Norbert Cohn (NC), born 1925 in Berlin, died 2014 in London. Emigrated to the UK with his parents in 1939. Miriam Cohn (MC), born 1926 in Berlin, died 2004 in London. Miriam came to the UK on the SS Manhattan with the Kindertransport. Norbert attended the first High Holiday services of the synagogue in 1939, and Miriam occasionally took part in the synagogue's activities, when she visited from Wimbledon, where she lived with her foster parents.

Norbert and Miriam Cohn were interviewed by Dr Bea Lewkowicz on the 15th of June 2000.

Perhaps you can start by telling me something about your family background?

NC: Modern Berlin. Started off at a Volksschule in Berlin which I attended until 1933. At the time, we lived in Schöneberg. And then, in the summer of 1933, we moved to Grunewald, and then I attended the Lesslerschule, which was a private school, a Jewish school. I think the title was 'Privat Waldschule Lessler. And I was there from 33 to 39, when the school closed because Frau Lessler and her sister emigrated, and by that time the majority of children had left Germany. And then for about 2 or 3 months I went to the Holdheimschule, which was just off the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin. And we came to England just at the very end of August, a week before the war started in '39. The reason being that my father had to wait for the visa to get a working permit. Lots of people came without the permission to work. Lots of people came without permission to work, but my father decided that, seeing that he had to support five people, my parents, his mother, and the two children, he had to earn some money. And in order to earn some money he needed a working permit.

What was his profession?

NC: In the textile trade. And he was supplying textiles to firms that made ladies dresses and coats. And he also had some representations, firms from Belgium. Lace-making firms. And so, in 1939, that's when we arrived.

And what sort of permit did he get? He managed to get a work permit.

NC: Yes, a work permit. But that took such a long time because he applied after the November pogrom of 1938. Until that time Jews were permitted to work in Germany. After the 10th of

November 1938 he was no longer allowed to work, and that's when he applied to work in England. It took about nine months. Otherwise, we would have been here much earlier. That's how we came to be in London.

Can you tell me about your family background?

MC: I was born in Berlin. We were living in Grunewald. And I went to a local primary school until 1934. I was eight or nine. Then I had to leave and go to a Jewish school. I went to the Goldschmidt Schule, which had started because Leonor Goldschmidt had a split with the Lesser school and they opened shop almost next door to each other. They both had a great number of children, and they prepared most of the older children for taking school certificate in English, so they could come over and learn, and they made sure foreign languages were well taught. We found it very supportive to be in a Jewish school, because you got a lot of support from the teachers, from the school. If members of the family had been interned, they used to enquire after them. And there was a family feeling. My father never believed that anything like the Holocaust would ever happen. My mother who was younger, wanted to emigrate. And unfortunately, after Kristallnacht he was allowed to open the shops again. He wasn't allowed to bake, but he was allowed to open as a café for Jews only. He owned a café. This was unfortunate, because, here you are, but at that time England had offered to take children through the Kindertransport. My parents put my name down, and a school in Wimbledon had offered a free place for one of the refugee children, and I was a refugee child. There were very few Jewish families living in Wimbledon at the time, but one of the families, seeing that they are Jewish, were able to offer to take that child, and they took me.

What was the religious orientation of your family?

MC: Orthodox. I felt very deprived. Because going to children's parties, or if you had to go out, I always had to have separate sandwiches. I wasn't allowed to eat the cake or anything like that. Shabbat and Holidays were restrictive too, because you weren't allowed to drive, … we are not as bad as our children are now… but we did turn on the light. Going to the service, going to an orthodox service, I found it terribly uninspiring. And we were extremely fortunate because we had the old age home almost round the corner from the Grunewald synagogue, where the services were very much like the services of Belsize Square.

What was the name of the old age home?

MC: It was the most modern and the most recently built in Berlin.

So, did you go to services there?

MC: I went to services there. My father was on the management, … so he had to go once every so often anyway. And when I mightn't have gone to the Grunewald Synagogue, I always used to go with him.

But your parents sent you to the local school, not to a Jewish school?

MC: Oh, yes, I went to the local school. But we were allowed to take the holidays off, and we also had Hebrew and religion at the school, so we had a Jewish teacher come, so really until Hitler came there was no change. My father, in spite of his orthodoxy, sent me with the governess to the local church and the local chapel, to see what the services were like.

So, you had a German Christian governess?

MC: Yes, my parents were both working, so…and they were very interesting.

What about the home? Was it a kosher home?

MC: Oh, definitely. Very much so. There was some cutlery stuck in the ground if it had been used for the meat or the milk, and Pesach was a tremendous upheaval, with everything being taken up to the loft, and brought down from the loft. Cooking and all the rest of it. So much so, that I found it restrictive and we discussed it when we got married, we said we wouldn't, we'd just have a liberal household, and now the boys have gone the other way.

What about your religious background?

NC: Well, since 1933 when Jewish life in Berlin became very restricted, the activities centred around the synagogue, because it wasn't only the services, the synagogue was where you met people, and social functions at the synagogue, and of course, I attended the Hebrew classes, and I had my was Barmitzvah in 1938.

When exactly was your Bar Mizvah?

NC: On the 17th of September 1938, on my birthday. And we used to go, … although they did have a daily miniyan, because it was an orthodox synagogue, but we used to go on Friday evenings and Shabbes morning quite regularly, and we've done that ever since, for the last sixty odd years. So, although at home we were not orthodox, the synagogue, which was the centre of Jewish life between 1933 and '39, that was an orthodox synagogue. That's how one was able to get that background of orthodox Judaism.

So, you went to that synagogue because it was the closest synagogue.

NC: Yes, we lived directly opposite the synagogue. About 100 yards.

Can you tell me about your Barmitzvah?

NC: My Barmitzvah was the last one, at the synagogue because by that time most of the families, the children had emigrated. And I had my Bar Mitzvah in September, and of course, the synagogues were burnt down in November, on the 10th of November 1938. So, mine was the last barmitzvah because of course, the synagogue was destroyed. And I remember very clearly on that day in November I got up as usual to go to school, about 7 o'clock. I went to the front room, which was facing the synagogue, and I saw the flames shooting up. And I went into my parents' bedroom, and I said to my father 'Look! The synagogue is burning!' So, he rang the firebrigade at seven o'clock that morning, and he was told: 'Thanks very much for letting us know, but we've already had notification' Of course, they never came. But that incident sits very strongly in my mind, because it affected us very profoundly. It was the centre of our life in those years.

MC: Thinking back. We had a caretaker, and he rang my father during the night. And asked what he should so. He was not Jewish and he asked about the Torah scrolls. And my father told

him that if he could get a taxi and bring it to us. Fortunately, Mr Liebich was able to get the Torah scrolls and bring them to us. I don't know what happed to them after that.

So, he brought them to you.

MC: Yes, while the synagogue was burning.

Did you know Oberkantor Davidsohn?

NC: No, he didn't officiate at the Grunewald synagogue because that was a sort of a minor synagogue. He officiated in the centre of Berlin. And of course, one knew of him, but we didn't have any contact.

MC: I have a feeling he was at my parents' wedding.

NC: They did not get married in Grunewald, they got married in Lindenstraße.

When did your parents get married?

NC: My parents got married in September '22.

And your parents?

MC: In August '24.

And your parents, when did they come to Berlin?

MC: I think they came before the First World War.

And did you know each other in Berlin?

NC: We are sort of third and fourth cousins.

MC: Like the Queen and Philip.

NC: Yes. I think our grandmothers were cousins.

How did your paths cross? At family functions?

NC: Of course, yes. Birthdays and Bar Mitzvahs.

And obviously, your parents knew each other. So, the family connection is through whom?

NC: Through the mothers.

So, the mothers were…

NC: Second cousins.

MC: I think there is a generation gap between them.

Do you remember discussing emigration?

Both: No.

Because obviously, many people were leaving.

NC: Oh yes. But that wasn't a subject, a topic to be discussed by the children, only among the parents.

MC: Looking back, one was lucky to be living in a city like Berlin. Because we did not experience such active antisemitism, as you you had in smaller places.

NC: The antisemitism, the persecution, the actual physical persecution of the Jews was much more prevalent.

MC: And quite often one of the policemen would come and tell my father and my uncle: 'Disappear'.

Do you remember any anti-Semitic incidents as children?

NC: The day after the synagogue was burned one of our next-door neighbours was overheard to say that 'they should have put all the Jews into the synagogue before they set it alight.' This woman lived, I think, two doors away from us.

MC: I think one became much more friendly among the Jewish community, so one didn't really mix.

You didn't have much contact with non-Jewish children.

NC: Not at all. Being in a Jewish school since 1933, one only had contact with one's school friends.

MC: I remember sitting on the yellow school benches just out of pure… with a cousin of mine. We went round all the yellow benches [where only Jews could sit] in the park and sat on them, but nobody ever came near us.

When did you first hear about the possibility of leaving alone for England?

MC: It was after Kristallnacht. It was this great excitement.

Did you know of any of the other children?

MC: A cousin of mine came, a second cousin, came in January. And she went to Stoatley Rough which was a school established by the Quakers. In Haslemere.

Can you tell me about your departure and arrival in England?

NC: Well, I remember we left late evening on Thursday, and we arrived, went via Ostend, and by ship to Dover and then arrived at Victoria Station. And then for one night we stayed at a hotel. And my father found a boarding house in Hampstead, near Swiss Cottage, where we stayed for two weeks.

What was the address?

NC: Buckland Crescent. And I was six, I'm not sure. And then my father found a furnished flat in Greencroft Gardens, where we stayed until 1946. November 1946.

Throughout the war?

NC: Yes.

This was yourself, your brother…

NC: Yes, and my parents and my grandmother. But my grandmother died in '42. She was then 71 years old. But then otherwise the whole family stayed together.

Departure…

MC: Very sad in a way because there was a ruling that only one parent was allowed to come to the station. And my father decided that he would came. I think there was probably a lot of pretence on our part, by myself and my parents. We did not show each other how traumatic it

all was. We left Berlin by train and went to Southampton. We got on to the SS Manhattan, a huge American boat, from Hamburg. We went to Hamburg and from Hamburg to Southampton. And we were on the boat for two days, I think. And it was absolutely marvellous. Such luxury. And we were treated extremely well by staff and all. We had eggs for breakfast. The bunk beds were suprising, because they were made the English way. You know it was tucked in. Everybody made the journey exciting for us. So you didn't have time to feel sorry. And then at Southampton we went on to Waterloo station, to meet whoever. Unfortunately, my guardians and my cousins came at the same time. And my cousins were rather very cold-shouldered by my guardians. I'm not sure why. I think that carried on for years afterwards.

Did you have relatives in England?

MC: Yes, I had. And then they took me to Wimbledon, the guardians. They had two daughters. One was a year older and another three years older than me. And it was a complete culture shock. I just wasn't prepared for it. At home it was all very free and easy and a different relationship, and it was suddenly very English. I think almost more English than the English.

NC: But they were Jewish!

MC: And it was a kosher home at this stage. My father wouldn't have let me go if it hadn't been a kosher home. There wasn't very much observance of the Shabbat. I could make myself understood because we had learned English at school, but there was a whole different way of eating, of living. The food, one could cope with it. At home you were not allowed to cut potatoes with a knife and of course here you cut it with a knife, eating peas was very much easier in Germany because here you've got to put them on a fork with a fork upside down and… And at that stage they had an Austrian girl who'd come over to do domestic service, and Auntie sat at the table and rang the bell every time you wanted the food brought or the table cleared. It was all very alien.

So. it was middle class?

MC: It was middle class, English, Jewish. School was very good. They were absolutely fantastic at school, and I remember on Saturday just sitting there and crying, and my blouse left all sort of marks from my tears, terrible. One wasn't prepared for the culture shock.

What was the biggest element of that culture shock?

MC: I think the sort of restraint that you get in the middle-class English families which you don't get in the working-class families, you know 'to do the right thing'.

Did you correspond with your parents?

MC: Oh yes, and we telephoned. And of course, I never said anything about my situation. And I think my parents felt awful because they felt I wasn't missing them.

How did you get on with the children?

MC: Very well. … with the eldest daughter, the younger one has died since. It was strange between them.

Between?

MC: Between all of them. Strange to me because I wasn't used to it.

And how long did you stay with this family?

MC: 1939 to 1944, so five years. They wanted me to leave earlier, to do my nursery nurse training. Thinking back, it must have been an awful strain having a stranger living with them. And the school and the children's care committee insisted that I stay until I got my school certificate. So, five years.

Now maybe you can tell me about your first memories of Belsize Square.

NC: My very first memories of Belsize Square were the high holidays of 1939. There were services being held in a house in Belsize Park, a house facing St Peter's Church in Belsize Square. And we had a couple of rooms there, fairly large rooms. That was on Rosh Hashanah, September 1939. And my father and I went to the service, and the room was already full. We couldn't get in. It was packed. There were people in the entrance hall. And I remember sitting, finding a seat on the stairs that opened the door of the room. So, the people in the entrance could participate. It was September '39.

How did you hear about these room?

NC: You see, we were obviously part of the refugee community. We didn't know any English people. We only knew continental people during the first few weeks that we were in England. And they said there is a community, synagogue, congregation in Belsize Park, why don't you go to the services there? That's what we did. That's the first memory I've got.

Were there any youngsters? How old were you.

NC: I was fourteen. No, there were no other people my age, none. We've still got a circle of friends from the very early years, going back to 1940, but they were younger. I was already had my Bar Mitzvah in Berlin. None of the others have had theirs. They were two years or four years younger. And it makes a difference, at that age, whether you are ten or fourteen. At that age it does. Now it makes no difference at all. Then it was quite a gap.

You said you were part of a refugee community. What do you remember about being part of that community and living there?

NC: Living in Greencroft Gardens. Going shopping for example. Finchley Road, there was a department store by the name of John Barnes, quite a high-class store. And the other shops in Finchley Road they were more expensive than the shops in Kilburn. Kilburn High Road always used to be appreciably cheaper. And I remember one very small incident. I used to go and buy a two-pound tin of pineapple, which was quite reasonable in those days. On Finchley Road it used to cost six pence, in Kilburn you got it for five and a half pence. So, we went to Kilburn to buy a tin of pineapples. And everybody of course, within our circle of friends told everybody else where to go to get the most reasonable food. That's all what one could buy. You had to walk because nobody could afford to go by bus. And if you did go by bus, or had to go somewhere too far to walk, then if a bus fare was, say two and a half pence, and the next stop would have been say three pence, you got out at the limit of the two and a half pence fare, and just walk the rest in order to save.

So, what did your father do?

NC: Well, he was working in the textile industry. But then of course, he had the Belgian firms, he was importing lace from Belgium. When the war started, the import of goods from the continent was no longer possible, and then he was working with English firms, English textile firms. He had to build up from scratch, he didn't have anything here. But he was permitted to work, and that was the great thing in those days. The vast majority of people if they did work, they did so unofficially, except for the women and men who were in domestic service, because that of course, was a permitted occupation.

Your wife mentioned the culture shock. Did you live the culture shock?

NC: No. Because we lived entirely in a refugee community, German speaking. Even until my parents died, at home we spoke German. Everybody spoke German, the whole of the refugee community spoke German. Belsize Square synagogue, or what started off as the New Liberal Association, and then it became the New Liberal Jewish synagogue, started off as a German speaking association. All the sermons were in German.

Do you remember the sermons?

NC: Dr Salzberger gave the sermons on a Friday evening. During the war, he was evacuated to Hemel Hempstead, because of the bombing, and therefore did not attend the Saturday morning services. But he preached every Friday evening. They were the expositions of the weekly Sidra. They used to call them Bibel Erklärungen [bible explanations] and they were fascinating. And even later after he retired in about 1955, 1956, when Rabbi Kokotek joined us, his sermons were in German at first. Until people objected, because they said: 'Our children cannot understand German anymore. They have been been born here, they are teenagers and they don't' speak German'. That's when we switched to English. And the last thing to retain the German sermon was the Seelenfeier on Yom Kippur. That was still done in German.

And now?

NC: Now of course there is no German at all. Because of course, Rodney doesn't know any German.

So, the Seelenfeier was even printed in German?

NC: Oh yes. Yes.

You were young, so what impression did the service make on you? Was it familiar?

NC: Oh yes. Yes.

Because you were used to a more orthodox synagogue in Berlin.

NC: How different was it? The basic difference is that we didn't have the repetition of the Amidah. We didn't have the prayer for the reintroduction of animal sacrifices, and we didn't have the prayer for the rebuilding of the temple. But that obviously shortened the whole service, if you leave out a certain proportion then of course, it's a much shorter service. And the rest of it was, more or less, the same. Basically, those three things were omitted.

Did your mother also come to the synagogue, or was it mostly your father and yourself?

NC: Mostly my father and myself, and my brother. Because he had his Bar Mitzvah in Belsize Square in 1947, after the war.

What other things do you remember of the social activities of Belsize Square?

NC: It was exactly the same as it used to be in Berlin after 1933. The synagogue was the centre of all Jewish social activity. Nobody had any money to go to the theatre or go away on holidays, or travel, or do anything. So, everything was synagogue-centred, all social activities. We used to have the Sunday afternoon entertainment with Oberkantor Davidsohn and Melitta Heim who used to play the piano, and we used to have song recitals by Hanni Lichtenstern.

Did you attend the Sunday afternoons?

NC: Oh yes, every week. Who was the other singer?

MC: I don't know.

So, at that time you were not coming?.

MC: Well, we were living in Wimbledon.

That's right. Were you in contact with each other during the war?

MC: Yes, I used to come visiting when I was allowed to. And I remember coming and it was something to look forward to. Going back, I used to go to Waterloo on the Northern Line and then got on the Southern line to go to Wimbledon, it was awful going back. Because you were there within the community and then I had to go back. I remember Norbert's mother used to give me some money, going home, as a present. I don't know whether the rest of the family knew.

NC: I just remember Franzi Goodman used to do the entertainment. And then we had lectures by Rechtsanwalt Dr Freyhahn about Goethe, Schiller and all the German classics. And every Sunday afternoon there was activity.

Did you attend things in the synagogue or not?

MC: No.

Did you come for social visits?

MC: Very rarerly, as I had started nursing by then. On occasions I came to some concerts. At the beginning I felt as a stranger because they all knew each other and I was practicallay an outsider. I only knew Norbert and some of the people.

NC: Well, it was a very close-knit community because everybody knew everybody else. Everybody was dependent on everybody else. Everybody counted. Now if you go to Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah on Yom Kippur, there are hundreds of people who you don't know.

That was not the case?

NC: Not in those days. You knew everybody.

What about school?

NC: I went to Willesden College, which was in Willesden Lane at that back of what used to be called the State Cinema. I walked. I could have taken the bus if I'd had the money. But I walked there.

Were there other refugee children in that school?

NC: No. I was the only one. Why did I go there? Well, my brother went to the Hall School, near Swiss Cottage. Of course, he was nine years younger than I am. The Hall School is a prep school and only goes to the age of thirteen. So, from The Hall people went to ther private schools. When we came to England, my brother was only five, so he went to the Hall. Of course, I was beyond that age. I was fourteen.

So, did you have contact with local children?

NC: From School? No. No private contact at all. None at all, the only contact was from people from our own refugee community.

So, in Belsize Square, who were your friends, your age or younger?

NC: There was nobody my age in those years. There was Karl Heinz Goodman, and Herbert Levi, and Heinz Kuttner.

Now Henry Kuttner.

NC: Henry Kuttner yes.

NC: He was Heinz then.

When did he change his name?

NC: I don't know. I still know him as Heinz.

All boys.

NC: Yes. My brother, who went to the Hall school and was friendly with the Summerfield twins, Peter and Günther, now George. They were only one year older than he was. But again, they were from the the same background, from Berlin.

Was your father interned?

NC: No. He was very fortunate because when the internment was at its height in 1940, he used to get up very early in the morning, about 5 o'clock, and leave home and go for a walk in Regent's Park. So that if anybody were to come from the police, he would be out. And in fact, they did come, and he was out. But there was an elderly gentleman, who was about fifteen years older than my father at that stage, and he was at home and he was taken away. So, it was just fortunate that my father went for these early morning walks, out of the house.

How did the war affect both of you?

NC: I was an air-raid warden. If there was an air-raid, we had to be out patrolling the streets. And if there was a firebomb we had a bucket and pump to put out any of the firebombs. And the air raids were mostly at night. So that was in those days of course, a bit of excitement. For teenagers, things were happening.

MC: The main worry was of course, to have no news from our parents. In the beginning there used to be the Red Cross letters. And until America came into the war, the second cousin I had in Haslemere, her parents were in America then. And her parents were in New York and my parents used to write to her and I used to get the letters. But in '41 I had no news.

Where was the last letter sent from?

NC: From Berlin. And then my mother wrote, just after the outbreak of war, 'Can you see that we can get out?' There was no way at all of doing anything about that. We were evacuated for about six months, we went out to Bogner Regis.

The school?

MC: No, the school went to Wales.

Who was evacuated?

MC: My guardian was in the Territorial, in the Home Guard. And we went down to Bogner Regis, and I got a free place in the school the girls went to. And it was very interesting, because it was the first time I encountered Christmas. They put their stockings out, and we went singing to collect money for charity, and it was all very exciting. I remember we belonged to the sea-rangers and I remember cycling along the coast with my bicycle. Some people were worried about me being German. Fortunately, nothing happened. When France fell, we came back to Wimbledon, and it was in a way exciting. The school got bombed and the classes were in the air-raid shelters, and exams were taken in the air-raid shelters.

Were you quite isolated?

MC: Very isolated. And I always feel now, with the refugee children, or children being taken into safety, they should make sure they are within the community, rather than as outsiders. Mind you, at school I was never made to feel an outsider.

Did you ever experience any anti-German sentiment? Or antisemitism?

MC: My guardian felt that when the Polish Jews people came out of Poland, the Germans Jews didn't really want to have much to do with them. And here was I being looked after by her, a Polish Jewish woman. In a way, that made me feel as if I was responsible for the way German Jews had behaved to Polish Jews. But otherwise at school they were delighted if I made mistakes in my English, and they were kind about it.

Did you ever experience any anti German sentiment or antisemitism during the war?

NC: No. The only thing I recall, at school, lots of boys joined the air training corps, which was the Junior branch of the Royal Airforce, and I was turned down because I wasn't British, and I was quite disappointed, because the other boys, not all, but quite a number of them joined the Air Training Corps. But I couldn't because I was a foreigner. That was about the only thing I remember.

Were you careful about not speaking German outside on the street for example, do you remember that?

NC: We certainly do remember that lots of people said 'You mustn't speak German', but of course we always did.

MC: With our accents.

NC: We always spoke German, wherever we were. At home, in the street, in the shops, wherever. No, we didn't feel inhibited.

So, what are your first memories of Belsize Square synagogue?

MC: My first memories are of the Friday evening services at St John's Wood synagogue. I was in a hostel. It was great. Every holiday I went to various places to give us both a relief, and I was in a hostel in Randolph Crescent, again run by the Children's Care committee, for girls who had already started work. I was the youngest, I was very spoilt, we all had to sleep downstairs because of the air-raids, and they told us about this Friday evening service in St John's Wood, and I was absolutely enthralled, because it was as we used to have at home. And unfortunately, it was too far away from Wimbledon, but I went there for two weeks that I was at the hostel. I went to the service there.

So, it was very familiar.

MC: Very. So, after that, because my guardians were members of Brixton, we liked it. But it was strange, but there was nothing there. I don't' think I started coming to these services… was it before we were married? Yes, I did come. I went to the High Holy Day services in various places and enjoyed them. But otherwise… But our wedding was the first Jewish wedding I'd attended

since I was a child of five or six. In Berlin my cousins got married. And of course, it was all very strange.

Do you remember Lily Montague?

NC: Oh yes. She was the first chairman of the synagogue. She was very active. She wasn't only chairman in an honorary capacity, but she also used to actually chair our board meetings, so she was an active participant in the running of the synagogue. And on occasion she also used to preach. She was a lay-preacher at the synagogue. And on occasion she used to preach a sermon at the synagogue, but she was very closely involved as chairman of the board in the actual running of affairs.

MC: I don't remember her.

So, you became a board member in 1952?

NC: No, in 1950.

And when did you get married?

MC: In '63.

So, what happened after you finished school?

NC: Then I started studying at City University. And then I went to, what used to be called the 'London Refraction Hospital', and is now called the Institute of Optometry, and I'm still there, one day a week. Just working there one day a week, that's all I do, in a professional capacity. Other than that, I'm still closely involved with administrative work for the Camden and Islington Health Authorities, and with the College of Optometrists.

What made you choose this career path?

NC: I wanted to study medicine. That was in about 1941-42. And at that stage, in the middle of the war, we didn't know if we were allowed to remain in England when the war finished. Obviously, one hoped that the war would finish in a year or two years, at that stage no one would foresee that it would go on until 1945. But the impression was, well another year, or two years, probably, and then the British government may say well you are no longer to be regarded as refugees, you may go back to Germany, because Germany now, is where you came from, this is your country, you've got to go back. And we discussed the matter at home, and said, well, medical training takes five years. The war can't last as long as that, not another five years. The first war only lasted four years. And then they may say well, if I'm just in the middle of a medical course, if I've done only to years, say and then they say well go back to Germany, then in Germany they wouldn't recognise those two or three years and I'd have to start from scratch, from the very beginning. It would be a waste of time. So, this is when we decided that optometry is a sort of allied subject but wouldn't take as long. That's why we decided on that.

And how long was the training?

NC: At that stage it was two years at the University and two years at the hospital.

And so, while you were studying and training you were still involved in Belsize Square?

NC: Oh yes, all the time, all the time. Throughout, yes. In fact, I have got a prayer book which was presented to me by Dr Salzberger in Purim 1944 with a German inscription: 'Donated on behalf of the synagogue to Norbert Cohn for his achievements in the religion classes of the synagogue'.

Tell me about the religion classes.

NC: They were started in 1940. Karl Heinz Guttmann's mother and my father went to Dr Salzberger and they said: 'our boys need some religious education'. I was 15, and Karl Heinz was 13 at the time and and our parents wanted religious education to be provided for us. So, we were the first two, after school, on a Thursday afternoon after school we went to Buckland Crescent, and it was just Karl Heinz and me, and later there was Heinz Kuttner and Herbert Levi, and Kurt Schmeidler, and that was the whole school, one class, and we used to meet on a Thursday afternoon. And there was no Hebrew. It was just what we called 'Religionsunterricht'.

What was the content?

NC: History, festivals and customs.

Did you also teach?

NC: No.

So, for how many years did you attend?

NC: I attended from 1940 to 44.

So, at that time you went to the classes and then went every Friday and Saturday.

NC: Yes.

So, what made you decide to become a board member in 1950?

NC: We had a youth group called the Claude Montefiore circle, CMC. The youth group in those days went up to 30 because up to the age of 30 we were considered to be a youngster. The previous chairman of the CMC had been a member of the board, Peter Wagner, he's now in America. And when I became chairman of the CMC in 1950, I was elected to the board as representative of the youth.

So, when did you become involved with the Claude Montefiore Circle?

NC: When it was founded in '45. It was founded by Hans Kuttner and Eric Goodman.

Can you tell me about the activities of the Claude Montefiore Circle?

NC: Well in the early years they used to have a lot of theatre shows, they used to have plays. They used to write their own plays and perform them on a Sunday afternoon. Our main activity

used to be lectures on a Saturday evening. We had regular lectures. We used to have on average about 20 or 25 people attending. Mostly on religious subjects, being the synagogue youth group of course. Then we used to have regular, on Friday evenings, our own youth service in the synagogue and then we used to go out in a Friday evening meal in a restaurant on the in Finchley Road.

Which one?

NC: It was The Blue Danube, which was a club, a theatre club in Finchley Road, downstairs in the basement, and they had a restaurant.

So, there were more young people?

NC: Oh yes, this was in 1950. It must have been about 35.

Was the idea behind the circle to have a social place, or to provide entertainment?

NC: Both. Yes.

Was there a sort of idea of the community to meet each other or to marry.

NC: Yes, we did have a number of marriages arise from those activities. And then we used to have rambles, in the summer months, outings, it was very active. And then it unfortunately finished in 56. I was chairman between 1950 and 56. By that time of course, people were much older, so they didn't consider themselves to be the youth anymore. In 1956 I was 31. I was the chairman, and I was the youngest member of our community. So, everybody else was 34 and 36 and 38. So we decided we can't call it a youth group anymore. So that's when we decided to finish.

So, on the board you represented the youth?

NC: I represented the youth, yes.

Did you attend any of the activities?

MC: Very rarely. I used to go to a few concerts, and some gatherings.

Where were you then?

MC: I started nursing in 44, and I must have been in Chase Farm Hospital. I was living in Edmonton, and I remember we had some meetings, and arriving on a bicycle. I think that wasn't the done thing, because quite a number of people had cars by then. And I arrived very sweaty on my bicycle.

On public transport?

MC: Public transport was very difficult from Enfield to Edmonton and it was much quicker to get there on my bicycle. And having been outside the community, I had to show myself as wanting to be part of the community. And it was quite easy. I got invited to all the functions, and gradually I wormed my way in, but I didn't attend many of the functions.

Did you go back to Germany after the war? How did you find out what happened to your parents?

MC: I think we were notified. At least they tried to make enquiries. You know, I cannot really remember. I think we were notified or my cousins found out what had happened to them. I think a lot of us were in the same position as myself, we had never had time for mourning, and you had to get on with living and you never got a time for mourning.

Can you tell me about your wedding?

NC: Yes. Well, that was conducted by Rabbi Kokotek and Joe Dollinger, who was the Chazzan. And we had decided, seeing that both of our parents had married in Berlin, that we would follow the same pattern at our wedding as our parents had done in Berlin, so we decided that we would come together side by side into the synagogue, instead of the groom standing under the Chuppah and waiting for the bride to be brought into the Chuppah. We decided that we would come together into the synagogue. And then Rabbi Kokotek sent us a message.

Why?

NC: He wanted the English, so called English ritual, so he wanted the bridegroom to be under the *Chuppah* and we said no, we want to follow the pattern of the Berlin weddings. So just as we were coming in, he sent us a message and said, 'OK if you are coming in together, you must not hold hands. You mustn't touch.' The other thing that produced an awful lot of upset with Kokotek at that time was my refusal to break the glass. Because again that wasn't done in Berlin. There were are a number of explanations why we break the glass, for example that it is a reminder of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and a reminder of the suffering. But they are also other explanations, which have to do with scaring away the evil spirits, because in Germany, there used to be, the day before the wedding, they used to call it a 'Polterabend', where they broke the glass against the front door of the house, friends and neighbours used to come, and with some old plates or cups, chipped, broken, and then throw it against the door in order to scare away the evil spirits. And I said 'I'm not going to break the glass', because I was against the superstition of breaking the glass.

MC: And Norbert had to go back to discuss it on a Sunday morning.

NC: Kokotek was upset because he thought thay this is the local custom. And I said we are following the Berlin custom. Both or our parents got married in Lindenstraße in Berlin and one didn't break a glass.

MC: So, we did get married in Belsize Square in the end. I haven't got a Ketuba, but I think that's…

Why is that?

MC: I don't know. They had to get a new one.

NC: At that time, we were still members of the Liberal Congress of Synagogues, and they were reprinting their marriage certificate. We've got the English marriage certificate, from the registry office. Of course, an orthodox Ketuba is written by hand. But of course, with the Liberals it's just a piece of paper, and it's printed. So, at that stage Belsize Square was still part of the Liberal movement. And they were still in the process of reprinting the Ketubah, and so Rabbi Kokotek said, I'll let you have it when it's available. And we're still waiting.

MC: When our son Jeremy got married he had terrible trouble, because our *Ketubah* wasn't recognised by the United Synagogues. I hadn't got my mother's Ketuba. I was furious at the time, and they had terrible difficulties to get that all sorted out.

NC: On my birth certificate it says 'Mosaic'.

MC: After Norbert was born, they stopped writing the religion on the Birth Certificate.

NC: They didn't say 'Jewish', they said 'Mosaic', and Miriam didn't have it. If that had been on the birth certificate, there would have been no trouble. It's not recognised because it's outside the orthodox fold.

What had changed when Kokotek became the new rabbi of the community?

NC: Basically, Salzburger was an academic, he didn't take very much part in social activities, wheras Kokotek did.

What other changes occurred?

MC: The change of name and the new hall.

NC: That wasn't until 1970, 1973. The change of name, yes. Change of language from German to English, and from, more recently, from Ashkenazi to Sephardi pronounication, that was about 25 years ago, when we changed the pronouciation from Ashkenazi to Sephardi. But that provoked a tremendous lot of friction. Because there were one group of people who said, that given we are teaching Sephardi pronunciation in the school, we should have it now in the synagogue services, so that young people can follow the service. But some people said, well it's not in the tradition, it's the constitution, it says that it should be based on the tradition that we brought over from the continent, and Sephardi certainly wasn't our tradition in Germany, and in fact I remember Kokotek saying that people had suggested a referendum. Not just a general meeting, but a referendum you see, of about 1500 letters to be sent out, asking 'Which would you prefer?' And Kokotek said, well, at that stage, even today we only get on average, on Friday evenings and Saturday morning, about 70 or 80, if we are lucky out of the 1250. And Kokotek said he would not be told how to pronpouce his prayers by 1000 people who never come to synagogue anyway. He would only account for the votes of the people who attend the service on a regular basis.

What was your attitude?

NC: My personal attitude was to retain the Ashkenazi, because I can't speak Sephardi. Even we have had the Sephardi pronunciation now for 25 years, … this is the way I learnt it and this is

the way I carry on saying the prayers. But if you haven't learnt it, that is a different matter. I remember Rodney saying on one occasion he can't say the Kaddish in the Ashkenazi way. And the Kaddish is one of the basic prayers of the synagogue service. If you've got a Minyan, you can say a Kaddish. So, it's one of the most basic prayers in the service. And he said if he were asked to do it in Ashkenazi, he says he can't do it. In the same way I can't do it in Sephardi.

What were the other main issues?

NC: Changing the name was a big thing. Because it was New Liberal Jewish Association then became the New Liberal Jewish Synagogue. And then there was a tremendous discussion, because at that stage we looked at the actual words. We said 'Synagogue, yes. Jewish Synagogue, yes.' But we are no longer 'new', because we have been in England now since 1939, we've been here for thirty years or so, and we are not 'Liberal', in the English sense of the term. We are what used to be called in Germany Liberal and that's completely different. So 'new' wasn't applicable, and 'liberal' wasn't applicable. So that left 'Jewish Synagogue.' And that's not a name, so then somebody suggested very wisely that many United Synagogues are named after their location, like Dennington Park, like Hampstead Synagogue, like Lyndhurst Gardens, Finchley Synagogue. So, somebody said: 'why not call ourselves Belsize Square, because that's where we are', so that was accepted. But that took quite a long time to arrive at that compromise because people were against it. Some people suggested why don't we give it a Hebrew name? We've got it now, but that's recent. Because if we were to give it a Hebrew name half of the people didn't know what it meant. Because the level of Hebrew knowledge of the majority of our members is very limited. So, if we had a Hebrew name they wouldn't know the meaning of it, so we decided on 'Belsize Square'.

What about the issue of women's participation? What do you think about it?

NC: A very big issue.

MC: I think that if the women want to be involved, provided I don't have to do it, I think you know it's a personal thing. I know it's against the tradition, but why is it going to be such an issue?

NC: I'm totally in favour of women's participation, because it's been my experience over a very long number of years that when a girl becomes a Bat Mitzvah, she does it, generally speaking, much better than when a boy becomes a Bar Mitzvah. And the reason is, it isn't obligatory for a girl to become Bat Mitzvah, it is voluntary. If they want it, they put much more effort into it,

and they do it much better, in the reading of the Hebrew and the reading of the English. And that's also important although many people overlook it. If they speak English, they think they can read it, in public. And of course, that doesn't apply at all. Many Bar Mitzvah boys, their reading is absolutely atrocious, their English reading. They've learned the Hebrew, because they've been to classes for a year. But their English is terrible, really terrible. But when the girls do it, they do it much much more clearly, distinctly, their reading makes sense. That's why I say that if girls want to do it, if they are keen to participate, they should not be prevented from taking part in the service.

MC: Our daughter Judith was the first to have a Bat Mitzvah in the way we do it now. Norbert fought for that.

So how do you see the future of Belsize Square? Not just on the women's issue but in general?

NC: In general? We are, I think, one of the very few synagogues in this country who have been able to maintain their numbers. The vast majority are declining. Because of the decline in Jewish population. Only about fifty years ago, there were about half a million Jews living in England. It went down to 450,000. A few years ago, they conducted another census, and they came up to 300,000. Now it's gone down to 280, 000. But in Belsize Square, we've still got 1250 members.

MC: I think it's the family atmosphere and family feeling, especially the new members who have joined, they say they have that special feeling about Belsize Square. Being friendly and open, that's our main attraction.

NC: Yes, we get a lot of children for Bar and Bat Mitzvah lessons on a Shabbath morning. Sometimes there are about 20 youngsters sitting there before our service starts. That's very encouraging.

MC: I don't know how long they will stay, but I often go up to them and I talk to them, and they say 'we do like it here. It's just the atmosphere,' one can almost sense a family atmosphere.

Do you think Belsize Square is still a German Jewish synagogue?

NC: To me it is. In as far as our friends, our own personal friends are all members of the synagogue, the ones that are still alive. But if you go there on Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur, and there are 1000 people there and you only know a handful of people and the vast majority of them are complete strangers to me, and of course, they are new people. They are all… if

somebody is now 50 or 55, they were born here, they haven't got that continental background. Their history and culture and their whole way of life is different to ours.

In which way?

NC: Because they are anglicised. Whereas I still live in the past. I wouldn't object to a German sermon.

MC: I would.

What else? What does it mean that you still live in the past?

NC: The sort of thing that strikes me, is that every few years, at the High Holy Day services, we move around from place to place. At Belsize Square we can accommodate about 300 or 350 people. Now we need a separate hall for the children's service to accommodate about 250 or 300, we need a huge place. We've got to move. In the old days we used to start off, except for the one where we sat on the stairs in Belsize Park, we used to go to the Unitarial Church in Quex Road in Kilburn, a church hall. And then we moved to St Stephen's Church, which is right next to the Royal Free Hospital in Haverstock Hill. It's been standing empty now for the last 40 years. Then we moved to Wigmore Hall. Then from there we went to Friends House in Euston. Then we moved to St. Pancras Town Hall. Then we moved to the cinemas, the Odeon in Swiss Cottage, the State Cinema in Kilburn, then we moved to the cinema in Wood Green, then we moved to the Grosvenor Rooms in Willesden Lane, now we are at the Decorium in Wood Green. I don't know how many venues we have used, but it must be at least a dozen. So, every time we move, I'm reminded of the story of the wandering Jew, even though it's still our community, our own synagogue. We are still the wandering Jews. On Rosh Hashanah we are still wandering from here to there non-stop. That is our story.

MC: That is our story.

NC: That is our story because we were wandering from Berlin. But not the new people. They are not wandering, not in the sense that we were Vertriebene. Our son Jeremy has been in Jerusalem, in Israel, for 15 years. But that was a voluntary move. He was not forced to go. We were forced to leave Germany. That is the basic difference. This is why the new people, the younger people, they were not forced to leave England. They are still here. And this is, in that sense this change, for every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur reminds us of our own history.

What role did Belsize Square play in your refugee experience?

NC: It has been the focus of our lives, of our experience. And our children as well, as soon as anything comes up, they want to know. In Jerusalem, we told them about the new website and they spent the next hour reading it. And they have got all the details about the synagogue and they still feel part of it because this is where they spent their childhood.

What is the most important aspect of Belsize Square to you?

MC: It's a home. A second home in a way.

NC: It's the social cohesion.

NC: And the noting of the shortcomings. It's like a family. There are family quarrels, if you live as part of a family, father mother brother, sisters, uncles, aunts, there's bound to be differences of opinion, quarrels, upsets, but it's still a family. Exactly the same applies to Belsize Square.

Is it a bridge to the past for you?

NC: No.

MC: To the future.

NC: It's lovely. *On Simchah Torah*, I don't know how many kids we have parading, about 200? That is our future. There must be more than 200. They've split it now. It is really beautiful. It makes it worthwhile to think, well, you've worked for the synagogue, you've been active in supporting it, and this is our future. And to see all these children.

MC: It's lovely to see it as a sort of tree of life. To think you know, Hitler would be turning in his grave, and here we are.

NC: Yes, I suggested a name. Rodney said: 'we must have a Hebrew name'. Until a few years ago we didn't. So, I suggested Etz Chaim, 'tree of life'. And there were other suggestions. And it was discussed and voted on. And my suggestion got the most votes. And that was adopted. I thought that a tree, if it's got roots that go sufficiently deep into the earth, it will withstand the wind and the rain and he snow and the frost, if its roots go deep enough. If there is enough support, it will flourish. And the same thing applies to our synagogue.

You've been a board member now for 50 years. What do you see as your main contribution to the synagogue?

NC: Being there. This is our responsibility. Particularly funerals and cremations. I always go. Since I am retired, now for the last 8 years, I always go. Funerals and cremations, to represent the synagogue. And sometimes there isn't anybody else.

And the last thing, the women's society.

MC: The women's society has always been very strong. It was started by Mrs Salzberger. She was the first chairman. It was always very strong because there were a lot of single people.

NC: Hundreds. There were hundreds.

MC: Mainly women. They started the Friday evenings, dinners, and then they had a lot of get-togethers, and they went out, when money was easier to come by, they went on outings all over the place. To Holland, weekends away. I wasn't involved. I was still working. Norbert's mother was involved, and they also organised the hosting on Sukkoth to get the Kiddush rotas, and I went with Norbert's mother. It went on for a long time, and it was great. And there was a feeling that the women ought to include the men as well, which was fine, on Friday evenings. It became open to men, they were invited. We also got the children involved, and this was when we started getting the PTA going and some of us from the PTA (Parents Teachers Association) went into the Women's Society, because it felt we had to do something with the Women's Society to get the whole congregation involved. And that's what the women are there for.

So, the Womens' Society was representing the older women?

MC: Very much so. To make it alive again we had to get younger people in. And to be involved. We had functions there, and we used to see that the children are fed before we went off. We had sausages and all sorts of things and hot bread, and we got it going. It was a great shame that the Women's Society was stopped.

Also, the Women's Society also read out the names of the women, the memorial, for the women without families?

MC: Yes, that was once a year, an initiative of the Women's Society.

When are they read out?

MC: Before Pesach. And there are so many now. It's printed out now. And they have a memorial service, and that definitely was a great support.

NC: Because there were so many single elderly ladies. Hundreds.

MC: There used to be a lot of them working as sales assistants in the shops, and they were all lonely jobs.

MC: It was a lifeline. Absolute lifeline.

So, when did it stop?

MC: About ten years ago. It's missed even more so now as the people get older and they feel they could really do with it. They've got this membership, this members' group.

NC: This members' group, but there's nothing there for the elderly. For some years I was a member of the welfare committee of the synagogue, and we've always had a part- time social worker for the synagogue. So, we've had the Welfare Committee for many years. My late mother was a member of the Welfare Committee. We've had a part-time social worker, but not a qualified Social Worker.

MC: A lot of our members are members of the Lodge, the Leo Baeck Lodge, and they are covered by us.

NC: There is a large overlap.

Is there anything else you'd like to add which we haven't discussed.

NC: Can you remind me of some subjects.

We've discussed the Rabbis, your involvement, etc. Most aspects. Is there anything else? Have we covered the issues which are relevant? Maybe one thing we haven't covered, and that is the past and history. How do you see the role of Belsize Square in terms of the commemoration of a German-Jewish heritage or the Holocaust? I visted the memorial in the cemetery which was erected in the fifties.

NC: Yes, under the auspices of the Chevre Kadisha.

And I saw the plaque which was erected last year. My question is how do you feel about it and how should the past be commemorated?

NC: That's a very interesting point, because again we've had some heated discussion last year on this subject, because I suggested we should have in the synagogue, inside, or in the entrance Hall, a memorial to the six million martyrs. Other synagogues have that. And there was a prolonged discussion, and there was a vote, and my proposal was outvoted. People said they don't want to be reminded of the Holocaust every time they come to a synagogue. To me somehow that doesn't make sense, because every time there is a synagogue service, we say Kaddish. Now when you say Kaddish you don't say Kaddish only for your own family, your own father and mother, but for the community. You think of the community. And if you read the prayer and our books, the Yiskor it refers specifically to people of the community who have died. And if we say Kaddish, we are being reminded of the people who have died, who have been killed, or murdered. I think this argument is erroneous to say they don't want a memorial in the synagogue, they don't want to be reminded. They don't leave the synagogue when Kaddish is being said. So, I think it's a fallacious argument. I was very much in favour to having a memorial to the Holocaust. And as a compromise, a very inefficient compromise now we have that little plaque there which is not adequate by any means.

NC: Talking about memorial boards, in the entrance we have the Sidra board, where there is the announcement of the weekly Sidra and the Haftara. And that had been made, hand painted by Rabbi Kokotek, probably about 1957, '58. And he used to put up the readings every week. And he died in about 1980, and then I took it over. And then Rodney came, and I said it's been the Rabbi's duty to put up the weekly readings on this board. I've been doing it since Kokotek died, would you like to carry on doing it? And he said 'Well, if you've been doing it, you carry

on. You do it.' So, I've been doing it for the last twenty years. Now it's getting a little bit shabby. And to some people it's not modern enough. It doesn't fit into the ambiance of the refurbished synagogue, 'we want something more modern'. So, money has been donated. And I made enquiries about getting a new Sidra board. The problem with us is that we are on the triannual cycle of Torah readings. In other words, we read one third of the Sidra each year. In an orthodox synagogue for example you read Bereshis. So, all you need to do is put up that word and everybody will know this will be read on that Shabbat. With us, the first year we read the first third, the second year the second third, the third year, the last part of Bereshis. It's cut into three. So that means we've got to put up Bereshis, 'Verse, number, verse, and so on. Which is only a third of the whole. Now a thing like that doesn't exist. So, I made enquiries. I took it to the owner of 'Jerusalem the Golden', in Golders Green Road. And he made enquiries and said that nothing like this exists. It doesn't exist. So, he said: why do you want to change it anyway?' He said this Sidra board is imbued with the spirit of holiness. So now it's going to be changed, in any case. But what can you do? This is the more modern approach. And this is where I feel after fifty years on the board I have done enough, let them carry on with their modernisation.

Thank you very much for this interview.