

NATIONAL | Life  
stories

NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

ARTISTS' LIVES

Kim Lim

Interviewed by Cathy Courtney

C466/51

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# THE NATIONAL LIFE STORY COLLECTION

## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

## Title Page

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Ref. No.: **C466/51/01-05**

Playback No.: **F5569-F5573**

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Collection title: **Artists' Lives**

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Interviewee's surname: **Lim**

Title: **Ms**

Interviewee's forenames: **Kim**

Date of birth: **1936-1997**

Sex: **Female**

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Date(s) of recording: **20.10.1995**

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Name of interviewer: **Cathy Courtney**

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Additional material: **3 exhibition catalogues, plus photos (13) of Yorkshire sculpture park installation**

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Interviewer's comments:

Track 1: Tape 1: Side A

[Interview with Kim Lim at her home on the 20th of October 1995.]

Tell me the work you've been doing today.

Sweeping leaves, and just preparing a stone, grinding away, to get away the excess stone, because I don't have an air tool here, I have to use a mechanical electrical one which is very dusty.

And do you do that indoors or outdoors?

Outdoors, outdoors, and I hope my neighbours don't mind too much.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

You know, I'm just trying to do a concentrated half-hour.

It's very exhausting?

Mm?

Is it very exhausting?

No, but it's very hot-making and everything, trying to hurry it along.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

If I can begin right at the obvious beginning, where and when were you born?

I was born in Singapore in 1936.

And I'm afraid I'm painfully ignorant about Singapore. I know a few things but very little. What sort of household were you born into?

I would say, I suppose a middle-class household. My father was what you would call a self-made man. He came from a fairly poor background, but had enough ambition to want to go and study abroad, so when he finished his schooling he taught and saved up some money and

found a sponsor, and he found that he could come to London for about two-and-a-half years to study law, which he did successfully at Middle Temple. You have to remember that Singapore at the time was a British colony and therefore an English education was something very desirable, so, that was what he did.

Right. What was his name?

Lim Koontek.

Could you spell that for me?

Lim being the family name, L-I-M, K-O-O-N-T-E-C-K.

Did you know his parents, were his parents alive?

Yes.

Can you tell me what your memories of them are?

Oh, well, the father was a very spry, small man, who had a family of fourteen of whom my father was the oldest. And my grandmother was a very very calm lady, an incredibly devoted Buddhist and would give everything to the temple all the time and pray all the time. And she was a very gentle kind of person, and that's how I remember her.

If she had all those children, was she also an exhausted person?

No, they seemed to take it in their stride. In fact my father was born when she was only about 15, and hadn't a clue about how to bring up a baby or look after a baby. And she, you know, was totally at the mercy of I suppose the midwives and things, and I can remember her telling me stories about having to lie on a bed of ash, because they didn't have any kind of wherewithal to deal with the bleeding and things, so it was very primitive. And, how we survived I suppose is another question.

Yes, it's what's amazing isn't it, to think of babies being born in cave times and...

Yes.

That anybody could survive. But ash actually might be quite a good idea mightn't it?

I think it was quite antiseptic, I mean, very hard on the skin but...

And do you know about her growing up at all?

No.

How far back can you know?

I know that his line came from China through Sarawak, Borneo, and my mother's line came through Thailand, and she has the more kind of, better connections, I mean she always claims to having rich merchant uncles, and one of them was supposedly the one who found Anna the job with the King of Siam. Makes a nice story. But they were very well connected and very rich, and in fact in Singapore there is a hospital called Tantockseng Hospital, and it was one of her great-great-great-grandfathers who gave it as a hospital to the public, because there was very little of that kind of care in those early days. And it still exists as a hospital today.

Sorry, I'm going to have to keep asking this. Can you spell the name of the hospital for us please?

Tantockseng, T-A-N-T-O-C-K-S-E-N-G.

Thank you. And, do you know where your paternal grandparents had met, how did they come to marry?

I don't know how they met, but it was presumably made by a marriage broker, and... In those days in Singapore there were two strands of Chinese, those who come straight from China, and the ones who are called Straits- born, who have been there for a few generations, and I think my grandmother must have been Straits- born.

Right. And was your grandfather as young as she was when this family began, or was he a bit older?

I think he was a bit older, a few years older. They tend to take younger brides. But you know, the first women never really came to Malaysia, Singapore, until, I don't know, the

middle of the 19th century I suppose, so before that the men who came to work in the rubber estates and tin mines usually had local connections and would... So there's a ceremony when you get married in the palakan way, which is the local, Straits-born Chinese way, is that you will have the bride having a Malay go-between and the groom having a Chinese one, you know, it's a real strange inter-marriage of cultures there.

And is the negotiation, is it done in a rather elegant, ritualistic way, or is it sort of hard bargaining? How did it...?

No, I think most families look to have either an obedient daughter-in-law or a successful son-in-law; I think, you know, it's very materialistic that way, and no love ever comes into it, they don't even see each other until the day practically.

And did you get the impression that your grandparents' marriage had been a good one, or not?

I think so, because, they're never going to talk about whether they felt happy. It wasn't a question of whether you love the other person, it was a question of getting on with it, and I think a lot of marriages were successful, in quotes, because people accepted that idea that you had to work at compatibility, you know, it wasn't something that the moment you were unhappy you could get out of, there was no way you could get out of, for the poor women. I mean the man had the option up to fairly recently of having other wives and mistresses, so it was a pretty bad deal for the women.

And did your grandfather do that, do you know?

Not that I know of. I mean if he did he was extremely discreet, but I think not, he seemed to be quite happy with his...

And do you think that his wife turned to religion rather as a way out of this rather difficult situation, or do you think it was just something deeply in her?

I don't know, that's a good question. I think it may have given her solace, because you know, it can't have been very funny, you know, being pregnant from the beginning of the year and the end of the year again, because there was hardly a gap before you had another child.

Did she have help with all these children?

No. It was just that, when the children grew up they just became the help, and the daughters particularly were very domesticated and they were not expected to go to school or anything, they were expected to learn how to cook, and so they would look after the younger ones.

So was...would your grandfather have wanted a mixture of sons and daughters for that purpose in a sense?

I think so, but it was always, sons were always the more kind of treasured of the two, because they were the ones that could earn a living and keep you in your old age. And my father actually turned out to be an incredibly dutiful son, because when he finished his law degree and came back to start working in Singapore his father said, 'Well, you're the only one who has had a degree abroad,' not that he did anything to help him to get it, 'so I'm retiring and you take over.' So my father had to actually support him and his brothers and sisters.

My God!

And he put his brothers and sisters through school. Fortunately school was fairly kind of inexpensive, so the sisters had a rudimentary education, whereas the brothers, if they were bright, he could help them along.

How many boys and how many girls in this huge family?

There were six boys and seven girls, and I think a couple of them died, so there weren't fourteen surviving altogether, I think there was about eleven...

And was there any prospect that those children, the girls, would have a job in their lives, or was it assumed that they would just get married?

It was assumed at that time that they would just get married, although I think the youngest ones started to think in terms of, you know, getting training as a teacher or something and getting a career. But certainly not, it wasn't really all that expected of them to go and have a career.

And what did your grandfather do to earn a living?



He was a cloth merchant I believe, but it wasn't a terribly successful business. He would import things from China I think and sell, he had a little shop somewhere.

And what was his personality for you as a child, how did you find him?

Rather remote, always came to the house and had a meal with us and say, 'How are you?' but you know, other than that... He kind of gave up the reins to his first-born son, and my father was the one that would say what, you know, he was to do, or if he wanted money he would come to my father. And if he needed a house or repairs or anything, my father would have to deal with it. So he was a fairly kind of happy-go-lucky chap, I think.

I was going to ask you if he was depressed.

No, not really. No he used to go and call on his friends and had a very nice time.

What were his interests, I mean did he have hobbies, did he...?

No, not that I can remember. He just hung about.

And what was his relationship with your grandmother by the time you were aware of it? I mean did they do things together, or not?

No, no not really, I mean, he would, I suppose get up and have his breakfast and then go out and visit friends, and go wandering around in town, and then come back for meals when... I remember all the kind of celebration times of New Year, Chinese New Year, or birthdays, there would be a family dinner at their house, and everybody was expected to help and cook, and then the men would sit down and have it first and then the women would have their meals. But I wouldn't care, I would actually just sit down whenever there was food. By the time I came along I just, you know, they never really made that discrepancy for me.

Because you were a little girl?

Because I was a little girl, yes, and... And also because I was favoured because I was the child of the first-born, you know, there was that kind of hierarchy.

But you were doing it just because you were sort of eager to join in and have something to eat...

Yes.

...rather than as a rebellion to sort of say, I'm not going to be pushed out?

I think I was a little bit rebellious, because I really didn't think that was on. But, the strange thing was that, my parents' marriage was not at all like that, I mean it was a love match, and so he kind of broke the mould for his family.

And, when you went to your grandparents' house, was it a sort of formal household? Did you behave differently in their house than in your own house for example?

No, not really, not really. I mean, one was just there and you went in and said hello and sat around, and it was incredibly boring most of the time.

What was their house like?

It was...well I think they stayed in several houses over their lifetime, and I can remember one of them, which was a very pretty old shop house, and that kind of architecture is fast disappearing in Singapore, and I'm very pleased that they are now preserving some of them. And they would be built in a very sensible way where you come in off the street and there would be a kind of, what they call a five-foot way, which was a paving thing for people to walk along outside, as strangers, then you would have swing doors that could be kept, the whole thing private, but there was air coming through because it was hot. And then you entered into a hallway, and then it went deeper and deeper in, into the living quarters. And it got darker and darker because there was no daylight, and then there would usually be a well half-way through to let in some daylight, and then the other part of the house would continue for the kitchen and the maids.

So did it feel claustrophobic, or did it feel safe?

Not claustrophobic, it was very nice, very safe.

And, did they have objects that appealed to you, did they have a lot of things in the house, or was it a...?

Not at all, no. It was a very kind of comfortable house that was functional, but no, nothing of beauty anywhere. I mean they had things where, there would be the altar to the Goddess of Mercy, and then there would be an altar for the kitchen god, but these were ritual things that were not particularly beautiful.

And did your grandfather have the same faith, or not?

No, no I think it was just my grandmother who was extremely devoted, a staunch Buddhist.

And was she distressed that he didn't share her faith, or would that never sort of...?

No, I don't think she was, I think she just prayed for him, as she did for her whole family, and because my father wasn't either.

So she didn't pressurise anyone to share it?

No, no she didn't. I think, he got very cross with her, because every time he gave her money it would always go to the temple rather than to her, so he thought that was not on, that she was giving away too much, and he thought it was all... Because in Singapore, you must remember that the Buddhist faith is not the same kind of pure Buddhist faith as in India, which is more of a philosophy. You know, there it becomes where the Buddha is actually worshipped, and it seems that, it becomes a thing where you pray for favours. So the whole thing becomes slightly changed into another kind of.... And there's a lot of Taoist superstition and things that creeps into the religion, so when you are a Buddhist it's not the same as the Indian big wheel Buddhism and the little, you know, the lesser wheel Buddhism, you know, it's totally diluted by...

Have you any idea what your grandmother would have prayed for?

Oh I think she was very altruistic, it was never really for money or anything, but, you know, her grandchildren or her sons would be successful and healthy, and they would be happy, and I think that would be the main thing.

And was she quite hard on herself, I mean was she quite strict with herself, was she always giving things away?

No, she was just very simple. Her needs were very simple, and she never... You know, as long as there was food in the house and there were people around her, her daughters, there were always daughters around, you know, she was very happy.

I was going to say, was it a house that was always crowded even though it had all these series of rooms, or...?

Yes, yes, you know, she always had one or two staying with her. And then some of the daughters would marry and then, you know, they'd still remain at home, if they didn't have flats or houses to go to. I mean at that time it was far more common for families to be extended within one house rather than move away.

And presumably that meant it was a more stable society in the same way it would anywhere.

Yes, yes.

And what do you remember your grandparents wearing?

Oh my grandfather would wear shirt and trousers.

Smart, or not?

Yes, yes he was always very kind of, well turned out. And she would wear a kabaya[ph], which is not the Chinese dress, as I said, because I think her history is a Straights born family, so it would be more the Malay dress with a sarong and a top, it's called a kabaya[ph].

And do you associate them with any particular colours?

No. I suppose the kabayas[ph] was mainly browns and sombre, kind of earth colours. And the top would usually be white, and they would have a brown skirt.

Right. And did your grandparents show you physical affection, were they warm towards you?

No, the only kind of physical contact was, my grandfather would kind of pinch my cheeks, which was excruciating, so I really did not welcome that.

Did it actually hurt, or it was just humiliating?

Yes. Not humiliating, it just hurt. I mean I could see that he was actually very fond of me and wanted a cuddle, but instead of doing that he would just go, oooh! pick me up. And that is a very strong memory of him doing it, and I did not like it at all.

And do you think the values of either of them became important to you, did you sort of internalise them at all?

I don't know, it's very hard to say, because these things, we kind of grew up with osmosis. I suppose the Buddhist influence being so early, a seed being put there, you know, no matter how agnostic you become it's still there.

I mean if you see a shrine, like the ones they had in their house, now, do you actually feel anything?

Yes, I would certainly have a feeling of respect for it, I would never kind of do anything awful, like sweep by it or something like that, you know, I would actually kind of, in my head I would say a prayer, because I've had to do it when I was a child so often.

Oh really? What, you were made to stand before it and say...what do you?

No no, you kneel down and say a prayer, and put joss-sticks down and ask for blessings for your family.

What are the sticks?

Joss-sticks. Sandlewood joss-sticks, and if you talk about a madeleine cake, for me the smell of joss-sticks is something which absolutely just transports me back to my childhood and the house.

And is that a good feeling?

Yes. yes. It's a very beautiful smell, and it's a very peaceful smell, it's kind of all-pervading. And more because at the days of New Year, when one waits for with anticipation, it's when it's absolutely, the house is filled with this smell, and it's a very pleasant memory.

And can you remember the prayers?

No I can't now. I mean I used to remember the Buddhist prayers in Cantonese, because my, the women who looked after me, you know, because we all had kind of nannies, Chinese nannies, and she was also a very devout Buddhist, so she used to teach me little prayers in Cantonese. A chant, they were not really prayers but chants that you would say with beads.

Like a rosary then?

Yes.

Right. And what did the shrines actually look like?

They were usually very garish and red, and would have Buddhas, figures, sitting inside, and different... The Buddha himself took on so many manifestations that if you go across south-east Asia you will find there are names for different ones, and they are all extremely confusing, and I'm not devout enough to remember the different ones. But there's one manifestation which played a great part in my life because it was one of the ones that we always prayed to, and she was the Goddess of Mercy. Funnily enough it was a female transfiguration that he took, and she was, I suppose very similar to the Virgin Mary. He was an intercessor. And, I'm very interested in reading myths and things, and when you read these things, it is just amazing how this figure recurs again in different forms in all the religions, quite fascinating. And she was just a wonderful person who was very giving and came back, because with Buddhahood, what you do is, when you reach a state of nirvana you can actually leave this world and enter into this state of perfection, but like the original Buddha, chose to come back to help mankind.

And if, when you were this small, your grandmother was the sort of root to this, did you associate her with this figure of mercy, or...?

Oh yes, because she also had a very calm face, very Buddha-like, and would...just have an extraordinarily kind of relaxed face, you know, not at all 'angsted' up, in spite of these fourteen children.

So did you feel quite close to her?

No, not really. I was very fond of her but she wasn't a person that one got close to, and, she just was there and one had to go and visit her once every month, you know, we kind of would drive up and see her, and it was a duty thing to...

So was it the equivalent of English children being brought down from the nursery in their white socks and clean clothes, was it like that?

Yes, a bit like that, but less formal because one wasn't expected to just sit quietly, I mean you could just mooch around, you know, and, as long as you showed a face.

What do you associate her doing?

Cooking. She was always... I mean her way of showing affection was to cook things that she knew my father would like, and she was a devoted mother that way, you know, she was always...or whenever she was ill, if he was ill she would kind of cook special things that would nourish him and things like that.

And did he value her or did he take it for granted?

Oh yes, oh yes, he was very...I think he loved her enormously, because he knew the terrible hardships she had to go through, and I think he did think his father a little bit irresponsible for having had so many children continuously.

And would he ever have reprimanded his father, or they would never have confronted it?

No, no. No I think, by the time he got to the state where he was aware of it, I think he felt, he had stopped having children anyway, but, you know, he reckoned that was, you know, too late and, he couldn't overcome this thing of actually being the dutiful son too. To do this was... Chinese relationships with family are never confrontational; I mean, there might be

exceptions but as a rule the thing is that you are supposed to listen, obey and be dutiful, it's, the Confucian ethic is very very deeply ingrained.

So did that mean really that a lot of things that might have come out in other environments were just utterly suppressed?

Oh yes. And whatever feelings of antagonism or rebellion or, even questioning, if they decided that the question was not appropriate, finish, that was it.

And what do you think the result of that is, I mean what...? It must be very different, but...

Well it makes you very very inhibited, you know. It's not a very good way of growing up I don't think. But on the other hand I think sometimes when you squeeze something tight, there's always, the pressure always releases somewhere else, so whether it's good or not, it's hard to tell, because I'm not another person.

Yes, no I was just wondering if it did release in some other way, if there was some point of explosion at some point, or if people stayed repressed all their lives really.

I think sometimes, unfortunately people do stay repressed all their lives and dominated, and you know, they're not fulfilled.

But it sounds like, as though they're reconciled and they're not in agony either.

Yes, there is one way I suppose that they've learnt to be philosophic about it. I know this must sound terrible in terms of Western psychology, because it goes the other way, where you, you know, are supposed to naturally be able to express yourself and not do this, and that's why I feel sometimes terribly schizophrenic, because I can see that it's bad, but on the other hand it's been quite good in the way of giving people a lot of motivation to do things and to find that you can pick yourself up and do things and not sit and moan, you know.

End of Track 1: Tape 1: Side A



Track 2: Tape 2: Side B

I mean, I would have thought one of the plus sides to it must be that people could actually live very privately within themselves.

Yes. But the minus side is that, when you want to express yourselves, there is great difficulty to do so. I mean I found it very difficult when I first came over as a student.

Presumably young children would have been busy expressing themselves anyway. I mean, it must actually have had to be schooled out of them fairly early wasn't it?

Oh yes, but it's done so easily and surreptitiously that you don't even feel that it's been done. I mean children are very well cared for, they're never left on their own, I mean they always have a nanny or mother or something, so they have that, at least the comfort of somebody always being with them, so they're not abandoned in rooms and locked away or anything. But the schooling and the teaching is started from very young, so that they know when not to do things, and you know, they're left in nappies for a bit, but they're very soon potty-trained. So I mean in terms of Western psychology that's supposed to be very bad things, but you know, Chinese children are taught very early to kind of tell them when they want to do something. And the nannies usually catch them, and so they learn how to do it.

So they learn to be terribly disciplined.

Yes.

And when they're small, I mean in order to teach them what they can and can't do, is there any kind of physical punishment, I mean how does it work?

Those kind of, being told off and scolded, yes, and being shouted at, that's quite normal, and being smacked. I mean, I think that on the whole Chinese families do scream and shout at their children quite a lot.

Right. Because I would have thought if you had that many children it would be quite hard to have this sort of calm control the whole time.

Yes I'm sure there were quite a lot of scoldings and punishments, and denials and things that, you know, teach you very soon where to toe the line and what you can and can't do.

Did you get the impression your father had had a pretty strict upbringing?

Yes I think so, yes. But you know, you're told very young, when you are very little, that you know, this is a good thing to do and this is not a good thing; you haven't got to be lazy, you have got to learn, and get yourself an education, and... So, the work ethic is drilled into you very early on.

But what happens...

And self-sacrifice and all that bit.

Well that sounds fine if the person has got the resources to do those things.

Yes.

But what happens to children who are sort of slow or not very bright, or...?

I think they do make allowances for that, you know, they don't push them that much and they can do other things, but you are encouraged to try.

And do you know what your father's schooling was?

I think he went to what you would have called a State school, and in those days they have the 'O' level, it was kind of Cambridge Certificate I think, which you took, and then after that he applied for law - no, after that, sorry, he got a job teaching for a few years as I said to earn some money, which he saved, and then found a sponsor and then found himself a position in a law school here.

And did he learn English at school?

Yes, yes, he was bilingual.

What was he teaching, by the time he got to that stage?

I think he was probably teaching English.

And was he particularly close to any ones of his brothers and sisters?

I can't remember. I think, towards the end it was with the youngest one, who was very close to him, because he used to...

There must have been quite an age gap.

Yes, a terrific age gap, of I think, I can't remember but it must have been 24 years I think, because they're both Dragon, Dragon.

And was it a brother or a sister, the younger one was a boy or a girl?

The brother, he was close to. He kind of helped him along a lot, and this youngest one used to look to him as a kind of role-model you know.

It must have been like having another child almost.

Yes, it was.

And did all these others, did they play a part in your life, were they important to you?

Not really, not really, they were around, and, because he was the boss man, they were always creeping around trying to gain favour.

So were they rivals in a way?

No, not really, not...I can't remember that.

Right. And the house you've described, was that where your grandparents had lived when your father was growing up?

No, no I never knew the house that he was growing up in.

So do you know the kind of environment where he grew up, was it...?

I think it was very poor, because he used to say that he had a bed under the kitchen table, and you know, it was really very spare.

So it would have been urban rather than...?

It was very urban, very urban.

Right. And where your grandparents lived was quite a way from where you lived, in the house you have described, you used to drive there?

Yes. We also changed quite a number of times, you know, moved around, but by the time we were kind of settled in the family house that my father had built, it was quite far away from them. But Singapore is so small, nowhere is really very far.

And, can we talk a little bit about your mother's family then?

Yes.

Did you know her parents?

I knew her father, but he died during the war, and he married... Her mother had died when she was very young in the very big 'flu epidemic, I think it was in 1915 or something, '16, something like that.

There was one in Europe in 1918 wasn't there?

Yes.

The First World War.

And it started maybe earlier there. Anyway she lost her mother when she was five, and her father married again. But I remember him quite well because he was a very strong personality, terribly strict with her and, a terrifying person I found, because whenever he came to visit we had to perform, like recite things and do things, and I'd be very good and not

make a noise, and things. And I think he...he had a very strong influence on my mother, I mean, I do blame him for a lot, you know. I think he was terribly neurotic.

And what did she think about him, did you pick up any of it?

Oh yes, she adored him, and thought, you know, he was wonderful, but I think he treated her abominably.

Because he was so severe?

Yes, and he, you know, he had a second family, and so I think, the step-mother treated my mother... He had a sister and a brother, and, they weren't equal.

So was your mother the only child of the first marriage?

No, she had an older brother and an older sister, she was the youngest one, but she was the most vivacious and rebellious one and got into the most trouble, for that reason.

Over what sort of things, do you know, or you mean just generally exuberant?

Oh, just through exuberance and from doing just perfectly childish things, like eating a fruit and then being caught, and not admitting to it, and being given the most horrible punishments.

Such as?

Such as being told to wear a hat saying 'I'm a liar' and told to stand outside in the street. You know, humiliating things like that. That's why I think I'm very unforgiving towards this maternal grandfather, I think he had a kind of very strange outlook on life.

And did he ever try and sort of imbue you with his philosophy?

No, because I was too young, he died by the time I was growing up. But I got the, I suppose a bit of it via my mother, who obviously inherited this terribly strong thing of never saying 'I can't', that was a word that was not tolerated.

So she went out of her way to bring you up in a totally different way?

Yes, yes.

And she still adored him?

Yes.

That's great.

Yes. I mean, she still had, when you're brought up a certain way the imprints are too hard to erase, so it comes through certain things of, you know, what you're supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do. Although she tried to be different, you know, it was still there.

And do you think she felt sort of rather split, or was it quite well amalgamated in her really?

I think she felt quite, you know, she was a very strong personality, and I think she resolved it, whatever hardships she had she resolved it, and I think it was very sad that she missed her mother. Although her grandmother lived on for quite a bit, and she found great comfort with that because her grandmother adored her, and so she had a kind of champion in the family.

And, how had that grandfather earned his living?

He was a schoolteacher too, I think. I can't remember. But he was also very interested in business and things, and, the interesting thing about that family was that he was a hard-working man, and my grandmother was the one that was the daughter of a rich family, and they looked around, and this is where the match-maker comes in, where they were looking around for a good man for her and found him, and they got married. And she came from an extremely well-to-do Hokkien family in Singapore, and a lot of the property in Singapore used to belong to her family. But they had so many wastrel sons that would gamble away, you know, all the money, so by the time it came to her... I mean she was still pretty wealthy, but when she married my grandfather, in those days all the money goes to the husband, the wife had no say, and so when he died everything went to his step-wife and children, so, you know, that was the way it was.

Right. And, was your mother close to her brother and sister?

Very close, extremely.

And what were their personalities like?

The brother, she adored the brother. They are both dead now, he was a banker, and he was extremely charming and she adored him. The sister was much more cautious and quiet, and she and my brother - her brother, were the ones that used to get into scrapes and things. But he, the brother, her brother actually did a dreadful thing, he married an English woman, and so there was a terrible period of animosity between, you know, my grandfather and him.

Was your grandfather religious?

No, not a bit.

So what was the animosity about?

It was just that you were not supposed to intermarry; intermarriage was not encouraged in those days, so...

And had your uncle met his wife in Singapore, or how did it all happen?

Actually I can't remember. I think he actually studied abroad as well if I am not mistaken, and met her. And so, I mean they have three, four children, they had four children, so when the children arrived, you know, and they were boys, and they were lovely children, you know, it was kind of forgiven, but for a long time I think it was considered terribly not done.

But it sounds as though it was a successful marriage, if they stayed together and had four children.

Yes, yes, it was. But, no, they ultimately divorced, after the war.

Oh. So through that aunt, or aunt-in-law almost, did you come into contact with English culture in a way you might not otherwise at that point, or was she rather remote in your life?

No she was rather remote, because I didn't grow up in Singapore, I grew up, although I was born in Singapore my father was, when he was a magistrate he worked in the Government service, and he was posted in different places, like Malacca first, and then Penang afterwards.

Right, well we'll come to that. And, do you know much about your mother's education?

Oh yes, yes. She was sent to a Methodist girls' school, which I was sent to as well, a dreadful school. And, I mean she...I suppose my grandfather was quite forward-looking in the sense that he wanted his daughters to have an education, so they were educated up to 'O' level, but after that they were expected to get married. Because she had a very good voice, and she could have had a career of singing, and she would dearly have loved, and there was apparently some American who was very keen to sponsor her, but that, my grandfather wouldn't think of it, it was just too much to allow a girl to go abroad. Although by her time there were already women who were sent abroad to study, very few, about one or two, I mean I know that my father met, there was another woman who, of his age and my mother's generation, who studied abroad, and she was considered terribly kind of bold and wild when she went back to Singapore.

But did she put up quite a fight, your mother, for it, or did she accept it?

No, no, I think she might have tried to cajole and persuade but I don't think putting up a fight was on the cards with him.

Mm, how sad.

Yes it was, because I really felt that she would have, is a very creative, has a great creative energy, and, it just got thwarted. But then, it went into different directions, you know, it went into her family, and my father's career, she became a very good wife, you know.

So somewhere there was a sadness in her, but it wasn't a dominant thing?

There was a frustration that came out, certainly, in pushing the children I guess.

And do you remember your grandfather's house on this side, was it very different from the other grandparents' house?



Yes, this was a family house. There's a very old street in Singapore called Emerald Hill Road, it still exists, and there's a big family house there; this house doesn't exist any longer. And it belonged, I'm sure it must have belonged to my grandmother's family, but he decided to call it 'Oberon'. He had terrible kind of...he was such a snob, and, because he was educated in English, you know, he had to kind of have his things. And it was a very beautiful old colonial type house that had a driveway, it was on a hill and you drove up, and it had a porch, and you entered this huge hall which was tiled, very cool. And the rooms, and you went in to the kind of back area in the kitchen and the rooms were off a side. And upstairs was where the sleeping area was, and there was a veranda at the top, which again was always open, and you had these things which were like blinds but they were called chinks, which were made of bamboo, and you just let them down when the rain came in but otherwise they rolled them up. And it was a very kind of successful merchant house, that kind of architecture, there was quite a few of them about.

And would there have been shrines in that house?

No, because neither of them were religious, but there were servants around and if they were, there would always be something in the kitchen.

That the servants had put there?

Yes, that they would worship.

So in that sort of household, was it regarded as it might have been in English society, that it was something the servant classes believed in and not the enlightened rich people?

No, not necessarily. It was just whether you were a believer or not, because there were other households of equivalent standing that would actually have an altar.

So in that sense it sounds a very tolerant, free society.

It was.

It was fine if you did believe and fine if you didn't.

Yes. And in fact, you know, there were quite a few families that were Christian for instance, because the missionaries were quite, you know, hard-working in those days, and, as it is my mother went to a missionary school.

But, in terms of the values of people with all these different religions, it sounds as though it was a fairly homogenous way of living.

Well I think the Chinese are always very open, they accept, and anyone who wants to kind of join in can join in as long as you don't push them out. And they're very tolerant of other religions, and other faiths, and in fact if there's something for them they will also have a go, you know. It's an all-encompassing thing rather than the Judaic, Islamic faiths which is, you know, it's this and nothing else. That's why when Buddhism came in, and Taoism, and everything gets a little bit amalgamated, so it's very hard to see what it is. And they also, ancestor-worship comes in as well, and I remember having to observe this particular festival in the seventh month where the spirits are let out, then you have to go and offer food to appease them so that they don't come and bother you.

Where do you take the food?

Oh well if you actually have graves and things of ancestors you go there, otherwise you just kind of pray in your house, in the garden, and just offer food and burn things, offerings.

So is it a bit like the Mexican Day of the Dead?

Yes, it must be the equivalent of that.

And as a young child, did it frighten you the idea of these spirits?

No, that didn't frighten me, but what used to scare me slightly was when there were funerals, because if you were extremely rich, and I do remember one in Penang where this, there was this woman who was the mother of an extremely rich merchant, and they would have, all the mirrors would be closed up, because they said that the spirit would be still wandering around, and that scared me slightly. But at night they would have this huge conflagration of offerings, and, I mean to this day I can just see this, there was this house made of paper and bamboo, a replica of her house so that she would have it in the next life. I mean this is not Buddhism, I mean this is part of something else, of a superstitious thing that gets

incorporated in their religion. And there were servants made in paper, and there was food, and a car, and, I mean it's I suppose like the Egyptian burying the dead.

What sort of scale would these things be?

Oh huge, I mean the car was the size of that sofa, and it was splendid.

The tape can't see that, so it's not as large as a real car but it's pretty big.

It's about six foot. And there were these two-third size figures that were burnt, paper figures, and...

And would they have been very beautifully made?

They were, they were wonderful kind of pop objects that were very garish, but beautifully made in bamboo and paper. And that existed until, I would say in the Sixties there would still be streets that would cater for the requirements of funerals, because when Bill used to visit Singapore he was fascinated by the skill and craft of these things being made.

And then burnt.

And then burnt, yes. But you can't find them now.

And when did you first become aware of death then? It sounds as though it was quite early.

Oh I was aware of death very early actually.

Because you lost somebody close to you, or what?

No, it's just that when you get taken to funerals and things you become aware, and when you have a Chinese funeral then it goes through the street; they do make an awful lot of noise. There is a Chinese orchestra that really goes thumping through, so you are aware of it. It's rather like the West Indian ones I think, in a West Indian... And then also you would, for those ones you would also have professional mourners who would wail, and the richer you are the more you would have, so there would be this terrible wailing following. It's

something that was very apparent when you're a child, when you pass by and somebody's dead, and there it goes.

What happened, because presumably there were people who lived and died alone, I mean this all sounds like a big thing, is a family thing and a stage sort of thing.

I suppose they did, but it would have been very aware at that time; people lived in families, and even, I mean no old people lived alone, there would always be a cousin or an aunt or somebody would move in, and you know. And I suppose if you couldn't do that, you would employ somebody to come and stay with you.

And so what were you actually told death was? I mean, what did you think it was as a child?

As a child, I don't know. I suppose you go to... Because it was pretty mixed up with the Christian thing of Heaven and Hell, and anyway with these temples that I used to go to with my grandmother there would be very explicit paintings on the wall, to Hell and torture, and, they were very gruesome, you know, the Chinese tortures, they're very imaginative, the Chinese, as far as tortures are concerned. There was these two men who were tied together and cooked in oil, and, I mean those were also things that were done to human beings, so obviously they would be also this thing, punishments would occur in Hell.

End of Track 2: Tape 2: Side B

Track 3: Tape 2: Side A

But that sounds to me a bit like the way religion's been used in this country historically, it was really a means of controlling people a lot of the time.

No I don't think it was actually controlling them explicitly, it was just that, you know, if you were good you would go to Heaven and have a good life, or what the equivalent of Heaven was, or you would be in peace, but if you committed awful things, you would have to pay for it. And I think in all cultures the same thoughts recur, and I don't know whether it is a self-imposed thing in society so that there is some structure so people don't go berserk or what, I don't know.

And can you remember any of the other images? I mean it sounds as though they were very vivid, these paintings.

Very vivid indeed, because they used to haunt me. The other images would be of, I suppose the benign figures of the gods, the Buddhas and things, sitting around, and this wonderful pervading smell of incense.

So, those more peaceful images were also fairly deeply embedded, but it sounds as though it was the scary ones that were more vivid really.

I think obviously, if you think back, you know, your nightmares are probably more vivid than your other things that you, you know... Although I don't think, I mean I don't think about them, it doesn't come and hit me.

But I mean was there any attempt to sort of protect you from the frightening ones, or you were actually shown them as a...?

No, I think people are much less protective of children there. You know, children just followed adults about and was exposed to things much more than here. And in any case I think this idea of children not being able to handle things is fairly late, maybe something of the 20th century, because when you think of what was done to children in Victorian times, sent down coal mines and things, you know, they grew up pretty quick, so I think that's something that the liberal 20th century has evolved, about children.

Do you remember sort of adults talking to you about death and explaining it to you, or not?

No, no not really. I think the Chinese are a very matter-of-fact race, they're very practical, things happen then you just get on with it.

So what do you believe now, what's come through all these mixtures?

I don't know, I honestly don't know. I think, I would like to believe that there's something a little bit outside just the humanity that is more powerful, but it has to be an energy; it's not a person or a thing. There has to be a kind of, I'd like to think that there's a kind of benign energy somewhere.

So we don't just stop?

Well I don't know that we carry on. I mean a very dear friend of mine aged 94 told me that energy never dies, it's only changed, so, if I am a person made of atoms, and it goes away, it doesn't, I suppose it just changes.

But when you've lost people who mattered to you, do you still feel a great link with them?

Yes.

And a presence from them?

Yes. And don't ask me how I can actually justify that rationally because I can't.

And, I mean, did you, as a child presumably you did have to, as you say, have a certain amount of formal worship in various parts of your life; how long did that go on for and when did you cease?

Well I had the Buddhist grandmother, a Christian school where we sang hymns and celebrated at Christmas, and, you know, the whole thing just seemed to just paddle along happily and I never really gave it very serious thought, of what would happen to me if I ceased to exist.

But I mean...

I rather, I mean since reading about myths and things, and doing a lot of yoga, I found that, reading a lot about Indian philosophy, and the idea of reincarnation and things, and I don't believe in it but it's a very attractive idea.

But you don't actually, and haven't as an adult, really done any kind of formal worship?

No.

You haven't belonged to a faith?

No, not actually actively. I can't claim. I suppose whenever I'm asked to fill a form, I usually put nothing, but sometimes when I'm in a mood I'll put Buddhist, because if anything it would be the philosophy of Buddhism that would be something that would guide me more than anything else; not the religion, the philosophy of it.

When you say if you're in a mood, what do you mean, what mood would that be?

I don't know, I suppose if I had to think about more spiritual things, you know.

Right. And, if through the school Christianity came into your life, was there anything like a church or a cathedral building?

Oh yes, there were lots of churches. I mean Singapore has got a very strong Christian following, Catholic, Anglican and Methodists.

And did any of those buildings have an effect on you do you think in terms of their space inside or light or art or...?

No, I didn't like them. And I didn't like the Methodist thing, I just found it was neither one thing or the other, it didn't appeal to me.

Right. And did you get sort of Heaven and Hell sermons there as well?

No, not so much Heaven and Hell, so much as kind of, be good, and a more kind of, just a Christian doctrine and the Ten Commandments things, not so much Heaven and Hell.

It sounds as though from all directions you were being told what you could and couldn't do.

Absolutely.

And did it feel very much like that?

Oh yes. So the fact that, you know, I end up as an uptight person is no surprise, you see.

I should think it was paralysing in a way. But, going back to your parents...

No it didn't stop me from thinking things.

Good. Going back to your parents, do you know how they met? I mean you said that their relationship was love rather than an arrangement.

Oh yes, I knew that, because in Emerald Hill Road there was a house next door, and my father's family lived next door, by a strange coincidence, and when he came back after studying his law he was being very very kind of courted by all the families, because he was extremely eligible. Then he used to hear somebody singing, and he thought it was my mother's sister, and he started getting interested, but in fact he discovered it wasn't the sister, the oldest sister, but my mother, who was aged 16 or 17 then, quite young, and had pigtailed still, you know, and very tomboyish. And he was totally smitten by her. But, I think my mother was utterly surprised when she discovered that he was after her.

How much older was he?

He was about five or six years older. And, by the time he actually proposed she was a bit older but I think he kind of caught sight of her when she was quite young, but didn't immediately, you know, have any ideas, but by the time she was about 18 I think he decided he wanted to get married. But, in those days it was also the tradition where the oldest sister had to marry first, otherwise she would be considered, you know, on the shelf, so they had to have a rather long engagement.

And did the older sister have an arranged marriage, or not?



I think yes, it was known that there was somebody looking for a wife, but I think she was consulted, whether she would be agreeable. And they met. So it wasn't so harsh as the ones of the grandparents for instance where there was no say whatsoever; I think my father - her grandfather, did actually consult with daughters.

And do you think your mother's sister would have married your father, given half a chance?

I think so possibly if he had gone for her, yes.

Right. And was there any pressure on your parents to marry other people, did the families accept that they wanted to marry one another and should be allowed to?

As far as my mother was concerned no, because she was very young and I think he was the first proposal, but my father had certainly quite a lot of people angling to make him their son-in-law. Especially I think the person who sponsored him, also had designs on him, but he was very very positive about what he wanted and who he wanted to marry.

Do you know how he wooed your mother, do you know what their courtship was like?

Well he used to come and call, and her sister would always have to be in the room, and she would be chaperoned, and you know, they were very rarely left on their own. And, she certainly was totally innocent and, you know, very very unsophisticated as far as all that was concerned, poor thing. So I think she was, I think she fell in love with him after she got married, because he was so kind and gentle and, you know, taught her everything, and he was very good-looking. And of course, having had an education abroad he had a kind of suavity about him that made it very romantic and...

It must have been agony for her sister to have to be the chaperone.

Yes.

And, what was his training in England, how did...where did he go to do that?

Middle Temple, and did law. But he did it in double quick time because he knew he didn't have all that funds to, you know, while away the time, so I think he did it in two-and-a-half years or something, which is very very quick.

Who was his sponsor?

I can't remember the name.

But it was just a private family?

A private family. You see in Singapore in those days, it still is now, they're very clannish, and if you have a surname like Lim, and he was a Teocheu clan, because again the whole, all the Chinese societies in Singapore are, from which province do you come, are you Cantonese, are you Hokkien, are you...? And it's like a kind of Freemason thing, they tend to help their own. So if you are Teocheu clan with a surname like Lim, somebody else who is very well-to-do, and it's a tradition that's been carried on, because my father did it as well, and there's somebody who is bright, you know, you would give them some money, or you would lend them some money, so, to help them on.

Sorry, could you spell the clan name?

Lim?

No, the...

Oh, Teocheu? T-E-O-C-H-E-U. It would be from the, from Fujian I think, Province. It's from, you know, one of the provinces from south China, but because these people come away, they kind of find their own, I suppose like the Jewish émigrés in the new world, you know, you'd help each other.

And did your father talk about his time in London then?

Yes he loved it, he enjoyed it very much, and, I think he stayed with a landlady, and obviously had English girlfriends and had quite a wild time.

Do you know any details about it?

No, not at all. He's very shy about that kind of thing so he never talked about it.

Presumably he was working pretty hard too.

Yes.

And do you know, did he love London as a city?

Yes he did, and the reason why he allowed me to come here was because he had studied here and knew the Slade, and therefore, you know, thought that was a good place for me to come. Because I really wanted to go to Paris at first, but he didn't think that was a safe city.

Why did he know the Slade?

Because this other person that was, I told you, was allowed to come to study, this woman, was I think a student at the Slade, and so he, I think he used to go out with her, and so he knew about the Slade School.

Right. And so, did your parents set up house together as soon as they got married, what happened?

No, this is a tale of woe on my mother's part because she had to move in and live with all these in-laws, who were very beady-eyed about this young daughter-in-law, whether she could do all the things. But she was actually very very together, because while she was waiting to get married, she was a very good seamstress, she sewed her own wedding dress and did a lot of embroidery, and made wonderful bead decorations on her clothes and things, so she proved that she was actually useful, good, nimble-fingered. And when she joined her in-laws she had to join the sisters-in-law and do the cooking, and serve the mother-in-law. I mean it was a very harsh apprenticeship for her into marriage. And obviously the sisters were slightly jealous of this love marriage, you know, and, she's very attractive my mother, so obviously, you know, that caused some, a bit of jealousy as well.

And was your father able to protect a little, or not really?

He did his best, but he could see that it was difficult, you know, to make a special case for her, because it was in... And he didn't have enough money you see to move out, that was a thing, because that was when his father had already told him that he was retiring, so he had to support that family as well as his wife.

So it wasn't that they were living there out of duty, it was necessity?

Yes. But it was only when he was posted away, was when he had to actually move away, and then it was actually freedom for my mother.

Did he apply to be posted away?

Maybe he did, maybe that was the way he helped her.

Right. And, so how old were you when they moved away?

I can't remember. I must say, we went to Penang, because I know I have photographs of myself as a very young child in Penang, and then we went to Malacca, and then back to Penang again.

So your earliest memories really would be Penang?

Penang, yes.

Right.

No, actually, very strong memories of Malacca, because when I was in Penang I think I was still two or three or something so I was very very... But in Malacca I remember the house very well, because it was a beautiful old colonial type house, which, a few exist in the east still, but it was built on stilts and was very cool and it had a veranda in the front. And these were not built by architects, they were built by civil servants, these houses, and they were so well designed for the climate. And downstairs it would be very open and cool, and upstairs would be this whole, a square veranda that was totally open, and round the top would be also a veranda going all around that you could keep open, and the rooms would be a little bit further back from the veranda, because the rain would beat in, so the rooms were set back a bit, and you at least would stay away from the storms. But they would be in huge gardens full of frangipani and coconut trees. And this particular one was a very beautiful house because my father was one of the first, I suppose of the Chinese lawyers that had a degree that could enable him to enter the Civil Service, and this compound where we lived was actually mainly Europeans, and so it was a very secluded, beautiful spot. And I think my

mother suffered a little bit in the beginning because, you know, there were these colonial Europeans who were wondering what the Chinese family was doing there, and, it was a bit snotty.

Well she must have had very drastic changes in her life in a very short time.

Yes, and the thing is that she is amazingly flexible, which is her surviving thing, and she's a great fighter. Because I'll never forget the time when she said that these English wives were being very very uppity and inviting her to dinner, and she, poor thing, didn't know one end of the cutlery arrangement to the other, and had... But fortunately there was a lovely old man who took a great shine to her, his name was Fora[ph], and he must have been in his sixties then, but, I think he liked her, and took her under his wing and would help her with the etiquette, so she got a little bit of tuition from him and coped. But she had to reciprocate, so she said, 'What shall I do?' So, she was brilliant, she did a Chinese dinner and put chopsticks there, and she thought, I'll fight you on equal basis, you know.

Excellent.

And ever since then, you know, they kind of treated her with a bit more respect, because she wasn't going to be cowered by these memsahibs who...

And was your father quite at ease, having been in London?

Yes, he was quite at ease, and she wasn't so much at ease, but she was ambitious for him, so she soon learnt what the protocol was, and, you know, became an extremely successful hostess in her day.

And do you remember a sort of sense of that social life going on?

Oh yes, definitely, because I hardly...she had very little to do with me really, because you know, I was looked after, and she could just see to my well-being but didn't spend a lot of time with me, as I remember. And so I was left to my own devices, because she was a very social person. And in the early days it was I suppose having dinner parties, and there would be kind of badminton parties where they would meet and play badminton and have drinks, and you know, and I'd always be dragged along, willing or not. And then there were also mah-jong parties that they would go to and I would have to... I suppose to appease their

conscience she would kind of drag me along, but it would be sheer boredom. I should have preferred to be left at home to get on with my...

And you would have gone in your smart clothes and been clean and smiled prettily, that kind of thing?

Yes, yes. And also sometimes there would be other children that would be dragged along as well, so one was thrown into company of, you know, groups, not by choice.

But it would be very international in that sense, you would have come across quite a lot of different kinds of children?

No, more Chinese children. I mean the English children were always sent to school so they were never around.

Oh right.

Unless it was times of holiday, you know, but... But in Malacca I don't remember any children at all, it was a very very, quite a lonely...because I wasn't at school then, so...

You were an only child?

No, I had a brother, and a sister afterwards, but my brother died, so I'd rather kind of just leave him out of it.

As a child he died?

No, he died later on, but... So, and anyway he was so much older that we had very little to do with each other, so, you know, I kind of felt... I had a very solitary childhood.

Right. And you had a nanny?

I had a nanny, a wonderful old nanny who, nanny in terms of, not like the English nannies where they were trained to be nannies, but a servant that would devote her time to looking after children. And in those days there were these women who came from China, from a particular province, where they would actually dress as, with black trousers and white tops,

and they were very specifically from the particular area. And they very seldom married, and they would come away because their families were too poor, and they kind of formed a sisterhood, and they came over and became cooks or servants or whatever, and they would have clubs where they would go back to for social reasons. But it was a very strange thing, I mean I don't know whether they were lesbians or what, but anyway they...they never married, these women, and they would devote themselves to their family, and if you were lucky, as we were, we got one who was terribly terribly wonderful and...

What was her name?

Ah Kuan.

How do you spell it?

A-H, which is just a kind of sound, but her name was Kuan, K-U-A-N.

And she was there all through your childhood?

Yes, yes.

So what was she like?

Terribly quiet and devoted and very caring, I mean she was just there whenever I needed her, and I must say there are times when I'm appalled at how I treated her.

Why, how did you?

Well, you know, when I couldn't sleep at night she would kind of pat me, you know, when I was little until I fell asleep. And, you know, she was a mother really. And when I went away I missed her as much as my mother, you know, she was just very, a lovely person.

And what was the relationship between her and your mother?

Well, I suppose there was a kind of jealousy sometimes, but she had no position, poor thing, you know, she was...so she couldn't really answer back or say anything. But she did actually just devote her love to us, to the children, you know, she was just...

And was it a sort of upstairs-downstairs existence, was there a sort of nursery area and that's where most of your life took place, or...?

No, no not really, we were kind of everywhere, but there was a kind of servants' quarters and the main bit, and you know... What I remembered in the early days in Penang, I mean after Malacca we went to Penang, was that she would take me to see Chinese operas at night, and I loved it, I mean it was a real fantasy world, and that was my ambition, to marry an opera hero. They were so good-looking, and they had this extraordinary makeup where they would pull their eyes up and have this red going up, and wear these incredible costumes. And I would go night after night. I don't know...we didn't have...my mother seemed to be very relaxed at bedtime, because I used to remember going out at night to see these operas. And they were very casual affairs where you, it wasn't like the opera here where you have to just sit and be, you know, quiet; you could just wander around, eat peanuts, drink and walk around and come back again another, after ten minutes. And they would be long serials of incredible fantasies of, the legend of the snake woman or something, things like that.

And what would the building have been like, what were the theatres like?

They were usually pretty open-air stage things, and, there would be some permanent ones that would be attached to an amusement park that you'd go to. Then there would be ones where they have special festivals and they would erect them for the street, and do a kind of opera then.

What sort of age would you have been at this stage?

I think about five or six I guess.

Gosh. And would there have been other children there, or would you...?

Oh yes, oh yes. Oh yes.

And, I mean it was a fairly respectable thing to go to the opera, it wasn't like going to the music-hall here or something, it was...?



No, no, it was very respectable. It was a thing which a certain section of the Chinese population went to, and, if you were Chinese-speaking you went to it, you know.

And did they have props that you remember? I mean, compared to the models you were talking about to do with the funerals, I mean were there things like that that were used on stage?

Oh yes, I mean there were... Well the Chinese theatre didn't use a lot of props in a sense; they had screens and back-drops. But you know that tradition of what the West now employs, where people come in and carry things and move things, well the Chinese theatre used that all the time; when something is needed and it's not there, they would kind of put it up. But there was a lot of suspension of disbelief, and things became symbolic, you know, a kind of thing with a tassel is a horse because it's a whip, so when somebody brings it out, leading this thing, you can see a horse coming out, and then the hero would kind of, there would be certain ritual mounting movements of how you get on a horse, and then you would go riding with it. And there are certain things, if you go to the opera, as you would the ballet, there are certain symbolic movements of, you know, saying that's beautiful, or whatever.

So a lot is by implication?

By implication and by knowing the language of the opera. Then if you had to cross the stream, you know, they would probably throw a scarf over, and do that.

Sounds very poetic.

Yes.

End of Track 3: Tape 2: Side A

Side B is Blank

Track 4: Tape 3: Side A

Have you any idea what today's date is?

Maybe, I think it's the 9th.

Of what month?

January.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

[Interview with Kim Lim on the 9th of January 1996, at her London home.]

When we were talking before we had got you going to Penang, and then to Malacca and then back to Penang, because of the way we were following a line of thought. And I just wondered if we could pin down when you first started to have lessons of any kind, either from the nanny or parents or when you went to school.

Well, the lessons were I suppose informal ones, reading with my father, but nothing more formal than that at that particular stage.

Were you reading in Chinese or in English?

English, he was teaching me in English. And I had a Chinese teacher who came to the house, but it was so boring and he was so bad that I actually freaked out and blocked it off and didn't really do very much, to my regret.

Did you at that stage as a child have a sense of either Chinese or English?

No, not at all, it was so integrated that you just fell from one to the other without actually much thought.

Right. And so, did you, I mean to somebody like me the Chinese alphabet is completely unintelligible.

There isn't a Chinese alphabet.

That would partly explain it then. But I mean, you would, as a child, have just grown up being able to recognise Chinese symbols, or not?

No, you have to be schooled for that. Because it hasn't got an alphabet you can't learn it and construct words from it. The letters are made up from writing in a particular way and you usually have, the more complex letters have two sides, a left-hand side and a right-hand side, and the left-hand side usually denotes the kind of category of thing it is. To simplify, whether it's to do with water or metal, you'd have a kind of metal water sign, and then the other side would be another configuration of strokes. But because there's no alphabet you just have to learn it by heart, and the way it's written gives you no indication of what it means, unless you know it. Or how to pronounce it. So the parrot-fashion was the only way to actually learn the language.

And could you speak Chinese?

Yes, my nanny was Cantonese so I spoke Cantonese.

Just naturally as a child?

Yes, yes.

And you also spoke English because your parents spoke English?

Yes, and I was, you know, supposed to go to an English school when I reached the age, but I, when I reached the age the war broke out so I never went. And so...

And when your father was teaching you to read, what books did he use, what were you reading?

The only thing I can really remember was Br'er Rabbit, and...

Those are quite cruel stories aren't they?

Yes, yes, but, it didn't strike me as being particularly cruel, because I think life then was quite cruel so you...you know, I didn't really think of it as particularly cruel. I mean all the Grimm's Fairy Tales are very cruel and frightening anyway, I mean a lot of children... Nursery rhymes are cruel. So...

But you were in effect learning American then, weren't you.

No.

Br'er Rabbit's American surely.

Is it? I don't know.

I'm fairly sure. I can [INAUDIBLE].

I mean it was a book that he had in the house and he would just read me the same stories again and again until I learnt to read by recognition. That's why I'm very bad at spelling even today.

And do you remember wanting to learn to read?

Oh yes, yes. I mean the desire was there, and so, and because I have a quite a good ear, that wasn't difficult. But he tried to teach me maths and that was something else, because I am not at all numerate and it was very difficult to grasp the abstract things like numbers.

Was he patient with you?

Yes, yes he was very patient. But, then when the war broke out I was supposed to go to school, didn't, and I was sent to a Japanese school.

Are we in Penang?

Yes, that was in Penang. And, I was so frightened, because they were extremely tough and cruel, the Japanese teachers. If you did anything wrong or, you know, they considered a fault, they would put you outside in the hot sun standing, holding up a broom for hours. And I mean the punishment was very severe, like their own code, and it so terrified me, and

anyway having never gone to school, going to an environment like that with lots of people, I had always been a loner, I found the experience traumatising; I developed a temperature for years which gave me an excuse to stay at home.

How old were you when you first had to go?

I was 4½, 4½, 5.

And why did your parents send you there?

Because everybody had to go to school when the Japanese occupation started, you know, you did what they told you to, it wasn't a question of choosing.

So if you had gone to a British school you would have been sent to England, would you?

No no, they had English schools. They had English schools, and Chinese schools and Malay schools, and my father chose to put me in an English school because, you know, he was educated. At that time, being a colonial country, you know, the way to better yourself is to do what the masters did, so, and that was the way, you know, he wanted.

So, when you were this tiny age, I mean can you remember the first class, was it at all like a nursery class would be here in any respect whatsoever?

Certainly not, no no no. It was regimented desks, sitting down, and you know, teacher at the blackboard in front, and being taught. But I didn't go there for too many days, you know; after a couple of weeks I just decided that was it.

But you've also said before that you were not in a sort of environment where you could stamp your feet and have a tantrum and say, 'I'm not going to school'. [INAUDIBLE].

No, so I got ill you see.

You genuinely got ill?

Yes, I mean they really worried about me, and they couldn't find a cause, I mean I just ran, had this running temperature. And so, and at the time there was not a lot of food and

vitamins, so the doctor said it was obviously a lack of nutrition or, I was growing too fast, or something like that, so, you know, as I wasn't well he said I shouldn't go to school.

And so you got some sympathy as well?

Yes, and therefore the lessons at home, the reading, and the very simple maths, carried on.

And was that done during the day, or when was it done?

Yes, in the afternoons, in the evenings, as far as I can remember. At weekends. But I was, you know, very badly educated for a long time.

And when your father actually was trying to teach you, was it sort of fairly formal, he sat you down and made you write things or whatever?

Yes.

Right. And so, when he wasn't around, because presumably he was working?

Yes.

Were you just playing?

No, well actually during the Japanese occupation he wasn't working you see, because he used to be a magistrate and when the Japanese came, you know, you were just part of the population that was under another power, so what he did, what my parents did, was to grow vegetables, and you know, my mother made cakes and tried to sell it to raise some revenue, and he tried to do little jobs here and there to earn some money. I can't really remember what he actually did during the war.

I mean as a four-year-old how aware were you of what was happening, the Japanese coming and the money not being available and everything?

You were aware of it, because there was a feeling of threat, and you were aware of it because I was hungry quite a lot of the time, and... And I remember being put in a room with mattresses when there were airplanes and things, you know, that, which was kind of I

suppose, the bathroom was the strongest room where, you know, one was kept, from air-raided shelters and things. But apart from that, you were aware that the adults were being very frightened, and certainly in the early days when, before they had actually arrived and established their power, as they were just coming in and the English were leaving, there was always this threat with the soldiers coming, breaking into houses looking for young women. And at that period of the war, right in the beginning we, because my father was a volunteer officer, as well as being a magistrate, was told that he should defend Penang against the Japanese with his band of merry men of twenty. And then, this was before the war broke out, and he was assured that his family would be taken care of and evacuated, but as it happened the expatriates were actually taken away very silently at night, and one of the wives who was very friendly with my mother rang up and said, 'I'm terribly sorry, I'm very embarrassed, we're leaving'. And so they drove off in cars without lights and things. And so my mother was furious, you know, because she thought that we were supposed to go as well. And then my father kicked up a fuss and then, I remember trips to the ferry, because Penang being an island you had to take a ferry across to the mainland before you could get down to Singapore and catch a boat to wherever, India and Australia were the two places that were where people ran to. And twice we went to the jetty and they said no room, no room.

Oh God!

So my mother put her foot down and said, 'Look, it's decided, I'm not meant to go. I'd rather stay anyway, you know, and be with you.' So, she stayed in town in this house, and we had this very fabulous family friend, he's dead now, but he was a great admirer of my mother's, so he said, 'Look, you know, you want to stay in town, you stay in town, but you can send the kids with my family, and, we have a house in Penang Hill', There's a little hill in Penang where, it's a very pretty place and people usually have holiday homes, and so we went up there, and my mother stayed in town where... And my father went off to defend this island you see, with his twenty men, and then decided it was totally daft, because a) the Japanese never came the way they said they would, up through Singapore, they actually came down through Thailand, on bicycles, and the army was quite a lot of men, so he said, you know, 'I'm never going to be able to defend it'. What he did was that he took his men and went into town and kept civil order, because there was a huge lot of looting. When I went up to this hill station with my brother I remember going up on a train, and it was a kind of chugging little train, and you could see the town and you could see burning, and you could see lots of people running around, as war images of people running with bags and things on their heads, you know. And so, there was obviously a lot of looting going on, so he decided to keep civil

order, and that was what saved his life, because when the Japanese finally arrived, this was the first town that they arrived in where there wasn't a lot of looting and rioting going on, so he said, 'Who was responsible?' So, they discovered it was my father, and even though he was a volunteer officer and ex-magistrate, they kind of, just kept him alive, because they thought he might be useful.

I was going to say, it's fairly unheard of for them to be compassionate isn't it.

Yes, but, no no, they used it, because it was quite useful because he could speak the language, and he obviously had the respect of the population, and you know, he might be a useful intermediary. But I remember on our living-room floor - I mean this was much later, when we'd come down from the hill station - there was a mat laid out with gold things that he had got off people who had looted, because a lot of the women in those days wore huge bangles that looked like ropes, and you know, and the floor was absolutely covered with gold which, you know, he handed over to the Japanese authorities, as they were the kind of ruling power. And so, you know, but he was actually watched very very vigilantly by them, and...

And how did he deal with them, I mean how was he negotiating, do you know? Because he must have loathed them, didn't he?

He loathed them, and you know, but he realised that he was powerless against the sword, which, you know, they would kind of pull out every now and again.

Literally?

Literally, yes, you know, they used to show it to me, you know, they loved, you know, to scare children. And there was one particularly nasty one with very long hair who vowed he was only going to get it cut off after they conquered Australia, and... My mother had a very rough time, because she was very attractive and they really fancied her, and you know, wanted to take her off. So, she would drag us out and say, 'Look look look, I'm a good woman, you know, I'm sure you have wives and, you know, small ones at home in Japan, you know. If you want women, I'll find you women.' And so she did. She actually rang round and found out where the prostitutes were and said, 'Look, if you want to do something for your country, this is the time'.

And did they?



Yes, oh I mean it was their trade, you know.

But presumably they weren't going to be paid this time?

Well, you know, they said, 'Well I'm sure you'll be well rewarded,' I mean, and in fact a few of them came to see her with presents after that, saying, you know, thank you so much, because they became the mistresses of certain officers and things you see. And so, you know, that was a kind of little aside where she...she's very resourceful my mother, so she kind of got out of a very sticky situation. That way she's very charming and she can actually have the gift of the gab, so she obviously talked her way out.

It's very double-edged though, because the more charming and more gift of the gab you have, the more attractive you are.

Yes, yes.

And were you aware just how bad that danger was?

No, not at that stage, later on, you know, I was aware that there was always this threat that, people would always talk about pre-war days, and I would think, what were they? You know, because this was the way it was. But the good side of her being attractive was that there was one... When the Navy came they were much more civilised than, you know, they were more humane, and there was one officer who used to always come for coffee, and I'll never forget him because he gave me chocolates and he was very charming, and, you know, would just kind of chat to her, and I think he was quite honourable, he never kind of threatened her or anything. And he always said, 'When the war is over I'm going to take you back to Japan and adopt you.' So for me, I was hoping the war would never end because I was absolutely petrified.

So it was a very real threat from your point of view?

Yes, yes, yes.

And was your father actually in the house?

So he was in the house most of the time, working and mending things, and growing vegetables, and in that house where we were was one with a compound, so everything got dug up and planted, so we had our own vegetables and chickens and things.

But you must have had the sense that, although your father was in the house, he wasn't able to protect you from that threat; I mean it must have been almost doubly, more frightening than if he had been absent in a way.

No, I think while he was there, and while the war was on, I felt I was all right, it wasn't going to happen till it ended, and by the time it ended I was older, and I, you know, knew that it wouldn't happen, but when it was proposed I was very young and, you know, felt...

Presumably it might have happened actually, I mean it's all very well in retrospect because of the way everything, the war went, but I mean, it could have happened really couldn't it.

Yes.

And were you in a terrible state the whole time, I mean people threatening you with swords and taking your mother away, and God knows what?

No, because funnily enough, you know, we had quite a, I suppose as far as I was concerned quite a fun time, because I didn't have to go to school, and you know, I...

When you went to the Japanese school, were they speaking Japanese?

No, no, everybody was, you know, from the population, so they had to learn, and everybody spoke Chinese, Malay, English or whatever, and then we were lumped together, and you know, learnt Japanese.

So the teacher was speaking Japanese?

Yes.

Right. And when the Navy came to your house, say the man who was being courteous to your mother, would he have been speaking Japanese?

He was actually, he could speak English, no, because my mother couldn't speak Japanese, so, I mean there were a lot of Japanese who could speak English, and I think...

And the one with the long hair, would he have been speaking in English?

No, no, just very bad pidgin English, he was... He used to be not very tall, and I could always hear his sword, because he was so short that his sword would drag along the ground.

And if your father, because of controlling the looting, was given a slightly privileged position, or not as bad, as awful as it might have been, did other people resent that?

No, no they didn't, because they felt that maybe he could intercede on their behalf, so, I mean, he was asked to make anti-British broadcasts, and he refused several times, making excuses and things, and finally, again it was my mother's resourcefulness, saying that he was sick when they came for him.

Gosh, it must have taken enormous courage to refuse.

Yes, and she wrapped him all up till he did get very hot, and then stuck the thermometer in hot water and said, 'Look look, you know, you can't make him go, he's...' So, and I think after a while maybe the help of that nice naval gentleman eased it a bit so that they didn't insist that he do it, so...

And did you have...

Because he was very loyal, in spite of what happened and being abandoned, you know, there, he was still extremely loyal to the British and he didn't want to say anything against them.

And did it not rather put you off the British?

Well I didn't understand then what was promised or what... I mean that aspect of it only came home to me much later, as to...

At so late a point that you already had your own feelings about the British, or what?

Later, only after the war did I realise that, you know, that was a kind of rather nasty thing they did, and, it wasn't very honourable. Then I realised it wasn't an admirable period of their history as colonial... Because by and large they were very good masters, compared to others, I mean they weren't as cruel and, you know, as unjust; there was a certain fairness in their regime, and...

But when you first came here, wasn't that something in your mind, how they had behaved?

Yes, but I had got over it already by the time I came over here, because I had wanted to kind of soak up other things, so... Every now and again it would come to the fore, if I meet a particular kind of English ex-pat, then it would remind me tremendously of a certain behaviour. It's really the behaviour of certain people that would get me. But other than that, you know, it was a kind of history that happened to a place. You can't really hold, I don't think you can always hold people who are not responsible for it after the event, really, things happen. I mean, if the Chinese were colonialists they might have been worse somewhere else, so I think it's unconstructive to think that way.

And do you, you know, you obviously went through a lot of terrors at this point; do they come back to you, or is it something that only you know, talking now, will make you remember?

No it doesn't come back, it's like another lifetime, it's very curious, because when you have events like that happening, they're so isolated and encapsulated in periods, that they become very compartmentalised.

And did it bring your parents very close together? I mean it must have been something they very much went through together.

Oh yes, absolutely, yes. Oh yes they did.

And your father must have been very frustrated not to be able to be working. Was he depressed during that time?

No, I think he is of a very philosophic nature, thank goodness, so, you know, he just made the best of it, and as long as his family were safe, and we weren't starving, you know, that was all... I mean one's concerns in situations like that get very very pared down to priorities.

How long were you two actually up in the hill station and away from your mother?

Not very long actually, I think maybe two weeks to a month and then, when things calmed down...

Because I would have thought that would have been the most petrifying thing you could do, have your children somewhere else at a moment like that.

Yes, well we, what she did was to send us up with this very faithful nanny, so in fact this nanny in a sense was my second mum; as long as she was with me I felt secure, because you know, my mother, although she looked after me, she was kind of remote, as all Chinese mothers are when, you know, if you have servants, that's the way... I suppose English families are like that as well, you know, the nanny takes on a very emotional attachment for the child.

And have you other specific images? I mean when you talk about looking down on the town and it being in turmoil, have you got other very vivid images from that, snapshots?

Just kind of snatches of other periods. Oh yes, another time when we were all in hiding at another seaside place, and again this was another period after the hill period but before we went back to the town house to get settled, we went to another of their holiday houses by the beach, and there would be banging on the door, and all the women would go hiding in cupboards, and I would go with them and they would kind of push me out, you know, saying, 'Go on, you know, you don't have to hide'.

Mm, I would have thought it would be best that you did.

Yes, but that was a very strong memory too of wanting to join them and saying, 'Oh you children go and play,' you know, you...

But they were hiding because they were afraid they'd be raped?

Yes, they'd be taken away.

And they actually were fairly confident that nothing, no harm would come to you?

Oh yes. Actually the Japanese were in a sense quite good with children, I mean they never...

So you weren't there as a sacrifice?

No, no, no no.

A detour. No, right, because it sounds terrible.

No no no, they just thought, that, you know, children were not in their eyes threatened.

It must have been a very very confusing time.

It was. I mean you grew up in funny ways, and very quickly, you know, you were aware of all sorts of things. Although you were very young you were aware of a lot of things.

Apart from being hungry, were you aware of there being financial changes, were you conscious of that aspect?

Yes, in a sense of, you know, not having nice clothes and everything having to be repaired, and you know, saved. I mean, I haven't actually lost that to this day; if you ask me what has stayed with me, it's that I am incapable of throwing things which I think can be recycled and re-used. And, it's awful, I'm trying to fight it, but I guess, you know...

Is it awful? Why is it awful?

I don't know, you shouldn't worry about, you know, things like that. You have such clutter.

You're speaking in the most immaculate, uncluttered room in the world.

Oh well I have clutter rooms, I have clutter rooms.

I mean the principles of it are, actually I would have thought not bad ones in the sense it's sort of respecting things and not being wasteful.

Yes. And actually waste, I cannot bear the idea of kind of wasting food, for me that's wanton, because not only have I...my hour of deprivation was fairly minor compared to others, I mean you know, so that for me is a real evil when people throw things away and waste things.

And what do you remember, other than the blindingly obvious, about feeling hungry?

[PAUSE FOR THOUGHT] What do I remember? I used to have... The animals that we bred to eat became pets, and we had guinea pigs which we would never kill, and rabbits. And I had this extraordinary, unusual pet of a white cockerel, and it had the longest back claws you've ever seen, and it was very very aggressive and belligerent. I was the only one that it would allow to pet, it would chase everybody else in the house, and I remember him with great affection, and of course when he died, he ended up in the pot.

But he died naturally did he?

Yes, he died naturally, but he was a bit tough, but I wouldn't eat him, because, he was so old and crotchety.

You weren't actually in pain with hunger, you were just kind of uncomfortable?

No no, no, I mean it was just wanting to eat things and it not being there, and, you know, things were...very special treats of, you know, when my mother made some biscuits, home-made things when she could get hold of flour, and she made cakes to sell, and when she could get rice flour and things she would sell something, and barter, I mean that was quite prevalent.

And you'd want to eat it rather than sell it?

Yes.

End of Track 4: Tape 3: Side A

Track 5: Tape 3: Side B

And presumably one other aspect of it was that you actually at this stage of life saw much more of your father than you would normally have done.

Yes, I suppose so, yes.

And do you think that was quite important for your relationship with him?

I don't know, I don't know.

I mean did he do any playing with you and amusing of you that he might otherwise not have done?

Oh yes. He actually, if anything he actually spent more time with me than my mother, because I loved swimming and I loved the sea, and he liked it too, so we would actually go out and swim and things, whereas my mother hated the beach and didn't like the sun, and things like that. So, you know, he...yes, when you come to think of it I did spend a lot of time with him.

And did you have to help sort of dig vegetables and look after the animals, and sew and that sort of thing?

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

And did you quite enjoy that, or it was an imposition?

No, no, but you know, I did my...we had to do it, so, you know... They didn't make me do any hard work or anything, but it was usually kind of picking things or gathering things and...

In little short bursts or..?

Yes, yes.

So what really over those years, presumably most of it was in the town house was it?



Yes.

What were those years, what was the pattern of life for you, I mean how did you fill the day?

Well, there would...I remember...was it then that...or some time else, when she actually did employ a teacher to teach Chinese, Mandarin, and then we would have lessons, maybe twice of three times a week.

This was the bad teacher, or this is another teacher?

No, he wasn't bad actually, but I think when you're a child, you know, learning a thing like Chinese is extremely tedious. So he taught it straight, as it should have been, whereas it could have been made much more, you know, that one wanted to participate, and I mean the techniques of teaching, you know, were not like what they are today, just sit and just learn by heart, and write it out again and you know, if you get it wrong you get told off, and get bad marks, and... Oh yes, and I had music lessons and I detested that because she was a dreadful teacher who threatened me, if I get three black marks she would never teach me again, and that would have been terrible humiliation to have to confess to my mother that this teacher wouldn't teach me any more.

What was she teaching you?

Piano.

And did you want to play the piano?

No, I mean not really.

And did your mother sing to you? I mean you said she had this wonderful voice.

Yes, she would sing, not to me but she loved singing whenever there was an occasion, when there was a party or something she would kind of, she's a real performer, she would sing.

She didn't teach you to sing?

No. I mean she would sing, we would sing little songs, but I don't, I never thought that I felt comfortable singing.

What about drawing, did you draw?

No. But I made things.

Such as?

I made all... I was a terrible tomboy, and we didn't have any toys.

Because of the war or because...?

Yes, I mean, one or two little things. But most of the time I made catapults.

Out of?

A tree, tree branches. And tops, you know, I used to play with some kids and you know... Marbles, oh yes I used to remember, you'd have a game of marbles, and anybody who lost had to put their hand there and get marbles flicked at it, and that was a penalty. Yes. And made things like that. And there used to be a palm tree which, this was supposed to be my beginnings of sculpture, and it had a black nut, and if you took the nut out and hollowed it out and rubbed it on a very rough stone, with a lot of patience you'd end up with little rings, little black ebony-like rings, and I used to make those.

Did you discover that?

I can't remember how I came to make these things, but I remember making it, you know, whether somebody else had done it or what I don't remember, but, we spent a lot of time making these rings.

So you were a patient child?

Yes, I suppose when I started making something. But, you talked about cruelty and things, because it was a very cruel period. I mean you would hear of relatives being taken off and beaten, or given the water treatment, which was ghastly.

What was that?

When they would fill you up with water and then jump on you.

And which you died from presumably?

Well, I mean you didn't die but you did yourself a huge amount of damage. If they wanted some information out of you, or you know. And they would be very badly beaten up. A lot of people went deaf because of the terrible blows to their heads. So, and you would always hear about the Japanese code of honour of death before dishonour, and death was a very close thing, you know; punishment was a very everyday occurrence. People who stole were, I mean almost like the Arab countries, very drastically dealt with, so nobody stole because it wasn't worth losing fingers for or an arm or whatever. And, so I...I think that naturally did rub off on me, this, because I kept goldfish, they were - not goldfish, sorry, fighting fish, and they were these little tropical fish that would glow red when you put two together, and they would really engage in a fight and a battle, and if...

Are those two males, or...?

Yes, it has to be two males. They would be quite ordinary-looking grey fish, but when the moment came for the fight they would kind of glow blue and red.

I thought when you said it you meant because they loved each other and it was excitement, [INAUDIBLE].

No no no no, when they got into kind of their aggressive state. And if any of my fish lost... Shall I tell you this?

Oh, you actually introduced them to other fish to fight them, like cock-fighting?

Oh sure.

My God!

And if they lost, they would have to commit the honourable thing of death before dishonour.

You committed it on their behalf?

[CHOPPING SOUND]

With what?

Oh a little knife. And then I would give them an honourable burial.

How many did you have?

Not that many, I mean, one or two. But I know I did it once, and put it in a, gave it a kind of honourable burial, and so much later when I was here and I saw that French film called 'Les Jeux Interdits', it was also about children in a wartime situation and that they had this secret burial ground, and I thought, my God! you know, it's extraordinary.

And when you did it, did you feel any contrition, or you...?

Of course I did, but it was the thing to do, you know, I mean...

So you didn't automatically reject everything Japanese?

No, because you grew up with them all around you, and that was the way it was. It's very funny because I think when you're a child you adapt and you grow up, and you do things because that's the way, you know, it's...you see it around and you're taught by stories and things, because you know, when these people would come, they'd say how beautiful Japan was, and you know, you'd get bits and pieces of that. So although it's from a position of fear and victim, you still take it on. I mean it's too complex, I don't really know how or why but that was what happened. But you hear these stories and you think, well that's it, you know, it's honourable if you have dishonour before...it's too awful to live with so you have to do this.

And you translated it into the honour of your fishes; did you even mentally sort of translate it into human activity? I mean, was there a point when you thought that was a reasonable thing and then a point when you questioned it, or...?

No I didn't actually apply it to myself, because there weren't any kind of...

But if your father had done something dishonourable, would you expect him to fall on a knife honourably?

I don't think so, I think I would...my kind of protective thing would have rationalised it somehow so that he didn't have to do it.

So were the Japanese at all glamorous to you then?

No. No, I mean I only knew, came to learn more of their culture and admire the culture much later on.

And what do you feel now about it?

I mean I do admire their sense of aesthetic, they have a great sense of material and I do admire that. I like their theatre and dance, and the visual sense, you know, it's very admirable. But they also have this extraordinary hard code and a very cruel side, which is not only specific to them, although theirs manifests itself in a very codified way. I think the Chinese also have a very cruel streak, not that it's meant to be cruel but because I think life is so tough and hard that you grow up all...a kind of unsentimental attitude to certain things becomes quite a usual, normal thinking, that you don't question it. I mean I think the West think the Chinese are incredibly cruel to animals, and they probably are, but if you have nothing to eat, and that's the only choice, you do that and then it becomes so that you don't care for animals in the same way, you know? I'm not trying to justify it but I'm just trying to understand how it happens that certain things committed in certain societies, and you are horrified, but when you see how basic life is sometimes, that you don't have the luxury of that kind of valuing things, and it becomes you or me. And if you go and see some of these Chinese films that have been coming out, especially the earlier ones, it does give you a sense of how terrible it is actually, and I suppose I should be very thankful that I was born in Singapore, in spite of the Japanese occupation, than in China, because that would have been hell on wheels.

Have you been to China?

Yes, but I can't say I know it, I mean I went in 1985 and did a journey along the Silk Route, because I wanted to explore the beginnings of things that I like, which was the early Han and Chou and Shang, which is along the Yellow River basin. So I decided to go and do that route. But it's only scratching at the surface, I mean I can't say that I know it. But I think, I felt as foreign as some of my foreign friends in China.

Well you would be almost certain to, wouldn't you, I mean it is foreign to you.

Mm?

It is foreign to you, isn't it?

Yes. Because in the end, it's not only the great changes that happened in that period of Mao, you know, all the values that I grew up with which I thought were Chinese no longer apply for them, so...

And I mean obviously it's a country where there's enormous change happening now. I mean do you feel particularly interested in it?

Oh very, very, very interested. I mean, I think all overseas Chinese whom I suppose can be categorised as that, feel a certain emotional loyalty to China, so that's why when one first heard about communism and Mao, you know, there was a certain support for him because he managed to unify China, because before that she was kind of rich pickings for everybody, because she was in such a state of disintegration and corruption. I mean it wasn't anybody's fault either, I mean it was the country itself which was so badly ruled and run that here was somebody who actually managed to make it stand up again, and everybody applauded that I think from afar, even though on the other side at the same time one was very worried about communism, and there was this kind of funny ambidextrous feeling about his regime. But since then I've read so much, and it is actually terrifying to learn what damage he did to the country.

I mean, with the changes that are happening now, are you more optimistic than pessimistic or vice versa?

I'm very frightened actually to see how it goes, because having gone through such terrible upheavals, you can't blame the population for wanting all the goodies that it has been denied,

and with communication the way it is, you know, the television, people know what it's like now to have, so you can't blame them if they want to make it quick, and I just despair at the thought of what is being put up now at the expense of kind of proper planning, you know. I have never been there but the new, that new city of Shenzhen, which is next to Hong Kong on the communist side, sounds absolutely hideous, and you know, a lot of building and hotels and things are going up, but the kind of quality and...

Presumably it will also be a town of great divisions between generations won't it?

And also back to wealth again, because I think a lot of people are getting extremely rich, and the same kind of horrible evil of corruption is already happening again on a big scale, which never went away during the communist regime but it was I suppose, fear held it at bay, and now it's kind of coming back again, so...

And what about sort of looking at China more culturally, I mean things like the early printing there and that whole line that's gone through, has that been important to you in any way?

I think...I went...this trip was to actually find out whether there were any links, you know, and, because emotionally one feels that you would like to think that there was, so, I was very curious to find out how I would react to things. And of course the early things I feel very strongly, a powerful link to, but definitely I start stopping when, there is in the Chinese character a desire to elaborate and decorate, and also a great predilection for the bizarre and the exotic, because some of their gardens are terribly, they look for these rocks that are very kind of strange, suggestive shapes, and they like that kind of fantasy, the fantasy side, and I don't like that. There are certain buildings and things that you go into and they do paintings, or they find bits of marble that are incredibly, almost figurative, and they would love it, and they kind of frame it up.

So it's almost kitsch.

Yes, there's a very strong element of kitsch in the Chinese character which I do not like. And things that have evidence of craft and hard work are very much admired because of the length of time it's taken to do this, you know, there's...

And of course we've still got an element of that here haven't we.

Not so much.

You know, that's not art because it's all, you know, because I could do it or you could do it.

Because they would wax lyrical, still now. I went to this antique shop and there was some very beautiful calligraphy things, but what this chap was waxing lyrical about was this crystal bowl painted with the 1,008 eight heads of Buddha from the reverse side, so he would actually have to work with a copper brush with an angle, doing that, you know, painting on the other side, and it was absolutely hideous. And you know, that was what he would pay a lot of money for, but if he took one look at my pieces he would say, my goodness, you know, that's rubbish. So...

So, are there things Chinese that particularly matter to you and that you particularly admire, their artefacts?

Yes I like the early bronzes, I think they're very beautiful, the Shang bronzes.

I don't know what those are like, tell me more.

They were funerary pots and they were just bronzes of shapes of bowls and wine vessels and things that they would have had...they're very strong, powerful shapes, very sculptural. And the early Han pieces, I think the Han period was a very creative period for sculpture, they had a strong sense of form, and they never elaborated. By the time it comes to Tang, and they start painting and decorating, and you have those Tang musicians, it's the beginning for me, I mean I kind of stop at Tang, after that I'm not all that interested, apart from the Sung pottery which is later.

What's that?

It's the white, very white ceramic pottery which is very beautiful, because they're very pure shapes.

And when did you actually first see any of these things?

Oh, when I went, after the war when we had left Penang and went to Singapore, and then I went to a proper school, and there was another traumatic experience because my father



decided I should go into the class where I should be, had I gone to school. So I went, and there was no problem with reading, and the English and things, because that was fine, but the maths was a real nightmare, because I could deal with simple things, but I had to deal with fractions and algebra and geometry, and that totally traumatised me. I remember my first class, they were I think 44 in the class and I was 43.

Oh, someone was worse! But at that stage, were these artefacts within a museum or something?

Yes, but I wasn't aware of them then, it was much much later towards the end of the school career that I noticed them at museums and had friends who had them in the house, but most of my art awareness was kind of scrolls and pots and things.

And you never worked in either bronze or ceramics?

No, no not at all, not at all.

Because you just were led much more powerfully in other directions, or because you actually feel those wouldn't be sympathetic things to work with for you?

No, it's not that, it's that, I'm much more a carver than a builder-upper, and bronze is more a kind of builder-upper from plaster and clay. And I like to take away...although I have cast my wooden pieces into bronze, and they worked very well, but it's because of the way my mind works, I like to work from a given and take away.

And you found that out by instinct very early on?

Yes, I think, you know, my kind of...I'm a maker, and I've always used my hands, and I didn't kind of particularly want to draw things, I wanted to make things and get my hands on wood. Oh yes, the other thing that is very strong in my mind is that a friend once had some things renovated in her house, and a carpenter had left lots of blocks of wood, and I loved them, I used to collect them, and I had a whole box, and I would play with them and, you know, they would be my environments that I would create into somebody's house or whatever, but I remembered the sensuousness of these wood blocks. And up to now I'll never throw away a wood block, if I pick one up, or an off-cut, because I like the thing itself as an object [INAUDIBLE].

The other thing is, if you have a lot of wood blocks as a child, is the sounds they make.

Mhm.

Was that part of it too?

Yes, yes, but then, sounds of wood block was evident in another area of my childhood which was when people sold things, they would clack things together, like bamboo or two bits of wood, and you would know by the sound of the clack what it was he was selling, whether it was noodles or rice cakes or, then some people would call their wares out. But the food hawkers would always have a clack, and that is like a madeleine cake for me, you know, to hear that sound of... And then you would just send your servant out and say, 'Hey, come in,' and then he'd come in and he'd make you a bowl of soup and you'd pay him and he'd go away. I mean that is the wonderful aspect of life that no longer exists anywhere, vendors on the street.

And they would be walking up and down so you could summon them, rather than you having to go to the street where they were?

Yes. There would be streets where there would be hawkers as well, where you would deliberately go there because you would know that was a well-known store for certain things. But there were, when I was growing up in Singapore in the street where I was, it was quite well kind of patrolled by these vendors. Because they were large family houses there, and you know, they would pick and know that, you know, trade would be quite good there. And fruit and vegetables, that's how you bought your fruit too.

And it wouldn't be regular, like, you know, somebody might have vegetables delivered every Tuesday morning here.

No.

It would be slightly more random than that?

Slightly more random, and of course you would go to the market as well, but these were the enterprising people who would, you know, have their own business, and brought the wares to your house.

And what drove it out?

I suppose competition from shops. And as these people got old and died off, it's very tough carrying this heavy stuff, going up and down, you know, so, when they died off I think the children didn't want to do that.

And was it men and women doing it?

Yes, yes.

And would that person become somebody you knew and sort of almost like a friend, or would there always be a division?

Yes, you would, you would. And for noodles and things, you wouldn't bargain, that would be a straight price, but for fruit, you'd have this little haggle.

And it was kind of expected to have to haggle?

Oh yes, yes. And I always used to feel, poor man, you know, who's carrying the basket? Why are you haggling five cents off him? But if you didn't do it he'd think you were, you know...

Foolish.

Foolish. So my grandmother was very good at it, and so was my mother, so is my mother still.

And none of it rubbed off on you, you don't haggle here?

Not here, no, but I can do it when I need to. It used to embarrass Bill because he's totally not used to it.

I mean were there other sounds at this time? I mean we came to that by chance with wood blocks.

No, not kind of random sounds of the street, but the other thing that my Chinese amah took me to was the Chinese opera, so, that was a real fantasy world for me, because, I don't know why I had so much time, and I was allowed to go, I was allowed to go in the evenings; it seems that my mother never cared, as long as I was amused and kept out of her hair, it seems that she allowed me to go, And I really fell in love with the heroes, I wanted to marry one, they were so good-looking. You know how Chinese opera used to have the makeup where their eyes, they rode from here up, and they would have a band tied up round their heads to keep their eyes looking like that, and the hero would inevitably be very good-looking and have wonderful kind of head-gear. The baddies would have masks, or have terrible painted faces, but the heroes would have his own face, and only speak kind of, bring wonderful things.

And going back again to your toys, I mean, the marbles you mentioned, I mean for a child those are just hand, very comfortable in the palm aren't they, and when you're talking about working with these nuts it's the same thing.

Yes.

Were there other objects like that?

No, no not particularly, not particularly. But, I used to like to collect shells and things, I mean, you know, going to the beach, all the time I used to always pick up shells that looked beautiful and things.

And were these sand beaches or pebble beaches?

Sand beaches they were; we were very fortunate, Penang had beautiful beautiful beaches, like white ground pepper. It was so fine that it was soft, you know, they never hurt your feet, and they were just endless endless stretches. The other sound that I suppose I remember would be when we were at this beach house, would be the sound of pounding waves, because where this coast is, at certain times of the year you wouldn't just have gentle rolling waves, you have these huge ones that would come over and rise up like a wall, and we used to have a wonderful time jumping through them when they rolled up, so that when you came out,

everything was filled with sand, your ears, your nose, your bathing suit; you know, you walk out and your bathing suit would be hanging down because half the sand would be scooped in.

End of Track 5: Tape 3: Side B

Track 6: Tape 4: Side A

It's very interesting, I mean, this is probably a wrong thought but, that in a sense it made you into sculpture if you came out covered with sand in your trousers or whatever [INAUDIBLE], you became...

I don't know whether there are any...

You became very much united with that material.

You felt it all over you, but, you know, you soon got it off because it was so uncomfortable having it in your ears and hair and everywhere. But, it was very fine sand so it didn't matter.

But again, I mean it's a sort of facile link, but I mean the sort of wonderful flows in your work, it's quite interesting that you were so bound up with being part of that flow.

No I think water, I was very aware of water, because everywhere I lived, you know, it had, I was very close to the sea, spent a lot of time seeing things floating, and very aware of rain, there was always torrential rain, and so the rhythms of water running was one of the elements that's very close to one's being.

And the sound of rain presumably as well.

Yes, yes. I love it, I love it when I'm inside and I hear rain at night, it really is, really heavy stuff, you know, I really love it.

And also, would it be like here, that when there's rain there's dark light and grey light, and always contrasts? What was the light quality there compared to here?

Oh, it's very different. I mean there it would be very dramatic, either it would be very thundery and the whole sky would go very grey, or sometimes there would be shafts of sunlight and... I mean never the very soft, all over non-light, like winter here, which is what depresses me intensely, I feel as if I'm living under water, because it's murky and I don't like that. I like it to be really kind of clear and bright, and the light there is never murky, it's always either torrentially dark and the sky would just go black, you know, and...

And where you lived, are we back in Singapore when you're talking about this, or were you in Penang?

Sorry, we're in Penang, by the sea, that was when I got a lot of experience by the sea.

And when the rain came, that's Penang too?

Both, both places, that would happen.

And when you were in both those places, where you lived, I mean did you have a sense of horizons rather than being built up or...? I mean how much were you aware of the sky?

Well, in, I would say more in Penang by the sea you would have kind of the horizon and sea, whereas by the time I got to Singapore it was more city and streets and things, so...

Although, you know, one went to the beaches, and went out, you know, you're not that far away from it, but from everyday living, it was more a city scene.

And the kind of shells you'd find in Penang, are they different from the shells you'd find on the beach in England?

I've never found any shells on the beach in England.

Oh no!

I mean I've never really gone on beaches in England to find shells, so I can't tell you. But you have those very long spiky ones that end up like a spiral cone, and...

Quite large.

Long like that, white. And then, just normal kind of cowrie type things, a lot of those. And starfish and things like that you'd find. And, I know that certain forms, like spirals and things, have come out of my love of those shells and things, and the idea that it grows in a very organic way, you know, one adding on to the other and then turning on within itself is...it's a theme that I've actually used in my work.

And was it very clear sea, was the sea very clean?

No, the sea was always, because it was most of the time a very move...or sea that move a lot, it would always churn up sand, so it was never very clear water. You get the very clear water on the east coast in Malaysia where it's really kind of, where you can look down six feet and you can see beautiful swordfish and coral and things.

And what about weeds, were there seaweed?

Oh yes, lots of seaweeds; they were very nasty because at low tide you're kind of walking around, it's a bit slithery and you never quite know what it is actually brushing against your ankle.

I was going to say, nearly everything you've talked about coming out of the sea has been attractive, but, I mean were there things that bit you and [INAUDIBLE]?

Oh sure, there were kind of mud, and these little catfish, and jellyfish and things, you know, you'd get stung by that, but you don't remember that so much, you just...

And did you build with the sand, or not?

Oh yes, made the usual sandcastles and things. But, we used to also go hunting for king crab, which at seasons you would have the male and female and it would come up as a pair, these rather ancient-looking things. And you'd find a lot of their shells as well, the king crab shells.

And do you get anything like turtles or anything like that?

Not when I grew up, but I did go up the east coast to watch the turtles, that's quite a memorable...

What's that like?

Amazing. That's up in Trengganu, up in the east coast of Malaysia, and, you'd have to go, it's a beautiful coast that, a really wonderful trip we did once. And you go there and wait by the beach, and you never know whether they are going to arrive or not, but you have lots of coffee and you know, go with a group of people, so you don't get bored and you kip on the



sand, and then, you know, maybe at 2 in the morning if you're lucky, and we were, you see these turtles come up. And they start to dig, and you keep away because at that stage they will get frightened and will...but once they start laying it's curious, they don't move at all and you can go up and stroke them and touch them, and, it's too late, there's nothing they can do, they just stay there. And then after, then there are these kind of huge, what they call tears, in her eyes, but they're not tears, they're actually moisture I think, I've been...this is one explanation, that it's moisture to keep her eyes lubricated. And after, because it's such a kind of, it looks such a labour, and poor thing, while she's laying, the beach, the guy who looks after the beach is actually taking them off, because what happens is that they are allowed to sell some and hatch them. I mean, it's official, and it's better to be official than to have them poached, because then nothing survives. So they take them away to hatcheries, and then they bring them back. So, I kept on saying, 'Leave a few for her, leave a few for her,' you know. And after she finishes laying she doesn't even look, she just closes up the hole.

How many do they lay?

Oh, about, I think 60 to 70, I mean quite a huge clutch.

Per turtle?

Yes, quite a lot.

I had no idea.

I think it's as many as those, I may be wrong. But, then she starts to close it up, and then she'll do a kind of, a whipping motion with her little flippers, flicking the sand over, flicking sand, and she'll go in ever-winding circles doing that. So even though you're standing there, when she finishes you don't know where the hole is. And by the time she's finished she's so tired she kind of just about makes it to the sea again, and you think, go on, go on lovely, just a few more paces and you're in the sea. And, it's a very moving experience, watching this. And they always come back to the same beach apparently, because they are tagged.

To lay again, rather than to see what's happened, where they...?

Oh to lay again, because they just leave them, and when the turtles hatch. That's why they have hatches because that's when they lose the most, because they get crabs and birds and

things just picking them off. You can imagine these tender little things without skins, must be like caviar to certain birds. And then they put them back.

So this circling motion that she makes, is your spiral again isn't it?

Yes. But it was really impressive that she wouldn't leave it until everything was totally camouflaged. Even though you were standing there watching her, you know, she wasn't going to be pushed away from the kind of ritual, her cycle of her activity had to be complete before she left.

And did you do that trip with Bill?

Yes, yes.

When did you go?

Some time in the Seventies we went and did that long trip up the east coast, and it's very very nice, beautiful. It's very beautiful, Malaysia, actually; I mean Singapore is totally wrecked now as far I'm concerned, but Malaysia has a lot of charm, and the people are very nice.

And going back again, can you remember any other toys?

Oh yes, I was, for some reason towards...a friend of...this very kind uncle who had helped to look after us when we were young had managed to find a doll for me, and it was a very special present, and it was an amazing thing in a little case, and it was a Shirley Temple doll, it was about that big. And, yes that was an amazing thing I had, and you know, I loved it.

What did it mean to you? It must have been totally bizarre to you, wasn't it?

No, not really, because I'd been fed stories about blondes and things, so I was quite, you know, I mean one was fed in a very roundabout way, English values and cultures and things, you know.

Would you ever have cited a Shirley Temple film?

No, my mother did but I never did, I was too young. But I knew that Shirley Temple was a kind of child star. And there were kind of records, that's right, vinyl records that had all sorts of songs that were a residue from my parents, you know, when they wanted to be very modern, had records of old-time dancing type stuff. And anyway, I had this doll, and I played with it for a long time, and it was a great joy and everybody was delighted that I was given it, and I did a terrible thing one day, I decided she needed a haircut, and I cropped her. And I had the biggest hiding of my life, the other hiding I had, I had two, and that was one of them, for wrecking this beautiful gift, you know.

And what did you feel about having cropped her hair, you were quite happy?

Oh yes, I was delighted, I thought I did a great job.

[INAUDIBLE].

But I never knew I wasn't supposed to you see.

That's a bit much, because it was your doll.

Yes I know, but that wasn't the point you see, we weren't raised like that at all, I mean, things that were given to you, you had to look after, so even though it was yours, never mind, you had to look after it.

And what was the other thing you were beaten for?

Oh, well this is, we used to be regularly given castor oil, and one time I decided I did not need this, and I went, [BLOWING SOUND], straight at my mother's face. And that was it, I had the worst hiding I ever had.

And that was spontaneous fury from her?

Absolutely. No, not quite spontaneous, she had a cane, a whipping cane, you know, it was pretty [INAUDIBLE]. You know, I think people nowadays are very very kind of, saved of all this. I grew up, you know, quite... And even Bill said he had, they had leather thongs and things in their hands.

But at school, or in his parents' house?

At school, at school. But at school I had rulers and things. I mean I preferred that to being slapped or hit, so...

But if your mother hit you with this thing, where did she hit you?

On the legs. And, you know, I mean one didn't think then that it was a terrible thing, and I don't feel psychologically traumatised. I mean it was painful but you know, you did something wrong and you know, that was it, and I was very bad to spit this at her face, you know, so... You know, it's cause and effect, which you learn to accept, and I don't think that... I mean when my children were little, when they were naughty I smacked them on their bottom, I mean I'm not ashamed to admit to that.

But in a controlled way, or in a sort of [GROWLING SOUND] way?

Well you know, in...sometimes I was mad and I would smack them on the bottom, or on the hands, you know, if they did things that I told them three times. I mean it was at the end of something. But never enough to hurt them a lot, but enough to sting, otherwise it would be pointless, so that...

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Have you any idea what today's date is?

Yes, the 12th of May. I should have looked in my diary this morning.

And what year do you think we're in?

Oh, '97 I think.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

You've just been working on a piece this morning that we've been looking at; is that the piece that's outside that I saw?

Yes.

Can you just tell me a little bit about that?

That's a diversion from the other things isn't it.

I still would like to know about it.

Oh well, I suppose it came out of another piece called 'River Run'. It's a horizontal piece, and there's a possibility that I might show in September, so, although there is enough work, I wanted a few more pieces made this year, so I went, and fortunately found some marble from a monumental masons in Holloway Road, without having to go to Italy.

What kind of marble is it?

It's Carrara, white Carrara marble.

And this piece is called?

I haven't quite decided whether it's going to be 'River Run 2' or something else. I think I'll wait to do, if I can manage to finish the three pieces then I will title them accordingly, because I think titles are quite important. But I like titles to fit, and it has...I like them to be very simple too, but they have to have some association with a piece, but I haven't quite decided whether I'll call it 'River Run 2' or something else.

Given that the tape can't see, could you just talk about the scale of it?

It's a piece of marble that is 36 inches long by about 8 inches by 4 inches, and it will stand on a block across the block making it a kind of horizontal thing, floating across the block, I hope.

And was it cut to that size, or you found it that size?

I found it that size, although it is a scale that I have worked with before. There are kind of certain sizes that you like to use, I think it must be to do with my own physical size too, you

know. I like doing big things but more often than not I think pieces that size are what I like working on most.

Can you just talk about...

I can move them.

You can't pick that up, can you?

No, I have a gantry, but at least I can use...I mean anything much larger than that, even with a gantry, it's very hard to turn them round, you need four pairs of hands - oh no, two pairs of hands, at least two, to help to twist and, you put struts round them and then you flip them round. But, it's very heavy.

And can you just talk about the stage it's reached at the moment?

It's finished, it's finished. You don't think it's finished?

I don't know, I can only see it through a window.

No, it's...I mean apart from just a bit of rubbing down, because there's still some rough marks on it, it won't change radically from what you see. The children.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING - TELEPHONE]

.....the marks you've made on the piece we're talking about?

Well it's the usual way I work where I put lines on the surface of stone to give a kind of rhythmic structure to the piece. I use the lines as a method of leading the eye round and creating a kind of composition if you like, and just manipulating the piece of stone.

And this one, the waves in this particular piece, how do they relate to the piece you were relating it to, the first piece?

The first piece, I suppose the relationship is that their rhythms run horizontally in both pieces, but this one has a difference, on either side of the stone I've actually used a different kind of sweeping...I can't think of the word. The relationships are different.

Right. And would you have done this one had you not done the previous one, did it grow out of the previous one, or was it..?

I think most of the work which I do comes out of a continuity of having done something, and it sparks off another idea, and so you think, well, next time I'll do it differently, more simply, or with more complexity, either way, you know, and it just depends on the kind of stone I come across.

And do you see these two as being kept together, or are they completely independent pieces from your point of view?

They're completely independent pieces, completely independent. This one has more kind of, I suppose musical overtones for me, if that doesn't sound too pretentious and pompous, but I do think of music, how you have a kind of note and the way it's repeated, and a reprise, and the intervals, you know, these things kind of come into my head while I'm working, but it doesn't necessarily look that way when I finish. But these are the things which help to germinate the idea.

You mean it doesn't look that way to you, or that other people don't see?

It looks that way to me, but perhaps it doesn't come across to other people, I don't know. But I have had comments sometimes on other pieces when people have said, 'Oh, yes, it's very musical,' so you know, maybe it does come across, I don't know.

And given that you've now got many years of experience, when you're beginning work with a piece of marble that shape, you obviously have done a lot of preparation probably and know what you're trying to achieve, but does it surprise you as you are actually carving into it, do you find things you didn't expect?

Of course, that's why I don't use assistants; it's not that I don't like the idea of assistants at all, it's, I think that the element of surprise and change is totally out of your hands, because if you hand a maquette to somebody they'll make it perfectly, maybe even better than you but

the possibility of changing one's mind I think is gone. I mean I have totally reversed, you know, doing something I was going to do and find out that it's ended somewhere else.

So can you talk about anything that happened with this piece that was a little bit like that that might have...?

Not with this piece; somehow or other there are certain pieces just happen very quickly and this is one of them. I had an idea, I saw the stone, and it seemed to require these lines, and I drew the lines. I don't make a little maquette, I mean I just drew the lines on the stone, and just thought, well, you know, risk it, either it works or it doesn't, and go for it.

And the depth that you go into is intuitive as well, or...?

That comes a bit later. I just make the lines first and then after that the lines have to be of a certain size and a certain depth to hold the spaces, and that's when I call it my fine-tuning, because it's like having a quartet, if each instrument doesn't play together or in tune, it goes all wrong.

[BREAK IN RECORDING - INTERRUPTION]

I'm a bit dopey today, I've been having a little nap, so...

And the piece we're talking about, have you really just finished it today?

No, not today, but within this last week, because I started another slab, which is a square one, and it will also be horizontal. This one I started before I went to Singapore, because I went to Singapore to see my mother, and when I have a long break like that I like to have something going so that I don't have a problem getting started again. Because with the total change of atmosphere and scene I find it very hard to get back into work, so it's always very good to leave something kind of roughed out so to speak so that when you come back you can just get into it much faster.

And are you working on it in the back of your mind while you're in Singapore, or not?

No, I wasn't, I wasn't. I mean not consciously; it obviously was there, but you know, not consciously. But with this other piece, it was something that I had wanted to do many years



ago, and I had a maquette for it, so that was not a problem, because when you have something that you know what you want to do, the mechanical thing of cutting it is hard but quite quick, because you don't have to spend time just sitting around looking at it indecisively, you know, wondering where to go next.

I don't know at all the procedure of the process. If you're making one of the lines, is that several day's work and then there's several days' work on another line, or do you make them...?

No, no. They're making the lines very easy because they use a mechanical cutter. But I usually cut in very lightly so that if I do want to change my mind, I mean there's a bit of grinding to get rid of it but it's possible. But sometimes it's very hard to see how it will work until you put the line in.

So when you said the piece that's outside and that we were looking at was a very swift piece to do, what do you mean, several days, several weeks?

Just several weeks, which is very fast for a piece of sculpture, for me.

And it didn't change much in the process, it was pretty much as you had imagined it in this case?

Yes, but the lines widen and deepen considerably, and how I ended the lines, the way I wanted them to stop, and how I wanted the stop to be, whether it was kind of, to fade off or to finish abruptly, made a great difference to the piece as to how it looked.

And something like that decision will come from the material itself rather than a mood you're in?

No, I don't think it's the kind of material itself. It's just the interaction between the carving into the stone and the weight of the line, I suppose, as to whether you feel it's too feeble or whether... I really want the lines to actually in the end look like something that flows together and that you're not kind of conscious of each line, you know, you just look at it and it's there, and then of course when you start analysing you realise it's a line that's stops there, and then another one that stops further along, but the first impact, I'm always trying to get at,

is to see the whole thing as a kind of finished piece, a kind of melody that's there with a tune, if it doesn't sound daft.

It doesn't sound daft at all. And it's probably a very difficult question, but can you think of any instances in any detail where you were working on a piece and you, through working on it, it changed enormously?

Oh yes, I have a piece like this that's been going on since 1989 and I still haven't finished it. It's a piece in granite, and it's just very difficult, and I've changed my mind at least fifty times.

Fifty?

Well, you know, that's...I keep on chopping, and it's getting smaller.

How big was it to start with?

[LAUGHS] It was quite a big block, so at least it's lost six inches all over, you know, and I just keep cutting it. And it just doesn't work for me, so I just leave it and go back at it.

What sort of shape is it?

It's a vertical block with grooves running up and down vertically. But I had, I think the problem was that I had too many ideas for that, and sometimes that is a mistake. You can't put too many things in one piece, it just can't carry it, for me anyway, I mean some people can work in a very complex way and get away with it, but not for me, I need to have a simple structure that holds; at least it doesn't work for me for the moment, still, and I'll keep at it.

And how long would the intervals be between working on it? I mean has it had years sometimes with that, and...?

Oh yes. And then sometimes when I'm working on another piece, my eye keeps shifting to it, and then inevitably I move... I mean that's a very bad thing, I should cover it up, because it distracts me from what I'm doing. But, it's one of the ones that's really challenging me, and I think, one of these days I'll get you! [LAUGHS]

Does it have a name?

No, no name yet, so it's...

Right. And if I may just...I'm just going to turn the tape over.

End of Track 6: Tape 4: Side A

Track 7: Tape 4: Side B

Just go back now. We were talking about Singapore after the war, and you'd gone back there with your parents, and we talked about them, their being very close during the Japanese occupation. Did their relationship change when you got back to Singapore?

No, not really, not really.

So they stayed very close?

Yes.

And at this point you did go to school didn't you?

Yes, yes.

What was the name of the school?

It was the...actually I did go to school, we didn't leave Penang straight after the war so I did go to a school there as well, but the one in Singapore was a Methodist girls' school.

And how old were you when you went back to Singapore then?

I was nine.

Right. And so, it must have been quite difficult adjusting to a more structured life wasn't it, at this point, and being at school?

Extremely difficult, and being put into a class where I would have been, had I had a kind of proper schooling, so, because my father had taught me how to read and taught me very basic maths he felt I could cope, and I couldn't with the maths I must admit. But the strangest experience was to be with people five years older than myself, because they went back to the class they were when the war started, so all my friends were not my age, I mean they were past puberty, you know, and I was still nine, and it was a very curious experience.

It's a very big gap at that age.

A very big gap, and maybe that's what's made me a loner, you know, because you couldn't really communicate with people, or at least they didn't want to know because you were so much younger. And it took a few years for me to catch up with the work. I mean I was all right in the kind of art and English subjects, but maths was a real problem.

And was anybody sympathetic to you about it?

Not really. I mean they just took it as a matter of fact that, you know, the classes were big and you just sat down obediently and did your best, and it wasn't a question of, how do you feel?

And do you know what had happened to the others during the war?

Not, no, no I mean, everybody just survived as best they could.

Mm. And so, did you feel completely outcast at school, or did you have one or two allies?

I had one or two friends but not very very close I wouldn't... Until I was much older and in the kind of more senior classes, then that was all right, but in the beginning it was a bit isolating.

So did you sort of show any sign of misery, or not?

No, I don't think I did. I mean, I had a kind of happy home so that was a help, so... I mean school was just something everybody had to do, so you put up with it, it wasn't something that I expected to be happy at.

And were any of the teachers important to you, anything that happened there important?

Yes, there was one very very nice teacher called Miss Esther[ph], and she was a Jewish lady, and she was actually a friend of my mothers, and I think she was very kind to me, she actually liked my work and so, you know, I felt that she was the person that kind of paid attention to me more than the others.

What did she teach?

English.

And what was your work like? Was this essay-writing, stories, or what?

Yes, well, our school was based on the English Cambridge exams, and looking back at it, it's totally ridiculous that I was learning English geography, Tudor history, you know, when I had no idea about my own country. It's very weird.

And were you writing stories in English?

Yes, yes, but they were pretty feeble.

And what about any art teaching?

Oh the art teaching, she was a real dragon, but the art teaching consisted of embroidery and flower painting, you know, which I quite enjoyed, but my embroidery was dreadful because I had very sweaty hands and all the thread would end up being furry. But I was always doing things that I wasn't asked to do, which used to irritate her, but she kind of liked me because I was a bit of a rebel. And for the 'O' level exam I was supposed to do lettering, which I loathed, and something else, and I looked at the paper and I thought, mm, this is very interesting. It was, design a cover for some book, which I'd never done before, so I did that. When I got out of the exam she said, 'What did you do?' And I told her. She was so angry with me.

And did you pass?

Yes, not very well but I got through. It was terribly funny.

And did you learn any art history?

No, not at all. Actually being a Methodist girls' school we had very weird teachers, some of them would be American missionaries from Missouri, we couldn't understand a word they said. And all we had was a lot of scripture crammed down our throats.

And had you seen by this stage, were you beginning to look at any art books, had you...?

Not at all, I mean there wasn't any in my house; the only reproductions one saw was kind of vague Degas on calendars. I mean I saw Chinese art of course, calligraphy and ceramics and Chinese scroll paintings, but no Western art at all, very little.

And were you drawn to those at that point, as a child?

No, not particularly, not particularly.

And, I mean when you say you were a rebel, you mean just by not doing quite what you'd been asked to do in lessons; you weren't leading rebellions and things?

No no, I wasn't leading rebellions. But I was also quite, if I found a lesson incredibly boring I would start asking questions and try and divert the teachers into more interesting venues, you know, and...

Was there any sex education?

None at all.

And did your parents talk to you about it?

Not at all. It was, you know, something that you kind of, when the time came they would kind of indicate, well this is going to happen physically to you, and things like that, but other than that, not at all.

When you say they, you mean the teachers or your parents?

No, my mother and aunts and things, you know, would let on that your body would change. But then, because I was with girls older than myself, I picked up a lot from them, so I was aware of things.

And did you not ask anybody about it because you felt there was a sort of taboo around it, or because you felt that you didn't need to?

I didn't, because it just didn't occur to me. I mean you know, I was very much of a tomboy and interested in kind of doing lots of other things. And then I got very impassioned with ballet.

Oh right. At what sort of age?

I think I was, soon after I got to Singapore I think, round about ten, twelve. It was a very big thing in my life at the time, and at one time I really wanted to be a dancer, and that was the thing which gave me the most release.

And how close did you get to being able to do that?

To do what?

To become a ballet dancer.

Oh, well, I mean I worked at it very hard in Singapore, and you know, went through exams and things, but the moment I came over here and saw what it was really about, I thought, well forget it.

What do you mean, you saw what it was really about?

Well one wasn't good enough, you know, it was just, they were.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING - TELEPHONE]

And, that leads on, I mean what music were you listening to? Were you very drawn in by the music or was it really the movement?

I suppose it was the music and rhythm. I mean I think that must have been quite an important part of my work, because I listened to quite a lot of music and...

Do you remember what you were listening to?



Oh, things, of course more ballet music, like Tchaikovsky, 'Swan Lake' and all that kind of thing, the more romantic things, Chopin. I mean I did, I was made to study the piano but I had such a bad teacher that I loathed it, so dancing became, you know, my passion.

And do you still like that music?

Very much, yes.

And do you still like ballet?

I love watching it when it's good; when it's just kind of dull and, you know, it doesn't interest me. I like watching modern dance as well. I just think that the body has such amazing rhythms, and to feel the kind of movement is a very exciting, exhilarating thing to be able to do it, and so you know, when you watch somebody like Makarova, I think she is the greatest thing that I've ever had the privilege of seeing, for real, on stage.

Where did you see her?

At Covent Garden, doing 'Romeo and Juliet' with Nureyev, I mean that's I suppose the peak of ballet experience. I mean she's just so marvellous. When you watch her, she never stops moving, there's always one part of her body, whether it's a fingertip or toe, it's all kind of continuous. She's just amazing. And of course one paid, I spent all my money at the ballet when I first arrived, I used to go up to the gods and watched all the ballets, you know, just...

And how much of that do you think feeds into your work? Because I mean when I think of your work I think much more in terms of water or nature.

Yes. But it's got a movement, movement and rhythm. I mean it's probably quite far away from a kind of ballet, but it's just a sense of rhythmic movement, and kind of repetition that you get in music, the structure of it, you know, that's for me a very exciting thing, and I would like to kind of be able to recreate that experience in something else.

And you obviously stopped doing ballet at a certain point, but did you carry on dancing in other ways, have you always carried on social dancing?

Oh well I did, you know, just kind of, when I came as a student, but then after that, when you start working you get too involved with it and you don't do it any more, and then you just go and watch other people do it better.

But do you like dancing at parties and things, or not?

I used to, I used to.

Right. And, have you any regret that you didn't become a ballet dancer?

No, not now, not now.

And what about when you're growing up and you're a teenager, I mean were you seeing films, did anything like that become an influence?

Yes, I suppose that was the only way I could see what an artist was, because I had no conception of, you know, what art was. And then, just after I finished my 'O'levels I knew that I didn't want to do an art course, a B.A. in university or anything like that, I wanted to do something to do with the visual arts, so my father sent me to St. Martin's.

But how did you know that? Because you had so little basis for it, as far as I can see.

Well, I had a very nice French woman in Singapore who was an ex-pat's wife, and I had this year between to find out what I wanted to do.

Between school and coming here?

Yes. Or even deciding and doing 'A'levels, and my school didn't have an 'A'level course, so they sent us, whoever wanted to do 'A'level courses, to our brother's school, and that was the time when I realised what a bad education I had, because there there were very good teachers. There was a marvellous Indian professor who taught literature and he was very good, and also a very good history teacher who did South-East Asian history, and all of a sudden, you know, I discovered all sorts of things which I should have been learning earlier on. And at that time I wanted to do French, and so I met this woman, who was very bored, and decided to take me on. And so, I went to her twice a week or three times a week, and she was, she is,

an extremely cultured, well-read and very charming, very attractive woman, and she took me to French films.

Do you remember what you saw?

I can't remember the names of the films, but there was a film about a sculptor, and that intrigued me enormously. And she introduced me to kind of French literature and things.

Again, do you remember what? Do you remember what literature?

Oh well you know, the kind of things that she thought young girls, were suitable for young girls, like Colette and all that kind of things, to read. But, mainly it was the kind of language that I fell in love with, I thought it was such a, you know, a lovely language.

So this film about the sculptor was really pretty important?

I can't say it was important, but it intrigued me, that ha! you know, because I've always been very manual and there was this guy making something with his hands, and it kind of struck a chord. But then, you know, you forget it, and then when it was decided that my father would send me abroad to study something, I wanted to do something to do with art.

Why did he want to send you abroad, how was that decision made?

Because he had come to England and studied, and because he had done well, he wanted his children to have a kind of all-rounded education, and this was seen as a kind of finishing school so to speak, you know, either...it was immaterial, because he didn't think I was going to have to work, that I'd finish, I'd probably go back and get married to somebody they approved of, and never mind my degree or whatever. So the fact that I didn't want to go to university to do a B.A. literature course, or history or whatever, but wanted to go to an art school, really didn't make any difference to him. And he thought that by doing a kind of, commercial art was what was known then as kind of advertising, you know, would be useful. Because I was quite good, I mean school, while I was at school I was always doing things like that for competitions and things, and you know, he could see that I had an aptitude for that, and I had won some competition once and he was very proud of me. So when I wanted to do this, you know, he thought it was all right, because it was like, what, three years at St. Martin's, that would be OK.

So you had very little to do with the choice of St. Martin's, it was really done by him?

Yes.

And just before we leave Singapore, were there any public sculptures in Singapore?

No, not to speak of, apart from Sir Stamford Raffles standing in front of the place. But before I came over to St. Martin's, you know, he found some woman to kind of give me some lessons in drawing and things, you know, to help me out, and she wasn't very good. I didn't know at the time but she thought I wasn't very good either, so we really didn't get on.

And how did you feel about leaving home?

I loved the idea. Because it was like having a cage opened. They were terribly upset with me because I was never homesick.

And did you, before you came did you have an idea of what England would be like?

Not at all, not at all. But I was very lucky to have friends over here already, so that when I came over they kind of took me under their wing, and people who were studying here already...

Who had been at school with you or something?

No, no, they were friends of the family, from way back, who happened to be here and were studying law or whatever, and so when I came over they took me under their wing. I mean at first he had found me a bedsit in St. John's Wood, when I first arrived, and I was so miserable. It was cold, and they managed to lose my suitcase at the airport, and, I found it incredibly uncomfortable with this couple that I didn't know. And so this friend whom I knew lived in Bayswater, and she was so kind, she had a one-room apartment with a roll-down bed, you know, and she said, 'Look, you look so miserable, why don't you come and stay with me until you find your feet?' So then, you know, I was a lot happier.

And, dealing with things like a suitcase that gets lost is quite difficult at that age in a strange country; you sort of coped with that?

Well they assured me that it would turn up, so you know, I just kind of hung on, and it did turn up, the next day. But, you kind of get on with it, because I was quite excited coming over here and I tried not to let it get me down.

And you came over in '54, is that right?

Yes, in the autumn of '54.

And you arrived at the airport; was anybody there to meet you, or not?

I actually missed out a bit, because I travelled with somebody, there was this man called Malcolm MacDonald, who is the son of Ramsay MacDonald, he was the High Commissioner in South-East Asia, and he was very friendly with the Singapore families, and terribly disapproved of by some of the English expatriates because he was so informal. And we used to, he loved skiing and we used to go water skiing, and he liked going to the ballet, and you know, we met him and became friends. So when he was flying over, around that time, my parents said, 'Please, can, you know, you keep an eye on her,' and so he did, so I wasn't kind of on a plane alone. But it was terribly funny when we arrived, because he...he's a bit of a kind of wild thing, because he was photographed walking in a Bali beach with these Balinese girls without tops and things, so when he arrived with me they had in some magazine Sir Malcolm MacDonald arriving with a protégé. [LAUGHS]

So that was a pretty good way to arrive.

Yes.

And did he take care of you a bit when you were here, or not?

No, because he wasn't living here, he was still working in Singapore, he just kind of, saw that I arrived safely, that was all.

So apart from this rather grim time in St. John's Wood, I mean what were your first impressions of London?

Oh I loved it, I thought it was great fun, and you know, finding my way around in a big city where, for somebody who has no compass in their head, I was always getting lost. But people were so kind, you know, always trying to tell you where you are and, you know, I was never, I never felt threatened in London, not like now. I mean I used to walk across Hampstead Heath, you know, when it was quite dark, and in those pea-soup fogs, you know, never feeling that one was, you know, in danger in any way.

And England in its terms was still not long out of rationing and austerity.

That's right.

Did you have a sense of that, or how, from your point of view, coming from abroad, did it seem austere?

No, no it didn't.

It seemed the reverse?

It seemed the reverse to me, and very optimistic. And, I soon found my feet, and met up...actually Tessy was the first person I met in St. Martin's, because we both had to share one locker together, and there was another older girl there who came from Switzerland, and she was looking for somewhere to live, and I knew that I couldn't carry on staying, you know, imposing on this friend, so we found a flat together.

The three of you, or you and the Swiss girl?

Me and the Swiss girl. And there was another Chinese girl, I can't remember how she came into the scene, but there were three of us in a flat in St. John's Wood, sharing, so that was OK.

And do you actually remember your first day at St. Martin's?

Yes, certainly I did, because it was a drawing class and we had to, you know, set up these things on donkeys, and it was a male model wearing a loin cloth, and that was a bit embarrassing for me, because I'd never been so, you know, used to looking at nude males.

Why does a male model wear a loin cloth when a female model doesn't?

Well, that was the way art schools were.

Are they still?

When I was at the Slade they were still doing that, and there was one who was a very strange guy who didn't like wearing a loin cloth, and he didn't, but McWilliam objected, so on the day McWilliam was there he wore a loin cloth, but the rest of the week he didn't.

Why did McWilliam object, do you know?

Because he thought it was immodest for the females I suppose. Very... I mean it's a very kind of male thing isn't it, that looking at women naked is all right because of all the tradition of, you know, nude paintings, but for women students who look at male parts is considered immodest or something.

Mm. No, because it's one of the things I ask men when I'm recording them, particularly men in their 'eighties, you know, whether that was the first time they ever saw a naked woman, and they say it was, and mostly they did find it extremely strange.

They found it extremely strange?

Yes. You know, that it's rather overlooked.

Yes.

Had you, by the way had you fallen in love with anybody by this stage?

No. No, certainly not. My head was too full of discovering things, that was really far away from my horizon.

And while we're on first impressions, I mean what was your first impression of St. Martin's as a building and an environment?

I just took it in as a matter of fact. I mean architecturally the city was so different from where I had come from, so I was quite prepared for the buildings and everything else to look extremely different.

And what was it like inside St. Martin's?

It was kind of rambly and messy, and you know, quite fun, and the teachers were a motley crew. There was Gore who was always, Frederick Gore, who did painting, who was always smoking a cigarette, and we would always wonder whether he'd burn his lip first or his eyelashes. And then there was a very nice Basque sculptor who was extremely helpful, I mean in the...I didn't spend all that long there because I really didn't like the man who ran the whole St. Martin's, Frank, what's his name now, I can't remember. Martin. He was a bit pompous. And in those days it was a diploma course called N.D.D., and you did a first two years and then Intermediate, and I did the first two years and was moving to Intermediate later on but didn't enjoy the Sculpture Department then, so... But when I was in the beginners, this Basque teacher called Joel Birdy[ph] was extremely helpful, he was an incredible craftsman, could carve anything out of anything, and he taught me how to treat wood, put handles on chisels, look after your tools, and that has been really a very, that, if I have learnt anything, that's what I've learnt from St. Martin's.

When you say treat wood, what do you mean?

You know, when you're cutting into wood, which way to go so you're not against the grain; to make it easy for yourself; and when you've finished with the wood, how you soak it in oil, and you know, look after it so it doesn't dry. And generally work with the material rather than against it.

And we talked on the tape before of you as a child making rings out of some sort of nut I think.

Yes, yes, a palm nut, I used to grind on a rough ground.

And is there anything that happens in between doing that and beginning to work with wood at St. Martin's?



I think that the fact of making things is a link. I mean apart from grinding those, I used to make my own tops as well, and catapults and things, so, because during the war there were very little toys anyway so you had to do things to keep yourself amused.

And, so at first you did a general course that was drawing and sculpture?

Yes.

And ceramics or anything, did you do?

No ceramics. Drawing, sculpture and, what else was there? Painting.

In about equal mix, or did you draw for a long time first, or...?

It was more painting than sculpture actually, I mean in fact the sculpture was evening classes that I used to go to because I liked it, and that was when I started to get more and more drawn. I mean I felt I could control it more than the painting.

What was your painting like?

Pretty awful I think.

Oh yes, but what sort of awful?

You know, at the time it was all composition, and you went through kind of phases of drawing people in markets and, all very much to do with realism. But I did, towards the end I did actually try and draw in a looser way, you know. Because while I was there of course one went to museums and things, and as I, I don't know whether I've mentioned to you before or not, but my main art education has been the trips in between going from London to Singapore, because in those days as a student you could travel at half fare, British Airways was very good, and you could stop off as many times as you like, as long as you were travelling vaguely in the direction of your destination. So I would stop off in Italy, you know.....

End of Track 7: Tape 4: Side B

Track 8: Tape 5: Side A

You just said, and I missed it by not having changed the tape, that you were more, you were braver then than now. I mean you are still pretty brave.

No, well, I wouldn't do half the things I did then. I mean I would take a ' plane and stop off, not knowing anybody in a place, and spend a couple of days there, and go and find myself a hotel, or kind of pensione, not really a hotel, and then go around looking at museums. And I saw, I stopped off at India and went to see Aurangabad and, you know, and Ellora, and that was a great revelation for me, to see things in its place where it was meant to be, in the light that it was meant to be. When I first arrived at Aurangabad I thought, well, if I was an Indian god this is where I would choose to have my temples, I mean it was such a beautiful situation. And the caves are wonderfully decorated. And you know, I was like a sponge in those days, didn't know anything, so everything was just amazing and marvellous, and going to Ellora where these temples were carved out of solid rock, and these huge figures, you know. It was just thrilling.

Indeed. So in fact you were in a marvellous position in that you were on virgin territory so to speak [INAUDIBLE].

Absolutely.

And you also had the travel facilities.

Yes.

So in fact...

And I really had, I was very ignorant about the history of art, so I didn't have a kind of imprint as to what was superior, you know, and like the Renaissance being the highlight of art, you now, everything I saw I could actually evaluate and take in, and find what, whether there was an echo inside me or not, you know, and respond to it accordingly. Then later when I went to the Slade there was art history where you learnt that, you know, there were the primitive art, leading up to the kind of epitome of Western art, which is the Renaissance, and, I still don't feel that way.

What do you feel?

Well I just feel that that was an absolutely magnificent achievement, but there were other things equally good which you can't kind of equate it that way, you know. Like when Kenneth Clark did those programmes, it was a marvellous set of programmes but there were so many things that he ignored that was happening in the rest of the world. So, in the end you just have to think, well, you know... I mean the first time I saw Michelangelo I thought, wow! fantastic, but he didn't really move me; he impressed me. So in the end you just have to go according to your instincts and look for what you find that really you are chasing after. I mean I don't think there's anything new, it's often done but it's a way, you're kind of re-doing it in another way, and rediscovering certain things. And I found that I always responded to things that were done in earlier civilisations, they seemed to have less elaboration but more strength and potency. I mean that was the, the early things were very potent, and when you go into the Louvre or the British Museum, you know, the early cultures had such a strong belief, they had a kind of magic which really bowled me over. And of course when I went to Greece it was the Cycladic things, I thought, my goodness, which alien form arrived and made these extraordinary things? I'd never seen anything quite like that before, and I just walked into that room in the museum and there were these kind of shimmering marble figurines, you know, that blew my mind. It was really exciting.

And you would have discovered them at this period?

Over the years. I mean it was just every year, every summer I would go back and try another little trip somewhere, stop off somewhere else and, you know, have a look, so, that was my art education, not art schools. Because at the Slade they left you entirely on your own, and they had this model standing there, year in, year out, in the same pose: I mean different model but practically the same pose, and you had to do this life modelling. And the people in the Sculpture Department were very dour, they never spoke to each other, and they were so serious. They had this thing, this plumb-line mania, with callipers. There was this, these poor models would kind of shiver and cringe when they'd come with these callipers, and try and measure up, you know, inch by inch. And in the beginning of term you'd see them put armatures up and the figures would be quite, looking quite lively; at the end of the term, you know, they'd be all dying in clay, being pattered. So, I spent a lot of time outside the sculpture studio, upstairs with Anthony Gross, doing printing. I escaped doing that in the end, and spent a lot of time with Stanley...

Jones?

Jones, yes, thank you, doing lithography, because I loved that.

Before we get to that, I mean, what was wrong with Frank Martin when you were doing sculpture at St. Martin's, what was the problem with it?

Well, I just didn't like him. And, you know, the Sculpture Department was run by Tony Caro, who was doing figurative things at the time, and not his abstract things, and, you know, he thought, you know, when I tried to do abstract things, you know, it was greatly disapproved of. Everybody was doing these figures, and I just doesn't go with it. And Liz Frink was teaching there at the time, and she was very very kind, and she said, 'Look, you're obviously not happy here, you know, why don't you go to the Slade?' And in those days there wasn't the terrible difficulty of getting into the Slade, you know. I just applied, went for an interview, and they accepted me, so I switched.

Right. And did Liz, I mean she could pick up that you were unhappy but could she actually pick up on anything in your work, was she able to meet you there so to speak?

Yes, she was. I mean she was never somebody to impose her style on people, that was why I liked her. But at the time I was kind of struggling with figuration.

In wood?

In wood, and in clay. So, you know, it was just one of those things that you do because you haven't found your feet yet, but they were awkward and clumsy, and as soon as I got to the Slade and had some freedom there to work, I started working in wood, but they became far more abstract. And of course in my course of looking at things outside I discovered Brancusi, and Giacometti and other things, and so, I just experimented. And I was very lucky, as I said I was very kind of bold in those days, to go around looking for a studio, and I used to poke my nose - I lived in West Hampstead by then, I had a flat there - over people's gardens, and when I saw this shed with a glass roof, I knocked on the door and said, 'Is that an empty shed for letting?' And there was a strange couple who lived in this huge house, and her father was a chemist, and she said, 'Yes, as a matter of fact there's an old chemistry lab at the back which you can rent for £1 a week'. So, I couldn't afford £1 a week, but I found somebody else who would share it with me, so we paid 50p a week.

Who shared it with you?

It was somebody that I met when I was in St. John's Wood, and she's a sculptor from the Royal College, and she carved and, you know, did modelling as well.

What's her name?

She was then called Ann Howes[ph]. And, you know, we kept different times so we never kind of got into each other's way. And she's very nice.

And this studio you found while you were at the Slade, or what?

Yes. And it was a leaky, marvellous leaky studio, cold with ice, you know, in winter, because there was this draught, but wonderful, it was my kind of hideaway, and I loved it.

And in there you were working in wood, or...?

Yes, working in wood, and plaster, and everything, you know, experimenting in early things.

What wood were you using?

Anything I could lay my hands on. So, I used to go to wood yards, they were plentiful in London and buy kind of off-cuts and things. I'll show you one day some of these early things.

Can you describe a couple of pieces that you made in that shed?

Difficult, because they were kind of abstract things. Easier if I show you some photographs.

Well, the tape won't be able to see, that's the trouble.

Well I was very interested in assembling. I mean I'd given up carving in one piece, I prefer to put things together, so I would take several shapes, carve them up and fix them together.

And do you think these shapes as a whole were entirely imaginary, or did they relate to any of the other things you might have seen around the world?

I think they probably had references to things I'd seen around the world, but not very specifically. And I used to scorch the surface of the wood, because I didn't want to paint it but I wanted to make a difference between different planes, so, I think this came out of my trip to Japan where sometimes you would see the roof beams being very black, at the end of it there would be a different colour, so you know, it gave me an idea that I could change the skin of the wood, not by imposing an artificial paint or a foreign material on them, but by firing it, I could change it. So it would still be part of the wood.

And if you were making an assemblage of, say three shapes or whatever, would the three shapes be from the same wood or would they be different materials in themselves?

Most of the time it would be of the same wood, but sometimes if I can't find a piece big enough for the base to contain them, it might be of a different wood, but more often than not it would be the same kind of wood.

And did these, even at this stage, have a sort of element of flowing about them, or not, was that not part of it?

No, not so much, but what did emerge fairly soon after these wooden carvings were their repeated forms, I would use a shape, I would find maybe a triangular off-cut that I would join to another one, and then I would make six of these units, and I would alternate them, and that kind of repetition started quite early.

And why do you think you were led in that direction, what was the pull of it?

I don't know, I've always liked repetition, and things that create a vibration by just having more of it than just one. I don't know where that's come from but it's certainly a very strong key to my work actually.

And is there an equally strong key to the work where the repetition stops, it just doesn't go on infinitely, there's a stopping point?

I think sometimes I like to kind of build up a sense of repetition so that you can continue it yourself without actually doing it. I think if I can infer something in a work, I would like that very much.

So, the continuation being infinite might be implicit?

Yes. Yes, you know, I just think that you could go over the top, repeating too much, but if you just set up a pattern, you know, it creates an image which the person looking at it would respond to and continue. I think in the end that's what one tries to do really, a kind of, a metaphor to trigger off a response in a person, because obviously the observer would come with a totally different set of references from your own, so you can't always impose what you want to infer on the person. I mean there's a great hope that they will get what you're trying to do, and if they do it's a great bonus. I mean sometimes when people have seen exhibitions of mine and have written to me, and I've never known them at all, and say how they feel about it, I mean it's the greatest pleasure for me to find that, ha! you know, they have actually got it, that I'm not mad. Because sometimes you think you are, doing these odd-looking things, you know.

But don't you have a sense of them existing as themselves, and that's almost enough?

Yes, but again I think if you can communicate, it's even better. I mean obviously it's enough, because whether I sell or not I carry on doing it, but the fact that, you know, even if somebody doesn't, you know, acquire anything but just gets something out of it is better for me, I mean I feel a lot happier.

Yes. I suppose, thinking about the artefacts of the past that one might see in a museum, because we know that they're from a context that's vanished, we don't need them to be anything other than themselves.

Yes.

And I suppose that's in a way what I was thinking of, rather than if you think of it in the case of somebody going into a gallery and standing in front of something, they're expecting something to come at them because they're in an art gallery, and some sort of communication. We ask different things of different, in different contexts don't we. And I

think that a lot of the small pieces of yours, particularly, just seem to me wonderful as themselves.

Yes?

I'm interested that there's any sort of burden on them to do [INAUDIBLE].

No, I suppose when I'm making them it doesn't actually occur to me at all, wanting to communicate, I mean it just, I just have the desire to make this thing. And as you say, when you go to a museum and see something you kind of just have this buzz when you look at something. But I do say thank you to whoever has done it 2,000 years ago or how long ago, and I suppose if you look back in the early things, that repetition appears a lot in the decoration and embellishment of things that people made.

But do you...I can't remember what we were talking about, I think maybe it was some sort of Chinese art, if that artefact was a painting, but I think it was an object, a decorated bowl or something, where you were talking about how hideous they were because they were so over-decorated. I mean when you're talking about decoration you are meaning in a very strict...

Oh yes. I mean decoration in the best sense of the word, of trying to kind of add something and enrich, to enrich your experience, and not just elaborate for the hell of it. Because I think decoration has got a very bad, you know, meaning these days, because it's kind of slight and things, considered, you know, not important. But when you look back in the early, early parts. We went to Turkey in September and it was a wonderful experience, because we went to this dig, which is the earliest human urban habitation found to date, called Chatalhaiuk[ph], and you would think that people who made pots and things there would just have crude vessels for functional use, but no, they have the most beautiful kind of decorations on them, paintings, and very abstract designs. A great sense of balance, or else a kind of geometric repetition, you know, very very thoughtfully and sensitively done, in very basic colours, but my goodness they were beautiful. So it was kind of in a way very reassuring to see these things done 6,300 years ago, where the need is there.

And, when you were a child drawing, did you do figurative drawings? I can't remember. I mean has that just been something you never had an urge to do?



Oh, I never really was encouraged to draw anything so I never really did do very much drawing.

But when you were in your shed, studio, making the wooden pieces, were they small pieces, what sort of scale were they, were they hand sized pieces, were they...?

No, they were bigger, they were about, some of them were about that big. A foot by...

The tape can't see that, yes.

12 by 12, or even bigger pieces than that. It would just depend on the material I could find, as to how big the pieces were.

And although there were different elements joined together they would have a sense of wholeness about them, you weren't trying to create discord in them?

No, no it was the whole idea of assembling into one unity.

And that's always been true, there has never been a deviation from it really?

I don't think so, I mean I can't see it, but perhaps somebody else will find it in the work, I don't know. I think there's a continuity. I mean recently I was asked to assemble about 100 slides for Goodwood, because they wanted to do a CD-ROM, and it was a very good exercise because at last it made me sit down and do the things chronologically, and it was a good experience for me because I'd never actually looked at the work in different phases. I mean obviously one changes, but I think one is like a goat tethered to a post, you can think you're going really way out radically, but you're still pinned to the post, you know. So, in all the different phases I think there are links, I hope.

What do you hope those links are?

That they show a kind of continuity of the interest. I mean the focus may change, but the basic thread still runs through the work, that I don't flit around, you know.

And did it surprise you seeing the work like that?

Yes.

Did you find...what sort of things did you come across you didn't expect?

You know, the work that I thought was very very different, still had a kind of link to the earlier pieces, things that I hadn't seen, scenes that I hadn't seen, kind of changed.

What sort of things?

Like I suppose, using the circle was another shape that would recur, that I hadn't thought about, and if you spread your slides all across the floor then you can see, pick up on threads, and very often there's just so much to do, and you never quite finish a theme, you get diverted and you go on to something else, and way after you come back to it. And I work in a much more cyclic way than a linear way, I don't think it's a kind of question of progressing or getting better, it's just a question of discovery and rediscovery. And it's like travelling, you can go to a place once and when you go a second time you see totally different things, because you are different, and you're looking for something different, you know. So, it always changes, and I think that's the important thing, not to get stuck.

And when you look at the early pieces now, what do you feel about them?

I feel quite good, and I'm very pleased I didn't chuck them all out, because at one point I nearly did, thinking, well, you know, this is early work, no good, out, but I think some of them have a quality which I don't think I can get now. There was a kind of innocence and an arrogance at the same time. You know, when you don't know very much and you're very eager you do lots of things without thinking, and I think that's very good; when you think too much it kind of does constrict you.

And how might that, either the innocence or the arrogance, show itself in these pieces?

I don't know, I think it's...when I look at the things that I did back in '59 I think, how on earth did I make that, you know, why on earth did I make that? I don't know. It's hard to say.

But you know instinctively that it is yours, there's no question of you feeling that it was almost made by somebody else?

No, you feel it's yours. But the funny thing is, sometimes when you've done things and you look at them in a gallery, they have a kind of sense of detachment, you can look at them and say, you know, is this mine, did I do that? And that's a time when you can actually be very critical, and that's why it's good to have shows, not only for the ego and sales, but the fact that you can evaluate better when it's outside your own studio.

And can you think of an instance of seeing something in a gallery where you've realised that you would like to change it, or is it never that?

Oh yes, oh yes I think quite often, and I've brought it back, and changed it.

And what sort of changes might those have been?

Well just certain proportions, or...not radically, but just little things that, you know, I felt needed a bit of correction. That's why I'm quite pleased that I don't sell things instantly, I have time to look at them.

I was going to say, supposing you've seen something like that in a gallery and in between somebody wants to buy it, would you actually ask to work on it again before they took it, or...?

Yes, if I was aware that it was something that I was unhappy about, I certainly would.

And are we talking about really minute changes, or what are we talking about?

I think they would be minute for somebody looking at it; they probably wouldn't be aware that I'd done anything to it, but for me it was just a kind of imbalance which I feel had to be corrected, and I would do it.

And going back to the time at the Slade or even before, I mean, before you went to the Slade you hadn't really begun to do these assemblages, because you were being forced in the wrong route, or you had got an inkling of what it was you were trying to do?

I was kind of trying to be like everybody else I think. In the beginning you tend not to know who you are of course, so you just try out things, because there are these teachers, and

coming from a society where the teacher is always in the right, you never question them, you tend to go along with them. It's only a little later on when you feel, well, I don't sit comfortably with this, you know, I don't think it's right for me, then you start to diverge. And also looking at other things, just gives you a clue as to what you want to do.

And did Caro have anything to offer you?

At that time, when he was doing these nudes, frankly no.

And was he at all kind to you?

He was a kind of a teacher which I found very different from the kind of teachers I've had, very confrontational, which was meant to draw people out and be challenging, which is very good, but at the time I wasn't ready for that, because having come from a society where you kind of listened and you never answered back or were asked to think, I found that quite frightening and difficult.

It's interesting, because a lot of other things that might frighten other people at this stage you took on board by the sound of it and weren't in the least bit frightened, so this must have got somehow...

But the personal, I mean because I wasn't...I mean this girl I shared the flat with was a bit like that too, she would always try and challenge me and draw me out to, you know, which I found I suppose in the end good, but I did not like it.

This is the Swiss girl?

Yes.

And who was that?

She's actually somebody called Margo Stuart[ph]. I don't know what's happened to her now because we didn't, we lost contact. But, being able to kind of verbalise was something I found extremely difficult, even now, and a lot of people in art schools and all that did this, and it was part of discussion and things, and not being used to it, I found it extremely uncomfortable.

And, you said that you met Tess Jaray, we ought to say for the tape.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING - TELEPHONE]

End of Track 8: Tape 5: Side A

Track 9: Tape 5: Side B

You said that you met Tess Jaray at St. Martin's, and before we put the recording on, when we were talking downstairs, you were saying what a shock it was to find out what her family was like compared to yours. Could you just talk about that on the tape a bit?

Well it was just that they had this wonderful way of being able to communicate with each other and say whatever they wanted to each other, and I came from a totally opposite background I found that quite amazing, and admirable, and I wished I could do that, that I could get my emotions out and scream it out, and you know, then it's, everything is over. I mean that was a wonderful thing, not to have to kind of keep things in, and implode. So I really thought that was quite a new, totally new experience for me.

And what was she like?

Oh she was very kind of full of life, and enthusiastic and full of fun, and was a great person.

And her family was in London, or...?

No, they have still, her mother still lives in Martley in Worcestershire.

And so you went to stay?

Just one summer I went out with her and stayed with her, and spent this lovely summer swimming in this cold river; when I dived in I thought I was going to die. It was the River Severn, although it was a hot summer's day the river was icy. So it was quite an experience, a total shock.

And she had brothers and sisters, did she?

She has a sister, and mother. I hear the doorbell, may I go and answer it?

End of Track 9: Tape 5: Side B

End of Interview

