

NATIONAL

Life stories

**LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH
COMMUNITY**

WLODJA ROBERTSON

Interviewed by Doreen King

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Fl95 Side A

What is your name?

My name is Wlodja Robertson, that's my married name.

What was your maiden name?

Blit.

When were you born?

I was born on the 12th October, 1931.

And where were you born?

In Warsaw.

Where were you brought up as a child, was that in Warsaw?

Yes, I lived in Warsaw till I left there in '43.

And what was your father's name?

My father's name was Lucien Blit.

And do you know where his family came from, what his parents did?

I think that they lived, well, I know that his grandmother, or rather, my, yes, his grandmother, lived in Warsaw, I remember seeing her when I was a small child. His father worked as an Administrator, collecting, I think, rents of houses belonging to the Jewish, some Jewish Council, I'm not sure.

What would that have been, a sort of self-governing Council?

Yes.

That's interesting. And your father, was he born in Warsaw as well?

Yes, yes.

And had he stayed there most of his life?

Yes. Yes, he lived in Warsaw.

And what was his occupation?

He was a full-time employee of the Bund.

The Bund was the Trade Union movement?

Well, it was a Political Party, Socialist Party, which was not a Zionist Party, and it was a very large Party in Poland.

This was, I believe, for Yiddish speaking workers?

Yes, they were, yes, it was very interested in the Yiddish culture, and my father was the Secretary of the, of it's Youth Movement, and edited papers for the Youth Movement, and was also the representative on the Socialist International.

And how old would your parents have been when you and your sister were born?

They were about 26.

So they were a young couple, and a very modern couple, I imagine.

Yes, well, yes, I think that especially my mother, is (INAUDIBLE) probably against her background, more than my father. Her parents were a much more traditional, religious Jewish family.

What would your economic situation have been? Relatively comfortable, modest, or was there, or did you feel short of money as a child? Or did you feel that you had as much as most of the people in the neighbourhood?

Well, I think that we lived in a very poor part of Warsaw, therefore we, as children, felt, I felt well off comparatively, because the people around us were very very poor, but we lived in a very small apartment on the third floor, with just two rooms, and a tiny kitchen, and then a young woman who was a maid, sort of sleeping in the kitchen, and I know that my father used to have worries about paying rent, and so I'm sure that we were not really objectively well-off, but comparatively to the people who lived there, we felt we were well-off.

This was, of course, a time of economic recession, in the Thirties, I suppose?

Yes.

Perhaps many people in this district were not working?

I think that Jewish families who lived in this way, the Jewish part of Warsaw, were, if they weren't working, but if they were working, they were earning very very low wages.

What was the name of the district?

I remember the name of the street, it was called Molopija.

And in the house, what language did you speak? Did you speak to each other in Yiddish or in Polish?

Well, I certainly spoke Polish to this young woman who looked after me, because my mother was working, was a Headmistress of a school, she was a Polish young woman from the country. And in fact, I didn't, but certainly my parents spoke Yiddish, and I heard Yiddish spoken, they spoke to their friends in Yiddish.

And did you have non-Jewish neighbours, or were most of the neighbours Jewish?

Well, in that particular, yes, before the War, I think that they were all Jews, I don't know, but I'm almost sure that they were, 100 per cent certain.

Do you remember non-Jewish neighbours at all? And if you were friendly, or ...

Not there. And I don't really remember my parents having Polish, non-Jewish friends, though my grandparents and my uncle, my father's brother, certainly had Polish friends, who they were in contact with at some point, during the War.

Were you religiously observant at all in the home? Or was that ...

No, not at all.

Now, what was your mother's name?

My mother's name was Fela, or Feiga, which is the Yiddish name, Hertzlig.

That's a famous name.

Is it?

Hertzel.

No, Hertzlig.

And your mother's family, what were they like?

My mother's family lived, as a kind of extended family, in a street not very far away from us. My grandfather had a little factory, which made things made of metal and silver-plated spoons, and, and also my mother's brother had another little factory next door, where frames for handbags were made, also out of metal, but the whole family lived in the same block of flats. My grandparents on the third floor, and one of my mother's sisters in another flat in the same block.

How many brothers and sisters did she have?

I, or my mother?

Your mother.

My mother had a sister and a brother in Warsaw, and she had a brother living in Paris, who had emigrated to France very soon, I think, after the First World War, when he was 18.

And your maternal grandmother and grandfather, did they come from Warsaw as well?

Yes, I'm sure they were both born in Warsaw.

And what did your mother do before she got married? From what you said, she continued her job when she was married as well?

Yes, I don't know, I should imagine she was always a teacher.

And did she teach young children or older children?

Well, she was, when I knew her, she was a Headmistress of one of the Poale Zion Primary Schools, that was a primary school, for children from 7-11.

So it was small children.

No, they were not small children, because the schools went on from 7-14, some of the children, the ones, usually the little children, went to other Gymnasiums at 13.

So would, would the children at this school have worn a uniform?

I don't know, I'm sure they didn't.

You can't remember.

I think they wore overalls, but I really can't remember, and yes, it was a Yiddish school, Yiddish was the main, was the language.

And was your mother at all religious, or about the same as your father?

Yes.

And the grandparents, her parents?

Her parents were religious, my grandfather was very religious.

Did he wear a beard,

He wore a small beard, he was not a Hasid, but he prayed, observed the Jewish holidays, prayed every day, wore, I really don't know the names, which I'm rather ashamed to say, the tallit when he prayed, yes. And the thing around on his head, with a little box, yes. (Phylacterics - Tefillin)

So, you'd probably go there for the Jewish holidays. Did you and your parents go there sometimes for holidays?

No, I think that there was some slight rift over the religious observances, I think, so I didn't, it was only during the War, when I stayed with them, that I learned more about it.

Can you remember, in the family, did your mother or father have defined roles? Did the man always do this, and the woman always do that? Or was it quite modern?

There was a young woman from the country who lived with us, who really did all the domestic things, and I don't think my mother did any more than my father. That's my impression. She maybe did a little more, looked after us perhaps a little more.

Now, the place where you lived was an apartment, it was a flat.

Yes.

Was it in a big building? What was it like?

Yes it was a house with a courtyard, inside there was a big gate, in a big apartment block, and there was an area which children played and old ladies sat, away from the street.

Which floor was it?

We lived on the third floor.

With stairs?

Yes.

And how many rooms did you have?

We had only two rooms, and the tiny little corridor, which served as a kitchen.

And what sort of, did you have the usual sort of, how was it furnished? Did you have particular pictures, books?

I certainly remember there was a put-U-upp, because my sister and I slept in one room, and my parents used the other room as a dining room, and slept there. I really can't remember. There were certainly books, yes, I remember shelves, I can't remember pictures.

And did you, would you have had, would you have had a Mezusah on the door?

No.

And compared, you said compared to other homes in the District, it was good. It was better.

Yes, well, we felt that we were better dressed, that we had more food.

You had one sister or more than one?

No, I just have one, twin sister.

Your twin sister.

And what is her name?

Her name is Nelly.

Nelly. And were your parents strict, or easy-going, as parents?

Yes, they were very busy outside the house, and I don't even have an impression if they were, I don't know if they were, probably not very strict, because they were not looking after us full-time.

So were you much influenced by your household help? Was she a very nice girl? What was her name?

The young girl was called Hella. Yes, I remember, I knew her as the person at home, before the War, when I was small, she was the person I went to when I needed anything. I don't know if she was particularly nice, but she looked after us, she was the person in control, yes.

What did she look like?

I really couldn't describe her now, it's so long time ago. She was, there was nothing very special about her, she was quite blonde.

Did she tell you and your sister stories?

No, I think the books and the stories, probably my parents used to read to us, and tell us, yes, now I remember now, that we were told stories at night, and that was always by our parents, especially by my mother.

Do you remember what the stories were? History? Fairy stories, legends?

I think that they always had some moral about children being good and doing the right thing.

And how did you spend your evenings?

Yes, I really cannot remember very much about it, they couldn't have been very eventful.

Did you have a radio?

Yes, we had a radio.

Do you recall your parents speaking much about world events, what was happening in the world?

Yes, I, when I think about it, probably why I can't remember very much about the evenings, because very often people would come to the house and we were sent to our room.

What sort of people?

Well, I especially remember, before the War, I think it must've been when the Polish Jews were expelled from Germany, there were some people who came to my father, there was a lot of business being done, where they should go, and who should look after them. But anyway, yes, friends of my parents, and I suppose, members of the political parties, used to come.

Do you remember consciously hearing about what was happening in Germany, at a young age?

No. I remember the talk about the possibility of a War.

But not specifically what was happening in Germany?

But not specifically, yes. First was Czechoslovakia, I remember, and then Germany.

What age did you start school?

I must have been just 7 years old, just before the War.

That was the normal age.

That was the normal age.

And what kind of school was it? Was it a Jewish school?

Yes, yes. Cos I went, when, yes, I went to a nursery school, I now remember, before that, which was also a Jewish little nursery school, and then the school I went to with my sister, was the school where my mother was the Headmistress, so it was a Yiddish speaking school.

And did you get Jewish stories there? And you know, religious instruction?

No, there was no religious instruction at that school. It was

Purely secular?

Yes. Yes, with some difficulty, because I didn't know Yiddish, so I don't even remember if I completely understood it at the end of that year.

Oh, so you were Polish speaking, but you went to a Yiddish speaking school?

Yes, yes.

Did your parents speak Yiddish in the home then, but not to you children?

Yes, that's right.

They wanted to keep the secrets?

I think that my father was probably more used to speaking Polish as his first language anyway, I'm not so sure about my mother, I think her family were much more Yiddish speaking. They spoke Yiddish to each other.

Do you remember any individual teachers, besides your mother, what they were like?

Yes, I remember, probably because they were friends of my mother, or at least one very good friend, whom I then saw, when I was a little older, in the ghetto.

What was her name?

I can't remember her surname. Her name was Manya, and she was very energetic and a lively sort of person.

And what sort of lessons were there? Were they particularly academic or, seven, I suppose, it's just reading and writing?

Yes. I think a lot of stories were told as well.

And was there any bullying, or fights with the children?

I think that because my mother was the Headmistress, we had suffered a little from a little bullying, but no I don't remember gangs, or, I rather think that the children were very anxious to be at the school, and were well-behaved.

And it was a happy school, then, on the whole?

I think that the children were very poor. I think that I felt that they were so much poorer than I was.

What do you remember? That they were badly dressed?

Yes. They had torn shoes, for instance.

Did, did the school organise outings or clubs, or trips, or camps, or anything like that?

If it did, then I don't remember it.

And do you remember any particular sort of games in the playground?

Yes, I remember a game, especially where figures were drawn with chalk, and

Hopscotch?

Hopscotch, yes, and I think the other games where circles were drawn, and there's a name for this particular game, it's rather like musical chairs, where you have to jump into the circle.

Was it boys and girls?

Yes.

It was a mixed school?

Yes.

The children in the neighbourhood were all Jewish, whether they went to your school or not?

As far as I know, yes, I think they all were.

So you didn't go to any Hebrew classes?

No.

Or a Cheder, or anything like that?

No.

And how long were you at this school?

It must have been only one year.

What happened after that?

Well, then the War started in September.

And do you remember that?

Yes, I remember the beginning of the War, yes, I remember that I was quite excited about it, it was seen as quite an adventure.

How old were you then?

I was eight.

And were you told by your parents, or did you hear in another way?

I must've been told by my parents. My father's uncle was killed by the first bomb that fell, or his two uncles were, it so happened, killed by the first bomb that fell on Warsaw, so I remember that. That a tragedy happened immediately.

Did you ever play with non-Jewish children?

Not as, yes, we used to go on holiday, sometimes just very near Warsaw, in the mountains, and certainly we played with non-Jewish children on holidays, yes.

Were you aware of them being different, or you being different to them?

No. Not, no, not really.

And they never said anything?

That's not my memory. Not until 1939.

Would they have been children of comrades of your father and mother?

The Jewish children, or the non-Jewish children?

The Polish children.

No, they were not.

They would have just been children at the resort?

Yes, yes.

This is a place where people went in the summer, from the City?

Yes. And they were often children also, of the people who rented the houses to us, so they were, in the mountains, peasants there.

So you were eight years old when War broke out, and, and you remember being quite excited, because, were Polish soldiers mobilising then? Were people sort of ...

Yes, and there were horses in the street, and Polish soldiers, and also, we were given small masks, I remember, gas masks, because, I am told that we may have to wear them. So I remember at the beginning of the War, because very soon after the War started, my parents left Warsaw.

Where did they go?

When the War started, and there were just a few bombs dropped over Warsaw, after that, the Polish Government decided that Warsaw would capitulate, and asked all the able people to go East towards Russia, where an Army would be formed, and I think the idea was that a Front would be established some way East of Warsaw, so a lot of people suddenly began to leave, Poles and Jews, and also my parents.

How did they leave?

They walked.

They walked? Did you and your parents?

No, they went, we were left.

You stayed with Hella?

Yes, we were left with her, and we went to live with my mother's family then, with the grandparents.

Were the grandparents worried?

Yes, I'm sure that they were very worried. And we were somewhat protected, yes. And then, so we lived with the bombing of Warsaw in '39, and I remember the fires, and people extinguishing some fires with buckets of water, and the Polish soldiers in the yard, with horses, because what happened was, although Warsaw was not going to be defended, I think there was then some change of plan, and Warsaw was defended by some of the Polish Army, mainly with, on horses.

Cavalrymen?

Cavalrymen, yes, and the horses. I remember the horses, dead horses, and people cutting bits of the horses to get the meat, and then after the Germans came in.

Do you remember when they came? Were you in Warsaw then?

Yes, I was with my grandparents, and also with my, the aunt, who was, who lived in the same block of flats, and had two children.

Your cousins.

They were two cousins, yes.

Were they a boy and a girl?

They were two boys.

What were their names?

They're still alive. My, the eldest cousin was called Jerzek, and the younger one was called Pavel.

Were they younger or older than you and your sister?

And the older one is seven years older, so he was about 14, and the younger one was very young, he was, he's about three and a half years younger than I am, so he was about 3, three and a half at the time.

And was that family a modern family like your family? Were they also Socialists?

No, they were not, they were much less removed in the way of life from my grandparents, but they were not, not particularly religious, but I don't think they took quite such a stand, and they were not politically engaged.

And the uncle, what did he do?

Yes, in the apartment where they lived, which was only also just two rooms and the kitchen, in the kitchen there was a workshop, he was a jeweller, and he used to make, with three other men, golden bracelets, I remember, and watches, and sort of women's bracelets.

So the War broke out, your parents had gone East of Warsaw.

Yes.

Did you know to which town?

No, they just went. I don't think they knew. They eventually went to Vilna.

And when they went to Vilna, did you and your sister follow them?

No, we stayed with my mother's family, and then when the Germans came to Warsaw, we then went to live with my father's family, who lived, not in the Jewish district, but outside it, and they were better off, and lived in a much smarter apartment, had more room.

What district was that?

I don't, this was still in central Warsaw, a street called Swarta.

And what would that be like in terms of London, what kind of ...

That was quite a smart part of Warsaw, and it was much much more mixed, it was not predominantly Jewish, and there we at once began to know that I was Jewish, that the children began to call names.

What year would this have been, still 1939?

It was probably just at the beginning of 1940, or '39, yes.

Well, War broke out in September,

Yes, it was still the Autumn, yes.

And so you and your sister first stayed with your maternal grandparents, and your aunt and uncle in the district you were used to.

Yes.

And then, what made the decision, do you think, to go and stay with your other grandparents?

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After staying with your mother's parents, you then went to your father's parents, and it was a very different district.

Yes, it was not a particularly Jewish district, and it felt very different, it is a much better-off kind of district.

What do you remember about it?

I remember the entry into the block of flats was much smarter, I remember the street, smart shops, and various, I remember eating cakes, in the cafeteria just opposite the house where my grandparents lived.

And you were the only children there? It was just your grandparents alone, and you and your nursemaid?

Yes, we were the only children, but my father's sister was living at home, and my father's brother also left Warsaw.

Why did he leave Warsaw?

My uncle, my father's brother?

Your uncle, yes.

I think people were told to go, and once some people began to go, it was a kind of a, almost a panic, I think that they, because I know that when my parents left, were leaving Warsaw, they asked him to look after us, to be responsible.

What was his name?

Yes, he is called Romek. But he left, because suddenly everybody was leaving.

Was this organised, or on people's own initiative?

No, I think that the call to leave was organised, and ...

It was an evacuation?

Yes, yes, it was of able-bodied people, to form, the idea was to form an army, east of Warsaw. But once people began to go, I think they were just going.

Was this just men, or men and women?

It was mainly men, but it was, but there was women as well, and ...

They were all volunteers?

Yes, yes.

Jews, and non-Jews?

Yes, but, yes, but I think that the higher proportion of, well, at least the sort of people that my parents knew, and were friends with, a high proportion of the men, and some women, left.

Ah. These were the politically active people?

Yes, but certainly there was a call to all able-bodied Poles, to leave Warsaw, and that the Army would then be formed, and they would then fight the Germans, so that Warsaw should not be destroyed.

The children were not being evacuated?

Well, some people took their children.

So, at that time, your parents, how did you hear from your parents, how did you get news from them?

Well, my mother returned sometimes that autumn, very soon after the Germans came to Warsaw. She smuggled herself back from the Russian side, because what happened was, that when all these people left to form an Army, the Russian Army came forward, because of the Hitler/Stalin Pact, and that's why the Army could not be formed, and they dispersed all these people, some were sent to concentration camps in Russia as well, but that's what happened when my parents left.

Do you remember your parents being very distressed at this time? Because, it must have been distressing to see that Pact?

No, I just remember, yes they were, yes, I remember that, but it happened very quickly, I remember that they were ...I remember also my, well, I remember my uncle, my aunt's husband, sort of crying because they were leaving, he was going to stay. Yes, that's a very distressing happening when they left, but they left very quickly.

Did they tell you they'd be back soon?

I don't remember being particularly reassured. I remember being told they had to go.

Did your mother cry?

I don't remember that. I remember my uncle crying. But maybe it made more of an impression, a man crying, something I wasn't used to.

He cried when he left himself?

No, he wasn't leaving, this is a different uncle, I'm sorry. This is my mother's uncle, I'm now talking of the time when my parents were leaving. We were then, my sister and I, were sent to my mother's family, so it was my mother's sister's husband who cried, I remember.

Because he thought they were going somewhere dangerous?

It was just the very frightening time, no one knew who was going to live and who was going to be killed, I think. But he just decided he would stay in Warsaw and stay with his family, and they decided to go.

Do you remember seeing Germans?

When the Germans came in?

Was that '39 or '40?

'39. Yes, I remember some tanks, yes, a sort of a, yes, I remember Germans, a kind of whole column of them.

In the district where you stayed with your father's parents, do you remember seeing Germans there?

Not, not a particular memory, I probably saw single soldiers, because by that time, the Germans were there, and occupying Warsaw. I think I just got used to seeing German soldiers.

And did you and your sister go to a different school when you were in the different district?

Oh we didn't go to school after that.

You didn't go to school at all?

Oh that was certainly not happening.

Were schools closed?

Yes, I don't think there were any schools for Polish children either. I think that perhaps, yes, as far as I know, there were no schools. But I'm not sure, when I think about it, perhaps some Polish children did go to some school, I really don't know.

Did you understand what was happening, your sister and you?

I understood that there was a war. I, that my parents had left, I didn't know where they were, but I was quite well looked after by the rest of the family, and I remember when my mother came back, she had not been away for very long, she seemed like a, she seemed as a stranger almost, because I'd got so used to being without her.

Did she look different when she came back?

Yes, she was very, she seemed very frightened, I think she was frightened for my father.

Do you know what they were doing?

When they were away? I know that when they went they were, some people were killed, because they were bombed, not bombed perhaps, but machine gunned from aeroplanes, from German aeroplanes.

These were people on the road?

On the roads. And then when the Russians entered that part of Poland, I know that my father had to change his name. He was afraid of the Russians, I think, I think he was known to them, and he made sure that they didn't know who he was. I know that they made their way to Vilna, which was part of Lithuania, where the Russians were not quite so much in control.

It was still an independent country then, Vilna?

I think the Russians must have come in, but they were not so much in control. Which perhaps it wasn't for a little longer, and then I know that a lot of my father's comrades, and some other people, somehow got American visas.

You remember hearing about this?

No, I must have heard about it later, I think they were organising

They were organising escape.

They were helping people to survive really, yes, and my father decided that he would not go away, he was, that's another story. He tried to get back, but that was a little later, back to Warsaw.

So you remember, was it a bad winter, do you remember?

It was a very cold winter. Yes, I remember that winter, where we closed most of, all the apartment of my grandparents, all the rooms were closed, because it was so cold, and just one room was being kept warm, and we slept in it.

Did you have a stove?

Yes, there was a stove.

What would it burn, wood or coal?

Well, it should burn coal, but I think they burned whatever they could find, even furniture.

You remember shortages then?

Yes, knowing that it's very very cold.

Did you have enough to eat?

I think we did, yes. I don't remember being hungry.

Was there any rationing?

At that time, no. Not as far as I know.

Did people listen to the news very carefully?

Oh yes. They listened secretly, because I think, very early on, they were told to give away all, by the Germans, to give away all the radios. I remember some little radio and my grandparents putting wire, it must have been down into the sink, and that way they could get some news.

Where did the news come from, can you remember?

Oh, it was probably from England.

And so that winter went on, do you remember the end of that year, or what happened next?

Well, I remember that my mother came back, and therefore,

For a visit?

No, she came back to stay, and this young woman, the Polish young woman then went away to her family, and then I remember being very frightened by some of the children in the street, began to be called "Jewesses", and we had a bicycle which was pushed over quite often, and

One bicycle between you?

Yes, yes, one between us! And yes, my grandparents getting very, especially my grandmother, getting very depressed, sometimes she wouldn't get out of bed, she was crying, worried about her sons, there was no news from either of her sons, but, and then yes, always discussions what would happen next, they'd begun to use the word "ghetto", the ghetto, and having to move into the Jewish District.

Do you remember this grandmother, how old would she have been then?

I think she was young, young comparatively, because my father was her eldest son, and so I should imagine she was probably in her early fifties, or perhaps middle fifties, or 60, yes.

And you say both her sons had gone away, was that the Uncle Romek you mentioned?

Yes.

Was he an idealist like your father?

He was a member of the Bund, but he was not so engaged, I think in it, and I don't think ...

So, both her sons had gone, and she was worried.

And worried about what would happen to everybody else, I think, because they were aware of the things that would happen.

Do you remember hearing people talk about what was happening to the Jews, or what had been said by the Germans in Warsaw, about the Jews?

Well, at that time I knew that the Jews were being beaten, that some were taken as hostages, and then quite quickly, some gangs of Poles, hooligans, were organised to beat up the Jews, because at that point, adults, grown up Jews, were told to wear arm bands, with the Star of David. I remember these being made, machined, and everyone had to wear them.

People had to make their own?

Yes, or they bought some as well, I think that was, but I remember some people making them.

What colour were they?

They were white, with a blue Star of David.

And do you remember your grandparents wearing these?

Yes, I think, yes, everyone wore them. I think that they were told that it was punishable by death if they did not wear them, and at that time they wore it. But I remember being chased by a gang with sticks, and I remember my mother telling off the ..., and shouting at them, and pretending that she wasn't Jewish.

Pretending she wasn't Jewish?

Because she tore the armbands to hide that she was Jewish, and just shouted at them, telling them to get away.

Were these children your age?

Oh no no, they were more or less grown up, I don't know, they must have been 18 or 20, they were not children.

Did they wear a uniform?

No, they were just gangs, yes. And so I remember that when there was a talk that war, there was a ghetto being built, and the wall was being built, I remember thinking that that would be really a relief, to get somewhere where the non-Jews would not get at us.

Was this your first experience, as children, of anti-Semitism? When you were in this district?

Yes, before that I don't remember having any particular experience. It may be that when I think about it, I had occasionally been called some names, but I don't remember taking it at all seriously, I suppose I thought children always called other children by some names.

And this was happening in the, you called it the Swarta District?

Swarta, it was Swarta Street, central Warsaw.

And were these local boys who formed the gangs?

I don't know who these people were. But I think that they were organised by the Germans.

Do you remember announcements or posters about Jewish people?

Later on, yes, in the ghetto, but at that time I don't particularly remember, but they must have been about the ghetto, about moving to the ghetto.

And was it 1940 then?

Yes.

After the turn of the year, your mother came back?

No, I think she came earlier, I think it must have been, sort of end,

End of 1939,

Yes, through the autumn, yes, the end of '39, but it could've been 1940, I really don't remember, but I think she was only away for about two months.

Did she leave your father in Vilna?

Yes.

Were they able to correspond?

Well, I think these things either were kept as a secret from me, yes, it's because my father assumed a different name and because he was particularly at risk in Vilna, that the correspondence, we had some letters and news through my uncle.

Not through the post, or a courier?

Well, I'm not so sure, because I have got some cards here, I think that the, there was some way, I really don't know, I know that the letters came from Vilna with some news of both my uncle and father.

Do you remember being told what the news from Vilna was?

Yes, not in detail, but that he was there, yes. But then my father left Vilna quite soon after that and he was caught on the frontier, and was sent to a Russian camp, and so on, and so after that my mother seemed very sad, and we had no news of him.

How long did you have no news?

I myself? Not until after the War. But there might have been, I know that at some point, it seems strange now, we had some letters coming from my uncle who eventually went to New York, he went through China and Japan, he had an American Visa, and was then living in New York, that, I suppose, was '41, and letters somehow came also through Portugal, there were some people there.

Portugal was neutral?

Yes.

So that hard winter your mother was with her father and mother-in-law, your paternal grandparents, and you were all waiting for news from the father and the uncle?

Yes, but my mother was busy. She was running a sort of soup kitchen, there were all these Jewish Organisations which had some money and she was going off every morning and coming back in the evening, to the school where she used to be a headmistress, but she was now running a kitchen there, where soup, where the children who went to that school, came to eat, and had some other activities.

Do you think all their parents had no jobs because the Germans had come?

Yes, I'm sure that even before the War they seemed very poor, so that once the Germans came, yes, I'm sure that there was very little food.

So, so that winter was a very worrying time.

Yes. And certainly for my mother, I mean for all the grown-ups.

And as children, did you understand it?

Well, at that time, we knew not to spend too much time outside the house, but we thought that if we stayed at home we would be more or less safe, we, I don't think that I, at that point, felt that my life was at risk.

Did the grown-ups tell you not to play in the street?

Yes.

Or not to go to the parks?

Yes, yes. But we did, my sister and I, we went on these excursions to the cafe for cake.

Did you have to have the armbands with the Star of David?

No, it was, I think that it was only people over the age of 12, and I wasn't, and my sister wasn't either.

Did you and your sister look recognisably Jewish?

Yes, obviously, because you know, unless we were like Poles, we were very much recognised, yes. Cos I've got dark hair, and curly hair.

And, and the people in the district would say something?

Well, I suppose it was just a minority, but it happened so often, it wasn't very pleasant to walk around the streets.

End of F196 Side A

F196 Side B is blank

F197 Side A

Wednesday, March 5th, Mrs. Wlodja Robertson, continuing from the winter of 1940.

You were telling me that when you were living with your paternal grandmother, you remember there were gangs of rough youths who bothered you and your sister. This was after the Germans were in Warsaw, and you thought, you thought they'd been instigated by the Germans. Do you remember what happened later that winter?

Well, I remember on two occasions, being with my mother, and then seeing these gangs, and my mother telling me and my sister to run to the house where we lived, but on one special occasion where we were in there, it must have been a taxi, a car, and my mother was wearing the armband, and she tore it off from her arm, and told the taxi driver to stop, and sort of shouted at these, there were people around, and they seemed to be taken aback, and we just passed through and ran home.

This was the winter of 1940, was it a very hard winter, was there snow?

Yes, it was a particularly hard winter, and we lived with my grandparents, grandfather and grandmother, and aunt, and we, I remember, because it was so cold we lived all in one room, the other rooms were closed, and we could heat just one room, there was a little stove in that room, and we slept there, and ate there, and just I remember, taking it in turns to get undressed at night.

Was your aunt, the wife of your uncle who went away?

No, she was an unmarried sister, of my father.

What did she do?

She, I'm not sure if she really earned a living, but she was a pianist, she was a pianist, and I think she gave piano lessons, later on she also organised, with another aunt, some rhythmic classes in the ghettos, I know that she made some money by playing the piano.

What age do you think she was then?

I know she was the younger sister, I would imagine she must have been, probably about 28.

So she was at home with her mother, your grandmother, this was your aunt, and the other adult in the house was your mother who'd come back from Vilna.

Yes, yes.

When did you see your father and uncle again?

I saw my father again when I came to London after the War.

Oh, that's a long way ahead.

And my uncle later than that.

But this winter, you told me earlier that sometimes you listened to broadcasts, you got news, and you think this was the BBC, do you remember what, how the sequence of events came over to you?

No, I can't remember. I know that the Germans were winning, they seemed to be winning, but the news was bad, that the grown-ups seemed to think that the Germans may win the War altogether, but I never thought so, but I think...was not optimistic. But I think there was this sort of thing that people were more and more worried, seemed to be a kind of cloud, which became, things became to seem more and more frightening, and then there was talk about a wall being built around another part of Warsaw, which becomes the ghetto, and that we would have to move.

Ah! Do you remember when you first heard that?

I could not put a date to it.

Was it something a person told you, or you knew it from a poster or a radio?

No, I think I just heard my mother and the grown-ups talking about it.

Is the word 'ghetto' the same in Polish?

Yes.

And had you heard what one was, did you know what it meant?

Not before, no.

Do you remember somebody saying to you what it meant?

No. But I think, as long as I can remember, I knew that that was where the Jews would have to live, enclosed area.

And was it the section of Warsaw where you had lived previously?

Yes, where my other grandparents lived, and where we lived before the War, but not where we were living with my father's parents.

And where you were living, it was a less Jewish district?

Yes.

When did you have to move? How long did you stay with your grandmother?

Yes, I don't remember the dates of moving, but we moved, we moved before the walls were completely built and, and gates were shut, because I remember when we first moved, it was quite easy to go in there and out again.

Did you have to go there to find a place? I mean, did you know where you were going to live?

Yes, because we went to live, my mother and myself and my sister, went to live with my other grandparents.

Were they pleased to see you again, or had they heard a lot of rumours, were they very frightened?

The family? No, I don't remember any conflict there. We lived also with my aunt, partly, because in the same courtyard, it was quite a large family of my mother, my grandparents had a flat there, and the factory, and then a son was living with them, and he had another factory in the same block, and then a sister of my mother's lived in a different apartment.

Was this a block where there were homes and workshops together?

Yes, and there were small workshops where people worked in their own apartments, but the little factory that my grandfather had, was a little bigger, it, it was separate from the flat, downstairs, and he employed some people there.

It was on a different floor of the block?

Yes.

What did they make?

He was working with metals, sort of silver-plating, and nickeling things, and mainly, and I remember he made some, some things he made, were sort of Catholic pendants.

Oh, religious objects?

Yes, they were, I think, silver-plated.

What we'd call fancy goods, I suppose.

Yes, and my uncle's little factory, which was more or less in the same place, he made things for women's handbags, the metal parts of the...

The frames,

The frames, yes.

Oh that's quite skilled, isn't it. So, did you see children you knew before, again?

When we came back to live in the Jewish district, in the ghetto, yes, my cousins, I had two boy cousins, with whom we then lived, and then we met again some of the children that we went to school with, especially when we went to visit the place where my mother was working, a soup kitchen, a lot of the children had gone to school with that year, we met again.

Had you missed children to play with when you were at the other place?

No, we always knew some people who had children, I don't think we were deprived of children's company.

And how old were you by this winter?

Eight. Or seven.

Were the schools working then?

No, there was no question of going to school. But quite soon after going to the ghetto, some little classes were organised for some children, and I know at some point, someone came, a friend of my mother's, to our, I think perhaps only once a week, to have some sort of lessons, but they didn't last for very long. I don't think that we were very responsive to these lessons.

What did the children do all day, without going to school?

They were, playing mainly in these two courtyards, we did, I suppose, I don't know, some children had bicycles, I remember going round, we had bicycles, round on the courtyard. I think we had quite a lot of very complicated games we played, and we read. I don't remember.

What do you next remember quite vividly as happening? What was the next change?

Yes, I'm trying to think. I think, yes, more and more hunger, beginning to see people, dead people in the street, being put out, who had obviously died of hunger. A lot of people were thrown into the Warsaw ghetto from the provinces outside, I don't know exactly where they came from, they suddenly appeared, and they were terribly impoverished, and sometimes living in, in the street, and the children we knew from the school, and in this soup kitchen, they, so many of them, obviously became more and more hungry, and some, they were swollen, and I think that my sister and I were comparatively well looked after by our family, I remember feeling very alienated from these children, and feeling guilty that they had so little food, and we began to, there was a group of children, children who were some friends of my mothers, we used to meet together, and collect some food, and give it away.

Were the shops getting emptier?

I don't remember shops at all.

You don't remember shops?

I don't remember going to shops.

How did the food come into the home? Your mother brought it in in bags?

We spent so little time outside the courtyard, but I really don't, there was some rations to begin with. I remember honey, for instance, and some sugar, but that was rationed, and was delivered to the houses, and I think that the, I think that my family, that my mother, and the rest of the family, had some ways of getting probably bagfuls of flour, and rice.

What sort of meals did you have? Can you remember? Would you have a breakfast and a lunch?

Yes, I think we, I can't remember if we, it must have been bread from somewhere, because bread was very much the staple diet, and I can't remember eating anything like cereals, bread and honey. I guess things used to be made by hand, all sorts of pastas, at home.

And you had your meals separately, in your own home, with your grandmother and your mother?

Yes it was, no, it was my mother was usually out during the day, and my aunt, I think it was my aunt who gave us food, we stayed with her during the day, and slept in the evening with my grandmother.

So you were in your, this is the married aunt, with the boy cousins?

Yes, my mother's sister.

What was her name?

She was called Gutya.

And the boy cousins, they were older than you and your sister?

Both was, is, they're both alive, and one seven years older, and the other one is three years younger, so he was very little, he was about three years old, I think, when the War started. But he had a very hard time, no one had patience for him, for this youngest child. And my uncle, the father of these children, he had a little workshop, he was a jeweller, and he and two other people, in the kitchen of the apartment, had their tools and used to make things like bracelets, and rings.

Oh they must've been skilled craftsmen?

Yes.

And were they too supporters of the Bund, like your father and mother?

No, no, they were very unpolitical, no, not at all, they had no connection. Of course, my mother was not in the Bund, my mother was a member of the Poale Zion, it was my father who was ...

Was this, I think you told me, this side of your family was more religious?

Yes, this side was, yes, my grandfather was certainly a very devout, praying person, and as he always, there were always prayers on Saturday, and candles ...and were traditionally Jewish, more than the other side of the family.

And when do you remember things sort of, how long was it before things became different? Was it still an almost normal, or was it starting to be less normal?

Well, I think if you say what normal, I was getting used to whatever was happening. I think that almost immediately, I mean, it was never known, I knew about the people being shot in the street, I knew that I mustn't go out, that if the Germans are seen, we should always run home, and I knew that people had been called and beaten and shot, and so it wasn't, but I took that for being normal quite quickly.

You heard this from adults?

Yes, well, you could hear shots. Yes, it was sort of around us, you just,

You saw it?

No, I don't remember seeing anyone being shot at that point, but I think we could hear the shooting, and we would know that people had disappeared, that they had been taken away. Some people were taken as hostages, I don't quite remember why, and then shot. I knew all this, and it's just that things probably kept getting worse, but I don't remember any special moment when, except when, I think that was in '42, was it? When the rumour was suddenly that, that people were being killed, that Jews were being killed outside Warsaw, and then there were suddenly posters, talking about having to move out of Warsaw.

Do you remember, you could read then?

Yes. They were in Polish and German.

Do you remember what they said?

I don't remember exactly, they were big posters, and at that point, people, it was obvious that people were in a great panic, and there were gatherings of people outside these posters to see what they were saying, and discuss what to do.

Can you remember how daily life was organised?

When? This is, at this point, or before, cos before, in spite of all these things that happened, I remember how, in other ways, people tried to lead more or less a normal life, those who could, who somehow had enough food, how there were, for instance,

some secret libraries, and there was even a sort of little theatre, and I remember being taken to puppet shows.

This is for the children?

That was earlier, yes. But, I don't really, I know, because my mother used to go out in the morning, and would not come back till quite late in the evening, but I think my, I used to spend a lot of the time just playing with the children in those courtyards, and don't remember, I don't really know how other, how grown-ups organised their lives, but the little factory was working, they were getting some work.

Do you think, do you think that people were very frightened? Did you understand why it was the Jews who had such trouble?

Well, I understood that it was that the Jews had more trouble than other people. I think at that point, I didn't understand it was so much, so very different for the Jews from, cos once I was living outside, I did not see the non-Jews, I didn't think about it. But yes, I've just remembered that the grown-ups became more and more, obviously, frightened, and always standing together and talking, and wondering what to do. There was also some sort of Houses of Committee in the House, I'm not sure what they did, but I know that there were these meetings of people.

Were there any efforts in your family to go anywhere else, or talk about it?

Well, I don't remember at which point, but after it was known that there were going to be deportations, after these posters were seen, and it was going to be organised, I know that my mother rang some Polish friends, they were friends of my uncle, to ask them, and this surprises me when I think about it, because there was a telephone, I know that she phoned, not from our house, but that it was possible to phone outside, and asked them if they would take me and my sister into their house, because earlier on they were, sort of close friends of my uncle, and knew my father's parents well, and had earlier offered, I think, to have my grandmother to stay with them, and she refused that offer, and they, when we moved to the ghetto, I think, took quite a lot of things to look after them, especially my grandparents things, fur coats, and I don't know, other sort of more valuable possessions. When my mother rang them, I remember, they put down the receiver, they said, "No, that's out of the question."

They put the receiver down?

They said it was out of the question, they were obviously frightened, but anyway, I remember that occasion.

Was your mother upset?

Yes, I remember that, she was really upset and angry.

What sort of people were they? Were they people who had been close personal friends?

Well, they were not close personal friends of my mother, they were close personal friends of my uncle, who had left, and they knew his parents very well.

So this was the winter of 1942?

Yes.

And so the situation was getting more tense, I suppose, if the deportations had been announced.

Yes, well, and they almost immediately, I knew, I had heard that people were being gassed, that it wasn't ...

You heard, in '42?

Well, almost immediately, but I think it was because my mother had, you know, connections with the sort of underground, and people came back, and they knew that people had been gassed, and vans before, people from outside Warsaw, and so, I remember being told that it wasn't terribly important to take a lot. In fact, I knew, I understood that almost everyone was gassed. I mean, I was in a way, surprised, after the War, to find out that there were camps, and that people have survived.

Did you have bad dreams, were you frightened?

I don't remember that. After that, we had, no, I don't know, it was ... we just tried very hard not to be caught, not to leave. Because my, very soon after this announcement, that Jews would have to leave, and go to this place, Umstadtplatz was set up, to which people were being taken and then put into trains, and at the beginning, some people would be exempt, and my mother had some sort of document to say that she did all the social work, and that she was not to be deported, and my sister Nelly and I also had these documents, and I remember the first occasion when the Germans, (INAUDIBLE) and some Jewish policeman came to the courtyard, and my mother wasn't there, because she was in this kitchen, and I remember sort of losing this document, and I was terribly frightened, I couldn't quite remember where it was.

What was it called, the document?

It was something to do, I don't know the English word for, mean I was Jewish, the main Organisation which was partly administering the ghetto as well, Gehille I think it's called in Yiddish, isn't it? Cherbnokov, the leader of it, he committed suicide.

The Committee leader?

Yes, yes, he was, his name ... They were just pieces of paper, and anyway finding them, and seeing the other people being led to the other side of the courtyard and taken away.

Other children?

Well, lots of people, not only children. But after that, very soon after that, my uncle built a sort of bunker in the cellar, in that courtyard. He build a wall, which ...

What did he intend to do, do you think? How big was it?

It was quite a big space, fairly. Probably like a third of this room, or perhaps a little smaller, but enough space for people to go down.

Almost 20 feet x 8 feet probably.

That first place was quite big, yes. And the whole family and some people we knew, whenever there was what was called in Polish, "Wapanka", when Germans and Ukrainians and Lithuanians, and some Jewish police came to find people.

What did that mean, a kind of sweep?

Yes, we would just run and hide, it had a sort of secret opening which we would, he would put the bricks back, and it wasn't obvious that there was this extra space.

Was it a ground floor flat?

My aunt's flat was a ground floor flat, but my grandparents lived on the third floor.

And which flat was the bunker in?

No, it was in the cellar, it was ...

The cellar of the whole building.

The cellar of the whole building, yes. It must be that, that they must have had a space, perhaps, in the cellars, to keep their stuff.

A storage space?

Yes. And I remember, especially the first time when we heard shooting outside, and then shouting, that everyone must come out, and whoever will be found, who hasn't come out into the yard, would be shot, and you know, that was very frightening.

Was it dark?

Inside? Oh yes, we used to have no light, there was no opening, no windows.

So the door into it was, sort of, made of wood, or brick?

No, it was brick, it was a kind of camouflaging brick. It, I don't know, probably 20 bricks together, which fitted into the hole.

And how many people, it was just your own immediate family?

Others in another family as well, my uncle's family.

What was their name, the other family?

I can't remember. I think they were some sort of special friends of my uncle.

What was this uncle's name?

He was called Jacob Felinberg, this is the father of the children, but it was really, I think that the other uncle, the younger uncle, my mother's brother, was the more energetic person, and I think it was his initiative to do this.

Did you know if this was happening in other places? Or you just knew that this was a good thing to do?

End of F197 Side A

F197 Side B

You were telling me about moving to the other flat in a different district, I forget the name of the street.

Yes, we moved from the place where we had a hiding place in the cellar, and that was Golashna Street, moved because factories which were called "shops" were being set up by some Germans, to manufacture things for the German Army, and they announced that Jews who were still in the ghetto, and who could work for them, and had their own machinery, would then be allowed to stay, and my uncle and grand, both uncles and grandfather, had some machinery, and I also had another aunt, my mother's sister, were accepted to work in the, I think they were making, repairing helmets for the Germans, and we found, the family found the flat, which obviously belonged before, to some people who had been deported, and in it my uncles again built a hiding place, by putting a partition and making a door which looked like an oven, which was easily opened, that was a very small space, and when, again, the Germans came to catch people, and take them to the Umstadtplatz, to the station, we would hide in this very small place, and that I remember being, very frightened, because it was a very tiny space, and we could hardly breathe there, could not put a match on, the match would not burn, because there was no air. But then, at some point, we, my mother and my sister and I, went to live somewhere else in the ghetto, where, I'm not quite sure what she was doing, she had some function, something to do, and we found again, some flat, I remember it was very very cold, so that must have been the winter of '42, no, it must have been '43, the winter of '43, when we had no heating, there was no coal, there was a little fire, and we used to collect furniture from around the place, and burn it there.

Was it, you collected furniture, was this from deserted places?

From deserted places, mmm, and then some, there was, and it seemed reasonably peaceful. There were no deportations, and, before that there was, I remember, an incident when my uncle was caught, somehow, in the street, and taken to the station, to the Umstadtplatz, and then he was allowed to come back, he was brought back by this German, called Tebbens, who was the chief of the factory, he apparently, used to go to this station and if he recognised people who had worked for him, he would rescue them.

He was a civilian, then?

I think he must've been a civilian, though I don't know very much about him, except that he was a German, and he was an industrialist, and that he run this factory in the ghetto.

So he was possibly not a Nazi?

I don't know what he was, it seems a very odd arrangement where he worked with a machine, but went to rescue his workers. But there was another episode where, in the middle of the night, suddenly, in this flat where we lived with my mother, on our own, there was a knock on the door in the night, and there was a friend of hers with a

gun, we were very excited, because I'd not seen a Jew with a gun, to say that, that the Germans were surrounding again the district, and he led us to another hiding place, where we somehow got by for a night, and then were somehow taken back to my family again, to this other, to the Tebbens factory, where we then knew that all the people who were still working in these factories, we thought that they would have to go to some selective place again, and that probably they would be allowed to come back, but my grandparents and my mother and the children of the family, and my aunt, were then taken to a huge cellar, where there was a huge bunker, with I don't know how many people, perhaps 100 people, perhaps more, different family groups, where we all hid, and I remember that, and being very frightened there. People were sort of making food on the floor, and cooking, and some people were completely screaming, sort of going off their heads, and other people trying to keep everybody calm, and they were telling jokes.

Do you think it was the cellar of a public building?

No, I think it was the cellar of a big block of flats, I remember somehow getting through to get into it, there were barrels, it was some kind of way of going into the place, by crawling through these different barrels, some of them had open ends, eventually getting to this big open room.

Which, it must have taken a bit of organising.

Oh yes, I don't know how because we were just taken there, yes, but obviously my family must have known about it, and be part of this, because not everybody could have known about it.

So there were a lot of secrets.

So I think there must have been secrets. And then I think we stayed there for about three days, with hearing shootings and things, and then, and then our family came back, they did, in fact, come back from the selection place, but there were all sorts of terrible tales being told, how people have taken arsenic, how they've committed suicide, some of them perhaps could have still got away, but you know, despairing, and all sorts of stories, how children were being smuggled in coffins, to take them away, back to these factories, at the end of the selections.

Did you understand?

Yes, I think I understood everything perfectly clearly. I remember meeting, oh, that was before that, when we were living with my mother, how she had a friend, somebody she knew, who, who's husband had been taken away, then he came back, and he came back from Treblinka, he had run away from there, and he was telling all what he saw there, I remember that very clearly, the gas chambers, and how he had waited, thinking that his wife would be brought there, but then he came back.

Did that make you, did you and your sister talk about it to each other? Were you very frightened?

I don't remember particularly, what we said about it, but we certainly knew what was going on.

Did you know that it was just the Jewish people they were doing this to, or did you think they were doing it to all of Warsaw?

No, I think we knew it was just the Jewish people. I think because we were shut off from the non-Jews, we didn't, at that point, think very much, as children, very much about it. It was only later that we discovered the difference, and so after that, it seemed quiet again. They were letting off the deportations, and it was at that point that one of the people, very active in the Resistance, on behalf of the Bund, someone called Mihail Klepfisch, came to see my mother, he was then living outside the ghetto, and organising some deliveries of ammunition, and he was an engineer, he was making sort of fire bombs, mortars, cocktails, he came to see my mother to persuade her that my sister, that he could find somewhere for me and my sister, to leave the ghetto. I think she was reluctant at first, that we should go.

Was he trying to do this for as many children as possible?

Yes there were others, there were quite a lot of other children they were trying to do this for. I suppose there was some sort of feeling that my father tried to get back, to the Underground, to work for the Underground, from Vilna, and was caught on the frontier, and perhaps they felt that, why they remembered me and my sister, they somehow owed him, I don't know why, I suppose that's
But other children, they did that for quite a lot of children.

How did they manage to be outside the ghetto?

He knew some people, he had some people, who like him, wanted to help him, and he was living with them. And do you know there was money coming in, some money for the Underground, through the Polish Government here, because I think they had some money to pay for sparing people. Anyway, he persuaded my mother, who was reluctant, she wasn't sure if she should do that, and then I remember my grandfather being worried that we would become Christianised, and talking to us about this, and saying, "Oh, you may think you are very clever, but other people have become Christian." But that was the least of the worries. And we were taking some bits of clothing. At that point, I mean, my father's parents were taken away and killed, all his family long before that, but my mother's family, still everyone was alive.

How did you hear that the grandparents who lived within the other district had been taken away?

They also moved into the ghetto, but there was something called "the little ghetto", which was another bit of Warsaw, which had a connection with the main ghetto by a bridge, and so it was quite difficult and dangerous to see them, to pass that bridge, and so we did not see a lot of them. And then we met some other relatives of my fathers who told us how they had seen them being taken away.

Were you upset?

We were, but I mean, this happened continuously to everybody around us. I, I don't know, yes, obviously, but we were so used to hearing such terrible tales around us, about so many people we knew, that we were used to it. Anyway, my father's family, most of the people were amazingly still alive, so, so going away from all that large family, we were still quite sort of changed, but we were taken sort of late in the evening, my sister and I, and we held ... Klepfisch, Marek Gettermann, who is one of the few people survived the Warsaw ghetto, he was one of the leaders of... They were there.

What were they like? Big men? Or, how did they look?

Well, Marek Gettermann, he was young, slim, dark, very Jewish looking, boyish, he was probably about 19 or 20 then, and Mikhail Klepfisch, probably by Jewish Polish standards was quite tall, blue eyes, but with a big nose, but always very cheerful, I think that he, I later heard that before the War, he was a very studious and serious young man, and wanted to be an engineer, but when I knew him, in some ways he quite enjoyed, he seemed to enjoy himself, for him, it was the right moment, he could do all these things, very much in control and command, and I remember how different he was when he talked to my mother, sort of very fatherly and quietly persuading her, and then immediately when he supervised taking me and my sister over the wall, and there was some Poles helping him, and he was also taking some other people over, how different he seemed when he talked to these other people, these Polish young men, he seemed completely a different man, how he could adapt and seem so much one of them.

Did, was there a sort of Warsaw accent, or Warsaw dialect, like we have in London?

Yes there is, that is, there is a difference, but I really couldn't describe now, how people spoke. I just know that later on I was told that I spoke with that accent. But I think that Mikhail Klepfisch probably, well, obviously spoke Polish very well, but yes, there was this incident, where immediately he and my sister and I went on a, over that wall, because I think that the German was being bribed, I think that there was a regular smuggling of people and things across that gate.

You said he came and, Mikhail Klepfisch, came and spoke to your mother about getting you and your sister Nelly out, did he sort of discuss it one day, and then you packed up and went, or did it all happen fast?

I think that we went the same day, that evening, that he came, but I, oh maybe it was a day in between, but it was a fairly short time, you know, between the offer and the way we went.

Did you and your sister understand what the implications were?

Well, we were told there was this very nice family who wanted to help, a Polish family, and also that my mother was, you know, trying to organise her own, that they would all try to get out of the ghetto, so, you know, at that point, it seemed not such a terrible decision to make.

What, did it almost in fact, seem an adventure?

No, because I'd not been with strangers completely before, I didn't know Mikhail Klepfisch, it was, it was daunting, had to climb, and say goodbye to my mother and to be taken, late in the evening, over the wall, and told, you know, do it very quickly, you may be shot and so on, it was more than an adventure, you know.

Oh, how very frightening, yes. Did you and your sister take all your clothes, or what clothes you had?

No, we didn't have much clothes left, we had moved around, but we took some clothes, we didn't have much clothes.

What would you have had, a little case, or a bundle?

Yes, no I can't remember, it couldn't have been much, because we didn't want to be visibly somebody moving around. I think, perhaps we wore some clothes, one set on top of another, and that was all. Yes, we weren't carrying a case, because that would have made us more recognisable as somebody running away from somewhere.

Did you have any toys that you had to leave, or books?

Oh, by that time, we were not really, everything had been burnt, and moved, and had run away from so many places, you know.

So you knew that the evening was coming when you were going over the wall, and did you, was it dark, was it very late?

Yes, it was dark, but it was winter, I suppose, I don't know how late it was, I can't remember, but it wasn't night time, because there still trams, I remember being taken on a tram.

In the Polish language, is there a kind of "goodbye", which is like "au revoir" - see you again?

Yes, (SPEAKS POLISH HERE) to see you again.

Is that what she said?

I really can't remember what she said.

You can't remember, no.

Yes, it all happened very quickly, you know, we were under pressure to move and climb, and go.

So what was it like the other side of the wall?

Yes, I was going to say, we got there, and suddenly it seemed somehow a normal kind of life, something quite different, the sort of atmosphere of people being around, and a tram, which I hadn't seen since the ghetto. Very earlier on they were horse driven buses, and that was the last kind of public transport I remembered.

Oh, because they,

Because there weren't any electric trams, there was no other transport.

They'd cut the ghetto off from the rest of the city completely?

Yes, yes. And so suddenly, it did seem a different world, and then immediately, on the tram, people began to look at us, looking at me and my sister, and started pointing, or something, and Mikhail told us to jump off as soon as, and he sort of changed trams, and that was the first kind of, I was surprised, I didn't, no-one warned me, my family did not warn that I would have to be frightened of Poles, of the people around me, and that was a very quick lesson.

Do you think it was because you and your sister perhaps looked a little ragged, or ...

Well, I think we just looked quite Jewish, I think the Poles are such a pure race, that it's, well, you know, we were continuously recognised as Jewish children.

So where did you sleep that night?

Oh, he took us to a place called Moranoff, I think, where he stayed with a Polish family, to someone who was a caretaker in the factory where he had worked before the War, a man called Dubiel and his wife, it was a tiny, just one-roomed flat, where he slept, and Mr. and Mrs. Dubiel and their two sons, and then my sister and I, so even after all our travels, and our life in the ghetto, I remember being surprised that they lived in this tiny room. And I also remember being given some food and being sick, so I must have been very undernourished, we were not used to eating anything, I seem to remember scrambled eggs that we had eaten, and being sick, because we were not used to eating proper food.

So you stayed how long with these people?

I don't know how long that was, it was some, probably a month or so. Mikhail then moved out.

Did he leave you alone with the other people during the day?.

Yes, he wasn't there very much, but some of them, he did make his, that was very exciting for us, because he was making these Molotov cocktails and also he was very gregarious, and talkative, and would talk to us about the Underground, and how they were organising an uprising, and how he had to smuggle these things to the ghetto, and so it was comparatively quite an exciting, you know, it was quite a relief. And, but then the Dubiels knew another Jewish family somewhere, who had given them some money to find a larger apartment, and the idea was that they would also come

from the ghetto, so we all moved, that was just, must have been the beginning of April, just before the Warsaw Uprising. This family didn't appear, and that was just opposite the ghetto wall. We could from the window see the ghetto, and people moving around there, and then my mother used to come to this other side of the wall, and sort of wave to us, and we would sit in the window.

But you couldn't talk. Could you talk? Just wave?

Well, no, but I mean that was quite a lot. And then, then one day, the Uprising started in the ghetto, you know the ghetto was surrounded and ...

End of F197 Side B

F198 Side A

So you and your sister were living in this place outside the ghetto walls, and were visited by Mikhail Klepfisch, who'd helped to take you out. You said you got there in February?

Yes, we were taken out from the ghetto on the 13th February, by Mikhail, and was taken to the house where he himself was being sheltered by this family who he knew before the War.

What was the name of the family?

The name was Dubiel. That was Jan Dubiel and his wife.

And it was a couple with no children?

They were an elderly couple, they seemed very elderly to us, they were probably about in their fifties, and he was a caretaker of the factory where Mikhail used to work, because Mikhail was an engineer before the War, and they lived in a little, just one room. They had two sons, and a daughter, the two sons, when we came, they were still living in this little room with them.

How old were the sons?

Well, the youngest son was 18, and the older one was probably about 23. The daughter was married and had two children.

Why do you think the Dubiels helped to look after you and your sister?

They were very fond of Mikhail and I think that he persuaded them that, you know, these were very nice people, and it was some money for them, because they were going to, they were paid monthly, a sum of money, which was certainly more than the cost of feeding us. I can't remember how much it was, but it was quite a lot of money for that time.

So you lived with them like you might have been their grandchildren, I suppose.

Yes, it was a very tiny room, I remember there was just one double room, a double bed where they slept, and then they had sort of arrangements on the floor, folding beds, and they were, yes, they were very nice. But they were a little frightened and nervous, and we were told to, when we were going out, to go out when no-one could see us leaving, and I know that when, very quickly, we found that when we went out into the street, especially children, shouted at us, "Jewesses", my sister and I, once we begun to tell them, and then realised that was a mistake, that they would be so frightened that they would not keep us there, we kept it a secret, that we were being recognised in the street.

What, you and your sister agreed between you not to tell them?

Well, it seemed obvious that it was better, otherwise they would become ...

And you were about 12 then?

Il, I think.

So that was quite something to work. So you ate meals as a family?

Yes, I remember they, when we first got there, we couldn't really eat, because we were not used to eating food like eggs, and I remember especially, being sick. But I think we got used to it. They were poor, and there wasn't very much food there.

When you were the other side of the ghetto wall, did you hear more about the progress of the War from radio, or newspapers, or what people said?

Yes, I don't remember the sequence, but there were newspapers printed by the Germans in Polish, and there was some news there of how the War was going.

So,

And yes, Mikhail Klepfisch talked to us, and the eldest son of the Dubiels, belonged to the Akart, which was the home army, the Underground.

How do you say that?

Well, the, really the A K, and that stands for Armia Kryova, in Polish, which means the, I suppose it means the National Army.

And that was like the French Resistance? It was Underground?

It was the main Polish Resistance.

So he had news as well.

Yes, and they used to talk about what was happening.

So the months you spent there, were you able to read books? Did you have any lessons?

Oh no, there was no question of having lessons. Books, I don't suppose there were very many books. I don't think they read very much.

Did you feel cooped up?

No, I think we were, we were just very, I don't think we thought about that, by comparison to the life in the ghetto, in the bunkers, it was much better, you know.

In that time, what news did you have of your mother?

Yes, well, Mikhail used to go to the ghetto and also someone else, Wak Kapeldel, who I lend you the book she has written, she came to see us, she was also a courier for the Bund, she was 23 then, and she used to smuggle herself into ghettos, as well, she was a contact, and they used to see my mother and tell us that all was well.

Did they say what she was doing?

No, well, we knew that she wasn't, there wasn't very much she could do, just getting by. And yes, she was trying to organise herself to leave the ghetto, to find somewhere outside it, but then I don't remember how many, yes we had some other things happen, somebody who knew Mikhail, who co-operated with Mikhail, and used to smuggle some arms to the ghetto with Mikhail, Paul, suddenly turned against, became an informer for the Germans.

Oh that's terrible.

And he first tried to blackmail, and couldn't get the money, and then some agents came to this flat to look for us, and to look for the arms, and for Mikhail, but it so happened that we were out, Mrs. Dubiel took us, I think, to Church, so after that, it became obvious that we should all move, and the Dubiels knew another Jewish family in the ghetto, I don't know who they were, who gave them some money to buy a flat, and the idea was that they would soon, when this flat was bought, they would also come and be sort of hidden there by the Dubiels. So from this little room, one day, we all moved, quite soon to another flat, which was opposite the wall, the wall of the ghetto. We could, from the window, look right into the ghetto, because the wall was dividing the street in half.

Like the Berlin Wall now?

I suppose so, yes, I haven't seen the Berlin Wall.

So, from the previous room of the Dubiels, was that the place that you could see into the ghetto, or it was the new flat?

No, it was the new flat, the next flat, yes.

The new flat, yes. Do you remember the name of the street?

I think it was called Moranowska Street.

And what floor was this flat on?

I think it was the second or third floor, I can't remember.

What was it? A sort of apartment block with stairs?

Yes, yes, and a courtyard, as all Polish houses tend to have big courtyards.

So would you recall which month it was you moved to this flat?

Well, I think it probably must have been the end of March sometime.

So, so by then, you had heard things about the preparations for what was going on in the ghetto?

Well, we knew from Mikhail, and we were quite excited by this, that there was going to be some sort of uprising, not uprising, but they would defend themselves if the Germans came again, but in the meanwhile, the ghetto looked quite peaceful, it was, it had some soldiers, mainly Ukrainians, and Lithuanians, guarding the outside walls, but we could see from our window, people moving around inside, and then someone we knew, who knew my father, begun to come and wave to us, he must've known from Mikhail that we were there, and we would sit at the window, to watch and see if he would come.

What news did you have of your father in this time?

Just trying to think of the sequence of that. I think we, well, we knew he was in Russia, and that he had, we didn't really know what happened to him in Russia.

Because you could only know, I suppose, what your mother knew, and told your couriers.

Yes, yes. But I remember somewhere, it must have been a Polish paper, but when that was exactly, perhaps later, seeing the piece about Ehrlich and Alter, who I knew were great friends of my father, who were shot in Russia, and I remember wondering if that meant bad news about my father.

What were these men exactly?

They were the leaders of the Bund, and they were members of the Socialist International. They were very well-known outside Poland, especially among the contacts of the Socialist Parties in Europe.

What were their full names?

The elder one was Heinrich Ehrlich, and the younger, Victor Alter.

And the Russians killed them?

Well, they left Poland in the same way as my father did, and I don't know, but their history is very well-known, but they must have been in concentration camps, as so many Poles, until, in Russian concentration camps, until the War with Germany, when Germany attacked Russia, and lots of these people were let out of camps, and I understand that Ehrlich and Alter were asked by all sorts of people high up in the Soviet Union, to form a Committee, to be in contact with American Jews, and that there would be aid for, organised for Jews, for Polish Jews, probably, from America, and that they would be their main contact. But they were then staying in Kuhlbeschef, and my father was with them, and one night they were taken by the

police, and they were shot, I think, a few nights later, and as traitors, and it was said that they, the Russians, then announced they were spies for Germany, which was absurd! But a lot of people were being killed like that.

And so did you and your sister both see this and talk about it?

No, at that, yes, it must have been later because I remember now that I wasn't with my sister, I remember reading that, and there was no one to talk with about it. It must've been later.

Your sister and you separated? When was that?

Yes, well, this was after the, the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, once, at that point, the Dubiels got very frightened and nervous, and decided that they couldn't look after two children, and said they would just keep Nelly, my sister.

So you and your sister were still together at the Dubiels when the Uprising took place in the Warsaw Ghetto?

Yes, we were there in that flat. I was going to say that, before that, we could see the ghetto, then my mother began to come to the wall as well, and we used to see her, and sort of gesture to her, and once even, the Dubiels went into the ghetto with some food, they somehow smuggled themselves. It was possible with some money, some Poles went in, this is how they mainly made their money, they used to bring some food and sell it, into the ghetto, or exchange food for other things, so there was this contact with my mother, but then, one early morning, we heard shooting, and when we looked through the window, the ghetto was, the wall was surrounded by many many more soldiers, and the Ukrainians, and the Lithuanians, they wore different uniforms, they wore black uniforms, and the Polish police, obviously we realised that something really terrible's going to happen, and then we could see the German Army, and even some tanks, going into the ghetto, and then we could see soldiers, German soldiers, are going in with containers of petrol, into the buildings, and setting fire to buildings, and then people running out of the buildings and being shot.

You could see this from your window?

Yes.

What time of day was this?

It just went on, I mean, it began early.

So you stayed at the window all day?

I don't remember if we, both stayed, but we could see the, and then once the ghetto began to burn, it was just one flame. I remember particularly, bits of paper, newspaper, flowing everywhere, and burning, and coming over the wall.

Were, did the fire look as if it was going to be contained the other side of the wall?

No, it just wasn't being, there was no question of that, there was no one trying to put it out at all, it was just burning.

So the Uprising and the fire went on for several weeks, while you were in the Dubiels flat?

I think that the fire probably for not quite so long, but the Germans were still there and we could hear shooting, and the family, the Dubiel family, were more and more nervous, and began to say that they probably really couldn't keep both us there. Vladka Perto came to see us, and we heard from her that Mikhail Klebfisch had gone back to the ghetto, with his last consignment of the Molotov cocktails that he was making, and some other arms that he arranged to smuggle into the ghetto, and later, she knew that he was killed. I remember also, she was telling us how she tried to smuggle herself to the ghetto, she thought it may be useful to make some contact with people there, and how she was, she met some Ukrainian, talked to a Ukrainian soldier, and sort of flirted with him, and he promised to take her into the ghetto, but it didn't work out, I think he wasn't allowed to. I know that the, yes, the people outside were very shaken, the Poles, but they were still, I could hear that that was just the Jews, it was a sign of revenge on the Jews, because of what they had done to Christ. I remember going to Church with Mrs. Dubiel, and I don't remember exactly what the priest was saying, but it wasn't, he again said something like that.

Did you hear any Polish people say it was a terrible thing?

Well, certainly the Dubiel family were saying that. Yes, I'm sure some people were saying that, but also a lot of people were saying that it was a kind of sign of God, that He has ...

And you and your sister were still both together at the Dubiels at this time, but what happened later?

Yes, well, the Dubiels also they heard that a lot of Poles were much more afraid to keep Jewish children and how some children were, little children, were brought by Poles to the ghetto wall, and just left there for the Germans to shoot them, and so, anyway, they decided and told Vladka, who was partly a family friend, she used to come to, because she used to like to come, and liked the sons as well, but also as a courier, and paid money for us, they told her that they couldn't keep me any longer, and so Vladka found some other family who would have me, and she took me by train to a very small place, somewhere outside Warsaw, I don't remember even the name of it, and I don't know how, Vladka knew the family, what her contact with them was, but it was a railway worker who lived in a little house, by the railway line, and his wife, and three children.

Was that boys or girls?

There were two little boys, and a girl of my age, with whom I didn't get on at all, she used to taunt me and

She knew you were Jewish?

She knew I was Jewish, yes.

The Dubiels felt two children was too much, so it was, sort of, I suppose, just by chance, whether it was you or your sister, because you were twins!

I don't know, that doesn't matter, it had to be one, so I suppose they got on with her a little better than they got on with me! But

Oh no, I think children sometimes think that, in retrospect, it isn't.

Oh no, I don't hold that against them!

So you couldn't be in touch with your sister, and at this time, you didn't know what had happened to your mother or father?

No, I was completely isolated, I knew Vladka to come there but I didn't know where she lived, I couldn't get in touch with her, but I knew that she knew where I was.

So in this village outside Warsaw, did you go to a school, or did you just stay in the house?

Oh no, just stayed in the house, and tried not to be seen by anybody. But the children got to know I was there, because the little girl, my (INAUDIBLE) told them very quickly, so obviously I couldn't stay there, and so when Vladka came again, to pay for me, she took me, or I don't remember now, or perhaps came again, a second time, and took me back to Warsaw.

With her?

With her, by train, yes. But I was going to say, there were trains somewhere nearby, going to, deporting Jews, who were trying to, I used to, could hear the family talking about it, that some Jews tried to jump out of trains, but they were very hostile to the, to the, I know that the woman had to go, even to the Priest, and somehow, I suppose it was one of her sins, that she was keeping me, and he was quite forgiving, but I know she had to tell some extra prayers about it, because I wasn't Christened, something to do with that, I think.

Did they want you to be Baptised, do you think?

I don't think really that people,

Why do you think they took you, if they were so hostile?

Well, they wanted, well, the man was nice anyway, I think that he, the father, he was always very nice to me, and he probably did want to help, you know, someone, but I think also they needed the money, I think they did it for the money. I mean, yes, obviously, they were very poor.

So have you any idea which month it was? How long you were there? A month or two, or three?

I imagine I was there about a month only.

So then your friend took you back to Warsaw, and where did she take you?

Yes, she took me to a house, in Warsaw, to this old town, this old part of Warsaw, which was also very, very near the ghetto wall, and the family I stayed with, they were a whole family of brothers, and one sister, who were all children of the, of the monitor, I suppose that would be called, a kind of caretaker, and they lived just in one room, this very young couple, and the young man, who, this is not fair.

So you came back from the village to Warsaw, where did you go then?

Yes, I went to a house in the old town of Warsaw, and that was very near the ghetto wall, there was a ghetto just at the side of that block of flats, and the family I went to stay with, was a very young couple, a young man, he was only 23, and his wife was probably a little younger, and they had a little three year old daughter, and they lived in one room, and he was the son of a caretaker, who was already dead, and some of the other brothers were still living in that block of flat, but not in the same room. They were, he was making something, he was baking bread illegally, was an oven in this room, and I think that there was a death penalty for baking bread.

Is that so?

And he was also making vodka, distilling it out of rye, and so that was another thing that was, I think, very highly punishable, by the Germans, and then he had me as well, so he was doing all these things.

He had no proper job?

Oh, he didn't have a job, yes. And

He wasn't the caretaker, then?

No, it was one of his older brothers who was the caretaker. And he also used to go into the ghetto and smuggle things, which was then empty, though it was still being guarded, though not very efficiently.

So he was living by his wits?

Yes, and he was taking out metal girders, he and some other people, and selling them.

Were they kind?

They were very disturbed, they were probably, in some ways, perhaps kinder to me than to themselves. He was drinking a lot, and becoming completely unconscious and

beating his wife, and committing, trying to commit suicide, and whole life was very disturbed.

Were they what, looking back on it, would they have been what you might called 'slum dwellers'? Were they a respectable working class family, or were they a little more ...

Well, it was so, the middle of the War, he probably was only a child, and a child of a caretaker before the War. His wife, I think, seemed to have a respectable mother, who was trying to persuade her to leave her husband and come and stay with the mother. I don't know, I think at that age, I don't think I was aware, I just took them for what they were, and and couldn't really compare.

They were kind?

Well, they were, they weren't kind, because they, if I had anything, even a toothbrush and so on, they took it, but they needed it, if Vladka bought me some things like that, which would be necessities, they obviously almost always disappeared, but they were very poor, and I suppose they needed these things for their child.

And their child was what age?

About two or three. They were not unkind in other ways. They fed me and they, and I think the wife quite liked my company there, as a sort of defence from her husband.

Had you had another birthday then? How old were you now, about? Still 11, or 12?

I must have been still the same year, it seemed a terribly long year.

It must have been a hell of a year, yes.

Perhaps this was October, I probably not, yes, no, I think it was still the same year. And one of the brothers was dying of TB I remember, and eventually died, and so it was clearly very kind of poor and unhappy, this household.

Did you, did you help the wife in the house?

Yes, I used to sort of peel potatoes, and sometimes she used to, she and her husband, used to go away by train, to go somewhere and buy some sort of provisions, like flour, and sell them for a little more money in Warsaw, and I remember staying with, looking after the child, for a day and night at a time, sometimes.

Was it a boy or a girl?

A girl, a little girl. And I played in the courtyard there with other children, and some other people then, used to come and pay the money to them, not Vladka, but two other people, someone who then became Vladka's husband eventually.

Did they bring you news?

No, they didn't, I didn't really know them very well, I mean, I didn't know them at all, and they didn't talk very much, I never knew who was alive and who wasn't, and if they were, where they were, and who it was.

At this time, what, you're getting towards the autumn of 1943? What did you see in the ghetto? Nothing? It was silent?

It was completely silent, but then at some point I knew that there was an old prison in the ghetto, which wasn't burned and then they brought some Hungarian Jews, men only, who were doing some work, I'm not sure what they were being made to do, but I knew that there was a group of Jews inside the ghetto.

And how long did you stay with them? What was the name of this couple that you stayed with?

Serafin, I can't remember, I think Jadir, was the woman's name, no, Krisha, Kristina.

Did you call them by their names, or did you call them aunt and uncle?

No, I didn't call them aunt and uncle. I think by their names, probably.

What, you'd call them Mr. and Mrs, or by their first names?

I think by their first names. And I had false papers, and there were whole stories which I had to know.

What was your name on the false papers?

I was called Irene Zarenda.

And who were you meant to be?

I was some relative who had come from the Western parts, which were cut off from Poland. There was a story that my parents had to go somewhere else, they were in the Underground.

Did you have to tell that story to the other children?

Yes, I knew the story, that was my, I think that some people in that courtyard, they probably guessed and knew I was Jewish, but they were quite sort of nice about it, they never, particularly one family, who also used to invite me up to their house, and who's children I played with, and they were nice to me.

And how long were you with this household?

I was there then, well, the next thing that happened, we begun to see, in the streets, that the Germans were coming away, more or less running away from the Eastern Front, they looked very bedraggled, and they were columns of German Army, going

west to Warsaw, so we began to think that the War was about to end, so it must have been ...

'44?

'44, yes. And at that point, Vladka's husband's family were brought to the same block of flats, because, I don't know exactly why, but it was obviously that they thought they would be safer there, and I suddenly saw this Jewish family being looked after by one of the other brothers, and they were, husband, wife and a daughter, who was my age, and I was terribly amazed, and they used to burn bits of candles,

Oh, they were quite religious.

When they arrived there, I really was amazed, because I thought there were just no Jews left at all, it was my kind of, but I knew my sister was around, because she did occasionally come to see me.

What, you really thought you and your sister were the last Jewish children?

No, no, not exactly, but it just seemed like, because I didn't see anybody, and there was this whole family who burnt candles on Friday night, and led this Jewish life.

What was their name?

They were called Mildejetski.

And you played with their daughter?

I played, and that made it, life completely different for me, for, it was for a very short time, because then the Warsaw Uprising started.

Which was the whole city?

Yes. You know, the Warsaw, the Polish Underground, cos what happened was, that the Russians came to the river, to the River Vistula, which is east of Warsaw, and the Polish Underground, which was very very strong, decided to have a proper Uprising, and fight the Germans as well. And so one morning, there were suddenly all these people with guns and uniforms, and sort of arm, Polish armbands, it was all very exciting, but then the Germans began to bomb the city, and use of heavy artillery, and there was at once no water and no electricity, and then it was very badly bombed, it was burned.

They bombed from the air?

Yes, from the air, and with the very heavy artillery, they had just nearby, so that we all went to stay in the cellar, and the house was burned, but the cellar was not burned. And this Jewish family had to hide, because there was a lot of hostility, people began to whisper that they were Jews, and the fact, and they began to, I remember, I always remember this, that in that cellar, where all the people were so much against the

Germans, and they were all very patriotic and heroic, and they began to whisper that I was Jewish, even I was amazed at that point, because there was no question of the Germans being around, they were all fighting the Germans, and then, yes, and Hungarian Jews who were in the ghettos came out, they were probably liberated by the Polish Army, but they were not given Polish, they were not given civilian clothes, so they were in these striped pyjamas. And so I always wonder, and then when the Germans came to, came in, this bit of Warsaw, which was the old part, what's called the ancient part of Warsaw, the Rufka, capitulated, the Germans. I know that, no one, that these Jews, couldn't get any clothes, I was thinking that they were so obviously prisoners, I don't know what happened to them, but anyway, the population capitulated and the Germans came in and we sort of came out of the cellar, and were taken to an outskirt of Warsaw. I went with the family, with them.

Oh, so you left the couple you were staying with?

No, no, I went with the couple.

They left Warsaw at this time?

Yes, everybody, yes, because the Germans just told everybody to leave, they had to leave the house.

Was it organised, the departure? Or was it just people who had to go on foot, or ...

To go, I can't remember how we were taken to this outskirt of Warsaw, I think we must have gone on foot, to this huge church, and then somehow, there was a kind of selection, where sort of single men were being told that they would have to go to Germany to work there, and the families would be taken somewhere else, I don't know where. But I remember how, all suddenly, before that, how I know, how people seemed so frightened to be near me, if they could recognise I was Jewish, but everybody wanted to be my Daddy and Mummy, because it was single people, because they could, then they had this child with them, and would not have to go to Germany. But anyway, we, we were put on a train, the people who were not going to Germany. I'm not sure whether the Germans were planning to take that particular train for, of people, families, but the train stopped somewhere, and the family I was with, had family somewhere in the countryside, so we clambered out of the train.

And you went with them?

And with me, yes, I went with them, and walked, I remember, I don't know how many miles, I remember it was, I didn't have proper shoes walking on this, it must have been autumn, it was September, because the fields were cut, how painful to walk on the fields were, and got to the family, they were some sort of uncles and aunts, a very remote little village, without any running water or electricity, and they sort of made room for us. We stayed with them.

They were farmers?

They were very smallholders, yes. But they were very poor peasants, with this house, we stayed in, just the two rooms, one where the parents lived, and everybody else, and all the animals, it was winter, lived in the other room.

What animals?

I don't know, goats, there was a cow, I think.

So food wasn't such a problem perhaps?

Yes, they were big families, it was a problem, there just wasn't enough food. And they had to sell a few bits, and they had to give things to the Germans, they had sort of quotas that they had to provide, so yes, there was very little food, there was potatoes and very little else.

Were there children there?

Yes, there were children there. I remember, yes, they were more or less my, there were a lot of children, all ages. I remember reading books.

Which you hadn't had for a while?

No, I didn't read books, sorry, I remember telling stories to the children, because they had, yes, no one could read, they were not really literate, but they were delighted. And the men as well, used to listen, because in the winter, there wasn't very much ...

Did they have a radio?

No, radios were completely illegal anyway, but in any case, there wasn't, I don't know if they ever had radios, they lived a very primitive life, and in the winter, when there was a lot of snow around, the men had not very much to do, and the women were spinning, and making clothes, cooking, and looking after the animals.

You told them stories you remembered from books you had read?

Yes, yes. And they were, they obviously knew I was Jewish, though they never, on occasionally, I still remember once or twice, if they quarrelled, either with me or with the people, the Serafins, they would then shout and say that I was Jewish, but that I think only happened twice. On the whole they were nice to me. But they all, ran the whole thing, that was a bit of a, perhaps not fair to them that they all thought, they were told, to hate, and I was telling them that I had this terribly rich family abroad, but I think they somehow thought that, after the War, someone would give them money.

What, you told them this?

Yes, I was sort of saying that, it seemed the right thing to do.

The shrewd thing to do, I think, because was the money not getting through?

No, because at that point, no, there was no contact with anybody.

At that time, do you think it was already looking as if Germany was losing?

Yes, now there is no question that they were losing the War, yes.

So, so you told them you had rich family in another country?

Yes, and also this young Serafin, I think he was telling, I think he was, he thought that, and he was telling those people in the country that he would be all right after the War, there would be always people looking after him, he won't have to worry after the War.

So you think this is now already, this is 1943 or 1944? That was '44 ...

End of F198 Side A

F198 Side B

The Serafins used to go to Warsaw sometimes, and just looked through the ruins there, and bring back clothes and whatever they could find, and sell it at the market.

So any news you had was the news they brought back from Warsaw?

Yes, there was no news in Warsaw, Warsaw was completely empty, they were just scavenging there, really, finding dead bodies and their belongings and bringing it here and then selling some of it. There was really no news, but at the market, I think, perhaps, at a small town called Bruidz, perhaps they heard some news. It had become obvious that the War was coming to an end, that the Germans were losing the War, but I still had my, I didn't know what happened, and then just by chance, the Serafins, when they were selling some of the things in the little town, came across Vladka, who, with her husband, Jiliminsky, were there, and Vladka and her husband naturally, were very glad to see them, especially because they didn't know what happened to Jiliminsky's family, his parents ...

So what happened next?

Yes, so, Vladka and Jiliminsky came to the village to see me, and I was unhappy not to be able to tell them what happened to the Jiliminsky's mother, father and to the little sister, because towards the end of staying in the cellars during the Warsaw Uprising, they had to hide in a separate cellar, because they were so obviously Jewish, they couldn't speak Polish, and had got a Polish accent, and I used to run in there sometimes, because I felt so happy to be with them, but on this last day when the Germans suddenly came, I didn't see them, I still feel bad about them, we were taken out very quickly, and it was only after, after the War, that I learned that luckily, they all survived, and they pretended to be deaf and dumb, and stayed in some village, and survived that way, but certainly during the Warsaw Uprising, in the cellar, the Poles were hostile, I remember ...and knew probably that they were Jews. Anyway, when Vladka came, I felt much happier, I'd then had the contact with them, and the Serafins were a little disappointed, because they thought that they may get some money for keeping me, but Vladka and her husband didn't have any money, but they promised them that the money would eventually come, and so Vladka went away, and Jan Serafin felt that things would work out, that the War would be over soon, and that he will not need to worry about his future, that somehow my family would look after him, and so it was still the middle of the winter, very cold, and everything under the snow, and we began to hear more artillery noises, quite nearby, and see the Russian, not Russians, the Germans, leaving, going West in some disarray, and then suddenly there were some Russian soldiers around in little groups, looking very cold, and hungry, and asking, coming to the houses of the peasants, and asking if they could get some food, but there was just no food, the peasant didn't have any food either. And the Russians were friendly, seemed to behave quite well, and were not threatening, and saying, oh, they may find some bread and give it away, and I think that the people in the villages were glad to see the back of the Germans, yes, I'm sure they were, very glad. But very little had changed, just in the village, and I waited, and the Serafins waited for a bit, hoping that someone would come from Warsaw, but then we, they decided to go back to Warsaw, and hired a cart, then we all went to Warsaw.

A cart?

Some sort of cart that takes the children, a child on, because it was quite a long way from the village.

What, with a horse?

Yes. And got to Warsaw and found some part, I don't know which part of Warsaw, house, which had a roof, which we all lived in, sort of squatting in some four rooms.

End of F198 Side B

F199 Side A

May 2nd 1989.

So, in the winter of 1944, you were back in Warsaw?

Yes, I waited for a while in the village, because I knew that Vladka knew where I was, and therefore I hoped that she would come to take me away, but after about a week or 10 days, the Serafins felt they couldn't stay longer, they were no longer welcome to stay in the village, and decided to go back to Warsaw, and this is why we went to Warsaw. They must, yes, I'm just now thinking how they left there, just cos we didn't know where we were going to stay. It must have been that once they got to Warsaw, somehow they send news where they were staying.

And had the Russians virtually taken most of Poland then?

Yes, I don't know what happened. I should imagine that the Front moved pretty quickly. But I wasn't going out at all, I didn't have any winter clothes, I didn't have any shoes, I was just in, in this little place we were living at, and didn't really know very much what was happening.

And you had no news of your family?

And I didn't know, apart from the idea that Vladka should know where I am. I felt that probably no one else was alive, of anybody that I had ever known. I didn't know what happened to my father, and presumed that he probably wasn't alive, and I didn't know what happened to my sister.

What was the next thing that happened?

But, sometimes after, very soon afterwards, Ala Margolis, whom I didn't know, but she was also one of the couriers who worked in the Bund, and had survived the War, she later became the wife of Marka, the man, came, found me. She came to this little flat, and asked for me, and explained that she had been told by Vladka where I was, had walked through the snow to this little village, near Gruyez, found I wasn't there, but found from the people there where the Serafin family had gone, to come back to Warsaw, and found me, and well, that was, you know, a great thing. I was, suddenly felt completely different, I had felt completely abandoned and felt I wouldn't, didn't really know what to do, and suddenly there was this very lively, charming, Jewish, obviously sort of Jewish young woman, who was very warm to me and told me that she was going to take me to another town in Poland, Lodz, where some, I'm sorry, I know there are two ways of calling, there's a German version, just Lodz, and the Poles call it Luch.

So you were going to Luch?

Yes, she told me that my father was alive, that she knew ...

Oh, you must have been very happy to hear that. Were you surprised?

Yes. And yes, she told me that my sister was alive, and that there were these people, old friends of my parents who were in Lodz, they had come from people they knew there, and they would look after me until I could go to London, or England with my father.

Did you understand how your father had got there?

Well, I think at that time, I didn't really worry about that, I was just very happy he was in London.

And your sister?

She told me that my sister was still also living in Warsaw and that she was with the family Dubiel, but that someone else would take her to Lodz,

Oh, so you would be together in Lodz?

Yes.

And who were the people you were going to be with there?

Well, they were old friends of both my parents, and in fact, when my father was in Vilna at the beginning of the War, he was, he stayed with these old friends.

What was their name?

Well, their name is Ashinski, they are still both alive, and living in Poland.

Were they Jewish people?

Yes.

And had they been in the Bund with your father, do you think?

Yes.

How old would they have been then?

Well, they were ...

The same age as your parents, or older?

Well, Irene Ashinska, the wife, is a little younger, but not very much, well, she's now about 65 I think, but she was younger, yes.

So they were like a married couple in their twenties?

Then, yes, I remember she was, no, she was about 28 when I got to Lodz.

And did they have children of their own?

No, no.

How had they got through the War?

They hid in some cellars in Vilna, got out of the ghetto, and they were helped by some nuns in Vilna. Or a nun.

Were they Polish Lithuanian?

Well the, Mr. Ashinski he came, he came from Warsaw but he spent the War in Vilna, he left Warsaw and then, but his wife comes from Vilna, she had always lived in Vilna.

So how were they living when you reached them?

I would say that they lived in a flat.

So how were they living in Lodz?

They lived in quite a pleasant flat, I remember it had two bedrooms, and a kitchen, and a sitting room, and quite nicely furnished, but it was a flat which some Germans of what was called the "Volksdeutschen" who had, Germans that had left, or were taken away, and the Ashinski's moved into this flat. He was a journalist on a newspaper there, but almost immediately, it was always full of people who were, Jewish people, who were coming either from camps or from Russia, and they were simply everywhere in that flat, on the floor.

It was open house?

Yes.

So you saw people who had come from the camps?

Well, very soon, soon afterwards, yes.

How did they look?

Well, on the whole, I remember that they were sort of rather swollen, and the women, if they were not, they were still very very fat, because I think they, when they were very thin they ate a lot of, and that sort of made them blow up very quickly.

And you and your sister were together again then? You hadn't been together for how many years?

Oh it was, it wasn't, it was about two years.

About two years. Did you still look alike?

Yes, we always looked quite alike. We looked quite a way, but in no way, we are not identical twins.

Ah, I understand. And was she pleased to see you?

I hope so, I don't know! We felt, immediately sort of quite privileged, because we knew, you know, we knew our father was in England and we were going to go to England, and we were both alive.

Did you have any sort of firm news about your mother, or did you just presume,

No, I didn't even think about it.

Neither of you?

Didn't like to think about it, just blocked it out completely, didn't ask, or ...

And nobody told?

No.

Did you ever sort of say anything to your sister?

No, not for a long time. I mean, I have since been given a letter from, by my uncle in America, which told me what happened to my mother, but that was very recently, only about a year ago.

Is that so? So it's 1944, is it the turn of the year, or the winter still?

Well, the War was still not over, because it was ...

It was still not over, but the Russians had come in, so the Germans had gone from where you were?

Yes, and quite a lot of, yes, the people were so much on the move that a lot of, especially from Russia, a lot of people came, a lot of Jews came back from Russia.

Because they'd fled there? They thought it was safer there? I suppose it was, in the end.

Because they survived. Yes, by no comparison, many more survived there, yes, and, but they wanted to get back to Poland, away from Russia, so while the frontiers were still very fluid, they were coming back.

So it was a time when many many people were moving, in many different directions.

Did you find what happened to your aunts and uncles, on both sides, and your grandparents at all?

Yes well, then one day, someone knocked on the door of this flat, and when we opened the door, it was my cousin, my older cousin, a cousin who's name was Yeschek, who was seven years older than I and my sister, and with whom we shared, in the ghetto, we spend all our time together, so we were amazed and delighted.

How had he escaped?

He, he, he and his little brother were alive, and he told us that he and his parents had left the ghetto through the sewers, just as the Uprising began, because they had made arrangements with some Poles they knew before the War, who, for whom they were going to work, I think that he was in some ways connected with, he was a jeweller, and he was making bracelets, and I think they still had some gold with them, so anyway, they lived in some, they and another family, Jewish family, who were also jewellers, lived with this Polish family, somewhere hidden away in the east of Warsaw, but when the money ran out and the gold, these Poles told them they had to go, and when they said they had nowhere to go, they actually told the Germans. That was just at the very end, just before the Warsaw Uprising. So somehow, the young people, my cousin and the little boy, and the other young, younger members of the second family, somehow ran away, somehow got away, I don't know exactly how and when, to Praga, which was East of Warsaw, by the river, and more or less immediately the Russians came in, so they survived, but they, their parents were shot by the Germans.

So how old would your cousin Yeschek have been at this time, in the winter and early part of 1944, in winter, 1944?

Well, he must have been about 19.

And what, by then, you and your sister were what, 12 or 13?

Yes.

13. Had you had your 13th birthday, or would you still be 12, do you think?

I was born in '31, October, so must have been 13 by that time.

And so, so what did he plan to do? How was he living?

My cousin?

Yes.

He was trying to look after his brother.

Oh, he was little, wasn't he. Cos he was three at the time.

Yes, his brother was IO, and he found some, he had found somebody who worked for the jeweller, but I think afterwards, for a short time, he worked for the sort of Police, I know that he now deeply regrets, but he hid from the Russians, he was, and at that time, he couldn't look after this little boy, Paul, so the little boy Paul, Pablovik, went to a children's home, near Lodz.

So you were able to see this cousin again.

Yes.

And what happened next? The War was still going on? Did you hear more about what was happening in the War, because now the Germans had gone, there was better communication?

Yes, yes, papers were being published, we in fact, the Ashinskis, with whom we were living, was an editor of this Polish paper, called, Robotnik, yes, we knew that the Germans were losing the War, and then one day, there was a lot of shooting, and we weren't quite sure what was happening, the Russian soldiers were shooting, and I remember being quite frightened, and then we realised they were celebrating the end of the War.

Oh, so they were firing their guns in the air.

Yes.

So this would have been in 1945?

The 8th, yes, so that was the 8th May.

So, so, did, I suppose things were still chaotic. Was there more food, or had the schools started again?

Yes, I went to the school, I remember, for a few months.

In Lodz?

Oh yes, a chaotic school, where the children, there were only about three classes there, and the children were so roughly divided by not properly ages even, the children seemed to be of all ages in each of these classes.

Was it a Polish school?

Yes, it was a Polish school, yes. But there was quite a lot of Jewish Organisations, sort of helped organise that, because I remember I used to go to, for lunch, to some Jewish kind of little institution, I don't even know what it was, where dinners were being sort of, lunches were being cooked.

Were there many Jewish people left in Lodz?

Well not, certainly not of the people who originally, but by that time, yes, a lot of people came back from Russia, and some from the camps. No, there were, there weren't any Jews left in Lodz, except perhaps a few who had hidden themselves away. The ghettos were completely empty.

And had there been any sort of contact from your father? Had he been able to write or anything?

Yes quite soon, there was a contact in letters, yes, came, and I remember he even sent some chocolate and some vitamin pills that were being locked up in a little cupboard, and rationed out for me and my sister.

What did he write in his letter, do you remember?

I don't,

That he was happy that you were okay?

I don't really remember.

Did it come with the English stamps on, do you remember?

The letters? I think it must have done, yes.

And so what was the plan then?

I think that we, my sister and I, we were told that we would go to England, but we didn't know how long it would take, because of the necessity to get permission, and passports and visas.

Was where you were, I don't know what happened, it wouldn't have been what you called a Russian Zone, like it was in Germany, it was Poland as a sovereign country, I suppose? Getting itself together again?

Well, the Government was in Poles, you know, it was a Communist Government, which was formed in Ljublin, before the, I think it was even before the Uprising in Warsaw, so then when Warsaw, when the Russians came to Warsaw, the ...

The Polish people were ready?

The Polish Government was brought. Yes, this President Pierroot, and some other people who became the Government.

As a child, you weren't particularly conscious of this, I suppose? Or did you understand what was happening?

Well, I thought I understood. I, at that time, I thought there was nothing left for me to learn, and probably at the time, I thought that was for me, that seemed quite a safe set-up.

But I suppose growing up with a father in the Bund, and a mother in Poale Zion, were they sort of fellow travelling, as it were? Was there a Popular Front?

No, no, not at all before the War, my father was certainly,

They were opposed to the Communists then?

Well, my mother, I don't know what she would have been at the end of the War, but certainly my father was his great, because he had been in Russia anyway, and it was his great mission to tell everybody what went on in Russia, so that, but on the other hand, I think that the people I stayed with in Lodz, felt this was a rather safe set-up, and I think they were quite happy to go along with it for the time being, they were not Communist, but under the circumstances, yes, yes.

Absolutely, particularly after the Nazis. So, so at that time, you knew you wanted to get to England. Did you have any idea what it would be like? Or you just knew it was far away?

Yes, I don't know, I don't even know that I, I probably was slightly anxious about going somewhere completely different, but I don't think I spent much time thinking about it.

Did you and your sister both have the same reaction? That you were sort of quite excited, you wanted to go?

I don't know, I don't know that we even, yes, I think that we felt that we, you know, we won't suffer, and in a way to look after us, after all this time, and had very romantic memories of my father, and so we thought we would be happy to see him.

So the months went on, and you stayed in Lodz with your father's friends.

Yes, and then I got ill, I had typhoid.

Typhoid? There must have been an epidemic?

Yes, we went to the seaside, so is the other typhoid, the stomach.

Oh, paratyphoid.

Paratyphoid, yes, and I had scarlet fever, so I spent some time in, certainly with scarlet fever, I went to a hospital near Lodz, and I remember there having, because they knew I was Jewish, it wasn't a very pleasant experience.

What happened?

Oh, I just remember how the nurses, and the nuns, how they said that they wouldn't look after me, and I could wipe up whenever I was sick, my own things, and so on, because I was Jewish. But, ...

Cos you were saying, you were always more frightened of the Polish people, because you really felt there was this ...

Well, I always knew that, it wasn't directly the Germans, except by chance, being caught by them, but they couldn't tell if I was Jewish or not Jewish, there was always local people that I had to be very afraid of. No, they seemed to be always able to tell.

So, so these nuns, and yet there had been nuns in Vilna who had looked after this family you were staying with?

Yes, I don't know, I suppose there are all sorts of people.

So, I suppose you'd had your stamina a bit undermined by the bad food and everything?

I think that it was almost like a relief that I wasn't ill during all this, when I really had so little to eat, but as soon as the War was over, I seem to have got these illnesses.

Well, they were the sort of illnesses children get, of course. Did your sister get sick at the same time?

She had, she had an appendix removed, yes, that's true.

Of course, one never knows how much of these things are stress, and you know, prolonged stress. So, so you're in Lodz, you're waiting to hear what's happening, and there's a certain amount of red tape, I suppose, which your father's friends did on your behalf?

Yes, well, I think it was my father who did these things.

From the other end?

From London, and eventually he got permission for me and my sister to come to England.

Do you remember what month and year that would've been?

It was winter, again, I should imagine it was probably February.

So we might be talking about February '46?

Yes.

Cos you said you were 14 when you came.

Yes, yes, yes, and somebody, it so happened that somebody that my father knew, Mr. Patt, who was travelling on behalf of the Jewish Labour Committee, to Poland, and ...

Was travelling from London?

From America, no, New York, and I think he must have stopped over in London, and my father arranged for him, that he would accompany me, me and my sister, take us out, because he was coming back through London. And in fact, he took us, he was going to Sweden, so we went with him to Sweden.

What was his name?

Jankel Patt.

And had he spent the War in America?

Yes, yes, he was living in America, I think, for some years before the War.

So when he came, he collected two little girls he'd never met.

Yes, he came to see a lot of people, he wasn't really just interested in us, he was, there was a lot for him to do and see, but he took my sister and me on the plane, and he was going to Sweden as well, where already some Jews from Poland had already gone to, because Sweden gave quite a lot of visas to Jews.

Oh yes, and it was neutral wasn't it?

No, Sweden was occupied by the Germans during the War, but, oh no, it was neutral.

It was Norway, Norway and Denmark were occupied, but Sweden was neutral wasn't it.

Yes, and anyway, it gave visas, after the War, to quite a lot of Jews who have come out of camps, and some of the people came from Russia, so he was going to see, make arrangements for some kind of hostels.

He was doing sort of relief work, and things.

Yes.

So I suppose you'd never been in an aeroplane?

No. That was very exciting. And coming to Sweden, I remember, that was terribly exciting. Because, as you say, Sweden hasn't been in the War, and ...

And so it was prosperous?

There was this city full of electric lights, and food, and oranges I had not seen, and bananas, for years. And had windows full of things. That was mainly the lights I remember so much, there were electric lights everywhere, and the windows, shop windows lit up, which I hadn't seen for years.

I don't suppose you saw them when you came to London?

No, I was going to say, I thought, then, I thought coming to London would be even more, even more exciting, but London still was very black.

The blackout?

Yes, no, well, there was very little light, yes. But I remember staying in Sweden for a few days, and we knew, and there were some people we got to know in Lodz who were then already in Sweden, and I remember sledging with them, because it was winter.

Were you bought clothes there? Did your father send money for you to get clothes?

No, we had clothes, because in Poland it was very cold as well, and we always had coats yes, I don't know if it was my father's money, or whose money, I never really thought about it.

Cos you said when you went back to Warsaw with the Serafins, you had nothing.

Yes, I didn't have any, I really can't remember, I suppose somebody got some clothes, because there's some old photograph of myself wearing a coat and shoes.

So you and your sister were in Sweden, in Stockholm, do you think?

We stopped in Stockholm, and we got there this whole one night, and that seemed an amazing place, to us. And then I don't know the name, somewhere very near Stockholm, there was a villa, in which there were some of these people we got to know after the War, which, and we stayed with them, and that was very enjoyable, yes, we had a very good time there.

And then you went to London, by plane or by boat?

We went by plane again. By plane, to London, with the same man, with Mr. Patt. Yes, we went to Croydon Airport.

Oh right! So, was your father there to meet you?

No, he wasn't.

Oh dear.

No, I remember taking a coach to Central London, where he was.

There was a sort of terminal in Central London in those days?

Yes.

And did you recognise him?

Yes. Yes.

And did he recognise you?

I'm sure.

How old had you been when he last saw you and your sister?

Seven, I suppose.

And now you're young ladies, I suppose.

14. Yes, well, he certainly knew Mr. Patt he had seen, so he thought there's no question.

So where did you go? What time of day was it?

I can't really remember. I knew we went to, he was living in Finsbury Park, in a flat, and he took us there.

And what did you do? You had tea, or supper or something?

I don't remember, no. I expect so. He was on his own then, and I remember thinking how my sister and I would look after him. And I think we were disappointed when we saw, to find, there was a young woman, you know, who was also keen to look after him.

Oh right, cos he'd been on his own for how long?

For, well, since he left, yes, since my mother came back to Warsaw.

But I suppose it's not, it's not as children expect things to be.

No, I was 14. Yes, it was very easy for this woman, who became our stepmother, I'm sure she had a lot to put up with.

Was she Polish?

No, she's English.

And Jewish?

No.

No. So, so how soon after you and your sister arrived, did you hear about this lady?

Well, she, I don't know, quite soon, she, you know, she did come to visit, and meet us.

So this was quite a surprise for you?

Yes. I suppose she didn't think of that.

What was she like?

End of F199 Side A

F199 Side B

So how soon after you and your sister arrived, did you hear about this lady?

Well, she, I don't know, quite soon, she did come, you know, to visit and meet us.

So this was quite a surprise for you, I suppose.

Yes, I suppose she didn't think of that.

What was she like?

(WJ LAUGHING)

Well, no, your impression of her as a child?

Well, she was young, probably only about 24, 25.

And your father would have been what, 30 something?

Yes. And she seemed very English. She was a bit nervous of me and my sister as well.

Yes, I suppose she would have been. So how did you talk to her? Your father translated?

I don't remember, we somehow communicated, by signs and things, and yes, if he was there, he translated, yes, and she learnt odd Polish words, like "Shut the door", and "Wash your hands".

And were you told, what was going to happen, they were going to sort of make arrangements for you and your sister to go to a school and learn English?

Yes, I remember some Polish woman was teaching us English, for, I think, two months, before we went to school. We must have gone to school, I suppose, at the beginning of term, so it would have been some months before we went to school.

How do you remember London in those days? How did people seem? Did they seem friendly?

Yes, they were, I remember there were some people in the same little house, this house where my father lived, it was subdivided into, into, I think, two flats, and there were some other people in the other flat, and they were very friendly, and yes, I thought, yes. But I think we were a little, we found some, or my father knew some people who had some connection with a sort of, we knew some other young people who came here from Poland, and I think we were slightly oblivious to the local people, and were interested to meet people who had also come from Poland here. And then felt we couldn't really tell anybody what had happened to us, so that I remember, I could never say anything about it, because it seemed to be so different

from everybody else's life, thought they might think I'm crazy. Anyway, or maybe I just couldn't talk about it. But there was never any question of talking about it.

How long do you think it took you to be able to sort of talk in English, and go to school, and

I went to school, and I still couldn't speak English properly, but I would imagine about a year.

What sort of school did you go to?

I went to a little grammar school at Stamford Hill. I think it was mainly, it was later explained to me, not because anyone thought I was so clever, but how the school leaving age, I think, was 14, then, so that.

Oh right, so to get some education.

To go to school at all, I either had to go to a grammar school or not at all.

So, so how,

It was kind of the headmistress of that school, to just take me and my sister.

And did it have a school uniform?

Yes, yes. I thought that was very peculiar. I remember, I found the school very strange.

It was girls, just girls?

Yes.

What were the other girls like?

It was in quite a Jewish district, in Stamford Hill, there were a lot of Jewish girls, and I remember realising that, yes, they were just girls, all sorts of girls, other children. But I had my twin sister with me, so that made it a lot easier. But no, looking back on it, I'm surprised there were no other refugee children in that school at all. We were the only ones. And on the whole, the teachers were very nice to us, and took a lot of trouble. I remember being taught how to play cricket by one of the teachers there.

That's quite unusual for a girl's school?

No, no, no, I think they, no, no, this was not because the other girls were playing, just to explain, because they realised we wouldn't know about cricket. But I still don't know how, I still don't remember the rules!

Did you listen to the radio?

I remember when I came to England how my father, how we were always not allowed to talk during ITMA programmes, because my,

Yes, that was a comedy.

Because my father was listening to it. But I suppose eventually I began to understand and listen to the radio. And yes, I remember seeing my first film, which I was very excited by.

What was it?

Yes, I still remember, it was, The Odd Man Out.

Oh, that was about the IRA, wasn't it?

Was it, I didn't understand it all, just I know I saw it, and being taken, I remember being taken by, by Barbara, I mean, a friend of my father's who's now my stepmother, to ballet in Covent Garden, I think they must have more or less ruined themselves on this, and I think sitting more or less in the first row, and then complaining that we didn't like it!

Oh dear! What were you interested at that time, or getting interested in? Were you following the progress of the War? Because it was VJ day in that year later.

No, I think as far as we were concerned, the War was over, I don't think we were even, I don't think we took other people's war, this War with Japan, very seriously. I think we were interested to find other people, to have friends with other people who had come here from Poland. And in fact, we did, we formed a little group, which used to meet in Aldgate East, about 10 or 11 people.

Boys and girls?

Yes, and I think that took a lot of our energy. We used to go camping together, and that was a sort of separate life from the school, where we vaguely made friendships, but not very much.

Was that, were they Jewish young people?

Yes, yes.

Was they Zionist?

No, this was to do with the Bund, it was the Bund, yes, so that was really through my father who knew some people here, who had brought some children, who were not their own, but they had some family.

So they were boys and girls you didn't know before?

No.

Have you kept up with them?

Yes.

Oh that's nice.

Yes, with all of them, yes.

And what sort of happened next? How long did you and your sister stay in this school, and in this district?

Well, my father moved, bought a house, I think quite soon after that he moved to Muswell Hill, but I went, we went on to the same school, and I stayed until Sixth Form.

Were you finding English easier now, and you were fluent?

I don't know, I did quite well at school, I got my Matric, and ...

They must have been very pleased with you?

Yes, I suppose they were surprised. But then I didn't quite do my Higher Certificate, cos then I went to the Radiography, because I had got a place, I had discovered that I could go there actually, after my last exam, so I was, but I was a year older at school than the other girls, I was in school till I was 19 almost.

And you'd had some pretty, you know, maturing experiences. Did the English girls ask you much about what had happened on the Continent?

No, I never talked to any of these people about it. I still see one of the women who was then a girl, she was, she became a very good friend of my sister's, more so than me, but then I sort of inherited the friendship, and I've never told her exactly what happened, I think she knows vaguely, but I've never talked to any of them.

What, you just couldn't find the words, or you just didn't want to talk about it?

I don't know, I just couldn't, I don't think, could talk about it.

At that time, so you stayed at this school till Sixth Form, and then, had you decided what you wanted to do?

Yes, cos I was doing science, but that's really, my abilities are not terribly in that direction, but I thought at the time, that with a foreign accent, there wasn't very much I could do, if I did English, let's say, History, at which I was better than I was at, I did, in fact, Physics, Chemistry and Maths, and I wasn't doing terribly well, it seemed doubtful that I would get through the A levels, and I was wondering what to do, and someone told me about doing radiography. I applied to the Royal Free, and they said

they could take me that April, before I, before I had to sit my exams. So I did that. And that's what happened.

Did you feel very much a foreigner?

Yes.

Did it go after a while?

No, I had no illusions about that!

So what happened next? You started work? Did you still live with your father and sister?

No, my sister, my sister got married very very much earlier. She left school, she did, she didn't sit her Matric, or the School Certificate exams, and she tried to do some nursery nursing, but we, we went to a sort of Youth Camp of the Bund, in Belgium, where she met a very nice young man.

A Belgian boy?

No, no, from Poland, from Lodz, a Jewish boy, and very quickly they got together, and very quickly they were, she, they got married.

Did he live in London?

No, she went to Belgium, rather against my father's wishes, and then they ...

How old was she then, about 18?

18.

Oh, it's young, isn't it, to get married, but if it's the right one, why not?

Oh yes, I don't think my father quite thought it was the right one! But anyway, she, then they came to London, she was expecting a baby, and he was a printer, but he, and they found something, a terribly miserable flat, a sort of one room where they lived, near Stamford Hill, and the baby was born, but he had great difficulties and he found some jobs with a Jewish printers, but he couldn't get into the Unions here, because it was very much a closed shop. So then he went to America, he had two brothers in America who helped him to get there.

And is that where your sister is now?

And that's where they live, yes.

But you write?

Yes, we now, it's not difficult, we see each other quite a lot.

And so you were the one, you were just left at home.

Yes, I remember when she, when, yes, I remember, though I already knew Bruce, my husband.

How did you know him?

I met him at the Labour Party. It was, my father was very active at that point.

Oh yes, it must have been after the '45 Election, there was a lot happening wasn't there.

Yes, and there was, I ...

Did your father speak good English by then?

Yes, my father spoke good English, he wrote in English, yes.

And so, so at this time, we're talking what, '47, '48?

Yes, my sister, when would she have gone? Well, it must have been later than that. It must have been '50 something.

End of F199 Side B

F200 Side A

You met your husband when you were both in the Labour Party, what year was that?

It would have been, probably, 1948, or '49, I was about 18, 17 or 18.

So were you both continuing your education?

Yes, I stayed on until the Sixth Form, until I was 19, and after that, I decided to radiography, because I did sciences in the Sixth Form, so I did two years at the Royal Free Hospital, and Bruce was a student, and then he went for a year to Holland, to do a post-graduate Diploma, in the Hague, while I stayed here, yes.

And where did you get married? In London?

We got married in London, in Wood Green Registry Office, yes.

And then your first home was where?

When we got married, we lived in a furnished flat, in Wood Green, and Bruce was then working for the Labour Party, it was his second job, and when I became pregnant, we had to move from there, and we bought a little house in New Town, I remember we had to queue up for it, and how we had to borrow 100 pounds for a deposit for it.

And it was quite a new community then, I suppose, a lot of young people?

Yes, that made it easier for me. I had no experience really, of normal family life, but there were a lot of young women with first babies, and they were all very friendly and helpful to me.

What, you all babysat for each other, and that sort of thing?

Well, just even showing each other how to put the nappy on, and things like that, because I really had no experience. And my sister had, by that time, emigrated with her husband to America, so I did feel lonely, and it was lucky that there were all these friendly people.

And your father was still in London?

And my father was still in Muswell Hill, yes. And his wife had a baby about the same time as my second child was born.

Oh really. So you had a half-sister or brother?

Brother.

And, and so you had, the girl and the boy then?

No, I had two daughters,

Two daughters, and then ...

And then Bruce was offered a job in Paris, and we moved to Paris which was a great change from a little town outside London, yes.

What year would that have been?

That was '61, and my son was born a few months after we moved there. And in Paris we moved four times in three and a half years, so the children had a lot of moves then.

Did you like Paris? Did it seem ...

Yes, Paris, in some ways, seemed easier than England, though I didn't speak French, but I have some relatives, my cousins were living in Paris, and that made a lot of difference.

Oh, cos you were able to have some sort of family.

Yes, and then we met some other people, that made it a lot easier. And we were much better off suddenly, we had a bit more money.

What was the job?

He was working for OECD.

So, you had the three children by then, in Paris.

Yes.

And how many years were you there?

Three and a half years.

And then you came back to the UK?

And then we came back, and came to live in South London, which meant, also somewhere where I hadn't lived before, and knew nothing about, away from the few friends I had in North London.

So you had to sort of start again.

Yes, I found that quite hard, yes, again.

But you sort of stayed in the same area?

Yes, we stayed in the same house for 23 years. We've only just moved.

You've only just moved?

A year ago, yes.

Just a year ago. Oh, so it's a year ago that you moved. And I think you told me it was a year ago you had this very belated news from your uncle.

Well, about the same time, because I went to America.

So when you were in America you saw your uncle, who is now how old?

He's now 82, I think, or 81.

And he had this letter?

Well, he has sort of kept the whole little archive, a whole lot of things, letters from my father, and lots of photographs of the family, and also when my father died, he took a lot of things, and so he still has, I think, quite a lot of things about the family.

And had your sister who lives in New York, had he told her, had he shown her this letter?

No, well, I think he showed it to her, but only a few weeks before he gave it to me, yes, about the same time.

And who was the letter from?

The letter was from someone, a woman, the letter was in Yiddish, and it was some friend of my mother's who knew her, and was with her in the Camp in Majdanek, and it talked about her and what happened.

How did you feel when you read it?

Oh, not very, it was not very pleasant, I mean, it was, but I was not surprised, there was nothing that I didn't have imagined really, but didn't like to think about it.

But you didn't know for sure.

No.

What did your sister say?

I don't remember what she said. I don't think she was surprised, I think it was, I mean, we knew my mother wasn't alive, that she obviously was killed. There was some other story, we've heard from somewhere else, that she was killed, getting out of the ghetto through the canals, so, you know, obviously this proved that story. But I must say, I just, through the years, I got into the habit of just not thinking, and just putting it out of, trying not, knowing vaguely what happened. I mean, I knew what happened, but I didn't know all the details and didn't try to think about it.

Probably better. Do you think, do you think both you and your sister just sort of concentrated on getting on with your own lives and families after the War? And really, sort of not thinking ...

No, to be truthful, I had problems, I used to get very, I used to get depressed and very lethargic, and hope that someone else would organise me, a lot of the time.

Do you think you put that down to ...

Well, it's difficult to know, maybe it would have been that way anyway. But I have that excuse!

What about your sister?

Well, I think that she is more, yes, I think that, she seemed to me more energetic, and sort of making things to happen more.

And do you think, did your wartime experiences make you feel any sort of difficulty in sort of trusting people? Or, cos you said you were very frightened, and you didn't trust anybody during the War?

Yes, I think I have that slight tendency, I have that tendency, yes. When I compare myself to my husband, for instance, I am much less trusting, yes.

Do you think this is something that comes from a person's experiences?

Well, that's difficult to know, because they are such different set-ups, I can't really compare. And I know I quite like pretending occasionally, only the other day, we went to see my son's play, he was putting on a play, and he had sort of jokingly said that he didn't particularly want for us to be known as his parents, he felt that we should come, he wanted us to come and see the play, but not necessarily tell everybody we were his parents, and I sort of quite enjoyed playing this game of not knowing him, and he was very impressed, because then he came up, and in fact, he did introduce us as his parents! And he sort of noticed that I was playing this game so well, as, and it sort of brought me back, how I used to pretend not to know my sister when I met her, or other people.

Do you think people in this country understand, you know, the depth of experience that people went through in that time, in Occupied Europe?

Well, yes, I think that they, they do, yes, probably. I think that they hear a lot of reminiscences from all sorts of people. But I think that, I, for instance, still find it difficult to talk about it, but, but I try a little harder.

And have you talked to your own children about this? About what happened to you as a child?

Yes, but not in a sort of continuous story like that, and they have read a lot of books. They are interested and know a lot, and have ...

And so they have understanding?

Yes, yes.

What do you think, what do you think probably, the experience of the War and what happened during the War, what sort of difference do you think it's made to your consciousness as a person, politically, or in relation to the way you know, people live? Philosophically if you like?

No, I think I was too young. I didn't have enough past, beforehand, to know what is the result of that, and what are the results of the other things. Obviously, I was very influenced by the people I have met, and some of the more heroic figures like Mikhail Klepfisch, I think, do make a difference, a sort of uplifting difference, because I know that people are able to forget themselves, and do things for others, but otherwise I think I was quite influenced by my father's political views. Some I reacted against, some I was influenced by, and that was by the influence of the Bund, I probably, it's because I was so involved with the few of these people, that I think it has some sort of lasting, lasting effect.

Because you said that you used to know a group of young people,

Yes, yes,

Young Bundists in London. Did you sort of keep up with them afterwards?

Most of them left England, most of them went to America or Canada, and there's really only one person that I see, and I'm very much in contact with her, and she lives in Ilford.

It was a close group?

Well, she was, at that time I knew her less, but since the others have left, she has stayed a good friend.

And how did you sort of, what feelings did you have about being Jewish? Do you think your feelings about being Jewish, were formed by what happened during the War, or changed? Or how would you say you felt about it now, and what have you said to your children?

Well, I always sort of feel that I feel Jewish, because I have been, it's been, I've been made to know I'm Jewish by everybody round me for so long, that it is a very, you know, something that I have no doubts about what I am! But mainly because it has been thrown at me. And especially if I meet Poles, I am particularly conscious that I am Jewish, that is the main thing I can think about, I'm much more ...

You still feel that very much with Polish people?

Yes, yes, and I am very, perhaps I exaggerate, but I think of them, however friendly and I may quite like them, that they are very conscious that I am Jewish.

You don't feel that with English people, or French people?

Not to the same extent. Well, to some extent, but not to the same extent.

You don't?

Not really, no. No, I mean, one, I don't think so, but I suppose if one had had different experiences, perhaps one would. I can see that.

But you particularly feel that with Polish people?

I have very strong feelings, yes. And perhaps people who are Catholics more than others, I, I sort of think, I can sort of put myself, well, I think I can put myself, in their kind of psyche, which thinks of Jews as something very different, etc.. I think extraordinary English people, I mean, perhaps I'm oversensitive, but I mean, the few Jews, especially in higher positions, doctors and so on, they are, I think, perceived very strongly, in my view, by non-Jewish people that they are Jews, and this is something that they are very conscious of, I think.

Yes, you're probably right, actually. But you don't feel, do you feel the anti-Semitism in Poland was quite different? A degree?

Yes, but not completely, but that sort of feeling, yes, about the Jews as being so different, I think, a lot of people feel it. I think the English people have it somewhere at the back of their minds, I may be wrong!

You might be! Have you ever been back to Poland?

Yes. We went, Bruce and I went to Poland.

What year was that?

Now which year was that? It was that, it must be about nine years ago, it was the year before the Pope became the Pope, he was in Krakow. And yes, I ...

What was it like?

It felt mainly like a completely foreign country, but where I could speak the language, that was my main, but that was Warsaw. I think Warsaw has changed completely. I think that, well, the Jews are no longer there, and the Poles I knew and lived among were poor working class people, and I think that most people in Central Warsaw now, are, were more kind of useful people to the Government, and more middle class, and therefore it seemed a different place.

Does it all seem a very long time ago now?

Until quite recently, it seemed more as, it didn't seem long ago at all, and seemed very important, more important than the present almost, but suddenly that has changed, and does seem, and I think it's only now, because I talk about it, that it has somehow receded into the past. Is that possible? I just thought of it!

Do you ever dream about it?

Very very rarely. That doesn't seem to be a problem.

So it was something that you can recall, and you remembered it very vividly, but now it does seem in the past?

Yes, cos when I used to try to talk about it, I almost couldn't talk about it, I sort of stuttered and got emotionally upset, but I can now.

Thank you.

End of F200 Side A

End of Interview