



Lilian Levy, born 1939 in London. She started to attend the youth group of the synagogue shortly after she came to the UK as a child survivor from Bergen-Belsen in 1946.

Lilian Levy was interviewed by Dr Bea Lewkowicz on the 11th of February 2000.

The focus of this interview is going to be Belsize Square Synagogue, but could you tell me a little bit about your background and about your life, and then we can go on to Belsize Square.

I was born in London, on the 14th of August 1939, and I was born to a mother who was from Vienna, and a father from Frankfurt on Main, and they managed to flee from Germany. And my mother had come here [to the UK] to have me. My father was still in Holland when the war broke out three weeks after my birth. So, my mother went back to Amsterdam to be with him and then they were not able to leave. My parents ended up in Bergen-Belsen, where they died, and after the war, I was sent to an orphanage in Laaren, in Holland, and then was brought back to England, to be with an aunt who had survived the war in England. She was my mother's sister. And she was unable to keep me and had me put up for adoption, and I was adopted six weeks after my arrival, by a family who were German Jews themselves, and had escaped in 1933. He was a paediatrician, and she didn't work. She was very artistic, painted beautifully, and they were very good parents to me, but were very old when they adopted me. My father was then 60, and my mother 58, and I was probably a very difficult

child, I don't remember it, but I think I must have been. And they handled it very well, but having such old parents was quite difficult. At school particularly, when everybody said: "Look, your granny is coming to fetch you." I arrived in England in 1946 and my aunt, Alice Deutsch, who was a member of Belsize Square synagogue and introduced me to the community immediately. I found a second home there, which I was very happy about. I felt it was some sort of haven, always did feel that.

Was your identity always known to you, in the orphanage?

Yes. I knew my name. There was a letter in existence, written by another camp survivor. When my father realised he wasn't going to survive the war, he was in touch with Mr Birnbaum, who was a camp inmate. He, his wife and six children, they all survived, and my father gave him all details concerning me and concerning my aunt back in England, my only relative, and Birnbaum knew who I was, knew who to contact, and he arranged it all after the war. He himself ended up in Israel, but all of that I only discovered very much later. It's another whole story how I discovered that.

Can you tell me about your first impressions of Belsize Square? Your first memories?

My first impression is that it was a very warm place, and I loved the music. This is obviously a child's impression, aged six or seven. My earliest memories again were of the Friday night services. I went to the services. I loved the melodies. I never went on a Saturday morning, always on the Friday.

Where did they take place then?

It was in Buckland Crescent. In rather small and cramped conditions. I remember the singers, Franzi Goodman was one and Alice Rosenthal was another. Some lovely voices. They moved to Belsize Square in 1951. That's when we went there. But then it was only in the old vicarage, the other rooms were added later. One of the first things I remember was Kaye's restaurant. Have you heard about that? That was where the Seder was held, and Pesach, I used to enjoy that. After

Bergen-Belsen I had a very orthodox upbringing I mean 'education', the conditions were not suitable for any upbringing. Any education I got was orthodox. Birnbaum had been a very orthodox gentleman, a teacher in a Jewish school. So, when I came to England, I knew all the prayers and the *Ma Nishtana*. And so, at the Seder at Kaye's restaurant I was asked to say the *Ma Nishtana*. So, I said it beautifully, I think. People were weeping all around me. I couldn't understand why at the time. Had I said it so badly? But I realise now why everybody got upset.

Where was Kaye's restaurant?

St John's Wood. I can't remember the name of the road. It was very near where that picture of the Beatles is.

Yes, Abbey Road. Was that a regular thing?

Yes, several years. And it was the communal Seder. And we have them still to this day. They are much more official now. They were quite small. I remember Dr Salzberger conducting them.

What do you remember?

Well, the restaurant would now be considered poky, dark and dingy. At the time, I thought it was unbelievable luxury. I went with my aunt, and everybody made a big fuss about me. This was of course with a child's view.

Were you the only child present?

No, there were other children there. I think of one in particular, Paula Dannheisser. Have you ever come across the name Dannheisser? Paula was a girl of exactly the same age as me, six weeks younger, who had been born in Holland and her parents had placed her with a Protestant family and had themselves gone into hiding, had been betrayed, and were never seen again. Paula was sent to England before the war because her father's brother was here, whose surname was also Danheisser, so they never bothered to adopt her

formally because they had the same surname. And she spoke Dutch, as I did, it was the only language I had at the time. And we were very good friends, and we still are to this day. So, she was always there too. There were other children. They weren't all camp survivors or hidden children. There were plenty who had survived in England at that time.

Did your adopted parents belong to the synagogue?

No, they had absolutely no interest in it whatsoever. In fact, my father only joined it, in order to be buried some 25 years later.

Why were they not interested?

LL. They were not at all interested in anything Jewish. And I went through a very holy phase, I was very religious when I was 18 and had to have some strong arguments with my father about the merits of religion, belief, and he said: 'You are very lucky to be able to feel like that. I don't.' I've come round to his way of thinking by now. So, they had no interest. They were the sort of Jews who did not know they were Jewish until Hitler told them so. Strangely enough their friends were Jewish and always had been, but not the religious kind.

Did you remain in touch with your aunt?

Yes, I did. And she encouraged my involvement in the synagogue and the *Cheder*.

What was the Cheder like at Belsize Square?

The very nice thing about it was that one met one's friends and had a good time. And then later on, there was a new club and I joined it in 1951. So, the *Cheder* was really an extension of the activities of the night before, so it was all good fun, but I don't think I learned very much more. I think I learned more in the first six years of my life than I learnt ever after that.

Who were the teachers at the Cheder?

There was Martin Laurence, he finished fairly recently, Cantor Davidson taught there, Rabbi Salzberger put in appearance, once in a while, but his lessons were in German, and increasingly the children didn't understand him anymore. And that phased out.

I spoke only Dutch when I came. The family who adopted me spoke German, and English too. And I had a governess for English, and so I picked up a lot of German at home, but refused to speak it, I hated it as a language. Didn't speak it until I married. Though I studied it, at the French Institute. When I married, I spoke a lot with my mother-in-law, my parents-in-law. Their English was never very good.

So could you follow, when Rabbi Salzberger spoke?

I could follow, if he wasn't too high-flown. He used to do *Bibelstunde*, biblical studies. That I enjoyed, but anything more philosophical than that, even at an 8-year-old old level, I wasn't able to follow in German. Who else taught there? Mrs Brumnik, Elsie Brodmacher. We had various Israeli teachers at one time or another.

Do you remember the content?

Well, every week seemed to be *Alef Beth*. And then it was studying the prayers, trying to make sense of them, translate them, stories, choir practice, singing. Proper choir didn't come until much later.

What was the number of children who went to the Cheder then?

It started off small. By the time I stopped going, when I was about 12-13 or so, there were several classrooms of them. I'd say thirty, forty children by the time I left.

You said you felt at home from the beginning. What was it that made you feel at home? Again, from a child's perspective.

It was fun there. I was there for children's parties, which I enjoyed a lot. The home in which I was adopted was terribly serious, terribly grown-up. Wasn't fun. It was a good home, but there was no fun. There was no laughter in it. It was very Prussian, very severe. I don't think you can imagine yourself into this Victorian upbringing.

Can you tell me what you mean by that?

The father ruled the roost. What he said was law. What he wanted was what was done. If he wanted a particular kind of meal that was the meal, we all ate. If there was something he wanted to do, somewhere he wanted to go, everything was subservient to him. I'm quite sure he had affairs outside the home, which was considered the norm, though not by me, and he just dominated. The house was not child oriented. They went off on holidays and left me with au pairs, who I realise in hindsight were so unsuitable. One of them went off and spent a weekend and left me alone in the flat. And said that's to be our secret when my parents came back. And it was, I never told.

Where did you live?

In Swiss Cottage, Regency Lodge. There's a central island with a cinema on it. So it was right in the middle of the traffic, but there wasn't much then, and what little there was I used to enjoy watching go by, that was my entertainment, watching the traffic go by. I had a 'Prussian' upbringing, severe, strict, without love, work is all. I was meant to be good at school. And I was good, that wasn't a problem. They were proud of me when I did well, and frosty when I didn't. So, none of that did I get when I was in the synagogue, so I felt happy there, and peaceful, particularly once I joined the club and was with other children, because I was quite lonely at home. They did have a daughter of their own, but she was twenty years older than I and then left. I was six when I got there, and she was twenty-six. She was a dentist in Hampstead. Obviously, we weren't close as sisters with a twenty-year difference. And then the club was formed at Belsize Square, in '1951/1952 and I joined it, and that was just a revelation, an opening, it was wonderful.

Can you tell me more about it?

It was called the Phoenix, having risen from the ashes of a previous club, which was the CMC, the Claude Montefiore Circle, the members of that club were all quite a lot older than that, that was a club for late teenagers. I think Steffi Lachman, Steffi Blum as she was then, was a member. This club had been formed by Charles Goodman and Richard Graham, about 1951, I think. I joined in 1952-53. They were very strict about age, so I couldn't join before. You had to be thirteen, so I probably turned up after the 15th of August, the day after my 13th birthday, and at the time that I came there were already quite a few members, I can remember some of them if you want. There was Dolly, who was the same age as me. Later her younger sister Jackie came, Paula, whom I mentioned before, she joined at the same time as I did. Later on, her younger brother Peter came, he was the real son of the Dannheissers, she was their niece. There was someone called Hartwick, Peter and Michael Rosenbaum, Peter's still around, he has special needs. David Katchinsky, he's still around, those are about the only ones I can think of, I am sure there are others. The club was great. We just messed around and were children.

Was it on Sunday?

LL. No it was Saturday. Much to the dismay of the caretaker, Mr Callahan, he didn't like to open up the synagogue up much. The meetings were between 7 and 10 pm. As I got older, it continued at the local café, where we went for a coffee afterwards, but that wasn't allowed when I was little. The activities were quite strictly organised, we were not just left to run around. There were games, there were lectures, debates, 'This house believes'... You were for and against, and that's where I learnt debating.

On what sort of topics? Do you remember any?

Oh, I can't remember now. Then we had lectures on any topic and every topic. And I remember one series was about work. And people who had interesting jobs came and talked about it. And one series about the synagogue, and the

treasurer came and spoke, and the secretary. There were always games, table-tennis, chess, and such like, and ... the leader wanted to do drama, that was about four years later. And we did a small-scale production which went very well. It was really a cohesive thing for the club...

Which one?

I don't recall. And then he stayed on after the production and did play-readings, and everybody took part in the room. And then they needed drama festivals, and the synagogue belonged to the Union of Progressive and Liberal Synagogues, and they did drama, so we entered that, and we did Shakespeare and things like that. And then Herbert and Robin Hirsh wrote a play and we put that on twice.

What role did you play?

A very small role, I didn't like acting, but I was very involved backstage, I used to write the scripts, and I helped with costumes, and got off the ground. That club was really a revelation to everybody who went to it. We were all very odd people from very odd backgrounds, and we all had in common that somehow, we were displaced. And this was a binding, a blending, I suppose making civilised adults out of horrible little children.

Was the past talked about then?

Very, very little. The first leader Charles Goodman, he knew about everybody's background, I don't know how, but he made it his business to find out. He certainly never asked me, but he knew about me. A very strange thing happened then. I must have been about thirteen or fourteen, and I got to the club one Saturday evening, and there was a girl there and she looked at me. And I'd never seen her at the club before, and I looked at her, and said 'Hello, how do I know you?' And we tried to think of all the different places, at school, at *Cheder*. It wasn't at any of them. So, Charles took us both to one side and said: "You know where it was, don't you? It was in Bergen Belsen." And she and I had been there together, and it was true, I'm in touch with her family. She was Eve

Oppenheimer, and I see quite a lot of her brothers now, because they work with the Anne Frank exhibition. So, he did know about the past but didn't discuss it until a situation like that arose. But Hans Hartwick, a boy who was either born in England or came over as a baby in arms, he spoke English with the most enormous German accent. And I couldn't work out why until I met his parents and realised that they'd always insisted on speaking English with him. So, he learned bad English instead of their good German. He would have picked up his English at school anyway. I think he still speaks with that accent today, and he's a man of sixty or sixty -three by now.

Did you know the histories of the other children, or was it all 'assumed'?

Well, we all had some history of some kind. Unless I knew the other people intimately, like Paula, I didn't know the details, but it wasn't really talked about because it wasn't particularly interesting. Everybody was the same, everybody's story was different but the same, we all had a European background, and we were there to have fun, and boy- did we have fun.

Did other people share the same Prussian experience you describe?

They all had odd homes. Not all necessarily Prussian. Robin Hirsch's home, I'd rather he didn't write about it, though it appears in his book. His home, his father was an abusive father, we didn't really know to what extent, we just knew when we went there, we were terrified of him. It was an awful home, brilliant, but awful. I think that was probably as a result of what had gone on in their lives and in their parents' lives before. But obviously, those of us who had been directly involved were affected and those of us who weren't directly involved in the war years were affected by our parents' experiences. I think they call it second generation syndrome, and this was all so much more recent then.

Was there a spirit of rebellion in those clubs?

One didn't rebel in those days, that's a modern concept. We were children, we all did the best we could at school, academically, in terms of our behaviour and

all the rest of it. The club caused some friction, because we were so attached to it, some parents could have been jealous or whatever.

How did your parents react to it?

I think they were quite pleased to get rid of me on a Saturday night. They knew where I was but couldn't understand what was so good about it. Looking back, it wasn't like anything what kids would like to do today. It's terribly cliché, but we did our own entertainment, we really did, just had fun.

It was different times. Having just read Robin Hirsch's book, I think it must have been a very important institution?

It was looser than that. Friendships and kindred spirits.

Did other people come in, or was it only members?

It grew and grew. Other people did join, the ones who felt at home had some sort of continental background, and others that joined and didn't feel so comfortable, didn't stay that long. I don't know if it was a very exclusive club, exclusive to German Jews or descendants, but it grew to at one point about a hundred kids coming in on a Saturday night. And we didn't have the large premises then that we have now, but it got a bit unmanageable. I think they closed it down and started again afterwards. I was gone by then.

What about the youth club of the Liberal Synagogue? Was there any youth club at the Union?

The Union was an association of synagogues, and each one of them had their own youth club. And there were lots of inter-club activities, so for instance there were quizzes, there were sports competitions. Belsize Square always did extremely badly in the sports competitions and always did very well in the quizzes. They always said we were the intellectuals.

Was there pressure of cultural production for the children?

You mean from the synagogue?

From the parents?

Definitely. From the parents, yes. Do you call it pressure, or do you just call it home environment?

How did you perceive it?

I perceived it as cultural activity, as the norm, as interesting. Sports activities, I wasn't very sporty person, none of us were particularly encouraged to be so. It wasn't pressure, it was a way of life really.

Were you then involved in other cultural activities as well? Music, and other things?

Music yes. I was very interested in the theatre, reading. My mother was a wonderful artist and my sister too. She took me to galleries, and I was interested in all forms of art, went to lectures and that sort of thing, and I knew quite a lot through her, which I'm now passing on to my children and grandchildren. I go with my little four-year-old granddaughter, and she loves pictures. So, it goes on through the generations, which is nice.

What else do you remember of that era, the fifties?

I remember the opening of the new synagogue. I was chosen for a very important role. The synagogue was built in 1958, and The Eternal Lamp had to be taken from the old synagogue to the new, so I was asked to do that, together with Charles Goodman. So, the two of us walked from the old synagogue to the new. All the local dignitaries were there. I was terrified, completely terrified. I was 18, and this was so symbolic. The past being carried through to the future. You know, the old synagogue to the new synagogue. And I had to take this candle and put it into the new light of the new synagogue. Our present-day synagogue.

And who gave the speeches?

Rabbi Kokotek was a new minister by then. I don't think Salzberger would have been there. There were many dignitaries present and ULPS people. Do you know why we were members of the ULPS? We weren't liberal in the liberal sense. Do you know about that?

I know about it but tell me anyway.

The synagogue had had a lot of help from Lily Montagu who was- I think- a founder of liberal Judaism, I think she was from an orthodox background, I believe. In gratitude to her, we joined the ULPS, though I think we were not in that same mold. But we were perfectly content to be under that umbrella organisation. And they were very understanding of our own needs to be different and left us to get on with it. And if ever there were communal activities needed, they were there if there were any Halachic arguments, disputes to be settled, or interclub activities. They were very useful. It was a nice thing to belong to. I quite regret that we don't anymore.

Why?

It was a nice thing to be together with the other synagogues. I think we are rather on a limb now. People now ask 'If you're not liberal and not orthodox what are you?' You have to go into a whole length of explanation which nobody is prepared to listen to at any great length. It was very much a personal thing with Ms Montagu. She really was quite an amazing woman.

Do you remember her?

Yes. She was old and intelligent. She dressed in a protestant minister's garb. She had a purple cassock on, and a cape, she really looked quite peculiar, but she was an impressive lady for all of that. A bit austere, a bit distant.

Did she speak German?

I never heard her... She had a sister as well.

Did she come to the synagogue?

She gave sermons. A woman in the pulpit, she was there. I don't know what all the fuss is about. I wanted to tell you something quite different. I told you I had worked at the synagogue for about a year as a secretary to Mrs Beyer, who was the full-time secretary. She was quite an intimidating person and lots of people were frightened of her. I got on quite well with her, she wasn't frightened of anyone, with the exception of Ernst Levi. Have you heard of him?

Yes.

Was he chairman, or secretary? He terrified the living daylights out of her.

Which year? Where are we?

1963. And he was another one of those Prussian Germans and he used to call me 'Miss Lilian'. By this time, I was very pregnant. And he looked at me and said "I no longer can call you Miss Lilian. I will call you Mrs Lilian." So, I then became 'Mrs Lilian'. That was Ernst Levi. He was there together with Walter Strauss who was the treasurer. Walter Strauss was manufacturer of clocks, or importer of clocks, I think, very deaf.

Was there a lot of conflict in that community?

I didn't know about it until I started to work there. They were all working for the same end, and for the same good cause. One thing when I got involved and got quite upset... there was a women's society and always had been. And the synagogue had had a lot of single ladies as members. I think the reason for that must have been because a lot of them had lost their fiancés, so by the time they got to England they were ladies in their mid-forties, desperately in need of something like a communal home and somewhere to go. And when the society was founded, right at the beginning I believe, its chairman was ostensibly always

the *Rebbetzen*. When the Salzbergers left, Vally Kokotek took over the role of chairman of the women's society and continued it until she died. And by then the Mariners had arrived, and Sheryl Mariner became the chairman, so we were right up to date. And I always thought the women's society was a nice organisation even if there weren't any single ladies by then anymore. They did interesting things. Cultural activities, outings, holidays, it was very nice.

What was the aim of the women's society?

Originally to give a cultural input, non-religious, for single ladies and married ladies as well, but women only. Men were allowed to come, but it was a women's organisation. I joined it as soon as I married. I used to go to many good meetings there, particularly once the children were born, because I couldn't really go anywhere with my husband, we needed babysitters, so I went on my own and went there every month.

What sort of talks or activities do you remember?

Lectures by eminent people, they had readings, there were debates. I participated in one of the evenings in as much as it was my favourite piece of literature, how you came to be interested in it, with a short reading. And suddenly this society becoming defunct. Sheryl Mariner no longer wanted to be the chairman, and at the time I made the case very strongly that she didn't have to be, and it could be somebody else. But she did not agree and the society closed. And in its place, they got the Belsize Member's Group because they said there's no place for single women's organisations, it should be a family members' organisation, or husbands and wives, which I didn't quite agree with, and if anybody wanted such an organisation then why not.... It doesn't exist anymore.

When did it cease to exist?

It would have been early to mid-eighties. A leading light in that was Edith Dannheisser, the mother of Paula, actually the aunt. And she organised fantastic outings and holidays. I never went on those holidays because I couldn't get

away. I remember, my mother-in-law used to go. Amsterdam, Scotland... They went all over the place.

So you think it was particularly important for the single women?

Definitely.

About this Prussianness. A friend of my birthmother was someone called Annie Lorsch. And she came to England and was a member of Belsize Synagogue and put it to the board that a good way of raising money would be to have a bazaar. Shock, horror, dreadful, how common. Trade! You must know, all these people are hardly able to keep body and soul together with their little bits of work. Very strange attitude. And she pushed it through. She got a bazaar. This was before my time.... And with the first one she ever did, she raised the enormous amount of £400, which was big. So she got to do that every year. And I came in on that after the war. You asked why it was fun. That was fun. They had a children's bazaar, and I was allowed to serve, and there was a party there. And somebody called Renate Stern, she was a nursery nurse or children's educator, and I remember her very well, very early on she looked then just as she does now. Now there's a single lady who used to enjoy the women's society quite a lot. She used to run these parties. I loved them. She used to help with the children's bazaar as well.

So what was the children's bazaar?

They sold bits of rubbish for cheap pennies.

So there was the big bazaar and the children had their own section?

Yes. On a table or something. It was fun, it was intimate.

So the perception of the community was to be a place of culture and religion?

Yes, there was hostility to those events.

This is interesting because this means that a synagogue in Germany was not a social place in that sense.

Yes, it must have been quite a difficult idea to absorb. It was a place of learning, and study. Annie Losch herself, I later was able to ask her quite a lot about my parents. I was so young when they died, I didn't really remember that much. She was my mother's best friend. She married again someone who lived in South America, or somebody who emigrated to South America. And they went on holiday to South America. She was burned to death in a hotel fire. That was tragic.

And you met her here after the war?

Yes.

Do you think the bazaar is an important for the synagogue?

I think so, I used to think so. I was quite willing to take it on when they asked me. It pulls together everybody in the synagogue. Those who want to come and work behind the stalls, those who want to come and buy, those who want to sit and schmooze in the restaurant. A lot of people are involved. It's a great social event. And I used to find the money quite secondary. I'm sure the secretary wouldn't agree with this, but my reasons were not so much financial as social. The nature of it has changed now. Everybody who supplied goods was a member of the synagogue, they didn't have to be, but they were. Most of the synagogue members are no longer in trade or commerce, it's much more lawyers or doctors, who don't have anything to sell over the counter in that sense. So, it's much more difficult to sell the goods. So, they have people who sell on their own behalf, and sell for a commission to the synagogue, which is OK for fundraising, but the social side of it has gone. Which isn't quite the same. But the synagogue has changed, and its requirements have changed.

How has the synagogue changed?

There are still many people who are second third generation, there's even a fourth generation. They've become very anglicised now. They've married and brought in others who have no idea of what went on, and they are learning as they go. There are completely new members. That's the way of the world, it's got to develop, evolve, and change. It also has to do with the rabbi. He's no longer from a continental background. I remember my mother-in-law saying that the synagogue is doomed to die, that was thirty years ago. It hasn't happened, because it's evolved. It's becoming an English congregation.

Has it become an English congregation?

Not yet. It still has oddballs like Herbert and me. But it is more so now.

Do you think different rabbis mark different periods of the synagogue?

Definitely. Salzberger defines that Prussianism. Kokotek more the transition. Mariner now the arrival into the British community.

Why Kokotek the transition?

Because he was of that age I suppose. Salzberger was already old when I came. Kokotek came to England as a young married man. He must have been 25 when he came. Tragically, he was not able to hand in his doctoral thesis. He did all the studies for it and when it came to it the Nazis were already there, and he couldn't do it. So, he was never entitled to be called 'Doktor'. He had done all the work. And I think that hurt him quite a lot, because he had all the qualifications, and the ability too. And when he came, he was fairly young, and quite dynamic, with half a foot in the English camp, two daughters who had grown up here, so he had an idea of what it was like to be in an English milieu, so that was the transition I would say.

What sort of person was he?

LL. He was from an orthodox background, and really quite learned. But his English wasn't alright, and we children were so cruel. He introduced English

sermons and some of his English wasn't up to it. I used to keep notes of all the mistakes he made.

Was he liked?

I think he was. His wife was very liked. She was charming, really charming, with a natural charm, not forced, and she smoothed over things quite a lot. She was a wonderful *Rebbetzen*. People rallied around her. She brought a lot of this feeling of cohesion in the synagogue.

How did she do that?

By her nature. If anybody had a problem she was there, always friendly and loving.

Did Kokotek officiate your wedding?

Yes.

Can you tell me how you met Herbert?

Herbert was the drama expert called in by Charles Goodman for the club. And he first came in early 1956, and I became his secretary and help-mate, everything to do with these plays. I was 15 and he was 25. I don't think he knew I existed. And gradually things changed, and we married six years later. Rabbi Kokotek and Reverend Dolliger officiated at our wedding.

Can you please describe the wedding?

It was in the synagogue hall that we have now, but it hadn't yet been done up. The ark was in wooden and gold, which had been designed by Rabbi Kokotek, we still use it at high holidays. My father gave me away, in traditional style. I had three bridesmaids, my sister's three daughters. Rabbi Kokotek spoke to us. Herbert had obviously made his mark at the synagogue. Rabbi Kokotek gave Herbert a long address about what he had achieved in the synagogue. And then

he turned to me and said: 'And now Lilian, what can I say to you?' I thought 'Well, is there nothing to say?' He managed to say a few things. But he was trying terribly hard to say something about my parents, because my adoptive parents were sitting there in front of me. I think he found it terribly hard. Reverent Dollinger sang so beautifully. That's the best voice we ever had at the synagogue. A beautiful tenor. After the synagogue we went to Kensington Palace Hotel and had a tea there. Rabbi Kokotek was there too. And Ernst Levi was there too, who still called me Miss Lily. Mrs Baer was there, too. And then Herbert and I went to Stratford-upon-Avon. Herbert was besotted by the theatre. They didn't have a winter season. We were married in March. But we went there anyway because he was so besotted with the theatre. So, we went without any theatre going on. That was from the Monday to the Friday, because on the Saturday he had called a rehearsal for his play 'Project One'. And was I a fool in those days, I went along with it. We had to come back for our rehearsal.

Did your parents approve of Herbert?

Not at all, not one bit. They were Prussian, very academic. They had no sympathy or understanding for anyone who had not been to university. They had no feeling at all for the need, the circumstances that had arisen when somebody as gifted as he hadn't gone to university. Herbert thought that he was always going to be involved with the theatre anyway so he hadn't gone to university. He just went out and earned a living, his passion was the theatre, and he was involved in Sadler's Wells for instance for fifteen years. So, no they didn't approve at all. He handled it magnificently. So much so that when my father died, and my mother became frail, she lived with us for five years and the whole thing was smoothed over. He was fantastic.

What about Herbert's parents?

My father-in-law died eighteen months after we married, very suddenly. Surely, he was one of Hitler's casualties. He had done very heavy manual work for which he was unsuited for, in Germany before he was finally able to emigrate. He was a broken man the time I knew him, a very nice man, but broken. He died in 1962, and my mother-in-law lived another 23 years and was a very nice lady. She didn't

actually live with us but very near us, and she came visiting every day and helped with the child-minding and stayed with us for a meal in the evening.

So they approved of you?

Yes, very much. Unfair, isn't it? My mother in-law is the one who found out quite by chance that we are distantly related, through his father.

Coming back to that period. You got married in March 1961. And then you became more involved in the synagogue, or involved in a different way?

Differently, yes. Herbert became very involved with the club, not only for the drama. That was his main function really but if there was no drama going on at that particular moment, he did other activities with the club. By that time, I think Charles had left and so he was predominantly in charge and others came in. Harry Davis came in with Sheila, and Peter Strauss at one point came in. So, we were involved as club leaders to some extent, and we stopped that in about 1962, the club folded soon after that. I think somebody else tried to run it and then it grew out of hand, they just did dancing and that, and then the synagogue closed it down because they didn't want that. When the babies started to come along, I was still involved with the women's society throughout, but then the synagogue took a back seat because I was taken up with children.

And at that time there was no toddler group at the synagogue?

No there was none of that. I didn't have a car, and we lived in Hendon. No there was no such thing. I became very involved again when our children were a bit older and we felt that a youth club was really needed, so we helped to get that under way. We never took any leadership part in it because if your own children are there it's because they want to get away from their parents, not to be led by parents. And they had a good time there too. They also grew up in that club. And we were also ULPS members, and the same activities started again, inter-club functions.

So there was a period when there was no youth club? And that had to do with a lack of young people?

I would say a lack of leadership really. It was at least 10 years.

So it was between 1962-1963 and 1973-1974?

Yes. Or none that I know, really. Maybe there was something, my kids weren't involved, so I wouldn't have had a direct involvement with it, but certainly when our kids were that age, there was nothing and we started it.

So that's really Rabbi Kokotek's time.

Very much so.

Some people told me that it was then a synagogue of many elderly people.

That's true. There were far fewer kids. That's right. Which comes first though? Were there a lot of old people, no youngsters so no club was needed? Or if there was no club they went elsewhere. So only the oldies were left. I don't quite know which way round it is.

Yes absolutely. So that was still before Mariner's time, when the youth club was started.

Yes.

And your children? What was their experience?

Exactly the same as ours. They grew up within the synagogue and it was a home from home, or a second home. I don't think they viewed their own home as quite as Prussian as I viewed mine, though I think they thought of us as quite strict parents. But I think they had the same sense of escape from one place to friendship in another.

So they enjoyed going there, you didn't have to convince them?

No way. They were both very involved, and committee members, and that was part of our ethics in the first club as well, in the Phoenix club. Get them all involved in committees, get them involved in the club itself.

And they had Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah?

They did, yes. Andrew had his Bar Mitzvah first. There was no Bat Mitzvahs then, I think I told you this, that we worked long and hard, and actually had Kokotek on his side, but many of the synagogue members were against it, but they got it through. That argument continues to this day.

What do you think about that issue? It seems like a pertinent issue.

I've told you my feelings about religion have changed through the years. For those people who want to be involved and committed, why should we exclude them? How wrong, to exclude anyone based on gender. On balance, I've come to be entirely for women's involvement, because I think there is absolutely no justification for excluding women who want to be involved. One is losing a lot of talent. I know my son teaches at cheder. He says he's taught some children there, some girls, who have been so talented, so gifted. Where are they now? They've gone, he says, because there was nothing for them on offer.

Do you think this issue is dividing the synagogue?

Through Herbert being on the Board I get to hear what goes on, and there has been divisions on either side of the Board and the Executive. And the strange thing is that many women, also young women, are against women's participation, and that I find strange. And not women and young women themselves, but those who have daughters, young daughters, and even those who have sons, they see inequalities between their two children, and I don't know how they can justify it.

This is tape 2, we are conducting an interview with Lilian Levy. We were talking about the women's issue, and maybe we can continue... how you envisage the future of the community, which is linked to that issue.

I now have two grandchildren, my daughter is quite vehemently feminist in the sense of religious equality, so is her husband. His background is from a liberal synagogue, where no difference is made, where if one wants to get up and do something in synagogue, one can. So, with people like that growing up in the synagogue, now I imagine things will have to change or the synagogue will lose people like that who are vital because I think they are the future of the synagogue, young, educated people. My granddaughter is 4, my son-in-law says therefore that the synagogue has nine years in which to get its act together, and if she doesn't have the full Bat Mitzvah, saying all that the boys can say, doing all that the boys can do, that's the end. And I will be very sorry to see them leave the synagogue. They are now the fourth generation of my family who are in the synagogue, and we really hope that it goes through properly so that they will remain members and their children as well. My son-in-law maintains that it isn't only for his daughter that he wants this to be the case, but also for his son, who is a little boy of one now. He doesn't want to see him growing up with second class citizens within the synagogue, he doesn't want to see inequality, so either I see the synagogue without a future at all, or I see it changing and evolving with this in mind.

Is it important for you that your children and grandchildren remain in the community?

Yes, isn't it strange? Here I am saying that I don't believe in anything, and yes, it's terribly important. I've spent the last 55 years within the congregation, and it's been my home. I've grown up there, I've been very happy there, everything that's ever been good in my life has happened there, through it. And my children say the same of their own lives, and I'd love to see it happen to my grandchildren too. My mother-in-law says the same about herself, they joined in '39-'40, and that's half a century we've been going between us. Sixty, it's not fifty years. I know it makes no intellectual sense, but yes, it's very important to me, to see the children there.

What is the most important aspect of the synagogue for you?

Well, if you're asking my son, it will be academic learning and religious study. Not the case for me at all. It isn't even the social side of things, though there are some very nice social things to be had there, it's just that feeling of community, of kindred spirit, of like-minded people, with similar backgrounds. My friends are there.

Are your best friends in the congregation?

Yes, I would say so. Not my only friends, but my best friends, yes.

So your social life is greatly shaped by your involvement in the synagogue?

Yes.

So it played an important part in your life?

Yes, it's a small world, isn't it? But yes, it's true.

And your daughter got married in the synagogue?

Yes, she did. She was married by Rabbi Mariner and Reverend Fine. It was a lovely ceremony too. Quite different really, more modern. They did some modern readings. A Lebanese poet. I can't think of his name. Rabbi Mariner made a speech about crossing the mountains.

Do you think the community is an open community? Also concerning the question of mixed marriage. Has that changed?

It depends on who you ask. And as for being open, one time we were known as the German community, and that was dismissed. People weren't interested. The service itself is very traditional. A lot of people feel at home who come from the United Synagogues. Or used to, I don't know if they do so much now. Certainly,

they use the Singer Prayer Book. But now we use Rabbi Mariner's own prayer book. As for being open and welcoming, it depends on who you speak to. I've heard both. I've heard that we're very frosty, and I've heard that we're very warm.

What do you think?

I feel warm and enclosed and comfortable there. That's my experience. I know it isn't everybody's.

BL. Regarding the mixed marriages...

LL. Yes, under Rabbi Kokotek, he did conversions, and well... that's not a mixed marriage then, if they're converted. And I noticed that under him, once they'd converted and married, they didn't stay. So, they weren't warmly welcomed. Under Mariner that's changed. Once they come, they seem to stay. Which led one acquaintance of mine to say 'We are now a half-Jewish congregation', which isn't quite fair. Once they've done the conversion, they are Jewish, and I do believe many of the converts embrace the thing wholeheartedly and they become very involved and fully committed. What I think doesn't work, is if a Jewish member of our congregation marries somebody who doesn't convert. I mean the marriage may be fine, but I don't think they will remain as members of our community, because... especially if it's the mother. If the mother doesn't take it on board, the children, then don't usually survive within the community at all. I've seen that happen within the congregation.

So it is important that the mother...

It seems to be the mother that's the instigator, but that's a generalisation. I've known it to happen where the father is non-Jewish as well... is the non-Jewish partner. The Jewish partner might try to keep the children involved to some extent, but it never really succeeds with the children in the long run. They get lost to the community. I do think conversion is important.

How do you evaluate the role Belsize Square has played within the general process of emigration? For example, your adoptive parents, for your aunt.

For my aunt it was very, very important. I think it was terribly important for the people who came later than my adoptive parents, in other words came without money. My adoptive parents came to England on a 'capitalist visa', they had enough money to guarantee for themselves. So, they had enough to do or buy what they wanted. And for those that came with the tin mug in their pockets they found a home there and a culture that they knew, for free. And I think it was terribly important to them just to have somewhere familiar. There were so many single people, so many lonely people, and they found somewhere that they recognised as being their own kind. Lots of these people were in domestic service of one kind or another, and there was a marriage in the congregation, where the couple had met Hyde Park. She had had a day off in the week, and she had spent it in Hyde Park, crying on the bench. A man had come and sat next to her. They both had nothing, and they got married, in Belsize Square. I can't think of their name. Nice old couple, obviously childless, I remember.

When did they get married?

It must have been in the war.

So there were a lot of singles and a lot of childless couples?

Yes. There was one man who'd managed to escape Germany, and he left his wife and two children behind, he'd gone early to set up things for them, and they never got out. And he used to have a photograph standing on his sideboard. He married again a lady who never had children, she was too old. It was a happy marriage, but he never stopped grieving for those children. His name was Moses.

Was it important, the fact that refugees married each other?

Important to whom? To them?

To them, and also to the community, was it a communal concern?

I don't think so. It just happened. In the early days they couldn't speak to each other unless they spoke German, so they married each other.

There was no view one way or the other, in terms of continuity...

I don't think so. I think originally, they probably hadn't even thought of a long-term future for this community. It was a friendship association to start with; it wasn't a synagogue. And all these people just needed somewhere to be with each other as a bit of home from home because they'd lost everything else, at least they hadn't lost their language, and that's why they stuck to their German-speaking friends.

Was it important for you that your spouse had a refugee background?

It happened. I don't know whether it was conscious like that. In the event it made life a lot easier. Also, the fact that he was Jewish at all made life easier, although I wasn't wholeheartedly set on that, I would have married anyone who'd taken my fancy. Also, I had no pressure from my parents that he had to be Jewish. My brother-in-law was not Jewish. The reason that it was easier was that there was nothing I had to explain. He knew it all. My feelings on things. The same thing in reverse, for him. He would tell me about his early years, what he remembered, the Nazi Regime which he did remember, which I didn't, before the war. And I would be able to understand what he meant by that. Perhaps someone else would not be able to understand what he meant. There's no explaining to do, it's just understood.

Do you think within the community did the role of religion change? I'm trying to understand the relationship between culture and religion, and how this changed.

Well, I've often thought that there is a certain conflict between all the rabbis and their congregants, because the rabbis have their religious conviction, and that's what the synagogue is for. Most of the members don't have these convictions. So, I suppose that in that sense there is a conflict.

Has religion become more important now? It seems that for the younger members religion is more important than for the refugees?

I don't know whether that is the case in our synagogue. There is a far greater feeling of orthodoxy around at the moment, but I don't think that's specific to our congregation. I don't think so. If you go on a Friday night or a Saturday morning you won't see a whole load of young people, you won't see a huge congregation. Most of them are the same, traditional, old members, and always were. So, I don't think that's the case with our congregation. I think the type you are talking of are the far more orthodox communities and we are not that.

The last theme I would like to talk about, is the role of the past with the community. Do you feel that in the community memorial services and commemorations have changed?

Yes, it certainly has changed. Rabbi Kokotek used to do a memorial service every year on Kristallnacht, and at the High Holy Days he did a *Seelenfeier* and he knew what he was talking about, he had lost everybody. And he spoke wonderfully on those occasions. Those were the best sermons he ever gave. Maybe Salzberger did them too, but I couldn't understand his high-flown German. But once Rabbi Kokotek no longer did these memorial services, they lost their meaning for me. These terrible losses that people suffered during the war, in such tragic and unnatural circumstances, Kokotek really understood them and the services were very powerful.

What was the Seelenfeier like?

There were set things, and there was music, beautiful music. Music is very significant to me in these services, and above all, he gave a sermon which was usually not bitter, which it could have been, but moving, deeply moving, of how we felt, of what we'd lost, of yearning, really, he was excellent for that.

And it was part of the Yom Kippur service?

Yes. The *Seelenfeier* was, yes. But also, *Kristallnacht* and *Yom Hashoah*.

You think also on the communal side, people are more interested in the past than before? I noticed the memorial plaque in the entrance of the synagogue.

Did you hear about this argument?

No.

Rabbi Mariner went to Berlin and he was in the Oranienburger Straße synagogue and there he was given a piece of glass. And he wanted to have a huge memorial to the Holocaust in our Synagogue entrance. And actually, Herbert and I were instrumental in getting rid of that idea. We had long discussions with Stephen Brook, the chairman, that this was too painful a thing to be confronted with every time we entered the Synagogue. Incidentally, he handled the situation very well, and he implied that there were many who needed to be reminded, who needed reminding, so he said yes, but not whilst there were people still alive to remember. So, a compromise was reached to have this plaque, that it was a commemoration of the sixty years of this congregation, fine. And if I didn't want to look at it, it won't hit you in the face the way a huge sculpture would.

So, your argument against it is that it's still too painful to have...

For some people, yes, but Koppel Kendall, who is a camp survivor, took exactly the opposite point of view.

That's interesting. What about the monument at the cemetery?

It's an obelisk. It was erected years ago and is used for the *Tisha Be'Av* ceremony each year. I find it harmless out there. When I go to the cemetery, to visit people I see it out there, it reminds me, yes, fine. It's in the right place. But this is not suitable for the synagogue, where people come in a jovial spirit sometimes, for the synagogue bazaar or something, it's not the right ambiance.

Is there anything you'd like to add I haven't asked?

I can't think. I'm sure there are many things, but I can't think of anything.

Thank you very much for the interview.