IMPORTANT

The Association of Jewish Refugees
2 Dollis Park, London N3 1HF
Tel. 020 8385 3070

ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk

Interview Transcript Title Page

Collection title:	AJR Refugee Voices Archive
Ref. no:	RV303
Interviewee Surname:	Aronson
Forename:	Helen
Interviewee Sex:	Female
Interviewee DOB:	24 April 1927
Interviewee POB:	Pabianice, Poland

Date of Interview:	24 July 2024
Location of Interview:	London
Name of Interviewer:	Dr. Bea Lewkowicz
Total Duration (HH:MM):	5 hours 7 minutes

REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV303

NAME: Helen Aronson

DATE: 24 July 2024

LOCATION: London

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:00]

Today is the 24th of July 2024. We are interviewing Mrs Helen Aronson. My name is Bea Lewkowicz and we are in London. Can you please tell me your name?

My name is Helen Stella Aronson.

And when and where were you born?

I was born in Pabianice, 24 April 1927.

Helen, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Archive.

Thank you.

Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

Yes. There were three siblings in the family. I was the youngest one. There was my sister, Marilla, my brother, Henry. My father was an accountant, work in Łódź, which was the nearest big town near Pabianice. My mother *Hausfrau*, cooking, shopping, the usual. And I went to school, which was actually a Jewish school with Jewish teachers, walking distance.

The hours were from – like from eight to two, two o'clock we used to have main meal, lunch, and then I used to also go back to school, help with library. And we also had sort of a scheme for poor people who used to come in the afternoon. We helped them with lessons and they were given bread and jam and tea in the afternoon.

In the Jewish school?

Yeah.

What was the name of the school?

Mr Klajman's School.

Was he the headmaster or –

Sorry?

Why was it called Mr Klajman?

Well, he was the director.

The director.

Yeah, yeah. **[00:02:00]** And yes, and I was very happy there. And I also belonged to an organisation, Hanoar Hatzioni, as my father was the chairman of the Zionist movement in Pabianice. So, his dream was that Palestine becomes a Jewish state and he attended a lot of meetings with prominent people in Warsaw, here, there, everywhere, and he was just dreaming about Jewish people having their own land. And life was sweet. We went there, we used to go- on an ice- skiing-

Ice skating?

Ice skating. I belonged to those organisations, summer, we used to go on like a – on picnics, I had a lot of friends from school. They were mainly Jewish but I had some Christian friends too. And life was very nice.

Tell us a little bit about – how did your parents get to Pabianice? How – why did they settle – were they – they were not born there?

No, they were not born there but – I don't know. I don't know how they settled at Pabianice, have – my mother's father had a restaurant and lived sort of like two houses from us and I remember from school, first of all I used to go to my grandfather [laughs] say hello and then I used to go home [laughs].

What was the name of the restaurant?

It was – his name was Pinkus Katz.

They must have –

And we lived – where we lived, we lived opposite the market. **[00:04:04]** And twice a week there was a market day, so the peasant used to come with all the fresh produce and everything was fresh, everything was cooked every day, and, you know, my mother spent most of her life in the kitchen. And if they wanted a new hat or something, they used to go to Łódź, which was a big town, industrial town, textile, and plenty of shops and things, and it was – the textile was mainly in German and in Jewish hands in Łódź. And my father worked there and he used to leave very early in the morning and come home very late at night.

As an accountant?

Yes, in Łódź, yeah.

For the textile industry?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes, his boss was a very well-known manufacturer of silk materials and he had a palace and a big factory. And I also had three uncles in London and I was always talking about London. We used to send – they used to send little bits and pieces, sometime from London, little trays. I saw the Tower of London [laughs] and the Tower Bridge and we were very much connected with London.

So, when did they emigrate? When did they –

Well, they emigrated before the First World War and one brother brought for the other one and there were three of them. And of course, they had tough time but they all made money. It was probably much easier at that time [laughs] to do that. **[00:06:01]**

So you had a connection, then, in England.

Yeah. And of them was very, very well-off. He was a big manufacturer of ladies' dresses, called Diana Dress, and they had models and we had photos. We were very much connected with London. And as I said, life was sweet, life was nice, everything was lovely.

So tell us a little bit about Pabianice. How many people lived there? How many Jews?

8000 Jews, 60,000 population. And 8000 Jews, that's quite prominent because of Łódź and people, mainly Jewish people, were connected with textile, there were a couple of synagogues, and it was – there was not much of anti-Semitism or whatever.

You didn't feel any?

No, I didn't personally but my sister who was already in *Gymnasium*, in high school, she did because there were three girls and 600 Polish girls and she started sort of talking about going to Palestine. Well, my parents wouldn't think about it. I mean she was fifteen, sixteen. But anyhow, she went on hunger strikes and eventually they consented, and my father had to pay in advance a year money to a agronomical school called Nahalal for Girls and when she was sixteen she left, and it was just terrible for my parents. **[00:08:04]** That was in 1937.

Yes, at that point they – nobody knew what was coming.

No, no, no, of course not. Course not. And she stayed there and she became an expert on chicken incubators to such extent that she worked in this field for twenty-five years and when she finished, she was given an award from the country. She was quite an expert because I used to go to Israel and help her [laughs] collecting the eggs. And she knew – I mean she used to get eggs from America and keep records of these eggs and father and mother and- and some chicken could wear glasses. And all I had to do help her there, go just collect eggs [laughs] because they were in these batteries.

Did she live in a kibbutz?

Yeah, in a *kibbutz,* yes.

What's the – what was the name of the kibbutz?

The *kibbutz* called Usha. It's about twenty minutes from Haifa.

Right. And what was her –

Kiryat Ata. Miriam Abay [ph].

Miriam Habay [ph]?

Abay [ph], yeah. Yeah. And I was in Israel, well, I don't know how many times, over a year, I used to go there and – and very much connected with the kibbutz. And when she finished her job, she got a award from the country but they had to sell all the chickens because there was no one to look after them [laughs]. The *kibbutz* is still in exist 'cos her son is there, yeah, and my niece is there – her daughter – so yeah. **[00:10:06]**

So she left as a sixteen-year-old?

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And how old were you when she left?

Oh, well, I was – I think I was twelve.

What other memories have you got of growing up?

Well, I used to [overtalking].

What about Jewish holidays or – how [overtalking].

I, well, Jewish holidays, yes, I remember some of them, Passover and so on, but my father worked on Saturday and he used to go to synagogue twice a year or something but we – I had – as I said, I had Christian friends too. I used to go to midnight mass and Christmas and so on because where we lived, we had neighbours who were Christian. And we lived in a flat, it was very primitive, the water was outside but in spite of the cold winters we had water all year round, there was no toilet at home, it was very, very – the life was very primitive. Yet- [laughs] I don't know, we survived.

What was the address of that – where you – your flat?

Number nine Platz Dombrowski [ph] which was actually opposite a church and a marketplace.

So right in the centre.

Yeah.

And who lived with you? So your parents –

My parents and my brother, yes. What I want to say, that my uncle, one of them from London, used to come to visit us and one year, he decided to come with his own car and chauffeur. **[00:12:08]** It was a Hudson and they arrived and parked in this marketplace. The whole town thought it was the King of England [both laugh]. I mean you can imagine something like this. And I mean he used to – he just came quite often to visit us. He was really well – very well-off and I remember once we went for a drive in this big car, all the little children from my [laughs] – from the neighbourhood – and all kinds of things. One day, he brought his cine camera [laughs] and for us children, it was something wonderful.

Yeah, so he came to visit regularly.

Yeah, yeah, one of them.

And television, you said he brought a television?

Sorry?

A television, you said you saw for the first time.

Oh, television. No, that was when I came to England.

Ah, okay, later.

No, but we had radio. We had third people in my town to have a radio which I remember vividly. It was a mechanic from Philips that came from Łódź to instal this radio with a very big speaker and at night you had to sort of like reach out. And there was a party at home, my mother invited all the neighbours and I remember what they were listening to. It was a very well-known singer. His name was Joseph Schmidt, Joseph [English pronunciation] Schmidt, and they were listening to this aria and it was, well, something wonderful [laughs].
[00:14:05]

Where was it? In your parents' – in the living room? Or where was it?

Yeah, yeah, it was in the living room, yes, a big, big sort of – it was wonderful. And then we knew we were the third people and there was only one car in town for the president or whatever and there was horse and carriage, and a tram, we had.

Yes, so – but to Łódź, you went by tram.

Yeah, tram, yeah.

There was a tram connection.

Yeah, yeah. But then everything was walking distance. I mean there was a lovely park.

And you said you played with the neighbours, so it was quite integrated, Jewish [overtalking].

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, yes, yes. Yeah, I must admit I have not experienced any anti-Semitism myself.

Yeah. And at the time did you feel Polish? Did you – I mean and what about [overtalking], you felt –

Yes, yeah, I felt Polish, absolutely. We were taught about Germany with big slogans that, shh, they've got nothing to eat, they are starving, should they even dare, dare to come to Poland, the slogan was, they're not going to get a button. And then three days later they came and I was – we were all standing in the street, watching this army, nobody was walking, cars, soldiers, beautifully dressed, and I looked at these and I thought, are these the people who have nothing to eat? **[00:16:08]** I mean it was [sighs] – the government ran away to England, the few bedraggled army, Polish Army, came with horses. It was absolute mess. Apparently, there was a consignment of boots, only one left ones [laughs]. It was – people told stories-absolutely. And the German just came, there was no – because in Pabianice the population

was quite a lot of German, there was a German *Gymnasium* and so on. They just came in. There was no fighting, there was no nothing.

So there were ethnic Germans?

Yeah.

Yeah, in Pabianice and in Łódź also.

Also, yeah. Yeah. So they just came in, just like that.

So when did they come in to Pabianice, the German Army?

It was about three or four days after the war broke out.

Yeah, so 3rd, 4th of September.

And then straightaway it started. Just [sighs] they were collect– first of all, they were burning the synagogues then they were cutting all the religious beards and then I mean- there were some – before the war there were this thing – built this, um, oh, from oh, God, what's the word [laughs]. You put in the underground, you sit in the underground.

Like a bunker or –

It's like thing [ph]. And they were collecting people to work to put back sand [ph] and one of them was my father and my brother and my cousin. **[00:18:08]** And for the first time my – it was just – they were – they had to bury each other and for the first time I saw my father was crying. He came home crying and we realised that the war is with us. We had to wear the yellow star and – but still, we still lived our own place and we had contact with – we could have food brought in and so on. And then –

So what did – Helen, what I try to – so was it a surprise for you? And you were twelve years old.

Yes, yes.

So you didn't expect – it was not what you expected.

No, no, no, no.

Because from today's perspective, you know, it's difficult to understand but at the time –

No, no, it was –

Had you heard about what was going on in Germany or –

No.

Did you know anything?

No, we didn't hear anything. And when America and England decided to join the war, my father was very great – [laughs] in fact English [inaudible] he was several times in England, my grandfather, he said, now, America and England very kind fighting, in few days' time, it's all going to finish. And in 1941 they allocated a ghetto in Pabianice and because we didn't live in the attachment, we had to move a few streets, in old part of Pabianice. **[00:20:05]** So we were given a room and a ghetto was formed but it was not closed, but like six p.m. it was like *Sperre* [here: curfew] and nobody was allowed to go.

Curfew?

But at that time the German soldiers decided to have a run into the Jewish homes. So, we had a few of them came. My mother and my father spoke fluent German. And I was wearing a cardigan which I knitted myself from pieces of wool. So, one of them said he wanted this

cardigan and my mother said, do you need this for the people in the Siberia? Well, we had a good hiding, both of us, and they took the cardigan. And six o'clock, we children used to meet sort of although it was *Sperre*, we couldn't go out but we tried to get together and talk about when the war is finish. My father taught me a bit of writing in German, and we were hoping every day that America will happen.

Helen, sorry to interrupt you. Can I ask you, what happened to your school? So, you went –

No, the whole thing was finished. I mean nobody –

So the minute the Germans came, the school was closed.

Yes, yes, yeah. Nothing worked any more.

So that was the end of your schooling.

Yeah, yeah. It was the end of my schooling, yes. **[00:22:00]**

So you were twelve?

Yeah.

So then everyone just stayed at home?

Yeah.

So had your father –

We still had a little contact with Christian people because the ghetto was not closed [laughs].

So they could come and see you?

So they could come and bring some, you know, food and things so that was still okay.

And did they? Did they come?

Yes, yes, they did. And as I said, we could meet because everything was closed from the outside but we had between the houses had little street [ph] open, so we met, we used to talk about Israel and hoping any day that it's going to be back as it was.

What happened to your old – the flat? You left, you had to leave everything behind?

Everything behind.

What were you able to take to the new –

Just a rucksack.

What did – do you remember what you took in your rucksack?

Yeah. My mother, my brother and myself, we were together. We were forming an eight in this – middle of the street and then – it was 1942 – and then we were walking. The Christian population – it was Saturday, I remember, September, hot day – the Christian population was just watching. And we walked in the middle in the street. We had no idea where we going, what's going to happen. Eventually, we arrive on a big well-known football place which actually belonged to the richest man in Pabianice, was a German, belong to him, and then we were segregated there. **[00:24:07]** People able to work separate, older people and children separate, and it was crying and shouting and it was just terrible. So, I held on to my mother and my brother. Somehow or other my father disappeared. We were standing there, standing in the heat, no water, no nothing, and suddenly like three a.m. we heard trams coming and we were all shovelled into these trams. We heard about Łódź Ghetto because some people managed to escape and come to Pabianice. And my father, who was in the *Ältestenrat* [Council of Elders], he was in the Pabianice – managed to get these people cards, ration cards, from people who died.

The one who escaped from Łódź?

Yeah, yeah.

Because the Łódź Ghetto was already – was –

Łódź Ghetto was already closed to anyone. So, he helped these people by giving them these cards of people who died. Anyhow, I'm coming back to the [inaudible]. We're standing, and standing, and standing, and then the trams came and we loaded on these trams and next time we knew, we were outside the notorious Łódź Ghetto where everything was already closed and we were taken into a disused prison. **[00:26:18]** You can imagine the people crying and hungry and don't know anything. And in the morning, Chaim Rumkowski, who was the eldest [inaudible] came to see us.

Of Łódź Ghetto?

Yeah.

Explain who he was, Chaim Rumkowski.

Yeah. And he said, you are the first town that came from the area to the ghetto and I will try and find accommodation for you but the main thing is to get a ration card and work, work, work, and I'll do my best. So, the parents of the children started to cry. They said, Mr Rumkowski, what has happened to our children? So, he said, oh, don't worry about your children because my very good friend, Mordechai Chmura with whom I work before the war in various orphanages together. I know that he volunteered and went with all the children from Pabianice and I know that he will look after them. So, when my mother heard that, she came to him. She said, I'm his wife and these are my two children. And he said, well, I will try and help you as much as I can. **[00:28:01]** And I must admit that he did because his power was Queen of England. It was enough that he instruct to give you something. The whole thing was to be able to get a little bit more food. So, my brother got a job in offices

which were liaison between the ghetto and the German. Everything that was made in the ghetto went through these offices and things that came to the ghetto. And he spoke fluent German. My mother worked in a canteen which was giving ration every week to people and I was sent to a orphanage which Marysin, which is near Łódź, a area which is a little bit green and wooden houses and little bit like, you know, summery things and few green trees and so on, and there I was to look after orphanage children. They were not much older than I was.

No, because – how old were you?

And they all had to work. Pardon?

How old were you by then? This was when, exactly?

I was maybe thirteen, fourteen.

So when did you – sorry to interrupt you, Helen, but when was the date when you arrived from in Łódź, in the ghetto?

It was written somewhere there, on the thing. We arrived in – I think it was May, 12th of May 1930 – '42, '42, yeah. **[00:30:06]** So we had to go to work every day. And they were wearing these wooden clogs and these poor children had just a little bit of bread with jam or something. And we had to go to work. We were making straw mattresses. And I was with them.

So did you stay there, at the orphanage?

Yes, in the factory too. And then we used to come home in the evening, so late night. They had a little bit of soup and [sighs] they were always hungry. Some of them were German-origin, they had – they only spoke German. And –

What were the ages in the orphanages?

Well, eight, nine, ten, not much younger than I was. And I worked together with a friend of mine. And –

Did you manage – what were your languages, Helen? We've discussed –

Polish. Polish.

Your main language was Polish?

Yes, yes.

But you spoke some German?

Well, I could understand a little bit but –

Yiddish at all, or –

No. No. So I used to tell them stories, these kids, about Hansel and Gretel, that when they arrived to the house, it was made of bread [laughs]. But in 1941 at that time, I was not well, I suffered with various cysts of my body through the change of everything and I had to go to hospital and have this something opened. **[00:32:10]** And I was told that the German decided to make a – close the orphanage and evacuate all the children. [Gets upset] And I know that when they were loaded on that – these vans, they were calling my name, something I can't forget. Also, they decided to send old people, just like that, so my mother went. Because my brother had connection and he had a sort of a like a document saying that his family are not to be sent, well, it didn't mean anything. So, my mother's – so he knew more or less which area they will be looking for. So, my mother went from one street to another, to another, to another, to another. So, that's one episode. The other episode is myself. My brother – my mother said, I'd like you take some lunch for Henry. So, she put the food in a container and the distance was maybe three, four miles walking where he worked in the centre of the ghetto. So, I got to his office and left his lunch and I was going to go back home. **[00:34:00]** Suddenly out of the blue, lorries arrive and they're taking anyone at random and I am in the

middle. People started running, I started running, I didn't know where. I run into a big building there. And they were screaming, all in – rows [ph] of – in rows [ph] and loads [ph], with dogs with things. So, I run into this building, I don't know where it was, and run upstairs, everywhere the doors were already open, and run into a room which was empty and put myself in bed, inside the bed. Now, I don't know, I don't know what happen. I'm in that bed with the cover on all. Nobody's in this, the room was empty, and I'm hearing screaming, all in rows [ph] and screaming. They – and I can hear they come to this room and they're standing near my bed. And they go. And I'm lying in this bed, lying in this bed, I don't know how long. And I then – I looked out very timidly and I see it's dark and I thought, well, I better go home. In the meantime, my brother realised that I'm in great danger and because of his job, he decided to look for me. **[00:36:00]** He goes to the place where they – Radogoszcz, which is the station where they collect all the people, he can't find me anywhere. He can't find me. He goes home, he says, you know what happened? Helen's been taken. Well, you can imagine my mother, the neighbours, the crying, the thing. And then I arrived [laughs]. I don't know, I don't know, it's – I don't know what you call it. It just happened that way, like people say. I gave a talk once in Barbican. A woman stand up and she said, oh, aren't you – what did she say – sorry, or something, or guilt – oh, don't you feel guilty that you are alive and so many people died? For a moment, I didn't know sort of, you know, what to say. And then I thought and I said, well, maybe I am alive for a purpose because if I wouldn't be here to tell you all this, you wouldn't know. But that's what I mean. Every hour it was something. Every – and then was a [sighs] – the fight of being alive and food [laughs]. My birth – so the compact, you see, *Jaś i Małgosia*, it was a present from my brother in 1944, Litzmannstadt Ghetto, because I always talked to these kids about Hansel –

What did he give you? What did he –

Didn't – the compact that is on my – I'll show you in a minute. **[00:38:01]**

We'll look at it.

So – yes. Yeah. And it was a struggle of –

Daily life.

Being alive. My brother had typhoid, I looked after him and then he was in hospital, and then they decided to confiscate the whole hospital and he was there. It was every day, every day, every minute a struggle to live but then the [sighs] – how can I say. It's something within you that you just want to see from one day to another.

To survive, to –

And then of course, the end was this, that my cousin who lived in Łódź with her husband and two children, decided to come into the ghetto. And all working there, we had several doctors in the camp, and we all had poison because at that time we didn't exactly know what is happening in Auschwitz but we knew that nobody's coming back, so we had some poison with us. And we knew that – oh, so this is – oh, yes, and then 1944, the ghetto was closed and everybody was going, except they decided, the German, there's still some money to be made, so they chose a few hundred people to clean the ghetto. **[00:40:13]**

After everyone else was deported?

Gone. And my brother, myself and my mother, we were among them. So the – what was our job? Our job was to clean up the ghetto and still make a lot of money, because you went into these rooms, dinner was on the table, nobody was in these rooms anymore, so we had to segregate, the furniture separate, the crockery separate, the – everything in piles, in the street and lorries – it was winter – and lorries used to come and collect it all and take it all to Germany.

And the size of there? I mean Łódź was the biggest ghetto, so it must have been –

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, several hundred people were kept to do this job and we knew that when this job was finished, we'll follow the others. I had a job to clean the offices of the German officials and one of them was the *Gauleiter,* [Nazi term for district leader or provincial governor] Biebow, who was in charge of the ghetto.

Tell us for the record, what was his name, his full name, please?

Hans Biebow. And – but I had to do the cleaning when no one was there, so it was very early in the morning or very late at night. **[00:42:00]** I used to come ten – oh, yes, and then because of all these people, they decided to put us in a camp which was run by a Jewish man, Mr Bruder. So, women were separately. It was at this used factory, and men were separately.

So this was only for the last remaining – for a small group?

Yeah, a few hundred people. A few hundred people. So I had – we had – I had a bed with my mother, we had a table, and we had a little – like a Primus machine, we could cook a little bit. But every so often this Biebow, who was a drunk and whatever, used to have fun coming to the camp and few people could die or whatever. It was nothing. And it was situated very near the Jewish cemetery. The driver of this Biebow, he was a Polish German and we made sort of friends with him and by money, we knew when he's due to go to the camp, so we used to send, stay in, don't go out, Biebow is coming, and so on. And this chap, for money he was giving details and telling us. And the right hand of this Biebow was a Mr Krampf that I work for. He quite liked me but I must not be seen, so I had to work at night, light fires, toilets, everything, and – or very early in the morning. So, this went for a while. **[00:44:01]** One day I'm cleaning the office of this Biebow secretary. There is a key in the drawer with a note, "My name is Halina Schmidt. I'm not like Biebow. I will leave some food for you in my desk and here is the key, so just look at my desk." Right, I opened the desk, there is some food and things. One day we decided to meet. Again, not allowed to be seen, somewhere behind some buildings. And she said, well, I'm actually in love with one of your friends, a Jewish boy in the camp. Her name was Halina Schmidt [ph]. And this boy said, well, I'm invited to her home in Łódź to a party.

She was, what, Polish?

German.

She was German Polish?

German, yes. Volksdeutsche.

Volksdeutsche, in Łódź?

Yeah. And he said, I want to go, this friend of mine. Well, he was blond, Aryan, perfect German, so we dressed him up in this leather coat and boots and thing, and off he went.

What was his name?

His name was – I've forgotten now. [Inaudible], I've forgotten. But her name's Halina Schmidt [ph]. Off he went. He comes back after the weekend, back. We said, well? Well, how was it? **[00:46:02]** He said, well, there were dignitaries in her home, SS men, and he spent the whole weekend with her. Okay. Then one day there's a raid, air raid, and we were told that it's done by Russian women or something, and were just standing laughing, oh, it's wonderful to be killed by a bomb [laughs]. One day – and I think that some of the boys managed to have some sort of a radio and we've realised that something is happening with the Russian Army. Right, one day, I'm opening the – her desk and what do I see? A revolver. I said, Helen, I feel that the war is coming to an end and you might need that. I was scared [laughs]. I was scared to take this damned thing in my hand [laughs]. And then my cousin approached me and said, look, my husband was working on a bunker and tonight I want you to be ready with your family and we're going to that bunker, which was actually situated opposite the German Criminal Police. **[00:48:00]** It was winter, 13° cold, we were ill-prepared for anything like this. We gathered our eiderdown, bit of dry food, and off we went. It was a hole made into ground, with a desk, and there were maybe ten of us. We went, we sat, we covered ourselves with eiderdown. I can't hear anything, nothing. Every so often my brother opens the thing, quiet, you can't hear anything, can't see anything. Oh, before I went, this boy, my boyfriend, I said, look, we don't know what's going to happen but I am going. I'll be – if you are alive, look for me in this area.

What was his name, your boyfriend?

Shlomo Wysocki. He came from a little town near Łódź. Zduńska Wola, it was called. Anyhow, we're sitting there, sitting there. We couldn't last longer than a week or so there because we had no [overtalking], no food, no nothing. [Sighs] One day, my mother – so we heard a lot of thumping over ground, like big boots. And my mother said, I think I can hear Russian. Russian? **[00:50:00]** You must be crazy. So anyhow, my brother very, very cautiously opens this entrance and hears someone's calling my name. I'm opening this thing and I'm facing, face to face with a Russian soldier and he says, the war is over and you are free. [Gets emotional] Well, how can you describe that? And then we hear that the chap who did this Russian offensive is a Jewish man, Benyamin [ph] something, he was. My mother spoke Russian. And the Polish government came straightaway. We had a friend, my father's friend, lived there, gave us a key because the Russian – our luck was that the Russians were coming very quickly and the Germans simply ran away, because they came in the morning to count us, seven graves were ready for us in the cemetery – I saw it. And because the Russians were coming very quickly, they simply ran away.

Which means the Germans found you before the Russians?

Sorry?

Before the Russians came, the Germans –

The German ran away.

Found you – no, but they knew where you were. No.

No, no, no, no. The Russians ran away – the German ran away.

But those graves, you said they had prepared the graves.

The graves were afterwards and I saw – I was in the Jewish cemetery and they were ready for us. **[00:52:03]**

Meaning for the last Jews, they –

Yeah, to finish us off.

The plan was –

Before, yeah. Yeah. And that's how I was liberated. But then I remember the agony started. You ask people, people were coming slowly back, have you seen this one, have you seen this one? I couldn't believe that my father is not alive. All we had was just we were worry, it was not easy. It was extremely, extremely difficult.

Yeah, because you had to face the reality.

To adjust.

A new completely –

And this chap – wait for it – this Russian commandant, Jewish, stayed with us and he said, well, tonight we're having a party. So, the jeep arrived with half a cow [laughs]. Some eggs arrived and we made advocaat and sandwich. And there were something we've never – five years we were starving. And there was a party and in our – oh, we had keys straightaway from the Polish government to help –

To what?

In Łódź.

You got a key of a flat?

Yeah, yeah. And there was a piano in this. There was a lovely flat. And he brought musicians with the army and there was music and there were my – our neighbours who survived with us. **[00:54:03]** And you can imagine, first time we see food and things and so on. And it went on for some time.

This was when, Helen? What was the date? When was the liberation of the ghetto in Łódź?

Um, I've written somewhere. I've – it was January 1945. January, cold winter. Right, in the middle of the night- so this Russian officer who liberated now stayed with us. We hear some movement in the kitchen. He had two drivers with him. Well, they were dead drunk. They were trying to go out through a cupboard. So, he gets up and they became a little bit drunk and they call him a Jew, [inaudible]. He takes the revolver [laughs]. He's going to shoot them there and then. My mother started pleading with him. She said, look, please leave – you can see they're drunk and – and what I want to tell you, that five a.m. in the morning these Russian soldiers, the jeeps, everything was outside, off they went to Berlin, just like nothing ever happened. And Stalin was God. Stalin was God.

Helen, at that time did you know what happened to your father, at that point?

No, no, no. Little by little I got to know. **[00:56:01]** So that's it, that's how I'm here. It just happened that way, that's all. There's no other explanation. I wasn't more clever, I wasn't more – so when I – when they made this film about Rumkowski they wanted me to say that he was a collaborator. I wasn't going to have it. I said, look, if he didn't do it, they will come and do it themselves. What –

Tell us what happened.

Maybe, maybe, maybe they thought that by making this ghetto a working ghetto, it will survive.

Yeah. Tell us what happened to Rumkowski, for somebody who doesn't know.

Yes, I know what happened to Rumkowski 'cos I saw him going with all his family, the last transport, and apparently when he arrived in Auschwitz he said, what is this? He couldn't believe what it is. And I don't know, the rumours are that he was actually killed by a Jew – by Jews.

Who accused him of collaborating?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's – the film is very good. I – they sent me a copy and it was under the History Channel.

Yeah. But do you think it's a more complex –

It's – look, I mean we were entirely in their hands. What – all right, he wanted to make I think a Jewish state. It was a Jewish state. He was giving – there were marriages, there was theatre, there were hairdressers, there were concerts. **[00:58:04]**

The police?

The police. It was a complete state.

Did you see him also once you were in the ghetto? Did you regular – did you see him? Not when he went –

Yeah, yeah, because he used to come. He used to come to the orphanage. And it was enough to be seen with him that you were already privileged.

And do you think he helped you in a sense because [overtalking] of your father? Because of his connection to your father?

Yes, yes. Yes, I said that in my testimony that I – he definitely helped us because the whole thing in the ghetto was getting a little bit more food. So, after the job I had with the orphanage I was working in a factory making sweets, *Zuckerwarenfabrik,* and the sweet –

Zuckerwarenfabrik?

Yes. And the sweets were for export. We were – we had a police watching us all the time, when we went in and we came out. We could eat while there. [Laughs] How many sweets can you eat? And we were making honey, we were making sweets, we had expert people, experts, and I was working there.

Helen, I think we should do a break. I have more questions for you [inaudible]. I think now you should take something.

Right, yes. Oh, gosh, look at the time.

We'll have a break.

We'll go and have something to eat.

And then continue. Is that good? Good for you?

Yes.

Okay, let's do that.

[Break in recording]

Helen, I know we got now already towards liberation but I'd like to go back a little bit. ***[01:00:03]*** *I'd like to go back to when you were separated from your father, when you were, you know, when you were all assembled. And at the time, what did you understand what was going on? I mean…*

[Sighs] Well, [sighs] well, we knew we are – we were in Łódź Ghetto and we had a job to do and we were just hoping that whatever is there, the hardship, won't take long and we get back to normal. But in the meantime, it was very hard.

Yes, 'cos the – I mean so many people in the ghetto died just of starvation.

People were dying. You saw people lying –

So, what did you – sorry to ask you this but what did you see? I mean in terms of –

People dying in the street from hunger. But as I said, we lived – which was also a ghetto but a little bit better where all the dignitaries lived. It was a bit of greenery, some green trees and it was a little bit like far away from the main ghetto.

So describing in terms of – can you describe the area [overtalking]?

Yes, it was Marysin. Marysin. Actually when I was in Poland a few years ago we went there by car. I wanted to locate the house but I couldn't. **[01:02:01]** I couldn't find it. It's all changed.

So Marysin was part of the ghetto?

It was part of the ghetto.

But it was –

But I was as I said where all the people, dignitaries, lived, and Rumkowski lived. He had a palace there. And it was just a little bit of greenery, a little bit different.

And it was because Rumkowski helped you?

Yes, yes, yes, he did.

Yeah. And then you started telling us that – so you worked for the orphanage.

Yeah.

But you also said you had an operation and you didn't finish the story quite. What happened to you?

Yes. Well, it was because of the change of diet and all and my periods stopped and I had boils, every so often on my body, which were getting septic and they had to be opened. We had very good doctors and hospitals in the ghetto and that's what happened. When the children were sent out, I was not there 'cos I was in the hospital at that time.

So your name was on the list. You said your name was on that list with the orphanage.

Oh, that – oh, later on, later on, they still even when we already were all a few hundred people left, they still wanted to send people who were old and not very good and my mother was on that list. So, the German that I worked in this – working in the – cleaning the offices, his name his Krampf. Later on, after the war I learnt that he was one of the commandment [ph] in Chełmno. **[01:04:00]** But he took quite a liking to me, so when my mother was on the list, I came to him and I said, Mr Krampf, I have to say goodbye because I'm going with my mother. Well, as I said, he sort of, I don't know, quite liked me and he crossed her off. So, there were so many…

Helen, you were – I mean a young teenager I guess. Did you ever feel like, say, working – did you feel vulnerable as a young woman? I mean did you ever experience any – apart from the obviously all the other situation, any sort of, you know?

No, no.

What's the word, I don't know what the word is but I guess –

Advance –

Sexual threats or that sort of thing, or was –

No, no.

Because I know –

No, many times though- *"Schade, Helen, dass Du Jüdin bist". Rassenschande* [racial defilement]- it was – not done.

Oh, but that was said to you?

Yeah, that pity, I am Jewish.

Did you witness any – I mean - any sort of violence against young women?

No, no. No.

Because I know that obviously it was an issue for some –

No. No, no, I didn't witness anything.

So when you worked for them, they behaved properly, in a sense. ***[01:06:00]*** *I mean –*

Well, [coughs] I…

It's the wrong word.

[Coughs] Sorry. I didn't see anybody when I worked. I worked on my own. I could not be seen, so that's why I had to work in these hours when the offices were empty.

But you did know them that you could say, I'm leaving, or – this Krampf, for example.

Well, I used to come and go on my own. I used to go back to the camp like, ten, eleven o'clock at night, nobody around, quiet. But there was one incident that happened during that time. We had a very well-known doctor, Dr Weiskopf, his name was, in Łódź. And apparently this Dr Weiskopf and his family found a bunker and hid themselves in the bunker and they were denounced. And we saw Biebow, this *Gauleiter*, going with some other people and found him. And when they approached the bunker, Biebow was hit by a stone. And then we saw, all behind curtains, the whole family taken out. And he said to him, what have I done to you? So, he said, no, you didn't do anything to me but to millions of other people. And we were behind curtains watching. Biebow came out with all of them and they were all killed straightaway and we were just waiting for percussion [ph]. **[01:08:05]** We were just waiting, what he's going to do after. So, the whole family of this Dr Weiskopf perished that way.

And you saw? You saw it from your –

I saw the family. And I knew the doctor because he was my mother's doctor. My mother suffered with stomach, with – yeah, he was a well-known doctor. And in camp, we also had prominent doctors. And after the war, I decided to do something for this girl, Halina Schmidt, and for the first time in my life I was in a Polish court, rehabilating [ph] her, telling what she did for me. And at the same time, they found this Mr Krampf who now appeared that he was commandant in Chełmno and he was sentenced to death and I was one of the witnesses. For the first time in my life I was in a court. And he said, oh, and the same Helena Chmura said he will – that she will do something for me in return. And I said, I think I did. I remember still, stand up, and I said I did, but I didn't know that he was a commandant. So, he was sentenced to death. They also found another man who was one of the people in charge with Biebow. He was an ex-prison-something. **[01:10:00]** He had this horrible leather bat that he hit people. And they never found Biebow. He escaped. He was a rich man before the war. He was connected with coffee plantation. They never found him. But they found this other Schwind, his friend. I remember reading in a paper.

Schwend?

Schwind, his name was, who was –

And Biebow was tried in absentia? Or what –

I don't know. I don't know. I never heard anything.

But when was that, um, the court? You said went –

After the – yes, when we were liber –

'46?

Yeah. I must admit that the Polish government came straightaway with the Russian and straightaway people were given flats and keys to restart their life. And as I said, one of the men who worked in the Polish government was my father's friend. And my brother got a job straightaway and I got a job. I was working in an office.

In Łódź?

In Łódź before I – because we had no money, we just had no clothes, we were – we just had what we were wearing, and we had this flat.

Just to come back a little bit. So, when you said they operated, was it – there was no hospital? Or how –

Oh, yes, very – I mean I've donated to the- Wiener Library 200 photographs from Łódź Ghetto I had and you could see the nurses, doctors, we – it was fully equipped. **[01:12:04]**

And how did you have these photographs? Who took those photographs?

I don't know. I got it after the war.

Okay, okay. So, you were in that hospital while that orphanage was closed?

Yeah. Yeah. Yes, I was in there.

And also you said your brother was very ill. Maybe tell us a little bit more about that.

My brother developed typhoid. At first, I [sighs] tried to look after him myself but then he had to go to hospital and he was there for a while. I used to go and visit him and bring him some food and he was getting better and due to be discharged when out of the blue we hear that they decide to evacuate the whole hospital. And my brother is there. My mother and myself, we run outside the hospital, commotion, people are taken out, Germans, screaming, and we don't know what to do. We knew he is there. So, a doctor comes out whom we know and we said, have you seen my brother? He said no, I have not seen him. We stayed in this hospital, people screaming, people being evacuated, ill people, other people. We can't see my brother anywhere. We come home. We don't know what to do. We come home. Four o'clock at night, my brother comes in, all black with soot. **[01:14:03]** He said when he realised what's happening, he put a white coat, sees a nurse, and trying to sort of take the people out. But then he saw that this German looking at him but he didn't look like a nurse. I mean he was thin. So, he realised this is no good, so he ran away and hid himself in a chimney.

So similar to what you did.

Yeah.

In a different way.

Yeah. Yeah.

So, you both knew that to be taken and deported, you completely understood that-

Oh, yes, yeah, yeah. Oh, yes, we knew by then, yeah. So I know it's – everything is just, I don't know. I don't know, it just happened that way. Then he was in Australia. He lived in Australia for – after the war and I was there several times then unfortunately, he had cancer and buried in Melbourne. Yeah, I was three times on my own in Australia.

Helen, I was going to ask you also because I know there were deportations, there were a few Sinti and Roma in Łódź Ghetto.

Oh, yes, yes, there was – [laughs] I've got a very nice film about this doctor who's talking about this Roma and –

Yeah. Did you come across anyone when you were in Łódź?

No, I didn't.

Did you know about them?

No, no, I didn't. **[01:16:00]**

I mean there must have been so many –

No, I didn't know of that. I only learned afterwards.

Yeah. And were you with other people from – other people you knew in Łódź?

Yes. Yeah.

Yes. So, your friends or –

Yeah, well, this Shlomo Wysocki.

So tell us, how did you – he was – he knew you from before?

Yes, yes. So anyhow, so we got together after the war. He was my first love and he wanted to go to straightaway to Palestine but he was caught and nobody was allowed. He did the illegal way and he left. And he contacted my sister, he got to Israel somehow [laughs]. And my brother and my mother thought, well, he's not good enough for me [laughs]. And then when the book came out, Łódź Ghetto Album book, with the photograph, I went to Israel and I said to my niece, I want to – I don't know where he is but I know he had a son, I'd like to contact him and give him the book. So, she went on the Internet and she said, never mind the son, I found him [both laugh]. He lives in Haifa, his second wife, and so I said, okay, I'll make contact and go and visit him, which I did, in Netanya, he lived. So, he – we reminisced. Since he was this second marriage, and I thought to myself, what did I see in this man? [Both laugh]. **[01:18:00]** I got fooled [laughs]. Yes, so that's it.

You had no regrets?

No, no, no.

But tell me, because you were talking that you met with other youngsters, what – in these terrible circumstances in Łódź, you said there was some music. What did you do apart from – do you remember?

I – my boyfriend was the policeman who looked after Rumkowski. His son, Eismann [ph], his name was, he was my boyfriend. We used to go concerts and thing. I was invited to their home. And yeah, it was – we had a social life. I had friends –

What – who played what? What music was played there?

Yes, classical music and there were theatres and reviews and hairdressers and you name it, it was a Jewish state. And Rumkowski was giving weddings, officiating weddings and he had absolute power. It was – if you had seen, being with him, just being with him, the power was just like the Queen of England. If I wanted a pair of shoes or something, I contacted, we

could go and get it. And my brother's job was quite – supposed to be safe but with German, it didn't mean anything. One honoured something, one tore it.

I mean your luck was that you were – that you managed to stay on.

Yeah, yeah.

In Łódź. ***[01:20:00]*** *With a few other people, not [inaudible], yeah.*

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So, it was just – I don't know, the Russians were coming very quickly, that was the whole thing. After liberating Auschwitz, the next town was Łódź Ghetto, and maybe Rumkowski, it was the only ghetto who was first started and last finished. 750 people.

And what do you think helped you? I mean you witnessed violence and had experienced hunger and this threat of deportation. What do you think helped you in this situation as a young girl?

I don't know. I don't know. It was just the urge [ph] of knowing what the next day will bring. We didn't know much what's going on and some, you know, the Warsaw upbringing.

Uprising?

Yeah, and when the Russian, we thought, oh, something will happen, just blow out. And when we had our flat and so on, the things were going on. Whoever was alive to come and live with us and me and my mother cooked for them and one of them was a Russian soldier which we burned his uniform. **[01:22:00]**

Why? He –

Escaped from the Russian Army. Yes, I met him later on in Los Angeles. He was in America.

And just to come back to the lady, to the woman who helped you.

Yes. Well, I don't know what happened. I think they did get married after the war.

Oh, to her Jewish boyfriend.

Yes, yeah, to this Jewish boyfriend, but I lost touch. I had some friends in Israel that from my town that, and I have one friend in America that wrote actually a book about Pabianice and about my family and – yeah.

Was the boy from Pabianice, the one –

No, he was – my boyfriend? No, Zduńska Wola.

No, the one, the – sorry.

The book?

Yeah.

Oh, yes, yeah. We were in the same school. Yeah. North Carolina in this [ph].

But when she lived – when she gave you the revolver, was the idea that you needed it against the Russian soldiers? Or anyone?

Well, against whatever. She said, I feel the war is coming to an end and you might need that. She was lovely.

So, was she acquitted in the court? You said –

Yes, yes.

She was acquitted?

Yeah.

Did she help other people as well? Do you know then what –

I don't know. I don't know, but he was – she was the secretary of Biebow. You saw the photo of Biebow, because I have got photographs, Biebow and Rumkowski and – because they sent me photographs from the people who made this Henryk Ross exhibition. **[01:24:03]**

Tell us, what is that Henryk Ross exhibition, for somebody who doesn't know?

Well, so it all started with this photograph that I found myself beneath the book and then he decided – oh, yes, the Henryk Ross was this. He was a photographer before the war in Poland and then during the war he took photographs of people hanging and whatever he can. He was in the same camp with me, with his wife, who was not Jewish, she was Christian. And then we were liberated together. And he had several hundred slides of life in the ghetto, so what does he do before? He wanted to make sure that these things are alive and he goes out from the camp and buries them somewhere outside the ghetto, in a garden or whatever. He survives the war, like me, same camp, and he goes out afterwards, digs them all out and they make into a exhibition and book and things and –

What did he do with it immediately after the war, with all these pho – so he had a camera in Łódź?

Yes.

In the ghetto.

Yeah.

Amazing that he could keep it.

Yes, yes. Well, he survived these things. And then I learnt that when they had the Eichmann trial in Israel, he came and produced these photographs. **[01:26:12]** And I understand that his exhibition went all over Europe and it's still on in Canada.

And on one of the photos, you're –

It's me.

It's you. We're going to look at it afterwards.

Yeah, yeah, I'll show you the book. It's me. I mean [laughs] when it was discovered, I was crying, I was laughing, I just couldn't believe it, that my daughter recognised me. And it says they're taken after the liberation in Camp Jakuba18.

Oh, so it was taken just shortly after the liberation?

Yeah, yeah.

18th of January 1945.

Yeah.

So how did it feel like, suddenly seeing yourself on this –

I'm telling you, I was crying, I was laughing. I just couldn't believe it. And that took a whole different kettle of fish because everybody was connected with this. My daughter's friend was in New York. He said, oh, I just read about your mother in New York Times. And I had an interview with the Guardian and all the papers, all the articles I got about this phenomenon.

And when was that, Helen? 2000…?

Well, it was, I don't know, it's – I've got the papers there somewhere.

Yeah, you said 2008, you said.

Sorry?

2008.

Something like that, yeah. **[01:28:00]** Yeah.

And where are the photographs? Where are the originals now, the negatives of these?

Well, they're all kept in this special office or somewhere.

In Washington maybe, Holocaust Museum?

Maybe, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Because you can still buy the book. I bought it recently for my cousin as a present. I said, look at page 118 [laughs].

You're on page 118. Okay, for anyone who watches this.

Yeah, yeah. No, it's a very good book with plenty of photographs, and yeah, that's how it was.

Witnessing, the camera is a witness, his camera.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. Let's just go back to the liberation again. You were saying you were in this bunker when the Soviets, when you heard the steps, of the footsteps. And –

Well, we couldn't last there for long because we had no provision, it was winter.

And why – was the idea to go in there in case the Germans were still taking people or killing people or –

Well, as I said, my cousin said, look, my husband worked on this, we heard something is happening and she said, we're going there and you're coming with us. She later on emigrated to Australia and again, a wonderful person. Everybody, whoever came to Melbourne, stayed with her.

So how many people were you when you were in this…

Well, maybe ten. **[01:30:00]**

And at that point, were you worried about the Soviets liberating or [overtalking]?

No, we didn't know what's going to happen, we didn't think about anything. You just do these things day by day.

Yeah. But that's when other difficulties started really after the war for you.

Yeah. After the war, you were alive but that's about all. And then we started learning about what happened to people and who – people came back, have you seen this one, have you seen this one? [Gets upset] And for a long time I wouldn't believe that my father is not coming back. You know how it is, you just don't want to believe.

And what did you find out, what happened to your father?

Well, I found out from various other places what happened to my father when they arrived in Chełmno. And you know what? Chełmno is not well-known as a camp and it was one of the only killing and when you go there. It's the middle of nowhere. You have to go there by car. It's in woods, very quiet. It's like my – Danny said, my grandson, told Camilla, she said, one thing I – when we got there I – there were no birds singing. It's the quietness and the slogan

[ph], tell everyone, millions of slogans, and massive graves of people from every town, and I've got a photograph, I'll show you. **[01:32:04]** It's eerie place, it's – I can't describe.

So your father there with the children.

In the lorries.

In the lorries.

And they didn't even get out because they were experimenting, 1942, the gas. I try not to watch these films and books at night because it's no good [gets upset]. It's no good at night because somehow in back of my mind it stays there.

It stays with you.

Yeah.

Do you find it's becoming stronger, the older you get, this? Or it's just with you?

Well, I try, I try not to, I try not to watch anything at night which I know it will upset me. And by – I think by speaking to others I feel better, I think.

That's interesting because of course I wanted to ask you, you know, when you started speaking, as you mentioned before, that –

Yeah. No, I feel I sort of like something came out and it's better than just staying there.

Yeah. But did you always talk about it or did you – did it start –

No, at home, for ten years I didn't. **[01:34:00]** I didn't say anything to anybody. We didn't say anything to anybody. Nobody wanted to know, nobody was interested, and we didn't talk.

And then what changed? When did you start talking?

Well, I told you, when it started when this man made this recording and the book and that's how it all started.

Yeah, much later. When was this, in the '80s, '90s?

Yes.

Early '80s?

Yeah.

Yeah. We'll come back to that. That's the reminiscence.

Yeah, the Reminiscence Centre, that's how it all started. He came with a tape recorder and then they followed this with a film. I've got a film that was made by Age Exchange called 'In My Father's Footsteps' and it's very interesting because the cast are black children, white children, Muslim children, children – it's made by children. That was the whole point. And the play, Łódź Ghetto, they made by – only by English children who never heard the word Holocaust and it was a great success. It was shown in Blackheath and there was not one dry eyes, and it was all children who acted my life, and they'd never heard that word. So this David Savill, he really did the whole thing. Yes, so they followed with the film, it was shown in Lewisham Town Hall, it was dignitaries and people came.

Right, so that was the beginning of your –

Yeah, yeah.

We'll come back to that. But for you, when you started talking, maybe it's a difficult – what is the big – your biggest trauma or when you, even when you're telling your story, what is the most difficult for you? ***[01:36:09]***

Well, I mean more or less, I relive a little bit of it when I tell the story. I mean [sighs] it comes back quite clear and I feel that it will just stay there. You can't erase something like this, you can't, although I've done so many other things since then but it's there. If I start talking, it's there. So there must be something that I remember it so well after such a long time. Well, it was experience and I was so young. And I thought when I come to England, I'll be able to go to school, have some sort of education. It never happened.

No. So tell us what happened. You said you were given jobs for the – working for the Polish government after liberation.

Yes.

And then what happened to you? What –

Well, then my aunt who was already here, she wanted me to come to England and she told brothers, yes, yes, this lovely young girl, bring her over here, bring her over, so my uncle decided to bring me over here to England. And everyone was so jealous of me, you lucky girl, because after the liberation we realised that the Polish people do not want us anymore. **[01:38:09]** They –

How did you realise that? How did you realise?

How do I? When we say, you know, when you meet people, oh, you alive? And I went to my hometown, Pabianice, with a friend of mine and my daughter, Monika, was with me, and I felt a complete stranger. I was trying to find my Christian friends, I went to the church, I went to – I couldn't find anyone at all. I was standing in the middle of the street, five years.

Any remnants of anything Jewish in Pabianice?

Nothing.

Any sign?

Nothing, nothing at all.

Memorials?

No, I just – I said, let's go back. I just couldn't take it. The – our place was burnt down. As I said, I went to the church, I tried to see whether the register – I felt so awful that I realised that that's all gone.

But when was that, just that visit?

After – that was 1945.

So you went back quite soon after liberation.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

With your mother?

No, I went with my daughter, Monika.

So that must have been later, not in '45.

Um, no – yeah, it must – maybe it was later.

Because she was born in the '50s, you said.

Yeah, yeah.

But also you went back immediately after the war?

Yeah.

And what did you find there then? Not –

No, nothing. I couldn't –

Your home?

Nothing. It was burnt down. Nobody. I couldn't find anyone that I used to know, that I used to – we used to live. **[01:40:02]** Absolutely complete stranger.

I mean out of your school class, did you meet any –

No.

How many people survived?

No. Some survive, yes. Two or three people survived. They were already went to Israel.

Out of your class of how many? How many people were in your class before the war?

Well, maybe twenty-five, thirty.

So most of them didn't survive.

Yeah. Yes, most of them perished. One friend was in Miami in America that I met from my class after the war and this other friend who lived in America that I used to keep in touch and correspond and he actually wrote a book about –

Pabianice?

Yeah.

But you understood then that there was no way of returning to Pabianice for your mother?

No, no, no, definitely not. There was nothing there. And not only me but the people that were liberated, the Jewish people, realised that there is no place for them in Poland any more. They managed all these years all right, they've taken every – all the Jewish home. I mean Poland is the only country we do not give you any compensation, nothing, they could manage all right, they've taken all the Jewish homes and things. And, you know, it was a funny joke, you said, oh, excuse me, I'm alive. They said, *"ty żyjesz?"* You know, they couldn't believe that you are alive, so you had to excuse yourself. So everyone tried to go away somewhere, where they found, you know, relations in America, here, there. Not many people stayed.

And your mother and your brother? Was there [overtalking].

My mother and my brother, my sister wanted very much for us, all of us, to come to Israel but my brother, his very good friend who lived in Australia sent him papers, he married a non-Jewish Pole, a Christian girl, and they went to Australia. **[01:42:24]** My uncle decided to bring me over to London and my mother went to the *kibbutz* in Israel.

Joined your sister?

Yeah. But she was not very happy there. She came to my wedding. And at that time if you marry an Englishman, you become automatically English and the brothers and all wanted someone to marry and stay here. And they – she loved her brothers, and her sister was here, my aunt who survive camp and alive, but my mother, she was not a person who could make up her mind. And all her life, even to buy a hat, she had to go with her sister [laughs]. And I was young and [laughs] I mean I couldn't very well say, yes, you stay, or make the decision for her. So she went back to Poland, nothing happened. This chap was living in East End and he was a short man and a fat man. She didn't like that. It doesn't look like Father. I said no [laughs].

Oh, they wanted [overtalking].

You can't have everything [laughs]. And I was young and I couldn't say, look, you stay here, never mind short or – so she went to the *kibbutz* but she was not happy there. **[01:44:03]** Although my sister try her very best to accommodate and she had a room. She was very liked because she was very good with her hands, needle, she was working in the – sewing things and so on. But she never learned Hebrew and she had very little rapport with the grandchildren. And she came to England several times but I know her heart was here.

So tell me about your journey to England. What do you remember from the journey?

My journey to England was terrible. I was sick the whole day. It was a small boat called Messapia. It was broken before we started.

Where did it sail from?

From Toruń. It's a Polish port. And in [inaudible] canal, we had to stop already and have an engineer in and it was a miracle that we arrived to Tower Bridge because – my things were wet in my case [laughs]. It was agony. And I was sick most of the journey. But I made friends with the people that I arrived with, with a young girl that came to two brothers who was here. And –

And your future mother-in-law?

Yeah, and the future mother-in-law.

You have to tell us because we haven't heard it on camera yet.

Yes, the future mother in law, she was telling all about her son. And Mrs Aronson, she was grateful to us that we gave her our bed to her. And of course that's what happened to her, it was a terrible experience. **[01:46:00]** It was a terrible experience for her with her husband. So, then she lived with us when we got married, twenty-five years. She didn't know how to peel a potato, so –

So she had survived in Warsaw, she was in hiding?

Yeah.

Her husband and son had come here?

Yeah.

And then she came and her husband…?

Decided to stay with this other woman.

But just to come back. So, the journey, so you arrived in this broken boat.

Oh, it was terrible.

And what were you –

I was ill all the time, the whole journey, being sick and ill and –

And which port? Where did you arrive here? Tower Bridge?

Tower Bridge, we arrived for the first time, I saw Tower Bridge.

So what did you think when you saw Tower Bridge, when you saw England? What were your feelings?

Well, wonderful [laughs]. Wonderful. And that was the time, I tell you, where it was the [inaudible] in Israel, so they were very, very strict, the British. So, my uncle fetched me in the car. I couldn't believe that these houses, all this looked the same [laughs]. So I arrived in my

– in his house and for British standard he was very well-off. Well, I told you there was a television set.

Uh-huh, in his house?

Yeah. And [inaudible] there was a cook, there was a maid, there was a nanny and there was a gardener, and there were five people in the family.

And where did they live?

Willesden, Bryan Avenue. He was manufacturing handbags.

And he – you spoke in Polish to him? Because –

No, he can't – he couldn't speak Polish. He only spoke German. **[01:48:02]** He went to a German *Gymnasium.*

Okay. So, you did –

No, I – very difficult. I was – first couple of days I was just sitting and crying. I sat with the maid, I sat with the nanny, and we had like a little room there where we ate.

And did you know him? Or he was –

I never – no, I'd never met any – I didn't even know him. Strangers.

So it was like coming to strangers.

Complete strangers. And I thought I'd be able to go to school, I'd be able to get some education. I didn't know that he had other ideas.

What was his idea?

I'll be a good maid.

For him or for somebody else? Or did he want you to work –

I want to tell you about my English, how I learnt.

Go on.

So I didn't know that what he meant. Well, after a while I thought, oh, maybe a bit of English is – I should know. So he was very mean. Most rich people are [coughs]. So, he decides to take me to a evening class for illiterate English people, okay. In Kensal Rise was class in evening, okay. He go there in the evening and he meets the teacher, and the teacher doesn't know what to do with me. It's for English people, illiterate. So, he – but he was a very nice man and he really took pity on me, so he said to my uncle, leave her here and collect her in two hours. **[01:50:00]** I'm sitting there on a bench, he give dictation to the class, I don't know, something on the blackboard, and he spends the two hours with me. And how do we learn? Drawing pictures. And I tell you, that man, what he did for me. And then of course I met my future husband, so my English when I got married improved quite a lot. So, I could sort of speak but – or rather reading, reading was – and then when I got married, I joined a class for foreign students in St Martin's on the Lane [ph]. They had a class. And we had a teacher who was a ex-colonel and he was extremely good. He decided the time we are there, the foreign students, to spend on conversation, speaking, because reading and writing is one thing but speaking grammatically is the second thing. So, weekend we had to prepare to talk what we did weekend and learn all the British songs, It's a Long Way to Tipperary, all these songs I know. So, we had to tell him what we did over the weekend and then he was teaching us songs, and it was very good because little by little we were able to speak. And that's how it started.

So how did you meet your husband? You got in touch with the mother? ***[01:52:02]***

Oh, well, he came for the weekend.

Yes, but tell us before. You told me already, but off-camera. When he arrived.

Well, he came for the weekend to see his mother and of course we could speak Polish, so we had plenty in common. [Laughs] Actually, very little [laughs]. Very, very little. But I could – we could speak Polish and we used to go out for a walk and he was in uniform and I remember [laughs] we went to the Horse Guard Parade and that chap on the horse saluted to him and I thought I am the Queen of England [laughs].

So you were impressed by the uniform.

Yeah, the uniform did a lot [laughs]. So, it was very terrible when he went for the demob clothes.

[Both laugh] Disappointing.

Yeah, and then he went for Ministry of Defence until he died, he – until he got – died Alzheimer, very young, he was sixty-something. And here he is, a photo with him, with Prince Philip, he worked in depot in Woolwich and – and his capacity, we had to send from various parts in England, we had to go. So we stayed in Wellington, Shropshire for a bit then we had to go – come back to England and work in Woolwich where the very big army depot. So, I had to look for somewhere to live in Woolwich, never been in that area in my life. North London was my area, [laughs] Swiss Cottage, Finchley, Golders Green. **[01:54:05]** I mean – so I looked – it was the most terrible part of London where – [background noise]

[Break in recording]

Woolwich?

Oh, Woolwich. So, I had to look for something and it was the part [ph] when we had no electricity, you know, and candles and so on. And I was looking for a house and it was agony. I used to go to that area, get a paper and look and nothing was suitable. And then finally, they

were building a new – completely new building in Greenwich, in Blackheath, and you had to agree to buy a flat before knowing the price because it was such a shortage at that time. So, eventually we moved but prior to that I had – we had a house and everyone said, oh, don't sell it, don't sell it, let it. I let it. What could be better? A tailor, a wife, a child and a mother-in-law. A family. I made the contract myself and everything was black and white. They were paying rent to the agent. One day I get a phone call from a neighbour, they ran away, took a lot of things from the flat, they're not there, and owing money. I come to London, I've got a small child at that time, just one child, Monika, er, Annie. I come to London. **[01:56:00]** I couldn't recognise my house in [inaudible] Road. And the police – and then we realised they're professional crook, hundreds of letters on the floor, owing money. And the police said, well, we don't know where he is. And everyone said, oh, don't sell it, don't sell it. When you come to London you need to live there, don't sell it. So, I redecorated the place and I thought, right, this time I'm going to make sure that someone is reliable. So who comes? The first secretary of the Madagascar embassy. He's paying direct to the bank every month. But he's got nine children. It was a four-bedroom house. All right, never mind. We still live in Shropshire. Well, I don't know how long he stayed there, nine months or a year, I don't know. He's moving out [laughs]. Moving out. Come back to the place. I could not recognise that I ever lived there. One bedroom upstairs was made into the drying room, with lines. He had nine children. I had a slow combustion stove that used to burn the whole night. Write – everything was write-off. And at that time, I just had enough. So I redecorated and sold it. I wish I didn't [laughs]. I wish I didn't because it was detached four-bedroom house in Willesden and I'm sure it's worth a lot of money but I just – it was too difficult. **[01:58:01]** So –

Helen, do you think when you – you married young. Do you think it was partly you wanted to have a family or did you want to –

Well, I just – yes, yes.

You wanted to belong or –

It was – I was too young. I should not – but I just wanted to leave my uncle and –

What did your uncle – what did your family say when you wanted to get married?

Well, I remember when my husband – when my uncle came back, oh, you are engaged. He was a very difficult man, very cold man. Even the children, that I am very – still close with the children.

Did you help you with the wedding, your uncle?

No, I told you, I had to pay. It was a posh wedding but it was paid with all the – people were – felt sorry for me and his friends sent him cheques for me. It was all paid for the – with my – with those cheques.

He asked you for the cheques?

Well, we were grateful we had a place to live and some few utility furniture. People say, oh, where did you go on your honeymoon? Honeymoon? [Laughs] What's that?

So where was the wedding? Which synagogue? Where did you get married?

At synagogue in Chamberlain [ph] Lane. It was a little synagogue that I used to teach there, help the teacher there. They had a little Jewish nursery.

Ah, what did you teach there?

Well, I just helped the children with giving them tea, coffee or something. So that's for the wedding. And then in Gunter's which was the club, Park Lane, tea dance.

Gunter's?

Gunter's was called. And later on became Bunny Club, the same building. **[02:00:01]** So it was posh wedding because he had to show, you know, this – it was I think something in the

local paper, you know, uncle gives shelter to Holocaust survivor, and, you know, but little did they know, [laughs] I had to pay for it [laughs]. Yeah. But I am in touch with the children.

I mean for you coming to England at that point, I mean coming from where you came from, you know, having survived the Łódź Ghetto, did anyone understand where you had come from?

No. No, no. No, I didn't say – I didn't talk about it anymore. No.

But did anyone ask [overtalking]?

No, no, no. You know, the English Jewish people, they were not keen on the whole idea anyhow because these boys, like my husband, who were in uni, from Poland, I mean- they didn't invite them for Friday night and they were all in the same circumstances.

You mean your husband wasn't invited?

Yeah, when he was in Manchester Uni, yeah.

So he didn't think the English Jews were so friendly.

Sorry?

He was not invited.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So – and here, nobody was interested. The English Jews couldn't care less. And so nobody talked.

Your husband? Did you talk to your husband about it? At the –

Very little, because I realised that he won't be able to understand it. When he told me he had chocolate for lunch, I shut up [laughs]. Chocolate? [Laughs] What's that?

Because he told you how he – the rationing [overtalking].

Yeah, yeah, so I thought, well, now, it's – we don't speak the same sort of language, and we didn't talk much about it. **[02:02:05]**

And were you in touch with other survivors at that point? Were there any other – was there anyone else?

No, I didn't know anyone in England. Everyone tried to get away to America, here, there. The Jewish people tried to get away because we realised that there's no room for us in Poland anymore. Although I worked in a Polish office, Ministry of Transport for a while, my brother worked and – but we realised that nobody wants us and they manage – the Polish, they can manage now without the Jews. So, it was a funny joke going, oh, excuse me, I'm alive.

Yeah, yeah. So that's why so many people emigrated.

Yeah, yeah, 'cos we realised that nobody wants us, we can't go into our old homes anymore and nobody wants us.

Did you have – when you came to England did you have contact with any – I mean were there still sort of from the Polish government, minister – no.

No, no, I didn't.

Here in England?

No, I had nothing to do with the Polish government, the Po – no, I didn't. My three uncles were very well-off financially. As I said, one of them had dresses, one of them manufactured handbags, one of them has got a shop in the East End of London that only sailors used to know, B. Cohen and Son. They used to have things to sell. **[02:04:01]** They used to collect

the sailors when they came to London port, bring them to the shop so that they can spend their money there. And that shop was like Aladdin's Cave. You name it, they had it [laughs].

In the East End?

East End, yeah. It was well-known, B. Co –

What was it called? Cohen?

B. Cohen and Son. It was East India Dock Road. It was a well-known – sailors knew this shop [laughs].

And those uncles, were they from your mother –

My mother's. My mother's brother, yeah.

What about your father's family?

My father's family, one sister, her name was Helen too, she went to America. She had three sons. One of them was a professor in Yale, one was a dentist. And I used to keep in touch with her. Her name was Helen too. And we used to correspond in Polish when I arrived, yeah. All his other family, was one sister's son alive and he went from – he was from Kalisz and he went – before they evacuated anywhere [ph], they were in Auschwitz and so on. They buried a few things underground and strangely enough he went after the war, they were still there, and I got a ring which they managed to recover. And one of them lived in Israel – that my father- he lived originally in Berlin and when was the problem with Hitler and so on, my father because of his influence in Zionist movement, managed to get affidavit for him and he went to Israel with his family. **[02:06:11]** And when I was in Israel, I used to always visit him and stay there and – and he worked in a newspaper in Israel.

So what about the ring? What was – whose ring was it?

Well, it was my aunt's ring, gave it to me. I gave it to my daughter, Anne, and it was stolen.

So it was your aunt's ring buried there.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we put it in a sort of with [inaudible]. It was aquamarina [ph] with sort of gold setting. And unfortunately, it's gone. Also my wedding ring, I gave it to my daughter, that's gone. She had burglary, everything's gone what they had [Laughs] But I've still got my mother's engagement ring. My mother's. So, the ring is over 100 years old.

She kept it? She kept it?

I've got it now. I've got it.

She gave it to you?

Yeah. Yeah, I've got it.

So, when you started life here, you didn't have that much support?

No, I didn't. I had no support at all. From whom? No. I had to work. I worked most of my married life.

Yeah. So, what was your first job, then? So you became British. That means you could start – you could work.

So, my first job was in that place, that Shock Absorbers, and then they went bankrupt. I was upset. My second job was completely different. **[02:08:00]** It's two Jewish refugees from Germany, they open a shop in King's Cross. It was called Confirming House. So what happened there, we used to send things to whole world by letters of credit and we had samples of things that we used to send to these firms in Africa and Iraq, here, there. And they paid to British bank for us but it used to take three, four months, so we had to have credit from the banks. My boss was from Germany, very clever. So because we did this transaction

with various bank, they used to let us have deposit before we can pay. So, we used to send samples of certain things. So, we dealt with ICI and pharmaceutical firms. And I learned this job was export and I dealt with ships and bills of lading and insurances and thing. It took me a year to learn the job. I was his secretary, until I went to Africa. And I loved my job. It was very interesting. And then I went to Africa. And when I came back, [laughs] we lived in [Gerie?] Road and there was another company. He was a refugee from Germany and he was well-known in AJR, Mr Holwell [ph]. And he opened again a sort of export firm to the Crown agents of the Colonies where we used to send medical equipment, okay. **[02:10:13]** And I learned already this export thing and we used to send parcels with medical stuff to Nigeria, here, there, everywhere, and documentation and all. It was quite a impressive and difficult job. But we were – it was like a family. It was in Cricklewood, they had an office. It was a family.

What was it called?

Mr Holwell [ph].

Holwell [ph]?

Holwell [ph], yeah. He was a refugee, and his wife. And every day there was a bakery in Cricklewood Broadway called – I've forgotten his name. He's well-known. So, we had cakes and tea, German-style. And I was extremely happy there. I had my second baby, Monika while I still there and that was until we had to go to Wellington, Shropshire. I had to leave. But I was very happy there and it was a sort of specialised job.

So, did you have contact with – when you arrived, with this German Jewish refugee community?

No, very little. But my boss where I was in Africa, my boss, we did a lot of business with West Africa, he used to come there. There were two partners. And we had a special door for him in a hotel and so on. **[02:12:00]** And that was – that's my [laughs] working [laughs] – working experiences. Yeah.

So it was chance that they were refugees, or –

No, they were refugees and they very clever, they opened a business and then they opened protective clothing and other little bit. We had a whole house in King's Cross to disposal. They were very clever, and they were refugees, and they knew how to do business because we had no stock, just samples to send, and deal with this big firms that we didn't have to pay straightaway but it was letters of credit and so on samples would take three, four months. But because we did the transaction, we had dealings with banks in the City and a messenger who used to take the documents. And I was doing all that myself.

So, you learnt bookkeeping, administration?

I – it was very, very interesting, the export business, bill of lading, the ships, the insurances, and it was very good.

And at that time, what did your husband do?

My husband was given a job as a civil servant in Ministry of Defence and that's where he worked till he died.

And that took you to Africa? So, tell us a little bit about your adventure.

Yes. Well, one day he came, oh, there is an opening. And he had itchy feet, he wanted to go somewhere, to Lagos, where I was – I mean I didn't like the idea. It took me a while to – we had our circle of friends, we had people like some Polish boys that were together with in university, married to English girls. **[02:14:03]** We had lovely circle of friends.

He had? So, your husband had a circle.

Yeah, yeah. And we had a lovely life. We was very fond of cinema, theatres, all these things. We're both working, and it was lovely. And my mother-in-law supposed to look after our

home. Well, if I tell you that we had to buy her a Polish cookery book and when the book said one pound of potatoes, used to peel the potatoes, weigh them, and sort of make sure it's one pound. That's – this – she spoke fluent French, German, Polish of course, very educated, but she's never done this.

So she was supposed to keep the house while you were –

But I must admit that she learnt English and eventually she got better and we supposed to go back – we went to work and she is supposed to look after the home. But later on, she developed Alzheimer and my friends said that I deserve a medal. Twenty-five years, we were together. And I decided that she was Mrs Aronson and I was the kitchen help [laughs]. Because I thought to myself, I'm not going to make hell for myself. And we had – every Friday we play canasta. We had friends coming. We were the only people who had a large – the flat we had in Walm Lane was 35 square feet, it was a very big room. **[02:16:02]** So every Friday we had canasta evening. My mother used to greet them, Mrs Aronson has baked a cake [laughs]. I was the kitchen maid. But I thought to myself, look, it's not worth it, we have to live together and I'm not going to make hell for myself. And her husband remained with this lady friend. And my mother-in-law, eventually she developed Alzheimer, was in hospital. And I tell you something. She was in Shrewsbury Hospital. When I came there, she – Helenka, Helenka. I was – calling my name. And she died. She's buried in Birmingham. And this lady, this Russian lady who became quite friendly too, and my father-in-law had angina and he died, but he said, oh – my daughter, Anne, who was a baby, we used to meet in a cafeteria in Swiss Cottage [laughs]. And that's how it was.

But she didn't go to Africa with you, your mother-in-law?

Oh, no, no, no, she stayed. She stayed in the house.

So what convinced you to then go to Lagos?

Well, I had no other way. He went first and then I went. And it was quite an experience.

And you worked there? You worked?

Yes.

So tell us what you –

For Philips. So, experience, I left England, Christmas, with the snow, so I was appropriately dressed in a suit, in shoes and thing. **[02:18:04]** Little did I know – and first class, I was going, and we had champagne because it was New Year's Eve or something like that. Little did I know about Africa and climate, although I read a few books and things. But little did I know about this place. I mean I – first time I saw a black person when I was waiting for a boat [laughs] in Poland [laughs].

In Poland?

Actually see a black person, not a picture [laughs].

Because there were no black –

No.

No. So that [overtalking].

So, when we arrived in La – in the airport, when they opened the doors – I've written actually quite a lot about my experiences – I thought, this is inferno. I had never [laughs] experienced anything like it. Of course, I wore all these things that I left London. Everything stuck to me. Legs were like this. I couldn't put my shoes on. And I don't know, I expected like sort of Sahara Desert or something like that. Everything was green, flowers. My husband took me home and introduced me to our servant. His name was George [laughs]. And everything that I wore stuck on me. Well, in the morning he went to work. He worked for the Meteorological Stations of West Africa. **[02:20:00]** And this man knocks at the door, a black man, with a cup of tea. His name was George [laughs]. Oh, God, it was quite an experience.

Yes, and you started working?

Then I started working. I worked for Philips. They quite a lot of intake in West Africa, not only manufacturing music and records, but also street lightings and, you know, this country needed everything. And it was a collaboration between the French and Dutch. The French put the money and the Dutch put the work. And I had a very nice office on the laguna, air conditions, and three directors. These chaps were in Indonesia before and when became they gave it back, they didn't know what to do with them, so they sent them to Lagos to that office there. And it was all Van Doren, Van this, Van that, and they were used to it, to have slaves [laughs]. Well, I wasn't used to it. I worked in British offices and I was treated like a- So, I had to be in charge of toilet papers, of this, of the other. Anyhow, I change a whole filing system there because I decided to do it in colours and symbols, various things what they did. And it was running quite smoothly and – but I hated them because I didn't do shorthand so I had to do these letters longhand. **[02:22:074]** Do you know Dutch? [Laughs].

A little bit. Difficult.

Well, you know, German words are long. Dutch are longer. So business letters used to go on and on and on, translated, and it was terrible. And I didn't like the people. They wanted you to be a slave like they were used to it. And then I became pregnant and I was leaving, so they gave me a very nice [inaudible] and a present, a clock. Oh, what a beautiful morning [laughs]. In Lagos [laughs]. So, that was West Africa, my first job.

And you came back to give birth in England?

Yes, then I – yes, I gave birth in England and she was three months when we went back. And everybody told me, you are crazy, taking this little child to white man's grave. That's what that place was called because of the climate, of the mosquito, and everything else.

But you managed? You managed? You managed there?

We survive. And at one point – well, we made a lot of friends there then that were like us, on a certain jobs and things. And I used to put her in a carrycot, take her to this other place, slept there, bring her back home. She had her net and her bed. **[02:24:00]** One day, I look in the morning, this child is covered in red spots, the whole body, hundred of spots, and I see those two mosquitoes inside, thick with her blood. Well, if anyone asked me, the worst day in my life has got to be that. I was – we lived near lagoon where there's plenty of mosquitoes and water. I left there, I was crying and crying and crying. And she never cried. She never sort of – and I was waiting for the chemist to open, nine o'clock. Well, I went for the – to the chemist, got some calamine lotion and luckily it just went. Because only the female mosquito give you malaria, and –

She was okay?

Yeah. Yeah. But I mean the precautions, it was a constant fight with the climate. In the wardrobe, because of the mildew, you had to have lights on day and night in wardrobe, electric lights.

The humidity, yeah.

And I had three servants. One of them was a very good cook. And I decided when I took her over that she is my full responsibility and I, only I are going to wash the dishes, wash her clothes, look after her. **[02:26:00]** And she was thriving there. She was actually thriving there.

And you started to work for the Israeli embassy?

Yeah.

Doing what?

Secretarial work. I'm telling you, organising cocktail parties, organising photographers, sending His Excellency Mr Hanan Yavor, thank you for this. It was the best job ever [laughs].

What was the name of the ambassador?

Hanan Yavor. I want to show you photographs of him. And it was the best job ever.

And when you were there, Golda Meir came to visit?

Yeah.

So tell us a little bit, meeting Golda Meir.

Yeah. So when – oh, well, I'll show you a Jewish Chronicle article.

We'll look at it in a second.

Yes. When she arrives, well, we gathered thirty Jewish – Jews, worked for various firms, some French firms, some French airlines and so on, and she said, okay, she's going to meet us in a hotel. So we're trying to get blue ribbon but out there unless it came in a transport, you couldn't get it. You could get – there was a Swiss shop with pearls, with jewel, with expensive stuff, but if you wanted white cotton and it wasn't on the boat, you didn't get – you couldn't get it. There were a lot of shops, Indian shops with silk material and things like that, so we couldn't find blue ribbon, so I remember I tore a dress which was blue, we found some flowers for her, we presented that for her and we made this tea for her in a hotel and gathered these thirty Jewish people. **[02:28:10]** So I had a nice chat with her and telling her all about myself and so on. My husband took all the photographs. And I said, well, I used to belong to organisation called Mo'ezet Ha-Po'alot in London, ladies' organisation, Israeli thing.

What was it called?

Mo'ezet Ha-Po'alot. So, I said to her, well, we've got these thirty Jewish people, couldn't we start this organisation? So, she said, what, thirty people in one organisation? [Laughs] A very clever woman, very clever woman. And then she went to Ghana and other African countries and that's how it all started with Israelis. 200 people arrived, so of course we had friends among them, we gathered together and we had Passover in the hotel, *matzos* flown from Israel.

In Lagos?

In Lagos. We all read a portion. This chap, this Hanan Yavor, he made sure that Israel is in the paper every day. We had this exhibition. He was doing his very best to put Israel on the map, and was there, but I don't know what there – what's happening now there. It's a mess. Yeah.

And what made you then come back, or what –

Well, there were certain tours. We had this tour, we had enough, Anne was three and a half, well, education and so on. **[02:30:02]**

It was time to.

And we had enough, so we came back, and that was another experience which was very difficult. We came to this small house and I was in the middle of this kitchen, I didn't know where to start. Fourteen crates arrive by boat, just personal things. And it was extremely difficult, to that extent my husband had a nervous breakdown. He was three months in sanatorium.

After coming back from…

And I was with this – Anne, I just had Anne, and difficult mother-in-law, who said that my doctor told me I must be in bed by ten o'clock, or my doctor told me I mustn't do that, I – extremely, extremely difficult, no help. I was working and it was not easy.

And your – you had no own family. Your mother wasn't here.

No, no, no.

Sister, brother? No.

It was very difficult. So eventually they decided that we have to move to another location near Reading for my husband to be in charge of some sort of factory. Well, we didn't want to go. We already started settling in London. But they insisted, the War Department, that's where he is to go. So, he had a nervous breakdown. Oh, yes, so we went and look and we pay deposit to a house in a place called Earley near Reading, very nice four-bedroom with adjoining lake and so on and we signed a contract. **[02:32:11]** In the meantime he got ill, so I wasn't going to move – moving anywhere. I had this house to buy, I had no money, I had luckily a friendly bank manager who gave me a bridging loan. I had to do all this myself, and put the house on the market. And then visiting my husband in Virginia Water, that's where he was, and I used to take, I remember, my dustman [ph] to cut the grass there, to look after the place there. And it was with ten agents because I just didn't want any money, I just wanted to sell it, to pay the bank loan. Anyhow, one day a lady came and she bought the house. And we stayed in London. And my husband got better. I used to go and visit him.

What triggered it? What do you – did somebody trigger –

The change. The change from Lagos, from different jobs, they – when we came back, the Ministry of Defence didn't have a job for him, so all this together brought this on. Anyhow, he got better and I had my job with this Mr Holwell [ph] which was around the corner and I just had Anne, she was in the nursery already, and carried on. **[02:34:00]** So he got better and they had to give him some sort of a job and he worked with the head office in central London for a while. And then they decided to transfer him to another place in Woolwich.

Right, and that's when you moved to Greenwich?

Yeah, and that's when I moved to Woolwich and Greenwich and that's – and then everyone said, oh, one child is – Anne was six when Monika was born – one child is no good, you know, have another one, so Monika was six years' difference.

[Break in recording]

Yes, Helen, you were saying, so you had your second daughter.

Monika.

Yeah. What I want to ask you, do you think your experiences in the wartime shaped your – the way you were a mother, a parent?

Yes, I think it did because I think that I can recognise important things in life and not. Therefore, you have to differentiate what is really important in life to worry about and what isn't. And I feel that anything that could be solved, especially with a young couple – I remember my daughter, Monika, I gave a talk on her wedding [laughs] and I said, whatever you do, if you have any differences, settle down before you go to bed because if you don't, you can't sleep, it stays in your mind and you come out, you get up in the morning and it's still there. **[02:36:02]** And I think I can differentiate important things in life that one has to worry about, and not so important.

Such as?

Some people worry about stupid things. To me, it's not important. For instance, I'll give you an example. I had friends in – Jewish friends in Wolverhampton. When we moved here it was – my two daughters stayed there because there was no light, no – we – the house in Blackheath was just being built and finished. Anyhow, it happened that my younger daughter, Monika, broke an ashtray in my friend's house. To her, it was the end of the world and I said to her – I said, look, please let me replace it. It's an ashtray, I can buy another one. To me, it was nothing. To her, it was something. So really and truly I think I can differentiate really important things to worry about and things that can be solved and if it can only be

solved by money or buy, it's not important. And I think I tried to put that logic to my family and my grandchildren that if it's something not important and can be replaced, there's no need to worry. Okay, we all like our own things and our own ways but sometimes happen, so what? **[02:38:03]**

Yeah. So, say, for conflict, children?

Yeah, yeah.

What to argue about or –

Yeah. And I think they're learning [laughs]. I think they're learning [laughs]. Yeah.

Because you saw what's important.

Yeah, yeah, I think they're all happily married. Now, we've got little children, little babies and –

Great-grandchildren?

Yeah, great-grandchildren, so I think it's okay, what – the way I feel about life. That's – you just have to be grateful for you've got and if it can be replaced with money, it's not important. The only thing important is life.

Yeah. And did you feel it impacted you, that you I mean were a small family, from your side, I guess from your husband's side as well, in some way?

Well, my husband's side I know very little. He never disclosed a lot. I know that he was a spoilt child, the only child, both parents kiss his hand, he was thirteen, he was already skiing in Austria. And he was not an easy child, brought up by other people, nannies and God knows whom. And his upbringing and everything else was completely different to mine. And he

talked very little about his family. **[02:40:00]** I know he had a cousin in America who was in a concentration camp and that's all.

And do you feel – I know your sister was in Israel and your brother in Australia – that you had close contact with them?

Oh, yes, yes, with my niece in Israel, I was in Israel so many times in the *kibbutz.*

So it was important for you to meet them?

Yes, yes. Oh, I do, I speak to her on the FaceTime. She's in a *kibbutz* near Haifa and they're doing very well, the *kibbutz*, because they're manufacturing plastic sheeting. Yeah. And when my sister was alive I was – and my mother, I was practically every year in Israel, I spent my holidays.

Helen, how important was being Jewish in raising your children? Was that important for you or –

No.

No?

No. But my son-in-law, one is English, my other one is half-Jewish, and they're the most wonderful – we've got most wonderful relationship, especially the one that is English. I can talk to him about anything.

So being Jewish was not so important for you in England?

No, no, it's not – it's not important for me. Important for me to be a person who try to help. When I moved to this area, straightaway I offered my services to a charity shop where I worked for ten years, meeting people from all over the world. Last week I went to a party there. I'm still very much honoured. I went with [inaudible] to a party they had been invited

and met people from every walk of life. **[02:42:01]** To me, it's a person and I don't care if you believe and you're religious, good luck to you, I respect but I can't now change.

Yeah. And when did you move here, to this area? To –

Twelve years ago.

From Blackheath?

From Blackheath, yeah, yeah.

So what made you decide to leave? What [overtalking].

Well, because each time my daughter visited me, I opened the door and she said, I hate this journey [laughs]. The thirty miles, no matter which way you go, it's thirty miles. She hated the journey and she said it's time, it was just right time – we didn't know about Covid then – to move. And I took her advice and it seems that I've done the right thing because she's seven minutes from me, she lives in Northwood. And she's just wonderful, she's taken over completely, so has my other daughter. I'm not in charge of anything.

They take care of you?

It's perfectly all right.

You're close to your daughters.

Absolutely, and grandson is the same. I'm happy, they're wonderful, they all love me [laughs] and I love them.

And are they interested in your history?

Sorry?

Are they interested in your history?

Oh, yes, yes, all of them, of course. They're very proud of me [laughs]. **[02:44:00]**

And Helen, did you talk to your daughters about your story, about your –

Yes, yes, they know, yeah. Well, last time this White Factory, what happened was, Monika who lives in Newbury had some friends in the circle and she said, oh, Łódź Ghetto, my mother was there. So anyhow, they've organised transport tickets and I was invited to the matinee of the play and met all the act – afterwards I met the actors and they said, would you mind saying a few words after? I said no. The play was excellent, really excellent, the acting, how they managed to act this Rumkowski the way they did, it's ingenious. So, I was invited, they were whole audience, was matinee, would I come on the stage and say a few words [laughs]. So I did and I introduced myself and I didn't want to talk much about myself but I said I was there and I think the acting is absolutely marvellous and thanked the cast and all that. The – I had the applause, everybody was coming, shook my hand. There were not mainly Jewish people in that audience. And I met all the crew, I met all the actors and then we exchanged emails with the main actor who was acting as Rumkowski. And he was due to visit me with his family when unfortunately, he dies. Andrew Schiller, which was a Shakespearean actor, and it was a wonderful experience. **[02:46:00]**

So, let's talk – because you have shared your story so widely, you have been painted by – commissioned by King Charles. Let's –

Yes. That was something well –

Helen, just one second. What I'd like to just talk about now is your journey kind of as a witness because you have shared your story and we said – maybe let's talk about how it started and then why it's important for you to do it and maybe also how it changed over time, or maybe it hasn't changed. Maybe, let's talk about that project when you started sharing your story for Age Exchange.

Oh, Age Exchange, it was very beginning I offered my services, I was working there for many years, first on the accounts, I was in charge of the accounts.

As a volunteer?

Yes, yes, as a volunteer when I stopped working and I was extremely happy there and still in touch with the person who started it all.

And what is the idea of Age Exchange as a charity?

Well, it started with – we were given a complete shop, of grocery shop before the pre-war, before the war, and we installed it in Age Exchange with all the things and the idea was the schoolchildren came and we had women who were telling them how life used to be before the war, and the shop had all the things there. It was one of those pulley that you did the money, you could open every drawer and find things there. And I was – and what we did in addition, we used to collect various items and send to schools for history lessons. **[02:48:04]** And I used to be in charge of these items in boxes and make a catalogue of them and send to schools for children to learn. So, we had a stock of various irons and things and everything that was pre-war. And we had these ladies who talked, we also gave theatre things in Greenwich –

Was it one lady called Pam Schweitzer?

Yeah, Pam Schweitzer. She was the organiser.

Yeah, because I know her.

Well, I know her very well. So, Pam also made a play of my life some time ago in Woolwich and I was there, yeah. And Pam's husband, there was a book they've written together, it's in German and English, people who arrived to this country like me, and what they did of their life. So, one chapter is me. And her –

Was he a refugee, her husband?

Yes, Alex, he was. Well, I think so, yes. I think his mother was English and he was a refugee, Alex. He died of cancer. But I speak to Pam from time to time. She's still involved with a lot of projects and things, and that project with her –

Okay, so they started collecting your story.

Yeah, yeah.

Okay. And that was the first time you talked about it.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

And did you find it – it was good for you. You said it was helpful.

Yes, it was good for me but I mean [laughs] this book, it's, you know, written and talking is two different things. I mean I would like to [laughs] change certain things but – but that's how it started. **[02:50:04]** He said, oh, Helen, I want you to record.

And how did your friends or your surrounding or your husband – was he alive still then? Or –

Oh, I didn't discuss it him much. I told you. I couldn't.

How did people react when they started reading your story?

Well, they went mainly to schools. Yeah.

And then what happened next, in terms of your –

Then I think that the Holocaust Survivors' Centre came on and I joined –

But you were far, you were in Blackheath.

I know, but I used to come to Hendon where the place is, original. I used to come for meetings and things and–

And until that time did you have any contact with other survivors, like '45 Aid Society?

No, no. No, until that time I didn't have any contact, no.

What is interesting – so how did you hear about the Survivors' Centre? How did they know about you?

I don't know how they know about it, how it – I don't know, whether I was reading somewhere or Jewish Chronicle, I don't know. I don't remember.

Okay, so you started going. And what was it like then to meet other –

Oh, it was wonderful meeting – yes. I used to go every time. And then there was Coventry staged a Holocaust Day and we were all invited for two days to Coventry. They made an exhibition, they took a lot of photos but I never got back my personal photos there of Pabianice. And there were plays and there were things and my friend, what's her name, she gave a talk in the cathedral, Coventry Cathedral. **[02:52:02]** We had a wonderful time, wonderful.

When was that?

In Coventry.

When was that, roughly?

A few years ago. Well, maybe ten years ago.

And so you started going to the Survivors' Centre.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And then also you gave a testimony for Shoah Foundation. Yeah, for the Shoah Foundation? You said you gave – for Spielberg.

Oh, yes, yes.

Was it the first one?

Oh, that was much earlier. Yeah, that was much earlier. It's – I've got the dates there where I've done it. Yeah. I was one of the very first ones to be interviewed.

Then it must have been 19 – '95 even, '95.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. They stayed the whole day and when I finished, I thought, I'll build a house. And you see the two boys, children, and I said when they grow up, I want them to learn something about their heroic grandfather [gets upset].

But the wonderful thing is that you could tell them yourself now.

Yeah, yeah.

Many years later.

Yeah, yeah, it is, it is. No, we are very close, especially with Danny because I took him to Auschwitz.

So was it important for you –

Near Auschwitz, in Chełmno, rather.

Chełmno. Was it important for you to talk about your father?

He was seventeen and he'll never forget. He'll never forget. Like he told Camilla because I introduced them when we were there for the portrait thing, and he said to her, one thing I noticed there, he said, there were no birds singing. And she said, oh, they're so tall, they're all so tall [laughs] because they're all 6'10" [laughs]. **[02:54:05]** Richard is doing a half-marathon next September for the shelter.

So Shoah Foundation was the next thing. And then what about Holocaust Education Trust and schools? When did you start speaking in schools, Helen?

Well, in Green – after this publication of that book. It started in Greenwich.

With the Age Exchange?

No, just – I was invited to various schools and one of them was a convent school in Greenwich, which was the best reception ever. The girls were intelligent, asked questions, lunch was served, press was there, pictures were there, I really felt wonderful. And you know where the worst was? The Jewish school here.

JFS?

We were eight of us. They invited eight of us survivors. We all shuffled into this enormous gym or something, I don't know. They were all given a little corner of speaking. I could hear the other ones. The boys and girls were not interested, nobody asked any questions. We complain and we had a apology letter from the headmistress. She's left since then. Terrible, terrible. Badly organised. **[02:56:00]** I told you, the school we went, the Radley College, I can't tell you. The boys – well, it's a private school, they were all very intelligent boys, sons of diplomats and thing, it cost a small fortune to be there. And we had lunch with them and

two boys were allocated to each of one to look after us, and then I got handwritten thank you from the headmaster.

And what is your main message, Helen, to the children? Or when you started off, and has it changed?

Well –

What is your main message you want to give to the children?

To tell them that this thing should not happen again. Stand out.

And when you started speaking, did you find you changed your talk slightly or was it – do you –

Well, I try to – I've got sort of something written down, so I try to keep to this – the same order and make sure it's not too long and then it's interesting, and take the interesting bits of course. I couldn't do it [laughs] two and a half hours [laughs]. So, you know, you have to concise and just stick to it because after a certain time, people's mind –

Yeah. And you don't find it too upsetting?

No, no, I found it okay. **[02:58:00]**

Because it's interesting that some people can do that and some people can't.

I know, I know. I know that, I know that. No, I'm perfectly all right. I gave a talk in Houses of Parliament but I was a little bit, [laughs] you know, I had hundreds…

Yeah, what was it like?

Very good. Olivia introduced me and –

Yeah, it's Holocaust Memorial Day.

Yeah, and I had photos with Labour, with Conservative [laughs]. Yeah. It was quite good.

So now tell us about your portrait and the King, King Charles.

Well, the portrait, it's difficult to put in words because I was crying, I was laughing. I was crying when this Lord Rosebery [ph] phoned and he said, Prince Charles has chosen you as a Holocaust survivor to be painted for prosperity. How can – what do you say to that? Look, in the wildest of dream, I couldn't dream anything like that [laughs].

And you were featured obviously the portrait was featured in a film, it's hanging now in – where is it hanging now? Helen, where is it?

It's now hanging in Holyrood Palace. I don't know where it's going to go afterwards but that's where it was after Buckingham Palace.

And you were happy with the result?

Yes. Everyone said that mine was the best.

Who was the painter? Who painted you? ***[03:00:00]*** *We can check it later.*

I've got his book. I've forgotten his name for a minute.

And did it take – was it from a photo or did you have to go there for sittings?

No, he came here and we were talking all the time.

How many – how long did it take?

Well, I think he – I had about five sitting.

Oh, that's quite a lot.

Yeah.

Yeah. And do you feel it – the seven paintings, they brought the message out, I mean, King Charles?

Yeah.

Enhanced the voices in a way.

Oh, yeah, yeah. But I tell you, I was telling the – when I was told we'll go and have a look, I went with Monika, I looked at it and I thought, something, something is different. We started with mauve, now it's pink [laughs].

They changed the colour?

He decided – he says it in his whatever, little bit there that he says – he decided that pink is better for my – for me.

You're okay with the pink?

Yes, I'm okay. I'm okay with the [laughs] – yeah.

So you were surprised when you got that phone call?

Sorry?

You were surprised when you got that phone call?

Yeah. Well, the phone call, I was crying and laughing. I – to be chosen by Prince Charles to have my portrait for prosperity.

Yeah. How was it? Because it links to – I wanted to ask you because when you became British when you married your husband, how did you feel? Was that important to get –

Yeah, it was important because I was able to work [laughs]. And I became British automatically. **[03:02:00]** I didn't have to do anything, whereas before, I had to report to the police every month.

Yeah. So, it was important. And how do you feel today? Do you feel British? How would you describe your identity?

I feel British, definitely. Yeah.

How would you describe yourself?

European [laughs].

British European?

British European [laughs]. British European [laughs]. Yeah [laughs].

Not many people have their portrait painted for your –

No, no, no, definitely not, definitely not, yeah. So overnight I became a celebrity. So, every Christmas I'm invited to private party by the King. Famous people, I've got photo with Judi Dench, a lot of actors are there. Well, 200 people, I don't know everybody but [laughs] a few of them. So last Christmas I went with my daughter-in-law mother. She was – when she – I said I was not going because I can't go on my own and nobody wanted to go, it's mid-week, oh, Helen, I'd love to go with you. I said, Okay. So we had the thing for the car and she came with me and she met the King of course and I said this is my friend [laughs] and when we

left, the King said goodbye to me and shook hands and there was his nurse, a male nurse, he said, take this – good care of this lady, take her to the car [laughs]. **[03:04:07]**

And do you think there is general interest? I mean from King Charles –

I think so. Well, I mean nobody asked him to do it. I mean he did that of his own accord. And when he came to JW3, well, that was – he said, not you again [laughs] because that was very soon after we had the party in Clarence House – yeah. He said, oh, not you again and I had a kiss on the – I said, I'm not washing my face.

[Both laugh] Helen, how do you – I mean how do you see the future of Holocaust education? I mean so many of your generation have gone to schools and [overtalking].

Well, I think the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, they're doing wonders, I mean with schools, with things, with whatever. What else can they do? They keep going. Because unfortunately the survivors are less and less, so they try to do the second generation.

Yes, and what do you think about it?

Well, I think it's wonderful that they do it. It's definitely- should be alive, should not be forgotten.

Well, I guess second, third generation or now they do this interactive [overtalking].

I know, I know, I know. Yeah. That's all they can do. What else can they do? God only knows what's in front of us.

Yeah. And do you still go to schools or – today? ***[03:06:00]***

No, I know I'm invited some with the synagogue but it's too much. I don't want to go to strangers and…

You don't. You've done your bit. Yeah.

No. I've – yeah, I've done it and it's difficult for me to get ready and walking and getting into the car and sitting and so on, and I thought to myself, I'm sorry, I can only do so much and I have to think about these things now. I've done it, I've done my very best [ringtone in background].

[Break in recording]

How are we doing?

We're getting – yeah, slowly, slowly. So, we're just saying, so you were happy for next generation to take on the speaking.

Yes, of course, of course. I think it's wonderful that people must remember 'cos we only learnt from history, don't we? How can we improve if we don't learn from history?

And Helen, how do you think your experiences in the wartime have shaped your life?

Life? Well, I just said that I think I quite enjoy life and don't worry about stupid things [laughs]. I can differentiate important things and not so important. And getting older of course it's – I'm more concentrated with myself now and my health. And my daughter tells me off that there are more important things but to me, they're not [laughs]. But my family is wonderful and I'm very lucky. I'm very lucky to have such a wonderful family. **[03:08:03]** And I think I've been always tolerant and I never was interfering mother-in-law [laughs] and try to lead my own life.

To be independent?

Yes, to be independent and to look after myself and thank God, I'm grateful that my head is still sort of functioning.

What's your secret, then?

[Laughs]

Is there a secret?

No [laughs]. I don't know, don't know. And I have got quite a few friends and people who look – who phone me every day and see how I am, and I'm okay. I'm okay.

But do you feel losing your father at such a young age for you, how –

Yes, a very young age. We adored our father. He was very popular and a man of the world. There aren't many people volunteering things like that. Because I always say, before you criticise people, you have to put yourself in their situation, how would you behave? It's so easy to say, how could they? You can. You can, you can. And hunger is one of the things that you can do anything.

Yeah. ***[03:10:00]***

And it was a situation without help. I'd never believe in my whole life that the German will lose and I'll be the witness. I mean they said – we used to say, oh, God, God. They said, why do you say God? You haven't got one. If you had a God, He wouldn't allow us what we're doing.

Yeah.

And the war, well, every day was a gain day, so you didn't think there was no future to think of. It was a day.

And 'cos you didn't know what – it wasn't in your control.

No, no, it was just a day, from day to day. It was just a matter of, I don't know, luck or had to happen that day, I don't know. I don't know how to – when people say why do you – why are you alive and so many people died? I don't know. How do you respond to that? I don't know why. It's just – just happened. That's all. It just happened that way. And the Russian came very quickly, before they had a chance to finish us off. **[03:12:00]** That's all. Because I saw, I saw the graves on the cemetery.

Prepared?

Ready – yeah. They came to finish us off but nobody was there, everyone was hiding somewhere. The ghetto was empty.

They couldn't find people?

No, they came for appeal in the morning and nobody was there, so they had to run away quickly because the Russians were coming very quickly. So that's all. That's what it was.

Yes. That didn't happen everywhere. There were some places – because I know that where my father was, it took a long time until the Soviet – they only came on the 8th of May.

8th of May?

Yeah, very [inaudible].

Well, you see, I was liberated in January.

My father was in a place called Reichenbach Sportschule, which was Sudetenland somewhere and that took longer time to get there.

Not till 8th of May?

Yeah, 8th of May.

So can you imagine, we were already liberated in January.

Yeah. Helen, how do you feel about Poland today?

Poland? It's a mess. I don't think about it at all. It was from- Mascha [ph] tell me, she's been recently there, it's quite a mess there too. Terrible.

I mean do you feel a bit Polish or – at all?

No. Well, I feel to that extent that my childhood and when I speak Polish, but that's the end. Nothing else.

I mean for you, coming from where you came from, what is the most important thing from your heritage, let's say, from coming? ***[03:14:07]***

Well, I think my upbringing. I was the youngest, I was spoiled, I was loved [laughs]. We adored our father, he spoke languages, he was a man of the world. Oh, I want to tell you a story about my father. Well, as I told you, his boss was Jewish, his name was Reisfeld, and he had this palace and they had the factories. They were manufacturing silk materials in Łódź. And my uncle when he used to come from England to Poland, he used to meet this Mr Reisfeld and he said to him several times, why don't you sell everything and move away from Poland? And one day he listened to him. He sold his factory, he sold his palace, everything, he moved to Israel and he is figuring in Who's Who in Israel because he had hotels there and [inaudible]. Reisfeld is the name. And the factory, everything, moved to – sold it and he moved to Israel before the war. And when I was after the war in Israel first time, I met him and he said to me, you see, I took advice from your father, I'm here and he is not. And so, I said they're well-known family in Israel, they – he had [inaudible], hotels and God knows what, and he left in the right time. **[03:16:08]** We could leave too but my mother was – she couldn't envisage leaving her sisters, they were all living in a small town, she could not decide to buy a hat for use herself, she was just a *Hausfrau*.

Did you think your father wanted to leave? Your father would have left?

He probably would be but she was the one who would never think about thing like that.

How did your parents meet? I was going to ask you, do you know how they met?

No.

When did they get married?

I think they married in Pabianice I think. There's something written on the photograph there but I don't think they were – they said where, they just put the date.

So like 1920 they would have got married, something like that?

Yeah.

Okay, Helen, I – we've discussed many things. Is there something which we haven't discussed which you would like to [overtalking]?

I don't know [laughs]. I don't [laughs]. You're the expert [laughs].

A broad – very broad I think.

You're the expert.

We've covered many themes.

Yeah, we did, we did [laughs].

I mean do you have any sense of nostalgia for anything?

Well, I'm [laughs] – I'm wondering if I could go to school here, have some education, maybe I'd be a different person, but I never had the chance.

Yeah. ***[03:18:00]***

So whatever I achieved – I was working twenty-five years in one place, and whatever I achieved, I achieved by myself. And I am sorry that my husband, who could help me a lot, didn't take much interest.

So you had to kind of fend for yourself.

Yeah. Whatever I know, I was just appreciated by other people. I mean my two bosses who were English and were so funny because they were ex-police officers and Helen was the Foreign Department [laughs]. They had a sense of humour, I was twenty-five years there, I'm still in touch with one – one died – and my eightieth birthday, I celebrated in Greenwich, eighty-five people were there, proceed went to Age Exchange, and one of them stood up and he said, well, I don't think that you can find anybody more loyal than Helen. And if I wanted to, I know a few things [laughs]. I advised my boss, he was – we were moving and some – and offices were for sale, they were ex-insurance people, and they wanted very little, oh, can I do this, can I do that? I said, look, you don't – he wanted to start an agency, security people, and I said, look, Ken, you engage three people for a month's period, you don't have to buy stock, you don't have to do anything, tell them, in a month's time either it's going all right, they can stay, or you can go. **[03:20:10]** And he listened to me and the firm now employs 500 people, security, and is still in – still alive in Rush Green [ph], near –

So, your – both of your profession –

Yes, yeah, well, they say – they – no, I – no, I don't know, I think I could think clear. I don't dream and I'm really very down to earth.

Did you ever think of ever doing your own business?

Well, I wanted once to open a coffee bar, [laughs] you know, when the whole started with the coffee machines, when they open, I really wanted coffee and cakes to make. My husband was not a businessman. There was no encouragement [laughs] to do something different. But I was willing to sort of do something, some enterprise, but it never happened [laughs]. Never happened, I'm afraid. But I must admit I was appreciated wherever I worked and I've got wonderful references from everybody and I was happy whatever I did.

As you got involved locally, so because in – where you were in Blackheath there were not – I mean there wasn't a big Jewish community there [overtalking].

No, no, no, not Jewish community at all, absolutely place I've never been in my life, Blackheath, I didn't know where it was even. **[03:22:08]**

But you joined Bromley Synagogue from there?

Yeah, Bromley Synagogue.

Did you ever go there or –

Yes, we – I used to go there once a month. They had lunches and talks and it was lovely there, and I still get the brochure and things. I pay but I don't go [both laugh]. Yeah. Yeah.

Okay. And is there any message you have for anyone who might watch this interview in the future? Have you got a message for anyone who might watch this interview?

Message? Well, message is, try to live a decent life, respect everyone, it doesn't matter what religion or colour. And I don't think there are bad people in this world, it's just the way they are brought up or they don't know any better. So, education in my opinion is an asset which should be taken because a lot of even English people still don't know much about Holocaust and got no idea what it was. And just be tolerant because I don't think there are bad people. I had three servants in Africa, they were all African, they were – we had wonderful relationship, although women are sort of second-grade [laughs]. One boy, I taught to type and

he got an office job. And I tried to be sort of a decent person to everyone. **[03:24:04]** I don't mind. And it's just how the people are treated. If you treat them nicely, if you treat them like human beings, they're all right.

And how do you feel about – are you worried about what's going on today in this world?

Of course I am. I'm very worried about Israel. It's a situation which is very difficult and I know I've realised that Israel was made after the Holocaust and it's very difficult to solve because these – some of these people lived there in Israel all their life too. I saw the programme with [inaudible]. Did you see it?

Yeah, I did.

It was very moving, that girl that went to see her grandmother. But how can you solve that problem, I don't know. I mean they had to do something with the people after Holocaust. They had nowhere to go. And Benyamin [sic], who was terrible person, I hated him always. My father – I mean I really hated him.

Who?

He always –

Netanyahu?

Netanyahu. And his – this politics, his – my niece in *kibbutz*, they said, we hate him, we – but we – what can we do?

Yeah. Are you worried about how this is affecting the Holocaust education here in the UK?

Of course, of course. **[03:26:04]** It's affecting everything. I mean the students, the universities, they're all –

And schools, yeah.

Yeah. So many. I don't know how this will all end. It has to come to an end sometime. How many people can get killed? And the hostages are still there.

Yeah. Just to finish, what about the AJR? When did you join the AJR?

Oh, I – a long, long time. For ten years I was the treasurer. I was one of the very first – yeah. I joined the AJR through my friend, Otto, because he went – he took me there. The first meeting was in Streatham and people came from all over, not only London, and I used to collect £1 from everyone and look after the food, used to bring milk and biscuits and things. And –

This was in Streatham?

And you know Myrna Loy [ph]? Myrna Glass. Well, we worked together. She phoned me not long ago [laughs]. And I loved it. It was lovely. And the speakers we had. Once a month we had committee meeting, we met and programme what we're going to do, and it was very popular, the meeting in Streat – yes, people from – came from all over.

Who took you? Who was your friend? Otto…?

Otto Taubmann. Otto Taubmann. And he was my neighbour, he introduced me and I've been doing it ever since, sort of, you know, until I retired after ten years. **[03:28:06]** And I was the treasurer, I tried to organise theatre parties, this and the other and whatever. Yeah. And then I met Rosemary and we became very, very friendly, she used to come here very often and we used to meet up and – and her granddaughter was born and [laughs] yes, and –

And did you find it different from the Holocaust Centre?

Oh, yes, completely. Completely different.

Tell me.

Different people were together. Well, the German Jews, the first of all, they look [laughs] a bit down at the Polish Jews. They're not quite the same because for a long time AJR didn't take anybody else but German Jews, not other nationalities. And they were definitely lower class.

At the beginning?

Yeah, because the German people, the Kindertransport, they've done extremely well for themselves. They were able to go to school and they were able to make something of their life.

Some of them, some of them, yeah.

Yes. I mean they went to school and made something and everybody became somebody and they did a lot of change in English life.

While you feel it's different with the survivor community?

Yeah, well, we had no chance and we came here as grown-up people and it was – everyone had difficulty in learning English and the doctors couldn't even practise, they had to go – they were washing dishes at Lyons' Corner House. **[03:30:11]** It was completely different, different idea. So of course, the German refugee, the Kindertransport, have made a completely different life for themselves because they had the opportunity. I would have loved to go to school and become somebody or learn something but I had no chance.

But also in terms of numbers, the number of survivors coming post-war was very small. It was difficult to come to England. The British government didn't –

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, very small. The British government, you couldn't come, there was a quota, and as I said, my uncle had to guarantee that I will not take any jobs and he's, you know, so that was the only way I could come.

Yeah. So that's very different, wasn't it, from –

Yeah. And I had to register with the police every month.

So Helen, do you see yourself as a survivor today? How would you say you are?

So – yes.

Do you see yourself as a survivor?

Oh, yes, I definitely see myself as a survivor, yes. Yeah.

And what do you think this-, it seems today everyone seems to be called a survivor. I mean often, you know, in the press, Kindertransport, they're also called Kindertransport survivors. How do you feel about it? Do you feel –

I don't know. It's not quite the same, is it? I mean the Kindertransport were not in concentration camps. It's a completely different experience. I mean they were separated from the parents and went through a lot but it's not the same. **[03:32:01]**

No. But I think it just sort of changed, you know, while some years ago a Holocaust survivor was only somebody who –

I know.

But now, it's sort of everybody [ph].

It's – yeah.

But maybe it's because also not so many people are alive any more.

Yeah, yeah, I know, I – yeah, I agree with you, yeah.

But I know that caused some discussion in the Holocaust Centre also, you know, I mean who is –

Really?

Well, who is entitled to come, for example, I know that at some point it was decided only if you had experienced Kristallnacht, that's what I heard you were allowed to come.

Oh.

You know, because otherwise you were a refugee or – I don't know. It's an interesting I guess debate about, you know. But that's why it's interesting to hear your – that historically of course, the [overtalking].

Yes, yes, definitely be – they had a chance to make something of their life because they were young, they were children and managed to go to school, and it was completely different.

Yeah. Having said that, there were also older refugee, you know, who couldn't work, who couldn't, you know, but yes, and it's different. So you started going to that local group a bit [ph]?

Oh, yes, yes.

And here, do you go today to meetings? Here, do you go still to AJR, to local meetings?

Oh, yes, I go to Pinner every month. Yeah, I manage to go there. I know Vera Gilllman. Vera came with me to several function as my [laughs] –

As your escort?

As my escort, yeah, yeah.

That's nice.

Yeah.

Yeah, and do you think the future – bow do you see the future of the AJR, you think –

Oh, I think they're doing very well and I like the Zoom, I like this – I try – I manage to watch the Zoom and I think they're doing very well, extremely well, what they're doing, and Michael is very competent. **[03:34:17]** [Laughs]

Okay. Anything else, Helen? Anything else you want to say?

I don't know [laughs]. No, I'm very grateful for everything, what they do, and I hope they'll be doing it for a long, long time.

And also Survivors' Centre, you go there as well?

Well, they say, oh, we can send a car, we can send – but the journey is very long from here to Golders Green and back, and I think am I prepared to sit three hours in a car for forty minutes' pleasure. It's difficult. The long journey is difficult and I have to now weigh what is – what I can and can't do.

Yeah. Well, Pinner is closer.

Yeah, Pinner is –

I was very impressed because that's when I met you, how many people came to the meeting.

Meeting, yeah. Oh, yes, Pinner is very popular.

I think it's the biggest AJR –

Not only from Pinner but from – they come from Wembley, from Edgware. Yeah. No, Vera is very good. She always try her very best to – and the speakers are good sometimes. Sometimes they're not. Sometimes they just read. It's – they have to understand that there are people hard of hearing and when you relate something, you've got to talk to this person and speak. **[03:36:02]** The some [ph] is with Zoom, some I understand every word, some is hopeless. These young girls, they speak too fast, they read the notes and it just doesn't come out, especially when you've got ear-aid. But what can you do?

The very last question. Have you ever – because I know you've given interviews and you've written, but have you ever written your own memoirs yourself?

Yeah, I've written something. I've got something written down, yeah. I've got very nice things about Nigeria, which I've written and talked about. I belonged to a club some time ago, Northwood Ladies' Club, mainly American ladies, and I gave a talk about Nigeria. I said, I don't mind speaking but I don't want to speak about Holocaust, it's Nigeria [laughs]. Yeah. Yeah, and I've written down something, so…

Yeah. Yeah, who knows, maybe there will be another TV programme or –

Well, maybe, maybe. My husband took 600 slides of Nigeria which my [laughs] daughters got. I've got some – a lot of photographs with monkeys and things [laughs].

Okay, so another topic, a popular topic.

Yeah, absolutely another topic. Yeah, yeah.

But you're still open, if somebody asked you to speak on your experiences, you would speak?

Yeah, yes, it's – well, I recently went to see my cousin who works for The Telegraph and she said she sent me an email after, oh, God, how interesting it was listening to you, this and the other. **[03:38:00]**

Have you been ever officially invited in – to Poland? I mean as an official –

No, no, I had – I've got no connection. I've got no connection with Polish government or – other than just get this pension.

Yeah. They have never invited.

No, no, no, no. But I've got a very nice book in Polish, a friend sent it to me, about Pabianice, Pabianice – Łódź, Pabianice, how the Jews arrived there and origin of the town.

But they have – nobody has invited you from there?

No, no. No, no. I don't know anyone. I met the president here on functions and his secretary once but that's about all.

But you said there is no memorial or anything.

No.

'Cos some places now they do something.

I know. No. No, I haven't. Now that I speak to Mascha [ph], my Polish has improved.

Do you – would you like in Pabianice to be there something, like a Stolperstein or –

Well, there was a man who was doing a video or something, DVD, about Pabianice and he mentioned, oh, we could do something about your father, but I decided against it.

Yeah. Why?

Oh, it's too far and I don't know, money, how much money and I felt nobody's there. No, I've finished. I am now here, I'm now in London so many years, so – since 1946, so –

You don't need anything there to –

No, no.

No. ***[03:40:00]*** *Well, you give testimony and you speak about him and so on. Hopefully that will be [inaudible] opportunity.*

Yeah.

And now we have this interview and people can listen in our new – I'm doing this Holocaust Testimony Portal so people will be able to listen to your Shoah Foundation interview and this one. And if you've given other ones, maybe other ones as well.

Yeah, thank you [laughs].

Anyway, Helen, thank you so much for sharing your story.

Thank you, thank you, thank you very much.

Do you have – I'm sorry it took so long.

Would you like a cup of tea or something?

We will have something in – yes, a second. Just one moment until we finish.

Okay. Thank you, giving me so much time, of your valuable time. I do appreciate.

No, that's what we're here for. [Pause] Helen, tell us please what you're holding in your hand?

I'm holding in my hand a medal, BEM, British Empire Medal, given to me by the Queen, late Queen Elizabeth, for my contribution to the Holocaust education.

And how did you feel when you were given this honour?

Well, I felt very, very honoured to receive that. **[03:42:03]**

And this was before your portrait was taken?

Oh, yes, that was years – a few years before – there is a date there I think on the photograph. And it was given to me in Tower of London with other people but I was one – because of my name, Aronson, I was one of the first ones. And the representative the Queen was Lieutenant Owusu who was a Nigerian, so we had an extra, extra [laughs] connection.

So you have now – this cemented, plus the portrait your connection with the Royal Family.

Oh, yes, yes, yes, absolutely, absolutely [laughs]. Yes, it was wonderful.

Do you ever wear it?

Sometimes [laughs]. Sometimes [laughs].

Okay. Thank you so much.

Well, you know I always told – was telling these children the story about Han –

[Break in recording]

Helen, can you please tell us what you're holding in your hand?

I'm holding in my hand the most prized possession in my life. It's a powder compact which was given to me by my brother, Henry, in the ghetto, for my birthday. And it's a powder compact with a picture of Hansel and Gretel in English, *Jaś i Małgosia* in Polish, because I was always telling the children in the ghetto when I worked in the orphanage about *Jaś i Mał* – about Hansel and Gretel and the wonderful house they will come across which is made of bread and they will able to cut as much as they like. **[03:44:28]**

And show us the – there is an inscription, right?

Yes, and the inscription is in Polish, "Dear Helen, the day of your birthday from brother" and it's Litzmannstadt Ghetto, 24/4/1944. And this is the most prized possession in my life.

Why is it so important for you?

Well, first of all it's something from the ghetto which was given to me by my brother and I know that he had to pay dearly for this, not by money but in some kind of food in order to obtain this because money had no value in the ghetto. The only value was if you were able to get a little bit of extra food somehow.

And do you remember receiving it?

Vaguely [laughs]. My mother made a cake with potato peel and coffee ersatz. **[03:46:09]**

So this is your seventeenth birthday, '44? Yeah, your seventeenth birthday?

Yeah.

And can you please read it in Polish, Helen, what it says in Polish?

In Polish?

Yeah.

Kochanej Helence w dniu urodzin, od brata, Litzmannstadt Ghetto, 24/4/1944.

And you brought this to England with you when you came? Did you bring this to England?

Of course. I brought with me to England, yes.

And what are your plans for this?

Well, I shall [laughs] – I shall guard it [laughs]. I shall guard it. This is my prized possession. I haven't got anything more priceless than this in my life.

Thank you, Helen.

As souvenirs go [laughs].

[Pause from 03:47:31 – 03:48:07]

Okay.

It was –

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

I'm holding in my hand a photograph taken from Jakuba.

Camp?

Jakuba Camp and it's says people liberating and among them is the man who plays the accordion, his name is Shlomo Wysocki. And my daughter, Annie, who was with me, looked

at the photograph and she said to me, but you, Mummy, you're sitting next to him. I did not recognise myself. I don't remember when this photo was taken and I was just – I didn't know how to react, I was crying and laughing.

And this was taken shortly after liberation?

Yes, a few days, when we were still in the camp.

And he was playing something on the accordion?

Yes [laughs]. Something, I don't know what [laughs]. I don't remember. The remaining prisoners celebrating liberation, January 1945.

Amazing to have something like that, a document of yourself.

Yeah, I know. And not to recognise yourself. **[03:50:00]**

Thank you.

Łódź Ghetto, which is still – you can still buy it.

Yeah, we just checked. It's on Amazon.

Yeah.

Yes, Helen. Please tell us about this photograph.

This photograph was taken in Poland before the war and actually we managed to save it somehow, I don't know how, and my brother who lived in Melbourne, Australia, donated this photograph to the museum, the Holocaust Museum there.

And you said this is the only photograph of your father?

Well, I've got some little sort of snaps from holiday and things but this is a sort of like official photograph.

His portrait.

Yes.

And what was his name, please?

His name was Mordechai Chmura.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[03:51:33]

Yes.

This photograph portrays my father and his sister and two other brothers. I'm afraid I don't know- I only know one name, Jakub, and I knew the sister but I don't know the other people.
[03:52:01]

Yes, please.

This is engagement photograph of my mother. She was twenty there and she looked absolutely very lovely and glamorous and I cherish this photo very much.

And when was it taken?

Well, they married in, what, no, their engagement, I don't know, 1918, something like that.

[Inaudible] 1914?

I don't know what it is. I have put something down on the back, I don't know. I found this photograph in London. It was sent from Poland and the uniform I'm wearing actually came from England as a present and it was given to me by my uncle. And as you can see, this is a specially made photograph in a studio and I was very happy to see it again in London because I never had a copy.

[Cameraman] Do you know what date it was taken?

Yes, I think I was six or seven then.

[Cameraman] So '34, '35?

'35, yeah. And it's also my sister and my brother are there.

[Cameraman] So who is – can you tell us about this photograph?

Yeah. This photograph was taken in the wedding of my aunt. Her name was Fella [ph] and it was in Łódź and most of the family is there, including my uncle from London and my aunt and my- all other aunts that are sitting in the first row. **[03:54:11]** And on the floor is myself, my brother. And my sister is actually standing on the right-hand side.

[Cameraman] And where are you in the photograph?

I am on the floor on the right-hand – the left – the last person on the right [laughs].

This picture was taken before the war in park in Pabianice. As my sister was in the *Gymnasium*, she still wears her uniform. And there's me with my favourite doll [laughs].

Did the doll have a name, Helen?

No, I don't remember [laughs]. I'm sorry [laughs].

This is in – I think this is probably in a place called Ciechocinek which was a sort of well-known summer place, well-known of salt bath and cure for things like that. It's still a well-known place. I was there a few years ago for a weekend and stayed in a sort of sanatorium. And it's very well-known.

[Cameraman] This is your – in the photograph is your –

My father and my mother. **[03:56:05]**

[Cameraman] And when?

Before the war. Well, I should say- a couple of years. A couple of –

[Cameraman] It's – I think it's '35.

Yeah, something like that.

This photograph was taken the same year as the war broke out. We had a holiday again in Ciechocinek. And it's me standing outside our little villa.

[Cameraman] Yes, please. Yes, please.

This photo was taken in Pabianice, in the park one Saturday. We just used to go there quite a lot. And some family in it.

[Cameraman] And taken in – when was it taken?

Well, I would think the year 1935.

This was taken in Ciechocinek together with a cousin of mine who used to live nearby, and my mother and myself and I suppose it was the last holiday we had before the war broke out.

I believe that is an engagement photograph of my parents and I think it's really lovely. I think my mother was twenty then.

But it says – on the back it says 1936.

So probably right what it says [both laugh]. Oh, it was sent 1936 somewhere, yeah. **[03:58:02]**

It's a lovely photo.

Yeah.

This pho – sorry. This photograph is very, very precious to me because it's my father and my sister before she went for – to Palestine to agronomical school. And this is the time when they said goodbye to each other, not realising they will not see each other again ever [gets upset]. And it was a very sad time in my family 'cos my sister was very young. She was seventeen.

Thank you.

[Cameraman] Yes, please.

This is my uncle Idu [ph], his wife and his son. We were quite close. We lived very near each other. We used to see each other at least once a week. There was a family gathering in my grandfather's Saturday night or Friday night meals and parties and holidays. It was a small town and a very – our family, very close-knit. We all lived near each other. And although my father worked in Łódź, people couldn't understand that we lived – that he had to go to work every morning by train and come back in the evening, that we live not in Łódź. But my mother, she could not envisage being away from her family, her sisters, and that's why we stayed in Pabianice. **[04:00:03]** And – but the last – 1939, it was on the books that we might

move to Łódź because I was due to take some exam in a schools in Łódź, Jewish schools, and we might be moving then. But the war came along.

These photographs are four sisters of my father. They were very educated ladies. They were teachers, teaching Polish, very emancipated and they lived in various parts in Poland. One lived in Piotrokow, one lived in Częstochowa. And they used to visit us in Pabianice and I remember admiring them. They would recite Polish literature and other things and they were extremely, extremely educated and emancipated.

And what happened to them?

And I'm afraid none of them survive.

[Cameraman] And this picture was taken just before the war, in 1939?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

This picture was taken 1939, again in Ciechocinek and our last holiday together. Little did we know what awaits us. **[04:02:00]** Thank you. Thank you very much.

My daughters, one of them is minimalist.

And this photograph was taken by Henryk Ross who as the chief photographer in the ghetto. And my mother is in it, at the far end. And this is actually a photograph of a shop that used to deliver daily ration to the people. So, you had to go every week and you got your ration of some fat, some sort of jams, some sort of something, and my mother worked there.

And where is she exactly in the photo?

In her photo – she's at the far back, on the right-hand side.

[Cameraman] On the left-hand side I think I –

Er, sorry, left-hand side, yes.

Thank you.

And it was to my amazement I found this photograph among Henryk Ross photographs, who took hundreds of photographs of life in the ghetto.

[Cameraman] And this was 1942?

Yeah. This photo was taken with my very good friend. Her name was Iza Henechovicz and it was in the ghetto. And after the war we still – she survive. She actually married a friend of mine and went to live in Buenos Aires but then we lost in touch. **[04:04:04]**

And when was it taken?

It was taken in the ghetto.

1942 I think it says on the back.

Yeah, yeah. My daughter told me I'm not as good as I used to be. I was much better –

These four people were actually manufacturers before the war of confectionery and sweets. A factory was open, *Zuckerwarenfabrik*, for manufacturing of honey and sweets for German consumption. I was given a job there. We were – we had a Jewish policeman who was guarding us all the time. We could eat as much as we wanted to but we were not allowed to take any out. And before we left, we used to [laughs] – before we left, we used to be searched to make sure we're not taking any out. And the point is this, how much sweets can one eat? So that was the *Zuckerwarenfabrik* and it was for consumption for Germany and citizens of some value and we were just working there, making sweets, making honey and various other things. **[04:06:00]**

And what happened to the men in the picture, Helen?

Well, they're not – they haven't survive because when it was a general – the liquidation of Łódź Ghetto, everybody went. Everybody went. It was a general liquidation and only few hundred people, we were left behind to finish the ghetto off.

Thank you.

This photograph is of workers in the ghetto but I don't know anyone on that photograph personally.

This is taken 1943 with my boyfriend then, Leon Eismann [ph], whose father was the [coughs] guard for Chaim Rumkowski, and I believe we attend here a concert.

Oh, this photograph was quite a revelation for me. I was in Holocaust Survivors Centre in Nottingham when a young man stood up and he said, I've just published a book called Łódź Ghetto and I want to show to the people gathered there some photographs from the book. Maybe you will recognise some people. I was there sitting with my daughter, Annie, and a lot of photos came through and I used to – and I said, oh, I knew this one, I knew this one, I knew this one. And then we come to the last photograph and I said, oh, I know the man who played the accordion. **[04:08:10]** His name is Shlomo Wysocki and he was my first boyfriend. But my daughter, Annie, sits next to me and she says, but Mummy, you're sitting next to him. I couldn't recognise myself, I couldn't recognise the photo, I had no idea when it was taken. Well, apparently, as it says, it was the – it was taken when we were liberated, 1943.

'45?

'45, sorry. 1945, yes. January 1945.

And do you remember the scene in the photograph?

No. I don't remember the scene, I don't remember that, any – nothing at all. But I know the man because I have met him again in Israel a few years ago when the book was published. I tried to – I was in Israel, I tried to connect with his family and then my niece went on the Internet and she said, never mind the son, I found him. He lives in Netanya. So, we made contact, I took the book, and I gave it to him, and we were just reminiscing [laughs] how it used to be. And they've decided to dedicate a whole room to Ross and his photographs and I was invited to attend this exhibition and interviewed by BBC on the news. **[04:10:18]** Oh, Mrs Aronson, say something about it. And I was scared to death [laughs] that they'll ask me question I won't be able to answer but apparently the news came through on two o'clock, six o'clock, and I've got the DVD with the news, and everyone said, I came through very well [laughs].

This photo was taken after the war. One of my friend took it.

In January '45?

January '45, yeah.

Oh, this one. This is a photo of myself with my mother soon after the war, after they liberated.

I think it says July – 1st of July '45.

Yeah. This is a photo with my brother in Łódź, very, very soon before I left for England and we're very happy to be together [laughs] in a – one of the main street in Łódź.

This photo was taken with my mother. She came to England to a wedding of my cousin and we had this photo taken together.

1948?

Yeah.

Yeah. ***[04:12:00]***

This photograph was our engagement photograph when my husband – my future husband asked hand in my marriage to my uncle. And he was still in the army, he was a lieutenant in the [inaudible], and I was very happy [laughs].

And when was it, Helen?

'43 I think.

No, it must have been after the war. '48?

Sorry, '4 – yeah. And I – '46 I think. I was married in '47.

Okay.

This wedding photograph is of my cousin's. His name is Salek Monitz [ph] and her name is Ibi [ph]. He went through four or five different concentration camps and he survived and his wife came from Hungary. They met actually in Auschwitz and this photograph was taken I believe in Auschwitz after the liberation, and this is their wedding photograph. I understand that her dress was made from a parachute, silk. They lived in America. I have been in close contact with [inaudible]. He was in England many times. They lived in California. And unfortunately, they both died. **[04:14:01]** But he – she actually wrote a book about her experiences. It's called The Rose Tattoo, which I have got it.

'46, Hyde Park, I was already in England for a little while. The weather was nice, it was sunny, and I believe I was meeting someone there.

This picture is our wedding in the registry office in Willesden and I was – we were both very happy, looking forward to our future together [laughs].

This photo was taken in Lagos, Nigeria, when Golda Meir came as a – on a goodwill visit to West African countries in order to establish embassies. And we gave her a special party, tea party, in a hotel with about thirty-odd Jewish people which were working in Nigeria and it was a lovely experience and I was able to talk to her a lot about my experiences in – during the war in Poland.

That's a holiday which we had in place called Portmeirion in Wales. We had a day out there and I'm here, there with my two children and we had a lovely time there. Very, very nice. **[04:16:00]** It's a town completely turned into Italian style and it's called Portmeirion and it's in Wales.

Thank you.

[Cameraman] Yes, please.

This was I believe bar mitzvah of my grandson, Danny, and it was the reception at home.

[Cameraman] Who is in the photograph?

On the photograph is my daughter, Annie, on the right, and my younger daughter, Monika on the left. And it was taken in Northwood.

This was a school in Greenwich, high school, where first time I was invited to come and talk about my experiences during the war. And I was so pleased that the girls actually listened and as this photo showed, they quite like what they heard [laughs].

[Cameraman] Yes, please.

This photo was taken on one of the Holocaust Survivor academies. It was about Łódź Ghetto and the Chief Rabbi was there and he talked about it and then I was introduced to him. And together with me, his name is Fox. He was a survivor too. And the other lady's name is – I've forgotten for a minute. You know –

Lily?

Lily…

Ebert? ***[04:18:00]*** *Ebert?*

Lily…

Ebert, I think.

Well, anyhow, she's a Hungarian survivor and she's also one of the participants of the seven portraits.

This photo was taken in 2018 when I was the chief speaker on Holocaust Memorial Day in Queen Elizabeth Hall and afterwards, I had photographs taken with various people who attended this special day and among them were actors and famous people and Lord Mayor of London and actresses, and very memorable day for me. Thank you. Okay.

This one? This is a very special photograph for me, when I received my BEM. I was extremely grateful to the Queen to honour me with this particular medal for my work for Holocaust survivors. And this is her representative who gave me the medal and it was in Tower of London and the year, I don't remember.

[Cameraman] 2019?

Okay.

[Cameraman] In 2019?

2019, yes. This is a very memorable photo which I will cherish till I die, when my portrait was commissioned by the King to have painted myself for posterity. **[04:20:13]** And I am so,

so grateful. And this is the – when it was shown to the public, with my family present, and of course I shall never forget it. The painting was in Buckingham Palace for quite a while, on show to everyone and now I believe it's in Holyrood Castle in Scotland and I don't know whether it's going to be in King's private collection or any exhibition. I don't know the future of it. But I thought that the thought was wonderful, that he decided to choose seven Holocaust survivors on his own cost and painted their faces for posterity.

Thank you.

Well, for a moment but I've got his book somewhere. This painting for the first time I saw already finished at Buckingham Palace when it was opening for the families and I think I did see what I like [laughs]. I did like what I see. And judging by other people, they all thought that my painting was very, very good indeed. **[04:22:00]**

And the name of the painter?

Paul Benney.

Thank you.

This is a photo of myself, a portrait which was uncovered in Buckingham Palace, with my two grandsons as my family was able to come and celebrate this very special day.

This photograph was taken in Chełmno concentration camp when I went together with my daughter, Monika and my grandson, Daniel. He was sixteen I believe. And it's a place I shan't forget ever. It's middle of nowhere, it's woods, extremely quiet, nothing moves there and you're surrounded with a lot of slogans and writing in every language, tell everyone what happened here, how people were murdered, and I manage – and the graves were usually connected with towns and places and I managed to find the grave of people from Pabianice, which I took part and took photograph. And of course, this picture will stay with me all the rest of my life, and not only me but my grandson, Danny, the same. He'll never forget what he experience there.

[04:24:00] Yes. This is a card from a library that I used to belong in 1938 with my maiden name in it. And I was a very good reader, I did a lot of books, and a good scholar and I've still got the card. This is a card.

After the war I managed to get a job for the Polish Railway and this is my card that I worked there. How do you sort of start from the beginning. Can I just –

This document was given to me by the British consulate in Warsaw because my uncle put an application that he would like to bring me over and he will be responsible for me and I will not be able to take any position of a British person and he's fully responsible. And I went to the Consulate in Warsaw. At that time Warsaw was still – it was just one building left, everything was down to the ground after the bombing and war and I saw the consulate and I received the document that which enable me to get a passport and come to England.
[04:26:03]

Thank you.

[Laughs] So this letter I've written to my sister in Israel just soon after the war, just tell her a little bit about me and when she left, I was still a child and I – the five years I became a grown-up person and I was trying to give her some details about our life during the war.

Thank you.

This is first letter to my sister, Marilla, in Israel about my journey to London and my first views of London when I arrived in 1946.

Helen, you have a letter you wrote to your sister in 1945 and you kindly agreed to share it with us.

Thank you. I'll do my very best in translation. So, it’s, My dearest Miriam, with husband and daughter. I don't know how much tell you how happy I am when I received your letter.

Really, I have got no words to describe. First your letter after eight years of war and it is now eight years when we said goodbye in the station in Pabianice, when you left for Israel. **[04:28:14]** My God, how much it has changed since then. Then I was a small girl, went to school and my life was without any problems. I looked at the world with pink glasses and the future seemed to me very nice and quiet and we all made plans that after my education I will go to Israel and be with you. But do believe me that these six years of war changed me completely and it was much – it was like twenty years in normal circumstances. From 1939 to '42 I did not know that it – that the war will be so bad. I did have the yellow star of David on my coat but I was *razem*, I was together with my family. **[04:30:02]** [Gets upset] Well, I was several times working for German on slave labour but that was gone. I had no idea what is waiting in front of me, of my life. Unfortunately, that moment has arrived when – and I will never forget the date, 12th of May 1942 and this date will be in my memory to the end of my life because at that time, I was left without the care of our darling father. Can you visualise yourself, arrival in Łódź Ghetto if in wagons which are closed up? I have held my mother's hand very tight and I was so scared that we might be separated. **[04:32:07]** We arrived to Łódź at night and then for the first time, I heard the famous Litzmannstadt Ghetto. And then we knew or we heard that this ghetto, once you get there, you do not come out because the whole ghetto is surrounded with wires. And people are starving already from hunger. Well, my mother was in a very bad state. So was my brother. All we had with us is the shirt we were wearing. And we stayed before we arrived there the whole day without a drop of water either to drink or be able to wash. But we had to be alive. None of the people had been brave enough to commit suicide. **[04:34:02]** I mean they've taken from us everything which was the most precious but I have to tell you that thank God to our dear father we are alive because the president of the ghetto who was our father's name, Mr Rumkowski. They worked together before the war in various orphanages and he came to the *Lager* where we were and gave a talk that he was going to look after all the people from Pabianice as we were the first transport from the area to be sent to Łódź Ghetto. And he says that he's going to look after the people from Pabianice, give us accommodation, but the most important is get a ration card and work because this is a working ghetto and everybody has to work. **[04:36:00]** And the ghetto as we see it, if you didn't die from starvation, you died from various illnesses. And my brother, Henry, also had typhoid. He was sent to a hospital and I tried to go there and look after him. But coming back to the place we were, it was, by the

way, a disused- prison, disused prison where we sent there. So, when he gave this talk, Rumkowski, my mother stood out and she said, well, I am actually the wife of Chaim Chmura and these are my two children. And he said, yes, I knew your husband well, we worked together before the war and I know that your husband volunteered to take all the children from your town and he will look after him well, speaks fluent German. And don't worry about your children. And I will take special care of you. So, we got a flat in the ghetto and then my mother lived there with my brother. **[04:38:22]** And he took me to a orphanage which was in a part of ghetto called Marysin which all dignitaries work, lived, and there was a little bit of greenery, a little bit of a – few trees and so on. As I said, this was not the worst thing. People were always hungry but they live. [Pause] And then in the – in this – in the orphanage that I was in, I had children that I was to care for, they were maybe three years or four years younger than I was, and these poor children had to work hard. So, they had – they wore wooden clogs and every morning very early after some piece of bread and some coffee or something, off we went to work in a factory that manufactured, um, oh, God, what do you call on the bed? **[04:40:26]** Um…

Duvet?

No, no, the frame and the bed and then the –

Mattress?

Yeah. Sorry. And the matt – mattresses made with straw. And we were there quite a number of hours and then we used to come home like six o'clock, get a little bit of soup again and that's how it was. And then we hear that the whole ghetto is being liquidated. We found out from various radios and things that the ghetto is being liquidated and everyone is being sent to Auschwitz. And also, we had – some people had radios and we heard that the Russians are in Prague, in a part of Warsaw. What we Jews could we do? **[04:42:02]** And with what could we fight? People which are close then, ill and don't – didn't know how to be able to live, every day they look for people in the street and every day one of 5000 [ph] people in the wagons and they're all being sent to Auschwitz. We had no idea what was going there, or what, and everybody went. And then we just go on our own to these places. And we've

realised that the war is against Jews, us, and they wanted us to disappear and finish with the Jews. And in four weeks they sent out 100,000s of people and – to Auschwitz. **[04:44:07]** And we didn't know what to do. Do we go with all the other people or is it better to stay put? One thing I knew, that I'm going to be dead and it's only matter of time. Okay. We were the first family – I haven't read that letter for some time – who were chosen of 500 people and our task was to clean the ghetto. So, I was a cleaner and I had to do it from – every day from five a.m. During the night the weather was extremely cold, it's winter, and I worked till ten o'clock at night. Well, this work had good and bad time. **[04:46:00]** I could listen to a radio and more or less know what's going on, and everyone was looking for when this is going to finish and they're going to send us the battalion [ph] which is like the Frei, the Frei [ph]. Irony of the – those happening. And one day I'm listen- a station from London and you can imagine my – how happy I was and I started to cry, being so happy. But little did I know that the war is going to last for another two years. I was utterly unhappy. And we had to have – we had already a programme of going away to a concentration camp. And then suddenly bombardment started. **[04:48:02]** [Ringing sound in background] I can't – tell – and then suddenly we have this Russian bombardment and I can't explain to you my happiness [laughs] being able if necessary to die from a bomb [laughs]. And then next day, again. The Germans started leaving Łódź and we could see through the ghetto that [inaud] – that the making of the ghetto was with steel things. We could see through it.

A fence?

Yes, that the German are going to – are leaving Łódź. In one word, we could hear in the air that something is happening, something is going on. I had – could not believe in this luck because I thought that in the last moment before they leave, they're going to finish us off, and I wasn't – and I was right. **[04:50:04]** Next day, I heard that we all had to come to the appeal in the morning and at that time I went with my brother and my mother to a bunker underground, where we stayed three days. We knew we couldn't stay there too long but we had nothing to lose. And then a miracle happened [laughs]. A miracle happened because the German didn't have much time and ran away and we were liberated with the Russian – by the Russian. I cannot tell you in words how to display my happiness, 500 Jews lived. Well, and there's a proverb that the Jews are like- what do you call, on the [inaudible], dust. **[04:52:08]**

Like dust. And no matter how many times you try to clean it, it comes up again [laughs]. We were just going mad. One was in the street. The Russians were taking the yellow things that we were wearing. For the first time we saw Łódź and the main street, Piotrokow, and we received a very nice flat- home and we started to commence normal life. And then we realised how difficult it is to live without people that are not alive any more. And now we come to present. I'm learning English, I'm reading. The next letter, I will send to you my photograph. **[04:54:00]** And yesterday we received your letter and telegram. The letters I will send periodically. And thank you very much for your parcels which she send us, to us, from Israel. And my aunt that survived the war is now [ph] is with us, and she was in Mauthausen, and together we have wonderful days. I'm dreaming about being you as soon as possible. I'm interested in Zionism and whatever is happening with you. And far as is that [ph], while the rest [ph], a lot. God [laughs].

And how do you finish the letter? What is the end of the letter?

Well, I said in the letter that I hope…my – I know I- number, three, four. This is – oh, right, I finish the letter here. **[04:56:00]** We had a film about Israel and about your child, your little girl, how much I would like to see her, and then dance around. I would like to see to tell you all this. Will I see you? But it's now twelve at night and everybody is asleep and my eyes are [inaudible] are also going to sleep. And love and kisses for your husband, and please send photos [laughs]. I didn't think I could do it [laughs]. Well, did you make any sense of it? [Laughs]

Thank you, Helen, for sharing it with us.

Did you make any sense of it?

Yeah.

That. Are we ready for a cup of tea? When you're ready.

[Cameraman] Okay.

That was 25th 09 ’46.

So here is another letter, this time written –

From London.

From London, to your sister. Maybe just share a little bit what is in the letter.

Yes, right. **[04:58:00]** I sent it, as you see from this I am now in London and now, my darling, I realise how much it cost for you, how difficult it was and to be in another country when you went on your own, of such long journey. Why is it that we Jews [laughs] have all – must always not be together with our siblings and people we love? I can’t describe my farewell with my mother and my brothers, Henry [ph], and feel that I cannot live without them. Fare was very long. It took five days Gdynia, which was the Polish port. I was ill in the boat and have got – my head was aching and of course I was sick most of the time. **[05:00:02]** All the time I didn't eat much and looked very bad. The fifth day of our journey, we finally reached Tower Bridge. This is the tower that we used to watch in our pictures [laughs]. I was very looking forward to be met by my cousin, Francis, and my uncle, Jack, and was very nervous because I didn't know him and I didn't know whether he would like me [laughs]. I am – but I am very happy that it’s better than I imagine. And Jack insisted [ph] with – for me very good. They buy me every day something else. I've got lovely new dresses and yesterday my aunt, she bought me a fur coat [laughs]. **[05:02:00]** Please, please forgive me for not writing properly but I don't know what to write about first, and difficult for me where to start. Well, I – the whole family came to see me and I cried no end. And then we went first to my aunt and then Uncle Jack came and took me to his home in Willesden. I find it difficult to describe how much they live. The children and the house and how rich he is. And every day they take me somewhere else. And I was even in a nightclub and I was dancing [laughs]. And Uncle Jack says that I dance very well. And everybody is – our English family love to see me and they – everyone is well-off financially and have wonderful life and are very orientated in money. **[05:04:16]** And I said, this doesn't worry me because I have been through too much to – particularly Jewish in Poland and we can’t help

remembering [inaudible] people, our people, who were killed in Poland. And therefore, I'm thinking of coming to Israel and I want to see your children and kiss them and so on. My mother is still in Poland. [inaudible]. Okay, I've got some parcels to be sent for her child. My uncles who buy me all kinds of things and they're all very well-off financially, in money is everything. **[05:06:04]** And hours before I left, we went to a nightclub in Poland, and about my family in America, and my Uncle Jack has got business in America, and my brother, Henry, is probably going to Australia. And that's all. [Inaudible]. Okay.

Thank you, Helen. Thank you so much for sharing your story and your amazing archive and photographs and letters with us.

Thank you.

Thank you so much.

Thank you, very much for all your hard work you did and I do appreciate very, very much. Thank you.

Thank you.

[Laughs] What –

[05:07:26]

[End of transcript]