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**Interview Transcript Title Page**

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<b>Interviewee Surname:</b>	Figes
<b>Forename:</b>	Eva
<b>Interviewee Sex:</b>	Female
<b>Interviewee DOB:</b>	15 April 1932
<b>Interviewee POB:</b>	Berlin

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<b>Total Duration (HH:MM):</b>	3 hours 3 minutes

## **REFUGEE VOICES: THE AJR AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE**

**INTERVIEW: 94**

**NAME: EVA FIGES**

**DATE: 18 March 2005**

**LOCATION: LONDON**

**INTERVIEWER: BEA LEWKOWICZ**

### **TAPE 1**

BL: Today is the 18 March 2005. I am conducting an interview with Eva Figes. We are in London and my name is Bea Lewkowicz. Can you please tell me your name?

EF: Eva Figes.

BL: And what was your name then?

EF: Eva Ungert.

BL: And where were you born?

EF: I was born in Berlin.

BL: And when where you born?

EF: 15 April 1932.

BL: Thank you, Mrs Figes, for doing this interview with us. Could you maybe tell us about your family background?

EF: I came from a fairly well to do upper middle class family. My grandfather was a doctor. My grandfather didn't want my father to become a doctor because he had an incurable disease and he thought it was a terrible situation, so my father went into business and did rather well. He was connected with British firms which was to help us later. My mother went to art school and did sort of fashion drawings and that kind of stuff before she started a family.

BL: What sort of business did your father go into?

EF: Basically, what would now be called the rag trade. But his main earning came from... he had the franchise for British textile firms, quite well-known firms like Viyella, which was greatly helpful later, because, when the Nazis came into power, he left his earnings from British companies in a British bank, which was to be a great help later on, because he knew at some stage we would have to leave.

BL: What about your grandparents? Can you tell us a bit about them?

EF: My maternal grandfather was also in the fashion business, but by the time I remember him he was already retired. My other grandfather died very young of kidney disease; he was a doctor and he died when my father was still at school. My grandmother, I don't quite know where from, was extremely wealthy, which enabled her to escape from Germany after the war had started, as late as 1944. And, in fact, there was a lot of money on that side of the family. My grandmother's sister married Franz Wertheim, who started the big Wertheim empire. So, although they were a lot richer than we were, there was a general feeling of wealth and well-being.

BL: What are your memories of growing up in Berlin?

EF: The happiest ones are, we had a weekend house in Pichelsdorf and also a sailing boat on the Havel. Life was much happier and freer there as a child, and all of my happy memories of childhood associate with that.

**Tape 1: 3 minutes 20 seconds**

We lived in Tauentzienstraße, which is very sort of central and it was a huge apartment. I didn't see much of my parents during the week. My father would be away on business; my mother was always organizing the house. And I was very largely looked after by servants. There was a nursemaid; there was a housemaid; and there were various people like cleaners coming and going. And not very much what I find now is not very much association with other children. I mean I remember meeting other children in kindergarten, but they were never invited home the way families now... I mean you were just left with the servants. So really I was very attached to my grandparents, particularly my maternal grandparents because they were always having me for the day or taking me out. And when I began school they would pick me up from school. So I had a very strong emotional attachment to them. Less to my other grandmother, who would pick me up in her chauffeur-driven limousine to take me to the Grunewald or something. But she didn't communicate with a child the way my other grandparents did. So I was always slightly nervous of her and slightly in awe of the Mercedes and the chauffeur, all that kind of stuff.

BL: What were the names of your grandparents?

EF: My father's mother was called Toni, Frau Dr. Ungert she was. And my mother's father was called Emil Cohen; she always hated that because, having had a father and a husband called Emil which... she hated the name, she didn't like... And my grandmother was always called Lenchen; actually her name was Ella. And I only found out later, when I was in England, that in fact she wasn't my real grandmother. That my real grandmother had died when my mother was very small, in childbirth. And when I found out, I found out through looking through photographs when I was in England and I said: 'Who is this woman in old-fashioned clothes?' And she said: 'That's my real mother. And I didn't want you to know because in fairytales stepmothers are always very wicked.' But in fact I adored that grandmother more than my other one and I grieve her to this day really.

BL: What would the atmosphere be like in the house?

**Tape 1: 6 minutes 0 second**

EF: In the flat in Tauentzienstraße was a happy atmosphere except that, as I say, I was slightly neglected, what would now be called neglected by my parents because I was largely left in the charge of servants. And the only time...Weekends were different because we would go down to Pichelsdorf and then the servants were left behind and I was with my parents and that was much happier. And I loved sailing and my father was always a very keen sailor. And I loved being on the boat; it was always my idea of heaven. And I loved playing in the garden and so on and the informality. Being able to run next door and play with the little girl, which I couldn't do in the city. I remember bedtimes were a happy time. If my mother was there she would read me a story. But what I really liked, if my father was at bedtime he would sing with us, or particularly with me. He had a songbook and my father loved singing. And he would teach me bits of Schubert and nursery rhymes and stuff. I didn't even know that Schubert wasn't just for children, because he would sing stuff like that and I would learn it from him. So those are some of my happiest memories of those song sessions in the nursery at night.

BL: What songs? You said Schubert. Were there some German...?

EF: There were nursery rhymes. I still have the songbook actually. But then he would suddenly sing *Der Lindenbaum*. And I remember, the first time I heard *Die Winterreise* I suddenly heard *Der Lindenbaum* and I said: 'What is that doing there? That's a children's song.' Because I thought of *Der Lindenbaum* as something you... because my father actually singing. He liked the sound of his own voice. I mean he never trained or anything like that. And other things, too. On the sailing boat I learned a song which I still hear going around, *Eine Seefahrt, die ist lustig*, which had rather rude words, and I still remember the words of that. And my father was a very outgoing person. And he was always a lot of fun. My mother was much quieter. She was good when we were not well and things like that, but she didn't actually do a lot of playing and there were certainly no high spirits with her. I mean sometimes she would come into the day nursery in the afternoon if it was bad weather and we would have a magic lantern show which was, you know, pre-television days. And the Zoo was just around the corner and we used to go to the Zoo a lot. Sometimes with my mother, sometimes with the Kindermädchen. So that was a regular outing. Or go to the Tiergarten, but the Zoo was very regular; we had season tickets and it was really only two minutes walk away, I mean it was one of my strongest memories, those trips to the Zoo.

### **Tape 1: 9 minutes 23 seconds**

BL: Do you know how your parents met?

EF: Yes. They were very keen on skiing. I mean their two favourite sports: in the summer it was sailing, in the winter it was skiing. And they met on a skiing holiday. And I never heard the end of this. But they were in a group and my mother had come out without food and my father gave her a lecture and said; 'You should never set off in the morning skiing without something to eat!', and gave her a bar of chocolate. And that's how they met. And in fact I remember going skiing with them a couple of times before we emigrated. Once to Switzerland and once to Czechoslovakia. I remember the Swiss one, which I think was our last holiday which was in Gstaad. They were in a posh hotel and I was put into, the custom in those days, a sort of Kinderheim where you were looked after so that parents could go off and go skiing properly. And I was given skiing lessons. And I was rather good at it. I mean I was only five but I was rather good at it. My brother was too small and he was taken out on a sledge. And I really enjoyed it. But at first I thought I'd been abandoned because I woke up in this chalet and I didn't know where my parents were and I looked up and I thought I'd been

dumped. And I remember my parents coming to see if I was alright and they peeked through the front door and I was standing there going like this [sad faced, AB], completely lost, all these people speaking French. But, once I realised they were going to come back every afternoon and pick me up, then I was quite happy. So that's what I remember. And the other thing I remember is that the owners of the hotel invited us to tea, including me. Now, as I said earlier, I wasn't used to playing with other children because it didn't seem to be a habit in the class I grew up in. You know, your nursemaid looked after you. We were given this fantastic tea and for some reason there was a fashion for *Schlagsahne* on toast. And I thought this was wonderful and I ate myself sick on it. And then, when the tea and all finished, my mother said: 'Now you go and play with their children.', and I said no. And they stared at me and I stared at them. 'I don't know them, I'm not playing with them.' you know that kind of thing. And my mother said: 'You go and play with them.' And then she eventually said, 'Alright, if you don't go and play with them I'm going to put you to bed.' You know how stubborn children can be, so I found myself taken up to my parents' hotel room and put to bed in broad daylight. And she took off my skiing boots and inside there was a little tiny Domino which I'd stolen from the *Kinderheim* because I thought it was so sweet. And it was in my shoe and she did, before we went home she bought me this little miniature Domino set, which was very sweet because it was real ivory, and I brought that to England. That's my memory of that skiing holiday.

**Tape 1: 12 minutes 50 seconds**

BL: When was that?

EF: That must have been 1937, because 1938 of course everything was crisis. And, oddly enough, I only heard later from my son-in-law, because my son-in-law got to know my mother when she was very old and she was not speaking to me at that time. My daughter actually said to him: 'Whatever you do, don't talk about the war!' But of course, whilst my daughter was making tea or something, he had started talking to her. And she actually talked a lot and told him a lot of things I've never heard. And what he heard from her was at that skiing holiday my mother had said to my father 'Don't let us go back to Germany. Let us apply for asylum here.' And that would have been Christmas 1937. And my father said 'No, we can't do that. We have responsibilities at home.' And I never knew that. Because my mother actually was very anxious to get out of Germany long before my father would consider it. So that's very interesting.

BL: How Jewish was your upbringing?

EF: Not at all. I didn't know what the word Jewish meant until I was going to school in London and I was told by... This was where I was evacuated at boarding school and there were two girls who had a German father, not Jewish, a German father and an English mother. They divorced. And quite clearly, her English mother had explained to her daughter who was called Isolde, I remember, who was my age, had explained to her what my situation was and how it was different from theirs. And why I was there. And, as I said, I didn't know, I had no idea. I mean I didn't even know what Jewish was. I didn't even know who God was! There was no religion at all. And because of going to English schools I'd been given a Christian education and I'd copied the other children, said my prayers and so on. And in this school, because it was a small boarding school, we said our prayers at night. Always in our bedclothes because our room was so cold. And I started saying, 'Our Father, bless Mummy and Daddy' and all this kind of stuff, and Isolde suddenly said: 'You shouldn't be doing this!' And she more or less implied I was going to Hell anyway, so why did I bother. I was

desperately upset! I could not understand how she could know something about me that I didn't know myself. I'd been very happy up to that point. And in my weekly letter I wrote home, I wrote to my mother and said, 'Isolde is being beastly to me and I want to come home, I'm not happy.'

**Tape 1: 15 minutes 52 seconds**

And of course the teacher read this letter and said, 'You can't send this letter, your mother has enough problems at the moment. Isolde is a very naughty girl and I will speak to her, but write another letter.' That's the first time I knew there was something different about me. Not only were we completely secular; I never heard the word God or anything like that. I mean, Father Christmas came. I didn't really believe in him because in Germany he is supposed to bring a whip and I've never been whipped and I knew that couldn't be true! But I remember because we lived very near the Gedächtniskirche, on Tauentzienstraße, you pass it every day on the way to the Zoo or the Tiergarten, this funny building. And I remember saying to my nursemaid: 'What is it?' Right in the middle of a traffic island and it didn't look like a house. She said, 'It's a church.' And I had no idea what a church was. I mean I sort of left it at that, very peculiar place. Never any talk of God.

BL: What about your grandparents? Did they celebrate something?

EF: If they did they kept it quiet. I mean I don't think they did. I never saw any signs of it, let's put it that way. I never saw any signs of Jewish observancy at all. Because that's something I would have asked about, because it would have been different. So I think not. I remember years later my father told me he went to Shul as a small boy. But my father was a sort of vehement atheist. My mother was really drawn to Christianity. In fact, after the war was over, she got herself baptised. She was always attracted, like so many assimilated Jews, to Bach, the sort of cultural side of Christianity in Germany. She used to talk to me about when they went skiing at Christmas, how beautiful it was to arrive at a church for midnight mass or Christmas Eve with the snow and the candles. That was sort of important to her.

**Tape 1: 18 minutes 31 seconds**

And I remember, at the end of the war, going to the Saint Matthew Passion with her in London. At Easter, going to midnight mass with her. Because by that time of course I had a Christian education. And she always said: 'Of course, if it hadn't been for Hitler, we would have had you baptised as a child.' But of course you didn't do that under Hitler because it was a betrayal, as though you were trying to find your way out. Of course my father, being an atheist, he probably would have said no, but I don't know. So it was never something...I didn't know anything what it meant. I had no idea of Jewish customs. So when I, eventually in England, you came across some once or twice, like we had some English neighbours during the war. I didn't even know they were Jewish, and then they had a Seder and we had been invited. And my mother said: 'You go, it's interesting.' She didn't go; she stayed at home. And it was interesting, but to me it was completely strange! I often in later years quite resented the fact that, if they were going to kill me, I at least might have known what I was being killed for. In this sense, because it is interesting. But I mean I've long since lost my own, any religion which I had when I was growing up. And I quite often put my foot in it, even now. When I sent someone a Christmas card instead of a Hanukkah card because to me the whole Christian thing is so part of my upbringing. We had Easter eggs and a Christmas tree and all the rest of it.

BL: So you don't remember anyone calling you Jewish in Germany?

EF: No. Absolutely not. I mean ---

BL: What about your schooling?

EF: When I went to school in London.

BL: I meant in Germany, sorry.

EF: In Germany of course I went to a Jewish school because I had to, after the Nuremberg Laws. But it was not a community school, it was a *Privatschule*. So there was no religion there either. There was no...I mean I know if you went to a Jewish community school you'd learn Hebrew and all that kind of stuff, because I know people who went into that system. And that's what happened; you then got a Jewish education. But my parents, who would have wanted me to go to a normal school but weren't allowed to by what, 1939, when I...I mean in 1935 that became forbidden. So, by the time I went to a *Privatschule*, which was quite expensive, up in Grunewald, and there were several of those schools...

BL: What was it called?

EF: Goldschmidt-Schule. It was rather posh, lovely buildings and all this kind of stuff. But there was never any mention of religion.

BL: So all the children were Jewish?

**Tape 1: 21 minutes 46 seconds**

EF: All the children. But they were all secular Jewish. With parents who didn't want them to have a Jewish education. I mean I think that's something that English people don't understand actually, that in fact...I remember when I started writing my agent said to me: 'But what about synagogue?' Synagogue? I mean, until I came to England, and after the war my uncle remarried, a British Jewish wife. We went to the wedding in St. John's Wood. That was my first time I'd ever been to a synagogue in all my life. That was all completely strange to me. So that simply was a complete blank. I mean, certainly the word never came up in German, I wouldn't have known what it was. When I started elementary school in London in 1939, I didn't get called a Jew, I got called a German. That was a bother, with the war starting. And I didn't know any different of course. I felt it was slightly unfair because my Daddy was in the army and their daddy was not in the army, you know, and so on. It simply, until this sort of confrontation with Isolde Gundert, it never raised its head at all.

BL: Do you remember your parents discussing leaving Germany at all at some point?

EF: Well, yes, that was very strange. It was never discussed in front of me, as I say. I only found out very recently that my mother wanted to stay in Switzerland during that skiing holiday. What happened was that my father was arrested on *Kristallnacht*, went to Dachau. Because I was so young and he often went away on business, my mother told me he was away on business and I bought into that. When he came out, this is what I remember very vividly, he contracted Scarlet Fever. My mother paid to get him out. So he came out after about a month I suppose, something like that. He had Scarlet Fever, which meant he had to be in quarantine. And I remember Edith, the housemaid, because we couldn't go to school, the



*Kindermädchen* had taken us somewhere on a tram. And, as the tram came to a halt on Tauentzienstraße, there was Edith standing there without a coat on waiting for us. And she said: 'Take the children to their grandparents; they mustn't come into the house', because my father had come back with Scarlet Fever.

**Tape 1: 24 minutes 36 seconds**

So we had several weeks staying, first with my grandparents, my mother's parents. And then, because their flat was quite small, moving to my rich grandmother, who had ten rooms on the Kudamm, and staying with her. And, eventually, we came back home when my father was better and I got the shock of my life. Because I came in the flat and most of the furniture had disappeared. So I hardly noticed my poor father who was looking rather thin and lost his hair and so on. And I said: 'What's been happening here?' Because we had this enormous living room, twice the size of this, or even three times, because I was a little girl. And, apart from one or two items, all the furniture had gone; it was bare. I said, 'What?' 'We are going to England!', they said, obviously very pleased with themselves. And this was a complete shock to me. And of course the next few weeks were all about packing and going to get visas. And I remember having to go to the Gestapo to get our exit visa and that was a very frightening experience to me because I'd been told 'you must behave'. It was a horrible place, Nazi uniforms and all the rest of it, and my parents not daring to open their mouths. And then the British Embassy, which was very friendly and so on, to get our English visas stamped. And all these preparations, going to buy new clothes to take to England. And being told things, like my mother told me: 'You must spend your pocket money because you can't take it to England with you.' And then being told: 'When we get to England we are going to be very poor.' And this all puzzled me because I thought: 'Well, we are very rich here. Why do we have to go somewhere where we are going to be very poor?' But my parents were obviously very happy, very happy, so I thought, well, they must have their reasons. So if they are happy then obviously this is a good idea. I thought maybe they just...I don't know why, I just thought they were happy to go.

BL: They didn't tell you any reason?

**Tape 1: 27 minutes 5 seconds**

EF: No reason. And I remember asking my...because I knew my father had been to England several times, and I said: 'What's England, what's London like?' And he said: 'Well, it's very foggy and it rains a lot and the buildings are very dirty.' And I thought: 'I'm not sure I want to go there. Doesn't sound very exciting.' And the only other bit of news I was told: the taxis come straight into the station, you know. You don't go outside the station; they come right in. All of which didn't strike me as terribly impressive. But again I thought, well...I remember that last winter, thinking about it. Oddly enough, what I thought about most was how I was going to miss our weekend house. I was so happy there. And I imagined it all shut up for the winter. And next year we wouldn't be there. Because it was really...Whenever in my books I've written about a sort of paradise childhood, it's always Boxfelde, it's always Pichelsdorf, that garden and that sort of feeling of freedom, being close to the nature in some way and also close to the family, so that was really...And it wasn't really until the day we left that I realised how much else I was leaving behind. It was a very traumatic day, I remember. My grandparents, I suddenly realised, I mean they'd given me goodbye presents and things like that and it hadn't really sunk in until that morning, you know, with the flat empty. And the cars drawn up – because my father had a car, but it had obviously been sold – cars drawn up outside the door for our leaving. And I said: 'Well, what about Opa and Omi?' And I was

suddenly very upset and they said: 'Yeah, they are coming to the airport, hurry, hurry, hurry!' I was very nervous. And there were all these cars waiting outside with all my grandparents in the back and with my Aunt Lotte, who came to England later that summer. And we had to get in the front car and the cars left very slowly. And my mother was sitting like this [head in her hands]. She couldn't look out of the window. My brother and I were completely silent; we realized this was a terrible, terrible day. And I always think of it since like a funeral cortege because it went slowly. I mean obviously it went slowly so the other car could keep up with us. This was my grandmother's limousine, my rich grandmother. But it felt terribly solemn. And I knew this was my home, my street, and I would never see it again.

**Tape 1: 30 minutes 6 seconds**

My mother loved Berlin and she couldn't bear to look out of the window. And then, arriving at the airport...And there was a tremendous...It was Tempelhof, which was sort of half built in those days and there wasn't asphalt, it was still a green field. And there was an awful lot of shouting going on at the desk, a lot of people shouting, obviously all trying to leave in a hurry. And my parents were busy, shouting too, their papers and all this kind of stuff. And I had nothing to do. I was just standing there. And I looked out of this window and there was my grandfather, trying to see in. And I pulled at my father's coat and I said, 'Opa is out there.' And he said, 'Yes, yes, yes.' You know: 'leave me alone' kind of stuff. So I was the only person who saw him, he was obviously trying to catch a last glimpse of us, or certainly of my mother, his daughter. And it started to hail, I remember that. And then in the plane we could see this little group waving at the other end. And it took a long time for the plane to take off. And my brother, who was only four, who was a lifetime miser and it started in childhood, he suddenly said in a very loud voice, 'Mummy, if you don't have any money, I've got some!' You know, a few Pfennig, in his pocket. And everybody looked at everybody else in a slightly amused, but also slightly nervous way. Because everyone, there was a tremendous sort of tension on this plane. But it took off, in spite of my brother's outburst. And that was it. And we landed in Amsterdam because my father had a business friend there. Later, my mother told me, they decided to fly because there was a lot of hassle, and I've heard that since, at the frontier if you went by train. You know, they took Jews off, bullied them for 24 hours before letting them back on the train. And they thought rightly that, if we flew, there wouldn't be any of the hassle and there wasn't. She said to me in later years: 'We were very surprised, because we thought, you've never flown before and you and your brother would be madly excited. But you weren't.' And if she'd known the atmosphere on that morning she would have known, that was the least, you know, of what was going on. Even for small children, it wasn't about getting on a plane; it was so much more than that, that actually getting on an aeroplane was not exciting. And I remember sort of seeing... because they had very big windows in those days, aeroplanes, didn't have little portholes. So as you gained height you could see everything in great detail down below. The people walking in the streets, little tiny ants and so on, everything getting smaller and smaller.

**Tape 1: 33 minutes 25 seconds**

And then we landed in Amsterdam and got Emil Elkan, another Emil, that was the business acquaintance of my father, with his wife, and they were supposed to meet us. And they had somehow missed us, so we got on a bus to the city centre and suddenly, I remember, there was a car hooting behind us and there was Emil Elkan catching up with us. So we had this week in Amsterdam and then came by ferry, came by boat, on the Hook-Harwich connection.

BL: Do you remember what you were allowed to take on that plane?

EF: On the plane? Well, not on the plane, I remember my mother packing toys and saying, 'You can take this, but you can't take that.' This sort of thing. We had those great big tea chests full of straw or whatever. And I had to go through my toys in those last few weeks and I had a doll's-house which my grandmother had given me, which wasn't actually a house, it had two rooms and a bathroom. But it had electric light and taps and it was wonderful. And she said: 'You can't take the doll's-house, but you can take the furniture.' So I took the furniture which is actually very like, it was done in a very 1930s style. So afterwards I would move this furniture around as a child and it was exactly like my parents' own furniture which was suddenly moved around in different rooms, except they were much smaller. But that was a sort of mirror image really. I couldn't take the doll's-house, but I could take the furniture. I could take the scooter, which caused a huge sensation in my London suburb because they didn't make them like that in England. And it got stolen as a result. Made me quite popular as a sort of foreign child because it had a pedal, like they still make them in Germany, you know, you didn't have to push with your foot; it had a pedal, so you stood on it and pedalled. And this caused a sensation and everybody wanted to have a go on it and eventually somebody stole it because my mother wouldn't let me take it indoors. And my doll's cot came...

BL: In a crate? This was all separately...

EF: Yes, this was all crated up, so I can't remember taking anything actually on the plane. As I say, my brother smuggled his pocket money. I can't remember taking anything on the plane at all. No.

BL: Can you describe the journey from Hook of Holland to England?

**Tape 1: 36 minutes 12 seconds**

EF: Yes. What I do remember very clearly, because I never, I mean Germany doesn't have much seaside and we'd never gone up to the Baltic, anything like that. I mean my father sailed with his cousin and had been on sailing trips, but I had never seen the sea. I didn't see much of it because it was an after-dark crossing. I think my father shared a berth with Ernest and I shared a berth with my mother. What I do remember very clearly is landing. The only bit of sea I ever saw was the sort of black water as we got, came on the gangway at Harwich. And I do remember very clearly the immigration officers. They wore sort of naval uniform; there were two of them. And my father spoke English to them. And I remember these very clearly, because everything changed from that moment. The status of my father changed; everything changed. One of the immigration officers... they were both very unsmiling. And I, by this time I was six years old, had become very wary of grown-ups' expressions. I had noticed the expressions at the Gestapo. I noticed the smiling expressions at the British Consulate. I'd become very observant of grown-ups, of how they reacted. So I was watching people all the time. And I watched these immigration officers and I noticed they were not smiling. And they opened the passport, and we were all on the same passport. And he said, 'You and your wife?' And my father said, 'Yes, and two kiddies.' And I knew immediately that this was the wrong thing to say. There was something wrong about saying 'kiddies'. I had very few English lessons while we were waiting to leave, very few, I have to say. Some private woman turning up, I remember, when I was staying with my grandparents and we were suddenly supposed to learn English and we didn't know why. And my brother was four, hadn't even been to school yet, let alone learn English! And I found later that most of it was wrong. I mean, she was German, you know; she wasn't English. And I just knew that my

father had somehow put his foot in it by saying 'kiddies', that he was trying to be over-relaxed and over-familiar. And they weren't buying this. I think now they were probably just thinking, 'More bloody Jews!' That was probably what was going through their heads. 'How many more of them?' sort of thing. But I just observed this and from then on I realised that my father, who had always been a very extrovert sort of person, outgoing, very jolly, friendly, making jokes a lot and so on, that this was alright in Berlin, but in England this was not going to be alright; it was not going to be alright.

**Tape 1: 39 minutes 42 seconds**

And I suppose like a lot of immigrant children I found my parents increasingly an embarrassment, as I assimilated and picked up English pretty quickly and how the English behaved. And they kept doing these awful foreign things, you know! That was my first intimation that this is..., my father's status suddenly changed. I mean, before that he was God. And suddenly I realised, oh no, he's a very little man in a tricky situation.

BL: What happened from there, where did you go?

EF: Well, we came here actually. Oddly enough, because my uncle had been in London since 1933, he had booked in a boarding house two rooms. Just around the corner from here; West Hampstead in those days was full of German Jews, this area. Just behind what was John Barnes, which is now Waitrose. Two rooms in a terrace house, at the back of it. Now of course they are very smart, but in those days all rather run down. I think that's why the émigrés settled here, because it was reasonably cheap. We had two rooms and I was scared out of my wits. Because they were dark and not very clean and I wouldn't go to sleep at night without the hall light on and so on. We would go to John Barnes food hall to buy food from the delicatessen to eat over lunch and stuff like that. We weren't there very long, I don't really know, probably not more than a week or two, I can't say exactly. But what happened after that, my uncle and his first wife Hertha – they were divorced later that year and she went back to Europe - had a flat in Hendon. And my brother and I went to stay with them whilst my parents had rented a flat in northwest London and were moving the furniture in. So that's what happened. So I actually had my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday with my uncle and aunt.

**Tape 1: 42 minutes 26 seconds**

And being used to a kind of old-fashioned 19<sup>th</sup> century apartment in Berlin, I thought their flat was wonderful! It was brand new, all art deco, and I was absolutely fascinated by the bathroom fittings and stuff like that, because it was all chrome and tiles and very modern. So I thought it was absolutely gorgeous and wonderful. And I remember they gave me two goldfish in a bowl for my birthday. And then we went in a taxi to the new flat where my parents had been moving in. And I remember worrying about the goldfish on the taxi floor because the water kept shwubbering about. I called them Gerd and Hertha, the goldfish! And we arrived at this flat, which was in northwest London, a ground floor flat, and they were packing cases. It was an inner yard and our front door opened on to this inner yard. They were packing cases everywhere in straw. And there had been a fire! So we'd been too late to see it, but what was later to be my bedroom window was black because a neighbour from upstairs had come down with a cigarette offering to help unpack and had set all the straw on fire, all the packing on fire! So that's how it started. That's how we moved into that first flat. Which was obviously very small compared to what we were used to, had no central heating which we were used to.

BL: Where was it?

EF: It was in Kingsbury, which is NW9. And it was a brand new flat. I think we were the first people in it. I found it quite fun as a child because it was built like a castle. In fact they are now a sort of architectural curiosity. I've been up there once or twice and I've seen it in architectural magazines. Some architect, you know, suburban architect went mad. Because there were three castles, three corners, it was a crossroads. As a child it was wonderful because you could play. There were what looked like drawbridges but weren't. Everything was castellated and so you could play around, play 'pretend' and all that. It was a great place for running around. But of course for my mother, who was used to things like central heating, there were little electric fires and an open fire in the living room, which was very picturesque, but, you know, you burnt in the front and froze at the back and we weren't used to that. The plumbing was diabolical and the first winter all the pipes froze and burst and she was forever going on about English architects, 'What are they doing, call this building?!' She didn't move out of that flat until the other one a couple of years later because, as I say, I remember burst pipes and my brother sleeping under an umbrella and that kind of thing. It was problematic.

**Tape 1: 45 minutes 55 seconds**

BL: So from a child's perspective what were your first or lasting impressions of England?

EF: At first I liked, I mean, from the family point of view, I liked the first few months because, for the first time in my life, I wasn't being looked after by servants. I mean my mother was there, my father was there, we were a family and I liked that as a child. I could also play wild. There were no cars in those days, so you could play in the street with children and we did. Get friendly with neighbouring children and my scooter attracted them, if nothing else, and various toys I had. You were free to run around. It was much more free and easy. School, when I started school that became problematic because I was the only foreign child in the class. There was this sort of xenophobic attitude by the staff, not just children. I mean obviously when the war started they'd say 'Jawohl, Heil Hitler!' and stuff like that to you because they didn't know the difference and neither did I. It was just something that very small children, a 7 year-old, would pick up. But I also found that the girls were quite nasty to me on occasion. Not the boys. The boys seemed to quite like a little foreign helpless girl. You know, they thought I was sweet because I didn't open my mouth – yet. They tended to come to the door and invite me to tea and bring flowers and said: 'Could I walk you to school?' But the girls were bitchy. 'Funny clothes you've got!', that sort of thing as well. All the clothes my mother had bought for coming to England and weren't the fashion in England. And I found that difficult. I was being excluded all the time. My first day at school was a disaster, because I was suddenly dumped in this classroom by a teacher who said: 'Can you write your name?' By this time I could understand what was said to me but I hadn't yet worked out how to answer back, I hadn't the confidence yet to do it. So I understood but I couldn't answer back. So she said, 'Can you write your name, dear?' And I said yes. And she gave me a pencil, and I thought, huch! I was taught to write in ink in joined up writing and they were doing sort of single letters in pencil.

**Tape 1: 48 minutes 48 seconds**

So she gave me a pencil and I wrote my name, 'Eva Ungert', in my, the only thing I could remember from my days at the Berlin school, in *Sütterlinschrift*. And the teacher took one look at it and she said, 'That's just scribble!' And I couldn't answer back! She walked away and I felt, 'You stupid cow, no!' I couldn't hold my hand up because I hadn't yet got the

words. So that was a bad beginning. And there were various other things that made me feel... There was one terrible incident which...I mean children can be very sort of spiteful. And I remember I had school dinners and I remember all the children wanted shiny spoons. That meant that some of the spoons were grey because they were used, and there were new ones which were very shiny and they all wanted shiny spoons. Now, nobody wanted to give me a shiny spoon. So I thought, I want a shiny spoon, too! You know, that sort of thing. God knows why, I've of course grown up with spoons and spoons. So I got this clever idea that I took a shiny spoon to eat my pudding with. And then I had the clever idea of keeping it and I would have it every day. In those days we had little purses with a zip where you put your hankie in or whatever. So I had my pudding and then I slipped it in my purse. And I actually showed it to my mother and she said, 'Take it back!' And of course I didn't. And after a few days of this I found a gang of schoolgirls waiting for me as I left school. And they stopped me and they said: 'Open your bag!' and I said: 'No.' And they said: 'Open your bag!' and I said: 'No!' And in the end they forced me to open my bag and there was this spoon. And they took me off to the kitchens and reported me to the dinner lady who said: 'No English child would ever do a thing like this!' Right, 'no *English* child'. And of course I was deeply humiliated. I knew I hadn't stolen the spoon, I knew why I had done it. But I was being accused of stealing. And I hadn't realised just how deeply this affected me until years later I saw a French film called *The Seven Deadly Sins*. I don't know whether you know it. It was seven directors doing the seven deadly sins. And the sin of pride was about a woman who is quite poor but has upper-class connections. She goes to a reception and because her elderly mother is at home and they had very little food, she puts bit of food in her bag. Somebody gets a diamond necklace stolen so everyone has to open their bag. And when she has to open her bag of course there is food in it. And I got terribly upset when I saw it, I was so upset, and I didn't understand why. Of course later I understood why. And I suppose it also taught me my deadly sin is pride. I know that now. But this incident as a child had such a terrible effect on me and I had really sort of forgotten about it. And this film brought it back; it was in my first year in England, probably my first term at school.

BL: Let's take a break now because we have to change tapes.

### **Tape 1: 52 minutes 46 seconds**

#### **TAPE 2**

BL: This is Tape 2. We are conducting an interview with Eva Figes. We were talking about your first experiences at the English school, so maybe you can continue with what happened in that primary school.

EF: Well, as I say, my first few terms in the English primary school were not very happy because I felt very much an outsider. I was treated as one. I was quite lonely. And then, in 1940, in September, it was my parents' wedding anniversary and my father was stationed in Cirencester in Gloucestershire. So we went for the weekend to visit him. And when we came back, we arrived at Paddington, and everything was exploding all around. Very frightening. And my mother said: 'Oh my God, we should never have come back.' So what happened was, a couple of days later, we went back to Cirencester as evacuees. And, first of all, were put on a...various places. The farm was what I liked best because it was an old farm and it was great fun to me as a child to feed the chickens and see the pigs and all the rest of it. And I was sent to a small private school, what used to be called a Dame School. It was really run by two sisters with a couple of assistants. There were mostly local children, but they were also taking boarders, who were basically evacuee children. They advertised, I found out later when I

wrote about it, for 'officers' children', although my father never made it further than Corporal, but anyway they took us. And that was really for me a very happy time. The teaching was quite different. It was much more intimate; it was much more exciting. Whereas elementary teaching in those days was very much more learning by rote, 2 x table and all that kind of stuff. We had music. Instead of being blamed for being German, suddenly being German was an asset! They'd say: 'Ah, here is a Schubert song, I think Eva should sing this.', you know, that kind of stuff. Much more that kind of atmosphere. I mean they were not young, I suppose 50ish, the two sisters. And there were nature walks. It was for me a very happy time. I mean I was always hungry because I didn't get enough to eat, but that was a minor thing compared to the benefits to me. And I think even by that stage I was very happy to be away from my mother, because my mother was getting very depressed by the situation and it was difficult to be with her. Couldn't do anything for her, but she wasn't very happy.

BL: When was this? What time are we talking about?

**Tape 2: 3 minutes 7 seconds**

EF: Well, we arrived in Cirencester in September 1940 and I was brought back to London for good in December 1941. I'd been back for the summer holidays in 1941. I remember that because that's when Hitler invaded Russia. And my mother said: 'Thank God, they've lost!' She said things like that occasionally which turned out to be completely true. And I was actually quite honestly heartbroken because I thought I was being brought back only for the Christmas holiday, and it was only when I got home she told me I wasn't going back because the bombing wasn't as bad as it used to be. I didn't feel like I tell her I wanted to go back, please. I knew that would hurt her feelings if I said: 'I'd rather be with them than with you.' So I had to get used to that, but I was very sad about that. And I did stay in contact with them, visited them after the war when I was nearby. And they never forgot me. In fact, during a student break, (they had retired by that time and I knew they were living nearby where I was doing a student job) I turned up unannounced and I said: 'Hello'. And Zoë, the older one who was my particular idol, said: 'Oh Eva!' And I said: 'How did you know it's me?' She said: 'Oh, I know that German accent anywhere.' I didn't even know I had a German accent! But that was sort of really the end of that. But they had a huge effect on me. And in fact it was the year I knew I wanted to be a writer because it was that year...I mean they let you read all sorts of books that you wouldn't have been able to read in a normal school. And it was also that time that I realised that I had mastered English. I could understand everything, not just the general gist of what was being said, but everything. And I got such a feeling of elation that I immediately, you know, ach, I've got to write all these words down! She even introduced...on my 9<sup>th</sup> birthday, my mother had sent a postal order, and she bought me Shakespeare's *As You Like It* for it. I'd asked for a Bible because I didn't have a Bible. And I think my mother sent a postal order for 7s 6d, and a Bible cost 5 Shillings. And so she said: 'Oh, I think you'll like that.' And I completely fell in love with Shakespeare. The fact that I only understood one word in three didn't matter; it was just so wonderful. By that time, I had an appetite for language as such. And for me Cirencester Park, which was rather wonderful, became the Forest of Arden and I was always trying to persuade Isolde to play. She was a little senior and she always thought that was sissy; she wouldn't do it. But I was completely enamoured of English and the language and started my own poems and things. So that was a very important year in my life.

**Tape 2: 6 minutes 29 seconds**

BL: What was it, you said? You suddenly realised you'd mastered English. Do you remember what...?

EF: Well, I just remember I was standing outside. (The school was an old Victorian villa, which had been turned into a hotel last time I visited it.) And Zoë was standing outside; we'd been waiting for somebody, maybe my mother, I don't know who was maybe visiting. But we were standing outside and she was talking to me; there was nobody else there. And I suddenly realised, yeah - I got all of it! All of it! Not just the general idea what is expected and what is happening next, but I understood it all. And I got this tremendous feeling of elation. Some years later, I realised that those things are sort of connected in my falling in love with the idea of language. Because if you only know one language you take it for granted; it's like breathing, you don't think about it. But of course the asset of having to change languages when you are young enough to do it fairly easily is that you know it's something special. And each language has its own qualities. And I was quite intoxicated by this. Of course it was a sense of freedom, too, because I wasn't anymore thinking, 'What does she mean?' You know, that kind of thing, what's being said. That was over. So that was very important to me. And I was in that sort of school where that kind of thing, creativity, anything artistic, was being encouraged, not discouraged.

BL: Did you continue writing in German at all?

EF: No. I didn't continue to write in German, but I did continue, when I was back in London, reading in German. When the war started, my mother said to both of us, my brother and me: 'Right. You've got to learn English anyway. We are at war with Germany. You cannot go out in the street and be heard speaking German. So from now on it's English only!' And she meant at home as well. I mean only if a relative who was hopeless in English, or for certain things like jokes you can't translate, but otherwise it was English only. And, fortunately for me, I realised very early that if I didn't use my German I was going to forget it. I would lose it. And it struck me very early that this was a shame. And there were quite a lot of German books in the house. Some of them were mine, but then grown-ups' books as well, reference books. So when I was back in London, Christmas 1941, I began reading out loud to my mother. And if I didn't understand a word she'd explain it to me. And sometimes I made mistakes so that I never sort of... In fact, considering that I was only six I was actually learning more German than I knew before, but I wasn't losing what I already had.

## **Tape 2: 9 minutes 39 seconds**

And that stood me in good stead. And of course once I went to grammar school... Well, in the early years, I didn't go to German classes; I just did the exams. But when I got to sort of general school certificate I did the exams and that was pretty horrifying, because the German teacher was English. And my first mock general school certificate was dictation and she read out the piece and I couldn't understand what she was saying because she had such a terrible accent! And I sat there, thinking: 'What am I going to do?' I mean, luckily, the second time round she read it slowly and I began to understand what she was saying. So I obviously passed with honours and so on. And in the Sixth Form I did go to classes: a) we had a better teacher and, by that time, we had to do literature as well as written... So, in a sense, I always sort of built on it. And I suppose I've been building on it all my life, because a language changes and you suddenly don't know what a computer is or whatever, so you soon find out if you're going to need it. So I've lost the sense that I had for a long time of actually basically I've got nursery German, you know. A friend of mine with the same background, she said to me: 'When I speak German I always feel like I'm a child pretending to be a grown up.' I've



lost that sense now because I now have enough vocabulary, grown-up vocabulary, to get by. I don't call everybody 'du', you know, this sort of stuff, what you do at first. I mean obviously one is never completely at home in two languages at once, I don't think that's possible.

BL: Did you ever write anything German?

EF: No. I've translated from German in my early years. But writing is...I wouldn't...I mean apart from the odd letter, and then I suddenly I worry about case endings. Does this take a capital letter? All that kind of stuff, and I'm really not sure. I mean in a personal letter it doesn't matter. But translating? Yes, I've done it; I didn't like it. When I started writing properly I thought: it's actually easier to write your own book than translate somebody else's, because the problems are enormous and the more familiar you are with a language the more difficult it gets, because you are so aware of the nuances, the German version of whatever the word is, that you can spend a lot of time worrying; it's not easy.

BL: Let's go back to the 1940s. What was the name of the family you stayed with?

**Tape 2: 12 minutes 35 seconds**

EF: The family or the school? In Cirencester? Well, the school was run by two sisters called Zoë and Hilly, actually Hillary Sarden [?]. Very middle class, very oriented towards music. That's when I first started having piano lessons. And as I said I kept in touch. And when,...? Was it 20 years ago or something? I decided to write a book about that period because I realised just how important evacuation...Not only for me, but for a lot of children, evacuation was a very important period in their lives because they were taken away from their families. Sometimes it was a bad experience; sometimes it was a wonderful experience, you know, depending...And I suddenly realised just how enriching that year had been and I wanted to write about it. And I got a letter. They had an adopted little girl, now grown up of course. And she wrote to me and said: 'Zoë is still alive; she's in an old age home in Bath and she's read your book. And she'd love to see you.' And of course it was thrilling to me. It turned out that somebody who worked in that home; it's a Methodist retirement home, had taken my book out of the library and read it. And because I used real names, you know, thinking everyone was dead anyway, had said: 'Zoë, is this you?' And she'd said: 'Yes!'. So of course I rushed to visit her on the next train and it was all very moving and touching. She was obviously thrilled to bits. We sort of kept in touch. She lived to be well...I mean I just missed her sister who died a year before, but she lived to be well over a 100.

BL: So this was a boarding... You slept there as well; it was like a boarding school?

EF: Well, it was both. So originally, when we arrived in Cirencester in the autumn 1940, we went there as day pupils and stayed with my mother. I then told my mother: 'I'd like to be a boarder there.' Because children think boarding school is sort of exciting because there are so many books about it. And she said: 'Oh, I'm fed up with being here anyway.' A lot of women got fed up with evacuation because they didn't have their own kitchens; they had nothing to do except go for walks. She said: 'Yeah, if you want to be a boarder then I'll go back to London.' My poor brother had to be a boarder too, and he got very homesick. And she eventually took him back because he was suffering from malnutrition really. So I had a year there as a boarder until Christmas 1941.

BL: Can you tell us a little bit about what happened to your father at that time?

**Tape 2: 15 minutes 35 seconds**

EF: My father volunteered for the Pioneer Corps shortly after the outbreak of war, which was basically an army unit which was full of refugees, German Jews, Austrian Jews, foreigners generally. He was based in various places around the country. When we went to visit him in Cirencester he was based there. Oddly enough, my uncle, who was in a very different unit because he had been in England for a long time, was also there at the time. And that first reunion is a great family anecdote. Because we hadn't seen him since he joined up; in other words, we hadn't seen him for nine months. We'd never seen him in an army uniform. And we arrived in Cirencester, which is a little market town, very charming actually, and for some reason...I don't know where my parents arranged to meet, but we were walking one way and suddenly my father in his army uniform was walking the other way. I remember it very clearly, a sunny day, nice September day. And my brother, because like all little boys, he was fascinated by anything warlike, much more than the girls were...And he shouted in a loud voice: 'Daddy, how many Germans have you killed?' And the whole street started to laugh! Because it was a Saturday morning, all these women were out shopping and they all started to laugh. Because I mean no Germans were getting killed anyway and my father, because he was in the Pioneer Corps, hadn't even got a rifle. I think, he was digging ditches and that sort of work, which is what they were doing in those days. So that is a story that has gone down the family, 'Daddy, how many Germans have you killed?'. So that was the first time we saw him again. And then, when we came back for good, he was actually still billeted there. While my mother was still there we would go and see him maybe at the place called Bingham Hall where the union was billeted, and he was peeling potatoes or whatever you do during the day. So you would see something of him. Oddly enough, when I was writing my book about evacuation I spoke to somebody, I interviewed various people who remembered the war and that time, and he said: 'Oh yes, I remember the Pioneer Corps. They were very good cooks!'. Being continentals they knew how to do something very tasty out of some very basic ingredients which of course they were during the war. 'They were very good cooks!', he said.

**Tape 2: 18 minutes 37 seconds**

And once my brother and I were boarders at the boarding school, my father was no longer billeted in Cirencester and he would suddenly turn up at weekend leave. The front doorbell would ring; there was my father, all jolly and stuff, and he'd come to take his children out. That was fun. He had a way of saving his...Of course, chocolate sweets were rationed, but soldiers got chocolate rations and he'd always save his chocolate for us. And, as I said, we were always hungry. It wasn't shortage of food; it was because they weren't used to young children. They didn't understand how hungry young children get. So we were always hungry and we used to fantasise about food. And so parents visiting their children would always stuff as much food as possible in them. And I remember my father taking us to a teashop called Ann's Pantry, which the last time I was there was still on the marketplace. I mean Cirencester changes remarkably little, Ann's Pantry. And all the people at the neighbouring tables laughed because we were stuffing ourselves with cream cakes, the sort of thing that was available without ration books. And then that night my brother was violently sick and I got the blame because I was the older sister and I should have stopped him eating too much. So that was sort of one memory I have of my father during that period.

BL: Was your father happy in the Pioneer Corps?

EF: My father had a funny...He treated everything as a joke. He was very chirpy, very upbeat, had no wish to get promoted to be officer. He just regarded the whole thing as a sort of a joke. He very soon found...because very few people drove cars before the war. I mean they were a middle class luxury and my father did drive a car. So he soon found himself driving a lorry which he did for a lot of the war including landing in France with a lorry. And in fact my uncle too. I think he was chauffeur to an officer, but he also drove because he was used to driving. And he tended to treat the whole thing as sort of funny, in a jokey way. Later he said he spent more time worrying about us in London than he did about himself because in London it was dangerous. Later his visits weren't so happy. Once I was back in London, I didn't get on with my mother. My brother had been sent to boarding school because my mother felt she couldn't handle him, because he'd have a temper tantrum and kick and scream and pretend to run away, that sort of thing. So she sent him to a boarding school.

**Tape 2: 21 minutes 45 seconds**

And of course I was deeply jealous of the fact that he'd escaped my mother and I hadn't. So later it became very unhappy, because my father would come home...Before D-Day, occasionally he came home for 48 hours at the weekend. And the first thing that happened was my mother would shut herself in the bedroom with him and I knew what they were talking about. My mother was telling him what an awful child I was. I wouldn't do this; I wouldn't do that. I was unhelpful. I answered back, etc., etc. So his visits became very miserable really. Can't have been much fun for my father either, you know, to have that sort of thing hit you as the first thing when you get home. Then, when my mother said her piece (I didn't need to listen at the door because I could hear it and I knew what she was going to say) he'd come out and he said: 'Eva, your mother is having a very difficult time and you've got to try and be helpful.' And I said: 'I am, I do!' You know, I protested. And to tell you the truth, I really tried very hard. I'd do anything to win her approval, but it was pretty rare and then quickly forgotten. She had absolutely no time to consider the needs of a child at all. I mean she just didn't. They became really sort of painful occasions, these visits home, because it was always me getting a lecture on being a helpful daughter and me saying: 'I am doing what I can.', and so on.

BL: What did she want you to do? What were the conflicts?

EF: The main...well, my mother didn't like housework. She was used to having servants doing it for her. And she didn't like washing up; she didn't like cleaning. And I never did enough and it didn't matter how much I did. I remember the day I came home from school and told her I'd passed the 11-plus. And she said: 'How do you know?' And I said: 'Well, because the headmaster came in and read out the list and my name was on it.' And she said: 'Oh, I'd much rather you did a bit more housework than pass the 11-plus.' That sort of thing.

**Tape 2: 24 minutes 23 seconds**

She also, which my aunt, the one who survived everybody confirmed, she also began to resent me as I got older, when it was obvious that I was clever and I was getting cleverer than her, that made her feel very insecure and threatened by it. So instead of being proud of me she was always trying to cut me down in some way. If I had some sort of anxiety or anything, she would laugh at it. She'd find any excuse to mock me rather than support me. So increasingly, when I realised I couldn't sort of change her. I mean I would still try. I mean I even got to the stage where I stole money from her to buy her a present! Because I was always trying to cheer her up because my father said: 'You must try to cheer her up. You know, this difficult time,

I'm not here', and so on. But increasingly of course I just shut myself with my books, went to school. Even when I was told not to because the air raid siren had sounded I was going to school. The fact that I was doing well at school was really my escape and the whole thing of reading books. I read like voraciously as children do at that sort of age. So it became an increasingly difficult situation. I'd say the one happy occasion, when my father came home on embarkation leave before going to Normandy, the telegram came from Stockholm which I actually picked up. I answered the door, my father shaving in the bathroom, and I took this telegram and handed it to my father, and his mother had arrived in Stockholm! That was an emotional moment. I don't know so much about it, but I remember my mother saying: 'There you are!', and kissing him and so on. So that was a sort of happy occasion. A slight disbelief I suppose. It happened just in time before...

BL: Did you have contact with the grandparents at all until you knew what happened?

**Tape 2: 27 minutes 4 seconds**

EF: No. That is something else. I mean I remember my mother's parents sending me a postcard with their photos on in summer 1939. I've still got those photos, which was the last I heard from them. My mother heard, what must have been in 1942, that they'd been deported and threw it at me as though it was my fault. That was another one of these awful moments when we were going out to tea with Miss Lewis, who actually taught at the school I was about to go to. But she knew my mother because she'd been a lodger while I was away and she'd slept in my room. And my mother bought me a pink cardigan and I hated pink as a child. And I said: 'I don't want to wear it.' And my mother suddenly shouted at me, she said: 'You are fussing about a pink cardigan and my parents are being deported!' And I kind of... [stared blankly]. And I didn't quite know what it meant; it was obviously bad news. I mean she didn't know what it meant either, at that stage, but it was obviously bad news. And I felt, you know: why throw it at me like that? Why didn't you tell me, because..? She never confided in me. I mean if she'd got into the habit of confiding me as one person to another, and I think by that time, you might simplify things, but there are ways that you can confide your distress to children, other ways. I mean obviously you don't do it in adult terms, but there are ways of doing it. But the fact she made me feel two inches tall and she made me feel as if somehow what happened, whatever it was, was my fault, and I was being.... So there was that sort of thing going on. I was made to feel as if everything was my fault. So it was difficult. I mean we did have moments where... She liked going to the cinema, and if I sort of stole a bit of money and said: 'Come and see Laurence Olivier or whatever', she would quite enjoy that sort of thing, but they were pretty rare.

BL: Did she have friends at all, did she mix with other refugees?

EF: Yeah, quite a lot. Well, not a lot, but most of the people we mixed with...The one I liked best was in fact the old lady from Berlin who had told us that my grandmother was alive. And she was a very cultivated, intelligent woman. And I very much took her as my surrogate grandmother, you know. I'd listen to her and sort of pay attention when she was around. She also had a sister-in-law living in North London. This lady's brother, the sister-in-law's husband, had died, but she was living in London and was, again, a rather elegant and posh lady with a grown-up son. So we saw her quite a bit.

**Tape 2: 30 minutes 41 seconds**

And then there was some remote relative of some kind, the Schindlers, who lived up on the North Circular in a flat and we'd occasionally visit them. And then we would be visited by a cousin of my father, whom I liked a lot, called Ruth Heppner, who became a nurse during the war. And she was very nice; she moved to America after the war, got married in America, had a sister in America. And she did visit once. She married an American academic. And I remember, by the time I was a young married woman, she came back and we all met at a hotel. And there was a woman called Ilse, I don't know if she was one of my father's many, many cousins or not, but she got herself engaged to a Czech freedom fighter, who was in the Czech army here and they would visit sometimes. So there was quite a network. And then her oldest friend, Eva König [?], who was older than my mother; in fact she used to live around the corner from here during the war. And she was a sort of regular and she had a son who was deaf and was in a special school. Her husband was stuck in Bangkok or somewhere or Vietnam. I don't know where, but he only showed up again after the war was over and they were reunited. There was quite a lot of those sorts of links. So I was very used to all these sort of people. Of course my Uncle Gerd was also in the army. But my Aunt Lotte, who had made it out of Berlin at the last possible moment, about June, she was a dear thing, completely eccentric. I mean she spent her life playing the piano and painting [?]. And she was coming down to visit from Oxford which was always a tremendous palaver because she was a great eccentric and she'd always say: 'I have to go back to Paddington, I have left some luggage there.' This was a sort of joke. She'd arrive with three alarm clocks: one in case the other two didn't work, that sort of stuff. My mother thought her slightly maddening, but the rest, we all loved her actually because she would laugh at herself because she was eccentric. She outlived everybody else actually, the oldest of that group. My mother was always afraid I would turn out like her because I was interested in the arts. And the fact that Lotte had decided against marriage even though she had offers, because she wanted to devote her life to the arts. My mother was afraid I might do the same thing and I might turn out some sort of nutter.

**Tape 2: 33 minutes 47 seconds**

BL: Did you go to any of the refugee places, the Cosmo or others?

EF: Not during the war, but I did, when I was independent and I started living in this area. I did go to the Cosmo. I mean I've been here 40 years. And when I was first here, if you went to the Cosmo there were lots of German Jewish ladies having Kaffeeklatsch wearing fur coats just like my mother, you know, Persian lambs, that sort of thing. And of course, gradually they died out. And, as I say, for many years I had a lady from Berlin on the ground floor, Paula Eisner. Her husband Fritz died quite a while before, so that was another link. But oddly enough, when I think about it, when I was younger, the friends I knew with that sort of background, we never talked about it, it wasn't interesting. We took it for granted. It's only now, people like a friend around the corner I see a lot of, partly because I've been ill a lot and she's been terribly good, coming around and we often do things together. And I've known her 40 years and in the old days you never talked about it. And yesterday I had lunch with somebody I've known for 30 years, also from Germany, and in the past we never talked about it. It was just one of those things. It's only now that it's such a long time ago and the past becomes more important that we actually start comparing notes. You know: 'Did you do this as a child? Did you do that? Remember [...]? Remember whatever?' You know, that sort of thing becomes... One is much more aware of one's common heritage than one ever was in the past. The past didn't seem to matter because there was... I suppose partly because there were so many, and partly because we were much more interested in the future, you know, being British and building up lives here that it didn't seem to... It wasn't where we were going to; it was where we'd come from. We sort of shut the door more or less, or tried to.

**Tape 2: 36 minutes 18 seconds**

BL: You must have felt isolated with your mother's experience.

EF: I was very lonely I can tell you. Before I left the elementary school, suddenly there were two *Kindertransport* children in my class. There was a very large old house next door to the school. There was a church next door and a very old Victorian house next door. It had obviously become a *Kinderheim* for *Kindertransport* children. And suddenly I came to school one morning and there were these two little girls sitting together, Anni and Erna. Erna was fat and Anni was thin, I remember. And I immediately went to look at them, I couldn't wait to get their attention, I absolutely couldn't wait. And immediately made contact and then I started going next door after school to play with them. And knowing what I know now it sounds terrible, but I was jealous of them. I was jealous. I thought: I walk home at the end of the afternoon, it was 6 o'clock, and I thought they were all having such a lovely time. They were playing games in the garden, you know, and they are all together; it's like a holiday camp there, and I have to go home to my mother and she..., and it's going to be miserable and I'm all by myself. And I really was jealous of them. And of course now I know what happened of course it sounds a terrible thing to say, but I was. It was lonely. I suppose that makes one who one is; it's character-building in many ways.

BL: So you didn't have any contact to other refugee children?

EF: No, not really, not of my own age. I know I was occasionally visited, a nearby couple who had a child which was too young for me. She was a toddler really and I was much too old for her. She spoke a terrible mish-mash of German and English because she wasn't being properly guided. I mean she was very small. One couldn't really identify with her or become a friend with her at all. So I didn't really. It was really only when I started grammar school that I found my feet because by that time nobody remembered me as a refugee child. My English, in fact I was top of the class in English and I always would be. The fact that I spoke German was an asset because I could help other children to cheat in their exams. And so from then on it was no longer a problem.

BL: How old were you when you started grammar school?

**Tape 2: 39 minutes 24 seconds**

EF: Eleven.

BL: And this was in which year?

EF: 1943.

BL: So still during the war.

EF: Oh yes. Very much so, very much so. And in fact, in many ways the war didn't get easier because it got worse in some ways, because, although the worst of the Blitz was over, we then had doodlebugs and rockets which in a way were... the rockets particularly were more frightening. I think people completely lost it. I remember when the doodlebugs were about children weren't very frightened of them because you could see them and they seemed to go very slowly and you knew they weren't coming down unless the light at the back went

up, in which case you were supposed to go flat on the pavement. So they didn't really frighten. And I remember at school during that period, that must have been my first year, we had a prefect up on the roof. And if he could see one coming he would blow a whistle and the school bell would go and we all had to get under the desks, which was for us at the age of eleven a wonderful opportunity to compare answers. 'What do you make no. 3? I think that's 57.' I mean, children, you know, good chance to cheat. But, when the rockets started, there was no warning at all and they were very, very frightening, and I really was. They actually closed the school down. We would go in once a fortnight for homework and take our homework back. That was such a frightening period. The block of flats we lived in was almost completely empty; everyone couldn't stand it any more. And I too, I mean children on the whole don't get...you know, they are frightened for a moment and then it's over. But I mean I was a bit older by then, I had a very bad experience because one day, it was a Saturday afternoon and I was doing something. And my mother said: 'Come into the hall, there is a rocket overhead.' And I said, 'Nonsense, it's just a bus.' Because we were on a bus route, there was a rumbling noise and the building shook a bit. And she just dragged me into the hall; we always went into the hall because there was no glass there. And then it hit a house a few yards away and all the glass fell out. In our flat you couldn't actually hear it, it was that close. There was a suction and all the curtains were sucked out of the windows even though the windows were shut and all the windows opposite fell out; in the shops opposite all the windows fell out. Then I lost my nerve. I spent half my leisure time sitting in the hall with a book. That was scary and I think a lot of people lost their nerve because there was no warning; there was nothing you could do. And there would be other times when I'd be out and I suddenly heard a huge explosion, a mile away. So once France was, when the invasion got far enough for that to stop, that's really when...big relief. So really, how did we get on to this?

BL: You said that your father also took part in the invasion-

**Tape 2: 42 minutes 58 seconds**

EF: Yeah, I was told that there had been a sort of guarantee that German Jews would never get into the frontline because they would obviously be shot immediately. And my father didn't change his name. My uncle changed his name, I don't know, he might even have been naturalised because he'd been here for several years, and he was in a British unit. But my father, having driven a lorry, landed in Normandy about ten days after D-Day, obviously carrying supplies. And then he went all the way to Germany. And in Germany, he was a translator. He was having to interview Bürgermeisters and stuff like that. And he said, he needed two bodyguards. I think because people knew that he wasn't British, I mean he only had to open his mouth for that to be obvious. There was such hostility. It sounds crazy that Germans should regard German Jews as traitors; it's ultimate irony really. So he went all the way through Germany, landed if I remember rightly actually in Berlin with the Allies. And then, when he came back to Britain, he was demobbed fairly early, in 1946, because he was quite old to be a soldier. He was about 40, which was old for a soldier and never set foot in Germany again, said he never would and he never did. My mother did. My mother had surviving relatives and went back a few times while they were still alive. My father not. He completely set his face against Germany. He'd talk about it, the old days. He told me about Max Schmeling or the great whatever. But go – no. He said: 'As far as I'm concerned, unless I have proof to the contrary, I want to know what they did. Otherwise I....' That generation – finished.

BL: Did he ever meet his mother again?

**Tape 2: 45 minutes 21 seconds**

EF: No, because she died in Sweden. She died. What was very sad was she came to Sweden in June 1944, died in September. When her luggage came, I saw her passport photo before my father tore it up, and she looked about 100, she looked terrible. And my father always thought what was really sad was when her letters came through, she wrote to my father and said: 'If only I knew what happened to Margaret and the kids.' Because my father's sister had emigrated to Paris with her family, she had two sons. If she'd only lived another month she would have known they were alright. Because when my father got to Paris with the British Army, he went to my aunt's concierge and asked the concierge after his sister, who was at first very suspicious what was he asking. And the concierge, when she understood he was Margaret's brother, said: 'Yes, they are OK; they are in the Dordogne.' They'd gone underground. In fact their apartment had been taken over by a Nazi officer, because it was very central Paris, you know. So there was always this sadness that if only she had lived a few more weeks she would have known that her daughter and her grandchildren were alright, whereas she died worrying about them. She also died very penitent from not having left because in her position she would have had no problem getting out of Germany. I mean, all her children had left. Lotte was the last to leave and she'd been living with her mother. Lotte was the last to leave; they'd all left, and yet, I suppose she thought nobody is going to touch her. I suppose a lot of elderly people felt: 'Well, we are not doing any harm to anybody; they are not taking anybody, why should they?' And in fact, my father had died by then. And, when I was researching, I asked my mother to show me what my grandmother had written to my father. I mean she gave me the letter that my grandmother had written to me, which I still have. But the first letter she wrote to my father from Stockholm, and, apart from saying that she was worried about Margaret and the children, she said: 'I feel terrible because all I did was add to your anxiety and you had enough of that.' And she obviously regretted not having obviously what was current advice, to get the hell out, and then she hadn't done it. And that just added to his problems really because we didn't know what was happening to her.

BL: How did she survive until 1944 in Berlin?

**Tape 2: 48 minutes 29 seconds**

EF: Well, she was hidden. I really don't know how except that I know what this...Landsberg, Frau Landsberg was her name, had said: 'I'm a friend'. And what I now researched on what happened, they were probably going to cafés, meeting, exchanging news and that. And she was a great Bridge player, so no doubt she and Frau Landsberg were playing Bridge somewhere. So I only know what we know from reading all the literature, how other people survived. I mean until I started doing the research I tended to imagine something like Anne Frank, sort of blocked up. Now I realised it wasn't like that at all. But my parents were always amazed that she got through because she was diabetic. They said: 'Well, how did she get insulin injections?' Because now, from the research I've done, I know that there were certain doctors who were known to help Jews and would get medicine to them. Other people would pretend to need it and then get the prescription filled in and then take it to some hidden Jew and this sort of stuff went on.

BL: And how did she get out in 1944?

EF: In style obviously, because she had 14 trunks! I mean, this was so, I mean this deal was done through this Swiss bank. And of course from what I know now of the Swiss is that



they were trying to help their Nazi pals, not trying to help Jews. Through a Swiss bank where my grandmother had an account, plus all these other Jews, to buy this shoe factory in Guatemala in return for safe conduct out of the country, which in this case was Sweden. I imagine the others also went to Sweden. And, as I say, when the war was over and the Red Cross finally wrote to him and said: 'We have your mother's leftover belongings here, what shall we do with them?' And when they arrived in England, there were suitcases and suitcases and suitcases. There were three pearl necklaces, she'd obviously had in mind one for Lotte, one for Margaret and one for my mother. Actually my mother had one, so I got that and I still have it. There was a coral necklace which was obviously meant for me, but I was already too old. You know, she'd forgotten I was no longer a little baby. I mean I still have that. I tried to re-thread it, so there was a coral necklace for me. There was stacks and stacks of brand new, unused linen. It was obvious that the Nazis who got her out ...you know... I mean and you'd think that Berlin shops by that time were pretty bare, but she managed to do quite a lot of shopping! It seems bizarre, I mean, completely bizarre.

BL: It means by then she must have come out of hiding and had some negotiations.

**Tape 2: 51 minutes 40 seconds**

EF: I mean obviously by that time she was officially allowed, she had a visa and safe conduct to go to Stockholm. That was all arranged by high-up Nazis. Because these people would all help themselves. If they had a buddy in Guatemala who wanted some hard currency, that's how they... you know... Conveniently, there were these wealthy Jews still alive who could pay for him to come back to defend the fatherland, which nobody wanted to do. And so in fact she clearly... instead of coming out with what we imagined would be one nightdress and a change of clothes may be, it was vast pounds of package; it was sort of unbelievable really.

BL: When did you find out what happened to your other grandparents?

EF: Only a few years ago. I mean, I knew they were dead. Once I'd seen the Belsen film that came out in the cinema, which I saw by myself; my mother sent me on my own, which was fairly traumatic, in April 1945. And she said: 'Go and see what they've done!' Again, it was like this anger, sort of, but anger at me, too. So I went to the Odeon cinema in Hendon and sat through this thing myself and came out in a state of total shock. I told the story to somebody and they said: 'I'm surprised they let you in.' I mean I was 12, just about to turn 13. April was my birthday. In fact, Belsen was liberated on my birthday, the 15<sup>th</sup>, so it would have just been after my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. And I came back and neither of us spoke for the rest of the day. I mean obviously my mother had already seen it. It's only having written about it; it's only in hindsight that I realised when people said: 'How could she do a thing like that, to her own child?' You know, if you want her to see it you take her, you don't send her on her own. So, as I say, I came out in a state of shock. I knew they were dead and I didn't know how. You know, you've probably heard this many times before, it was a taboo subject for years and years and years. People never spoke. You broached the subject in your family at your peril. And if you did, if you felt the moment was right, you were quite likely to get a lie. I very rarely dared to broach it and this went on for years.

**Tape 2: 54 minutes 34 seconds**

And on one occasion when I did ask my mother she said: 'Well, her father was killed in an air raid in Warsaw. I said: 'How does she know?' And my father said, he doesn't know. And I

knew, easily found out, that no German Jews had ever been sent to Warsaw. And another time she said: 'All I know is that they were separated.' And I thought this is wishful thinking, because by this time she blamed her stepmother for her father's death. You know, I told you that Omi Lenchen wasn't actually my real grandmother. And by this time...the reason was that Omi Lenchen apparently didn't want to leave Germany. What later transpired during another bust up was that Omi Lenchen had said: 'Well, if we come to England...' (because they weren't rich, you know, they were retired, middle class) had said: 'What are we going to do in London? Be Irma's *Kindermädchen*?' You know, what else? 'What are we supposed to do there?' And I suppose like other elderly people they thought: 'Well, what can they do to us?' So this went on for years. And I did wonder sometimes: is my mother really not knowing, are these fantasies? And I thought it's also very strange, because for a while she worked in Bloomsbury House, you know, which was a search bureau. Because she had German and, by that time, she taught herself, taken lessons shorthand writing so that she could do office work, and she worked in Bloomsbury House. So if anyone was in a position to find out what had happened to her father and her stepmother, she was. She probably didn't know, I don't know. But, when she died, I felt I had a duty to find out, I really did. And when the past began to catch up on me, when I turned 65, I began to have a real problem with it. I was thinking about nothing else. I was having tears; I was crying, any mention of the subject and I was in tears. And I never cried in 1945. I mean nobody did. I mean we were sort of frozen.

## **Tape 2: 57 minutes 8 seconds**

And then I joined as a sort of associate of...Berlin runs an office for Jewish refugees where they send you mailing lists and invite you over for one visit. And I decided: well, if I'm having this emotional crisis, I'm a writer, I'd better write about it. So it's now time to take the official invitation. I'd been there many times, to Berlin, but I'd never done the official visit. And I thought I'd better do this official visit. And oddly enough, Orlando was going to give a lecture. He was leaving a day before me to go to Jerusalem where he was due to give a lecture and we were talking about this, that I was flying to Berlin. My daughter-in-law is very sensitive to other people's emotion, much more than Orlando is. She said, 'Would you like Orlando to do it for you?' And I'd been waiting for somebody to say that and I said yes. And I gave Orlando all the material I had, names, rough dates of birth, where they were born. My grandfather was actually born in Hamburg. And he went off with the information. And, a day later, I got on the plane to go to Berlin and when I was up in the air I thought; 'Eva, you have got to do this yourself. This is why you are going. Just grit your teeth, do it!' And so I found myself in this huge group, 200 people, because you were allowed to take a relative, so there were nearly 200 people, half of whom were refugees. And it was actually tremendously helpful. They organised a huge programme, some of which was optional which you didn't have to do. I mean some of it was very serious stuff, or political, other of it was just entertainment, going to the opera and that sort of thing, receptions and so on. We were all given an information file on...with tickets in it, programme, addresses, contact addresses you might need. And everyone had an interview with a couple of women who talked to you. And when I went in they gave me this file and she said: 'Anything you want to know?' And I said: 'You murdered my grandparents and I want to know where and when.' They were obviously used to this. I mean they didn't take offence or anything because they were your generation and they'd been doing this professionally for a long time. And she said: 'Well, there is a memorial book and it's coming to the hotel on Sunday. But if you want to do it yourself, you go to the Jewish Centre on Fasanenstraße. Is there anything on the programme you don't want to do?' And I said, 'You go to the Weißensee cemetery and as far as I know I don't know anybody who's buried there, so....' So she said: 'They've got the memorial book at the

Fasanenstraße, so if you want to do it on your own...' I know all the addresses were kept there.

BL: I need to stop you here, we have to change tapes.

**Tape 2: 60 minutes 36 seconds**

**TAPE 3**

BL: This is Tape 3, we are conducting an interview with Ms Eva Figes. You were talking about your visit in Berlin.

EF: Yes. So she gave me the address on the Fasanenstraße and I went there on my own, I wanted to do it that way anyway. It is a library now there where the old synagogue used to be. And there was a young girl behind the desk and I told her what I wanted, and the memorial book was actually on the counter of the desk, so it was obviously a very important reason the library was there; it was obviously the main request. So I went and sat down at a desk and I found both their names within five minutes; it was very easy. And I went back to the girl at the desk and said: 'Can you photocopy these two pages for me?', which she did. She was looking increasingly upset as she did it. By the time I was out of the main entrance hall I was starting to cry. I then took myself straight off to the new Gedächtniskirche, which I think is a beautiful building, all blue glass, and I sat in there for about an hour crying. And that was sort of it.

BL: What did it say in the entrance?

EF: Well, it said they were deported to somewhere, Travniki, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1942. This puzzled me because I'd never heard of Travniki. And there was a rather nice woman called Brigitte who was one of the helpers for the group. And I had another look at it when the book arrived at the hotel on Sunday and I saw quite a lot of tears being shed. We got quite friendly with her; she was an intelligent woman, and I said, 'I don't understand it because it says 'verschollen', you know, *Todesort* it said 'Travniki'. And she said: 'Look at the back of it when you see the book again', because it gave definitions of all the different camps. 'Travniki is listed as a transit camp, so this doesn't make sense to me.' And it still didn't make sense to me. It may be the last place that there are any records, but this doesn't mean that they were killed there. Somebody gave me Martin Gilbert's address and I wrote to him and he was extremely kind and helpful. He sent me photocopies of all his reference books with underlinings of any mention of Travniki. But he also gave me the address of a Holocaust historian, British, who is based in Poland. And he said, 'Write to him and say it's at my recommendation and ask him.'

**Tape 3: 3 minutes 18 seconds**

So I wrote to this guy and he wrote back and he had given me transport numbers and dates and everything and so on, which I did. And then he wrote back to me. He was actually tremendously... he sent me colour photographs of Travniki, maps and all sorts of stuff. But he wrote me a letter, which I found horribly upsetting. He said: 'Travniki was a *Durchgangslager*. Your grandparents would not have been there very long and they were almost certainly gassed at Belzec because people went on from there.' And that was another time I broke down because I think that was sort of... Because when you don't know, you imagine all kinds of ways of dying and you are trying to think of the most acceptable way of

dying. And this isn't. I suppose this is the most horrible. The quickest I suppose, but the most horrible. I spent the whole day wandering around Hampstead in tears. And ended up at the greengrocer and bought a bunch of white tulips which now, whenever I buy white tulips it's for them somehow. But it did make sense of certain things. I then I realised when my mother said, she'd had one letter - I mean they weren't letters they sent, they were filled in forms and sometimes, as I discovered, they were sent after the people were already dead - that my grandfather, the one missive, let's call it that, that my grandfather sent, my grandmother had been sent on somewhere else. Now I always thought that was my mother possibly lying, you know, because she hated my grandmother. I then realised it made complete sense. It meant that my grandmother was shipped off to Belzec to be gassed first. He probably followed afterwards if something else didn't happen. So it suddenly all fitted. I'd always imagined my grandfather putting up some act of defiance. My favourite fantasy was that he showed some sort of defiance and got himself shot. That was my favourite ending for him. And oddly enough, although he probably didn't get shot, I did find some confirmation of how he behaved at the end. Because when I was in Berlin I discovered from sort of talk going around that when the Jews were deported they had to sign away their final possessions to legalise it. The German sense of law is wonderful! Every last possession, to every last lamp bulb or whatever, they all had to be signed away to the state.

### **Tape 3: 6 minutes 52 seconds**

And the East archives were never destroyed; they are still there. I didn't have time to go to them while I was there, but when I got back to England I got the address and I wrote and said: 'I would like the final, whatever it's called, any documents you have on the deportation of Emil and Ella Cohen, this and that address, deported on such and such a date.' And back came the Photostat of this form, typed... Interestingly enough, I knew that they'd been hounded out of their own apartment, so I then had the address where they ended up, which was in Friedenau. And I looked that up and in fact the woman they lodged with was also deported later. But it gave their final address, all neatly typed at the top. And there was both their names and so on, address and so on, transport number, and then itemised down to the last Pfennig of what they left behind, the valuables, the evaluation of what was left behind. But there was one inkblot at the top. Now all this was done in a very efficient and tidy way, and I couldn't understand this inkblot at the top. So I held it up against the light. And you know what my grandfather had done? Where it said 'Cohen, Emil, Israel', he had stroked out 'Israel', and that was under the inkblot. I was so...I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, I think I did both at the time; 'That's my grandfather.' You know, he wouldn't have that: 'I'm not Israel!' And it was an extraordinary moment, it was as though he'd done it for me and I got there, after it took me fifty years, but I got there! And it's funny what an, you know, even a small child has a very instinct, intuitive feeling what a person is like. And that's how I saw my grandfather. He was always very upright, walked very upright. He was always very well-, very smartly dressed, good-quality coat, gold watch chain, spats; old men wore spats in those days. And I could just see him doing this. I mean, just as I could see him possibly standing up to a camp guard and getting himself shot. And he did that. I mean I was proud of him. I was pleased that I found it.

### **Tape 3: 9 minutes 41 seconds**

BL: When did you find, first of all, the first information, and the second, when did you find out?

EF: This was, when was the visit to Berlin? I can't tell exactly, it was sometime mid-1990s.

BL: So fairly recent.

EF: It's fairly recent. As I say it's only around the age of 65 I suddenly found I was being haunted by the past and I had to handle it, had to deal with it. Having done it and come through the other side, I realised everyone talks about closure, closure, and I suddenly realised there is no closure. And in fact what is required is opening up. And most of us haven't opened up to this at all; we've shut it away, you know, as unbearable. We've shut the door. And you have to open up to it as your only salvation that there actually is. I mean the grief will never go away, but at least the bitterness goes and some sort of... it's the nearest you get to peace is to have worked through that. It's necessary in that the guilt goes, you know, because the survivor guilt as they say... I mean, I certainly when I found out what had happened at the end of the war, I felt terribly guilty. I kept thinking: 'I've left them behind with that. I left them!' And of course I was a child of six, but I had dreams for years about Tempelhof airport, sitting in that aeroplane, with that little group of people at the edge of a field. And I didn't understand at the time what it meant, I just... So it's something you sort of have to do. And, as I say, people talk about closure, but I still don't know... In fact the mother of a friend of my son's, who's actually a volunteer at the Wiener Library, she's sort of... I've bumped into her once or twice and in fact, years ago when our sons were friends..., She lives in Belsize Park and I had dinner with her one night, and I bumped into her, I think it was at the Wiener Library when I was going through all this. Must have been that Holocaust evening, because they had a lot of people there and so on and she was there.

### **Tape 3: 12 minutes 47 seconds**

And I said: 'I've been doing my research, I found out.', and she said, 'I haven't opened my Pandora's Box yet.' And as far as I know she still hasn't. Well, as somebody else said to me who also has a whole history, she also said: 'It's just when you're ready to do it.' I suppose you can't do it until you are ready to cope with it and feel it's necessary.

BL: What happened to your life after the war?

EF: Well, I did an English degree, didn't do a lot of work. I mean I knew I wanted to be a writer and I didn't like the whole academic scene. My parents who weren't used to having anyone... I mean the idea of having a girl going to university! I got a state scholarship so the argument stopped, because my father was... I adored him, but he was terribly patriarchal. And my mother thought I should get married and have children; and if I managed to work on the side, fine, but marriage was really the thing. And really, after Finals I had a gigantic row with my mother. I suppose, I mean they stopped when my father was home because we all had to behave ourselves, but that was one of the occasions when we both lost it. And in fact I was celebrating the end of finals with a friend and I asked... she'd missed her last train and I said: 'Well, come and sleep in our spare room.' And we'd come and woke her up! And the next morning she was absolutely beside herself with rage. Now that I'm getting some of that myself I'm more sympathetic to that, but on the other hand there was one hell of a slanging match and my father played the heavy father and made life so impossible for me that I packed up and left. As a result of that, I met my future husband a few days later which I wouldn't otherwise have done. And within a week I'd got myself engaged to him! You know, one thing leads to another. And a year later we were married. I was by now quite ill and I developed very severe eczema, which was one of the reasons that I went through with the marriage

because I needed someone to look after me, and he was willing to do that, estranged from my parents. And my parents actually felt that maybe this is all Hitler's doing, a kind of nervous reaction. And in fact, so I ended up having about three years of psychoanalysis at my father's expense.

**Tape 3: 15 minutes 50 seconds**

Because dermatologists were two types: the physical type who injected you with all sorts of ghastly things nobody would inject you now. And there was a psychological type who would send you to a therapist, and if that didn't work, full scale analysis. So I ended up full-scale analysis, which didn't do anything for me. And then I went to a physician who recommended steroids, which got my life back on track. I then had two children. And my marriage got increasingly rocky, so by the age of 30 I was divorced with two kids. Moved in here on a 5-year lease and 42 years later I'm still here. And worked in publishing. Started to write, also because I needed the money badly as you can imagine, as a single mum with two kids. Did quite a lot of translating in spare hours, at night or whatever, to bring in extra money. Started writing and my first attempt actually caused another gigantic row with my mother. Because my first attempt of writing...I used to write poetry as a student, and then I decided it was not for me and why couldn't prose be poetry, too. If it didn't 100% succeed, it's less of a disaster. If a poem doesn't succeed, it's a complete disaster, but you know, prose you can...is more adaptable, is more forgiving. So my first attempt was just... not trying to invent anything, but early memories and sort of fragmented, which my parents asked to read out of curiosity. And my mother read it and had one of these spontaneous outbursts that came from her. Because it was full of my wonderful grandparents. And she said, 'You don't know what your grandmother was like; she was an absolute monster!' That sort of thing was liable to happen.

**Tape 3: 18 minutes 20 seconds**

I only had to show some sort of affection for Omi Lenchen and that would, was liable to be the result. Anyway, then I had a first book published in 1966. Freelance work wasn't enough so I got myself a job in publishing which was fairly easygoing, in other words it wasn't too much like hard work. They didn't mind having a woman because I'd promised I wasn't having any more babies, because in those days, you know, women who were liable to have babies were never taken on by anybody. But as I said, I've been through one divorce and I'm certainly not having another, so they took me on.

BL: With what publishing house?

EF: They don't exist anymore. I did sort of nine months at Weidenfeld, but I had to leave there because the man who had the job initially wanted to come back and they chose to kick me out and have him back. Wasn't a very nice thing to do, but they offered me a bit of freelance work and I think I did...I made quite a lot of, while I was sort of having babies, quite a lot of... even from one of the jobs I'd had before my first child was born, as a publisher's reader, you know, kind of stuff, and also reading German and French stuff that came in. Because a) I found it quite interesting and it was another bit of money, and in fact I discovered Günter Grass and they turned him down! I translated Martin Walser, whom I discovered. Martin Walser wrote to us and said: 'There's this book coming out by someone called Grass and it's called *Blechtrommel* and you should really try and get it.' And I got a proof copy and I didn't even finish it and I said: 'Get it! This is a book from Germany we've all been waiting for!' Obviously something sometime had to come. And they didn't, and of course they regretted it. But, so I did that sort of thing. And my second book came out in 1967 and I knew it was much better than the first one. I got a small Arts Council grant, but my

father, who by this time didn't think I was mad to want to be a writer, who was now suddenly very proud of me, gave me £ 1,000 (because I wanted to stop working in publishing. I wanted to go freelance and take a chance), which I never spent, I stuck it in a building society and it stayed there, but it made you feel safe. And then I gave in my notice to Blackie, which was a...They were nice people, but it was undemanding; it was quite obvious that the place was going to shut down and I was bored half the time. And I gave my notice in there and I hardly had done so and then the Guardian said: 'You got the Guardian Fiction Prize!' and I thought, 'Oh, this is good; this is the right time to leave.'

**Tape 3: 21 minutes 34 seconds**

So that was a sort of good time; I felt I could sort of manage. So that was really the start of my life as a freelancer. I gave up the translations and stuff Yes, I did give up the translations, and was able to manage from then on really. And that's really it.

BL: How many books have you written?

EF: I think I've lost count, but I think it's sort of 18 or 19, something like that. Quite honestly, I have lost count because, I think it's about 13 novels and 5 non-fiction books, 6 if you count the present one, something like that. Seems like an awful long journey, because the funny thing that happens is you tend to remember why you wrote a book, but you don't actually remember the actual text. When I was younger and I saw older writers interviewed I was very shocked that they couldn't remember the names of their characters or the plots. Now I can understand it completely because I know what motivated me to write a particular book at a particular time. But quite often I have no idea and if somebody comes to interview me about a certain book I thought: 'What are they talking about?' It's sort of a strange process really.

BL: What was your main motivation when you stated writing? What were the topics you were drawn to?

EF: Well, I think, like I said before, I think just the use of language was...I mean, wanting to use language. My first love was poetry and then I realised that this was fizzling out on me and I wasn't really interested. I felt, I think rightly, that extended poetry seems no longer possible. I mean T.S. Elliot, whom I hugely admired, was really the last person in the *Four Quartets* who'd ever produced anything that was [of] any scale. And I just thought I don't want to spend the rest of my life writing six lines on this and eight lines on that. And I began to think that in fact why can't prose do the same thing? So that was my main interest, was really in writing. I wasn't very interested in plot. I was interested in people's emotional and interior lives.

**Tape 3: 24 minutes 53 seconds**

And using prose in a way that got the essence of that inner existence. I don't mean flowery language, I mean in some simplified way that was at the same time poetic. I mean sometimes, over a long career, when you've written twenty books, you diverge because you get interested in something else and you write a book on it. And it's not your favourite book or your best book, but it was fun to do at the time, interesting to do at the time. So that inevitably happens. But I think that was sort of my main motivation. Time passing, death, that sort of thing. I suppose Kafka was a huge eye opener for me. Because when I was at school and even at my days at college I sort of divided fiction and poetry as two different...and I was interested in

the poetry. I read fiction, but I wasn't interested in following that route at all. And then, it was actually after I graduated, I began to read Kafka and it just blew the top of my head off. I suddenly realised: here is a whole different way to go, you know. Doesn't mean to say I'm going to be Kafkaesque, but I suddenly realised everything was open in a way that I hadn't before...So that was a sort of great excitement. And I was also interested in theatre. I did think that at one time I might write for the theatre. And I think if my first job, which had to be any old job after I left university, had been in theatre, then I might have continued writing for the theatre. But I think you actually have to work backstage in some form or other to do that well. You know, I mean Shakespeare after all worked in the theatre, Pinter worked in the theatre. You know, to get the feel of what works and what doesn't work at that very basic level I think you do and I didn't and so it simply didn't follow.

**Tape 3: 27 minutes 37 seconds**

BL: Do you see yourself in a particular tradition as a writer?

EF: Well, other people do. But, I mean I'm often compared to Virginia Woolf and that is sort of ironic. In a way I can see why. When I was young I was terribly aware of that there were very few top notch women writers, and she was clearly it. And I didn't want to, you know, find myself imitating her or being compared to her, so in fact for something like 20 years, I wouldn't even read her.

[Small pause]

BL: Which tradition do you see yourself in?

EF: Well, as I say, I'm often...I don't see myself in any particular tradition, because what one feels as a young person: I want to go out in a white blue yonder where nobody else had been, you know, that's the sort of feeling. And I often get compared to Virginia Woolf now and in fact I avoided reading her for 20 years exactly because I didn't want to be influenced by her, because I was terribly aware that she was one of the very few women writers that were worth looking up to. I mean then, at a certain stage, I discovered I could read her because I was now my own woman. I wasn't going to be influenced in a way that I would otherwise be influenced. If I wanted to pinch an idea from her I'd just pinch it, you know, that's what Auden said: 'Good writers steal, bad writers imitate'. And I'm not going to imitate anyone, so that's not in question. So I could then go back and look at stuff she'd done without sort of any fear of not being me. But I mean I suppose when you want to do something avant-garde, you get ideas. I said Kafka blew my head open without my want...even dreaming of writing another *Metamorphosis* or something. But then you start to get ideas from other things you read. I remember reading Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, and realising that gave one all sorts of technical ideas of how things could be done.

**Tape 3: 30 minutes 31 seconds**

And you can also get ideas from music I find. My second book was called *Winter Journey* and I actually got the basic form idea from *Winterreise*. Nobody spotted it, but I did. So you sort of pick up hints of more technical possibilities rather than...I mean after all only you can decide what you want to say. But the way the technique is saying certain things you can pick up ideas in all sorts of places and you sort of do.

BL: How would you describe yourself in terms of the identity as a writer?



EF: I think I am a European writer writing English. I mean all my influences have come from Europe really. I mean during those years reading for publishers I not only read German, I read a lot of French writers. And French writers in the 1950s and 1960s were doing very interesting stuff. A lot of it I now would think is pretty arid. They were playing around with a novel form, 'le nouveau roman' and stuff like that. Whereas in England it was terribly cosy, old-fashioned, you know, 'the Hampstead novel'. That has changed in recent years, partly because of stuff like magic realism and ethnic writing. But when I was starting in the 1960s, the byword...the people like Margaret Drabble, you know, the idea of anything... and if you were labelled avant-garde, then you were really kind of almost a figure of fun, you know, somebody on the sidelines and stuff like that. And also my concerns are more European. I mean until now I haven't written about my German Jewish experience, I have in fact hidden it. It's usually there, but it's sort of hidden in disguise. But nevertheless, I think both in form, the sort of form that I use, because form I think is very important to me, the shape of the thing, and my value system, too, is European. The English, it's changing, but the English are regarded as a very complacent nation, everything is sort of cosy here, you know. I remember once writing an article about the country hasn't been invaded since 1066 and I mean they simply don't get sort of to grips with it all because they hadn't had to. And so I do feel that I'm essentially a European writer who happens to be writing in English.

**Tape 3: 33 minutes 50 seconds**

BL: So you were not part of a sort of writing group?

EF: Well yes I was, a very long time ago, when I started. In fact it all came back to me last year when they published a biography of him and I reviewed it. There was a writer, about my sort of generation, called B.S. Johnson,. You know about Brian Johnson? And he was wonderful at getting publicity. And he was publishing...he was playing around with a novel and doing things like publishing books where there was a hole in the middle or the pages were loose-leaved. And he had a feeling, his mantra really, was telling stories is telling lies, so you always have to tell the truth, in other words, everything is basically autobiographical. And although I think for everyone who takes their craft seriously, the whole business telling stories, you have to ask yourself certain questions. You know: 'Is this a valid thing to do and why? And so on. But he took this to the ultimate. And there was a small group of us who had the same feeling. We were very much part of a group at that stage. There was Brian, who was definitely the...because he was a great self-publicist and none of us could get on telly. He was always on television because he had a book with a hole in it, and publishers hated him because he was different. He was expensive in production and so on. But he was a great self-publicist and got a lot of attention, so he was very much the ringleader. And he was also very much into...Authors are very badly paid and ripped off by their publishers, which in those days they were. So there was him and a young writer, my sort of age, called Anne Quinn, and another writer called Alan Burns. And we formed a sort of group. And it all sort of went...rather sadly fell apart. Brian Johnson and Anne both committed suicide within three months of each other, for different reasons I think. Alan went to America and sort of sold out, really, and could never get mainstream publishing. So I felt of that group I was the only survivor, which was rather sad at the time, I felt rather isolated. But then I had to tell myself, yes, but I'm also the only one who's been successful, really. It did strike me that some of them went to. Ann had a history...she was a gifted writer actually and I think we had most in common.

**Tape 3: 36 minutes 50 seconds**

You know, sometimes if I read some of her stuff it's a little bit like my early stuff. But she had a long history of schizophrenic breakdowns and had tried suicide as a teenager and stuff. And Brian was a very aggressive character whose marriage fell apart, so he killed himself. Oddly enough, Jonathan Coe has written this very, very comprehensive biography, which came out last year, and I reviewed it and it was like my whole past coming back. It was extraordinary to read all this is history, because it was my news, really.

BL: When was this group in existence?

EF: In the 1960s. Brian and Anne both killed themselves in 1973, so that is really when it all came to an end. And very much he was the linchpin that held us all together. And it was very strange when last year they gave a big launch party for the book which I reviewed for the Guardian and all these ghosts from the pasts coming together. Even close friends of Brian who'd come over from America especially and all this kind of thing. And Brian's widow remarried and sort of stuff. It was all very strange. I mean I was pleased in a way that a much younger writer should find him sufficiently interesting to spend years and years researching this book. Because, apparently, Brian did take himself very seriously and in fact he kept a huge archive which his widow still had in his house: every letter he wrote, every memo, there was copies of absolutely everything! I don't keep my letters, you know. So Jonathan had a lot to work with.

### **Tape 3: 39 minutes 6 seconds**

BL: But speaking of the past, you wrote one sort of autobiographical novel of your grandparents, I mean which has autobiographical elements.

EF: No, I haven't. Did you have something in mind?

BL: Yeah.

EF: I quite like it when people don't know how to categorise *Tales of Innocence and Experience*. I mean I think actually it's sort of an essay really because it's about the whole... It is obviously very personal, I mean, the memories of my grandparents are personal. Most of the incidents with the grandchildren actually happened, not only one, because sometimes you make one up to fit. And my children read it and they don't know how to handle it at all they say, because for them it's all gospel truth, they recognise... They can't sort of categorise it at all. And in fact I had a new editor for this book and, when I first went to see him, he said how much he liked it and he wanted to do it. He said: 'Well, what will you call this?' And we both agreed actually it was really an essay on innocence and experience. But of course that's the biggest turn off you can imagine, to publish something as an essay. I think maybe I created a new art form. Because what happened was I tried to write a memoir about my grandparents and it was just another memoir of which many, many had been published, both about publishers and privately, and it was not fun to read and no fun to write and nobody seemed to think there was a market for it. And my agent was still trying when I suddenly rang her up and said: 'Hang on, don't do anything with it. I think I've got the answer.' I can't remember exactly how it happened, but I knew I suddenly thought I'd opened this up with all these other things, fairytales, and my grandchildren; it's going to work. And in fact my daughter said it's the best thing I've ever written, I don't agree with that. But I certainly think it works. And I know a lot of people actually love it. And not just to a refugee. My editor said this would happen, and it didn't occur to me then. He said: 'Grandmothers will love it.' And it's true,

because in fact people write about parents and children; they write about men and women's relationships, but grandmotherhood is a relationship they don't write about. And, in fact, if we live long enough and are lucky enough to experience it, it is one of the most wonderful relationships life has to offer. And, in fact, over and over again I get told: 'Oh I bought it for so and so...', because grandmothers give it to each other and this sort of stuff.

**Tape 3: 42 minutes 35 seconds**

And of course, I mean it had a validity because... I mean somebody else had been trying to write her memoir, a Polish refugee who, when she read it, said: 'What a clever idea to do it from now.' And I think it's partly because once you start relating to grandchildren it brings back your own memory as a grandchild, because things will repeat themselves. And that relationship brings it back so vividly. And of course grandchildren also ask questions and you do the same sort of thing with them as your grandmother did with you. And I also found it quite a therapeutic experience because I realised I'm getting towards the end of my life. This is actually not a sad book. You don't think it's a sad book, do you? It's not a sad book. And I remember saying to my agent, we were having lunch, I said: 'You know, I have this feeling now' - you know, I was getting towards the end of the work, 'that I've got my grandmother sitting on my shoulder and saying: 'It's alright. It's all alright.' I mean I had this sort of feeling that she was... I mean I don't believe in the afterlife, but I had this feeling she was watching me. She was here. And I suppose it has to do with partly experience repeating itself and partly the knowledge that your own time is drawing to its close and therefore... I mean as far as other people, I mean I don't think we'll be together, but in a sense everyone is together. Why not? It's strange; it's the whole business of... And also I think the fact of another generation has a healing effect. I remember when my eldest granddaughter started doing German lessons and she found it very difficult and Kate used to send her over on Saturday mornings for me to do a bit of coaching. And I'd take her out in the afternoon for a treat, like going to the theatre. We were going down the road and she said: 'Mum says you only just got out of Germany by the skin of your teeth.' And I said: 'That's true.' And she said: 'It's funny, you know, none of us would be here if it weren't for that, you know.' And I thought, well, that's a happy thought. It's a positive thought.

**Tape 3: 45 minutes 32 seconds**

And then, a little later, I met a survivor of the death camps, a musician. You probably have heard of her, Anita Lasker-Walfisch – I keep remembering Lasker-Schüler. And she gave me a lift home and she said: 'You know, my grandson said to me: 'If you hadn't survived I wouldn't be here.' And I said: 'My granddaughter said the same thing!' And we obviously both found this tremendous sense of a positive outcome in that because we no longer had to feel guilty about being alive, about having survived and abandoned whoever we did and so on. I don't know whether she did, but I'm sure she does. But that there was a positive outcome, because there were not only my children, but theirs, you know, my children's children are here and leading happy lives and are well-rooted in this country. And to them my background is just something very, slightly exotic. One granddaughter who identifies very strongly with me is actually determined to learn German for, I think, largely for my benefit.

BL: But for me, this book in a way links to your experience very strongly, about a child being not told and not telling.

EF: Yes.

BL: So this is the next question: What impact you think did your refugee experience have on your life?

EF: Oh, it's permanent, I think. I mean you think it's getting further away, but it doesn't. In fact, one of the books I'm dealing with at the moment is the whole question of identity, because that relates to the story of the housemaid.

BL: Tell us about it.

EF: I'm telling the story of a Jewish housemaid we had in Berlin who was hidden during the war. Went to Palestine, couldn't hack it there at all, felt, as she said, everyone hates everyone else, and then came to us. But of course it enables me at the same time to tell my own story as it was, as somebody who is now a naturalised British subject, postwar England, what was my identity. And in fact in the last few days I've been writing...because I realised suddenly this is the key question for the whole book: What was my sense of identity?

**Tape 3: 48 minutes 12 seconds**

And in fact, you never ever lose it. And I think, I mean obviously your whole value system is created by that sort of background. I mean books have been written about the second generation and so on, and I sort of remember, and I could be, I mean I was a good mother, but I could be quite a tough mother. You know, when we divorced and my daughter would say: 'I wanna see my Daddy', and I said: 'Don't be silly, you will see him at the weekend. I didn't see my father for six years!' You know, sort of stuff: 'You think you've got it hard!' you know, that sort of thing. So there is that that you have a whole different yardstick with which to measure how good life is or how bad it is. The whole Jewish thing is for me complicated because in fact I'm a secular Jew. And most of the British Jews you meet aren't. So they act sort of quite shocked that you don't keep the high holidays and this kind of stuff. 'And you've been baptised?!' You know this sort of stuff. I hardly dare tell them that, you know, because the fact that it was to me just a phase I was going through in childhood and adolescence, partly wanting to be like everybody else, but also buying into the story, because it's an attractive story.

BL: So obviously you were baptised in England?

EF: I was baptised. And I remember at a party with Tom Rosenthal and Andrew Franklin, a publisher, were there, and they were talking about something to do with Judaism or something, and I came in, butted in and said: 'I got baptised as a child because I wanted to be like everybody else.' And Andrew looked at me and said: 'It didn't work, did it?' No. You are never like everybody else. I mean there is always a bit of you that is different and that is shocked... I mean I can be quite shocked for instance when somebody like Angela Carter or Alan Bennett gets flippant about Kafka. Because to me Kafka represents..., I mean apart from his literary quality, he represents everything that's been most traumatic in the history of Jewry. And that they can treat him as a funny joke I just find offensive. I mean that runs very deep. I remember Angela somewhere writing or saying: 'If only Kafka had been fat, everything would be different.' I thought: 'You just don't know where you are'. I mean I just find that shocking. I really do find it shocking, that sort of total lack of actually sort of sensibility. So there are certain things that I find offensive, which even quite cultivated English people wouldn't find offensive. That can happen quite easily.

**Tape 3: 51 minutes 39 seconds**

And as I say the Jewish thing is a problem because if you meet Jews here, they are terribly different. They come from Eastern Europe mostly, third generation, and they keep the holidays and have Bar Mitzvahs for their children and all that kind of stuff.

BL: How did you raise your children?

EF: Well I found that quite hard because, as I say, I'd lost any vestige of Christianity by the time they were born. I suppose by the time I was twenty I'd sort of...My husband was sort of vaguely religious and we used to occasionally go, at Easter or whenever you go to church, but that had all worn off. And basically, when my children were born I had them baptised just because I thought well it's like inoculation - if they chose to believe they've had the water put on them. They don't believe...the bit of water won't make any difference to them anyway, because I knew...I had a chip on my shoulder as a child because I was sort of, as far as the other children were concerned, I was a sort of heathen. I didn't know what was going on when I first went to an English school. I have to admit when I first heard about Jesus I thought he was a cat! Because at first, having seen these children praying and having no idea of the Lord's Prayer, what was going on, why are they doing this, shutting their eyes or pretending to shut their eyes? And then the first Christmas came along and we all sang *Away in a manger*, you know, 'the stars in the bright sky'. And I saw this comic; there was a comic which had a black cat character and he was in a hammock with stars above him and I thought: 'Ah, Jesus is a cat!' Felt very bad about that later. So I had them baptised. I thought: 'Well, if it matters to them it's done. If it doesn't matter then they won't care anyway.' And at the time all English schools were...state education, it was Christian...in fact a lot of intellectuals were protesting about it at the time, but religious education meaning Christian education was part of it still; it had been in my childhood. So I worried what to do and they went to the primary school up the road. And, after about three days, Orlando says: 'The teacher says there is a God, but she's lying, isn't she?' So I thought: 'I don't think I have anything to worry about here.' And sort of left it at that. And both of my kids are firmly atheist.

**Tape 3: 54 minutes 37 seconds**

My daughter's mother-in-law is the daughter of a bishop actually, so she's quite horrified that Kate would refuse to have her children baptised, but she had to put up with it. They were married in a registry office. My daughter-in-law is slightly more ambiguous; she had her own Catholic upbringing. And I found out that the twins had been baptised while her mother was over here in the Catholic Church, but Orlando had stayed away. And when I heard: 'Why, you didn't want to go, did you?', I said, 'No.'. I was just sort of surprised, you know, and I can never really pin down Stephanie on how far her belief goes. It is clearly somehow important to her because it's important to her mother, you know, whatever. But so far I've seen no sign of any sort of religion in any grandchildren.

BL: Do you feel you have transmitted part of your German Jewish heritage to your children?

EF: Oh yes, because I remember when my children were growing up my parents were still around. So they were used to the way my parents did things. They were used to going there on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day; they were used to having Stollen at Christmas and they still do eat Stollen at Christmas, and all that kind of stuff they have actually carried on. I mean I can't imagine my daughter's household without Stollen. I mean that is something they just inherited through their grandparents. So there is something of that. I don't know how far

it goes. I think it's probably one of the reasons I didn't educate... because I realised I hardly ever talked to my own children about it. It's probably because my parents were still alive, and anything they wanted to know they could get from them. And it's only now with grandchildren that I start getting questions.

**Tape 3: 57 minutes 3 seconds**

BL: For you, what is the most important part of that heritage, of your heritage?

EF: It's so central, it's hard to... I think the most important part is realising what the world is really like. And having a very realistic... well I can say a very realistic world of a view [sic]. You know, genocide, murder, atrocity don't surprise me – I expect them. And I know too, because I'm intelligent and I read and I think, that all human beings are capable of just about anything, given the right circumstances. So I think I probably have a more pessimistic, but probably more realistic view of the world. I mean one of the writers I most admire is Samuel Beckett. I do see things very starkly. But on the other hand you appreciate the nice bits more perhaps. I now begin to think actually I'm in some ways... I mean every life is a mixture of good and bad, but I now think I'm quite fortunate. I'm beginning to feel that I'm quite fortunate to have what you might call a double heritage.

BL: I need to stop you here.

EF: Yes, I can see you are looking at your watch.

**Tape 3: 59 minutes 23 seconds**

**TAPE 4**

BL: This is Tape 4, we are conducting an interview with Ms Eva Figes. Double heritage.

EF: Yes. I'm really only becoming more aware of that now I think, whereas perhaps before I thought of myself split rather than... But lately I found myself getting much, much more interested in German history and I don't just mean 20<sup>th</sup> century history. And I thought, well, this is nice actually. I'm bored to death with English history, I know it backwards. But suddenly I can read about Frederick the Great or whatever and get really absorbed in it. And also of course it's in fact good to have two languages, if not more. Some writer somewhere, I was read a quote and I can't remember who it was who said: 'You don't know your own language until you know another.', and that is terribly true for a writer. So I was fortunate in a sense that I changed languages when I was young, because I know plenty of people who were 15 when they left Germany and, basically, are foreigners in both languages. So that's sort of an asset too; there is that side, too. Obviously, the loss of family is a big thing, that you are never part of an extended family. Well, I mean now I am part of an extended family, going downwards to the younger generation. But in this sense, having lots of kith and kin around, that's all gone, which is a shame and we were always scattered, you know. I mean people don't keep in touch because links get more and more tenuous and that sort of thing.

BL: Was there ever a time when you wished you didn't have that background?

EF: No, it never occurred to me that you could wish that sort of thing away, no, it's sort of part... it goes very deep, after all. And, as you get older, it gets more... you become more aware of it. It's an age of regression, so you tend to... I mean you even lapse into German

occasionally if you are on your own. That's something I've never done, or at least I don't think I have done, you know, kind of thing in a way. And you talk more about the past with people who share that background in a way you didn't... in a sort of nostalgia about it almost. I'm certainly in nostalgia for Berlin. I mean I think, given the way it is now, if everything were different and I had another 40 years to live or something, I wouldn't mind going back at all. But I mean that's actually an illusion, but in a sense you sort of feel, certainly it's almost sort of Heimweh sometimes for that. I think it is an illusion, this idea that you can go back and be at home there, I don't think you probably would be. I think at a superficial level you might be for the first six months and after that you realise that you don't really belong there; you belong here now.

BL: Do you feel you belong here?

**Tape 4: 3 minutes 42 seconds**

EF: Yes, really. I mean it's one those things. It's when I'm here I feel I belong somewhere else, but when I'm somewhere else I feel I belong here, you know. And if you live in England long enough you will feel the same way. But really, I mean, I spent really all my life here. Everything I know about customs, politics, the way the country works I know from here.

BL: Do you feel British?

EF: Yeah, this British thing is...I think actually I feel more than British, I feel English, by which I mean that when I go to America I teach them how to make tea properly. There are certain yardsticks from feeling English. One to me is definitely tea, which is, to me, I couldn't live without it, absolutely. But I remember going on a foreign trip where the tourist guide was a German who lived half of his life in England, in fact, he'd gone to school in England. And we had quite a few discussions over lunch about where you really belonged and this kind of thing. And then he says, when he goes to Germany everyone is really polite to him because they think he's English. And then one day, this was a sort of continuing debate between us, 'What are we?', you know, and then one day there was a large dinner table in a fish restaurant and he was right at the other end, and he suddenly shouted across the table at me, and said: 'Eva, do you like Marmite?' And I said: 'Love it.' And he said: 'Then you are English.' So it's those sort of things: how you like your tea, do you like Marmite? And do you grumble about the Underground? You know, I think that makes one feel English. I mean British is a bit like you've just come off the boat and got your passport, this sort of feeling, because I don't know. British is such a strange thing these days and everyone is talking about multiculturalism and all that sort of thing. So I'm definitely more.... But then now we live in a country where everyone seems to come from somewhere else, so it's less rare. Because you have to remember, in 1939 it was very rare, I mean, I was the only foreign child in the class, and then for a little while there were two more from Germany. I never saw a coloured face until the American soldiers arrived and I saw my first GI, pitch black! 1943 I suppose it was, and I just went ah! He was obviously used to it and thought it was funny and grinned all over his face.

**Tape 4: 6 minutes 52 seconds**

But I mean it was such a totally different country. It's sort of unimaginable now, even in the last 20 years England has changed so much. It's so much of a mixture of people from everywhere of every different type.

BL: Do you think your life would have been very different if you hadn't been forced to emigrate?

EF: I wonder about this sometimes. Well, yeah, I mean I came from a very wealthy background, so obviously in that sense I would have, you know, if that had all gone on I would have had a very privileged background. I was so young; it's very hard to know what I would have done, I mean I imagine things like artistic leanings are... you must be born with them. But, on the other hand, what sort of writer I would have become if I'd written in Germany, in a peaceful country, is a very open question. I don't know really, I really don't know. It's very difficult to say. Or I might have quite probably rebelled against my bourgeois background and all that sort of thing. Well, I did anyway, but much more so than would otherwise have been the case. It's very hard to say. Would have been nice actually when you think of it, sailing on the Havel every weekend, all that sort of stuff. There is a bit of me that's still... I mean there are certain things you always respond to and I suppose different people respond to different things. If I'm in a wood, and especially if it's a pinewood, I think of Berlin, I think home, you know. Certain little things, certain foods, too. Well I mean certain foods that everybody likes, I mean like Rote Grütze is one. I remember when I went to this reunion thing in Berlin, nearly 200 people, half of whom were refugees, and we had this banquet in a palace on Unter den Linden, it was very sort of grand really, lunchtime.

**Tape 4: 9 minutes 35 seconds**

And I got talking to this bloke from England who had left Berlin as a refugee and ended the war bombing Berlin, which was quite a story in itself. And we all went in and there were all these tables and the buffet was at the side with what was to follow. And I heard him say: 'Rote Grütze!', so everyone.... I mean it's the first thing I order if I go to a German restaurant, Rote Grütze, it's one of those things. My mother used to make it after the war, so we went on having it.

BL: What is it?

EF: Rote Grütze? You don't know Rote Grütze? Where are you from?

BL: Rote Grütze?

EF: Yeah. – No? Where are you from, the South or somewhere?

BL: Cologne.

EF: Cologne. You don't know Rote Grütze?

BL: *Rote Grütze?*

EF: Yeah!

BL: Okay, that's clear. Can you translate it?

EF: It's a sort of jelly made of-, it's like summer pudding with summer fruit, you know. A bit like summer pudding without the bread.

BL: So that's for you the sort of-



EF: So that's one of the things. But as I say it's more pine trees.

BL: We've discussed many things. Is there anything I haven't asked you?

EF: I can't think of anything, can you?

BL: Is there any message you'd like to give to someone you might want to listen to the tape?

EF: What, for people like me or for other...? Well, for the world I would say: What happened could happen to anyone at anytime anywhere if the circumstances are right. It is not one, I mean it is a one-off event we hope, but human beings are very fallible and none of us know what we are capable of doing in particular circumstances, so we should think twice about judging other people I think really, that's what I think.

BL: Ms Figes, thank you very much for this interview.

#### **Tape 4: 12 minutes 13 seconds**

##### **Photographs**

#### **Tape 4: 12 minutes 30 seconds**

EF: (1) This is a photo of my grandmother with her five children, taken I suppose about 1912 or so. My father is on the extreme right, then his sister Lisa, his sister Lotte who was the eldest, then my Uncle Gert who was the baby of the family, and my Aunt Margot who ended up living in France.

BL: And when was it taken?

EF: My guess is about 1912 or so because my father was born in 1904 and he looks as if he's about eight, I'm not sure.

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BL: And where?

EF: Berlin of course. (2) This is my grandfather whom I never knew. He died quite young, while my father was still at school. He was a doctor and died of kidney disease which was then untreatable.

BL: Where was it taken?

EF: Berlin.

BL: Roughly?

EF: Oh that I don't know. I imagine about 1920, something like that. (3) These are my grandparents, my mother's father and his wife, Emil Cohen and Ella, always known as Lenchen. And they lived in Berlin and I imagine this was taken in the Grönwald.

BL: When?

EF: Well, they are much as I remember them, so I imagine it was taken about 1938. (4) Which one are you looking at now? Oh, this is an album mostly of childhood pictures taken at our weekend house in Pichelsdorf; we always called it Boxfelde. And that particular picture was taken in 1935.

BL: What's in the picture?

EF: Oh, I can't see. It's my father with my brother Ernst and me. (5) Yes, this was taken in Boxfelde, as we called it, our weekend house in Pichelsdorf in the garden, which had lots of fruit trees actually, and soft fruit as well.

**Tape 4: 15 minutes 5 seconds**

EF: (6) This was taken on the porch at our weekend house. My mother is eating ice cream and as you can see my brother and I are wondering when the hell we are going to get some as it disappears mouthful by mouthful.

(7) This is somewhere in the Pichelsdorf area as well. And as you know children think it never rained when you are young but it seems to have rained that day.

BL: When was it taken?

EF: I imagine about 1936, something like that.

(8) We had a sailing boat moored at Pichelsdorf and this is my mother, my brother and myself sitting on the boat, my father taking the picture.

(9) This is my first day at school obviously, with the *Schultüte*. That would be April 1939 and I'm standing at the entrance to the Tiergarten, Bahnhof am Zoo.

(10) This is my first passport photograph, taken in 1946 when I was naturalised.

(11) This was taken after the war, probably 1947, after my father had come home from the army.

BL: Who is in the picture?

EF: My father, my mother, myself and Ernst.

BL: And where was it taken?

EF: I think on holiday, but I can't really remember where.

(12) That's a shot taken of me when I was in my mid-thirties.

BL: Where was this taken?

EF: London.

(13) This is a picture of my two children when they were about 12 or 13, in Scotland, on a holiday.

(14) This is a picture taken on a beach in Jersey. My father organised a family reunion. And on this picture there is me, my father, my mother, my daughter, my cousin Norbert and three children from the French branch of the family. Two Norbert children and one child belonging to his brother Stefan.

(15) These are my four granddaughters. Elena on the left, then her sister Grace, my son's twin daughters Lydia, and then on the extreme right is Alice.

BL: Thank you again, Ms Figes, for this interview.

EF: Bitte schön.

**Tape 4: 17 minutes 57 seconds**