

NATIONAL

Life stories

**LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH
COMMUNITY**

NICHOLAS WINTON, O.B.E.

Interviewed by Milenka Jackson

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

F832 - Side A

This is the life story of Nicholas Winton, in the National Life Story Collection - The Living Memory of the Jewish Community. The date is 14th August, 1990, and Milenka Jackson is the interviewer.

Mr. Winton, do you mind telling me about when you were born, and about your family?

I was born on 19th May, 1909, in Hampstead, London. My mother, at that time, must have been 19. She married my father when she was 17, and I was the second child. She, herself, was born in Nürnberg and her name was Wertheimer. She was, in fact, the first girl in Germany to pass the Abitur when that exam became available to ladies. My mother then was Wertheimer, and my father was Wertheim, and he was born, in fact, in Moscow, when his father, as a German, was American Consul to Moscow, which sounds very complicated, but that's as it was. And Father brought Mother over to England then, when she was 17, put her in an enormous house with 20 rooms, and as you can tell from their names, they were both Jewish, but Liberal Jewish, and, in fact, not in any way religious. And they decided, for reasons best known to them, that we should be baptised and we were brought up as Christians, but as British Christians, but, in fact, with a German Jewish name, which, of course, made our lives, at that time, as we were heading for the First World War, extremely complicated. The feeling against anything German in the First World War, was much more pronounced than ever it was, curiously enough, in the Second. And my mother, when the War broke out, in 1914, had made a lot of English friends, and living in Hampstead, she knew a lot of people. Directly War broke out, I don't think there was one English person who would talk to her again during the whole of the War, and all the various things that she then did for the War Effort, were done in the company of other similar people, who were British, but of German extraction. Father joined the Pioneer Corps, and actually, our name was changed to Wortham, which was supposed to make our life rather easier, and at the end of the War, the name was changed back again to Wertheim, but it's difficult for people to imagine now, the feeling there was during the First World War, of anybody in England, of German extraction. Most of the people were, were interned, but anyway, there was almost complete segregation. At one point one was conscious of it, and certainly in later life I was very conscious of it, but the fact that you're living as an English Christian, with a German-Jewish name, during a War with Germany, doesn't make life easier. You've already got the complication of not really being accepted by the Jews because you've, if you like, contracted out of being a Jew, and you're not really accepted by the Christians, because, after all, you've got a Jewish name, and worse than that, you've got a German-Jewish name! So I think that the people that we met, and the friendships that we made, must have been from a very early time, conditioned by this factor.

Yes. And did you notice the anti-Jewish feeling as a distinct entity apart from the anti-German feeling?

I think I was too young to realise the implications of that. I mean, one can feel the result without realising the implications. I think it was only much later that I realised

that. I mean, one got into trouble by having a lot of the, or most, of Mother's and Father's acquaintances at that time being Jewish, and not knowing anything about the Jewish faith or the Jewish holidays, of course, one was bound to put one's foot in it often, and to quite a great extent. No feeling about it at all. I feel that everybody should, during their life, do what they feel is right, and they should do what they think is best for their children. And I suppose when they both suddenly found themselves in England, Father, of course, was British, because his father was already naturalised British, so when we were born, we were born, in fact, of British parents, although perhaps first, or however you like to calculate it, second generation. But I suppose if they thought that being in a predominantly Christian and British country, where they knew they were going to stay, that their feeling was that their children would have an easier life if they were brought up as British Christians. Now, whether we have done or not, I couldn't say. But I would say that a lot of my character has been based on this mixture, of which I am, to this day, dealing with the Jewish people in Israel. Well, I don't think I will say any more about the mixture, except that it was, at that time, completely invasive, both at school and later on, at work. I mean, it wasn't, the family often discussed the possibility of changing our name, and I think Father was very keen that we should do so. And we thought, you know, what's in a name? And we decided that we shouldn't. I've since found out, of course, that there's a great deal to a name, and eventually what happened was that after Hitler got going, and one realised that there might be a war, the family, of course, realised that all this was going to happen again, and we were going through the same kind of trauma again, and so we had a family gathering, and decided at that time, when Chamberlain went to Munich, that if, when he came back, there was going to be a war, then it was really too late to change our name, we were just kind of stuck with it again. But if, when Chamberlain came back, there was not going to be a war, then we should change our name. Well, Father was dead by then. When Chamberlain came back and at least declared that he'd settled everything, and there shouldn't be a war, then we decided that we would implement our decision, and it was then that we changed our name from Wertheim to Winton, and that was, well, as I said, the day after Chamberlain came back.

Well, what job did your father do, for instance?

We were a closely-knit family. Father originally was a, a banker. After the War he joined a firm which dealt with importing mostly glass, from Czechoslovakia. My brother was an electrical engineer, and was in the REME mostly in Egypt during the War, and my sister was in the WRAF, listening to conversations of the German Air Force, and writing down anything that might be interesting to the Secret Service.

Going back to your childhood, you were the middle one of the three, then.

I was the middle one, yes.

And did you go to prep school locally, or were you sent to boarding school?

I went to, I went to prep school in Hampstead, University College School, and my best friend then, Stanley Murdoch, eventually was sent to Stowe School, when it, originally when it started, which must have been roundabout 1924, '25, I can't

remember exactly. I persuaded my parents to send me there. So I went to Stowe School as a boarder, the second term that it started, and was considered kind of a founder member of that school.

And did you find any German or Jewish feeling against you at school? Either at University College or Stowe?

I think at University College I certainly wasn't aware of it. At Stowe, I didn't make a lot of friends, and how much of that was due to the fact that, in that rather kind of rare atmosphere I didn't make friends because people didn't want to be friendly with me for one reason or the other, one can't tell. But in retrospect, I would say, I'm fairly certain that it very likely had some impact on it, although you don't know at that age, why these things are happening.

Were you homesick at boarding school, or did you enjoy it?

No, I don't think I was homesick. I was extremely bad at cricket, and didn't like cricket, and said I didn't want to play cricket, and so I was told that if I didn't play cricket, I'd have to fence, which was about one of the good things that happened to me in my early life, because I became a very good fencer, and during the time I was at Stowe, we beat every university and school in the country, and later on, when I was studying abroad, I fenced in France, and I fenced in Germany, and I was preparing to fence for the British Olympic Team when War broke out. So, I owe a lot of my interest to having fenced. In fact, when I was studying banking in Germany, in Hamburg, I actually fenced for Germany against Denmark. It was rather a unique situation, I suppose.

Going back to your early childhood, can you remember what your home was like?

Well, I suppose it was, I mean, I can't remember ...

Whereabouts in Hampstead did you live?

We had an enormous house in Hampstead, which previously belonged to my father's parents. It was a 20-roomed house, with a full-size billiard table, and I mean, life was so different in those days, you really can't compare it. I mean, we weren't, by any means, rich. When Father died there was practically no money left. But we had three servants, and in those days, you didn't really have to be particularly affluent to have that. You know, it was, well, life was general in those times, you know. Mother not being allowed in the kitchen, but the cook coming to her every day for her instructions. And you'd get a leg of lamb put on the table and take a few slices out, and the leg of lamb disappears, it's never seen again. I mean, it was all very extraordinary if you compare it with today, but it wasn't extraordinary compared with other people, as they lived at that time. Not, in our class, which was, I suppose, moderately middle, middle-class family.

Did your mother have hobbies or any occupation besides running the home?

Well, yes, I suppose Mother's main hobby was bridge. She did an enormous amount of needlework, and the old kind of needlework, I've forgotten the names of all the things. Filet.

Yes, Filet lace.

... was one of, there was an enormous amount of Filet lace. And other things I can remember, with holes all over the place, it's also got a special name. And she did, she did a lot of knitting. I think she was the fastest knitter I've ever seen. But then she didn't do anything unless she did it extremely well. I mean, she was absolutely brilliant. She spoke, obviously, English perfect, French, German, Italian, Latin, Greek. Whenever Milton Shulman wrote an article in the paper, she'd write to him next day and explain all the spelling mistakes he'd made, and the grammatical mistakes he'd made, and she certainly spoke English much better than 99% of the English people. And she was very well-read.

And do you feel she brought you up personally, or did you have nannies?

Oh, we had nannies, yes.

Did you see a lot of your mother?

Oh yes, we saw a lot of Mother, yes, oh yes. Yes, I think so. I mean, I can't, I don't know what the average was, but I mean, she was always with us on holidays, and we went out with her.

Was she strict? Were your parents strict with you?

I really can't remember.

You don't remember if it was a highly disciplined home?

Well, I mean, what can one remember? I mean, this is 65 years ago. I mean, I really don't remember. I remember only one of the things, and that was, when food was put on the table, we weren't allowed to comment on it. Whether we liked it or disliked it, we weren't allowed to say, the food was there to be eaten, and that was it. But

And did you have to finish it?

Yes, I think we did, yes, I think we did. But I can't remember any kind of particular tantrums or ... but perhaps they were dealt with by the nanny, I don't know. I suppose one did lead a much more separate life to one's parents than the children do today. Because I can remember Mummy often having her dinner parties, and sometimes we were allowed to come down and show ourselves to the guests, and go back up again.

So the nanny would put you to bed, or your mother would put you to bed, as a child?

I suppose when we were quite young, Nanny would put us to bed, and then Mother would come in and tuck us up.

Did you like your nanny?

Yes, I think so.

Was she German or English?

No, they were all English, yes.

Did you see much of your father?

Yes, yes, very much, yes. Yes, we saw a lot of Father, yes. We went for bike rides with him, went to the zoos with him, oh yes.

And what about your brother and sister, did you get on well with them?

Yes. And we're very close today too. Very nice. My sister's 80, yes, heading for 83, and is terribly active. She works once a week for Oxfam. She gives lessons on china painting. She does pottery and has her own kiln. She makes dresses, she makes underwear, and yes, she's very, she never married because her fiance was one of the best-known pianists in, in Germany, and Jewish, and disappeared during the Holocaust.

And your brother?

My brother's married, lives in London. He's got three children and they're all doing well. We're very close. Quite recently we went on a holiday with him up to Northumbria, climbed over Hadrian's Wall, had a very good time together. Yes, it's very nice, the family get on very well together.

And where does your sister live?

My sister lives also in London. Oh, we see quite a lot of her, she was down here quite recently.

Do you feel it was happy at home?

Oh yes, yes, yes. Certainly. ... My mother's family were all clever, insofar as she wasn't the only brilliant one amongst them. Her brother was Friedl Wertheim, who was a psychiatric person who worked in, in America. He opened the first Psychiatric Clinic for coloured people, in New York, and he was, if anybody in New York was had up for murder, he was the person who had to pronounce on their mental state before they could be prosecuted. He wrote a lot of books, oh, years and years and years ago, on violence and comics, violent comics and everything, which people are still starting to talk about now as though it was something new, and nobody took a blind bit of notice of anything he wrote. I think the only people who took any notice of him were the Canadians, who, I think, incorporated some of the things he wrote, in

their legislation, but he was streets ahead of everybody, envisaging the violent age that would come, which, were he alive today, he would say, and I know was directly relevant, to the violence in the comics, and in cinemas, and books, and all that. Nobody took any notice of him. He's dead. His sister was a doctor in Germany, came over in 1935, I think, took her medical exams again, and became a doctor in England. In Germany she worked for the Pestalotze Frobel Home, quite a bit, and she also was a psychiatrist. Wrote heaps of books and became very well-known, as did her son, and she was the one who pronounced that George the, which one was it who lost the American colonies?

Third?

George III, didn't have

Syphilis was it?

Wasn't mad at all, but that he had Porphyria, and this created quite a stir some years ago, when she wrote this book to say that George III wasn't mad, but this was a disease that he had. But like all psychiatrists, she, she was almost as barmy as her, well, no that's not fair to say that, but she was eccentric! And another, but I mean, brilliant, really quite at the top of her particular tree. And then another brother came over from Germany and started a very big plastic factory, which was a continuation of the work he was doing in Germany, and joined up with the Cussons Group, you know, the soap people, and made a very big business. He is dead. And the fourth member of the family, he went off to South America, and died there. He was in the leather business, and was a very nice chap, perhaps because he wasn't quite so brilliant as all the others! Very brilliant family, very clever family, all of them. I don't know if it's been inherited at all, perhaps those things aren't inherited!

And what about your father's family?

Well, I don't really know an awful lot about Father's family. Father died when he was very young, he was only 56, and he had a brother who worked on the Stock Exchange in England, and whom we used to see from time to time. Another brother of his lived on the Isle of Man, we've never been in touch with the family. They may be still there as far as I know, but there's never been any contact.

What did your father die of?

He, he had some liver complaint, I've forgotten what it was called, which they said was due to some illness that he got during the War.

Was he ill for a long time?

No, not very long.

Did you all have good health in your youth? Were your parents well, and you children well?

Well, Mother only died recently, she was well over 90, and we're, what am I? Getting for 82, and my sister's over 83, and my brother was born in 1915, so how old does that make him? Quite old.

Yes, about 73, something like that.

Yes, and we're all, we're all very fit. Thank Goodness!

Would you like to tell us some more about your schooling, and how you and your interests developed?

I don't quite know how my interests developed, but I think I must have left school when I was 16, having just failed to get the Matric., so that the first year after I left school, I studied in the evening and took Matric. at the same time as I was working as a volunteer at the bank. Father was very keen that I should become a banker, so I worked as a volunteer in a bank, the Military Bank. At that time, of course, very unlike today, instead of getting a large sum of money for working as a volunteer, Father actually had to pay them to take me, which was fairly general in those days. And I quite enjoyed it. That was in 1926, I suppose, yes.

Do you think that, did you have difficulty at school, or do you think you didn't work very hard?

No, I don't think I had any, I don't think I had any difficulty. My best subject was maths and geometry. I was always top of my class in maths and geometry, I remember. In fact, I was so good at maths that our maths teacher, who was quite famous chap called Hextall-Smith, said to me, one day when I said that I'd finished my work in class, he said, "I'll give you a problem I'd like you to work out for me, and I'd like you to give me the geometrical method of trisecting an angle." And after a few days, he said, "How are you getting on?" And I said, "Well, I've covered sheets and sheets of paper, but I haven't got there yet." And he said, "Well, keep working at it, I'd like you to do it." And he kept me on this for about 10 days. And I said, "I really can't do it." And he said, "Well, it's not surprising, nobody else has ever done it!" Which was a bit unfair, but I think he was a bit fed up with me always being first in finishing my homework and everything in mathematics. He was a great character, was Hextall-Smith. He built a boat in his study, and eventually, when it was built, he had to take half of the wall and the window out to get the boat out onto the lake!

Did he write a mathematics book?

Yes, he wrote ...

I've certainly heard of him.

He wrote a book, and on the flyleaf of the book, he wrote, "Daddy, what's that?" - "That's a cow, my son?" - "Why?" - "Checkmate in two moves!" He had that on the flyleaf of his mathematics book. Yes, he was a brilliant chap. Yes, well, then I worked in the, in the City for two years.

You say your father was keen for you to do banking, did you have any preferences? Would you have preferred to do something else?

I remember saying to Father that it would be interesting to be a solicitor, and I remember him saying to me, "You have to be very clever to be a solicitor." And I don't think I ever mentioned it again. It shows how susceptible is when one's a child, and how careful one has to be in what one says to them, or I might have been a solicitor. Anyway, I was brought up as a banker, and after a few years, Father sent me for, as a volunteer, to France for a year, and then to Germany.

Which banks did you go to in France and Germany?

In France, I was at the Banque Nationale de Credit.

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F832 - Side B

At Paris, I worked at the Banque Nationale de Credit, and in Germany, in Hamburg, I worked, first of all, for El Behrens und Sohne, in Hamburg. And then I went to Berlin, and worked in a merchant bank called Wassermann. Had a good time there. My own boat on the Wannsee.

The Wannsee?

The Wannsee - W A N N S E E.

Where did you live in each of these towns? Did you have relations, or did you take digs?

I lived with families.

And you were fluent at French and German?

I'm fairly fluent in French. I'm more fluent in German, yes, yes.

Did you learn those at school, or at home, or did you go to crammers?

Well, I must have listened to them at home, and, of course, prior to the First World War, I think we were almost bilingual, but then the War started when I was five, so I don't know how bilingual you can be at five, but I was always told that I was bilingual at five. But one of the friends I made when I was a volunteer in a merchant bank in London, I've kept up with. In fact, I was over visiting him in Germany only a week ago, we were four days together, which, I suppose, is quite a long friendship, 65 years, surviving the War too, and I knew him before he was married, and now he's a great-grandfather. So we have a lot to discuss when we meet.

Did you get that matriculation?

Yes.

Or was it not necessary?

Well, it's never served me to any purpose, but I did get it. Chiefly due to the fact that the English book was the same that I had at Stowe, which was Hamlet, and so I had that again, twice, so that I now practically know Hamlet by heart.

And which bank did you work in in London?

In London, I worked for S. Japhet, and it became part, I think, of the Charterhouse Group.

So how long did you spend in France and Germany working?

I was about a year in each case. And I was then to have gone and spent a year in America, to finish off my bank training, but then we ran, of course, into the 1929 slump, and so I was called home to earn some money.

Did that affect your father, that slump?

I suppose it must have done, I can't really remember. I think, yes, I think it must have done. I can't really remember in what way.

And, going from bank to bank like this, was this the normal training for a banker at that time? Going to several countries.

Yes, I think so. Certainly in the, certainly in the milieu, which as you can see, were all the merchant banks, and all the merchant banks were Jewish banks. So there again, there was the kind of mixture.

Did you feel this conflict? Did you feel a conflict at all?

I think there were times, there were some times when I doubted, I don't think that I particularly felt it at that time, no. Obviously started to feel it in Germany, it was the start of Hitler, but to start with, it all seemed rather a joke, you know, it all seemed as though they were kind of playing soldiers. One didn't really realise the full implication of it.

Was it 1929 you were in Germany, you said?

Until 1929.

Yes, yes. So what kind of atmosphere was there then?

Oh, I can't really remember. I mean, I ...

Because they had, was sort of poverty-stricken in a way, weren't they, before Hitler? With inflation.

I wouldn't like to pronounce on that time with any kind of feeling of truthfulness, because I don't remember. I can imagine today what I should have felt, whether I did or not, I don't know.

Were you perhaps not all that politically aware at the time?

I shouldn't think I was politically aware at all at that time. I shouldn't think so. I had my banking, I had my friends, I had my boat. I had my fencing. I did an enormous amount of fencing the whole time, and it didn't seem to, to impinge on me in any, in any great way, no.

What about your family's politics? Did your mother or father feel strongly about any political party?

I can't remember ever talking politics with my parents. I can't remember ever talking politics to them.

So what happened next? You then returned to England to earn some money, as you said, because of the slump?

I then returned to England. Got a job with the Anglo-Czech Bank, and they paid me £1 a week, with the promise to increase my salary to £1.25 a week if I did the German correspondence. And after three months I went and said, "Look, I've been doing the German correspondence for three months, what about £1.25?" And they said, "We've just had a letter from Prague that we've got to cut down our staff, so you're sacked." So that was what was generally happening in, in 1929, at the time of the big slump. And then I got another job with a merchant bank, I think again, it was Japhet, I can't remember anything that particularly happened then. Perhaps I got my £1.25, I can't remember!

Did you live at home while you were working in London?

Yes, now I lived at home until, oh, I really can't remember, it must have been round about that time, '29, how old was I? 20. It must have been round that time that I left home and took a flat with my great friend, Stanley Murdoch, son of Murdoch, the piano people. And we had a, a flat in, off the Belsize Road, and we did pretty well everything together.

So what happened to you between about early 1930 and the onset of the War? You just continued living and working in London? Pursuing your hobbies?

Well, I certainly became very politically minded round about that time. I had a great friend, Martin Blake, who was a master at Westminster School, who was fairly Left-Wing, and we had a lot of meetings, I think it was at the time, really, of the Peace People's Union, which sounds rather curious. I remember walking round Marble Arch with a placard, and I used to go with him on winter sports holidays, because he used to take a class. He was a master at Westminster School, he used to take a class winter skiing, and I went and helped him on that. And then, in 1932, I joined a bank which was just starting, called Ullmann and Company, and I started all their Stock Exchange business, and all their Foreign Exchange business. I was a dealer.

Did you enjoy your banking work? Did you feel right on top of it, and confident?

Oh yes, yes. I suppose I should have done after all that training. And then, after a little while, I joined the dealing branch of Ullmann and Company, which entailed working on the Stock Exchange, and doing deals on the Stock Exchange, and, very difficult to remember so far back. And then a little later, I joined a stockbroker, who was doing arbitrage with South Africa. And then, as I was doing arbitrage with South Africa, another stockbroker who wanted to do arbitrage with South Africa, got in touch with me, and said, "We would like to do arbitrage with South Africa, but

we've got no contact out there. Would you go out to South Africa for us?" So they sent me out to South Africa, to arrange a joint account. And that was very exciting, that was in 1937, when the quickest way of going out to South Africa was by flying boat, and that took five days, because they couldn't fly at night, so, of course, one came down at all kinds of places, and I saw a lot of, of South Africa, Alexandria, Daar-es-Salaam, Beira, Naivascha, Kenya, Durban, all on the way to getting to Johannesburg. And I was there for, can't remember, two or three weeks, I suppose, fixing up a joint account. I came back and we did a lot of, a lot of business, they made quite a lot of money out of me. And I worked for them until the War started, but I had, by then, in the evening, joined the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, and that's why, when the War did actually start, I was asked to run an ARP depot in Hampstead. But, of course, before then, I'm jumping forward now to September '39, because, before that, of course, Christmas '38, I went out with Martin Blake to Prague, and it was there that the whole business of bringing out Czech children started. [So, let's have a breather.] Martin Blake was very interested in politics, and he had a lot of friends who were interested in politics, and we had a lot of meetings. We discussed what was going on in England, the world, and, and Hitler, in a general way, and obviously, what was happening in Germany was, as far as England was concerned, of paramount importance at that time, and I met a lot of, of the politicians during that time, you know, we were quite friendly with Russell Strauss, who was a Socialist MP I met. Tom Driberg, and I knew Aneurin Bevan very well, who started the Health Service.

How did you meet them?

Well, I met Russell Strauss through Martin Blake, and I met Tom Driberg, Anuerin Bevan and Jennie Lee, and all those people, down at Russell Strauss' house at Slapham, where we all met and had a riotous time. I think the most exciting person I've ever met was Aneurin Bevan. Extraordinary chap.

What, can you tell a bit about him?

Well, only that, whenever you were in a room with him, I mean, he was so much the centre of everything. He was full of joy and happiness and excitement, and quick-witted. It was really a kind of a privilege to be with him.

You feel he was really inspired in his ideals, do you?

I think he was, definitely, I think. I mean, if he'd have lived, he would certainly be a leader in this country, definitely. It's interesting to see now that when he brought in the Health Service, his main battles were with the doctors, and that's why I'm discounting a lot of the battle that they're having at the moment with the doctors opposing it, because the doctors oppose any change. I mean, this time they might be right, but I very, I rather doubt it. They just don't like it. No, he was a marvellous person. Yes, I was in touch with him quite a lot. I've got letters from him upstairs from the House of Commons, or later, somewhere. And Jennie Lee, of course, was also an extraordinary person.

Was she? In what way?

It was a privilege knowing her.

Was she different from her husband? In what special way was she ...

Well, she was just one of those people who was full of the joie de vivre, more than life size. Marvellous person. Real tragedy that he died so young.

Did you read Mein Kampf at this time?

I've got it, I think I've got one of the first editions of Mein Kampf, but it's rather like, what is it? Rushdie.

Salman Rushdie?

Salman Rushdie's book, everybody talks about it, and nobody's read it. I mean, I've got Mein Kampf, and I talk about it, but I've never read it. I mean, it's a book you can't read really. I suppose you can.

The reason I asked is, I wondered if you were aware at that time, of Hitler's plan, about the Jews?

Oh, I think so. Oh, I think so, oh yes. Because, I mean, a lot of people who were still friends, or relatives in Germany, were coming over. I mean, that was the time when my aunt and uncle came over from Germany as refugees, and stayed with us, and we looked after them. Oh yes, very very much aware of everything that was going on.

Did you begin to have a feeling, at that point, that you ought to do something to help? Or did that not arise until your friend asked for direct help?

I don't think so. I think I very likely, I mean, one, I'd realised, I suppose, as much, if not more, than anybody else, what was going on in Germany, but I don't think anybody in Germany at that time really felt threatened. I think everybody was convinced that what they wanted to happen was going to happen, and that was that Germany and Russia were going to fight it out.

I see.

I don't think anybody thought, I mean, I don't think even the Germans thought that they were going to be involved in that time, in a war with England. The great adversary of Germany was Russia, and it was obvious that Germany and Russia were going to fight, and I should think it was one of the great surprises of history that, in effect, Hitler made a great mistake at that time. If he'd have dealt with Russia first, he would have done much better, I should think. Or if he'd have landed in England, he would've done much better. I mean, I was in the Home Guard, and we had broomsticks, pretending they were rifles! We had nothing.

And with regard to the conflict between Russia and Germany, did you feel it was a territorial one, or a political one?

Oh, I don't know, it's frightfully difficult going back 50 years, and not only saying what happened, but to try and to get me to tell you what my mind thought at that time. I don't know. I don't think it, I doubt if it was a territorial one, I mean, I shouldn't have thought anybody particularly wanted the territory, I should have thought it was a purely political one.

In other words, a Communist threat against Germany, at the time?

Yes, I think so. Because, I mean, there was a Communist threat against Germany and they were, they were, I mean, one of the reasons for Hitler breaking out was his, the internal difficulties, and that's always the danger. That's what could well happen in Iraq now. The worse that it goes for Iraq indoors, the worse it can be for the world, because that will be the time you break out to divert their attention. But it's, I mean, one can remember, to a certain extent I can remember what happened so far back, but to remember reasons and whys and wherefors, and all that, would be really guessing what one was thinking at that time.

When you were working in the bank in Germany, was that a Jewish bank?

Yes.

And did you feel any problem with Hitler, through the banking world at that time?

Ah well, I, I mean, I left in '29.

Yes, that was before Hitler, wasn't it.

No, it wasn't before Hitler, but it was before Hitler became a general menace, but it wasn't before Hitler. But, I mean, I don't know how many people in '29, were actually taking Hitler very seriously.

What happened to the bank you worked with in Germany?

Oh, they all folded up, yes.

So that when your friend Martin Blake asked you to come out to Prague, it was already in the context of you being very concerned with what was happening there, in Europe? And already having refugee relatives from Germany in your home.

Well, I, I really can't say. I really don't know. I mean, I was due to go on a trip to Switzerland, as we did most years, and Martin Blake just rung me up on a Friday, and said, "Look, I haven't got a minute to talk to you on the phone, but I'm going out to Prague tomorrow, and I know what I'm doing will be of interest to you. Give up your winter sports holidays, and come and join me." And I hadn't got a clue what it was about. And I mean, we, we were very good friends, he knew what interested me. I knew he wouldn't say it unless he was convinced that it would be something that interested me, and so I followed him out there and met him at the Hotel Sroebek, and

he told me what, what was happening there, and would I like to come and see what was going on.

Can you remember now,

I went round to the Camps that existed, where a lot of the Sudetan Germans, who hadn't got any other place to live in, in Prague or in Czechoslovakia, were living.

Where were those camps?

Just outside Prague, and I was taking, on the second or third day, I found myself actually taking other people round the camps. I took Eleanor Rathbone round, who was a Member of Parliament, and I took the Reverend Rosalyn Lee round, who was the Head of the Unitarian Church of England, and I met, going out there, a fellow called Mr. Hales. I think I met him at Nürnberg, and he said he was going to Prague to do business, and I said, "Well, you won't be able to do much business in Prague." I said, "If you want to see what I'm up to, come and join me at the Sroebeck." And he joined me at the Hotel Sroebeck, and said, "You're right, I can't do any business here." He, incidentally, was the chap who started the Blue Riband across the Atlantic, you know, the Hales Trophy. And I told him that, you know, "Today I'm going out to one of these camps, do you want to come with me?" So I took him round the camps, and I remember, after about half an hour, he was missing, and I went back through the Nissen huts and found him crying his eyes out on one of the beds. It was very disturbing, what one saw.

Can you describe what one saw?

Well, it was just a lot of people living in, in rather claustrophobic conditions, in Nissen huts.

Why were the Sudetan Germans put into these huts?

Well, there was nowhere else to put them. I mean, they fled when Hitler marched into Sudetanland.

And how many do you think there were in each hut?

Oh, I've no idea.

Approximately? Was it tight-packed?

Pretty tight, yes.

When you first arrived in Prague, and Martin Blake told you what was going on, can you remember what he said, I don't mean word for word, I mean, can you tell me what information you got?

Well, he said, "I'm working for the British Committee for Refugees" in Czechoslovakia, and he was working with Doreen Warrenner, who was the

representative of the British Committee in Prague, and their job was to bring out those people who were being, or would be endangered by the Germans, if and when they marched in, and that's what their job was.

Do you know who had set up that Committee in the first place?

Well, the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia. There were a whole lot of people working out there. There was the S.A.M's Committee, there was the Lord Mayor's Committee, there were the Quakers, there were the Unitarians, there were a lot of people, but the main Committee actually bringing people out, was the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia.

What I really meant was, was this a Government inspired Committee, or private people?

I'm not sure, I think it was all private, but obviously they had to work together with the Home Office, or they wouldn't have been able to get anybody in. ... I don't know if anything particularly happened to me, except that Martin Blake and Doreen Warrener and all these people just showed me what was happening in Prague, and saying that, "We're getting the elderly people out as far as we can, but there's no way that the British Committee can deal with the problem of the children, and we don't know if anything can be done about them anyway, because we don't know what the conditions will be in England, for bringing the children in, but, would you like to have a go, and see what you can do?" And, of course, at that time, as far as I was concerned, it wasn't a question of bringing out Jewish children, it was a question of bringing out children. And there were many children out there who were endangered, who were certainly not Jewish. I mean, there were the writers, and communists, and there were five different Organisations in Prague, each of whom were dealing with a particular section, as I say, Jews, and the Catholics, the Communists, and the writers, and I said, "Yes, I would see if I could do anything." It would be a question, of course, of getting lists of all these children who were, presumably, in danger, and for that reason, it wouldn't be possible to work on five lists, it would have to be one list. And, of course, all these five Societies were very keen that their ...

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You were talking about the lists of children to come out of Prague.

Well, eventually, as I couldn't get them to co-ordinate, to arrange between themselves to get me one list, I just rang up one of the Organisations, and said, "I've got the list of one of the Organisations, which is the one I'll deal with. If you don't want to send me yours, you, you won't be considered at all."

You were talking to the various Organisations about their lists?

Yes, well, I mean, the result of that was that next morning, of course, they all rushed round, and I had all the lists that I required, and that was the start, at least, of making one co-ordinated list of the children whom these Organisations felt were endangered. And I told them all, of course, I hadn't got a clue whether I could do for them, it depended on what happened when I got back to England. But it was a crazy time in Prague, really, because we were followed about all over the place. I had people coming into my room at about six in the morning, and I didn't get to bed till about 2 o'clock in the morning. I slept about four hours every night. And then at breakfast, you'd see a gentleman quite near you, and you would suddenly notice that he was on the pavement when you went out, and you saw him a little later on in the day. So the Germans were extremely active in Prague, at that time.

And what were people visiting you in your hotel room for?

Well, they're all asking for, to be given priority treatment in any rescue operation which I might be able to mount. I remember being in a hotel with Doreen Warrener, discussing what was going on and she said, in German, "I think until that gentleman, over there on the sofa, reading a newspaper, leaves, we'd better just talk about the weather." And he got up and left. And we were followed about by the Germans.

What do you think they would have done to you?

Not in any kind of sinister way, I mean, there was, I think the last thing the Germans wanted to do, was to pick a quarrel at that time, with an English person.

I wonder why they were following you?

Because the British Committee for Refugees in Czechoslovakia, were trying to rescue all those people that they were trying to get their hands on. So, I mean, we were obviously people that they were interested in seeing what we were up to, very much so. I met a Swedish girl, who was there under the auspices of the Swedish Red Cross, with a permit to get out 20 children, so in my daily discussions with Doreen, I told her about this girl, and Doreen, it was her business to know what was going on, and she knew all the people in the Embassies, so next day she came to me, and she said, "You can't possibly meet that girl again, because she's a Swedish spy, and

known to be a Swedish spy." And, I thought, well, having been warned, this is all right, her credentials are true. I mean, her credentials are to bring out 20 children, so we managed to get 20 children to Sweden through her, and I said this to Doreen, I said, "Despite what you've said, you may be pleased to know that the first 20 children were flown out to Sweden today." And she said, "Well, the Ambassador told me that I had to tell you not to deal with her, but I knew it would go on. And so that's jolly good." And so those were the first 20 children we actually got out, through a German spy!

So she was kind of using that as a cover, I suppose, was she?

Oh yes, definitely. Very good cover too. I mean, the cover was genuine and had to be. Oh, it was a heartbreaking time in Prague, at that time. Nobody in England wanted to believe that anything serious was happening. They always believed that Hitler's last territorial ambition was his last territorial ambition. But, of course, it never was.

Did you see the parents of many of the children?

Oh, I saw so many people at that time, yes, I'm sure I saw a lot of them. But I can't remember any details of it. I mean, I was there for a fortnight, and I hardly ever got any sleep, and it was a question of not only getting the lists, but getting an office started, get somebody to run the office, if and when we could get anything organised in England.

And which month in '39 was this? Or was it '38?

It must have been in early '39, I could look it up, but it was roundabout, I should think, early January '39.

Yes. Yes, that makes sense, doesn't it.

I hope so?

Well, it must do in terms of when the invasion was, and you missing your skiing holiday and so on. Yes, that makes sense.

I remember one evening, I came home very late, very tired, and got to the main street, Klamesti Namesti and started walking up and there was a big demonstration going on, with a big band, and I thought, "This is fine", and so I joined them, we marched, do you know Prague at all?

Yes.

We marched up the Klamesti Namesti, and when we got to the top, a whole lot of police with truncheons appeared to disperse this demonstration, and I disappeared into a cafe, and when I came out, I had to be very careful, because if you talked to anybody in German, of course, they turned away and wouldn't answer you, but if you could, "Ne rozimun Ceski Rozumin Nemetski", and then "Englandsky", or something,

then they'd talk to you. And I said to this chap, in German, you know, "What the hell's been going on here?" "Oh", he said, "Nothing", he said, "the police have just broken up an anti-Jewish demonstration." So I thought, "Well, to be in Prague, trying to rescue mostly Czech children, and then taking part in an anti-Jewish demonstration, must be a record! And then I wrote to the stockbroking firm I was working with in London, and told them what I was doing, and that I wanted a little more time, and they wrote back and said they can't understand why I'm wasting my time trying to help these people in Czechoslovakia, when there was money to be made on the Stock Exchange in London. And that was one of the first reasons which decided me not to go back to the Stock Exchange again, after the War.

Was that the general attitude there, do you feel? At that time?

I would say, if Hitler had marched into the City, around about that time, there would certainly have been a lot of people who would have received him with open arms, because most of the people, at that time, thought him to be invincible, and after, all, you always want to be on the winning side, irrespective of your ... I mean, this is what's happening now with Iraq, isn't it. I mean, we've really got to the stage between March '39, between September '39, and March '40, when the War really started, which is, kind of, the time when people pick up sides, and that's what they're really doing now with Iraq, you know. It'll either be contained in some way, or blow up to the greatest catastrophe the world's ever seen, but in the meantime

You returned to England, and

I think when I returned to England, the first thing was to see whether, at all, it was feasible to bring children into the country. I checked again with the British Committee, and they said they were far too busy dealing with the adults, to be able to deal with the children. But I got in touch with the Home Office, and they told me that if I could get a guarantor who would look after the children, I think it was until they were 18, and could get a £50 deposit against possible expenses if they were to emigrate further, they would give me a, a permit for them to come into this country. So I started working from my own place where I was living in Hampstead, up near Hampstead Heath, and a girl came and said she would help me in the evenings, doing my, my correspondence, because I could only work in the evenings, obviously, as I was back on the Stock Exchange during the day. And we had notepaper printed, with the official name of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, and just wrote underneath it, "Children's Section", and then I had my private address. And we got various articles in the paper, telling people what we were doing, that we were looking for guarantees for these children, and we started getting a certain amount of response. Also, people who had been in Prague knew what we were doing, and they were trying to help. And we got these lists from Prague, giving us the details of the various children that they thought most urgently required to get out of danger by staying in Prague. When we found somebody who was willing to take a child, or guarantee a child, we sent them a post-card on which there were pictures of six children, and asked them to choose the one that they would accept, and then we wrote to the Home Office saying that we had a guarantee for such and such, and such a child, and would they give us a visa. And in every case where we asked for a visa under those conditions, we got it. But, of course, it was a very slow process, until

such time as somebody brought us the name of the all the correspondents of the British Committee, throughout the country, and we were then able to write to them direct, appealing on behalf of the children, which they, of course, thought was officially the British Committee, which, in fact, it wasn't, and then we got a steady, but not really sufficient number of people willing to take children, which resulted, in the end, with about 640 children being brought out. We did, at that time, try and get assistance from America, and I went to all the important people in the American Government, and in the Jewish Community, and the answers that I got, which I've still got in my records ...

(gap in recording here)

You got a lot of excuses from America.

We were also helped by, particularly the Picture Post, who ran articles, which explained what was going on in Prague, and what we were trying to do, and when we got the actual visas back, or the travel documents back from the Home Office, we sent these out to Prague, and they arranged the transports from over there through Cedok, who became more and more difficult people to deal with, because we had to have private trains, which were locked on leaving Prague, and they had to have so many people in attendance on the trains, to look after the children. And very often, just a day or so before the train was due to leave, I'd get a message to say that unless the Cedok were sent another so much money, £1,000 or £2,000 they weren't going to let the transport leave. So all this added to the complications of an already very complicated situation.

Where did you get the money to pay Cedok?

I can't remember who gave us the money, but we got money. The first money we got was from the Reverend Rosalynn Lee, who sent us £100 from a sermon she gave at her Unitarian Church in South Wales. And I can't really remember who gave us the money. Mind you, we'd a hell of a lot of money, it was only a question of a few thousand pounds. We always seemed to have enough just to, just to carry on.

But it wasn't given by the British Government?

No. No, towards the end, rather late, the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, who saw that, in fact, they were doing the business that they said they wouldn't, because, after all, we were operating in their name, and so although they didn't really acknowledge us immediately as legitimate, having pinched their name, they were, in fact, doing the business, and rather they belatedly, they allowed us a room in Bloomsbury House, and we worked there, and they did allocate us some money then, but that was a bit late. So we had the office in Prague, which was getting all the children together, and we were getting the guarantors in England for the children. And then, of course, it was the question of co-ordinating the arrival of the train from Prague, with all the guarantors coming to Liverpool Street Station to collect their, to collect their children.

Did you find the guarantors through your various contacts, through various charitable organisations?

Well, as I said, the contacts came through the articles which we had written in the newspapers, and all these letters which we wrote appealing to the various correspondents throughout the country of the British Committee. And I think that really was, you see, I suppose that as we had these correspondents in various parts of the country, they very likely got articles in their local newspapers.

So you didn't go to Prague again after that initial visit? You did the rest of it from London?

I must have been the only person in England who, in August '39, had a visa to go to Prague, and I, I was practically going, and then there was so much to do here I couldn't get away, and I suppose it was quite lucky I didn't go, because I certainly would never have got back.

Do you remember what hall, or room you organised at Liverpool Street Station for the meeting of these children?

It wasn't a room and it wasn't a hall, it was the platform, the arrival of the train they arrived in, which, you can imagine, with a couple of hundred children arriving, with tickets with their round their necks, and a couple of hundred people who were trying to find out which child they were, and getting them to get their luggage, and sign for the child, it was as near chaos as I think one should get. And one was always having added problems like the Rabbis who arrived to collect children on a Saturday, and refused either to carry the luggage, or to sign for the children. Mother dealt with them very effectively, but it all added to the strain.

The reason I asked you about a hall, is that I can remember a hall when I arrived, and waiting in this hall to be collected, and I wondered where that was?

Well, I should think there may have been some people taken off if the parents, or the guarantors rather, weren't there immediately, I dare say they produced some kind of waiting room for the children.

Maybe it was just a waiting room?

I really can't remember. I only remember the chaos on the main, on a platform.

And this must have happened at regular intervals as each train arrived?

Well, yes. There were only four or five actual trains, because we waited until we, I mean, as we had to have closed trains, we had to wait until there were about 150, 200 children ready to leave.

Were you liaising with anybody in Prague besides Cedok?

Oh yes, I mean, I had an office there.

Yes, so you still had people there.

Trevor Chadwick who was running, and he was the one who was getting the lists, getting the people together, getting the children on to the train, seeing that they were on the train. Seeing this last terrible goodbye between the children and the grown-ups. I think a lot of the children didn't understand why their parents were weeping, they thought they were going on a holiday, or an outing.

And was Cedok under the thumb of the Nazis by then? Is that why they were being so difficult?

Oh completely. Because, I mean, all the children we brought over, were after March '39, so I mean, all the children we brought over, it was at a time when the Germans were in control of Czechoslovakia.

How did you meet Trevor Chadwick, was he a friend of yours?

Well, when I was out in Prague, he came out and said that he'd heard, I don't quite know how, what was going on in Prague, and he'd given up his job as a schoolmaster at Swanage, and what could he do to help? And he had given up his job, and I said, "Well, you've obviously got longer than I've got, because I've got to get back to London. If I can fix anything up in London with regard to getting visas, would you run the office?" And he ran the office in Prague. Very efficiently, too.

Did you have any contact with him after this whole business was over? He got out safely before the start of the War, did he?

He actually came back to England before the last transport came. And I haven't seen him since. I have heard from his wife fairly recently, but that was a wife that he married, oh, years after the end of the War, so she would have known nothing about all this.

He's died now, has he?

He's died, he's dead now. No, because it wasn't really a difficult business once one had got the organisation going. I mean, one had difficulties and frustrations, like with the Barbican Mission. I don't know if you know anything about the Barbican Mission?

No I don't.

The Barbican Mission was an organisation who brought out Jewish children to proselytise them on condition that they became Christian.

Oh, I didn't know about that.

Did you know Veras Harry?

Yes.

He came out of that.

Oh did he, mmmm.

And one of the people that the Esther Rantzen programme, who is a vicar now.

Yes, I know who you mean, yes. I forget his name, but I know who you mean.

He came out as a Jew, and was converted by the Barbican Mission. And, of course, I had deputations from the Jewish Community, to see what I was doing, and I must stop it, how disgraceful it was, and I told them that I had no particular bent, and I didn't start this whole business to save the Jews, I started this whole business to save children. And I said, "Proselytised Jews, to me, are a more satisfactory thing to do in life, than having a dead one."

... Just saying about people objecting to you, bringing in

... They were, they were very cross with me at the time, but this business of rather having a dead Jew than a living proselytised one, seemed to me absolutely unbelievable, you know. But they were very cross at the time, very cross. I believe it's packed up now, but there's a whole book which I've been sent, which I've got upstairs, which I think Harry gave me, about the Barbican Mission, and they were very successful, and I suppose that we did bring out Jews, who were proselytised who otherwise would have been killed, so I suppose they, I mean, as far as I am concerned, that was quite satisfactory, and never quite certain, with regard to this business, the more I learn about the Jews and the non-Jews, as I was telling you earlier on, the more, the less I understand it all, I mean, insofar as I told you, they can't make up their mind whether I'm a Christian or a Jew, but obviously, to them, it's extremely important so ... but it didn't figure in my scheme of things. We were told, at the time, that once we'd collected all these children in Prague, and brought them into Prague, that if, for any reason, they then couldn't get out of the country, they would be very much exposed, and the last transport which would have been our biggest, was due to leave on the day War was declared, and one of the things that has come out of all this publicity that has occurred recently, is confirmation that lots of these people who came over knew a number of the children who were on this last transport, and none of them have ever been heard of again. They were all killed. So these are the kind of things which I, you know, find a bit shattering, after all these years, to suddenly have all this brought up.

But you must have deduced that they wouldn't have survived, yourself, I expect?

Well, I mean, when this particular bringing over of the children stopped in 1939, it was the day that War was declared, and I had no time to look after the after-care, Mother was helping with that at a hostel in Hindhead, if any guarantor broke down, they were looking after the children. But, as far as I was concerned, the whole thing was over, and some of the children obviously were doing very well, some of the children not so well, and some of the children quite obviously disliked intensely, their

new surroundings they found themselves in. And I, to be quite honest, didn't concern myself with any of that. I mean, they were saved, they were brought over here, one had confirmed immediately that the people who were still over there, to put it mildly, would be very badly dealt with, and I was then doing ARP work, and I went to France with the first contingent of the Red Cross, and then I was in the RAF, so I mean, for me it was a thing that had happened, wasn't, I wouldn't say I wasn't interested, but I had no, nothing to do with the, with the after-care.

Would you like to say just a little bit more about the part your mother played in it?
Both before and during?

Yes, Mother helped in the office. When I was working from home, to start with, then I was just working there with this lady, or this girl, who came every evening to help with the enormous correspondence we had, who, curiously enough, afterwards I introduced to Martin Blake, and he married her, and then, when we got an office, as I told you we did later on, with the British Committee ...

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When we got a room, an office from, at Bloomsbury House, then we had three or four people working there, and Mother was in charge of the office. And when the War started, the office was moved down into, made more into a hostel, at Hindhead, which Mother ran.

So did she have to get a staff in and run quite a big operation? What sort of size was it?

I think I only visited it twice. I think it was a fair size. I mean, it wasn't, it wasn't a school or anything, it was a large private house, so they couldn't have had many people there at any one time, but I think for what they did, the work was quite important. I mean, after all, those children who were placed in homes, where the guarantor either died, or the whole thing broke down, or the child needed saving and a new home found, it, it really was quite important. The only thing is that I had nothing to do with it.

Did your mother find other foster homes for the children?

I suppose they must have done, yes, they must have done. I'm trying not to answer anything by guesswork.

It's interesting to speculate though, somebody must have done it.

She must have done, she and her staff must have found other homes for them. And, after all, they had the connections to all these British Committees, the British Committee for Refugees, correspondents throughout the country, all of whom had committees and organisations, so the, the framework was set.

Yes, the network was there.

I mean, once you set up a framework for this business, it's just a question of somebody keeping the mechanism going. And all I did was really to create the framework which they continued to keep going.

Would you like, then, to describe what happened to you during the War?

As I say, I belonged to the St. John's Ambulance, and the Hampstead Local Authority got in touch with me and said, "Would you start an Air Raid Precautions Depot in Hampstead?" And I said "Yes." And so I ran an ARP Depot and organised it at the beginning of the War, and well, there are all kinds of stories that happened there, I don't think they're particularly relevant. And then, they were recruiting for the First Red Cross Ambulance Unit to go to France, when the War started, and I volunteered for that, and went over to France, only, of course, to be driven out when the Germans reached Abbeville. We scraped out through, we couldn't get to Dunkerque, we came

out via Calais, and then I, through the Red Cross, met up with an officer who was going back into France, to look for British officers in the various hospitals in Northern France, so I went back again to France, and got out again. And I, at that time, of course, why I was in the ARP Depot and in the Red Cross, and later, for a year, I joined Martin Blake at the British Council, was because I was a pacifist, and I couldn't see any point in fighting the War, which, it had seemed to me at the time, could have been prevented, and it was all a nonsense, and nobody took it seriously when they should have done, in trying to stop Hitler, and that I didn't want any part of it. And, of course, when you're really in a war, as Shakespeare said, "Bear't that the opposed may be aware of you", you were, you get dragged in, and so I, I joined the RAF, having been a, a pilot myself, I'd learnt to fly in 1932, in an aerodrome in North London, and I'd flown myself, so I thought, "I'll join the RAF", only to be told I couldn't fly in the RAF because I wore glasses, and so I did the training and became what they called a "Link Trainer/Instructor", which, in fact, was a machine for teaching pilots how to fly at night on the standard instrument panel. And I did that till the end of the War. At the end of the War, they sold a lot of these link trainers to France, and as I spoke French, they sent me over to France to teach the French how to use them, but as none of the machines ever worked, and they never had any mechanics to repair them, we spent most of our time with the fishermen, duck shooting, and fishing at La Rochelle, which was very nice! And then, La Rochelle, let me think. Yes, then I was demobilised, and I thought that, having spent so much of my pre-war time, yes, pre-war time, in saving refugees from Hitler, the best thing to do after the War was to join an organisation which got people back to where they belonged. And I joined the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees, which worked in, in London, just off Berkeley Square, and this was just at the time that the International Refugee Organisation was starting to work in Geneva, and after about six months they told us we were all going to be sent off to Geneva, and become part of the International Refugee Organisation. So then I found myself in Geneva, at an enormously increased salary, tax-free, because we were working on the American scale. In fact, at a, we were earning a fee which took all the kind of charity side of what we thought we were doing, away. And I think, which was the start, really, of the reason why a lot of these United Nations specialised agencies never work, because they paid them so much, that instead of it becoming a good thing to do, from one's feeling of charity and point of view, it became a business in itself, and so it all, eventually, got into the hands of, really, international civil servants, which is one of the reasons that bedevils it now, there's no kind of idealism left in it, or very little, whereas to start with, when we were in London, we were earning a pittance, we all did it because we thought it was the right thing to do, and then suddenly they sent us to Geneva, and trebled our salary, told us we hadn't got to pay any tax, which, I suppose, yes, I mean, it was very nice, but it was not what we were looking for. And when I was in Geneva, I became Assistant Director to the Reparation Section, under a fellow called Abba Schwartz, who was the very able Director of the Department, and our job was to liquidate all the loot which the Army had collected from all over the place, which the Germans had taken from the people who had been working in concentration camps, and it wasn't a very kind of pleasant job, you know. You had crates and crates of false teeth and crates of jewellery and crates of everything you can imagine, which we had to sort through, and liquidate, and the money had to be distributed according to the, what was it called? The Paris, the Paris Agreement, or Reparation, or something, I think it was the Paris Reparations Agreement, whereby

90% of the actual money collected was sent to the Jewish Agency, and 10% was sent to Christian organisations. They reckoned that 90% of the persecuted people had been Jews, and about 10% non-Jews, and we dealt, I dealt with, in Geneva, the money went to a fellow called Caplan, and he was, at that time, treasurer of the Jewish Agency, and, of course, a little later, became the first Chancellor of the Exchequer of Israel, and it was a question of sorting all this stuff out, taking it to America, and selling it and turning it into cash. So, that was another, I had all these pictures of all this loot, which was deposited in the vaults of the Reichsbank in Frankfurt, and I was able to take photos down there, big exposures, and had a wonderful record of all this stuff, which was really absolutely unique. And, when I had my first meeting with Betty Maxwell, I thought this was the book she was going to be interested in, but she wasn't interested in it at all. And nobody's ever been interested in it, although there's a long story all about, all about this loot and what it was, and pictures which otherwise don't exist any more.

And it's very important, because people have been denying that this ever happened, and this kind of picture,

All this stuff was melted down. ...

Yes, well that's good.

The Yad Vashem have got it. But I was surprised nobody used it as a story in this country, because when I went to see Betty Maxwell, I thought this was by far the most interesting of the two stories. She didn't seem to think so, anyway.

(gap in recording here)

My life really started, because then I moved from Geneva to Paris, and joined the International Bank, where I met my wife. And that was over 40 years, so we've still got 40 years to go!

That's all right. So what happened then?

(break in recording again)

Well, just before the War was over, I was seconded to a section of the Air Force called PR8, which dealt with exhibitions, and I took an RAF Exhibition all over Europe, Oslo, Paris, Brussels. In fact, we had an exhibition going, an RAF Exhibition going in Brussels at the time of the Battle of the Bulge, we were already, presumably thinking that the War was over, and the Germans nearly got to Brussels. And then I took an exhibition to Prague, which was a big undertaking. I've got all the pictures upstairs of that. I've forgotten where we had the exhibition. It was a big exhibition in Prague, of the RAF, and I think our Ambassador there was called Nichols, and I think the General Viserik, and we put on a, put on a, a big RAF exhibition which created a lot of interest in Prague, at that time, which went very well, until one of my sergeants caught diphtheria, which created a bit of a problem, to say the least, because I was the only one who could interpret in the hospital, so I had to run the exhibition, run over to the hospital, and interpret, and rush, rush off to the

Ambassador, to see if he could get the various medicaments flown out from England, which this poor chap needed, so it was all rather traumatic. Unfortunately, eventually he died, and I had the job of bringing his coffin back to England, and the Czechs, because he'd died of diphtheria, which was contagious, put him into a double coffin, which was absolutely enormous, and we went off to the, the airport, and I can't remember why, but for some reason, the special aircraft which had been arranged, couldn't take off, and we were stuck there, or I was stuck there with the coffin, and eventually, it had to be put on an ordinary passenger aircraft. It was kind of put at the back, as though it was a bench, and when we got to England, it seemed to me that the whole of the RAF, all the important people of the RAF had been sent out to meet us, including, of course, the, the wife, who fell round my neck in a paroxysm of tears, which made it all very awkward, because while she was weeping in one ear, the RAF sergeant was saying, my lieutenant went and, "The coffin's too bloody big to go in the hearse", you see! And I said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, take it into the workshop, and get the legs chopped off." So he got it into the workshop and had the legs chopped off, and it went into the hearse. And then we went off, and the coffin was deposited in the wife's home, with strict instructions that she mustn't open it. And when it came to a few days later, where the official Church service and burial was to take place with all the RAF pomp and firing of guns, she asked me to come in, and I came in, and she'd opened up and laid out the corpse, which was a bit awful, because he died of diphtheria. And it was pouring with rain, and we got, we got to the Church, and we had the church ceremony, and we walked in the pouring rain from the church to the graveside, and they had all the coffin, kind of all the RAF round, and the people were just ready to lower the coffin into the grave, and it wouldn't go, it was too big! Which was absolutely awful, because then she really went into absolute hysterics. It was really quite terrible. We had to hoick this thing out while they made the grave bigger. Terrible experience really.

What were the conditions like in Prague on that visit? Or did you have no time even to notice?

Well, we had a terrible journey. We got bogged down in the mountains between Nurnburg and Prague, and we got, one of the cars went into a ditch, and we had to pull it out, and it was thick snow, and it was a terrible time. And it was the time of the American Lend Lease, and just as we got to Nürnberg, apparently the Lend Lease Agreement expired, and the Americans wouldn't let us have any petrol. And so we were absolutely stuck, and it was left to me to sort something out. And eventually, I found an American sergeant, and I said, "Look, we've got to do something." And we had a lot of iron rations on board, which they wanted, so we swapped iron rations for cans of petrol, which got ourselves through to Prague. And when we got to Prague, we thought, "This is absolutely marvellous", and so we all went in to have a drink of Czech beer, and when we came out, all the rest of our rations had been pinched! But the Exhibition itself went very well, it created a lot of interest. I've got some pictures upstairs that they gave me as a kind of memento of that occasion. But that's going back now, to '45, and I've gone forward, haven't I?

You had gone forward to Paris, but we just went back to Prague because it was interesting. Did you know then about the fate of all the Jews in Czechoslovakia,

when you were there in '45? The news about the camps, concentration camps was already known by then wasn't it.

I think it was all known by then, I mean, it didn't, it wasn't, in any way, the centre of what I was doing.

So do you want to continue where we left off in Paris, when you met your wife?

Well, yes, I suppose I can. Well, I met my wife in Paris, or met my intended in Paris, and she was Danish, so it was a question of arranging a wedding in Denmark, as an English person living in France, which entailed an enormous amount of writing, telephoning, and sending information backwards and forwards, which seemed to go on absolutely endlessly. And I remember the last letter we got was, "Everything is now in order, but you haven't told us what music you want when you leave the church." So we wrote back and said, "Look, surely you can sort that out for yourselves, we've really done enough answering." Now, what in fact happened, we were in church, in Denmark, you get married in Frak, in the white tie, in full evening dress. So we got married in full evening dress, and we were in church, and lots of our friends had come over from England, and all our relatives were there from England, and a cousin of mine from France was there, and my best man, Stanley Murdoch, with whom I told you, we shared a flat earlier on, and we were standing there, with the ceremony over, waiting for them to start the music up, which they had chosen for us to march out of church, and they'd got "God Save the King", and, of course, this seemed all right for the Danes, but Stanley Murdoch wouldn't move, and you can't march out of church to "God Save the King", and we just stood there. And then they, we thought, well, one verse, let's get it over and we'll be all right. And they started on the second verse, whereupon we had to, I should think we're the only people who have marched out of church to "God Save the King"! And then there were two days of Danish celebration. Every relative of Greta's had to put on a bigger party than the last one, so there were great celebrations for two days.

Were your families happy about the union?

Oh yes, yes. It all went very well, I think they were all very delighted that, at 40, I had at last decided to get married. And then we went back to Paris, and they were going to send us, we were in Paris to supervise the first loan paid by the International Bank to France, and the loan of the International Bank to France was to various major projects that they had on, like building a dam, and paying for coal for certain industries, and the only thing we had to see, was that none of the coal that they were financing, was used to go to any of their naval ship plants, and it was all a bit of a farce because we spent our life delving through paperwork at their various Ministries, and we said, "Aha! We've found some of the coal that has gone straight to Toulouse, it shouldn't have gone there." And they said, "Oh well, forget about that piece of paper, we'll give you another piece instead." So all that kind of supervision of the International Loans is, is very phoney. And then they were going to send us to do the same thing in Finland, when the whole thing folded up, and they thought as well, that it wasn't quite fulfilling it's duty, and what they could be doing there, could be just as easily done from Washington, so it was wound up. And we found ourselves with an enormous number of dollars, we'd been vastly overpaid, and both of us were earning,

and we knew if we came back to England, we had to surrender all these dollars, so we then became the first tourists to visit America, and we were in America for about three months, and we were over there at the same time as my very rich cousin from Paris was over there, and so, although we were travelling steerage, he was travelling first class, and so we were invited to all meals in his first class restaurant. The trouble was that it was so rough, we could never eat anything. And then when we got to America, he said, "Well, look, I'm going fishing down in Florida, if you like, you can take my car and meet me down in Florida." So we had a car, where we travelled right down through the Smokey Mountains, Jacksonville, the Tallahassie trail, right down to meeting him in Key West, and then all the way back again. We had a marvellous time. And then we went up into Canada, Victoria Falls, met some of the people I'd been working with in Geneva. It was really interesting, as a matter of fact, because every American we met said, "Where are you going to live?" And we said, "Well, we're going back to England", and their immediate reaction was, "You don't like it here, then?" And we said, "Well, we've only come to look round." But, they'd never seen a tourist. To them, somebody just coming to look, everybody they'd ever seen were refugees, and to be a tourist in America, was something that they, just beyond their comprehension. If you come to America, and don't stay, you don't like it! Then, I suppose, at that time, we could have lived anywhere. We could have lived in America, we could have gone back, we could've gone, emigrated to Denmark, we could've stayed in Canada, we could've come back to England. We decided to come back to England. So we came back to England. And that's where most of my life really, has been spent, so if you want me to start my real life, it starts now.

F833 - End of Side B

F834 - Side A

So you decided to come back to England to live?

We decided to come back to England to live, we'd no idea what I was going to do. I was determined not to go back to the Stock Exchange, but I didn't know what else I was going to do instead. And Mother, actually, met somebody at her Bridge Club, who was starting, who had just bought a factory down in Maidenhead and was looking for a partner, and so she introduced me to him, and he happened to be somebody I already knew before the War, quite well, because we worked together on the Stock Exchange! Which was rather a coincidence! And he had just taken over a factory in Maidenhead, making ice lollipops. And so I worked with him as Co-Director, and we moved down to Maidenhead. Until we found a house in Maidenhead we lived with my sister in Hampstead. Then we came down to Maidenhead, and we found a house, and I worked with this friend of mine, oh, for some years, and he was doing very well. And then the firm was bought out by Lyons, and I didn't get on with them at all, you know, having worked either for myself, or mostly for myself, and then suddenly to be in an enormous organisation where the higher you get, the greater the jealousy, and the more back-biting you seem to encounter, didn't suit me at all. And after a few years of a rather miserable existence like that, I left. And I joined a firm of the gentleman who lived opposite us in Maidenhead, who ran an engineering business, and I worked for him, doing the administration of this metal working business, for quite some years, and it was then that I joined the Rotary Club in Maidenhead, met a lot of new friends, and as we had a speaker one day, talking about a Housing Association which refused housing for the aged, I became involved with the Abbeyfield Society, in which I am still occupied, and have been now for the last 15 years. So that at the present moment, the two things that I'm interested in are the Abbeyfield Society, where I do a lot for both the local Society and for Head Office at Potters Bar. There are in all, in the country, about 600 Abbeyfield local Societies, running about 2,000 Old Peoples' Homes. So it's quite a big organisation. And I spend a lot of my time doing that. And a lot of my time working for the mentally handicapped, because we had a mentally handicapped son, who died at the age of seven, which really got me to know about that type of illness, so that's cutting it a bit short towards the end, my main, what I've been doing. I've got a son who is 38, who has just got married, and his business is mostly concerned with conference work. He lives in London, and I've got a daughter who is a year and a half younger than he is. She's been married for about four years, and has got a boy of about just over two, and is just expecting their second child. She's living in a very secluded spot near Hereford, and who practises homeopathy.

Is this the house that you bought originally? Have you been in this house for 40 years?

No. We lived the other side of Maidenhead originally, which was very nice, but we wanted to get our children into a certain school, and to do that, we were told we were on the wrong side of the Bath Road, and so the school said, "Look, if you tell us that

you are going to move into our area, we'll accept the children even before you move." So they went into this particular school we wanted, and then we were lucky enough to find the land to build this house. And that was about 32 years ago.

Would you like to, we'd like it if you could put it on record, how you became involved with all that's happened with the refugees being reunited, and publicised, and so on. Could you tell us about that, how it happened.

Well, you asked me about how it came about, suddenly after 50 years, the story of these Czech children suddenly became public knowledge. The fact of it is that at the beginning of the War, those people who had been working in the office with me, in bringing out Czech children, had collected together a lot of the relevant documents, and presented it to me, as a rather comprehensive scrap book, together with a list of all the children whom we had managed to rescue. And I had always kept these papers, but realised more and more as I got old, that it's not fair leaving your children to have to deal with papers such as this, and I ought to find a place for them, because they must have some historical importance. And, for a long time, I really couldn't get anybody, you see, to raise much interest in this. And quite by chance, a lady, through a friend of mine, visited me, and said that she'd got a lady whom she thought might be very interested in all my papers. And so she came and visited me one day.

Who was the lady who visited you?

I can't even remember her name. I can't remember, I mean, she's gone completely out of my life. I met her for that one day, and she took me up to Headington Hall, and introduced me to Betty Maxwell, who's Robert Maxwell's wife, and ushered me into this enormous house, beautiful place. And there I was, confronted with a little French lady, absolutely charming, really very interesting, and very very interested. And I placed before her, the two books which I had, one was my book about the Liquidation of the German Loot, which I had compiled from my work at the International Refugee Organisation in Geneva, and the other one, about Czech children. And the Czech children one, she seemed to be extremely interested in, and asked if she could keep all these books, and look through them, and see what could be done. Which she did.

And that was in 1988, was it? I think it was '87 or '88 that this happened?

Yes, I think so. And the next thing I knew, practically, was that it was being run, I think, in two or three instalments in the Sunday Mirror, ... well, I wouldn't say it's the first thing I knew about it, because their correspondent had come down and interviewed me, and talked to me in some detail, and taken pictures. Anyway, it appeared in the Sunday Mirror, and none of my friends had seen it, of course, because none of my friends are Sunday Mirror readers. But it got about and the Sunday Mirror, Eve Pollard, the Editor of the Sunday Mirror, Eve Pollard was a great friend of, or apparently a friend of Esther Rantzen, and Esther Rantzen obviously decided it was something worth doing on her programme, and I was down in Hereford with my daughter when the Esther Rantzen people rung up and said, "We would like you in the studio on Sunday." And I said, "But I'm down in Hereford", I said, "I'm coming back on Sunday, but not in time to be in the studio at 7.00", and they said, "Well, it's very important that you should be." And I said, "Well, I can try and get back a little

earlier." And they said, "Well, that's fine. And we'll send a car to meet you", which they did, and they said, "Oh, Esther Rantzen wants us to go through her notes just to see that what she says in introducing the programme is correct." So when my wife said, "Shall I come up with you?" I said, "Really, there's no point in doing that, I'm going through a few papers, and then I'll come back again." So she didn't come and I was kept waiting about before the Esther Rantzen programme started, and then suddenly I was conducted to this seat in the front of the audience, and I spied one person whom I knew, Rudi Weisele, and I asked these ladies if they would mind moving so I could sit next to him, and they said "No", they wouldn't move, which I thought was a bit, a bit off. And, of course, later on it transpired that they couldn't move, because they'd been told not to move because the camera had been fixed on my seat and not on any other seat. And then the famous programme, introduced by Esther Rantzen was put on, only to my astonishment, to find that all the people round me were children who'd been on the transport which I'd brought out of Czechoslovakia 50 years ago! So it was all rather a traumatic experience, which they then repeated a week later. There were two programmes about it. And I've still got the tapes, but I haven't got a video, so I can't see them again. But that's how the reunion with the people I hadn't seen for 50 years started, which has led, of course, to all kinds of reunions, and meetings and get-togethers, since then. And Betty Maxwell arranged for me, and my wife, to go to Israel, where we eventually presented the original of all these papers to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, and she made copies of the book, of which I have a copy, and a number of other people have also bought copies now. And it, it has resulted in lots of people who had lost touch with other people, to meet again. Lots of people asking me thousands of questions about what happened at that particular time in Prague, because, after all, they were children. Lots of them sending me their life stories, which I've still got. And, from my point of view, it's been a bit heart-rending, but interesting in the long run, to be able to be of some value still to these children. A lot of them have collected money together and presented me with a gold ring, inscribed "He who saves lives saves the world". And an extra £1,000 which I was able to put towards the work I'm doing for the Maidenhead Abbeyfield Society. And a great number of the children in America, Canada, New Zealand, Israel, as well as this country, are still in touch. It has increased my correspondence enormously. And has meant that whereas I started all this business to get rid of my papers, I've now got a roomfull!

In some ways it's been a mixed blessing for you, hasn't it.

Well, I mean, to start with, it was a bit traumatic. But I think, on the whole, it's, it's helped a lot of people to, to understand more why it all happened, how it happened, when it happened. And a lot of them, of course, have done very well for themselves.

Also it's good for the people who weren't involved to be reminded, isn't it, of what happened at that time.

Yes, I suppose for those people who saw the show on Esther Rantzen, or read the Sunday Mirror, but apart from that it hasn't, in this country at least, had any follow-up in the rest of the press.

Yes, you mentioned that earlier, didn't you, that the more literate newspapers have been remarkably uninterested, you felt.

Well, no, all I'm saying is, that it hasn't been picked up on what I consider the more, I have to be careful here, don't I!

You're entitled to say what you like.

Well, I mean, I mean, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Express, The Mail, I don't think have mentioned it at all.

As a matter of fact, I think I saw something in The Mail.

I would have thought a story like this, if it is or was to be resurrected at all, was of interest to a wider public than the readers of the Sunday Mirror.

I think it has been a little wider published, I think I've also seen a bit out of, either The Independent or The Guardian, I think it went a little bit farther.

Oh, I didn't see that. It's been in a number of local papers, there was a mention of it in the Maidenhead Advertiser, especially when I was given this golden ring, and it's been in other local papers where a particular, one of the children has been living and has caught the eye of the local press. It was in one of the Washington journals.

I saw it in a New Zealand paper.

Yes, there was something in a New Zealand paper. I think that was due to Vera's sister, yes. Because two of them came over here, I think, a Mrs. O'Ryan came over from New Zealand. But, I mean, from my point of view, I wasn't particularly interested in having it published in the first place. Whether or not it's more widely published is of no interest to me, but if people feel that it's done anything in getting some of these children together, or being able to discuss with people what happened at that time, or, in general, if, as they are telling me, it was a good thing, then perhaps it should be more and more widely noted. Not from my point of view because I find it, except for the few very good friends I've made out of it, to whom I'm now supposed to be either Honorary Father or Honorary Grandfather of all kinds of children in Prague, the only real satisfaction one can get out of it is if it's done some of them some good.

I think in terms of Holocaust history, it's thought to have done good, because there is a big movement now to teach the younger generation about the Holocaust.

Yes, yes. I mean, what I tried to do is to help any of those people who have got in touch with me, to fill in any gaps in their knowledge, which they want filled in. And, quite frankly, also to make a distinction, which other people attempt to gloss over, (a) in the general or widely held feeling that all those rescued must have been Jews, that the only people in danger were the Jews, and although I know the Jews were in the majority, I feel that the other people by no means should be forgotten. And secondly, that also all the children and the refugees were German, whereas a lot of them were

not. And I think these are the two kind of general misconceptions, that all of them were Jews, and all of them were Germans.

You were just going to tell me what your wife started.

Well she started a movement for European Friendship in Maidenhead, which has got opposite organisations in all our twin towns, in St. Cloud (France), Courtrai (Belgium), Frascati (Italy) and Bad Godesberg (Germany). And that's a flourishing organisation, and she was President of that for about 15 years, and it still flourishes. It's never taken on, it's the only one of it's kind in the country, but I think they've got about 40 or 50 members now in each group, and they meet each other every year. It's quite a flourishing organisation.

Does it extend to Denmark?

No. No, it was really based, originally, on our twin towns. And we've got so many twin towns, because Maidenhead was linked with Windsor, which were separate Boroughs, and they each had their twins, and when they put us together, we had to accept the other peoples' twins. And so we've got a rather larger family than most people. We've made a lot of friends through that as well, going over there and meeting them, and them coming over here. And, of course, one meets a lot of people from the Continent through our twin towns in Rotary, because Rotary's also got twins, twinned with all the people that the town is twinned with. They also meet every year, so we're, keep up a fairly lively international existence.

F834 - End of Side A

END OF INTERVIEW

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