Transkript zum USC Shoah Foundation Interview 48608 mit Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

Interviewer/in: Joanna Buchan
Kamera: Gareth Hughes
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Today is the 8th of December 1998. This is the interview with the survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. Maiden name Lasker. The interviewer is Joanna Buchan. The interview is taking place in London in England and the language of this interview will be English.

My name is Joanna Buchan. I'm interviewing the survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. The interview is taking place in London in England on December the 8th 1998 and the language of this interview will be English.

To redate this interview with the survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, it is taking place on the 8th of December 1998.

First of all, could you say your name for me, please.


And where were you born? In Breslau. And at the time, where was Breslau? In Germany, the east of Germany. And could you tell me your father’s name? Alfons Lasker. And your mother’s? Edith Lasker. Her maiden name? Hamburger.

And could you tell me your father’s name? Alfons Lasker. And your mother’s? Edith Lasker. Her maiden name? Hamburger. Did you have brothers and sisters? Two sisters. And could you tell me their names? Marianne and Renate. And were they older than you or younger? Older, yes. I am the youngest.

Let’s just talk about childhood in Breslau before the war, before the Nazis came.

It was a totally normal childhood, you know. I come from a family typical Jewish assimilated. Er, I didn’t even know I was Jewish. And it didn’t seem to be a problem to be Jewish. You know, I mean, there was total mixture. Er, my parents, er, went to the synagogue twice a year to the high holidays, that’s all I remember. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a synagogue, that I can remember, maybe once or twice. But the Jewishness didn’t play any role whatsoever. Er, we were, I think, quite well off, sort of typical middle-class. We had, I remember, very nice, er, flats we lived in. We had at one time, I remember, two maids and then one maid and then no maid, as time went on. But I have very good memories of my childhood.

What, what did your father do for a living, what was his profession? He was a lawyer. He was a lawyer and I think he was a very good lawyer. And does, er, you know, I have very good memories of my childhood. I mean, everything was totally normal and, (-) and nice.

And what about your mother? Did she stay at home with the children? Yes, my mother was a musician actually, but in those days musicians didn’t really work in the sense that nowadays you go out to work. Yes, my mother stayed at home, er, but she played the violin, I mean she always practiced and she played in the local orchestra, which was, in the end was a Jewish orchestra. And there was a great deal of chamber music in our
house, I mean, there was always music.  

INT: Did you all play together as a family?  

Yes, we, we all had music lessons. My eldest sister learned the piano, my second sister learned the violin and I played the cello and we had a trio together the three children. And there was always, every week there was a chamber music, er, evening in our house or in other people's houses. Music was absolutely part of the, er, of the setup.  

INT: You said that Jewishness wasn’t particularly important in, in the family. The, the big holidays, things like Chanukka or, or, they wouldn't necessarily be celebrated, wouldn't they?  

No, I remember Christmas or instance. We certainly had a Christmas tree <smiles> (--) and=er, (<-) <lowers her voice> maybe we lit Chanukka, yeah, perhaps we also lit Chanukka candles, (<-) maybe. I don’t remember too much about that, but I do remember my grandmother, from my mother’s side mother, my mother’s mother, er, we used to go to the Seder e-, evening, which is the, the Jewish easter, as it were, celebrating, er, the liberation of the Jews from Egypt. And I also have very good memories, 

partly because I always got some chocolate, I remember. <grins> (--) And we liked that. And there was sort of special food, you know, various things to remind you of this, that and the other things that happened. So that was a bit of, there was a bit of that.

INT: As you were growing older, were your friends Jewish friends or German?  

AL-W: Well, you see, the, er, we were sort of marginalised, er, very slowly. I suppose, (<-) when I was very little there was no question of Jewish or not Jewish and we went to a private school which was, was very, very small classes, it didn’t come into question, who's Jewish and who isn’t Jewish. But I do remember that=er (<-) my first antisemitic remarks I heard in that particular school. So that must have been after 33 [1933], so I must have been about eight or nine, when a child said, er, I was just about to wipe the blackboard and the child said to another child, "Don’t give the Jew the, the sponge."

<lowers her voice> I thought, "Well, this is very strange." (<-) And then people started spitting at you in the street and calling you a "dirty Jew" and (<-) I remember asking my father, what all this was about and he, <shortles> (<-) he tried to explain. (<--) It didn’t really make too much sense. I was, I was full of envy of people, who didn’t have that stigma, you know. I thought, (<-) for a child this is most peculiar, especially if you are not brought up in the Jewish tradition and (<-) everything is, you know, people are people. That’s how, how we were brought up. Er, and obviously then we had to leave the Jew-, er, er, the, the normal schools and eventually we had to go to a Jewish school. So, I think quite naturally (<-) the friends were Jewish friends.

INT: Were you ever given the sense, though, that you wouldn’t have been welcome in a German house, say? <-->
AL-W: Er, possibly, but I, I think one avoided to expose yourself to that situation. (-) I don’t remember ever having gone to a German house and be told, "No, you can’t come in." I don’t remember that. But maybe naturally, you see, if I’m, I’m thinking back of something now that happened in my childhood, obviously I can’t remember everything, but I don’t remember a feeling that, "Oh, I can’t go into that person’s house, they won’t let me in." I don’t remember that.

INT: Was there much conversation at home between your parents what was going on, what should happen to the family?

AL-W: Er, w-, ye-, yes, I picked that up eventually, one picked up as a child, one picked up things, you know. I think in those days parents were always careful not to say too many things in front of the children. (-) But there was a definite sense of something was not right here. (-) And I remember, I think in 33 [1933], (-) you know, there was sort of general depression, depressing atmosphere in the house, which I didn’t quite understand why, but=er, yes, I do, do remember. (-) But my father, you see, was, what was called in Germany a Frontkämpfer. In other words, he took part in the First World War, he was fighting at the front, he had the Iron Cross first class. And that type of Jew, totally assimilated in Germany, (-- ) thought that they would be protected. (-) And I remember my father saying also, you know, "The Germans can’t be that stupid. This has got to stop soon, they can’t, the Germans can’t be that stupid." But the Germans were that stupid. And I think in the very beginning people who fought at the front also had some sort of, âh, dispensation. (-) I can’t tell you exactly what sort of, but it (-) it seemed to be a good thing to have been fighting at the front, but that didn’t last too long. And=er my father was then once, even we started talking about emigration and, you know, it is so easily said "Why didn’t you all leave in time?" With a profession like my father’s and three children it’s very difficult to even think about emigration. How are you going to earn a living?

INT: And the, the, the special tax, the <German> Steuer that you mentioned, that, that had to be paid before you could leave? // Exactly, so in other words, if you wanted to go, you had to pay. It wasn’t as easy as people imagine, "Okay, I will emigrate."

INT: With all this going on around you, was it possible for you to have=
be a normal little girl?

**AL-W:** Yes, in a funny sort of way life seemed to go on (-) fairly normally, but, you know, our idea of what is normal was totally distorted, (-) slowly. (-) I mean, I will say, I've got letters that I wrote to my sister and I'm amazed what I'm writing still in 19 (-) 40 [1940], you know, when the war was already (-) declared. And in Germany be, there wasn't the sort of, er, (-) they didn't establish real ghettos in the sense like that happened in Poland. Only we had to leave. Everything was rather slow. We had to leave the, the flat that we lived in and had to move somewhere else, (-) to my aunt, for example, into a very small flat and we were very crowded there, but (-) it wasn't just Jews living in that area, if you see what I mean. Everything retracted (-) slowly in one's life, you know, (-) everything, you know. You were marginalised and=er, (-)

and you weren't allowed to go, (-) you know, the <German> Juden unerwünscht appeared everywhere, to sit on a park bench, you weren't allowed to go to the cinema. I remember being very upset I couldn't go to a swimming pool, you know. I mean, that affected me personally. Jews were not wanted and pushed into a corner, slowly and (-) surely.

**INT:** Had you decided what you wanted to do when you grew up, || to use a classic phrase?

**AL-W:** Yes, I ||| never had any doubt I was going to be a cellist. <chortles> (-) // **INT:** Had you started training seriously? /// Not seriously, I mean, as a child I had, we all learned instruments, you know, but I was the only one that was really, (-) that was very devoted to the. I, I was going to be a musician and that was that. And there was no question about anything else ever. // **INT:** Were your parents happy with that? /// Yeah, very happy, yes and I had all the, all the help I could get, you know, teachers and. But then came of course a situation that no=er, the Jewish cello teachers or cellists had emigrated

and we couldn't find a teacher anymore for me, because no (-) German teacher would be so brave as to teach a Jewish child. (-) // **INT:** Were you always at home in Breslau with the rest of the || family? /// No, ||| because, because of the situation of not finding a cello teacher, (-) I was sent to Berlin, because in Berlin everything=you know, being a very big city, things were easier. And there were still Jewish=er musicians there and=er (-) I was sent to have cello lessons with a very fine cellist who was there at the time. So I was not at home (--) 1938. So I was twelve, thirteen, I was sent to Berlin. // **INT:** What was that like for you, living away || like that? /// Lovely. ||| <laughs> Yeah, I felt extremely grown up, you know, I mean, I was on my own in Berlin. I must say I do admire my parents for, for, you wouldn't do that now, I think, at that age. But I was still, had to go to school, so I, special permission had to be granted for me to leave school and have school subjects and_
er, privately, with a private tutor. So I had a room in the house of my, of the lady who was supposed to teach me school subjects. Er, and I felt terribly grown up, you know, and I, yeah, I thought, it was tremendous to be in Berlin.

**INT:** Who was your teacher in Berlin?

**AL-W:** Leo Rostal. (-) Very, very, er, fine cellist and his brother in fact lived in England, he came to England after the war, and he taught practically everybody who was anybody. Everybody went to Max Rostal. Leo Rostal was his brother, also very fine cellist, and I mean, I have to thank him a lot because he gave me a very good grounding. It only lasted six months before the whole thing, then came Kristallnacht. (-) Er, but I'm very, er, very grateful that he gave me at least in that time some grounding, although I didn't practice too much, I must say.

**INT:** What happened at <German> Kristallnacht?

**AL-W:** Well, I was in Berlin at <German> Kristallnacht and I, of course during the night, I didn't know what was going on, but in the morning one knew. (--) And=er, I went out to have a look at the streets and that was rather an incredible sight really, all those shops smashed up and_. (--) And I have a very (-) strong recollection of smelling alcohol. It was running down the gutter, you know, they smashed up liquor shops. And=er phone calls from my mother. I should come home immediately, because (-) that was, that was the beginning of the end, actually. So, and my teacher emigrated anyway, he went to America and I went home.

**INT:** What sort of circumstance was waiting for you when you got home?

**AL-W:** Well, <sighs> (-) I don't know what we were thinking (-) <slowly> at that time. I mean, then, I think_, that was the time when my father probably started making very serious attempts at emigration. He_, my father was a great anglophile. He, he wanted to go to England and England was not exactly an easy place to emigrate into. And=er Eng-, England or America. (-) And I think talk about emigration then started seriously. (-) And what_, it was a sort of waiting period, that's right. I=We_, one was waiting, (-) waiting, waiting, waiting for something to happen. And=er I got a bit bored because I had no longer cello lessons, I didn't go to school, (-) and I then deci=er, then the war broke out and that was__, (-) then one was trapped. And I decided to go back to school then, (-) just to do something. (-) The school was still functioning, for a bit anyway. // **INT:** Was it a Jewish school, so_? /// By that time it was a Jewish school and I=er, (-) I had lost almost two years of schooling with this going to Berlin and waiting around. And=er I was so determined to go back into my own class that I actually caught up, in four weeks I caught up with two years of schooling. So <shortles> I, I really (-) went bananas,
school and, (-) But that didn’t last very long, then the schools closed.

**INT:** Were you still all together, yo-your two sisters and || your parents?

**AL-W:** No, my eldest || sister (-) just went. She went to England. (-) For some reason, I can’t quite remember why, she went via England, she was supposed to go to Palestine. She was a great Zionist. (-) And she was in England for a bit, I think in order to go on and then the war broke out, so she, (-) she remained in England during the war. So we were just the two of us, two sisters and my mother and my father. /// **INT:** Where had your sister’s interest in Zionism come from? /// Well, we were all, (-) we all eventually joined the <drawling> Jewish, er, youth movement. (-) I don’t know where it came from with her. (-) Anyhow, she was very, (-) she was a great Zionist and she, er, (-) she was going to build up the country, you know, pioneering spirit. And she wanted to learn, (-) you know, in those days, (-) the normal thing was to finish school and to do your A levels and go to university. Now my sister wanted to become a, a bricklayer and, I don’t know what, a shoemaker and my father was horrified at this. She eventually became a carpenter, because she was very gifted. Er, and, yeah, she was a carpenter. (-) And she worked in a carpentry, f-, factory, I don’t know what you call it, a workshop in Breslau and I think that was raided on the 9th of November by Nazi youth. And so my sister who was eighteen, I suppose, by then just said, "I’m going." (-) So she went. (---) /// **INT:** Would you’ve gone with her? /// No, (-) no, I mean, you know, we were still really very young and there was no question of that. (-) And, you know, as what? You couldn’t just go, you couldn’t just go. <grins> You, (-) you know, I have this correspondence, er, at home, applications (-) asking, "Can (-) my daughters come?" and you, -refusals, you have no idea, how difficult it was to actually emigrate. (4) /// **INT:** How (-) aware where you of the situation, that, (-) perhaps not yourselves were in, but Jews in Germany were facing? /// Well, one couldn’t at that time possibly imagine where it, where it ends. (4) <whispers> I know, it’s difficult to say, I think, (-) I think, we knew things were bad, but how bad, nobody could really perceive at that time. And my father was a great optimist, you know, I think in our family (-) one was always thinking, somehow we will get somewhere. And for some curious reason which I will never understand till the day my father still thought he could go to Italy. Italy was the last thing. Even during the war, I have letters where we are writing to my sister, by that time clandestinely via Switzerland and, because there was no postal service, uh, (-) that we are going, we’ll probably, our next adress will be Bolzano. He must have had some=er contacts in Italy. (-) And had one gone to Italy, which of course didn’t happen in the end, er, you know, the Italians, of course they were with the Germans, but I think it was (-) more possible perhaps to survive in Italy. Although what we would have done there, I can’t think, but I know that this is what happened. And we even went to the, I remember, certain things stick in my mind, went to the Italian embassy with our papers,
whatever we had, (-) to get the visa to go. And I remember the man with his stamp in his hand (-) nearly bringing it down to the paper (-) and then hesitating for some reason. There was something that still had to be cleared. And I remember this terrible, (-) terrible disappointment. Again, well, we’re stuck, we’re stuck. // INT: What were you doing at this time that the Jewish school had closed down, there was no schooling for you, || what could you do? // Well, what then ??? happened, is, then, then we started getting, er, (-) called up for war service. Yes, my sister was called up to work on a _, (-) er, what do you call it, er, rubbish tip, (-) that’s right, rubbish tip. It was unbelievable, she had to sort out dead rats from (-) toothpaste. You know, one saved everything. Toothpaste in those days was still in metal tubes, so the metal had to be sorted from this, that and the other. And it was the middle of winter and she got very ill, so she was transferred to a paper factory and eventually (-) I was also called up to work in a paper factory.

INT: Do you remember where you were when war broke out, when it, when war || was declared?

AL-W: Yes, I ||| remember where I was when war broke out and I also remember looking out of the window, thinking like a child, (-)

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"Now everybody is shooting everybody else." But, (-) you know, it was quiet, war had broken out, but it (-) was <whispers> silent and I thought, "That’s, that’s a funny war." That’s not how you _, how I imagined war. <whispers> Oh, I remember that very well, yes. Because that really was _, (-) you know, (-) one knew, one was trapped. // INT: How old where you then? /// In 39 [1939] I was, (-) when did war= in September, I was fourteen.

INT: What sort of reaction was there from o-, other people, er, Jewish or non-Jewish, to the fact that war had broken out?

AL-W: I couldn’t really tell you exactly, but <chortles> (-) I suppose everybody was very shocked. (4) No, it was a sort of, (-) we knew, that the curtain is coming down now. // INT: What sort of war service, er, labour, did you have to do? /// Well, do you_, uh, uhm, I was working in the paper factory, making toilet paper.

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// INT: And what sort of hours did you have to work there? /// Yeah, that wasn’t terribly pleasant. Six to two was the first shift and two to ten was the second shift. And in order to get to the factory which was outside Breslau we had to get up at four o’clock (-) and get into a train, it was in Sacrau which is outside. Strangely enough, when I was _, er, I went back there some time ago, I was taken to that factory and I couldn’t recognise anything nor did I remember how far we had to walk from the s- =station (-) to the factory. Certain things, you know, one blocks out, because it was very cold and=er, you know, can you imagine getting up at four o’clock in the morning. Anyway, that’s what happened. So we worked in these two shifts. // INT: Were you made to wear a yellow star? /// Yes, oh yes, by that time we wore a yellow
star and (-) we weren’t allowed to sit down in the tram, in, you know, I mean, we were totally sort of pushed out. // INT: What about shopping, buying

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food, things like that? // Oh well, that was very complicated, because then, I mean, when the war broke out, er, food coupons were introduced and the Jews had a "J" on their coupons and only certain shopping hours were allowed. So it was very, very difficult. (-) And you got smaller rations. I don’t remember exactly, but=er, (-) only certain shops, you know, and certain times and_. (-) Yeah, it was, that’s how it was. // INT: While you were doing this work, were you able to stay in the same apartment with your family? /// No, no, but, I can’t remember, (-) yes, I think, we had already had to leave our, our apartment and lived in the a- apartment of my aunt. There was my aunt, my uncle and a very ancient couple (-) and then us, I mean, it was, you know, we were a lot of people in a very small, (-) small flat. <raises her voice> But we somehow made the most of it, I mean, I've got these letters, you know, where my mothers writes to my eldest sister, (-)

0:24:00

that Renate and I are sharing a tiny little room and we sit there in the evening and sing canons. And (-) we always tried to, to keep cheerful somehow, I don’t know how we managed it, but (-) we tried. // INT: How long was that sort of life able to go on for? /// Er, I'm not too sure about dates but in that particular period we did work in the paper factory and during that period my aunt and uncle were deported. That really started, you know, that you were sent ostensibly to the east to work, (-) which, uhm, (-) one liked to <slowly> believe. (-) And then my parents were deported (-) and then this old couple were deported and in the end my sister and I were alone in this, in this, er, apartment. And it was very difficult altogether because as soon as my parents went, er, (-) we had to look after these old people, who didn’t understand,

0:25:00

er, that, you know, food was difficult to get. Nor did we ever have ti-, we were never at home when we were allowed to go shopping. It was a ludicrous sort of, er, catch-22 situation. And=er, (-) so my sister just took the yellow star off and=er, you know, tried to get food (-) because she didn’t look Jewish, which was supposed to, you know, (-) people look Jewish or not Jewish. Sie could get away with it. And=er yes, it was a very difficult time and these old people never understood why there wasn’t enough food, you know. We were working in the factory. It was quite crazy, really. Er, in the end we were on our own, and=er-, yeah.

INT: What happened when your parents were deported?

AL-W: You mean, how were they deported? Well, they, (-) they were given 24 hours notice which was not altogether usual. Sometimes people were just given two hours notice or, or had to go straight away. <quickly> They were given 24 hours notice to report at a certain (-) place. (-) So=er, you know, we wanted to go with them, but=er (-) my father, I think, knew quite well what was going on by then, although he didn’t let on. And obviously we wanted to go, let’s just, family has to stick together. And my father said, er, (-) that he will ask permission and I suspect, and he went out of the house and he came back half an hour later and he said, "No, you are not allowed to come." I suspect that he never ever went and asked
permission. He went round the block a couple of times (-) and he said the very wise words, "Where we are going, you get there soon enough." (-) And that was that. (-) And he was right. (-) So I have the greatest admiration for my father looking back, because what it must've cost him to, (-) to do that. // INT: How did your mother react? // She cried.

0:27:00

(- -) She was very frightened. You know, one_, (-) by that time one had heard, (-) one had heard what was going on in the east, but I mean, although one tried not__, (-) thought, "This is not possible." (-) But there was always a lurking suspicion, you know, if you hear a rumour that many times, that there is something in that. So=er, so we were alone then, my sister and I and__, uhm, (-) but you know, er, if I look back, we just sort of went on regardless. One, (-) you know, you didn’t give yourself time to really think of anything, you just carried on. You go to the factory and this is that and we do this, that and that. And in the end, of course they_, we couldn’t, (-) we couldn’t maintain the flat or anything like that. And then=er we had to go into an orphanage. There was still a bit of Jewish community there. And we were given, er, what do you call it, er, Vormund, I can't think, a guardian. We were give a guardian, because we were way under age. And put into this, uhm, (-) into this orphanage, which we absolutely__, (-) we were horrified at the idea, but=er, <chortles> in fact, we quite enjoyed it. We were, we weren’t there for very long, but (-) it was the first time that we’d, we had got food put in front of us without having all the problems of, of getting it and cooking it or whatever, (-) you know. // INT: And we’ve just come to the end of the first tape there. /// Uhmm, ok.

<End of tape 1>

00:00:00 INT: <recording starts in mid-sentence> Mrs. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. We, we’re talking there about your sister and yourself being in an orphanage in Breslau. Who, who ran that orphanage? Who || provided_?

AL-W: There was ||| still a, there was still, er, a sort of skeleton (-) of, (-) of Jewish community there. (---) But we didn’t stay very long, because I will just tell you the story, because we__, er, (-) we dec__, we were working in this paper factory. We were brought up speaking French at home (-) and=er this__, in this factory there were Jews, er, Poles and French prisoners of war. And=er we were both rather bolshie youngsters, I suppose, it must have been very difficult to control. We, er, (-) we started, er, making contact

0:01:00 with the French prisoners of war, which was of course strictly forbidden, which made it extremely attractive for us. And=er (-) we were approached fo__, whether we could help (-), er, somehow, er, by procuring civilian clothes, I mean to help these prisoners escape. Because there was a scheme at the time, there were French civilian workers and French prisoners of war in Germany. The civilian workers were people who were picked up after the war (had started), civilian young men, who were
brought into Germany to work. And (-) as a French civilian worker you were allowed to go home from time to time on holiday. Er, so the idea was to produce papers for French civilian workers and give them to the prisoners, (-) so they didn’t even have the problem of the language. With the false papers they were then people et cetera. So they needed civilian clothes and they needed the Gothic script which we could write
to fill in the papers. So we became forgers (-) in other words. We started forging, er, passes with the German script and, er, (-) procure civilian clothes and altogether, you know, did what we were asked to do. And all this happened, er, through the _, quite a funny story, a bit like A Midsummer Night’s Dream, because in the Jewish lavatory, we had segregated lavatories, Jews, Poles and, er (-), Germans. There was, was=also some German, sort of, er, (-) people, who were in charge.=What do you call it?=Foremen, yeah. And=er (-) in that Jewish lavatory you could=, there was a hole in the wall if you pulled out the mechanism where you pull the chain. And on the other side of that wall was a refectory for the French prisoners. So that was our post box, you see, we put messages through, we talked through it etcetera, etcetera. And a lot of prisoners escaped. And=er, (--) you know, we thought that we are being terribly clever, nobody noticed that we
are (-) doing this. But we, we were obviously, were being observed and people were very cross with us, because everybody gets in danger, “These Lasker girls do these terrible things.” And=er (-- one day the hole was blocked up, so we knew that we’d been observed. So we decided in our total naivety to try and escape ourselves. I mean, we’re talking about the middle of the war. And=er (-) we produced papers for ourselves. (-) I mean it was _, (-) we had sort of, (-) we had contact with various people, er, we=we never knew too much who they were. I think that was on purpose that in case we get caught. But=er we were told, "It’s time that you go yourself” and=er so papers were produced for us, (-) and we were workers in a upholstery factory. If I think back now, I didn’t even know whether women _, there were French women civilian workers. But you know, at that time anything was good enough to try and get out.

So we became_, hm, I became Madeleine de Montaigne and (-) worked in a (-) upholstery factory. And=er (-) the fact that we were in a, (-) in an orphanage sort of, er, was an impediment to our escape plan (-) because they of course, er, mustn’t know what we are doing and, er, the train didn’t leave ’till the evening. So we left the orphanage (-) as though we were going to work. But we spent the day with friends of ours who were a mixed marriage couple. The husband was Aryan and the wife was Jewish. And the train was supposed to leave in the evening and, er, (-) then really a terrible thing happened, I mean, they wanted to_. They were much older than us, you know, and I think, (-) looking back, everybody knew that we are doing something crazy, but (-) it’s _, (-) it was_, we felt better to do something, than just sit and wait. So, er, (-) they wanted to
accompany us to the station which we, er, we asked them, "Please, don’t.” But they insisted and came to the station and there was the train to Paris (-) and we were arrested there at the, at the station. And my sister, strangely enough, was already in
the train. We had, I think, four suitcases or whatever, three suitcases. She had already put, she was in the carriage when the Gestapo came. (-) And I thought, (-) if the train leaves now she might just get away. (-) But she came out to look for me and, er, we were all arrested (-) including our friends. And=er, and i, (-) ended very badly, because, er, eventually we had a (-) well, I’ll try and tell you chronologically what happened. We were then taken to the (-) station police, (-) right, and, er, (-) there we, er, (-) we remained French. (-) We remained French because we didn’t quite know, <smirks> we didn’t quite

know why we were being arrested. We remained French, we thought, we’ll try that out. (-) And=er (-) at the station police (-) we waited (-) for a car to take us to the Gestapo headquarters. By that time, a friend of mine had supplied us with, er, poison which was quite, (-) quite a normal thing in those days. It's crazy to think_. With, er, Zyankali , I forget what it is called in English. // INT: Cyanide. /// Cyanide, yeah. So we had cyanide upon us. And I had it in my stocking, a little bit of cyanide, because a little bit is quite enough. (-) And as I sat there with my sister (-) <whispers> we thought, "Well, maybe this is the moment to take it", because after all now everything is going to go, (-) you know, (-) everything is lost. (-) So I managed to divide this under the. <rapidly> we’re sitting by a table, to take it out of my stocking, divide it, give her a bit and I kept a bit and then we waited (-) for a moment to, to take it.

And=er (-) then it transpired that the car that was supposed to fetch us did not arrive, so it was decided that we would walk from the station to the Gestapo headquarters, which was very close. So we were a whole group of people, (-) black-out, dogs, walking along the street. And we thought, "Now, now we’re going to do it." <slowly> And I said to my sister, "We will count to three and then we'll do it." So we counted, "One, two, three." And I even showed to my grandson now the very corner where we did it. And we licked the stuff and I thought I was going to die because that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’re licking this poison. (-) But I didn’t die at all. I, I (-) you know, you think, you are going to die, so you feel a bit faint. Rubbish. It was sweet, the stuff was sweet (-) and we kept walking. Well, what this friend was mine who is still alive, I’ve just sawn, saw him, er, a couple of weeks ago, what he did, he gave us this stuff

at some time, (-) and I opened-= is in a little bottle, I opened it and I took a whiff of it and it smells of bitter almond, it’s bitter almond. And I closed it again and that was that. And then he said to me, this man, I thank him my life, really, (-) "You are not ready to go yet. Give it back to me till you are ready to go. The day before you go, I'll give it back to you." And he gave me back the very same bottle. Of course I didn’t test it again, but he changed it into sugar. (-) So really he is the guy. <chortles>, I have to keep telling him, you know, "Thank you very much." So we did not commit suicide. And (-) we were quite glad actually. We didn’t really, (-) <laughs> it didn’t feel right somehow. It just shows you, you never know, when the end has come. And=er (-) we were taken to the prison (-) and we <laughs> even insisted to have an interpreter. When I think back, we were total-, very cheeky. Because we couldn’t speak a word of German, you see. So we were (-) put into prison as French girls. // INT: In the (-) paper
factory, were you´d been working. /// Uhmm. // INT: Were you approached by the French, who asked you (-) to take part in this || forgery? /// Yeah. ||| It wasn´t even in the factory. Somebody came to our house. <grins> I don´t remember exactly, how it was, but we were, we were being recruited, really. And (-) we were very glad to do it. I mean, I, (-) I always found it totally unacceptable to just sit around and wait to be killed, you know, just because I happened to be born as a Jew. It gave you the feeling of doing something. I suppose it´s like, er, you know, like belonging to the, er, (-) you know, to the people who fight against what´sc going on. What do you call it in English? I can´t think now. (-) <German> Widerstandskämpfer? // INT: Resistance || fighter. /// Resistance. ||| <raises her voice> You felt you´re doing something. (-) Not just sit there and wait 'til they come for you, and then, er, (-) by that time we already heard about gas chambers. So that we do something. If they (-) come to kill me, they kill me for something I've done, not just because I happen (-) to be a Jew, which I have no choice, er, about.

So, er_. // INT: Were you afraid of that? /// Yeah, a lot of people always ask me, were, were we afraid? You know, you get so so used to being afraid, I think, we were afraid all the time. We got so used to being frightened all the time that you didn´t, er, notice it anymore. (-) Fear was, (-) was the accepted feeling. (-) And, er, you know, you=you knew they were after you and (-) what can you do. You just hope for the best, you know. (-) I know it sounds crazy and very difficult to believe but we weren´t really frightened all the time. (-) Or we were so used to it, we didn´t really notice it. // INT: How long were you held by the Gestapo? /// Well, then comes a very curious situation, you see. We were then put into prison, (-) put into prison. By that time (-) we had time to discuss, (-) lots of days passed and we were not called to the Gestapo. B by that time (-) we had time to discuss, (-) how we're going to handle this thing. Well, the first thing, it became pretty obvious, we can´t keep up this French business for too long, (-) because Breslau is not a huge town. The fact, that two Jewish girls have tried to escape was (-) absolutely the news of the day. And it´s like attending your own funeral. People who came into the prison cell afterwards told me that a priest actually, er, (-) prayed for us, a German priest in a, er, (-) church for these two Jewish girls, which was quite a brave thing to do. (-) So it was well known that these two Jewish girls have escaped (-) or tried to escape, so (-) we decided to come clean, because the farce_, it was getting farcical being French. So (-) we asked to see the governess of the prison (-) to make our big confession. And=-er she was an extremely nice lady, I must say in retrospect. She took it extremely well (-) and just noted the fact, that we are now (-) simple Anita Sara Lasker and not Madeleine de Montainge. But the trouble started <laughs> when we were taken back to the cell and all the people who tried to speak French with us suddenly knew what fools they´ve made of themselves. So it was (-) slightly unpleasant the whole situation. But (-) we were then who we actually were. And then
we waited and waited and waited to be called to the Gestapo. That was (-) pretty, er, nasty. But by that time we’d made a plan, what we will say. You see, if they had separated us, it would have been much worse. So we decided, (-) that I will be the_, because I am the younger one, I will be the one that

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and my sister will be the one (-) who did everything. So when there is any question_, because, you know, we_, (-) if you’re lying, _lying is quite difficult, but two people lying simultaneously, is impossible. So I was the stupid one who did everything that my eldest sister told me (-) et cetera. And it was almost three weeks before we were called for the first, er, Gestapo interview. <smirks> And that, again, is a rather=er (-) typical, er, affair. We were called to this interview, (-) and our suitcases (-) were lined up and we had to sign for the suitcases. (-) And there was a suitcase missing. (-) And that was a very important thing for the Gestapo, that this suitcase was missing. And we had to sign, what was in this suitcase and we already by that time thought this was absolutely stupid, who cares about a suitcase in this situation? (-) Er, the tale goes on that almost a year later I was, when I was (-) already in

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prison, (-) a year later, I was called, er, down, it was called (-) nach unten gerufen (-) to identify a suitcase and my suitcase had been left in the train, you know, when my sister was, er, <rapidly> was trying to put this suitcase in the rack and came out and was arrested, the suitcase was left in the train. So a suitcase, unlabelled, unlocked, during the war, travelled to Paris or whereever it travelled, back again, was located by the Gestapo and restored to the rightful owner. _This_, (-) simultaneous, when they were stealing, killing, murdering, confiscating. No, the suitcase has to be (-) restored. I'll come back to that story later when I'm in prison because it's not the end of that suitcase story which is so ridiculous. But that’s somehow typical, er, typical German. **Ordnung muss sein.** Suitcase, "It’s your suitcase", you know. (-) <laughs> I never saw these things again. Anyway, hm, (-) yes

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then=er, (-) <stammers> there was a system there. If you_, (-) The great thing, the_ (-) was to get out of the clutches of the Gestapo. (-) And since we had actually committed a crime, we had=er made a criminal offense, forgery, helping the enemy, attempted escape, these were our indictments when we finally (-) got, er, ca-, called in front of the court. I think, there was a fight behind the scenes between the legal system and the Gestapo who did not see entirely eye to eye always. And my father was a, (-) er, well-known lawyer and we suspect that somebody in the legal profession (-) said, "No, b-, let_. We will give them a court case", because (-) that was a very good thing. To be actually stuck in prison was very preferable to being sent straight to Auschwitz or any other <quickly> concentration camp. And we already knew that, so (-) it was obvious after 21_, it takes 21 days before the decision is made

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and since it took 21 days to be called back to the Gestapo we knew that we will have a court case, which was a great relief. But the people who did not get a court case, like my friends, the mixed marriage couple, they were sent straight to Auschwitz. (-) So we were the lucky ones compared to, to them. (-) // **INT:** What happened when the (-) Gestapo finally came (-) to interrogate you? /// Well, first they took my sister.
Again, they were extremely stupid. First they took my sister and then she came back to, to the cell and told me exactly what’s been going on, (-) so I knew. (-) <loud> It was, it was not, er, what you usually imagine (-) a Gestapo interview is. I mean, we were not beaten, we were not tortured, because, I think, they already knew that we were going to go to the court. I can’t remember too much, er, really about it, because, hm, I think I just kept saying that I don’t know and

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"I don’t know anything" (-) and "ask my sister", who already knew __, they had already asked. They were of course interested to know who else is implicated in this forgery business, you see, because (-) it was quite a big organisation. In fact they __. Eric Williams, you know, the man with the wooden horse story, he used one of these papers. I found this out years after the war. This was quite a paper <laughs>, false paper factory that we were implicated in. // INT: How much did you know about that when you were doing your bit of it? || Did you know contacts or_? /// That, that __, I didn’t know anything about that. ||| No, I didn’t know anything about that. I only found that out by, by pure, er, chance, because I went to the Imperial War Museum, because I happened to be working nearby, and there was an exhibition of Eric Williams’ paraphernalia, you know, the wooden horse and all that stuff and the paper he used on the wall and I suddenly had this feeling of déjà vu. And then I saw a stamp Breslau, so <laughs>. And I have __, in fact I wrote to him and we have a little exchange of letters about that. // INT: He was a British soldier

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who escaped from a Stalag prisoner of war camp? /// That’s right, with a fantastic, hm, story with, with the wooden || horse. // INT: With your ||| false papers? /// Yeah. // INT: Was there, (-) what you would think of as a normal legal process? Now here you are, you’re a criminal, you’re also Jewish, but you’re a criminal, er, || in German eyes. /// Yes, there was ||| a sort of legal process. The only thing is that it was a __, (-) it was called a Sondergericht. Well, Sondergericht means special court and it was a special court. What wasn’t (-) normal is that we had no, (-) no defense. I’m not sure that we weren’t offered a defense. (-) No, I don’t think so. No, I mean=, we just stood there, but we already knew (-) that it would be a good thing to have a heavy sentence, (-) because we thought, "The longer the sentence, the longer (-) we can stay in prison and not go to a concentration camp." Because, by that time, one knew what was going on. (-) So, we weren’t really interested in defending ourselves. Anyhow,

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it was plain to see what we did. I mean, we forged papers. The ridiculousness of the, er, of the indictment is, er, (-) Feindesbeihilfe, you know, helping the enemy. Well, their enemy wasn’t our enemy, as it happens. And attempted escape also seems a rather curious indictment, er, if you try to escape from certain death. You know, it’s not exactly a criminal offense. But we were quite happy to, to have a criminal offense and we were sentenced to three and a half years et cetera et cetera. My sister was, er, sentenced to penitentiary and I got one and a half year to stay in prison still. And we were quite happy with this, (-) strange as it may sound. (-) And my friends were __, did not get sentenced. They were __, (-) er, what do you call it? I mean, they were let go and the Gestapo already waited outside. (---) And none of them survived, except for the German, er, my German friend, Werner Krumme, (-) who became a very important, er,
prisoner in Auschwitz, important in the sense that, he was imp-__, because he was German after all, he had a very responsible position in the camp and he really did most fantastic things to help other people. And he has got a tree in Yad Vashem, (-) which, er, tells you enough. I mean, he was an extraordinary man.

**INT:** At this point, though, you and your sister had been together since the war had broken out. Were you able to stay together now?

**AL-W:** Well, we stayed together 'til the, 'til we were __, had our court case. I mean, we were already in prison for a year. It took a long time before we, er, we (-) came to the court. (-) And then she was sent to penitentiary and then she was sent away. So then we separated. She had to go Jauer penitentiary [Zuchthaus Jauer] and I stayed in prison. And, er, by that time __, hm, we said good bye, and we didn’t think we’d see each other again. I mean, you know, the situation then was so, (-) don’t know, <chortles> fluid is not the right word. And=hm, (-) so

she left (-) and I stayed in prison, (---) and still hoping to sit there 'til my sentence is finished, but, er, by that time we already heard rumors that they, er, you know, try to make room for other prisoners in, er, in the prisons and the Jews __. <gesture indicating "sent away"> Because the moment you’ve had your court case, (-) you were not so safe any more, you know, as we thought we might be. And, true enough, I was sent __, er, (-) I think the court case was in June and in December I was sent to, to Auschwitz, (-) not having finished my sentence. // **INT:** How were you treated in prison, before you were deported? /// Well, you know, looking back, the prison was a very cushy place. (-) you were not so safe any more, you know, as we thought we might be. And, true enough, I was sent __, er, (-) I think the court case was in June and in December I was sent to, to Auschwitz, (-) not having finished my sentence. // **INT:** How were you treated in prison, before you were deported? /// Well, you know, looking back, the prison was a very cushy place. (-) I mean, <grins> it's not as cushy as now prisons are. If I think how the prisoners complain about this and the other, it's laughable. We all sat in one cell, very small cell, four people, one bed, mattresses, so at night, you know, you filled it with anything. And=er, we worked in

prison. We were given a job to do, which was __, thank god, you know. And I painted, er, toy soldiers. (-) <laughs> I met my first Scottish, Scottish soldier there in prison, you know, with skirts on, I thought, "What is this?" Hm, (-) er, yes, I mean, they were made of plastic, of course, I mean, not like the (-) (incomprehensible, 1 second), (-) which in a way, you know, it's very, very meticulous work this painting and (incomprehensible, 1 second). They come there absolutely, er, just brown (-) and then you have to make the face and then you have the eyes and eyebrows and the uniform, we were told what colours to use. (-) And you can do it well and you can do it badly and, you know, if you do it well it makes the time pass. And there's a sort of satisfaction in (-) turning out <laughs> nice-looking soldiers, I mean it sounds crazy. But the important thing about the soldiers is that the girl who brought these soldiers to the, to the cell, was not a prison guard. She was obviously employed by the, er, toy soldier factory or something. And she used to

breeze in and breeze out and soldiers here and colour, this and the other. (-) And when my sister had gone she started talking to me and asked me where my sister was. And (-) a really very nice and remarkable relationship (-) developed there. She was obviously a very nice young girl. I would very much like to meet her again. Now
she must be over eighty, now, but (-) she was, as far as I am concerned, she was tremendous support. // INT: What was her name? // <German> Fräulein Neubert. She was very small and we used to call her <German> Püppchen, (-) you know, little doll. <Coughs> And she was, (-) she used to open the cell door and say <cloud> "What do you need?" <whispers> and then she used to shut it and then we started talking very softly in case another guard hears it. And she was very interested in everything and she used to bring equ., I found at the bottom of the, the soldiers, (-) some bread or a piece of cake or something, which her mother had

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sent us. You know, very touchy. To us this was a terribly important thing, you know, nobody was nice to us. (-) She was terrific. (-) And how were we treated? You know, prisons are, I mean, you know, you sit in that cell, which I was trying to describe. I went back into that cell, I did a documentary for the BBC, (-) and I went back, I think I must be the only person in the whole world who goes back to the prison where she was a prisoner in. And I took my daughter with me and (-) I remember it was cell 116, but they had been renumbered and I said, "It doesn’t matter, one cell is like the other." (-) And the cell door was open and my daughter nearly fainted and I said, "Look, this is luxury now." They had a television set in there, they had beds in there and they had a flushing toilet. We had what’s called a <German> Kübel, (-) a pot, where four people were shitting into it, and it was emptied once a day. (-) So I needn’t tell you what it was like in such a cell. And we

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were out, allowed out, once a day for half an hour (-) to walk in circles in the yard, hands on the backs, (-) not a word spoken, you know. That was prison life then. <chortles> Believe you me, luxury, compared to what followed.

INT: How was it, that you were told, you were called and told, (-) you’re, you’re (-) being taken out of the prison? Who told you that?

AL-W: Well, by that time, although one isn’t allowed to talk to anybody, everybody knows everything in prison. I will also tell you that some of the prison guards were decent, some were not decent, you know, the usual thing. Hm, (-) rumors went about, that Jews will have to go. (-) And you also knew where you’re going on which day. (-) If you were called on a Monday, you knew, that was transport to hm, hm, Tuesday hm, hm, Thursday Auschwitz. I was called on a Thursday. So I knew, where I was going. <with emphasis> One just knew, don’t ask me, how. (-) Things penetrated.

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// INT: But how much did the name Auschwitz mean || By ||| to you? /// that time it meant exactly what it actually was. Because one, (-) you know, the, <sighs> (-) yeah, the gas chamber bit had really got (-) repeated to such a, such a degree, that. But, you know, er, (-) human nature is most peculiar. You knew, where you were going, but you’re still hoping (-) <loud> "Maybe not." Maybe it’s, (-) you know, as long as you breathe, you hope. (-) So, er, Auschwitz was not exactly good news, (-) to be called on a Thursday. But again, you know, I mean, although I had this crazy life, I, (-) there was some degree of tremendous luck (-) all the time accompanying me. Because if you were actually a convicted prisoner, you did not travel to Auschwitz (-)
in a cattle truck. Like we know now, cattle trucks arrived from all over Europe and people spill out and there is a selection on the ramp. In a prison train, you know, with cells, you’re locked in a cell, and criminals had more chance of survival than innocent citizens. No selection, and I think the reason behind is that since we had been involved in court cases it’s possible we might be called back, you know. I think that probably was the reason behind it. But I didn’t realise that. I didn’t know that much about Auschwitz that I was already lucky to actually go straight into the camp. How many days were there, before you were taken? I mean, you were told on the Thursday, when did you actually leave Breslau? Oh, the next day. Oh, could have ev-, yeah, the next day. I was then put into another cell, you know, there was that end of me with all the stuff. You go to that cell before you get sent away. And that girl who brought us the soldiers came to visit me in that cell, which was already quite dangerous, she had no business any more, she was my supplier. And wishing me good luck. You know, it was, to me that was something fantastic. There was some expression there. And yes, and the next day, off we went. But I, you know, Auschwitz isn’t very far from Breslau, so we must have left in the evening because I arrived in Auschwitz, it was black, it was dark. So I don’t know exactly at what time we left. And we have just come to the end of the second tape there. OK, so, I’m gonna have a_.

<End of tape 2>

INT: <recording starts in mid-sentence> with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. You talked earlier about being lucky the way you arrived at Auschwitz. What do you remember of seeing it for the first time?

AL-W: Well, there were two lucky aspects. One of them is that my arrival in Auschwitz was deferred, because I was in prison, because every day in Auschwitz was a day gained. And then that I arrived in a transport of convicted criminals who did not have to go through a selection at the ramp where, you know, they stood and said, "To the right, to the left." But I didn’t realise that ‘til I was actually in the camp. I mean, the finer points of the camp I only really learned once I was in it. And__ // INT: What sort of a reception was waiting for your train then, when you arrived? I remember, we, we arrived late at night, so we, we were put in a barrack to wait for th’ next morning. And I’ve often been asked, "What was it like to arrive in Auschwitz?" All I can remember is that it
was freezing cold, it was December, in Poland, (-) and=er an enormous amount of noise, screaming, (-) dogs barking and people in capes, black capes (-) walking about. (-) I mean, not, er, most welcoming (-) atmosphere. And we didn’t know at all now what is, what's the next thing going to be. And the next thing in fact was, the next morning we were taken to another barrack (-) and=er had to take our clothes off and=er had a number tattooed (-) on the left forearm and=er (-) your hair was _, your head was shaved. That was the next thing. And then,

again, a tremendously lucky thing happened. I, I didn’t realise who was doing this, (-) you know, shaving of heads and tattooing. In _, these were in fact prisoners, who had this job. And they were always very, er, curious to hear _, you know, they thought, you are coming from the outside, (-) what are the news, how is the war going.

<rapidly> You were always hoping the war would end. // INT: What date was this, that you’d arrived? // December 43 [1943], (-) December 43 [1943]. Apropos, one was hoping for the war ending: I will just go back to my prison days now, that we did hear that the Allied had landed in Sicily. (--) And we thought this was <drawn out> fantastic. (-) So that must have been forty-, (-) early 43 [1943], I suppose, the Allies had landed. And I was so happy because <rapidly> I thought, "And now they are here." And it will take them a week, two, three weeks and they reach the prison and open the gates, you know.

And I was=er _, one of the people in my cell whose job was to sew buttons on (-) cartons, you know, you_. I don’t know whether you still _, yeah, you can still buy buttons <rapidly> on cartons. <gesture indicating sewing> So her job was to saw these buttons on cartons. So she had a huge (-) bag of (-) buttons there. And I was so happy about what was happening, I took this and I threw it up in the air. (-) It was sheer joy. I thought, "Everything will be OK". And when I started picking up the buttons it took a lot longer than throwing them in the air. (-) It was much longer. But this is just apropos one was always thinking in terms the war might end and just in time before they get us. (-) So, er, this girl who was=er (-) processing me asked me (incomprehensible, 1 second), "How’s the war going?", and "Where do you come from?", and "What did you do before the war?". And like a fool I said, "I used to play the cello." And I thought it was a crazy thing to say, in Auschwitz. What importance can that have in Auschwitz?

And then the extraordinary thing happened. She said, "Well, that’s fantastic." (-) "St-, you stand here", and all the others went, I don’t know where, and I stood there by myself. (-) Everybody had left (-) and I saw showers overhead. (-) And I knew, gas chamber, showers, and I thought, "Oh dear, that’s it." (-) But not a bit of it. Hm, (-) she came back with a lady who turned out to be Alma Rosé (-) and again I didn’t understand anything, because she was quite well dressed. She wore a camel hair coat and she had a (-) head scarf. (-) And she started asking me questions about <chortles> (-) cello playing. I mean, it was so ludicrous, er, the situation. Where did I study and what, er, yeah, who was my teacher and, "Fantastic, we need a cello, because we have an orchestra here, and we haven’t got any bass instruments." (-) And=er, "Don’t worry", she said, "you will have to go to quarantine, but they will get you out and you will soon be in the music
block.” Well, I thought, “well this is crazy." And this is exactly what happened. (-) Also, er, I will mention that the girl who took my clothes off me, she said, "Give me your shoes, because (-) I think I could use them and they’ll take them away anyway." Anyhow, I gave her my shoes. And these shoes have quite a story attached to them, because they were, (-) they were pig skin shoes when I was given them, bought them by my mother, (-) and I spilled ink or something on them and I got into terrible trouble with my mother because I ruined the shoes and, "What can we do?". So we dyed the shoes black (-) and they looked very sad, so we bought some red laces with great big pompons in it. And these, in these shoes I was arrested and with these shoes I arrived in Auschwitz. And it was through these shoes that (-) I met my sister again, because she arrived (-) a couple of weeks after me in Auschwitz from the penitentiary. Same girl, (-) she saw the shoes, I’m not sure that she was wearing them

or she saw them standing. (-) She recognised the shoes. You see, these were unique shoes. <chortles> It wasn’t Mark’s & Spencer, you know. (-) And she said, er, “Where did you get these shoes from?” She said, "Well, someone came in here a couple of weeks ago and=hm is in the orchestra now.” She said, "That’s my sister.” So she came running, by that time I was in the orchestral block, she came running and said, "I think, your sister has arrived." So, I mean, (-) what can I tell you? A pair of shoes. (-) Spoiled pair of shoes. Because we could easily have missed each other. (-) Anyway, this is just a (-) interjection. So she_, yes, and I had to go to the quarantine block which (-) is beyond description, because that_, you’ve probably seen in pictures, on shelves, we were all lying on shelves. (-) And=er it was terrible. I mean, it was for most people the last port of call, really, it was dreadful. And=er_, but sure enough, after a few days, a, (-) an SS man came in and called, "Well, where is the

cellist?", you know. So I_, suddenly I was the cellist. (-) And I was taken to the music block. And_… // INT: Tell me about the music block, was it separate from everything else? /// No, it was just one of the blocks. (-) One of the blocks was the music block, number 12 [Auschwitz block 12]. (-) And=er (-) there I saw this (-) bunch of people there, (-) you know, with most peculiar instruments. <chortles> I mean, it wasn’t, (-) you mustn’t think in terms of a proper orchestra, I mean, there were (-) people with mandolins and=er guitars and a few violins and a couple of accordions, that sort of thing. <whispers> Now there was a cello, I mean_. yeah, bass, you know, that is exactly what they have been waiting for. || I mean_. // INT: And there was || a cello for you to play? /// There was a cello there. People’ve, have often asked me, "Where did it come from?". (-) Stra-, strangely enough, I never, never occurred to me to wonder when I was there, but looking back, it probably came from somebody who had a cello under his arm when he was taken to the east <French> soit-disant to work, you know. I mean, people come with, er,

with instruments. You know, somebody comes to your house and says, "I give you two hours", or give even twenty-four hours. (-) You take what you think is the most precious thing to you personally. (-) And that could have been somebody’s cello. So there was a cello there. (-) So, she asked me to play something and, I mean, I hadn’t played the cello for about two years, so I asked for a little bit of time to, you know,
see whether (-) I could still know where the notes are. (-) And I played something to her, slow movement of the Boccherini concerto, I tried to play it. But there was no danger of <laughs> my not passing the audition. I mean, she needed a cello, however badly I played. (-) So I became the cellist of the, of the orchestra, which (-) I think, is the (-) reason why I have survived. (9)

**INT:** Who was Alma Rosé, who was || in charge of the orchestra?

**AL-W:** Alma Rosé was ||| a very remarkable lady and, er, in retrospect we all agree, because, we are still, who is still alive, we are still in touch, we all agree that=er we have to thank her our lives. She was the daughter of Arnold Rosé, and Arnold Rosé was the leader of the Vienna Philharmonic, had a very famous string quartett, the Rosé Quartett. (-) And=er (-) she was the niece of Gustav Mahler, I mean, a tremendous musical tradition there behind. She herself was a very, very fine violinist. (-) And=er, but the most important thing is, she was a very, very (-) strong personality. She (-) commanded respect, from us anyway, I mean, we were scared stiff of her, but even from the SS. (-) She was never, (--). I mean=er, (-) she was dignity in person, er, personified. (--). She was dignity personified. Very strict, I mean, (-) she was terribly strict with us, tremendous discipline, you know, wrong notes, this. We were, (-) most of us, kids, who had learned an instrument when they were little, so we were hardly orchestral material. (-) She had to, (-) literally, <gesticulates> (-) note by note, you know, (-) but her standard (-) had to be (-) well played and. A, a terrible book has been written about the orchestra by one of the orchestra members, (-) who= er painted Alma in a way as though she was afraid, if we don´t play well, we will be put in the gas chamber. That was never the case. (-) <loud> She wanted us to play well, because (-) she had these standards herself. (-) And also, somehow (-) it distracted us from what was going on around us in a way. I mean, all these things, I (-) ana-, analysed in retrospect. You know, we were so afraid not to come up to Alma´s demands (-) that we´d temporarily forgotten, <shortles> you know, you just look out of the window and you see the smoke. (-) So=er, she kept us together really with an iron (-) discipline. That was

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Alma Rosé. She, she didn´t survive and=er, but we all really, I think, we owe her a lot of, er, (-) gratitude.

**INT:** Why was there an orchestra in Auschwitz?

**AL-W:** Well, you know, there wasn´t just an orchestra in Auschwitz, there was an orchestra practically in every camp. You may well ask why. We had a job to do, we played marches for the, you know, there were all these factories surrounding Auschwitz and (-) other concentration camps for slave labour. (-) And the Germans, you know, like things neat and tidy, and=er we play marches, so we go left, right, left, right. These (-) columns of people who go out to work and come back from work. Less people coming back than went out, usually. (-) That was our job number one, to
play the marches, morning and evening. (-) And we were extremely privileged, because I know that, really I found that out afterwards, er, if you compare it with the mens’ orchestra, for instance, in Birkenau, (-) they had to go out to work during the day. We didn’t. (-) We went back to the block (-) and we rehearsed music (-) for the various occasions that they wanted to hear music. Like, for instance, we had to be always prepared for some Germans to come in and ask for something. We played light music, you know, it wasn’t (-) very serious music. Uhm... // INT: What sort of things? // Selections from (-) operettas, (-) then there were quite a few singers there, sort of arias from Butterfly and=er (4) whoever was, Peter Kreuder was the, the in-thing, Zarah Leander, you know, these, uhm, (-) these, I suppose, pop songs of the time. (-) I know Alma played <German> Zigeunerweisen. (-) I mean, there was the occasional=er (-) we had // INT: <German> Zigeunerweisen, they are the gypsy, || yeah. // Yeah, ||| by Sarasate, it’s a,

you know, very famous (-) virtuoso violin (-) thing. We, oh, had something called Dvořákiana, was some sort of Dvořák (-) mêlée. But you know, there were big problems, because where was the music for such, (-) for such an orchestra? So there were people who (-) were engaged to just write out notes, because, say, we,=-we’d get a piano reduction and had to be orchestrated then for the instruments that were there. So, (-) quite a few people were employed in this (-) slightly safer situation, than going out (-) to work. // INT: How many people in all, would you say? // Hm, (-) about forty, I would say, roughly. // INT: How many of you played actually in the orchestra? // Well, I suppose, <German> Notenschreiberinnen as they were, probably there were six <mumbles>. About forty people played and perhaps five people or six people wrote, I can’t remember exactly, (-) er, wrote out the music. (4)

Yes. (-)

INT: What sort of (-) typical day was it for you then? When, what time did it start for the orchestra?

AL-W: Well, it started, it started very early, I can’t. We didn’t have watches, so I don’t really know what time it was, but very early out, er, you know, get up and=hm take, (-) few of us had to take, er (-) chairs and the music stands out, plant them where we play (-) and then came back to the block and, I think, then we got something to drink, something lukewarm, (-) and went out to play. I don’t=can’t remember exactly what (-) No, I think, we got, er, (-) the drink we got after we’d had done our marches. I think that’s how it was. (-) Yes, we, some people had to take out the, the music stands et cetera and come back and then we’d all march out and play and then we go back to the block (-) and then we were counted, you know, Zählappell, and=er then we started to (-) <with emphasis> learn our pieces.

(-)

INT: How were you regarded (-) by the other (-) prisoners in Auschwitz?
AL-W: You know, er, opinions are varied. I have never really come across any abuse, but obviously we were envied, (-) obviously we were envied by people. But on the other hand we could also help people. (-) They used to call us die Damen vom Orchester, you know, we were the, the ladies. We were better dressed, you know, we were the show piece, (-) a bit like Theresienstadt, not quite as, er, pronounced, but, you know, when (-) people came to the camp to have a look what is it like in Auschwitz, (-) <laughs< they would come to us, (-) "Hey, here is music", you know. (-) // INT: How where you regarded by the Germans, by the guards? /// Well, er, (-) luckily, the two people in charge, I mean, two women, Drechsler and Mandl, (-) were very interested in the orchestra. That was their, (-) their thing, the orchestra. So they didn´t_, I don´t know how they regarded us, they probably still thou=thought that we were_.

Mind you, we were not, you can´t say, just "dirty Jews", because we were the, one of the few blocks which were mixed. We were not just Jews in the block. (-) There were also non-Jews there, you know, Poles, Russians, er. (-) I don´t know how they regarded us. We were just=er the, (-) the sort of, the ornament, you know, (-) of the camp. // INT: How did you feel (-) about being in an, (-) in that situation? /// I knew that I was very lucky to be in that situation. (-) Much to be preferred to be in=er any other situ_-,=I mean, there, there were (-) sought after occupations in the camp. One is to be a musician, the other is to be a=er interpreter or to be a runner like my sister was, to messenger, (-) or to work in the kitchen for obvious reasons, you know. (4)

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(7) INT: When you look back on it, (-) how aware were you_, you say Alma, er, Rosé was such a figure (-) who´s dominating and demanding of you, but (-) how aware were you (-) of the life around you?

AL-W: Oh, we were very aware of the life around us. I mean, I was asked at a interview once, "How did you know there were gas chambers in Auschwitz?" Well, the gas chamber was about as far away from me as=er_ (--) <laughs and points to something>. I mean, it was there, you could see it, (-) you could see it, you could see the smoke, you could hear it, <with emphasis> you could see the people walking past, into the gas chamber, you know, the Lagerstraße. (--) Yeah, (-) I mean, in 1944, when the Hungarians came, you saw that endless stream of people walking in and coming out in smoke. <laughs> <loud and amused> I mean, you couldn´t not know it, you know, it was there, we lived there.

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(--) And it was a matter of time when we are going to go in there. I mean, that was the, er, that was the thing. We are still alive today, well, but tomorrow we may be in smoking, you know, in smoke. So when=er, (--) when we were_, (--) you know, when it all came to an end, (--) first of all Alma died, which was also almost a demise of the orchestra, because it, it was impossible to ca _, we carried on, but in a very_, er, (--) you know, <loud and agitated> that there was missing, that discipline was missing. It was a bit of "free for all" now and, er, also obviously the war was going badly, the Russians advanced, the interest (-) also of the Germans was, (-) you know, diminishing. And=er (-) eventually we were called out of the block and (-) separated, the Jews from non-Jews. So we thought, "Well, that´s it. That must be it." (--) But it wasn´t it. (--) We just had to relinquish our clothes, yet again, you know, it’s
always give up what you_, because by that time we'd organised a number of, er, you know, acceptable garments (-) and we were put in a cattle truck. // INT: What date was this? // That was end of November. (-) I don’t remember the exact date. Some people do remember, I think 26th of November, I don’t know exactly. Again, cold, cold, || very cold. // INT: And this is ||| 1944 by now, isn’t it? // 44 [1944], yes. And what had happened, er, outside is that the Russians, er, were advancing and the Germans tried to obliterate their traces (-) and sent the prisoners, er, westwards. But we had no idea where we were going and also, er, I was very worried about my sister who, (-) who wasn’t there and I’m going somewhere. (-) So somehow I managed to get a message to her that, you know, we are going on a transport and she appeared and just joined us. Because we couldn’t at that time_, we, we don’t separate again, you know. So she just

went into the train with us. And=er (-) rumours again had it. "Where are we going?" "We're going_, it’s a place called Belsen." You know, nobody’d ever heard the word before. (-) Belsen. And it is a, (-) it’s a <softly and stretches words> recuperation place, (-) that was the news. Well, I’ve learned in the meantime why it was called that. Belsen has quite a history. (-) It started off as a prison camp, a normal prison camp, and at one time it was a camp where people were sent (-) to recuperate, I don’t know, how they could recuperate in Belsen, but (-) it has quite a history and somebody has, er, written a big book about it, I forget all the details. But it was supposed to be an Erholungslager. Well, it wasn’t. Er, so (-) a few days of cattle truck went by and we were freezing cold and_, (--) but it transpired immediately that we would stick together, (--) the orchestra, we would stick together, we’d been through so many things already.

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We will keep together. And we tried to keep each other warm, you know, by (-) blowing into each other’s back and we tried to sing our=er parts, orchestral parts. (-) And we arrived in, in the middle of nowhere, really. That was Belsen. // INT: What, what was (-) upmost in your mind? Relief at leaving Auschwitz || or_?///<raises her voice> Tremendous ||| relief of leaving Auschwitz. Nobody could imagine that you could physically go away from the, (-) from <lowers her voice> the crematoria and the gas chambers. (-) <loud> Nothing can be worse (-) than sitting in front of, (-) you know, the means with which you are going to be killed. So to go, I mean, we were really quite happy. (-) Yeah, little did we know what was, er, what was coming, but +laughs+ anything was, (-) we thought, better than, (-) <lowers her voice> than gas chamber. So=er (-) we arrived in Belsen (-) and we walked <slowly> for very many (-) miles, probably it was, it seemed

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endless, (-) through the Lüneburg Heath (-) and=er arrived at the camp. And we heard a lot of shooting going on, because there was an army_, hm, barracks there, <rapidly> German army barracks, it was a shooting range, so we kept hearing this shooting. And we thought, "Oh well, they’re going_, now they’re going to shoot us", just for a change, you know. Because everything was so crazy. If you even think that in 1944, when the war was going as badly as it was going, the Germans would liberate rolling stock in order to bring Jews from A to B. Would have been much simpler to stick us in the gas chamber. They needed this rolling stock. Well, (-) anyway, (--) don’t look for logic, when it came to their, their, their murder machine.
So=er (-) we were about 3000 people arriving there (-) in Belsen and Belsen had no room for us. There were no barracks.

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So we stood for a while in front of the camp and looked into it <coughs> <chortles> and my sister said_., (-) we saw somebody with a Kapo <German pronounced English> band, you know a Kapo was also a very good position to have, you were sort of in command of other people. And the Kapos didn’t always behave as they should have behaved. And there was a Kapo, someone with a Kapo band, bending into a soup vat and scraping it out. And my sister said, “If a Kapo needs to do that, it must be very bad here”. <chortles> By god, she was right. (-) Anyway, we arrived, they didn’t shoot us on the way, and we arrived at the camp, and <gesture indication perplexity> (-) we had nowhere to be. (-) So we were all herded into enormous tents, like a circus tent. (-) And I remember that, you know, being quite a vintage prisoner by now, (-) one thing is important, is that people should have somewhere to walk (-) to the latrines. (-) Very basic necessity.

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And a friend of mine_, <chortles> we tried to, (-) we tried to make people lie down so that would be a gangway. <dismissive gesture> Forget it, I mean, we were just falling down on the floor and there was chaos. // INT: Had you made, you’d made friends in Auschwitz? /// Oh yes, I mean, we orchestra, we orchestra, we stuck together. We were a group inseparable all the way from then onwards. // INT: Do you think that also || helped you? /// Absolutely, ||| absolutely, yes. You see, what happened in the camp is that people formed families, camp families. You´d, you had lost your own family, you make families. People adopted younger people. (-) You know, it gave you some (-) sense of importance, you try and look after somebody else, I mean it sounds ridiculous, but=er we were definitely a group, er, (-) sticking together. That was obvious, without any discussion, (-) that was, what was going to be. And=uhm, yeah, it helped. I mean,

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we, (-) we took care of each other in a way or we bullied each other, because, you know, Belsen was so ill equipped and so basic. And the temptation (-) to just let yourself go is_, and there was no orchestra there, is tremendous. (-) And we bullied each other to wash, whilst there was still water, which later it wasn’t, you know, wash and strip and in the outside, you know, it was cold. It was much easier not to do it, but it was very important to do it. And on your own you probably wouldn’t have done it. But if you got somebody else, “Now, you haven’t washed properly.” You know, this is very important. (-) So=er (-) yes, so we were lying in these tents on the bare soil, I mean, it was unbelievable, winter, Lüneburg Heath, then came a terrible, terrible storm <snippy> and the tents collapsed on top of us. (-) So there we were with these enormous tents (-) <chortles> on top of us, I mean it was, the situation was indescribable. So we tried to get out from under the tent

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somehow, (-) which we managed and I will never forget, we stood then, for the rest of the night, in the pouring rain, in the winter, undernourished, not in (-) the best of health. (-) <lowers her voice> And I didn’t even catch cold. (-) I mean, what this human body can actually, (-) uhm, endure is quite unbelievable. (-) And by next morning (-) we were all put into a shoe bunker. There was one barrack full of shoes. <chortles> There wasn’t really room for people, but_, because it was full of shoes,
but somehow we hurled it in there and we were very grateful to just have a roof over our heads. And I remember sitting next to a Hungarian lady there for a couple of days and I thought, "I'll try and learn Hungarian whilst I'm sitting here", <chortles> really quite crazy, which I didn’t manage, but eventually they=er, they were=had barracks for us. Don’t ask me, why there were suddenly barracks for us. I have a suspicion because there is a **huge** Russian cemetery there. They

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may well have done away with the Russians to make_. Don’t ask me, I can’t answer it, but suddenly there were barracks. And then started the Belsen life where (-) things got worse and worse. And (-) the death marches starting in all the other camps that were, were (-) not liberated, but evacuated, started arriving in Belsen. Belsen became (-) an **inferno**. I mean, thousands and thousands of people came into Belsen in state, you know, half-dead people dragged themselves in there on these death marches. And=er at one time we got some (-) work to do. (-) We made plaids out of cellophane. (-) Long, long plaids. And I can only imagine that was some sort of rope. So we worked for a bit there and then we didn’t work and then, you know, it was_. Suddenly there was **no food** and there was **no water** and, (-) ye=you perished, in Belsen you perished.

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**Typhoid**, no facilities, **nothing**. (-) And then the, er, you know, the, the bodies started mounting up and there was no way to deal with the bodies. You know, Auschwitz had this fantastic facility there, but Belsen, no, there was nothing. (-) So we lived among heaps of bodies. // **INT:** What happened, if somebody died in your barracks then? /// Chuck them out, (-) chuck them out. I remember the first, uhm, the first body, you see, at first Belsen wasn’t as terrible as it was in the end. I mean there was no room for us, but there were no dead bodies lying around. And I remember that there was in the block, where I was (-) dwelling, I can only say, (-) news spread around that somebody is dead here, so what do we do with that? What do we do with a dead person? And I thought=er, well, we have to get that dead person out of here. And I volunteered to do it. I just thought, (-) "I’ll just do it", I mean, I’d never touched a dead body before. I’ve

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seen dead bodies, but not=er_. (-) Er, so somebody else came and we just (-) put that body out. **One** body. Well, it didn’t take long before that was multiplied by (-) thousands. And then no way to get rid of them. And by that time it got warmer, (-) so <chortles> you know, (-) you had a stench of the, of the, er, (-) of the bodies just=uhm, (-) you know, just lying there and decomposing. Er, you know, y=you can’t really describe it, it was__, I mean, you__, yeah, pictures of, of Belsen after liberation. But you know, it was meaningless to us a dead body by that time, (-) totally meaningless. (-) You know, heaps of them there, heaps of them there. And=er then the SS, then sta=__, no food and no=, the__, **nothing**. (-) So it was a matter of this__, obviously it’s not going to last very long. And then=er, by that time it was April, and then came the big

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miracle, that we heard a lot of rumbling noises outside the camp. // **INT:** Where the Germans still there by this time, the guards? /// **Less and less** Germans were visible, but by that time we knew that they quite like to blow up camps before they get=uhm, (-) before they get=er discovered. So we weren’t sure whether that meant
(-) that they dynamited the camp, (-) because that also happened. Er, but true enough, it was a Sunday and we heard these noises and—uhm (-) people said, you know, that might be tanks, British tanks. Well, whose tanks, you know, could be tanks, but whose tanks, how do you know? But at five o’clock the first tank or whatever, I think it was a jeep, came into the camp. And that was it. (---)

INT: And we’ve just come to the end of the third tape there.

<End of Tape 3>

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Tape: 004

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INT: <recording starts in mid-sentence> Lasker-Wallfisch. (--) Er, it’s April 1945 and you’re in <hesitantly> the camp at Bergen Belsen. Where were you when th-, you know, the noises started and people started saying, "It’s tanks, it’s tanks“?

AL-W: I, uhm, (-) I must admit that my memory is a little bit vague there and _, but I have a report of my sister who wrote what she did on that day. (--) My sister tried to get some water and she knew there was still a water tap somewhere just outside the, the compound. And there was a quite a harmless SS man standing there. And she writes in this report that he didn’t stop her, she went with a bucket outside, tried to fill it with water, came back into the camp and there everybody was so thirsty that they just jumped on her, tried to get the water. And what happened? That the water spilled and nobody had any water. And that she came then and took me out into the open air, apparently I wasn’t well, I suppose, it’s the understatement of the, (-) the century. And we sat (-) outside, with our backs to a barrack, surrounded by bodies and heard this noise. (--) And suddenly (-) we heard an announcement, "You are liberated, this is the British Army, you are liberated, but please keep calm and_". (--) Whatever, you know, the announcement was. And—uhm (-) I always have to_, you know, people have an imagination that people get liberated after such a terrible time, that they jump with joy, but nobody jumped with joy. We were all very silent, (-) partly through lack of, er, strength and, er, lack of actually believing, what, what was happening. You know, it was just too enormous (-) to be

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assimilated. (-) And then came the period, er, (-) which I can only understand, also again, in retrospect. I mean, so we were liberated, so these poor soldiers suddenly_, they didn’t know what they were going to find on the way, they knew_, the war was still on, one mustn’t forget, they knew there was a prison camp there. Well, they had their own idea what a prison camp is like. They had never seen anything like it. And they were suddenly confronted with this enormous problem of the bodies, the sick people and the zombies, that we were. (-) And of course, the first, er, first thing was to get rid of the bodies, (-) which <stutters> then, the Germans, which they managed to catch in the surroundings, had to do themselves. I have got a lovely picture of that. // INT: The British Army brought Germans back. || did they? /// Yeah, ||| I mean, some
of them, for instance Kramer, the camp commander, was caught there. (-) And there were, were quite, quite a number who were still there, but the majority (-)

had gone. Also I learned after, er, er, reading reports, is that, apparently the British Army tried to make a, ma--. umh, come to some arrangement with this prison camp before they knew what it was and said, "If you hand over this camp, (-) we will let you go." But of course, and they probably (-) thought that what's going to happen, but when, when, er, they saw what was happening, of course they don't let anybody go. So they were all arrested and, er, then had to clear up the camp. And=er (-) it must have been a tremendous problem for the, for the British Army to deal with the <loud> likes of us. Who are we, anyway? People without, (-) well, without anything, I mean, most of them half-dead. (-) So, er, a big sorting out began into nationalities, I suppose the idea was to repatriate people which is all very well for people who want to be repatriated (-) like it was not

a major problem for French, er, Dutch, Belgians to go home, they also were received by=er, because they were occupied countries. But if you happen to be German like me, er, the last thing I want to do is go home, there is no such place as home. (-) And I'd, well, I mean, <rapidly> it's just out of the question. So (-) we became what is called displaced persons.

INT: What happened to you, though, in those (-) few days after the British Army arrived? Do you remember?

AL-W: I tell you, what was then a big problem is that they were so shocked, the soldiers, all they could think of is to give us food and that was also a terrible mistake, because people who haven't eaten (-) can't deal with food. So a lot of people died, just, you know, can you imagine a tin of corned beef or something like that? I don't know how we escaped this=er (-) disaster somehow. But (-) we were given food, that was the first thing, given food and they tried to

reinstall the water and just the most basic things were, were repaired. // INT: Were you kept in the camp itself? // Oh, yes, I mean, it's no question, I mean_. (-) We're not allowed to go. It's--actually one of the announcements was, "You are not allowed to leave the camp", because of the typhus that_, we got typhus in the camp. We knew very well there was typhus in the camp. But, you know, where would we have gone anyway. Er, Belsen is in the middle of nowhere, really, on the Lüneburg Heath. Where, where do we, where does one go, you know. There's nowhere to go. So there was no question of, er, of leaving the camp. I mean, they were afraid that we would all, you know, run away, but I mean, no way. Uhm_. // INT: Did you understand English at this point? // No, I didn't, but my sister, who went to school in Florence and_, to study for her matric there, is very_. <laughs> has a lot of languages. And she was immediately, er, they looked desperately for people, who could interpret. (-) So very soon she was an interpreter for the British Army. (-) And it didn't take too long where she said, "Look, they're looking for people to,

to help here. Why don't you become an interpreter?" I said, <chortles> "Well, I don't happen to speak English, it's just_." "It doesn't matter, doesn't matter, you'll become
an interpreter anyway." So I think I must be the first interpreter ever who’d, had an interpreter’s band without actually being able to speak the language that she was supposed to interpret. But, uhm, I started my life as an interpreter in the, in an office of the British Army, typing. I can’t type either, but <shortly>, uhm. Anyhow, with two fingers, and I was copying Army reports and it took no time for me to actually understand more. I kept hearing (-) English spoken, you know, it didn’t take too long to, (-) to get the, the hang of the English language. And, yeah, so I was working for the British Army as an interpreter (-) whilst my friends, who were French, Belgian, eventually went home, and we managed to somehow come in contact

with what was left of my family through one of those search broadcasts that were made after the war, where you know, there was a. In fact, what happened, that the BBC, er, van came into the camp and somebody called me and said, "Look, here is the BBC van and he’ll, takes messages." So I went there and it was my first experience of talking into a microphone. I’ve, I’ve got the transcript of it which is so confused, but, er, German, I speak German, very, very good German, much better than I can do now, looking for my sister. I said, German, "Hier ist, spricht Anita Lasker" and so on. And my sister actually didn’t hear it, but a friend of hers heard it and it was always repeated, they kept repeating these things. And this is how I came in contact again with, er // INT: This was your eldest sister? // my eldest sister || who was in England. And then started a terrible period of trying to go somewhere (-) and realising

that it is not a good situation to be a displaced person, without any papers (-) and without anything, (-) not even talk about money. // INT: While you were interpreting for the British Army, did they ask you (-) questions about where you’d been and what you’d seen and what you went through? /// Yes, I mean, we became very friendly with some of the people that we worked with. I can’t remember too much, whether we told them great details, but you know, once you’ve seen a camp like Belsen, you already understood, what had been going on. I mean, we had some very, very good friends there, who really did everything to help us, also to get us clothes, and. And also there wasn’t a postal service then, we mustn’t forget, you couldn’t just write a letter. So we used the Army addresses, you know, whoever was stationed in Belsen, there was a Corporal Smith, we used his address. Then I would write to my sister, "Corporal Smith is now being, hm, (-) had to go somewhere else, (-) could you use now captain (-) Warville (by ear) or whatever.

You see, we always used, uhm, army addresses. And, (-) but it was a very desperate search for actually (-) being allowed to go somewhere. And one came to realise that the world was not a perfect place, even after the, (-) even after everything was finished, that nobody was going crazy to (-) have you. // INT: Where were you when the war ended? /// Well, when the war ended we were in Belsen, but Belsen was burned down eventually. On the 21st of May the last barrack was burned. And what happened to the people who were able to be transferred? We were transferred into that very army barracks that the shooting came from. (-) That became Belsen Displaced Persons Camp and stayed Belsen Displaced Persons Camp for years and years and years. I’ve been back there and I saw graves of
people who died in 53 [1953], eight years after the liberation, (-) which is a terrible indictment to the world. (-) Er, so Belsen proper, the camp as I knew it, (-) was erased to the ground with a big ceremony at the end. The last barrack had a picture of Hitler and a swastika and they brought flame throwers, I’ve got pictures of that, and burned it down. By that time I was already, er, an interpreter and then the in-_, we were quite a few of us, we were transferred also then to the other camp, which is about three kilometres away. And we were very lucky, because we had a little interpreters’ house, a sort of, must have been a garden hut. It no longer exists, I looked for it, when I went back there. Er, so we had our private accommodation and did not have to go into these enormous barracks, you know, it wasn’t _, I mean, <chortles> it was, uhm, a lot better than what was before, but the people who had to stay there and had nowhere to go _, it was not all that pleasant.

INT: But what was it

for you to hear that the war was over, (-) at last?

AL-W: Well, fantastic, I mean, it was unbelievable, unbelievable. The war was over and_ <sighs>. (-) <raises voice> Well, it was very difficult to actually really, er, take on board the whole implication that you’d actually survived this, I mean, it was_, <laughs> you know. Why? (-) How? (-) And both of us, my sister and I, I mean, it was, (-) it was tremendous. And then, I mean, I’ve got the letters that I wrote to my sister, because, er, (-) you know, irony of fate, the only person of my family who emigrated, died in childbirth (-) having her second child. So, after her death, my sister’s death, who by then was in, in Israel_. (-) All the letters that my parents and my sister and I had written to her (-) in 39 [1939], 40 [1940] and then, during the war, via Switzerland etcetera and (-) 45 [1945] after the liberation are in my possession. So a lot of things that I had forgotten in a way had come back again through the letters. And=er they are really quite a document, because also that _, the (-) more and more desperate letters after the liberation that (-) we can’t go anywhere, nobody wants us. I have all the refusals from the Home Office and=er etcetera. It was very difficult. But=er it took about a year and=er I got here in March 46 [1946].

INT: When did you hear what had happened to your parents? When did you find out?

AL-W: Well, I’d_, having_, knowing what was going on, I did not exactly entertain any hopes that I would ever see my parents again. But what actually did happen to them I found out, er, when I came to England and went to the Wiener Library, which is a <coughs> institute (-) invented by Dr. Wiener, it has nothing to do with Vienna. (-) Er, (-) it is a documentation place of the persecution of the Jews. It´s situated in
London. I went there and they have a lot of information. And I knew where my parents had gone, to Izbica near Lublin, and I found what the method of murdering people was there. It was the famous place where they had to dig their own graves and be shot into these graves. That’s what happened in that, that area. Yeah.

INT: After the war, were you ever asked to be a witness at all?

AL-W: Yes, when I was in September, when they created a trial for the, for the, er, Belsen criminals, the Lüneburg trial and I was asked to be a witness there. And the experience was quite salutary. So, by that time I spoke enough English to not have an interpreter. And I have the letters that I wrote about this, er, this trial and one of the letters I said, it’s the first time that I see how impossible it is for the outside world to understand what has been going on here. Because it was a proper trial, British justice, innocent ’til proven guilty, and I was exposed to the most ridiculous questions. I have a transcript of this trial, er, in my book, which really I think, tells you enough. I would be asked, er, questions like, "Did you ever see anybody kill anybody?" and I’d say, "Yes", and I’d be asked, "What day was it?", and I would say, "I don’t know." "What time was it? Was it a stick? Was it a stone? Was it?". <closes her eyes, lowers her voice> And I thought, "Oh my god." I couldn’t answer these questions, because a. I didn’t have a watch, b. I couldn’t care less whether it was, er, what date it was. And the moment you then, because you’re under oath and I was a very good girl, I wasn’t going to invent anything, you nearly feel like a liar. So the whole trial seemed a total and utter farce to me, because you cannot apply British justice, which is a very commendable thing, to something that is so outside anything that’s ever been, you know, it’s. Admittedly, most of the people were sentenced to death. But, uhm, the whole system suddenly made me realise, this is stuff that will never really be understood unless you’ve been in it.

INT: Do you think, then, that it was right for those trials to go ahead?

AL-W: Yes, what else can you do? I mean, the alternative is lynching. And no, I think it was right what happened, it just seemed, seemed slightly. Er, you know, that we couldn’t really understand it. But I mean, what can you do, really? And all the denazification and all this, it was a good attempt, it didn’t really work, because who did they know who the Nazis were? Suddenly there wasn’t a single Nazi in the whole of Germany anyway. And the denazification of course overlooked many, many people who should have been denazified. Because when <indicates quotation marks> normality as it were, was reinstalled, one needed people in certain places. And if
the=you were (-) told, that the judge in this, er, in this court was a dreadful man, a bad man, a Nazi_. (-) Yeah, but we need somebody there, there is nobody else. And this is how the thing got perpetuated, that a lot of people (-) were left in places where they shouldn´t have been, because there was no other

way to deal with it. // INT: The trial that you were involved in, uhm, you said a lot of the peo-, er, er, a lot of the people were sentenced to death? /// Yeah. // INT: But was that any kind of (-) resolution or satisfaction for you? /// No, not__. to me it was never a satisfaction. (--) It was never a satisfaction to me. <pondering> (-) No, I __. (---) <sighs> Yeah, (-) it's difficult to__. (-) <with emphasis> I mean, that was obvious, that was the natural thing that it should go that way. You know, if you take every case separately and analyse what made these people do what they were doing, perhaps nowadays you could find explanations or excuses, but it doesn´t work. I mean, these people couldn´t possibly not have been sentenced to death. (--) Although they probably_. they themselves thought that it was unjust. They only did their duty, you know. In Germany everybody

always did their duty. "I did, what I was told to do." And there are certain things which are misunderstood nowadays, like for instance (-) the <German> Einsatztruppen (Einsatzgruppen), you know, the people who did this murdering in=uhm, (-) you know, in=er Ukraine etcetera etcetera. I mean, // INT: The special troops? /// my parents__. The special troops. Er, the excuse was always, if I didn´t do it, I would be sent to the Russian front. (--) And this is not true. (-) There have been people, (-) who refused to do this (-) mass murdering and were not sent to the Russian front. So, the excuse that you risk your own life if you refuse to do what you were told (-) is a very, er, (-) feeble excuse. (5)

INT: Were you eventually allowed to come (-) to E-England after the war?

AL-W: Yes, eventually, eventually the Home Office, er__, (-) he

gave us permission, I mean, even that was complicated. But=er, you know, again in retrospect, (-) okay, England won the war, but (-) I can understand that the refugee problem was perhaps not (-) first on the agenda, although <laughs> it would have been nice if it had been. And the ludicrous thing is, when I finally got to England and I had to report at the, er, Home Office, I got a alien registration, (-) enemy alien. (--) Because I'm German, so (-) a German is an enemy. You know, (-) the red tape and the stupidity of people who sit and, and dispense the tape is, is limitless. So I didn´t even understand what enemy alien means and when my cousin saw it, with whom I lived there, he went straight back to the Home Office and said, "You have gotta to be out of your mind". (--) <indignantly> Enemy alien. (--) So they scrapped that with apologies.<laughs> (--) But for a bit, I was an enemy alien.

INT: Did you talk about (-)

0:20:00

things || here /// AL-W: No, no, ||| // with your sister, with other people?
**AL-W:** you see, that was, er, (-) another thing, which very often_. **Now,** now that I have written a book, and we are sixty years on and all that sort of thing, people always ask, "Did you talk about it?". Er, what was very upsetting for us, that nobody asked any questions. (-) We did not talk about it, (-) which we found very=er, well, very disappointing, because we, we thought that with what we have seen and gone through, we will change the world. And nothing like that will ever happen again etcetera. We were full of, of great ideas. Instead of that we fell into a hole of silence and I'm not the only one who will tell you that. (-) Questions were not asked and (-) if I now think back, had I been asked any questions, like for instance, "Tell me what was it like in Auschwitz", I'm not sure I could have answered it actually. (4) It is, in fact, not a topic for conversation,

(-) concentration camps. (-) Now, I suppose, it's taken a natural, (-) a natural development. I think it needed half a century (-) for people to address this. Because one is just, (-) timewise, far enough removed and=er (-) it's possible to ask questions now. And also, you know, people have the strange idea, if you ask somebody like me a question about a concentration camp, (-) you’re afraid that I might faint, you know, suddenly, suddenly remember what it was like in a concentration camp. I come across this quite often now that I, I talk to schools etcetera. (-) <grins> The thing is, I don’t need you to ask me a question, what was this like in a concentration camp, to remember that I was in a concentration camp. (-) You know, I don’t know who_. I think it was Elie Wiesel who said, (-) "If you_, whoever has been in Auschwitz, never comes (-)

again_, will never leave it, and who’s never been in Auschwitz will never (-) enter it." And I think there is a lot, (-) a lot of truth. And people ask me, "Has it changed, changed you as a person?". I wouldn’t know what sort of a person I would have been if I hadn’t been in a concentration camp. (-) But I think whoever has been in a concentration camp_, (-) I think it has stamped you in some way, you know. You don’t have to be reminded <chortles> by being asked a question about it.

**INT:** But are there ever times when you forget?

**AL-W:** Yeah, sure. I mean, I've, er, no_. (-) When I finally came to England I didn’t want anything to do with concentration camps, really. I was still young, (-) very old for what I wanted to do, because you don’t start studying music at the age of twenty, you finished studying. So I was totally one-track minded to catch up eight years that I had been_, (-) that I’d lost, that had been stolen of me, and I wanted to be just **normal, (-) a normal** person.

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(-) You don’t think 24 hours a day of concentration camps. No, I was a normal person, er, tried to be madly normal and bring up my children normal, you know. In fact, looking back, it wasn’t as normal as I thought it was. But one_, we tried, you know, (-) tried to be normal.

**INT:** How did you make a living in England?
**AL-W:** With difficulties at first, because first of all I didn’t have a working permit, and you can’t have a working permit unless you are a member of the union, but you can’t become a member of the union if you haven’t got a working permit. So, here again, catch-22. But I was asked that question actually (-) just a few days ago, when I was doing a talk, “Was it difficult for you to settle down in England?” and I said, “No, it was very easy.”, because I had enormous help here, enormous help from all sides. (-) I very quickly even got jobs as a cellist (-) from people, who knew, that I wasn’t in the union and who knew, that I didn’t have a working permit and I would never

0:24:00 be asked to do a job in a theatre, for instance, where sometimes people can check up union cards. I’d, I have never seen that happen, but it’s possible. And it is not I who would get into trouble, it’s the union members that get into trouble. (-) But I had a sense of being protected all by my colleagues (-) later. Uhm, (-) really, I mean, I did get work, not a lot, here and there, but everything helped, (-) er, whether I was a union member or not, you know. And eventually I became a union member and got a working permit, but it took five years. (-) But I was working all the same, so somebody, they all knew that, er, you know, so I had really, I am, er, very, very grateful that I came to this country. And=uhm, (-) you know, I, I have a great affection for it, because I had a lot of help and support here.

**INT:** Were you married here?

**AL-W:** Yes, I got married here to a boy from my school. Admittedly, I went right back to my childhood again.

0:25:00 // **INT:** Did you meet him again in, in London? /// No, I met him in Paris. He was also a sort of itinerant. He was studying. He left, er, in time, he left Germany in time. He was thirteen, he went to Palestine, (-) and as soon as the war was over he went to Switzerland to take part in a competition which he didn’t win, but he won a scholarship. And he was then studying in Paris. And when (-) for the first time I went on holidays after I’ve came to England, I said to a colleague of mine, “I’m going to Paris.” Because I’ve never seen Paris, you know, must see Paris. And he said, “you know, there is somebody there who you might know, Peter Wallfisch.” Of course, I know Peter Wallfisch, so we met there. (-) And that was that.

**INT:** Was the difference in your experience ever (-) between you, as it were, because of what you’d gone through, (-) but he had left as a child, he didn’t go through it?

**AL-W:** You mean, was it an impediment? No, no, becau-_. <laughs> He, he suffered in his own

0:26:00 way, you know. To be transplanted suddenly from, (-) from a normal life to Palestine for these children also was very difficult. (-) They didn’t know the language and_. (-) Of course he hasn’t suffered in the way that I have, but no, I_, but I don’t, (-) I don’t think in terms of measuring people’s suffering, (-) you know. (4)

**INT:** And you went on as a musician in Britain?
AL-W: Yes, oh yes, absolutely.

INT: And how many children have you got?

AL-W: Two. (-) And one of them is a musician and he has got three children and two of them (-) threatening to be musicians. <laughs> And so it goes on. (-)

INT: Have you ever been back to Germany?

AL-W: Yes, I have been back, er, strangely enough, because I absolutely swore, never ever to put my foot on German soil again. Er, (-) but by some funny, er, (-) funny, sort of constellation. You know, the orchestra I play in travels a tremendous amount and=er they've gone to Germany a hundred times, but "Anita doesn't go to Germany, so, okay, somebody else goes, that's fine." And we always got, get lists, er, you know, what we are doing the next month etcetera and I see on one of the lists (-) Soltau and Celle, and these are places very near Belsen. So I rung up the, the office and I said, er, "Sit tight, I'm coming on this trip", because I suddenly thought, I need to see what's become of Belsen. So, (-) I went back for the first time much to the fear of my colleagues who, they all thought, I was going to shoot everybody on sight, but this is, admittedly, was 45 years after (-) I swore never to go again. And=er, (-) it was very fortuitous the whole thing. (-) I went to see, er, the camp

0:27:00

(-) and the museum and some colleagues came along, the museum was extremely disappointing, just a small room, nothing. And, er, it's quite a long story in itself, but I met the, er, the director of the museum. (-) And from that day onwards (-) I'm in contact with the museum, I have been able to contribute a lot there. Now it's a very big museum, it's all been rebuilt. And altogether it has, er, (-) produced only positive things that I have gone back. Also for myself in a way, because I found it is possible for me to talk to a German without (-) cringing, (-) providing he is the right age (-) and I don't have to ask any questions. The first German that I met in, in Germany, was a man of 45, born (-) in 1945. (-) So he didn't have to tell me that he wasn't a Nazi. (-) And I

0:28:00

now, since my book is out in, in Germany, I get invited a lot to go to Germany and I speak to (-) almost a second generation after. And I think it is very important to do that. That we don't actually, er, I mean, (-) bridges have to be built, one has to speak to each other again (-) or it will end badly again. (-) So=er it was a good, good thing that I went back. I mean, I didn't ask for anything that's happened since then. It seemed to be natural, (-) a natural outcome of my first time to go back to, (-) er, to Germany. I mean, I have done better going back, than staying away. (6)
INT: We’ve just come (-) very nearly to the end of the interview || now. // AL-W: Uh-huh. /// ||| Is there anything that you would like to say, that you haven’t said, you feel?

AL-W: You know, <sighs> there is,

0:30:00
there is so much one, one can still say. I think it’s=er, (-) it’s (-) important that people identify with people when we talk about the Holocaust. Because I always feel this idea of six million dead people is, er, (-) is totally futile. Nobody can…, er, there is no concept of that. But the generation that come after us, if they talk about the Holocaust and just think of six million people, it becomes a dead, (-), dead, er, territory. (-) And I think these interviews are important for the people to see that we were actually people and (-) totally normal people and nothing, <laughs> nothing wrong with us, coming from totally normal families, being reduced to what we were reduced to, which led to the, er, to this, er, (-) unprecedented, er (-) mass murder, that, er, that the Holocaust is, (-) which, in a way, (-) cannot be compared with all the

0:31:00
other genocides that have taken place. And I think that is also important, because, er, genocides get lumped together, you know. We got Yugoslavia, we got the Tutsis, we got the, er, the American Indians, whatever, you know, you can…, there’s no end of (-) unbelievably terrible genocides. But the important thing, I think, is to remember that the Holocaust (-) was totally an imagery, er, it wasn’t territorial, it was, (-) it was an ideological, er, (-) total madness to drag people from all over the world, all over Europe, in order to kill them. (-) And there was no question of that they could defend themselves. (-) You know, it wasn’t, it wasn’t <chortles> (-) a fair war. I mean, you know, <struggles for words> it, it… (-) You know what I am talking about, it was, it is unique (-) in the concept, this…, (-) and the, the (-) marvellous way in which it was designed and

0:32:00
premeditated and executed. (5) <lowers her voice> That’s all I can say.

INT: Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, thanks very much indeed.

<End of tape 4>

Tape: 005
0:00:00
INT: <recording starts in mid-sentence> of the interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. Anita, could you tell me whose pictures we are seing now?

<still 1 and 2>

AL-W: These are photographs of my parents, (-) Alfons Lasker and Edith Lasker. (-) // INT: And what was your mother´s maiden name? /// Hamburger. (-) // INT: And where was she from? (-) /// She was born in Gleiwitz, (-) it is Gliwice now, it’s all Polish now. (-) // INT: And your father, where was he born? /// He was born in
Kempen, (--) which is also Polish now. (4) // **INT:** D’you know, (--) do you know where these were taken, at what time they would have been taken? /// <sighs> My father, I think, was about fifty years old then.

So he was born in 1886. (--) So you work that out, <chortles> when that was. He was about fifty, I think. (--) // **INT:** And your || mother, when_? /// My ||| mother, I think, must have been a little bit before that, I can’t really remember. (8)

**INT:** Anita, tell me about this picture.

**AL-W:** This is a picture of my sister Renate, after she came to England and worked for the BBC. (--) // **INT:** And what year would this have been taken, you think? /// I think, (--) 48 [1948] possibly. 1948. // **INT:** And where was it taken? /// Well, it must have_ =at Bush House, I think, because she was working at Bush House. (--) // **INT:** In London? /// Yeah. (6)

**INT:** Anita, tell me about this picture.

**AL-W:** This is a picture of my husband, Peter Wallfisch. He was a pianist. (--) He died at the age of 69, five years ago. And=er we went to school together in Breslau. (--) // **INT:** And this picture was taken here in London? /// Yes, that is a publicity picture for one of his concerts. (8)

**INT:** Anita, who is this, in this picture here?

**AL-W:** This is my son, Raphael Wallfisch. As you can see, he is a cellist as well. And it’s a publicity photograph. // **INT:** And where was Raphael born? /// In London. (--) // **INT:** And what year? /// 1953. (9)

**INT:** And who is in this shot, Anita?
AL-W: This is my daughter Maya. She was born in 1958, also in London. And she is a counsellor by profession. (6)

This is a picture of my eldest grandson, Benjamin. And he is at university now, studying music, he is very gifted, he is a composer, pianist, conductor, you name it. // INT: And when was Benjamin born? // Well, now you are asking me. <chortles> He, he is nineteen now. You work that out. // INT: 89 [1989]. // 89 [1989]. // INT: No, that can’t be right, 79 [1979], (-) 1979, that is nineteen years ago. // 79 [1979], yes. (4)

This is my second grandson, Simon Wallfisch, (-) also threatening to become a cellist. He was born in 1982, also in London. He is still at school now. (4)

And this is my granddaughter, Joanna Wallfisch. (-) She is, er, thirteen now, still goes to school, er, wondering whether she will be an actress or a musician. I think it will probably be actress in the end. (6)

This is my youngest grandson, he is three and a half now, he is my daughter´s son and his name is Abraham Peter Jacobs, (-) also known as as Abe. (8)

And that´s me playing the cello some forty years ago. (--) // INT: Which orchestra were you playing with there? /// English Chamber Orchestra. // INT: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. ///.

That’s me, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and I am playing with the English Chamber Orchestra. This picture was taken at the BBC some forty years ago.

<End of Tape 5>

<End of interview>