

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Selma Dubnick. I am a member of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Archival Testimonies Project of the Sterling Library, Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Phyllis Simon Tobin, associate coordinator of the Kane College project and clinical coordinator of the Yale Archives New York project.

We would like to welcome Renee Cantor, a Holocaust survivor who is now living in East Brunswick and is here to tell us of her experiences. Mrs. Cantor, we welcome you.

Thank you.

I wonder if you would tell us where you were born.

I was born in Brussels, Belgium on the 2nd of August, 1927. And how old were you when the war broke out? Do you remember?

Yes, I had just turned 12. I'd just had my 12th birthday.

And were you living in Brussels at the time?

No, I was living in London, England. And I was living in a Sephardic orphanage where there were 13 or 14 children. I can't quite remember the count. And we had been hearing the radio broadcasts of Neville Chamberlain going to Munich.

We had heard a lot about the concentration camps. In fact, living amongst us was a young girl by the name of [? Lucia ?] Peritz, who came from Berlin. And the stories she told us were horrifying. And we were very afraid because we were also Jewish children. And the fear was this could happen to us.

How did you happen to be in London when you were born in Brussels? How did you make the trip?

I can't give you the answer why I was sent to England. But I was sent to England at the age of four and put on a train. I remember a suitcase being strapped to my side. And there was really no communication with the people that I was with because they couldn't speak French.

I got to London. I got to England and then to London, also with the same suitcase, and being put in the luggage department in the charge of a guard on the train, or porter-- I don't know which is the better word-- and being met at London by Mrs. Neville [? Laskey, ?] who took me to the home for Sephardic orphaned children in the West End of London.

Could you give us a sense before that point of something about your background? Do you remember the kind of home you came from, the kind of family?

No, I don't remember anything. And I didn't even know where I was or why I was going there. Everything was very frightening. I remember I was crying a lot. I didn't know where I was. And nobody answered any questions.

Did you--

I remember calling for my mother. And I was told to shush. That was it.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I didn't know I had a brother. But I obviously did have a brother, which I found out later, who was living in Paris with my grandparents.

And did you ever see him?

I don't remember ever seeing him until I was evacuated at the beginning of the war, September 3, 1939, to a little village in the West of England called Holt, H-O-L-T, which was a suburb of a small town called Bradford-on-Avon. The reason that he came to visit me was that as I entered this house, which was a non-Jewish home, and being raised as an Orthodox Jew, I was very frightened of my surroundings. The people there had asked me questions and said very horrible things to me about being Jewish.

And I started to get deep anxiety about what was going to happen, how the outcome of the war was going to be. And I fainted. And they got in touch with the headmaster. And then a search was put out for a relative, through Mrs. [? Laskey, ?] who found my brother. And he came to see me. But there was only one visit. And then he joined the Merchant Navy in England.

He must have been much older than you.

He was 13 years older than me, yes.

You say that you had been orthodox. Was that in the orphanage? Was it an Orthodox orphanage?

Sephardic is orthodox. There were no conservative movements or reform movements in Sephardic. Sephardic is Orthodox.

But that's how you were raised.

How I was raised, yes, very orthodox.

How long were you in the orphanage? Well, technically, I was in the orphanage, living in the home itself from the age of 4 to 12. But then at the age of 12 came the traveling experience of being evacuated to small villages and towns all around the British Isles.

Was this after England entered the war?

Yes, this started the first day of war in Britain. We heard on the intercom, over the school system, that Britain had declared war on Germany and that all of us were going to be put on trains. And the terminology was used, destination unknown, which meant that not even anybody but the headmaster and the teachers knew where we were going. And I don't even think they knew until the trains landed in the various villages all around England.

And we were roughly about 400 Jewish schoolchildren, which were the 13 or 14 children from the Sephardic orphanage. We were integrated into the Jewish school, which was the Bayswater Jewish School, which I think was around Edgware Road, Portobello Road.

Do you remember much of your life in the orphanage? Were there were other children there from Brussels?

No, there was just one girl from Berlin who cried constantly. Every night, when we went to bed, she would bury her head under the pillow and cry. We say, why are you crying? Why are you crying? And she would say about her family, what they did to them, what they did to them. And so we got quite a firsthand information of what happened to her family, anyway.

So your basic memories, then, as a child are from 4 to 12 in that Sephardic home.

In the Sephardic school, yes. And then, of course, when we were evacuated and we were integrated with the Bayswater Jewish School, we met about 200 German refugees. They weren't all German. There were Czechoslovakian. There were Viennese. There were Polish.

And they all had their stories to tell, which of course made it even more realistic. They were the true proof that

something had happened to their families. And they were brought to England. I think they were brought to England by the British Jewish Refugee Committee.

So at the age of four, your life was seriously disrupted.

At the age of four, I was on my own.

Yes, indeed. And then, in 1939, that's when you were evacuated. And that's really where you had the second big disruption.

The big disruption of going out of an orthodox environment into an absolute foreign environment, which I had never-- I didn't even know about, that existed, really.

Was there any source of reassurance or comfort? Or were the children a group that was cohesive in any way? Do you feel allied, friends?

Well, the only thing we had was each other.

And you have remained in any way, or did you stay close with them?

Well, I was in a house with another girl. And then we all met at the school house for services on Shabbat. And then we met all the other children, too. But that was really the only cohesiveness amongst us, plus our school teachers, who were also all Jewish. But all the towns and villages that we were sent to were strictly Protestant. England is a Protestant country.

How long did you stay in the first home after you were evacuated?

The first house, I stayed a year. And then for some unknown reason, unless it had to do with-- the bombing had sort of calmed down in London and, maybe, was heading towards Bristol and the Midlands. So they decided to take all the children from the orphanage and went-- vacated boarding school in the town of Hastings.

That never quite made sense to me because it was on the coast. And when we looked out the window, we could see the barbed wire all across the beach heads. And the beaches were mined. So that, to me, as somebody who thought about it, it never really made much sense to me. Because we were on the coast where the anti-aircraft guns and everything-- we were really closer to the war there than we were in the west.

And all the children from the orphanage--

And all the children from the orphanage, we were all together, yes.

And did you stay there very long?

We stayed there not too long, about three months. And then they took us back again, to the west part of England, into a village, next door to the village we had been in. And this time, I stayed with another family.

So each time, you had to make a new adjustment.

It was a total disruption, new high school, new foster parents, new adjustments, new anti-Semitic statements, new accusations that we had to listen to that we really didn't understand. When you're brought up in a complete Jewish environment and you really don't know what the rest of the world is thinking-- but as the war went on, and the news broadcasts, you began to get different vibrations and hear different things happening to the Jewish people. And being Jewish, it was a matter of great concern, where we'd end up. We really didn't know what would be the end.

Did you stay, generally, with the same girl with whom you started out?

Yeah, I usually stayed with the same girl, who happened to be-- she was a close friend of mine, yes.

Are you still in touch in her?

Yes, we are. Yes, she lives in the East End of London. And she has a daughter that lives in California. And she visits here and there.

Yeah. And then, when you left Hastings, you went--

We came back to another village near Bristol. And it's a small town, actually. It was called Bradford-on-Avon, a small village also, a little bigger than the other one but not too big.

And each time, you had to transfer to a different high school. How was the transition?

A different high school and different house. And the same allegations-- oh, you're Jewish? You know, it's all because of you people we're in the war. And then the whole story of Christ, who I-- I'd really never heard that word.

Having lived in a Jewish school and being brought up so orthodox, I didn't sort of understand too much about the Christ-- the accusation was. And I would say, well, I never did anything. So it was very difficult to have people accusing me because I was Jewish when I didn't know, really, what they were talking about. I was quite ignorant of, actually, the different stories that had gone around.

Why did these families take you in?

The British government were paying everybody to-- the housewives of these villages to take in evacuees. The word evacuee was used, not refugee. The word was evacuee. They were paying them to house us and take care of us until the time would be that we could go back to London. But of course, that time never happened because the war ended six years later. And by that time, I was 15 or 16, yeah.

How many homes were you in?

How many homes, OK. The first one in the village of Holt, the second one in Bradford-on-Avon. And then another one-- I transferred from another house in Bradford to another house because there was severe illness in the family, and they felt that we would be better off out of there. And then to a woman who ran a small boarding house in Blackpool, England. So altogether, it was four different high schools, different houses, different, quote, "foster parents," and then on my own.

Did you retain any communication with any of these foster parents after?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did. Because when I left, the feeling was that they really liked me. They had begun to know me. They saw that when I cut, I bled, that I didn't have horns, and I was a child just like children of their own.

And one of them, when she found out I was an orphan, really tried very hard to see if she could adopt me. But of course, nothing could be done. But I did continue with two correspondents even after I came to the United States, until I didn't hear anymore, which I assumed they had passed away.

How did you manage to continue observing your religious holidays, living as you did among so many non-Jews?

Well, I didn't know any other way. I mean, I was raised that way. And I truly think it was something I hung on to. It was a force for me because I had nothing else. It's like when I went to bed at night, I would say my Shema Yisrael and pray that everything would be OK.

So I think that if I had been brought up-- anything sort of floundering, but the fact that I was brought up in such a strong

religious background, at that time, it sort of gave me a path to follow. And I didn't know any other way, so that's the path I followed.

During those years that you acquired this kind of attachment, were there good experiences for you living in London, at the home, at that time that would make this such an important--

Before the war?

Yes, yes.

Well--

Because it must have been in addition to the religion. My thought would be something very powerfully connected for you.

You know, I don't know how to answer that.

Were there any nice adults there? There were any women?

Well, my teachers were nice. I always got along well with my teachers. And I think my teachers were a very strong force in my life.

Do you remember learning the language, when you really knew you were fluent and comfortable in English?

Yes, when my teacher sort of took me under her wing and said she had a great future for me, yes.

Do you know how old you were when you felt that you had landed-- yes.

I think I got a part in the school play or something. So then I knew everything was OK.

You had arrived.

Right, yeah.

It must have been very difficult, not having parents.

Yes, I was very, very jealous of a mother picking up a child, my friends that I made in school, outside the orphanage. When the parents came to pick them up and they gave them a kiss on the cheek or whatever, I guess I was crying on the inside, laughing on the outside. And I did fantasize what having a mother and father would be. And I think, if I remember correctly, I wrote a poem, If I Had a Mother.

And the only way I could think about it was that I would try to be the world's greatest mother, Jewish mother, with the chicken soup on Friday and so forth, and the holidays. But yeah, so when you don't have parents, you feel that you've been cheated, that you've been-- in other words, you've been thrown into the world and not born into the world. It's an experience. If you've walked in those shoes of any of the other children or myself, it has to be one of the most harrowing experiences because you don't have the nurturing.

And certainly, when you're in an orphanage, you have your food. And you have your shelter. But you don't have a lot of TLC, you know? And you're just another kid. So what would happen was that each child would try to take care of the other. You were your brother's keepers. One child had a headache, you have a head. Another child had a stomachache, you try to take care of it. But you all sort of helped one another. Because there's no such thing as being the only child there or the child of a family. You're not.

You became your own extended family within the orphanage.

That's right. They were the extended family. But I must say, some of the mothers-- and I have to say, Mrs. Sassoon, because I remember her. And I have visited her in California since. Always, when she came to visit her son, she always brought an extra bag of sweets for me. So she always felt that little closeness.

So some of the parents that came to visit the other children, be it their mother or father that was the survivor, did used to bring, sometimes, a coloring book, or dominoes, or whatever it was. Because I didn't have any visitors.

When you finished high school, were you in Manchester?

No, I finished high school in Blackpool. Right. And then I went to Manchester, to a Syrian-- which is a Sephardic community where a lot of the people knew my family. And there were some distant cousins. But I didn't know them. And it was very difficult for me because no one talked. No one talked. I would ask questions, and no one talked.

Many times, I heard an Arabic word in a household, which was "hazita." And "hazita" translated in English, means poor thing. And I would say, why are they calling me a poor thing? And they'd say, forget it. Don't even talk about it.

So I never knew. And a lot of these people had been in business with my family, knew my family. In fact, when I walked into the social hall of the Sephardic community for the first time, somebody came over to me and said, what is your name? And I had red hair at the time, and I looked very much like my mother.

And I told them who I was. And they stood back in aghast and said, oh my God. And then I said, what's the matter? She says, nothing. And I could never get an answer from anybody, not even half an answer of what went on before I came to England.

Were your parents from Syria?

My father was from Aleppo, Syria. And my mother was from Paris. My grandmother was from Salonika in Greece. And my grandfather was from Istanbul in Turkey. And the family went to live in Paris, my mother's family, because my grandfather was an interpreter who spoke several languages. And I think he was attached to the Navy or something, some sort of either diplomatic, or the Army, or Navy Corps where he was used as an interpreter. So that's how the family got to Paris, I guess through the job, the work.

Then the Syrian relatives in Manchester were on your father's side?

Well, my mother, who was very young, from what I understand-- and in those days, there were shiduchs. And she was very beautiful and very young. And my father was a bachelor till quite in his middle 50s, but a very, very wealthy-- I don't know how wealthy, but very wealthy. And my grandmother saw fit to introduce them. And my mother, of course, then married my father, yeah.

And then they settled in Brussels.

Well, they lived in several capitals. I think Vienna, in Brussels, in Paris, and even in England. So I really-- I don't know too much about that.

Did you work? Pardon me?

Were you working in Manchester?

Yes, I did several things. Yeah, I did a lot of anything that would pay the rent. And--

By that time, the war was over in Manchester?

The war was over. And I can't remember. Was it 1944?

'45.

'44, '45? Oh, let me see. I was 12 when the war started and 16 when I graduated high school. So that's four years, right? I went to Manchester when I was 16, and worked, and also volunteered at the Jewish Forces canteen.

Did you understand at all, or has it ever been explained to you why your extended family did not take care of you? You don't know?

No, I asked so many questions. I came to a point where I stopped asking questions because it was obvious that nobody wanted to talk. So there was no point anymore. Well, I had made up my mind, actually. I mean, by this time, I was on my own for so long that this was it.

And as the war was coming to a close, I was trying to think what I would do with the future. I really wanted to get away from the war. I was tired of standing on lines. I was tired of not having stockings in the winter time, wearing wooden shoes. I was tired of everything. It was exhausting, the war and everything pertaining to it.

Were you made aware, during the war, of what was going on? Or you just knew there was a war going on?

Oh, we knew there was a war going on.

And did you know the particulars of it, of Great Britain's involvement, or--

Well, the way it was put to me at the beginning was, of course, that everybody was involved because of the Jews, what Hitler was doing to the Jews. And if it wasn't for what was done to the Jews, there would be no war. In other words, that was the essence of the war. But knowing history, it wasn't. But--

But you didn't know the other side of this then.

Yes. I don't-- in school, we did history. And we ta-- we had the newspaper in front of us. So we followed the war. There was-- let me see. What was it? The British landed at Dunkirk. And we went through the war, as the war progressed, in our history classes. So we were well aware of what was going on. And there were broadcasts all the time on the radio.

Do you remember the day the war was over?

The day it was over? I certainly do. I was in Manchester. And I had just been at my girlfriend, Margaret's, who had just recently visited in Reno. And we walked up to Manchester University. And we walked through the streets with all the University students singing.

And, oh, we stayed up all night. I remember that. Yeah, we stayed up all night. There was cheering. And it was just unbelievable. We couldn't believe the war was over. It was just something that, unless you've lived it, you wouldn't know the feeling.

What was your life like at that moment? Where were you living? How were you living?

At that moment?

Yes.

OK, at that moment, I hadn't met the man I was going to marry yet. I met him September '44. This was D-Day or VE day in June, I believe, June 6? OK. Well, I had figured if I would play my cards right, I would apply to go to Palestine.

I was alone. There were a lot of people who were alone. There were other refugees from all over Europe. And I figured I'd start life all over again. I would go to Palestine. It was not Israel at that time. I would live on a kibbutz, and probably

meet the man I was going to marry, and have the 10 kids that I wanted, and the picket fence.

Most of all, the only thing I wanted out of my life then-- because enough was enough-- was a family and everything that goes with a family and running a family. That's all. I didn't look for anything beyond that. Anything beyond that was going to be icing on the cake.

Were you living alone then?

I was living alone, yes. Yeah.

When you were living in England before all of this, was there a point when you were really fearful that the Germans might invade England?

Yes. When we were in Hastings, Hitler was already in the Channel Islands. They were just about 10 minutes from the coast. And when we heard that, and when we heard what the Nazis were doing-- and we heard a lot of stories about things they were doing to young Jewish girls. The fear was tremendous, absolutely overwhelming.

And we'd cry. And we didn't know. Where would we go? What would happen to us? And this was a true fear of all the kids when we sat down and we talked together.

How old were you then?

I had to be either 14 or 15, something like that. Yeah, I think I was 14. Yes. It was a very real thing because as far as we knew and what we had seen, the beaches had all barbed wire. They were mined. And how could you escape? There was no way to escape, as far as we knew. So it would have been the end. I mean, we thought if they landed-- but thank God-- no, this is-- I think America came into the war then. Was it 1941?

Yes, December.

I was 14. Yes, America came into the war two years later. Thank God for America, you know? Because then, I think things-- if I remember correctly, it was the Battle of Britain. I think that was at the time of the Battle of Britain. And I know Winston Churchill was in power because I was on 10 Downing Street when he did the V for victory sign. So I remember that also.

That must've been quite a memorable thing for you.

Right.

Did you actually see him?

Yes, I saw him. He was about 10 minutes away.

Really?

But I also saw Sir Oswald Mosley on a Sunday morning at Marble Arch. He was a fascist.

Yes.

And he, of course, was spouting fascism and Nazism. So I saw both.

I'm sure that made you feel quite uncomfortable.

Yes, very uncomfortable. And fear is more a word to use. Fear was an overpowering emotion. But it was real. It wasn't anything we were imagining. It was real. It was very real. There, for the grace of God, go I, you know?

How soon after this moment of the end of the war for you did you mobilize your life and move on?

Well, it wasn't that I was mobilizing because everything would take so long. I did apply to the-- I think I had to apply to the Zionist movement in order, at that time, to move to Palestine. And I was a very young girl, also. So dancing and having a good time was part of my life. And working at the canteen, and I had very nice friends. I had real good friends who I'm in touch with to this very day that I went out with.

And then, of course, I met my future husband, who was on leave from the 8th evacuation hospital. He was a surgical technician. And a lot of these young men had been subject to instant war. I mean, they would take the wounded out of the fields into the tents and perform surgery. So they sent a lot of American soldiers to this part of England and to Manchester University to study anything they wanted to. It was like a relaxation or a recoup.

And I met him the day he landed. And I dated him to the day he left. And then when he got back, it was then that he proceeded to ask me to start arrangements for visas. And he would send all the papers and bring me to America. And we'd get married.

And of course, being in love and everything, I just put the Palestine issue away. Right.

What year did you come to America?

I came to America-- it took me a year and a half to get here because of immigration and so forth. And transportation, also, was very difficult. They were still using the Queen Elizabeth and the Queen Mary for troop ships. So I didn't get here till-- I sailed December 6 from Southampton. And I got here December 12.

What year?

'46, excuse me.

Did you come over with a bunch of war brides?

I came over with the most beautiful girls on the boat. Beautiful, all these girls. And there's a funny anecdote that the sailors on the boat were British. And they said, well, what was wrong with us? And we said, nothing, you just weren't around.

[LAUGHS]

When you start dating, that's it, whoever is available, I guess. Yeah.

Did you have that family that you had wished?

I had the family. I had the children that I wanted. And I had everything that I wanted, yes. How many children?

I had four children and seven grandchildren up to this point. I have a single son. So we'll see if there's any more.
[CHUCKLES]

How would you say this, your early experience, and particularly the experience during the war has affected you, your life?

It has affected my life that-- I'm very aware of who I am. And if I wasn't aware, I was constantly told who I was. So being Jewish, I'm not an Orthodox Jew anymore. I'm not. I have a very strong heritage. I have a life that I lived as a Jew, fully. I gave my children all I could give them in the way of knowing who they were and what they were.

And all I can say is that the experience, maybe, has made me more compassionate to other people's problems than,

maybe, if I'd had the normal, quote, "life," especially, I guess, anti-Semitism or any anti-- because of one's faith, or one's color, or whatever it is.

Do your children know your story?

My children? Yes, my children know my story. But I didn't tell them-- I had very great difficulty. I remember when I first said-- one of my children asked me, where is your family? Where are they? And I said I didn't have any.

And they looked at me. I mean, their eyes, their faces dropped. And they just didn't understand what I said. And then as they got a little older, I began to tell them. And they just couldn't understand how I could have been left there without being told anything. They just didn't understand that.

Neither did you.

And neither did I. And neither did I. To this day, it really boggles my mind. Because it was something that was not right. And I wasn't a stupid child. I was smart. And I think at a certain age, I should have been pulled aside and said, this is what happened. This is why you're here, and so forth, or so on.

OK. I think we'll take a pause now and resume in a few minutes, OK.

OK, thank you. It's hot. I think that's it. Cut the feed.

We are back again with the puzzling and courageous story of Renee Cantor and how, at the age of four, she was orphaned and survived through the most horrendous experiences in England of separation. Mrs. Cantor, would you like to tell us now in summing up how you look back on those years and how it has affected you now?

Well, it affects me when I hear of synagogues being bombed and Jewish cemeteries being turned over. Because that is a throwback to what happened in Nazi Germany. And also, the German Jews did believe they were Germans first, Jews second. They learned otherwise.

So it's not that I'm harping on it. It's not that I think about it every day. But when I read something in the paper that shows that there's still animosity, hatred, anti-Semitism, it's very frightening knowing I have grandchildren that may someday have to confront somebody who's crazed and who hates them for the mere fact they were born a Jew. I said, I am not orthodox anymore. I do have my identity. And I know I'm Jewish because the whole world told me I was Jewish besides learning it myself.

And the only thing I would like to say is that people have to keep pressing and watching for anything that looks like a Holocaust of the future so that my children and my grandchildren can live, and be what they are, and enjoy their life without being afraid to live and afraid that they won't be here the next day.

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. OK.

[MUSIC PLAYING]