

NATIONAL

Life stories

**LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH
COMMUNITY**

RENATE COLLINS

Interviewed by Ilse Sinclair

C410/024/01-02

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

**BRITISH
LIBRARY**

IMPORTANT

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it.

Should you find any errors please inform the Oral History curators.

This transcript is copyright of the British Library. Please refer to the oral history section at the British Library prior to any publication or broadcast from this document.

Oral History
British Library Sound Archive
96 Euston Road
NW1 2DB
020 7412 7404
oralhistory@bl.uk

Fl94 - Side A

This is Sunday, 25th June, 1989, and this is Ilse Sinclair interviewing Renate Collins in Newquay, Cornwall.

Well, here we are, Renate, sitting in your lovely sitting room, overlooking the sea, and we're going to start now. Would you like to tell me the date of your birth, and your maiden name, please?

I was born on 7th July, 1933, and I was christened Renate Kressova, but when I came to this country, I wasn't allowed to use that name, so they took the "ova" off, and I was thereafter known as Renate Kress.

You say you were christened, were you actually christened, or were you brought up in a Jewish family?

I was brought up in a Jewish family, but not an Orthodox Jewish family, and I understand I was christened, but I don't really know what Church.

So I wonder if you would tell me, if you remember anything, from, what is your earliest memory?

I think my earliest memories were going to kindergarten, and at that time, we were living with my grandmother, and a maiden aunt, and I can remember the Germans taking over the school, and being absolutely marvellous to us, giving us sweets, and seeing us across the road to go home.

So you saw them as kind people at that time?

They were very kind people, yes.

Could you give us the name of your grandmother, and of your aunt?

Aunt was Selma, now I don't honestly know, unless I look up the records of my grandmother's name.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

No, I was the only one of, in all the family, my grandmother just had one daughter, and her mother had had two daughters, one of which was Aunt Selma that wasn't married, so I was the only one, so I probably was very spoilt.

Was there a sort of a, you said you weren't Orthodox, but do you think they christened you because of the Germans, or because of any religious reasons, were they in fact really Christians by inclination, if you like, or were they very very liberal kind of Jews?

Very liberal kind of Jews, I don't think they christened me for religious beliefs, I think probably when I was born, the clouds were already gathering, and from the letters that

my mother wrote to my adoptive father in Wales, she had been worried for several years about the future, so I think probably, on that relationship that I was christened.

Do you know anything about the history of your parents, where they came from?

Well, my father came from Germany, and they were a banking family, and had been in Czechoslovakia for quite a while. I believe my mother's family came, was sort of Bohemian, that side of Europe, and were more on the artistic line than my father's family.

What did your father do?

He was a banker.

He was a banker. So can you tell me a little more about the memories that are there, before you were 6?

All in the vicinity of where we lived.

Can you remember the name of the street you lived in there?

We lived in Kostelni.

Kostelni, that was the district?

It was the road, and I think it was the name of the district, and it was very near the bridge over the river, the main river in Prague, and I can remember being taken through the park down to the bridge, but as for remembering anything else, no, cos I was very very restricted. We lived in an apartment, so therefore I didn't have freedom to move around, and I was always with older people. No children at all that I can ever remember.

Do you remember your parents?

Yes.

How would you have seen them at the age of 6? Were you attached to them?

Well, my father went to live with his father, who was very sick, for the last year that I was there, so we went down, sort of, every weekend, and my mother, I wouldn't say I was very attached to my mother, so much as I was to my adoptive mother, because she had the attitude that it was a very hard world, and I must be brought up to stand up for myself. I had no love as such, I didn't get kissed at night, good night, and when this happened when I came over to England, I was so surprised to sort of have a cuddle and a kiss before I went to bed.

Really?

Yes.

In the long term, do you think perhaps that was a good idea?

Oh it was, yes, yes, because as a 5 year old, I was a very hard 5 year old.

Tell me, Renate, anything at all that you remember about those first six years of your life, it could be anybody who worked for you, did you have a nanny, or something like that?

No, I didn't have a nanny, because my grandmother was always around, and my mother was very young when she had me, about 19, or nineteen and a half, so my grandmother was a young grandmother, so when my mother was nursing, and I came home from school, my grandmother was always there, and my Aunt Selma was always there, doing her sculptures, as she was, and so really, probably, my grandmother might have had more effect on me than my mother did.

So what sort of a lady was your grandmother, can you tell us something about her?

She was a very quiet sort of person, and I think probably would have dealt differently with me, but she did as my mother wanted her to do, which is probably what a grandmother should do, but I think she would have probably been more loving and kind to me, but she knew my mother wanted me to be brought up rather hard, and she sort of went along with it, but she was a very nice lady.

And your Aunt Selma actually lived with you?

She lived in another apartment in the same block, but we were always sort of in and out. She would do her sculpturing and then come in for dinner with us, and then if my mother was out, I'd go in and watch her doing her sculpturing and that seemed to be my leisure time, with adults, watching what they did, rather than them coming with me, to see what a child would do.

Did this do anything for your appreciation of art? Did you remember the sculptures she did? Did you like them?

No, I think I thought they were rather funny and crude, because my memories of them were when they were in the raw, you know, just a big blob, and her cutting away at them, and looking back now, I don't think I can ever remember a completed one, and it seemed, I suppose, like some children would watch their parents making something out of clay, or Plasticine, I saw that more as a play thing than actually anything artistic. Yes, I do like artistic things, I've sewn a lot, I've done tapestries, not in the painting line or anything like that.

Was she your mother's sister?

No, she was my grandmother's sister. She was my grandmother's sister. My mother was the only one.

Did your mother have any professional training at all?

Well, she was a nurse.

I see. In Prague?

Yes, she was in the local hospital, and she was the one that lasted the longest, the rest of the family were killed about 1940, but she was obviously kept alive because she was very useful, and the last we heard from her was in May, 1942, so that was virtually three years after I had left Prague.

So when you were a child, do you ever remember going to a Synagogue at all?

No.

No, you didn't go on high holidays or had any Jewish instruction at all?

Nothing at all. And I found out from my relation that was in London, that none of the family practised the Jewish faith at all.

But you did know that you were Jewish?

No I didn't at the time.

You didn't actually know you were Jewish,

No, I didn't until I was a lot older.

It never occurred to you at the age of 6 that you might be different to the other children at school?

I don't think so, because from what I can gather, most of the children that were in school with me, were sent away as refugees, so presumably they were mostly Jewish, perhaps I lived in a Jewish area, or something like that, I don't quite know.

Is anything, I mean, do you remember how your apartment looked, what your room was like?

Yes, very stark. White, and all lovely sort of old, dark furniture. I can never, I can't remember one bright thing in the house, very very dark, sort of ...

Rather gloomy?

No, not gloomy, but very stark. It sort of hit you when you went in, because it was all sort of white walls, and dark oak furniture, and Merzibor carpets, but it never sort of had the "lived in", the feeling was very very stark, that's what I can remember, I can't even remember pictures on the wall, I think there must've been, we probably had a few heads and busts around the place that Aunt had done, but no, very very stark.

And do you remember any friends? You don't remember many children.

I don't remember one.

You don't remember one friend at all?

The only one I can ever remember was Tanya, who was our doctor's daughter, that was put in charge of me to come over, she was about 15 years of age, but as for small children no, not one.

Can you remember how you were prepared for leaving home?
Was there conversation about "soon you will have to go to England" or something like that?

Oh, I knew from the Christmas before I came, because when they found somewhere for me to go, there was a continual correspondence between Wales and Prague, and there were pictures, we had a picture on the shelf there, of my adoptive father and mother, and his mother and father.

So it was carefully prepared?

Oh it was very carefully prepared.

So it took six months really, six months of preparing you, and preparing themselves?

I doubt whether I realised, I probably thought I was going on a holiday or something like that.

So it wasn't a rush job, it was well-prepared.

Oh no, many letters passed.

Do you know how your parents found this family, or what sort of, what did they do in order to find a home for you? What organisation did they get in touch with?

Well, evidently the one that Mr. Winton had organised, it was not really a professional thing, but my mother heard, in the hospital, I think, that this was being arranged, and she just went and pleaded would they take me, and the, one of the organisers in London, actually wrote to my Dad in Wales and said, "We're having desperate trouble to get people to take these children, could you possibly find somebody to take one?" And they had no children of their own, and they felt, well, that was something that they could do, so then he wrote to my mother in Prague, and said, "Yes, we can do something for you, and these are the people that are going to take Renate" and thereby the correspondence started.

That was really marvellous, because your parents were in personal touch with your prospective parents, as it were, so that gave it a link, didn't it.

Oh it did, I mean, it also gave my mother the satisfaction of knowing that I was going somewhere, I don't know quite how to explain, where there was going to be a

continuity of interests in my education, and how I developed, rather than going somewhere that had no academic interest in their own lives or the childrens' lives.

Do you remember the last day in Prague, or how you said good bye? Or something around that time?

I don't think I did say good bye, because I had chicken pox, and I was very poorly, I had a temperature of 103 or 104 degrees, and my mother literally carried me to the station, and at the last minute, she was going to hold me back, and our doctor said to her, "Well, Hilde, you must realise this is the last chance. If she doesn't go now, she won't go." So she literally threw me into Tanya's arms as the train was going out, so I didn't really say good bye, and if I did, I probably thought I was coming back soon.

Did your father come to the station too?

No, no, he wasn't there.

Because he was with your grandfather?

I don't know, I've got an idea from Tanya, at a later date, that only one parent was allowed to go, because quite a few of the parents had jumped on board previously, with their children, and so the German soldiers literally lined the platform, and the parents were allowed to put their children on the train, and then they had to stand back.

Do you actually remember this sort of picture, or was it told you by Tanya afterwards?

No, I, I can remember it.

You do actually remember that?

I remember the journey, the whole of the journey very well.

Where did you go? And which places did you stop at, or spend the night?

We spent the night on the train. We went to the Hook of Holland, and then we came by ferry to Harwich, and I can remember that, because I've always been seasick, and I was seasick all the way, and then we came by train from Harwich to Liverpool Street, and there we were sort of put into little groups, and eventually some went to hostels, and the others had people meeting, which I was one of.

You had your prospective parents meeting you, but was there this Mr. Wingate?

Mr. Winton. I can't remember him, and he was at university then, he only did this as sort of a, something that he felt he had to do, so whether he was in an office helping out somewhere, but I can't remember him. In fact, I don't think he could've been there, because all the people that were at the Reunion, that were older than me, didn't

even know about Mr. Winton, so I presume that we were all in the dark who'd got us out.

What else do you remember about the journey? I mean, you were still quite ill, weren't you?

Yes, yes I was. I remembered a baby, and it wasn't till three or four years ago that I was told by Tanya that the baby was literally thrown on the train, she had me holding in one arm, because my mother had given me to her, and as the train was moving, this baby was pushed in her arms.

And how old was the baby?

She says about three or four weeks old. And there were ladies travelling on the train, who were nothing to do with us, but they went to the border with the train, and then they came back to Prague, they were allowed to do that, and one of these ladies took charge of the baby, and Tanya or I didn't see the baby again, not even on the ship, or in England, so whether that baby was taken back, or whether it was given to the Red Cross, we never found out.

You have no idea what happened to that baby?

No.

How come you kept in touch with Tanya?

I didn't keep in touch with Tanya because, about a year or 18 months after she came here, she had to go into the Forces, because obviously, she was over 16, and she went into the Navy, and at the end of the War, she married an Italian and went to Italy to live, but her mother came over here after the War, and brought a few things from my mother's with her, and she kept in touch with my relation in London, so it was through her, at the end of the War, that I realised what had happened to Tanya, and from the day we arrived in England, to three or four years ago, we'd never seen each other.

You weren't in touch?

No.

Can you tell me your sort of first meeting with your parents?

Yes, very well. I was sort of taken up the, I can remember walking up the platform, and there was this gentleman with a black hat, a black coat, and a dog-collar, and I'd never seen anybody like that before, but he had a lovely smile. So I was just given to him and said, "This is Renate", which is the only bit I understood, and I went off with him, not speaking any English, apart from "Yes" and "No", and if you don't speak the language, it's difficult to know when to say "yes" and when to say "no"! So I went with him, and the next thing, of course, you can guess. I wanted to go to the toilet, and how was this gentleman going to take me, a five year old, to the toilet? So at Paddington Station, the toilets were down in the basement, there was about 40 steps,

so he asked a lady, would she please take me, he gave her a penny, he said, "Would you please take this little girl to the toilet?" So she said "Yes". She put the penny in, and I went in the toilet, and this was great, but I couldn't get out, because it was this big brass thing, so there he was at the top of the stairs, and he heard this, he said he couldn't understand what I was saying, obviously, but I was absolutely shouting my head off, either in Czech or German, and so he then had to give somebody else a penny, and say, "Would you please get that little girl out, that's making all the noise down there?" And I can remember the train journey to Wales, and I can remember being put to bed that first night, as I say, having the cuddle and the kiss, and the next morning, I was taken to Church, first time in my life, and knowing none of the children there at all, and the service ended, and I saw two little girls picking up the hymn books, and Mum looked around, and I wasn't there, and she looked down the front of the Church, and I was with the other two little girls, collecting hymn books, and the three of us were laughing our heads off.

Oh what a lovely story!

None of us can ever understand what we had in common, but I suppose we thought it was funny, collecting hymn books, and we all laughed, and the friend that saw me the first time that morning, she was looking over my bed when I woke up. She's still a very good friend of mine. She's more like my sister.

Was she related to them?

No, she lived next door but one. And, of course, everybody had been told that this little Czech girl was coming, and would they please be nice to her, and we have an odd relationship, I ring her up and she's just about to ring me, and you know, we do these sort of things, and she had no sister, and I had no sister, so we've kept this lovely friendship.

What were your very first impressions of your new father and mother? Can you remember how you felt about them? Were you in awe of them, or did you immediately warm to them?

Yes, I think I immediately warmed to them. I think, looking back, I was very frustrated, because of the language barrier. I wanted a glass of water, and I literally, they took me all round the house for me to see what it was I wanted, because they knew whatever it was, when I saw it, I would point to it, and, of course, in those days, we had no bathroom in the house, the toilet was outside the back door, and the kitchen was in a conservatory, and as soon as I saw the tap in the conservatory, that was it. And this is my first memories, this terrific speech barrier, with not being able to understand people.

Which town was this in? This was in South Wales?

In South Wales, in Porth, in the Rhondda Valley, which was a Valley, in those days, it was just getting over a very very bad depression, plus the fact that just after I arrived, we had an invasion of evacuees from London, which absolutely flooded the whole of the Valleys.

Did your family take in anybody else?

My family didn't take in anybody else, because Dad was Minister of the local Baptist church, and our house was a sort of a storehouse for blankets and all sorts of things, spare beds, so that if any of the members of the Church needed them, they came into us, so no, we didn't have anybody else.

What sort of a house was it? Was it a terraced house?

Well, it was a house that was rented for my father as a Manse, or a Vicarage would have been. It was in a terrace of four houses, it was just an ordinary Valley house. There were no detached or semi-detached houses in those days.

Could you tell me again, exactly, the date when you arrived?

In Porth, I must've arrived about the 1st or 2nd of July. I think actually we arrived in Harwich, the last day of June, and then, of course, having to go down to London and then to Wales, I think it was about the 1st or 2nd.

Did they know your birthday was approaching?

Oh yes.

You remembered that it was your birthday?

I knew it was my birthday just after I came, and they gave me a party and a cake, I'd never had a birthday cake before, and to see candles and blow them out, was absolutely fantastic you know.

You were very lucky, weren't you?

Yes, very lucky, yes, yes. They treated me as if I was their own. They couldn't have any children, and if they'd had children of their own, they wouldn't have treated them any different than I was treated, because, I wouldn't say they gave me everything, but, cos they didn't have everything to give, but I was certainly made to feel one of the family by my mother's relations, and by father's.

Everybody accepted you?

Oh everybody. I was a little bit of a seven day wonder at the time, but everybody accepted me just as one of them eventually, and I go back now, and people used to tell my sons, "We can remember your Mum when she was so high, when she first came." And after being away from the place for 35 years, I still walk down the main street, and people remember.

Do you really?

Yes.

What was your connection with your real parents at that early stage, just before the War, could you remember anything like letters going backwards and forwards? Would you write little letters to your parents?

After I came to this country, you mean?

Yes, just before the War started.

Yes, I've got the letters here that show that I had written to my mother, and that my father had written, cos evidently, when I did speak a little English, I began using naughty words which the children in school had taught me, and of course, they wrote and told my mother in Prague, that I was using these words, and she was very upset about all this, because she felt that they were blaming her for it, which, of course, they weren't at all.

How funny! You must've been quite proud, because in another language, that's about the first thing one learn, a sort of "bloody" or nasty word.

Yes, yes, it is.

Of course, that's one way of getting attention, too, isn't it.

Yeh, but in those days, there were a lot of milder words that were called "naughty words", weren't they, in this day and age, they seem quite tame now, but it was quite timid little words.

Interesting that they would tell your parents about that.

Well, I think my mother wanted to know how I was settling, and was I coping with everything, and she didn't want me to be naughty.

I see, she wanted you to be good, but in a way, it made it much more real, didn't it?

Oh it did, yes.

End of F193 - Side A

Fl93 Side B

Will you tell a bit more about your first few days or weeks, or just a few months before War started? Like this funny story you were just starting to tell me.

Well, just before we came from Czechoslovakia, my mother evidently thought that I ought to write to my new father and tell him a bit about myself, and one of the outstanding things was that I told him I would be a very very good girl, if I was given plenty of ice cream. So I obviously had it in the back of my mind that I could bribe my way to getting these things, and I did get ice cream, which was very very scarce in those days, but we had an Italian restaurant near us, so every so often, when probably I'd been a good girl, or they wanted me to be a good girl, I would get some ice cream.

Do you remember any times of homesickness at all?

No, none at all. Nothing at all. A few days after I arrived, they sent for a teacher in the Grammar School, that was next door but one, she taught German, so she came along a couple of evenings and had tea with us, and talked to me, and put me right about asking for things, and getting things, and saying "thank you", and this sort of thing, so by the time the school broke up by the end of July, I was quite getting on with my English. Unfortunately, she left that term, so after that, I was really on my own, but by the time I started school the first week in September, I was evidently speaking enough English to be able to be understood at school, and to understand what I was being taught, and consequently, in the grammar school, I was top of the class in grammar, which amazed everybody, including myself, but I suppose I'd been taught English properly. My dad was quite an academic, and insisted that I learnt and did my homework and what have you.

Did you call them Mum and Dad right from the beginning?

Yes. Cos my mother wanted me to. She felt there was a continuity in it, and that if I call them, I believe when I wrote to them, it was "Uncle", "Reverend Uncle", that's what I called him, but she felt that once I was there, to say mum and dad was continuing what I'd just left behind.

It was quite wise of her really, wasn't it?

Yes, looking back on it now, I think, to be living with somebody and calling them "uncle", cos in those days, you called your father's friends uncles and aunts, although they weren't really, so it gave that bit of homeliness to it.

Did you ask them, at the beginning of the War, what War was about, and where were your parents? Were you at all interested? Were you worried?

I don't think consciously I was worried, because every so often, my second cousin used to come down from London to see us, and she was a lot older than me, so she used to tell me about the family, and her father was still alive, he was the Chief Engineer for Skoda, well, it's cars now, but they used to make tanks.

He was still in Czechoslovakia?

He was still in Prague, yes.

And she had got out?

She was here before the War. She came in 1933, as a dress designer, and then she married in England in 1938.

So you didn't really know her, because you were only born in 1933.

I didn't really know her, she came back to Prague a few times. The last time she came back to Prague, before I'd left there, she was very badly ill-treated by the Gestapo, even then, and consequently she was rushed to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, and had a series of big operations, she lost all her toes, and all the rest of it, which we didn't find out until three years before she died.

How old was she when she died?

She died two years ago, she was 79.

Oh, I see, she did get old. And you kept in touch with her?

Oh yes, yes, yes. In the latter years, she was very very clingy to me because I was the only one of the family left, and she remembered the family more than I did, because she was a lot older, and me being the only one, she was wanting to see me a lot and this sort of thing.

When you first arrived, did she come down to welcome you, and to see you almost straight away, or did she keep in touch for the first few years?

Well, to be honest, mum and dad wondered why she never had me, because being the family they felt that perhaps she ought to have taken charge of me, and unfortunately, I wish, in those days, she would've explained to them, why it was that she hadn't had me, but she was so ill, there was no way she could possibly have me.

Was that due to the Gestapo treatment?

Yes, yes.

Her illness.

Yes. Well, what happened actually, she came back to Prague, and picked up the phone and said to her friend, "I'm back." And her friend said, "What are your plans, Liesl?" And she said, "Oh, I haven't got any plans, I'm just going to enjoy a couple of days holiday, and then I'm going back." And within half an hour, the Gestapo were at the door. "We want your plans." She said, "I haven't got any plans." "Oh yes, we heard you speaking on the phone." And the only reason was because of her father, cos they knew what her father, or who her father was, and ...

Who was her father?

He was the Chief Engineer for Skoda. So they sort of associated her with him, and what plans, because evidently a few factories were getting sabotaged and that sort of thing, and they said, "Will you come with us down to Headquarters?" Now, right opposite lived a German soldier, and he literally saved her life, because he was coming in when she was going out, and she said, "Would you please tell the British Consul I'm being taken away." Well, he did so, but, of course, the time lapse between them getting there was a little bit too long, and they tied her to a chair, and the soldier stood there with his gun, and every time she refused to say anything, he just butted her toes, and then she passed out, and, of course, sitting on a chair, the chair went over, and she went with it, and they kicked her in the stomach, so she had perforated ovaries, at which time, the Consul came in, and they took her away, they rushed her to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. Consequently she had everything removed, and was never able to have a family, and over the years, gradually all her toes went. But she was a most fantastic woman, she bore the Germans no grudge at all. She taught German in night school, and some of her best friends were Germans. So it rather upsets me when I hear people still say, "I hate the Germans", when they've had no, nothing at all in their lives to make them say that, and yet people who have, I mean, I've got a very good German friend down in Spain, and she was a marvellous woman, but she never told us until two or three years before she died.

She never told you she was German.

No, she never told me about this incident in her life. And it was just by accident that we got it out of her then. But she was the one that went back after the War, and found out all the little bits and pieces, and brought back the Death Certificates for 63 members of the family.

Of your family?

Yes, yes. That was the ones that she could remember.

Can you, just to make a little more historical sense of this, when was it that you realised, or that your parents realised, your adopted parents, that something had happened to your real parents?

Well, the letter we got in 1942 was the last we heard, and Aunt Liesl tried several times during the War, to find out little bits that she could from people coming back from Czechoslovakia, or, we had a lot of Czech soldiers in this country, she tried to contact people to find out, but we never found out anything until she went out in February 1946, and by this time, we realised that they must've died, but I couldn't be adopted until my parents Death Certificates were found, and I couldn't become a British Subject until I was adopted, so she went out on a Trade Visa, and brought me back photographs. I never did get the Death Certificates of the family because my father felt that they were her private little bits and pieces.

She actually did find, I mean, I wonder how they ever got Death Certificates.

Well, there were lists of people that went into the Concentration Camps. Whether they were, whether they knew how they were killed, they did actually know how my mother was killed, because they were all put on a train, and went through a gas-filled tunnel, and that Death Certificate, or the list, came from the last concentration camp she was at.

Do you know what that was called, the concentration camp?

No. No. I know the one my father was in was Belsen, but the one my mother was in, was some, about 23, or 24 letters, and it was a very very long name, it wasn't one of the ones that we hear of on films and programmes.

But Liesl heard exactly how they died, and roughly when they died?

Yes. Yes.

She had all the particulars.

Because evidently, when my mother was killed, that was the end of that concentration camp, it actually closed, so it was the, they knew that anybody that was in there hadn't survived because the whole place was closed.

Very tragic. How did, your parents heard from Liesl about all this?

Yes, yes.

How did they convey this to you?

Well, by the end of the War, I was 12, and my biggest worry then was that I'd have to go back to Czechoslovakia, not that I wanted my mother and father to be dead, but I didn't really want to go away, because I'd now got lovely friends, I liked the school, and I felt a part of the community, and the thought of going back to Prague, and having to learn the language again, rather horrified me, so although I was sad that they'd died, it was, in my childish way, I was relieved.

Yes, I can understand that. Were you then adopted properly?

I was adopted properly when I was 14, because I believe it takes a long time for these sort of things.

Did they make quite a fuss of you and of the adoption, or was it done very quietly?

No, it was done very quietly, and then I had to go to the Consul in Cardiff to be made a British Subject, and he had to satisfy himself that I could read English and all the rest of it.

By that time, you were more Welsh to the English than the English, weren't you!

Oh, yes, very Welsh, yes.

Yes, it must've been a great joy to your parents, to be able to adopt you, and have you officially as part of their family.

Yes, I think so, yes, they were quite happy then, I think probably they had all the War to think about whether they ought to adopt me or not.

Did they keep your parents' pictures and letters from just before the War, and at the beginning of the War too, for you?

Oh yes.

Or did you keep them yourself?

No, no, I had nothing to do with them at all, they were all kept, until well after I was married.

All these pictures that you've got here, and the letters were kept by them?

No, not, most of these were brought to me after the War, the pictures, because they were in Prague, and Aunt Liesl brought them back, but all the letters, the Red Cross, birthday greetings, and those sort of things were kept, and then, in the latter years, Aunt Liesl gave me the post cards she'd had from the concentration camps, because she'd adopted two children, and they're very nice children, but they're not really interested in her background.

She had actually adopted some children?

She adopted two children, yes. Marvellous children. We spent the Winter Olympics with Hilary, one of them, in Calgary last year, and we keep in touch.

They were also from Czechoslovakia?

No, they were British. Or Robin is half-Spanish, he was a very neglected baby, and Aunt Liesl had a marvellous touch, she, anything that was neglected, if she saw a dog that was neglected, she'd take him in, and Robin is now in Los Angeles, a businessman, but they weren't interested in her background, so I've got all her bits and pieces to put into my files now.

Would you like to tell me the history of this ring that you're wearing?

Yes, the doctor that brought me into the world, in Prague, was, at one time, in the same Concentration Camp with my mother. They didn't go together, they didn't start off in the same concentration camp, but because my mother was a nurse, and the doctor, they eventually met up, and the doctor married, in the concentration camp, to another doctor, and he was eventually shot in front of her, as a traitor, and she went out with a group of people, I don't really know why, and my mother put the, her engagement ring and a silver comb, you know, a little bone comb that folds into a

silver case, into a loaf of bread, and the doctor took it out. And she literally brought that loaf of bread to London with her.

She survived the concentration camp?

She survived the concentration camp. She was awarded the George Cross for getting 68 very sick pilots out of Yugoslavia during the War, she commandeered a train and got them out of the country, and she was awarded the George Cross.

So she actually escaped from the concentration camp?

She did, yes. When I say "escaped", she was taking, going with the Germans from one Camp to another, with patients, and she managed to escape, and she was in, a surgeon in Maida Vale in London for several years, and as far as I know, she's still alive in the South of France.

So she must've got your address from somebody?

Well, she knew where Auntie Liesl was in London, and it was at Aunt Liesl's when I was 14, that I met her again, after the War.

Her husband wasn't the same doctor who was Tanya's father?

No, no. Tanya's father died when she was very very small. She never knew her father at all.

That's an amazing story about this ring, isn't it?

It is. The bread was literally in the groove behind the stone, when I got it, and also in it, was my father's, my mother's wedding ring, and a ring, presumably that my mother had given to my father at some time, which, later on, when the ring wore very thin, I had to have put into the back to make it up again, so literally in that ring there is my mother's engagement ring, my mother's wedding ring, and my father's wedding ring.

That's amazing. That's a wonderful thing to possess now, isn't it?

It is.

What happened to you, you went to grammar school at the age of 10? Had you sailed through grammar school, presumably?

No, it was a very funny situation, because, as I said earlier, we had a lot of evacuees, so the evacuees were allowed to go to the grammar school first, or you went mornings and they went afternoons, so I went to the grammar school when I was 12. I can't say, honestly, I sailed through. I was not really academic. Very bad at languages.

But you worked hard, because you were very much encouraged at home?

Oh yes, I was very much pushed at home. I, I didn't think I'd learnt any Latin until we started going abroad, and then Dave says to me, "You know, learning Latin at school did you the world of good, because basically all the European languages come from Latin, and you can just get a gist of these words." So I think probably my schooling did do a bit of good, but I left when I was 15, because Mother was very poorly, and consequently I had to do the housework, so I went to a private commercial college which fitted in, you know, afternoons one day, and evenings another day. And then I went to work for British Overseas Airways. They had a depot near us, cos during the War, all the engines were brought out of London, they opened up a depot in Wales, which is still there.

And you did secretarial work for them?

Yes. Yes.

And then what happened to you?

I got kidnapped to Cornwall by a Cornishman!

That is your husband?

I came straight from ...

So you met Dave, your husband, where did you meet him?

Actually, we had a very elderly lady used to come to stay with us, who'd been in Japan as a missionary, and she stayed with us quite a long time, and then she said, "Well, now, you've been very good to me, would you like to come down to Newquay for a holiday?" So we did. And we came for a month. And after about three weeks, she said, "You know, you haven't had any young company. Why don't you go out to my brother's farm, he's got six children, and there's always three or four others there." So of course, I did, I went out there for a couple of days, and Dave was living with them at the time. And then a couple of years later, he went in the Air Force, and my friend from Newquay was writing to me, and she said, "Dave, we told him to come to see you, but you know what he's like, he's very shy, and he won't come unless he's invited." Now, being in a minister's house, at home, we always had young people, after church on a Sunday, our house was open house. We'd have perhaps 25 of them there for supper. So when Mum saw this letter, she said, "Oh, you must invite him up, because I know how I'd feel if a son of mine was away from home and nowhere to go." So I had to sit down then and there, and invite him, and I had to walk a mile and a half to the main Post Office, and post the letter on the Friday night, so that he'd come up on Sunday. So when eventually we got married, and she moaned that I was too far away from home, my one little repartee was, "Well, it's all your fault!"

And how long did you know each other before you married?

Oh, he went to Singapore for two and a half years, so, four years.

Really, that was quite a long time.

Well, he was away for 2 years 9 months, actually, and we knew each other for a year before he went.

Did your parents like him?

Oh they did, yes. Yes, they did. I was quite surprised because Mum, in a way, was what I would call, what's the best word to use? A nice snob? She wasn't stuck up, but she liked everything nice, and I thought she was going to be rather fussy, but of course, I, I wasn't one for boyfriends at the time, because we went around, 8, 10, 12 of us, and we were such a good group of young people, we didn't want to be bothered with going out in twos, but she did, she really took to him very much. And so did my father.

And what happened to them, your parents?

Dad is still alive, he's 87. He's just published a book, it's out any day. Mum died, she had her Golden Wedding in 1980. She had her 80th birthday in the October, we had our Silver Wedding in the October, our eldest son was 21 in the October, and she just lived for that, and after Paul's birthday, she just deteriorated, and she died in the February. But Dad is still very active, he types six hours a day, got the most fantastic brain.

What is the book called, that he wrote?

The book is on Islam, which is rather odd, I was a bit worried when the Rushdi Affair blew up, but Dad's book is not a novel. He lectured at Swansea University on non-Christian religions, and he had so many Indians and Pakistans, and Jordanians and all the rest of it, that he decided he would write this book. So when I asked him, "Is it going to cause the same stir?" He said, "No, it's just a factual book, as opposed to ridicule."

So it's now being published?

Yes, it should be out any day now.

You must be very proud of him.

He's a wonderful old chap. He's rather now obsessed with the book, if you talk to him, this is all that's in his mind.

But it is an achievement, isn't it.

Oh it is, yes, and that's what keeps him going, his mind is absolutely fantastic.

So you had two boys?

Two sons, yes.

Where are they?

The eldest one is in Frome in Somerset. He, he went to college and got an Honours Degree and went teaching, but about three years ago, he got rather disillusioned with it all, and he decided he couldn't keep a wife and family on a teacher's wage, so he gave it up, and he's gone into finance, and he's loving every minute of it. And he became a father in April, and he's got a marvellous wife, she's, she's a real dear, she is.

Was the baby a boy or girl?

A girl. Amy Elizabeth. His wife was a teacher, she's now given up because she wants to bring up her own family, which I admire her for. And the youngest one is in Australia. He's got a business in Alice Springs, and he's the extrovert of the family.

Is he married too?

No, he's not, but he's got a lovely English girlfriend, who we hope one day he'll marry, when they feel like settling down.

And that's where you've just been, in Australia?

We have yes, we've been to see them. They've been home every year, and last year they gave us an ultimatum, "We don't come home any more till you come and see us." So we had the most fantastic holiday. I still don't believe that I've been, you know, I have to pinch myself occasionally.

What we haven't got, Renate, is what Dave does, or what did he do when you married him, for instance?

Well, he was in the Air Force when we were first married. But being a farmer's son, and being an Engineer in the Air Force, he turned to the machinery side of agriculture, and he sells farm machinery.

And you work, don't you? As a receptionist?

I'm helping out at the moment, yes. I managed the hotel for eight years, and then gave it up, because I suffer a bit with arthritis in my neck, and I found it too demanding. We then bought a restaurant for Peter to have when he came back from Australia, and after buying it, we found he wasn't coming back. So last year we sold it, and so I had a summer at home, and nobody leaves me in peace, so I'm just helping out, a few days a week, at the moment, at a local hotel, but really, I've semi-retired.

Would you like to finish up this side of the tape with something like looking back. What has this done for you? The, having been sent to England at the age of 6, nearly 6? What are the good things coming out of it, which I can see, but what are the bad things for you? Could you put it in a nutshell?

I can't honestly see anything bad, apart from, if I look at it from my family's side, my real family's side, a very sad thing, but I think I would have had, probably, a very

sadder life if I'd stayed in Czechoslovakia, and probably a much sadder life if I'd gone back after the War, which I could've done, because all my family's property was still there, and I was told I could have it, I could have it all if I went back to Czechoslovakia. I could sell it all if I went back to Czechoslovakia, but as long as I was in England I couldn't do anything.

So you didn't get any money?

Nothing at all.

As restitution?

No, nothing at all.

(Interviewer thanks Renate for the interview)

End of F193 Side B

Fl94 Side A

Well, here we are again, we decided that it isn't the end of your story yet. Would you like to tell me a little bit more about your father in Porth.

Yes, it's rather difficult to describe him, actually, because he is so theological, it's a job for him to come down to my brain capacity, I suppose, and he's very very knowledgeable and has a photographic mind. If he reads something in a book, he can remember the page that it's on, and the paragraph that it is, even at his age, at 87. It's absolutely fantastic. And he's just finished writing a book, which is due to be published any day now, and it's called, "The Bible or the Koran?" which is rather apt after this novel has just come out, but he got so involved with it when he was lecturing at the college, on non-Christian religions, and he was asked to write a book, which he has done, and finished, at the age of 87.

And he actually lectured at Swansea University?

Yes.

Yes, well, he must be a very unusual man.

And he still has some of the students now come to him and have extra tuition of an evening, during the week, so he's still very involved with them.

And would you just like to say a few more words about your Aunt Liesl, who was a very unusual woman, wasn't she. She married at what age? Early on in life?

Well, she married in Czechoslovakia, actually, and divorced very quickly, because she married in haste, and I suppose, repented in haste, I think. And she came over to England to be a dress designer for Marks and Spencer, this was before the War, and married the nephew of the Equerry of the late King, he was called Lord Plunkett, she married his nephew. She was a fantastic woman, because she went through such a lot in her early life, ill-treated by the Gestapo, but fortunately, she was, by that time, a British subject, having married a British gentleman, and so she was rescued and didn't come to the fate of the rest of the family, and she lived till she was 79, which was two years ago.

Yes, she sounds a lovely woman. Renate, I thought it was very interesting to hear how you got hold of the people who were interested in recording your story, can you tell us how, when you came back from Canada, what happened, because I think that's a very very interesting little story.

Well, we'd been out to Canada, to the Winter Olympics, to stay with Aunt Liesl's daughter, who's now a Canadian resident, and we'd driven back from Heathrow, and my husband had gone to bed, and I sat and had a cup of coffee, and switched the television on, only to see that Esther Rantzen's programme, That's Life just finishing, and she made the remark that if there was anybody watching who thought they were one of the last children to come out of Prague, would they ring this number. And I was absolutely, I wouldn't say speechless, but so surprised that it could involve me.

So I rang the number the next morning, and eventually was rung back to say that yes, my name was on the list, and that I was one of the last children on the list, and they interviewed me, and a small story came out on the Sunday, in the Sunday Mail and then later on, in the summer, about 40 of us were asked to go back on the last programme of That's Life before the summer recess.

This was on live television?

Yes, yes we were, and Mr. Winton was brought on again, and we were there for him to look round and see us. We were still called his "lost children".

Did you know anybody else on this programme?

No, I didn't, no. I made one or two very nice friends there, but they were all completely new to me. The nearest one to here was from Cardiff. Most of them still seemed to be in a circle around London, I think.

And then you went to a conference?

We went to a reunion, actually, at the end of a conference, they had a three-day conference at Oxford.

That was about the Holocaust, was it?

Yes, but that was really for professors, solicitors, business people, that were involved in the Jewish community, and lecturers came, I think the Environmental Health Officer for France was there, a big solicitor from New York, and then it all ended at the Jewish Centre in Finchley, with a reunion for Mr. Winton's children, and a climax to the Oxford seminar.

This was at the Sternberg Centre for Judaism?

Yes, it was a fantastic day, it really was. We had several people there who were very worried about history being wiped out, the bit about the Holocaust, and what should be done, where, I think this is now the ...

Yes, this is the offshoot of it.

The offshoot of it, and there were some very emotional speeches there, with people who were very much involved with Auschwitz and the Holocaust, and people around me were very very upset about it, because I mean, everywhere you looked, people were really emotionally involved with it. I found that, that most people were involved with it, were the actual people who were still practising Orthodox Jews, who were still at the centre of it, whereas I felt I was a little bit on the outside of it.

Also, you were so young that you couldn't remember any emotional trauma.

No, no, cos all the people around me that were speaking, said, "Oh, you were very young", "We were 10," or "We were 15", and this is what I found most of the people involved were, and they were more emotionally involved.

So this was how you became involved and how I'm interviewing you now. Have you ever talked to your boys about your history?

Yes, they've been in the know ever since they were very small, because they realised that I had two families. They realised that Aunt Liesl was a part of one family, and that the rest of the people were part of my new family, so they were brought up with complete knowledge of everything that had gone on, they saw the letters, they saw the pictures of me, Aunt Liesl often told them things about my mother and my father, and the family. So that was part of their bringing up?

So you're going to leave them the letters and the photographs and all those things?

Oh yes, yes. We're in the process now, of making them, putting them into polythene holders so that they keep.

Well, you've got them very nicely tidied and in very good order, and I'm thinking that it would really be very interesting, if you wouldn't mind, reading some of the last letters you had from your parents, or rather, your father received these letters. I think this is very very interesting from a historical, and from a family point of view. That was the last one wasn't it. But there was one earlier, two earlier ones, I think it shows your real mother's personality quite a bit. You apparently wrote one letter to your father in Wales, but I imagine that your mother made it up, because you were only five and a half, but I'm wondering if you could read the other letters.

Yes, do you want me to read the first one after I came over?

Yes, I think that would be ... Could you give us the date when it was written?

Yes, 15th July, '39, and my mother always called my new father, Reverend.

"Dear Reverend,

We have received your letter you kindly wrote immediately after Renate's arrival. We have answered it in return of post, and we hope you will have got it. Excuse our writing again, but owing to your remark, Renate's face looks thinner than on the photo. We are worrying that something might be wrong with her health. We do hope ever so much that this worry is absolutely superfluous, but I trust you can imagine a mother's anxiety. If you are writing to us, would you mind telling us all about Renate's behaviour, conduct, and if she is already perhaps able to smatter a few words in English. We are very much looking forward to hearing from you as soon as possible, and remain very sincerely yours,

Hilde Kress

P.S. We do not want to cause expenses, therefore we take the liberty of enclosing one International Postal Coupon. We all send many kisses to our darling."

And when was the next letter written?

The 5th August, the same year.

"We thank you very much for your kind letter, and I hope that this letter will be forwarded on to you, as I expect you're staying on the seaside by now. I am lacking the words to express how happy I am about your last message of Renate's good behaviour, and I hope that her good manners will last. How nice of you to intend to give her all the enjoyments a little child can desire for. Especially happy we are, about your intention to give her the chance to be taught the piano. I am certainly agreeing with you about the points of bringing her up, and taking an interest in all the children she will be associating with. Though it is particularly hard for us all to live under the circumstance, it means a great comfort to us to know how Renate is happy and so well-kept. We are constantly thinking of her, and for her every line you are dropping to us, we shall be ever so thankful.

We remain with our best thoughts, very truly yours,
Hilde Kress"

Now, was that August 1939, would you think?

Yes, yes.

It was just before the World War.

Yes, the War hadn't started yet.

So when was the next letter?

The next one was 26th April.

So that must've been in 1940.

Do you want me to read this one?

Yes please.

"I am thanking you for your beautiful and helpful letter. I would call myself happy to know my little one is in a surrounding of so much affection and love. Your encouraging and heartfelt lines have convinced us that my little girl had all prospect to grow up under your leadership, to a fine honest human being. I am lacking the words how pleased we were with your lines, telling us that there are still people of human attitude, understanding. The great difficulties we are confronted with, there is no chance at all for a little Jewish child to grow up undisturbed. I trust you will understand. I gave my daughter the best and tenderest education, the best surroundings as long as it was possible. Circumstances we are unfortunately confronted with, force me to undertake steps which seem for the moment, heartbreaking for me, but there is no other choice to save the future of our beloved little girl. Now you will understand what a great comfort your letter has been to us all. I know that our child will be in the best of hands, and I'm sure that you and your

dear wife will learn to love her just as we do. May our Lord allow me to bear the separation bravely. I do not give up hope, and I will only live for it, that I will be able to see my child once again, whenever it may be. I regain strength to carry on with life, knowing that there are people like you. I thank you once more. My little daughter will prove worthy of all you are doing for her. I arrive you of my great and deepest thankfulness, and I'm very much looking forward to hearing from you soon. If there is anything else to facilitate the coming over, I will be only too pleased to do it. I thank you for the lovely photo, you look so happy. I am convinced that Renate will be just as happy in your midst. In my next letter, I will enclose a photo of my family."

Renate, what I don't understand is, in 1940 there was a war on, how could they have sent that letter?

I don't honestly know, but it must have been, because I didn't come till the end of June '39.

No, I know, it must've been, you are quite right. So somebody must have brought it, quite amazing, actually, isn't it.

Yes, but then you see, after that ...

Because Czechoslovakia was part of Germany at that time.

Yes, it was.

And they wouldn't have been able to write direct to England. What they could have done, is sent it to somebody in America, because America wasn't in the War yet, and somebody in America could have sent it on to you, which happened in some instances I know of.

Yes, but you see, what I couldn't understand, the Germans were in Prague before I left, and they were lining the streets, they were lining the stations, I can't understand.

Well, that's all right, I understand that. That was because in 1938, Hitler invaded Prague, he invaded Czechoslovakia, and there was nearly a war, and it was just simply prevented by Chamberlain at that time, and you and I, in fact, wouldn't be alive now, if Chamberlain hadn't been and made a pact with, a Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler, and the War was postponed by a year, and so that I understand completely, but how a letter could have got to England after that, I don't know, but never mind.

You see, August, after the 26th April, that was it, oh, 8th May.

So you had one more letter, would you like to read that? Or two more letters.

That one there was July 22nd, that's got out of, now this seems to be in the last ...

Would you like to read the last one?

"This is to thank you most heartily for your kind letter we just received. I am sure Renate will feel very happy, and are very thankful that you are intending to give her so nice possibilities for her future life. We were especially happy to read that Renate will enjoy a lot of fresh sea air. As a matter of fact, she had to do without it lately as there is no possibility for children like her to enjoy all the benefits of a young child is in need of. There is something lying hard on my chest. We have the plan, the realisation of which at present, is impossibly unfortunate, to go abroad. If we should succeed, what we hope, and be able to settle down and earn such a sustenance which would enable us to bring up a child as well. You will understand our desire, by the love of God, to be reunited with our dear little one again."

Which I should imagine, they were trying to get out of the country.

"You have given us, by your letters, many proofs of deep understanding and human feeling. This encourages us to write frankly. We call ourselves happy to know Renate, over there in your peaceful home, but we do hope that if ever in several years time, only we should love to have Renate with us again. And therefore we beg you most heartily, to abstain from eventual adoption. We hope you will understand our feelings, as it is going concerning our single child. We are enclosing the two photos and the Medical Certificate wanted. Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours truly,
Hilde"

Now, you think this actually was written in 1942.

No, '40.

That was in '40. This was in '40. The ones from the concentration camp were in '42. That was the actual last...

There was also the post card, wasn't there?

Yes, the post cards were 1942.

Would you just like to read that post card which you think was, were they already in the concentration camp?

Yes, this has a concentration camp mark on it, and it was sent by Maria Krieger, which was Aunt Liesl's mother. And it came from a concentration camp which was afterwards called Dachau.

I see, and it was translated by somebody, the post card, wasn't it.

It was translated from, Aunt Liesl was too emotionally involved to translate them, she read them in German, but her husband, who she'd taught German, during the years, he translated it.

Would you just like to read it?

Yes, and it was written to my mother, from her aunt.

"I do hope that you received our card, and have realised that Mizzy, (which was aunt) is very poorly. Get in touch immediately with 441111, and 41098 (which is obviously their numbers). Felix is so resourceful and Hilde can advise. Pier has a brown and black dress which are warm, a pair of comfortable shoes, in all things which one can use for many purposes. Call especially the last number, we badly need a cushion, a warm blanket. We both only have a straw mattress. We do envy Selma for many reasons. Soon it will be cold, we will need winter coats. Mizzy has also lighter dresses at Piers, but send more only after Mizzy acknowledges receipt. Felix was so good, but unfortunately not good enough to stay well and alive. I am so grateful for his ideas. These saved us, but now we are in a terrible state. Our destitution, (literal translation means relief) have closed any possibility of existence. Write immediately after receipt of this card. Hugo is so nervous. I kiss you with all my heart, Maria."

And these were kept for you by whom? How did they come into your hands?

Well, these were in Aunt Liesl's keeping, because it was her mother had written the letter to my mother, because obviously my mother being a nurse, had access to many things that could bring things in and out, which the others couldn't do, and latterly, in her life, she asked if I would like to have these few things, and obviously I was pleased to have them.

When you say your mother was able to, in and out, she was able to go in and out of concentration camps, you mean?

Well, evidently, by some research that we did with a doctor, when she came to England, she said that mother had been in three, if not four, concentration camps, because obviously the Germans took her to wherever she was needed, whereas Aunt Selma and my grandmother, and Auntie Liesl's mother, were all together in a concentration camp where they stayed till they died.

And they were gassed? Most of them?

We don't know. My mother and Felix were gassed, yes.

And then you had one more Red Cross letter, didn't you?

Yes, that was June, 10th June, 1942, which came to Renate Kress, c/o Rev. Copplestone, and you were allowed 25 words at the bottom, and it said,

"Many birthday wishes. We think continually of you. Are well, hope you too. Much love, kind regards, and thanks to your foster parents." And it was signed, "Mummy, Grandmother, and Felix." So obviously, in 1942 they were, I presume, all together, or whether my mother just signed for them.

And your father was probably dead by then?

We never found out when my father died. We knew that he was taken away just after the War started, before the end of 1939, and after that, we can't find out anything about him.

But it's obviously very nice for you to have these letters and this card.

Oh, absolutely fantastic. It's sad when you look through them, but I think in a situation like this, it's nice to have them to look back on, and to be able to hand them to your children, who realise how lucky they are to live in a world where they have freedom.

Yes. And it is a reminder that you were very much loved by your parents.

Oh yes, yes.

That they sent you out, because they loved you, they wanted to save you.

Oh, I think that is, that is quite true.

Well, once again, Renate, thank you very very much.

Oh, it's been a pleasure, I enjoyed doing it.

End of F194 - Side A

F194 Side B is blank

End of interview