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ARTISTS' LIVES

Carel Weight

Interviewed by Cathy Courtney

C466/07

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

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Interview Summary Sheet

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Title:

Interviewee's forename: Carel

Sex: Female

Occupation:

Date and place of birth: 1915

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F1898 Side A

[Interview with Carel Weight, January the 22nd 1991.]

....begin absolutely at the beginning, can you tell me when you were born and where?

I was born in 1908, as far as I know in Paddington, I was always told so. And my parents had a small Edwardian flat, and I believe it was called, the name of the flats I believe was called the Oxford and Cambridge Mansions, but I'm not even quite sure about that. And I have only...I think I remembered a few odd things when I was very young; I remembered being taken along on a Sunday in a pram along the Regent's Canal, which I thought was beautiful, and I believe it was then that I saw my first aeroplane, and you know, they were rather like those aeroplanes, you know, they made a terrible lot of noise, frightening to anybody really, and frightening to a child, and I was terrified, I was so terrified that it remained in my mind.

Right. I mean do you remember if you screamed and somebody comforted you, or you just remember the terror?

I can only remember the horror of the aeroplane, really. I'm sure they were very nice to me and said, 'Oh, my dear...' you know, that sort of thing, but I...no, I was quite... And I remembered about a year or so later I was wheeled again in a pram, and again in a park - well, in Battersea Park, and the same thing happened to me there. I was very allergic to those. But you've got to remember that the planes in those days, they were very low and they made a terrible noise.

And propellers presumably.

Yes, and the engine.

And they were rare of course, they weren't like they are today.

They were...yes, it was a great event, everybody would stop and look up in amazement. It was, you see, 1910 was when all the...1909, was when all the great pioneers were flying, were still very much about. And another thing I remember was being bathed, and there was me, absolutely naked in a bath, looking up, and the family were looking down and saying things, 'Oh isn't he pretty,' and, 'Oh isn't it a pretty little girl,' and I was horrified, and I wanted to say to them, if my vocabulary would allow me, 'Not girl, boy!' But I can remember that very clearly. I didn't say it because I couldn't quite say it then.

So this would have been some distant member of the family presumably.

Yes, some friends came and...

And can you remember what the bath was like, what the bathroom was like?

It wasn't a bathroom, I was being bathed in a tub. Baths were rather things for the extreme elite in those days.

So was this a tin tub?

Pardon?

This was a tin bath, or what?

What bath?

Tin, metal?

I think it was a tin bath, yes.

And where would you have been being bathed, do you remember?

Well, you see at that time, after I was old enough and that only meant a few, I suppose a year or so, my parents farmed me out to live in a friend's house, a poor friend who my mother thought would do her a lot of good to have some little extra money coming in, and she wanted somebody to look after me while she and my father were both out at business. So they got an arrangement by which I would be looked after during the week, and I would return perhaps on, be brought back by my father on perhaps Saturday evening and stay over the Sunday. And so I had the best of both worlds; I lived with these very very poor people in Fulham - no, I'm sorry, first of all in Chelsea, and it was then a very slummy neighbourhood really, and I loved it, I got to love my foster parents more than I loved my actual parents.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....*were sent away.*

I can't tell you the exact age, but I must have been very very young, about two perhaps, something like that.

And have you any memories of the beginning? Did you feel very displaced at the beginning, or you don't recall that?

I was hardly...I found...I thought everybody lived in tiny little houses, and everybody, even in those days I saw that there was a vast difference in sort of class... My parents, because they both went to work, neither worked...neither of them had marvellous jobs, but between the two of them they had quite a, they would be considered rather well-off, and when you realise that my mother gave, and she thought she was being rather generous, ten shillings a week to look after me, you can see that that was the sort of scale that... But they were, although very poor, they were very sensible, and I was never, I always had enough to eat, and we had sort of stews and all sorts of things which were the most economical to have. But what I, I think I loved them because they were real people, and I could understand them, whereas my parents were always putting on a slight act, do you know what I mean? They were always saying, well we're a cut above all those people, and were rather snobbish somehow.

Do you know anything about their own histories that would account for that?

Yes. My father, his father was a rather successful person who ran a wine and spirit shop, and he made so much money that about the age of 28 he retired, and I think he was an old rogue probably, I don't know, but any rate, he never did any more work, and he bought a little house in Streatham, and there he lived, and from what I could see a very affluent sort of life. [INAUDIBLE] he looked like a rich man to me, because I had no experience of rich people, but...

So what's the image of him that you've got?

He was a terrible man; I hated him really, because as I grew up he sort of bullied me, and said, 'Little boys should be seen and not heard, get under the table,' and that sort of thing you see.

Was that supposed to be a rather black joke, or did he mean it?

He meant it. He was really, he brought up his family, my father and the rest of the family, they were all cowed by his dominance. I think one has very little idea of how awful Edwardian parents were very often to their children, and particularly to their wives. The poor

wife, who I think was a very good woman, my father's mother, hardly dared say anything to him.

Can you remember what they looked like?

Yes. My grandfather was a very fat, red-faced man with a beard, very white. He lived so well really that he died comparatively young. I think he over-ate, he over-drunk, he seduced the servants - because they had a servant or two - and he did everything that he wanted to do. I hope I'm not giving too black a picture of him, but that's the sort... My mother attacked him, and she couldn't bear this overbearing person, and that caused a great deal of friction, because she kindled a great deal of fighting spirit into my father, who, nobody ever thought he had any, but he always used to say to me, 'Oh your mother has made my life for me,' and I think it was probably true. Although they weren't entirely a perfectly married couple, but she certainly took his part very much in fighting this tyrant of a father.

Verbally fighting you mean?

Yes, I don't think...I believe my father's sister kicked him on one occasion, but I think that's as near fights as it got.

Right. And when you say he was very self-indulgent, would you say he was actually alcoholic or anything, or he just was a good liver?

No, I wouldn't say he was alcoholic, although he drank a fair amount really, and he ate a great deal, he was rather fat and that sort of thing. No, I wouldn't say he was at all. That's about one of the very few vices he didn't have.

And what was your grandmother like physically?

I can hardly remember her because she died. I think she had a very sad life really, being continually bullied all her life, but she was gentle and very good, and she went every Sunday to church, which would give him time to seduce the servant, the current servant.

And do you think the servants enjoyed it?

I've no idea, I didn't know them.

Right. And did your father have many brothers and sisters?

He had one brother and one sister. The sister was a swimming instructress, and she was a beefy person, not very sympathetic I didn't feel, but she was a lesbian, and one of the pioneers I should think.

When did you become aware of that?

What, who?

That she was a lesbian. I mean when did you...?

Oh my mother told me years afterwards that she was a... She was a very male sort of person, and not very, I don't think she was a very great intellect or anything like that, but she used to be a swimming mistress, and I know I didn't warm to her when I heard that she used a boat hook to pull them out if they got into difficulties. But anyway...

So you never ever got close to her?

Pardon?

You were never close to her presumably.

Not really, no. I met her on family reunions really.

And what about your father's brother?

Well, he was...he left home as soon as he could and became a tax inspector, Inland Revenue, and he was all right, he was a very quiet man, he had had all the sort of guts knocked out of him by his father, but he was rather nice, and a perfectly pleasant man. Never had anything to say very much.

So he can't have been much of an influence either by the sound of it.

No, I don't think they were. But on the other hand my foster parents, I had a lovely godmother; she worked in service all her life, but she was much more human really, and she used to sit and read to me, sometimes Shakespeare, sometimes, oh, Baroness Orczy, or sometimes...all sorts of people. And she sort of loved me, and I loved her.

Was this Rose, or was this...?

This was Rose.

She was the foster mother, and your godmother, or you just used the...?

I called her, yes I called her my foster mother, she was my godmother too.

Oh right.

Yes. And I've got a little painting of her, but it's not here, it's at home. But she had a terrible life herself really, because she worked with a lot of absolutely heartless people, but she was such a marvellous person. After all that she wanted to...she gave me love and all those things that are so essential to a young person really.

Do you think if you had stayed with your parents you would never have got that?

I think...yes I think that is true. I don't know. I think my mother would have...she would eventually...well I'm sure she...well both my parents I don't think were lacking in love for me, but they didn't have much time really.

And did you mind that?

No. I got so attached to my godparents and their family that I never looked forward to going home on Saturdays and Sundays very much. They were a little bit, they felt that I was outrageously spoilt, and so they were very critical of me, and they always used to say, 'Oh you didn't wash your neck today,' or you didn't do this, or you didn't do that, and they were, I always found, rather difficult really from my point of view.

So, were you hurt by that?

I think they could...they did occasionally hurt me, but generally, I dare say I deserved all these things really, I dare say I wasn't very good in their way of thinking really.

And, can we just go back to your father's parents. Can you describe what going there would have been like? Did you go there rarely, or quite often, or...?

Well, going home, the first thing I had to do was to have a bath, because there was no baths in this little place in Chelsea, called Racey[ph] Street, because it was just tiny really, it was just the upper floor of one of these awful little, miserable sort of working people's homes.

This is Rose's house?

Yes. It was just off the World's End, and now they've got all these great big tower blocks and things all round, but in those days it was just tiny, tiny little houses in streets very close together, and they lived in a street called Racey[ph] Street which has long since disappeared. No, first I would go home and I would have a bath, and then I would come down. And my mother was a good cook, because on my mother's side, her father was...he came over here from Germany, he was born in Hamburg, and he loved the good things of life, and he taught my mother to cook, particularly German foods. But she was a very very good cook, and we always got a wonderful meal on a Sunday.

What sort of thing?

Well, it could be a joint, or...it generally was a joint of some sort. But she would always go to enormous trouble, and we would have things like sauerkraut and red cabbage, which was unheard of in those days in England.

And did you like that as a child?

Yes I did. And then she made German cakes and all sorts of things like that. She was an extraordinarily good cook.

And what were the meals like? Were they quite formal on a Sunday?

Well we all sat at table, yes. My parents had a servant, a Mrs Simey[ph] who was an elderly lady who had been in service all her life, and she was very nice. My father was a bit sort of, wanted everything to be done in the way that he would like, but my mother was extremely[??] dominant to have quite a say in everything really. And I enjoyed the day, Sunday, and my father would bring me back on a bus to Fulham in the evening. I quite enjoyed that, and we would listen to...they had in those days a thing that, before television, the...if you had a telephone, for a few pounds you could have a thing fixed up to the telephone called an electrophone, and it was the first beginning of a sort of television in the home, but it was done through the telephone. And there was a chart which you could have, you could get through to a number of theatres, and you could listen to performances on the theatre, and also you could listen to concerts. My mother had a great love for music, and I think I got it from her very much. We could listen to the Albert Hall, or the Queen's Hall concerts very often, or you could have a lighter vein and listen to the reviews and things at the theatre.

Can you remember any of those?

I can greatly remember hearing all the great singers of the time, and the orchestral concerts, all that sort of thing, and I remember hearing reviews by Greene[ph], people like George Robey and all those sort of people. They were very good, and they were probably superior in many ways to the average thing that you listen to on the television really.

So, you and your parents would sit down together and listen to this, would you?

My mother would sit down, and I would sit down with her, because...that was very nice to...in the afternoon she would ring up and ask to be put through to the Palladium or to this or that. But mostly on a Sunday afternoon it was nearly always music. My mother was a chiropodist and a manicurist, and she used to go to all sorts of people and make a little money, and she did quite well really, and she had a lot of very famous clients. And, my grandfather came over here from Hamburg and was the first real chiropodist there had ever been in England, and I think he even was a chiropodist to Edward VII, at any rate to a whole lot of very grand people, including a lot of musicians. I mean you've heard of Kreizler the violinist, he was a customer at the time, and so was I believe Caruso, and she got to know a lot of these people. And I think, she never could play a note of music herself, but she got a wonderful sort of worship of music; in particular she thought that, because she liked all these people and they were amusing and that sort of thing, quite apart from...and so she, when I got older she was most interested in my voice, because she wanted me to become a singer. And in a way, I've always had a very powerful voice really, and I could sing when I was in school, choirs and that sort of thing, and she thought how wonderful if I became an opera singer you see. When my voice broke it became a base baritone, and so, she knew of a person that she thought could give me singing lessons. Well there were various things against that, and one of them was that I had no natural gift for music. My father curiously enough had, it was the only thing he had, at that time, it was the only thing I knew he had, was this...he could sit down on the piano without ever having a lesson, and could play tunes without very much...and he could pick up a violin and he could play it, and he could look at a score and he would sing it straight from the score. I couldn't do any of that, and I was quite stupid about that you see. And I did realise that that was a great handicap, even when I was young. Well as soon as my voice broke my mother almost insisted that I should go and have lessons from a woman who had a very beautiful voice, and she had sung at Covent Garden, but she had so...she was so highly strung that she...it was absolute hell to go on stage, and apart from being one of the Valkyries in Tannhäuser...in 'The Ring', she never appeared again, although everybody said she had a superb voice, and I think she did. So she took to teaching, and she said to me when she had heard my voice, she said, 'I'll teach you to sing in half the time that it took me.' But her methods were a bit drastic, and she used to make me lie on the floor and put heavy books on

my tummy, and then make me sing notes, and she kept saying, 'No no no no, it musn't come from anywhere up here, it's got to come from the diaphragm,' and she would give me a great punch, you know, and I felt, by the end of the time I felt like a boxer after being beaten by a champion or something, that I had no guts left in me really, and I hated it, I got to hate this thing, and I knew that it wasn't the right thing for me to do.

End of F1898 Side A

F1898 Side B

.....on your stomach, or is that untrue?

Yes, yes.

She did?

She did that. And it was most drastic, her methods. And so I went back to my mother and I said, 'Look Mother, I can't do this, I really don't feel...' And my parents took it very well and they said, 'Oh well if you can't, you can't, so that's the end of it.'

Do you think if you had had a gentler teacher you might have become a singer?

Well I don't think you would have got over the fact, and I never believed that I had any very great musical gift.

And how do you think you would have felt about going on stage? Is that something you can imagine?

Pardon?

How do you think you would have felt about going on stage?

I think I would have been nervous, mm. But whether I could have put up with it I don't know. I would have rather said...well I couldn't, because I was a very nervous child. I think the business of two parents and two lives that I was leading tended to make me very nervous.

Did you actually have a room in your parents' house, a bedroom?

No. No, but...I was put up in the spare room.

So you would stay overnight, but you would...

Very rarely stayed overnight. Occasionally I stayed overnight, yes; perhaps for Christmas they would make up a bed for me in the top room or something like that.

So you felt very much a visitor?

I did really, yes, yes I did, mm.

And did the maid live in, was she a part of the household?

The maid lived, yes she lived downstairs.

And there was nobody else who was part of the household?

No. No, no.

And does any of the music that you heard with your mother, has any of that stayed important to you?

Oh yes, yes, a great deal. And my mother also had, you know what a pianola is? A mechanical, that you put rolls of music in and it plays. Well she had one of those, and she played me Schubert and Chopin and all those sort of things, and I got to love them, and I still do.

And were you taken to concerts and to the theatre?

Yes, my mother took me, and she occasionally took me to the opera, and we sat in the gods. And my father, in spite of...my father was an extraordinary man really, he, nobody really got to the bottom of him at all; because I suppose he had had this frightful upbringing, he never committed himself in any way, and people used to say he was mean and all sorts of things, which, and then long afterwards we discovered that there was various flower sellers and people that he had got to know, and he gave them a great deal of money when they were needing money, but he did it all very surreptitiously and never, people never knew. In the same way, a very extraordinary thing, he would always say that a great time in his life was the First World War, because he had always longed to get away from the office that he had to go to go to every day in the Tube and come back every evening, and he loved to be in the fresh air and see nature and all the rest of it you see, and those were the things that were burning inside him. He would never admit it mind you. And there was a moment at the end of the First World War when, he was in the Artillery, and in those days they didn't do everything with maps, they made people go out and draw the countryside, and he went out, and he did two or three absolutely lovely drawings, and I wish I had them because they were quite beautiful, pencil drawings that he did as exercise.

So he was a good draughtsman?

Absolutely, a very gifted draughtsman who had never had a lesson in his life.

And did he draw anything else?

No. And the astonishing thing, when he came back from the Army and he showed us these drawings, and I loved them, I thought they were wonderful, and my mother praised them, and everybody praised them. You would think he would go on, go and have some classes, or if he didn't want to do that, just go out and paint. He never did, he never did another drawing; he went back to the office and went on doing his routine, horrible life.

And did he talk to you about his Army experiences?

Yes, he was very amusing. If you could get him in a good mood, he was quite amusing about his Army experiences. But, really it couldn't have been too bad, because he was an officer, but he never...he never saw active service; he was a little bit old, and although they were sending people out at his age, somehow he missed it. He had no desire to fight.

He was in France?

No, he was always in England. The highest thing that he ever...there is a little island in the middle of Plymouth Harbour called Drake's Island, a tiny little place, and he commanded a battery of guns there. God knows what would have happened if...he would probably be shooting all the wrong way or something. But any rate, there was something...I got to know my father when I was grown-up, and I found he wasn't a tyrant or anything like that, although he was quite strict with me when I was young, and I got to be very fond of him. He wasn't at all, he had no intellectual interests, he had no, he never wanted, I never saw him reading a book even. And he would bully me occasionally when he thought I was wasting my money, and that sort of thing.

Again, would this be verbal, or...?

Yes. And he would be furious with me because I couldn't do my income tax when I started doing income tax; he would do it for me, but with great disdain and, 'Ah, wasting all my time,' and I think he was rather liking doing it to show how, what a dominant character he was.

But that painting of yours called I think 'The Fury' of the little boy being hit, that's not a personal memory, that didn't happen to you?

No. No it didn't, but it did...although it was personal in a sort of way, because I felt I was being bullied in a way.

By him?

Yes, yes. But I was very fond of him in many ways, and I felt that he had wasted his life because his father had knocked all the guts out of him, and he never got it back.

Did he talk about his own childhood, do you know what actually happened to him?

No, he was very reticent about him, he wouldn't talk about him really.

And was he close to his own brother at all?

Not really, no, he didn't get on with...well, his brother was rather a non-man really, he never said anything. My mother always said, 'Oh, Leslie never utters,' and that became a sort of, you know, everybody thought of that, because it was absolutely true. But he wasn't a bad chap really.

And your father worked in a bank?

He worked in a bank as a cashier, and he never got a rise - well I suppose he did in a way, but he never got any more than just being cashier.

And did you ever go to his bank and see where he worked?

Yes, yes I used to have to meet him there, and, he seemed to be quite popular with the other people. It was almost sort of like visiting a prison, because in those days they seemed to be working by very little light, and the whole place was dismal, and great big tall rooms, and rather horrid really.

Whereabouts did he work?

He worked right up in the City, a stone's throw from Liverpool Street Station.

And did those particular buildings have any impact on you? Because it's a very...

Pardon?

Did those particular buildings have any impact on you? Because it's a very distinct part of London, isn't it.

Well they did, yes. I loved them in a terrible sort of gruesome way, I thought they were wonderful really, although I must say they were pretty grim when you were inside them. But, I used to meet him and he used to take me sometimes to supper. Because in those days there were very nice places for, they were rather humble in a way, but you could get lovely food, which most of the working people, there were masses of them up there, got their meals, when they could afford them.

But as a little boy you weren't taken to the bank? It sounds as though you were quite grown-up when you used to meet him.

I wasn't...yes, I suppose I went up there when I was about 12, that was about the age really.

And at the stage when he used to come back with you on the bus to your foster mother, were those journeys quite uncomfortable, suddenly being thrown together, or was it easy?

Yes, it was...I got on... Unless he was aggressive to me, and then I would shut up rather, but normally it was all right really. But I did some terrible things; we had got a new carpet which I'm sure they must have paid a lot of money for, in those days, comparatively a lot of money, and the first thing I did was to upset a bottle of black ink all over it. I thought he would never forgive me.

What was your punishment?

What?

Did you get punished?

Oh, only in a bullying sort of way, I mean you know, that I was...he had worked so hard and got this carpet, and it was the joy of his life and now it was ruined and nobody could ever do anything... I was quite true really.

And were you a child that felt very guilty, or did you just think, that's happened and that's all there is to it?

Oh I felt terrible really about it. But then, I must say I had a friend who was a bit of a wit, he said, 'Do you know what I would have said to your father?' And I said, 'No.' He said, 'Well, "Father, I'm very sorry that I have spoiled your beautiful carpet with my horrible black ink, but I'll buy you another bottle of ink".'

Your father doesn't sound as though he was the kind of man who would have appreciated it.

He wouldn't, no, I don't think he would at that moment, no.

And did you have, when you were very small, when you went home to your parents, were there particular toys you had there?

Yes, I had, and my...I was rather spoilt with toys and things of that sort, because my mother brought home a whole mass of things from all her rich clients, and I had so many beautiful presents. One of the most terrible things was to have to write to them all and thank them all.

Were there any toys that particularly mattered to you?

No, they were just things that every boy might have, but rather better than most, because they were very good quality, expensive things you see.

And did you have particular books there?

Some books too, yes, yes; I got Shakespeare given to me with beautiful illustrations, and all sorts of things like that.

Can you remember who the illustrations were by?

Yes. Well, now, they were nearly all the very best, Edmund Dulac, and...they were all very good.

And did you have Rackham?

Rackham, yes, yes. I didn't care for Rackham curiously enough so much as some of the others, but...

And do you remember spending a lot of time looking at the illustrations?

Yes, all the time, more than reading very often.

And do any of those images still live with you?

I think Edmund Dulac, of course he did...I had the 'Arabian Nights' which I thought was very marvellous, beautiful, and I still rather like them really, although I think that they were a terrible hotch-potch of Chinese art, but they were very well done.

And what was on the walls of your parents' house? Did they have paintings?

Nothing very much, reproductions of odd and ends. But curiously enough, in my foster parents' house they had some very beautiful watercolours, and that of course was because... Because a distant relative of theirs was a man named Warren, who was still remembered as one of our better water-colourists at the beginning of the 19th century; he was a landscape painter, and there was several of these pictures on the walls, and they were very good.

Can you remember any details about them?

I can remember them very clearly. They were pictures of the Wye Valley, and pictures of Wales, and beautifully done, and I've got a very clear picture of them. And you can see some of them in the Victoria & Albert, they may not be on show but they have them in there. There were two or three brothers I think, and I don't know which were which really, but these were...they were awfully good really. And they did have a sort of influence on me I think really.

Can you pin-point it at all, or is it just very general?

They were marvellous landscapes of the country, and to me at this moment I think of them as superb really. Perhaps if I saw them again I would think that they were not so good, but...

When did you last see them?

Oh, thirty or forty years ago. Because the family, I mean Rose died, she had the most terrible death really.

What happened to her?

She lost the sight of an eye, and evidently there's a disease that attacks the back of your eyes; in those days there was nothing you could do about it. And she also had a terrible thing happen to her legs, she had to have both her legs amputated, and both her eyes. And it was so awful that, she had such spirit that in the nursing home where she was, everybody used to come round her, and see her, and she would joke and laugh with them. She was a most amazing person really.

Did that happen to her when she was comparatively young?

No. No, she was working, when I was a little boy she was working for a rather tyrannical lady, she used to come home at night absolutely dead tired, but...

What would she have been doing, do you know?

Oh just clearing up and keeping the house clean and that sort, rather menial things. But the lady of the house recognised she was an unusual person and used to confide all her troubles to her, I don't know whether that helped her very much. She was paid a preposterously small sum for doing all these things. She was I think as near a saint as I've ever known in the way she put up with this frightful illness which gradually sort of killed her, but it was a long and lingering thing really.

And did you stay very closely in touch with her?

Well I couldn't awfully in many ways. When she was at her worst it was towards the end of the war; I was in the Army away, and I used to visit her in her nursing home, and my mother went too, because she was very fond of her too. But she, in a terrible sort of way she made the best of it really.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....her husband, you don't mention him very much.

No, well there was a husband, and she had a son, but the husband had died before I came on the scene, and the son was about ten years older than me, and so it was too big a gap really to have much...but he was all right really, but he was a chap who was...the only thing...only engines and motor cars were the things that interested him, and he eventually got a job as a mechanic. I was never very close to him; he was all right, we got on reasonably, but...

So you didn't really feel he was a brother, he was...?

Not a bit, no, not a bit.

And would you have liked brothers and sisters?

I had lots of friends at school and that sort of thing, and I never felt that I was terribly alone. It might have been a good thing, I don't know.

Have you got memories of what you would have done in your free time when you were quite young, when you were in that household, how you would have spent your time?

What, in...?

At your foster home.

In my proper home?

Your foster home.

My foster...oh yes, I had a lot of friends who, we used to play in the streets, and we used to play cricket in the quieter streets, and all sorts of things like that. And I had a particular friend who was, his father ran a butcher's shop next-door, and another Jewish boy whose father kept a linen draper's shop, and we were quite a merry little gang of people really.

And were you a leader, or was nobody a leader, or...?

No, I don't think anybody was a particular leader really. They all had their little things. I mean the Jewish boy was very clever at getting things out of us, and we didn't really blame him for that at all, because we thought it was his sort of nature, and I felt that the Jewish boy was the cleverest of us all really. I don't know what happened to him really, but... No, we were...I wasn't by any means a solitary character at all.

And as a group of children, were you fairly law-abiding?

Fairly I would say. It was a wonderful place to be to see what life was all about really. When I went to school for instance, the first thing I noticed was that all the, some of the children weren't even wearing boots or shoes, but that was in the summer more, most of them did have

something on their feet, but they were very very poor, and I went into some of their houses and they were very sort of smelly and not at all... Even my...my foster mother's house was always well-kept and that sort of thing, but I had a shock when I visited some of these other children really.

Can you remember what effect it had on you?

I was just shocked really, and also of course when one saw children going out without shoes on, that sort of thing really, one realised how poor some people were. And you see it was just at the end of World War I, and you saw some of the, there was a chap who was shell-shocked, and he lived near, and he thought he was an engine, and he used to go along the streets saying, 'Choo-choo-choo-choo choo-choo-choo-choo,' and he sort of pulled the imaginary thing to stop the engine and that sort of thing. And, you know, there were rather terrible things around.

That must have been very frightening if you were young.

It was rather...yes it was frightening in a way. But it stayed in my mind, I can see him now. 'Engine Joe' I think they called him.

And, I mean do you have vivid visual memories of the First World War from your point of view?

Well I saw a Zeppelin raid in London.

What was it like?

Well I suppose it wouldn't be quite as bad as raids that we knew in the Second World War, but it was rather...we saw these great things passing over, and bombs dropping. I wasn't near the worst of it in those days, but there were daylight raids, and, rather horrific. Although when I was young I looked out of the window to see as much as I could see, but...no, it wasn't as bad as the Second World War.

So you were intrigued rather than frightened?

I was intrigued, because I wanted to see everything that was going on.

And you weren't concerned about your father or anybody?

I was a bit concerned about him, but he wasn't at the front, and I would have been more I suppose if he had have been really.

And were you brought up to be very patriotic?

Not particularly, although my mother was...it's strange really, because being partly German made her, I think she was quite patriotic in a way, she wanted England to win, but at the same time she was very critical and she said, 'Well, we'll never win really if we go on like we are,' the same sort of thing as we have in the present war really, but... On the other hand, she was quite patriotic really.

End of F1898 Side B

F1899 Side A

And were in fact your mother's...was your mother's mother German, or was she English?

My mother's mother, curiously enough, I believe was Swedish, but she died long before I came on the scene, she died young.

Right. And did you know your maternal grandfather?

Only very slightly. He was a rather, I suppose rather a great man in his curious way; I mean he rose very high in his sort of profession as a chiropodist, and as I said he was amongst the very earliest people who came over here, and he set up a business which he might have made a considerable fortune at. It was a popular thing to get...he called himself Williams, his original name was Sissenbach[ph], and he changed his name because it was too difficult for them. But he decided to come over here, and he would have been a comparatively wealthy man had it not have been that he had a great feeling for gambling, and he gambled his money away as quickly as he made it, and he died with very little eventually.

And was there any of that in your mother?

No money.

No, but any gambling instinct.

Yes, she rather liked gambling herself, but she never did it more than in a very humble sort of way.

But it's something I would have thought would horrify your father.

Well she kept it rather quiet from him, yes, yes, yes.

But do you have any memories of your maternal grandfather treating you in any particular way? I mean he sounds very different from the other one.

No, he was very...I can hardly remember him because he died very early, but he seemed to be much more sympathetic, and he seemed to like having a grandson. But he also was a very dominant character, and my mother said, `You would never have been painter if he had had

his way; he wanted you to become a chiropodist...' No, I'm, sorry, 'He wanted you to become a dentist,' he wanted me to become a dentist.

Why?

He looked at my hands, and he said, 'You've got beautiful hands, sensitive hands that would be very good as a dentist.' That's what he said. So, in a way it was lucky he died when he did really. But I think he was a much more interesting man really, and he certainly had a great feeling of living well; as I said, he made my mother be a good cook, and woe betide her if it fell below a standard you see. And he also knew all the best restaurants which were not expensive but very good in London, and my mother was always taken out, she was always taken...he took her out to all these restaurants.

So it sounds as though your parents were living very separate lives really.

Not so... Well that you see was when my grandfather was alive; they were a bit more separate than they were...but then my grandfather died, and then, my mother had got a lot of knowledge about cooking, as I said, and going to restaurants, and took my father out, and he I think enjoyed his food.

And when were you first taken to any galleries, do you remember?

My mother was always rather keen to take me to museums and galleries on a Sunday, and we used to go off from time to time, and my mother took me once to the Academy, which I remember, for the first time.

Can you describe that visit?

Not very well, but I remember seeing a portrait of King George V in all his garter, robes and God knows what. I thought it was the most wonderful picture I had ever seen. But, it's no use telling you the story about that one, because it doesn't bear on me, but...no, I loved going to the Academy, that was wonderful, and I got my mother to take me every year.

To the Summer Show you mean?

Yes, yes.

And can you remember what the pictures were like?

Yes, I can in a way. You see they were very different to what it's like now. It was dominated to a great extent by portraits of royalty, of rich ladies with tiaras, and all that sort of thing; rather stuffy landscapes and things. But I thought they were all wonderful at the time.

Anything in particular stay in your mind?

I remember some very...well of course that portrait more than anything else I think, because I suppose it was a very big portrait, and there was a lot of gold and red in it. I can't say that there was any great picture. But my mother also took me to the National Gallery, and I do remember a whole lot of pictures that stayed in my mind from there very often. And I was just the other day asked to write about any picture that I have a particular feeling for, for the National Gallery pamphlet thing they get up, and I wrote about the Arnolfini 'Marriage', you know the one, don't you, of the interior, and that I remember had a great effect on me, because it was so real, and it's remained ever since a great favourite of mine.

And would you at that stage have tried to copy pictures, or would you just have looked?

I don't remember copying anything really, although I very often saw a thing in a picture and I made a sort of, my version of it a bit, but I never actually copied any.

And did you have particular art books at home at all, was there any of those that were important?

No, not at that time, when I was really young. But a thing that, curiously enough there wasn't art books at all, and when I went to see my grandfather, my wicked grandfather, he bought the first three volumes of the history of the war, which was illustrated with photographs, and that had a great effect on me, and my grandfather knew that he could keep me out of mischief by just letting me have one of those books to look at, and I used to look at all the pictures. And that did affect me in a lot of drawings that I did, I did lots of drawings of soldiers and ships and all that sort of thing, more than I think any really famous picture I ever did.

And were they photographs of ships and soldiers setting out hopefully, or were they pictures of destruction? What were they?

They were all about the war; they didn't have any particular...I didn't have any particular favourite. I did battles, bloody battles, or blown-up houses, and all that sort of thing. It was a sort of world that was not known to me in those days, and so... It had quite an effect on me