

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page

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| Forename: | Max |
| Interviewee Sex: | Male |
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| Interviewee POB: | Berlin, Germany |

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**REFUGEE VOICES:
THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE****INTERVIEW: 10****NAME: MAX ABRAHAM****DATE: 21 MARCH 2003****LOCATION: LONDON****INTERVIEWER: BEA LEWKOWICZ****TAPE 1**

BL: What is your name please?

MA: Max Abraham

BL: And where were you born?

MA: In Berlin. On the 24th of October 1913.

BL: Can you please tell me about your family background.

MA: My father was a plumber and he worked at Siemens in Berlin in Jungfernheide, as a Rohrleger, or as a plumber as they say here. And he earned his money, and he worked there for 25 years. And they released him as a Jew. They chucked him out really, you know, and, more or less a year later, I left. So I really only had very, very few communications. We wrote letters, but only from the Red Cross really. We could only write... In the beginning it was all right. We had some letters; we could, during the war. But, later on, we could only write Red Cross letters. And I got quite a lot of letters, as it happens, from my parents because they sent letters to Christian people from Theresienstadt to them. And one of my boys, I call them boys, you know - they are grandparents now, mostly - they collected them, and I got them here. I gave them out to the Wiener Library, and they made copies of it. I didn't read them all. I read some of them, but not all of them. That is roughly the background. And then, unfortunately, in 1943 was the last I heard. They vanished, you know; they had been killed.

BL: You heard about it at the time, or much later?

MA: No I heard about it more or less at the time, more or less, yes. And I got proof of it, you know. I wrote to Prague, and where certain parts, where you can write to get the information properly, and that they have been collected and they never returned. That's all they said at the time. Right.

BL: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother?

MA: My mother. We were not a very *frum* Jewish house, but somehow I liked to go to the religious school, which I did for, I don't know, for about five years or six years. And then I

got Barmitzvah, and then I sort of more or less introduced the Seder in our house. To show you my parents were not very Jewish. But just the same I liked it, you know, and I always went to Synagogue.

BL: Which synagogue?

MA: In Berlin, there was... In Regatt [?] strasse there was a synagogue really. But in Weissensee we never had a synagogue as such. We only had a place where we, at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we could go to, you know. They made that a synagogue sort of thing. That was it. I studied. I was not very much at home. I was always very much interested in sport, and I was always out, you know. And I belonged to a Jewish Bar Kochba in sport, and I loved sport. And I went to High School. Again, in the afternoon sport was always my occupation.

BL: And what High School was that?

Tape 1: 4 minutes 5 seconds

MA: König Städtische Oberrealschule, near Pasteurstrasse. I made my, what they call Mittlere Reife, that is GCSE here. Then I started apprenticing as an engineer at Ludwig Löwe. That was a very, very famous engineering firm. And we learned. For four years I had to apprentice, and then I had to make my exam, and then I became what you call a proper engineer. But, during that time, in the evenings from six to nine, I went to evening classes to become what they call here a draughtsman and in Germany an 'Ingenieur'. And I was more or less the only Jew left, and I just passed the exam. And I got a job where I actually apprenticed, at Ludwig Lowe. But then, again, as a Jew, they didn't want me anymore. And, as it happened, I saw in the Jewish chronicle, well, in Berlin it was called 'Das Jüdische Gemeindeblatt', I saw an article, an advertisement that they wanted a teacher at the ORT school. And I tried to get this job, and I got it, and so that was in 1938 or '37. I'm not quite sure. In 39 the whole, well half, of the school went to England. The other half, they all vanished. And we started opening up another school here in Leeds, you know. I should mention really that some of the last years in Germany they were not very, very pleasant to say the least of it. One incident which happened I should mention, that is on Rosh Hashanah the police collected us.

Tape 1: 6 minutes 5 seconds

Sorry. Well, you can always cut it out. Yeah I should mention it.

I should mention that at Rosh Hashanah the police came at eight o'clock in the morning to collect my father and myself, to the police station. And there we had to stand, just stand there for about five or six hours. There were about twenty people there. Nothing else. And, at one o'clock, they let us go again. Just to show us that we are Jews and they can do with us what they ever like, you know. That was one of those instances. Otherwise, I don't think I have to mention everything because they all know that they said 'Jude Untermensch', which means they did not want any Jews to buy here, or shop.

BL: When was this?

MA: This was in '36, '37, '38. Yes.

BL: But that incident with your father.

MA: That was '37, '37.

Tape 1: 7 minutes 19 seconds

BL: Before we talk about that period, about what happened. You said you lived in Weissensee?

MA: No I lived near Bahnhof Weissensee, but Weissensee was a little bit further down. But I went to Weissensee always to a Jewish religious school there. And for this Rosh Hashonah, Yom Kippur too.

BL: What are your memories? How come you lived in Bahnhof Weissensee? Were there many other Jews who lived there?

MA: I was born there. It was not a particularly Jewish district. I wouldn't say that at all. Not really. What else?

BL: What do you remember of growing up in it?

MA: What do I remember? It was a very... We played in the street as children. I had always plenty of sport in the street. And what else can I tell you, really? I was very good at school. Let's put it that way: I was very good at the elementary school. And, afterwards, at High School, I was average, may be a little bit better than average, but not much more. I was always a very good pupil, you know. I was always there in time at school, and I still have all my testimonials. That was about the only thing I really took along, when we emigrated from Germany, you know. What else can I tell you?

BL: You said you went to the Bar Kochba?

Tape 1: 8 minutes 52 seconds

MA: Yes, handball. We played handball, not football as they do here. And I was a very good gymnast. I always attended the Wettbewerb der höheren Schulen. Every year, at a certain stage you know, when I was about 12 years old, until I was about 15, or 16. That was when I finished school anyway. What else can I tell you?

BL: You mentioned your barmitzvah. Could you please describe your barmitzvah.

MA: The only thing I remember from my barmitzvah is really that I had to make a speech, which I did. But, otherwise, I cannot remember much more at my age. No. I'm sorry to say. It started as 'Rabbi Akiva' said. In German obviously at the time, but that's about all I know really. But I had to learn that speech. I think I read it. I don't think I did it by heart.

Tape 1: 9 minutes 56 seconds

BL: So what sort of circles did you mix in?

MA: Not particularly Jewish. Not particularly Jewish. In Bar Kochba obviously was Jewish. But, otherwise no. I did not particularly do that.

BL: And can you tell me where you met your wife?

MA: I was a member of the Deutsch-Jüdische Jugendgemeinschaft and we sort of saw each other for a long time. And we didn't take notice quite honestly of each other, and then there was a Hanukkah ball at the König von Portugal Am Bahnhof [...]. And, that's where I met my wife; and she didn't let me go anymore; and that was the beginning of it, anyway. And that's about sixty-five years ago now; in July it will be. So we're a few months short of sixty five. What else?

BL: You got married in?

MA: In 1938, at, in the Oranienburgerstrasse. It was one of the last allowed weddings sort of thing. I don't know whether it was the last one; it was one of the last, definitely. And we were only allowed thirty people at home; and I think I had to go to the police to particularly mention it, that there would be particularly thirty people that evening in our house. Because they checked everything and made sure that the Jews not concentrate sort of too much, you know. And it was very nice really. But the atmosphere was not particularly so beautiful and wonderful, you know.

BL: Did you get married in view of emigration? Was that an issue?

MA: That was a year before we emigrated. We emigrated '39. And we lived together in at my parents' house at the time for one year, you know.

BL: At the time you were already thinking of leaving?

MA: No. I could have left to Australia on my own at the time, as an engineer, you know. But I, and my wife, they said I could bring her later on, you know. But I didn't go in for it at all. And then, when I was a teacher in the ORT school, eventually the representative here of England, he came always over to Germany, every three or four weeks, to negotiate with them. And he tried to get the machines out as well as the people, and as a war... The war came sort of. Or shall I say, we could feel that the war was coming nearer and nearer, you know. So our Colonel, Levey was his name, here, from England. He said: 'forget about the machines, you come over' and that was about three days... We arrived here Wednesday night, at Liverpool Street station at two o'clock. And, from there, he divided up the men and the women. On the Station, straight away. And we had to go to the Rowten House, which was a 'Obdachlosen Asyl', a down and out house sort of thing. We stayed there for one night, and then we had three coaches waiting outside the next morning. But we arrived in the R? House, I think, at three o'clock in the morning or so. Practically we didn't sleep, you know. We had a cup of tea quickly, I think, in the morning. And then we went out to our coaches. And I must say that all the people from the East End at that time - there must have been God knows how many women there who gave us grapes, cigarettes, chocolate, apples. It was unbelievable. So then we arrived and went to the Kitchener camp.

Tape 1: 13 minutes 48 seconds

And we all stayed there. That was at the beginning of September. On Sunday, the war broke out at 11 o'clock. And there we had really a lovely time, as such. The weather was beautiful; we had something to eat, and I looked after my children, or my pupils. I arranged on a Shabbat and kept them going.

Well, I was 24. The children were all between 14 and 18, I would say. Yes, that's about right. And that was in September, October, November, December. I left the Kitchener camp in December. Some of the boys went to the Military. They had to go to the...; they wanted to go, you know. And some other boys who were, I'm not sure. I think all the boys who were over 18 were interned; they had to go to Australia. And I'm still in contact with them, and in America. And I'm still making reunions here, you know. We meet every half a year once, you know, in a hotel; and, unfortunately, a lot of them died in between.

BL: The reunions are with the people who all came from the ORT and how many were there?

MA: A hundred pupils. A hundred pupils and we were about 20 adults at the time. I'm the only surviving teacher. I was not the only teacher, but the only surviving teacher. All the others died already.

BL: Just to go back a bit, can you tell me about the school? It was a vocational school?

MA: Yes. The ORT school, in principle, was there just to teach the children a trade so that they're able earn some money when they go to a foreign country. Right. Eventually, of course, very few stayed in engineering, you know. But some learnt electricians, some learned plumbing, and very few stayed in their trade, because obviously some became doctors, and some became chemists, and so on and so on, you know. But that was only, yes, they really had a chance of earning some money in the first place when they come to a foreign country.

BL: Was it mostly boys, only boys?

MA: Only boys, only boys, yes. And they had to pay for it. In Germany. Here they didn't have to pay obviously, when they were over here. But the school finished off in 1942 here, you know. And I got a job here as a manager in a spectacle factory, to make hinges; and I was manager there for ten years in one firm. And then somebody bought me out sort of thing, and then doing the same thing in another firm.

Tape 1: 16 minutes 30 seconds

BL: The school was dissolved?

MA: '42, yeah, they dissolved. There was some internal squabble sort of thing you know and the school finished off in '42. But not the ORT organisation. The ORT organisation is still a very, very good organisation, and I'm still in contact with them all the time.

BL: You described the journey already, can you maybe describe it in a little bit more detail?

MA: Well, that is quite a... I mean I got a book here funnily enough. I asked the boys in the Kitchener camp to write down their experience, and the... What happened was that our secretary from the ORT at the time, he had to get the visa in for going to England and, as it happened, the consulate, the English consulate in Berlin was closed already. And he had to go

in somehow from the back and get the visa, which was signed by Eichmann funnily enough. I don't think he got it singly signed, he got it signed for the whole lot at once. And we should have gone on a Saturday evening at ten o'clock, but somehow it didn't work out properly. So, instead of that, we went on Sunday night at ten o'clock, and Charlottenburg, Bahnhof Charlottenburg, from Bahnhof Charlottenburg. And he was able to get two, one or two wagons – I think it was two, specially for us, which was quite something. And there was such a shoving going on, and the parents coming to say bye bye to the children. And then we eventually left in the train soon after 10 o'clock to Cologne; and then from Cologne we had five hours to wait for the next train to take us to Flushing, Flushing. And so we went to Cologne and we bought things with the last money we got there. And then we came; first we came to the border station. I don't know; I think it was called Kraanenburg [?] as far as I remember. I remember that there was such a... Sorry, I'm going to start crying again.

Tape 1: 19 minutes 12 seconds

And all the boys, we all cried and laughed and just to be out of Germany you know, just to be out of Germany, you know it was just unbelievable. Anyway, we arrived at Flushing, and there we went to a boat. There there was somebody waiting for us, and we arrived here at Harwich; it must have been something like nine or ten o'clock[, ten o'clock] at night, very late. At Harwich we had a bit of a medical examination, but only very superficial. And from there, what happened from there, from Harwich, where did we go...? Yes. Then we went to Liverpool Street Station, which I mentioned before, quite right, and we arrived there at two o'clock at night. It was absolutely terrible, and then we went to the Routen House and from there to the Kitchener camp. And that's where we enjoyed ourselves. It was like a holiday camp.

BL: What were your first impressions of arriving in Britain?

Tape 1: 20 minutes 7 seconds

MA: Liverpool Street station was absolutely terrible. It looked .. but quite honestly everything was of no importance; the importance was really being out of Germany.

BL: Tell me about the Kitchener camp. What was the daily routine?

MA: Well, I went to the carpentry department they had there, and I worked there, you know, and I enjoyed it thoroughly, and in the evenings we always had, we were together with the boys. You know we talked, when ? was there, and he was the Rabbi and every Friday night there was a service on, so and we made it. We were next to the canteen. We played a lot of table tennis, and we really enjoyed ourselves there, and the boys enjoyed it too.

BL: There was no feeling of resentment or something that you were in that camp, and that you couldn't immediately go?

Tape 1: 21 minutes 10 seconds

MA: No we could go out on Saturdays in the afternoon. Six o'clock we could always go out; it was not a concentration camp, not at all. On Saturdays we could always go out all afternoon. We always went to Sandwich, and I expect the boys had their girl friends there

partly, you know, and partly not. It was very nice there; the weather was beautiful; it was absolutely beautiful at that time.

BL: Did you have any contact with the local population?

MA: No, we went only to the bakery there, to have a cup of coffee there. But no, not really. There were about three thousand people there in the Kitchener camp, you know; it was quite a camp. And then the boys, eventually they went to the military, partly, they went to Australia, and, later on, partly to America. But, as I said, most of the boys I'm still in contact with, and we enjoy it whenever we have a reunion. We really enjoy it. We meet here at what used to be the Post House; now it's called the Holiday Inn. And we meet there quite regularly, every half a year, and we are just starting again now to organise one. We are about ten boys here now, or fifteen boys here. But they've become with wives, so we're about 20-25 people.

BL: How long did you stay in the Kitchener camp?

MA: From September till December. But some of the boys stayed longer, to January, and February. But not, I mean not too long sort of thing, you know. They all found a job eventually; they all started really with engineering, to start with, you know. When I talk about '41- '42 until the war finished in '45, then they started doing whatever they wanted to do.

BL: You said the school went on in Leeds.

Tape 1: 23 minutes 16 seconds

MA: The school went on in Leeds, yes.

BL: So what happened? You went from the Kitchener camp to Leeds?

MA: From the Kitchener camp we went to Leeds;. That's quite right. And there were the teachers. We had one, two, three, four, about five teachers there, you know: electricity, electrician, plumbing, engineering. What else? Obviously, we had two teachers in engineering; there was somebody else with me at the time. And it was a lovely time we had in Leeds.

BL: Were you one of the only married teachers?

MA: No, no, no. The others were married too, yes. But some married later than me. Yes. No, no, one, two, three... three of the men were married already too at the time. And they came, one came along with the children, and another one had the child here in England at that time.

BL: So it was quite a different experience, because you were part of the group.

MA: Yes, yes, absolutely. And we had really, I mean really I can't complain about the emigration as such, you know. We didn't have any money as such, but that was of no importance; we had enough. The ORT supported us at the time with the necessary things, so that was good enough to start with. And then I started earning some money, being a teacher obviously. But I mean we didn't earn a lot of money, but somehow we had so many friends, which was the most important part really at that time.

BL: Friends, what sort of friends?

MA: Jewish friends, all refugees, most of them. We have now, we've got some English friends. But at the time it was all refugees. Leeds was a very Jewish community there. English Jews and refugees. Not that the English Jews particularly liked us, quite honestly.

BL: What do you remember of that, let's say of the relationship between the English Jews and the refugees?

Tape 1: 25 minutes 26 seconds

MA: No relationship. There was no relationship there. But we know that they didn't particularly like us. I don't know why, quite honestly. The background, you know. They came here twenty or thirty years before us, sort of thing, but why the difference I don't know.

BL: Were you interned?

MA: No, No! As a teacher they didn't want to intern me. Because they thought that's more important than being interned, you know. But we all had to come to the, to a sort of a Jury, and we were all classed as friendly aliens or enemy aliens. And we were classed as friendly aliens, but some were classed as enemy aliens, you know. But not from our school.

BL: And that was true for the other teachers, they were all exempt?

MA: All exempt, yes, yes, none of them were. But one or two of them, funny enough, they were interned. But not for a very long time, you know. And I don't think, quite honestly, they had a very bad time with the internment.

BL: So within the school there was quite a feeling of support; there was quite a support system.

MA: The ORT actually supported us financially always you know. If we needed some clothing. Also, we could go there and could ask for money and usually got it, not the best obviously but enough to look respectable.

BL: Did the local industry actually take on some of the refugee boys?

MA: In Leeds we took on Czech boys and Austrian boys, which were not coming over. I mean what came over were mostly German boys, you know, from Germany. And then we took over Polish boys and then Czech boys...

Tape 1: 27 minutes 21 seconds

BL: And did they join the ORT?

MA: Yes, they joined in Leeds.

BL: It became bigger then?

MA: Oh yes, we were quite a lot. Nearly 200 in Leeds I think at the time, oh yes.

BL: And where was the school?

MA: We had three hostels, four hostels there, and we had what you call hostel masters. And I was a hostel master in two of them. Yes, I was hostel master in two of them, and we had a lovely time with the children. And every Sunday morning they had to clean up, and they had to clean up properly, because our colonel was a proper military person, you know. He was a lieutenant colonel; he was a colonel in every sense, and everything had to be absolutely spot on. The blankets had to lie down folded up absolutely perfect; they had to be at the end of the bed lying down there. And every Sunday morning he came along he made sure the hair was cut. It must have been less than an inch, you know, and he didn't want it any longer. And we all had to obey whether we liked it or not. And I got plenty of sort of notices what to do with the boys and make sure that this is clean and that is clean. He really looked after us very well. But it was right, in principle I mean looking behind, looking in hindsight, sort of thing. It was perfectly right looking at what he did and said.

BL: So what were your duties as a hostel master?

MA: We had two big houses. My duty was to look after the children, make sure they were home at ten o'clock, not later, (not that it always happened), and make sure that they behaved themselves. But they did on the whole. I have really no complaints. I had no trouble with the boys. Every Thursday night or Friday night they came down to us, three or four boys, and we discussed everything what we had to do and how we do the cleaning and so on. And I had a lot of Czech boys, and the Czech boys are very, very... I would say their IQ is a little bit higher than our normal German boys, you know; they behaved wonderfully.

BL: It must have been a difficult time for the boys because they were without their parents, so it wasn't an easy time.

Tape 1: 30 minutes 30 seconds

MA: Yes, yes, well I helped them along personally if I could, you know, if they had some particular troubles. Some were not so easy, obviously, naturally. But, on the whole, I must say we had no particular trouble. There was one or two I think who had a bit of trouble with the police or so, you know. But all that I heard afterwards; I never was called about it at that time.

BL: You must have been a very important figure with your wife, at that time.

MA: Yes, up to a point, yes, yes, ya. Not that I want to make myself important, but in a way yes, we were. And I was the youngest, that is the funny part. I was only 24 years old, which is really very young, and the boys were, as I said, 14 to 18, you know. And of course, later on, it levelled itself out a bit, you know, naturally. Now we are all the same level. Well, they are about 10 years younger than I am, on the average, you know.

BL: What was it like for your wife to be there?

MA: My wife had to look after the cleanliness. She was, she got paid for it, and she had to look after it. Not that she was very able to do it, but she got used to it eventually. Because she was very young herself she had no idea about it all, how it all worked or so. She comes from

a, I would say, comparatively posh house and I don't. I come from a normal working class family, you know. But, touch wood, everything worked out very nicely. And then, eventually, we rented a house with somebody else, and we lived together, and we let some rooms there. And eventually we normalised ourselves, you know, in Leeds, when the school was still going. And then eventually I got, the colonel got me a job here in London. And he kept me going for a quarter of a year in one of their houses, which he owned and which I didn't have to pay any money for at all for a quarter of a year. And then I took, I rented another house again with friends from the Deutsch-Jüdischen Jugendgemeinschaft, whom we knew that they were here. We rented a house here. And then, later on, I got some compensation from Germany for the loss of my parents, and that's when I started buying a house. And I bought the house on a mortgage obviously, in Melrose Avenue, and I paid a mortgage up in twenty five years, and then gradually.. Then we went to another house which we bought, and then eventually I bought the flat here. Being as old as we are, I didn't want a house anymore; it was high time that we moved. So we are established here, and we are very happy.

BL: The colonel that you mentioned, was he actually employed by ORT?

MA: He was a represent... Yes, he was director of the ORT at that time. When you say employed, he, he collected money, for the ORT, that was one of the things, you know.

BL: What was his name?

Tape 1: 33 minutes 47 seconds

MA: Lieutenant Colonel Levy, Colonel Levy, he was in a Scottish regiment, you know. He was quite a, quite a figure. I mean he arranged for us to come over, you know. I mean we are grateful for the ORT, who saved our life, you know.

BL: Do you know how long these negotiations were going on?

MA: About a year and a half or so, something like that. He communicated with the Nazis always. He came over to Berlin, and he didn't send any news at all, neither from the Nazis all through. He was a very upright man, very powerful.

BL: You mentioned that only half of the school got out.

MA: Yes, unfortunately, the other half vanished, including the secretary, who did all the work for the ORT at the time. Because they had so much money and his wife didn't want to come out because of so much money they had. But they all vanished. We all heard all that afterwards.

Tape 1: 34 minutes 43 seconds

BL: So was the plan that the other half of the school was coming at a later date?

MA: No, no, I don't know. Well, the war was on so they couldn't, even if they wanted to you know; they couldn't. I mean, I tried to get my parents-in-law out, but I couldn't. It was just too late; the war was on and there was nothing you could do anymore.

BL: Did you have any contact with refugee organisations at the time, apart from ORT?

MA: No. I was in the Deutsch-Jüdische Jugendgemeinschaft, which was like a Jewish boy scouts movement, but otherwise not really.

BL: But you said in Leeds you knew other refugees.

MA: In Leeds we only had refugee friends, you know. But it kept us going all of this... Unfortunately again now they died now away. Obviously, we are the next ones to die; that's how it goes.

BL: When you came to London, what were your impressions?

MA: Well, we came here when the bombs were coming down, wholesale, you know, and it was not particularly nice. But we carried on; quite honestly we carried on without any trouble. I went every day to work to do... There was a hostel in West End Lane, which unfortunately was hit. And there were three boys living there in that hostel and unfortunately they got killed too. So that's one of those unfortunate things at the time. And I had a good job; I was a manager there, to make hinges. England always actually imported hinges from France or from Italy and so on. And then, Mr Martin was his name; he started making hinges for the first time here in England, you know. And I had a very good job there. I must say that.

BL: And were you the only refugee there, working for that company?

Tape 1: 37 minutes 32 seconds

MA: Yes. Yes. The others were all English. I had about thirty or forty girls looking after, you know, for the production. And three or four men, there. And, touch wood, you know, I got on very well with them. My English was probably not perfect, but it was not that bad, you know. And then afterwards we, the firm, went together with another firm in Lewisham. And that was a proper engineering firm, that was a proper, very English, and, unfortunately, the manager thought that I wanted to take his job, and he made life very, very difficult for me. And so I decided to leave there, you know, and so and I got another job, the same thing, making hinges again for Neuburger products at the time. And I stayed there for ten years, didn't earn enough money, started painting in the evenings and Saturdays and Sundays. And then, eventually, I became a decorator. And eventually I had my own business. Yes, my own business. And I had two or three people working for me, and I went always with them, you know. But I didn't do only decorating. I did a little bit of woodwork too, although I didn't learn it as such, but I was able to do it. Lots of pelmets I did, and even shelving,

Tape 1: 38 minutes 51 seconds

I even did cupboards, you know. At the time everything was going, you know, soon after the war. People were pleased to have somebody who is honest, and they could leave alone. You know that was really my priority sort of thing, and, touch wood, I was never without work.

BL: Did you experience ever any hostility as a German refugee?

MA: No, no, no anti-Semitism or nothing. I cannot complain about that. It might be my own personality which did not bring it out or it did not show up or so. But no, I didn't have any trouble really, you know.

BL: You are a member of Belsize Square synagogue, so when did you join the synagogue?

MA: Firstly, I didn't join the synagogue; I just went to the synagogue, because we didn't have any money really to join. And.. oh well this must be 20-25 years that we joined, and become a member and we are still a member, and I am still going, not every Friday, but every three weeks, two weeks. I go Friday nights to the synagogue, which I like very much.

BL: So you were not a member during the war years of Belsize.

MA: No. We went to synagogue here in [...] here to the synagogue. But we were not a member as such.

BL: So you didn't know Oberkantor Davidson, or...

MA: Yes, yes, I did. And then I was... I don't think I was a member at that time, but I know him, yes.

BL: Did you know him from Berlin?

MA: No. No, but I heard of him, I heard of him. Why do you mention him, do you know him?

BL: No, it's just interesting in terms of Belsize Square.

MA: He had a very good voice, Mr Davidson.

BL: So you did go to Belsize Square.

MA: Oh yes, absolutely. I like synagogue, as such. That's sort of my... And we are going tonight as it happens too.

BL: To Belsize Square?

Tape 1: 41 minutes 15 seconds

MA: Belsize Square, Ya, ya. Do you know the synagogue? Which do you belong to?

BL: I live very close to Belsize Square, so... I live round the corner.

MA: So you belong to Belsize Square too? Which do you belong to? None of them?

BL: South Hampstead. So was it a familiar service at the beginning, Belsize Square?

MA: Absolutely. Yes. I mean now it changes slightly you know. But the main part is the German Lithurgy sort of thing, you know, and the melodies too.

BL: So those were the melodies you knew.

MA: Absolutely, absolutely. Livandowski is still the main composer sort of thing, of the music.

BL: Was that important for you?

MA: I don't know, but it might be. Let's put it that way: it might be important, you know. Because it's something that's the same as it used to be, and we were used to it when we were young, you know. But is it important as such? It must be, it must be, really somehow, of some importance, because I never felt very happy in the English synagogues. I mean I went there and enjoyed it, but I wasn't sort of happy.

BL: How did the end of the war change your life, or did it affect you at all?

Tape 1: 42 minutes 40 seconds

MA: It didn't really make much difference, except that you know there were no more bombs coming, which you don't know when it might hit you or not hit you, you know. But I can't really say as such that it made such a lot of difference. What did I do? I didn't change my profession at the time, or so. I just carried on what I was doing at the time. It didn't change. But mentally of course it made a lot of difference, naturally.

BL: When did you become naturalized?

MA: '47. Two years after the war finished.

BL: Was that important?

MA: Yes, I like to know that I am something. Either that or that. Yes. I make sure that this sort of thing is always something positive, you know.

BL: Did you go back to Germany at all, or...

MA: We were invited once privately, us two for one week. They invited us, and they made a very, very good job of it. And then the ORT, they invited all the old boys there. But not all of them. We must have been about ten. Some came from Australia, some came from America, and some came from England. We had a terrific time for one week. We didn't see each other for twenty years or so.

BL: Did you recognise many people?

MA: Oh yes, very much so.

BL: After the war, you did not go back?

MA: No.

BL: Did you know at that time that nobody had survived?

MA: Well, as we are in contact with each other I knew very well who was and who did survive and who didn't survive, yes.

BL: No, I meant your family.

Tape 1: 49 minutes 36 seconds

MA: Family? Yes. We got to know straight away, yes. We were able to make enquiries at various stations. I think I went to Israel at the time and they could even find out on the computer straight away what happened. They had sort of a list of all the people who are, most of them at least, you know, who sort of vanished, and who didn't.

BL: Did you plan to stay in England, or did you plan to go elsewhere...

MA: I love England, I love England, yes. I'm very grateful for them to let us come here. And it's still a free country, you know, even if you haven't got always... their opinion sort of thing. But we are still can do what you like, you know.

BL: So you never considered emigrating...

MA: Not at all, no. No intention at all.

BL: Do you consider yourself British, English or what do you consider yourself?

MA: That's a very good question. Slightly Anglicised, let's put it that way, very slightly. I still got a lot of... I still got a lot of... so they say, my family, a lot of German blood in me. I'm very accurate with everything, sort of thing, you know, so, I think that's how you're born, or that's how you're brought up.

BL: What does it mean to you, your background, your German Jewish background? What aspects are most important to you?

MA: How do you mean?

BL: I mean of your background, what are the most important aspects to you? You mentioned religion is important to you, or language.

MA: The language, German, of no importance, no, not really. I love music. We go to the Opera; we went to the Opera a lot, you know. Now it's getting a little bit less, you know. As age is creeping up, you are not able to do all the things you really want, as you really would like to do. But, and I still like music, and I still go to concerts, and, touch wood, I still got my driving license back for three years, which is quite something, and I'm very happy about it, and I can still drive. We still drive to the Festival Hall, and, having still the blue disk, you know, I can drive right in front of it, which is a pleasure, absolute pleasure. But, otherwise, we have a lot of friends. We play a lot of bridge, and which is a social as well as playing bridge; it's not only the bridge as such, you know. And we have a lot of friends and that keeps us going very nicely and family too, of course. I am a great grandfather, never mind a grandfather only, so I cannot complain about life as such.

BL: You said you are more involved with the AJR for quite some time, can you describe this to me?

MA: Well, for ten years I took the elderly people home in the car. And there's a lady downstairs who you interviewed, you know, she got me this flat. Because I said to her one day: "whenever there's a flat going here please let me know", and that's what she did. So

eventually I got the flat here, otherwise I wouldn't be here. I enjoy that with the AJR. We go there every four weeks now. You know when they have their lecture, when somebody is talking there for half an hour. And the food is terrific, no complaints, and our girlfriends, Sylvia and Carol and Suzie they will come here. Suzie we are in contact with, anyway, because her parents-in-law are good friends of ours, and they are coming here to have a look at the flat; they want to see it. And, hopefully, we go to Bournemouth in June with them.

BL: Why did you decide to be active in the AJR?

MA: Because I like to do something. Is it next week, or the week after we are going to look after an old lady. We will be introduced; that's only the beginning of it, you know. I like to do something and help people if I can, you know.

BL: So you have befriended her.

MA: No, she is not a friend of ours, I don't know her, but yes, we are just starting that up. Next Tuesday at... no she's collecting us, what's her name, Carol? Carol, I think, is her name.

BL: So you're going to visit her?

MA: Once a week on a regular basis sort of thing, and help her a bit along, not financially, but mentally and so on. Probably do some shopping for her, and whatever. I don't mind, but I'm looking after two or three ladies anyway. I've got to go to one soon.

BL: So what do you do?

Tape 1: 50 minutes 15 seconds

MA: I talk to them, and I do little jobs too.

BL: They're probably younger than you are.

MA: They're all eighty-ish. Let's say eighty-five, yes. The one I'm going today, she's a year older than I am, you know. But they are all yes more or less... I never tell them how old I am, but they know. They are all friends of mine. So I keep myself going.

BL: You think the AJR is important...

MA: Yes, although they are all dwindling down a bit, you know as we are all dying out slowly. But they are still very important and they do a terrific job, the AJR, I must say. And we go to Bournemouth, you know. What they do for us, it's unbelievable, really unbelievable, yes. Sylvia specially, Sylvia and Carol.

BL: You are going for a week?

MA: For one week, yes.

BL: And how many people normally go?

MA: Fifty, round about fifty, you know. And some are not so easy to handle sort of thing. You know how it is, but Sylvia does a terrific job. I must say that. And the food is always very, very good.

BL: Is there anything else we haven't discussed about the emigration...

MA: What is it particularly you would like to know?

BL: Well we've covered the war-time; we've covered the school; we covered Leeds. Maybe just to ask: did you frequent any of the refugee coffee shops, like the Dorice or the Cosmo?

MA: Yes, yes. Well we went to Hertz all the time obviously. You know Hertz, the cabaret, the Jewish cabaret. Hertz, he had a cabaret in Finchley Road. By refugees, mostly. And that was the only entertainment we had really during the war. It was in Finchley Road: Herz. He was a Viennese; he was a producer, or owner or god knows what. And he made a very good job there, yes. It was always quite interesting and quite lively and quite nice and pleasant, you know. It was the only entertainment we really had. But we went to Dorice quite a lot, the coffee shop, and Cosmo. It was more Dorice than Cosmo.

BL: Do you remember anything? What did it look like, what sort of people...

MA: It was always refugees who met there for coffee. And we always just talked and schmoozed about, you know, but nothing special.

Tape 1: 53 minutes 17 seconds

I still can't forget, and I must mention it again, that I am most grateful to the ORT because they really saved our life, really, you know. And that is really what matters. And I am still active with the ORT too, you know. I get a lot of stuff. You know they've got a shop in Ballard's Lane, and I put a lot of stuff down their way.

BL: How would you say has your refugee experience affected your life?

Tape 1: 53 minutes 48 seconds

MA: I probably would have been an engineer, what you call a draughtsman here, in Germany. I would have earned a lot of money I would say, and here I had a bit of a struggle to earn some money and earn a living. But I'm not complaining. Don't misunderstand me. I'm certainly not complaining, but it would have been easier, let's put it that way. Now I'm retired, and everything seems beautiful. But it was not always beautiful and easy to live, you know. But I don't mind; somehow I got through very well. I can't really complain. And I'm not one who's got to have everything, so this really the important thing for me. I can always make do with whatever I haven't got. I don't mind. And we are happily married, touch wood, as you can probably notice, so which helps a lot, obviously.

BL: When was your daughter born?

MA: 1945, I timed it so that three days before the war ended, you know. I don't know how I did it, but, I did. Don't laugh, it's true. It just happened to be. She was born; she was actually in Oxford. We went always every two or three weeks. We went to Oxford during the war.

Here from London you know, because it was a little bit too dangerous. So we had a long weekend, Saturdays and Sundays, or Friday we left, and Sunday. So that's where she was really born actually.

BL: So right at the end of the war.

MA: Ya. The end of the war was the 5th of May, wasn't it? And she was born on the 8th of May. So it can't have been any better.

BL: So did you talk to your daughter at all about your experiences when she grew up?

MA: The children are only interested up to a point I would say, not all that much. There was a time when my grand-daughter was very interested. But just it was only a particular time in her upbringing where she was interested. 'So what did you do at that time?' 'How was it in Germany under the Nazis?' and so on. But, eventually, I have a feeling it becomes history to them, and that's all, you know. Not..., lately I would say completely forgotten, you know.

Tape 1: 56 minutes 53 seconds

BL: But you said you assembled this book of memories from your boys from the Kitchener camp. When did you assemble that book?

MA: In the Kitchener camp. In the Kitchener camp at the Kitchener camp from my boys, yes. I asked them all to write their experience of whatever they want to write too, you know, so... It just went to Australia for all the boys to have a look at and they made a copy of it, and I got it back again. Because there is a boy there whose brother is here in London, and he occasionally, he comes back to London always. He took the book over to Australia, and then he sent it back to me. Two weeks ago I got it back again, you know.

BL: What are the most striking things in that book, do you remember? I mean we can have a look at it later, but what do you remember?

MA: Well it's all in German so you will understand. Well, there's one, the... unfortunately he doesn't live anymore. And he describes exactly what happened when we came over, actually from leaving Germany, leaving Charlottenburg, Bahnhof Charlottenburg. Actually, in a very, very nice way he wrote it. And then the others wrote about what happened in the Kitchener camp mostly, you know. How they experienced it, and what they liked there. And every four weeks we go to one boy, who is very well off. He got a very nice house in St John's Wood, with a swimming pool. He invited one, two, three boys, and we go there every four weeks for breakfast, and we have a terrific time there, you know.

BL: There is quite a feeling of unity.

MA: Absolutely, yes. Well, it might have something to do with me, as such, you know. I mean I don't like to sort of show myself off, but I'm probably the centre point of it, you know, to start this, and that probably helped them all along. That's why we have a bit of a closeness between us you know.

BL: It was important for you to keep in touch.

MA: Yes, yes, the other teachers were... From the human point of view I think I'm probably a little bit different to them, you know. I think that has something to do with it.

BL: You were more involved.

MA: I was more involved, yes, but I don't like to show off quite honestly. But it must have something to do with me.

BL: Do you feel a bit of a sense of responsibility towards the boys?

MA: Well they're all big enough to have their own responsibility now; they are all grandparents now more or less, you know. We meet in Brent Cross. We meet every Thursday, you know, and there is one couple coming along always. We meet, my boys.

BL: Is it important for you to keep in touch with everyone?

MA: Yes.

BL: So ...?

[Inaudible]

MA: No, no we enjoy it and they enjoy it too, and this is really the point. Well, there are some boys who are not interested in us any more, obviously. You know, it's not all of them in that sense. There is one or two here who, who, don't like to know about it, you know. But we are not interested in them either sort of thing, so it doesn't matter.

BL: Is there anything else which we haven't covered which you would like to add, which I haven't asked you?

Tape 1: 60 minutes 0 second

MA: Let me sort of see whether there is something here.... [looks at book]

Quite honestly I don't think so. I'm still working a little bit, but not a lot, you know. I mean I just haven't got the energy any more to really do what I want to do. But... well I do a little bit of painting and shelving, you know. I have done quite a bit here too, you know, little things. Nothing great. Nothing which is exhausting to any extent. But, no, I think we covered all, our emigration... We went to America also obviously. But we haven't got any mishpoche [family] left, except second cousins sort of thing, of my wife. I have got, yes...

BL: About tape. Go on into other tape.

Tape 1: 62 minutes 0 second

Tape 2

BL: This is tape two. We are conducting an interview with Mr Abraham. Can I just ask you to read what you have written in this memoir of the Kitchener camp?

MA: Right. 'Ein Tag... [in German].

BL: When? What's the date?

MA: Let's see if I can find the date somewhere. 15.12.39

[reads in German]

Tape 2: 6 minutes 13 seconds

He was the Rabbi in the camp, Werner van der Zyl Besides that, he was a teacher, my religious teacher in Weissensee. I know him very well, specially his wife. He had a beautiful wife, she was beautiful.

BL: You said you organised the Shabbat?

MA: The Oneg Shabbat in the camp, yes. So we all sang a little bit, and we all prayed a little bit, not much I expect. But we all were together, you know; it was always very nice, and some of the boys appreciate it now. Sometimes we talk about things, you know, what happened.

BL: Do they remember those Shabbats?

MA: Oh yes, and for them it meant much more, I expect, than for me, you know. For them it meant really a lot at the time.

BL: Is there anything else?

MA: Not really, no.

BL: Mr Abraham, thank you very much for this interview.

MA: You are very welcome.

Photos. [Very bad sound]

Tape 2: 13 minutes 50 seconds

1. Father of wife, mother, brother. Hoffman. Felix. Went to concentration camp.
2. His parents soon after they married. Around 1900.
3. His mother. With him as a baby. In Berlin.
4. Picture of him and his wife, in 1937 in Dresden.
5. Mr and Mrs Abraham in Scheveningen. 1947-48 in Holland.
6. Mr and Mrs Abraham.

7. Family, with grandson, son-in-law, his wife, himself, grand-daughter, and beloved wife, grandson, taken five years ago 1998 (?)
8. 1939 ORT boys in Kitchener camp, September 12, 1939.
9. Wedding picture, Oranienburgerstrasse.