

IMPORTANT

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Interview Transcript Title Page



REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV302
NAME: Gerta Regensburger
DATE: 22 July 2024
LOCATION: London
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:07]

Today's the 22nd of July 2024 and we're conducting an interview with Mrs Gerta Regensburger. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we're in London. Can you please tell me your name?

Gerta Regensburger.

And when and where were you born?

Braunschweig 1928.

Gerta, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices archive. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

Well, my father was a lawyer and politician. My mother was a trained librarian. She was born in Hildesheim but I was born in Braunschweig. She married into Braunschweig with an elder brother three years older than myself.

And do you know how your parents met or...?

Yes, I can tell you exactly. There was a – my mother wrote her life story which is very good. She – her – my father belonged – was one of the people of the Zentralverein and he was giving a lecture in Hildesheim and my father – and my grandfather was involved and my mother went to his lecture and it was love at first sight.

Hmm-mm, and when was that?

She married in '22.

Uh-uh, and what was the lecture about, do you know? What did he talk about [laughs]?

Something. No idea what the lecture was about, but it was on behalf of the *Central-Verein* where he was active in Berlin.

In which capacity was he active?

Sorry?

In what capacity was he active? What did he do for the –?

I don't know.

But as a lawyer probably? [00:02:00]

A lawyer, yeah, yeah.

Okay, so your mother –

And then my mother went to Berlin for six months at the *Central- Verein* where she organised their catalogue as a librarian and went on. My father would occasionally come to Berlin to be with her and so on. So, it was quite a pure chance. And she hadn't wanted to go to the lecture but – 'cos she'd just returned from Hanover.

Hmm-mm.

Where she'd been working [inaud], so –

You said she was a librarian. Where did she train to be a librarian?

Well, partly in Hildesheim and partly in Berlin.

Interesting. And so, they married in 1922 –

I hope I've got that right. I think it's '22. Think so, yeah.

In Braunschweig or – where did they get married?

Sorry?

Where did they get married?

In Hildesheim.

In Hildesheim. And tell us a little bit about the grandparents. I don't know whether you met them, your father's parents, and your mother's parents.

My father's mother died before I was born, I think. I don't remember the – my father's father I don't remember at all. I think he also died before I was born. My other grandfather we occasionally went to visit in Hildesheim and he died in – I think it was '32 or something like that.

And what was –

No, not – no, not '32. Yes, something like that. I don't remember. I'd have to look up the family tree.

Don't worry, don't worry. And what was his profession, that grandfather, Hildesheim?

[00:04:01]

My grandfather was a law – my maternal grandfather was a lawyer [coughs].

What was his name?

[Pause] –

What was your mother's –

Alexander.

And her maiden name? Alexander?

Oppenheimer. And that's his father there.

Okay, we're going to – and did they live – had they been in Hildesheim for quite some time?

Sorry?

Had they lived in Hildesheim for quite some time?

Oh yes, yes.

That family [ph]?

They were born – yes, he was born there, my grandfather was born there, yes.

Yeah, and your – that was your mother's father. And the grandmother?

Her mother was a Cohen, very well-known family in Hildesheim. Banker's family in Hildesheim.

Because Hildesheim is not such a big space. I mean, tell us a little bit for anyone who doesn't know about Hildesheim and Braunschweig.

Well, Hildesheim is quite well-known but quite a smallish town.

Yeah.

And Braunschweig is the – what you call the *chef-lieu* of that area there. Braunschweig is a lot bigger than Hildesheim.

So did your mother – was she happy to move to Braunschweig?

Yes, it was very near.

How far was it?

God, now you're asking me. Can't tell you. Short train ride.

Okay, but you said as a child you visited Hildesheim.

We went – yes, I went once or twice to Hildesheim to visit but my memory of my early childhood is very dim. I'm not very good at that. [00:06:07]

Okay, well let's see what you can remember. What are your first [background talking] – yes Berta, I was going to ask you what are your earliest memories? What can you remember?

Going to kindergarten in Braunschweig and coming home with chickenpox. That was the end of my kindergarten [laughs].

Yeah. Tell us, where did you live in Braunschweig? What was it? Was it a house? Was it a flat?

A flat.

And the address? Do you remember the address?

Let me think. I know it but I can't recall it at the moment. I know it but – [pause] what was it? No, I can't recall it. I know it but I can't recall it.

Maybe it will come back to you, don't worry.

It doesn't really matter does it?

No. Was it in the centre? What sort of flat –?

A flat, a flat.

And who lived with you in the flat?

Well, we had a nanny, and my father, and my mother, and a cook, etc.

And your brother.

And my brother, yeah.

Hmm-mm.

But I don't remember my father at all very well because I didn't really see him. The nanny was very much our life and I think he was a very busy man [laughs].

Yeah. What was the name of your nanny?

Well, we called her Ga [laughs].

What did you call her?

G-a. We – what was her –?

Ga?

Do you know, I would have – if I'd known you were going to ask all those long, long ago details I would have tried to recall them but I – we just knew her as Ga. [00:08:00]

Hmm-mm, and was she a local girl or who was she?

Yeah, yeah.

So you spent –

And we saw her – when we went to Braunschweig after the war we saw her.

What was that like when you saw her again?

Can't remember. I mean – you know, she – obviously when we moved from Braunschweig, she – we didn't see her then or were in touch with her until well after the war when we went once to Germany.

Yeah. So, you said you went to kindergarten. Was it a Jewish kindergarten you went to or a State –?

Haven't a clue. I wouldn't have thought so.

Just ordinary.

No, not at that stage. I wouldn't have thought so.

And what sort of circles – I know this is not your memory but maybe your knowledge. What sort of friends did your parents – what sort of circles did they move in?

Sorry?

What sort of friends did your parents have? What sort of circles –?

Well, in the Jewish community as I say my father was very – you know, head of the Jewish community at one stage so I think all their friends – well, a lot of their friends were Jewish but they must have had other friends too, but I don't – you know, my mother and my father travelled quite a lot. My mother was very fond of travelling.

Where did they travel to?

Oh, all sorts of places. England, they went to Sweden, Switzerland, went here, there. My mother already had travelled a lot as a girl 'cos her parents were travellers, so she enjoyed travelling all her life and later on she – once she could afford it, after restitution, she went right round the world on her own. [00:10:03]

Amazing. Did she continue – after she married did she continue to work at all as a librarian or...?

Well, in Berlin she worked at the – oh God, where did she work? At the central Jewish – what – tell me the names of the Jewish organisation.

Central-Verein?

Centra-Verein there, yes, yeah.

Where your father –?

Yeah.

Central-Verein

And – no, she did *Sippenforschung* which is, you know – she had a part-time job working on ancestry and so on at the time. It was the Central-Verein it was –

Oh, another –

I can't – you know, as I say –

Okay, don't worry.

All these things don't – listen, I'm ninety-five.

Yeah.

It's ninety years ago.

It is, it is.

So –

I'm just asking so don't worry.

So I can't remember all the details. My brother would have – has a far better memory for the past than I do.

Okay, but they travelled a lot so you stayed with the nanny and your brother at home.

Yeah.

In Braunschweig.

Yeah, yeah.

Any other memories of Braunschweig? Synagogue? Did you ever go to synagogue in Braunschweig?

There was one yes, yes. There are *Stolpersteine* in Braunschweig where they misspelt my brother's name, and those were put up without even our knowledge which I felt a bit peeved about. There was also an extra one for my father where he was at school.

So they were put up by somebody but – [00:12:02]

Without our knowledge.

But maybe they didn't know – did they know you lived – were they in touch with you at all?

I know they spelt my brother's name with a k [laughs].

Kurt. His name was Kurt?

It was. Yeah, he was Kurt with a c, you see, and the *Stolpersteine* has got Kurt with a k. And if they'd consulted us we would have put it right.

But you saw them, the Stolpersteine?

No, not in person 'cos I never went to Braunschweig after they were put in. And there was another one, as I say, for my father at the school where he went.

So how do you know about it? Did somebody send you a picture or – how do you know that they're there?

Well – how did I know? Got picture – I think I was sent a picture or something. Can't remember. I think so.

Yeah.

So...

Okay, coming back to Braunschweig. So, synagogue, there was obviously one but you can't remember. Anything else? Any swimming, sports, or anything?

Any what?

Swimming or sports or any outings you remember?

Listen, I was – [laughs] –

I know, I know.

I was five years old when I left there so...

Okay, so the next question I'm going to ask which probably again you can't answer, when –

I mean, I remember my six months in Nice where I had my appendix out. I always remember that [laughs].

So tell us a little bit about the circumstances or anything leading up to '33 and what happened to your father.

Well, I don't know anything apart from the fact that he took his life. Let's leave it at that.

And when was that Gerta?

Where?

When was it? What was the date?

'33.

And when exactly, do you know? [00:14:00]

Twenty-sixth of April.

Okay. So, a few months after Hitler came to power.

Well yes, but, you know, things had gone – I don't really wish to talk too much about that.

No problem. So, if somebody –

It's personal.

They can find things about your father, for example, on the web. Yeah.

You know.

Yeah. So just for the record, your father's name?

Norbert.

Norbert Regensburger.

Hmm.

So that must have been obviously difficult for your mother with the two children. So, what did she do afterwards, after –?

Well, I told you, we left Braunschweig and went to Nice for six months.

Okay, so tell us about it. Why Nice? Why...?

One of my great-uncles was there also. He used to spend winters in Nice.

So, your mother, your brother, and yourself [inaudible].

Hmm. And my grandmother then because by that time she was a widow.

And did you stay with this uncle?

Hmm?

Did they – did you rent a flat?

We had a flat.

Okay, and of that time in Nice what do you remember? Any memories?

Of what?

Of those six months in Nice.

I went to kindergarten there and started to learn French, reading, my first reading some French.

Okay.

Until I, as I say, had my appendix out which kiboshed the situation [laughs].

And after the six months?

We went to Marienbad for six months. I have very few memories of that. **[00:16:02]**

[Overtalking 00:16:05]

I don't think I went to school. I think my brother went to school and then we moved back to Berlin, went to Berlin.

And again, why Marienbad? Why...?

Hmm?

Why Marienbad? Why did –?

Now you're asking me. How would I know? No idea.

Okay, so after a year in Nice and Marienbad –

We went to – lived in Berlin, yeah.

Okay, and where did you move to in Berlin?

Well, you have the address.

This was before, tell us now for the camera. You haven't told us.

Well, we moved to a flat.

And the address was?

Meierottostraße *fünf*, yeah.

Hmm-mm, and then –

And I went to school at the Fasanenstrasse.

Yeah, so Fasanenstrasse was the –

You know the synagogue, you've heard of the Fasanenstrasse synagogue?

Yeah, so tell us.

Well, that had a junior school attached to it and that's where I went.

Yeah, and what was it like? So, by now it's 1934/35?

'34, yeah.

'34.

Thirty –

So September '34.

'34, yeah, yeah.

And what do you remember of that school and going there?

Not very much. I walked to it. Not very much. Just very little in fact about the school. Except on the odd occasion – in Germany if the temperature went above a certain height you got what was known as *hitzefrei*, so school was cancelled [laughs]. I remember that.

And any – I mean, did you pick up anything at that point that there is a problem or that – did you feel any antisemitism or anything at that point? [00:18:06]

I don't think very consciously, no.

I mean, I guess for you it must have been – the shock was to move from Braunschweig and to lose your father.

Yeah, I mean, you know, as a child you – you know, you just carry on. I used to go skating and I had what was known – my great toy, not toy, was a scooter but in Germany and I've never – I've always thought if I were a businesswoman, I would have imported those to this country. What was wrong as a *Trittrroller* which had a pedal –

Yeah.

And that – you know, you didn't have to paw on the ground you had this treadle. And I used to go everywhere on that. Used to go skating, you know –

Was it Trittrroller?

I remember skating on flooded tennis courts in the winter. I was quite an outdoor person.

Hmm-mm.

Whereas my brother was a bookworm.

Did he go to the same school or...?

The secondary school, yes, Wilsnacker [Straße], but he went to a different school.

What about friends? Do you remember any friends from that time?

I don't have any more. I had one particular friend whom I used to go and visit but I don't – apart from that one friend I don't remember friends.

And how did your mother manage? I mean, on her own after losing your father, how did she manage?

Well, I couldn't tell you but she did. I mean, obviously there was – there must have been an inheritance. [00:20:00]

Yeah.

And then she was working, part-time.

So – was she? What was she doing?

Well, she was – as I told you, she was doing this *Sippenforschung* which is, you know, ancestry thing for the – not the – yeah, it must have been for the *Central-Verein* I think it was, yes.

So, at that point when you moved to Berlin –

Yeah, she worked part-time there. And my grandmother lived with us.

Her mother?

Her mother, yeah.

Hmm-mm. It's interesting. Sippenforschung maybe to prove somebody was Jewish or not, or...?

I don't know. What –

It could be, in that time.

I never – you know, don't know the details.

Yeah, hmm.

Was the *Central-Verein* – anyway –

Well, we can check it.

So, she worked there part-time.

Hmm-mm.

And, as I say, my grandmother lived with us. I mean, I can visualise the flat very clearly.

Tell us, what did it look like? Describe it.

Hmm?

Tell us, what did it look like, the flat?

Well, we had one, two, three, four, five rooms.

So quite big.

Not particularly. With a balcony. It had a balcony.

And what part of Berlin was it?

W15. Very near the Kaiserallee which was one of the main thoroughfares.

So, a nice area of Berlin.

Yeah, and opposite was this – was a park and a children's playground where I can remember going. They had a sandpit but also a park attached. And I do very clearly remember that they had some yellow benches where Jews were not allowed to sit. [00:22:06]

So you were aware of that.

That I was aware of, yes.

That you were not allowed to sit on these.

Yeah, I didn't – well, I didn't – had no cause but I clearly remember this yellow bench in the park.

So were you allowed to just go by yourself?

Yeah.

On your Roller, Trittroller.

Yeah, I mean, I went skating by myself, you know, we weren't pambied like nowadays.

Yeah. And any other encounters? Apart from the bench, as a child did you see any other things which made you feel uncomfortable or threatened or –?

Not that I'm aware of. I really can't remember.

Okay. So, when did things change? When was the topic of emigration discussed or –?

No, no, nothing.

So what led to –?

My mother must have arranged this for me to go to Belgium through my aunt, I would imagine – my great-aunt rather.

So you were [overtalking 00:23:12] –

And then my brother came to England in March on the Kindertransport, and my mother came on a domestic permit. But the person who became my guardian, Miss Hollingsworth, who was the daughter of one of the founders of Bourne Hollingsworth, she provided a flat for us. And so, all this furniture was there. You know, when I came to England, we had a flat. Well, one – my brother first stayed with – was brought over by Dr Crichton-Miller who was a founder of the Tavistock at the time, and his neighbour was a Miss Hollingsworth who provided the money. [00:24:07]

So, she was the sponsor.

So she sponsored me, yeah, and paid for the flat. And then in – when was it – in – was it in May '40 when Harrow became a protected area, and we had to give up the flat, and everything went into storage.

So is this furniture still from – is this your German furniture?

Yeah.

So your mother managed to put it on a crate and have it sent –?

Well, you know, they were called lifts in those days. All this was brought over, but much more amazing to me is the fact that it was stored somewhere during the war, somewhere that it wasn't bombed.

So, is this the furniture you would still have in [overtalking 00:24:58]?

This was the furniture I was born with as it were [laughs].

In Braunschweig? This is from Braunschweig?

Yeah.

It's beautiful. Amazing what the – okay, we'll look at that later. So, then after the war you [overtalking 00:25:14].

Then when we – when my – after the war when we managed to – we had a flat. A very primitive flat in – just up the road in Blenheim Gardens.

Yeah, and managed to –

Yeah.

Let's just go back to Berlin. So, the plan was to put you on the Kindertransport to Belgium and who was exactly in Belgium? Your mother's sister or who was in Belgium?

My mother's uncle and Belgian aunt.

Okay. And you think they had something to do with it? You're not sure.

Possibly, I don't know. I never – I presume so. But it was not a happy period in Belgium on the whole. [00:26:00] The families I stayed with first, were terrible so I went back to

Brussels to stay a little while with my aunt, and then I went somewhere else, and then – it's all very vague.

Okay. What do you remember of the actual trip or what were you told where you were going?

Nothing. Don't remember a thing. I remember that I had bronchitis before I went and it was – [phone rings].

[Break in recording]

Yes, so we were discussing your journey to Belgium. You said you had bronchitis.

Yeah, and it was a question were they going to let me go or not? They decided yes, so – [laughs].

And what did you manage to take with you? Do you remember any of the luggage?

No, I don't remember.

Okay. And you took the train from Berlin.

Sorry?

The train was from Berlin?

Yeah, yeah, to Brussels.

Okay. Which station? Do you remember which station?

No.

No. And who took you? Your mother took you to the station or...?

I can't remember. Presumably, yes.

Okay. And the date? [Overtalking 00:27:04].

I think it was in February – no – in February. I don't know the exact date.

So you were the first of your family to leave.

Yeah.

Yeah, 'cos your brother was still at home.

My brother came to England the following month.

So it's interesting that he wasn't sent to Belgium, that he was sent to England. Yeah, okay.

Well, I imagine that his thing was probably already in the making. I don't know.

And how many other – was it a big train? Were there lots of other children?

I haven't – I can't tell you anything about it.

Okay, but you do remember that it wasn't a happy time. You said you came to a family and you were not happy there.

No, and I seem to remember doing some crying. But it's all, you know, a period of my life that–

You'd rather not think about it or –? [00:28:01]

Well, I have, you know, no feelings but no – not very many memories.

Okay, but you did see the family in Brussels. You did see them at some point.

Yeah, yeah.

So they tried to find a solution for you.

I – you ask me questions I cannot answer you.

Okay. Your brother left the next month to England and your mother came as a domestic –

On a domestic permit.

Domestic service when –

Arranged by Miss Hollingsworth in July.

Okay, and then you arrived in –

In August, 23rd of August. Miss Hollingsworth sent somebody over to Belgium to bring me to England.

So Miss Hollingsworth was the sponsor of your brother?

Sorry?

She was the sponsor of your brother?

No. The Crichton-Miller – Dr Crichton-Miller was responsible but I always suspect – they also took an Austrian boy they had, there were two boys, and they were both sent to Taunton School, a boarding school, where one of their sons was the headmaster. You know, it's a public school, Taunton School. But I may be quite wrong but I always suspect that the money

connected with even my brother's and the Austrian boy probably came from Miss Hollingsworth. They were very, very close friends. Neighbours and very, very close –

Where did they live? You said –

On the hill. On Harrow on the Hill.

Okay. And what do you think motivated them to help [overtalking 00:29:41]?

I don't – I have no idea.

But it's an example where – so they didn't only take your brother in, but they helped you and your mother.

Well yes, I mean, Miss Hollingsworth arranged for my mother to come over as a domestic, on a domestic permit, and installed her in this flat. [00:30:02]

So did your mother work for her or –

No.

It was just a way of getting her in.

Yeah. Well, I mean, a lot of people came on a domestic permit. And she installed her in the flat for us two, and the Austrian boy who came during school holiday there.

Right, in Harrow.

In Harrow, yeah, on the hill, right at the top.

So do you remember the journey from Belgium coming to England?

Not very much except that I know that somebody was accompanying me. Sent over to get –
to collect –

To fetch you.

To collect me.

Yeah. I wonder what papers you had at the time. Whether you had –

Sorry?

I wonder whether you had a passport at the time because –

Well, I have one of these cards, you know, for – I've still got that card for entry.

Yeah, because it's unusual. So, in a way you have a Kindertransport to Belgium and then –

Well, privately.

Yeah.

To England.

Yeah, yeah. So that didn't count as Kindertransport then, or did it –

Sorry?

Probably it was also part of a Kindertransport.

I mean, I – when the AJR had this Kindertransport thing I was considered a Kindertransport even though it wasn't to England.

Yeah, of course so].

I did not come on a Kindertransport to England.

No, no, but no, there were – Kindertransport went to Sweden as well, you know, other places.

Yeah.

Switzerland.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah, okay so the lady picked you up and you came. And what was it like to see your mother again?

Well, would it be like, I mean [laughs] – I don't remember. Presumably she was at Liverpool Street Station – no, not Liverpool Street. We would have come from probably Victoria I imagine. I can't remember. Coming from – across from Belgium. [00:32:05].

I mean, by the time you arrived you were eleven years old?

Ten.

Ten. You were still ten. So that's – yeah. I mean, were you sort of – I don't know – traumatised is the wrong word but you had a difficult experience so by the time you got here, do you remember your sort of emotional –?

No.

No. Okay.

I'm not a very retrospective person.

Okay. I'm trying [both laugh] to see what [overtalking 00:32:41].

I mean, it always amazes me that so many of these people remember every – you know, cross every t and dot every i. Not me. I'm a broad-

Everyone is different. Everyone is different. So in that time after you arrived and came and settled with your Mum [overtalking 00:33:03] –

I was first meant to go to a school up on the hill, a Catholic girl's school, but they were evacuated – thankfully for me as far as my later career went [laughs] – and was sent to this private school down in Harrow.

And who paid for this?

Hmm?

Who paid for it?

Miss Hollingsworth.

So she also paid for the private education.

She paid for everything. She paid my mother, she paid – 'cos my mother – while we were in Harrow my mother didn't work, she looked after me and my brother and the boy, the other boy, when they were home. But, I mean, we weren't there very long.

Yeah, and your brother? Which school was he sent to? Oh, he went –

He went to Taunton. Yeah –

Oh, he was part – with the boarding school.

The boarding school. He was already at boarding school when I arrived.

Okay. With the other –

Well no, he would have been on holiday in August, wouldn't he? But...

Again, paid for by the –

Who paid for his – whether the school gave – didn't charge him, didn't charge fees to him and the other boy, the Austrian boy, [coughs], I haven't a clue. **[00:34:10]**

Hmm.

Probably didn't charge fees for them. I imagine, I don't know [coughs].

And do you know what – whether at that point did your mother have any dealings with Bloomsbury House or with other refugee organisations or –?

Sorry?

Did your mother have contact with other refugee organisations [overtalking 00:34:30]?

I think there was one family on the hill, living on the hill, she was in touch with. There was one, I think it was an ex-doctor 'cos I remember getting a bone, a fish bone, stuck in my tonsil and she took me to him for him to take it out [laughs].

A refugee doctor.

But otherwise she didn't have many friends. Mostly all her friends had emigrated to America but she really made friends – well, I mean, she wasn't in London, she had a checkered career

during the war because she couldn't – she lived in a hotel and she worked as a housekeeper in Epsom and so on, but she made her friends then mainly through the *B'nai B'rith*.

Yeah. And Gerta, how did you manage language-wise? So, you said you learnt some French I guess in Belgium and in Nice.

Well –

When you came here did you have any English?

I can't remember, I suppose I must have learnt it.

Yeah.

Pretty quickly.

You don't remember any problems in school?

No. I know my first report – I still have my school reports – it said, 'Gerta's learnt English very well. She must try and speak more now,' you know, [laughs]. Later on, a few years, 'Gerta must check her tendency to be too talkative,' so – [00:36:02]

Oh, okay [both laugh], you caught up, you caught up.

[Laughs] I caught up.

Yeah.

Yeah, I still have all my school reports.

And do you remember in school how were the other girls to you? Do you remember any – were there any problems at all being a refugee?

No, no.

Or Jewish or...?

No, I think there were only two Jewish children in the school.

Hmm-mm, but –

No. No, I settled in at school and later on, you know, I did my school certificate and then my higher school certificate.

Yeah, what about the grandparents, your grandmother?

Well, unfortunately my grandmother died. I mean, she was deported and died, you know – we didn't get her out in time despite great efforts of my mother. My mother tried – there's some correspondence. If you look her up, there's correspondence my mother had with the Home Office about money and so on, and all that, to try and get her to America or here, but anyway, she didn't make it. A great sadness.

Yeah, so you –

She came to a – you know, was deported from Theresienstadt, God knows where.

So your mother tried to correspond –

Tried hard to get her here.

But after the war had already started because she came quite late. She came in the summer of 39.

Yeah.

Yeah, so she couldn't get her to England at that point.

She couldn't what?

She couldn't get her to England anymore because –

No, no.

The border was closed. Yeah. In that time- obviously you said – so then in 1940 your mother had to move, so tell us a little bit about that.

About my mother? [00:38:00]

Yeah, because she had to move. You said you had to leave the flat.

Yeah, we had to give up the flat, yes.

Because –?

Harrow became known what was known as a protected area. No bloody foreigners.

But why actually? Why did Harrow become –?

I think it was because of Northolt Airport being not very far.

Ah, okay. It's not in the coast –

Possibly. Anyway, it was declared and my mother was – when she went to tribunal, she was made the best category, you know. So Miss Hollingsworth went with her and – to the tribunal and she was – I can't remember whether it was category A or category C which was the best.

Yeah, it's C I think. It's- C is the best – I mean, the best of not being a Nazi. [laughs].

Yeah [both laugh]. And she went to live in London and then she had various – she had jobs in hotels so that she had accommodation, and then she had this job as a housekeeper in Epsom to a very, very – to a husband and wife. Very, very nice family with whom we remained friends until they both died. He died first and then she. And so she was in Epsom as a so-called housekeeper which is a big joke considering she didn't do very much housekeeping [laughs].

Could she do any housekeeping? I mean, she probably –

Well, I mean, you know –

You had a cook before and-

They became very good friends and he was away during the week.

Hmm-mm.

And there was one German family living opposite in the same road with whom my mother became friendly in Epsom.

And at the time you stayed –?

Well, I was with this English family [inaud].

So who were – what was the family called, the English –?

[00:40:00] Fowler, Mr. and- he was a commercial traveller. And they had three children – well, grown up by then. The boy was in the Navy, and the eldest girl was married already, and the second child – I'd shared my bedroom with her, I had a camp bed on which I lived for years, four, five years, however long I was there.

So were you a sort of lodger or did they decide to sort of foster you, or was it –?

Well, I lived as one of the family and they were no doubt paid board and lodging for me, or lodging anyway for me from Miss Hollingsworth. All those years she paid for me. ‘Cos I’m quite sure they didn’t do it for nothing. They had it – I mean, it was a – you know, I’ve got very – a very nice family and...

And were you happy there?

Yes, yes. I went to school by bike. I had acquired a bicycle from this family where I stayed with a term up on the hill. A boy’s bike. So for years I rode on a boy’s bike [laughs], and eventually I got a proper bike and went everywhere by bike. To school, youth hostelling weekends we used to do from our group, BBY group.

Yeah. But later or then [overtalking 00:41:32]?

Well yes, once I’d joined this group which was in – once I’d left school.

Yeah, yeah. So throughout your – until you finished school you stayed with this family in –

No, no, no, once I –

No.

No, by that time I was living with my mother back. When I left school, I – in 1945 – I left school in ’46. In ’45 we went into this flat in Blenheim Gardens, this primitive flat, where we had three rooms and a kitchen, and we had – [00:42:05] ‘cos we didn’t wish to share the bathroom with the tenants upstairs we had a tin bath [laughs], which we used to have in the kitchen. And you had a flex, you know, which you put and you emptied it by getting out. And the bath stood in the corner of the kitchen [laughs].

Yeah, yeah.

But we had our own stuff back then in that flat, and I was there for – until 1957 I think it was and I lived for thirty-three years in Christchurch Avenue where we got a proper flat in the house that belonged to a friend. And from there I moved here thirty years ago.

Hmm-mm, so you've been in Willesden quite some time.

Yeah, yeah. And all that – ever since I came to live in London, yes.

Yeah.

I used to cycle to school in Harrow when I was still in – at school, when I was living in Blenheim Gardens. I used to cycle there.

Oh, from here, okay.

To Harrow.

Because interestingly enough – I mean, in this area first of all it was Jewish area but also there were all these hostels, you know.

Yeah, I knew nothing about those.

Did you know any – no.

No.

Minster Road.

No, not at all, not –

Willesden Lane and, you know, [inaudible].

Didn't know anything about it.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you must have been quite independent if you'd lived with this family. You were not that old, I guess, when your mother moved in 1940. You were just twelve.

Yeah well, I mean, I just lived there with them. I mean, I can visualise the flat very clearly. I can remember –

Was it a Jewish family? [00:44:00]

Sleeping for a time in what they called these shelters –

Yeah.

Indoor metal shelters, you know, like a cage.

Yes, yes.

You lived in. We slept in – I slept in those – that for a while [laughs].

Was the Blitz – do you remember –?

Hmm?

Do you remember the bombings?

Yes.

Yeah?

Yes, because at school we had – the gym, assembly hall, had shutters and that's where we used to go during raids. And when I did my school certificate, I remember these shutters and then the teacher would – air-raid finished, he would put them down and then we used to say, 'For God's sake just leave them up,' you know, [laughs], middle of our exams. The rest of the school had been told – you know, given holidays. There were just my – school certificate and the higher school certificate people were still there being taught all the time in the hall.

Because I know that one of the [overtalking 00:45:10] –

During the Doodlebugs.

'Cos one of the hostels, these kinder hostels, got a hit.

Did it?

Yeah, in Willesden. Yes, yes, [ph]. I remember one of our interviews told us about it.

Don't remember that.

Yeah, yeah.

I didn't know if they existed even.

Yeah, hmm. So was the family – they were not Jewish, or were they Jewish, the –

No, no, no.

So at that point when you lived with them did you have any contact to anything Jewish?

Hmm, well, my friends weren't Jewish 'cos there were no Jewish children in the school. Occasionally I would –

I mean, any contact [overtalking 00:45:53] –?

Go to the – *yontif* we would – I would go to some friends called Ballheimer who had a flat who my mother knew the father there as children. [00:46:08] And over *Yom Kippur* I stayed there and slept there. And occasionally I went to see my – well, I didn't see my mother much during the war really. It was later that, you know, I went to – when I was able to drive, I went to Epsom, drove to Epsom, and she was – and we used to go and visit this family – well, yeah, Mr and Mrs Pomfrey. Every Christmas Day I used to drive my mother and me to spend Christmas Day with them.

What was the family you said you – for the Jewish holidays you went to? What were they [overtalking 00:47:02]?

Well, we had some friends who already had a flat, a Jewish family, and I remember spending a night there. You know, went there. And my mother was working in a residential – in the Russell Hotel and then the Imperial Hotel.

Oh, in Bloomsbury.

In Russell – she had a – so she had accommodation there until she found this primitive flat and we moved in there, and that's when I left the family and we went to live with my mother again.

So economically it was difficult. I mean –

Well, my mother was earning her living.

Yeah.

I was paid for by Miss Hollingsworth.

But it's interesting because I think there's quite a few cases where the parents, you know, domestics, they couldn't be with their children. Like your mother, she – you know... [00:48:02]

Yeah, because it was felt important that I should stay at the same school –

Yeah.

For which I was very grateful.

Yeah. You wanted to stay there.

‘Cos I had a very, very good seven years in that school.

And do you feel the teachers had an understanding that you were a refugee or was there any understanding that you’d come from Germany or, you know, were you treated differently?

Don’t think any special fuss was made.

No.

I mean, I think probably my form teacher when I first joined probably looked after me, you know, but you just mucked in and that’s it.

So then the end of the war, did that change anything for you or for your mother?

End of the war, wait a minute. When did the war end, forty...?

In ’45.

Don’t think anything –

I mean, did your mother think she wanted to go back to –?

Oh God, no. No. But, I mean, what – the lifesaver, as it were, was the restitution.

Yeah. Tell us about it.

You know, we had somebody, an old friend who was a lawyer, Dr Loeb, who did very, very well for her, and she got decent restitution and pension, a decent pension.

In the fifties or when?

Whenever it was. And so that of course, you know, made all the difference.

Yeah. Very important, yeah.

Without that I wouldn't probably be living here and inherit it from her, you know. [00:50:07]
That was the real Godsend to make her life and she was able then to travel and so on.

Did she have any surviving family members, your mother?

No, because both she and my father were only children so we don't have much family. I've never had any cousins, first cousins, I never had any aunts or uncles.

Yeah.

I mean, my brother married in due course and had two children. One who lives here – in fact he came to see me yesterday – and his daughter who is married in Israel.

So your brother – what did your brother do then during the war?

He was a civil servant after the Army.

Okay, so he joined the Army, when?

As soon as he was eighteen which was in '43. He was in the Far East, in Malaya.

And that's where he changed his name.

Yeah. Well, he had to change it when he joined the Army.

Yeah, so it was – tell us –

Charles Morris Regan.

So –

To keep the same initials.

Charles Morris Regan, and he was –

R-e-g-a-n, yes.

And he was urt –?

Moritz.

Moritz Regensburger.

Yeah.

Yeah, hmm. And then he joined the civil service after the Army.

Well, he went to the LSE on a ex-serviceman's grant.

Hmm-mm.

Which existed in those days. And then he joined the civil service, you know, in the admin, in the senior civil service corps, and spent his entire career in the civil service where his son, strangely enough, has followed him. [00:52:17]

Hmm-mm, but in the UK or abroad as well or...?

Hmm?

In the UK or also abroad?

No, no, here in the English civil service.

Yeah, yeah, but here, working in – yeah.

So a lot of civil servants. First my brother, now my nephew are civil servants.

And Gerta, what was your plan – what were your plans then after you finished school? What did you want to do?

Hadn't a clue, so I got the job in the city as a secretary. I had learnt shorthand and typing at school as an extra, which the school secretary used to teach my friend and I, and I worked in the city for two years at a firm of non-ferrous metal merchants, secretary to one of the directors. And went to Birkbeck. And then got a grant for the third year, so that I was able to stop work and study full-time. I used to go to some lectures at Bedford College. I don't know whether you've ever heard of it, but –

Yeah, yeah.

It was a women's college situated in Regent's Park.

Hmm-mm, and what did you study?

French, English, and History. I remember I started off with doing Latin for the intermediate but the lecturer had such a soporific voice, I used to fall asleep, so I thought I better give that up [laughs]. [00:54:06] And then I had a year in France as an *assistante anglaise*, which was interesting. And after that I did the postgraduate certificate in education, and then I taught for a while, and then I had an interesting eighteen months in Brazil. Because I went as a so-called *au pair* to the family of the British Consul in Rio whose wife was a niece of my Belgian aunt [laughs].

Okay.

That's how I got it [laughs].

Yeah.

But I was meant to look – he had three children by his first wife, she was his second wife and she had a baby, but – so I went out there – nice sea voyage – but in the event the three elder children remained in boarding school in England, so I only helped look after the baby.

Hmm-mm.

So I was – a bit of teaching in the English school in – French teaching in the English school in Rio. Then I went for three months to Montevideo because Monique's parents had emigrated from Belgium to Montevideo and while they came on home leave, I went with the baby to his grandparents in Montevideo and I spent three months there.

Hmm-mm.

It was quite interesting. Then I came back –

So you also like travelling.

Well, it was part of the thing.

Yeah.

And then I resumed teaching with the LCC. And then I got this job for teaching [00:56:04] – finally got a job teaching French at Willesden Grammar County but after one term I decided teaching was not for me, and that was the end.

Why was that?

Which I never regretted for one moment that I gave up teaching. I'm really more of an administrator than a teacher [laughs]. I didn't enjoy teaching.

What did you not like about it?

What didn't I like? Well, I remember having a third-year class of – they were all bigger than me and the bottom class in French, and they were pretty unruly, and I didn't care for it [laughs]. Gave up teaching. As I say, which I've never regretted for one minute.

Yeah, and then what did you do?

What did I do then? Oh, I worked for the Educational Interchange Council, which arranged education visits and exchanges until that packed up. Then I had a job at the Institution of Electrical Engineers on a special project, and then I worked for the editor of- for a fashion magazine for a short while, then she wanted a – part-time, and then she wanted a full-time secretary, so I left that. And that's when I went to the Wiener Library for the last part of my working life. Sixteen years. So, I finally fully retired at the age of – how old was I – 1996. I was nearly – well, seventy-eight.

I want to talk to you about the Wiener, but let's just – so when you started then your administrative jobs, what were you looking for? [00:58:08]

Nothing particular. I mentioned that I worked in Inghams, didn't I?

No, go on.

First as a representative abroad and then in their office in Bond Street where I was head of the schools – of the accommodation department. And I had a happy few – number of years at Inghams until they were taken over by Hotelplan, and that's when I left. And then I had a non-job for a few months, which – language tuition centre which was really a non-job, and then I went into the Educational Interchange Council. That's how it was.

So you could use your languages. [Overtalking 00:59:02].

Not really, no.

No?

No.

And were you ever tempted to live elsewhere apart from England, I mean, to emigrate again?

No.

No. So did you find – did you feel yourself feeling quite English or British or...?

Yeah.

Yeah?

Never thought much about it. I mean, that's why I don't join a lot – I mean, I don't keep looking back – I mean, I don't really enjoy what I'm doing now, looking back.

[Laughs] Sorry about that. You wanted to be interviewed. [laughs]. Yeah, I know what you mean.

Yeah, well, I mean, you know, Philippa's husband Jimmy said, 'Oh, you must do it,' and blah, blah, blah, when I saw them at the concert. I mean, you know, I don't dwell on the past all the time. [01:00:05] That's why I don't go in for many activities – well, I can't go anywhere anyway any – join any of these activities any more 'cos my walking's too bad and I go everywhere by car. But, you know, I don't have the obsession.

Yeah, so what does it mean, you don't dwell on the past? Tell us what you mean.

I don't dwell on the past. The past is the past.

And do you think some other people do?

Yes. I mean, that's the whole purpose of all this. What you're doing and all this, you know, AJR groups for next generation, etc., etc. It's all looking to the past. If it makes people happy, fine. But it's not my [overtalking 01:00:54] – it's not my scene.

And why is that? Why do you think?

Because I live in the present. I made friends. I don't need to harp back to, you know, what was.

But you did join the B'nai B'rith and you did join the organisations at the time.

Well, the B'nai B'rith, yes –

Yeah.

Because that's – well, my mother was a founder member of the Leo Baeck Lodge and they had – I mean, in fact the youth group was formed slightly before the Leo Baeck and I, you know, joined them and I made lifelong friends there.

And they were mostly refugees?

Oh, yes.

Yeah.

All refugees, yes.

All refugees. So, that was the refugee branch of the B'nai B'rith, or...?

Yeah, yeah. I mean, the – before the Leo Baeck Lodge was founded some people belonged to the first lodge of England, and then the Leo Baeck Lodge was founded. [01:02:04] And an offshoot, the children of those people formed the *B'nai B'rith* youth group –

Yeah.

And we were in fact the country's first mixed youth group, *B'nai B'rith* youth –

Oh, I see. The others were –

Were girls and – you know, we were the first mixed one. And so, they became friends. We used to go cycling weekends, youth hostelling, and as I say, sadly there are not many left.

So did many people also marry within these groups?

Oh, yes. A lot married within the group, yes.

Yeah.

It was in some sense a marriage bureau [laughs] but, you know, we remained friends ever since. Those of us who've survived.

Because there were other groups, weren't there? There was something called the Hyphen].

Oh yeah, well, the Hyphen – well, just that much older than we were.

Okay.

They were about, I would say, two or three years older than we were. And I know there was this row. The AJR wanted to call them something and the person I knew who was a – who objected and I think was quite right. I'm very glad that she won her point, that this new group shouldn't be called Hyphen.

Really, why?

Hyphen were our contemporary group, slightly older than we were.

Okay, but you agree with that, that Hyphen shouldn't be used now because it –

I mean, I know Peter – what was his name – Peter Somebody-or-other – was a peculiar character who found – partly founded the Hyphen –

Yeah, objected to it, yeah.

Hmm?

To the renaming now, yeah.

You know, because it would have been wrong to have called a different group, what was very much a group in its own right, Hyphen. [01:04:08]

Yeah.

I mean, I know – knew people who belonged to it.

Yeah. They were a bit older, yeah. There were other groups as well. I guess, some of the synagogues had youth groups as well. Belsize Square had its own youth group.

Yeah, I never – yes, well, my mother joined West London because she was living in central London, you know, and she joined that. Basically, I suppose our home would have been Belsize Square but it so happened she joined West London because that was convenient for her. And so, you know, that's where we've stayed ever since [coughs].

You're still a member there.

I am, yes.

Yeah.

Hmm.

Yeah.

I joined in my own right once my mother died [laughs]. I was, at it were, an appendage before [laughs] [coughs].

Because I wonder was it – how similar or different it must have been from Germany because your mum, did she go to a liberal synagogue in –?

Sorry?

Did you mother go to, or you, to a liberal synagogue in Germany?

We went to the Fasanenstraße.

Yeah, so Fasanenstraße –

Was a sort of liberal type of – yeah.

Yeah, I just wonder –

But the West London synagogue were very good to our *B'nai B'rith* group because they gave us premises for us to meet.

Right.

We used to meet twice a week, Wednesdays and Sundays, and they provided a room for us. Rabbi Reinhardt was very supportive.

And he – yeah.

I mean, that was a long story with him, but as far as we were concerned – that came a lot later, his problems [laughs] [coughs]. **[01:06:02]**

Yeah, because we recently interviewed somebody who worked as a secretary. She worked –

Sorry?

We interviewed somebody who worked with – who was in the youth movement there – the lady I just mentioned – and she worked with him in the office.

Did she?

*Anyway. So the *B'nai B'rith* you said you had meetings and what was the – were there lectures and what else?*

We had talks.

Talks. What –?

We had lectures.

On what topics?

We'd go out on - and we visited some people, did some visiting, and it was just a very happy cooperative group who did good works and acted as a friendship group.

And do you think it was important that people had a shared history to some extent?

Yes, obviously. Yes. We all, you know – as I say, a lot of our parents were in the senior lodge.

Hmm, yeah. Yeah, so –

As I say, it's very funny that one of the few survivors was – earlier, rang me [laughs].

From that.

[Freddy] Margot Haas [laughs].

Yeah, yeah. Any other things? So it was B'nai B'rith Lodge. Any other things? So Belsize you didn't go –

Sorry?

AJR? Did your mother join the AJR at that point?

Yes, yes, my mother was – yes, was a member. Yes. I don't know when she joined, but early on. Then of course I – for twenty-six years I proof-read the AJR journal and was booted out without so much as a thank you more or less. **[01:08:02]**

Oh. Not good.

I worked with the various editors throughout the years.

Okay, so when did you start – so let's talk about that.

I started off when they were in Swiss Cottage.

Yeah.

And – yeah, when Lydia Lassman was the chairman.

Yeah. Yeah, so you said you were proofreading the AJR journal so from which year to which year? Twenty-six years.

From 1990 until – well, when was it – [coughs] when did the new editor come?

I don't know.

Well, shortly after.

Okay. Hmm-mm, and this was as –

And I believe they now employ somebody to proofread.

So you were a volunteer copy editor.

Of course, yes. Twenty-six years I did it.

So what drew you – you say you're not looking at history, so what drew you to that, or what did you...?

Sorry?

Why did you start that? Why –?

Why did I start it?

Yeah.

Well, when I started working part-time, I wanted something extra. I don't know how it came about. I don't know how I got to do it first. I offered my services when Rosenstock was still around. He, in fact, knew – my mother knew him.

Werner Rosenstock.

And later on, he went to Heinrich Stahl House, he was in Heinrich Stahl House and my mother was there as well. And I just somehow – why and how I got there I can't remember, but that's when I started.

Hmm-mm, and did you enjoy it?

Yes, yes. I have a sort of eagle-eye. **[01:10:00]**

So you're a good copy reader.

And I proofread our brochures at the U3A.

Wow.

I've always done proofreading in jobs.

Very good.

For – you know, because I have an eagle-eye.

That's good.

Or rather – but the strange thing is one's own mistakes one misses.

Yeah.

But other people's mistakes I beam in on.

That's good. So, in that time could you see the changes taking place at the AJR?

At the AJR, yes.

Yeah.

Well, I mean, the different premises we went to.

Yeah.

First there, I – there, there, there, four premises I went to. The different one. The one in Stanmore.

Yeah.

Was that before your time?

No, no, I was at Stanmore, yeah. I remember it.

And then in Finchley.

And how do you think – because – how do you see the future of the AJR, Gerta? What do you think should happen to the AJR?

Well, I mean, I think it's – [coughs] – doing a fantastic job, and obviously memories should be perpetuated but I think they'll be around quite a time, providing there's the money.

Yeah.

And, I mean, I do have the feeling that I could call for help any time –

If you need it.

If I need it.

Yeah.

So I think they're doing a fantastic job. And obviously next generations do – are interested so –

Are you surprised that the next generation – I mean, now the majority of members are next generation –

Next generation.

Yeah.

Yes.

Are you surprised about it?

In one way yes and one way no. You know, it's [pause] – but if they feel happy and they want to know about their past, fair enough. **[01:12:10]**

'Cos I think that the founder members would be very surprised – the founding members, you know – that this is still going or that the second, third, fourth generation want to be associated

–

Well, I don't know. It's been a fairly smooth transition, hasn't it?

Yeah. But I – you know, I think that people thought in a way – become English or British so that – I don't think people would think there was a need for that, you know, for the future. Originally. I don't know. Who knows, who knows.

Each to his own.

Yeah, who knows. So, you had twenty-six years, yeah. So did you meet Werner Rosenstock still?

Sorry?

Did you meet Werner Rosenstock? Did you know him?

I still met him, yes.

Yeah.

I think he was still around when I first went – started there.

And then the next editor was –

Richard.

Richard Grunburger.

Yeah.

Yeah, so you worked with Richard.

Yes.

Yeah.

Oh yes, but he had an assistant then.

Tony Grenville. Then – Tony Grenville later.

Who?

Tony Grenville.

Yes.

Was the next one.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have an appalling memory for names I'm afraid.

So tell us about your work at the Wiener Library, Gerta. So how –

Well, I first went as part-time secretary to David Cesarani who was at the time director of education and public service or something, as a part-time. And when he became director, they thought of – [01:14:04] he needed a full-time secretary and – but Liz Borges who was there suggested I might like to stay on. So, I then became more part – I stayed on part-time and was there running the friends' scheme as at then, and helping with events that we – organising events so that in theory – I first started three mornings and then was cut down to two mornings. But the mornings often went into afternoons when we had something special on, but the friends scheme was a little bit different now but I ran the friends scheme.

Yeah. And are you surprised again the Wiener now is very active and –

Oh –

I mean –

I'm absolutely staggered by what they do now and how they have blossomed as it were. Incredible.

Yeah.

I think it's amazing what they do and the breadth of their work and their outreach and so on. No, I'm full of admiration. You could hardly recognise it. They started really when they moved to Russell Square.

Yeah.

That's when I gave up, when they moved to Russell Square.

Okay. No, because I think I – you know, I worked at the Wiener briefly. I think I met you at that point because I worked for David Cesarani a little bit.

Did you?

Yeah. As a student. And yeah, in the nineties.

Really?

Yeah.

I don't remember –

Yeah.

I mean, I remember our volunteers who used – [01:16:05]

Yeah, I remember people going – and there's a cutting room, you know, with the newspapers and –

You did that, did you?

No, I didn't, I didn't.

Yeah, but I remember – those were the ladies who did that.

Yes, exactly. But it's amazing that you sort of worked with two major sort of I guess refugee organisations, the AJR and the Wiener.

It just so happened [laughs].

And they're of course sort of closely related I think in terms of trustees. There was always a close relationship between AJR and the Wiener Library.

Well, I think, yeah, they always have.

Yeah.

I mean, no, I was very happy in my sixteen years there until it was time to retire, I was made to retire.

Yeah.

But I suppose at seventy-eight you're entitled to retire.

Yes, but then you went to the USA.

That's – immediately got myself involved in the office, so I didn't miss the Wiener Library as I expected because I got involved there and, you know, did something –

And are still involved in U3A.

Oh, very much so, yes.

So what are you doing for – tell us what it is, the U3A.

I was at one stage office manager and membership secretary, but at the beginning of this year I decided that I would give up the office manager. And I'm still membership secretary because I have the database on my computer, so I can do all the work, most of the work from home. And the office had become – nowadays with this mania for personal security and this and that and the other, I couldn't – can't take that. [01:18:01]

So in the University of the Third Age, were there quite a few refugees? Did you encounter quite a –

No, I don't think so but a lot of Jewish people.

Right.

I think a good proportion – well, I'm not so sure now – we had a good proportion of Jewish members. Well, in that area.

Yeah.

And again, from there I made friends, you see. Bridge with them. Two people from there, I got to know their friends with whom I play Bridge every Sunday.

But tell us, you were also friendly with the Wieners.

Yes.

We haven't talked about that.

Well, that's been a family friendship ever since my mother met Dr Wiener in the 1920s.

Oh, you didn't tell us that. So she met him in the 1920s –

Yeah.

In the Central-Verein?

Yeah, yeah.

In Berlin.

Yeah.

Okay.

Where she was organising their catalogue and he was one of the syndicus people.

Right and then –

And then I think they probably lost touch but took up a relationship again when he came to England and became, as I say – stayed friends through the generations.

So you go there for Passover.

Yeah, every year still.

Since 1950 [laughs].

Yeah, whenever he first had one which was in 1950-something. I don't know when he came to England [coughs].

After the war, yeah.

The first one I remember was somewhere [coughs] off Edgware Road. They had a flat.

Yeah.

And then they had their house in Middleton Road and we went there. **[01:20:03]**

Because you're a contemporary to the daughters, to Wiener's daughters. A bit younger.

Yes. The eldest – Ruth, the eldest, one year older, was one year older. Eva was I think a year younger, and Mirjam was – that one's younger. So, originally my friend was the eldest, Ruth. 'Cos when Mirjam – I first got to know her she was still at school, as she went to school here.

Yeah.

Maida Vale High School I think it was for girls. And so, every *seder* through the generations. Now being taken by the third generation.

Hmm-mm, and you still go there which is lovely. Yeah again, do you think he would be surprised, Alfred Wiener to see –

Sorry?

Do you think he would be surprised to see the Holocaust Wiener Library today? He would be probably.

Yes.

And of course now his story is much more known because of Daniel Finkelstein's new book, Hitler –

Yes, well, I mean –

Stalin, Mum & Dad.

Yeah, I found that very interesting, very well researched and very well written. Couldn't have been easy to do. But I learnt [coughs] some things obviously that I didn't know.

Yeah.

But some of the things, you know, the people one knew.

Yeah, yeah. And do you find – because Mirjam said that at the beginning obviously she talked more than Ludwik, about her past, and then...

[01:22:04] Well, first it was – yeah. I mean, the generations, yes. Mirjam took over and there we are. They all – that goes back, as I say, a long-time relationship.

Yeah.

I'm now definitely the oldest at the *seder*.

Yes, yes. You're representing that generation.

Well, Anthony – yeah, three generations, four generations I knew. I'm a relic.

But you said Gerta, so you don't really – you're not looking back but do you find the older you get the more one looks back or – not for you. You didn't find that. You know, we often find that when people get older you think more about the past or people –

I don't.

You don't.

No. That's why my memory of some of the past is poor. The details.

Yeah. What is for you the most important thing of your German/Jewish past?

Sorry?

What is for you the most important aspect of your own past, of that German/Jewish past for today?

Part of a tradition I suppose. Don't think much about it.

And how do you identify yourself today? How would you describe your identity today?

[Pause] Well, British by nationality, German by origin, but as I say, I don't dwell a lot on the past.

Hmm-mm.

[01:24:03] Got enough to keep myself going in the present [laughs], at my tender years.

And do you feel that those events, the emigration, have shaped your life later on?

Look, how do I know how my life has panned out if it hadn't been? Nobody can tell.

Yeah.

How do I know?

But do you think about it sometimes?

No. I've no way of knowing how my – what would have happened.

Well, you might still be in Braunschweig [laughs].

I mean, you know, it's – I mean, I remember a lot more of Berlin obviously 'cos I lived there for six – '33 to '39, yeah.

And when – did you ever go back – you said you never went back to Braunschweig. Did you go back to Berlin, to Germany?

I went once with the – yeah, you know, when they had – I went back to Braunschweig once with my mother and my brother.

Oh, you did.

Yeah, yeah. When I was working at the Wiener Library and Yvonne mentioned that she was going to Berlin for children of Jewish schools in Berlin that year, and I thought, oh well, I'll do that as well. And I applied and got, you know, taken. That's when I went back to Berlin on one of those organised –

Trips.

Trips.

And this is Yvonne Alweiss..

And I remember being very well-organised and –

And what was it like for you to go then to Berlin, with this group?

Well, I mean, I went back to the block of flats where we lived. [01:26:01] I think as far as I remember, went back to the zoo because we had a season ticket in the zoo I remember, and I spent quite a lot of my time as a child in the zoo. My great-uncle was a great zoologist – well, not zoologist, but knowledgeable. So, it was quite interesting going back, but it was very – it's a long time ago so there was still – was there still East Berlin or was it just after? I can't remember now –

When was it?

What year it was. I'd have to look it up in my diaries. No, it was quite interesting but that's the only – well, no, I have been back to Germany a number of times but to go and stay near Cologne – well, first in Cologne, to stay with the daughter of – well, the half-sister of Sir Hans Krebs. Have you ever heard of Sir Hans Krebs?

Yeah.

Well, he was from Hildesheim, so my mother – his sister and my mother were childhood friends.

Hmm-mm.

And he married and had – the father married and had a daughter, and this daughter I became very friendly with so I often – on a number of occasions I went to Germany to stay with her.

And she lives in Cologne or near Cologne.

She lived first in Cologne and then in Bensberg which is not far from Cologne. And had a house there. Well, she had a flat and a house, and I used to more or less annually there to stay

with her, and she used to come here. And I'm still in touch with her niece and nephew, the son of Sir Hans Krebs. [01:28:12]

But Krebs came to England so how did she come to Germany, the daughter?

The daughter was –

Yeah.

I mean, she lived in Germany. Her mother was German.

Oh, I see.

Non-Jewish.

Okay, okay.

Her mother was German and lived in Hildesheim during the war.

Okay.

And after the war she came to see her family here.

Get it.

Or her half-family, you know.

Yeah, yeah. Interesting. Yeah, so you've been.

Of course Sir Hans Krebs, as I say, knew my mother when they were children.

And how did your mother – you said she lived quite a long time, almost 100, she died when she was ninety-nine.

Yeah.

How did she come to terms with her past, or how – was she bitter at all or –?

No, she was a very positive person. She was always an optimist and I'm always a pessimist.

Because for her, I mean, it must have been quite hard, her emigration experience.

Well, presumably. We never talked about it and she never talked about it.

But she wrote her memoirs you said.

Well, she wrote her life story, similar to the one that I've done. She wrote it actually in German but somebody translated it, but not very well [laughs].

And she lived in the – what was it called – the Stahl –

Heinrich Stahl House, the last four years of her life.

So that was a home for refugees.

Yes, one of the homes in The Bishops Avenue. **[01:30:01]**

Yeah, in Highgate, wasn't it?

Heinrich Stahl.

Yeah, yeah.

If you remember there was the Leo Baeck one and the – there was another one, what was it called? Also, in The Bishops Avenue. Can't think of the name for the moment.

Yeah, yeah.

Where no doubt – [pause] so now I – thank God I'm still able to drive which is necessary because as I walk very badly, I go by car. But don't go out very much. Happy in my flat.

And how do you feel Gerta, about what's going on today in the world? Being a refugee do you feel affected in a way or –?

No, I just think the world has gone mad. Nothing to do with refugee, all that, it's just the inordinate- stress on Israel when you think for example of the Uighurs, you know, first about thousands killed, then a million in Bangladesh, does anybody ever worry about them? No. What about all – in [inaudible] wars going on, Nigeria, here, there, no. That I find – I'm always on the verge of writing to the newspaper [laughs], but never do.

Ah-ha. Yeah.

It's – we live in a very sad [inaud] [01:32:00] – and the other thing that occurred to me recently, last week, how one day perhaps man will be too clever for his own good and some glitch – we'll all go up in smoke. Not exactly, but you know what I mean?

Yeah, yeah.

I faithfully read the paper every day.

Yeah. Gerta, is there anything I haven't asked you which you want to add which we haven't discussed? Anything else?

[Pause] Not really. Don't think so.

I mean, how do you feel towards Germany today?

Sorry?

How do you feel towards Germany today?

No particular feeling either way. Different generations. Look, everything is so crazy in the world today that – here, there, everywhere. One looks back and thinks it was better but I was talking to my nephew about it funnily enough yesterday and he says, ‘Well, it wasn’t all golden in the earlier days.’

No, but he –

There’s something going on always.

Yeah.

But I think there’s almost a danger that technology, which is a blessing in a lot of ways, in many, many ways, but the reliance on it is a bit of a danger, I think. And, you know, people’s mania with their phones. [01:34:00] I mean, I don’t have a smartphone. I have a little mobile which I have when I’m in the car in case I have a breakdown. That’s more or less it.

But you’re here today surrounded with these beautiful – the beautiful furniture from your childhood home.

Yeah.

Which is quite –

Yes, well, that I’ve always – you know, I’ve always enjoyed that very much, having that. But- *après moi, le déluge* [after me the flood] but, you know, when I think already when I moved

here, I got rid of a whole lot of china, and this, and that, and the other. Still got all the Rosenthal china and all that.

Do you use it? Do you use it [laughs]?

Not daily, no. 'Cos I eat in the kitchen.

Yeah.

I mean, I'm very happy in this flat. It's got a lovely spacious bedroom which is my office as well, and this very spacious room, and a nice size kitchen, so when I moved here that was a...

And that you could accommodate these rather big pieces of furniture.

The funny thing is, how they ever managed to get the furniture into the flat is a mystery to me to this day. 'Cos you can't dismantle that. You can't dismantle that.

Is it walnut? Is it wal – it's beautiful.

How they got it up the stairs into the flat, goodness knows.

Have you got any other objects sort of from Germany, anything else you value or –?

Yes, my teddy bear.

Okay.

But he was actually my mother's teddy bear. [01:36:02]

Tell us about the teddy bear.

Well, when my mother and her cousin were in Switzerland in 1911 – they were already adult – and jokingly it must have come up that they were – wanted a teddy bear. So, the brother of my cousin, my mother's cousin, sent for two teddy bears to Berlin, two Steiff teddy bears, yes? And they tossed – one was a white and one was a brown. My mother got the brown one. And he's sitting up there on top of my bookshelf. So, he came with her from Germany, or he must have come in the lift.

Right.

And he survived. Well, I had him – he was a little poorly so I had him patched up a little, but I look at him in – when I'm lying in bed, I look at him. You must look at him.

We're going to film him.

Hmm?

We're going to film this teddy bear. Has he got a name?

Teddy. No, he never had a name. Never had a name. Not that I'm aware of, no. So I always marvel that my mother brought him to England. He used to sit in her bedroom [laughs].

So you took him over. You took him.

Yeah, I'm very fond of him. As I say, I see him every – whenever I'm in bed I can see him.

Okay.

And he's – there's also a little doll, a French doll, which is disintegrating entirely, which I was given in France when I – he's called Armond – which I was given when I had my appendix out.

In Nice.

Yes. And his clothes are disintegrating entirely. [01:38:02]

But him – you brought him? You brought him to England.

Yes, yes, yes.

So the past is a little bit important in that way.

Hmm?

So the past is a little bit –

In that respect, yes. That's the only thing of my past.

Armond and – [laughs] –

Yeah, the teddy.

And teddy.

He will go to my nephew when – in due course [laughs].

Okay Gerta, if there is nothing else –

No, I can't –

Maybe I would like to ask you have you got any message for the future for anyone who might watch this interview, based on your experiences?

Just keep going.

What do you think helped you to settle here and to have a new life, and your mother and your brother?

Sorry?

What do you think helped you to create a new life in this country?

No idea. Sanity [laughs]? Ordinarity. Can't tell you. How does one know that about oneself?

I guess you could speculate or think what— you know.

I don't speculate [pause].

But maybe you think that by not dwelling on the past it helps you to – you know, to kind of I guess –

I don't think about it.

Yeah.

I mean, I keep a diary but only a baby diary, so I can sometimes look back if I want – you know, what did I do then and then? But really only for my own benefit so I know what I did last year or what –

Ah.

You know, birthdays in it and that sort of thing.

So when did you start it?

I'm a fairly organised person.

So when did you start your diary?

Uh?

When did you start the diaries?

Start my diaries?

Yeah.

Oh, I think they go back to – God knows, fifties/sixties, I don't know. Take up too much space.

[01:40:06]

So do you ever read what you've written some years ago? Do you ever read it?

No. Well, you had a little diary and – I mean, the early diaries don't say very much, but I've done – the daily diaries have only been in the last few years. But just, you know, what I did, appointments.

Yeah. So why do you do that? Why do you keep a diary?

For my own benefit. If I can't remember – if I want to look back on something, what did I do then, or when was that, and – you know, I have to look at diaries for birthdays. In fact, I must phone my second cousin once removed whose birthday it is today [laughs].

Yeah.

But I've always felt sorry that I didn't have any cousins, somehow. I've very few family.

Yes, so that – you feel that impacted you.

Yeah, well, that was – I've always known that my parents were only children.

So even – not to do with the Holocaust, just because they didn't have any siblings.

No, they...?

They were only children.

Yes.

Yeah.

Which was unusual in their time.

Yeah, yeah. Any other regrets you have, Gerta? Any other regrets?

[Pause] No doubt there are many but I can't think of them [laughs].

And how do you manage to keep so active? I mean, that's amazing. You're driving, you're writing, you're –

Well, I'm just lucky. You know, who has a say over their genes? **[01:42:02]** I mean, my brother died at eighty-nine, but then he'd had quite a hard life in a way. So...

Why do you think he had a harder life?

Because he had – he was a – when his children were seven and ten his wife died and he brought them up.

'Cos I was going to ask you whether you think the emigration affected him differently to you.

No idea. He was not one to dwell on the past either.

Right.

As far as I'm aware.

So none of you, neither your mother?

No, neither my mother, no. It doesn't do you much good, does it?

Well, I think everyone is different, you know, and –

Yeah, of course everybody's different.

Everyone feels things differently, but I think a lot – when people get older sometimes, you know, the past comes back. Sometimes unexpectedly.

No, I don't think my past comes back to haunt me [laughs]. The past is the past.

Okay, on that we can – [both laugh] it's good to finish. Thank you, Gerta, thank you for sharing your story with us, and we're going to take a break now and then look at some of your –

Sorry?

We're taking a break now. Thank you.

Yeah, would you like some coffee or something?

Yeah, just one second and then we'll break. One moment, one little minute. [Long pause to [01:44:37].

Yes please, Gerta, can you tell me please what you're holding in your hands?

I'm holding a painting of my great-grandfather on my maternal side.

What was his name?

Oppenheimer. Alexander Oppenheimer. No, not what his first name? Anyway, his surname was Oppenheimer.

Thank you. Yes, please.

What?

Can you please describe the two photos in your hand?

These are my maternal grandparents. Alexander and Elsbeth Oppenheimer.

And where would it be taken?

In Hildesheim.

Thank you.

It was taking in – that may have been taken in Berlin. I've no idea when it was taken. Could well have been taken in Berlin.

[Break in recording]

Yes, please.

It's a picture of my father, Dr Norbert Regensburger.

Taken in Braunschweig?

Yes. Does it give the year?

No.

No [pause].

[01:46:15] *Yes, please. Who do we see on the pictures?*

Oh, these were my – pictures of my parents, obviously when they were young.

And how did you get – you said the law firm send it or...?

I don't know what year it was taken.

But who sent you the photograph?

Sorry?

Somebody send you this photograph?

Yes.

You said the law firm?

Yeah. No, my mother had – they sent me this of my father.

Of his law firm in Braunschweig?

Hmm?

The law firm in Braunschweig sent you this photo?

The father, the picture of the father, yeah.

And the law firm still exists today?

Yes, but a different name, etc., etc [long pause to 01:47:21].

Yes, please. What are you holding in your hand?

I'm holding my birth certificate which showed that I was nameless for about three weeks and my father had to go back and register my name.

As Gerta Ruth. Thank you [pause]. Yes, please.

This is the tag I had when I went on the Kindertransport to Belgium.

And how come you still have it today? [01:48:03]

Apparently [laughs].

You kept it all that time.

Well obviously, yes.

Thank you [pause].

[Break in recording]

Gerta, what are you holding in your hand?

Well, my entry certificate to England.

Yeah. The Kindertransport document.

Yes and no because I didn't come on a Kindertransport to England.

But this shows that in a way you did come on the scheme of the Kindertransport from Belgium.

Otherwise –

I don't know because I came as an individual, so I don't know when I acquired it or not. [Long pause to 01:49:28].

This says you arrival date.

Yes.

23rd of August, 19 –

August, 1939 [pause].

Yes, please.

This is a document. My first passport for when I travelled with a friend on a youth hostelling holiday in Belgium.

Thank you.

In fifty – when is it? When was it issued?

[Inaudible] [pause].

[01:50:03] [Break in recording]

Yes, please.

This is a doll I was given when we were living in France, in Nice, for six months and I had my appendix out, and this was a consolation doll, dolly [laughs].

And you brought him to – first to Berlin, then to England.

Yes. And in fact, he's got a split in his face because my brother once broke his face and was made to pay to have him repaired.

And again, you still have him after so many years.

Yes. The worst for wear.

What does he remind you of, Armond?

Without his tie, and torn shirt [pause].

Do you want to repair him or –?

No.

Okay. Thank you.

[01:51:19]

[End of transcript]