have no transport. He said "it's not the observance of religious ritual that matters most it is being part of the Jewish community". He said "your level of observance is not important", with the result that his congregation, unfortunately he has left Glasgow now, expanded, expanded, expanded and he had every level of Jew. He appealed to people who find orthodoxy too severe for them in modern living. It appeals to those who have long since strayed. It appeals to the wishy washy ones but they can all find a level where they can feel welcome and can become involved. He is quite a great man, he is totally brilliant with children and young people and with more people like that, Judaism would expand enormously. He knows how to welcome and involve young people. They are deeply involved in the services and the commitment among those young people to continue with Jewish education and Jewish involvement is enormous.

RL: What difference did it make to you?

FR: Well that was the start of it. The feeling of feeling right with the people that one felt right with. To be in a room full of people who were all Jewish. Very important. And you see with the AJR locally, we are a small and disparate group. Different ages, different backgrounds, different nationalities, but we always enjoy being together. We always feel good when we come away. We have our meetings, since we have been around, which is not so long, have been very happy occasions.

RL: When was this group started?

FR: I would have to ask Susanne for exactly but we haven't been going for more than about a year, eighteen months but it has been very successful because every meeting has gone like a bomb.

RL: How many people are involved?

FR: We don't have that many, I would say on our list not more than about 20 but every now and again one finds another one under a stone, living some way away.

RL: We have jumped forward a little bit I think.

**Tape 2: 38 minutes 59 seconds**

FR: But I feel that a lot of my life is totally irrelevant and only perhaps the effect that the early times have had on me because one does grow up and it is very difficult to shake off this feeling almost as if there is something wrong with being Jewish, almost as if one mustn't say that one is Jewish because one is so aware of the persecution that has happened, could happen, of anti-Semitism that is increasing in many places. Take for instance the woman I spoke to you about, who doesn't want to see you because she is so scared still. She is a lot older than me and she thinks that big brother is watching over her shoulder, that people don't like Polish people. That somebody will come and get her if she speaks about her experiences about being Jewish and her suffering. Now I tried to explain to her that nobody is any Polish in Britain any more. OK they were 50 years ago, but they are not any more and I tried to explain that extreme Muslims and extreme anti-Jewish feelings are not particularly strong here, but she is still a very frightened lady and I can understand that there is still a little bit of that I suppose in all of us, the awareness of being Jewish is being different, that saying you're Jewish is like putting yourself on a wall sometimes waiting for people to throw the rotten eggs.

RL: How secure do you feel here?

FR: Do you mean being in Scotland which has happened by chance, or being in Britain or what?

RL: In Britain and then in Scotland as well.

FR: I suppose one is very aware when one goes to shul or to a meeting at a shul of the security measures that are necessary and sometimes one is warned and I know that when I went last Rosh Hashona in Glasgow and I couldn't believe the number of security guards in the entire area, all round the Jewish area where there are several shuls. There were men with walkie talkies everywhere, everywhere. So yes putting yourself into a situation where you are part of a group of Jews, we all have to be aware now that that is risky because anti-Jewish feeling has never actually gone away has it? All through my life there have been attacks in various places including this one in Istanbul a few days ago. And some people like the Polish lady I spoke of thinks that could happen here at any moment.

RL: Have you ever experienced any anti-Semitism yourself?

FR: I suppose I have been relatively lucky that I haven't experienced anything really, really bad. I have never been in a situation where Jews have been attacked. But I was certainly very low key for a long time, being aware of being different and not being in a Jewish community and it is only the last few years that I have gone around telling everybody "I'm Jewish". Absolutely very up front about it now.

RL: What brought about the change?

FR: Again I suppose my mother's illness and death a few years ago, yes, yes.

RL: When did she die?

**Tape 2: 43 minutes 10 seconds**

FR: Now what year did she die, about 5 years ago. She did a very clever thing. She knew she was getting older and she had a lot of ailments and she decided when she was 80 that she would have a fantastic 80<sup>th</sup> birthday which was wonderful. So we had a family lunch, by then she was living in a home and had been for some years. So we had a family lunch in a big hotel in Croydon, followed by the most enormous tea on a lovely summer's day. There were people from babes in arms to people of nearly 90 on sticks. So every age, every type, everybody she had any connection with, family, people she had talked with, friends from synagogue, all manner of people and it was just wonderful a day of non stop pleasure and she was so happy and I took photos of the day which I could show you and made her an album, which she loved looking at in her last couple of years. Everbody, I took the album round and got people to write their tributes to my mother and took photos of everybody and she really enjoyed looking through this album and remembering her happy day, and how right she was. She said it is no good waiting for my funeral because I can't enjoy the party.

RL: Was she still living in Croydon?

FR: Yes and she died actually at her sister's house. She had gone there to stay there for a couple of days and became ill and died there. My brother who is a very good speaker now made a very nice speech, a tribute to her. A lot of people referred back to the hard life, the suffering she had in her early days. She was very highly thought of, very much so.

RL: So what year did she die?

FR: I will have to get the album to show you. I haven't really got over it because I haven't really taken time to grieve properly so she used to ring every Sunday morning at about the same time. It took me a long while to realise that the phone wasn't going to go on Sunday morning at that time. That was when she rang round to everybody in the family. She was a pivotal point actually arranging family things and I would say the family has fallen apart quite a lot since she has gone. My brother who lives in London as I have said and has her old address book has better possibilities of remaining in contact with people but is not as interested as I am so it's really rather fallen apart.

RL: You know you said when you married your first husband, you were disinherited, how did your mother react to that marriage?

FR: Well nobody was very much for it. They thought the man inappropriate being of a different background. He was very shy and quiet and not pushy at all and they would much rather have somebody who was kind of very much more established,

successful, pushy, and above all Jewish. I think actually if he had been a one legged frog and Jewish it would have been ok.

RL: Did she keep in touch with you?

**Tape 2: 47 minutes 30 seconds**

FR: Oh yes she did, she did yes and of course I think when I had my first child to a certain extent all was forgiven because everyone was so pleased there was a new child in the family that did help to heal things and it was lovely too, I have got pictures of my grandmother, my mother and myself and my oldest son together somewhere. That of course was lovely to see their pride in it and I took the oldest when he was three months old to Brussels to visit my grandmother who was back living there and she was absolutely over the moon. Family continuation like that was rather nice.

RL: When did your grandmothers die?

FR: Now my paternal grandmother died at the time when I was having number two, so that's 37 years ago. A very, very strange thing happened then. I hadn't been told because I had just had the baby and was quite weak. I hadn't been told that she was seriously ill and likely to die and one night, I was in bed and something very strange was happening to me. The entire night, I could not get out of bed I was being sucked into the mattress as if by a magnet. It has never happened to me before or since. It was most peculiar. I felt extraordinarily weak, physically attached to the bed, Very scared, and the next morning I got a phone call to say that my grandmother had died. So afterwards, I felt as if she had been trying to take me with her. I know it sounds funny but it felt as if she didn't want to go and that she was kind of attaching herself to me. I had funny feeling too after my mother died. I had a sensation, a dream or sensation that she was going down a tunnel and calling to me. She didn't want to go she wasn't ready to die. Strange isn't it just on those two occasions when people close to me went?

RL: And your father?

FR: My father – no nothing like that when he went. He died at home in the South of France with his fourth wife. He had been ill for quite some time. There is a funny family rift there too. I do have a very strange family. My father married later on but he got together first of all with this very nice French Doctor, who is much younger than me. I met her first when I was in the South of France on my own. I went to visit my father and met her and she said to me, I would love to have another child. She had one by a previous marriage and I said "I hope not with my father" because he is rather old and medically as a doctor you must know, that having a child even with an older father is medically quite risky. There's a lot of complaints and disabilities that can occur. She was young enough but he wasn't. She said oh yes of course as a doctor I am aware of that; but anyway they married and they had a child and I have a little half brother called David who is now 18. Now I am 64 and he is 18. When my father died he was only tiny, yes he was about... 4 or 5, something like that. So the poor boy lost his father very early on. He was very attached to his older half sister and then when she married, he lost her of course from the family home. And I felt that here, her mother got into another relationship which went very badly and caused him much

upset. So I thought here is a boy who needs some support, some friends and he is part of the family. Even if nobody wanted him to be. The rest of my family will have nothing to do with that situation and when I said I would like to meet my stepmother again and get to know the little boy the rest of the family were appalled and said “leave them alone, don’t interfere, this is nothing to do with us. Your father should

**Tape 2: 52 minutes 54 seconds**

never have done this and so on and so forth”. The whole family were so anti so it took me a long while to pluck up courage and decide I was going to do it anyway. The second attempt of contacting my stepmother and saying I would like to meet, the first attempt due to airline things going wrong, it did not happen but on the second attempt I just said to my husband “look, I don’t care if you want to go or not. I am going to the South of France, I am going to meet my little brother, you can come if you like”. So we based a holiday around that without telling any of the family and we went and it was very nerve wracking. I met my half brother, and things went fine and we are now very friendly and he has been over to stay here and in fact my stepmother has just left recently from a week’s visit here and I have taken my oldest son to meet them and we stayed there for a week and I think that is very nice. There is only one person in the family, my aunt in Denmark who approves and thinks it a good idea. The rest of the family don’t actually know and I am still waiting to pluck up courage and tell them that we are now friends with another bit of family.

RL: Was this wife, Jewish?

FR: No. She took a great deal of interest in Judaism when my father was around and I think if he had lived longer she might even have converted but she has now reverted to Christianity unfortunately. So my little brother will have the choice for himself I suppose, when he becomes older what he wants to do but he looks, it is quite spooky, he looks very like my oldest son so the family resemblance has somehow survived and when I posted a photo of him to my oldest son and his former wife opened the letter and saw the photo, she thought it was a picture of her husband in his younger days and it wasn’t, which is quite funny.

RL: Where have you lived?

FR: I have lived Birmingham, Croydon, Hemel Hempstead, Peterborough and Edinburgh. Do you know something, I find it very difficult to get to grips with, the concept of somebody being Jewish and Scottish. I’m not Scottish at all but the two to me seem completely alien to each other and yet I have met quite a number of people through both shuls who firmly believe that they are very Jewish and very Scottish and the two are poles apart.

RL: How long have you lived in Edinburgh?

FR: Oh, far too long is the answer. Over twenty five years now.

RL: And what brought you to Edinburgh?

FR: Oh, ex husbands, ex job brought me here against my will and due to childrens’ schooling and various other things, I go stuck here. But it is not my natural

environment. I have a very good life here now, I don't say I don't. I have a lot of friends, a lot of activities, I have a fantastic social life, the children had their schooling here but it is not a natural environment for me. My natural inclination is more towards the Mediterranean, I would think.

**Tape 2: 56 minutes 26 seconds**

RL: What are you involved with in Edinburgh?

FR: Everything, everything. Well obviously the Edinburgh branch of the Glasgow Reform, the Jewish Literary Society, which is at the Orthodox Shul, WIZO when it happens. Scottish Costume Society, the Scottish Arts Club. I used to be social convener there at one time. Slow Food, I am side kick to the organiser here of Slow Food. One of the organisers of AJR here obviously, I am a member of a club in London too. I go to Pilates, I go to Yoga, I go to Belly dancing. I organise other peoples' social life. I can't even think of all the things I am involved with. The African Centre at the University. I did an M.Sc in African studies about 3 or 4 years ago and I have ended up as a groupy of the African centre. I am still involved there. I go to seminars and things. I go to once a week French class just to keep my French ticking over. I go to art classes and one of the things I have always done, and I think this is a follow on from my mother and grandmother, I told you they were both very hospitable and sociable, I cannot help doing it and I don't know why other people don't, but they don't, I am a sheepdog, I am always rallying people, rounding them up whether they want to be rounded up or not and sending them off to things. I mean like tonight, I am going to see some performance at the Theatre, a ballet performance and I am taking five people with me. Now whether any of them would have booked if I had not initiated this, I don't know. In two or three weeks time I have organised a dinner at one of the clubs in Edinburgh and I have got 20 people together to go to this dinner. I run charity events to raise money. I have done it for the African centre, the RSPCA. I have done it for the local shul, I have done it for the High Blood Pressure Association, for Paintings in Hospitals, for Music in hospitals and so on and so forth. I am quite well known locally for doing these charity events which I have in the house. Very frequently when I am out socially, somebody would come up to me and say, oh hallo, how nice to see you, don't you remember me, I came to some event in your house. And I think, my G-d, which one, when? Because so many people come here. The local hire company are used to bringing trestle tables. We clear this room and put tables down the room and I can seat about 18 people down the centre of this room for a start. I have had up to 60 people in this small house for a supper or a lunch in different rooms to raise money for different charities. That's one of the things I do. Yes, I do lots. I didn't realise how much I did until I turned up at one friend's house for a dinner a couple of years ago. And she said "well Francoise what are you going to surprise us with next"? I thought what does she mean, I am not into surprising people but that was her perception of me. One of the things I have done recently a few years ago, I volunteered to work on a tall ship and I have been twice crewing on a tall ship.

RL: Now we are just going to have to stop here

**TAPE 3****Tape 3: 0 minute 30 seconds**

RL: This is the interview with Francoise Robertson and it is Tape 3. You just mentioned to me just now about the first meeting of AJR in Edinburgh, will you tell me a little bit more about that?

**Tape 3: 0 minute 48 seconds**

FR: Susanne Greene came up, and I don't know how we managed to make contact with the right people but we did and we sat in the shul in Salisbury Road and she asked us each to say who we were, our country of origin and a little bit about our story just a short description. It was very, very interesting. Personally I found it extremely traumatic because it was the first time I had spoken in public in front of other people, some of whom I didn't know, about my memories and experiences and my mother's and I found it very, very difficult to speak and I was in tears a lot. One or two of the people found it not difficult to speak but found it impossible to stop because once they got started they had so much bursting inside them they had so much to say and two of the men left the circle left the circle and left the shul before it was their time because they did not want to speak. One of them has said to me since that there was no way he would speak about it. So this was interesting. I wish I had heard about AJR sooner because had I, it would have helped me., I should have known about it 30 years ago which I didn't. It would have helped me to cope with my feelings had I been able to speak to sympathetic people and hear the stories of other people. Knowing what I had was of course just very small. It just had a deep affect because I was very young but what other people put up with, being slaves in war camps, escaping from Germans, being moved from place to place. So many people had such horrendous things happen to them. How they have survived and how they have remained sane, it is impossible to say. Of course these memories shouldn't be lost. What used to say about me when I was growing up, people often said in my hearing, how has she come through what she went through. We would have thought she would have been mentally damaged, permanently. How is she is still sane after what she went through and that is what I heard people say. They expected me to have gone mad as a result of these experiences as a baby.

RL: How do you feel it has affected you and how do you think it affected you in the way you brought up your children?

FR: I think it gives you an insecurity as I explained before. It has given me this absolute hatred of violence, this involvement with working with anything that involves peace, understanding between people, acceptance of people regardless of their ethnicity, their religion and so on. Very strong feelings about that and the tendencies to support equal rights because I have realised how pathetic and ridiculous it is to try and persecute people because of their colour or their religion. Yes it makes you, I think, less secure, more scared of lots of things. I think I was brought up with that feeling that yes being Jewish is different and that you have got to be careful ,that you mustn't be too obvious perhaps because it could be dangerous.

RL: Has this passed on to your children in any way?



FR: Two of my three sons are extremely confident I would say. Quite strong, quite confident. One isn't, but he takes after his father more, who has no Jewish connections, so I don't know.

RL: Did you ever talk to your sons about your background?

**Tape 3: 5 minutes 20 seconds**

FR: Not enough, Not enough. My oldest one is very interested and he said that he does want to at some time take notes or recordings of some of my thoughts and memories and I think it would be to him that I would eventually pass the written documents from my grandfather and my mother. He is the one who would best understand this. I suppose it made me very protective of my children when they were tiny. It made me conscious of the fact that because of what my mother had done for me, if I ever had to do something similar for my children, I would have done it. But maybe any mother would. I don't know.

RL: What children do you have?

FR: Three sons, one who is nearly 40 one who is 37 and one who has just turned 30.

RL: Do they have any kind of Jewish identity?

FR: No they don't. This is a combination of things. It is something I feel very guilty about. It's my fault because I did not bring them up properly because they weren't ever in a Jewish community because they never had a Jewish father. There was never a Jewish group around of the right type ever for them to be part of and also because I was constantly aware of being different, I didn't want them to grow up with the kind of handicap that I felt I had by being different. I mean I was different by being half foreign; I was different by being Jewish. I wanted them to be more acceptable.

RL: So identity wise how would you say, where do they stand?

FR: Difficult question, difficult question. I think you would have to ask them that because only the individual knows the way they view themselves. I think I have always felt an outsider in many ways. Again maybe so many people do for many, many different reasons.

RL: Are your sons married?

FR: Yes two, well all three were married. The eldest son's wife couldn't produce children and that caused a lot of conflict as they were desperate to have children right from the moment they were married and she went off to the States and trained to be a pilot and stayed there and married somebody else. So the middle one is married with two grandchildren for me, and the youngest one was married in Australia to the most beautiful Australian girl from a lovely family and unfortunately, she had trauma as a child which made her unable to commit and very sadly from the point of view of both families and my son, she has decided that she doesn't want to be married and has

taken a job which involves international travel and so they are apart. But obviously I hope those two sons who are presently travelling round South America having a fantastic time together. They both left their jobs and decided to take about 6/8 months together, which is lovely travelling.

RL: What do they work as?

**Tape 3: 9 minutes 54 seconds**

FR: The oldest one is in training and he is hired by different companies to train people in finance, management and computers. He was a bank manager at one time, before he went to do this. So financial packages often, so companies now don't have the money to have a full time training officer and they hire trainers to come in for two weeks or six weeks or whatever to do their training and then they don't need .. they pay that person very highly for that time but they don't have to pay for a training officer for a full year so it is beneficial to them.

RL: What is his name?

FR: He is called Bernard.

RL: His surname?

FR: Wood

RL: And the next one?

FR: Julian David, and Bernard Jonathon. Both those names were in the family before which was why I picked them and they also both have, I also looked up, they both have nice Hebrew meanings so that was another reason for picking them and then Julian David, Julian because I liked it and David because it was Jewish and the last one was born in Scotland and with a Scottish father. No he wasn't born in Scotland. He was born down south sorry but came to Scotland shortly afterwards and he is Gordon Ross, typically Scottish. But he is the only one who has any kind of Scottish feelings. I mean I have absolutely none.

RL: What is his occupation?

FR: Gordon was, he is very good with sales. He has worked for several companies in sales and always gets to the top of the group because he has got the gift of the gab and was working latterly with a computer company and then with a mobile phone company. The company said they would take him back in Sydney if he wishes to go back but he has to, he is completing his travels and returning to Sydney probably.

RL: And Julian?

FR: Julian works with the Civil Service. He works in the Procurator Fiscal's office and lives in Dunblaine.

RL: Where does Bernard live?

FR: He is based in Kent but because he travels a lot, he has a flat in Kent near Canterbury but he is all over the place the whole time.

RL: You say he is the one who has shown the most interest?

**Tape 3: 12 minutes 58 seconds**

FR: Yes definitely, definitely. He has recently shown an interest in learning more about Judaism which is lovely. So that is something to look forward to when he comes back perhaps. He has very strong family feelings and is the one who might, who will, I think, take an interest. So they are all kind of religiously, they're all neutral at present, yes.

RL; How do you feel towards the Germans?

FR: I don't have any bad feelings although maybe I should do because I think unless we learn to forget, not forget but unless we learn to forgive, there can be no progress. I don't understand at all why one should hate somebody because of their religion, because of their colour or because of their ability, or their background or status. You might not like them but I would just say ignore them if you don't like them. Say hello politely and move on. We can't all like everybody we come into contact with. That would be impossible. For each of us there is only a small number we can bond with. I can probably bond with a far wider variety of people than most but if you carry on hatred, if you pass hatred on, that's destroying the world really and all the time I was growing up I heard people say things about hating the Germans or hating the Japanese or distrusting blacks or not wanting to mix with disabled people. It all comes down to the same thing and I am glad that of course I was brought up with German Jews within our circle, so how can you hate all Germans? Within my guide group there were disabled people so how can one hate and despise all disabled people? I am very glad that I had the chance to mix with all. That is very enriching. It is something people do not always understand that to mix with the widest possible variety is very enriching and that you learn from them as well and when I was living in Peterborough, my main work was first of all teaching in a multi ethnic school, which of course there weren't so many, I am talking about a long time ago, over 30 years ago and I did very interesting work there. After a while I eventually left the school where I had been teaching Asian girls and some very disturbed Caribbean girls. They were impossible, absolutely impossible, but when you consider their background you can understand why they were so impossible. They had been wrenched from their families and sent over to live with other people in the hopes of getting a better education. They were years behind, they were disturbed, they were disruptive. They were dreadfully difficult and I had to have these children in small groups and try to teach them the elements of anything to get them to fit in, and Asian girls who were from a totally different background and not treated in the way that little white girls would have been treated, perhaps. I then moved on to teaching adults from which I learned a tremendous amount and was actually the only white woman going into Asian households in the back streets of Peterborough. I had a tremendous advantage because I had a small child with me at the time. By taking the small child in the buggy with me I was a much more acceptable commodity. I learned the odd few words of Urdu so I could say this is my baby, what a beautiful baby you have. In

that way I was able to get involved in health education, play therapy and fighting for rights for Asian women, who weren't allowed to speak up for themselves because they were living in Purdar a lot of them. Some of them had very limited English and of course the tradition among them is that the husbands, fathers, brothers is they do all the marketing. They take the children to school so that the women sometimes

**Tape 3: 17 minutes 44 seconds**

had no contact with the schools. They really had a pretty old fashioned life. They weren't allowed to do anything. I helped to set up English classes for them. I helped to get, what is accepted now it wasn't then, I helped to get translations into their languages for the hospital for instance because they were traumatised when they went into hospital because they could not understand anything. So things that we accept now like cards and notices and different Asian languages in hospital. I used to take them on excursions to places which they wouldn't have been allowed to go to before. I had them in my house, I took them to a supermarket and explained how you bought things, from a supermarket, I took them to the library and encouraged the library to stock books in Urdu and Hindi. They had not realised there was any need. There wasn't a big need because lots of them could not read, but it was a start. I took them into a theatre, I could not take them in when there was a performance because that wasn't allowed but I took them in just to see what a theatre looked like. This kind of thing. So I was a bridge between two communities. Very sadly the local authority had just recognised me as such and I was about to be offered a very lovely job when I was forced to move up to Edinburgh. It was one of the really bad things that happened in my life because I was having such a good and interesting time doing that. I went to things like a wedding when at the time white people didn't go to Asian weddings. I went to a wake. That was fascinating. One day none of my class turned up and eventually I realised that none of them were going to turn up for their English class so I set off to look for them. Going from house to house, one of them told me "oh of course they can't come, so and so's brother or cousin has died. You will have to go to number so and so Cromwell Road, because they are all, I don't know what the term was anymore. When an Asian person dies all the family and friends must go and sit cross legged on the floor and mourn with them for a couple of days. So that is what I had to do because I had to be acceptable within their group, so I had to go and sit in a circle cross legged on the floor for a few hours. I had to drink an awful lot of disgusting tea, handle an awful lot of neglected babies. They did not understand of course about toys so I used to take a bag of toys on the back of the pushchair and throw them in the middle of the room, seemingly for my baby, but really for theirs. So I had a very interesting time doing that. I think you see, coming from a minority myself that kind of work was easy to do. The Health Authority actually asked me to do a report which I did for them on health in Asian homes because for instance they thought it was clever not to breast feed but to bottle feed because it seemed a bit more modern and they were doing horrendous things like leaving bottles of milk on a hot radiator all day for the bacteria to develop nicely. So I had a very, very interesting time then and the Caribbean girls were very interesting.

RL: Did you get involved in anything like that in Edinburgh?

FR: When I came to Edinburgh that was what I wanted to do and I was interviewed by the education authority and I said I want to teach in a school with a large ethnic minority. I explained all the experience I had. We don't have them. We

do not have immigrants. I said that is not true, I have read the statistics and I know you have the same number of immigrants in Edinburgh as we had in Peterborough but they absolutely denied it and I knew it was true. In Edinburgh they were more widely scattered. In Peterborough we had a concentration, where there were old railway cottages and a large number of them were all together. Here they were scattered in

**Tape 3: 22 minutes 20 seconds**

every possible direction. Three Chinese there and a few Pakistanis there and so on. Now they are more concentrated, there is a concentration of Asian people in a particular area of Leith. I think the Chinese are more scattered, very few people of African and Caribbean origin when I first came here. They were totally invisible. There are far more at University and they come to study and stay. They marry Scottish girls or get involved and stay on and I suppose that has help to encourage an early interest in different people which was started by my school. At Croham Hurst they had a wonderful and very forward idea that it was very good to learn about different countries in a practical way and at the age of 8 and 9, I remember a series of Commonwealth visitors coming in dressed in exotic gear, explaining to us and showing us on maps about their particular countries. I was totally bewitched and inspired by this. I thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world to hear about these different countries and see their wonderful clothes, absolutely adored it.

RL: Have you taught in Edinburgh?

FR: Yes – they couldn't find me a "proper" school. I was put in one with nothing exotic in it at all. The second school I transferred to, I taught in two nursery schools here, had some exotic interest. Some foreigners, but there wasn't at that time a concentration. Now I met quite early on, I can't remember how, a Jewish lady who is still a friend of mine and I said to her that I don't understand that in Peterborough we had this facility, we had that, this was being initiated. She said "my dear, you must remember that in the eyes of the Lothian Regional Council, a 1000 years is but a day. So don't expect any innovations here" and how right she was.

RL: Coming on to Israel. How do you feel towards Israel?

FR: I feel it is tremendously important, terribly vulnerable. It's in the wrong place, of course because for Jews to be surrounded by so many hostile Arabs is awful. I have always sent money to any appeal. I have planted trees in the name of my mother and both my grandchildren in Israel. I wish it weren't where it is because there is always going to be conflict. I am afraid I don't think the Arabs are ever going to accept and of course people have very funny ideas about Israel, don't they. One person who could have been a member of AJR got very angry on the phone when I rang and tried to encourage him to come to a meeting. He said I don't want anything to do with Jewish people, or the AJR because I can't stand Sharon and what he has done. I said we are not a political group, what we are doing here in Edinburgh is purely social. We are just meeting for social reasons and to give each other a little bit of support and friendship, that's all. We don't discuss religious or political matters at all. But that was his response. Of course a lot of people don't realise that not everyone in Israel is Jewish. Some of them may be of a Jewish background but they don't wish to practice any more. They are not all orthodox Jews. I don't know even how many of the fanatically orthodox Jews there are. What the percentage is but certainly I regard them

as potential trouble, just the way fundamentalist Muslims are a great deal of trouble because unfortunately if one doesn't make some adaptation one is not going to survive intact. Life moves on and if you are not prepared to move on you won't survive.

**Tape 3: 27 minutes 0 second**

RL: Do you still suffer from dreams, nightmares about the past.

FR: No, as a child I had these horrendous dreams as I said to you, horrendous. No not that anymore but I have had the recurrent dreams over the years about houses and the importance of a house and a home. This is a recurrent theme. I do still sometimes have dreams about being turned out of my house and that to me is a nightmare. Not being turned out physically but a dream of having to move on which results as a dream longing to get back to my base, to my own and the dream doesn't end correctly for me unless I can go back to the house that I have been forced to leave. That I have been pushed into selling a house and move into one that doesn't feel right for me, which has happened to me several times in life so maybe that is where that comes from. I should have been a Belgian girl. I shouldn't have ever come to England or Scotland. If the war hadn't come along I would have been a little French speaking Belgian.

RL: Have you ever wanted to move out of England or out of Scotland?

FR: Well Scotland as I said isn't my environment. I happen to be trapped here and I suppose in a way I hope I don't end my days here. I would rather be back in England. I do feel England is a home. I don't feel Scotland is - no. Although I have a good life here, a nice house, I have lots of friends but it is not the place that I personally should be, no and I do find it very hard to understand how so many Jews have landed up scattered all over Scotland in a totally alien environment because the Scots are very, very racist and although I spent all these years working with the Asian ladies and children and the Caribbean children and have spoken up for them and done everything I could to help their lives, I didn't really understand in my heart how awful it was to be the victim of racism until I came to Scotland and had people being racist towards me. I was inexcusable. I was an English woman living in a nice area in Edinburgh, taking a job that a Scottish woman could have had and I also spoke my mind some times which at that time 25/30 years ago was inexcusable for a middle class woman and so I met a lot of malicious racism. Now if I was treated like that now, first of all if I were, I would be vicious back because that's the way I have become, but I would be prosecuted if I spoke about a black person or a disabled person in that manner. It is not allowed under the law any more but you are still allowed to do so if the person is white skinned and English and I am afraid in this area of Scotland anyway they still a lot of the even very well educated people hate the English. I am even worse an outspoken English woman, Jewish – how much worse can you get. I have often said that if you had been black with purple spots and flown down direct from the moon, I couldn't have been treated worse when I first came here. It was so difficult and unpleasant and people were so unfriendly. So eventually, I got thick skinned and decided that if anyone thought I wasn't good enough for them, they certainly weren't good enough for me and that's how I got through it. I had a

very unhappy time when I first came here – it was dreadful. I cried non stop for three months.

RL: Things got better?

FR: Oh yes otherwise I would never have stayed this long. On a number of occasions I made attempts to leave but always something about the child's exam or  
**Tape 3: 32 minutes 3 seconds**

something intervened. I was going to go back and teach in London which would have been a much better option. I said I have a lot of friends, a fantastic social life and I have a good life here. I don't like the people or the weather but I have a good life here.

RL: Is there anything else that you would like to add, anything that we have not touched on?

FR: No not particularly.

RL: Any message you would like to end with?

FR: I suppose the importance of everyone, learning to accept and value other human beings for their qualities. One mustn't look at colour, one mustn't look at religion and one mustn't look at the differences between people. One must think of them all as human beings and we do have something in common with all of them. I happened to be in London last February when the big rally was going on against the war. I actually became taken ill that weekend which was quite strange. It was discovered that I have got a heart condition and all kinds of problems but I remember standing on a little ledge in front of a window in Piccadilly. I got a man to heave me up there because I couldn't get up there on my own and some Muslims came and stood beside me and we had big discussions together about racial equality and religious tolerance and I was able to say what I thought to them and pointed out to them that there were Muslim extremists in this crowd too, demonstrating. I said look how lucky we are to be here. If this happened in your country these people would be killed outright and here in London we can say and do as we like. Your Muslim brothers are surrounded by people with an opposite point of view and yet they are accepted. They have the right to speak out. Freedom of speech and freedom to mix with other people.

## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

### **Tape 3: 34 minutes 24 seconds**

Here is a lovely picture of my mother at her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in May 1995. She had a fantastic celebration at the Selsdon Park Hotel and she is holding a gold chain necklace that was chosen as a present for her that was chosen by her younger sister Betty my aunt and we all contributed towards it. When she died all her jewellery was left to me and I still wear that chain often in remembrance of her. It gives me great pleasure to wear things like that from her.

Selsdon Park Hotel is on the outskirts of Croydon and is not too far from the very nice retirement home where she lived at the time.

Here's a picture of my brother. To the left of the picture he is four years younger than me. He is an architect as I mentioned before. He gave a very good and moving tribute to my mother during this day's family party, for her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. My uncle, her younger brother also gave a very beautiful tribute to her. It all happened at Selsdon Park Hotel in May 1995, near to Croydon.

**Tape 3: 36 minutes 11 seconds**

This is a portrait of me. It's actually a study for a bigger portrait that was exhibited at the Royal Academy. I was aged about 5 to 7. I am not quite sure what at that time. My Uncle B. Fleetwood Walker was a famous artist at the time who has had several retrospective exhibitions. I attempted to buy the picture when I found out about it but somebody had bought it already. So, somewhere someone has got a picture of me by him. He painted myself and my mother frequently..... It would have been painted in Birmingham. They lived in the centre of Birmingham and I remember going to their lovely old house, quite exotic and my aunt played the harp. There was a harp sitting around.

Well this is a picture of girls from Croham Hurst School and I am fourth from the right with the short dark curly hair. The school took part in this "adopt a ship scheme" that was popular at the time and we were all allocated to a different person on the ship and we had to write to them and possibly send them small gifts in order to encourage them in their difficult tasks at sea and I used to write to the radio officer. One day we got an invitation to go to the docks in London and visit the ship and we were shown round and it was absolutely fascinating. What a wonderful day we had.

RL : The date?

FR : In 1955.

**Tape 3: 38 minutes 10 seconds**