**John Subak Sharpe – Life Before The War**

John Herbert Subak-Sharpe (1924- ) was Professor of Virology and Honorary Director of the Medical Research Council Virology Unit from 1968 to 1994.

Born in Vienna, Subak-Sharp was brought to Britain by the Kindertransport mission in 1939 and was a farm pupil from 1939 to 1944, before serving in the Parachute Regiment. He graduated with a BSc in Genetics from the University of Birmingham in 1952, gaining his PhD in 1956, and came to Glasgow in 1954 as an assistant in the Department of Genetics. In 1956, he joined the Animal Virus Research Institute at Pirbright and worked on foot-and-mouth disease. After a spell at the California Institute of Technology, he joined the MRC Experimental Virus Research Unit in Glasgow in 1961.

Subak-Sharpe was made a CBE in 1991.

source: (Glasgow University 2008)

INT: Today is October the 12th 2010 and we are here to have a conversation with Professor John Subak Sharpe. Good evening.

JSS: Good evening.

INT: Can I ask you first of all; when and where you were born? And was this your name at birth?

JSS: I was born in Vienna in 1924 on the 14th of February 1924 and my name, and I have the birth certificate here if you want to see it, was Herbert Subak, S-U-B-A-K. And that’s the family name. The Sharpe came later and I can tell you how this came about but is this the right moment to tell you?

INT: I was just asking you about the street where you lived John, could you explain what it was called?

JSS: Oh this is in… Subakova is in Třebič, I never lived there or at least… long after the war with the family. The street, a shabby little street now but still the main street of what was the Jewish quarter, was called Subakova. Then the Nazis changed the name to some extent totally away from it. Well when, later we will come to that. When I joined the army, and at that time that was in 1944, several other Jewish boys had volunteered at roughly the same time and we were encouraged, well it was suggested, that it would be better if we adopted an English name or a British name in case we were either captured or killed. And in our case it was particularly in case our parents were still alive. We didn’t know that they had already been killed at that time. So, my brother, who is, although he is younger he had joined the army somewhat earlier, had also came to Scotland first and that was the first time we came to Scotland. He came to Maryhill Barracks and here he picked a name ‘Sharpe’ which was very similar, in certain ways, same number of letters and so on. And it was obvious to me that the only reasonable thing to do is to take the same name a few months after Gerhard had been. The Subak I took back into my name before we got married so that Subak Sharpe starts from that moment onward. It’s Subakova so this is where the family had a business which at that time was mainly involved with leather.

INT: And this was in the Jewish part of the town?

JSS: Oh yes.

INT: Oh yes.

BSS: The Jewish part is quite separate on the other side of the river from the main town.

INT: Did all your family move to Vienna? Or was it just your…?

JSS: Well my father moved to Vienna, my mother came from another part, actually from Vienna. They were… is the Brühl family, and they got married after the war in 1919. They had a daughter who unfortunately died of peritonitis I understand as quite a small child before I was born and she is buried there in the Brühl Cemetery.

INT: So tell us then. You came to here because you were part of the Kindertransport, can you tell us how that came about?

JSS: Surely yes. Things got worse and worse in Vienna and you have enough information about that that I don’t need to go into great details about that. And my mother became very frightened and worried about what would happen, what would happen to the children. And she heard about a man whose name was Musikant, believe it or not, who unknown to us, who had helped other people, was interested in the refugee children’s movement apparently. And he found a family, or at least a married couple, who had no children. Her name was Peskin, he was David Peskin and she was Dorothy. And they were Jewish, they were, David was Jewish, I’m not sure whether Dorothy had become Jewish. Anyway they didn’t really know much about children, in particular young 14 or 15 year old children but they put down the… I know that they put down the £50 that had to be put down for each child to guarantee that the child would not become a burden to the British tax payer and we managed to get onto the Kindertransport. And so I left Vienna and my brother and I together and on January the 10th we arrived in Harwich and the family we finally got on the 12th of January.

BSS: Well no I’ve got the letters. John was never followed up by any religious thing, no refugee thing. John was never followed up. In fact…

JSS: It was after I had gone to the farms.

BSS: No actually we have a thing from the refugee children saying they have no record of him except that he has of course his Kindertransport… These are the letters sent by a Mr Musikant saying to “Dear Mr and Mrs Peskin, enclosed please find two photos as promised. If I hear anything further I will communicate with you. Kind regards, yours sincerely, Simon Musikant”. And this is sent on the 22nd of the 12th to the Peskins. Then you come to the letter from the Hampstead Garden Suburb Care Committee for Refugee Children, in conjunction with the World Movement for the Rescue of Children from Germany, British Inter Aid Committee. Right? Nothing else. “Dear Mr and Mrs Peskin 61 Audley Road. We are very grateful for the generosity shown in offering a home to Gerhard and Herbert Subak of Vienna 3 Paracelsusgasse. We would be glad if you would communicate with his or her parents but ask you to be extremely careful not to mention anything about conditions in Germany or anything which might in the slightest degree annoy the German authorities”. And the postmark on the envelope is 9:30 am on January the 6th 1939 and it came from Golders Green, and you left on the 10th so…

INT: How interesting.

BSS: …John was never, ever, ever followed up. And there’s a Synagogue chambers, Norris Lane, we’ve never been able to contact them. No official Jewish thing, are you with me?

INT: Yes, you think they maybe mislaid your records?

JSS: No idea.

BSS: You see the only, the Kindertransport people…

JSS: But you’ve got a piece of paper that has my photograph on it.

BSS: Well yes.

JSS: That’s my father there as an Oberleutnant in the Austrian Army. He was a cavalry officer, he was an Uhlanen, you know?

INT: Yes.

BSS: We have a picture in the hall of him being decorated by the emperor in the field.

INT: My goodness and how did these pictures survive?

JSS: Some of them, not all of them, but some of them were kept, kept by a not related, but by marriage related through my cousins, marriage related family. And they had a big box including some of the things that my parents obviously stored there so that something would be done because they had to leave. They were thrown out eventually, I heard that much later of course, out of their flat, given 24 hours to leave the flat and move to another place where they stayed for a while. And then eventually they were transported. The Germans were very, very careful to document everything. We know exactly the date when the transport went to…

BSS: We know the number of the transport that they were taken on, everything.

JSS: And we know where it went to, Riga, and they were abgemeldet [registered as having been sent] from…do you speak enough German to…? abgemeldet from Vienna and not yet neu gemeldet [reregistered]. So in other words what really happened, I found out much later out from my cousin, was they were sent by train to Riga, stopped just before and they had already graves, not graves but big ditches were prepared and they were shot. And his parents were in a different transport, a little bit later, and he tells me, and I did not know exact details of this but, they were meant to go to Izbica, but they were gassed in the railway carriages, in the carriages that they were transported on.

INT: And who was that?

BSS: That was our cousins

INT: Your cousins.

JSS: Apparently where our son got the name. And I can give you that and their number on the transport in early ’42. My cousin’s parents who lived in the same house but then were parted were transported, also with the information about them, about May/April I think of the same year. They were sent, my cousins, to Izbica, that is known, that was the concentration camp. My parents were sent to Riga and apparently on arrival without going into the town at the railway they had already dug graves. That’s what my cousin tells me. And the people were shot and there is no clear evidence of where my parents… I wanted to go to Riga because my cousin knew Riga from before. Initially he escaped to Riga and that was fine, that was before this all happened, and he strongly advised me not to go because there was nothing there. There is apparently a small monument…monument is the wrong thing, a note or something. Not where they were shot but in the woods where they shot other people. There were a lot of people shot and unfortunately I have nowhere to go to know that my parents actually were murdered. I’ve got the date, I’ve got the good evidence, clear evidence what transport that they were on and if you want I can find it although it’s from Austria. They actually sent it and that’s really all I had. And of course there was no further letters, no card arrived or anything like that, just it all stopped as far as I was concerned in ’42.

This is where people were murdered in Riga and Izbica and Auschwitz and so on are all there for everybody to see if you want to see but without any explanation rather than…

INT: In Vienna.

JSS: In Vienna in the first district. It is in the area where the Gestapo building was still so I’m told.

INT: Were you interested in science when you were a little boy in Austria?

JSS: Not particularly, certainly not biological science because we had a teacher in the Gymnasium who was known as Wurzelsepp, I don’t know if you can read, it’s sort of a, it’s like calling somebody ‘clodhopper’.

INT: Oh I see. Right.

JSS: I mean it’s not…

INT: A compliment.

JSS: A literal translation. He was totally uninteresting, he brought in a stuffed animal.

INT: And muttered.

JSS: And muttered. He had a beard you’re absolutely right that’s why he was called Wurzelsepp. So I had no interest and I’m sure I would either have been a lawyer or would have been directed towards it or medical.

INT: But your…what did you…did you say what your father did?

JSS: Engineer.

INT: He was an engineer.

JSS: He was an engineer, not mechanical, a building engineer.

INT: Ah so more of a surveying engineer?

JSS: It’s, look this is, we’re talking of almost a different century, things have changed considerably since then. But he was building sugar beet factories, you know they were extracting sugar from beets, and he was building at Durrenkroten and places like that. He was involved in them but he was junior at that time and so he worked for a bigger outfit and I don’t know very much about it. I mean he was a remarkable man in other ways. He was an engineer who rarely used a slide rule at that time, he did it in his head. He was an excellent mathematician, he taught me quite a bit at that time. I was not very good at learning at school you know and this is almost just before Hitler came in and so on. And eventually my mother complained so he, my father came to me, now he can’t have touched Latin for 50 years at least and this… OK, he took Caesar’s De Bello Gallico, he opened it at the fourth chapter, I never got there at all, and he translated and so he spent the next hour or so with me with translating. By sheer accident the next day the Latin exercise that we had started one paragraph after where we started and it did continue for another paragraph and the Latin teacher said to me, I had a very good mark, said to me “I can’t understand it, I thought you must have been copying from somebody else but there was nobody sitting near you”.

INT: Going back to your Jewishness because I don’t think we’ve touched on that, it was the cause of all your troubles in the first place. Once you came to Britain, I think Barbara said before, you’ve always seen yourself as Jewish. Do you think that’s because of what happened?

JSS: Sure because of that and my family was Jewish. Both my mother and my father were Jewish and my father was not religious so he went to the synagogue on three holidays; Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah and actually in the last year just before Hitler came in I went, I was already getting bigger, you know nearly old enough to go. I went with him and his brother to the Seitenstetten Temple, I don’t know if you know it, it’s the one they didn’t burn during the Kristallnacht. The reason they didn’t burn it because it was so built in that it would have destroyed…

INT: Destroyed a lot of the other houses.

JSS: Anyway, so he kept, we never kept a kosher house, and he was pleased, proud of being Jewish, but he was not religious and he was not really very much involved in Jewish… Most of our friends were Jewish but they were all very similar to us.

INT: Did you know any of the people in Glasgow? Because, well, my mother in law was from Vienna and I would say that her life was very much the same as well.

**John Subak Sharpe – Life During The War**

JSS: I ran away from that farm, I didn’t tell you this before.

INT: Ah so you came over to stay with the…?

BSS: Peskins

JSS: Peskins

INT: The Peskins…

JSS: Until about May

INT: So only for a very, very short time.

JSS: A very short time.

INT: And then what happened?

JSS: I became a farm pupil or a farmer’s boy and I stuck it out for one year and then I actually ran away from there.

INT: He must have just been thrilled because you were cheap labour I suppose.

JSS: That’s me, that’s my brother.

INT: Was your brother on the same farm?

JSS: No, no, no.

BSS: No, no.

JSS: He was… This was on the day that I was delivered there and at that time everything seemed to be…

BSS: Gerhard was one year younger and he had one more year at Ealing, Little Ealing Grammar School and then they took him to Coventry to his uncle who was a barrister and who was working as a, as a labourer.

JSS: Initially as a butler.

BSS: He came over as a butler.

INT: Did you have any contact with your parents after you came over?

JSS: We had letters. Initially, of course, the war hadn’t started. Once the war started it became very, very difficult but by a roundabout way, and I don’t remember the details of it, they knew somebody in one of the mutual countries and they could write to them and those people could then send the letter on so we had two or three letters. Unfortunately by that time, as I say I was working very, very hard. They had three times a day milking, that meant you got up at 5 o’clock in the morning and you got to bed at 10 o’clock at night. And they used you as much as they could. It was not a very happy situation. So we had some contacts for a little while and then they ceased.

BSS: We have his mother’s letters with various people writing round the edges.

JSS: Because my children don’t speak German so I tried to do it…

BSS: It upsets him terribly.

JSS: It got to the point where I felt I couldn’t do it.

BSS: Also when she writes she is mourning these boys. Now she’s a very upstanding woman from all that I know but she was writing “To my dearest, darling boys”. Do you understand? And a lot of things in them was that “Aunty so-and-so came but they’d moved house.” and Aunty so-and-so wasn’t actually by name that person but you know there’s a lot in them. So it’s quite difficult but we have them all, but again it’s difficult to know this other person. They need translating, they need translating for my children. They know about them, they know all the history, they know all the stories and the grandchildren… well no not Yiddish what’s the …?

JSS: Kurrent

BSS: Kurrent

INT: What’s that?

BSS: That’s the German.

JSS: That’s the Latin way of writing, I mean, the German which is all ugly but it was called Kurrent and of course under Hitler that was the way the writing should have been done.

INT: Oh is that right? He stopped using the gothic script?

BSS: That’s Kurrent.

JSS: I wouldn’t say he stopped using it because once people have grown up and then… My mother always wrote in script that you can read very easily.

**John Subak Sharpe – Immigration**

INT: Good. When did you arrive here in Scotland and how old were you when you came?

JSS: Well, first of all I did not arrive initially in Scotland but in England on the Kindertransport. I had been working for quite some time in agriculture as a farm labourer or farm pupil, whatever you like. I can enlarge that later if you want me to. In Scotland, the first time I came to Scotland was in 1944 in June, early in June 1944, after I had been called up. I say called up because I had volunteered in May, I had some problems in volunteering in May simply because I was in the reserved occupation and I had to say that I was a hay carter that was apparently not enough reserved and so I got in. So I came here, the first time in 1944, I spent 6 weeks being in general training in Maryhill Barracks and from there then after 6 weeks I went to Colchester and joined the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, Light Infantry. If you want me to continue this aspect very quickly?

INT: Yes sure

JSS: And I after a short time in there, the best of 3 or 4 months, the opportunity came to volunteer for special services. I volunteered both for commandos and the parachute regiment. The parachute regiment needed people at that time because they had just lost a lot of people in Arnhem I guess? But in any case they called me first and I became a paratrooper there.

INT: Goodness and did you ever have to go out of the plane and battle? Did you have a chance of showing off your skills?

JSS: Not really because the war was coming towards an end at that time and we were standing by, standing by, we were not used at that time. And then there came the, the European theatre would disappear. I had an opportunity initially, or I thought I had one but it didn’t work out, to drop onto Norway at that time but it didn’t work out. I was with the intelligence office, I was in the intelligence section of the para’s at that time and then we put aside, the battalion it was moved aside, moved our camp amongst other things and then we were going to go… to fly east. The seaborne part, they had already gone to the far east at that time and then the Japanese war came to an end and for a short time I was trying to learn enough Japanese to make sense of any maps that I could find and instead of that they decided to send us into the one theatre that I did not want, particularly want to go, to Palestine. So we were sent to Palestine and first up in the Gaza area and then to Tel Letwinsky.

INT: I was trying to find what (Tel Letwinsky) was called now because we couldn’t find it on the map and actually we couldn’t find it on old maps either.

JSS: Well that was the name that I had, I was not there very long but it was I will say a British…barracks is too good.

INT: An outpost?

JSS: It’s not an outpost. The outpost would be Gaza because nothing much happened there. From there they went into Tel Aviv for example, on one occasion, I was getting very angry at them but that’s beside the point. I didn’t go on this but they were all in favour. Bevan’s policy was anti Jewish and pro Arab. You probably know that as well as I do. In fact he made a statement at some stage to say that he would solve the problem but he didn’t solve the problem and he handed them… he evacuated, he evacuated. There were lots of things but Israelis would be able to tell you much more of the anti Jewish policy and it was only after they used to hang Irgun or fighters that they had caught and so on. And then Irgun got two British sergeants, they were actually intelligence sergeants, caught them. And they threatened that they would retaliate, which they did, and they hung these two which was a pity. But after that the hanging of Jewish Irgun or other fighters stopped. There were a few Jewish boys in there and when it became very obvious… and the British powers, that they were really much more interested in siding with the Arabs there. The Jewish boys were taken out of the unit and sent to Egypt to work in POW camps and so the rest of my work was really in POW camps again on interpreting and intelligence work and identifying potential war criminals and so on. But it was all a waste of time; Britain had lost its interest in the war criminals. Their main interest was what was happening in Greece where the communists, there was a big communist problem going on there. It was really largely a waste of time.

INT: And what happened in the end to these people, the prisoners of war?

JSS: They were sent back. Nothing happened.

INT: Nothing happened.

JSS: I took one group, OK, you asked… So later when we were stationed… forget them for now. I took one group to Port Said and the reason was these were all German spies, now I mean spies. Most of them had been captured in Iran or what was then Persia. Some of them were apparently civilians, German civilians, others were from the… Abwehr was the army.

INT: Was it the regular army?

JSS: Yes but there was the SS and the Gestapo and so on and the Abwehr was the military side that had been captured. So there were all sorts of individuals that were there and it’s really incredible. I had the job to take them in the lorry, ten or twelve of them, with a couple of squaddies with me, through a lot of desert to Port Said to be sent back to the UK initially but actually to be employed in Berlin which at that time was the last thing I wanted. The first people to be repatriated to the best of my knowledge from there were people that I would have thought should have been hung. However, that was the job, I had my pistol there and I don’t think they had any intention of escaping at all, they knew then what was going to happen. They were going to be used for intelligence work against the Russians. I mean all I did was make sure that they arrived at the other side with my two squaddies.

INT: So say again, they were going to be used in intelligence…

INT: Against the Russians.

INT: …against the Russians.

JSS: In Berlin, I think that’s where they were finally, but I lost all further contact. I’m pretty sure that’s where they were used. It was interesting to some extent. And then I was, my time was up, I was released in 1947, September 1947 with having reached the dizzy heights of war Substantive Sergeant.

INT: And what age were you then?

JSS: In 1947 I was 23.

INT: And you say you were a Substantive Sergeant, is that right? Is there a word substantive Sergeant?

JSS: War Substantive.

INT: What’s…?

JSS: In other words the regulars didn’t have the war substantive. It meant that as soon as the war finished as far as they were concerned the rank could be reused or changed because of money.

INT: Ah right.

JSS: But it was nice at least to have the war substantive which means whilst there was a war on… but that was irrelevant. That rank was arrived at…on extra regimental duties, I hope you have got there, because it was extra regimental duties in prisoner of war camps. The prisoners of war were German prisoners of war who had been captured mainly in the Aegean area. Some, there were allsorts, and if you want me to I’ll enlarge slightly on that.

INT: Yes please.

JSS: There were hardliners, that was ‘hardline’ Nazis. They had already been identified by the time we got the majority of them. Then there were people that were involved but in some cases involved in war crimes which were of various different types that had been elucidated by other people who had earlier interrogated them but it couldn’t easily be proved so they were all a category. So they were ‘C’s’ or ‘B’s’ ‘C+’ was the real hard core. The ‘B’s’ were non political almost and the ‘A’s’ were really totally non political. And they were usually quite young and some of the clerks that we employed were mainly, at least that I employed, were all ‘A’s’. And they were nearly my age or very close to it. And there was no clear political…

I should enlarge a bit more on that. I served in two different prisoner of war camps. That was because the Jewish people in the parachute regiment were sent out of Palestine. The majority, except those who protested and wanted to serve there and there were very few. I don’t know, they could say they wanted to stay with the regiment which there always were, I didn’t have much choice and it never even occurred. So they were sent out, there were, in my unit, there were maybe between 6 and 10 out of the four or five hundred people that were there, a small group. And earlier, before we went to Palestine and so on, I was in the ‘I section’, that was the intelligence section of the unit. There I was a private, again if you want me to say a bit more I’m very happy to but it may not be relevant because eventually I left the ‘I section’ when the war had finished and we were, or just before the war had finished. We were due to drop probably on the Japanese mainland, the whole unit, and I learned for a very short time, learned is the wrong word because I’ve forgotten most of it, to identify Japanese regiment units from maps. If we got some maps we were meant to read… A total waste of time I couldn’t do anything of this sort.

Now our seaborne party, that means the party to accept the regiment and prepare things for it, had already gone out to India. We were still training in Britain but the war had then finished, that was after the Japanese surrendered. So Bevan decided to send the unit to Palestine where there were real problems, that was the last place I wanted to go to. I actually spoke to Captain Pengelly, he had been a Captain in the para’s, the name Pengelly is Cornish I think. Anyway he persuaded me that I, being in the unit and… he would be prepared to try to help me to look for my parents but I really should show some esprit de corps. I decided I’d been part of the unit for some time so I didn’t insist on trying to get to Europe after the war.

INT: So when you were 23 and released did you come back to Scotland or stay in England at that point?

JSS: I went to England, I went to Birmingham, I had decided for some time that I ought to do something positive rather than pretty negative things and that I needed to get back to the educational level that I expected, or I should say that my parents would have expected me to reach. When we were demobbed my brother and I were together and came together again at that time. He incidentally had been earlier and he was sent to ‘OxU’ Officer’s Training Corps and he just made that at the end of ’45. So neither of us actually…he was in the Royal Warwicks and neither of us actually did anything really useful during our army careers.

INT: But I was under the impression that you had to be in a Jewish Brigade as somebody coming from abroad, you were allowed to serve?

JSS: At that time, yes absolutely.

INT: Because it was later in the war then?

JSS: It was later in the war, it was ’44, and there was no question about that.

INT: That’s interesting. Then after the war ended what happened?

JSS: When we came out both of us wanted to get our university education. My brother who had been doing his matriculation and his Highers in Coventry, because we had been separated, whereas I was on the farm, he got an FETS grant, Further Education and Training Grant. In my case it was refused because I had been in farming and I had not been studying apparently at that time. So I got nothing from that. However, my brother and I for the first year shared actually his grant but then he went to University College London whereas I had my… sat my matriculation, my mature matriculation, both of us had to sit mature matriculation, into Birmingham University . So they had to offer me a place, so after the first year I got a grant from Birmingham itself. I also had some help from the family, Mr and Mrs Peskin, who are dead now, who had actually guaranteed for us children when we first came over as children, aged at that time 14 and 13. So I got a grant from Birmingham, not from the university but from the city, and from then onwards we went slightly separate ways. There were two things that I should say; first of all going back early to when we first came over to England we were both going to be interviewed by an educational psychologist. We had of course done no educational work at all for the last year in Vienna, after Hitler had came we were thrown out of our school and this was nearly a year later. And this man had obviously been educated beyond his intellectual capacity and he decided we were not worth educating. That is how I actually was interested in farming although I was not sent to a farming college but to work as a pupil on a… for a pretty dreadful farmer.

INT: How did he decide you weren’t worthy of educating?

JSS: He tried to interview me in Latin, he said “I see you’ve done Latin for at least a couple of years” and so on. Now I don’t know whether you have done Latin at all.

INT: No.

JSS: But certainly not colloquial Latin.

INT: No.

JSS: I obviously could not possibly hold an interview in Latin. That’s the way it goes. A second time almost the same thing happened to us when we got into Birmingham University, potentially into Birmingham University, because we had taken this mature matriculation into the university itself. There was a man, the admissions tutor, I don’t know if I should mention his name. But OK, his name was Dr. Ibbs at that time, Major Ibbs he called himself because he was something in the Territorial Army but he had not done very much elsewhere. He was an awful lecturer, he lectured in heat, however, he interviewed us. He offered me mining engineering in which I’d absolutely no interest whatsoever and he offered Gerhard, my brother, a year below what he could already enter in because Gerhard had taken an intermediate just before joining, the London Intermediate. I had learned matric but that didn’t make… We both didn’t accept this, eventually he had to offer something else so he offered me botany and biology and from then onward it went on. But he said “You would have been better off if both of you had failed”. He obviously didn’t like refugees or at least like… Don’t forget, we weren’t young men then and we were experienced, we had been living for quite a long time in the army and had made reasonable progress there.

**John Subak Sharpe – Settling In**

JSS: When I got to Birmingham University, as I said, the first years had to be shared but I got lectures from a brilliant lecturer, a not very pleasant man, but a brilliant lecturer in genetics. And I decided when he asked me to go into the first year in genetics which would be the third year at university. I took some time and then I said ‘yes’ and eventually I graduated with first class honours in genetics.

INT: And you got a first class honours? And I believe that was the first degree in single genetics.

JSS: It was the first. First ‘first’. The others got two… as far as I remember it was a relatively small class, but maybe second… I don’t remember what everybody… There was no other first, there was no other first that year in the whole biological sciences. So that was; botany, zoology, at that time and genetics. I had the only one. The year before there were two firsts but not genetics, they were, as far as I remember, either both in zoology or one in zoology and one in botany. Firsts were very hard to get in those days.

INT: Very rare. And you decided then to go into academics?

JSS: I was offered then to, and again there had to be an interview, I was offered to do a PhD in Birmingham University with the small group of lecturing staff there. And I had to go to London to be interviewed and I got an agricultural research council scholarship which was as good as you could get. That was £300 a year, tax free. I’m mentioning this to you because actually later on I had a letter from the inspector of taxes saying “why had I not registered”. I said “my award is tax free”. We had several letters coming which ended up being from the inspector of taxes “it appears that your A.R.C grant is tax free”. No apology or anything.

INT: Sorry say the name of the grant, the type of grant. The grant was called the…?

JSS: A.R.C – Agricultural Research Council.

INT: Ah right, OK.

INT: And did that mean that you had to specialise in one particular area?

JSS: Oh yes, that and I had to do it with Martin Reece and a couple of other people. But I was really not much supervised but that’s beside the point. You can see my PhD thesis if you want to.

INT: And what was it on? What was your subject?

JSS: I specialised, I managed to isolate unusual Aspergillus, it’s a fungus, from the top of a marsala bottle cork. And it turned out to be very interesting and I developed that so… Really I could have stayed in that subject if I wanted to but at the same time, I had my own problem there, but at the same time the problem I was given is to investigate heterothallism in wild Aspergillus. That was an interesting investigation and I did that too so I had two parts of the thesis. My ‘prof’ said at the time that I was ‘gilding the lily’ whatever that means but it really hooked me onto research. The fact that I didn’t have a supervisor, I’d had a supervisor nominally but he was on external leave in Scandinavia with (???). So I really had no supervision.

NT: And thereafter what happened John? Where did you go next?

JSS: I, let me try to say this, I had a number of, once I got my PhD, no before I got my PhD, I was attracted by one of the competitors so I still was writing it up and the competitor was in Glasgow. So I went after two years in Birmingham with no supervision I went to Glasgow with no supervision. But, I was now an assistant, really an assistant lecturer with Pontecorvo here in Glasgow. And I wrote a… I was married after the first year of my PhD work still in Birmingham, to Barbara, we’ve just had our 60th wedding anniversary.

INT: Congratulations.

JSS: I’ll show you. We had it in the teeth of opposition from her mother.

INT: She didn’t approve of you did she?

JSS: I was a refugee, a Jew, penniless as far as we were very poor and she didn’t approve. You can ask Barbara, she will give you an even better description. However it worked out OK. After two years we came to Glasgow. Barbara worked in the, she was a nurse, and Barbara worked in the Queen Mother’s I think for a short time. Then we had at the very end while I was finishing my PhD thesis, to be submitted to Birmingham of course, we had our first, our eldest, child. And so he was born just before we left again for here and I dipped his foot into Loch Lomond.

INT: A true Scot.

JSS: To remind him of when we were…I went into Pirbright, I was given the opportunity to become something new for them, a geneticist in Pirbright and this is when I switched to viruses. I worked on foot and mouth disease virus. And I worked in Pirbright, I had assistants and started genetics of FMD – Foot and Mouth Disease. Do you want me to go on or not?

INT: Yes please.

JSS: Well I was in Pirbright, now I was, we had a house there that was provided. When we came in it was a brand new house and there was seven different leaks from… but they had an organisation to put that right and I worked in, let me try and think, mainly Foot and Mouth but I became a senior worker there.

INT: A what worker sorry?

JSS: I became one of the senior…

INT: Ah senior.

JSS: We were called research officers and so on. And then, I’ll make it quick because it’s… As I say I started in the genetics section then Michael Stoker, who has just died, asked me to come up from Pirbright to give a lecture to his staff, his new staff. He had just started virology here in Glasgow. He was good friends with Pontecorvo and it’s quite clear to me that Pontecorvo, who was a wonderful person and a very good scientist, had obviously recommended this because I had the flu when I came up and I gave this lecture straining and he, Stoker, then asked me to come to his office, which I did, and he said he won’t beat about the bush. He was wanting to offer me a position there immediately. I said “that’s impossible” I said “I have just obtained a visiting scientist or professorship…” (I think it was visiting scientist it was called) …”position for the next 6 months with Renato Dulbecco.” Dulbecco won the Nobel prize subsequently. And not thanks to me but thanks to his work in California at California Institute of Technology .And I had a grant so it was OK. And Stoker said “That’s OK, you’ll have this, sort of, sabbatical leave before you even start”. I don’t remember his exact words but he obviously wanted me there and M.R.C will take over the grant from the A.R.C itself. The grateful people in Pirbright, I was just about to be promoted, stopped that promotion in Pirbright then, but asked me to appoint a replacement for myself so I appointed the next geneticist. It’s so funny, it’s unbelievable. But you don’t want to…

INT: So who did you appoint then?

JSS: Pringle.

INT: Ah right.

JSS: Craig Pringle. And Craig Pringle invented… do you know who…?

INT: My husband’s talked about Craig Pringle.

JSS: Yes, I appointed Craig Pringle.

INT: So when you came back from Caltech…

JSS: Well when I say I appointed, I recommended and that was the only recommendation.

INT: And then so you were 6 months in Caltech and then you came back to Glasgow?

JSS: Yes

INT: Is that correct?

JSS: It may have been slightly longer than 6 months, it was more, it may have been up to 8 months. I came back but I sent… I was poor, I was still on a British grant in America at that time which was not very good and I sent back Barbara and the children, but at that time we had just two, to Pirbright where we had been before until I would come back and so I came. When Dulbecco found out how poor we really were he suddenly got me an extra $500, which was quite a bit, per month but then Barbara just left so.

INT: He meant well.

JSS: And then it came to Michael Stoker. I did not go to the university. I went to the virology unit. He was both Professor of Virology and director of the M.R.C unit. So I was now in M.R.C from A.R.C, Agricultural Research Council.

INT: To the medical research.

JSS: To the Medical Research Council. And the work went pretty reasonable here and that’s… But I was M.R.C and then I had made a couple of discoveries which are irrelevant at the moment but, well, I won’t go into that. And I was asked whether, whether I would like to come to Seegmiller to do some of the work, this was with cells rather than anything else, and come as a sort of visiting professor at that time. It wasn’t really a visiting professor but it was really doing research at NIH, that is National Institute of Health in Bethesda. And I then came… and then Stoker, I was out, I’d gone out there to do this because when Michael Stoker was resigning and was trying to do into the ICRF he, there were three, no four, senior scientists of which I was one who did not know what was going to happen. And there was so many rumours and what… Stoker offered all of these a position there, now the letter is still somewhere here, he offered, he was very good, and I would have gone to him.

INT: And where was that sorry?

JSS: This was in 1968.

INT: And where was he?

JSS: Oh he was here, he was still, but he had accepted, he had accepted the position of, in London, to become the research director in the Imperial Cancer Research Fund – ICRF. He offered me the position, what would have been a good position. Earlier he had been offered a chair in Oxford and when he was offered that he consulted us but we would not have had a laboratory. Facilities were very limited so we would not have had much advantage of uprooting, going there without that. And none of us, I can’t speak for all the others but probably, did not feel that they could accept this place so he refused the Oxford one and then accepted the ICRF one. This time, of course, he could offer us a lot more laboratory space and the others, Crawford and MacPherson, went with him and stayed there and I suddenly got… I went out to Seegmiller and then I had a call, the Principal of the university would like to interview me. Don’t forget I was not at university so I came back and strangely enough as soon as I came back, Barbara can tell you that, there wasn’t a… this was in December just after Christmas, just then. There was a letter or she had information, I don’t know if it was a letter or not, saying “the interview is off”. But I had arrived, I had to get that information, so I just went to bed after flying the Atlantic and so on being, at last, with my family. And then a few days later the interview was on again and I was offered the position that Stoker had had, in other words, the position of now full professor in the university, responsible for the department and more important really, the director of the whole institute of virology, which included the MRC virology unit, which was a big research institute by then. In a building, believe it or not, that building had been built by the same person that built the Coventry Cathedral, the architect, anyway I’m reminiscing here and I shouldn’t do that. But that’s how I came…

INT: And you said yes?

JSS: And then I was stuck.

INT: Right.

JSS: And I held that position until I retired in ’94, from ’68 to ’94.

INT: So, tell me, tell Clare and I a little bit as well about the CIBA medal. Because I don’t think we kind of noted it down properly last time. So the CIBA award…?

JSS: It’s strange, I…

INT: We have a photograph of it.

JSS: You’ve got a photograph, OK. It was just for various bits of research or researching that I’d done and established. There’s also something else which I almost feel should not have been done, not the CIBA, this was the International Herpes Virology Commission instituted a lecture which was in my name but that shouldn’t have been done until I was safely dead.

INT: No I don’t think so.

INT: It’s nice you know about it. It’s good that you know about it.

JSS: Well you couldn’t help know it because this is an annual thing and as far as I know until at least a year ago or so there was still enough money to have it so it was, it’s been going for a long time. I mean they just appoint somebody. I have nothing to do with it anymore and they gave me a golden whistle, did Barbara tell you that?

INT: I thought that was wonderful but I was going to ask is the lecture held in the same place every year?

JSS: No, different places, wherever the international meeting takes place. During my time I ran these meetings in several places, one in, one of them in Cambridge and another one in Edinburgh. Most of them are in other places, either in Italy or France and in the States, quite a lot of them in the States. So I’ve become reasonably accepted.

INT: I think highly accepted.

INT: And your golden whistle what was that representing?

JSS: I was astonished. When I retired, you haven’t seen it have you?

INT: No. Show it to us afterwards, tell us about it first.

JSS: I can’t tell you anything except that I was so astonished to get it, so I tried it and it works.

INT: And it was from your research on herpes, was it?

JSS: From the international community. Strangely enough that’s the first time as far as I’m aware this was done. But it says from the international community but they didn’t put my name on it.

INT: Well you better not lose it then.

JSS: Well I can sell it now. No it was astonishing. They also supported with the cost. Barbara had been very ill at that time. They had ships to Alaska from the last meeting it was in Vancouver to Alaska. That’s the only time I’ve been to Alaska, it was quite nice, and it was on a cruise ship simply and solely because Barbara was not very well and it was very important that there would be a doctor there and she didn’t need it as it is. And so at different places where we stopped… we flew onto a glacier, the sort of life that I never enjoyed and didn’t know quite how to handle it, but it was ok.

INT: Now wait, I better say, this is Barbara, John’s wife. Barbara.

SS: Right so, the two boys were at two different technical colleges trying to get their exams and I was at Birmingham Technical College. John was at Aston which eventually became the University of Aston and it turned out that I was sitting with, I can remember an Irish girl I can’t remember what her name was at all, I was sitting with this girl and it appears we were chatting. She was very talkative and it turned out John was sitting…

JSS: Trying to read calculus actually and I remember the book itself: ‘Calculus made easy’ by Silvanus P. Thompson and two girls came in and they were chatting continuously, they sat behind me, you know it wasn’t very full. So eventually I turned round and said “For god’s sake shut up” and that’s how I met my wife.

INT: That’s an unusual chat up line I think.

INT: That’s right, it is.

BSS: Well it wasn’t a very long…we weren’t going out for very long. We were married in…

JSS: Several years later.

BSS: On August 22nd 1953 which means 57 years we’ve been married. My mother disapproved very much. I married a student, I married a Jew, and I married a foreigner. Now what on earth worse could you possibly do?

JSS: The opportunity came to try to get a job as a geneticist and so on and I was encouraged to apply from different places. There were actually three different places. The first of these would have been in the West Indies and your wife would have had a servant at that time and all sorts of things like that. And the man who interviewed me had been a Colonel in the past and I was of course very delighted not to have anything to do with the army anymore and then he suddenly looked at my CV and said, “I see you were in the army”, I admitted that that was so, “Parachute regiment. OK, you spent three years in this, what do you think of this army thing?”. I said “After the first year when we got through the sort of interesting problems, it was a sheer waste of time”. And you don’t say that to a Colonel normally so the West Indies were out. We were not that interested. The second was in Sheffield and the third was in Glasgow. When I went to Sheffield for an interview it was a dreadful day, thick fog and I looked at it and there were grey tulips, they were yellow actually, but I wasn’t too keen on Sheffield at all. However I…There was no problem with the interview but then I went to Glasgow and here was Pontecorvo, Guido Pontecorvo was at that time leader and the type of research that I was doing was in fungi at that time. And his department was mainly interested also in fungal genetics. He worked on a slightly different organism than the one I had and he had done an enormous amount of work, but I was the only one who was working on my system and it had gone well. Anyway I got the job and Ponte was a friend ever since really, although I only spent two years with Ponte and then went to…it was recommended at the time when I got my PhD that I should start a genetics section in Pirbright which was foot and mouth disease research institute. I went to Pirbright, Pirbright in Surrey.

INT: How long were you looking at foot and mouth?

JSS: I was working in foot and mouth from ’56, ’56 I left from Pontecorvo who is genetics in Glasgow, I went to Pirbright and I was there for about four and a half years. I went in for a relatively…OK, I went from there to California, to the California Institute of Technology to work with Renato Dulbecco who since, and he was a wonderful man to work with, but he got the Nobel prize later but it’s not relevant except it shows you there was some quality there.

INT: I would say so.

INT: Great quality indeed.

JSS: And before, when I still was in the foot and mouth disease institute because Michael Stoker my predecessor there and Pontecorvo were very friendly and were working together, Ponte must have told him that if he wanted a geneticist then this was probably… And I was offered, I was offered a position there, I said “I am now committed to go to California for a while”. He said well you can start life on that as a sabbatical. So I had a sabbatical before I ever worked for the MRC.

**John Subak Sharpe – Reflection On Life**

INT: Can I ask you a little about your experience as a refugee? When you came up to Glasgow did you mix with other people who had escaped Germany?

BSS: Yes

INT: Or even before that did you…?

JSS: You mean when I first came up?

INT: Well you were only here for 6 weeks so no, no, I mean the second…

JSS: No there were several, there were several at that time.

INT: Really.

JSS: At least one, or possibly two, I don’t remember exactly. Also eventually I met again in Paris. When I say met again, simply and solely, because we were… once we left here we went to different uni’s and I’m sure I was the only one who went to the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry. The last employer, farming employer, was very, very helpful in many ways.

BSS: He’d already had your uncle as a butler.

JSS: Yes and he actually, he could have stopped me coming but I think he needed it and it was a reserved occupation, you couldn’t argue with this. He was very helpful, he understood and I kept in contact until he died with him and his wife. In fact while I was farming there it was the better times. In the evening I played bridge with them.

INT: You know I think I wanted a little more because I know that when we first met you it was through the SAROK so was there a gap when you were here and you weren’t mixing with other refugees and then you met them again or was it continuous?

JSS: No once I was working I was working and I really had very little else. Incidentally Glasgow University had at least three, I think it was four, professors…

BSS: Who were Kindertransport.

JSS: …who were Kindertransport.

BSS: That I think is incredible.

INT: I know that is amazing. So that’s you, Professor Hutter…

JSS: That’s right.

INT: Isi Metzstein as well.

BSS: Isi.

JSS: Isi Metzstein.

BSS: And who’s the…Overton

JSS: Overton

BSS: Karl Overton.

JSS: He’s died.

INT: Yes, Karl Overton who died recently.

INT: What was Karl Overton’s area?

BSS: Chemistry.

INT: Chemistry.

INT: That is quite remarkable.

INT: Did you know any of the people when you came to Glasgow and came along to any of the meetings?

JSS: When I first came up, just during the forces, the Glasgow people…

BSS: Gave hospitality.

JSS: Especially, I’ve forgotten what the name of the place was, hospitality to Jewish recruits if you like to put it. And I went to that with two or three others and we were very hospitably treated. We met some of the younger people but we never, we were there only for 6 weeks and 6 weeks in Glasgow, at that time which is winter time now, fogs, I don’t know if you remember Glasgow?

BSS: Black, black, black.

JSS: So the people were friendly but also the non Jewish people were friendly. For one penny you could go anywhere on the trams and the conductress often refused to take your penny because they knew we were getting very little. So that was very reasonable, very happy, But I never kept up with any of them.

INT: And later you met, did you meet through SAROK people again? When you joined SAROK did you meet other people at that stage or not really?

JSS: That I had met before? No. Don’t forget so many years have gone in between that probably most of them have gone somewhere else.

BSS: I can remember going to a lecture when we first came up, when we came up, with (???). And I can remember.

JSS: Wasserstein was one of them.

BSS: Oh yes of course the Wassersteins lived very close to us for that very short time. And my children… they gave us a lot of baby clothes, we had absolutely nothing. So for years my children’s dolls were wrapped in a blanket, a little square blanket with BW in the corner. So there he is and we unfortunately should have kept it shouldn’t we?

INT: And have your sons kept Subak Sharpe as their…?

JSS: Yes they’re both consultants now. Yes, Subak Sharpe. His daughters, his son also is Subak Sharpe, he has two twin daughters and although they got married and got new married names have taken the Subak into their name. I was on a visiting committee that were involved in cancer research, it was British and Czech combined and we started in Prague and I happened to be sitting opposite another man called Alexander who was also, I think, a Jewish professor speaking to one of the leaders on the Czech side who was minister as far as I know. The Czechs had two ministers, one was Slovak and one was Czech at that time. And he just asked me whether I had any connections so I said “Yes”, “Where to?”, I said “My father was born in Třebič but I’ve never been there.” So he said “OK, I’ll make sure that you go there and visit, joint visit between British and Czechoslovak scientists with interests in various aspects of cancer research, which incidentally the British leader was Michael Stoker who had been my predecessor. So that’s the first time I went and I’ve been a number of times.

BSS: 91. Keeps crossing the Atlantic, was there two or three weeks ago, 91.

JSS: The family has been very close and…

INT: I was going to ask which I know hasn’t anything to do with the questions, but I was admiring the photograph…

BSS: Of Robert?

INT: …of your award, it’s John and you. So when was that taken?

INT: What is that? That looks very impressive.

BSS: That’s the CBE.

JSS: You have some photographs…

INT: “For god and the empire”

JSS: …of the queen.

INT: Because we interrupted your history of what happened.

BSS: There you are there’s John and Lizzy.

INT: So let’s go back to the foot and mouth, there must have been something that led from foot and mouth research to getting the CBE.

JSS: I held the chair and the directorship together, they were really separate things, for 26 and a half years.

BSS: And also he was on various governments.

JSS: And after about 20 odd or so, this was in, when was it? ’91?

INT: I don’t think I’ve ever seen a CBE, it’s lovely looking, the blue is beautiful.

BSS: What a good looking man, what a good looking boy my husband was. Don’t you think?

INT: I noticed that.

INT: Actually yes, I thought that actually.

INT: Very handsome.

INT: And blonde.

BSS: Oh actually, well you can see the grandmother with the blonde hair on the landing.

JSS: I was very blonde but of course one turns pink as one gets older.

BSS: There you are, you see you have various appointments, government appointments and things.

INT: So this is the Biochemical Society?

JSS: That’s really quite… that’s the CIBA medal. There’s only one awarded each year. Can I tell you you’ll see it’s more attractive on the other side. Could almost be a Jew, his name was Miescher, he might have been.

INT: And why were you awarded…?

JSS: He started DNA.

INT: Right

INT: Why were you awarded the CIBA medal?

JSS: Isolated the chemical.

INT: What would you say was the highlight of your working career?

JSS: Highlight? It was really in considerable competition at that time to be picked by Himsworth as the future director when Michael Stoker, my predecessor, took over the Imperial Cancer Research Fund. And I was picked and given that opportunity despite of the fact that were several other people who were…

BSS: At least three others.

JSS: …more British than I certainly. You say highlight, I enjoyed my work, I enjoyed the work I did on nearest neighbour analysis. This is where you analyse DNA and RNA by transferring one atom from one to the nearest neighbour and then identifying which are the different letters that follow one another. I did quite a bit there and that gave me some reputation elsewhere. I did quite an interesting work much earlier than that, I did, before when I was with Ponte initially, I really discovered some non nuclear inheritance, extra nuclear inheritance in fungus. That would have been my career normally if I hadn’t suddenly had a wife and a child and the opportunity came to start something quite different in viruses about which I knew very little at that time when I started. Other things were isolating some of the first mutants of herpes simplex virus, still with my hands. It was very important and suddenly finding that I was beginning to get an international reputation. I didn’t publish very much.

INT: Probably because you were so busy actually working.

BSS: That’s right. That’s right.

INT: I would imagine.

JSS: Even if I say it myself I was fairly generous in starting something and then handing it over to others. But I felt that that was the right way of going about it.

BSS: He never kept anything for himself, other people often got the…

JSS: I was to be elected to EMBO, it’s really another (???), the European Molecular Biology Organisation, very early during it’s time. And I did quite a lot of work for them and amongst other things I went on to one of their committees and then became the chairman of the workshop, course and workshop committee. I ran several workshops here in Glasgow which was really very important because it’s seeded. So I got known quite well as seeded virology in particular the genetics aspect of virology which I did virtually throughout Europe, so that was quite early on.

INT: I liked the way you sort of say, very understated, that was… I think that’s quite exceptional.

BSS: He worked for the horserace betting people, well OK but I’m just going to say he did at some stage or other, and he was given hospitality by Lord Carnarvon.

JSS: Carnarvon.

BSS: So he went and saw the remains of the Tutankhamun bits in his… that were there. And it was very interesting and he goes to the jockey club, I’ve even been to the jockey club and, you know, the game’s not worth the candle so you had to pay for the candle on your bridge table or your card table and that game wasn’t worth the candle. And yes, of course, he had lunch with the queen and they talked about snotty noses. It’s a horse disease.

JSS: I lost out of that one because…

BSS: You didn’t get your lunch.

JSS: …this was at St. James Palace she came, we had a very nice lunch with very good wine that was there and I was in the queue standing and Carnarvon came up to me and he said “John you should meet the Queen”.

BSS: Talk snotty noses.

JSS: So I was dragged out, saw everybody else continuing getting their wine and so on, went to speak to her and she talked about her problems and so on and you can’t really leave the Queen.

INT: No.

JSS: Finally she said “Just talk to my vets and tell them when to see a vet” and once off the beat so to speak…

INT: You raced back for the wine.

JSS: It was too late.

INT: Exactly.

INT: Aw that’s a sad story.

INT: I think that’s got to be a low point.

JSS: Yes. No but that was quite nice, it was interesting in itself to be on that committee that had quite a lot of money but they ran out, eventually they ran out of money so that stopped it. And the money the committee still had was handed over to the Horserace Betting Levy Board and they went on.

BSS: He worked very closely with Smithkline Beecham.

JSS: That was quite interesting, other highlights was I think running some of the herpes virus workshops was really…

BSS: When he retired…

INT: And I would have thought this…

INT: CIBA medal dinner.

JSS: Yes that is a bit of silver.

INT: It certainly is.

BSS: Now that was a wonderful lecture because all the people who had been associated with him from all over the world, and there was a map up on the wall of the world where all the people who have been associated with him came, you know, they were marked on the map.

JSS: They did me well.

BSS: And the Principal at that stage was very nice, he said he always knew, he always knew that when John Subak Sharpe had something to say, he said “John always thought first and spoke afterwards”. I can’t remember the exact words but it was very nice. And then later on there was the last meeting of the herpes group, and this was in Vancouver, they gave him, presented him with, a gold whistle. Now don’t laugh but the whistle was the handover, you know in a relay race you handover, well the whistle, a whistle, was always handed over to the next chairman. So this time they presented…

JSS: You started the meeting and then you handed it…

BSS: So they gave him actually a gold whistle so I don’t know who on earth has a solid gold whistle? Which we have, and then the other thing that they did was when the collection was made when he retired and the John Subak, JH Subak Sharpe lecture was inaugurated for each of these meetings.

JSS: Well I think they must have by now run out of money.

BSS: They must have run out of money by now. But certainly…

JSS: Because they collected…this was international, it was all international.

INT: Well I think you obviously, what mining engineers loss was was a gain to the world of genetics. I think you’ve done much better than you would have done as a mining engineer.

JSS: I think you might be right there.

INT: So he was obviously wrong.

JSS: The idea of course…I don’t know, this man just wanted to fill certain places, he had no interest.

BSS: So anyway it was only after he retired and Dorrith started that, we went to the first one, suddenly he becomes a member outside of a Jewish community and I think this was very good. The other thing was that while he was working people said “You speak very good German, where did you learn it?” and he said “School”. Which, of course, is correct but not giving away too much.

JSS: Well it just depends who…

BSS: And the children always used to make fun of him as, I can remember, Bernard Wasserstein’s parents telling us a lovely story. She was called to the telephone and when she came back the eldest one, the others were in the bath, and the eldest one was standing there Imitating his mother “You vill get out of ze bath now!”. Our children always used to say Dad, why does dad say finger and not finger. What were the other things they always laughed… And the other thing is we have one or two words which are Austrian which we use and automatically kukuru which is maize, sweetcorn, palatschinken which is pancakes.

INT: That’s in Hungarian as well. My mother in law had them.

BSS: That’s right.

JSS: Don’t forget the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

INT: Oh I see.

JSS: You asked about Jewish and obviously there was my colleagues and people in the institute had all known that I’m Jewish, however, nobody ever said anything that I could in any way regard as hinting at some problem. The only time that I have come across it on one occasion was quite different. You know I had, as the director of the institute, I got a number of visitors at different times and I took them to lunch and showed them round the institute and so on. And there was one retired chap, he had a cardio problem, I don’t even remember his name exactly anymore, who kept on asking questions and he then said, you know personal questions, he said “How come I couldn’t find your name in the medical directory in the list?”. I said I’m not there but if you’re interested. “Well how come you’ve become the director? I said, I was just taking him back from the lunch and said “Ok I’ll let you know”. I took him into my office where my secretary sat and said to Mary “Mary just get the Who’s Who and get my entry from the Who’s Who and give it to Dr….”

BSS: John has always had tremendous loyalty from his staff. He’s had three, I think it’s three, it might be even four, secretaries. We keep up with all of them and they all think he’s absolutely wonderful you know.

INT: It’s been a pleasure

INT: No it’s been extremely interesting and incredibly impressive actually.