**Gretl Shapiro – Life Before The War**

**Read the Transcript**

NT: How did you come here?

G.S: I came with a children’s transport which was arranged by the Quakers, the ‘Society of Friends’

INT: And where had you come from?

G.S: I had come from Vienna

INT: Why had your parents allowed you to come?

G.S: Well, they could see no future for me. They were frightened of what would happen to me and they themselves couldn’t get out. And they sent all their children – three children.

INT: Did you know what was happening to you?

G.S: Well, not clearly. I mean, I thought I would see my parents again. I knew I was going to someone I had never seen before but my parents had communicated by letter to the lady, and I knew I was going to a good home but I didn’t know where.

INT: Can you understand how it must have felt for your mother?

G.S: Well, I think she must have felt absolutely awful. I mean, she, three children you know, disappearing. And she obviously knew that she’d never see them again. Well, it must have been dreadful, dreadful for her.

INT: Were you aware, when you were younger and before you left home of other families being parted in this way?

G.S: Yes, yes. You know, there was a general exodus. They, most people tried to get their children out even if they couldn’t get themselves out, they tried to get the children going.

And, I must say, the British government was quite good about that, at that time. They did take in a lot of children.

INT: Were you scared that it was going to happen to you when you saw other children having to leave home?

G.S: Yes, and, in a way I sound selfish but I was glad that I had the chance of leaving because I saw such terrible things. You know, I remember coming home from school and seeing an old man having to scrub the floor, the pavement and a whole lot of brownshirts, you know the Nazis, standing round poking him with rifles and oh everybody laughing and jeering.

I mean this sort of thing happened and it was, you know, frightening – it was terrible.

INT: When you had to move schools were you aware that the kids who were not Jewish were sorry for you? Or were they pleased you were being humiliated in this way do you think? Had they been indoctrinated by the regime?

G.S: I don’t think that we, you know, that we had anything more to do with them really. We were just whisked off and that was it. I don’t know what the reaction really was. We had a lot of non-Jewish friends and I don’t really know what the reaction of the children was. I think we had so many worries, I think that was the least of our worries!

Whether they would play with us, I don’t know. I think most of the time my mother would keep us in anyway by then, you know because she would be frightened of what they might say.

INT: Were you aware then, I mean you say you saw this old man scrubbing the pavement, were you aware of the attacks on Jews?

G.S: Oh yes, yes, yes. The thing was that my family didn’t really look Jewish and we didn’t have a Jewish name, I was called Marlé. and so I wasn’t so obviously Jewish but anybody who faintly looked Jewish was attacked. You could walk down the street and have people attacking you, jeering.

INT: Physically attacking?

G.S: Yes yes. Spitting at you and that kind of thing.

INT: And you remember that very clearly?

G.S: Oh yes, yes.

INT: These were just ordinary people, not soldiers- not brownshirts?

G.S: No, no. You see, I’ve always had this feeling. Now everybody pretends the ordinary Austrians, the ordinary Viennese weren’t Nazis – they were all Nazis. If you scratched one of them you found a Nazi underneath. I just don’t believe. Now they pretend they, they were good people but they weren’t.

There were very few, the few that were ended up in concentration camps like everybody else. If there were some Catholics who were good and helped some Jews or protested – they were whisked off as well! You know, they. I don’t think there were so many who weren’t Nazis.

INT: Do you think a lot of them just joined in because they were scared not to?

G.S: Well there must have been some who did that but some enjoyed it. I mean if you, for instance, we had to leave our flat because it was a council flat we lived in. One of those modern flats built in the 30’s by the socialist government there.

And, so we had to leave it as soon as the Nazis came and somebody moved in. Well they would be pleased – they wouldn’t worry about us. And we couldn’t.we had to leave all our furniture, piano – everything was left. We just had to leave. It wasn’t a question of ‘would you mind going out?’, we were told ‘You must leave this house by tomorrow or in the middle of the night..’ whatever. You see.

INT: So you, you lost everything?

G.S: Yes, yes

INT: And you were used to this happening around

G.S: Yes. The only reason we had somewhere to go to was my uncle actually owned the whole house – where my mother and father and brother went to. So that wasn’t taken away until much later.

INT: So it went as well?

G.S: Yes because they were sent to Theresienstadt

INT: So everything was taken away?

G.S: Yes. But after the war my sister went back and because he had left a will and the house, half of that house was left to her. But by the time they had paid all the lawyers and everybody she didn’t get anything out of it.

INT: And did you manage to rescue any keepsakes from your family? Furniture or anything?

G.S: Well. no

INT: No

G.S: I have a tablecloth that my mother knitted. You know, a lace one. There isn’t really anything.

INT: Nothing left at all? No photographs, nothing?

G.S: Well that was the sad thing also that we haven’t really. I have a photograph of my parents taken at that time. They look awful, all thin and worn. Dreadful.

INT: That’s the only one?

G.S: Yes

INT: Were you aware, at that age, of the political situation in Germany?

G.S: Oh yes, yes yes. We were all terribly frightened. I mean, it was really traumatic. I saw my father cry and I’d never seen that before. You know, it was terrible. Really.

INT: Do you feel when you look back that when you left them, that they knew that they would never see you all again?

G.S: I think they had a jolly good idea that they, you know, that it was on the cards that they wouldn’t see me because, you see, war was declared on the 3rd of September and I’d only just arrived the end of June. It was very short time, you know things looked pretty grim.

INT: Do you feel, looking back, I mean -are you bitter that you lost your family in this way?

G.S: Well of course I’m very sad about it all. I wish that I could have got my parents out. But it was impossible. They had no money by then and, you know, my father lost his job and there, there was nothing for a Jew to do.

You know, it was terrible conditions. We had to leave our house, we had to, the family was split up even before I came, you know, before I came to England. You know, my father, mother and brother lived with an uncle who had a house and they had to share there. My sister lived with someone else in the family, I lived with an aunt – you know, it was all split up already.

INT: So it had begun long before you left for Britain?

G.S: Oh yes, because there had been a pogrom on November of ’38 and that was dreadful. I mean, I was still there, my sister was already in England. But I was still there and it was frightening, I mean really.

INT: Were you forced as a child to identify yourself as a Jewish child?

G.S: Oh yes, yes because we had to leave. You see I went to a good grammar school, a girl’s grammar school and no Jew was allowed to go to a grammar school, you see. So we than had to leave en masse from that school and go to an ordinary – what was called Hauptschule. And, but the thing was that some of our teachers were Jewish too so they came as well so we had the same teachers. But you see you weren’t, I did, for instance, in that school you did Latin in the first year, English in the third and then if you stayed on long enough French in the fifth.

Well I’d had three years so I was, I had done one year of English and three years of Latin but all this was stopped in this school you see. You were sort of doing arithmetic and German.

INT: Much more basic work.

G.S: Yeah

In this next section Gretl is talking about her journey across from Europe on the Kindertransport boat.

INT: You never know – you might find someone who was on the same boat or train or.

G.S: That, that could well be. I remember on this boat, of course the children were all frightened, we’d never been on a, well, most of us had never seen the sea before. You know we were all coming from the middle of Europe. And because I was a little bit older than some of the others there was supposed to be, in each cabin there were supposed to be four children – one older one and one younger one. But in mine there were three young ones and me. And they all were crying and being sick and it was pretty ghastly. I sort of gave one my, my container for being sick in and then wondered what I would do if I were to be sick! But it didn’t happen.

**Gretl Shapiro – Immigration**

This section describes Gretl’s arrival in England through the Kindertransport system and explains how she came to be placed with an English family.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: When you arrived do you remember how you felt? Were you frightened or bewildered?

G.S: Well, yes. My sister was already here and we arrived at Liverpool Street Station and I remember there was a sort of barrier and my sister was standing there waving madly, but we were rushed away because I think that we had to catch a train to Coventry. And so I never even kissed my sister or greeted her or anything but the following, I think it must have been the following week, the following weekend, she came to visit me from London.

INT: And you were pleased to see her?

G.S: Of course!

INT: Did you feel lost and did you feel foreign at that time?

G.S: Yes, a bit yes, because my English was practically non-existent and my guardian couldn’t speak German. So it was difficult at first but it was such a wonderful household I went to – a fabulous woman.

INT: This is the lady that you eventually called your aunt?

G.S yes yes

INT: When you came to Britain and you arrived here, and you knew you were coming to a family did you know anything about the family at all?

G.S: I think I knew there were three sisters living together, all teachers – and that’s about it. Really the, the connection was made originally by a cousin of mine – Ilona, who used to go to Bielefeldt and, on holiday. I’m not quite sure whether, what she did there but maybe she took English people around, I don’t know. But she met there, the headmistress of that school I went to in Barrs Hill, Barrs Hill Grammar School, and this lady had said that she wanted to help somebody and she knew of somebody who wanted to help children out and my cousin Ilona had said ‘Well I’ve got a small cousin who needs to get out’. And this is how it all started. That’s how the names were exchanged.

INT: And this was the beginning?

G.S: Yeah

INT: But there was a, it was a large movement, there were a lot of children who came out at that time

G.S: Yes

INT: Through the Quakers weren’t there?

G.S: Yes, over nine thousand children the Quakers took out. They arranged for.

INT: Did you speak any English at all?

G.S: I’d had one year at school – that’s all.

INT: So it was very limited?

G.S: Yes, very limited yes.

INT: What was the full name of your adopted aunt?

G.S: Margaret Kershaw Scholes and she came from Oldham in Lancashire

INT: And you kept your own name? Your own family name which was?

G.S: Yes. Marlé

INT: And how do you spell that?

G.S: M-A-R-L-E accente aigue. It’s got an accent on it – it’s French

INT: And then, when you came here you just kept your name right through?

G.S: Yes, oh yes. Well no, when I married then I changed it.

INT: And you came first of all to Coventry

G.S: Yes

INT: And what date did you arrive in the UK?

G.S: On the 22nd of June 1939

INT: May I ask how old you were then?

G.S: Fourteen

INT: Fourteen. And.if there’s anything else I need. And you’ve been in Scotland since 1950? Is that right?

G.S: Yes, yes

**Gretl Shapiro – Settling In**

Gretl talks about life with her new guardian in Coventry and describes her education and the evacuation of her school during the war.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: This is the lady that you eventually called your aunt?

G.S: Yes, yes.

INT: She actually brought you up?

G.S: Yes. She did yes. She brought me up, she paid for my education. She was wonderful, really, an extraordinary woman. Never made you feel you owed her anything, always approved of what you did. A fabulous woman, really.

INT: Did she welcome your sister into the home regularly?

G.S: Oh yes! Yes, yes she asked that my sister should come of course and, oh she was, I’ve never met anyone quite like her since.

INT: When you look back and you remember those days of your childhood, do you remember the first days that you went to school here in Britain?

G.S: Yes, in fact, I arrived on 22nd of June and I went to school on the next day, the following day because my Aunt Margaret (as I called her) she was a history teacher at Barrs Hill Grammar School in Coventry. And so I went to school the following day of my arrival- after my arrival.

INT: So it was straight into school then?

G.S: Yes, yes

INT: Just learn from the beginning. You weren’t cosseted at all?

G.S: No. Well, I wouldn’t say cosseted but they were in the middle of their exams I remember and I did the art exam only I didn’t know what the questions were about, they had to be explained. And then I followed my aunt for a bit. Wherever she taught, I was in the same class. I sort of followed her around the school for a bit and then I just joined the ordinary class and less than two years later I was sitting school certificates, so.

INT: And your English obviously came along

G.S: Yes

INT: Tremendously well.

G.S: I think so yes because I had to speak English all the time

INT: Was your aunt then, one of the ‘Society of Friends’? Was she a Quaker?

G.S: Yes. She was a member yes. She was a Quaker and she had heard about what was happening in Germany and Austria and eh, she let it be known that she wanted to adopt somebody, to get somebody out – a child out.

INT: Did your mother make contact with you after you left Austria?

G.S: Yes, I had about two/three letters after. But then you see, there was such a short time, you realise.

INT: Yes, it was very very short.

G.S: And we were scared to write through the Red Cross because, in case they were hiding, you see, and we didn’t want anybody searching for them if they were hiding. They are just sort of, they are really rather limiting in language because she’s trying to write in English and her English wasn’t all that good. But well I mean they are mother’s letters that she would try and not cry I suppose when she wrote them.

INT: So you didn’t know what had happened?

G.S: No. My brother-in-law, that’s my sister’s husband, he was in the army of occupation and he had special leave to try and search for them, to see what had happened to them. And, I’m not quite sure whether I was told the real story of this or a sort of expurgated version but what I was told by him was that they were sent on a transport from Vienna in 1942 to Poland and a doctor, a Jewish doctor who was also sent, he made a list of the names of the people on that train. But they never arrived – there was no record of their arrival so whether they died on that train I don’t know.

It could well be because they were sort of cattle trucks with people just pushed in, you know. Far too many in a truck, and so on, without food and water. So it could well be that they died on the journey – I don’t know.

INT: And you’ll never know

G.S: No. I won’t know. No. Because even, I was in Israel and there is a, a place there where they have collected the names because the Germans were frightfully efficient. When they killed people they kept records in the concentration camps of all the people they “processed”, it’s like what they call ‘processed’. And there are these thousands of names, thousands of names.

But they tried to look up the name but they couldn’t find it so I don’t think they ever got as far as the concentration camp.

INT: So they died on route you think?

G.S: I think so.

INT: And quite soon after you left

G.S: Well about three years after I left.

[Gretl now talks about the support she received from her guardians.]

INT: Did they encourage you to get on, when you came here to England and to go to school and usual things like that?

G.S: Oh yes, this is exactly yes. She sort of felt I must behave well and I must do whatever the lady said and so on and so forth. And I did try. I mean, you know my guardian was a history teacher and I was determined to do well in history and, you know, I did. And that was one of the things I must say I did work at.

INT: Did she become for you a substitute mum do you think?

G.S: Yes, yes, yes. And she had a very sweet sister called Olive who was a very motherly sort of lady and charming, you know, lovely and she would come and, eh, tuck me in and kiss me, that kind of thing, you know. That helped, helped greatly.

INT: Yes because it must have been difficult for women who had not had children around.

G.S: Yes, yes.

INT: I mean it’s one thing to welcome another child into your home if you already have some but if you haven’t got any yet, they were learning weren’t they? With an adolescent.

G.S: Yes. Although they had also, I was telling you about their real niece – they had had a lot to do with her as well so they were used to, sort of, teenager. They were. And of course, you see, I came to Coventry and then the war broke out and the school was evacuated and we, the whole school went to Leamington Spa. And then nothing happened in Coventry, no bombing for a bit and we all came back.

And then of course there was the blitz and we were right in the blitz. My school was bombed and we were evacuated again to Atherstone in Warwickshire. But because of that I lived with a lot of other children together and my aunt was there all the time which was more than some of the children. You see the other children didn’t have their mothers with them, so I think that made it easier because it was a boarding school then and the mothers and fathers came to visit at the weekend and that kind of thing and I had my guardian there all the time.

INT: Was she very pleased when you went on to study A-Levels?

G.S: Yes. Yes I think she took a delight.

In fact, this is what made her so lovable because she took a delight in all, any success, you see, she really took a great delight. She never disapproved of anything. I don’t know – she was just wonderful.

INT: She sounds very special.

G.S: I think so.

**Gretl Shapiro – Integration**

Gretl says that she feels truly British and has many non-Jewish friends though she is, of course, proud to be Jewish herself

**Read the Transcript**

INT: She, as a Quaker, did she ever try and suggest that you should join her in her worship?

G.S: Oh, no no no. I mean I used to go with her to meetings, into the meeting house but she would never have. No, no, she wouldn’t want to convert me or anything. No, no, that wasn’t in it. And at first I used to listen, because I don’t know whether you’ve ever been to a meeting house in the Quakers?

Well, most of the time you just think, and you can think any thoughts you like but every now and then someone is moved to get up and say something, you see. But after a bit, I asked if, on the Sundays, I could take a book with me and she said ‘Certainly’. So I would read a book and then if somebody spoke I would listen and that was it. No she wouldn’t, she wasn’t the type to be evangelical or anything. No, no Quakers don’t do that.

INT: How did you go about, then, following your own religion?

G.S: Well I’m not exactly a, you know, terribly observant, but I’m very proud to be Jewish and I even belong to a Synagogue now.

But I must confess that’s because my, my daughter-in-law likes to keep a Jewish house and I like my own grandchildren to participate and so I go as well on occasion, but it’s only for special days that I go to the Synagogue.

INT: Can I ask you what happened to your sister? And to your brother?

G.S: Well my brother, he went to Israel just before I went off to England and he’s in a kibbutz and very happy. He’s got three children. My sister came here and she came as, what was called ‘lady’s companion’ but turned out to be housemaid and I don’t know whether you want to record this but it was in ..eh.. what’s his name?… In the household of a man who became Minister for Agriculture

INT: Oh, I can’t remember back that far, it doesn’t matter

G.S: Anyway, and it was an upper class English household- can you imagine? She was maid, it was like ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’, you know. It’s fantastic. And she came from a house where, you know, she used to go to opera and that kind of thing and there she was emptying potties.

INT: Oh, gosh. How long did she last?

G.S: Not very long. She was really very unhappy there, as you can imagine. The only nice one was, really, was the man who finally became Minister for Agriculture. Soames you know Soames?

Because he was about eighteen at that time and he used to call her in for silly things, you know, and told her to put on records that she could hear because he knew she brought masses of music with her you see. So that was the only nice thing. But then two ladies came to the house of the Soames’ and they met her and they sort of said, ‘Oh she can’t stay here, she can’t stay here’ And they took her in and she was married from their house. Quite nice.

INT: So it was a happy ending after all?

G.S: Yes, yes.

INT: And quite soon after you left

G.S: Well about three years after I left.

INT: When you look back on your time as a teenager here, do you think back at yourself as being a German teenager?

G.S: No, no

INT: Or British?

G.S: I always thought myself more English than the English! Yes.

No, I hated everything to do with Germany. I really didn’t want to speak German, hear German, read German or anything.

INT: What about now though you’re here in Scotland?

G.S: Well, funnily enough, recently I’ve thought maybe I ought to start reading a bit of literature, German literature because I haven’t really, you know, I mean what you read before you’re thirteen, you know, before you’re fourteen, it’s rather minimal really.

INT: And you’ve been here ever since?

G.S: Yes

INT: Do you ever go back, do you ever want to go back to Vienna?

G.S: I have. I was back in 1948 to see who was still alive. An uncle of mine, a dentist, he’d been to Dachau concentration camp but he’d got out.

At that time you could still get out sometimes if you got a visa to England. And he came here during the war and then went back to his wife. She wasn’t Jewish you see, stayed in Vienna all during the war. So I went to see who there was but that was all there was.

INT: Just the two of them?

G.S: Left. Yes.

INT: Do you ever want to go back now?

G.S: No, not really no.

INT: You said you were homesick? So it was homesick for here?

G.S: Yes, homesick for England, never homesick for Austria! No.

INT: So you don’t even – you consider yourself British completely?

G.S: Oh yes, yeah.

INT: And with your brother in Israel have you ever been tempted to move?

G.S: Well yes. At that time when I went there for a year I thought I might stay but I didn’t really because I was too homesick for here. I couldn’t stay.

INT: Yes because your husband was Jewish too?

G.S: Yes, my husband was Jewish.

INT: Did you find that it was easier, did you find you gravitated more towards people who were Jewish when you came here to work?

G.S: No. Not at all in fact. No. You see I have a lot of non-Jewish friends. In fact, I have very few Jewish friends. I mean my relations are Jewish but I don’t really have Jewish friends.

INT: So it was just a happy coincidence?

G.S: I’ve never asked anybody, you know if I meet somebody I don’t say to them ‘What religion are you?’ If I like a person I talk to them and we become friends and the fact that one is a Catholic and one is a Protestant and one’s a Jew doesn’t really make any difference.

INT: As a mixture of all three

G.S: Well, you know, I have a very good Catholic friend and lots of Protestant ones and it doesn’t really make any difference

INT: Yeah

G.S: If you like a person that’s it.

INT: Yes, it doesn’t matter at all

G.S: No

INT: Can I ask, it may seem a silly question, but how did you get from entomology to pottery?

G.S: Ah, well yes. Hmm good question! Well, because I had children I had to stop work you see so then I had to do something. I, you know, to do. And I was always interested in pottery actually. I’d met Bernard Leach down in Cornwall once and anyhow I was always keen so my husband said he’d make me a wheel if I was any good at it. So I started taking classes and when my children, when my girls were born, I started really. Pottery. And he made me a wheel and I worked downstairs and I have a little workshop downstairs and so it grew and I’ve now been doing it for thirty-one years

INT: And you never went back to entomology?

G.S: No no. Because, you see, after a few years you find you’re out of date. You, you know, they’ve got new methods and so on.

**Gretl Shapiro – Reflection On Life**

Gretl hopes and believes that there will be no repetition of experiences like the Holocaust of the 1940s

**Read the Transcript**

INT: When you look ahead or you see something now, about any kind of prosecution ehm persecution do you get extremely upset about it? Are you moved to do something about it?

G.S: Well I get upset about it but I haven’t joined any groups or anything to do anything about it. I suppose I should.

INT: I just wondered if perhaps an experience like that would make you fear that it could happen anywhere – do you think it could?

G.S: Well I think the Germans are a particular lot of people. I don’t know. I hope that it couldn’t happen like that anymore, I don’t think it could. That you can kill six million people, you know? It’s systematically so well organised, so cold bloodedly. It’s not, I mean, I can understand a pilot dropping a few bombs, I can understand that. Because he doesn’t actually see what happens to each individual person that he kills. But to go and torture and, you know, skin people, that kind of thing is.it’s unbelievable that human beings can do this to one another. I, I just, I can’t really, I can’t really describe it.

INT: For your own children and your grandchildren now, some growing up in France, some growing up here – what do you want for them?

G.S: Well I just want them to be happy. I think that, it gives me great joy to find that I have in fact five grandsons and I sort of feel, every time something like that happens I say one in the eye for Hitler, you know. Because, you know. And I now even have a Jewish name – Shapiro, you know. And there are three new Shapiros! Which is wonderful!

INT: One last question. What do you think you missed in your childhood? Apart from having mum and dad, do you think that your aunt managed to make up for most things?

G.S: I think she did make up for most things. Perhaps the only thing – I think our household was more musical.

I mean, there was more music in it, but that’s about it. But that, you see, a lot of the childhood I spent in school really, so it wasn’t so much lacking. I think I had a very happy childhood as far as, you know, one can without one’s mother

INT: That’s lovely