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## Interview Transcript Title Page

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## REFUGEE VOICES

**Interview No.** RV277  
**NAME:** Kurt Wick  
**DATE:** 28 June 2023  
**LOCATION:** London  
**INTERVIEWER:** Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

**[00:00:00]**

*Today's the 28th of June 2023. We're conducting interview with Mr Kurt Wick. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in London. Can you please tell us your name and where and when you were born?*

My name is now Kurt Wick. It used to be Kurt Wickelholz, in Vienna. And I was born on the 26th of October 1937.

*Thank you, Kurt, so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive. Kurt, can you tell us a little bit first of all about your family background?*

My family background, my father's family came from Warsaw at the turn of the century. And he was born in Vienna and 1904. And soon after he was born, within a few years, he had three other siblings, a brother and two sisters. And unfortunately, his mother died. And his father married another lady who had three children of her own. And she wasn't at all interested in his – in the father's children, so they were left to their own devices. They made a – tried to do – make a bit of a living to look after themselves. When they were teenagers, transporting leather across Vienna on a cart and that's how they got older. **[00:02:00]** And my mother was born was – her family came from a Brno in Czechoslovakia. They came over at the turn of the century and she was born in Vienna in 1906. And when she was very young,

she had two sisters and a brother. And when they were very young, unfortunately, the father died. And the mother had no way of making a living because she had no profession or anything. So, the way they survived was she had a flat, she let one room in the flat and she also took in washing. So, they had the basics of life. When – in the twenties when the room was being let, my father and his brother looked at the room and took the room to live in. And that's how my father met my mother and they got married in 1931. My father became an apprentice to a handbag firm and he became a handbag maker. He made a fair living at it and he was joined by his brother as well. After a few years in 1934, they had a child that was my brother, called Sigmund Wickelholz. And three years later I was born in Vienna. Our life carried on quite nicely and my father was doing quite well. [00:04:08] But once the Nazis took over, in 1933 in Germany, gradually it spanned over to Austria and the Nazis became stronger and stronger in Austria. And ultimately, in 1938 in March, they marched into Austria and took over there. Overnight, the situation of the Jews in Austria changed considerably. All the laws that applied to the Jews in Germany, applied to the Jews in Vienna. So, it became more and more difficult to survive there. My father told me that it was difficult to go out. Sometimes he saw some of his best friends from early days in school and he had to hide in doorways, if they had a swastika armband, in case he was in trouble through that. When you were at home, you were also in danger. Because sometimes Gestapo men came in the evening, asked for the name of the person who lived in the house. And they said, “*Sie kommen mit uns*”, you come with us and then you went to a concentration camp. Our luck was that in Vienna most people live in apartments. Hardly anyone lives in houses. Every apartment, every apartment, group of apartments, has somebody who is in charge, a sort of a housekeeper. [00:06:07] Luckily, our housekeeper was a very kind lady and our luck was that her son was a top Nazi. And she said to my parents, “Don't worry. I – whenever anyone knocks on the door, I will tell them that there are no Jews living here. So, when I tell you, have the curtains drawn, don't make any noise, no lights on and nothing will happen to you.” And this really was so. My father was never in a concentration camp. As things went by, Jews became more difficult to carry on with business. So, at the end of the year of 1938, he had to shut his firm down. Jews had to live on reserves and they were only allowed to go for shopping at certain times and only allowed a certain amount out of their bank to finance them. What Jews did was that whenever they met, they discussed with each other, “have you heard of anywhere that one can get into?” If there was a rumour that a South American

country allowed you in, there was a queue of Jews there. Mostly it came to nothing. So, one evening, my uncle, who used to work with my brother, father when he was able to, was at a cousin of his and there were about ten people there. [00:08:00] And as usual they discussed, "Have you heard of anywhere you can go in or something?" Nobody knew nothing. But by sheer coincidence, there was an Italian-Jewish lady there. And she just casually mentioned that she's got a brother who works for a shipping company called Lloyd Triestino in Italy, in Trieste. And what they're doing is they're sending a ship to Shanghai every month, like 1000 or 1500 Jews. When my uncle heard this, he took down the particulars and of how to get in touch with her. The next day, he spoke to my father and said, "Would this be of interest?" My father said, "Of course, ask her if she could do anything to help us." By sheer coincidence, he got in touch with this lady. And about three or four weeks later, she said, "I've managed to get you seven tickets." My father, my mother, my brother, myself, uncle, aunt and cousin. The seven tickets were for the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1939. So, it was a miracle for us. We had the tickets and even then, it wasn't easy because before you could go, leave the country, you needed permission from the Nazis to get out. You had to pay, if you ever were in a hospital, you had to pay back whatever it cost. You had to pay any back taxes. You had to – they managed to get all the money they could out of you. You were allowed what was known as a lift. A lift is a wooden crate, which can be five or six feet square. You are allowed to put everything in there, which is no valuables, no paintings, no gold, nothing. [00:10:09] And you were only allowed to take about five marks out and that was supervised by a Nazi. My parents put in their sewing machine, they put in what was called a *Badewanne*, which is a zinc bath, sit up bath and clothing and things like that, that you could take. That was supervised by Nazis and when – by a Nazi. And when he was happy, it was sealed and that went separately by lorry to Trieste in Italy. When all that was arranged, my parents had the job of telling – she had her mother here, she had a sister and a brother. And when she said goodbye to them, my mother said to my father, "Look, I'll stay here and you go with the boys and I'll come out after." So, my father said, "Either we all go, or none of us go." And her mother and sister and the brother persuaded her to go, thank God. That's why I'm now here. So, the last journey that we made was from Vienna to Trieste. But even then, we didn't want to cause any attraction of any sort. So, when we finally left our apartment, we just walked with a little box case. And we were on the train where there were Nazis on it but we didn't

have any problem. We left Trieste, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1939 arriving – the last boat before war started, the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1939.

*And was that the last boat from Trieste?*

That was the last boat before the war. [00:12:01] When we arrived –

*Kurt, one second. Before we go to Shanghai, I just want to go back a little bit.*

Yes.

*So, your parents both came from quite modest circumstances?*

Very modest circumstances, yes. Very modest circumstances. They both had quite a hard upbringing. Very difficult, it was. In those days, you had very little help.

*Yeah. And where did they live? Do you know the areas where they lived?*

The areas they lived? It was in Bindergasse. It was a working-class area. It wasn't very Jewish, that area. But they lived all right, they were happy.

*Yeah. So, once they got married, did they stay in the mother's – in that flat with that room?*

No, I think they had their own flat. I think my mother lived – and my grandmother lived in Denisgasse, a different area, a slightly different area.

*But in the ninth –*

I think it was there, yes.

*Yeah. And you said your father had his own company. What was it called?*

It was it was called; I think it was in his name. I think it was in his name. I've still got a leaflet there, which advertised his firm and where he is.

*And where they – where was he selling? He was making handbags?*

He was making quality handbags and he was selling to the very good stores, equivalent to Harrods and firms like that. He made top quality leather bags.

*That's really interesting. And do – you said your parents met because they moved in, your father?*

That's right. That's right.

*Yeah. And did they get married at a synagogue? Or do you know anything about that?*

I think they got married in a synagogue.

*And which synagogue, do you know?*

[00:14:00] I don't know. That, I don't know.

*And did they go to a specific synagogue? Do you know much about their lives?*

I don't know anything because my parents were very reluctant to talk of their early days. It was very depressing for them. And unfortunately, I think my mother had suffered with depression all her life because she loved her mother and siblings dearly and she never really got over it, unfortunately. So, after the war, they never would discuss much about it.

*Neither of them?*

No, I got most of my information from my uncle.

*And that gets me to the question of memory, of your own memory. Do you remember anything from those early days in Vienna? Do you have any memory?*

No, because I was about one-and-a-half. I don't think anyone, any child remembers anything from those days.

*So, where do your earliest memories, where do they start?*

They started when I was in the – in one of the *Heime* which we arrived at when we came to Shanghai, which I will tell you when you want to know about what happened, how we came in, why we were allowed in and what happened after we arrived.

*Yeah. So, your memory really starts in Shanghai? You were very young.*

Yes, yes, yes.

*So, is there anything else from that time in Vienna, information on your parents? So, you lived in the ninth Bezirk and you said your father wasn't arrested?*

Was never arrested.

*What was the name of that woman, the Hausmeister?*

I don't know her name. I don't know. But it was a sheer coincidence that she – that her son always informed her when there was a roundup of Jews. [00:16:05] So, she warned us and that was lucky for us.

*Yeah. And the seven tickets, did your family have to pay for the tickets?*

We had to – we paid for the tickets. But in many cases, when people couldn't afford to pay for tickets, there was a Jewish Kultusgemeinde and they paid for the tickets. And I know of many cases where Jews got out of concentration camp if they had a wife, or a brother or sister



or somebody who got managed to get the tickets. If you went to the concentration camp and showed them the tickets, that you could get out within a few weeks, even if you didn't have the money, it was paid for by Jewish charity organisation. And quite a few Jews arrived that way to Shanghai.

*Yeah. And you said the lift, so was that lift sent on the same boat? Or was it sent completely separate?*

I think it was sent on the same boat.

*And it arrived?*

It arrived.

*Yeah. And did your parents manage to...? Did they put any valuables in there or...?*

No, no. I do think that they did hollow out some shoes and took off the heel. And they put in maybe a strand of gold or something. But it was a very risky thing to do. And in those days, they didn't have X rays or things like that to go into that sort of thing. But it was a very dangerous thing to do. Because there was a case that somebody, some Jewish people were with a case at the station, going off to one of these countries and a Nazi hit it with a stick and he broke the case and out fell some gold things. [00:18:13] And those people never survived, so.

*Yeah. The other thing I was going to ask you because your parents came from Brno, did they have Austrian citizenship in Vienna or...?*

Yes, yes, they did. Yes, they did.

*So, they were both Austrian by the time they left?*

Yes, yes, had Austrian passports. But I don't know what happened to that. I think they were not recognised anymore by that time. So, we really were stateless people, yes.

*Yeah. Okay. So, tell us a little bit, not from your memories but what you heard about the journey maybe. So, you left, you took a train to Trieste?*

Yes.

*You said and then went on to that?*

It was a luxury cruise line. So, although many Jews who were on board, some of them came from concentration camps or real poverty, had hardly food and all of a sudden you were on a luxury liner. It was a totally different thing.

*And what was the name of the liner?*

The liner was a Giulio Cesare, Julius Caesar, Italian ship. So, it was a luxury trip really.

*So, was it cabins? In cabins?*

Yes, yes, yes. It was a luxury ship.

*So, there must have been an enormous sense of relief for people to be there.*

I think so. There was relief. But also, there was always that back worry about the people you left behind. You cannot really relax and enjoy anything if you've got such a major worry. If you love your mother and your sisters and brothers and you leave them behind and you don't know what will happen, it was a very dangerous time, you cannot relax.

**[00:20:04]** *No. And how do you know that your mother wanted to stay? You said she didn't talk about.*

Well, I asked recently my cousin, who lives in America because it's always been worrying me about why they didn't get three more tickets for Shanghai. And my cousin said, they were told to, 'Why don't you go?' And they said, 'No, we don't want to go to Shanghai. We don't really want to go to Shanghai.'

*This is the mother and the siblings?*

Mother, sister and brother. And unfortunately, there were quite a few high up Jewish leaders who said, 'It's not a good country for you. It's not a good country. It's got lots of crime, lots of opium, drugs, criminality, brothels. It's a very, very bad country, lots of crime and it's quite a dangerous country.' And it put quite a few people off from going, unfortunately.

*Yes, obviously, in hindsight, it does make sense. But at the time –*

Well, hindsight is never any good. 'Should have' doesn't work. 'Should have' doesn't work.

*So, they didn't want to go?*

No, they didn't want to go. They didn't want to go. And unfortunately, they were all killed, like most people.

*So, you said there were about – how many people on that liner?*

On that liner, I would think probably 1000 or 1500.

*And mostly refugees?*

Mostly Jewish people. Nobody else wanted to go to Shanghai. Why would somebody who is not in danger want to go there?

*Yeah, yeah. Right. So then take us to your arrival.*

[00:22:02] We arrived there and we didn't have any homes. We had no food, we had no money, we had nothing. What happened? Luckily for us, there was a Sephardic community there from the 19 – 1850s. The Sassoons, the Kadoories and the Harpoons, there were all in all about – in all – in the total, there were eventually 700 Jewish Sephardim there. They came there in the 1850s. They dealt in textiles and mainly opium. In those days, opium was like cigarettes became later in Europe. They made a fortune there, ending up very, very wealthy. They owned most of the Bund, a lot of the properties, they had palatial houses. And they decided when they see these Jews coming, they're going to help. So, they bought up warehouses, empty warehouses, empty schools, in an area of Shanghai called Hongkew, which was bombed in 1937, '38 by the Japanese. They were very cheap; the properties and they were known as “*Heime*” type of homes. And those homes, they transported the – with lorries, the people to these places. They were very primitive. They lived with separation, families, by blankets, so they had very little privacy there. But at least they were safe, they weren't in danger. They set up food kitchens for them, so they had food. [00:24:02] And the one thing I do remember is we had rows of like fourteen, fifteen taps, with cold water for washing. And –

*That you remember?*

That I do remember because I remember this because we were there for a few years. So not immediately but after a couple of years.

*So, they were sort of reception camps?*

They were reception camps, they were somewhere so we had the basics of life, basics of life to start with. And we had schools, we had the Jewish school, the Kadoorie School and we had synagogues. We had – there were about six synagogues there. And gradually, they set up committees to help as well. So, when they – after a few months, when there were more and more Jews coming and the Sephardim were very few, they asked America to help. They sent a lady called Margolis to set up a health agency. So, between the Joint and the HIAS and the other aides, we survived. So as far as I remember, I was never hungry in Shanghai. And people were always looked after, whenever they were hungry or short in any way.

*But obviously, for your parents, it must have been a difficult experience?*

It was very difficult because it was still under the Japanese, under the Japanese.

*So first, it wasn't but then it was?*

[00:26:00] It was under the Japanese all through. We arrived with the Japanese in charge of that part of Shanghai.

*Okay.*

So why did the Japanese – the next question you will ask will be, why did the Japanese allow us to come there with no documentation, no money, nothing? This goes back to 1905. There was a war between Japan and Russia, which the Japanese started. The Japanese-Russia War, where the Japanese attacked the Russians, in the dividing part between Japan and Russia, for some islands that the Russians took from the Japanese. And the Japanese wanted to have them back. The Japanese were losing the war against the Russians. So, they came to London for money to carry on the war. The British bankers weren't interested. There was an American Banker, called Otto Schiff, who was here. He was at this meeting and he told the Japanese to delay their return trip for a day or two. He'd have some news for them. He saw them the next day and he offered them to help them by whatever money they needed. And he managed to get them a few 100 million dollars. They carried on the war and they had a much better outcome to the war. The Japanese thought, Jewish banker, the Jews, they were rich bankers. It's good to have them on our side. That was the first thing. The Japanese, don't forget, had no idea about Jews. [00:28:00] Another thing that they studied was the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which was an antisemitic pamphlet from around about 1875, 1885. And it said that there was a big meeting of the top Jews of the world, they're going to take over the world. The Japanese had no idea about anything and they believed it. So, they thought it's good to have them on our side. And the third thing, why the Japanese allowed us in, they've never been antisemitic. There's never been any antisemitism, either in Japan or in China. And that is how we came in. Another reason is, it was by default, the American – half

of Shanghai was the international settlement, American, British and French. And the other half, Hongkew, was Japanese. And they didn't really have much of an interplay between them. So, we sort of slipped in, in a way, by default. And that's how we got in.

*But in that time, did the condition not become worse for the Jews in the – in between '39 and let's say, the end of the war, in those six years?*

Things went along quite well. People started to do their business, started founding businesses, coffee houses. They called it Little Vienna, in a way. They started coffee houses. My father started making handbags to a certain degree. He managed to get a little shop in East Yuhang Road in Shanghai. There he made masks because Japanese all wear masks. [00:30:03] So they sold a lot of masks to Japanese. They made bomber heads for Japanese in leather. And they managed to make a few – bit of a living.

*And did he use the sewing machine from Vienna?*

They used the sewing machine from Vienna. Gradually, people started to move out of the *Heime* because no privacy, not much fun. So gradually, there was a committee there that helped Jews call the Komor Committee. They helped to lend people money, or the HIAS, they lent people money to buy properties, houses and so on because it was very cheap to live in Shanghai. We lived in a lane because every street had a lane, a narrow lane in between. And we bought – we got a house there and I've got a picture there as well with it and it was very primitive, the conditions. We just had one room, which was maybe twenty-five feet long, you had four beds next to each other. In front of that was a big table with the sewing machine. And then, we had what was called a *Vorhof* a little courtyard. And in that courtyard, most of the year it's very hot in Shanghai, it's like 100 degrees, very humid. We had the *Badewanne* in the *Vorhof*, filled it with cold water. An hour later, it was hot. That's why I've got a photograph of me having a bath in the *Badewanne*. In the back room, there was a tiny little kitchen, six foot by eight foot. It had a sink, only cold water. Next to that it had a, what was called the honeypot. [00:32:04] A honeypot as a non-flush toilet, where they pick up the waste every morning at 6 o'clock. It was very uncivilised but we were alive. Next to that was a little stove, which was hated by briquettes. Briquettes are – are coal, which you do with

water, make it into balls and then it burns. That's how we had our cooking. No fridges, nothing like that. You had to go every day to the market to get fresh food. You had to boil everything because there were always diseases there. Typhoid, cholera, dysentery, very, very – and that was our place, that's where we lived.

*So, when did you move in there?*

We moved there after a couple of years from the *Heime*. And that's – and so we lived like that. My father tried to make a living there. Then the next big thing that happened was war between Japan and America with the attack on Pearl Harbour. That changed things radically. What happened was, first of all, the Sephardim could no longer help us because they all had British passports. So, they were interned in a camp called Lunghua. I've got the story of Lunghua as well. The – so that helped. It became illegal for America to send in to enemy territory money.

*So HIAS couldn't operate there anymore?*

So, what happened was the Americans found a way of sending money to Switzerland and to other countries and got money indirectly to Shanghai. [00:34:10] And the Japanese kept their eyes closed to that, sort of thing. The alliance with the Nazis didn't help us because the Nazis sent over a top Nazi from Tokyo called Meisinger. And his idea was to put all the Jews on three big ships, blow them up and sink it in the Yangtze and kill all the Jews that way. The Japanese said to them, 'We're going to think about this first.' Luckily for us, they said 'We're really not interested in this. What we will do is will confine them in a smaller area, a kind of a ghetto.' So, they gave us six months to go into a slightly smaller area, people had to live outside the area, had to go into this area. And in future, you had half a dozen exits, which were staffed by people called *Pao Chia*, who kept – and you needed a permission card to get out to do business in other areas. You had to need that. And you had to have that from a Japanese guy called Goya and he was not a nice man. He was a very tiny man, about five foot. And in order to be bigger, he jumped on a table. And he said, when he saw tall people, he said, 'No visa today for going out of the thing. Come next week.' [00:36:00] Right? So that's how we lived. We could carry on going to school, which was outside the area. It was

called the designated area. We could go out there, we never needed passes. The teachers never needed passes. So, they were very, very easy.

*Can I – and was your – the – where you lived, was that in the area of...?*

That was in the area.

*So, you didn't have to walk?*

We didn't have to move. We didn't have to move. But generally, the Japanese were as decent as you could – don't forget, it was war time. It was war time. And I would say probably looking back and having studied history, it was the safest place on Earth for Jews to be because we weren't bombed in the early days. Only in the very – towards the end of the war was there any bombing there. But for most of that time, we went to school, we went to synagogues. We didn't have any problems as regards that.

*How did it affect your father's business once the...? Was his business outside that area or was it...?*

No, it was inside the area.

*Okay, so he could –*

So, he could carry on there in the war time.

*And who was he selling to? The other refugees?*

Most to Japanese, mostly to Japanese, mostly to Japanese.

*But could Japanese come into the area?*

They could, yes, yes.



*So, it was...?*

Japanese and Chinese could go as well. Yes, yes. We never had very much interplay with Chinese at all really.

*Now, speaking of interplay, what about languages? So, what language did you speak to your parents?*

We spoke German at home, only German. At school, only English. All the teachers were from Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia. And they also seemed to speak English and we had school there. [00:38:01] We went to school at eight in the morning, 'till 1 o'clock. Then we went home to eat. And in the afternoon, we either came back to school for activities like sport, baseball, we mostly played American- basketball, table tennis. Or we went to Talmud Torah for Hebrew lessons. And all the boys who went regularly to Talmud Torah, I went several times a week to Talmud Torah, although my parents were not very frum, they encouraged us to go to Talmud Torah. And if you went regularly to Talmud Torah, for Hanukkah, you always got from charity made to measure leather shoes, which was a luxury. You know, so I got always brand-new shoes every year.

*So, this was Talmud Torah, the Sephardi...? Was it – so my question is, did...?*

It was Ashkenazi.

*It was Ashkenazi?*

It was Ashkenazi.

*So, my question is, did the European Jews create their own structures like synagogues, you said, or did they go into the Sephardi?*

Well, we had the Sephardi – they were Sephardi shuls but they were more or less run like Ashkenazi shuls, some of them. There was Ohel Rachel, Ohel Moshe. And the name of – they're always the name of Hardouns' wives or parents, the names of them.

*Yeah, because it's in Sephardi style. Yeah.*

And I remember, I remember I went to the Ohel Moshe synagogue and I remember looking up and I saw there all these *yeshiva bochers* [students at a Jewish school or college]. You know what *yeshiva bochers* are?

*Yes.*

And that was Mir Yeshiva. There was only yeshiva that was saved from the Nazis in 1941. [00:40:04] That was after the war started and they came from Lithuania, across Russia, to Tokyo. They got permission to go to Tokyo and from Tokyo, they sent them to Shanghai. And that was the Mir Yeshiva.

*And they sent –*

*400 yeshiva bochers.*

*Yeah, that's quite the famous story, isn't it? Yeah.*

It's a famous story. Funnily enough, I bought a book about the head of the Mir Yeshiva three weeks ago, in a charity shop for a pound, about the head of the Mir Yeshiva.

*Yeah, who was there with them.*

*Yes.*

*Yeah, yeah. So, in terms of synagogues and things, so do you remember meeting the – let's say there were local, I guess, the Sephardi population. Was there any interaction at school? Like what do you remember? Like who are the other people you remember from your...?*

Well, I was a schoolboy. I remember my teacher; my main teacher was Mr Gassenheimer. And we had a photograph of me sitting with the whole school and I'm sitting in the front right and there's Mr Gassenheimer. He was a teacher. And the head of the school was Lucie Hartwich. She was from Germany; she ran the school. And it was a brilliant school built by the Kadoories. It was in a large U and everybody could get around the school without getting wet. Because when it rained in China, the water was like this. I – sometimes I came home and I had, like a little boy, I had to walk through the water because there was no drainage in a lot of Shanghai.

*So, did you have friends who were Sephardi-Iraqi Jews too? [00:42:00] Or that's what I'm trying to find out, whether – was there any mixing? You know, or did – was it quite separate because...?*

It was quite separate because they were the upper-class. We, most of the Jews and Shanghai were poor. Very few people became rich in Shanghai. There was very little other interplay, although they were fantastic to us. When they ran out, the *Heime*, Sassoon, who owned the Cathay Hotel in – it was called the Cathay Hotel...

*Cathay?*

Cathay. C-a-t-h-a-y. After the war, it became – when the Communists took over, it became known as the Peace Hotel under Mao Tse Tung.

*So, they owned that hotel?*

Yes. And they allowed, they set a whole floor, it was, I think, eleven stories high, they set the whole floor for refugees who just arrived if there was no home for them. So, we were supported. In the war, when we ran out of food even the Japanese sometimes opened up their

store houses, food. And allowed us to have some of the food that they had and released it to the Jews. So, they were as benign as any power could be.

*What other communal structures were there? So, there were schools, you said. Were there youth movements and things like that?*

There were youth movements. There were youth movements and there were organisations which prepared Jews for Palestine. They had meetings and exercises and so on. [00:44:03] But I don't remember ever – I was too young to go in.

*You were young. What – how different was your brother's experience? Was it very similar to yours?*

Very similar, very similar. I remember always playing football with my brother in the lane. And we had – at the – it's a lane next to – on the corner of this lane, there was a water shop. Every street had a water shop because there was no hot water in most places. So, you had to go there. And for like a dollar you got thirty litres of water. So, every time you needed hot water, you went there, gave them the stick. I've got one there left over. This stick with Chinese writing, that entitled you to the water.

*How would you get the water?*

You got it in a big metal pail, big metal pail.

*So, somebody had to carry that?*

Yeah, my father had to carry it, it was only three shops along. Next to him was a dentist, Mr Heimann. He had the same sort of house as us and he had a dental surgery. No, sorry, Mr Heimann wasn't a dentist, he was a hairdresser. He was a hairdresser. And he cut people's hair in his place downstairs. So, we were next to him making handbags. Next to us was Rabbi Wartenberg. You might not have come across that name. He was one of the leading cantors and rabbis in Germany.

*Warten...?*

Rabbi Wartenberg, his name was Rabbi Wartenberg.

**[00:46:02]** *From where he was from?*

He was from Germany. And next door to that was a well for water. In the war time, sometimes when water was cut off or bombed or something like that, we came with pails. And you threw it down and you got the water up from this well. Next door was a gentleman called Mr Kaiser. He was a butcher; he ran a butcher shop from his place. And that's what I remember. And further than that, became a very slummy area. And there, there were two open sewers. Each one was about 100 feet long, open sewers, which was terrible smells and so on. And there were Chinese living on the side of that and there were always fights going on there. And that's how we lived but at least we were alive. We had the basics of life.

*And did you pick up some Chinese or Japanese or...?*

Very little, very little because there was very little interplay between the Chinese, Japanese and the Jews, very little. And as far as I remember, the Japanese were never bad to the Jews.

*Yeah. Do you remember any – it sounds like for you, it was one adventure than –*

It was, it was.

*Fear? Or did you experience...?*

I never experienced any fear. I only remember one day in '43, coming home from school and my mother was crying. And I said to my father, you know, 'Why is Mum crying?' And he said, 'She's just been informed by the Red Cross about her three members of her family who were murdered.' **[00:48:03]** So obviously, she was very, very upset.

*In '43?*

In '43 this was, yes.

*And what did it say? What was it...?*

It said where they were murdered, in three different camps. So...

*It looks like you have it there. We're going to – that little note.*

I've got it in my – yes, yes.

*Yeah.*

It's – so we carried on with this kind of living until '44. 'Till 4'4, we survived, you know. And in '44, they started bombing in Shanghai. And I remember, in early '45, one of – there was a radio station within a mile of where we lived. And the Americans wanted to bomb this radio station, the Japanese radio station. And they – one of the bombs went astray and hit a Jewish home, old people's home. And I think thirty-three Jews were killed that day, as well as a hundred Chinese were injured and so on. That was the worst part. And then, things went bad, badly for the Japanese. And I remember getting up in the middle of the night, waving a little American flag. And everyone shouting, 'Peace, peace. *Frieden, Frieden*, you know, sort of thing. And overnight, the Japanese disappeared. No more Japanese. And what happened then, was that a lot of American ships came to Shanghai. [00:50:00] And another big thing that happened was that there was war between – civil war between the nationalists and the communists, which started in the late twenties. But once there was this trouble with the Japanese, the communists and the nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse Tung on the communist side, decided not to fight each other but try and do damage to the Japanese. So, they did little attacks against the Japanese. But of course, after the war ended, they restarted the conflict. And there was war between the nationalists and the communists. The Jews straightaway, as I always say, it was a place of refuge and not of settlement. So, what Jews did, first of all, they saw firstly, the list of all the people who got murdered. And

everybody saw that there was nobody left for them back in the old country. So, what they did is they got in touch with whoever they knew, either they were in America, or Canada, or Australia, or any of these countries and asked them, any chance of coming there? If people had people in America, they managed to get an affidavit or one thing and another, they went there. The only person we had as a survivor was my aunt in London, who came over as a parlour maid at the end of '38. She asked us, would we be interested to come to London? We had nowhere else to go, so we said we'd be interested.

**[00:52:00]** *What was her name?*

Her name was Lilli Koslitschek.

*And she came on a domestic visa?*

Domestic visa, end of '38.

*And she was your mother's sister?*

My mother's sister. and she lived in London, in West Hampstead. And she asked us, would we be interested in coming? My parents said, 'Sure.' But it took two-and-a-half years for her to get us there. You had to guarantee that you had about 1000 pounds, which was a lot of money in those days. The country didn't want to be liable for any kind of help to you. So, she had to guarantee she had 1000 pounds. She had to find a job for my father, which she found. A job in a handbag factory in Dudley near Birmingham, which wasn't ideal but it was a job. And she had to have a flat. So, she found a flat in 18 Priory Road, West Hampstead. And that took 'till the beginning of '48. So, in '48 we came to England.

*So, three years after the war ended?*

Three years after the war ended.

*So, what I wanted to ask you, once the Japanese withdrew, did the condition change for you in the – where you were staying? I mean, I guess the restrictions lifted.*

The restrictions were lifted. And the Americans brought some kind of prosperity there because there were loads of sailors and Americans. We got assistance of food. There were ten – what was called ten and ones. They were boxes of food, which were – which the Americans were given. [00:54:03] And we got them, the refugees got them as well, which must have been arranged by Jewish committees or something. So, we weren't short of food, they did some kind of business. My parents made a living by buying in *Puderdosen*. In those days, they had powder compacts and so on. And my brother became quite good at doing pictures with – ceramic pictures on the *Puderdosen*, with Chinese scenes on it.

*On top of it?*

On top of the leather. And the Americans, sailors and soldiers, they bought loads of these and they made a living like that. They made a living like that. And so, one way or another there wasn't a prosperous, brilliant living but they made a kind of a living.

*And you continued to go to school?*

And we continued to go to school. But gradually, you saw more and more people found havens to go to.

*Anyone staying? Did anyone stay, of the refugees?*

No because it went on like that. There were people who couldn't – didn't find anywhere in the world to go to. And there wasn't Israel yet. But in 19 – my uncle had nowhere to go with his wife and his daughter. So, they went in 1949 to Israel and to Raanana in Israel and that's where they lived 'till '55. Then my cousin married an Israeli and he was a mechanic. And he found a job, good job in California. So, they went to California in 1955.

*And some people even, I guess, were even longer stuck, 'till the early fifties? I don't know.*



[00:56:04] Yes. The last ship I think went around about 1950. And by that time, the Communists were in charge and they wouldn't allow any ship. There was a Swedish ship that came for the last paper. I've got the details of it because my brother's friend's father, his name was Rudi Joritz and he was in charge of the Jews of Shanghai. His brother's – his son's name was Harry Joritz and my brother's still in touch with him. He lives in Germany now. And he arranged the last ship to take Jews out of Shanghai. I think it was roundabout 1950 or '51. And they had to have the ship a few miles out from a different part of China. That's what they – because the Communists tell you what you can do and can't do. And there were about 700 Jews who – there were about 900 Jews in all who were on this boat. And 700 of them, I think, ended up in – they left them somewhere where there was an Israeli boat waiting en route. And they took them to Israel and the last 200 ended up in Germany. And then they might have left for other countries. Hardly any Jews were left behind, maybe 100. Some might have had businesses who wanted to stay but it virtually ended the Jewish stay in Shanghai.

*Because it's so interesting. It shows that emigration or going to other countries was not only a problem pre-war but post-war.*

[00:58:04] Yes, it was.

*For those Jews.*

It was. You couldn't get in. You couldn't get in anywhere. You can't believe it. You might have heard of the Evian Conference in 1938, which was organised by Woodrow, by the president of America. I think it was Woodrow Wilson. And he organised the Evian Conference, to see what could be done to help these poor people to find somewhere to live. It made things more difficult. Nobody agreed to take any Jews. Australia said, 'We haven't got a Jewish problem now and we're not looking for one.' Canada, I've got a – had a book, which is now in Shanghai, called 'One is Too Many', meaning Jews. No country allowed Jews in. Even Britain didn't allow Jews in, other than with guarantees. The Jews who came as a Kindertransport, had to have a guarantee they wouldn't cost the country any money. America

wouldn't allow Jews in without affidavit, or without – they had a quota system in America. We had an affidavit from America, in Ohio but the quota system wouldn't have got it in because, yeah, Austria had a quota of about 500, which would have taken 'till 1950 to get in, which was useless. So, no country really allowed people in. The only country was Shanghai.

*So, when you then left in '48, could – what did your parents – did they manage to bring some of their possessions from Shanghai to the UK?*

[01:00:00] Yes, yes, they could – they still had the lift. I'm not even sure if they brought the lift anymore. But they didn't have very much, in any case. You didn't amass very much in China. And we were we came on a boat called the Orbita, a British boat and we landed in Southampton. And then we came to London, to 18 Priory Road and we had a flat.

*Yeah.*

And –

*Tell us about the journey because that journey you can remember?*

That journey was –

*How were you feeling leaving Shanghai? I mean, for you, it was a home. That's what you knew.*

Yes.

*What were you feeling at the time?*

To me, it was all – I was eleven, it was an adventure. It was an adventure. It's – we left one country and gradually, all my friends left. So, it was quite good to – and it was very primitive China, Shanghai, where we lived was always very, very primitive. So, it was an adventure

that I was looking forward to and it was a nice journey. And we ended in Southampton and then I came to Priory Road.

*And how long did it take? How long did the trip take?*

The trip, I think, probably took the same length of time, three for four weeks. We went through the Suez Canal. And when we ran through the Suez Canal, the one thing I remember is I saw these *Scheinwerfer*, skylights in the sky. And I said, 'What is that?' And they said, 'That's looking for Israeli planes,' because there was on the – you know, bad situation between the Arabs and the Jews at that time when we went through the Suez. [01:02:02] And I remember when we went to Aden, I drove my parents mad. I wanted a car or something, a toy or something. So, we went in a taxi around Aden and the taxi driver said, 'That's where we burned down a Jewish school. That's where we burned down a Jewish synagogue.' So, it was a nightmare that we did that taxi drive and we were glad to get back on the boat. And then we landed here and it was a different world.

*But you – also, you spoke English?*

I spoke English.

*So that must have been helpful for you.*

Yes, yes. My parents spoke a little bit of English. My father had a job in Dudley, Worcestershire. And after – and he came back at the weekend always. So, after about four weeks or so, he managed to get another job in London because it was an impossible journey to do.

*And what were your first impressions of arriving in '48 here in Britain?*

Well, it was luxury. We had a garden. We had a bathroom. For all the years in Shanghai, we never had a bathroom. It was luxury, we had a telephone. It was a different world. I didn't like the school; I didn't like the school. But I managed to get – thanks to my rabbi, he got me

into the Hasmonian. I got an appointment with Mr Stanton and he had an assistant called Mr Kastenber. [01:04:00] And they interviewed me and I was eleven, you're supposed to have the eleven-plus thing. And after the interview, they said 'Well, Wickelholz, we can take you', they said, 'But do you realise this as a paying school?' It was a private school. So, I said, 'Well, my parents are refugees', I said they haven't got much *Geld* [money]. So, they said, 'well, could they pay a pound a month?' So, I suppose a pound a month they could pay. So, they said, 'Well, then you can come here.' So, I was in for *gornisht* [nothing]. And when it came to the holidays, they said, 'Wickelholz, do you want to go on holiday?' So, I said, 'Yes'. So, they said, '*Wieviel* [how much]?' So, they said, 'To you, a pound a week.' So, I was there for six weeks in Bournemouth, in a lovely holiday there as well.

*So, which was school you first went to? Was it the...?*

Harben secondary school, which was a very rough school. Kilburn was a very rough area in those days.

*So, what didn't you like about it?*

They – I didn't feel comfortable. They were very rough backgrounds and I didn't feel comfortable there.

*And also, until then you'd only been in a Jewish school?*

I'd only been in a Jewish school.

*So that was quite different?*

Yes, yes. And I went to synagogue, at the back of John Barnes there was a – I don't know if it was in your day, John Barnes at Finchley Road. At the back of there was a shtiebel called Sarah Klausner Synagogue. That's where I went to and that's how I got into the school.

*To the Hasmonian?*

To the Hasmonean, yes.

*And what was the rabbi called? Who was that?*

Rabbi Ansbacher. [01:06:02] He was the rabbi in my – in the Sarah Klausner Synagogue.

*Was he a refugee as well?*

Yes, yes.

*From?*

He was from Germany. Yes.

*That is what later was called the Shtiebel?*

Yes.

*It's that synagogue?*

Yes, yes.

*I don't think it exists today.*

I don't think it exists anymore.

*No.*

But then I went to Bennington Park synagogue, you know, off West End Lane.

*And what was it like for your parents to come here and for your mother to be with her sister?*

She – it was all right but it was a very difficult times. Because, unfortunately, my aunt who came here was also a very damaged lady because she lost all her family. Lost her mother, brother, everybody and she was a very damaged lady. And she worked, I think, she made hats or something like that. And she made a living but she was always a depressed person. Always in a very, very bad mood. And it was a very different life being with her because she was damaged, unfortunately, you know.

*You said your mother too? Both?*

My mother was damaged but she wasn't quite as moody as her sister. So, the relations between them was not very good. Every little – it was difficult to explain but she was never in a very happy state.

*So how long did you stay together?*

We stay together for – from '48 'till – she lived for – when did they move? **[01:08:09]** When we got married, my – I think my – I lived there 'till I was married in 1964. And then my parents moved to Sonia Gardens in Neasden. And by that time, my mother – my aunt wasn't very well. So, she lived in a flat, a council flat. And I visited her always but she was – she hardly knew me; she hardly knew me.

*So up 'till '64 they all stayed together?*

They all stayed together, yes.

*So, she didn't marry, your...?*

She – my aunt never married, no, no.

*Because there must have been many, you know, of that generation who came as domestics who did marry.*

Yes, it was a very sad life. It was a very sad life.

*Yeah. And do you know, did they go – did they join any synagogues? Did they all – did your parents, did they go to the same synagogue? Or did they...? They were not interested?*

No, my parents didn't go to synagogue. I always went to shul and my brother went to shul.

*So, the two of you, not the...? For them, that wasn't...?*

Yes, no, no. But they always did Pessah and Pessah was always 100%. But the rest of the time, they weren't careful about Kashrut [Jewish dietary laws] or eating kosher meat or something. So, when I got married, I said to my mother, my mother was always brilliant making schnitzel but I said to my mother, 'Unfortunately, I can't have schnitzels anymore because it's not kosher.' And from the time I got married, I only stuck to kosher. So, that's how big I went.

**[01:10:04]** *And you went to Hasmonean School as well. So, you –*

That's right. That's right, yes.

*And did they join the AJR, do you know, your parents?*

Never, no, no, no, no. They never –

*Did they have – they must have had other refugee friends, I assume, or...?*

They never were very sociable. They never were very sociable. They were very introvert really. And unfortunately, my father joined us in the handbag trade when we had our own business in Kilburn High Road. And – but he had a heart attack in about – when he – in 1969. And he – in those days, they didn't do much. The doctor said, 'Go home and have a rest and after a few – you'll be all right.' So, I remember my father went home and he came to a

holiday time. And Carol and me had a little baby. And we went to Cornwall and they said, 'Go on holiday, it'll be all right.' And whilst we were in Cornwall, my father passed away. So, I left my wife and daughter in Cornwall and I came here. And that's what happened. And you know- and then my mother carried on to live at Sonia Gardens and we carried on making handbags. And we looked in on our mother every morning before – on the way to work. And she managed to live another quite a few years. [01:12:02] But wasn't a nice life but what can you do? Life doesn't always act nicely.

*Did she ever go back to Vienna? Either –*

No, no, no. I've been a few times to Vienna and –

*But your parents, no?*

No, no. They never went to Vienna. There was nothing there for them.

*No. So, to come back to you and so you finished Hasmonian school?*

Yes.

*And just before moving on, did you ever experience – because you're a refugee, any sort of anti-refugee sentiment from the other boys at the Hasmonian? Did they have an understanding of where you came from or what your situation was?*

Yes, yes. I never kept it quiet. But no, I wasn't treated badly. I had lots of friends. I had some very good friends at the Hasmonian. Obviously, I had a different background to any of them.

*Where there any – because I think some of the survivors who came also went to the Hasmonian. Did you meet them? Like some of the boys or some of the...?*

No.



No?

Rabbi – the head of the Hasmonean was Rabbi Schonfeld. He saved a lot of Jewish youngsters as well.

*Yes, some of his – the Schonfeld children like post-war, I know came to the Hasmonean. But you didn't come across them?*

No, no, no. I had lots of friends in the Hasmonean.

*Did you know Rabbi Schonfeld?*

I met him a few times. I met him, a really lovely headmaster, Mr Stanton. No, no, I had a lovely time at the Hasmonean. [01:14:01] I enjoyed my days there.

*And your brother? Did he go to the Hasmonean as well?*

No, he didn't. He didn't. He started making handbags very early. He first made furniture and then he went to make handbags. And he learned his trade and eventually, wanted to start his own firm. And when I also did handbags, we joined together and we started the firm when we were very young. And we made such nice handbags, that overnight we got in – we specialised in lizard and snakeskin bags. And we made such good quality bags, that wherever we went we managed to get in. And our biggest customer became Mappin & Webb. He made – that was a top jeweller's shop. And we made – and eventually, we had like twenty – we supplied most of Bond Street and Knightsbridge, including Harrods with our bags. Unfortunately, we never made very much money because I made every bag myself with my hands. And when you make every bag with your hands, you start the week with just skins, end the week with ready-made bags, fifty or 100 bags. Start from nothing, complete bags, a lot of work. I worked 100 hours a week most of my life, which is not a good life. Not a good life. And – but I enjoyed making bags and I've got a –

*Firstly, just something else. Tell us, after school what did you do?*

After school, for a few months, I went to – Mr Stanton, the headmaster, suggested that I try the law. [01:16:06] Well, I'd never thought that that before and then you in those days, you needed articles to start. And he got me a list of fourteen firms or Jewish firms and each firm wanted around about 1500 pounds for you to start the articles. Well, I wasn't on for my parents. So, there was one non-Jewish firm called Sedgehill [ph] and Collins. They were at number 64 New Bond Street, third floor. Mr Collins was a very nice, young man of the middle forties. And his partner, Mr Sedgehill, was a guy who was in the late sixties. He was always drunk and he wasn't a very nice man. And he made my life a misery, always got me in lousy jobs. So, I didn't really enjoy it very much. And when I went to the Law Society, you have to pass to start your articles, I wasn't very happy and I didn't do very well. And they said, 'You can't start the articles right now. But if you wait for six months, we'll let you start the articles.' I went home and told my parents, 'I am not sure I want to do this.' Mistake! And I became a handbag maker and I enjoyed making handbags. I enjoyed making handbags. Got a photograph of the Queen of England wearing one of the bags I made in my life story book.

*Oh yeah, I remember because that was a few months ago, there was a whole story about that handbag.*

Yes, yes.

*I saw that.*

I gave a talk about that handbag in the – in East End Road, the synagogue there.

*The Sternberg Centre, the New North London?*

Yes.

*Yeah.*

Yeah, the rabbi invited me to give a talk when the Queen died. [01:18:02] And I gave a talk there to the *kehillah* [Hebrew: congregation] there.

*So that was your handbag?*

That was my handbag.

*Handmade handbag.*

Handmade by me.

*But she bought it not from you?*

She didn't buy it. It was her mother who bought it. Her mother went every year. We made a special bag at Christmas for Mappin & Webb. And they gave us the order in January and however many bags we could make, they would take. And the maximum we could do was 5000 bags of the same bag, which they didn't sell 'till November. End of – middle of – the end of November, they advertised it for about one or two weeks. And at the end of those two weeks, they were all sold. And then we had daily phone calls from Edinburgh, from Glasgow, from Newcastle, where they had – because when we started with Mappin & Webb, we had an order for 200 bags but they had only three shops. And as the years went by, they ended up with thirty-three shops and they all needed bags. And it was – it went out of control.

*And you made these bags all yourself?*

I made every bag myself and I sometimes – I remember, this is a crazy story, I remember and even when I left the factory in Kilburn High Road, I took work home. Had supper, took work home, did another few hours of work. And one night, before Christmas, we could never make enough, so I worked and worked and worked. And when I went up to bed for a couple of hours, my father was just coming down having slept all night, ready for the morning [laughs]. It was crazy but you can't put the clock back. You can't put the clock back.

[01:20:02] *So tell us about, so the handbags. So, what's the story?*

Every year, every year, the Queen Mother went to Mappin & Webb in Regent Street. And she always bought six of this bag in different colours. And she gave them to her family as Christmas presents. And one of them, that she gave to the Queen, must have been. That's how she got it.

*And how did you identify – or when did you see the Queen with that bag?*

I happened to see it once in a magazine that she went, she was stroking her horse, you know, she always was keen on horses. And she – she was wearing this bag. She always liked these bags with straps carried, that look like Mama's bags. That was her style and that's how she got a bag.

*So that's how you saw it?*

Yes.

*And you never met her?*

I never met her but I met King Charles. I don't know if you want to hear that.

*Yeah, please.*

And on the 16th of December of last year, we were invited to the NW3, Carol and me as guests on the Hanukkah party.

*JW3.*

JW3, every year they invite Holocaust survivors and they invited us as well. And as we're sitting around the table and just as we walk in, there was such security there that Carol was joking to me, 'There's so much security. I've never seen this before. Maybe there's royalty

coming today', she joked. And in walks King Charles. And as we're sitting at our table there and the speech is all done by the person who founded JW3, they presented King Charles with a *menorah*. And then, they started dancing – after we'd eaten our lunch, they started dancing and they danced the *Horah*. [01:22:07] And King Charles was dancing with us the *Horah*. And he went over to two ladies who were at our table, both ninety-two-year-old survivors and he gave them a peck on the cheek. He was a really lovely man. And he said to my wife, 'Have you had enough to eat?' You know, so my wife said, 'Yes.' And we danced with him.

*And did you tell him the story of your bag?*

No, I couldn't. I couldn't take it over; I couldn't take him over to thing. But he came over as a really nice man. And it's all on video as well, us dancing with them, which our daughter sent us from Israel. It was on Israeli television as well.

*That's nice. So, how do you feel about that, that the Queen was there with your bag?*

I think the queen is a very nice lady. Very fine lady. I've never had any bad comments about *Yidden* from her. I think they're fine people.

*So, in fact, when did you become naturalised after your...?*

I've got the naturalisation papers upstairs. Must be in the early sixties maybe, or late fifties.

*And was that important for you?*

Yes, yes. I've tried to get the papers, my Viennese passport as well. But there have been so many obstacles, it's taken – I did that for a year, to try and try and try. Somehow or other, it's never come through.

*You're trying to get...?*

I was trying to get it but I thought in case it's ever needed. But if I don't get it, it doesn't worry me. [01:24:01] Doesn't worry me. I've never had any problem in Vienna. I've been back to Vienna a few times. What can you say? What can you say?

*Yeah, what...?*

It was lucky we escaped.

*Yeah. What do you feel like when you go back to Vienna?*

Well, my feelings, I would say to my wife, I said, 'I feel quite comfortable and I don't have any anything bad about the present-day youngsters.' I think that in those days, people were brainwashed. People were brainwashed. And like Hitler, who was a very clever man said, 'You tell people a lie often enough and they will believe it. And the bigger the lie the more they believe it.' Any – you can be brainwashed; you can be brainwashed. And I can't say anything about the present youngsters. And most of the countries in the West were sort of – didn't come up in a good light, shall we say? Most countries quite enjoyed being persecutors. If you come across a lot of this country like Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, Austria, they all enjoyed picking on Jews. It's an endless story, unfortunately. Will there ever be an end to it? I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I must tell you one other little story.

*Go on.*

The only time I've never ever felt – I've never, ever felt antisemitism in my life. But my wife and me, we like to go occasionally on cruises. [01:26:00] We were on a cruise one day and as I'm always on cruises, I always talk about – I'm never ashamed of being a Jew and I always talk a lot. And I talk to people and I tell them about Shanghai and one thing and another. And one day, this Jewish guy came up to me and he said to me, 'Now, you won't believe what happened', he said. He said, 'I was just sitting in the Jacuzzi and there were about eight of us there. And all the other people were non-Jewish. And there was one guy who was talking and he said, 'I met this nice guy, see that guy over there?''', pointing to me. I was on the cruise. And he said, 'Very nice guy', he said, 'the only thing wrong with him is

he's a bloody Jew.' So, all these guys who were there, non-Jewish, put their back to him and went out of the jacuzzi. They were disgusted by this. That's the only time that I've ever heard of anybody saying anything anti-Jewish. I've never felt anything like that. It's very unusual. What can you say? What can you say?

*Kurt, how would you feel in terms of your identity today? How would you describe yourself?*

I was – I would just – how would I describe myself? I would describe myself as a person who just lives, survives, makes the best of life. I've been very happy with the wife I've had for the last fifty-eight years. I'm happy with my children. I've got five great-grandchildren. And I'm very happy and they live in Israel, they're all happy there. [01:28:01] And life is good. As long as God is kind to us and keeps us healthy for another few years, I'm very happy.

*And what sort of identity did...? You have two daughters, what did you want to – what sort of identity did you want to give to your daughters or...?*

Well, I'm happy that they both married Jewish. And I'm happy with their husbands they've got, I'm happy with the grandchildren, they've got three. One younger daughter lives here in Elstree. She's got three very nice grandchildren. In Israel, my other daughter has done Aliyah last year. Her – my grandson, who has always been very *frum*, when to *yeshiva* and ended up in Israel, married Jewish here. And his lives in Beit Shemesh Gimmel, do you know it?

*Hmm-hmm.*

And he's got the fifth great-grandchild on the way, due in another three weeks. Life is good, life is good. I'm proud of what happened. Thanks to my brother and me surviving, there are about forty people now alive, or fifty people who would not be here. But thanks to our surviving, they are here. So, we've had a lot of *mazel* [good fortune] as well. And you need – I believe in *besheit*, if something's going to happen, it'll happen. And you do need these little bits of luck in life.

*Yeah. And you said your parents didn't talk about the past. Did you talk about the past to your children? I mean, you're interested, you've done a lot of research yourself.*

Yes, I do. And I think it's important to talk about the past because otherwise, it'll just, like I said, it'll go like the *Haggadah* [the book read on the festival of Passover] where it's like something in the background. [01:30:09] You know, it's not – something that happened in history. But this happened within living memory of a lot of people and a lot of people are still paying the price of it. And the more I think about it, it's still unbelievable what happened. It just is unbelievable what happened. But brainwashing is a very powerful thing.

*And was there a particular point where you started talking to synagogues and schools in your own life, or...?*

I started talking about maybe fifteen years ago. And I thought that, although it's always a bit stressful for me, I do think it's important to still let people know. My last talk I gave two weeks ago, in Bushey to 150 people. And I think it's important to tell people because when I read statistics, less than less young people know any details about what happened to our people. And it's important to know, it's important to know.

*And what message, what message do you give in your talks? Is there a message?*

My biggest message and I tell this to everybody, is the most important word is kindness. Think of other people, think of other people, be kind, be kind to each other. Be kind to the *kehilla*. Do whatever you can and I believe in *tikkun olam* [Hebrew for “repairing the world”]. You know what that means? Make it a better world. [01:32:00] Try and leave it better than it was, if you can.

*And you said sometimes it's difficult for you to speak. In which way?*

Well, I always worry in case I don't talk fluently and I get stuck in any way. And I do like – when I give talks and they're usually about three-quarters-of-an hour to an hour, I prefer talking without any notes. I have it all written down but I like to talk without any. And I did it



two weeks ago and I didn't need talks. And I gave a Zoom talk to Israel on Yom Hashoah, where I spoke to 150 people in Israel. And I do that without any notes and for eighty-five, that's not too bad.

*No, not at all. And do you get sometimes surprising questions or things which surprise you?*

Yes. And I have – and some very odd things happened to you as well, which you can't understand, which is like *besheret* almost. Because when we went to Israel, we went for one week to Israel about two weeks ago. And on the way out, I now go in a disabled chair because the distances are so great that it's – for me, it's not easy with one lung. So, and it also cuts corners because there's often delays and it's a lot. I'm not a youngster anymore. So, when we came, when we went from Luton to Israel, there was an old gentleman there who was a similar age to me. [01:34:05] And he was quite an unhappy looking man, so he didn't talk much to us. When we arrived in Israel, he was waiting for a chair and we were waiting for a chair. And we started talking a little bit. And as we're talking, we discovered that we – that I went to the Hasmonean and he said he went to the Hasmonean. And I said to him, 'You know', I said, 'in those days....' And he said he also went on holiday with the Hasmonean. I said, 'I went with a holiday', and we gradually spoke. And I said, 'I remember one thing on holiday. There was one guy who came to the camp and he...' – there was a hotel in Bournemouth called the Green Park Hotel, which was very expensive hotel and it doesn't exist anymore. But his parents were very wealthy people. He was an accountant. And he came over to the summer holiday camp and he said, 'Anyone who wants to come to the tea in the Green Park is welcome.' So, all the fellas, there were about twenty or thirty of us, we went, descended on this Green Park. And he said, 'That was my family. It was me who invited you' and their name was Epstein. So, I said, 'I knew the Epsteins.' He was one but I hadn't seen him in seventy years, so I wouldn't recognise him. He was the one. And he said, 'And when I go back now to Israel', he can't – he can hardly walk, he said, 'I'm going to phone up a friend of mine called George Weil.' [01:36:00] And I said, 'You mean George Breuer Weil?' He says, 'Yes, George Breuer.' He said he was my best friend in the Hasmonean. He was an artist as well and he made a head of Ben Gurion, which was very famous and he's not very well at the moment. There's George Breuer Weil and he lived in Temple Fortune. And he married their – the girl who does their jobs in their house, who was

non-Jewish. Became ultra-orthodox, very *frum* and they got divorced later in life as well. But how small a world is it to live in there? And when I gave the talk in Bushey, two people came up to me. One said to me, 'You might remember me. I remember you because of your name, Wickelholz.' He said, 'We were in the same class for years.' And another girl came up to me and said, 'I was on holiday with you in Bournemouth.' So, it's a small world.

*A lot of connections.*

It's a small world, isn't it?

*Kurt, so what I want to ask you what, from your heritage, your Jewish-Austrian heritage, what is the most important thing for you?*

What's the most important thing? I think the most important thing is to keep going our Jewish heritage. To try because nowadays, it's very difficult with all the world going off and everything is on the telephone. People are busier in so many different directions. And because Jews survive better, unfortunately, when there's persecution, isn't it? [01:38:05] That's what it seems like to me. When people are more consciously Jewish. When they are just prosperous and so on and so forth, I think they lose some of their heritage. And I think the most important thing is to keep Judaism going. That's my opinion.

*And lastly, I wanted – you're an AJR member.*

Yes.

*I don't know for how long you've been a member. Is it important to go to any of the meetings, or...?*

Yeah. Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes. Yes, I think so. I think it's a brilliant organisation. I think it's a brilliant organisation.

*Yeah, but you said your parents didn't join. They didn't?*

No, no, my parents, they weren't sociable people really. They were mostly just with each other.

*Yeah, because I know there was a day centre in West Hampstead and AJR had all kinds of activities there.*

Yes, they did, they did. But they weren't that type of person.

*And lastly because you lived in Priory Road, do you remember the sort of Finchley Road and all the refugee businesses in...?*

Yeah, the Cosmo.

*Yeah?*

The Cosmo, yes.

*So, tell us about the Cosmo.*

Well, I never went to the Cosmo, I just know of it. I did – I went once or twice to book sales in the Belsize Park synagogue. But yes, I went to – I mostly went to Jewish clubs. I belonged to the Jewish, in Cricklewood, Northwest Jewish Boys Club. I played table tennis for them. And yes, I – that's – unfortunately, there are no longer any clubs around.

**[01:40:00]** *No. But any other – the Dorice, the coffee shop on the other side of Finchley Road?*

No, no. Don't remember.

*No but the Cosmo, you remember? But it was quite expensive, I assume, the restaurant for sure.*

Yes, yes, yes, yes. No, I –

*Did your parents go there at all?*

No, no, my mother always liked to cook herself. And they were, they hardly went out. They were not very sociable, they weren't sociable. But then, when they were in this country, they were – my father worked all the time. My mother didn't want like going out much. And they just enjoyed being home, enjoyed being home, just didn't socialise too much. But what can you say? Life shapes you a certain way. You sometimes have to go in the direction that you have to go.

*Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to add, which I haven't asked you? Any aspect which we haven't discussed?*

All I can say is that I'm happy with how life has turned out. And I've had the *mazel* of marrying a wonderful girl.

*How did you meet your wife? You didn't tell us.*

How did I meet my wife? In the fifties and sixties, most people went to Jewish charity dances. And that's every week, you looked into the Jewish Chronicle and you checked the dances for the weekend. And that's how you decide where you went going. And I had friends from the Hasmonian, Izzy Lerah, Raymond Zakharov. I don't know if you've heard of the Zakharov Sephardi family. [01:42:00] Mickey Wilson, Roy Haim. They were the same crowd every week and we decided to go to – which dance we went to. It was like a *shidduch* [matchmaking] place. And one evening in the late fifties, I went to a dance at the 55 in Moreton Street, or somewhere where Dunhills was. There was a store there, number fifty-five and there was a dance there. And I was always very shy, I grew up with an inferiority complex. I was always very shy to ask girls to dance. So, one evening, it was about ten-thirty and my wife, that was the first dance she ever went to. And she was with some friends and the friends – and I was with her. And the friends came up to her about a quarter-past-ten and

said, 'We're going, we're not enjoying it here.' So, my wife said, 'Oh, don't go, I'm enjoying myself.' So, I said, so she said, 'No, well, we're going.' So, she said, 'Well, I'm staying.' I said, 'Don't worry', I said, 'I'll give you a lift home.' So, in any case, we spoke and we had a nice time. And at the end of the dance, she said, 'All right, let's go home now.' I said, 'Where do you live?' So, she said, 'Edgware.' So, I said, 'Where's Edgware?', I'd never heard of Edgware before. I didn't know Edgware [laughs]. So, in any case, she told me where it is and I got her home. And then, I went and got her home. And I was always very prim and proper. [01:44:02] Didn't touch her, no kiss, no *gornisht*. So, I dropped her in and she asked me, 'What is your name?' So, I told her, 'Kurt Wickelholz.' So, she went in and she said to her mother, 'You will never guess what his name is.' So, she said, 'What is it?' So, she said, 'Kurt Wickelholz.' So, she said, 'Well, what does it matter? You're not going to marry the boy.' [Laughs] So, after that, I saw her and I was always working and I could only see her one evening a week, that I could fit in. And I saw her every week. And she was still at fifteen-and-a-half, under sixteen, I think. It was the first dance she'd ever been to. And every week, she went to Pitmans to learn shorthand as well or something. And they asked her, 'Well, has he tried to kiss you yet?' She said, 'No.' And for six weeks I didn't and then I gave her a peck on the cheek. And she said, 'He's kissed me', she said, '*Mazel tov*.' [Laughs] So, that's how we met. And she was – it was a wonderful life together.

*What did your parents say then when, I guess you asked her to get married?*

Well, we sort of drifted together. It was just accepted. It was accepted that we were married. And we started out in Holders Hill Road. And, yes, I think we were both very lucky because we were happy.

[01:46:00] *And at what point did you change your name from...?*

We changed it when we had – after we had the second child my wife said, 'I think we should do something about the name because it's not a good name.' German wasn't very nice in England in those days. So, I changed it by deed poll and it was okay. It was okay. I would say overall, I enjoyed my life. 'Should have' is the most stupid thing to say.

*Have you got any regrets?*

No, no, no, no. Overall, I'm very happy that – how things worked out. Of course, everybody makes mistakes but you can't do anything. You can't put the clock back and, you know...

*Do you sometimes think, what would have happened to your life if – without Hitler?*

Without Hitler, I have no idea, I have no idea. But nobody knows, nobody knows. You've got to make the best of life that you're given and make the best of it.

*Yeah. It occurred to me that maybe you probably have more German because you went to Shanghai and continued speaking German to your parents there.*

Yes, I have very little chance of talking German. I still talk German but I have no chance to talk, use it. Even with my brother I only talk in English now. He's eighty-eight, he is in America at the moment because his family, his daughter lives in the States. So, first holiday he's had in ten years because he doesn't like going on planes.

**[01:48:00]** *But you – yeah but your German is – you speak...?*

*Mein Deutsch ist ziemlich gut, yes. [My German is rather good.]*

*But in Vienna, when you go do you speak?*

I speak German, yes.

*Have you ever spoken to Viennese children or to talk experience with them?*

No, no. No, I haven't. I haven't. I did have a nice holiday in Germany, in Vienna, rather. I've never been to Germany. I've never been to Ger – you've been to Germany?

*Yes, I have, yes.*

Many times?

*Well, I was born there, so [laughs].*

Which part of Germany?

*I was – I grew up in Cologne.*

In Köln?

*In Köln, yeah. So nolens volens [Latin], as they say, I had no choice in the matter.*

Right, right. Have you got brothers and sisters?

*No.*

No.

*But anyway, Kurt, is there anything else? Anything else you can think of? Important – you want to say anything to anyone who's going to watch this interview in the future?*

No. And the only thing I would like to say is, be aware of the situation anywhere in the world. And always be on your guard and hope that you have a peaceful, healthy, happy life. And make the best of it because you only have one life and you're – nobody's ever coming back.

*Yeah. Maybe – and that's the – really the last question I want to ask you. What about the current refugee situation? I mean, do you feel we can learn from the experiences from the Second World War?*

I think that unfortunately, there are always some bad people around who thrive on bad situations. [01:50:00] And they do well if there's a bad situation and even you can get it nowadays from the Ukraine situation. That totally unnecessary war has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Has made a bad situation in the world food wise because Ukraine was the breadbasket of the world. And it's ruined a lot of people's lives in Russia, by having the sons of twenty killed unnecessarily. And it's when you have bad people running a country and feeding you lies. And you've always got to be on guard and let's be kind to each other.

*Thank you, Kurt. So, thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to talk to you.*

My pleasure.

*We're going to take a break now and then, look at your documents and photographs.*

My pleasure.

*Thank you.*

I hope it's come through all right.

[Pause]

I don't know any details about this. It was just my great-grandparents. [01:52:00] I think they originally came from Poland and ended up in Austria. But that's all I know about them. It's going back a long, long, long time ago.

[MS1] You don't have their names?

[KW] I don't even know their names. I assume their name was Wickelholz.

That photograph was taken in 1938, of my mother, my brother- older brother- and myself on the banks of the Danube, the year before we left for Shanghai.



That photo is an outing that my parents had in 1932, with a load of – a crowd of their friends. I think most of them were not Jewish but they were friends of theirs.

*And when was it taken?*

1932.

*Thank you.*

And this photo was taken in the beginning of 1939 in Vienna, when I was about one year and four months old, yes, at that time, a few months before we went to Shanghai.

That photo was taken in 1940 of my parents, my brother and myself in a garden, which was part of the *Heim* that we lived in when we first came to Shanghai. [01:54:03]

This is another photograph taken around 1940 of my parents, my brother and myself in the garden, a part of the *Heim* complex.

*And you just that you remembered some music there.*

I remembered because in Shanghai, there were maybe 100 people who were associated with operetta and opera in Vienna. And they were mostly Jewish or married Jewish, so they also escaped to Shanghai. And they started giving concerts and some of them were in the *Heime*. And one of them- my parents who liked music must have taken us. And that's what I remember, I must have been maybe four when this happened.

*And what operetta? Do you remember what operetta?*

I remember it was called 'Gräfin Mariza'. I think it was by Emmerich Kálmán, I'm almost sure. And I've loved operetta ever since, it stayed in my brain.

*Thank you.*

This is a photograph taken in 1940 of my brother and myself in Shanghai, with trousers which were still brought along from Vienna, matching trousers.

And this is a photograph of my parents, my brother and myself in 1941, when we'd moved out of the *Heim* and we had our own place, off Alcock Road in Hongkew. [01:56:15]  
And yes, it's us in the entrance, forecourt of our home.

This is a photograph taken in 1946 at the Kadoorie School of my class. I'm the one seated from the right-hand side. On the corner, is our main teacher called Mr Gassenheimer. He went to America after the war and he became a rabbi. And he became quite a famous rabbi in America.

And this is a photograph taken around about 1946 of my brother's class in the Kadoorie school. He's in the middle row, second from the left.

This is my brother and me in 1947. Our house lived in – was in a lane, which was off the road. And we, in the summer, this was summer as you can see from the sunshine, we often played football in the lane. And that's us playing football.

[01:58:00] This photo was taken in 1947. It's my mother shopping for fruit from a street vendor. At the back of the vendor is the wall of the biggest jail in Shanghai. And the Japanese had a lot of prisoners there. And often you could hear screams from there because the Japanese sometimes beat up their prisoners and tortured them. You had to go shopping every day there because it was so hot in the summer that food went off very quickly. And nobody had any fridges in those days. So that's why my mother did the shopping.

*And it says Shu Xiang Road? What's the name of the road?*

And the name of the road was Shu Xiang Road.

*Shu Xiang.*

And one of the main streets in Shanghai.

This photo was taken in 1947 of my parents, my brother and myself. I was aged ten at the time and it's the entrance to our house. Virtually the front door at the entrance.

This photograph was taken in England in 1948, around about June, July. We'd just arrived from Shanghai and we, for the first time, had a garden to our house and this is in the garden.

[MS1] Whereabouts is this?

[02:00:00] Priory Road, London, NW6, West Hampstead.

This photograph was taken in 1948 in the garden of the house where we lived in. That's my aunt, who brought us from Shanghai to London, my mother, myself and my father.

This is a photograph of me doing a bit of gardening in the garden, in 18 Priory Road, London.

This is a picture taken of the *Heim* that we lived in when we came to Shanghai first. Most Jews who arrived came with no money. And they were – they went to live in *Heim, Heime*, which is the German for homes, which were supplied to them by the Sephardic Jewish community, who were very charitably and managed to find housing for quite a few thousand Jews, who were very poor and had nowhere to live. In order that they've got somewhere to live.

And this is a photograph of my mother's mother and one of her sisters, who were left behind in Austria and Vienna. And were both murdered in concentration camps in 1943.

[MS1] Do you know their names?

[02:02:00] And I can't remember their names.

And this is a photograph of my wife, my wife, Carol and myself when we first – shortly after we met, which is about sixty-two years ago. A long time ago and we're still happy.

And this is a photograph of my wife and me getting married in 1964, with all her parents and my parents and all our family. And, unfortunately, most of them no longer with us. Yes, that was a happy time.

That's a photograph at Harry's Bar Mitzvah in December 2021. To the right and left of Harry is my wife and myself. Then there is my granddaughter, Francesca. My grandson, Alexander, his – their mother, Chantel. My granddaughter, Natasha and her then boyfriend, Nick, who she's now married to and living in Israel. [02:04:01] To the right of – then next to the girl in the red dress, my granddaughter, Francesca, is her father. And next to her, next to him, is my daughter, Amanda and her husband, Harvey, who both now live in Netanya in Israel. So, it's a nice family photograph.

This is a photograph of my brother and myself outside the place in Vienna that we first returned to in 2009, as the guests of the state of Vienna. They invited people around – Jews who had to flee for their safety when the Nazis took over and they wanted to show that things are a bit different now. Yes, it was a very interesting visit for us.

*Thank you.*

This is a photograph of the wall inside the Jewish Museum in Shanghai. There's a Jewish Holocaust Museum in Shanghai, which was – is about the 20,000 Jews who were saved by Shanghai in the Holocaust. And the name of every Jew who was saved is on the wall inside the museum. [02:06:04] And when I came there in the – in 2019, after seventy-one years, I returned to Shanghai to see how – to show it to my wife, my son-in-law and my daughter because they wanted to see where I lived during the war years. I went in and I showed them my name on the wall, Kurt Wickelholz and they told me that this is very rare. They thought I was like a dinosaur who'd walked in because most of the people who used to live there and

were much older than me, have unfortunately passed on. So that is the name on the wall, dedicated to the Jews who were saved in Shanghai.

*Thank you.*

This is a card with my father's name, Moritz Wickelholz, publicising the fact that he makes, manufactures first-class leather handbags in Vienna and where his factory is.

Here you see the shipping line, Lloyd Triestino, which was a luxury cruise line before the – in the thirties. And they – in 1939, they almost ran a shuttle service to Shanghai with Jewish people. And when we heard about this by sheer coincidence, we asked if we could go with them through a third person. [02:08:01] And they managed, we managed to get seven tickets on the ship called the Giulio Cesare, departing, as you see on there, on the 2nd of August, arriving in Shanghai on the 28th of August. And that way, seven people were saved from Austria, who would otherwise not have survived after that from the Nazis. They saved our lives.

On here, you see how we – which route we took to Shanghai. Trieste, Venice, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Bombay, Colombo, Sumatra and Shanghai.

This is my school report from the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association school, also known as the Kadoorie school because it was built by a Sephardi Jew called Kadoorie, when he saw the Jews of Europe arriving in the late thirties to Shanghai. It was a very good school, where we spoke only English. Although at home, all the people at home spoke German. It was a very good standard and it was a brilliant school. [02:10:00] And the head mistress was Lucie Hartwich and my main teacher was Mr Gassenheimer. I enjoyed my school days very much. Happy remember – happy memories of that.

And this is a photograph of my uncle, Uncle Ernst, who came with us to Shanghai in 1939 from Vienna. It's in the directory of Jewish refugees, to show that he was a refugee. And he made handbags, a bag maker, with my father in Shanghai.

This is a photograph of a rent receipt for rent in 147 Shu Xiang Road in Shanghai, where my family lived for a short while in 1944.

*Yes.*

This is a photograph of the announcement of my brother, Sigmund, his bar mitzvah in 1947 in the synagogue we went to, the Ohel Moshe synagogue. And I remember we had a party there as well, *kiddush* [blessing]. It was a very nice bar mitzvah. Very nice synagogue as well. That's the one that the Holocaust Museum is in now, Ohel Moshe.

*In that synagogue?*

[02:12:00] In that synagogue.

*So that's where your brother had his Bar Mitzvah?*

That's right.

*But you had your Bar Mitzvah here?*

Yes, yes. I had my Bar Mitzvah in the Sarah Klausner shtiebel.

*Thank you.*

Yes. This is – this photograph has got a residence certificate in my name. You had to carry that about with you all the time and if you didn't have it, you had to get immediately another one. They wanted to know who you were.

This is a booklet of the certificate of inoculation and vaccination because there were so many diseases rampant in Shanghai. Typhoid, dysentery, all kinds of diseases and you need to have quite a few injections every year. And if you didn't have those, there were always barricades

that stopped the general public. And if you didn't have that, you had to have immediately another injection. They were always terrified of outbreaks and that is what you needed.

*Thank you.*

That's a photograph of me, showing that I had the injections in May 1948. That's another verification that I had the injection. Yes, it certainly helped in looking after us. [02:14:00]

This is my brother's Jewish Youth – Shanghai Youth Association community centre membership card. It was a kind of a club.

Okay. It's just to show that he paid his fees for the community centre.

This paper states that you need a certificate of registration as an alien because when we arrived in England in 1948, we were still – we were not British, obviously. So, we were aliens and you needed this booklet to show to any police officer.

This is a detail of where I lived when I came to England, in Priory Road, NW6, from Shanghai. And I was still Austrian, an Austrian from Vienna.

This page of the document said about what the conditions were of our being here. And we were permitted to stay here for twelve months. But luckily, we were permitted to stay a lot longer after the twelve months ran out. I don't know what that meant, actually. I don't think my parents even understood what that meant. [02:16:00]

This is a picture of the Queen of England. When I was a manufacturer of ladies' handbags, from the age of around about twenty onwards, the name of my firm was Mondaine Handbags. And I manufactured in Kilburn High Road, London. I specialised in making lizard handbags and I produced very good quality bags. And one of the people I supplied was Mappin & Webb. And every year, the Queen's mother used to go there at Christmas to buy a special bag, which was sold only at Christmas by Mappin & Webb, that we made. And it was sold only at Christmas time in the end of November. And the Queen Mother went there every year

and bought six of these skin bags, which she gave to her family. And one of the bags that she gave was to the Queen, to her daughter, who was then the Queen of England. And that's how I had the pleasure of seeing the Queen of England wearing one of the bags that I produced with my own hands.

*Thank you.*

We see here an address book of the immigrants to Shanghai from Austria and Germany. [02:18:03] And it's got the name of most people who arrived in Shanghai within its folders.

*So, this is a facsimile of the original?*

Yes, yes.

*Which is a quite unique thing.*

It is. It is, I wouldn't think it would have such a big demand for it to have a facsimile.

*Where did you get it?*

Do you know, I don't even know where I got it from. I don't know how I got it. I've always been crazy on buying books. I've always been crazy.

*Okay, Kurt, well, I think this is a fitting kind of document to finish this interview. So, thank you so much for sharing your life.*

It's been a pleasure. But I still would like you to tell my wife how to get the information on our telephone.

*I will, Kurt.*

Please because I'm useless at it. I've never been any –



**[02:19:09]**

[End of transcript]