



UKHMF TESTIMONY TRANSCRIPT – ELI ABT

[Testimony 1 hr 54 mins: Artefacts 5' 57"]

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00:00:00

Eli Abt

My name is Eli Abt, at the time of saying these words I am 86 years old, because I was born on the 23rd of May 1929. And I feel the time has come to tell my story as one of the Kinder transport children, so that future generations will know what happened in those traumatic years, 1933 to 1945, to the Jews of Europe, of whom I was merely one child, who against all the odds, survived.

[fade to black and back up]

00:55:07

Interviewer

...if you would start, please by explaining to me a little bit about your family and the kind of life you were born into?

01:05:00

Eli Abt

Well, I was born on the 23rd May 1929 in Berlin. We lived on the banks of the, of the Spree River, the main river through Berlin. Er, it was a, a street called Bundesratufer, which is the shore of the I think it's the federal building.

01:28:11

My father was a teacher at the Adass Yisroel School, which is a, an Orthodox school in Berlin. He had um come from as a small town in um Friesland, east Friesland which is near the Dutch border. Um, and he had served in the -, fought a few months in the First World War. He, uh, worked in a coalmine in order to make, um, some money to be able to go to university, which he did in Frankfurt. He then went to Yeshiva, which is the religious school, advanced religious school in Frankfurt. And from there, he went on to his first job which was at this school in, um, Berlin.

02:29:02

Interviewer

And carry on, sorry.

02:31:03

Eli Abt

And um, I went to that school. I remember that school, um, vaguely. I remember a big tree which stood in the, um, courtyard of that school, which in fact I have gone back to see and it's still standing there.

02:54:01

And I remember walking along the Bundesratufer with the mother, uh and later on with my kid sister who was born uh a year after me.

03:06:14

It, it was - so far as I can remember - uh a very happy and settled existence for a Jewish family in Berlin, very comfortable with their existence. Very comfortable with

the fact that they lived in um a settled civilised society as Jews, as well as part of the German culture. I was well aware of that early on. To my father, learning Goethe and Schiller and all those German writers, and knowing them was as important as the knowledge of Bible and Talmud, and that's something that I've inherited because it comes from a tradition which was started in the 19th century by a prominent rabbi, who, whose name was, um, Shimshon Raphael Hirsch - Samson Raphael Hirsch, a very influential rabbi who decided that in the 19th century, it was important for German Jews to imbibe what the, the civilisation around them was giving them, as well as to be steeped in the knowledge of Judaism. That was called, that philosophy was called Torah im Derech Eretz, that is Jewish tradition allied to being a civilised human being. I learned that almost from my mother's knee, on my mother's knee. And it's been with me ever since. Even though times have changed now, and Orthodoxy in many ways stands for what I would call black hattery, that is not my way of looking at Judaism. My way of looking at Judaism is to be able to live life fully, both as a civilised human being and as a Jew, in the Jewish tradition.

05:35:10

Interviewer

Thank you very much. And can we talk a little bit about the prelude to the war? Um, you were a very young boy at this point.

05:43:04

Eli Abt

Yes.

05:43:24

Interviewer

So, in 1938, how old were you?

05:46:19

Eli Abt

In 1938 I was nine years old.

05:49:09

Interviewer

Nine, yup okay.

05:51:03

Eli Abt

Uh, in fact I think I, I should just preface that by saying that in 1936, my father was no longer happy as a teacher in Berlin. He wanted to improve himself and he became the head of one of the largest Jewish secondary schools in Germany. It was called the Jüdisches Reform-Realgymnasium. But in, in fact, the German Reform-Realgymnasium was certainly at graduate level, virtually the same as first year in university. I know that because of the calibre of some of the people that he worked with. Um, I know that particularly because 1936 when he -, when we moved to Breslau, 1937 he took the graduate class on holiday in a place called Agnetendorf, and the Riesengebirge, which is the, the giant mountains in Silesia and took my

sister and me along. And I remember those teachers and I remember many of the students. Just to give you one example, the music master at this school was a man called Erich Werner who managed to get out in 1939. He was the founder of the music school of Hebrew Union College in Manhattan and then became professor of the music department at Tel Aviv University, so we are talking about that level of uh, of achievement. Um, the pupils as well, for instance, one of the pupils I remember well from 1937 was a guy called Sal -, Sam Zelmanov It's, who became Professor [?] at the Hebrew University. So, these, these were fairly, uh, senior, uh, pupils. I think they were, there would have been, some of them would have been 18, 18 or more. And my father always believed in taking them, um, making a fuss of them by taking them on holiday together. Um, and I was privileged to be part of that. Um, there were tragic stories there as well, which I remember. There was a wonderful, won-, a beautiful girl called Lottie Krakowa with the typical German pigtailed. Uh blonde, blue eyes. At nine years old, I was passionately in love with her, and she unfortunately, I learnt later perished in Auschwitz, as did some of the others.

08:54:22

Um, 1938 I remember for, particularly for two things. First of all, the signs appearing on the benches in the parks which said "nur fur Arier", that is only for Aryans. Jews were no longer allowed to sit on the benches in the parks. And the other thing I remember is that in July of 1938, there was a sports festival in Breslau, which was attended by Hitler and all this, these other gangsters. We happened to live in the Goethestrasse near the corner of the main thoroughfare, which was called the King, the, the, uh, Wilhelmstrasse, Koenig Wilhelmstrasse. Um, and the entourage passed down that road. All the Jews had their curtains drawn. There were flags, there was an, an enormous multitude of people with their, uh, screams of adulation for this man and we were -, I remember cowering behind the curtains, just putting a curtain aside just to see what was going on. And seeing this cavalcade of cars and the, the cheering people going down, um, the, the Wilhelm-, Wilhelm Allee. Um, that was in July. And of course, the world collapsed on the 9th November.

10:42:08

Eli Abt

Do you want me to go on?

10:43:04

Interviewer

Carry on, yes.

10:45:17

Eli Abt

Okay. [*Clears throat*] On the morning of the 10th November, I remember my father had gone to Berlin. I don't know why he'd gone to Berlin, but there was just my mother and the three of us, my, my younger brother had been born in 1935, so he was three years old, uh, my sister was eight and I was nine. I can't remember what, what I heard during the night. I cannot remember that. All I remember is that in the morning, my mother said to the two of us, that is my sister and myself - not to my kid brother - I don't know who looked after him. Somebody must have done. I am going



to take you through the streets of Breslau, and I never want you to forget what you are going to see. Now I've been thinking about that all these years. On the one hand, one could say that my mother was failing in her duty to protect her, her two children from the sights that they were going to encounter. On the other hand, my mother was a very strong-willed woman who felt very strongly, as I could see from what she was um, doing later on, that what happened had to, had to go on record and in sitting here and telling you what I am about to tell you, I feel I am fulfilling what she asked.

12:40:01

I recall vividly walking through the streets - the three of us - I can't recall the order in which we saw these sights. All I can tell you is I remember the plate glass from the smashed shop windows strewn across the pavements. I also remember the vandalised shop windows, obviously of Jewish businesses. She took us to the big Orthodox synagogue called the Storch - the Stork. It was in a built-up area and what they had done is they had smashed all the windows; they'd trashed everything inside and dumped it outside. Um, but they hadn't set it alight because as I say, um, it was in a built-up area. But they also saw, it may have been before or after, I cannot remember, the enormous Reform synagogue. It was called the Neue Synagoge, it was a wonderful con, confection if you like of Victorian architecture. It, the German equivalent of Victorian architecture with, with enormous rose window, turrets, it was, it was, it was, a, a wonderful, wonderful building which was standing there burning. And there were fire engines either side. I remember that. But there was no, no spray, no water, nothing. They were there just to make certain that the flames didn't reach the adjoining buildings. It was burnt to the ground - there's nothing there now. It's just a memorial. Whereas the Storch did survive. It survived the war, uh, and as I understand it, it's used as a synagogue and a community centre now. Um, from there, we went to our little synagogue. It was called the Pinchas Synagoge, little, little private um shtiebel we call it, it's a chapel almost. Um, in a residential building, so that couldn't be burnt either. But what the Nazis had done is they had gone inside, and they had completely wrecked it. This I will remember for the rest of my life. They had torn the curtain from the ark which contained the scrolls of Torah, the scrolls of the five books of Moses. They had taken out the scrolls, they'd taken off the velvet covers. The scrolls themselves were written hand, handwritten as they always are on parchment, they had thrown them on the ground and urinated on them. I'll never forget that sight. They had smashed all the furniture, um, so what I remember was that the adults were breaking open the various boxes to retrieve the prayer books, *siddurim* we call them, and the prayer shawls, the *tallitot* and one of the things that we managed to retrieve was my sister Ruth's prayer book, which she still has, with her name engraved in gold on it. And she still uses that. She lives in Israel, and she still uses that. She's now 85 years old. I think that's all I can remember from going out that day, but I do remember - that was the 10th November - I do remember two days later, my father had come back from Berlin.

[cut for direction]

and he had told us then, and repeated it later, that they were arresting Jews wherever they could find them. He happened to be in a taxi going across the, one of the big squares - I think it was the Alexanderplatz - in a taxi and he saw the brown

shirts, the SA, uh closing all the roads, all the entrances into that square. And he said to the, the driver if you get me out of that entrance before they close it, there's something extra for you, and the taxi, taxi driver did, he just sped through and the cordon, cordon closed after him. He also mentioned, and I don't know if it was on that occasion but it's, it's certainly confirmed in some of the interviews he gave later, that the police were looking for him because he was one of the prominent leaders of the Jewish community as head of the school in Breslau. He had plenty of non-Jewish friends and on one occasion when the police closed in on him, uh the friend hid him in a cupboard in the flat so when the SA called, he wasn't there.

18:37:02

Going back then to the 12th November, one memory I have vividly is of my mother sitting on the bed in her bedroom, with the pap-, newspaper open in front of her, weeping bitterly at the headline, which was that the Jewish community of German had been fined eine milliarde Reichsmark, one billion Reichsmark, for the damage done to the community's property by the SS. They had to pay for the damage which had been wrought by the Nazis. And of course, this was, uh, uh a total nonsense because by that time, the community had been depleted by emigration and of course the, the loss of property that was, was going on made a nonsense of any fine such as that. It was merely an excuse for the Nazis to be able to take what they wanted from individual Jews as well as from the community - which they did.

19:58:06

Um, in 1939, uh my mother told me that she had to give in all her jewellery and her furs, um, and they lost everything they had in the house - uh, in the flat. Um, subsequent researches which I have done from the records which are still available with the authorities in Germany, show that they left behind everything in their flat, some of which might have disappeared. I don't know. The rest was apparently auctioned off by the Nazis in 1942 for what was then the sum of uh, equivalent now of about £20,000, that's 3,000 Deutschmark at the time. I've still got the document uh which shows that. So, it was a question then after Kristallnacht of trying to get out of Germany.

21:12:15

Interviewer

Wait, can I just stop you there for a second because I want to talk about, um. that next chapter of your life, in a moment's time. Um, you were nine years old when this happened.

21:22:11

Eli Abt

Yes.

21:22:24

Interviewer

And you'd had security as, as much security as any loving family could give.

21:27:19

Eli Abt
Yes. Yes

21:29:02

Interviewer
And suddenly everything around you was destroyed.

21:32:01

Eli Abt
Yes.

21:32:12

Interviewer
That must have been an incredibly frightening experience for a very young boy.

21:37:11

Eli Abt [*interrupting Interviewer*]
Traumatic. Traumatic. Traumatic. It was absolutely traumatic. I remember the, the trauma set in when I saw what, what I had been educated to believe the holiest thing in Judaism torn on the floor with urine on it. It, I, I was speechless. I was speechless. I couldn't understand how any human being could treat something holy like that. Yes.

22:16:08

Interviewer
And the conflict that your mother had as your mother to protect you and guard you, and yet at the same time, she needed to educate you as to what was happening to your community.

22:26:03

Eli Abt
Yes, yes, I don't hold that against her at all. At all

22:31:06

Interviewer [*talking over the end of the interviewee's sentence*]
Did she maybe, do you feel like she made the right decision then?

22:33:22

Eli Abt
I think so. With the benefit of hindsight, I think she made that -, I've asked myself that question often and I think now, now I am quite certain that she did the right thing for the same reason that you are doing the right thing, recording what I have to say.

22:52:18

Interviewer
You have dedicated your life to be an architect. You -, your building, beautiful buildings, does it strike you that maybe your life was set that night?

23:06:21



Eli Abt

Uh, no. That's a later part of my story, but since you deal with it, I will deal with it now. Um, one of the things that I remain unhappy about, uh, from a family point of view is my father's discussion -, discouragement of my being a musician. I cannot pretend that architecture was my first love, it wasn't. [*Clears throat*] I have been, I have enjoyed architecture. I have been a successful architect in, in a modest way. Um, and I have made a living as an architect, but my first love has always been music. And that has been, um, enhanced by the fact that I came out of this experience and wanted to live life to the full, and the best way of celebrating that was to sing. I was endowed with that voice, but I felt that voice was a vehicle for me to celebrate life. Judaism is all about celebrating life. Every aspect of it is celebrating life. The music is in celebration of life. The festivals, the ceremonies, everything is in celebration of life. And the fact that I was able to celebrate that with my voice and to enable others to celebrate that with my voice, enabled me to overcome what I had experienced.

25:21:01

Interviewer

Thank you very much for saying that, Eli. I've got lots more questions about music for you, so we'll leave that just for the moment.

25:26:16

Eli Abt

Yes. Yes.

25:27:08

Interviewer

But thank you for highlighting where we're travelling in this interview.

25:30:16

Eli Abt

Right.

25:31:05

Interviewer

Um, before we talk about your family's escape from Germany, um can we talk a bit about antisemitism and obviously that one night was just deeply affecting for you, but you had other experiences, didn't you? Can you tell us about, um, walking in the park with your mother, that one particular story.

25:51:13

Eli Abt

Yes.

25:52:00

Interviewer

And anything else that that might, uh, lead you to remember.

25:54:14

Eli Abt

Well yes. The, the, the only time that I was ever physically assaulted was in December of 1938 when we were walking through the park. It was snowing, I remember, everything was white and suddenly in front of me appeared a, a member of the Hitlerjugend. Uh, who proceeded to assault me. Uh, he could see we were Jewish. We'd, there, there were no yellow stars then, but they had a sense of who was Jewish and who wasn't, and he could see from my mother's face and, and mine that we were, we were Jewish and he, he assaulted me. Um, threw me to the ground. I didn't think I was hurt, in fact I, you know, I was shocked obviously, and my mother screamed. She -, I've never heard her scream like that. I think that must have put him off because he didn't proceed to do any more to me, you know, he just slunk off. Uh, my mother said to me later I, I couldn't touch him cause if I had, I would have been in concentration camp. And she almost apologised for the fact that this, this happened to me. I can't complain, I really, if that's the only physical thing that happened to me in that entire story, it pales into insignificance compared to what other people went through.

[cut for sound]

27:25:10

Interviewer

I know that you're very concerned to put your experience in context and so I fully respect what you've just said, but nevertheless, you were nine, your sister was eight and you had a younger brother -

27:39:01

Eli Abt

Yes.

27:39:05

Interviewer

- and uh your community was being targeted, which must have made you as a very young child, feel very vulnerable. How, how did your parents explain to you what was happening just because of your faith?

27:54:12

Eli Abt

I don't think they needed to. I don't think they needed to. I don't remember my parents explaining anything to me. I just saw everything with my own eyes. Here's one example I just thought of. One of the teachers whose name was Salo [?], he was um a language professor. I mean he wrote books. He wasn't just a teacher; he was quite a high-powered guy. Uh was one of the people they'd caught on the streets on the 9th of November. Night, night of 9th and 10th of November. And he was bundled off to Buchenwald. And he came back, I don't remember when, later that month, beginning of January. By that time, we had moved out of our flat in the Goethestrasse and were living in the school. I don't know why. Whether the



premises were um taken away or whether my parents felt it was safer than the school, I don't know. We were living in the school, and I was in the courtyard when the gate opened, and this man walked through the gate, and I will never forget what he looked like. I remember him as a healthy, young man. He looked haggard, old. His head had been completely shaven. And I know, I knew, I understood, I understood what was going on. My parents didn't have to explain that much to me. My, my mother sitting there crying over that newspaper, uh, uh and so on. I knew that we were surrounded by people who hated us sufficiently to mean us harm. Um, obviously a nine-year-old can only um understand that to a limited extent, but I believe I did. So that by the, by the time that my sister left and, and I left, I understood the reasons why we were going. Um, before I go on to that, I need to mention just one thing. Um, a lot of what I'm telling you became clear later on. Um, but through my parents' researches and my own, one of them is a terrible story of a little girl called Hannah Sholock who was my brother's age then. And in 1939, they were both six years old. They were both born in 1935. And they were both playing in the school yard, and I have a photograph of them. They didn't make it; the family didn't make it. They were finally uh due for deportation in 1941 I think it was. Uh, a father, a mother, the brother, sister, it was quite a big family. And this little girl. The father must have known what they were being deported to because he killed her on the night before they took them away. And I often look at that photograph, and I think so many of them didn't make it. Lottie Krakow didn't make it, the girl I loved. A lot of the other pupils didn't make it. So, I feel it's important to tell the story so far as I know it so that people should understand, these were innocent children, innoc-, totally innocent children who did not understand why this was being done to them. That's all I want to say about that.

32:42:24

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. It's a terrible story. But it shows you the, um, desperation uh, as a, as a parent.

32:53:14

Eli Abt

Yes. Yes. Yes.

32:53:19

Interviewer [*with interjections from Interviewee*]

To protect your child, that you would go to that, that extent. Um.

32:59:09

Eli Abt

Yes, yes, yes. Yes it -, it, I, I verified it and it, it is a perfectly true story. My mother told it to me - she's on record actually - and that photograph, and I checked it through at Yad Vashem.

33:11:04

Interviewer

Mm hmm.

33:12:00

Eli Abt

And what we see at Yad Vashem is Hannah Sholock murdered Breslau, 1930-, 41. That doesn't say by whom. But it's, it's obvious.

33:22:22

Interviewer

Of course.

33:23:18

Eli Abt

Because all the others were murdered. They were deported and they were all murdered in [*Hovne?*] - the rest of the family.

33:30:20

Interviewer

Um, Eli, can I just again, a very small diversion now before we talk about, um, where you went next.

[cut for sound]

So you remember a lot.

33:43:06

Eli Abt

Yes.

33:43:11

Interviewer

You remember streets and um places and names and dates and faces?

33:48:04

Eli Abt

Yes.

33:48:21

Interviewer

And experiences.

33:50:05

Eli Abt

Yes.

33:50:20

Interviewer

And yet - as far as I understand it - you don't speak about this very often; you've

chosen to speak about it to us. Why have you not spoken about it publicly before?

34:01:13

Eli Abt

Two reasons, first of all the reason I gave you. After that, you celebrate life. You, you, you don't dwell on that. In fact, my children are aware of what happened to me but not in the detail that I'm giving it to you. I didn't ever see the need to speak to them about it. Um, secondly, um, without being vain about it, I feel I'm a young 86. I've always lived young, acted young. I didn't feel that it was appropriate for me to start talking about this until now. I'm 86 as I'm speaking to you. So, I thought now is the time. I hope that's as good an answer as I can give.

35:03:12

Interviewer

But up until now, you've lived with all of this in your mind -

35:07:00

Eli Abt

Yes.

35:07:14

Interviewer

- and your memory, but you haven't necessarily shared it and it must have been very hard to process, because quite often when people deal with stuff by talking about it, don't they?

35:17:17

Eli Abt

Um, I've dealt with it by singing. Singing is the most wonderful way of expressing yourself. We'll come later to how it helped me overcome the results of what I'm talking to you. Um, but singing is so therapeutic and I thank God every day of my life that I was given the voice to be able to express myself that way. Um, the only time in the Jewish New Year that I call on those ghosts that you've just mentioned is the memorial prayer on Yom Kippur - on the Day of Atonement - when we remember, not only our parents and our grandparents, but in particular the six million who died and also those who followed them and, in, in uh, trying to, uh, defend, uh, what was to become Israel. And I sing that prayer with a full heart. In fact, I am told that when I sing that prayer, there is not a dry eye in the synagogue. So that's when I come to terms with that. For the rest of the year, I have just celebrated life. You know, God has been good to me. With my career, with my marriage, um, with all the things I've done in life. I really cannot complain. But it's interesting that you should say, you know, have I come to terms with it? It's interesting cause once I had decided to tell my story to you, that's when I began looking at documents and at photographs. Uh, and putting together this scrapbook, um, which in fact I'm going to keep after this and show it to my family. So yes, I've come to terms with that in detail. That's the detail. I've come to terms with the experience long ago in my singing.

38:19:21

Interviewer

How lucky for you that you've had that -

38:22:16

Eli Abt [*talking over Interviewer*]

Yes.

38:22:16

Interviewer

- an outlet. Okay.

38:23:12

Eli Abt

Yes. Yes. Very lucky.

38:25:17

Interviewer

Okay.

38:26:04

Eli Abt

Not everybody is given that.

38:28:03

Interviewer

It was a real blessing for you. An escape. Mm.

38:29:10

Eli Abt [*talking over Interviewer*]

Yes, it is a real blessing. Yes.

38:31:20

Interviewer

I, I'm looking forward to hearing more about that in a moment. So now I'm gonna ask you, taking you back to your story, I'm sorry that I've diverted you. Um, so talk about what happened next after, uh, 1938.

38:42:16

Eli Abt

Yeah.

38:42:21

Interviewer

-1939. What happened?

38:45:05

Eli Abt

Yeah. Well, beginning of 39, um, beginning of 39, the, the problem was not for Jews

to leave Germany. The problem was, uh, where would, where would they be permitted to go? Um, just giving a bit of back-, background, the Evian conference met in July of 1938 to try and solve that problem and no country was prepared to take Jews in any number. So that the panic that set in can only be imagined. I say this as an adult now, not as a nine-year-old. All I knew was that we had to get out and the first to get out was my sister. Uh, who was given a visa by the British authorities in what was then Palestine. Luckily. Um, because my uncle, uh, was the guarantor for her entry and for looking after her. Just to, to go back with just one minute, this is something which I really wanted to deal with, which you haven't asked, but if, if you don't mind, I'm gonna deal with it.

40:14:11

Interviewer

Please do.

40:17:15

Eli Abt

I often asked myself why did my parents stay till the last minute, whereas of my entire family, the only other one who stayed behind was my grandmother Orsa. Everyone else that is my maternal grandparents left for Jerusalem in 1936. One of my aunts already saw the writing on the wall and left in 1933, also for Israel, for what is now Israel. My one uncle that is my father's brother left in 1935. The other uncle went to South Africa. My parents stayed behind. The answer I think is like many Jewish leaders - particularly those that were heads of schools - they did not feel they could abandon their children. For some, it was too late. And this is where I want to bring in the story of my permit. The various heads of schools were collaborating in trying to get permits for their children. The head of the school, the Reform-Realgymnasium called Jawne in Cologne was a Dr. Eric Klibanski who was busy trying to get entry permits for some of those 10,000 Kindertransport, uh, visas and I was lucky, I was one of those that was selected. Mine was number 5,500 and something [*clears throat*]. So, the document that I treasure is the document from his secretary which says I'm happy to tell you that Dr. Klibanski has, this was to my father, has obtained certificate number so and so for your son. Uh, to me that's, that's the most, most important document in this entire scrapbook. And again, the story ends unlike that of my parents, in that he left it too late. He and his family didn't get out and in 1942, uh he was put in a transport with his family. They were taken off the train at Minsk, taken to a wooded area and shot in, in a, in a, in a pit and just, just buried, just like, just like that. 1942 was the year that I was Bar Mitzvah. And I often think about what happened to the man who was responsible for saving me in the summer of that year. And me, celebrating my Bar Mitzvah in sunny South Africa the same summer. Obviously, that stirs feelings, um, which I feel I have to convey to you. But to get back to the story

[Cut for card change]

I am unhappy about the fact that my father disapproved of my becoming a musician. I've always been, been unhappy about that. Had I had the chance from an early age, uh, to be a musician whether it's a singer or, um, instrumentalist, or even a

conductor - I did conduct an orchestra at one stage, in Johannesburg – um, it would've been more fulfilling. Um, but I feel nevertheless the fact that I have been able to express myself this way has been sufficient for me to deal with these experiences, without making a career of it. So, I forgive my father for that.

44:57:05

Interviewer

Good. That's good.

45:00:07

Eli Abt

Right, um, in fact it's very interesting, just jumping forward, jumping forward. Um, when I finally came here after 1955 and got married and so on, uh, I was in demand as a cantor. Um, the scrapbook shows all that, you know, the PR and so on. Uh, one thing I treasure, I was asked to do the high festival services at the Western Marble Arch Synagogue. Um, one of, one of the main synagogues in the West End of the London. And I was asked to do the additional service on the Sabbath. I'm using English words by the way so that people who are not familiar with this, are not using the Hebrew words. Is that all right, Natasha?

46:04:14

Interviewer

Yes, of course it is.

46:07:14

Eli Abt

The Musaff service, the additional service, there is a wonderful hymn, Adon Olam, which finished that service with a wonderful tune by a 19th century composer called, de Sola. Uh, and, it expresses everything that is in the soul. The last line is בְּיָדוֹ אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי, "I will uh, entrust my soul in his hands.", אֵינְשָׁן וְאֶעֱרָה, "When, uh, when, I, uh, is, am asleep, and when I awake." אֵינְשָׁן וְאֶעֱרָה. "But whatever happens to me, uh, I shall not be afraid." וְעַם רוּחִי גִוְיָתִי אֶדְנִי לִי וְלֹא אֵירָא. And...at the end of the service our parents were there. My mother came up to me and said, "Do you know your father was crying?" So, you know, that was good. That was good.

47:35:11

Interviewer

Because he was so proud of you.

47:38:13

Eli Abt

He just, he just, felt, you know, this was worthwhile after all. It was always an issue between him and me, um, as I grew up. My sister had piano lessons and I didn't. He

just didn't feel this was something for an Orthodox boy, right. It is something else that I had to deal with but I, I, have dealt with it, I've dealt with it. I want to go back to 1939.

48:07:07

Interviewer

Yes, so do I. I mean, not because I don't want to talk about that, but we just need to establish what happened to -

48:11:02

Eli Abt

Right

48:11:18

Interviewer

-to Ruthie. Ruthie got her -

48:13:13

Eli Abt

Okay. She got her visa, my, eh, and I've got the test with my name, her, em, her test with my name in my scrapbook, my father saw her off on the platform, in Breslau, with a card around her neck which said, "My name is Ruth Abt, I am aged 8 years old, and I am going to my uncle in Palestine." And she caught that -, she went on that train to Trieste. She caught the right ship with the help of people who were around her. Total strangers. And she was met in Haifa by my uncle. Uh, she was there for two years until my parents were able to call for her in 1941. Uh, that was her own trauma, and I can, I can only imagine what, what it must have been like.

49:14:15

Interviewer

Do you remember saying goodbye to her?

49:16:07

Eli Abt

No. I don't. I don't remember saying goodbye to her. I only got certain moments in my memory which - you know - I can remember. You say I have a good memory, I, there's some key moments I have no memory for.

49:33:12

Interviewer

Maybe it's too painful.

49:36:07

Eli Abt

Might be. I don't know.

49:39:03

Interviewer

So, what happened to, so that was Ruthie's story but what about you and your -

49:41:13

Eli Abt

Then my, my story was that I got this um, this confirmation - I think it was in April - and in May my parents, both my parents, took me on the train to Berlin, em, where there were hundreds of other children assembled on the platform. I remember sitting on my father's lap. And I remember him holding me tight. And somebody was making some speech or other, you know, um, and after that I remember nothing!

50:21:12

I don't remember the train, I don't remember the ship's crossing, I don't remember the, the train from, I think it was from, uh, Holland to Harwich. The train from Harwich to Liverpool Street, except that I do remember - as a nine-year-old - you will not be surprised that I thought that the standard of the British trains were nothing like those of the German. They were far too old-fashioned; they were not modern enough [*Laughs*]. I remember that reaction.

50:59:00

Anyway we, we arrived at Liverpool Street - me and God knows how many hundred children. And there was some guy who made some sort of speech in, in, trying to make it in German. I remember that, and I couldn't understand a word he was saying.

51:16:09

And the next memory I have is of being in this hostel in Brighton, at number 33 Vernon Terrace. All I can say to you about that experience, from the moment that I got on the train in Berlin, to arriving in Brighton, and beyond, there's only one word for it and that is disorientation.

[cut for sound]

Eli Abt

Total sense of disorientation [*Long pause*]. And it came out in various ways. Um, I am talented at languages. I speak - apart from English, and German - I speak Hebrew fluently, I speak Afrikaans, I speak Yiddish, as a singer I speak Italian, right. Up to a point. I did not learn a word of English for the 6 months I was in that hostel. I sat in school and did not understand a word of what was going on. Not a word. I cannot remember ever speaking to anyone in English. Only to the boys around me and to the head of the hostel who was name was, he was a Mr. [*Jonas Plaugt?*]. Um, in German. Which looking back on it now is totally unnatural, because it is one of the things that children do is that they imbibe another language almost immediately. Which I think is a comment on the degree of unhappiness, um, but it didn't end there. Because I was the only Orthodox, I hate that word, I prefer the word traditional, Jew, Jewish boy, among those thirty odd boys, thirty, thirty-five boys. I was also the

second youngest. So, you had a crowd of boys who had been ripped from their environment - from their parents and their families - into a completely strange milieu. And inevitably boys being boys, from that age I was the second youngest, the youngest was nine, I turned ten just after I arrived, up to about fifteen, there was a lot of bullying going on before, before very long. And I was clearly a target because I was different. One of the things I vividly remember is, standing in my little *tallit*, my little prayer shawl, as I'd always done, by the window, facing Vernon Terrace, in the morning. And a boy, another boy saying to me, "Eli, why do you have to be holier than us?". Which I think tells you how far, uh, I was from the environment that I was in. Um, I was bullied - mercilessly. Um, I refused to cry. I would not cry. Until, uh, at the very last, we were all in the park, as we were frequently, and, uh, a bunch of them had decided to beat me up and see if I would cry. And I did in the end because it was just, you know -, I was on the floor, and they were pummelling and kicking me, and I started crying. And I remember one of them saying, "*Jetzt weint er*" - "Now he's crying". The only happy time that I remember was when we went on a Shabbat morning - on a Saturday morning - to the service at the Middle Street Synagogue in Brighton. I remember how beautiful it was, gor-, gorgeous building. With the stained-glass windows and so on. And I remember singing in the little choir. To me this was the highlight of the week. Um, so, there's nothing else to say about that time except for me, it -, that was almost as traumatic, possibly more traumatic, than my parting from my parents in Berlin

56:54:21

Interviewer

But there was no end to the persecution, was there? You suddenly got home, and you were still being persecuted -

56:59:00

Eli Abt

Yes, yes.

57:00:00

Interviewer

- and you were alone, and you didn't have your family and you didn't know when you were going to see them next, and it must have been absolutely terrifying for you -

57:05:18

Eli Abt

Yes, yes it was.

57:06:22

Interviewer

-and you couldn't communicate.

57:08:00

No, I couldn't communicate. The next thing I remember is the 3rd of September 1939. I don't remember my father coming out to see me before then, although obviously,

he did. just to go back, uh, a bit, after my sister and I left there was my brother, um, who in 1939 -, Sorry I said previously was six years old he wasn't he was four, because he was born in 19,

57:44:06

Interviewer

Discrepancy on dates, that's fine. Yeah.

57:46:17

Eli Abt [*talking over each other*]

thirty-five, but he was four years old, there was my mother and there was my father and clearly, they were getting increasingly desperate, because 1939 everybody knew there was going to be a war. Right, Czechoslovakia had been invaded and so on. The Sudetenland had been invaded. And like many others my father decided, um, he got a visa, but my mother didn't. Uh, and he decided he was going to London to see whether he could get a visa for her. And for my brother. So, he went over on his own and apparently stood in Whitehall and God knows where else, in line with other refugees trying to do the same thing, um He didn't know what the result of his efforts had been, this, this is all also in writing in an interview that he gave. So, I'm, I'm only going by what has been written down. Um, war was declared -, Hitler marched into Poland on the Friday the 1st of September. Uh, he was given his ultimatums I think on the 2nd and on the 3rd, and on the 3rd of September, at 11 o'clock in the morning, Britain declared war. On that day, my father came down to Brighton. And asked to take me to the park. And, we went in the park, and it was a beautiful day. And he sat me down on a bench - park benches seem to play an important part in this, in that you had the parks in Berlin where we weren't allowed to sit and the park bench where this happened in Hove, in Brighton, and he said, "You know that, Britain has declared war today on Germany?" And I said, "Yes.", he said, "You know what that means don't you? I don't think we are going to see your mother and your brother again. Because I don't know whether they have got out or not." And I will never forget that moment. [*Long pause, sighs*] We looked up, and there was a woman and a little boy walking towards us [*Swallows*]. It was like from a movie, it was just like a movie. [*Long pause*]. I'll never forget that. Never forget that. [*Long pause*]. It's quite clear, um, that my father had, he had come out without anything, at all, possibly a suitcase, he had nowhere to live, because the documents I have show that, that, he, he gave his address at 33 Vernon Terrace, Brighton. Where he spent the nights, I do not know. I do know, though, that after my mother came out, they took a room somewhere in Brighton because that appears on the documents. And, um, from the documents it is clear that they had been given a visa on the basis of my uncle's guarantees, to stay in the England for one month and thereafter to, uh, go to South Africa, where the visa expired sometime in December - I think it was the 6th of December.

01:02:17:00

Interviewer

So, the one thing we haven't said is the person, the woman and the child, was actually your mother and your brother.

01:02:22:17

Eli Abt

Yes. Yes. So, we got onto the *Arundel Castle* in Southampton, that's the next thing – oh no, the next thing I remember is saying goodbye to the one boy I was friendly with at the hostel, and he was the one boy who was younger than me. I remember his name, his name surname was [*Lemler?*] and I remember saying -, him saying to me, "Good luck, you are lucky to get out of here".

01:03:08:06

Interviewer

So, at this point your family, your family, unit was, was reunited, apart from Ruthie who wasn't with you?

01:03:13:16

Eli Abt

That's right, that's right.

01:03:14:21

Interviewer

And -

01:03:15:03

Eli Abt

But of course, we were reunited only in the sense that my parents were living somewhere. I was living in this hostel, okay. Um. The fact that, the fact that my parents were living in the same place didn't in fact um, stop any of what was going on in the hostel. I didn't even talk about it. In fact, I am certain I didn't mention the bullying to my parents. I'm certain I didn't mention that. I think there must have been a sixth sense that, that they had enough to cope with, even at ten years old, I, I must have realised that. So, I -, the next thing I remember is getting on board this boat. the *Athlone Castle* – the *Arundel Castle*, sorry. Um, and I remember the moment when we cast off. Because we were all standing on the stern and there was a band on the, on the quay side, and as we cast off the band started playing God Save the King.

01:04:37:02

And at that moment my father burst into tears. He was a man whose life had been completely obliterated. He was a successful, well-known, er, educationist and communal leader in Germany and here he was, a penniless refugee, on a ship which had been paid for by the Jewish community. I'll never forget that. I won't forget my mother's crying over that newspaper headline and my father crying on the stern of that boat.

01:05:34:21

Okay, um, we took weeks and weeks and weeks to get to Cape Town because the



ship was trying to avoid the German submarines. So instead of going straight, it zig-zagged across the Atlantic. I don't remember how many weeks, but it did take weeks. Um. I remember there was a pathetic gun on the stern which, which they used for target practice, they, they, put old crates of timber and let it float out and then they, they, they tried to hit it with this ridiculous gun and even I at aged ten knew that if we had a sub-, submarine, that that gun would be totally useless. But that was the state of things I suppose uh with um, with Britain, the state it was in, in 1939. Um, the important thing that happened to us on that ship was that there was a girl there who was going out to Johannesburg to marry a guy called Abe Hermann. Her name was Zena Stone. And my family got friendly with her, my parents got friendly with her, and there's a photograph of all of us on, on the deck. She got to know my parents' story. Because when we docked in Cape Town, they wouldn't let us land. I don't know why. The visa must have expired. Or the South African Government decided that, that the visa wasn't valid anyway, I have no idea. We had to go on from there on the ship to Port Elizabeth, where they wouldn't let us land either, we couldn't get off the ship at all. From there we went on to East London, same thing. Went on to Durban, same thing. And then we, we started going – the ship turned around, and we started going back, East London, Port Elizabeth, and we ended up again in Cape Town. Now I can readily understand my parents' state of mind. They had visas which had either expired, or which weren't accepted. They were fully aware, as I now know, of what happened to the *St. Louis*, the ship that started in Germany, and went around the Atlantic and the Caribbean trying to get permission for its' passengers, the Jewish passengers to land and was refused, there was a movie about it, a movie made about it. And ended up back in Germany. In this case, there wouldn't have been any, uh, um, chance of landing back in Germany but my parents were aware - I'm sure - that their visa to the UK had expired, they were only allowed one month, they were certainly, they must have been in a state of desperation. Because my mother told me - later on - that when we reached Cape Town, she said to one of the sailors, "If they don't let us land, will you look after my children? Because I am going to jump in the sea." And, this crewman said, "Don't worry madam, everything will be- ", he you know, sort of English, sort of um, uh, way of placating a desperate woman. What had happened in the meantime was that Zena Stone, knowing my parents' story, had got in touch her fiancé, Abe Hermann, who was the Jewish Agency Representative in Johannesburg and said, "Look here's a family, prominent educationist from uh, Germany, who are not being allowed to land, the, uh the Jew – the South African Jewish border deputies has really got to do something about this." And they did. They went to the Government, it is an apocryphal story, and I am not certain that it is true that actually landed on the desk of General Smuts, the Prime Minister, because Jewish refugees by that time were just not allowed to land anymore. And yes, we were given permission to land in, in Cape Town. That wonderful woman became -, Abe Herman, became Avraham Herman who became the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, and became President of the Hebrew University, and Zena his wife, Zena Herman, was part of the Israel Delegation to the United Nations. She served on UNESCO. She was a high, high-powered chair lady with all sorts of international organisations. And she with Erich Klebanski, I have to thank, for sitting here a free man having lived a wonderful



life. I did phone her in Jerusalem the last time, the last time or the time before last, we were there, I wanted to see her, but she passed-, she has passed away in the meantime, which makes me sad. Because I wasn't able to thank her personally [Long pause]. We landed, um, at first, we stayed with my uncle, in his tiny flat. Then we had our own flat, um, in Sea Point. On, on the brow of Signal Hill. Uh, overlooking the ocean, down below. Wonderful new experience for me. Uh, the sunlight and so on. My father got his first job, teaching in a small Talmud Torah, a small Hebrew school in a tiny place called, Paarl, out of Cape Town, for the princely sum of £20 a month. We were as poor as dormice. And I have got two stories to illustrate that. First of all, um, there was an appeal, um, for the war effort in the form of a fair, on the common, overlooking the sea, um where the most wonderful thing for a ten year old boy, a model train, the real thing, a real train, with you know a steam-driven train, model train, for which you paid I think one penny, two pence, um, to ride on, for the Governor General's fund, for the war effort. I didn't have that penny or two pence. I just sat there, in the middle of that circular train just admiring it, and watching the other children go around. Until one Saturday – Shabbat - somebody came up to me, who had obviously noticed me sitting there, and said, "Can we invite you to go on that train?", and I said, "Thank you but no." I was aware that you do not ride on the Sabbath. I kept sitting there for days on end later, after school, but nobody asked me again [Laughs]. That's story number one [clears throat].

Story number two is an occasion when I saw both my parents crying again. I was ten years old and, with the few pence they had, they bought me a new suit for Shabbat. It was a very simple and humble thing, but it was a new suit, and stupidly on Shabbat, I walked on Signal Hill, uh and with the brushwood tore the jacket. And when I came home there was hell to pay. With both my parents crying. They had spent their hard-earned pence on this suit which was ruined. I will never forget that. There's something else I have to, uh, I have to tell you. Going back to the ship. My father's knowledge of English was rudimentary. He obviously had knowledge of it from school but enough to be able to teach and he felt he had to give himself a crash course through those weeks of being on the boat. So, he sat down, with a book - he told me about this several times - on English education. He felt he had to know all about the English way of educating people and a dictionary. And he came across a passage which he simply couldn't understand. And the passage was something like this -, went something like this, "It is regrettable, that in the academic institutions of the present day, it is considered more important to achieve a century at Lords, than to, uh, excel at Latin and Greek. So, he looked up the dictionary and century, what is – that's a hundred years. Lords is God. And he thought, this is the strangest education system I have ever come across, they regard it as being, uh, regrettable that to serve God for a hundred years uh is, better than to achieve, distinction in Greek, Latin - whatever. This is a joke, he told it against himself for years and years later, but it does show that when he arrived in Cape Town, his knowledge of English was rudimentary, and yet he went out to teach those children in Paarl. That's how desperate the situation was. The thing that I remember best about Sea Point is my first moment of triumph, success, achievement. And that was, we were asked to write an essay in Afrikaans, I can't remember what, what it was about, I was ten

years old. We had a lovely Afrikaans teacher, a lady, and uh, I wrote my essay. By that time, I was learning English, learning Afrikaans, no problem! I was in a home environment - for the first time - although my English was still 'zis' and 'zat', and instead of 'this' and 'that'. I'll never forget the moment that she stood up in class and said, "Right now, do you know who wrote the best Afrikaans essay in this class?", dead silence. "It was Abt", the little refugee boy among all those South African boys, right. English speaking boys, Afrikaans speaking boys, it was Abt. [*Sighs*] That's, that's a moment that I will never ever forget. I'd suddenly come out of the darkness into light. And from there I went on. It was a turning point. For me that was the turning point.

01:18:57:12

Interviewer

And that's an amazing story, it's a lovely moment that you were able to -

01:19:01:03

Eli Abt

Yes, yes.

01:19:02:15

Interviewer

achieve and it's -, and as you just said it was because you were in a home environment. you were all safe again, Ruthie then came to join you, didn't she?

01:19:09:16

Eli Abt

Yes, yes.

01:19:06

Interviewer

And you were back as a family unit.

[cut for card change]

01:19:12:13

Interviewer

In, in your life, I mean you've had extraordinary experiences -

01:19:14:20

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:19:15:16

Interviewer

-The experience of your brother and your mother -

01:19:17:08

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:19:17:15

Interviewer

-walking towards you in a park in Hove or Brighton or whatever it was -

01:19:19:17

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:19:20:07

Interviewer

Was, was -

01:19:21:00

Eli Abt

What my father didn't know was that she, that she had got a visa. I don't quite know whether if it's his or it's hers or whatever. He didn't know that, and she had managed to get out on the last train on the Friday, the 1st of September, before Hitler closed the border and marched into Poland. And she had obviously travelled on the Sabbath, on Shabbat, which in Judaism is perfectly okay whether it is danger to life, on the contrary, it is a commandment, that if you have to break the Sabbath, in order to save life, that is what you must do. Must do, not may do. Must do. Um, so she must have arrived in London on the morning that my father came down to Brighton. Uh, she came separately to the hostel where they said to her, "Your fa-, your husband and your son are in the park, and you will find them there." That's what happened. *[Long pause]* Where did we leave off?

01:20:35:22

Interviewer

No, I'm going to set you off again in a second, but that must have been just an extraordinary moment.

01:20:40:02

Eli Abt

It was the most extraordinary moment of this entire story.

01:20:44:15

Interviewer

Yeah. Um, I, I know there's a, there's a whole, I mean seam of, of stories about living in the hostel and what that meant for your family, and all the rest of it. If we've got time, can I return to those, a bit later?

01:20:57:03

Eli Abt

Please do. Yes.

01:20:58:1

Interviewer

But but let's just focus now on music because that has been your peace, hasn't it?

01:21:05:16

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:21:06:10

Interviewer

It has been your salvation.

01:21:07:21

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:21:08:03

Interviewer

It has been your solace.

01:21:09:09

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:21:09:13

Interviewer

It has been your religion.

01:21:12:19

Eli Abt

I don't know about religion, but it's certainly been a means of religious expression.

01:21:17:03

Interviewer

Yes.

01:21:17:23

Eli Abt

Uh, and, um, notwithstanding the fact that I was deprived of an early musical education, I made it my business to catch up. I taught myself sight-reading. Uh, in Johannesburg I made it my business to take voice lessons, with a Russian lady called Olga Reiss, of ample proportions. Um, I learnt cantorial, the cantorial art from two of the most outstanding cantors in South Africa, in fact they're world famous. One is a man called Israel [*Alter?*] who, originally came from Hanover, and the other was a man called [*Sholoman Mandl?*], the two of them saw that I was capable and

taught me and there's a very famous band of brothers, literally four brothers called the [Korsovitski?] brothers]. There was Moshe and [Simhar?], and David and Jacob and they were world-famous cantors. Eh, several of them were in the United States and there was one in South Africa in the Park View Greenside Synagogue. And at the age of twenty-two, they thought I was sufficiently competent to be able to take his place, which was a real compliment. He went on to Cape Town and I took his place in Johannesburg and I have this photograph of me and the Park View Greenside Choir. Um, it was very satisfying musically but it also helped pay for my education. I didn't ask my parents to pay for my university degree nor were there any such things as scholarships, certainly not for me. So, that set me off.

01:23:24:02

When I came to London I was, I was still hankering after a musical career and when I was working in an architect's office, I took time off with the permission of the principals to study at the Guildhall School of Music. Uh, I studied particularly with a wonderful teacher of German Lieder called Walther Gruner. Probably one of the best post-war experts in uh, German Lieder and in fact there is now a well-known leader prize called after him, Gruner Prize. To the extent that there was a group of um, young people who were looking for rising talent who sponsored me with two other young artists, uh, for a recital at the Wigmore Hall, and it's the only Wigmore Hall recital that I've ever given. Um, I sang Brahms, um, I sang some Aria Antiche. Uh, I sang a bit of Richard Strauss I remember I sang [name of song] which is a wonderful, wonderful song. Um, the reviews weren't all that marvellous. They were not, they were not enthusiastic. Uh, but it didn't matter I did it. Um, the, the, turning point, the reality actually came in 1958, because I, I had been singing in synagogues and in concerts in London and elsewhere. In 1958 [coughs], excuse me, [clears throat], in 1958, um, a company decided to, um, to use the two new ships belonging to the Israeli ZIM Line: the *Theodore Herzl* and the *Jerusalem*, for what they called a luxury cruise from London or Southampton to Israel and back. And I decided well that's for me, uh, and I, I told them, "Right well, I can do your cabaret and I can do your services and I can entertain the passengers." You know, all those, all those things.

01:25:51:18

Interviewer

And that was your -, yeah.

01:25:53:07

Eli Abt

They took me, uh, took me on. They apparently liked me enough to say, "Well we've got another cruise on the way. When we're back in Southampton, we'll be there only for a day, going back to Israel, will you come?" and I said, "Yes, only on one condition, that is that I'm allowed to bring my girlfriend as a hostess" They had hostesses there for the,

01:26:19:01

Interviewer

Yes

01:26:19:14

-passengers. Um, and, uh, Muriel, Muriel's mother was suitably horrified, uh, but on the second night out, standing at the rail in her finery and my finery, I proposed and there was no way she could turn me down. And we still have the silver tea service to show for it. But the reason why I'm telling you all this is because on that occasion, on the second cruise, we were staying at the Sharon Hotel in Herzliya. And also, staying at the Sharon, Herzliya, uh, uh, Sharon Hotel in Herzliya was the conductor, Otto Klemperer. Otto Klemperer was at that time, all the rage. He was the principal conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra, uh, owned by a man called Walter Legge, Legge, um, doing some wonderful work at the Festival Hall, he was doing a series of uh Beethoven, um, concerts, all the, all the symphonies and concertos of Beethoven over two or three years, and with typical audacity in, in Yiddish, we would use the word chutzpah, with typical audacity I went up to him and I said, "I am a singer from London" and he was, tinkling at the piano, and he just said, "Sing!" and I did. And everything stopped, everybody in the lounge was just standing there listening to me singing. And he said to me, "You are very good Mr Abt. I would like to have you as the soloist in the Beethoven Ninth Symphony at the Festival Hall, only I have to speak to Mr Legge about it", Mr Legge was the owner of the Philharmonia orchestra. Uh, I said "Fine, great" um, then there was a whole load of correspondence, with his daughter who was his manager, Lottie, Lottie Klemperer.

01:28:18:04

Interviewer

Uh, huh.

01:28:19:16

Eli Abt

One of those letters is in my scrapbook just to show you that I'm not telling stories, okay?

01:28:24:22

Interviewer

No, I know that.

01:28:26:15

Eli Abt

Okay? Okay. And the letter says, "Yes, I want you, I want you, but I still have to get Mr Legge's permission" and that was the last I heard.

01:28:36:05

Interviewer

Okay.

01:28:38:02

Eli Abt

Mr Legge quite obviously said, “Who the hell is this guy, Eli Abt?”. He was married to the celebrated singer Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. He was doing, he was dealing with people of that ilk.

01:28:51:03

Interviewer

Yes.

01:28:51:15

Eli Abt

Right. And even though his principal conductor thought that I was the man for the Ninth symphony, it was not to be. I think that was the time that I decided no, I've got to be sensible. I'm going, I am going to make this a side line as much as it breaks my heart.

01:29:07:17

Interviewer

Okay, but you've, but in so doing you've incorporated it into your life,

01:29:01:21

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:29:12:00

Interviewer

Haven't you, so, I would like to know,

01:29:13:09

Eli Abt

Very much so.

01:29:14:05

Interviewer

so, I'd like to know from, from you, from your emotions, is, is what it actually feels like to sing.

01:29:20:00

Eli Abt

[Sighs] Wonderful.

01:29:23:16

Interviewer

Why? Who are you singing for?

01:29:27:04

Eli Abt

I am singing first of all for myself. Secondly, I am clearly singing for those people who are around me. Thirdly, [*clears throat*], particularly when it comes to prayer, I am singing to God, for God, pleading to God, thanking God. Whatever. And lastly, when it comes to, memory, I am singing for those who were not in the same fortunate position as I am, to escape that hell, hell and to celebrate life. So, it's a very mixed picture. Very mixed. Depending on what I am singing and where I am singing. But it, it just lifts me, or has lifted me. Not only beyond that experience but beyond the everyday, beyond the everyday. Into another world. And the fact that people are prepared to come and listen to me, uh, I find amazing. And wonderful. I've got – my scrapbook shows, for instance there was one occasion in 1976 where I gave a midnight service with the Edgware synagogue choir. Um, the place was packed to the rafters, there was not a seat to be had. The headline in the *Jewish Chronicle* said, "Architect draws the crowds", that made me feel so good, it felt [*sighs*], it felt I am giving myself something, and I am giving these hundreds and hundreds of people something else, something to remember, something to share with me. [*Long pause*] Is that enough?

01:31:45:23

Interviewer

It is, and I'm going to, um, pause your story for a moment and if you'll allow me, just tell you a very quick story about myself. Uh, so many years ago, I did the BBC programme, *Who Do You Think You Are*, do you, do you know that programme? And um, I ended up going to Belarus, and um, discovering the most horrendous um, horrors that lay in my family history. And we ended up finding ourselves in a synagogue where my great-grandparents used to worship. And that was the place apparently where they met their death, and they were herded into there, and they were burned alive. And I was there with my father's cousin, who was a cantor, and he suddenly started to sing. And for me and for everybody, it was the most moving experience, and people still stop me on the street, and they talk to me about Benny who sang. And, I know that you don't want to sing, but I know that if you did, just even a few lines, that it would mean a huge amount, and it would make this a very special experience. And so, I'm going to ask you if you could consider just singing for us, a little.

01:33:02:11

Eli Abt

I said to you that um, in a very similar way, when I sing the memorial prayer, people weep, they do weep. And I can understand that they do. Because I weep myself, and so I am going to sing to you, just the last phrase of that memorial prayer which says, "[*Hebrew*]", "May their souls be sold-, be, be bound up in the bonds of life", "[*Hebrew*]", "And may they rest in peace where they are buried." "[*Hebrew*]", "Let us say Amen", [*Hebrew*].

[*Sings*]

There is very little lift of that voice I'm afraid.

01:35:01:22

Interviewer

It was beautiful. Thank you very much for doing that, Eli.

01:35:15:22

Eli Abt

I'd rather send you the tape.

01:35:18:10

Interviewer

You can send that to us too, but that was a very special experience for us -

01:35:22:23

Eli Abt

Thank you.

01:35:23:10

Interviewer

- so, thank you very much. And I can understand what you say that, um, when you sung that in the past that you've looked up after that and seen everybody cry, because it -

01:35:33:24

Eli Abt

Well, I've got the letters -

01:35:35:03

Interviewer

It must be very emotional to sing that -

01:35:37:09

Eli Abt

Yes, yes. Very, very and I've kept all the letters, all the letters I had. All the letters.

01:35:44:18

Interviewer

Because it's a voice that has not been able to be heard by so many millions of people.

01:35:50:17

Eli Abt

Well, there's nothing left of it now as you can hear, um, but it's wonderful to know -, for instance, last year, last year, we were in Jerusalem and there was an eminent professor of-, an eminent psychiatrist, who was, who we found worshipped in the same synagogue and as a boy he sang in my choir in Edgware. And he's, he flung his arms around me and he said, "There never was a cantor like you, and I've heard

them”, and I said, “Well thank you,” he said, “No, the important thing is, when it came to that prayer, you made us all cry, the choir cried like one man”, right, now that means to me that my emotions have been conveyed to everybody else in that synagogue. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, there are some wonderful pieces, wonderful pieces which are nothing to do with crying – right - which, which was celebratory – right - which we did together and, and people flocked to hear them. But since you focused on this particular, aspect, that’s what I’ve talked about, there’s lot, there’s a lot else to talk about. Jewish composers, the stuff that, that, we, that I arranged for choir and cantor, a lot of which I have given away, because I can’t use it anymore.

01:37:21:22

Interviewer

Of course, but, but, but what has been so, um, striking, by your testimony today, is your celebration of life -

01:37:32:07

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:37:32:14

Interviewer

And, uh, you, you have decided to use all of your pain in a very positive way -

01:37:37:00

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:37:37:04

Interviewer

-throughout your life

01:37:37:22

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:37:38:06

Interviewer

You’ve chosen maybe not to speak about it as much as you might have done, but now you are speaking.

01:37:45:07

Eli Abt

Yes, I am. I am.

01:37:47:07

Interviewer

Does it feel good to speak about your experiences?

01:37:50:21

Eli Abt

It's very good to speak about my experiences. I feel, I feel I have, no, not lifted a burden that's not the right, that's not the right word. I feel I have done what is my duty to do to the memory of those who didn't make it. And for the benefit of coming generations who ought to know what happened. That's the obvious answer. [*Long pause*] I'm just trying to think of what else we've, what we haven't covered.

01:38:30:15

Interviewer

No, what you've just said was extremely powerful. Because that's the point of all of this -

01:38:36:06

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:38:37:06

Interviewer

It's for people to understand in generations to come -

01:38:40:14

Eli Abt

Yes

01:38:40:24

Interviewer

- what happened.

01:38:41:22

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:38:42:09

Interviewer

And by passing on your testimony, you've done that.

01:38:45:10

Eli Abt

Yes, yes, I have.

01:38:47:06

Interviewer

You've repeated the exercise that your mum -

01:38:51:00

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:38:51:04

Interviewer

- gave you.

01:38:52:01

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:38:52:11

Interviewer

On Kristallnacht.

01:38:53:14

Eli Abt

Yes, yes. I just want to say one more thing.

01:38:56:18

Interviewer

Please.

01:38:57:14

Eli Abt

We've talked about me, but I think we need to talk about my parents as well.

Because I learnt from them that it is important to pick yourself up, dust your-, dust yourself down, and get on with it. And they did, from absolute poverty, absolute poverty. They did pull themselves up to the point where my father working finally for the board of deputies introduced, uh, European culture, Jewish culture, Jewish culture, to South Africa, they had their first Book Week organised by him, the first music festival organised by him, the first um, art exhibition and in fact they went around the world collecting artefacts so that in the end, Johannesburg had its first Jewish museum named after them. The Harry and Friedel Abt museum.

Unfortunately it is no more because, uh, it's a sad story where there was a break-in and there, there were, there was a lot of vandalism and, and so on but the point is, they, they celebrated life in their own way and I took the cue and did the same thing and moreover, this philosophy of Torah im Derech Eretz, tradition and being a civilised man, I have tried to keep up, um, with their example in that I am now, I'm no longer able to sing, I now specialise in speaking and writing about the wonderful illuminations of the *Haggadot*, the *Haggadah* which is the *Passover* story, of the Middle Ages. I speak all over the UK, I've spoken in Los Angeles, I've spoken in Johannesburg about it, I've written about, I feel this is, this is in their tradition as well as in the tradition of German Jewry that I grew up in.

01:41:15:14

Interviewer

Thank you. May I ask you, um, as we start reflecting on that period of history, whether you feel like we have learnt any lessons from what happened?

01:41:32:13

Eli Abt

What do you mean by we?

01:41:34:11

Interviewer

Collectively.

01:41:41:18

Eli Abt

[*Long pause*] I don't think that the world collectively has, has yet learnt the lessons of the Holocaust. If it is possible, barely seventy years after that Holocaust for antisemitism to have reared its ugly head again in Europe and elsewhere to the extent that it is, I feel we have been unable to inculcate in the generations that have passed since that Holocaust, the horror of what is possible when man decides to treat fellow man as what the Germans called an *Untermensch* – vermin, not a human being. And the result has been similar, we're not on the same scale, but similar events in Africa, similar events in the Far East, similar events all over the world. The fact that we are now fighting a philosophy, that believes more in death than in life, demonstrates that the world has not taken the lesson of the Holocaust on board and that life is the most important thing, more than anything. Life is worth living, life is worth celebrating. So, one can only hope that, the record, that is now being made by people like myself will serve to help future generations understand the necessity that human beings have to treat each other like human beings and nothing else.

01:44:05:16

Interviewer

What are your greatest fears?

01:44:01:00

Eli Abt

[*Pause*] My greatest fears are that the lesson will not be learnt. My greatest fears are that, inhumanity, mans' inhumanity to man, will persist and even get worse as a result of misguided philosophies of which Nazism was the first. It's never happened before, I think, that we now face a situation where not only is there – uh - a, a, a view of human beings who do not believe in a particular religion, as being worthy of death, but that it is worse dying to achieve it. Not even the Nazis, not even the Nazis went that far. Not even the Nazis went that far. So, the answer to your question is I am very worried and very afraid, where this is going to end.

01:45:40:10

Interviewer

You know with the technology that we're using you are going to be able to speak to generations to come that this testimony is future proofed for many generations.

01:45:51:10

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:45:52:07

Interviewer

Do you have a message?

01:45:58:11

Eli Abt

[*Pause*] The message is very simple. We are all God's children. The first lesson that we learn from *Genesis* is man was made in the image of God. It does not say a white man is better than a black man, or a yellow man, or any other kind of man, it does not say a man is better than a woman. It does not say that a particular religion is better than any other. It merely says, 'We are made in God's image', all of us, all of us. If we don't take that message on board, we are doomed. We are doomed, particularly with the technology that is now available, to destroy and exterminate millions of people in an instant. If we do not take that message on board, I fear for the future of humanity. I pray to all merciful God, that that message will be heeded.

01:47:29:05

Interviewer

Eli, you've spoken, um, so eloquently today, and we are very grateful to you for your testimony, and for reliving some of the pain that you've had in your life and sharing, uh, some of the learnings that you've experienced. Before we move to the end of the interview is there anything else that you feel that you haven't had a chance to say that you would like to?

01:48:01:04

Eli Abt

I'm trying to go visually through my scrapbook.

01:48:05:06

Interviewer

Don't think about that. Think into your heart, rather than that.

01:48:08:10

Eli Abt

Okay. [*Long pause*]. Yes, on a completely different level. Um, I have gone through, as a child I've gone through a degree of suffering. It was very brief. Very brief indeed, uh, and it didn't compare to the suffering that millions of other children, uh - Jewish children - at that time went through. Um, but I think it's important for my own experiences.

[cut for sound]

for adults to understand that children cannot sometimes express their own pain. It is no criticism of Mr. Jonas Plaut, that I don't remember ever him understanding what I was going through. Um, [*long pause*], I also feel that communally sometimes people do not understand how a child feels in a particular situation. I've not dealt with it; I'll deal with it now. My Bar Mitzvah in 1942 took place in this hostel of which my parents were in charge. 1941, '42, 4'3, for three years, so 1942, in May of 1942, I was Bar Mitzvah in the Great Synagogue. I had no party. All I remember is the children, all the children sitting round the table, um, and nothing, and there was an additional bar of chocolate for each of us to celebrate the occasion. The only other person there was my young cousin from Sea Point, who shared the Bar Mitzvah with me. Apart from my parents there were no adults. There was no -, there was nobody from the community. Nobody from the Sea Point community, or the, or the um, Great Synagogue community, shared that with me. Not the rabbi, not the cantor, nobody. Um, it is isn't like in every community, but I felt that very deeply. Very deeply. And I tried to make up for it by giving my two boys a Bar Mitzvah they would each remember.

01:51:34:15

Interviewer

How much of your story did you share with your boys, as they grew up?

01:51:39:10

Eli Abt

Not a great deal.

01:51:41:00

Interviewer

Do you regret that?

01:51:44:21

Eli Abt

I don't know the answer to that. I don't know the answer to that. Um, [*long pause*]. The short answer is I don't know the answer to that, I don't know whether I regret it or not. I haven't thought about that.

01:52:09:07

Interviewer

Okay, you don't need to. It was just, out there. Um, we've got a couple of things that we need you to do in a moment's time Eli, but may I just ask one, just one gap that we haven't um, covered is what happened to your grandmother?

01:52:25:04

Eli Abt

Yes. There's an apocryphal story which says - and it's only apocryphal - that she

went with my one uncle to Palestine, and then went back to Germany. If that is so, uh, I can only ascribe to a number of possibilities. The first is, at her age she couldn't take the climate - although there are many old people in Israel. There were difficulties, with, um, looking after her, which I can well understand because all the, that family in Israel were also as poor as dormice. My sister's account actually tells of how she was shunted from one family to the next because they couldn't, they couldn't all afford to keep her. *[clears throat]* All whether there was some family disagreement with possibly a cantankerous old lady, I don't know. Um, I just find it odd that she stayed behind. And lived in Frankfurt and was deported from there. And she was the only one. Not true - there was also a great-uncle of my mother's who was also, um, caught and died in Theresienstadt, uh, but she was the closest, the closest to me.

01:54:05:07

Interviewer

So, she was deported and where did she go?

01:54:08:01

Eli Abt

She died in Theresienstadt -, she was deported in November of 1942, and she was dead as soon as December of 1942.

01:54:19:07

Interviewer

How do you know that?

01:54:20:22

Eli Abt

We know that from the certificate which we have from Yad Vashem, the Israel authority for the records of the six million who died.

Interviewer

Okay thank you.

ARTEFACTS

ARTEFACT 1: Eli's Kindertransport pass.

01:54:37:19

Eli Abt o/o/v

...This is the document that was sent by Dr Klibansky, who was the head of the school, high school in Cologne, who was busy like many other people including my father, trying to get permits for children, to come to England, and this is the notification to say, that.

Eli Abt iv

I was, I had been given permit number 5156 out of the 10,000 made available to the

Kinder transport children, and it is dated the 26th April 1939, uh, and it reads, as follows,

Eli Abt o/o/v

it's from his secretary actually, to my father, [German], Dr. H. Abt, [German], we are pleased, [German phrase] that we can advise you, [German], we've just heard from our Director, [German phrase], in London, [German], for your son, [German phrase], the permit card number 5156, [German], it has, it has, has been granted. [German], this is a typical convoluted German sentence, what it really means is, so soon, so soon as we know some more details, [German], we will certainly let you, let you know. [German], great um, pleasure. Somebody called, [German phrase], somebody called [German]. That is my passport to life.

01:56:44:10

Interviewer

Do you remember the day that that arrived?

01:56:45:20

Eli Abt

Well, well I remember my father hugging me as I was sitting on his lap in the Berlin railway station. That's what, this was the conflict, he was letting me go, but he was stuck there still. Himself and his wife and his little boy. Because the world had closed its doors [Long pause].

01:57:14:00

Interviewer

It's unimaginable, isn't it?

01:57:17:03

Eli Abt

If I had been my father, I would have felt that way yes [Long pause].

01:57:25:09

Interviewer

Both of your parents must have loved you so much to make you go on that journey. Because they were trying to save your life.

01:57:32:24

Eli Abt

Well, well they were trying to save my sister's life and mine yes, and they realised, one life saved, two lives saved, that was really something. There was no hope of all five of us getting out together. It was quite clear. There were so many Kinder transport children who lost their parents. Thousands of them. I was the lucky one. You must have other Kindertransport children who told you that story. They never saw their parents again. I did. I did. So, thank God for those blessings. Let's sing it from the rooftops.

01:58:30:11

Interviewer

You're absolutely right Eli, we do, we have um, people um, that was the last time they ever saw their family, so, you have a, a very happy ending.

01:58:41:18

Eli Abt

Yes.

01:58:42:03

Interviewer

To your sadness.

01:58:43:02

Eli Abt

Yup.

ARTEFACT 2: scan of a 4 photographs of great grandparents

No commentary

ARTEFACT 3: scan of a photograph of grandparents in 1917

No commentary

ARTEFACT 4: scan of a photograph of father at the age of 17 in 1917

No commentary

ARTEFACT 5: scan of his father's army book

No commentary

ARTEFACT 6: scan of his father's commendation document from the Great War

No commentary

ARTEFACT 7: scan of a photograph of Eli in 1930 sitting on his grandmother's knee.

No commentary

ARTEFACT 8: scan of a photograph of Eli in a street watched by his mother? or a nanny? 1930

No commentary

ARTEFACT 9: scan of a document detailing his father's award from the army, dated 25 March 1935

No commentary

ARTEFACT scan of Eli's father's professional certificate dated 12 July 1939

No commentary

ARTEFACT 01: scan of the cover of Eli's father's identity card

No commentary

ARTEFACT 12: scan of the inside of Eli's father's identity card

No commentary

ARTEFACT 13: scan of the cover of Eli's mother's identity card

No commentary

ARTEFACT 14: scan of the inside of Eli's mother's identity card

No commentary

ARTEFACT 15: scan of a letter from the refugee hostel in Brighton dated 28-5-1939.

No commentary

ARTEFACT 16: scan of a photograph of Eli Abt in cantor's robes in South Africa

No commentary

ARTEFACT 17: scan of a document engaging Eli's father as a teacher at Paarl Hebrew School, dated 30/7/1940.

No commentary

ARTEFACT 18: scan of a list of family members lost, dated 6. March 1942

No commentary

ARTEFACT 19: scan of a letter from Lotte Klemperer August 5th, 1958

No commentary

ARTEFACT 20: scan of a photograph of Eli and Muriel's wedding in 1959

No commentary

ARTEFACT 21: scan of an article about Eli's father's life and career published in *Jewish Affairs* August 1968

No commentary

ARTEFACT 22: scan of a photograph of Eli with Lord Jakobovits

No commentary

ARTEFACT 23: scan of Eli's family tree

No commentary