



# Speaking for Ourselves: An Oral History of People With Cerebral Palsy

Jill Mahler  
Interviewed by Sue Geary

British Library ref. C1134/25/01-03

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**Interview Summary Sheet**

**Ref no:** C1134/25/01-03 **Digitised from cassette originals**

**Collection title:** Speaking for Ourselves: An Oral History of People With Cerebral Palsy

**Interviewee's surname:** Mahler

**Title:**

**Interviewee's forename:** Jill

**Sex:** Female

**Occupation:** **Date and place of birth:** Croydon

**Date(s) of recording:** 29<sup>th</sup> July 2005, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2005, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2005

**Location of interview:**

**Name of interviewer:** Sue Geary

**Type of recorder:** Marantz CP430

**Recording format :** D60 Cassettes **Number of cassettes:** 3

**Digitised as:** 6 WAV files (16 bit 44.1kHz 2-channel, 1411kbps) **Mono or stereo:** stereo

**Total Duration:**  
(HH:MM:SS)

**Additional material:**

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**Interviewer's comments:**

**Tape 1 Side A [Track 1]**

*This is 29<sup>th</sup> July. It's the first interview with Jill Mahler. Sue Geary is the interviewer. Jill, over to you.*

Hello. [Rustling sound in background] I was born with cerebral palsy, many years ago. I was the first of two children, and my parents lived near London. I had a very uneventful upbringing: no broken family or [laughing] anything, except that we didn't really have any grandparents, as my father's father had died when he was small, and then his mother was killed in the blitz in Plymouth. And my mother's mother died when she was 12, and her father died quite young too, so we were really a small family unit. I went to mainstream school, a small kind of dame's school or so, almost a private school. I got on quite well. Then, when I was eight-and-a-half, I went away to a boarding school for children with speech problems. It was a pioneering venture, created by a very interesting woman called Mrs Hudson-Smith, in Hurst Green, Surrey. Nowadays the school takes children with very complicated speech problems, but because we were the first pupils there – in fact I went on the first day – there were just two classes, and one class which I was in was children with fairly straightforward problems, like cleft palates, hair lips etc., and then, in the other class there were children who didn't speak at all and they seemed to have varying degrees of understanding. I think possibly nowadays one would call some of them 'autistic', but I was in a class of 12: 10 boys, two girls. I had a whale of a time, because I was a great tomboy already, and I loved football and climbing trees, so I really enjoyed my time there. At the age of 10, after 18... Oh, I forgot to say, whilst at the school part of the curriculum was speech therapy, naturally, and there were speech therapy students attached to the school, and one had regular therapy etc. At the age of 10 it was deemed that I should leave that school, and [sound of aircraft engine] the problem was where would I go then? It was felt that I wouldn't really manage in mainstream day school so, I was looking for a boarding school, and it just happened that my speech therapist's student who had been to a boarding school in Kent, suggested that I might go there. Well my parents couldn't afford the full fees but in those days one could apply to the local education department for help, and I had a real fighter of a mother,

who spouted the Education Act, that every child was entitled to receive the education that they were capable of assimilating. So, talking about this and fighting, I got my place in a girls' boarding school, a public school, which I will always be grateful for because it opened the world to me for further education. I started in the junior house, and for the first 18 months, my life was hell. Because I was the first disabled child they'd ever had, the girls teased me unmercifully. They were a very 'horsy' lot. [Laughing] They used to say things like (in loud voices), 'We think any child who's defective should be put down at birth, like a horse.' [Laughs] And they weren't very pleasant at all, and I didn't know how to handle this.

*How old were you then, about 11?*

Ten.

*Oh.*

And the matron was beastly to me too. She was horrible and I think she rather resented me because, in some way, felt she was responsible for me, although she didn't, you know, have any extra responsibility. But she was horrible, and it is quite possible that the other girls picked up on this, and I know she put me at her table because she said I had bad table manners [laughing] and all that kind of thing. So the first 18 months were pretty grim, and the house mistress was a very kindly, motherly person who had absolutely no idea how to handle the situation, but then we got a new house mistress who had been a Wren officer, and knew exactly how to handle bitchy, young women. She of course knew it was no good saying, 'Oh you mustn't tease Jill, you must be kind,' etc., because she knew it would just bounce back on me, so quite cleverly she found a way, in a treasure hunt actually, with a clue, making it a fun thing that made the other girls laugh, instead of at me, and from then on I developed a sense of humour [laughing] I guess, which has got me through the rest of life. I went on, up to the senior school. I missed this house mistress very much. I did reasonably well at school, I wasn't brilliant. I remember the maths mistress reducing me to tears, because I mean of course she didn't have the expertise, but nowadays one knows that people

with cerebral palsy often have problems with maths, and there are certain ways of teaching them (which she, of course, didn't know about). But, well I got a reasonable O-level GCE (it was in those days) and then I went on and did my Advanced [A-levels], and I got in. The school brought someone down to give me vocational guidance, and this man came to the conclusion that I should either go in for librarianship or be [laughing. Sound of aircraft in background] a social worker. I actually wanted to be a doctor, and my hero was [knocking sound] a chap called Carlson an American [Earl R. Carlson; 'Born that Way'] I'd read about, who had also had cp [cerebral palsy] and became a doctor, but my headmistress said no way would she back me, in trying to take up medicine. [Aircraft noise] She thought medicine, you didn't have to brilliant, you just had to work hard, and she didn't see that I would accomplish it. So we had a tradition at school of people going on to Trinity College, Dublin University, so it was arranged that I should go there and study social work – which I did. I enjoyed my time at Trinity; Dublin was super, and I had a very good friend there who'd actually done some of her practical work up in the North of Ireland, and she said, 'Ooh you should go and work in Fermanagh, it's beautiful.' Whilst studying at Trinity, we had all sorts of practical placements. It was a very good course really. One of my placements was in a hospital, and the other one was in a school for cerebral palsy, as far as I remember.

*And how old were you at this time?*

Twenty-one: and then by the time I finished the course, there was a question of what I would go on to do, what kind of social work, and at that time there was something called The Institute of Almoners, [loud aircraft noise] a very superior body (who are now the social workers in hospitals), but they were extremely superior, and when I applied to them, they said, 'No way: what do you think we are? We wouldn't take [laughing] anyone like you,' and previously to that I had tried to get into occupational therapy, but with the same kind of response: 'No way would we take [laughing] anyone like you.' Anyway when I finished my course, I went and got a job immediately, as a social worker in County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, and there it was before the time of specialisation in social work. I was a generic social worker. I

dealt with everyone and all types; from old to young, delinquent, adoption, fostering, the lot. Fermanagh is a beautiful place. It's very rural, [aircraft noise] and the county is divided by a long lake, and one of my colleagues used to take me out in a boat on this lake, and it was a super place. In those days it was really still quite primitive, [rustling noise] and it wasn't unusual to go into some of the houses of old people, and find the hearth fire, and cooking on the hearth, and one old man who proposed to me, well actually was lying on the stone floor in front of the fire – that was his bed. The local hospital was still in the old workhouse, a grim-looking place (cos Ireland was about 50 years behind England at that time), and to suggest to any of these old people they might go to hospital was terrible. They wouldn't hear of it because they could remember what the old workhouse conditions were like, and it was the last thing in the world, if they were going to end their days they'd want to end them at home, with the donkey next door and [both laugh] all that. I mean I'd come from an urban environment and it was quite a eye-opener to me, living in such rural conditions, and when one had to say take stock for a means-test or something, and I would put down that he had a donkey, well I remember my colleague asking me, 'Well how many acres has he then, cos he must feed the donkey with something?' [Both laugh] and it hadn't occurred to me to ask how many acres he had. So Fermanagh was also quite exciting in those days, in a way, because, you know, they were always blowing up the odd bridge,

*[Laughing.] Oh right.*

down in the South and every time you went over a bridge, [aircraft noise] you kind of crossed your fingers and wondered, you know, whether it was OK. And my colleagues were two men who had had no training at all, in fact, I think, well one had been a policeman and one had been an old relieving officer. I was very naïve in those days, and when this old relieving officer guy [rustling noise] used to say, 'Well have you seen young Tommy lately?' etc., I didn't realise that he was actually fishing for information, because he was a 'B Special'.

*Right.*

You know, that's a kind of policeman, who,

*Right.*

who nobody liked at all.

*Can I just pause for a sec? [Break in recording.] So if we could go back a little bit, to right at the beginning of your years, and you could just say; you said you were born a long time ago, when and where you were born?*

Well I was born in Croydon, and my father thought, I don't know why, but he thought we'd be safer down [aircraft noise] in Plymouth, where his family came from, but of course we weren't safer at all, and he remained in London.

*So you moved down to Plymouth, soon after you were born, did you?*

Yes, to my grandmother's house. He remained in London, and he was too old for active service but he was in the ARP [Air Raid Precautions] so he spent most of the war on top of buildings in London, fighting incendiary fires,

*Oh yes.*

[aircraft noise] and, I mean I think I've got a very poor memory because I don't remember much of him being there or not there etc. A few things stand out, like we had just moved back to Croydon when my grandmother's house was bombed and she was killed, and my sister came along when I was about four-and-a-half years old and I was looked after by an aunt in that time, while my mother was in hospital. You know in those days they went into the hospital for 10 days...

*Mm hmm.*

and I was looked after by an aunt, who disliked me, and I hated it.



*Why do you think she disliked you?*

Well I mean it's the 'pathology' of the family, you know, but I mean she was horrid. She'd been horrible to my mother and I think she disliked me because I was, you know, not 'normal', and I remember very well once, kind of, being there with my father and I was doing something, I was [laughing] dancing round the room I think, and the look of disgust on her face.

*What kind of age were you then?*

Ooh, oh four. And anyway, my sister was born, I remember going to the hospital and my father, and getting her. I don't remember an awful lot about her, except I was very horsy, and I used to give her rides on my back like a horse, [interviewer laughs] and I used to collect pictures of horses, and I went to the school from there. And my father spoilt me, I'm sure, and I think my sister resented this a bit, and he was a very soft person, and if it had been up to him, I'm sure I'd have never got far at all, it was my mother who was the driving force, and [talking together] I mean all...

*So he would have over-protected you?*

Yes, and although she didn't suffer fools gladly, I have to be grateful for her, you know, kicking me along and -

*So how early was it when they realised that?*

Well I'm sure, you know, within a few months.

*Mm hmm.*

Mm. But I never had any hospitalisation or any treatment really. I just remember going up to Great Ormond Street for tonsils out [laughs] when I was about three or so and that: no, I must have been older, about five. And that was very traumatic cos I

was only in three days but I can still remember the sister telling me if I sicked up the medicine, I'd have it all over again, twice, [interviewer laughs] and, you know, when you've got cp you can't always swallow on demand, but she seemed to have [laughing] no idea about that. So I really think I only remember [laughing] horrible things, and not good things in my childhood, and that, [aircraft noise] you know. Obviously I did have friends in the neighbourhood, but of course once you go away to boarding school, then it can be a problem to have friends, [talking together] in the holidays.

*Mm, so you never had any diagnosis? Was there any medical, you know... Did anybody give a name to what it -*

Well 'spastic' [talking together] as it was called then.

*They did say that quite early on. Mm.*

Oh yes.

*And your speech was [a] difficulty, was your mobility also a problem at that [talking together] early stage?*

Oh always from birth.

*Yes, right.*

Yes. No, I mean, cp isn't a deteriorating condition,

*Right.*

you are born with [laughing] what you have.

*Right.*

What you see, any deterioration, I suppose is with age.

*Mm hmm. And can you remember being told anything about your birth? Was there anything unusual about your -*

Well no, later on my mother said, you know, they'd left her alone for a long time, and I became distressed and stopped breathing, I suppose, during birth. I mean, sometimes, nowadays I certainly wish I could sue those people who probably [aircraft noise] had one more cup of coffee, or one more cigarette before [laughing] they came to see my mother, because it's affected my whole life, and it's getting worse.

*So you think that was partially to do with what, your condition?*

Well yes.

*Yes, and did anyone ever actually say that, or is that something that you just thought?*  
*[Talking together.] No.*

Well, look, [laughing: aircraft noise] you know, until I came back to this country in '85, I hadn't really ever acknowledged that I had a disability.

*Right.*

I'd never had any trouble getting a job, I'd never really had any discrimination from clients [in social work] or anything like that, so I suppose, well I was of course disabled but I certainly wasn't a militant and I didn't identify myself with other people with disabilities.

*So, what age were you then? This was when you came back from Israel was it?*

About 40.

*Mm hmm.*

Mm. Forty-five.

*So how did you get on with your sister?*

Very badly.

*Yeah?*

[Laughs] Very badly. I suppose we get on better now. I mean, she's a very kind, generous person; she loves my kids and all that. She doesn't have kids of her own but she can drive me up the wall: [interviewer laughs] she's so precise and, you know, I'm laid-back and she kind of drives me up the wall some. [Both laugh.]

*So, how did she react to your challenges?*

I've no idea.

*You don't know how she was when you were... whether she protected [talking together] you or -*

Well, oh no, I think she was ashamed of me.

*Mm hmm.*

Mm. You know. I mean there's four years between us.

*Right.*

No, I think she was very glad I was out of the picture.

*Is that when you went away to the - ?*

Yes. Mm.

*And you said that all four of your grandparents had died before you were born?*

**[End of Track 1]**

**Tape 1 Side B [Track 2]**

*[Feedback.] So what people influenced you most in your early years, if you just mainly got your parents? [Talking together. Inaudible.]*

Well I guess my house mistress.

*It was when you were about 11, 10?*

Ten, eleven:

*Mm hmm.*

and my head mistress did a lot, you know, to kind of urge me on and kick me when I got out of line. Cos I remember once I wrote home to my parents, saying, 'I really must have coaching in maths, [rustling noise] because I can't get on,' and they wrote to her about this, and she got me in the study and really blasted me about this and said, you know, 'I must press on with the maths in class, and I wasn't to worry my parents about it.' [Break in recording.] So those are the people who influenced me most in my young life. I also became a Girl Guide at school, and I did quite well then, and I got the appropriate badges and then I became a Queen's Guide and then they...

*What age were you, then?*

Oh, I don't know; 16.

*Sixteen: ah ha.*

And so then they took me up to London to have the Queen's Guide badge presented by the then Chief Guide – Lady Baden-Powell,

*Mm!*

so it was supposed to be a really great honour.

*So you obviously remember more from like 10 up. So what age were you when you first went to school? Five was it, when you first went to school?*

Ooh, four, four-and-a-half.

*Ooh four-and-a-half – that's quite young. So, what do you remember about what you did with your parents in the first four years there? Do you remember anything about how [inaudible] that was before you went away, almost at the time that your sister was born?*

Well no, I went away when I was eight, so she would have been [talking together] about three-and-a-half.

*Oh you were still at home then. Right, so you were still at home when you were going to school...*

Mm, yes.

*[Inaudible.] ... for those four years.*

Mm, mm.

*And how did that change when you went to school and you were away from home during the days there, and you went to a special school? Was that was a special school the first four years, or just an ordinary school?*

No: ordinary school.

*Just an ordinary school.*

Mm hmm.

*And you mentioned at the other school that children kind of bullied you and taunted you. What about this first school, was that true there also?*

No, I can't remember it but I knew it was a very small school, just a private school, run by a mother and daughter. The mother we called Governess and, [laughs] you know, the daughter was the main teacher, but I think we still used slates then, so I remember that.

*[Laughs.] And do you -*

But I remember I used to walk to school on my own, with no problem. I mean, in those days one could walk to school and never think anything of it.

*Was it far away from your home?*

Twenty minutes, but you don't consider distance and -

*No. [Pause.] Is there anything else you can recall about how you felt? Is that when you realised your differences from other people, or anything like that, when you were young, or it just wasn't a thing for you when you were young?*

I don't think it was anything, really. My mother certainly didn't encourage me to ask questions or to talk about it in any way, certainly not, so...

*So it wasn't talked about with your family and your home of what was goin' on with you and what might be... [inaudible.]*

No, no.

*And what about like neighbours and any other family members, or anything like that?*



Well there weren't other family members, except this elderly aunt, [talking together. Interviewer inaudible] who had died, and she died when I was about, well I'd have been under 10 I think. No, I don't think it was really a big thing, my disability really.

*For you or for your family?*

Well, for me. I mean certainly I played with other children around without disabilities and, you know, in the neighbourhood.

*And they were fine; they didn't tease you or anything?*

No, no. I had a 'fairy cycle', as they were called, and I used to pedal up and down with my friend who had a bike that was a bit bigger than mine. I had two good friends, a boy and a girl, and... Mm.

*Can I just... [Break in recording.] ... what that first day at that little school was like?*

Yes, I remember we went a day too early and [laughing] had to come back, [interviewer laughs] and the real first day I don't remember at all. [Interviewer laughs.] I think I could probably read and I do remember my mother trying to teach me division, and really hitting 'high doh' [being upset] when I couldn't seem to get the idea of division.

*So your mother taught you before you went to school?*

Well I don't know whether it was homework, or some: I don't know.

*So you said it was a small school, how many children were actually at the school? Do you remember?*

I really don't know. Possibly no more than 20.

*Right, and a few different classes?*

Two, I think.

*Oh right.*

Governess had one and Miss Howell had the other.

*And what was your favourite... what subjects did you like when you were at school?*

At school -

*You 'ad trouble with maths, so that obviously wasn't your favourite.*

Art.

*Art?*

Art I liked, yes. Art and biology. I mean I had trouble at school because I've always been terribly slow at writing, and of course there were no aids like there are nowadays: no computers or anything, so a greater proportion of my time was taken in writing and less time in doing all the reading that many people do. So I wouldn't say I was well-read at all. When GCE came along, I was given 20 minutes extra. [Aircraft noise.]

*Who was that?*

What?

*You said when someone came along...*

No, GCE [General Certificate of Education, or O-Level]

*GCE came along, right.*

exams.

*What, to do the exams you had extra time?*

Yes, and of course that was hopeless, and I've never finished an exam in my life. I just had to divide the time up into four or five, and when the time was finished, go onto the next question, which was extremely frustrating, and I sometimes wonder how well I could have done if I could have had all the...

*The time, yes.*

help that is available nowadays.

*Right.*

But maybe that's just making excuses.

*And how did you do with your GCEs then? Is that when you were about 16 that you took GCEs?*

Yes, well I got seven I think.

*Wow, that was pretty good!*

And then two Highers, [equivalent to A-Levels] so I got into the university.

*Mm hmm. Did you talk about the university bit in the beginning?*

Yes, that was at Dublin.

*Oh that was why you were doing the social work: it was in the same place, at Dublin.*

Well it was a university qualification.

*Oh right, OK. So you went to university specifically to do [talking together] the social work qualification. OK.*

Oh yes, to do social work. Yes.

*And then you left?*

And then I worked in Fermanagh, and then I came back to work in England, with the idea of doing a post-grad year in social work. So I started working in Wiltshire for Wiltshire Social Services, and then I was accepted by Swansea [University] and Dundee, and I decided to go to Swansea, where I did my post-grad year in Child Care, which was not learning how to change a diaper [nappy] but, you know, to learn proper family therapy and all the psychological stuff etc.

*So how long was this social work? [Inaudible.]*

A year, that one, and then after that, I'd had a practical placement in Glamorgan, so I did a few months' work more in Glamorgan, and then I moved to Monmouthshire, and worked for Monmouthshire Social Services. And by then it had become more specialised, and I worked with children – fostering or troubled children – and while I was there I became the Adoptions Officer for the county. And, well then I suffered 'burn-out' as far as I'm concerned, you know. Social work is very demanding.

*Mm hmm.*

You never see any real result: well, not often, so I decided to go to Israel for three weeks and work on a kibbutz. [Talking together] I had -

*And how old were you then?*

Oh, [pause] I don't know: late twenties,

*Mm hmm.*

and then I had wound up my job with Monmouthshire and I was about to take up a job as a social worker in Abergavenny Hospital, but in between I decided to go to Israel to work in a kibbutz for three weeks. And, well, there I was picking oranges and it was wonderful to just fill a box of oranges and see a job done, completed, [laughs] you know, after social work, and so I played 'hooky'. I decided not to come back after three weeks – I stayed for three months. And in the meantime I met my husband-to-be, who was working with volunteers like me, and I came back after three months and got temporary work back in Monmouthshire, and then said that I would be returning to Israel to marry this guy the next month. I think maybe I've talked enough now.

*Thank you.*

My voice is dying.

*Well we'll put it on for a minute, see how you feel. [Break in recording.]*

I never failed to get any job that I applied for, [sound of paper rustling] except the ones with Scope, [talking together] but -

*[Laughing] Oh the ones with Scope!*

Yes.

*When was that?*

And they would not consider me, didn't even get an interview.

*When was that? How long ago was that?*

Well this was up to about 1990.

*[Laughs] And what kind of job were you tryin' to get with Scope?*

Social Worker – [talking together] just the same

*Oh just the same – social work.*

as I'd been doing for the local authority. [Interviewer laughs] I mean I know that after '85 [1985] when I came back and I got involved with the Disability Rights at WEOCDP [WECODP: West of England Coalition of Disabled People] we used to hold our meetings in a Scope office, which we weren't very keen but at least it was free. And we'd meet there in the evening, and the guy who let us in had cp and he told us that he wasn't allowed to work in the daytime, to be seen by the general public, he was only allowed to...

*That's as recent as 1990?*

Oh yes.

*Wow.*

Yes, it was terrible. It used to make me so angry. I think it was Tim Yeo who was the Chairman [of the Spastics Society] or some bigwig, and I used to think, 'What the hell does he know about it?' and, 'Why should he be getting fat off my back?'

*But what was his name: Hargreaves? What was his first name? Bill, wasn't it?*

Bill Hargreaves.

*Yes. I mean he'd been involved like from the sixties or something, hadn't he? He had cp, but still they weren't - [Inaudible]*

Well I never knew Bill Hargreaves.

*But I thought that signalled an inclusion of people with cp, rather than like parents and whatever running the organisation?*

I don't know.

*But it's still in the nineties.*

I mean my mother was involved with [aircraft noise] The Spastics' Society from the time I was about 12 – I think she used to go round with [laughing] the collecting box [interviewer laughs] every year etc. I don't know.

*So how long did you spend in Israel?*

Sixteen years.

*Sixteen? You were out of the country all the time or you were*

[Talking together.] Yes.

*coming backwards and forwards?*

Well I did come back occasionally,

*Right.*

but of course living in a kibbutz, you don't have the money to

*Right.*

travel. So I came back two years after I went, I think, so that would have been... came back in '72, and then I didn't come back again till '83.

*Wow.*

Yes.

*And you mentioned children.*

Yes.

*Do you have children?*

Three.

*Three. Where are they? Are they in Israel?*

They're in Israel.

*And they've all stayed in Israel?*

Yes. I mean, they have travelled, like the oldest did a spell in Holland, and then he went to Brazil as a bodyguard for the richest banker Herr Soires, and he spent nine months there, and Adam spent a year here [banging noise in distance] doing physical activities with all sorts of people: able, disabled children, adults.

*He's kind of like a physical ed. teacher kind of thing?*



Well no, he was climbing walls, actually. [Both laugh] He was teaching wall-climbing, and he went to an activity centre and was doing all sorts – zip-wiring and all sorts of things.

*So how old are your children now?*

Oh. Twenty-seven is the youngest and 31 and 33.

*Mm.*

Yes. Mm. And the youngest is in Bulgaria at this moment.

*Oh yes?*

He's just got his first job, as a physiotherapist for a football team,

*Wow, good.*

and they're training in Bulgaria at the moment. [Both laugh.] Mm. [Pause.]

*You had enough?*

Yes.

*OK. Stop there.*

**[End of Track 2]**

**Tape 2 Side A [Track 3]**

*This is 23rd of August 2005. This is the second interview with Jill Mahler: Sue Geary, interviewer. OK Jill, we're just going to fill a little bit of detail in if possible, from the stuff that we had before. So, what was your family surname?*

My family surname was Partridge.

*Partridge. And, what was your -*

A good West of England name. My father came from Devon.

*Yeah?*

And, although the family had been quite large a few generations ago, in fact his father died when my father was two, so there were only two boys in the family, and his brother died quite young too, so we were really isolated. My grandmother, I think I told you, died as a result of

*Of bombing, yeah.*

bombing, and we moved up to Surrey. My mother also had a kind of funny childhood. I covered that though before I think. Her mother died when she was 12.

*What was your mother's name?*

Well, Lederer I think. Her father was an international bridge player who had a famous bridge club in Mayfair, and he had come from Czechoslovakia before the First World War, because he was in the British army in the First World War as an intelligence officer. But other than that I don't really remember much. I met him a couple of times, but I was only two or three. I remember we went up to lunch in his club: not the bridge club, but in his gentleman's club. [Laughing] That's all I really remember about it: and he died too at

a young age. I think probably from neglecting himself, he was very overweight and fond of the good life, [Interviewer laughs] and he died during the war. And so that's my family. There were just the two of us, my sister. [Talking together: inaudible.]

*What was your mum's first name?*

Catherine.

*And your dad's first name?*

Reginald.

*And was there any... [Had] they ever told you anything about why they chose 'Jill' for you? Was there any?*

Jillian, actually.

*Jillian. They always used to call you Jillian.*

Heaven knows. [Interviewer laughs.] No idea. Probably because it wasn't very common in those days,

*Right.*

especially spelt with a J.

*Yeah.*

So, no idea. [Pause.] My second name is after my grandmother. I think it is quite unusual, I've never met anyone else called Annas, but...

*Ah ha, yes.*

that's all.

*Doesn't sound English.*

Well -

*You spoke about how important this Mrs Hudson-Smith was to you when you were at [both talking together] school. [Inaudible.]*

Well -

*She was a fascinating woman.*

Well, she was because she was really a pioneer in her field of speech therapy. Of course, really we were more complex problems than just straightforward cp [cerebral palsy] but she started this school, a boarding school. And the first day I was one of the first pupils, and there were only seven of us, the first day, and then more came, you know, on following days, so I really felt like a pioneer [interviewer laughs]. And I was there for 18 months and, I mean now I believe it's for very much more complex speech problems.

*It still exists, the school?*

Oh yes. In fact I was rather disappointed that when it was 50 years old, they didn't invite old pupils back,

*[Talking together.] Oh! Yeah.*

or make any thing of it. Anyway, but you know, you always wish you had really made more of these people when you became adult but times and affairs and families kind of fill your life, and -

*You mean that you'd kept in touch?*

Well yes, or at least [knocking noise] went back to say, 'Well thank you very much.'

*Oh right.*

Yes.

*So it made quite an impact on you, this woman and the therapy?*

Well, I mean certainly it opened the door to a good education,

*Yeah.*

and without a good inclusive education, I'm sure I wouldn't have got to university or had a career,

*Mm.*

or anything like that. [Sound of pages being turned.]

*[Talking together.] Do you -*

Well the decision wasn't mine to leave that school. I mean I was told that they had done all they felt they could do for my speech, or they had completed the programme,

*Yeah.*

and then it was looking round for a school for me to go on to.

*And did they teach you other things in the school or was it specifically speech therapy?*

Oh no, you have a [talking together] full-time education.

*The full curriculum. Yes.*

Yes, and I suppose as I was fairly bright, you know. I had no problem in getting accepted by the public school I went to.

*And was there reasons for... they told you that a mainstream school wouldn't be [talking together] the best thing for -*

No it was a mainstream school.

*It was a mainstream school but it was a private school, was it?*

Well [laughing] public schools are private schools aren't they?

*Yes, [laughing] that's what I meant, yes. It was something you had to pay for, was what I meant.*

Yes. I think they thought that, you know, I really wouldn't manage in the rough and tumble

*[Talking together.] Oh right.*

of a day school.

*Yeah.*

I'd be better off in a boarding school, and unlike, you know, many disabled children who resent being sent away, I think it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

*Yeah? Would you say more about why you feel that?*

[Sound of aircraft.] Well I think I mentioned it on the other tape. Although things were tough in the beginning, you know, after the first 18 months I really found myself and I went on up through the school and became House Captain and finally Head of School.

*Right.*

And so suppose I had quite a successful career in school.

*Yeah, that's great. What was the name of this school?*

Lillesden.

*Lillesdon.*

Yes, it -

*And where was it, somewhere in Kent?*

In Kent yes. It is now part of another school [Bedgebury School, Goudhurst, near Hawkhurst, Kent].

*What part of Kent was it?*

In Hawkhurst.

*Hawkhurst.*

That's between Tunbridge Wells and Hastings, in the real boarding school belt.

*[Laughs] And you mentioned that the first 18 months weren't very good and then the house mistress used these kind of like games with you. Can you remember?*

Yes.

*Can you remember what that was, cos that sounds kind of a fun [talking together] thing to get them to be with you rather than...*

Well you know, it was only one thing but it did the trick. I don't know why we had it, but she arranged a treasure hunt for some occasion and there were different written clues around etc., and she wrote one clue about me which was very funny. [Interviewer laughs.] I don't know what it involved, I can't remember, but it was very funny, and from that time onwards, you know, it became a house joke and people laughed with me instead of at me,

*Right.*

and I learnt [laughing] a sense of humour.

*Pretty crucial isn't it?*

Yes. What I'm always trying to tell the people I work with to have a sense of humour.  
[Laughs.]

*[Pause.] You took O-levels and then A-levels. What was your choice... How did you choose your subjects to take for A-level? The ones you were best at?*

Well no, it just happened that I was more or less kind of lumbered with History and English. They weren't things I was interested in at all but I was more or less lumbered with them.

*Why was that?*

Well I suppose the sciences weren't being taught at the higher level, it was more art subjects, and I was certainly no linguist either.



*[Laughing.] Right, but you enjoyed art didn't you? So that's one of them.*

Oh yes, yes.

*So what a levels did you take? History and?*

History and English.

*English; they were the two that you took.*

Yes, you know English is several exams and there are about nine set books (or there were).

*Oh literature as well as...*

Yes, yes. I mean nothing that inspired me at all; [interviewer laughs] and in fact they were the very worst subjects I could have done because it all involved a lot of writing,

*Oh right. [Talking together.] Yeah English.*

which was awful for me. I mean, things have changed so much in the education system. I mean my education wasn't in any way done from an enlightened [laughing] point of view. I mean, nowadays one would hope that, you know, the student would be considered more, about what suited the student

*[Talking together.] Right.*

rather than what suited the school. [Both laugh.]

*You said that you wanted to be a doctor.*

Yes.

*What was it that drew you to this? Well there was this doctor that you'd...*

I suppose, you know, you have dreams of making things better for people when you're young, and I suppose even then I felt I might have been able to offer insight into cp and other problems like that.

*And as you said you were inspired by this Doctor Coleston...*

Yes. Carlson.

*Carlson. He had cp?*

Yes. He was an American, yeah. [Earl R Carlson.]

*And how did you know about him?*

Well I read his book ['Born That Way']

*Aha?*

Yeah.

*So what were the attractions when you moved to social work? What were the attractions of being a social worker?*

[Both laugh.] I don't think.

*It was a default position because you couldn't be a doctor, was it?*

Well, I don't know. I mean of course there were things I was quite interested in, and I told you I wanted to be what was called an 'almoner' in those days, and they were a very snooty lot,

*Yeah. [Inaudible.]*

and the Institute of Almoners. And no way would they consider me. And anyway, I had a very good rounded training at Trinity and because of course it was a non-welfare state...

*This is in Dublin?*

... in the Republic of Ireland, so I saw how things were done in a non-welfare state and -

*And can you say what those differences were?*

Well not really, except it was more run by the religious orders,

*Aha.*

than the government. I mean for the very poor people, the government did provide some kind of help, but otherwise it was mainly the religious bodies: like I had a practical placement in a hospital called St Vincent's and my supervisor was a nun who was the kind of social worker or almoner.

*That was in Dublin, was it?*

Yes, yes. And I did have a placement in a school for cp but that wasn't run by the religious orders. I think that was more a voluntary body, but I mean we had loads of practical visits from Jacobs Biscuit Factory [interviewer laughs] and Wills' Cigarette Factory right along to the Morning Star night shelter in the slums of Dublin. We went one night and it was like stepping back into Dickens' time. [Laughs.]

*Yeah? It sounds like it was an enjoyable time for you, was it?*

Oh yes. Yes it was very interesting, and although I think I've been to six universities since, Trinity Dublin will always be my alma mater.

You have learned (I can't think of the word) at six universities since then have you?

Yes, yes.

*What were the other universities?*

It sounds as if I've been chucked [talking together] out of all them! [They laugh.]

*Yeah, yeah! A university crawl.*

That's over a long time though. I mean I went and did a post-grad year then at Swansea, and then I did a year at Haifa University, not studying for any

*That's in Israel.*

Degree, yes.

*Mm hmm.*

But I was studying things like the psychosocial implications of disability and things like that, and then I started my Ergonomics degree: oh no, after that I went to Bristol University and did my Masters in Social Admin, which was so bloody boring.

[Interviewer laughs.] And then I started Ergonomics, which was the best thing in my life, but I came to it far too late in my career. Funnily enough though, when I was at Dublin, we'd had a lecturer who was talking about a very new subject of Ergonomics and I was terribly interested. At that time you had to have a degree in Psychology to do it and I didn't have time to [traffic noise in background] get a degree.

*So how old were you? You said you came to it late, like how old were you when you did the - ?*

Oh, well into my fifties.

*Oh right I see, much later.*

And I started at UCL [University College London] to do Ergonomics and I was working at night with Social Services in the out-of-hours team, and I used to rush up to London in the daytime, to attend these lectures and then back at night. It was pretty killing. But then after a year my job changed and I couldn't do that, so then I went part-time to Surrey University to do Ergonomics.

*And can you say a little bit more about how that's applied in life situations, the ergonomics?*

Oh well Ergonomics roughly is fitting equipment to the person instead of the person to the equipment, and I always made it my job in lectures to point out that there were also people with disabilities that needed to be catered for, as well as mainstream workers, etc. And from that I've gone on to access: making things accessible, and I did some courses at the Centre for Accessible Environments, and if I can get on with my computer I would like to be a full-time access auditor, but I've been having a great deal of trouble with my computer because typing is very laborious and it's [talking together] really giving me trouble with my neck and shoulders.

*Would one of the voice-activated systems work?*

Well, I had hoped that it would do, but I went to Ability Net [the charity] about six weeks ago to be tested for a voice-activated thing, and they said that the system could not recognise my voice. I didn't speak well enough; which was a damn nuisance because I really do need to talk into a machine rather than type. So I was talking to Phil and the

other guy about it last week and they gave me a few suggestions to kind of pursue the problem, so I will be doing it.

*And up until the time you went to Israel you weren't kind of identified with the disability movement, shall we say, were you?*

No.

*So what was it that changed for you? Was it something [talking together] in Israel, or was it when you came back?*

Well, no, when I came back in '85 [1985] the disability movement was quite strong in Bristol. I mean, Bristol is quite a place really for radical thought in a way. I mean at that time they were giving funding to gays and lesbians whereas other places in the country were saying, 'No, no, don't talk about it', [interviewer laughs] and things like that. And the disability movement was really getting off the ground here and they'd become stronger and stronger.

*[Talking together] So was there anything...*

Or they had.

*Right, was there anything that happened for you specifically that made you more, kind of feel you wanted to work in that arena [talking together] or feel more identified with those issues?*

No, I don't think so, cos in a way it worked to my disadvantage, [laughs]

*[Talking together.] In what way is that?*

vaguely. Well I became quite a bit militant and aware of my rights,

*Aha.*

and I would start talking back and up to people, employers, where before I might have just shut up and kind of... [inaudible]... on, and that didn't make me very popular at all.

*How did it make you feel about yourself though?*

Well it made me feel that I needed to, you know, talk up for both myself and for people who couldn't talk up for themselves. Mm, yes.

*I think it's going to get to the end the cassette, so... Well, we've reached a natural pause.*

**[End of Track 3]**

**Tape 2 Side B [Track 4]**

*We've moved on from Ireland, but when you were in Ireland what was the reaction to people to you in doing your social work as an English person, and as someone from a kind of more not a rural background shall we say? Was there any?*

Well, no, because in fact I went to work in a very primitive rural part, over in the west of Ireland. Still in the north, but over in the west. And in a way it helped, because they felt that I did not kick with either foot – that's the expression.

*[Talking together.] Can you say more about that then?*

I was neither a Catholic or a Protestant,

*Aha.*

so they felt that they would get a more equal treatment from me, whereas it was very sectarian you see, even in those days, and if you were Catholic and you got an obviously Protestant Orange Man social worker, you wouldn't feel at ease at all,

*Oh!*

and vice versa, whereas if I was a foreigner and didn't kick with either foot, [interviewer laughs] it was better [both laugh]. Of course I'm sure I was very naïve and there were loads of things that were going on that I didn't really know about, but, I did say to you that the two of the guys I worked with were in the Orange Order?

*Aha.*

And one was a 'B Special' and -

*Yes.*



I told you that?

*Yes. Tried to find information out from you?*

Yes. Things like that. And, well when you're in your early twenties, and you haven't been brought up in that kind of atmosphere where even the schools are segregated, well you just ignore it and go on your way. I would jump over to the west of Ireland, you know, to the sea, cos the Republic goes almost right round Fermanagh and when you're in the north of Fermanagh, in Belleek, well you're only six miles from the sea, over in the west of Ireland. So I was jumping backwards and forwards, you know.

*Going to the sea?*

Yes.

*And how did you get about? Were you driving then?*

Oh yes, yes.

*Had your own car?*

I've been driving since I was 17. I passed my test. Yes, I mean, one couldn't get round without driving,

*[Talking together] No. Yeah, yeah.*

because it's an extremely rural area.

*And what was your social life like?*

Well, I suppose -

*[Talking together.] And how did you live?*

It wasn't all that great. I suppose it wasn't really wonderful, compared to some people's social life, but I was quite happy really. Well, I've always been an outdoor pursuits person and I had a friend with a dog that I used to take out a lot, and one of my colleagues had a boat and we would go fishing on the lake when...

*[Talking together.] Yeah, you said that he took you out...*

I didn't fish but, you know,

*... on the lake.*

things like that – you join things like evening classes. I remember in one WEA [Workers' Educational Association] education class learning about Russian authors and then I also went to car maintenance, wood work, and we tried to start a Liberal Party [talking together] to go in.

*[Laughing] A Liberal Party? This is in Ireland?*

Yes, something in between the Protestants, I mean the Unionists and the Republicans. I mean, the candidate was pretty hopeless. He was a young English guy from London and I remember one of the old councillors on the county committee, saying to me, 'If you value your job you won't have anything more to do with the Liberal Party' and, you know, really threatening.

*And did you? [Laughs.]*

Well I think we quite soon had an election and he lost hopelessly, of course.

*So how long were you in Ireland, overall?*

Five-and-a-half years.

*Five, oh it was that long?*

Yes, and I left in order to come back and do a post-grad year at... well, yes, my idea was to get a further qualification so I came back and I got a job for Wiltshire County Council, cos I looked on the map and I saw Salisbury Plain and I thought 'Oh good, well there'll be open spaces and places [laughing] to walk'. Little did I know that the army was all over the plain and you could hardly walk anywhere, so I was only in Wiltshire six months. And I was seconded by them to Swansea University to do this post-grad year, and I never went back [both laugh] to Wiltshire, which was bad but I had become kind of 'mixed up' with a colleague who wanted to marry me and things were getting a bit kind of hot, so. [Interviewer laughs.]

*[Laughs.] 'Mixed up', what a comment! What happened there then?*

[Laughing.] Yes. You see in those days it was quite easy to get jobs; I never had a problem getting a job. Then... I don't know... I'm trying to think, that... Where did that go?... Oh yes, I had been at Swansea and I'd had some practical placements in Glamorgan so I worked for six months for Glamorgan Social Services and then went to Monmouthshire, the next-door county. And then, I was there for two or three years and I suffered from 'burn-out'. [Talking together.]

*Yeah, you mentioned that before. So what were the reasons?*

Well most personal, I lost someone very close to me very suddenly. It made me, you know, extremely upset at losing him.

*When you say 'losing him' you mean he*

He died.

*died, yes.*

And then also, you know, social work is pretty tough. You're all the time giving and you've got people taking all the time from you, and I was dealing with 'problem families', that's what you called them in those days, and problem children, and the county Children's Officer offered me the job of Adoptions Officer for the county, but by then I really felt I had nothing to give. I felt I, you know, had to have a change: so I went to the kibbutz.

*So that was at the point you chose to*

[Talking together.] Ostensibly.

*up sticks and go to Israel?*

Well I only went for three weeks [laughing] really, and then I was due to come back and work in Abergavenny Hospital as a social worker, but in fact I didn't come back for three months. I wrote to Abergavenny Hospital and declined the job and I stayed on three months as a volunteer in the kibbutz cos it's like living, hanging in limbo: or it was. You didn't have to make any decisions or, you know, the world could pass you by, and as long as you went out to work every day... We only worked six hours a day.

*Was that doing things within the kibbutz?*

Yes, picking oranges

[Talking together.] *Right.*

and sitting in the orange grove, [laughing] eating grapes, watching the big black snake wriggle up and down the row as you ate, and going out in the early morning and cooking breakfast out there and that, going out about six in the morning. And so it was a very pleasant life and you got so many days off a month to travel, and I travelled round Israel

with a fellow 'kibbutzim', I mean a fellow volunteer. And I saw more of Israel than I ever did in the years I was married cos I had a terrible stay-at-home husband, and then, by the end of three months, Peter (who had been in charge of volunteers and I'd got to know quite well), it was his turn to have a trip abroad because in those days money was very short and it took a long time for a kibbutzim's turn to come up. That was in '69, and he'd been there since '50.

*[Talking together.] Right.*

So he said that he was coming to England to visit his aunt and uncle and I said, 'Well, I'll meet you and take you round a bit', etc. And I did, and he kind of proposed to me [laughs] and then I went back the following March and, you know, we kind of lived together and we got married and had three children.

[Interviewer laughs.] *'Kind of!'*

So...

*So Peter was the one that you went travelling with? [Talking together.] Peter was your husband's name?*

Oh no, for God's sake no! No, he would never travel. No; a fellow volunteer, an American girl I went travelling with.

*No? Oh. No he would never travel, he was stay-at-home. Right.*

*So what nationality is Peter?*

Well, he's now Israeli [talking together: interviewer inaudible] but he was born in Austria.

*Oh Austria, yeah. So you mentioned somebody in Wales because you didn't go back to that other job cos you'd met somebody in Wales that you were going to marry. So you've had a few marriage proposals there that [have?] you? [Laughs.]*

Yeah, quite a few, I suppose. [Laughs.] Mm.

*What happened with that one?*

I couldn't stand him. [Both laugh.] He was all right when we were both working for Wiltshire but then he came on the same course as me in Swansea and it gradually got worse, somewhere, so I decided 'No sirree.' [Both laugh.]

*But different with Peter?*

I guess so.

*So how long have you been married now?*

Ooh ages.

*[Laughing.] Ages. [Talking together.] We're talking about 60 now.*

God. It sounds awful to say 35 years.

*I was gonna to say it must be that mustn't it?*

God, yes. Mm.

*So were you married in Israel in the kibbutz?*

Yes. Well, kind of. I mean I wasn't officially Jewish, you know, because to be Jewish your mother had to be Jewish,

*Right.*

and although I had a Jewish grandfather it doesn't count. Well, Israel is a theocracy, so it has no civil marriage, so anyone who isn't Jewish usually goes out, in those days, either to Cyprus,

*Oh right.*

or had to get married, well, you know... In a way I thought I... I mean, I'm not a religious person but if anything makes sense to me the Jewish religion does, and I thought for the sake of the children too I should be Jewish, so that they would be Jewish and have no problems in later life. So I embarked on a course to convert, which is a trial and tribulation in itself because Judaism, unlike most religions, isn't a proselytising religion. They don't encourage people to become Jewish, [both laugh] they say it's hard enough being born a Jew without converting to Judaism! [They laugh.] So I had a great deal of trouble, you know, converting.

*Peter's Jewish, is he?*

Oh yes. But, I mean, I know more about Judaism now than he does,

*Well it's often the way, isn't it?*

because he lived in a very assimilated family in Austria and they never kept any Jewish customs, and they had Christmas trees and things like that so, you know. Anyway I finally converted and we got married, finally, and it's [laughing] always been hard because it was hard to get converted [rustling noise] and, by the time we officially got married there had been a month of my first son being born, [interviewer laughs] which, you know [talking together] in those days...

*And what's his name?*

Well his Hebrew name is Joel, and then he has a middle name, Patrick. [Both laugh: inaudible.] Anyway we got married, I think it was about March the 21st and Peter had to go immediately.

*So what was that, in the seventies?*

Yes.

*1970?*

No, '71.

'71.

Peter immediately had to go into the army, to do a month

*[Talking together.] Oh it's forced service isn't it?*

army service and of course, it was, you know, 'Will he get out, or will the baby come first?' [Both laugh: inaudible.] Anyway he got out on the 21st of April and Joely was born on the 22nd, [interviewer laughs] so, mm. But with so much trauma in his life, you always had these fears, 'Will he be killed before the baby's born?' etc, cos he was up on the Lebanese border and [laughs] I mean he's a hopeless soldier, anything less militaristic you never met, he's hopeless [laughs]. And of course in March it's always all a lot of thunder and lightning and storms, and up in one of these metal border posts, and that, you'd think, 'Well, maybe if the snipers don't get him, he'll be struck by lightning [both laugh] or something.' Anyway, he did eventually get home in time.

*And you lived in the kibbutz for all the time through your marriage?*

Yes. Yes.



*And, what is the structure for [talking together] marriage and children in the kibbutz?*

It's like having 200 mother-in-laws! [Interviewer laughs]. It really is. I've often thought of [laughing] writing a book entitled *200 Mother-in-Laws!*

*Sounds like you should.*

Because, well, Peter was the eternal bachelor. No one ever expected him to get married and I was one of these queer foreigners and, you know, everyone was doubtful; would they look after this baby properly? And so they were all very free with their advice.

*[Laughs. Aircraft noise.] So are there any different views of Israel at that time (and indeed now), in disability, as opposed to England?*

Well, it was pretty grim when you went outside the kibbutz into town and that, because there was a lot of superstition about physical disability also being, you know, mentally disabled.

*U-huh.*

And also, some of the shop keepers were quite primitive and they had this idea that if a disabled person was the first customer they'd have in the shop in the daytime, then they were likely to have a bad day. [Interviewer laughs.] So it wasn't very good at all.

*And what about within the kibbutz itself?*

Oh that wasn't bad, you know. I mean, in a way this was one of the reasons why I thought about living in a kibbutz and having children there because I felt, well A) it would dilute the pressures of a nuclear family, and B) the children would be brought up in their peer groups, so that other children would always see who their parents were and, you know, just accept.

*Mm.*

So that was OK until a new child might come into the kibbutz or into the group, and -

*So what difference did that make?*

Well then they'd say, 'What's wrong with your mother?' you know.

*Oh, right.*

And I did find my second son, him getting almost hysterical if he hurt himself and I followed this up and I found that the kind of nurse maid who looked after the group had told them that I'd been very ill and that's why I was disabled, and he was afraid the same thing would happen to him.

*And how old was your first son when your second son was born?*

Twenty-two months.

*[Laughing.] Twenty-two months.*

Which is...

*I thought you were going to say 22!*

pretty, you know...

*... close together.*

I mean, I did certainly find it hard because the heat, for one thing, and working outside in it, it was pretty difficult.

*And what's your second son called?*

Adam.

*Adam.*

Yes, yes. And my first son, well, he was never still. You might call him hyper-active now. He was never still whereas Adam seemed so restful after [laughs] Joely. But, you see, the children are brought up in children's houses: well they were from the very beginning. As soon as you came home from hospital the baby would go into a children's house, usually about six babies in the house, of roughly the same age, and the child would grow up with that group, through until he's 18 if you... [talking together: inaudible.]

*So they weren't with you in your...*

Well, not at night, no. But when you finished work in the afternoon, then the child would come home and have tea with you and, you know.

*So who looked after them in these children's houses?*

Well, that's part of somebody's work.

*Oh right.*

Yes.

*Kind of like a nanny person.*

Whereas I worked: where did I work? I worked in the public garden all round the kibbutz.

*Mm.*

[Rustling sound.] OK, and things like that. Some people would work in the children's houses, others would work in the kitchen, others would work out in the fields and so on and so on.

*So did it make it easier for you having two little kids like that? [Talking together: inaudible.]*

Well in a way, but at night with the first one they had a bell connected to your house and if the child cried you had to get up and go to the child.

*Right, and did that happen very often?*

Quite often when Joely was young. So when Adam came along I said, 'No way. He's not going in the baby house until I'm ready', so Adam slept at home, for a year.

*And that was unusual, was it?*

Yes it was unusual.

*Did that cause any problems with the - ?*

It did, cos for one thing my husband was a dyed-in-the-wool kind of 'kibbutzim' and to go against the regime was pretty hard. In fact, the secretary of the kibbutz had threatened him at one point with expulsion [both laugh] but, you know, I just could not go through that thing of having a child...

**[End of Track 4]**

**Tape 3 Side A [Track 5]**

*This is Tuesday 22nd November 2005, and this is interview number three with Jill Mahler. Jill, just filling in a few of the gaps from previous questions: in a BBC article you related how, when you were born, the health policy was to put children with cerebral palsy into homes. Can you say a little bit more about that and what they said to your mother and what happened there?*

Well, I mean my mother didn't go into details, she just said that, you know, I don't even know how old I was when I was diagnosed as having cp [cerebral palsy]. Maybe it was obvious at birth, but the doctor just said to her, 'Well, forget about her. Put her in a home and go ahead and have another baby.' So, that was that. But, as my mother was quite a cussed person and said, 'No way', etc. and she kept me. And my sister didn't come along until four-and-a-half years later.

*So you were four-and-a-half when you had a sister, you must have been quite young when this first diagnosis then: [talking together] the first couple of years.*

I suppose so. I mean, yes maybe it was obvious from the start, I don't know, because the only actual treatment I've had for cp in my life, was going to Great Ormond Street for physiotherapy. So if I can vaguely remember that, maybe it was when I was about two years old.

*Right. And can you just tell me your father's name and your mother's name, and your surnames?*

Well, the family name was Partridge. My father came from Devon, and was called Reginald, and her family name was Lederer: they came from Czechoslovakia, but she was really English, never have been outside, and her name was Catherine.

*Great. And what was the name of your first school in Croydon? You mentioned it was a private dame school.*

Yes, it was Tenterden [Kent].

*Tenterden?*

Yes, and there were only, I don't know, maybe 20 children there, but the standards were very good and I got on quite well.

*So this wasn't a special school for -*

Oh no.

*[inaudible.] D'you know what the reason was for your parents sending you to a private school at that time?*

Well, I suppose they didn't like the ordinary schools, and they were rather big and thought I would get on better with a smaller school.

*You said that, you can't remember when the cp was actually diagnosed. Can you remember anything about your attitudes to your own challenges, shall we say?*

Well I don't think I was terribly aware of things, except, you know, my mother's intense irritation at trying to put my gloves on: [both laugh] one hand not doing well, and losing one's sleeves up one's arms when you're putting your coat on. But I think that happens to

*[Talking together.] Most children, I would think, yeah.*

most children, and I don't think I was really terribly aware of it. This dame who was my first teacher, I remember her saying to some other children that I could hardly talk when I first came to her school and I repeated that to my mother. My mother was furious because she was absolutely wrong. I think I could probably read before I went

to school and certainly could talk, [interviewer laughs] but I think this woman was kind of just bragging at how well she'd done with me.

*Right. And you mentioned about the doctor, was that you originally wanted to be a doctor because you*

Yes.

*admired this man, not so much as doctoring, as it were, as a vocation?*

Well yes. No, I mean I was really interested in medicine, always interested in biology and anatomy at school and things like that, and I read this book and it seemed to be possible for a person with cp to become a doctor. But the headmistress said, 'Rubbish!' No way would she back me in this venture. She said she thought it was far too hard, not academically hard,

*Yeah...*

but a hard

*... physically*

life, hard degree and qualifications, to get.

*Oh right.*

Yes, so I had to change my mind and look round for something different.

*And what drew you to social work?*

Hm. Well, I must have been seen by a vocational [talking together] guidance person

*Yeah I remember you saying that.*

who came to school, because it wasn't a general run of things at all – people didn't see vocational guidance people,

*Aha.*

they picked their careers and that was it. But this guy must have recommended either librarianship or social work, so I went for social work.

*And how did you feel about getting a university place to do social work?*

Well, I really don't remember it being anything special,

*Aha.*

cos it was just taken for granted that I would go on to university,

*[Talking together.] By whom?*

as I was, you know, one of the brighter ones

*Oh right.*

at school. The less bright went to domestic science college, [interviewer laughs] or into nursing,

*Right.*

and the brighter ones [laughing] went to university. So it was just no big thing, really.



*Right, and was it anything special for you to be actually going off to Ireland? Did that feel any... to be going to a different country to do it?*

Well, I did feel a bit challenged at first, when I got there, but no, that was really nothing. I guess, you know, with youth you just don't really

*[Laughs.] Oh right.*

see it as anything big, and I remember the first time I went, I went across with my mother, and she left after a few days. I'd already arranged my digs.

*So you didn't live in the halls of residence then?*

No, and, you know, just went there and into university and found some friends in my group, in my year. I didn't lead the gaily-mad life of a student, maybe because, well because of being disabled, or maybe because my group of friends also didn't lead a mad gay

*Aha.*

existence either. It just didn't happen.

*Right.*

But, I had a good time anyway.

*And you said quite a bit about some of the people that you saw. What were the attitudes like in Ireland to having an English person coming in as a social worker? Was there anything to that, or to your [talking together] disability?*

Well, when I was studying in Dublin there didn't seem to be any problem at all. There were lots of English students in Dublin and I don't remember any particular

problems on my practical placements, and the Irish, well they [were] quite religious at that time, and they would talk about the cross one had to bear etc. [Laughs.]

*Right.*

And then when I went to work up in the north, there was no overt discrimination at all. In fact I felt I was more accepted than perhaps my colleagues because I was neither Catholic, neither Unionist or the other lot, so [interviewer laughs] they did perhaps get a fairer deal from me.

*Oh right. OK. So, and was there... you've already said, 'The cross to bear'. What was one of your placements with children with cp?*

Yes, in Dublin. It was quite a short placement in a school for cerebral palsy but I do not remember one thing about it. [Laughs.]

*Right. [Pause.] So did you drive when you were there or did the other people get you around...*

Well I didn't drive in Dublin, but as soon as I left I got a car and I had to drive once [sound of paper rustling] I began working in the north.

*... in your placement.*

Mmm. My father taught me to drive when I was 17, and I passed the test the first time, so that helped.

*And if we can we move on to attitudes when you were in Israel?*

Mm.

*Did you feel that because you were in a kibbutz you were in a situation that wasn't necessarily the same as being in Israel? I'll call it 'proper' for want of a better...*

Oh yes, it's very different. And to some extent you are sheltered from the hurly burly of life. In town people can be pretty abrasive, and I think in Israel people live on their nerves an awful lot because of the political situation.

*[Talking together.] Right.*

Most people either have a father, brother, daughter, sister in the army,

*Right.*

and so one is always afraid, and the bus would fall silent on the hour for every news bulletin and things like that. So people are far more abrasive, they're far less tolerant and they're more suspicious of people who are different, whether they're, well mainly if they're disabled, but I think people are suspicious of any stranger cos a stranger can mean danger.

*Right. So were you aware of any kind of overt discrimination against you because of your - ?*

Well yes. I think I said that last time that, you know, people, especially those of Middle Eastern descent (well, and Eastern Europe) had the thing about disability being bad luck, etc.

*Oh yeah.*

So a shopkeeper would

*Oh yeah.*

try not to sell you

*[Talking together.] Sell you, right.*

anything first thing – [interviewer laughs] that kind of thing.

*And that was outside in the community. You didn't have any of that in the kibbutz itself?*

Generally no, you know. People got used to me. Of course, at first they were fairly suspicious, but when you think what most of those people had been through, during the war,

*Right.*

it was surprising any of them were normal. [Both laugh.]

*And what, there were lots of different nationalities in the kibbutz presumably?*

Oh yes, yes. The three main groups were Hungarians, Brazilians, and the so-called English.

*Oh right.*

And a lot of those English were people who'd come to England as refugees from

*[Talking together.] Oh.*

Germany and Austria, like my husband.

*Mm.*

And then of course you've got other people coming along: Polish, German, from South America, South Africa, [talking together] India.

*How many people roughly were there in the kibbutz?*

Well, at the height I suppose, in the early seventies, if you counted children members and the parents there of members, there were probably about 400,

*Wow.*

450.

*And they all lived in the*

Yes.

*community?*

Yes. [Pause.] Yes it was an interesting experience, and I felt that being raised in a group atmosphere would be good for my children because we wanted children and I didn't want them to feel... I thought they'd find it difficult having a disabled parent, in the outside community,

*Aha.*

so I thought it would be easier for them in groups where their friends would be familiar with me and know me and not bully them in any way for having a parent who was different.

*Right, and now that they're grown up, have they said anything to you about how they felt about that experience?*

Well, no but I'm sure I said this to you too: a few months ago I heard a programme on the radio about parents who were carrying recessive genes, as to whether they would decide to have children or not, so then I thought, 'Well why don't I make a programme about what it's like to have a parent with disability?' So I approached the first of my sons, the middle one, Adam, and I threw this suggestion at him, and he said, 'What's so different about you? I think that's a stupid idea. [Interviewer laughs.] Everybody has some kind of disability, so I don't see the point of it.'

*So [talking together] for him it hadn't been an issue at all.*

So that [laughing] hit the idea,

*Yeah?*

knocked it for six.

*And did you check with your other children or you just*

No, I didn't bother.

*left it at that?*

But with the youngest child, my son, unfortunately I think his partner has a problem with it.

*Aha?*

A great problem which, well, I believe girls often take sons away and I think she has. I mean, he and I used to [be] very close but she's a very jealous person and wants him completely for herself, and I think she has problems with my disability. I don't think he even noticed it before she came along. And also their usual problems, nothing to do with disability, in the fact that her own parents were divorced, and her mother

walked out and she's very attached to her father, and I think she's transferring her feelings for her mother to me.

*Aha.*

But according to my other sons, she's a very [laughing] difficult person anyway.

*And where do they live?*

They live in Israel also.

*Oh in Israel. Are all of your family in Israel?*

Yes, all of them, yes.

*And are they still in the kibbutz?*

No, unfortunately, no. The last one has left. I mean they haven't always lived, you know, in Israel. The eldest one went to Brazil for about a year and worked as a security guard for the richest man in

*Ooh.*

Brazil, and then he travelled for some time round South America afterwards, but thank God he came back safely. And then Adam, the middle one, came to England, no, went to South Africa for a year to just tour round and worked and, you know, with a friend of his and they had a super time and cos they also went to the Protectorates, etc., where he ran a back-packers' hostel for some months. And then he also came to England for a year, and worked teaching physical activities to all sorts of people including children with special needs, and now he's back in Israel: he teaches wall climbing, and is a manager of an activity centre.

*Aha.*

And the youngest one, Nimrod, he qualified as a physiotherapist in the summer, and is going on to do his masters, but also works for a football team as a physiotherapist.

*[Laughs.] Good job.*

Mm.

**[End of Track 5]**



**Tape 3 Side B [Track 6]**

*So, can you say what effects having children, made for you? You said you and your husband decided you wanted to have children and the kibbutz seemed more supportive?*

Well, within did my first 13 months in the kibbutz I guess I had undergone about four or five things which are supposed to trigger nervous breakdowns! [Laughs.]

*[Laughing.] Like what?*

(Well, they say they can). Change of culture, change of country, a father dying, marriage, birth of first child, you know. [Interviewer laughs.] All came within the first 13 months, and my eldest son was born end of April, when it was just getting hot.

*What year was that?*

'71, and I think I found it difficult to realise that he was actually my child at first because I had been so used to taking newborn or very young babies from unmarried mothers and placing them for adoption, because I had been a county Adoptions Officer, that I think I found it a bit difficult to realise this was actually my child at first. And then the heat and the actual physical conditions in the kibbutz didn't help, and I know I felt extremely tired, and one had to return to work after six weeks, which was hard for me, although one only worked four hours a day to begin with it was still hard. I remember, it was only when he was about six or eight weeks, I suddenly realised that I was [laughing] looking forward to seeing him when I was coming into the children's house to give him a 10 o'clock feed. You know, up to then it had been such hard, [laughing] exhausting work that I didn't naturally feel I was looking forward to seeing him at all. And the babies at that time went straight into the baby house as soon as you came home from hospital, and then there was a bell in your own house that they rang if the baby woke up and needed a feed or something,

*Right.*

which was awful, it was really horrible. And the person in charge of the baby house was an old dragon, and she was Hungarian with no particular qualifications, I don't think. In that first year they were still clinging on to the belief that the children must not be taken out of the kibbutz in case of infection. We were in the Middle East, and God knows what they'd pick up, and I suppose in the early days there was some truth in this because malaria was rife and all that kind of thing,

*[Talking together.] Right.*

but by the 1970s it was a load of rubbish. I wanted to go out with Joely, go out in the car somewhere and get out, and I can still hear this woman say, when Peter asked her if we could [laughing] take the baby, 'How', and she kind of exploded, 'Why? What do you think you're doing?' And that was pretty ghastly, so I think I was a pretty tense first mother, and I often wondered, in his later childhood, whether I had affected him at all, but thank God he seems to be a pretty [both laugh] well-adjusted adult. And by the time Adam came along, 22 months later, I said, 'No way is he going to go in the baby house, he is going to sleep at home at night,' and this was the first time anyone had said that and I must say Peter did stick by me, but life wasn't very easy and we were threatened with expulsion and [laughing] all that.

*Wow.*

*But...*

*So there were a lot of rules and regulations you had to [talking together] follow, with the support?*

Oh yes, well it wasn't rules and regulations, cos there's no 'Mr Kibbutz' as the big boss,

*Right.*

but it was just accepted, you know?

*Uh huh.*

These were the practices of the kibbutz. And I said, 'No way,' so Adam slept at home until he was over a year old but he went to the baby house in the daytime, and I worked, of course, you know. I've always found the heat exhausting, and I was working outside and probably doing physical work that was actually beyond my true capability, and it was a really hard life, and I guess that's why I look such an old bag [both laugh] because it was hard. Anyway the children are reared in small groups of six children, and they do every thing together: they eat, sleep, sit on the pot and all [both laugh] sit together and they each have a kind of nursemaid and an educator, and then when they're about four they join with another group of six and form a kindergarten, and they go on. And then at six, they used to then begin school, and each house would have its own teacher, and when they were 13 they would go to the high school which we shared with two other kibbutzim, about eight kilometres away, and they'd live in the high school and come home to see their parents in the afternoon. And, for most children, it was absolute heaven, [interviewer laughs] cos teenagers don't want to live with their parents.

*Right.*

There were no adults on site, they just lived in group houses and they were absolutely autonomous, and, you know, if they stayed up all night making a row, well, that was their look-out if they couldn't do their lessons the next day. But generally, you know, with peer pressure, people kind of toed the line and it was said that kibbutz children were far more grown-up and responsible than their equivalent in the non-kibbutz society.

*Right.*

And then when they're 18 or 19 they go off to the army.

*Ah. So all of your children had to do that?*

Oh yes.

*How long is it for? Is it three years?*

Three years, and four if you're an officer.

*And how old were your children when you actually decided to leave Israel?*

Well, I didn't actually decide to leave for good. I felt my brain was kind of stultifying so I wanted to do a masters degree cos I felt if I had better academic qualifications, I might find a job that was more suited to my qualifications outside, but I thought I needed a masters degree. So I made all sorts of enquiries etc., and I actually was accepted by quite a famous school of social work in New York, whereby you could do part of the course in Israel, and about eight weeks in the summer in New York, and then get a masters degree. Of course, one has no money at all in the kibbutz, except pocket money, so I went to the treasurer of the kibbutz and asked for financial help, and he said I wasn't worth it so, you know, that was...

*And what did he mean by that?*

Well, it wasn't worth spending that kind of money on me, [talking together] so it made me very angry.

*Did he say why, specifically?*

Well, he said any money they had they would spend on younger people,

*[Talking together.] Oh right.*

certainly not on me: I wasn't worth it.

*Right. [Talking together: Jill inaudible.] So it was your age and the fact that you were a woman, more than disability?*

Well, and the fact that I had a disability. In fact I had got funding from the English Jewish Agency on condition the kibbutz matched the funding; and he said, 'No,' he couldn't do it, and this made me very angry.

*Mm.*

And so then I started looking for ways of doing a masters degree in England for a year, and there were three places in England where I could have gone, but because I had been out of the country

*Mm.*

for more than five years,

*Right.*

it meant they wanted to charge me double fees

*[Talking together.] Right.*

as a foreign student, which was absolutely prohibitive. So I found that there was a part-time masters degree going in Bristol, and I thought if I could get a job to support myself, then I would do this part-time masters. And, in order to qualify I had to, well, study hard and produce some essays, etc., and in order to study I needed access to a

university library [sound of knocking], and in order to get the [both laugh] fifty-dollar subscription fee or membership fee, I gave up drinking coffee for a year, to save the money. [Both laugh.] Anyway, I studied and studied and I often studied when I was on night duty, you know, I got in the kibbutz because, in those days when the children were sleeping in children's houses, two women had to be on duty listening to the alarms, etc., so sometimes you had some quiet times when you could study. Anyway, I wrote the essays and Peter Townsend (who was quite a famous professor in Bristol) accepted them, and I got on the masters course, and I came over here, intending to go back at the end of the year, when I qualified, but it took me longer than one year working full-time and studying, so the year stretched out and I never did go back to join the kibbutz. Of course I go back quite regularly and I hope I have a meaningful position in my children's lives but -

*What work were you doing? You said you started part-time and then went full time?*

No, no I remained studying part-time. I first worked in Knowle West: that's a city ghetto in Bristol with very... and I was working for the – [it] doesn't exist any more – a kind of government scheme, whereby you're trying to teach young people how to work. And we were placed in a place over in Norwest and doing an access survey of the whole of Bristol, and I had about 10 or 12 young people doing it with me, but it was slow-going and a lot of them weren't very motivated. But anyway, after four or five months I then managed to get work as a social worker, which was pretty good because, having been out of social work for quite some time,

*Mm.*

it was hard, but then I got work for Berkshire County Council, so I went to live in Newbury, no, in Hungerford and I was working as a social worker in Newbury, but coming back to Bristol one day a week to do my degree. Anyway, at the end of six months, I knew I could never afford anywhere to live in Berkshire, everything was far too expensive and they're very straight down the line and Conservative, and at the end of six months I had to get out of the accommodation I had, and then I had applied

for a job in Bristol, with Avon County Council. And by luck I got it, so I came back here

*Mm hmm.*

to live, and moved into lodgings in Clifton, worked, and then I got a small place (kind of maisonette place) in Westbury-on-Trym, the council gave me, which was pretty hellish cos it wasn't really converted properly, and you had to share a bathroom and things like that. And I had a drunk living underneath me, and she made my life hell: but in the end I found someone to buy a house with in Southmead [north Bristol], which is another hell hole and [laughing] as I had never lived on a council estate before, I didn't know what I was letting myself in for – anywhere else the house might have been quite nice and the garden, but not there. And I was going on studying and writing my thesis, etc, and while I was there I was burgled and they took the computer, and all the tapes of my thesis went out of the window.

*Oh! Oh no!*

Yes. So I had to start all over again, and I couldn't face doing the same subject so I did something else. [Interviewer laughs.] So all in all it took me five years to get the [talking together] masters degree.

*To do your one year! [Laughs.] And at what point in this did you get involved with the disability movement, as they say?*

Well I don't know. I don't remember how, but it must have been very soon after I came to Bristol to live. Very soon. But I can't remember where I'd seen the notice, or how.

*Can you remember what drew you to it [talking together] at this point in time, whereas you hadn't felt like being involved before?*

Well I guess the feeling of solidarity.

*Right. So was there a change in the way England was after you came back, that there was more [talking together] of that kind of thing around?*

Well yes, in fact England seemed to have gone back instead of forward, because I suppose the big thing was there was more unemployment, and that made a terrific difference, because when I had been at school and working in social work before I went, one just took it for granted that people would be working after they left school.

*Mm.*

And I remember when I came back and I was working in Berkshire and I went round a special school and I said to the teacher about work and, you know, qualifications and she actually said to me, 'Well we don't really educate them to work,'

*Mm hm.*

and to me that was, you know, a real regression from

*[Talking together.] Right.*

what I had known, up to 1970. But as for how I got into the movement I really don't remember, but I was quite active and I went to regular meetings. I was on several committees, etc.

*Mm hmm.*

It was really good because it made one realise that one did have rights, and if they were infringed, one should stand up for them, not try and merge into the background and pretend, you know, you weren't any different from anyone else.



*Mm hmm.*

Anyway, I'm tired of talking.

*OK.*

**[End of Track 6]**

**[End of Recording]**