

**NATIONAL**

# Life stories

**LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH  
COMMUNITY**

**SUSAN ROHAN**

Interviewed by Milenka Jackson

C410/085/01-06

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

**BRITISH  
LIBRARY**

## **IMPORTANT**

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

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

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

Oral History  
British Library Sound Archive  
96 Euston Road  
NW1 2DB  
020 7412 7404  
[oralhistory@bl.uk](mailto:oralhistory@bl.uk)

This is the life story of Mrs. Susan Rohan, in the National Life Story Collection - The Living Memory of the Jewish Community. The date is 11th June, 1990. Milenka Jackson is the interviewer.

F483 - Side A

I was born in Prague on 11th January, 1923. My father was an industrialist. Together with his family, he owned a malt factory in Prague, a bricks plant in Lovosice which is in Northern Bohemia.

And could you tell me what your family name was at that time?

It was, yes, Reiser, Reiser.

How do you spell that?

R E I S E R. And then there was a farming estate in Oploty near Zatec, I don't know, just, offhand, in what part of Bohemia that was, and they owned a block of flats in Prague itself, in the centre of the city. Incidentally, my name on documents is not Susan, I will come to that later, but, in fact, my first name is Elisabeth, which I was never called, and which I wouldn't even listen to if somebody called me like that, and the reason being that, my mother was only half-Jewish, and she was brought up in the Catholic faith, and brought us children up in that same faith, and my godmother was called Elisabeth Charlotte Marie, so I got all these names, but Mother put as my third name, Susanna, because they wanted to call me Susie, as I was called then. My father was Jewish, of course, and so that meant that later, in later years, under the Nuremberg Laws we were considered Jews. I had two brothers, one of them, Arnost, who is two and a half years older than me, and the younger brother by five years, was called Jan. He died in 1943. We lived in that house, in the centre of Prague, where my parents had a whole floor at their disposal, where, apart from a huge living room, a room where my mother used to have her desk and her ladies parties, there was a large dining room and three bedrooms, and on the other side of the staircase, there were another two rooms, with a bathroom, which were usually occupied by servants, or teachers.

Could you tell us the street this flat was in?

The street, in those days, was called "Vrchlického sady", and renamed, in later years, to "Washingtonova Street", which it is called until now. "Vrchlického sady" that is, really, "sady" means "park", and it was in the corner of the street, surrounded by a park on two sides, so that we looked from our windows, we looked into the park, which, on the other side, was, led to the main railway station in Prague, called "Wilsonovo nádraží" - "Wilson Station". That was renamed much later to "Main Railway Station". We had a very good family life. What I minded was that we were always surrounded by servants, cooks, a nanny, later a sort of teacher of French. I started to learn French at the age of 4. We had a French, about 19 year old girl in our house, who didn't speak anything but French with me, which meant that at the age of

6, I was fluent in that language. In those days, in our family, we used to speak German, but we also spoke Czech, not only with the servants, but we were taught Czech from a very early age. My parents, especially my mother, at that time, didn't speak Czech very well. She learnt very much later, and by the time Hitler took over power in Germany, my family decided not to speak German any more, and we switched over to Czech and spoke Czech at home at too. I had my first four school years in a German Lyzeum in Prague, which was only for girls, and for the fifth form, my parents decided to transfer me to the French School, where I had one more year of basic schooling, and then I moved to the French State Gymnasium in Prague - Dejvice.

Were you the eldest of the family?

No, my brother Arnost was two and a half years older. He stayed on in German schools until about four or five years later, when he too was moved to the French Lycée. My younger brother started schooling in a German Evangelic School in Prague, but he was so young that he really never got to any higher schooling, and was stopped by Hitler's Occupation of Czechoslovakia, at all. We had a very nice nanny when we were children, called Anna Ihl, who was already nanny to my own mother, and she was more a friend and part of the family than anything else. We absolutely adored her, and she adored us very much.

And did she look after you from babyhood?

She looked after us from babyhood. When we grew older, my parents decided that we really needed something else, more teaching, and not so much nanny looking after, so she left, but we were all heartbroken. Only later, it was a bit with mixed feelings, thinking of her, because she became, or better, her daughter became a Nazi, and she lived with her daughter, so we completely lost touch with her.

You mentioned that you "minded" the servants, do you really mean that you disliked having servants around?

Yes, I minded that constantly there were foreign elements in the house. I never liked that. And it also meant that we got less in touch with our parents, and I minded very much too, that they were socially so engaged that we hardly ever saw them in the evenings. The only time when we really all met was lunch time, and they either went out, or they had visitors, where we were only allowed to say "Hallo" and go to bed afterwards. And I always minded that. I thought I would prefer to be much closer to my parents. But that was life in those circles, and friends of my parents lived under the same conditions, so it was taken as a matter of course, and nobody really spoke about it.

And what do you think your mother's attitude was to you children?

My mother's attitude was extremely good. She was, in fact, she was terribly anxious about our health, so much so, that it went to an extreme, where every slightest cold was, had to be looked after by a doctor, and we had to stay in bed for God knows how many days. But, and she was a very good, very good as far as education was

concerned. She had us learn all sorts of things after school, and she loved us very much, but there was always this lack of time to be in touch with her.

Did she show her love for you?

She did show her love for us, I must say that, mainly, for my brothers and that had it's reasons. My older brother was very ill as a baby, and got all sorts of illnesses, and my younger brother was an extremely delicate child, very frail, and I really remember him, most of the time, as having some kind of illness, starting with diphtheria, and all sorts of very nasty things, so that her worry was mainly about the, their state of health. Luckily, I was no worry, or at least, not so much. The only thing I got was, at the age of 10, I got some kind of tuberculosis, so that meant that for about six months I had to stay at home, I couldn't go to school, I had to lie down a lot, but that was cured after a while, with good food and no ....

Was it in your lungs or your bones?

It was in my glands. And I never had any symptoms or any difficulties again, and I was a strong girl, whereas both my brothers were sort of much more frail. I felt pretty awkward about it. I minded it. I always, until very much later, I thought, "Well, my mother really didn't like me as much", which I found out, and I will tell you later, was not the case. She just had too much worries with her two sons. Our relationship between my father and me, in my childhood, wasn't so good. I overheard him once or twice saying, when I had said something, "Well, she isn't as dumb as I thought", and his whole relationship with his family, with his wife, was very good. But with his children, they were sort of, they were looked after by my mother and all these other people, and he just was the head of the family, not really getting involved with us as far as playing was concerned, or so. The only thing he did was, every Sunday, he would stand in our bedroom, and wait for us to be dressed so we could go for a walk or an outing with him. We hated every minute of it.

Why?

Because, there again, he would have, sort of, very serious discussions with us and we children would have loved to be fooling around, and we had to walk along and sort of be very serious and quiet, and we didn't like that very much, really. And also, he was a very, he himself had been brought up very strictly by his mother. He had never been allowed to play with toys, he had always been only reading, and studying, so he somehow, we had the feeling he is very strict, although he was very good-hearted, and kind-hearted, but he didn't have this very personal approach to us. With me, that lasted until much much later, when I was a teenager, and as you will hear a bit later, I had a lot on my plate as far as the family was concerned. And then he realised that he could really rely upon me, and our relationship became something became quite different. After the War, I found out that he had even written to a friend of his, who died only a few years ago. A long letter about me and how he loved me, and how much help I had been to him all the time, before he had to leave, before we all had to leave for Theresien. I never knew my grandparents, they had died before I was born. In fact, the last of them died in that same year. I only know that my father's parents, my father was born in Prague, his parents, especially his mother, was very

strict. She was, by origin, German, from Germany, and she somehow managed the life of her three sons, in a very strict and pedantic way, and this reflected itself on my father's attitudes, of course. My mother, her father was born in Kladno, and there he was, that was a mining, a mining town, not far from Prague, and he was a surgeon, in that town, who, as I heard later, for some financial reasons, which I never, I never remember what it really was, but he committed suicide when his children were still quite young. My, when my father met my mother, his parents were so upset about the fact that he had met a girl who not only came from a much less rich background, but on top of not fully Jewish, so they thought they would send him to America for a few years, so he would forget my mother. They sent Father, who was just on his way when the First World War broke out, and the boat was taken back, or something like that, and he was imprisoned on the Isle of Man, for the whole duration of the First World War. When he came back, his father, in the meantime, had died, so he never saw him again. But he married my mother not long afterwards, so not only did it not help, but it really deprived my grandfather of the company of one of his sons. Another son, who was a bit older than my father, he was also a partner in the family business, and one day, he had the idea of buying a restaurant in Prague, Wenceslas Square. At the time it was called "Evropa", and later renamed to Vasata. This did not, was not successful, and that was the reason for this uncle to commit suicide, because of the failure of that restaurant.

So that was a second suicide in the family?

Yes, but in the other part of the family. My mother had two sisters and a brother. One of, the brother and one of the sisters were slightly older, and then there was a younger sister. The brother never really got anywhere, he was a sort of very humorous man, a bon vivant, but as far as career or real jobs were concerned, he always fluctuated between jobs for years, and very often, as far as I could gather, my father helped out financially, to keep him going. The older sister married a man who lived in Vienna, who was in the coal business, with the Guttmanns, and so we didn't see much of her, but the younger sister actually lived in the house next door to ours, and for a few years, which I still remember, we were sort of very close, the families. They had two children, more or less the age of my older brother and myself, sorry, not my older, my younger brother and myself. And then something happened between the two sisters, they had a row, and we were told we should never even greet our aunt, uncle and cousins again, and from that time onward, we were sort of cut off in this relationship, which I minded very much, because we had been very good friends with my cousins, and we were in and out of their flat, and they were in and out in our flat, so that, I've never understood how somebody can sort of hold a grudge for ever and ever. In fact, they never met again, these two sisters. When Hitler came, the sister and her family, they moved to America, and we stayed there, so that was the end of that.

Was there a lot of this grudge-holding around the family?

No not really. The only thing is that I noticed that my mother wasn't really ever fully accepted in the Reiser clan. She, they, they sort of saw her every now and then, because that had to be done, as it was in those circles in those days, but they never really got very warm to her, and she actually didn't get warm to them. She didn't like

the whole atmosphere in that family. But there was, none of them, whether she wouldn't have spoken, or wouldn't have even said hallo or so, but I don't think there was too much of it really. I think, I mean, as it always is, that they were talking behind each other's backs, probably, but otherwise, I think it was quite all right. And the set-up in our family, as far as religion was concerned, was strange, of course, because my mother brought us up in the Catholic faith, although she, herself, was, I think, not even believing anything, and my brothers took this faith pretty seriously, whereas I, I didn't. I wasn't interested. I only had to go to religious classes at school, which meant that once a year there was the compulsory Communion. I, most of the time, for days, I couldn't sleep, because I hated this ... the whole theatrical part of the churches and all that. And I found out later that my mother really had the same feelings but for her, she only had the feeling that we should, at least, learn a little bit about religion. My father, until 1938, kept all Jewish holidays, and fasted when he should have fasted, so there was lunch, my father fasting, we having our normal meal. It was strange.

At what age did you become conscious of this, these two religions in the home?

Oh, at a very early age.

Yes. And did it, did you feel a tension over it?

Not at all.

Or did everybody take it quite calmly?

Everybody took it as it came, and nobody really, the only thing which I, I really thought funny was, that when, shortly before Czechoslovakia was Occupied by Hitler, my father went over to the Catholic faith, saying and telling us, that this was really had to do with faith, and he knew that it wouldn't have been any other way. But there was the influence of a very good friend of ours, who originally had become our teacher of Czech, and as time went by, he became a very close friend of the family, a certain Mr. Vyskocil, who was a very religious Catholic and, of course, tried to influence the whole family in that, in that way. He never got far with me, he would have loved me to believe and to go to church every Sunday, I never did. My younger brother did. My younger brother took it much more seriously. He was also much younger when he started having this teacher. My younger brother was actually a pretty mischievous little boy, very spoiled, of course, with his illnesses, so he was, the whole week he would be a devil, and when the Sunday came, he would go to Mass like a saint, and come back and start with his mischievous things again.

And did your father observe the Sabbath and rest?

Not that, no. He was not, not only did he not do that, but he also didn't eat kosher. No, it sort of was limited to the Jewish holidays, but no kosher food, and no, no Shabbath and nothing like that.

And there was no dispute between your parents over this?

Not at all. That was a matter of course, they both accepted that when they got married, and I never actually heard a word about any conflict in that respect. And then he, he was Christened in 1938, and that was when I, I had to laugh, I found it really funny, because not only was he Christened, but suddenly, I was told, "Your parents are going to church because they will get married in the Catholic faith." So I said, "Well, does that mean that we are actually illegitimate children?" I made, really, fun of the whole thing! That had it's influence on my own parenthood, because I never did anything to teach my children any faith, and they sometimes tell me now, "Well, it was a mistake, because we don't know anything about it, and we now have to learn everything really from books." So you never know how to tackle these things. We had, we had school only in the morning, so that the whole afternoon was, would have been free.

This was at what age?

This was from the start, from the age of 6, when we started school. I, being born in January, so I was almost 7, because there was the date line that you had to be born until a certain day, I think it was the 1st of September, so in the afternoons, we had physical education lessons. We had these Czech lessons. We had, I started learning the piano in, at the age of 7, so I had piano lessons twice a week. My older brother was playing the violin twice a week, so the whole week, until Friday, was really taken up by these afternoon private lessons. I would have preferred to be in the park with all my friends and play.

This wasn't actually a Catholic school, though, was it? Or was it?

Oh no, no, no, no, no, that wasn't a Catholic school. So we were occupied from morning till evening, and with our homework to do, and practising the piano, and practising the violin, so time simply flew. And as I said before, the only, the only time with the whole family, was lunchtime. My mother, I remember, she used to stay in bed quite long, until about 9 o'clock in the morning, whereas Father had left for his office, which, incidentally, was in the same house where we had our flat, on the first floor. So she stayed in bed, she made a few phone calls. She had one thing she liked doing, that was mending socks and stockings. Then she would have a leisurely bath, get up and go shopping. Not food shopping, but a pair of gloves for one of her children, or shoes for another one and that would be her morning. In the first few years I was extremely happy because she used to go and fetch me from school, which I liked very much. These were the only times, really, where I would be for half an hour just with her. And then in the afternoon, she would have a nap after lunch. She did some, she did the accounts for the family budget. She did that. She was a keen photographer, so she had, for each member of the family, she made an album of all the photographs, and once the ....

F483 - End of Side A

## F483 - Side B

In the evenings my parents were either going out to see other friends, or relations, or they had visitors at home, or sometimes they went to the opera, and there were the rare occasions when they would even be free, and we would have a nice family meal altogether. Otherwise they, when people were in our house, they would have their dinner separately from us. We would have our dinner in our room. Incidentally, I had a room to myself, and my brothers shared a bedroom. Only in later years did my older brother move to the other side of the staircase, where he had a room to himself. But on the whole, I, I mean, apart from feeling a lack of the company of our parents, the whole atmosphere in our family was a very good one, and a very close one. As far as school was concerned, I loved every minute of it until the age of about 14 or 15.

Excuse me, could I just ask you one question? If you had worries in your childhood, could you discuss them with your mother?

Yes, yes.

So you were close enough for that?

Oh yes, I could, but I didn't very much, because I was an extremely shy girl, and there were things which I would never have talked, not even to her, but I could have done. She would have sort of definitely listened and advised. I was a very disorderly little person, and that was a topic which we talked about almost every day, because my mother couldn't understand that a girl could be so messy. I never put anything where it should have gone. I had a nice ring which, instead of keeping, or knowing where it was, I would, I one day left it on the washbasin, when I got home from school, my mother said, "Where is your ring?" And I said, "Oh, I've got it in my box", but she had found that ring in the meantime, so there was a big scene, and she was, she was very upset about me. And lying on top, that was the one time I lied to her. And there was another time, and never afterwards did I lie. She had this phobia with our health and hygiene, and all that, so when we went to a place away from home, I didn't, I don't mean friends, but to a hotel or so, she would always tell me to put a paper on the toilet top, before I sit down. I never did, and one day, when I got back from that toilet, she asked me, "Did you put paper on?" I said, "Yes", and she had found out before that there was no paper in that toilet left. So there was another big scene, and actually, she was so upset, and she made me feel it so much, that really, afterwards, I never loved her again. So she had her good educational methods. And as far as my brothers were concerned, I was very close, always was, and still am, with my older brother. The relationship with our younger brother was much harder, because he was quite a few years younger than me, and my older brother, so he was a child when we were already teenagers, and the whole relationship wasn't that close, and I think there was also a factor of jealousy in both of us, of course.

When you were ill, did they use a Jewish or a Catholic doctor?

We had a Jewish doctor. He was also, he also became a good family friend, Professor Epstein, who was in charge of the Infants Department in Charles Hospital, or whatever you would call that. And he saved my older brother's life. When he was a baby, he got some infection in his intestines, and it took, really, months for him to recover, so he looked after him very well, and ever since then, he was our family paediatrician. And he had a good job with us, because my mother being so scared about our health, she would call him every second day, because this or that was wrong.

He coped well with your mother, did he?

He coped very well with my mother, and she coped well with him. I think that, because he was a sort of very strict person, but they could, they got on very well until this friendship broke when I was about 15, 14, 15 years old because I, it was in summer, and I got a very bad bronchitis, and she kept sort of asking him, I was really desperate, I didn't know what to do to get rid of that cold, so she kept asking him to have a look at me, and he always said, "Well, that's nothing, it's only bronchitis, it will pass." And gave me some medicine, and it got worse and worse, and in the end, I felt very very ill, and got an infection of my sinuses, and got pleurisy, and it ended up with poison, blood poisoning. So one day, my mother came, and I was in bed with high temperatures, and blue from top to bottom. But, what she had minded was, that Professor Epstein was due to go on a holiday, and instead of not going, postponing his holiday, he left and his assistant was put in charge of my case. So that broke that friendship, because she was very upset. At the time I sort of should have had good care, he wasn't there. Which brings me to another, another part of my life, and that was one of the happiest parts really. After this very bad illness, I needed some convalescing, and my younger brother needed that too, so we were both sent to a school in St. Moritz, in Switzerland. It was a school for children in, with similar problems as we had, where you had schooling in the morning, and in the afternoon, practically all of us had to lie on a terrace and get the sun, and the fresh air of the mountains, and I loved this time, because we were children, between the ages of 6 and 16. I had a lot of very good friends.

How old were you yourself?

I was then fifteen and a half. And we did a lot of skiing, of ice-skating, we even played ice hockey, even we girls did. And I always had been a keen skier, so this was heaven for me. Not talking of the fact that I was also a very sociable child, or then teenager, so I loved the company, all day long, and even at night, with other people. I had a very, having come from the French Lycée, I was taught everything in French by a very nice Swiss teacher, who was only about four years older than me, so this was really, as I said, the nicest time of my life, this, only six months in that place. The six months, it should have been a bit longer, it was planned for a year, but when Hitler Occupied Austria, my parents wanted us to come back straight away, to be with them, and not abroad, so my father, who was just, at that time, in the Netherlands, on business, was told by my mother to do everything in his power to get us home as quickly as possible. So what did Father do? He rented a private small aeroplane, and we had to fly home. The day he arrived there in St. Moritz, we were, my brother wasn't that upset because he didn't like it there it so much, but I was really upset, not

only that, I was also upset because I knew that most people tried to have their children out of the reach of these countries, whereas my parents found it better to get us back there.

Could you tell me how much you understood at this stage, of what was happening politically?

I think I understood more than one would have thought, at that age, because I had heard so much in, in this St. Moritz place, the school was called Belmont, because there were, most of the girls my age or older, came from Germany, and were Jewish girls who already knew what Hitler's power meant and what it meant for the Jews, so some of them didn't even go back to Germany ever, and those who went back, didn't survive.

And did they tell you about Hitler's plans?

They told me, oh yes, they told me lots, so that I was pretty aware of what was happening.

Were you afraid?

I was afraid, and I begged my parents, when we got home, I begged my parents to pack their bags and to go with us, to sort of leave the country, because it was already getting pretty obvious.

Had you written to them from Switzerland saying,

Not before we returned, but, my mother sometimes acted a bit erratically, you know. For instance, when the mobilisation in Czechoslovakia came, that was some time in, I think May or so, 1938, so she then decided, my older brother had to stay at home, because he was already, he was already at the age where he should have been in the Army, or mobilised, but she decided that my younger brother and me, we should really be out of the country. If there were a war, she wanted to save our lives, so she took us to Switzerland herself, by train, and from Zurich, she rang the people in Belmont, the owners, who were two elderly and very nice people, Dutch by origin, and told them what the situation was, and asked whether she could leave us there, with the proviso that there might come a day when they wouldn't be able to pay for us, because it was a pretty expensive undertaking. So they said, "Of course", immediately. And the lady who was herself lame, she came all the way to Zurich from St. Moritz, to collect us from my mother, and Mother flew ....

And this was a second,

This was the second time. From there, in those days, I kept writing to my parents, "Leave everything and come", and my father was very stubborn, so not only did they not do what I had begged them, but they decided immediately after Munich, that we should be flown home again. So they asked a friend of theirs in Zurich to arrange for a flight for us, and to look after us for one night in Zurich, he put us up in a hotel, and we flew home. So that, I mean, and then when we were at home, I kept begging my

father, and he had a certain, he felt a certain responsibility for the three sons of his late brother, and for the whole family and the business, so there was no persuading him. Even a day before the Occupation, a business friend of his in Zurich sent a wire, saying, "Leave everything, and come over with your family", and he didn't, that was on 14th March, 1939. So we stayed there. Yes, he was stubborn in that respect, and unfortunately, it cost him his and his wife's life. He was more or less one of the few of that family which had, who had remained in Prague. There was only another partner, that was his uncle, my father's uncle, with his wife, they stayed in Prague too. And their daughter-in-law, who, by then, was divorced from their son, so she stayed there, and they all, of course, apart from the daughter-in-law, they perished. So ... I don't know whether there is anything else from that period I could tell you.

One thing you didn't tell me is about your father's business. Who started it? A little more detail about it.

Well, that was started by my grandfather, and his brothers. And these youngsters, in those days, youngsters took over, apart from one of my, the other brother of my father's, he did not go into the firm. He became a radiologist, so he was the only one who didn't really work in that business. But then, even one of the, this uncle, this Robert, Uncle Robert, the uncle of my father's who stayed also in Prague, his daughter married a certain Julius Lederer, even he was taken into the firm. And so there was a sort of, they felt responsible for, not realising that it would not lead anywhere anyway. They maybe realised it, I don't know, I can't, I can't sort of imagine what went on in their, in their heads.

And was your father a good businessman?

Oh yes, oh yes. And very devoted to the whole thing. His malt factory, the family's malt factory was the largest one in the country, and it was in Prague - Podbaba, and it's name was První pražská sladovna M. Reiser a synové, which means "First Prague Malt Factory - M. Reiser and Sons." In those days, money, of course, in our family, was no problem. On the other hand, I was very grateful in later years, to my parents that they kept sort of stressing modesty in our lives, and behaviour. We were never shown or told that nothing mattered, that we could have anything we wanted. And sometimes, I even envied my school friends, because they had, they went abroad, or to some, some nice resort for the whole summer holidays, whereas we didn't, we only sometimes went for two or three weeks, or even a month. But my parents had bought, when I was a baby, they had bought a small family house in Roztoky, near Prague, that's about half an hour's drive from Prague, and there we spent every year, from May until October. We moved out there with everything, we even went to school from there by train. Every morning at 7 o'clock, we had to be at the railway station, we went by train, and we had the great privilege to be fetched at lunch, after school, by a taxi, always the same taxi driver, who took us home again. Quite a luxury, but my father kept saying, "It's still much cheaper than if I had to buy a car and to run it."

Did you feel a privileged child?

Yes. Yes. I did feel a privileged child, so much so that when I wanted to, I remembered, very very clearly, even now, one of the things I played at was beggar, because there were lots of beggars coming to our front door in that Roztoky place, and they usually got a roll, or a piece of bread, and a cup of white coffee, and they would sit behind the gate and drink their coffee. So I sometimes played at that. I would go out with the roll, and my cup of, that coffee, of course, we didn't drink real coffee as children, and sit there and play beggar. So I, I felt this privileged situation very much.

Did you feel uncomfortable about it at all?

Yes. Yes. I felt uncomfortable about it, especially in Roztoky where we lived in the working-class part of the village, and when you are surrounded by people who live a completely different life, you feel it even more, that you are an outsider.

And what about with your schoolfriends?

Well, my schoolfriends, they were, the ones which I saw most of, even after school, were from a very similar background. They were all, they all came from Jewish families. They were more or less all of them, children of businessmen, so there was no difference really, not talking of the fact that at this French Lycée, most of the pupils, because you had to pay your fees, most of the pupils were from well-to-do families. So there I didn't feel it as much as I felt it in Roztoky. I didn't like that place at all, for many reasons, because I felt an outsider, and although the people tried to be nice, you could see that they were distanced from you, and that they looked at you as at something not belonging. And on top, we were, in that Roztoky, the only, apart from one, the only Jewish family.

Was there any anti-Jewish feeling?

Not openly, but I'm sure, I mean, if you, if you put together the Jewish side with the pecuniary side of it, so people must have been envious, and you can't even blame them. They wouldn't openly have anti-Semitic talk, and we had no conflict with anyone in the neighbourhood, but we felt, or at least I felt that I didn't belong. I think my parents didn't mind, I think they couldn't have cared less, you see. But when you are a child, you are much, you want to play with the children in your neighbourhood, and not feel that they ...

Do you think your brothers felt this same thing?

I think my older brother didn't. And my younger brother was such a cheeky boy that he just pushed it, and he didn't make any difference, and he played, and we, he fooled around with the boys in the neighbourhood, so it was a bit different with him. Also, in the last years, of course, we were, when Hitler Occupied Czechoslovakia, and when my father almost immediately lost his business, of course, and we had to leave our huge flat, because it was far too big for a Jewish family, so we moved to Roztoky for good, and we spent the last three years, before going to the camps, we spent only there. I want to go back to the day of the Invasion by Hitler's Army. It is pretty hard to describe. We, first of all, it was 15th March, 1939, and it was snowing very hard.

On top of that, we saw these tanks coming in, and one had the feeling, at least, we at home, we had the feeling it was the end of the world, although we didn't even realise, at the time, what was to follow. We immediately sort of put our heads together, what one should do, and then one couldn't do anything. One was just there, and had to wait what was going to happen. I don't remember exactly when, but very soon after that day, my father was chucked out of his business, with all the others, of course, and we realised that it wouldn't take long, and we would have to go out of our very large flat, and that's exactly what happened.

Can you describe at all, did your father come home saying, "They've chucked me out." What exactly happened?

I must confess I don't remember that, any details about that at all. There are many other details I remember. For instance, about when we were told that Jews had to give all their jewellery to the authorities, or we, my brothers and me, we had bicycles, so one day we had to give our bicycles to the authorities. We had to start wearing the yellow Star of David, on our left side of the coat, or whatever we were wearing. I don't exactly remember when these things happened, but I do remember that they happened and what they entailed.

And were you aware that it was the Jews who were having things confiscated, and not the Christians?

Oh yes, very much so, oh yes. And we also were, I mean, we were not allowed to go shopping in the normal times, we had only certain shops and certain times when we were allowed to go shopping. I don't remember when the ration cards were introduced, but I remember that our ration cards were much smaller, meaner than the ones the other part of the population got. So I remember all this, but as I said, I can't remember how quickly one followed the other.

Can you remember why, did you feel there was any reason why Jews were singled out? What did you feel like? What was the impression given about the Jews, that this had to happen to them?

Well, we, I just knew, or we just knew that Hitler was anti-Jewish. Maybe not so much for racial reasons, as for economic reasons, in the first instance, and so that was the reason I understood for it. I knew that there were also anti-Semites in the Czech population. I also knew there were anti-Semites in every population, there is not, I don't think there is one European country where you wouldn't find some people anti-Jewish, but quite honestly, I didn't sort of think about that so much. One somehow took it for granted that Hitler, being as anti-Semitic, and you could hear it in his speeches, in his many speeches, and he was, that he would make any difference with the Jews in Czechoslovakia. Mainly, also, we understood that he was out to get the properties and the wealth of the Jews, for his own purposes, and his own people.

Did you feel that he felt, or that the anti-Semitic people, the ones that were anti-Semitic, did they have anything special against the Jews, besides that the Jews had too much money or power?

I think that was mainly it.

That was mainly it. Did you feel affected in your own self-esteem by these things, or did you feel that the attitudes were crazy and nothing to do with you?

I didn't feel affected in my self-esteem, no. In fact, I became, in those days, much more aware of my origins than I ever had been before, and I became proud of my origins, in some, in some very odd way, proud that I belonged to ....

F483 - End of Side B

F484 - Side A

It affected the opposite way. In fact, I never, in those days, it never came into my mind that I really wasn't fully Jewish, and I felt very much belonging to it fully.

And it didn't occur to you to hide behind being Catholic?

No, never. Never. I want to illustrate this about hiding behind being Catholic. On the contrary, ever since, having been a child, when somebody asked me what was, or is, your faith? I would always say, "I'm Catholic, but my father is Jewish." This was with me, and I never sort of tried to hide that.

And you didn't feel uncomfortable about this?

No, no, never at all, not at all. There came a day when we were told that Jewish people were not allowed to travel on the trams, or on trains. They were not allowed to leave the immediate area where they were, and as we, by then, were in Roztoky, so that meant I couldn't even go and see my friends in Prague, nobody could. And we already were forbidden to talk to non-Jewish people, so the, in the end, one felt very very isolated and lonely, although there were a few Jewish families in Roztoky, but we didn't know them so well in those days, and you want to keep in touch with your friends, with those who were there still.

Did you not go to school either?

No. We couldn't, I had left school a little before, because I thought it was a waste of time, really, to stay on, it clearly led to not getting anywhere. My brother just managed in time, to get his Maturita, which is something like A levels here, and my younger brother, he also had to leave school, and he was at home. So what I did, in those days, first of all, before they said that we were not allowed to travel, the Jewish Community started some courses for people who had had to leave school, and one of them, a course for chemistry, and I was very interested in that, and I went to this course, together with my older brother. It was a course, I seem to remember, which had to last three months, so we worked in a lab, and then they said that they would change this course into a school, which would last two years, and where you would really come out as a chemical technician, not so much a scientist, but a chemical technician. Would I be interested? And Arnost. Well, Arnost was interested, so was I, but my father decided that it's no good for me to learn chemistry, I should rather learn something, office work, or something like that. In the end, one of the teachers from that school, persuaded my parents that it would be a shame that I was gifted, and why don't they let me? And so they let me. But the Germans closed this school down after a few months, and we had to leave again. But when we were forbidden to travel, I found a way of keeping in touch with Prague and with our friends, and also of keeping in touch of my, on my parents' behalf. I would travel very early in the morning, while it was still dark, with a brief-case held in front of my Star of David, and come back at dark again, which worked quite well until, one day, I came at the last minute to the railway station, and there was a train standing. I

jumped into the train, and it went into the other direction. So that was pretty frightening, but in the end, I, I, at the next stop I got out, it was still dark, so I waited for another train to go back, but that was a frightening moment, because I didn't, you never knew who would be there. I mean, I knew the people at my station, but not at the other one, and in the end, I found out, after many years, that not only the train conductor, but some other people knew exactly that I was travelling without being allowed.

And they were helping you were they, by taking no notice?

Yes. They didn't take any notice, and they just let me go. That was really our only connection with Prague.

And can you remember how frightened you were at this stage, in general? About what was going to happen?

I was frightened. I even had nightmares every now and then. For instance, when the transports started, the first ones went to Lodz, in Autumn 1941, many of our friends had to go.

And had you any idea of what this meant?

Not to what extent. I knew it was bad, but no ....

What did you think?

Well, I somehow, I thought it would be a labour camp, where people would have to work hard, but would still be leading some kind of normal life. "Normal" meaning that they would be housed properly and so on, and fed properly. But even my uncle, the radiologist, with his wife, they had to leave for Lodz, and as I said, many of our friends. And then, when the transports started to Theresien, there came a break. Suddenly, in, at the end of April, or at the beginning of May 1942, we were told, that was a sort of walking radio, you know, you could always hear the thing, that the transports had been stopped for six weeks. So my parents were relieved, thought six weeks at home is a Godsend. Let me not forget about my mother once more afterwards. And one day, a few days after that, I had a nightmare that the postman had brought us the slip calling us to the transports and I came down and told my parents, and they said, "That's typical for you. You are always a pessimist." And that day, the postman came with the slip. So, it must have been somehow, this constant, constant fear and danger, but I have to tell you know, before I go on with the transport. My mother fell very ill a few months before. She got arthritic rheumatism, and couldn't move at all, which meant that, by then, of course, no servants, and no cook, and no, no nothing, and it meant that I had to take over the whole household, from cooking, to nursing her, to teaching my younger brother, because we, my father, Arnost and myself, we tried to teach him just the basic things. Arnost had scientific subjects, whereas I had languages, and my father, I don't remember what he did, I think grammar. It didn't lead to anything because my brother wouldn't listen anyway, but we tried hard to at least give him some education. So there was a lot on my plate, and the household, and the washing, and there was, as you know, no washing

machines in those days, and that is when Father wrote to his friend about what I was coping with.

And may I ask, what did you feel, you had warned your mother you should all get out. What did you feel about it all? Were you angry with her?

On the contrary. I, I was angry with her that we hadn't all got out, but she had tried, she had tried to get only the three of us out, after, already after 15th March, and in the end, when it was almost ready, and we were supposed to go and join friends in Yugoslavia, and so my older brother and myself, we said, "We don't want to go, we don't want to leave you." Because we also didn't want the responsibility for our younger brother, Jan, who was so frail, and he was then, I don't know, 12 years old. It was a big responsibility, and we didn't, we said "No", and actually, my parents were very happy about us not wanting to leave them. And in those days, I was even happier that we hadn't left, because I could look after my parents. So I had no, no feelings of anger, or, nothing like that, no. I don't think I had the time for any feelings of that kind, cos there were so many other things to worry about. But to tell you, so that meant that my mother, who couldn't move at all when we were called up for the transport, we had to take her on stretchers. She could not even lift a glass of water from her night table. And not only did I have to do everything for her, but also to rub in some ointment on every single, what do you call it?

Joint?

Joint. So it was, it was pretty hard. Anyway, so, she was taken there on stretchers, and when we arrived, there was this place, Veletrzní Palác (Trade Fair Palace) in Prague, where the Jews, who went to transports had to gather, and when we arrived there, my mother had one of her hygienic fits again, because the, you can imagine what the toilets looked like! There's 1000 people in one building, so she, after I had taken her, with very, with great difficulties to the toilet, she made a fuss about the cleanliness and in the end, the people in charge said, "Well, if you think it's so terrible, your daughter will clean the toilets." And I was there to clean the toilets in the Veletrzní Palác. So she hadn't really helped anyone, mainly not me! We stayed, I think, one or two nights in that Veletrzní Palác, and in the morning, at 3 o'clock we were all lined up.

And what were your conditions in there?

Well, they were pretty awful, I mean, with the lying one over the other, and people were only ...

On the floor?

On the floor, and people were in panic, so they were not very kind to each other. Everybody, understandable, thought only of himself. It was pretty awful.

Can you remember your fear then?

Yes, yes. I only remember this feeling, I think the world is coming to an end, "life is coming to an end for us", without really, we didn't know what was in store. I mean, I think hardly anyone knew. We even didn't believe many things while in Theresienstadt, which we had heard about the other places, so maybe it's a kind of self-defence, that you don't want to believe the worst, but the specifics, I couldn't say that I had a specific fear. I had mainly the fear, what would be with my mother, who couldn't move. What would happen to our younger brother, who was so frail. But one couldn't imagine what was in store, one couldn't. And in Theresienstadt, in Theresien, many people didn't find it that bad, because most of the people had work. We were fed very badly, but every day.

Could I just ask you about your father. Were you all together?

No, I was just coming to that. When we arrived, that was at a time when the Jews were only staying in barracks, because the population was still there in Theresien, so my, my father and my two brothers were in one barracks. My mother, being on stretchers, came to the barracks where there was the hospital, and I came to a different barracks. Not only that, but we couldn't even visit each other. So I found a way of visiting by, when they asked who would be ready to do some cleaning work, so I said "Yes", and in that way, I could sort of, with a group, move to these other barracks to see them every now and then. A little bit later, they opened the whole town, because the people were moved out, and the houses were knocked together into sort of groups of houses where you could go from one to the other. We were in a house opposite the Magdeburg barracks, where the Headquarters of the Jewish Council of Elders was. And in that house, there was a kitchen on the ground floor, which was, I don't, I'm not very good at describing sizes, but I would say it was about the size of my present kitchen and my living room, and there were 22 of us, plus the kitchen stove, one of these very old tiled huge kitchen stoves, so you can imagine how much space there was for one person! But while we were still in the barracks, this move came much later. While still in the barracks, I found myself a job. In our barrack there was the Labour Office, so they, when I came to apply for a job, because everybody wanted to do something, they seemed to have liked me, and they said, "Why don't you work for us?" So I stayed in this office.

And when you say "they", you mean the Jewish people?

Yes, yes, yes. I stayed in that office for several months. In the meantime, my mother got slightly better. We could already visit each other more. I don't, but time, time things I can't remember so well. And suddenly, I got measles, although I had had measles as a child, I got the measles again, which left me with a slight heart condition, and my brother caught these measles from me, my younger brother, and he never recovered. He never recovered. He got the measles and then it went on to his ears, and to his lungs, and in the end, he died of tuberculosis, but the one which goes very fast.

Miliary tuberculosis.

Yes. So he died in Autumn 1943, at the age of exactly 16. I'm jumping a little bit, it's very hard to put it in order in the context, you see. And my mother, after a while,

when she got really better, because don't forget there were Jewish doctors in that hospital, and good doctors. So they said she could move in with me, and that is when I looked for a place apart from being in the barracks, and we moved into that room for 22 women. She didn't stay there for long. She just couldn't cope and got worse again, and after a few weeks, she had to go back into hospital. It was one of the worst moments of my life, was when we found, when the doctors told us that our brother was so very ill, and that he had only a few days or weeks. So we started to take my mother on a wheelchair, at least, to see him. And when he died, it's terrible to see anyone die, but when a mother has to watch her child die, I'm sure it's, that's the worst which could happen to a person. So her reaction was very, very moving for me, because she turned to me, embraced me and said, "I think you always thought that I didn't love you just as much. Believe me, it's not true." She sort of, I had the feeling she needed to come close now to me.

Did you feel it was too late for her to come close?

No, no, no. No, no, no. Not, maybe if it would have been under different circumstances, but not under those circumstances, with a very sick woman, and having gone through what she had to go through. No, I never had that feeling.

Did you feel comforted by it?

Yes. It, it took one of my worries completely away from me. It wasn't a worry, it was a feeling, sort of emotion. An emotion which I got rid of, just by that one sentence. Theresien was an odd place, because we knew that it was run, from the top it was run by the German Headquarters which were outside the ghetto, but in Theresien itself. On the other hand, the Magdeburg barracks where the Council of Elders was, in a way they were running it too. They were sort of looking after everyday things under the instructions, or orders, from the Germans, but it went so far that even when, later, the transports to the East started, it wasn't the Germans who picked the people for the transport, it was these people in the Council of Elders in Magdeburg barracks, which is terrible, if you think of it, because it really means that Jews were sending other Jews to the death camps. It also meant that, of course, people tried to get out of it somehow, but everybody must have known that once you try to get out, there will be others who have to fill in for you, so it was a very strange feeling about this whole, this whole business. I remember I had, I had, one of the jobs I did in Theresien later, was with the teachers of the chemical course in Prague. One of them was in charge of a lab in Theresien, and he asked again, my brother and me, to work there. So we were, we were allotted to this lab, and this teacher, he was twice my age, but somehow he, he, he took to me in a very human way, and when, later, when I was to go to Auschwitz, and I spoke to him, he said, "I hope you realise what that means." And he was really the first person to tell me about the gas chambers. And how did he know? He knew people in the Magdeburg barracks, people who were deciding about who was to go to, to Auschwitz, so he had heard from them. So, when you think of it, it is really terrible. But everybody knew that they didn't do it on their own free will, that they were forced to do it, because they were forced by the Germans.

Did you have any feeling that they should have done anything different?

No. What could they have done different? I don't see anything they could, I mean, a revolt wouldn't have helped, that would have meant the whole Theresien would have been liquidated, so I really, of course one begrudged it. Of course one had the feeling, that feeling of "Well, yes, he's going to send anyone who's not his friend, or who he doesn't know very well." Which was true, of course. But there was nothing you could do about it. And by then we were, in many ways, so apathetic, that you took everything and just, just did what you were asked to. Because our family, we were a family which suffered more than many others in Theresien, with, first, my mother coming on stretchers and being in and out of hospital practically all the time. When my younger brother died, after a whole year's illness, very bad illness, it was heartbreaking to see him, so I had to go, every day I had to go and visit him at his hospital. My mother at another hospital. In the end, when he died, a few weeks later, my older brother fell ill with tuberculosis of the glands, so he was in hospital. My mother developed tuberculosis. And, in the very last minute, even my father. I was the only immune one, because I had had it as a child, you see. The others got it from my younger brother. So we were sort of not blessed with good health, and it made life even more difficult than it would have been otherwise, while others still had a sort of chance of going for walks in the evening after work. That never happened to me. I just had to look after all these, all these patients. So it was, it was a bad time. So with all that on your, to worry about, one didn't even, at least I didn't, really think too much about who was sending others where. That was how life went then. That was it.

And did you feel that your life was short? That you weren't going to survive?

Not in those days, no. I, in fact, I always felt, somehow, very strong. I wasn't an optimist, never. But as long as you are still in Theresien, I knew you could survive in Theresien, as long as you are not sent away. Well, we were sent away, which there, I resented the way the Jewish people did it. Because instead of sending the whole family of the four of us who were still alive, they sent each of us on a different date.

Have you any idea why?

I have no idea. Not the slightest. So the first one to go was my father, on the 2nd September, 1944.

And what date did you arrive in Theresien?

On 12th May, 1942. Then a week later, I went, on 9th September, and when, when I was there, for about four or five days, somebody who had just told me, "Your brother was in the night transport." And my mother was still in Theresien. And until our return from the camps, I had hoped she would have survived, but she went with the last transport, which included all hospitals, all doctors, patients and nurses. So I found out only on my return that she was, had gone straight to the, to the gas chambers. So did my father, by the way.

And, can you describe the transport?

I can, indeed. Well, you probably know that we were, we were transported by, we were, when we were called to go to the transport, it was just a slip of paper delivered to where you lived, and on that, you were told that the next day you had to be ready and we all assembled in one of the barracks, which was closest, where one of the exits went to the railway station, and so that is where, in the courtyard, all, it was, usually it was 1000 people per transport.

Could I just ask you, I'm sorry to ask you to go back for a moment, but in the barrack, did you have beds, and washing facilities?

We had, yes, we had washing facilities. We didn't have beds, we had bunk beds. Usually it was at least two tiered, or, in some cases, three. In the other place where I lived afterwards, in that room, there were no beds. Some of us slept on the floor. Some of us had husbands or brothers who, who stole some wood and made sort of beds for you to sleep on, but ...

F484 - End of Side A

F484 - Side B

Before we continue about the transports, we've decided to talk a little more about the conditions in Theresien.

Well, in the barracks, there were the usual washing and lavatory facilities for barracks, and the same applied, later, for that house where we were. There was a bathroom and a toilet, which the people who lived there before had used. You can imagine, of course, that for so many people, it wasn't enough. As far as food was concerned, we had to line up every morning, lunch and evening, in the courtyard of the Magdeburg barracks, where there was a kitchen. And where, in the mornings, we were given a tiny slice of bread and Ersatz coffee, black, of course. And for lunch, we got a bowl, usually a bowl of soup, and the same in the evening. Sometimes there was a sort of stew. If we were lucky, there were even potatoes. Or very, a thing we got very often was lentil soup, thick lentil soup, which tasted horribly, but we were so hungry that we didn't really mind even that. So it took up quite a long time to get that. And what else would I say about life?

What about the atmosphere in the place? Was there a great deal of anxious discussion among everybody?

Yes. There was a lot of discussion, but mainly people were so involved in their well-being in inverted commas, that everybody was most interested in himself and you could so well see the, how people behave under, under hard conditions. Not very nice usually. People who were really good didn't even change there, but the atmosphere, don't forget I was a young person, so amongst the young people there was still a lot of humour, if you can call it that, and everybody took it much less hard at my age, than the people of our parents' generation, who had really, to struggle with these conditions much more, especially people like my parents, or families of the same standing who were used to a very comfortable life. So it was a very strange atmosphere, especially when these transports started, because then everybody started to be only nervous about "when would it hit me?"

Were people controlled in their anxiety, or was there some uncontrolled behaviour?

Not really, no. Most of them were controlled. I didn't really meet anyone who would be, I was lucky, I'm sure there were such people, but I didn't meet anyone who would be uncontrolled in his behaviour.

You didn't see loud, terrified scenes?

No. No, I didn't. In fact, in a way, especially when I worked in this lab, my, apart from lab work and experiments which were absolutely futile because we were, for instance, analysing the bread given to the inmates. Even if we had found something which was not right with that bread, nobody would have changed it, it was a certain way, probably of keeping the lab running. Later, they started to say that the Germans needed the regeneration of burnt out batteries, so we were put on that job, to find a

way of regenerating used batteries. We never finished that job because everybody had to leave before.

Were you worked until you were exhausted? What was the length of the day?

We worked a long working day. We worked, I don't know, we started, I think at 7, and worked until 5, something like that. So it was a long normal working day, but we had the evenings off.

And was the town guarded in some way? Did you all stay there voluntarily? Or did anybody try to escape?

I think there were people who tried to escape, but it was so guarded it was practically impossible, and if somebody did try and was caught, then he would be sent to the little fortress, which was a real very harsh prison, with cells, and with torture, and everything, so who went to the fortress hardly ever got out of there. And it was a kind of, but there were, in that fortress there were normal prisoners, also non-Jews, but once you were caught at some crime, again inverted commas, and sent there, you didn't stand a chance to survive.

And was there any open cruelty in your everyday lives?

No, no.

Apart from the generally harsh,

No, there wasn't, and we didn't, in fact, we didn't see the Germans very much. Only very rarely did they walk through the camp, but there was no open cruelty. There were no Germans beating the Jews, and the Jews were not beating the Jews, of course, either, so no, there wasn't. That only came later in the other camps. And then, in Theresien, I don't know in what year, there was this, they were expecting this delegation of the Red Cross, so they made a huge, beautifying action of Theresien. The people, there was, a band was formed, a part for children was built, all very quickly. The whole town was washed. We had to wash the pavements and too the streets, everything. And then we were sort of, the children were told that when this delegation comes, that the High Commander, the German High Commander, who, in those days, was called Rahm, so they were told that they must, they will get sardines to eat, and when they get these sardines, they would have to say, "Oh, Uncle Rham, sardines again?" So that shows you the theatre what was sort of put on. The band was playing. People were walking. It was a, an absolute lie. And they didn't, they didn't feel ashamed to make us do that. And this reminds me of another little story. One of the colleagues in that lab was a boy who had already been in the course in Prague, who we got very friendly with already in Prague, a certain Jan Rocek, a very gifted chemical scientist who now lives in Chicago and was Dean of his Department at the University. So he came one day, and said to me, "You know what? I've got something here you have to make as many copies on our typewriter as possible, because during the night, we will stick it on every tree, on every house, on every door, with a few other young people." And this paper said, The Leader of the Council of

Elders was called Marmelstein, came from Vienna, it said, in verse, I will quote it in German, and then translate it freely.

"Aussen kannst du schmutzig sein,  
waerest du nur innen rein,  
mein lieber Herr Marmelstein."

Which means, "You can be dirty outside, but you should be clean inside, dear Mr. Marmelstein." So, I typed and typed and typed, and then it really was being stuck everywhere by the boys, but we didn't think of the fact that I would be found out by the kind of typewriter. So the next day, Jan Rocek and myself were called to the Magedburg barracks, where, by coincident, a person who had been in charge of these courses in Prague, a certain Dr Freiburger, made a terrible scene to us, that he will have difficulties in persuading Marmelstein not to send us, extra, to Auschwitz. And there was a terrible scene, and we should never do that again, and in the end he really hurt us, we didn't, we were not sent anywhere, because that would have been immediately our certain death. But that was one of the little heroisms in my past life. I must say, I never regret it, maybe I would have if I had been killed, but then it would have been too late anyway.

What about epidemics?

Yes, there were epidemics. There were, there was even one epidemic which was pretty bad. It was encephelitis, which is a kind of, something similar to meningitis, an infection of the brain, which, funnily enough, mostly young girls were infected by. I was among them, I had it very slightly only, but some of them suffered, you lose your balance and you feel you want to vomit, so it, that was one of them. At one time, there was a bad epidemic of scarlet fever, so they started to inject people against it, and my older brother was injected, and the next day he got scarlet fever, because he was one out of 10,000 of cases where it has the opposite reaction. So they were in quarantine for six weeks, in a tiny place, called hospital.

So the doctors had access to some medications?

Some medications, yes, especially for ones where the Germans were worried it would infect more people, or even them, you see.

I see. What about things like rats, mice, fleas, lice?

There were mice, and there were rats, and what was the worst, was these bed bugs. You can't imagine what these bed bugs meant for us, especially in this room, and when my mother was there, because they liked her blood. I was quite lucky, they didn't bite me, they bit her, all the time she was swollen from top to bottom. So every now and then we would have to, we were the lucky ones who had these beds made by our men, they were about this wide, about not quite 3 feet wide only, but they were beds, you didn't sleep on the floor. So every now and then we would have to undo all these bits of wood, and kill the bugs in between, which helped for two hours, and then it started, they, they multiply horrendously, these bed bugs, so that was a plague, but we didn't, not, at least, not in our part, where we were, we didn't have lice yet. I got

them, those, a bit later. What else infections? There was a lot of measles. There wasn't so much flu. I think people were more immune because they were sort of, they were never very warm in winter, so funnily enough, people didn't suffer so much from colds and flu. But these other two I best remember, encephelitis, and scarlet fever.

How did your mother behave during all this time?

She was very brave. She was extremely brave. She suffered a lot, because later she got an abscess on her back, which grew to this size, which had to be cut open, and she had to lie on that back, so she really was in pains, constantly in pains, and she behaved very well.

And she was grieving for her son as well.

She was grieving for her son, she was worrying for us, so, but I always admired her. I always, so did my father, who, after all, he had the whole family in this state of health, and he was, he was basically a very left-handed, he didn't know, to do anything with his fingers or hands, so it was hard for him, and he was very brave too. Very brave, both of them.

Can you say a little bit about the children in Auschwitz, the younger children. Not Auschwitz, I'm sorry, in Theresien.

Well, the younger children, you know what, they were constantly hungry, because children need a lot of food, they never had enough. But childishly cheerful, even so, I didn't meet so many children because I was out at work all day, and the people with me, there were no children among them, at least, not in the house, but there was, particularly one child in the barracks. We were about 60 women in one hall, in these barracks, and there was a three year old, gorgeous little boy, whom I will never forget, I can still see his lovely eyes and face. He got the measles from me, and that poor kid didn't survive them. That's really the only child where I was in direct contact with, otherwise it was all my generation or older people. I sometimes felt terribly deprived of what people my age were able to do in Theresien, because after work, they could all meet and go for a walk in, inside Theresien, whereas I always had to look after the sick in the various hospitals, and sometimes I had that feeling, "Why can't I also be with them? Why did I constantly have to look after my sick family?" That was one of the worst emotions I felt, otherwise, I seemed to have had that feeling, "Well, we are all in the same boat, so there is nothing you can do to change it, and we just have to try and survive."

One thing I haven't asked you is, did you ever have a boyfriend up to this time?

Oh yes. I had a boyfriend before we went to the camp, a boyfriend in Roztoky, a Jewish boy, who left in the first or second transport for Lodz, so he left a few months before we left, and incidentally, he lives in, near Harrow, here, and he, with his wife, and my husband and me, we're best friends. We travel together, we see each other regularly every week, and we never ever spoke a word about our pre-War relationship. And then I had another boyfriend in Theresien, that was a man twice my age, from one of the families surrounding my, my father's circle, who, whom I met

through his girlfriend. She was with me in the home in the barracks, and suddenly this relationship with her grew, started to diminish, and he grew fond of me, and we had a very nice relationship, until he had to leave for Auschwitz. She didn't even go to see him off. I was there to see him off, and when he had left, I later found out that he died very soon afterwards, of blood poisoning. She came to see me, and said, "If you ever feel lonely, I go for a walk with you, you can talk to me", so she took it very well. I had, before this, a boyfriend in Roztoky, I had another one that was really more a friendship, a very good friendship, and I had one boyfriend at the age of 16, who left for Shanghai, and wrote from Shanghai that he would like me to join him, and to, to marry him, but by then, I had already the other boyfriend, so I declined, I wouldn't have been able to go anyway, so I wasn't a saint, no, I wasn't a saint!

Had your mother told you about menstruation and sex and so on?

No, there is the one thing where she would have loved to tell me. She told me about menstruation. I hated her telling me. I sort of felt very embarrassed and this stayed with me, I never wanted to hear anything about sex, so much so, that when I got my first kiss at the age of 16, I thought I would get pregnant. I don't know, and I don't understand why I felt so embarrassed about talking about it. But she never, she never succeeded, every time she wanted to tell me, and it would have been very necessary to tell me, I ran off, I just didn't ...

Did she seem embarrassed at all?

Not at all, no. But I couldn't sort of, I couldn't take it.

And you don't know where you picked your embarrassment up from?

No. No. But it embarrassed me no end.

Did your father seem very Puritanical? Do you think that he had any influence on that?

He did seem so, but I never really, I never really thought about what he seemed to me, and I just didn't want to hear, and I was also very unhappy when, in fact, I had the menstruation, my mother found out by chance, the day it happened, and then she told me. Otherwise I probably would have been very frightened, but that was the only time I let her tell me anything.

So where did you learn from?

Well, slowly by experience, you see, but not, not from my mother. Although I must say, to her merit, she really tried hard, that was completely my fault. I don't know how that happened, and I always thought, "My God, maybe I wasn't quite normal in that respect." I just didn't want, not even at school, when the girls were talking about it, I always run off, I didn't want to hear.

But you weren't frightened of the boys?

No, no. Strange, it's a strange attitude of mine. I didn't understand it myself. I was just, probably, too ashamed, or too embarrassed and whatever. On the 1st September, 1944, my father got the slip that he should turn up at the transport, going to a family camp in the East, and he was told where the assembly place was, that was at barracks which had an exit on the other side with the railway, so, and everybody who had to go to a transport was allowed, if I remember rightly, about 20 lbs. of luggage, but nobody had even that much to take, not talking of the fact that you wanted to take only what you could really carry. So he packed a rucksack, and I felt very much that it wasn't fair for him to be left on his own, and I wanted to go voluntarily with him, but when I talked it over with some other people, they said it would be very, he was a healthy man, and my mother needed me much more in Theresien, I shouldn't do it. So he left. We went to see him off, my brother and me, and that same day, I got very high temperatures and couldn't, couldn't sort of even stand on my feet, so I had to lie down, and they even called the people staying with me, in that room, even called a doctor, who said it was probably a sort of nervous temperature, because of my father's departure. And I just about had got rid of these temperatures when I got the slip that I was to go to the transport, so there again, my brother came with me, and I assembled there, and I don't know why, but this transport didn't go the day we assembled, so we were sent back home again, and we should come the next day. But before I left for this first assembly, I went to see my mother, to say good bye, and that was such a heartbreaking scene, on her side, that I just didn't have the guts to go there the second day again, and say, "I'll stay here, I want to say good bye again", so I never went back. It broke my heart. But I thought, rather than have her suffer once more, this ordeal, she cried to me, she heard me, she didn't want to let go of me, it was terrible. So when we were loaded into the train, I tried as some other people had done before, before boarding the train, to go to Rahm, who was there, who sort of saw off every transport, and tell him whether I couldn't stay back because my mother was very ill, and that I was working on the regeneration of these batteries, thinking that it might help. He just lifted his hand and showed me to the train, and that was it. When we came into that cattle truck, there were 100 people in one wagon. We had practically nowhere to, I mean, we were sitting on our luggage. I remember, I sat with one leg between two pieces of luggage, and the other one lying on the luggage, so it was unbelievably full, this truck, and crowded. Don't ask me what happened when somebody wanted to go to the toilet, because then you had to crawl all over these people. There were scenes, of course, people were crying, people desperate, and I didn't know a single soul amongst them. So that is the first time when I felt really lost and, and desperate, and thought, "My God, is this all worth it?" This journey to Auschwitz took about 72 hours under these conditions. We had got, as far as I remember, we got some bread and some sausage to take. Not a lot, nothing to drink, thirsty, so it was really an ordeal. And we arrived, after several stops. For instance, we stopped near the Moravian town of Ostrava. You had that feeling of being so close, and yet so far. You couldn't get out of the truck. It was, it was really dreadful, but thinking back, it was nothing compared with what would follow.

F484 - End of Side B

F487 - Side A

My husband, from the film studios where he stayed about three years, he had been moved to the Head of the News Department of Czechoslovak Television, and after another three, two or three years, he started to get fed up with the job because there was such a lot of interference from above that he couldn't really do it the way he would have liked to do it.

Was it totally censored?

It was censored and he liked that less and less, and when he found out that there was a job going for a correspondent of television of the News Department of television in Paris, where the correspondent would work, not only on France but also be correspondent for Britain, he asked his Head of the whole television, who he was very friendly with, whether he couldn't get that job. And he really got it in 1967. But our daughter was just, had to finish her basic schooling, her ninth class, and our son had just started studying to be an actor at the university, so we decided, and I had a job I liked, so we decided that he would go to Paris, and I would stay in Prague with my children, so they could get on with what they were doing, and that after this year, Katka would move over to be with her father and go to a French school, in order to learn French, and he would commute every second month, he would come from Paris to Prague. That worked quite well, and we were, we, for the summer we had, I had my holidays, three weeks holidays, and the children had their holidays, so he decided we should come to Paris, and my brother, who, by then, was in Britain, had organised for the two families, two weeks holiday in Menorca. And while we were in Menorca, the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia. We immediately decided that we would never go back to live, but the Head of Czechoslovak Television asked my husband to stay on as long as possible, so that he could still help a lot of people, and help we did. A lot of people got out, because they came to see us. In those days it was still possible to travel from Czechoslovakia. The frontiers were closed only in October 1969.

How free was travel up to that time? Could whole families go out for a holiday?

Well, no. In very rare cases they could, if they had the right connections, or if they were sort of reliable enough, then they could, yes. So in some cases it worked.

And did your husband feel he was still being watched, even though he was working abroad, up until this time?

No. No. This whole business stopped when, in 1966, there came a time when things were getting a bit better, and this really ended up with the Prague Spring. But it started already two years before then, so at that time, he wasn't considered unreliable at all. And this is, at that time when we were on that holiday, I was, of course, still an employee of this German-written paper. In fact, my editor rang me several times whether, when would I come back, and that he was keeping the job for me. He was then moved to another paper, for a very short period only, in the same publishing

house, a Czech paper, and he said to me, "Look, I have got two vacancies on that paper. I have only two people who will work for me, and I want you to be one of them." Anyway, I didn't react to that, and in the end, we, when we were recalled to Prague by television, because it was clear that by then he would lose his job, my husband, we said, "Yes, we would come." And the day we were supposed to leave for Prague, we left for Britain. In the meantime, in those several months, my husband had already applied to the British Authorities, he had gone through all the checks, and we were already told that whenever we wanted to move to Britain we could do so.

Did he already have Citizenship from his previous stay?

No, no, no, no. Not only that, but these five years, six years he was in Britain, didn't even count for his Citizenship when he applied. He had to wait the whole five years. When we got here, it didn't count at all, this six years.

On what grounds did the British accept you both? Was it because he'd been in the Forces?

Well, they checked our, our sort of reliability, from their point of view, and it was also definitely because he had good connections here in Britain, and he gave them as references, and these people told the Authorities what they thought about him. They came to interview us in Paris one day, so there was no difficulty, it took several months to get that, but there was no difficulty in that at all.

And in a way, he was also a political refugee, wasn't he?

He was. He came over every, he applied for asylum, sort of formally, and we had a, there was a correspondent of the BBC in Paris whom we knew very well, we had met him, and we got friends with him. And he also gave my husband references, and he actually took us to the railway station on the evening we left for London instead of Prague, because he wanted to make sure that we were on that train, and that nothing happened to us. Because, of course, people in the Embassy were still very keen to know what are they really up to? Because they must have sensed it somehow. Anyway, before we left, we wrote a letter of ... we wrote a letter of resignation, because, by then, I was helping him also, in his work, officially for television, to television, and at the same time, we wrote to the Party that we wanted to be struck off the Party Membership. And that was it. We started a new life here in Britain. Mind you, my husband was almost 50. I was 47. And the children didn't know the language, and we have nothing. So it was no, no fun.

And you'd left everything behind?

Everything. Apart from the few things we had in Paris, which were ours. Most of it was, was, belonged to television, but the private things we had, we took those. And already, about three months after we had arrived here, Fritz had applied for a job in the Monitoring Service of the BBC, so he was told in February, that he could start there. And until then, I, I earned the money for him, our daughter, myself. We had sent Jirka straightaway to Britain, because we knew we didn't want to stay in France, and we wanted him to learn English as quickly as possible, and, at the time we were

still able to pay, not only for, for a room for him, but also for the crash course in English. So we did that, he moved over here in September 1968, and by the time we arrived which was 1st November 1969, he spoke fluent English. He had found himself a job in Whiteleys, as, not even a shop assistant, he was just running around from one person to the next with some papers. So he was out of the way. And I found a job with one of Graham Greene's cousins, also a writer, Felix Greene, who was very much involved in Chinese and Cuban things. He was very Left in his political views. That I minded very much in those days, but he needed someone to retype a book he had written about Cuba, and to look after his correspondence. So I did that in his flat. I got quite a good salary, cash, so we could live on that. And, for the first two weeks, we stayed with my brother, and before we came, I had said to my husband, "I'm ready to stay there for two weeks, but not a day longer." And after two weeks, exactly, we moved out into one room in Sumatra Road in West Hampstead. A room where the windows didn't close, where there was no bathroom, no kitchen, nothing. And there we settled down with my husband, Katka was still with my brother, he said she could stay with them and go to school. We had, in Paris, she was in a French Lycee, about four forms under her level, because she didn't know the language. She learnt it very well, and now, after only a year, she was supposed to jump into English again, which she didn't know either. So, with a lot of pushing and pulling, we managed to get her into the French Lycee here in London. A cousin of mine, who lives in Boston, paid for that, because we wouldn't have been able to pay for that. And I worked for Felix Greene for about two or three months. Now, you must realise one thing. I had never seen a cheque book. I had never written a letter in English, a real letter. I had never seen an electric typewriter, and I had never seen a copying machine. Now, there was Felix Greene, in a huge flat in Montague, Upper Montague Street, where he had an electric typewriter. In one room he had a copying machine, Rank Xerox, and I had, more or less, within one hour, I had to learn all that, because he wanted me to write his cheques and he would just sign them, you see. Or he said, "Oh, I'm not going to, you, you do the correspondence in these things." So it was very bewildering, and I had to really concentrate. But, after a while, he left for Cuba again, and I was in charge of his whole business there. In that, that lasted a few months. In the meantime, Fritz started in the BBC in the Monitoring Service. In the meantime, we had moved from that room in West Hampstead, to a flat in Putney, round about Christmas, because somebody was moving out and offered it to us. We could take over, that was a Czech, we could take over his flat with the proviso that we would decorate it for the landlady. So, we had never decorated the flat, but my son and myself, managed to decorate it. Which meant that, for a whole month, we could live there free of charge. And then we paid rent which, in those days, wasn't so, so dreadful. My husband had relatively very small salary. He had to start from scratch in the Monitoring Service, without any consideration about his qualifications or so. And I found myself a job in the London office of a small American publishing firm, compiling Annual Reports for the whole of Europe, about chemistry, insurance, and God knows what! And this job was quite, it was not well-paid, but it was pleasant, we were only four of us in the whole office. The trouble was, though, that after about two or three years, two years, he closed this London office down, the publisher, so there I was without a job again! And I applied, I found an advertisement for a job in Equity and Law, Assurance Company, and I applied for that, in the Secretarial Department, and I was lucky to get that job, and stayed there for about three years. In the meantime, my husband had read, not an advertisement, but a news item in a

German paper, because he was in the Monitoring Service doing Czech and German. That paper, in West Germany there was a new News Agency being founded by two men who had worked in the UPI, but UPI was closing down in West Germany, so they were, there was a sort of gap to fill, and they were clever enough to see that it would be right to fill that gap. And that they were also considering to have foreign correspondents. So Fritz wrote to those people, they had even given the names of those people in the news, and he found where to write. He wrote to those people, and offered his services as London Correspondent, and that was some time in, in, I think, early summer 1971. So they said, "Well, why don't you come and see us? We could talk it over." And we were just having it, we wanted to go on a trip to Germany, so we said, "Yes, we would stop there", and they would meet us. I went with him. We had a discussion with the two people and they took him on. They took him on, and that was the longest job he had. He worked for these people for 13 years, until his forced retirement. And after several years, the Editor said, couldn't I work for them as well? Again, I thought it over for a long time, because they offered me twice the salary I had at the time, which was very tempting because, don't forget, we had to start from scratch with everything - furniture, house, and so on. On the other hand, I wasn't very keen to work for Germans, in Germany, and I liked the job in Equity and Law. Funnily enough, it had nothing do with writing, it was figures, and I, I liked this kind of work too. In the end, I said, "Yes". And I stayed there for eight years, until my 60th birthday, when I retired, very gladly retired, and luckily retired, because they came into financial difficulties, this News Agency, which was the second largest in West Germany, and did very well until a certain time, and somebody took over who sacked more or less all the people who had been there before. There was even, there were law suits, and my husband lost his, so we lost a lot of money, and he had to retire at the age of 64 instead of 65. So it was a not very happy ending to a very happy time for him. Well, in the meantime, our daughter finished, finished the Lycee with flying colours. The last year, she had been in the economic class, and a year before her final exams, she decided she would like to switch over to science, because she would like to be a, an ophthalmic optician. So they agreed, they said it's very risky, but she is good, she is such a good pupil, we will let her do it. And, as I say, she, she ended up with a, fantastic, a fantastic exam. But her English still wasn't very good, so for a year, she went to be a saleswoman in Littlewoods, in order to improve her language. And then, in the meantime, she was accepted to Manchester University to study ophthalmology, where she met one of the lecturers, was a young man from California, who came also to study for his Ph.D.. And they fell in love, and she married him, and she now lives in California. Whereas our son, first of all, he had three or four years of teachers' training college, then he taught for seven years at, mainly at a Church of England School in Elephant and Castle, he hated every minute of it. At the same time, he went to Birkbeck College to study History of Art, and got his BA with Distinction.

He didn't pursue his acting career at all?

No, that was not on, in a different language, it wasn't on. Not talking of the fact that after a while, he found out that he is not pushy enough for being an actor or anything of the sort. He's not that type, you have to have elbows to get where you want to get. So he studied History of Art and one day, we needed someone at the office of this news agency, to be there when we are gone, just to watch the telexes coming in, and

to put some telex tapes into the machine, and our boss said would we find someone, we could pay him five pounds per hour, and we offered it to our son. After 4 o'clock he was free, and he jumped at the occasion, because he was never, sort of, he had always less money than he would have needed. As a teacher, first grade, you can imagine that. So he jumped at it, and after a while, the boss said, "Would you not like to work for us all the time?" So Jirka answered, "But I don't know any German". And he said, "Don't you worry. You will learn German. You will stay here and your parents won't speak a word of English or Czech with you, only German." Which we didn't, it's, it's too unnatural to speak in a different language with your own children, and after a while, he moved him to Bonn, and put him in charge as the only person of an English service of their news agency. So there he was, he didn't know the language, but he stayed for almost four years and learnt it very well. And that's really how he became a journalist and how, in the end, he got his job in the BBC, in the Czechoslovak Section. And by now, he's really a very experienced and good journalist, and, but he had to work very very hard all the time. So did our daughter. So that is really the whole story. We stayed in Putney for about a year, and with Fritz having got that job in the Monitoring Service, that was near Reading and Caversham, and we thought it would be clever to rather buy a house, with a mortgage, than to pay rent all our remaining lives. So we found a house in a new estate in Caversham Park Village, and moved out there. It meant, for him, he had a walk of about five minutes to work, whereas my daughter and myself, we had to commute a long, long way, to our destinations every day, and then he got the job in, in, for the Germans, which again, was in town, so we were lucky to sell that house for a good price, we really, that was a time when we made a lot of money, on that house, and could buy another house in Ickenham where we are still now. But that's about it, about ...

May I take you right back to the 40s again, and get you to tell us how you recovered from your dreadful experiences, and the progress you made in your emotional life in general?

Yes, it took a long time to recover. The first few months I somehow constantly lived like, in a, in a nightmare, and I was very shy. I didn't find it easy at all to get used to people, and I didn't even think about what had happened so much, as I, I felt I was different. Different from the people I lived with, or worked with, and my husband, when he met me, he was very supportive, because he could see that I hadn't adjusted to normal life yet. And it took him several months to get me out of this, almost out of this.

Were you able to tell him what had happened to you?

Not very much, because he lost his parents in Auschwitz as well, and he, somehow, I always felt that he didn't want to hear too many details. It, it broke his heart, so he wasn't ready to listen to me very much. He rather wanted me to forget than to remember everything and to tell him on top.

How did you feel about that?

Sometimes I felt angry about that, because I felt angry about everybody. When we, when we came back, and we met people, we met people we had known before, so we always had, all of us, that feeling that they didn't want to hear. And we were all very hurt. Or there were other cases where we would tell them, or they would ask, and when we started to tell them, they would answer, "Oh yes, it must have been awful, but we suffered too, you know." Even people who had not, the only suffering was that they didn't have as much to eat as they had before. So that made us very angry, and I didn't like it with my husband either, I always thought "he's a coward really", basically, that he doesn't want to hear what probably happened to his parents, in more detail than, than what he knew.

Do you feel that made your recovery much harder and slower?

No, I think in a way, it made it faster. I think it was, although he didn't do it consciously, but it was good that we didn't dwell on the past so much.

But were you able to talk to anybody about what had happened, in such a way as to actually help you?

No, not really, no.

Never? In all the years?

I don't remember anyone having really helped me by listening to me. There were people who listened more, and people who listened less, but I don't think it helped. What helped, in my case, at least, was that when you had to earn your living, raise a family, you had nobody to help you, because we didn't have any grandparents. So you're constantly on the rush, and constantly under such pressure, time pressure and work pressure, that this helped, because you had to sort of make, the past had to be forgotten and you had to make your life. And I think that was good. Also we worked very hard ...

F487 - End of Side A

F487 - Side B

We had to work very hard because we had both very low salaries, and after all, we needed to buy some furniture, so whenever the occasion arose, my husband, who knew English very well, sometimes there were translations of speeches by Ministers, which had to be translated, within one night, into English, so he got that job, and with our footing at home, after having done our job during the day, we translated all night, which brought in quite a lot of money every time, but it was hard work. I remember once, we had 65 pages he dictated me, and I typed them, so, in one night, that's not bad going. And all this helped. On the other hand, physically, I had no, I hadn't suffered any damage really, physical damage, but, in 1948, after the events of 1948 in Czechoslovakia, I had a kind of nervous breakdown. In those days, Dr. Springer from the camp, was a doctor in our, in the Health Service in that part of the town where I belonged to, and when she saw that, she arranged for me to be sent to a sanatorium for people with nervous difficulties, and I was sent there in Autumn 1948, for about three weeks. Three weeks I don't like to remember, because I felt extremely lonely. I'm not a very good spontaneous mixer with people, I, I, it takes me some time to, to get sort of free, and this environment wasn't the right one for making friends. I had one bit of luck there, though, because my Uncle Egon, who was a radiologist, had got a job in that same sanatorium, so I could at least spend my free time, when I didn't have to have some bath or rest, or something like that, I spent it with him. That was good, because otherwise I would probably have run away.

Could you tell me a little bit about this nervous breakdown? What happened to you?

I don't quite remember it, but I know that I just couldn't cope any more, with anything. And I felt very tired, and very very depressed. So that is really the only thing that I remember.

Do you feel that all the bad things had sort of caught up with you?

Yes. I think so. I think so, and I also think that on top of that, the pressure, the work pressure, added to all that.

In the hospital, did anybody listen to you, to hear what you'd been through?

In that sanatorium? No. Nobody was that, that was more or less a factor, that there's nobody to listen to any stories.

Do you feel that the lack of sympathetic audience, to hear what you'd been through, might have prevented you having a breakdown? Do you feel that you did need some help?

I don't really know. I don't think I was that keen on telling people what had happened to me all the time. I think I really wanted to put it past me, and not to dwell on it too much longer. I also had that feeling, I had one, one, maybe what added to this nervous breakdown, we had been trying for a family for about a year before, and it

never happened, and so that depressed me, and I had that feeling that I would never have children because of, of the camp. Then I went to see, I was recommended to a woman doctor who had been in Britain during the War, and all these refugee women had been her patients, so one of them recommended me to her, and she found out, that was late '48, she found out that I had some deformation, and that it might be possible for me not to have children, but that, in Britain, there was a very good pill which helped people like that, and she had no way of getting it for me, but maybe I would have some friend here who would be able to get a doctor to prescribe it and send it. So I had a friend here, or that my parents had a friend here, and I wrote to her, and she said, "Yes, she would try to get the prescription and to send me the pill", and by the time the pill arrived, I was pregnant, so this again was psychological only, this whole matter with my pregnancy. Luckily the pill helped someone else. But I can't really put my finger on all that. I know that we all probably are not, we are not quite normal people, I'm sure of it. I'm not saying that we are mad. But something with us is different from other people. Although you don't want to admit it, but it is. It is like that, and I even think it is like that with our children, that they are, in many ways, more mature or aware, as children, much more mature than other children, because of this. My son was very interested in hearing what happened to me, and he actually was the one who wanted me to write down all my life story, and I did it for him, and for Katka. She is interested now. She wasn't so interested before, she was much more interested in her boyfriend and all that! But he was very interested, and still is.

So you feel the next generation have been able to take it more openly than those of you who actually went through it?

I think so, yes, I think so. Although I never, I mean, I told him a lot, I didn't tell him everything, because I didn't find he was old enough for hearing everything, but now he can read everything, and we never discuss it. No. I don't really want to discuss it too much with anyone. So that was our, my emotions afterwards.

And do you think that your desire to have a family was greater than people who hadn't been through this?

I don't think so, no. I think it was just normal, a normal desire for a normal woman. I don't think it was greater. My husband, when we got married, he said, "I would love to have four children." I thought, "Oh, my God!" So when our second child, I had a miscarriage in between these two, and when Katka was born, shortly afterwards, I said, "Look, if you want more children, we should sort of hurry up, because I'm getting older." And he said, "Oh God! No more children!" So, he loves children, but Katka was a tough nut with her sleeping habits, so he didn't want any more, and I didn't really want any more than these two.

What about the grieving for your parents that you'd both lost? Do you feel that you did allow yourselves to grieve openly, or do you feel that was pushed aside too?

No, no. I think we allowed ourselves to grieve openly. There is one thing which, and that is definitely a consequence of what happened to our parents. I, whenever I can avoid to go to a funeral, I will, because I couldn't go to the funeral of my own parents,

so I don't see any need to do it for other people. It's nasty, most probably nasty of me, but it left, I can't get over that.

It's like a terrible insult?

Yes.

As a last straw?

Yes.

Not even to have a funeral, isn't it?

Yes, yes. So there, whenever, as I say, whenever I can, I avoid going to funerals. And I'm sure this is, this is, have to do with my parents and their not being buried.

Do you want to talk a little bit about the Jewish, and even perhaps the Catholic aspects of your upbringing?

Well, I mean, my Catholic upbringing was more or less a compulsory thing, which my mother thought, I have to have some upbringing. I hated every minute of it. And I was never, I had never any knowledge about the Jewish faith, and also never practised it, but practically all our friends were Jewish, and are Jewish. Not in Prague, in Prague we had many non-Jewish friends too. And here, the British friends are non-Jewish, the ones we have. But otherwise, it's mainly Jewish people, but they are Jewish people who are not practising Jews either, you see, which I don't mind being friends with practising Jews. Actually I am a very good friend of one, and she's a very good friend of ours, but this, it's obviously, one does belong to it, whether you are in that faith, or have practised it, but you do belong to it, and that may be, again, as a consequence of what had happened, what happened during the War. There is a more common language with those people, even though many of them didn't go through what we did, so there is still something which is common. And I think it is very very frequently, Jews have many Jewish friends. But I think that was the case, even before Hitler.

Just to go back about your health a minute. You mention being depressed in this sanatorium, did you think bounce back, or did you have periods of depression in the years that followed? Or were you a fairly cheerful person? How did you feel?

Yes, yes, I was, and I am a fairly cheerful person. There, every now and then, there comes a time when I get depressed for a few days, for sometimes very silly reasons. But I have a feeling that it also has to do with your, with your physical condition at a given time. When I feel very tired, I get depressed, but that is also a little bit in our family. My brother, he has the same, he gets depressions even more than myself. I don't get them very often. I just try to, not to talk a few days, and have my peace, and that's it.

Did you sleep all right after you came out of the camp?

Yes.

You never had sleeping problems?

I have them now and then, but that's got to do with age, I think. I have them much more now.

Any nightmares at all?

No.

Any time?

No, no. No.

Were you left with any specific anxieties or phobias?

No, not really, no. I am basically a very courageous person, you know, and anxieties don't count for me very much, so no. The only thing I, I remember one day, you know, the things one says sometimes without thinking, when my children were very young. I think it was at the time when the Vietnamese War started. So I made a remark at home, yeh, I made a remark at home, "If there is another War, I'll commit suicide", just like that, you know, in front of the children. And then the events in Cuba happened, and my son was absolutely desperate. He came and said, "Mummy, are you going to commit suicide?" I said, "Why should I?" "Well, you once said, if another War breaks out, you will commit suicide", and it looked like war in those days. So that shows you how you have to watch your mouth when you talk in front of small children.

Do you feel that your experiences have left a scar which is something you have to battle with every day? Or is it something which is well in hand?

It's well in hand. So much so that there were many years, where I was all jokes and all fun, and all, no, it didn't leave any scars.

What other ways do you think it's affected your upbringing of the children?

In a way, I have the feeling, sometimes, that I was much tougher with my children than would be, would be normal. My children were really not spoiled at all. They were used to, from their very first day of life, to be on their own. They were, they had a key from the age of 4, to get into the flat, so they were brought up pretty tough. They also minded it sometimes, because they could see that other kids were much more spoilt than them, but that was maybe a consequence of that, of that, I didn't see any reason for bringing them up in cotton wool, and then they wouldn't be able to cope with life. Now, they are grateful to me.

Do you find that, compared with other people who've been through similar experiences, you're much more resilient?

The people I know were, most of them, just as resilient as me. I think that there are not many who didn't get over it quite well, and, but don't forget that we were, we came home at the age of between 19 and 25, the people I knew, and I had been with, so at that age, you are still able to get over things, much better than older people.

Do you feel at home in England?

Yes, very much so. It's actually the only country I do feel at home in. I went back to Czechoslovakia a month ago, because with the events in November last year, it was made possible for us to return for a visit. I would never dream of settling down there, and I found out that I didn't feel at home there at all. I felt like a foreign tourist in any other country, the moment I was not with friends in their house, or in their flat. The people were complete strangers to me. I even found it strange until almost the last day that when we went, we got into the streets, people are talking Czech around us. All that, I mean, I feel completely at home here.

Did you find the people had changed in the last 20 or so years?

Yes, very much so. Very much so. Even some of the friends have changed, although we immediately had the same relationship as before, but they are much more egocentric. They are bitter, of course, with all the things that happened to them, and what struck me was that, although they used to be very very close friends, with whom we met almost every day, some of them, that they were not interested in our lives at all. They were full of themselves, full of their stories of what they had gone through. But not with one word would they have asked, "And how did you start again, and build your life?" That was strange. That struck me as very strange. Not all of them, some, some were just as if nothing, with some of them we had the feeling that we met a week before. But this was strange.

Did they give you an impression of which suffering they found harder, the Communists or the Nazis?

Well, not really. I think, from most of them, when the Nazis were here, they were either deported as I was, or they lived, a more or less life, but the life now under the Communists was worse for them because most of them were Communist in the beginning, just like us. And then came the big disillusionment, and then, after 1968 came the sackings, and they were, they were left jobless, or they were doing jobs, they were most of them journalists, doing jobs of window cleaners, and van drivers, and things like that. So also, they are much older, and most of them got very ill as a consequence of lack of food, lack of vitamins, physical work which they were not used to, so most of them have heart disease, and one of them has even cancer, and diabetes and whatever. I mean, we only met three of our friends who were not seriously ill. So I think this was worse, for this generation of people it was worse.

Have you any idea how many Jews are left in Czechoslovakia?

I heard the figure, but I don't remember.

Is it a very small number?

A very small number, yes. Very small number. But I can't tell you at all, the figure.

Do you know anybody who's involved with the Synagogue, or the Jewish Organisation in the centre of Prague which keeps the statistics and information on all the Jews?

No I don't, no.

Can you tell me about your grandchildren?

Yes, well, as I said, my daughter married this Californian. She moved to California in 1977, end of 1977, and by now she's got three daughters. While the oldest is 9½ and the twins are 8 years old, and I'm amazed that a woman, having had the upbringing which my daughter had, would be capable of spoiling her own children to such an extent, that I just have to close my eyes sometimes and pretend not to hear or see. On the other hand, maybe this also is a normal reaction, because she wants to make up to her children, everything she has missed out on, maybe.

Can you give me examples.

Well, it wasn't really a very fun life for our children, because their parents were at work all day long. They had their keys, they had to run around on their own with some friends in the afternoon, in the park. So I think she wants, they didn't have a lot of toys. I never spoilt them as far as clothing was concerned. I remember that one day my son said, "Why can I only have one pair of shoes, and my friend at school has got eight pairs?" So I said, "Well, you have one pair, and when you wear it out, or grow out of it, you get another pair. I'm not a millionaire." And all that, I think, they want to make up, they buy toys all the time. They buy them clothing all the time. They would do anything for their children, and I don't think it's right, because these children will, one day, be very selfish, and, but then, I can see that it's not only my daughter, it's the American children generally, who are very spoiled, and I can see it with the whole generation of my children. They are all bringing the next generation up in a completely different and not very clever way.

Did you have any time at all to develop any other hobbies or skills that you have?

No time whatsoever. Don't forget, when I brought up my children, there were no washing machines. You had to do everything by hand, and you had to do it late at night, because after work I had to cook dinner, and put the children to bed, so there was hardly time for sleeping, let alone for any hobbies. I have developed, for years, I had been longing to do some, some woodwork. So when I retired, my daughter bought me a kit for a dolls house, in America, and I did this house, you can't imagine what a job it was to build it. It took me about ten months to do it. Sometimes I didn't stop until four in the morning, I was really wrapped up in that one, and I loved every minute of it. Since then I've built another two houses, much less complicated, and not from, not from kits, but from scratch for (a) my grand-daughters, and my nephew's four year old daughter for last Christmas. And I keep sort of dreaming of doing another real big nice house. I have built one or two birds' houses and I've made a

waste paper basket out of wood for my son, so this is a hobby I have acquired which I dreamt of for years.

Did you have any lessons?

No, no.

How did you learn?

Just by experience and by mistakes.

Did you read any books about it?

No. No. I just started to do it. There were instructions with this house from America. But just to illustrate, it had, I got, for the roof, I had to paint and stick on 2,500 individual tiles, so you can imagine how long that took! But I always found a way, for instance, to paint it would have taken probably two years, so I just put it in the garage on the floorboard myself, car varnish, and sprayed it. So I really, with experience, you learn, or you just, you mess it up and find another way. But I never learnt anything. And I do a lot of knitting, which again, I do it because it, it means that I am not watching television without doing anything, so I knit. But otherwise I haven't got, I don't play bridge, I don't play golf, or these hobbies of retired people, I haven't got those. They bore me, they would bore me.

You travel quite a lot, don't you?

Yes, we travel quite a lot, yes, yes. And we do a lot of sightseeing when we travel. We do a lot of photographing, so there I have to put it in order, and put it into albums and all that. My day is not long enough, not even now.

And having been journalists, you're both interested in current events, and

Oh yes,

And politics,

Oh very much so, very much so, yes.

What about your health, your physical health over the years?

Well, the only thing that sort of bothers me, is arthritis of the spine, I've had it for about 30 or 40 years now. It's better now, because I, I am in treatment with a chiropractor, but there were times when I thought I would end up very soon in a wheelchair, and I couldn't even move my arms or walk. But this chiropractic treatment put me ...

You had a lot of pain, did you?

Oh! Unbelievable. I mean, I was immobile, and it came back, always in, in intervals I got it again and again, and now, ever since I had this treatment, or have this treatment, it's been kept under control. But that's the only, that could have happened to me even if I hadn't been in the camp. Basically, I am a very healthy person, considering all my past, I'm even healthier than one could wish for. And I think too, that there the mental part of played a very important role, because many people, when they retire, they just go down, and they keep being ill and having pains, but when you keep yourself active all the time, and that I sure do, I think it helps.

F487 - End of Side B

F488 - Side A

Can you tell me about your thoughts about human nature after all you've been through in your life?

Well, I haven't got a lot of illusions left about human nature, and that is not only because of what I have gone through, but when the Nazi era ended, in the first few years, one had the feeling "This can't happen again". But now look, there was Vietnam, there was Korea, there was Nicaragua, and all the Eastern European countries, and last not least, the Soviet Union, where now, when we know about what Stalin did, so really Hitler only learnt from him, it wasn't the other way round. So, I have no illusions about humanity and I'm sure it could happen again in a different form with maybe not the Jews, but someone else being the target of extermination, so I, I think that's probably what it left me with - a very cynical view on humanity.

Do you feel that Jews are still vulnerable in the world?

Yes. Oh yes, they are, very much so, and I'm afraid I think they will always be. I also think that, I don't know what your views are, but I think that the political situation in Israel doesn't help the Jews at all, I think it does them a lot of harm. But they, they will probably, I don't know, maybe in many hundreds of years they won't be vulnerable, but they definitely still are, and will be for a long time.

Would you like to say some more about your views on the way the Israelis are behaving?

Huh! Well, I think, I mean, you can't, I know there is a, there is an enmity between Palestinians and Israelis, and rightly so, they don't have to like them because they have suffered under them a lot. But on the other hand, you can't do what they are doing to the Palestinians, you just can't do it, and you are putting yourself on the level with those people who we were abhorred about what they are doing, and they are doing practically the same. So I, I think that is, that is terrible.

You were talking at lunch time, about your attempts to tell people in England, or the attitudes of the English to refugees and to survivors, would you like to tell us about that?

Yes. It's, I mean, I've got quite a few English friends, and obviously, at one time or other, they did find out about what happened to us during the War, but it's, I found out that one can tell them a lot, but they don't, they can't, even with the best of will, they can't understand the implications of the facts you tell them, and you don't feel like telling the implications, because there again, you would have to explain such a lot for them to understand, and somehow, I think they are just, I don't want to, to sound very derogatory, because I love the British, but I think, in many ways, they are childish and naive. And I think that they, they, even when they read the books about what has happened, they can't understand. And, to see it, you know, one thing that always annoys me, television shows the Holocaust, television showed Shoah, but that's not

for the British, they don't watch it, they can't be bothered, and it breaks their heart, so that always annoys me a lot, because we don't have to see it, we know it. It's they who should watch it and that, by what I have heard, the Germans are very different from that. The Germans watched every bit of it with the greatest of interest, especially the young generation, they want to know what their parents did. So that, I think they are naive in many ways, politically, anyway.

How do you feel it should be put across for the British to be able to watch this and take it in?

They wouldn't watch anything, however you put it across. They, they are very selective in what they watch, and they definitely, they would probably much prefer to watch films about the British winning the War, that they watch, but why should they watch films about the Jews suffering in concentration camps? And this is what I mind, this attitude. Instead of being keen to know more, and to see more or hear more, I keep thinking they are naive in that respect.

Do you feel it's due to cowardice, or lack of emotional depth?

I think it's lack of emotional depth, yes. Which, by the way, I also find in their relationship with family. There is much less emotion in families here than in Jewish families.

Can you define that?

Yes I can. A child is loved, is looked after, finishes school, gets a job, and immediately, it has to either move out, or pay for it's upkeep. And this, in a Jewish family, wouldn't, would probably not happen until they are very hard up. You see what I mean? Do you understand what I mean?

Yes, yes. You mean that the responsibility continues.

Yes, yes. Whereas here, now, you are 15 or 16, you've got your job, either you pay, or you move out. At least, that is what I have so far seen with friends and so on.

You feel there's a greater coolness in relationships?

Yes, yes, definitely. Mind you, there is a coolness in relationships, in any relationship, in the British, which is not always bad, but it's much cooler than the Continental relationships to others, I've found.

You also mentioned that the British couldn't take in the implications of what you tell them about the Holocaust. Could you define what you feel those implications are?

That's very hard to define. For instance, when you tell them you couldn't get a passport in Czechoslovakia to travel abroad, now, they don't understand. Okay, couldn't get a passport, so what? You see, they don't think, "Oh well, yes, that means .."

Death.

No, that means that you, you can't travel. And why can't you travel? They don't want that. I meant it more for this, the Holocaust implications. Yes, maybe I could, I could say one example. I could say maybe one example. I could say, and I will say it if you like, that when you tell them your parents were killed in the gas chambers. It doesn't, it doesn't sort of, they haven't got the front of it to imagine it, you see what I mean? Well, okay, my parents died in a hospital, so your parents got ... they don't say it, but this is approximately what, what you can see they feel. Everybody has to die somehow, but they don't realise that my parents were 49 and 48, you see.

Yes.

It's hard to define, this one. I don't know how ...

You feel it's a sort of emotional cowardice, do you?

I think it's more a lack of interest to go deeper into it. I think so. When the War ended, I found quite a lot of my relations who had emigrated, were still alive, and they lived in all parts of the world - Australia, America, Switzerland - but they didn't know that many details about what happened to all of us in, in Nazi Germany. They found out after the War, or they, at least, should have found out after the War, but when I met them, I had that feeling that not even they were terribly interested about all that, and they didn't want to hear such a lot either. And I will give you one very concrete example. I've got a cousin who lives in Australia, in Sydney, who has had bad diabetes for the past 40 years and is not well at all, and he came to see us about two years ago. We had met him before, in my brother's place, and suddenly he put a question, where I have to explain something beforehand. In peacetime days, my parents had a tennis court built in the garden in Roztoky, for my mother to play, because she was a keen tennis player, and also for us children to learn to play tennis. And this cousin of mine loved tennis, so he came out to play there quite often. Now, when he came to see us two years ago, he suddenly said to me, "And while you lived in Roztoky, before going to the concentration camps, did you play a lot of tennis?" But my husband always says, "I have never seen my wife as mad and angry as at that moment. She got all red in her face", which I did, I could feel it, I said to him, "And do you really believe, that under Hitler Occupation, the Jews in Roztoky were playing tennis, while other people didn't have anything to eat? I want to tell you that we didn't have a tennis court any longer because we had not enough rations, and we had to make the tennis court into a field for growing potatoes, so that we could eat enough potatoes." "Well, I never knew that." So I said to him, "Well, my dear, and do you know why you didn't know it? Because you never asked, and you never were even interested to know, so how could you have known it?" That was two years ago. He came to see us last summer, and at that certain moment, because he is a bit senile, so he doesn't know what went on two years ago, he started with that tennis question again, and when my husband heard it, he quickly started to speak about something else, because it would have ended just with a fit of rage on my part again. They were not interested.

And do you feel that they haven't even read the Holocaust literature?

In that case I know he hasn't, because he hasn't read any, not many books at all. He's a stupid person, basically. But I don't think he has, and I don't think, I think many of them haven't. It is always the same people who are interested again, and mainly these books about the Holocaust, by what I see, are mainly being read by either direct victims, or children of the victims, but I think once they are so far away, like America, Australia, the interest is much, much weaker, I think, at least. And, for instance, my son-in-law's Jewish parents, who were very very, they were practising Jews, and they had only kosher at home and so on. Well, when I told them that six million Jews had been killed by Hitler, they didn't even know. They were most surprised! Huh!

You mentioned to me earlier on in our conversation that you felt the British Jews were something quite different again.

Yes. They are a group who, I think, mixes far less with other people than we Central European and Eastern European Jews were used to. We were much more integrated than, than, in my view, than the Jews here, the British Jews here in Britain. And they are, I think, in many ways, much less tolerant with each other, and very, they are not even interested in Jews coming from other parts of the world. They are just living, themselves, in a group of themselves.

You feel they haven't given serious thought to the Holocaust at all?

I wouldn't know that. I don't want to charge that, because I really wouldn't know. But they are, as I say, they are not interested in mixing with us, for instance, and not interested in mixing with the Jews from other countries. They are just interested in mixing with Jews from Britain. That's the experience I had. I just remember one, one other instance where I was most, most surprised. When Shoah was being shown here, in the cinema, we went to sit it out with my husband, for two afternoons, and I would have thought that the cinema would have been full. Believe it or not, with us, there were another four people, two of whom were Harold Pinter and his wife. So, where are the British Jews? If they don't even go to see ... .. Although we feel very much at home here, so there are some things which can't be overcome, even in a country where you, where you really feel you belong to. But you can't overcome those things. And I don't think there will ever be a day when all this will be overcome, because these, these, there is, somewhere, a different sphere of interest, and in many cases also, a different sphere of, I don't want to say intelligence, but level of education, I think.

But as we've also said, even our own people, Czechs and Jews, are often not sensitively aware.

Oh yes, oh yes.

Any more than the British are.

Of course not, no. No, I'm sure there are not, and it is strange, but then, sometimes I start thinking, "Maybe I am the strange one."

F488 - End of Side A

END OF INTERVIEW