

Kindertransport Association Oral History Project
Interview with
RUTH BISWAS
June 16, 1998

KEY:

- [brackets] describe action in the interview
- *Italics* indicates a word in a foreign language, spelled correctly
- {*italics in bracket*} indicates a word in a foreign language that may be incorrect
- {brackets} indicate indecipherable words

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Interviewer: We're here on the second day of the Kindertransport Reunion in London, England. It's June 16, 1999. And today we're here with—

Ruth: Ruth Biswas.

Interviewer: And you're from?

Ruth: Berlin.

Interviewer: And could you spell your last name for us?

Ruth: Biswas.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Ruth: I was born Ruth Israel.

Interviewer: You were born Ruth Israel. And where and when were you born?

Ruth: I was born in 1926, so I was 7, I think, when the Nazis came.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Ruth: My father's name was Georg Israel and my mother's name Alma. Now, my mother was not Jewish, but she left the Church and, well, I think she more or less felt herself as a Jew, although we were an assimilate family, for my parents' generation anyway. And not in any way religious.

Interviewer: Where were your parents born?

Ruth: In Berlin.

Interviewer: They were both born in Berlin?

Ruth: Yes.

Interviewer: How long had your family lived there? How many generations?

Ruth: Well, my paternal grandfather came to Berlin as a young man from the countryside north of Berlin, from Mecklenburg. And my mother's parents, her mother came from *{Tourn}* on the Polish border and her father came from Hanover.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

Ruth: My father was a lawyer, a lawyer then, but he was deposed of his job as soon as the Nazis came, so the coming of the Nazis hit us straight away.

Interviewer: How many siblings did you have?

Ruth: I'm the middle one. I had a younger brother and a younger sister.

Interviewer: And did they live with you? Did anyone else live with you?

Ruth: They lived with me and our maternal grandmother came to live with us when we were quite small because my grandfather died. My brother unfortunately didn't survive the War. He was called into forced labor and died in a camp call *{Rosbern} 0:05:20.6*, just outside Berlin. My sister survived all the bombing and everything, and then immediately after the War was evacuated through some Jewish organization to be out of the city in this terrible time when there was no food or anything. Unfortunately, she caught scarlet fever and died after the War was over, which was a real family tragedy.

Interviewer: What were their names, your brother and sister and maternal grandmother?

Ruth: My maternal grandmother?

Interviewer: The one who lived with you.

Ruth: Oh yes, her name was Schaffer, Johanna Schaffer. And she was a wonderfully kind, very simple, straightforward woman. My brother was called Georg after my father and grandfather, and my sister Esther because she was born at Purim.

Interviewer: And your brother Georg, who was named after your father and grandfather, is this your maternal grandfather or—?

Ruth: Paternal. So it's George first, second, third. And our first son is also called George.

Interviewer: And your paternal grandmother's name?

Ruth: My grandmother's name was Eda Meyer, maiden name.

Interviewer: Tell us a little bit about your family. Was it a close family?

Ruth: Oh yes. My father was not a very sociable man, really. He didn't like going out, so ours was not— Maybe when I was very small, but then as the Nazis came and tensions, worries came up, we rather kept very much to ourselves really.

Interviewer: What about the religious situation in your family? Were you very religious?

Ruth: No, not at all. I wish there had been a little bit more of it, really. My father just was not religious. So he didn't pass any Jewish tradition on to us, but he was very firmly Jewish in a sort of origin, intellectual way.

Interviewer: Did you celebrate holidays at all?

Ruth: Hanukkah. So really most I learned about Judaism was from school and Jewish school friends.

Interviewer: But your father was very intellectual?

Ruth: He was an intellectual, very much, yes.

Interviewer: What was your town like?

Ruth: We lived on the outskirts of Berlin. My parents moved there when I was a baby and I'm back there now, in fact, in that house. So there were a few Jewish families and then they became fewer as the exodus started. In fact, my family were the last to remain. When Jewish children were being thrown out of schools— And we started in the local primary school and my parents firmly believed that we should go to the ordinary school. And then when my brother moved on to a secondary school, it was a normal, a state school, until there were only two Jewish boys left. And the headmaster wanted his school to be the first Aryan, pure Aryan school, and tried to persuade the parents to remove their boys, which neither parent did until it became a danger, that they were afraid something might happen to the boys. So then my brother went to a Jewish school.

Interviewer: Do you remember when that was?

Ruth: Yes, that was I think in '35. It must've been in '35 because I started secondary school in '36 and had to go to a Jewish secondary school.

Interviewer: Which school did you go to?

Ruth: *{Privada von Schule Grunewald}*, known as *{Lesler Schule}*, which was quite a well-known school not very far from us. And my little sister, she was six years younger than me, had just started the ordinary primary school. And then the Kristallnacht, the next morning after Kristallnacht, the school wisely telephoned my parents and said, "We're sending your daughter home for her own safety. Please meet her." And that was the end of her going to a normal school. And for her, at age 6, she just couldn't comprehend that the children who were very friendly with her walking to and from school suddenly, by their own parents, were told "Don't talk to that girl."

And then the situation worsened, after I left, that even the neighbors would say "Jews are not to walk on the pavement. You walk on the road." And this was a small suburb, where there were not so many people living. It's not like you have a big apartment building where you have hundreds of tenants, so you're very conscious of everybody. And some people were extremely unpleasant, while others were very quietly pleasant and helpful. There were people who said make sure you can get out of your garden and you can always come to our house if there's danger. And when the bombing was bad, if their house was standing— Our house was very badly bombed. They had my mother staying there, and so on. But the people who helped were quiet people. They didn't make a noise about it.

Interviewer: Do you have any contact with them today, with their relatives or next generations of these people?

Ruth: Well, most people have gone. I don't— I hardly know anybody now.

Interviewer: When did you go back to this house?

Ruth: I went back in, I think it was 1949, during the Berlin Airlift. I went for the first time. I went to work in the holidays in an international peace camp, rubble clearing. I was desperate to go back and it was very difficult to get to Germany. Unless you belonged to some forces or something, it wasn't very easy.

Interviewer: But you're living in this house now?

Ruth: Yes, see my parents by a miracle survived. And stayed in that house. It was very badly bombed. My father— The last year-and- a-half of the war, my father was imprisoned. He

was in a police prison at first, which I think was turned into a *{zamellage}*, a connecting camp for the concentration camps. Then he was shifted after awhile to the Jewish hospital, which was really a connecting camp.

Interviewer: Where was that?

Ruth: In Berlin. And it was on a terrible— He started off in the police prison on *Alexanderplatz* and what he told me, there were 40 men in a small room sharing wooden bunks with one toilet at the end of the room. They had typhoid fever. They had all sorts of things. They lived on sort of water soup. My mother was able to visit him, or at least come there. I think she used to take his dirty clothes to wash and then she'd put some boiled potatoes in his socks for something to eat.

But there were many intellectuals and between them, they organized lectures and they kept their minds active. They didn't just sit and grumble. And other people—

Interviewer: He was there for a year-and-a-half?

Ruth: Yes. He was there until the city was taken and the prison doors were opened. So he more or less ran home before the bridges were blown up.

He told us once he had a gyp— They had a gypsy boy, because you know the gypsies were persecuted just as much, and he couldn't understand why they were all there. He thought they must have committed a crime.

Interviewer: Just a little bit more about how you lived in Berlin before the War. Were your parents friends Jewish or non-Jewish? Were you aware of any?

Ruth: My mother, being non-Jewish, of course there was that side of the family and we were very close with our grandmother—she came to live with us—and one of my mother's sisters, who lived nearby and we remained close. But, well there were the Jewish relatives. Most of them lived right in the town and my family had moved out to the outskirts. And as things got worse, actually people moved about less. They were too much tied up with their own problems.

Our refuge was the school, really. That was our whole life, where we could talk about our problems and get away from our parents' problems.

Interviewer: You were free there.

Ruth: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you aware that any non-Jewish friends became Nazis?

Ruth: Well, in my sister's case, who was still in a public primary school at the time of the Kristallnacht— I had already to the Jewish secondary school earlier that year. No, no, I had been there for two years, in fact.

Interviewer: When you were at this school, what were your aspirations? What goals did you have? What did you want to be when you grew up? Do you remember?

Ruth: I don't know that at that point I had any aspirations. I was very keen on art. I think it was later I was interested in biology, but at that point, I don't remember having real aspirations.

Interviewer: How did you learn— You've already mentioned your sister, but were there other things that happened that gave you an inkling as to what was happening when the Nazis came to power?

Ruth: Well, we knew, of course, that my father had lost his—whatever you call it—his license as a lawyer and that he had to switch his activities. He then became a legal advisor. He was allowed to advise people, but not to appear in court, and he had to close down his office. He had an office not far away that had to be closed. And we realized that things were not right, but we didn't— I didn't fully understand it.

What I can remember is very early on when the Nazis used to march through the streets signing their songs and holding the flag and all that. And when they were coming through our street, I ran out as any child would if there's something going on, climbing on the gate to watch them, and my father— It's the only time I can remember my father actually slapping me. And I didn't quite understand. "What are you doing out there? Keep away from those people." Sort of thing. And then the start of these problems about the school, that you couldn't just go to any school and that people wouldn't speak to you any more and so on. We didn't ask questions, really. I just didn't comprehend it all, but I don't think I asked questions.

Interviewer: Do you remember more about your school, what kind of subjects you were learning? Or any kind of preparations for immigration possibly?

Ruth: Yes. Now, my parents made arrangements that we took some private English classes at another family's house. This was a very common activity. Even there, I remember my mother got some gramophone record, as I recall then, a course of English. There was tremendous interest in learning English. My father had had a very classical Greek and Latin education, and his knowledge of English and French was there, but was weak. So—

And holidays we had. My parents liked to get out of Germany for as long as it was possible. So we used to travel out to Italy or other places just to get out of the place. But that soon became not possible.

And I remember once we—that was probably the last time—we went to Italy and on the frontier, after all the checking had been done, the passport controls, and the train was going to start moving, they suddenly called us out. Somebody had knowledge that we were going on holiday and wanted to play a trick on us and we were called out to be searched. And that was the first real trauma. The train went, meanwhile, and here we were between Austria and Germany on the frontier. And they searched us as though we were smuggling, which we certainly weren't smuggling anything. We wouldn't have dared! We wouldn't have done it anyway. And they searched my little sister who was in nappies. She was a baby, more or less. And they even searched her bodily, which was a terrifying thing, absolutely terrifying for everybody.

Interviewer: Do you remember how old you were at that time or what year it was?

Ruth: That was— Well, I think it was '33 or it could have been '34. Yes.

Interviewer: Was that the last family vacation that you started to take?

Ruth: I think we had one more. But then started that you were afraid. If the bell rang late in the evening, you were afraid. And I'm still afraid. If I hear a bell ringing suddenly, I shudder. It's something that stayed with me. Because that's what used to happen. The bell would ring and somebody would come and take the men. So, that's what you had to live with.

Interviewer: When did your father get imprisoned?

Ruth: Well, I'd gone by then. I left in '39 with the Children's Transport, and it was the last year-and-a-half of the war. Because then, gradually, I more or less lost contact. I had Red Cross messages, 25 words, which were wonderful. And I did get an occasional letter. My father's sister was in Sweden and occasionally I had a letter when she'd had a letter from them. But when— It was when the War was over that I had no news whatsoever when everything broke down. So I had no idea if they were living or not. And contact was established illegally through a Jewish soldier. My father just boldly approached some people, although they weren't supposed to, and happened to find a young ex-Austrian, Austrian or German, Jew in the army. And that established a sort of international mail system, with my parent's house being the GPO, the General Post Office!

Interviewer: This was a German soldier? No. You mean an American?

Ruth: It was a refugee.

Interviewer: A refugee soldier!

Ruth: Who joined the forces, you see, who of course was sympathetic.

Interviewer: So you were going to school and things were beginning to get bad, and at a certain point, you probably couldn't go to school any longer.

Ruth: Well, you see my parents, like so many others, I've found out now, didn't believe it would get worse. They felt very assimilated and my father was very conservative, really, he didn't want to leave Germany. He didn't want to leave his place. And it wasn't until Kristallnacht that they realized something has to be done and it was too late then.

So they put their names on the waiting list for the USA, for Australia, for South Africa, where there was some chance, some hope of being lucky. But the War broke out before their number came out. And then the Children's Transport started, the movement started, at the end of '38. Very, it was very, very soon after the Kristallnacht. So my parent's asked me because they felt if the whole family can get out soon, to have one person out it would be a help. It's one less to get out. And I went confidently with that hope, that oh, in a couple of months we'll all meet and go on. And it's an adventure for me! I was quite an adventurous schoolgirl. They asked me, they didn't force me. They said, "Would you like to go?" And I thought it was a brilliant idea.

So they put my name down. Then I think there was a fire in London at Bloomsbury House where they were processing everything and the papers were lost. So everything went to sleep again until early May '39, when they picked it up and I was told, "You're going next week." It was very sudden.

Interviewer: How did your parents find out about the Kindertransport?

Ruth: The Children's Transport? I really don't know. There must have been— I don't know. Maybe something in the Jewish papers? Because there was a Jewish paper.

Interviewer: You don't have any idea about how it was arranged for you or how they put it together or the process that was involved?

Ruth: Well, I know there were applications forms filled and a family in England—I was very lucky, I went to a family. A family— They must have been trying. They wanted to have a girl because they had a little girl themselves and wanted somebody who would sort of help with her. So they applied for a girl. And I knew I was going to this family that was half-Jewish like ourselves. I think that's all I knew then.

Interviewer: Did you have contact with them before you came here?

Ruth: There must have been some contact, yes, because I knew where I was going.

Interviewer: Did you know other children who were leaving?

Ruth: Well, at that point, people were leaving all the time. Some children at school were told by their parents that they were going, others were not because some of them went illegally. They arranged it and they didn't tell their children, not to let it out, you see. But people just suddenly just disappeared. At the Kristallnacht, one of the masters disappeared from the school to concentration camp, and I think there may have been some older boys, over 16. And this master came back with his ears frozen. But he came back. Many of them were let out again and from that we realized that there was something terrible waiting.

Then we were very much aware. Then came the time you were not allowed to listen to foreign radio, but everybody did. And everyday we discussed the latest news. But concentration camp, what happened— Most of what I know now, I only know since recently.

Interviewer: You didn't know at that time?

Ruth: No.

Interviewer: So you were about to embark on this journey and you knew a little bit about it, that there was a family that was waiting for you and you were adventurous. Was this the first time you'd been away from home?

Ruth: Oh yes. No, I had been on one Jewish holiday camp to Denmark. And so I had been away from home, but— I didn't really— I hated eating at other people's places. I was a very fussy [laughs], fussy child for eating and eating somewhere else to me was the biggest torture imaginable.

Interviewer: What was the date of your departure? When did you leave?

Ruth: Oh yes. On Sunday, the 21st of May, 1939.

Interviewer: And you were how old?

Ruth: I was going to be 13 the next week. And strangely we moved into that house on the 21st of May. So I always remember it.

Interviewer: Where did you get the train?

Ruth: I can't remember which station it was, what it was called. It was probably *Anhalter Bahnhof*, I seem to— But I'm not— All I remember is where I arrived and that was Liverpool Street, and I'll never forget that.

Interviewer: But the one in Berlin, was that a really big station?

Ruth: Yes, but I just don't remember now.

Interviewer: Do you remember who went with you?

Ruth: My parents went with me. My brother and sister were on the platform at our local station—the train went through there—

Interviewer: What station was that?

Ruth: *Heerstrasse*. It's not a long distance station. The train just went through. It's the local *stadtbahn*. And that's the last time I saw them.

Interviewer: Your brother and sister?

Ruth: Yes. And Liverpool Street— Then we went through Holland, where people were very nice. Crossed, which was an adventure, to England. And my experience of Liverpool Street Station was that a family friend of ours who had been encouraging my parents to send me was going to meet me and he was late. So all children were collected and there I was. And in German, we say {speaks phrase in German}, she's been ordered but— A parcel has been ordered but not collected.

Interviewer: What did you do?

Ruth: I just stood there, not crying, I think. And stood and stood. The whole place cleared. All these children were collected. And then the friend came.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you were carrying? What you were wearing?

Ruth: Yes— What I was wearing? No. I had two big cases, that I know. And I took my favorite 10 books.

Interviewer: What were they?

Ruth: Well, it was Kipling. *The Jungle Book* was one of my— And *Tom Sawyer*. [laughing] And a few others that are still with me somewhere.

Interviewer: Did your parents pack anything special for you that you found out about later?

Ruth: No, I think I helped packing. I had a lot of new clothes to last me for a while.

Interviewer: Did you have any valuables with you?

Ruth: I had a little diary with a torch battery in it. You pull out the pen and it lights up. I used to write that at night, in bed. And I don't think anybody knew about it. That was my faithful friend for any emotional problems.

Interviewer: Do you still have that diary?

Ruth: Well that diary is somewhere. It wasn't destroyed. It's in some attic, yes.

Interviewer: What was your most prized possession? Was that it, the diary?

Ruth: I think a thing I prized very much and is still with me now, although I've lost it twice, was a little folding scissors that my parents sent me with somebody who was coming to England. That was the last thing I had from my parents. It was wrapped with some sweets. The sweets, of course, were eaten, but that scissors goes with me everywhere. And when I lost it a couple of times, I was very upset. It's in my handbag now.

Interviewer: You have them with you? Can you pull it out?

0:33:41.7

Interviewer: Would you hold them up a little higher?

[she does]

Ruth: I left it in the sun and the sea once.

Interviewer: But otherwise you've had them all these years?

Ruth: Yes, 60 years. '39, '99.

Interviewer: And you've traveled around a bit, when you lived in different places?

Ruth: Oh yes, it's been around the world! [laughs]

Interviewer: These were the last things you had from your parents until you saw them again.

Ruth: Yes, yes. One of those sentimental things.

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Ruth: –sent to a school. That had been discussed there and there was a lot of help. I had a lot of local help, in a way. The family– Well, I’m grateful to them because they saved my life, but we had a lot of emotional problems, actually. I had to work very hard. And I was determined to do my school exams. My ambition was to study and I was fortunate that I was able to study.

Interviewer: You had a good school.

Ruth: I had a good school. But I was doing the housework and everything, and then doing my homework late at night and then they’d grumble that I was wasting electricity. That kind of thing. And gradually I had to do more and more housework. But I was very fortunate. When I hear now of so many who had no education, through no fault of their own, and could never catch up. I was lucky to survive while my brother and sister weren’t. I just consider myself very lucky. And I try to make the most of the opportunities that were given. I always took an extra subject because I feel knowledge is something that can’t be taken away from you.

Interviewer: What was the main thing that you studied?

Ruth: Agriculture and zoology. Well, somehow I managed to take both to degree level, which was good because it helped me with jobs. I’ve been a biology teacher, I’ve been an agricultural lecturer. That’s what I did in the last years.

Interviewer: How long– You said you returned to Berlin. How long have you been living in Berlin now?

Ruth: ’86, when we retired. We were working in Africa, where they retire people at 60 and that year my father died, so I had a lot to organize because he was working, he didn’t retire. When the War was over, he was immediately accepted as a lawyer again and he became a notary public and he had a big practice doing restitution for Jews. And I had a lot to wind up for him. And I inherited the house, as I was the only one left. So my husband and I decided to make the house our project. It needed renovating, patching up and so on. And we enlarged it and turned it into flats, which gave us something to live on now, because having worked abroad, we weren’t in pensionable jobs there. Our pension is very small and this has considerably helped us.

Interviewer: So you weren’t only in England then, you lived in numerous places?

Ruth: We had lived in England and went to Africa. Actually, my husband got a job there. We hadn’t planned to go to Africa, but it was through work. And then we were there for 20 years.

Interviewer: Where in Africa?

Ruth: In Ghana, in Zambia, and in Nigeria. And we retired from there. I went straight to Berlin then, to sort out all this inheritance and things. But we've had enough of the city. We've had enough of Berlin.

Interviewer: What are your plans now, then?

Ruth: To go to the Channel Islands.

Interviewer: Oh!

Ruth: In a rural situation. And we still like— I'll keep the property, but I'd like to get out. Well, we'd both like to get out of the city and all the problems.

Interviewer: Particularly?

Ruth: Well, it's definitely a foreigner tension with high unemployment. My husband is a foreigner and he doesn't feel secure there. There are a lot of problems that we'd like to get away from.

Interviewer: I'm going to ask you one last thing because time is running here. Is there any last thing you'd like to say about the conference that we're at now, what it's meant for you?

Ruth: Well, for me it has meant a lot to me because having lived in a little country town where there was this one Jewish family, or partly Jewish family, I've never really been in the crowd of refugees or the crowd of Jewish people. So I've never been much with people of my own background. I don't mean socially, but my own background as a refugee, as somebody from Germany. Certainly not in Africa! And this has brought together a thousand of us that have something very important in common. And how important that something is, the conference has shown, really. I found it extremely moving and heartwarming. And it's something I have missed. I'm glad I went to the first conference, which I found very moving, although I met nobody I knew. Not one person. But it didn't matter in a way. It didn't matter.

No, the conference could be bigger, could be longer because we all have so much to listen to and to contribute still that we haven't really had a chance to yet.

And I think it's been good to have your generation mixing in with it because that will make for the continuity of our pledge that such a thing should never happen again. I mean, not the conference but the— [laughing] Holocaust. Yes.

Interviewer: Well, thank you! Again for the tape, would you say your name and your birthdate?

Ruth: Oh yes. Well, I'll say in German. Ruth Israel. [laughs] I'm now Ruth Biswas, but I changed my name simply by marriage.

Interviewer: And when were you born, what date?

Ruth: 1926. And I married an Indian, a Hindu, who himself is a refugee from what is now Bangladesh. So we have a very different, but similar background. We both come from families where education was the main value above all material values and we're both kind of religious refugees.

[tape ends with chit chat]

END OF INTERVIEW

