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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Helen Bamber
December 28, 2003
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Helen Bamber, conducted by Vera Frankel on December 28, 2003 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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HELEN BAMBER
December 28, 2003

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum with Helen Bamber, conducted by Vera Frankel on December 28th, 2003, in London. This is tape number one, side A. Helen Bamber, tell me about your background first of all, where you grew up and the family you grew up in.

Answer: I grew up as an only child in a Jewish family in North London. My father was born in America. My mother was born in the UK, in England, of course, as it was then. Their parents came from Poland and Russia respectively. Interestingly, one of my grandfathers was actually born, we found out many years later, in what was -- and my pronunciation is poor, forgive me, Oswiecim, Auschwitz. And that sent shivers down our spine many years later. Now, it wasn't a happy household. My father was an accountant. He was a very obsessional man, and during most of my childhood -- I grew up, by the way -- I was born in 1925. So I grew up in the years of unemployment, dole queues, and the rise of fascism. And I think this combination absorbed my father completely inasmuch as he was something of a visionary. He could see, I believe, what was going to happen in Europe. He was bilingual, he spoke German perfectly, and a number of other languages, and I've never understood how it was that a man who was not -- you know, was quite simply educated in this country, a good scholar, but how it was that he spoke the languages he did, and how he could be bilingual in German. I never understood that, and I don't now, but he was. So, as an only child, in a house in north London, with diminishing financial resources, as my father's activities on behalf of people who were -- who needed to leave Nazi Germany became more -- how can I say more active, or more -- yes, more active. And as I was exposed to

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his version of events, his -- his horror of fascism, his fear of anti-Semitism rising in Europe, and indeed, in England where we -- I mean, I was frequently aware of Mosely's fascists marching through north London, and the east end of London. I'm losing my thread, but what I'm trying to do is to give a background about an only child growing up in what was later a working class area, because we had to move from a rather sumptuous house to something very modest. Was a -- a -- a kind of house of -- of s-something bordering on fear and apprehension of what might happen in the future. My father insisted that we listened to the broadcasts from Germany, which he would translate. So that as a young child, I -- I was exposed to quite a lot of my father's understanding and vision, but also his fears, and my own. N -- my mother tried hard to avoid all this by -- and it wasn't that she didn't care, it was that like so many people of her time, and h -- and as is always the case, she actually couldn't face the possibility of what might happen. She began to disengage as much as she could. As my father's activities became, as I said earlier, more -- more active, there were refugees from Germany who came to our house, en route perhaps for somewhere else, but would often stay in my house for some days, weeks, and -- and as a sickly child, on top of everything else, because I had what later was thought to have been TB, tuberculosis, which is very common in my time, many children had it, I was bi -- be -- I was bedridden for a lot of my -- of the winters of my childhood. And they -- there were -- people who came and stayed would often come and talk to me, sit on my bed and talk to me, but they wouldn't talk to me about childhood events, or childhood dreams, and -- and fantasies, and i -- yo-you know, celebration. It was about what happened to them, and what was -- what happened in Germany. And I remember there was a pianist who stayed with us, who I disliked very much. I found him pompous, although he played beautifully. And he came and sat on my bed frequently. But he made a great change in my life, in my childish -- my childhood. He said to

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me, "You know, you don't have to be ill like this. If you want to, you can get out of bed when I leave this room, and you can walk round the room, touch all the furniture, and get back into bed, and say to yourself, I am now in control of myself." Now, I disliked him more than ever when he said this, because of course, illness can be a retreat, and a way of avoiding issues. But I did exactly what he said. I got up and I walked round the room, and I touched everything, and I said to myself. "I can make changes, I can be in control." I wasn't very confident, but I said it. And I don't know, I think that was a -- a turning point for me.

Q: Looking back, how do you think that the family atmosphere, and your father's outlook on life influenced your personality, and your thinking?

A: I think it was a very hard upbringing in some ways, although I don't want to magnify it. I was very moved by my father. I still am when I look back and I think of his loneliness and his despair later on, when the Holocaust came. But I was always off -- I was also attracted by my mother's social skills, her interest in clothes, her interest in the piano, and her desire for me to be somehow -- I don't know, something very special. Not unusual, of course, in Jewish families. But it was a conflict for me, and I was torn between them both, really. Later they divorced; when I was in my late teens, they divorced. But it was an unhappy household, and I'm not sure that I -- I mean, I think I had a good role model for my future in human rights. I'm not sure that I had a good role model in terms of relationships, and in terms of parenting. I learned, though, as a -- as an only child in an unhappy household, with these issues, I learned how to negotiate, and I learned how to compromise. And these, I think, are skills I have. And that comes not only from later experience, but I learned it in the family home.

Q: You -- you spent your teenage years, I believe, in London during the war. Tell me about what that experience was like, and -- and how you think now, looking back, that it affected you.

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A: I was brought up in the war -- I mean, I -- forgive me, I grew up in the war. What can I say about it? In some ways, it was almost -- it's crazy to say this, it was almost a relief from the fear of be -- of anti-Semitism, and being specially chosen, which was always my fear if the Germans came, specially chosen for annihilation. So in other words, when I was involved in a bombing incident, when I was fire watching in central London, when central London was terribly bombed, and was buried, albeit it -- it -- it wasn't as dramatic or terrible as it sounds, but I was -- I wasn't hurt. I suppose in modern terminology, I was somewhat traumatized, and I still find it difficult to go downstairs because I was on -- I was -- I was firewatching in a solicitor's office, and standing on some steps, going down to the basement where all the documents were kept with little bits of pink ribbon tying them up. And I was going -- there was only about four or five steps, but as I stood on the top step, the steps collapsed under me. And I think that yes, I do have a phobia from that time, but I also know that -- that I ti -- I felt at the time, and I still do, that I was taking my chances with the rest of the population, and that I wasn't being particularly chosen at that particular time. And so in a mad sort of way, the war had it's reliefs for me, although it killed, in another bombing incident, an aunt of mine, who had a great influence on me, who was considerably left wing. Did a lot of work in the east end of London, working with the Communists, and the Jewish community there in trying to combat the activities of Mosely's fascists. And she was involved in the much glorified battle of Cable Street, which is an incident where when Mosely was going to march down one particular area of the east end, the people of the east end brought out all their furniture, their -- their pianos, their -- their tables, their kitchen equipment, and they blocked the roads of the east end. And for me, with a father who was growing into despair as to what was happening in Europe, this simple act meant a great deal to me. It was about resistance, and it was about finding ways, even if they didn't succeed ultimately

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in making a stand, in making a statement. So my aunt was another very strong influence in my life because she represented anything but despair. She was vigorous, she was sexy. She had the strangest advice as to how to behave in any sexual encounter. She was a fascinating, vigorous, lovely woman, and -- with boyfriends, and shocking everybody, platinum blonde hair, but also doing these fantastic things. An -- and she was a -- she was a very interesting influence in my life, and it was a terrible blow to me when she -- when she and her fiancé, someone I think she might have married, were killed when the Café de Paris had a direct hit.

Q: Café de Paris in London?

A: The café de p -- ki -- the Café de P-Paris was a very famous café for dancing, many soldiers and people would -- would go there on leave, and it was rather posh, and I think not inexpensive, but -- and it was supposed to be absolutely safe. I don't know why people talk about something being absolutely safe. It had a direct hit. Her body was never found, and I remember going with my mother to try and identify various objects that were lined up somewhere in the middle of London where people queued and looked at these objects. Handbags, shoes, this kind of thing.

Q: You were brought up with this kind of terrible fear of what might happen to the Jews of Europe. When did you actually begin to discover, and to understand what was going on?

A: I think I always understood, because my father had understood what was going on in the -- in -- in terms of the annihilation of the Jewish people and the Gypsies, and the mentally defective. He had read men ka -- "Mein Kampf," he had read other documents. The information actually was there for anyone who wanted to know it. Members of parliament denied all knowledge of concentration camps, and people -- I think including my father, but I'm not sure about this -- did lobby, and did try to persu -- persuade government of what was going on , but I don't think that -- that anybody really wanted to listen at the time of -- of a total war situation. And maybe for

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other reasons as well. So I always knew, I always knew about the concentration camps. It was no secret in my house that people were being taken to concentration camps and murdered. We weren't -- I -- I don't always know -- now when I look back, it's difficult to be accurate. Whether the details were known, I'm not su -- to me, I'm not sure, but certainly the word concentration camps, in my German -- my father would say it in German, was well known in my household. So it wasn't a stranger to me.

Q: What years are we talking about here?

A: I'm talking about the -- the years -- the -- the -- the -- all during the war really, th-the war years. The forties. The 1941, '42, '43, were years in which whilst the war was going on, and London was being bombed, my father was talking about concentration camps.

Q: I believe there was an exhibition of photographs in London. An exhibition of photographs from the camps which had a very profound impact on you. Can you recall how old you were when you went to see that exhibition and what -- what stayed in your mind from that?

A: No, I -- I think actually the exhibition of photographs came -- yes, that's right, there was an exhibition of photographs that was shown in London. It wasn't the photographs that shocked me so much as the attitude of people. And I think that if I'm not mistaken, that the photographs were discontinued; that means to say the exhibition was discontinued because of people's reactions. Now, I'm not quite sure what that reaction was, but you know, after the war people did not want to believe, they did not want to understand the totality of what had happened, and they didn't really -- they had their own preoccupations with the war, and loss, and deprivation, and rationing, and everything else. And to bring home to people the atrocities of the Nazis in that -- to that extent, I think either didn't move people in the right way -- but whatever happened, it didn't -- I don't think that it was received with -- with -- with real comprehension, I think, with

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real under -- l-let's say how difficult it was for anyone to understand what really happened. It wasn't the pictures though, I think, that influenced me to -- to want to go to Germany at the end of the war. I think that I'd started to think about it for quite a long time, and I -- I'm -- and in -- it's very interesting that the more one talks about this, the more you begin to understand, or the more you think about it, you begin to understand your motives. People often ask me why did I want to go to the camps, wh -- was it some voyeuristic reason, was it -- what was it that made me want to go and to work for the survivors. And I think it really, now talking today, I think it wasn't only my father, because my father was sunk in despair at the end of the war, whereas everybody was rejoicing, and even I was rejoicing, my father was despairing because of the -- the catastrophic events that had happened, and the -- the death of so many people, not only in the concentration camps, but the -- the -- the -- th-the -- the -- that -- the -- the awfulness of that war, I think just -- just crushed him, and he was very despairing. He also had his own personal reasons for -- he was living alone then, and he was very sad. But I think it was also my aunt, because my aunt was the -- the very opposite, in a way, to my father. And her belief was you must do something, you can do something, you can do anything if you want to. And so I suppose it was my father's knowledge, and my aunt's kind of message about go for it, anybody can do it, do something, make a statement, however -- even if you're waving your arms and nobody's watching, do it, was what she was about. I think that's really what influenced me.

Q: Do you remember actually taking this decision? And how old were you at the time?

A: I found an organization called the Jewish Relief Unit, that was in formation before the end of the war. I think I was then about 18, and I made some enquiries and I went to see them, and they announced that I was very young, but they -- they said yes, they'd consider me. And I joined the relief unit in the hope that I would be able to go.

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Q: Let me ask you something. Could you tell me what the unit consisted of, who organized it, how it was run, how big it was?

A: The Jewish Relief Unit when I first came upon it was a small office near Woburn House in that square, Woburn Square, or Ensley Place I think was it's name. It was a -- a house on a corner, and it consisted of an office with about six or seven people in it. It was financed, I think, by the -- now I'm not sure about that, it might have been the Central British Fund, I cannot remember. This -- this could easily be established how the organization was funded. I do have a book about it, but I don't read the book, and I'm not sure why. But anyway, there is a lot of information about the funding of this organization. And there were people being trained to go. And these were people who were volunteers, it was a volunteer organization, nobody was paid to go, as far as I know. And I started to -- to -- to train with them, telling my parents -- I was then living with my mother; my father was separated, as I said. And this was going to be quite a difficult issue. I remember sitting in Saint James's Park, and watching the ducks where I'd met my father, and I said to him, "I -- I want to go to Germany." And he didn't really say very much. He said, "Well, you must be sure you want to go, and you'll have to be safe and careful." Which hadn't actually occurred to me at the time, about being safe. Being careful, yes. But he -- he didn't express great enthusiasm or dismay or surprise or -- my mother, of course, was aghast. And her dreams of what she had expected of me for the future began to disappear to some extent, for her. She saw me taking a path that she really didn't like, and I suppose as a mother now it was, looking back, it must have been hard for her. But I was very determined to go. And so I continued to -- to train, to -- to be exposed to a psychologist who in pri -- in small intimate sessions would -- individual sessions would ask you questions, but also in group sessions. And I suppose there were about 20 of us volunteers at the time, who -- not all Jewish by the way, and I

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think that's important to know. There were several Quakers, people who felt very strongly about what had happened, who wanted to -- who offered their -- their services. And so that's what I did, and we went on various training courses, to a kibbutz somewhere in England, in Wiltshire, I believe, where we undertook various training in map reading and first aid, and -- but I do remember -- I do remember one session where we sat in a group and I think it was the psychologist asked everyone what they felt they expected to find, and how they would deal with the very impossible situations, and how they would deal with people who they cou -- who felt -- who didn't want to be helped, or were past helping. And I remember searching my -- my th-thoughts at the time, and trying to think what -- what is the answer to that, faced with a lot of people who you can't help. And I remember saying that maybe one has to accept that there will be people you can't save. And maybe if there are children and younger people there, we have to put our energies into trying to help them. And that maybe -- this now sounds all rather simplistic, but and maybe if -- if people see the energy going into the young and the children, that would be some compensation for them. I don't think it was such a bad idea now, looking back, because there were many people that couldn't be helped. Anyway, that was -- that was what I said at the time.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is tape number one, side B of an interview with Helen Bamber. Tell me a little bit more about the actual training process, and the extent to which you were really prepared mentally and physically for what you were about to find.

A: Well, l-looking at how people are prepared today, say in aid agencies, which still leaves a lot to be desired, I'm not sure that we really were prepared so well. It was a disparate group of -- o-

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of volunteers. There were nurses, there were people with a variety of skills at the time. And -- but I can't remember sitting down and really -- th-th-there was just that one discussion we had in which we were asked to face the possibility of not being able to help everyone, not being able to save everyone. It is important because it stayed in my mind and it -- it's the situation that I'm faced with every day of my life now. And it's always hard, it's always hard and it should always be hard. But it has to be there, that acceptance that you can't save everyone. But it's so hard. We went to various -- as I said, we went to this kibbutz, and I remember I drove with somebody in a van, and the idea was that we had to follow the map and find our own way there. And map reading and finding our way around with a lot of emphasis, I think on practical help, on the provisions to be given. On the -- on the question of driving, and map reading, and knowing how to distribute the wherewithal, food, or provisions and so on. I don't really remember, even with the help of the psychologist, a great deal of help about how we would feel, faced with what we were going to face, which wasn't only about a d -- a -- a d-devastated people, devastated in every sense of the word. Suffering from malnutrition, suffering from loss, some behaving as if they were quite mad, all of that. But it was also that we were going to a country that was in rubble, and starving. And I certainly wasn't prepared for the fact -- I'd hardened all these years my heart against the German people. I'd grown up with a dislike and fear of the Germans. And when I was on the train going out, on my own, with all my luggage and baggage and God knows what -- I mean, what a performance that was, I remember seeing starving German children standing along the railway line, holding out their hands. And I was traveling with soldiers, British soldiers, and everybody threw out their bread and whatever they had with them to the starving children. Now that I wasn't prepared for, and that was hard too, because these were children, these were innocent children. And that brought a conflict that I hadn't -- or an understanding that I hadn't

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expected to find in myself. And I learned that the very first moment I traveled. So there were many things one wasn't prepared for. One wasn't prepared for the devastated cities. No, we weren't prepared, but maybe there was no way to prepare us, because nobody really knew, I think, how catastrophic was the scene that we were t-to find eventually.

Q: Let me take you back a little bit. Can you tell me how you were kitted out? What you looked like and actually the journey? How does an 18 year old go make her way across half of Europe and end up where? I don't know what your destination was, what had you been told?

A: My journey remains really a bit of a mystery to me myself. I was then just 20 by the way, when I went. I think I was -- have to be very careful about this, but I think I just -- I was just 20 years old. And I had uniforms, we all had. We had officer's uniform, we had officer's rank. And an ordinary khaki kind of ordinary wear. I don't know what you call it now. It's awful that I don't, but anyway, I traveled in my khaki ordinary, and I traveled with the yellow star on my shoulder, my left shoulder, which is what we had elected to do. And that in itself was an undertaking. So not only was I kitted out beyond belief with a -- a kind of a canvas thing that was like a mobile bath, or whatever, and a kit bag that really I could barely lift. And a bedroll and all kinds of -- the bedroll was very important later on, by the way. The -- the mobile bath, I never knew it's -- what it was intended to do, but it -- I used to sort of keep all my dirty underwear in it because I could sort of snap it together when anybody came into the room. You know, it was one of those things, it sort of opened out with two kind of sticks, and it wa -- oh, I don't know, it was a kind of ghastly thing. But it was very good for underwear and you could smack the two pieces together when anybody came in, and nobody could see. So that's what I did with that. And there was all kinds of equipment that one didn't actually need. I think the bedroll was very important. So I was in uniform, with a cap, you know, a beret, and m-my khaki,

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my ghastly shoes and navy blue underwear and -- and the yellow star. And why I traveled on my own I do not know, but I think there was a very difficult procedure before anybody was allowed to go. There was a very careful vetting of every individual, not necessarily verbally, I mean I didn't meet anybody, but I know that there was one woman who belonged to the Communist party, who was not allowed to go. Which was a very great disappointment to all of us who knew and loved her. So, there was a very careful vetting of each individual, and I think there was a fear by the officials involved, that Jews going out were in some way -- Jews going out to work in the former concentration camps, or in Holland, or in Greece were somehow either a provocation or a difficulty, an embarrassment, difficult to control. Whatever it was, it was difficult. And so everybody was vetted very carefully, and although we came under the auspices directly of UNRRA, we were also responsible directly also, to the British military government. At least we were in the British zone, that means to say those of us who went to Germany. I had to go -- I mean, my final destination was a small village called Eilshausen, which I -- I kept spelling in my head all the time, E-i-l-s. Eilshausen. It was difficult for me. I'd spoke some German by the way, because I'd learned from my father enough German to get by. And the worst of all was that I went on a train from Victoria -- and I remember people were very helpful to me because I'm not very tall, and with all this heavy kit, the soldiers were good, and they would lift things for me. But of course they were also very -- they would also look quite quizzically at -- at the yellow star. So I was constantly in conversation, having to explain oneself. Why one was going, what one was doing. And it was the beginning in a way of a kind of role in society, in the public, that was always slightly uncomfortable for me, and it exists to this day, where I have to explain what I'm doing for asylum seekers and refugees. And so I -- I'd already begun then to explain what I was doing with the yellow star on my shoulder. [tape break] Where am I?

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Q: With the yellow star on your shoulder --

A: That's right.

Q: -- you had to explain --

A: I had to explain myself to people as to why I was wearing the yellow star. And people were tolerant, the soldiers were good. But when I got to Calais, there was a hold up. The trains to Germany th -- were held up. I can't remember why, whether is was overcrowding. It was quite a precarious journey eventually when I did get on the train because of the bridges, and the crossings. Bridges was dangerous and we all had to stand on one side of the train in order to give balance, which was a bit nerve-wracking.

Q: How do you mean? Can you explain?

A: Well, yes, but I haven't quite got to Calais yet, because I was stuck. Let me go back to Calais. I was stuck in Calais for a week, and we lived -- I never took my clothes off i-in that week, and we stayed in -- oh, what are those huts called?

Q: Nissen?

A: Nissen huts, yes, in kind of dormitories on paliasis and so on. And it was -- it was very primitive, and I remember wandering round Calais all on my own and feeling so alone, as I've never felt in my life before. I hadn't been out of England before, which is strange in this day and age, but I had never been out of England. And so this was the first time I'd been out. And I was very alone. Eventually we took our turn and we were put on the train. And I remember something quite awful about this train because it would always stop at various places which were not a station. I mean, in other words I couldn't -- you couldn't -- you had no platform, you had to get off the train, so to speak, without a platform, in order to go to wherever you were going to be fed on the way, which again was a kind of Nissen hut, specially prepared for the soldiers en

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route. And you would sit at a long table and -- and be fed. And I had the utmost difficulty with my height, in being able to mount this train. And this was one of the -- the extraordinary things that preoccupied me on the journey, all k-kind of, sort of incidental ridiculous things, not about the seriousness of my task, but how in heaven's name I was going to get up and down this train without making a complete idiot of myself. And usually I had to be hauled up and pushed from behind. But the train ricketed along, and there was one bridge that we crossed when we were in Germany, when the German guard, or person on the train came through carrying a lantern. Achtung, achtung, and inviting us all to stand at one side of the train so that we actually balanced it properly, because there was a danger that the -- you know, that -- I don't know, that maybe the train would topple over. Whatever it was, that's what we all did. And then there were the children on the way. And if -- you know, the journey was a bit of a nightmare because I was so terrified that I would not find myself at this tiny village -- no, it wasn't Eilshausen, do forgive me, Eilshausen was my final destination. The station I had to get out at was Badounhausen. Badenhausen, which was a base for British soldiers. And I had to find my way from Badenhausen, which was quite a long way, to Eilshausen, which was the headquarters of our unit, where Henry Lunzer, the capt -- a former captain in the British army, and who was then the director of the Jewish reli-lief unit, had set up our headquarters in the village. And because of the fact that I had taken a secretarial course at some stage, and was quite proficient in shorthand and typing, I was for the moment, to be his assistant. And so that was my route, Badenhausen and then on to Eilshausen. I had no idea how I was going to get to Eilshausen. Well eventually I managed to get out of the station, and I'll never forget it, it was an extraordinary sensation. I was in Germany, I was on a German station all on my own, with all my stuff. And I remember walking down the steps and walking into the street. And I remember hearing German, seeing

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German lettering, an-and this somehow German shops and the names of things in German, and German voices, and a s -- a terrible sense of panic. And it was the -- didn't -- doesn't -- didn't happen to me very often, but I really for the moment was frozen. And I remember standing there and thinking, "My God," you know, "what have I done?" I'm in the middle of Germany -- it isn't the middle of Germany, but you know -- I'm in Germany, and I'm with all this stuff. And I actually had to get the things down in -- in dribs and drabs. I think somebody helped me because I couldn't carry all the stuff down the steps in one go. I think somebody did help me, and I was standing there. A British officer came up in a car. And of course, this is what happens, and you learn this in post-war situations. There is a kind of help that doesn't normally exist that you -- you suddenly get used to. He drove up and he said, "Where are you going?" And I said, "I -- I have to get to Eilshausen." He said, "Where the devil is that?" I said, "I haven't a clue." And he said, "Well get in the car and I'll take you to my head -- my HQ, and -- and we'll try and find out where Eilshausen is." So I went with him to his HQ in Badenhausen. And you know, I can't remember whether I ate -- I can remember cleaning up, I do remember that. I remember there was some sort of provision there, and I -- I cleaned myself up a bit. I must have been filthy because the week in Calais, it was not the most hygienic. And I felt an awful wreck, I remember that. And eventually -- but I don't remember eating anything at all, except on the train. And then he came down, and he was very efficient, rather like something you see in British war films now, on a Sunday. You know, very elegant, very beautiful, very well spoken. And he said, "Look, I -- I've -- I've found a -- I've found somebody who -- we found Eilshausen, it's a small village, I'll get you there." I'm still conscious of the yellow star. I was very grateful that somehow -- you know, this -- this curious thing of sh -- of pride and shame, you know, what was the yellow star going to do for us out there? Was it going to open doors, was it going to bring hostility? But I'd

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explained to him what we were about, and he took it perfectly in his stride. And they found a driver for me, and finding a driver and finding a truck in those days was hard work. So I had to wait quite a long time, and then I was taken to Eilshausen. And I remember when I got to Eilshausen, which is a tiny, little village, and I met with Henry Lunzer, and I think he -- he and I at that time, at that moment, were the only people there, although some British officers were coming over that evening for whatever, I don't know what it was. And he was in -- we were in a commandeered house. It was the house of the local Nazi, and that was the kind of way things were done there, that people were billeted in the houses of the former Nazis. And the former Nazi would have been Nazi leader, I don't know whether he was imprisoned or whatever the situation was for him. But certainly some of his staff was still around, and I was very conscious of that.

Q: Did you have any encounters with them, or --

A: Oh, I always had encounters with them. I always had encounters with them. I -- I -- my work developed whilst I was in -- in Germany, between two camps and the headquarters. One camp was Belsen. The other camp was Kownitz, where I did a great deal of work, probably more than I did in Belsen, and Eilshausen, the vil -- the -- the center itself. And it -- it was there, in the main, that I had encounters with the local Germans, although I did have a very angry encounter with somebody once later on, much later on, when I was taking somebody from ORT, the American organization, well known, of course, in America, to -- to Belsen. Shall I just tell that story now?

Q: Sure.

A: We -- one of the things -- and you see, the context is always so difficult, why with me I don't know, but I had to -- I was in Celle, C-e-double l-e, which is a very beautiful, medieval town -- I

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think it's medieval town, not so far from Belsen. And it was my job to remain there, and to escort this Am-American woman who had come -- I think it was ORT, and I was to take her to Belsen. And as we were eating in the -- the mess, the officer's mess with other soldiers, and I was talking about Belsen, and this German waitress sort of said very arrogantly in Germany -- and I don't know why there's all this discussion about Belsen, we didn't know anything about the camp. We nev -- we didn't know that there was a camp -- we don't know what all this talk about Belsen is. But she was extremely arrogant, and for the first and only time in my life, I stood up and I was going to hit her. And I was going to hit her very, very hard. And it was only when the -- the p -- the person from ORT could see what I was d -- about to do, that she restrained me, but I -- I have never since felt such violent rage as I felt for that woman. And I do -- I can, amongst all the other things I understand, and I preach about tolerance, about this, about that, I can understand violent rage in such situations, because I was out of control, totally. But these servants that we had in Eilshausen, were German. There was Frau Shermburg and her daughter, who'd come from eastern German -- Germany, who declared frequently that they'd been raped. Frau Shermburg was the wife of a doctor who'd been killed, and her son had been killed in the war. Her daughter was a nurse.

Q: And what was there role exactly, at Eilshausen?

A: Their role was to provi -- was to cook and help us manage the house. We were very, very -- what's the word I want? Very correct. We -- Henry Lunzer had been an officer in the British army. He maintained good standards of behavior within the house. Nothing should be broken, nothing should be taken that was not ours. If it was broken it had to be recorded as having been broken. We were to be mindful and careful of everything. And Frau Shermburg and her daughter cooked and managed the house for us. There was people that came in and dealt with the laundry,

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because by the time other people joined us -- I suppose I must have been one of the first, really, to go out to Eilshausen because other people joined us later. Harry git -- Grojinsky from the Grojinsky bakers came, and he was the officer for provisions and storekee -- stores. And so, as people came, laundry and other things needed to be in place, and a -- and as -- and a group of about I think at least seven or eight drivers, with trucks -- because that was the only way we could manage to move around Germany obviously, there was no transport provided.

Q: So you were all billeted in this Nazi's house?

A: Yeah.

Q: And you were looked after by this --

A: Well, I wouldn't say looked after, she -- Frau Shermburg was there to -- to cook, and -- but she was treated well, and I -- and she was billeted -- she wasn't living in the house, she lived in the village. But I remember there was one scene, a very ugly scene, where she told me that they were being attacked on the way home, for being -- for working with us at the Jewish relief unit. And she said would somebody escort her. And one of the men in the -- in the unit escorted her, one of the tall men escorted her -- them, back to their billet. But there was one scene where a group of very angry people --

Q: From the village?

A: From the village. They were angry, I think they were drunk. They were very noisy, and they were carrying sticks, and they came to the house outside, and they made a terrible din. And Frau Shermburg was -- she said these are the peop -- these are people who di -- are going to hurt us if we go. And I, at that time, had been befriended by -- this was much later in my experience there, I'd been befriended by somebody from the Jewish Brigade, and I did quite a lot of work with him in Kownitz camp. And he had said to me on one occasion -- he taught me many things, he

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taught me for example, how to wake up at a certain time, which was my difficulty. I was very young, and I had difficulty waking up. And he told me that you can wake up any time you say you want to wake up, you can do it. So he taught me that, so that I wasn't late for things. And -- but he also said to me amongst many other lessons, if you meet th -- a kind of -- in a -- a situation in which you're isolated, and a lot of people are at the front door, or wha -- a-angry, don't come out in a posse -- he didn't use that word, but don't come out in a group, one of you goes out, only one. And on this occasion, I think because -- I don't know whether we were short of people, or whether because I am so short and small, and was quite small -- slender at the time -- not now, but then, I -- I went out, and I opened the door, and I stood by this -- in front of them, without saying anything, with nothing in my hands. And we just looked at each other, and then they slunk away. But it was a very important lesson to me. It may not have worked. It could -- it need not have worked. They could have done anything, but they didn't. And it -- on this occasion it worked.

End of Tape One, Side B

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Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is tape number two, side A of an interview with Helen Bamber. To take you back again a little step, what kind of an area was Eilshausen in, and what did it look like?

A: Eilshausen was in Westphalia, some distance from Hanover, I should think about 20 kilometers, maybe less. It is -- it was a very beautiful village. Not so much the village itself, because some of the houses were modern, you know, spacious, fantastic houses in their own grounds, with a laundry room and you name it. But the walks were brilliant. The woods were lovely and we would often walk in the woods. And there was a woman called Frau Mometchka who was German, who had married a Jew, and who died in the concentration camp, her husband did. And she really belonged nowhere. Because of her background she could not live within the German community. And oh -- because of -- she didn't quite belong in the house. She was a very educated, elegant -- it's very difficult to be elegant in those circumstances, but very dignified woman in her 60's, I would think. Tall, upright, spoke a beautiful German, played the piano beautifully, used to play for us. How she came to us I do not know. She was there one day when I came back from a mission. I don't know where I'd been. I got to know her very well, she was very fond of me, we used to walk in the woods together. It was beautiful, absolutely -- absolutely lovely, with streams, woods, hills. Lovely place. And she would talk to me about her husband, she would talk to me about music, she would try to correct my terrible German. She was very much a teacher, a scholar. I had a great admiration for her, and affection for her. It wasn't unusual for people to end up in our house with very few questions asked. I mean, it's very strange, but in those circumstances you don't ask very often. I don't ever remember saying how did Frau Mometchka come? I never knew. And I didn't know how she went, because when I came back from one mission, she wasn't there. And I said, "Where's Frau Mometchka?" And

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they said, "Oh no, she's not here any more." And I never knew where she went, but because of the speed, and the ferocity of everything that was going on, and the anxiety of pri -- everyday life, I didn't ask, and I never knew.

Q: Now you've told us that you lived in this -- th-the house that had formerly been occupied by one of the local Nazis, but your office I believe, was elsewhere. Could you tell us about the office, and w -- and the job that you went there to do, and that you ended up doing?

A: The office was a short distance from the house. It was just a v -- a few minutes walk from the house up a country lane, and was simply a low, brick building. I don't know what it had been before. It looked a bit like a -- a keeper's house. It -- but we used it as an office. It had obviously been a house. And I set up there with a typewriter and looked out over onto the fields. And -- and that's really where the work of the unit was fashioned in that -- in that place. There was a German man, who'd obviously been close to his master, the Nazi, I think, leader. I took an instant dislike to him, and I would often work in the building on my own. I -- I -- I'm a slow worker, and I often -- and I still do it, I work late and long, and I would often be in the building on my own and he'd be stoking the -- there was like a furnace, an old-fashioned furnace where you burned wood to heat the boiler for hot water and so on. Like a boiler. And he would fidget about the house and I was terribly uneasy with him there. And I found some leaflets in the house, Nazi leaflets. I asked him to throw them in the fire. There was a whip -- I always remember that, there was a whip hanging up on the wall. Now, that could have been for anything, I mean it need not have had an ominous -- a particularly ominous meaning, maybe they had animals, I don't know. But it -- it made me very uneasy. And I said to him one day, "What is that doing there? Why is it here in the house? It's not something I want to see." And he said, "Hm, it was always in the house." And I -- I said, "Please take it away, get rid of it." But he didn't like me, and I

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didn't like him. And Frau Shermburg -- Frau Shermburg looked to me for arbitration and negotiation. She recognized very quickly that I could negotiate for her and her daughter with Henry the director, and f-for any facilities that she needed. And that became my role. She would show me photographs of her husband, the doctor who was killed, and her son, standing near the Arc de Triomphe. And --

Q: In uniform, presumably?

A: In uniform, looking very much the Nazi -- well, the -- the German officer that he was. And it was very difficult, it was very difficult. It was a mother showing a picture of -- of her husband, her son. She maintained, as did her daughter, and I believe it to be so, that when the Russians came in to where they were living in eastern Germany, they were both raped many times and in front of each other and that -- that was not surprising, the story of rape was very common, both in -- particularly within the Russian zone. And you know, these kind of situations, to do with who you are and where you're born, become very relevant -- and the choices that you make. And you have to ask yourself what choices did she have? On the other hand she didn't see the significance of showing me the picture of her son standing near the Arc de Triomphe. I did have to point that out to her. It was a -- it was difficult, this relationship with local Germans, very difficult. And I remember looking out of the window one day when a colleague of mine, Edith Blau, who'd been in a concentration camp, and who'd been liberated with her mother by the Russians, and both of them were living in our house -- as I say, people came and went, and people stayed, and she stayed. And she's now in this country, in -- in England. And she was passing a group of Germans in -- she was in uniform with a yellow star, she became a member of our team. And I s -- I was looking out of the window and I saw her strike, very hard, one of the German women who'd obviously made a remark about the Jews, having seen the yellow star. So

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tensions were high. Strange things did happen. There were stories about Germans putting wire across the streets in order that British soldiers on motorcycle could be decapitated, and that did happen. And it was an uneasy time. You did not sleep easily, let me put it that way. You -- you were aware, all the time, of tensions, of hatred. Your own and others. And that was hard. That was hard, that bit.

Q: Tell me about the first few days, first few weeks in your job.

A: Well, for the first few weeks of my job, I think, was trying to help Henry to get some sort of order into what was a fairly chaotic situation, and to try to formulate some kind of strategy for the administration of a headquarters. I'd never had any experience of that before, but he, being an army officer, a captain in the British army, had experienced -- and so I learned from him. And we did quite well, I think; he was efficient. But after just a couple of days we went to Belsen together. We drove. And a ye -- part of Mrs. Henriekie's team, she led the first team into Belsen, the first team of the Jewish Relief Unit into Belsen. And her team was there, and I must say I was incredibly nervous. It was reassuring being with Henry, but nevertheless, I was very nervous. Now, I can't remember that first day very well. We went to the -- to the concrete blocks which had belonged to the -- oh, to the ger -- German army -- to the -- forgive me, I'll come back to that. But you know that the people who'd been in -- liberated from camp one, when camp one was burned down, they were taken to the concrete blocks, where the German army had -- had been billeted.

Q: We just paused there, and -- to allow Mrs. Bamber to reflect on whose barracks we were talking about exactly.

A: It was the former German barracks, but I -- I -- I do not -- th-the name, it has escaped me. Some people refer to is as the former SS bar -- barracks. I'm not sure. But whatever, the people

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were incarcerated there in the barracks. And the barracks were bleak, they were kind of solid blocks of concrete. I can't remember the lighting. I always remember it as very dim. I remember candles. I remember staying all night one -- on one occasion with s-somebody who died in one of the rooms. And it was over time talking to people in the rooms that bu -- was my first encounter with the inmates. Now, it wasn't on that first day. That first day was a kind of initiation into the whole atmosphere of Bergen-Belsen at that time. I met the unit -- the workers. I went to camp one, which had been burned down. I saw the mounds, these huge mounds where had -- which had formed the mass graves. It was very -- there was always about that place particularly, that camp one, there was this strange, sweet smell which I -- I know to be the smell of death. I believe it to be, but I always refer to it as the smell of geraniums, because that's what it was like. It was like taking the leaves of the geraniums and crushing them in your hand and then smelling them. And it's -- it's a sweet, dank smell, and that was the smell. And I've never forgotten it. And sometimes I'm reminded of it when the smell returns, that kind of dank smell. And this sense of awfulness, the sense of death was there in that space that was empty. There were no bodies, there was nothing. There were no birds, nothing stirred, it was just a terrible, empty space. And yet you -- you felt all the time as though someone was behind you, or someone was by the side of you. You felt very uneasy. I -- I know that I went there the first day, and I went there many times with other people who were involved in some kind of mourning. They may be people who had come as Jewish soldiers -- much later, this was much later -- or they were the inmates, although very few of them went there. But I went there sometimes, and I attended the ceremony there, where the monument was erected, the first monument, in memory. I believe there's a picture somewhere of my unit marching. It's somewhere in the Vina library, and I've never been to see it, but I believe it exists, because people have told me that it does, and they

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recognize me, mainly I think because I was very small, and I was in front for that reason. But I returned many times, and I spent many days there, and I spent a long period in the winter, because I remember sleeping in a sleeping bag with all my clothes on in the very cold winters that followed. And what was I doing there? And that's the difficulty, I can't really remember that I had a particular role as I had in other places. I went and I talked, and I can't remember anybody asking me to do that, or seeing any value in it. So maybe I elected to go. When I knew that a driver or somebody was going to Belsen, which was very frequent, people frequently went there with provisions or with papers, or what have you. There was no other way of communicating than by going somewhere. The telephone systems were down, and it was very difficult to make telephone calls. And so it was -- the easiest thing was to always go to a place. So it is not surprising that I elected to go, and I elected to go I think because over time I found that by talking to people -- that by receiving the information that they gave me, was in itself a v -- a v -- a value. That doesn't sound very profound, but people who give the most terrible information, of death, destruction, loss. Who rock with misery and despair, who are desperately fearful, who want to die, many of them, but can't, it's very important to receive that information in a way that says to people, I am your witness, I am here to tell your story. If you can't tell it, I will be able to tell it for you. But all I can be is your witness, I can't take away the past. Now I didn't learn that quickly, I learned it painfully because I always felt I couldn't do anything, what am I doing here? I can't take away the past, I can't change anything. So what is the value of my presence, and why do I keep coming? And I think it was because I began to learn that being a witness, simple and ordinary and limited as that may be, does have a value to the person who may not live very long, and who knows it. And so, I think in a way that was one of my tasks, but why I spent so many weeks there, sleeping on the floor, and what work I did with Henry there, or with anybody else, I

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honestly can't tell you. I later went back there many times, when I was responsible much later for what was referred to as the TB train. I was sent to nic -- by Henry, to negotiate in Switzerland with a Jewish organization, humanitarian organization for the transfer of young people suffering from tuberculosis, who -- whose chance of recovery would be very much greater if they were taken to Switzerland to recover, which was one of the ways people treated tuberculosis in those days. And I went to Switzerland and I met this extraordinary woman. And I remember saying to her -- I wasn't in uniform, and I don't know why, maybe it was politic -- no, to be -- I just can't remember. And I remember saying to her, "Why -- why -- how did you recognize me?" And she said, "It really wasn't difficult to recognize you, I would have recognized you anywhere, as one Jew to another." Anyway, I went with the x-rays, and when I say I went with the x-rays, believe me, I'm saying something extraordinary. Because to persuade people, young people, who were desperate to leave Belsen and other camps, desperate to get out, to emigrate to America or to England, desperate to get out. To persuade them to have an x-ray to identify that they were suffering tuberculosis was the last thing that they wanted.

Q: Because it excluded them from --

A: Yes.

Q: -- going to this country?

A: Yes, they would not be acceptable, and they knew that. And there was all kinds of maneuvering and manipulation of x-rays, and t -- name changing, and I mean it was a nightmare. And it -- it was a killer, I mean I -- I worked incredibly hard, and I remember losing my voice with the sheer -- you know, the -- the energy needed to persuade people that they wouldn't be able to go anyway, that they would be identified anyway at some point as having the illness. And I'd hoped I was right to do that. I wasn't working alone, I had a -- good advisors, but I had to

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persuade people. And then I had to persuade this -- to go with this delightful woman and persuade the Swiss authorities. And I remember a very suave, very beautiful, tall Swiss gentleman, who made clear to me, reluctantly, that yes, a certain number of young people would be acceptable to the Swiss, to go to Davose to be treated for their tuberculosis, on the understanding only that they were -- could recover, and that they could return to Germany at the end of their treatment. And that was th -- one of the first political lessons of my lifetime, because I learned about the la -- lo -- lack of compassion, I lat -- learned about politics, and in that one meeting, I learned it all. I learned about officialdom, bureaucracy that -- that -- that -- tha-tha -- that -- that protects people from the truth, it protects people from looking at that sick, young person. And I was very sick at heart myself, I was very upset. But I'd actually got the agreement, so I went back to Germany, and then there was an enormous activity on my part, and others helping me, to try to arrange for the evacuation of the young people. And I have pictures of this that can be supplied, to go on what was referred to as the TB train from Hanover station, which was bombed and derelict, catastrophically so, to Switzerland. And eventually -- I mean it was, I suppose, a triumph, but nothing -- it didn't feel like a triumph, really. Nothing -- it just felt right, I suppose, that young people should be treated eventually after many months, having fought with many officials, British army officials in -- particularly on one occasion, when I needed a document that hadn't come. They needed about five or six different permissions in order to leave the camps, from the British military government. And if they hadn't got all five or six, they couldn't travel. And in one case I had to go to Düsseldorf, I think it was, and persuade them to allow a young person in Düsseldorf to travel to Switzerland. And I think we were all day trying to persuade them. Finally I think it was only because we offered a lift. We were going to Berlin to catch the train, to put the document on the train. I mean, it's all very primitive stuff. And --

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and I got per -- I think that he was persuaded because we gave a lift to somebody to Berlin. And finally I got the documents. Eventually the train went, but it was made clear to me by UNRRA and the Red Cross, that if -- that I was short of one particular document necessary for the TB train. And that, you know, I would be held responsible for that, that everything was on course, that the TB train would come. It was all arranged by the Red Cross, but that at the last minute, there could be a hitch, and that that was my responsibility because I hadn't got this document. So I remember standing on this train, waiting for it to go, and the sense of fear and trepidation, everybody was happy. The children, the young people were laughing and singing and looking out of the window, and I was terrified that at the end of the day there would be a hitch. Some official, some army official would come along and say I'm so sorry, but this is not correct, there's -- something here is missing. However, it went. And I remember jumping off the train and think, my God, it's gone. And looking at this train -- and you've got to picture Hanover station without a roof, with things hanging down, and this train wobbling away, and the kids hanging out of the window. And I remember standing there with tears running down my face and thinking it's going to be all right, they're going to go -- I don't know what happened to the children.

Q: Let me take you back -- whoops -- let me take you back to -- to Belsen, and your early days there. How many survivors were there, and where were they from, what kind of state were they in? Can you tell me about them? You've taken us as far as describing the barracks where they were housed. What do you see in terms of -- of -- of the people within those barracks?

A: The people were mainly Polish, Romanian, from eastern Europe. There was one remote German woman who remained. And the reason, of course, was that most had been killed much earlier on. And she would always talk to me about the if factor. If my husband had only done

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this, he would not have been taken to the gas chambers. If he hadn't looked in my direction, or if he had kept quiet. Or if -- if -- if -- and this was always the word that people used all the time. If -- if only. And this preoccupied people so much, if only. And so you constantly had to ge -- take people back to the fact that it was -- it was totally out of their hands, that there was an inevitability about this. And -- but it was such a painful journey to take with people. She spoke English I remember. Mostly Polish, some were ruma -- well, eastern Europe. And of course, the two famous people who emerged as leaders of the camp eventually, and who I got to know very well, was Yosul Rosenzoft, a former lawyer, Polish, and Dr. Bimko, who became his wife.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is tape number two, side B of an interview with Helen Bamber. Right, so you were telling me you take Mrs. Forest, to -- to give us the names of the two leaders. But before that, if you can give me a sense of the kind of condition these people were in, how they were dressed, how they lived, how they slept, and the kind of experiences with which they were then trying to come to terms already, I think.

A: I remember people sleeping on the floor, and dressed in old jackets, trousers. Things were handed out, and when we ourselves had supplies of clothes, but they were ill-fitting, and people wore anything, so people continued to look somehow ill-kempt, and ill -- ill-fitting, ill-dressed, ill-cared for. They were emaciated, so very few things really fitted them well. They looked ill, they had a terrible pallor, terrible color. But what you have to, I think, remember, is that people survive because they are survivors very often. You know, there's a s -- there's a reason, there's a certain something, X factor, that putting chance to one side, where you stand or where you don't, people do survive. Once they've -- they're into the role of survivor, they do begin to get a

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resilience, and a kind of strength, and so people were fiercely active, fiercely wanting to get out, fiercely wanting to organize in some way, and fiercely angry. But people, how did they look when I first saw them? Ill, emaciated, thin hands. Very thin hands. They had the hands of old people like you -- you see sometimes in hospitals where th-the whole hand di -- hardly resembles a hand, where the bones stick out, and they used to press their fingers into you very often, in a kind of se -- with a sense of urgency they would hold you. And you would hold them, if you were sensible, and -- and you would rock, because rocking was very much part of the way they would present. You would sit on the floor sometimes with people and hold and rock. And people would hold you, and dig their fingers in while they told you their story. And I always -- and I've said in my writings that they spat out their story like a kind of vomit, it came out in a hissing sound. It's just barely audible, you -- you often couldn't understand what they were saying, but you knew, without understanding just by the -- some words, some snatches of things. You were never alone with anyone. There were always people there. There was always people around, so people would often ch-chime in, and -- and come up with something. But I -- I was alone with the German woman, and I can't remember the circumstances, and I'm just hoping -- I don't think it was at ca -- you see, I spent a lot of time in the camp of Kownitz, but I'm sure it was Belsen because in -- in Kownitz they were mainly Hungarian, and in Belsen I think, for some reason, I was more alone with her. And she told me about her husband, and it was very pitiful. But people soon -- soon began to resemble some form of normal kind of appearance. Their faces would fill out, their stomachs would protrude because I think it's part of malnutrition. You don't suddenly become -- you don't fill out properly, you fill out chaotically. And particularly with the younger people. But I remember some young adolescent boys, and they looked like any young kids from a village, with caps and ill-fitting clothes, and they didn't look so unusual after some months.

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People recovered, and they recovered slowly. Those that were going to die, died very quickly, I believe.

Q: On that subject -- on that subject, the day you arrive, I believe -- you know, th-there was -- there was such a sense of desperation still, that a woman took her own life, and her child's. Do you recall that?

A: Yes, I do. The day I arrived in Belsen, we were told that a woman who'd had a -- a child by, I think a Ukrainian guard, had drunk Lysol, and her -- poured the Lysol down the throat of her child, and they both died. And it -- it was horrific. And it was -- yes, it's strange I didn't remember that at first, that that was so important. But we all block. And there was a sense of real horror and upset amongst the workers about this woman.

Q: How did it affect the other survivors?

A: That I don't know. I only know how it affected the workers, and it was -- it felt like a sense of failure, like it does with all carers, who care for people who take their lives. You feel you have failed them. So, there's a kind of so-called reasonably normal response in a totally, totally abnormal situation.

Q: In terms of food and medicine and equipment and so on, how well were you equipped to help these people?

A: I think we often lacked supplies. I remember on one occasion we were waiting for some supplies to come, and eventually a -- a truck arrived at the -- our headquarters. And it turned out to be a traveling synagogue and didn't have the supplies that we wanted. And those of us who were less religiously inclined had quite a lot to say at the time, including myself. We were furious, and very upset. Oh, so much for what people feel you need. It was -- I mean, a lot of supplies were coming in. ORT was very good. There were other American organizations

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bringing in supplies. And we ourselves did have supplies and we did man the hospital in Belsen, which was run, I think, by one of the nun's sisters, who was a m -- a nurse. Henry Lunzer --

Q: So this is a -- this is a sister of your boss?

A: Yes, yes, yes, and she was running the hospital there. And I remember her showing us around the hospital, and the hospital was called the Glen Hughes Hospital after Brigadier Glen Hughes who reli -- who liberated Belsen, and who was, I believe, a remarkable man. What can I say about the hospital? I think I learned -- I learned so much in those months I was in Germany. You know, I think what I -- I learned, looking at what was going on in that hospital -- you've got to remember that nurses of the 30's and the 40's were brought up to believe in everything being absolutely pristine, to be -- you know, to have sheets that are tightly drawn, to have -- you know, to have everything clean, and -- and cared for. And again, it's like all the bureaucracies -- I mean, I do understand it, it -- it is -- the idea of chaos is always frightening, but chaos can sometimes be quite healing. And what I thought was very good, was when I watched people helping their own people. By that I mean maybe relatives, maybe friends, maybe a child, somebody feeding their -- their relative, or their friend. And it would be a mess. The cl -- the cl -- the -- the bed would be in a mess. Their trembling hands would never quite reach the mouth appropriately and there would be mess all over the bedclothes, and -- but -- but there was a to -- it was noise, and there was bustle, and there was a sense of activity. And I think that that is far safer for healing than the kind of -- the preparation for -- you na -- this sort of -- you being prepared for death with your white sheet tucked tightly round you, and I'm simplifying something very much, and I must be forgiven for that, because there is a place for order in a hospital scene, and many people do ask for it. But there are situations in which chaos and care can match, and can bring about solutions. And when I started, many years later with a group of other mothers, an association for the

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welfare of children in hospitals, so that mothers could go into hospital with their small children under the age of five, I remembered all the time the lessons that I'd learned in that hospital. And that is that sometimes it's better for a bit of chaos if you are looking after your child, and the sense of care and love is there. And there will be people who will disagree with me about this, and people who will remember everything about Belsen differently than I do, but I was only 20 years old, impressionable, taking everything in and not all of it may be as coherent as the listener would wish.

Q: Well, you say you were very young, as indeed you were, but in -- how could you, at such a very young age, absorb and make any sense of what you were seeing?

A: I think I was all -- you know, I don't remember approp -- this sounds rather self indulgent, but I don't remember a proper childhood. I remember being a very grown-up child. Not willingly, but somehow forced upon me by circumstances. I was always very serious, although I enjoyed fun, and I enjoyed fun when I was in Germany with my comrades. We had lots of fun and laughter, like one does in extreme situations. But -- I mean, you -- it -- it's difficult now to -- to be honest, and to say did I absorb all that then, or have I somehow taken it in and absorbed it slowly over the years? And there may be something in the latter, because every time I look back, I realize of things I learned, and maybe I didn't realize at the time I was learning about human relationships, about everything, and about hatred, about love, everything was encapsulated in that experience.

Q: Given the kind of desperate physical and psychological state of -- of these survivors, how did you begin? Can you recall how you began trying to reach out to them, and help them?

A: I can't remember trying. I remember moving into the blocks and talking, and being a ve -- and sort of sitting on the ground. I mean, don't misunderstand, as people became stronger, they

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became angry, and you, being the carer, you being the provider, would often become the target for people's anger, because you could not provide the answers. So I think with the creativity that existed amongst some of the survivors, and our own need to feed into that, we were able to support some of the things that were going on. For example, Yosul, and Dr. Bunko, and somebody called Norbert Fallheim, who later committed suicide, formed a committee within the camp. They were representatives of the camp. We were the next sort of go-between between ourselves, between them, and UNRRA, and the military government. So we would naturally, whilst we were supporting what they were doing, at the same time we would become the recipients of much of their anger. And I can remember sitting in an old Merck car that had been commandeered from somewhere by somebody, sort of closely packed in at the back with Norbert, and Yosul, and somebody else, and myself desperately trying to take notes with Henry and somebody else in the front, while they were raging and ranting and very angry indeed. About -- but you see, curiously enough, I think it was a relief because it was human, and it was life. And it was such a relief from the desperate, dejected, huddled figures. You know, sometimes when I used to go -- when I first started to go into the rooms, people didn't look like human beings, they -- th-they were all kind of like a huddle of clothes sitting there. It was quite horrible, because it was dim, and y -- and you couldn't always identify nu -- it -- and here were people shouting about what they wanted, and being very angry, with us, with them, with everybody. And in a way, although I felt very vulnerable sometimes, at being shouted at, I also was a go-between in my familiar familial pattern, between them and my own hierarchy, between them and Henry. And so they would come to me, either in Eilshausen, and they would ask me to negotiate, and they would complain about Henry, and then they would complain to Henry about UNRRA, and then all the rest of it and so on. Because of course, what they wanted more than anything else

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was freedom, and they hadn't got it. I mean, I'm making it sound as if I understood it all, and I don't think I did. I think it's only with hindsight that I can talk about anger as being something very positive. But it's something that makes you feel alive, whereas when I used to see the people huddled, and I thought to myself, I wonder if they're going to die, th -- I'd -- I -- I think I just felt that I could do more in that situation of vigor and anger, and -- and vision, because they had a vision of what they wanted.

Q: Which was?

A: Well, they wanted out. They wanted out of the camp. Some people wanted -- you know, this is a difficulty now, this is a big difficulty, because people talk about the formation of an organization that was -- whose aim was Palestine. Now, my recollection is that there were many people who wanted to go, for one reason or another, either to America or to England. And obviously they couldn't.

Q: When you say obviously, can you explain that for us?

A: Well, it's very little different than it is now, really. I don't think you could get into England unless you were sponsored by a relative or friend, and sponsored quite energetically. You had to be able to provide for that person completely and absolutely. And one or two people did go from Kownitz. So I don't remember anybody going from -- from Belsen. And others wanted to go to America, and I'm sure some did. And some people did come to -- to England. But there were many -- the majority didn't and couldn't. And I think it was only with the realization that nobody really wanted them again -- yet again. That no -- that the doors were not opening generously to -- and -- and -- and with -- what's the word I want? Like, with countries joining together in order to provide a solution for this group of people, who remained there, some of them, until 1950.

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Which is a very long time from 1945. So it's not surprising that people became more militant and more determined that Palestine was the only solution for the Jewish people.

Q: Again, let me take you back a little bit, because I think a lot of us don't know quite as much and -- and we need filling in. I'm very interested to know what a typical day was, or a typical week in your life out there, or in the life of the team. What you did in the office, what you did with the people, you know, in a fairly basic kind of way.

A: I mean, I was very involved with Henry in trying to negotiate for better facilities within the camps. And withi -- and within groups where Jewish people had -- had -- had come and were in need of provision, and -- and -- and support. And so we would be writing and Henry would be meeting -- I might accompany him with others, to try to negotiate, either with UNRRA or with the British government for better facilities here, and better facilities there. I would write endless letters, and I would be -- spend a huge amount of time screaming down the telephone because the telephones did exist, but it was almost impossible to hear anyone, and you would spend hours trying to get somebody, and it made such a difference because otherwise you just had to get in a truck and go. So I would do normal secretarial work in support for Henry. I would accompany him, particularly where Yosul and Norbert was concerned -- were concerned. But I spent a lot of time -- and this again is something I'd -- I can't put -- I can't be too correct about, because I simply can't remember. I went to Kownitz camp -- what happened at Kownitz was that -- and I can't even tell you exactly where it is --

Q: This was a camp for women, was it?

A: There were mainly women, there were some men, but there were li -- a large number of Hungarians -- Hungarian woman, but there were some young men. And we got a telegram to the unit, which -- which I -- it came to me, saying that -- that they were desperate, that they had no

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provisions, no means of support, that -- that there was this camp, and there was nothing and they were desperate.

Q: How many people were there, do you recollect?

A: A lot. I don't remember the number, and I can't tell you the number. It was quite -- it must have been about 600 - 700 people, I think. And I went there, but I don't remember with whom. I went there with somebody and we had a meeting in a room, up some stairs, wooden stairs with -- there were only candles, it was very cold then, very cold.

Q: Which winter was this?

A: The first. I just wish one could remember more, who was with me. And I went back with whoever, and negotiated for provisions, for supplies, for acknowledgement that this camp existed and needed, you know, the support of UNRRA and other facilities, as well as our own. But then they got -- was a -- was a situation in which I would go very frequently to the camp, and that doesn't seem to be acknowledged by anybody now who can remember. Neither Henry, nor Allison Ward, with -- who was our personnel officer, and who is still alive. Both are still alive. Neither have a clear recollection of Kownitz. Allison said yes, she remembers that I used to go off frequently with this former Hungarian Jewish Brigade leader, and that we would work there. But I can't tell you how it was, whether I elected to g -- I know I must have elected to go because I was there so often. I was there for their first Pesach, which we had in the open. And I remember we arrived late, and they were quite fed up with us for being late, and they had to carry me across all the tables, and there was enormous hilarity about that, as I was carried aloft across tables. And I got to know them very well. But they needed a lot of support, they were young women, who were very beautiful many of them, who were very si -- very vulnerable. Who the person I was working with was very anxious to protect from the sexual advances of any soldiers. And I

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remember a very moving discussion in which he spoke, and said -- and I was so touched that in the middle of Germany, in the middle of all this mess, a camp that was mud, you were up to your ankles in mud at the time -- or later, because it was snowing then, but he -- he spoke to the women and told them, you must preserve yourself. You've been preserved for a reason. I can remember it to this day. You've been preserved for a reason. Don't destroy yourselves, don't capitulate to men who find you beautiful and who want to give you chocolate, and who want to try to help you, and maybe not help you. He was really telling them, you have a sexuality which you're only just realizing because in the camp your hair was cut, you didn't have your periods, you now do -- but he didn't say this in so many words. But he gave this very moving talk to them. I was so touched by this, and thought it was so wonderful that -- that we should be talking there, preserve yourselves somehow as a woman, and as women. And it's important. And then we danced, I remember we did lots of dancing.

Q: What kind of dancing was that?

A: Oh, anything, we just danced. We danced the hora a lot, and -- hora, and then we -- there were people who knew various variations that I'd never seen before, that were fascinating. And lots of songs and wonderful, it was wonderful the way -- it was full of life. I met two of the woman later, here. And they'd managed somehow. But i-it's -- I-I don't know what we were trying to do there, we were trying and -- i-i-it was such a unsupported group of people, and it was so primitive. I think it was a very primitive camp. Somebody once described it as a very good one. I thought it was very primitive. I remember there was a sort of wooden toilet, you know, one of these open jobs, and sort of just by the side of the camp, and you know, you had to have people on guard when you went in there, because there's no way you could fasten the door, and it was --

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it -- that place was cold and primitive. We got supplies in, we got learning material in. We did something. We did our best.

End of Tape Two, Side B

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Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is tape number three, side A, of an interview with Helen Bamber. Now, the survivors who you dealt with were now officially displaced persons. What did that mean?

A: Well, first of all it meant that as far as the officials were concerned, the word survivor or victim had gone out of their vocabulary, and the word displaced persons, which is a sort of anonymous terms for a glob of people, is quite a useful shield, just as we use the word asylum seekers today, so the word displaced persons, and then DPs, even worse, was used. So the compassion that was there at the very beginning, and the sense of outrage when the camp was liberated, had gone, in my view. And the DPs, displaced persons were seen as a problem, number one. So, in emotional terms, in political terms, in psychological terms, displaced persons meant a nuisance, a -- a problem. They were vocal, they'd become articulate, they had their committee, they were demanding, they wanted rights. What wa -- what rights did they want? They wanted rights within the camp, as far as I remember. They wanted rights of travel. They wanted to be able to move about Germany. And that was very difficult because as far as I remember, and this -- this can be corrected by others, the people in the camps were not allowed to leave or to travel without special permit. Now, in the early days, many of the young displaced persons went particularly, as I remember, to Poland, mainly to try to find their relatives. They went to their old, former homes to find their relatives. When they got there, they were set upon by the local people, who drove them out, and some killings took place, and some assaults took place. And the people, bedraggled, and often with torn shoes and bleeding feet, would return back into Germany, and back, as it were, behind barbed wire, behind the camp. I use barbed wire as a -- as a -- to cover what I mean by that kind of incarceration. So their options were very limited. If they wanted to find their relatives -- and this was at the beginning, for the first year or so was the most

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important as I remember it, was the finding of relatives. Now we had set up a search bureau in Belsen. And that was one of the things that one of the volunteers in our unit had trained at doing was to set up a search bureau. People who would come to the camp, again presumably illegally because they would come and there was no way in which they should have been able to enter or to leave, with little bits of like cigarette paper, rolled up paper. It was probably cigarette paper, with the names of relatives on it, asking has anybody seen or heard of so and so? And the names would be on these little bits of paper. And they would give them to you, or they would give them to anybody. They would just hand them out, and you would -- you would do your best.

Q: How did the search bureau work?

A: I'm not well acquainted with the search bureau. The search bureau presumably tried to marry people through the camp, or through other means, relatives of the named person, so -- on the piece of paper. So, it did it's job. Whether it did it adequately, I can't say. It was primitive. But in some cases people were reunited. There were other search bureaus that were established as time went on. I'm not quite sure if the Red Cross was not involved also in trying to reunite people. That also can be confirmed. I have -- you -- you know, I have a very fragmented, compartmentalized memory of this particular period of my life. So I can't really speak with authority about the organization of the search bureaus. I know that there were several, I know that we had one in the camp. And I know that people came searching for their relatives, handing bits of paper to each other in order to see whether somebody remembered somebody. It was pathetic, and very sad. Full of pathos, very sad to watch.

Q: You'd been -- you'd been speaking earlier about the options available to people now -- once they were DPs, if you like. Can you tell us a little more about the options they were seeking?

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You said that some of them wanted to go home, for example, to Poland, and what became of them.

A: Mm.

Q: But what about those who -- who had their eyes set on other countries?

A: I think my memory is of people wanting to come, many of them, to England or to America. There was no means by which they really could simply ask to come. I'm not sure if the American quota system was operating in the way that it normally does. In other words, so many from -- you know, that you're on the German quota list, or the Romanian, Hungarian, or Polish. But what I do know was that it wasn't possible simply to enter the US, or the UK, not really. Some people did, and they're very proud of it, and they say it as though anybody could have done it, but they must forgive me, I don't believe it was so easy for everybody to do it, otherwise they would have done it. I-It's -- it was hard for people, they couldn't get out, and they couldn't go anywhere. They couldn't go -- the Iron Curtain had already fallen, they couldn't go to the Iron Curtain countries. They knew that they would be badly treated if they did. They knew what was going on by returnees. And so what were their options? To find their relatives, to -- but then, as the months passed people realized that nothing had happened. Perhaps they had found a relative, perhaps they'd accepted that that was it, that nobody was alive. Or they lived in hopes, but they still wanted to get out. Outside the camps, of course, the Germans were beginning to mingle, to fraternize with British, American and other soldiers in the various zones. And this came very hard to the inmates, the fact that they were still displaced persons while something else was going on outside. I believe then that a hardening of attitudes took place, a realization for many that they were not wanted. That was the feeling, that nobody really wanted to open their doors. I mean, many people returned to Holland, some maybe to France. But on the whole, people

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remained, and they didn't want to. So, I think that is when -- and again I must be forgiven by tha -- by those people who see it differently, but I begin that i -- I believe that it was then that the idea of becoming more Zionist, wanting to go to Palestine is the only solution for their problem. And I believe it was then that it really became an entrenched desire and need, and mission. So people began to learn Hebrew if they didn't already know it. They became more militant. There were the illegal transportations to -- to cross frontiers to try to get illegally to Palestine one way or another. And of course, many people perished on the way.

Q: What did you know at the time about these illegal journeys?

A: What did I know? Well, everybody knew that it was happening. It was no secret. An organization grew, an organization of -- I'm not giving it a name, I don't know it -- whether there ever was a name, but you know, with all these situations of -- of despair and need, a militancy grows, an urgency grows. People are not going to stay in that situation forever. And historically this has always happened. It's happening now with the Kurds, and it's happened elsewhere. People want something for themselves, and they want freedom and safety. And people will, if they're not allowed to negotiate for it, they will try to take it. And so people began to go illegally, and cross frontiers illegally. And transports from the camps were organized.

Q: From yours as well, among the people you knew? That's to say, inmates held at Belsen also.

A: And Kownitz, yes. Mm.

Q: So how would you find out about this? Would you turn up one day and there'd be fewer people? Or did it work other ways?

A: I know -- I know relatively little about the transports. They were small. People didn't go in large numbers, to my knowledge. I remember one particular incident, let me concentrate on that. We were told at the -- our headquarters that -- or we found out somehow, that there were a group

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of I suppose about 15 to 20 people being held in a British army post. And I can't tell you where it was, but it was a group of DPs who had been found crossing the Dutch frontier illegally and they were now being held, and had been held for many months in this camp. And in this camp, when we eventually got there, we found that the camp was also a holding place for infamous war criminals and Germans who had -- who -- with a -- with a poor reputation. So I went with the leader of the Jewish brigade, who drove one lorry, and I think, too, we had another lorry with -- or truck, large truck, which would house another group, and a small, kind of mobile ambulance which was intended for the pregnant woman who was quite near term. So I think we probably had a nurse with us. I can't remember that, but I would imagine so, otherwise it would not be necessary or prudent to just have the ambulance. So I think we must have had a nurse with us. So there were several of us, and when we got to the camp, the lorries stood in the comp -- in the main kind of open area, bef -- we -- we came into an open space. On the left of us was this open camp site with barbed wire, in which the Germans were standing or pacing. And there was one woman, whose name I think has been given as Irma Grace, but I'm not sure if it was she, and I will check that for the record, but it was definitely a woman of -- who was well-known for her crimes. And -- and when the lorries stopped, and we were to get out and go and negotiate with the British post, the inmates, the German inmates started to chant. They realized that we had come for, in inverted commas, the Jews. And they began to chant, and it wasn't a very friendly chant. Something similar to do -- Jews, Jews, out with the Jews, but nasty stuff. I can't remember the exact words, but it was very ominous, and the whole scene was very ominous. And as we began to -- as we negotiated, and we received the people, and they were walking towards the truck, and we were loading them onto the trucks, the chanting got louder, and louder, and louder. And my colleague said, "Start them singing, get them singing." And so they started to sing.

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Q: The -- the Jews who you --

A: Yes.

Q: -- had come to collect.

A: Mm. And so, rather reminiscent of that film with Ingrid Bergman and -- you know, that famous "Casablanca" thing, but not dissimilar may I tell you, because the singing got louder and louder, and the chanting got louder, and it was extremely unpleasant. And I've never -- that scene, I -- I will never forget, because of it's ominous nature, it's pure, unadulterated hatred that was present, and the kind of slightly banal, rather semi-amused laid back attitude of the British soldiers from whom we were collecting the former inmates. And they were from Kownitz, I think. And we took them in the trucks, and the proud, pregnant lady haughtily rejected the ambulance, and was most affronted. So the ambulance, it trailed behind, and we had our two trucks and we took them back. And it -- th-there was some exuberance I remember, some -- some sense of release, relief. And there was a lot of singing, but people were tired, and exhausted, and it was a long drive, I remember. And I remember that there was a boy, young boy, and we held out our arms to help the people out of the -- out of the lorry, and he refused that, and he jumped down. And I -- I talked to him for a little while. And when we got back into the truck -- because people needed to relieve themselves, I think we had food as well, we got back into the truck, this young boy, as we dropped him off in -- in the compound in Kownitz said to me, "You will remember me. Remember me." And I said, "Yes, I'll remember you." And I stayed in Kownitz, I -- I don't know where or how, I can't remember where I slept. And I asked, I think, several days later where the group was, and I was told that they'd gone off again, and that this time they had crossed the frontier and they had got away. So not, I think, the pregnant lady. I don't remember. Well, it may have been, but whatever, they had gone. So yes, there were

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transports, and they behaved as all people do in these situations, with incredible determination and much courage. Many died. Some were shot crossing the frontiers as well. But more than that, I don't -- I can't say.

Q: Just pause it there for a second. I wanted to talk a little bit now about how the camp at Belsen functioned, how it was organized and -- and what people did all day whe -- when you first arrived.

A: You know, I'm not quite -- to be honest, I'm not quite clear about what people did all day as far as the inmates were concerned. I think -- it wasn't a camp that I worked in day in and day out. My impression is that they did very little at the beginning because they were so vulnerable, so debilitated, it would be difficult to imagine an actual activity. I believe that the more orthodox gathered and prayed, and went about their devotions. And I'm sure there was some activity, but there was very little structure to the camp as I remember it. It was the emergence of Yosul Rosenzoft and Norbert Fallheim, and the establishment of a committee many months later. And also with the presence of ORT providing workshops. And I do have, and I w-will have to donate it at some time, a small pot, a small vase from some metal that was found somewhere, which someone gave me, which is one of the f -- one the early products of the er -- ORT workshop. So people began to occupy themselves. They began to form into their political and religious groupings. The theater was established and became one of the liveliest and the most exciting exponents of resilience and life in the camp.

Q: Tell me about it.

A: Well, the theater would start with, nearly always as far as I remember, with a very raw just sort of exposure on the stage of the destruction of a family. The scene would start with the mother, father and children sitting round a table, very familiar table. And you can see that they

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were joyful, that they were engaged with each other, arguing, discussing, etcetera. And then you heard the marching toward the door that would open on the family in which the Germans would come. And you saw the family being beaten, being taken, you hear the screams, you see the mother being dragged away. The whole scene of a family being broken up in front of you was played time and time and time again. And it would be received in absolute silence. It was the homage to the family, to the destroyed family. Whether it was a form of mourning, I'm not sure. It could -- it could have been. It was -- or was it more a kind of expression of outrage, letting the world know this is what happened to my family. I think it was more that than mourning, because it's my view that many Holocaust survivors have never found the way to mourn such grotesque happenings as those that they witnessed and were part of. So I think it's probably to do with -- to do with exposure of what happened, and wanting the world and everybody to see it. And as the military government and -- and officials from UNRRA were often invited to th -- these concerts. Not always, but -- but -- but especially so on some occasions, it's not surprising that they would want to say this. This is, or was my family, and this is how it was for me. It was incredibly intimate, and terrible to watch. And there was never any applause, there was only silence. But then there would be other things taking part. I don't remember all of it, but I remember that very often there would be a kind of cabaret element to it, in which there would be songs in Yiddish, or Polish, or whatever, really making fun of, and poking the finger at the establishment of the British rule, the British command and the British zone, the attitude to the camp. There would be -- and it would be received with roars of laughter and applause, and at the end of which, of course, everybody stood up and applauded, including the front row of officials from the army, who'd hadn't understood a word of this cabaret. And I think the cabaret was done very much in the old-fashioned kind of really sort of German style cabaret. You know, it was ironic, it was -- it

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was -- it's meaning was very, very clear, and I believe it was very, very clever. I didn't always understand it all. And so the theater was very important, the hospital was important, the workshops, the committees. The constant badgering for different individuals to move or do something, to go somewhere within Germany for whatever reason. Other than that, I cannot really -- I cannot really remember other activities.

Q: How about the -- the newspaper, wasn't there a newspaper?

A: Oh yes, there was a newspaper, of course there was a newspaper. Yes, there was a newspaper produced with again, factual and ironic comments about the life of the DP, and the life of Belsen. And -- and so on. No, th -- th -- there's a newspaper, I wish -- I wonder if there's ever any of this left. I've never seen anything. So much was of the moment, and you don't think in terms of history, which one should. Anyway, that's how it was, as far as I remember.

Q: So it went from being a rather desolate, to maybe quite a spirited place.

A: Yes, it was. It had its spirit, it had its resilience, it had its sense of life. And I think that there was a group of younger people there who were going to survive at all costs. Somehow survival and strength meant a great deal to them, and I think that they very often turned towards the idea of Palestine as their solution. Whether the Palestine or the Israel that we see now would have been different, I believe it might, but others don't agree with me. Had Britain and America taken people more readily and quickly, and quickly solved this question of people remaining within the camp that once abused them -- I mean, there's nothing much worse than that, really. Pretty awful stuff. I don't know. It may be a very simplistic way of looking at a very complex problem. But the sense of not being wanted, and the sense of not being a victim again, was prevalent. And I have seen it elsewhere.

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End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is tape number three, side B of an interview with Helen Bamber. To what extent do you think the work that you did, and the work that your colleagues did contributed to this resurgence of the human spirit, if you'd like, in the camp? The one that you've just described.

A: I find it difficult to make claims, I always do. I think that we were part of it. We were part of the res -- I don't want to use the word resurrection, but the -- part of the -- we saw ac -- something of the restoration of the human spirit. We -- we vis -- we actually saw amongst the people, something of the spirit. Okay, they were angry, and they shouted, but they also laughed and performed, and -- and -- and were quite remarkable in many ways. I'm not taking responsibility for it. I believe we played a small part in it, and I believe that we offered support and resources, and that probably, as is so often the case, we were responsible more for particular individuals being helped than we were for the kind of global picture, if you know what I mean. I mean, I can think of individuals, and I think of the German woman I spoke to, and who I had quite a lot to do with, and I think that without making too many claims, our relationship was helpful. The fact that she could speak to me about her husband, about her losses, and the fact that -- no, I just feel somehow I can think of individuals that were helped by my colleagues, and on occasion by myself, but I don't want to make too many claims about what we achieved.

Q: All right, well to get away from the claims, let me ask you about this. Beginning, let's say with a good --

A: I think the hospital was important. I think -- I -- I had less to do with the hospital, but I think the hospital was valuable, and did a great deal for the individuals.

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Q: Tell me in what way. I mean, you've spoken about one aspect of the hospital, the fact that it was open to friends and relatives and so on.

A: Mm, mm.

Q: But it -- when you say it was particularly important, in what way do you mean that?

A: Well, it was -- i-it was a place for recovery. And it was of Jewish [indecipherable] and it wasn't a German hospital. It wasn't a British hospital ostensibly, it was somehow manned by Jewish people helping Jewish people. And I think that was very important because you are very vulnerable when you are helpless. And they had been helpless many, many times, helpless victims at the mercy of others cruelty and lack of care, and lack of anything. And I think whatever else we did or didn't do, we did operate it well. I believe that. So I think that was a plus. And I -- I can think of many individuals who were helped along by something. But if you ask me were we responsible for all that renewal of -- of spirit and -- and so on, I don't think we were responsible. I think it came from the resilience of survivors. Had we not been there it might have been more difficult, let me put it that way. That might be the fairest way to put it.

Q: Can you describe in -- in greater detail how your relationship with people developed, how when you arrived on this very desolate scene, how you made contact with people, how they reacted to you, and how, if at all, you -- you managed to establish some kind of dialog with them, and -- and draw them out. Tell me how that process happened there in Belsen, as opposed to since.

A: I think in the early days -- I mean, this sounds very, again, rather trite, I think, and simplistic, but what I found was very important was to say very little, but to take somebody's hand. I -- I found that very important, and I sometimes find it important in my present day work. When there's nothing to say and the situation is so terrible, all you can do is to take somebody's hand

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and stroke it and hold it and try to indicate through your touch that there is a communication. So you don't begin with words, you begin with touch, and that's all. And sometimes I would just walk away. And they might call me back or I might just walk away and come another day. But it would be -- I -- I found that was helpful in the very early days, because people were so exhausted, that to take somebody's hand and to hold it was a way of you -- you, as a person, trying to give strength, as it were, to the other person. So that was all I could do sometimes. Words came later.

Q: And what happens when -- what happened when the words came, and what happened when you didn't have a language in common with the people you were nonetheless communicating with?

A: Sometimes people would simply come out with a whole story in explosions. I've -- I've said before like spitting up, like kind of vomiting something. So that it would come out stacat -- come out in -- in -- in -- in -- not clearly, not in a coherent way. And I would sometimes say either in German -- and I would always apologize for speaking German, and I would try to bring in Yiddish words that I'd learned, as much as I could, if I couldn't understand somebody, because there would be other people there, and often people would sort of want to come to help you to understand the story. So that again is a form of communication. The fact that you don't understand puts you in a less powerful position, therefore they have the power to inform you. Without them, I can't understand that person. So that's always a very useful way of looking at things, to accept your powerlessness, and let them have the power to inform you. And I would ask for help from them.

Q: You've said, I believe, that sometimes you were -- they were angry with you, they didn't want your sympathy, they wanted simply somebody to work out their anger on.

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A: Yes, well then, I mean, this is something you get in all -- with most survivors and something that you get y -- I -- I have to get used to in my present day work. People are angry because they are helpless and frightened and -- and they can't see a way out. And you just have to let them shout and be angry. There's nothing else you can do. You don't walk away from it.

Q: Did you have at the time any sense that you were achieving something? I mean, when you went back to the requisitioned house at the end of the day, after a visit to Belsen, what did you do? Did you get blind drunk, did you hide under the sheets? What -- what did you do? How on earth did you live with this stuff day after day, and what sense did you have, had it been worthwhile, the day you just spent?

A: I never talked to anyone about it, and I think that was one of the failures in the organization. It was born of it's time when organizations were not encouraged to speak about feelings, or things that they couldn't achieve. So that organizations -- and indeed they do it today, and the more difficult the outside circumstances, the more institutions call upon the solutions for the institutions rather than for the people they're there to help. So we would look at, if we met in the evening, we would talk about the difficulties of transport, or the difficulties of a car being stolen, or an accident. But we wouldn't talk about how I felt, or anybody else felt. So there wasn't much of that. What there was however, was a kind of group -- we would do all sorts of things in that house, that requisitioned house. We would sing, we would read poetry, we would read aloud to each other. We would put on various -- we had one boy who was an extremely good mimic, and Richard Talbor was a very popular tenor of the day, but dear Richard Talbor had a way of performing on the stage which was quite unique, and a little bit what can I say? Little bit arrogant and pompous. And he was wonderful at depicting Richard Talbor. And so he would sing and perform and we would all act out something. Or we would dance. Now we would

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dance, we would have ballroom dancing, we were very good at this. We'd put on something or other. We had some very sentimental Italian songs, you know -- you know, I can't even remember them now, but they were very sentimental, and we would all swoon, we would listen to music. So we -- we pu -- we had our own activities and we used each other very well I think, in the evenings, but we didn't talk about our feelings. So my main relief would be laughing at somebody taking off Richard Talbor or somebody else for that matter. And we'd have all those sort of activities, which was fun.

Q: Privately, did you despair of what you were seeing day after day?

A: No, I didn't despair at the time. When I came back to Britain, when I came back to London, I went through a very difficult phase, one that I haven't experienced since. I -- I can't explain what it was, it was an inability to work with what I'd seen. I was absolutely terrified of a recurrence of that kind of happening, I was terrified of it. And I was sure that it was going to happen again. And I don't know why I felt that, but I felt afraid. And I used to go to the cinema and sit and watch film after film after film. And I had traditional, classical panic attacks, when I would feel overwhelmed with fear. So a lot of -- of the experience emerged much later, when I was -- when I had come home. And it was partly fostered by the lack of interest by anybody around me in understanding or listening to what I had to say. That was very difficult for me. I'd learned a lot of negotiating skills in Germany, and in my family, but I hadn't learned how to deal, and I still find it hard to deal with a bystander, to deal with people who know and don't know, who don't want to hear, and who didn't want to hear. And I couldn't bear it. I came back to a country that was preoccupied with rationing, and which piece of meat they were going to get that week, and any effort I made on my part to communicate what I'd seen, even when I was asked to give official talks about it -- I remember going to the east end and talking in a theater there to people.

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I was actually asking for money, and that may have had something to do with it, but money for the relief -- the Jewish Relief Unit. I still do that sort of thing. And I had to ask for money and say what was going on, and I -- I mean, I met with cold, angry stares as much as to say, don't you think we've suffered enough, we've heard enough? But I think it's partly guilt. I know now that it's guilt. And so that before you start, you have to try to reduce that sense of guilt with people that they couldn't and didn't want to do anything or know anything at the time. And they certainly didn't then. And I found that the hardest thing of all. So I despaired when I came back. I despaired when I came back, and I was really very low, the lowest I've ever been in my life, I think. Well, almost.

Q: What was it that made you decide to come back and made you decide to come back at a particular time? Maybe you could remind us of the date as well. What -- what was that one single thing or that -- were you just completely overloaded with what you'd seen and done?

A: No, I'd been ill, I'd been in hospital. I'd been involved in an accident which I'd had what they thought was concussion, I was quite unwell. And I came back on leave and it was decided for me, I didn't decide. I had wanted to go back. In fact, I was dying to go back, I couldn't wait to go back. And I think that partly my despair i-in this -- in coming back, was due to the fact that I couldn't go back there, and that I felt more at home there than I did here. And I felt more at ease there, and with myself. And that was very hard for me.

Q: Why did you feel more at ease?

A: I felt more at ease because I knew where I was, and who I was, and what I was doing, and what I was doing it for. And even if we were failing, or not doing a fantastic job, at least we were trying to do something. Whereas I came back to nothingness, to people who didn't want to know about it. And that was -- that was awful. So I really found myself in the wilderness when I came

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back. And the fact that it -- that things had changed, new people, new order had been set up out there, Henry was no longer there. It meant that it was difficult for me to go back. And in a way that was quite difficult for me, that whole scene.

Q: Well, I mean it was two things as well, wasn't it? It was unfinished business, and you hadn't really said your goodbyes if you were expecting to go back.

A: I hadn't said my goodbyes to anybody, I hadn't -- I'd finished the TB train. I mean, that was a job, that was a project that lasted many months, and that was the one thing I did achieve, whatever else I did or didn't achieve, I achieved that. So I felt quite good about the bi -- the -- the -- the -- the fact that I'd got a -- managed to get a group of young children and adolescents to Switzerland for treatment of their TB. That was quite an achievement, you know, bearing in mind the difficulties that we were faced with. So I felt good about that, but I didn't feel good about leaving unfinished business, not saying goodbye. I felt very, very bad. It was bad, very difficult for me.

Q: So when you came home and you found this kind of uncomprehending response, what happened? What -- what happened to you?

A: Well, there was a period which I really can barely remember, in which I wandered about, as I say, going to the cinema. Sort of not knowing quite what to do. I eventually went to work for the Jewish Refugee Committee in their emigration department. And then finally, from there, I was asked to work with the Committee for the Care of Children from Concentration Camps, working with a group of young children and adolescents who'd been brought to this country whilst I was still in Germany. They came here in 1945. They were young people, orphans who'd been in Auschwitz, and been in the slave labor camps. And because of my background I was asked if I would be a caseworker with that organization.

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Q: Well, w-why don't you tell me a little bit about that organization and the -- and the work that you did? We're taking a little pause. Yes. Before we move on to look in some depth at the work you did when you came back to England, give me an assessment of what you, your organization, and people like you achieved in Germany after the war.

A: I think that had it not been for Henry Lunzer, with his or -- with his sort of military organization, in setting up an administration, and an office that actually could operate within German, and particularly in the British zone, but not only in the British zone, in terms of provision, in terms of negotiation with British military government for the needs of different individuals and groups, I think that we would have achieved very little. I think we -- and I think that his support of the need for children to go to the sanatoria in -- in Switzerland was -- was good, and he gave me all the support -- moral support that I needed in order to do that. I think that he was misjudged, as is often the case, where you have a small -- where you have small resources, and you have a base in another country of purse holders and trustees, who have the reputation of the organization at heart, and want it to succeed, but do not, and cannot seem to have a view, a good overview of what Henry Lunzer was trying to achieve there. So there were inevitable, and there always are, I think, tensions, even in organizations today, which are well known, where the base is held perhaps here, and the outreach work is done in remote parts of the world. It's very difficult to keep those communications clean and good. And it certainly was a handicap in -- in the -- in the Jewish Relief Unit at that time.

Q: Let's move on now then, fairly swiftly to the work that you be -- began to do.

A: But I -- I did want to -- but I do -- I do really, at this point, want to pay tribute to Henry Lunzer because I think that he was a courageous negotiator and was very knowledgeable. He

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knew Germany well, he spoke German well. He could speak to military government. I think, you know, somebody needs to say he did a bloody good job, because he did. Thank you.

Q: Okay. Let's talk then about the work that you did once you came back to London after the war.

A: Once I'd recovered my equilibrium, which took some months before I could actually face the world, really, I was appointed a case worker to the Committee for the Care of Children from Concentration Camps. I think I mentioned this a little earlier. It was an organization sponsored and financed by the Central British Fund, and had a board of trustees. And it's director was a practicing psychoanalyst, called Oskar Friedman, who I'd admired very much. Who had been the director of a type of [indecipherable] institution in Germany, until he himself, as a Jew, was expelled and taken to a concentration camp before the war started, and finally released, and who came to this country, or at least came to Britain as a refugee. And he was, as I say, a practicing psychoanalyst, and he brought to the work of the committee, a knowledge of institutional life, and of working with people who in turn were trying to care for what was considered to be a -- in the best sense, perhaps, but nevertheless, a difficult or complex group of young people. I came back in 1947, in the early months of 1947, so the children had already been, and -- or -- and adolescents had already gone through a kind of preliminary phase of being in special homes, out of London, where they were helped with language and many different things. By the time I got to work with them, they were looking at schooling, at advance study, at apprenticeships, and some kind of future. Again, we were looking at a very vigorous, articulate, demanding group of young people, competitive. Now, they were very different in some ways from the people that I remembered from the camps. Their survival, as -- as had the people in the camps, but let's just make this kind of -- let's mark this difference. The people in -- the peop -- the pe -- the young

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people I was working with had survived the daily selections for work, or for the gas chamber, through their ability to maintain strength, to maintain totally focused on their survival, nobody else's but their survival. Although of course, some were concerned with friends and siblings, but basically focused on their own bodily survival. They had to prove their strength, their capacity to work another day. Silence, not reacting to anything, however cruel, was part of their survival. So in dealing, in communicating with this group of people, one always had to have in one's mind that that was how they survived. And there was never going to be an easy, immediate communication and trust. There couldn't be. Nobody in their life really could be trusted for some time. So it was very important to find a way to build that trust, and to build a form of communication that took into account their need for their own private space. And this is quite important because I found it very important in working with them that -- for example, I -- I spoke about taking someone's hand in the camps. What I found with the young people to be very important was to pi -- allow a space between you and them. A kind of actual, physical space so that -- and I -- I could never quite put my finger on why, in the early days, that was so important to maintain that space, but it was. And I believe that it gave them a sense of their own kind of power base, their own sense of identity and strength. And I did not invade it.

End of Tape Three, Side B

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Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is tape number four, side A of an interview with Helen Bamber. You were talking about the space and your approach -- you were talking about your approach to these young people, and how actually they needed precisely the opposite kind of approach to the people you dealt with in Belsen.

A: Yes, yes. And a -- a -- this space was -- was a recognition, a kind of instinctive recognition. It wasn't something that I could put down to tuition or guidance from Oskar Friedman, although he was a guidance to me in many of the cases that I had. But I just -- it was something that I just sensed as very, very important. Now, my job then was to try and help the young people to be placed in jobs, to begin a life that would be possibly creative, or would certainly give them some sense of solid -- solidity. However, I have to say at some stage that we were not encouraged to, so to speak, open the lid on the horrors that they had experienced. And I do feel that there was, in some way, a denial of need here. I believe that these young people -- and I've said earlier I believe, in the tapes, that people did not have the opportunity, the ability or the resources in time to mourn their dead. And it's not only to mourn their dead in the sense of their dying, but in the sense of their grotesque manner of dying. And to mourn the grotesque is more complex, and needs skill. I don't think that we had thought that through, and even if we did fumble towards an understanding that their inner world was not being addressed, such was the -- the kind of culture of the day, that the idea that -- you see, Britain at the end of the war was a country blunted by war, where the message to everyone was to -- to just put the past to rest and let's move forward. A new world is born, the war is over, let's get on with life. That was the message of the day. Soldiers were not encouraged to speak about their inner fears and their nightmares. They were not encouraged to talk about the horrors of war. All the war films that came out were really like

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something out of Peter Pan, they were so -- so banal, and so sentimental. So sentimental a -- you know, sa -- the war was sentimentalized. It wasn't portrayed at that stage with all it's horror. And to bring the horror of the Holocaust out in the open was felt not to be appropriate. Now, I'm not saying that there wasn't some attention to their inner world. I believe there was some. The Anna Freud clinic was involved in some way in observing the young people. But I don't believe that we dealt with the need to mourn. And when I look today at the -- at the older people as they are now, men in their 60's and 70's, women, and I look at their relationships and the next generation, I don't believe that we did as good a job, perhaps, as we could have done. It's easy to say that in hindsight. I believe that we did quite a lot of good, and most of the young people have, in social terms, flourished, made good, married, had children. But if you observe them, and their relationships, and their long -- I don't want to use the word long-suffering, but in their very supportive wives, and you speak to the children, not everything is as good as it looks. So, I mean, I went about my task of trying to help people, young people t -- into jobs. I negotiated yet again with schools, and colleges, and institutions and most in a -- most unpleasant sometimes, landlords, landladies, and -- and -- and -- and employers. It was a hard time. It had been a hard war, and people were tough, and employers were tough. And the fact that these young people were -- I was just going to say asylum seekers -- were -- as the young people were Holocaust survivors, it did not call for compassion. Some were good, some were very good. And many people worked well with the young people, and offered much. And there was a club, and there were facilities and money was sought for special needs. But I would have liked to have dealt better with some of the strange things that happened. I had a young man, for example, who'd been -- who had TB. And I went every week to see him here, in a sanatorium near Brentwood. He was a delightful young man from Poland. We spoke together, we talked about his needs. We

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talked about all kinds of things. But one day when I went there, after many, many months of treatment, and he was doing very well, he wasn't there. And I was quite upset and I asked the nurses what had happened. And they said he just got up and went. Now he -- we don't know what happened, and I still to this day don't know exactly what the process was, whether it was long planned, or whether it was a sudden whim, or what, but certainly Oskar Friedman was very enquiring of me as to why I hadn't noticed a problem. But such was the defense of this young man that he could converse week after week, and I could become quite close, and we could talk about quite intimate things, about sexuality, about the difficulty of being ill, about a possible girlfriend, all these things we could talk about. But somehow he could, nevertheless, just g-get up and go. So it's that kind of thing where the defenses have been developed through crisis, through extremis, through the most terrible losses and catastrophes, and genocide. Where people have built defenses that are no longer so good in every day life, and do not make for absolute intimacy and trust. And this is what I think happened with this young man. We ca -- w-we managed to speak about it later, but it happened, and it felt like a failure, and was judged to be a failure.

Q: One boy out of many, then.

A: Well, I mean, he succeeded. He got better, he had a girlfriend in the end. No, I don't think it was a total failure. He was one boy out of many. There was another boy I took, a very, very brilliant boy, who I've lat -- just recently found as a professor of chemistry in Canada, in university in Canada. I looked for many months, years in fact to find him. He had TB of the spine, and I wondered if he'd survived. And I -- I took him before a group of headmasters in a special school in north London, because he was a very brilliant child, and we had wanted a particular standard of education for him. In coming before the headmasters -- it was a team of

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headmasters, to judge this young man. I had to, of course, to say that the -- he had lost quite a number of years of his education. Brilliant as he was, he had lost years. And I explained that he'd been in this camp, and that camp, slave labor, etcetera, etcetera, Auschwitz. And then the chair of the headmasters turned to me and said, "But didn't they give them books to read?" And I was so aghast. I couldn't believe it, and I couldn't find anything to say. Sufficient to say that the young man was taken into that particular school. But I've never forgotten that, and it's an indication of society's capacity to deny what is taking place. But there was also denial amongst the Jewish community when I came back from Germany, as to what had happened to our brethren, to our brothers and sisters. And denial can exist in every population.

Q: Why did it exist among Britain's Jewish population?

A: I think it was partly guilt, that s -- si -- a -- si -- their own survival and other people had not survived. I -- I shared that. I shared that feeling of -- of having survived when nobody -- you know, when other people did not, and you know, just by the luck of the draw, really. Many of my relatives in Poland indeed had not survived. So -- my father's relatives. So I think it was partly guilt, but it's also denial. If you deny something, you don't have to do anything about it. If you recognize something, you have to do something. And you know, I'm faced with this every day, in my every day life now. It's the denial of society to accept that certain people have suffered sufficiently to require our attention. And I think that's what I felt when I came back from Germany. It wasn't just the experience of the camps, of the people, of the ghastliness, of everything I'd seen and heard. It was the fact that when I came back I couldn't get anybody to even unders -- want to -- want to understand what had happened. And so this really is my -- my most urgent plea. It's not only about remembering the past, it's about preserving the future. And

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we can only preserve the future if we recognize what we are doing to each other, and what that means for the victims, and what we need to do if we're to be a compassionate society.

Q: Little pause here to allow us to --

A: Oh, I thought that was the fi --

Q: When did you finish working with the boy survivors, and -- and what did you do next?

A: I worked for many years, about eight years on and off with the -- the boy survivors. Of course, there were girls, we always called them the boys, but there were girls. And I continue to stay in touch with them. When I say I continue to work with them, the work finished probably after a -- a few years, I think, after about four years, but I continued to see them, and continued to work with them for a number of years after that. And I still see them, particularly one or two of them. But I then went on to do some hospital jobs, social work jobs in hospitals. I joined Amnesty in 1961. And I -- I just do want to say something about why I joined Amnesty, I know it's not relevant, except to do with hatred. It was very easy to hate one particular nation, and one particular group of people. And I'd enjoyed, if I can use that word, or indulged in that hatred for many years, particularly as my husband also had been a s -- a survivor in many ways, and seen his family destroyed in grotesque ways, and I -- at least his -- certainly his father, who was beaten to death in the house in which they were on the Kristallnacht. So living with his depression and his misery over the death of his mother, and rest of his family in Majdanek concentration camp, I certainly nursed my hatred of the Germans for many years. But it was when I began to realize that torture and other human rights violations were going on in so many countries in the world. That the French were torturing the Algerians, that other people were torturing. That you could not put -- you could not put a frontier up and say this is where it begins, and this is where it ends. And I'm not making, and I'm not comparing one genocide, or one cat --

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catastrophe with another. The Holocaust will always remain the most terrible of genocides of the 20th century. But I still feel that we mustn't close our eyes to other terrible disasters, such as we've seen recently, for example, in Rwanda. So I joined Amnesty [indecipherable] in the spirits, you know, with the idea that I can't nurse this forever. I have to accept and have to understand that violence and persecution goes on in many different forms, and I needed to understand it better. My work in Amnesty went on for many years. I -- I helped to form the first medical group in the British section of Amnesty International, taking testimony and documenting evidence of torture and human rights violations from relatives and survivors who'd come to this country, and in going on missions abroad for Amnesty. And it was coming out of that -- that work, knowing that we could document, and we could take testimony, and we could supply evidence of human rights violations to organizations and institutions concerned with human rights, including the United Nations, but that we weren't actually treating the survivors. That made me feel we weren't really fulfilling our task. And as people were beginning to ask us to take care of asylum seekers, refugees and asylum seekers from many different countries who look -- resided in this country, and who'd been tortured and violated in many different ways, and lost sometimes, all their members of their family, that made me feel that we needed to move on. We established as an independent charity, the medical foundation for the care of victims of torture at the end of 1985. And we had a vision, and visions are difficult to hold onto. And the vision was to combine human rights, and the care of the victims. In other words, to take heed of people's protection, their human rights, to be part of that. If necessary even to be advocates for that, which is not easy for therapists. But also to look at the medical, psychological and social needs of the people who came from the -- to the medical foundation. We've treated over 35,000 people, from over 91 different countries, and I have to tell you that my room every day, my

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consulting room every day, is filled with horrendous stories of torture, of deliberate mutilation, of hideous rapes, of dreadful executions from all over the world. And I suppose really, that is the beginning and end, in some ways of my story. I'm doing what I set out to do. I know I can't save everybody. I know that my own skills are limited. We're an organization with no -- insufficient resources to meet the needs of everyone. I believe we live in as hostile an environment as -- or at least our survivors do, as they ever did in the 30's. People are not welcomed, people are deported back to the countries which tortured them. European countries are closing the doors, we have a fortress Europe. We don't look for good solutions. We didn't in the 30's and we don't now. So really, my work is again about human rights, and the care of the individual, and the individual's family. And that can be very rewarding work, even if it can also be quite distressing.

Q: Is there a thread that directly links your experiences at -- of Belsen with the Medical Foundation?

A: I don't think I would have established the Medical Foundation, and worked so long in the Medical Foundation if I hadn't been to Belsen. What I learned in Belsen was about a kind of suffering that we have never really begun to understand, about loss, about grotesque death, about the need to mourn. About -- about despair and the desire to die. I learned all of these things in Belsen, but I also learned about the resilience, and something about the human spirit and people's capacity to survive, and people's capacity to overcome, if you are able to resource something within them. And that's what I've learned. I didn't understand how to resource it for many years. But with time, you are able to resource people's skills, people's -- you are able to retrieve something of who that person was. And that's very, very important. You are able to deal, or to try to come to terms with grotesque death. To find ways of burying the dead that are very unusual. And this we've had to do in the Medical Foundation. It's about an holistic approach to

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trauma, and to loss, using medicine, using psychology, but also using very adaptive measures. You can't deal -- you know, you can't bring a very traditional form of therapy very often to people from different -- from certain dif -- from different cultures, from different beliefs in healing. You'll have to listen to what is going to help them, and you have to find very creative ways of working with people, and I can give many examples of that, but I don't think that that is the purpose of this discussion. I think the Medical Foundation has learned how to address government, it's home office. It doesn't always succeed, but it tries. It's learned skills of negotiation and understanding other people's difficulties. But how you hold the vision, and how you deal with continuing -- a continuing lack of compassion and understanding, both in the public -- or some of the public, not all of the public, we have quite a following, but in some of the public, and in some of government, is very difficult to do.

Q: Now, on a slightly different tack, but not entirely, one aspect of the work that you've done for the Medical Foundation, I believe in June 1993, you went to Israel and you testified on behalf of a Palestinian prisoner. Could you tell me about that whole case, and your involvement in it?

A: I'll tell you some of it, because it would take a lifetime to discuss it properly. I went to Israel to take part with a colleague of mine who is formerly -- was -- was born in Israel, but lives in this country and works as a psychologist. I went to attend a conference of the Israeli and Palestinian Physicians for Human Rights. The Medical Foundation does link to various human rights organizations. And because of my background, and because of the background of my colleague, it seemed very appropriate that we should link to something that sounded as constructive as an Israeli and Palestinian Formation for the Benefit of Human Rights. We knew, and had met the Israeli members of the organization, and the Palestinians. I had known and worked with for many years -- that means to say, when I say worked with, I mean I've communicated with a very

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profound child psychiatrist from Gaza who studied in this country, and is working with the Gaza community mental health team in Gaza. So it seemed a logical thing to do, for us to attend the conference, which regrettably was on the subject of torture. Torture worldwide, torture throughout the world, but torture also in Israel. And when I was there, I was asked by the Physicians for Human Rights if I would help them in the case of a Palestinian where it had become obvious from the papers that had been found of his interrogation, that he had been tortured in order -- in order for him to confess, whether I will be prepared to help them. And I met the lawyer, the Jewish lawyer involved in his case before I made any decisions. And I was very impressed with his integrity, and his dignity, and his desire as an Israeli to provide fairness and justice where he felt it was appropriate. On reading the document, it was obvious to me that certain forms of what we would call torture had taken place. And I agreed, reluctantly may I say, to, as a visiting director of an organization concerned with torture, to take part in a certain aspect of his trial. It -- it was agreed -- it was agreed with the lawyer that this -- I mean, it was at the lawyers request that I acquiesced to this. And I produced a document, and I attended the court.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Beginning Tape Four, Side B

Q: This is tape number four, side B, of an interview with Helen Bamber.

A: And so we went -- I went with the -- with the lawyer, the Jewish lawyer, and my colleague who had come with me and escorted me from the UK, to Hebrum. It was extremely hot. And we had to wait for many hours because the judge was not happy about my giving any evidence in the court. And I think that she, quite understandably, had to take advice from other authorities before she could proceed, and she went on really for many hours before eventually, I was allowed to come into the court, and to give only very restricted information. I could not refer to certain

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aspects which they considered I was not qualified to refer to. So, my role was rather a limited one. But I could talk about confessions under torture, and that confessions under torture can never be reliable ones, for quite obvious reasons. That people will often say something in extreme discomfort that isn't necessarily true. And as torture is universally outlawed, it does seem rather inappropriate for any court to take, to accept a confession that actually took place under coercion, and under extreme pressure. Before I went to the court, I sat for some time in a very small, hot flat, without air conditioning, to see what it felt like to be hooded with a thick, smelly, kind of wooly, wool material, army material hood. I didn't have such an exact hood, but I had sufficient to give me a feeling of how claustrophobic, and how terrible such a feeling would be. I wasn't able to adopt the position that is adopted, that was adopted, and is -- is often used in such cases in Israel, where somebody is placed on a low chair, their hands tied behind them, and the chair's feet are shorter in the front than the back, so that the -- when you are hooded, and exposed to quite a lot of noise, loud noise, and you are also in this very uncomfortable position, sitting on this seat, which has a traditional name, which I shall remember soon, I think if anybody were to try that position, they would find it extremely uncomfortable, because the weight of the body is distributed in such a way that there's enormous pressure on the back, and one is in extreme discomfort and fear, and exposed to noise. Man also had an injury that had been recorded in the notes, but which I was not allowed to refer to in the court, which was an injury to his nose, which the doctor had recorded. Now, I -- it's difficult for me to discuss this particular case. It so happens that the case was resolved, inasmuch as an expert came from -- an expert in confessions under pers -- under duress, came from the Mordsley hospital as an independent expert, and gave evidence in this case.

Q: A British hospital, that is.

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A: Yes, a British hospital. Because, as they professed to be uns -- not satisfied with my credentials as an expert witness, I did suggest to the court, that if they were concerned, as they said they were, to ascertain whether the man had confessed under torture, then perhaps the best way of doing it was to get somebody whose expertise could not be denied. And so this was agreed, and eventually an expert, as I say, from a renowned institution, and whose seminal work is in confessions obtained under duress [indecipherable] attend the court. And the man's sentence was commuted. Is i -- is that the word? From I think 15 years, which was his convicted -- was the -- was what he was convicted -- was what he was given on conviction. But I think it -- he w -- did -- it was then --

Q: Reduced, or --

A: Reduced to a very short period, and he was released quite soon. It was a very, very difficult experience for me. For me, with my background, to stand in Israeli court, defending a Palestinian, who was there, and who looked extremely fearful, and obviously with a -- some -- well, was very hard. But it was much harder to do nothing. If had done nothing, I could never really have lived with my principles, which is that nobody, under any circumstances should be signaled out for torture, and that there are other ways. If you do want information, you have to find, with all the ingenuity that exists within societies, other ways. But you do not torture, you do not torture. Torture is such an abominable, devastating experience, both to those who practice it, I believe, in the end, and those on who it is inflicted. It is really the most terrible memory that la -- that -- that man can have. And the nightmares, and the physical pain, the sense of one's own betrayal -- the body betrays in torture. The body gives out, and the body betrays you in torture. And for a civilized country, for civilized people to be practicing torture on an individual is unforgivable, and cannot be condoned under any circumstances. And I know there's a great

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discussion going on about -- at the moment about whether torture is justified, and others must indulge in that. But my views are clear, and my experience of working with survivors is that they -- they do not -- it is very difficult to overcome, just as it is with Holocaust survivors to overcome the effects of torture. And for -- to employ people to torture as your agents is, I think the s -- beginning of a very slippery slope. If you employ people to torture, or to apply as they say, minimum pressure, or whatever the phrase is. It doesn't matter what the phrase is. What it means is to frighten through physical and psychological pain into a confession. It's no way to behave for a civilized society. And there are people in Israel who feel very, very unhappy, very uncomfortable about what is going on. And torture does exist, I'm afraid, in -- in Israel. And I have been witness to a number of testimonies of people who've been tortured. And it's an unbearable thought, but I think that we have to -- I take heart from the fact that there are people in Israel who are working very, very hard to find a way to end this, and who've spoken out very courageously. I wish there were more. I know that there's a great deal of fear, but I don't with to get into the political scene in Israel. People have elected their representatives, and they have made a decision. I with there was not so much hatred against the Palestinians. And I wish the Palestinians would not do what they are doing. I've worked with moderate, and intelligent, and caring Palestinians and Israelis who come together and want to bring about change, and it's our job to help them do that. Not to be defensive about what is going on there, but rather to look for a solution, I think, as to how we as individuals can assist people to bring about change in their societies. It is about the way people lose it, yes.

Q: Let me ask you a final question. What lessons can you draw so far from your rather extraordinary life?

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A: I don't know whether it's extraordinary, I -- I would question that. But I -- I think really, my concern, what -- what worries me most is lack of compassion. I think it's so easy to turn against people, to create scapegoats. I mean, no -- no nation, no group of people can be more conscious of that than the Jewish people, how easy it is for them to be scapegoated. They always have been, and they're still being scapegoated. But we have to be careful about this, and we have to be informing all the time, people about the need to understand other people, to be compassionate. We're not a compassionate society here or anywhere else that I can see. And we can do so many things. We're now going off to Mars, and to the moon, and here and there, but we don't know how to maintain compassion. What I saw happen in Belsen was the dying of compassion. There was outrage and compassion when the camp was liberated, but I watched it die. I watched it not there when I came back. And when I speak today to people -- I watched it in hospitals where children, in my view, were really abused, and restrained, when they should not have been. I don't mean -- when I say abused, I mean cruelly treated, really. Stupidly treated. I just -- I just -- I mean, for example, when the Kosovan refugees came to this country -- we can question why, but people came to the airports with teddy bears and presents, and there was all kinds of support and interest in their welfare, particularly families with small children. People were able to identify them. But even though they were able to identify them, the compassion is gone. If I say today that my own government is considering sending back a Kosovan family, who we feel, for reasons of torture and rape and various other situations, really should not go back, but should be allowed to stay, there won't be that compassion. The compassion has died. And so I don't know what maintains compassion. And I don't know how to help people or to instill compassion in people when they've lost it. And I think that is really the predicament for s -- f -- f -- and always has been. It's about being compassionate to the people who are so different from you. And even

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people you may not like very much. I mean, I don't like all my clients, I don't have to, it's not my job. I remember when I was in Germany and I said on one occasion to a much more experienced colleague, my God, I'm so tired of -- there's one particular person that drove me literally -- drove me quite mad, and was very demanding. And he said, "Look, you're not here to like people. You're not here to like them." And that's quite true. I'm not doing this work because I like everybody. And I don't expect to, and it would be foolish for me to do so. But there has to be a degree of compassion if we're to deal with the ills of society. I don't know. I [inaudible]. I can't finish it. I've come to the end. I don't know, it sounds like a sermon from God knows where. I don't intend it to sound like a sermon. It's not like that, but I've watched compassion die so quickly, I just -- it's just a plea for some kind of understanding that isn't there.

Q: Helen Bamber, thank you very much. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Helen Bamber.

End of Tape Four, Side B

Conclusion of Interview

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