**Bob Kutner – Life Before The War**

In this section Bob describes his childhood. He was born in Germany into a Polish-Jewish family. The family moved to France and then to Italy when Hitler came to power in 1933.

INT2: When were you born and what was your name when you were born?

BK: My name was Norbert Kutner, and I was born on the 13th of January, 1924 and in a place called Chemnitz (C H E M N I T Z) in Germany. Chemnitz is near Leipzig…

INT2: Yes, I was going to actually ask where it was near?

BK: …Saxony

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INT1: And your family in fact had… were they Germans or had they…

BK: No…

INT1: …moved to Germany?

BK: My parents were probably not for the better, for the worst were Poles. So we were really Polish, Jewish immigrants… from Poland. I was born in Germany though.

INT1: Now I’ve heard before about your early years. I know that you’ve had a most exciting set of experiences that eventually did lead you to the UK. So, would you like to tell a little about them?

BK: Yes. Most are in my book, but since the listeners probably won’t have read the book and, yes, first of all… um… in Italy, under Mussolini, we were

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refugees from Germany, to France to Italy. Cos France was just as bad. And in Italy we came under Mussolini of course. Um… and then my brother, not…I got into political trouble and he spied for the French. So he was caught by the Italians and put in jail at the age of 19 or 20. I can’t remember. And he served… sorry, he was sentenced to 30 I repeat, 30 years imprisonment

INT1: What was he doing… in what way was he spying?

BK: He was spying for the French and sending information from Italy on… this is unbelievable. He was told to count the number of military aircraft; bomber aircraft…

INT1: Can we go back again now, where… maybe I should have begun with what happened after um… I suppose it must have been after Hitler came into power in Germany, how did it affect your family and then what then happened to you?

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BK: To the best of my recollection, remember I was 9 years old, 10 years old; and Polish Jews, foreign Jews knew they were in for a hard time under Hitler who had come to power in ’33

INT2: Mm

BK: Um…. German Jews thought they were safe – they had been in the war fighting for Germany, they’d had their medals, their ribbons so they thought, “we’ll be alright. But these bloody, dirty Jews from the East let’s get rid of them.” Believe me the German Jews were as pleased to get rid of us as the Nazis were. So my father had to make the decision to stay or run, and we ran which was the best decision he ever made because they caught up with the German Jews soon after.

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So we left Germany, and by the way stop me if it’s too detailed but…

INT1: No

BK: …We left Germany and went to France to a small town called Neuville. It was a charming little town, and I remember there as a little boy it was a lovely, idyllic life. Everything a child could want; including a wonderful school, where I learned French from the bottom up with no difficulty and found that I can’t sing but I can do languages. So um, I went to school there and learned French pretty well, made a lot of childhood friends, and then my father went broke. He started a little business by Neuville.

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My father was quite good at going broke as you find out in the later years. So we moved to Paris thinking that was salvation and, as many people know, Paris was as anti-Semitic as anywhere else, in fact, it was highly organized [anti-Semitism](https://gatheringthevoices.com/glossary/anti-semitism/). The only thing is it was never officially recognized. The difference there was they didn’t give you labour permits or permission to do anything so you starved on your own quietly. I discovered, but this was afterwards, there was a Jewish refugee organization which took care of young kids like me. In my case they sent me to Switzerland to stay with a Swiss family for a few weeks and I fell in love with them. They were very good to me.

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So I went back to France to the same misery, by the way we had one room and kitchen for the five of us. When you came in at night and switched on the light, the bed was covered in lice And have you seen lice- the little, tiny black things. I think they were black. Um and the minute you switch on the light they disappear – it was like bang bang magic. But the next morning all the blood spurts were all over the sheets

This I have a clear vision of – I was ten, eleven by then. Anyway that was awful life, awful, and my father couldn’t get permission to work so with little money we had, if any, went. Then my father got cancer and cancer in the middle thirties was something else.

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It’s bad now but it was unbelievable, it was death sentence anyway and he was taken to a hospital that looked like… something out the movies, really horrible. I went to see him, it was very hard. And when he came home again, he came home to die. And I do remember, just happened to be the last son with him, and he looked at me and said, “Norbert” and died. Another memory, a definite one. And … then… the misery started in because we had no money. We couldn’t live. My mother took in lodgers, what doesn’t kill anybody, but she had to take in lodgers who took up most of our bedroom space in our flat in Italy. But anyway life in Milan had been pretty good until this thing with my father, and then it became terrible and then Mussolini started…

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INT2: We thought you were in Paris

INT1: You were in Paris, you were in Paris

BK: Oh sorry, sorry, of course. Well we left Paris with great difficulty. Oh no… I been sent back to Switzerland again to those lovely people and stayed with them for 6 months. And then had to start school all over again- not the language, but the history, the geography, everything, all from the bottom. I was started in the bottom class but was promoted very quickly to my own level. So that was Switzerland 6 months in bliss with a wonderful family. The guy was quite an important big shot in his own village and it was lovely.

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And they were good to me. And then I got word from my parents not to come back to Paris but to go straight to Milan. I started school again there, again from the bottom. All of it, the language and whole works. Again it didn’t come to me very hard. I wasn’t a particularly good student but languages yes

So that was life in Milan. And for a couple of years it was great until my father got cancer, then everything collapsed. As I said, my mother started taking in lodgers, and when…

INT1: You mentioned five of you… were you?

BK: Brother and sister

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INT1: Brother…and were you the oldest?

BK: My big brother…no I was the youngest

INT1: Right.

BK: My brother was 6 years older than me, my sister four years older. My brother was very much the leader in every kind of mischief, he was the leader. So, when the Mussolini thing got very difficult because although, to begin with life in Italy was lovely. The Italians didn’t know from [anti-Semitism](https://gatheringthevoices.com/glossary/anti-semitism/). They had no idea, they didn’t want to know I think. But then suddenly because of pressure from Hitler, Mussolini introduced an official anti-Semitic policy.

**Bob Kutner – Life During The War**

In this section Bob gives details of his brother’s work as a French spy and of his own efforts to get out of Italy and reach Britain.

INT1: You were in Milan

BK: Yea, this is the, the high and low point of our family life really. Um my brother got himself sort of conscripted. No, talked, tempted into the French secret service. It started out by he didn’t like our way of living anymore- my father was dead, it was hard to live. He didn’t like responsibility.

BK: He liked women. That was his hobby. He was very handsome. Um so he went off to France.

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To get to France those days if you were a Jew and you were under those laws that Mussolini had introduced, you weren’t allowed to move freely. You were ordered to leave Italy but there was nowhere you could go because the countries all around Italy wouldn’t take Jews

BK: So there was nowhere to go but you had to go. It was a terrible time of panic, quite a few suicides. By the way my brother decided he join the French, first of all the Foreign Legion which was nuts. That’s not the job for a Jewish boy (laughter)

BK: Then he was lucky enough because of his languages he was singled out and put into the French Secret Service.

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They trained him. And um he came home and never told any of us what he was doing, he couldn’t. But when he eventually got into trouble 1938, I think or early ’39, we were all destitute

INT: So Bob you talked about the fact that you had accompanied your brother on the back of the bike.

BK: Yes.

INT: And then you said at that point, that actually, did you say…How did your brother…How was your brother found out?

BK: Because he was an idiot.

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He played a juvenile game of spying and didn’t realize just what he’d got into. I think he must have been approached by some French guys, undercover people, who sold him the idea of becoming a spy for France. That was a time when already we were under Mussolini and Ciano persecution, which of course was inflicted on Jewish refugees in Italy. So he probably chose, I don’t know if it was patriotism or a young man’s adventure.

INT: Excitement. um

BK: Yes. So he did join the French Secret Service which was ludicrous. I think it was like an Enid Blyton story – unfortunately it didn’t end like that.

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They, after a few months they arrested him but before they did my brother got me involved. I was fifteen. But he needed an errand boy. The idea of his spying by the way was to count enemy aircraft, Italian aircraft, on Italian airports. Actually go round counting them literally “one, two, three, four, five…” – it was laughable. And he kept records. Now, no spy in history has ever kept records but because he had me as his errand boy… Don Quijote and Sancho Panza – guess who was Sancho Panza! He had me as his errand boy. He actually got me to write down records of what he had done. He used to send his reports to France written on plain paper with lemon juice, which, you may not know, lemon juice comes to light when you heat it from underneath.

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INT: Right.

BK: So that was the secret writing, it was heated. He sent these messages to France and I kept copies which he hid in the back of a wardrobe. This is a spy keeping records – unheard of. Anyway we used to cycle around Milan, Sancho Panza again behind Don Quijote, until he was caught. I think. Remember this I can’t guarantee. I think he was caught because some girlfriend or other (he had a legion of girlfriends), some girlfriend or other actually told on him.

INT: Right.

BK: So one day the secret police came to our house.

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I remember just coming in when they took him away. They came to our house, thumped on the doors and my mother let them in. She was terrified. She had no idea what these men wanted. But they went, excuse me, they went straight to the cabinet where my brother kept these records. Now, somebody must have told them.

INT: Uh huh, yes. They wouldn’t have known that they were in the cabinet. No.

BK: I think it was a girlfriend. Again, this is conjecture. Anyway they arrested him and I didn’t see him again for many, many years. He was taken away for questioning and that was the last we heard of him for quite a while. Meantime my mother and I were arrested as well on suspicion of complicity.

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My poor mother had no idea what we were doing, no idea. She’d have killed us if she’d known anyway. But I knew.

So when we were taken away for questioning we were kept in a place like this, like a cellar, and it was very tough at fifteen to be cross-examined by the Italian Secret police – the OVRA, O-V-R-A I think it was called. So anyway they kept me there for two days and two nights – terrifying, absolutely terrifying. What they made me do was, everything, I had written in my handwriting, these copies of the reports, they made me write them three times to make sure that it was the same person who had written them – me.

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INT: Right.

BK: After about.. writing them out they were smirking – they knew anyway. But after three times of doing that which spread over two days and two nights they let me go. And my mother was getting the same treatment. They let her go eventually but they sequestrated our passports and that’s the beginning of the problems.

INT: Right.

BK: We had Polish passports. It’s important, one you should know that Polish passports, unlike German passports did not have that stamp, J for Jew, in them. So I wasn’t quite as suspect with the Germans. I’m telling you that for a reason. So now we tried, we eventually struggled to get our passports back.

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By a miracle, we got them and in the same time I had taken a job as an errand boy in an organization, a committee for Jewish Refugees. You know, we Jews form committees.

INT: Oh we love committees!

BK: Yeah, but we’re very good at them! So, the reason I did that was I’d been thrown out of school – in common with all Jewish refugee children. There was no exception. Maybe you don’t know about that in Britain but no child stayed in school under Mussolini/Ciano, the foreign minister who was also Mussolini’s son-in-law.

INT: Right.

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BK: So he got his position because he was the son-in-law because Mussolini did what he wanted it. Anyway Ciano prescribed us no school, no job, no occupation of any kind. Six months in the country, get out or lose all your chattels- the lot. You were given six months to get out. The only thing was most of us had no chattels worth talking about because we were already refugees from Germany, via France, to Italy. So we were really quite skint, lived in very difficult conditions and we had nowhere to go and that was the next problem which many Jews experienced -we couldn’t get out of Italy. We were supposed to get out but France wouldn’t have us, even with a transit visa you were a Jew and a foreigner.

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No chance, no chance. I mean none. Going through Switzerland itself was risky because the Swiss were sending their Jews back to Germany in some cases, some cases. All the countries that bordered the north of Italy, Austria, obviously which was Germany by then, they were all closed to us. So we couldn’t get out of Italy but if we didn’t get out we were in trouble. Under those conditions I got this unofficial, illegal job in this organization for the refugees. I was an errand boy.

And while I worked there – no other job to be had. This Jewish couple with a little girl, probably about nine years old, kept coming up every day because they had been promised by an English gentleman that he was going to get this child and take her back to England under his sponsorship.

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And they came and they came and they came and it was tragic because the people from England didn’t arrive, it was just me. I mean the parents came with their daughter every day.

And eventually that couple and the child decided that they couldn’t wait any longer. And what was the practice in those days, not practice but the frequent practice, was to try and get over the border illegally. The easiest way was over the Alps from Italy into France at night, dangerously, with a guide. And as far as I know, and I will really never know what happened to those parents and that child but I assume…

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They may have made it to France, they may have died in the mountains – I don’t know. In a way that is very tragic apart from what happened to them because the English couple arrived the day after they’d gone.

INT: Which is truly tragic.

BK: Dreadful. And they said.They saw me there. I was fifteen, just fifteen I think and they said they’d take me.

INT: And this was Mr. and Mrs. Reigate?

BK: She was a Jewish lady but her husband wasn’t. But he was a saint as far as I’m concerned. Always will be and always was.

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Anyway, Mr. and Mrs. Reigate said they would take me back to Britain but then we had a problem.

INT: You had no passport.

BK: My mother was a very good conniver, and she somehow got our passports back. So then all I had to do was get somewhere to go because I hadn’t. I had nowhere to go legally.

INT: And had Mr. and Mrs. Reigate left?

BK: No. Mr. Reigate stayed behind and he said he would get me some kind of sponsorship through his connections which would get me into Britain.

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But in the meantime I got my passport. He said we need your passport to get there but I’ll also get you an Affidavit, a document that will let you in. Fine. So we, with my passport back in my hand and his escort we went to France expecting to get through, out and in this time. When we got to Bardonecchia, they took me off the train and said my documents weren’t in order. So they kept me for forty-eight hours in a jail.

INT: And what did Mr. Reigate do?

BK: He went on. He stayed a while.

INT: Right.

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BK: But he realized he couldn’t stay in Bardonecchia. He went on but I knew where he was and I knew I could contact him.

INT: Right.

BK: But I was sent back to Milan and my mother … Imagine being on her own back then, the family had dispersed totally and I turned up on the doorstep. She thought I was safely living in England by then. England, that was the word, England. In those days they didn’t say Britain.

INT: No.

BK: Anyway. So I’m back in Milan and we still want to get me out of the country.

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In those days Jewish people lived with the fact that their families were split up, by this refugee-ism, by this system. So my mother kept struggling and I kept struggling and nobody would let me through, because by now I didn’t have that Affidavit anymore.

INT: Right.

BK: I just had my lousy Polish passport which wasn’t so lousy in the event. I went everywhere I could and nobody would give me a Transit Visa until I went to the Germans in despair. I went, remember I speak German, native German, I went to the Consulate and said I would like a visa to go through Germany and the young man said:

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‘Certainly young man, would you like to spend a little holiday in my country?’ Because I did not have that ‘J’ in my passport.

INT: Right.

BK: In that sense my Polish passport was my salvation. I’ve never had a great desire to be seen as a Pole but I was very lucky to have that passport and that Polish situation. So they gave me a visa. I waved my mother farewell again, because she couldn’t get anywhere at that time, and also she was concerned about the other son, my brother.

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Whilst all this was happening my mother was struggling to find out what had happened to my brother first of all. Because he had disappeared from the face of the earth and she was in Italy, not even trying to get out really because she wanted to find her son. And my mother was a great contriver. She was good at getting things done and somehow or other, and I do not know how, she found out that he had been tried and sentenced to thirty – 3-0 years of imprisonment for what he had done. The Judge, I understand, handed down his judgment and mentioned the fact in passing that he was a Jewish spy traitor, which was true to a degree, and he got thirty years. And he was put, as far as we know, on the Isle of Elba which in those days wasn’t a holiday camp.

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BK: It was a fortress. My mother in the mean time managed to get to England after war broke out. I don’t know how she did it, never really found out from her but she got into England, was kept in jail for one night and then allowed in and settled legally with the family we had here already.

INT: Right.

BK: And my brother stayed in jail. And after the war, I was in the army by then, and I had a certain amount of latitude because I had a military intelligence job, I went to look for him in Italy. I found him. I actually found him. And he had by then escaped from jail of course and the war was coming to an end in Italy.

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I don’t know if the history of that has reached you. In the middle of the war the Italians surrendered.

INT: Right.

BK: So the Italian troops withdrew to the north of Italy where the Germans were still fighting. So that was the two armies in a mess, conjoined, and my brother had somehow got out of jail. Well, probably the Partisans got him out and he fought with the Partisans. Actually, he became quite a hero up in the Italian mountains. And then detached himself from them and that’s where I found him, in a place called Saluzzo near Cuneo, another fortress. He’d been transferred there first of all and then escaped from there. But after this second place I found him. We had a great reunion and that, more or less, is the end of that side of our story.

**Bob Kutner – Immigration**

In this section Bob explains how he came to Scotland and what his initial experiences of life in Britain were.

INT1: When did you arrive in Scotland and how old were you then?

BK: As I said, I estimate I arrived in Scotland about forty nine. 1949. And how old was I? Well you again

INT1: You must have been about 25 then

BK: That’s right

INT1: And how did you come to Scotland and why did you come here?

BK: Well, my mother had remarried recently, so they suggested my mother and my step-dad actually come to Scotland and try my luck from here

INT1: Was he Scottish?

BK: No he was another Polish; Polish Jew

INT1: Oh I see

BK: But obviously he’s much much older and he’s long, long dead now

INT1: Oh

BK: But he had lived here for many years

INT1: Right. Where did you stay when you first came?

BK: In…Ayr. In Dounefoot in Ayr

INT1: what was your impression of Scotland and the people when you first came out?

BK: Well, I say that… I thought Glasgow was grimy but great. That’s good alliteration. Grimy but great. And the people were wonderful. I didn’t meet much racism. In fact I found none. But I did, I was aware of the hatred that the Catholics and the Protestants carried for each other and of the effect it had

INT1: And you think it made it… it easier in fact to be something else?

BK: Oh yea, they… took no notice of me being Jewish

INT1: Oh that is good.

INT1: …did, did you mix with… well, obviously you mixed with Jewish and non-Jewish people…

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BK: Yes

INT1: …were the Jewish people that you met here, did you mix with them through the Refugee Centre or…

BK: No

INT1: No?

BK: Entirely independently

INT1: Well that’s interesting…

BK: I didn’t know any refugee centers. I didn’t know about the Kindertransport Asylum.

[Bob then continued to explain how he travelled to the UK]

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BK: So I went from Milan to the Brenner Pass where the Italians whipped me off the train and said my papers weren’t in order and they kept me for another twenty-four hours. I stress that because that twenty four hour delay meant that there was no one in London waiting for me. So there I was, fifteen years old, skint, hungry, lonely, terrified and no English. Not one word. Not a word and some refugee organization picked me up and took me overnight to some pretty grotty shelter. But the next morning, this limousine turned up.

INT: So you were living with Mr. and Mrs. Reigate and did you arrange this errand job with the German Jewish Aid Committee?

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Bk: Yes.

INT: In Woburn House.

Bk: That was almost the same thing that I’d done in Milan and Mrs. Reigate helped me to meet these people at Woburn House.

INT: Right.

BK: And I was an errand boy there again, a filing clerk.

INT: And what age would you be by then?

BK: Fifteen.

INT: Still fifteen.

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BK: All that happened over a few months.

INT: Right, Right.

BK: I became a filing clerk and I used to run errands and do a bit of filing and amongst my jobs was when files made up of people’s cases, case files, whenever I got them I had to file them in alphabetical order and I got my mother’s file. So I used to promote it to the top of the pile all the time.

INT: Absolutely.

BK: And that is as far as I knew. I helped her in that sense but after that I don’t know what happened.

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Anyway I was an errand boy. I even met the famous Lady Reading. I think she was the wife of the vice…not vice-chancellor…the Queen’s representative in India.

INT: Oh right.

BK: I’ll think of the word for it in a minute. Anyway, she was a big shot. I remember she stopped me in the corridor, big moment in my life, and she said ‘What are you doing here young man?’ by which time I knew a few words of English and I explained and she gave me half a crown.

INT: Which was-?

BK: Which was valuable. I had this big silver coin in my hand and I felt rich.

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I’d never really had money of any kind except pocket money from the Reigates. But I did this job until I left there to go… next is….Mrs Reigate and Mr Reigate were wonderful with me. But I think I must have been a little bit hard to live with. I mean I wasn’t exactly a disciplined youngster so I daresay she got tired of me after a few months. I hate to admit it but I think she did. I used to have to prune the roses and I didn’t even do that willingly.

INT: You were a teenager and also you had gone through so much getting there. I think it must have been quite a contrast to be one minute involved in really survival techniques and the next minute you’re meant to go back to being a boy of that age.

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BK: A boy, exactly. They had a little girl of three and I also had to help look after her. There was a nanny. I mean the household was incredibly wealthy, incredibly wealthy. The house was in… overlooking Hampstead Heath – near Bishops Avenue.

INT: Right.

BK: In Wildwood Road I think it was called. It was a stupendous house. The view was over the Heath and for my part it was wonderful. I had a room to myself with shelves and shelves of books. I like reading, I did even then. So I was quite happy except for the roses.

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And I was learning my English. I must have been a pain in the tonsils. Anyway eventually she got me a job and that meant the end of the Woburn House job.

INT: Right.

BK: And I was sent to this farm in Berkshire. And that was a poultry farm. Now I must tell you right here; I hate chickens. I hate them with a proud and dying devotion. I loathe them because of that job. It was this, it was a sixteen acre farm on a very steep slope and most of the damned chickens were at the top and we lived at the bottom. In those days I had shoulders. I used to carry these hundred weight bags of grain or feed or whatever up the hill, feed those loathsome animals.

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By that time I would have killed them gladly. We kept on going like that – that was my life. Carrying feed up, coming back down, maybe feed the horse, whatever there was. I’m not a farm person. Not an animal person so it wasn’t great. I was alright with them, I did well and Mr. Hundleby (would you believe that name – Hundleby?), the farmer, took me aside one day, by which time I was managing pretty well I think and he said ‘You have been a good boy Bert’. They called me Bert. ‘We are going to give you a rise from your half crown a week. We’re going to put you up to a pound a week’. I thought, my God I’m a millionaire! I’m a millionaire!

INT: That’s quite a jump.

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BK: ‘But we’re going to deduct fifteen shillings for board and lodgings’.

INT: Right, OK.

BK: Five shillings. But the life was good there. I just loathed the chickens. There was an incident… The farmer had acquired some wonderful cockerels, a special breed, and he was very proud of those things and I was told to move them from one pen to another. You can carry four at a time if you do it the right way and I must have damaged one of them. It was lame and I was terrified that I had done this damage. That’s something I should have mentioned – I was living with fear all the time.

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I never lost my fear from Italy and so I wouldn’t even ask a copper for directions. I was terrified of most things. So I’ve damaged this bird and I don’t want to tell the farmer so I took it to a shed and thumped it over the head with a hammer. A good thump on the head and put it in an overturned water bucket and left it. That night was a night of nightmares like I’ve never had before or since. I seem to remember hearing fire engines and police and God knows what coming after me. I’m sure that’s imagination but that’s what I remember. Anyway, the next morning I went to inspect the damage and the damned thing was still alive so I gave it the thumping-over-the-head procedure again and this time it was dead.

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Unfortunately the farmer had a dog and the dog kept sniffing around the bird. I tell you, the experience of the farm was not great except I was well fed.

And then my mother, as I told you, had in the mean time arrived in Britain and she’d gone to join our family in Nottingham. You know, with refugees there tends to be a clustering.

INT: Yes.

BK: And our cluster was in Nottingham. My uncle was there, my aunt Gina and the cousins and so on. So she went to stay with them and then when she felt that I’d had enough of the farm she got me out of there and took me to Nottingham

**Bob Kutner – Settling In**

In this section Bob describes his first jobs in Britain when he left the army after the war. He also talks of his time before that as a soldier in the British army.

INT1: Did you work when, when you arrived here?

BK: Yes, I started out as a small time commercial traveler. Working for somebody called Harold Rubin. He was probably my step-brother-in-law

INT1: Oh right

BK: I acquired a few of those

INT1: (Laughing) Right

BK: And he launched me. And it was only a small way, but I grew from there

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INT2: So were you… did you remain living in Ayr at the time?

BK: No. Oh, I came back to Glasgow within months

INT2: Right

BK: Within months. And I found digs here. (Laughs) Digs. Um, I won’t go into but… the truth it was dreadful to begin with

BK: …1945 we didn’t know front recording. I, we used to write little reports…

INT1: After the war ended, your war ended at really 1949…

BK: I couldn’t really easily get a job. There were plenty of demob soldiers who couldn’t get jobs.

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But like all Jewish boys in London I had connections. So I was offered a job in a night club. I was sort of the only one who could be trusted. I had to handle the money ’cause the nightclub business was notoriously…

INT1: I’m sure still

BK: Probably still. Anyways, I was the main money man and it was a fantastic life. But we worked all night and not during the day and during the day theoretically I was supposed to rest.

BK: Anyways, I was, I did that and also with my sister tried to use my de-mob money to start a little… dress making business that failed at no time at all, so that was my money gone. And that’s when I came to Scotland

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INT: So when you were working as an interrogator what age were you then?

BK: Twenty-one or thereabouts.

INT: And did you have any training?

BK: No.

INT: Or did you have any protocols that you were expected…?

BK: What happened was that I was a corporal in the Pioneer Corps – that’s the worst regiment in the British Army. A lot of us refugees were shunted into that. Some were put onto the Isle of Man as prisoners, others, in our case, were in the army.

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I was promoted to corporal and became a drill instructor to the worst scum in the British Army – the Pioneer Corps. I kept trying to get in the Intelligence Corps because I had four languages by then fluently. Obviously Italian, French because I lived in France in the interim, English…anyway.

INT: And German.

BK: And German. And German was an important one. So I kept trying to get in the Intelligence Corps and they kept rejecting me. One selection officer actually asked me if I could drive and I said ‘No sir, but I can speak four languages’ and he said ‘No, we’ll teach you to become a driver’. I swear to you.

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INT: It does make you wonder about the British Army.

BK: Well…I don’t know how we won the war. So anyway…But then came D-Day.

INT: Right.

BK: And on D-Day I was moved to London to Kempton Park, which in those days was an interrogation camp. I was made sergeant and became instantly an interrogator. First of all with the incoming flood of prisoners of war from D-Day, from the beaches of Normandy.

INT: Right.

BK: Thousands and thousands came in and we used to have sort of…..to question them briefly, get their records straight.

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There were too many of them to do anything else. But when I got past the prisoner of war stage I was put on war crimes interrogation and that was when I felt I made a contribution. You know we had some very nasty people.

INT: So did you decide on your own questions?

BK: Yes.

INT: And were you just told to go in?

BK: We weren’t even trained but, you know most of us, the sergeants, were of the same background as myself.

INT: Right.

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BK: Mostly German Jewish refugees who had landed in Britain. They might have been in the Kinder Transports, I don’t know. They had landed in Britain, landed in the army because, like me, they wanted to be in the army. We didn’t want to be foreigners, we didn’t want to be whatever it was, we just… So quite a few of these sergeants with slightly foreign accents and my kind of background. Well not quite my background.

We… Listen, you have one of these Nazis standing in front of you. You know without even questioning what his history is, you know he’s worked in a concentration camp or in a ghetto or he’s beaten up Jews or he’s done whatever and we worked on that principle.

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We prejudged. We did prejudge, there’s no doubt about it, but we weren’t so far wrong and that’s how it went. After the war it still went on for about a year because the prisoners were still coming, the baddies were still coming before us and that’s why I mentioned a few names. But it was an experience and a half for a young man.

INT: I think you must have had terrible nightmares at night as well.

BK: I did. For a while I was hypersensitive because at that age you’re not… But I did have some nightmares, I still have occasionally of some of the people I’ve mentioned.

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But altogether the animals that came before you and tried to persuade you that they’d ‘always loved the Jews, their best friends were Jews, they’d never met anybody but Jews, Jews were wonderful’

I’ve written about that. That ‘they used to invite them to their picnics’- like hell they did. But by that time the Germans were our prisoners and they lived in fear and trembling and it wasn’t always unjustified or unwarranted because we didn’t give them a very good time. No physical ill-treatment. None. We didn’t do that but we still didn’t make them very happy.

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The threat of imprisonment hung over their heads and that was the thing, we were twenty-one / twenty-two by then and we had the power to make judgments. I could say this guy’s a baddie, I recommend twenty years imprisonment. They never served all that time. Never ever because the British Army again… you’ve no idea. Higher officers thought that if a German could speak English he’s a gentleman, he couldn’t be bad… But meantime, we used to pass the judgement.

INT: So when they were sentenced to imprisonment for twenty years where would they be sent?

BK: To camps, internment camps.

INT: Internment camps in Britain?

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BK: No, most were in Germany

INT: Mostly in Germany, right.

BK: Where I was stationed, I was stationed in Germany by then. No we had camps and what happened was…say I, for example, interrogated him in an interrogation room and if I thought they should be dealt with further I passed my recommendation and the recommendation for sentence and so on. The ones we didn’t consider dangerous or really wicked in a big level we just released. We had the power to release them as well.

INT: Right.

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BK: So they knew they had to be good with us. Good boys or else. But in some cases I went as far as a thirty year sentence. One or two of the people I’ve written about. But they weren’t implemented. A year or two and they were out; all the Nazis were out in a year or two anyway. And that’s how it turned out. Eventually I got very tired of what I did and the minute my military service ended I quit and that was it.

**Bob Kutner – Integration**

Bob explains how he met his wife, what kind of jobs he did as a civilian during the war and the restrictions which Jews and foreigners experienced at that time.

INT1: How did you meet Barbara?

BK: Well, I was acquainted by then with a guy called Sidney Shear He plays the piano at the, very often at the Jewish Care

BK: Anyways so… Sidney Shear was a close friend at the time and one day he said – I think that is the book, “I’d like you to meet my fiancé”. So we went back to the fiancé’s house and there was also this other girl sitting in the corner working on her German homework.

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She was very pretty, so my German came in handy. I helped her and we’ve been married happily ever after

INT1: And how long, how many years have you been married?

BK: 1953 to… what is that? 57 years?

INT1: Um, o…once you start working, ah, my question is, was… was it hard to get work? Obviously, once you started as a commercial traveller…

BK: It was very hard to start. Very hard to start this commercial travelling

INT1: Was it?

BK: Uh, visualize a young man whose pretty well lost in civilian life, going around with a little couple of cases with a few skirt samples in them… knowing nobody in the business, right

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INT1: So, and did you make a difference? Well, your English is very good, do, do you think people knew you came from abroad?

BK: By that time I think I still had a bit of an accent. Not much, I never had much of accent, but you could tell that I came from abroad, yes

INT1: Mm. And did that make a difference to people’s attitudes?

BK: No! They were just curious about my accent. That’s all

INT1: That’s right, and…

BK: That’s still going on

INT1: …and and… I don’t hear an accent. Um, did you have any reason to tell the people you were working with your Jewish origin or was it an issue?

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BK: It was never an issue except with golf clubs

INT1: What?

BK: I couldn’t get into ANY club. You must all know that then

INT 1 & 2: Mm

BK: There wasn’t one, not one club that would accept a Jew. Not necessarily a different story. My accountant – when I started business and I needed an accountant, a one man business. And he one day said, “Listen Bob, why don’t you play golf?” I said, “Because nobody would take me.” He said, “you’re la… you’re laughable. That’s ridiculous, it doesn’t happen!”

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I said, “It happens.” So he went away and came back a month later and said, “Bob I’m ashamed, I couldn’t get you into my club.” And that’s what it was like at the time

BK: Oh yeah ! Then I got one interesting job. My mother helped. She was a great helper, my mother. She took charge. Um, so she remembered that there was a Nottingham man… big manufacturer of ladies’ stockings. You know the old fashion stockings…

BK: …with seams and fully fashioned. He ma… in a big way he manufactured those. My mother went to see him and said, “Can you give my son a job?” and he employed me. And they trained me to work this very fancy machinery… very, very long big machine; thousands of needles doing anything

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BK: Um, only I was useless with my hands. So I broke one

BK: Which was thousands of thousands of thousands of pounds worth

INT1: Oh dear

BK: Oh, it was located in a town called Ilkeston near Nottingham. And, um, Ilkeston was still I think in dark ages; they never seen a foreigner before. And nobody trusted me. Nobody wanted to talk to me. I was enemy alien by then

INT2: Of course, because the war was on

BK: Yea. Um, the only people that trust me was the girls in the factory the men didn’t

INT: laughs

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BK: And my English wasn’t all that good so it was hard to communicate and when I broke that machine I was in dog house. But Mr. Noskwith that was the name of the owner and the company by the way was Charnos. They’re still in business now

BK: Mr. Noskwith gave me one more chance. Ah, in the interim, the guy was sole in charge of me came to me and said, “Norbert, Bert whatever they called me those days, I’m getting married will you be my best man?” That was the funniest situation in my life by the way. He didn’t even like me. And I didn’t like him. But he asked me because he had nobody else I suppose

INT: laughs

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BK: Came the day, the great day I was dressed up in my best finery and I remember belting up the aisle, I handed the ring to the bride-groom, I went back down to the aisle to be the usher. I was usher and best man. And I went out to the car big bridal car and they came out, she was in a beautiful finery, opened the car door for her, she stepped in, and then I had the door opened for him and I slammed it on his hand

BK: Ah, I did not do much good for his honeymoon

BK: In fact, I never knew, I know he drove off swearing! Blood curdling swearing…

And that was the last I heard of him actually

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BK: And then I broke another machine. And even Mr. Noskwith had to fire me. These was complicated machinery!

BK: All the fine needles; hundred of needles knitting away at the same time you see. The end of fully fashioning bit, the machine picked up a stitch, transferred it to next row of stitches; like in knitting

INT 1 & 2: Mm Hmmm

BK: It was knitting. Ah, so eventually… (laughs) I was knitting!

BK: Out of that factory from frying pan into the fire because got a couple more jobs and there weren’t much cop or I wasn’t.

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Oh! One more thing that’s interesting. Not… my point of view. They introduced legislation that all foreigners if they wanted to move from here to there, they had to register that they were going somewhere. Well, Ilkeston was seven miles from Nottingham where my family was. So we… I was in digs in Ilkeston. Terrible digs. But, when I wanted to go to Nottingham for the weekend, I had to go to the police station. They had to stamp in this special book and they wrote inside, “Subject entitled to move from so… …… somewhere…… Um, may move from Notting… Ilkeston to Nottingham for twenty four hours and report back to…” Bloody ridiculous! We were the Polish-Jews who wanted to be on the British side!

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BK: We couldn’t have wanted anything more. Anyway, this happened for quite some time. So every… even… every time I wanted to go to Nottingham I got on my bike, literally, and rode the seven miles Nottingham back again, get the book stamped again. Even twelve hours stamp the book. And that went on for a while. Anyway, I got jobs in Nottingham. They were rubbish. So was I. So I eventually went to London, to begin with on my own. In London I got a job with some nice Jewish guys; two partners. Um, it was quite a good job. I was given reasonable responsibility. Um, it was right in the heart of London, in Poland Street

INT: Mm

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BK: Just in Oxford Street

INT 1 & 2: Mm Hmm

BK: Um, and that was good; at last I made good friends. Only London get… was getting shit bombed out of it, it wasn’t cozy at that time

INT2: Mm

BK: It was an experience to see what happened in London and to hear the bombs and the sirens and alarms, the alerts. That is a terrible memory. Terrible memory of going to the tube stations and see… seeing people living there

INT2: Mm Hmm

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BK: In tents! They, im… improvised homes!

INT2: Mm

BK: And there were sitting and troops playing music. It was something else. That was Britain in those days

INT: Mm Hmm

BK: And to see those bombed out houses. Eh, uh and I had this other job in again in London. I did reasonably well with these people. And as I said I kept trying the army and eventually I made it. And I told you guys that…

INT1: And, and you were part of, was the British army, wasn’t the Jewish brigade so that was quite (precious?)…

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BK: No, the Jewish brigade were tough cookies

BK: No. But they… they mostly came out of Israel. Out of Palestine

INT1: My, my father-in-law was in the Jewish brigade that’s why

BK: Well they were very very tough guys they were. All of them… and very…

BK: …And very hero worshipped. Us, who were not in it, thought they were wonderful

BK: They helped in the capture of Tobruk, which was one the major British victories

BK: Well, I guess a lot of them joined from here. I don’t know how but…

INT1: Right

BK: It was based on Israel. I think. Listen, I was… I think. Anyway…

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BK: …so we, I fought my own war which wasn’t very dangerous one because I was in the intelligence corp. In fact I made sure I never heard a shot fired in anger. Would have been very indignant if anybody had fired at me (laughs). Um, so after four years, two years which were spent on war crimes interrogation… I tell you something that was unbelievable. I think about now I,m telling you I was twenty one?

INT2: Mm that’s pretty young

BK: And bit young for this incredibly responsible job. I mean we had some famous Nazi war criminals some wound up in Nuremberg. And there was a woman, you would have heard of her, who came before me for just a few hours and I allowed her to sit ’cause she was a woman across the desk.

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And she crossed her legs and tried to be very seductive. Her name was Irma Grese, does that mean anything to you?

BK: But when I saw her she had beautified her as much as she… herself… as much as she could. And, she actually said to me, “What, what, why, there were far too many Jews. What would you do with them?”

INT1: ‘Cause what, what was her job in the concentration camps?

BK: She was deputy commandant at Belsen. Her husband was I think commandant. They had family business. And her hobby was making lamp shades out of human skin

BK: She was very notorious for that. Why, I didn’t have very much to do with her.

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I think I sent documentation to be put in. She went to, she was sentenced to death. AND she was hanged. And I’m told that she said, “hurry up boys” when she stood in the scaffold. She was really tough cookie but a cow. And her husband got the same treatment eventually, he, he was hanged as well

INT1: She didn’t try to deny what she had done?

BK: She was proud it. That she couldn’t have denied it. I mean…

BK: In fact, she used to have the prisoners pursued by dogs. You know what happened to Jewish concentration camp inmates.

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They left early in the morning for work, they were marched for two or three hours, got to work, maybe a gruel for soup, food I mean, beaten up all day, marched back maybe fourteen hours all together, and they were dying on their feet and when they got in she sent, set her dogs on them. Um, she was unspeakable. Well, there were a lot of unspeakables. And that, but that, that was my war.**Bob Kutner – Reflection On Life**

Bob talks of his own family in Glasgow and the importance of the wider Jewish community there

INT1: One last question really about your time in Scotland. What were the high and lows for you? Obviously you got married, you had children

BK: Yes. Well, obviously getting married was a high

INT1: Mm

BK: Um, 1953. Um, we had children… our children came I suppose 2 or 4, 2 and 4 years after we married, something like that. If, if Barbara was here, she’d tell me I got it wrong

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INT1: Mm

BK: Well, 2 or 4 near enough

INT1: Mm

BK: Yeah, and one boy and one girl. A reverse order, one girl and one boy. Yeah.

INT1: And did you get involved with working with the Jewish community? In a voluntary way? I I know you do now, but did you always do that…

BK: In those days no. I had I had no understanding of that even. I suppose like a lot of immigrants, we were concerned looking after ourselves and getting ourselves established.

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And I wasn’t even… re… remotely concerned with Jewish problems, except I tried to find a synagogue fairly soon. Make, let, make it clear I’m not very religious, but you have to have a synagogue. And partly though that I met some people as well of course

INT1: But, later didn’t, you were very involved with drama?

BK: Very involved. An amateur theatre club, which was very very high standing and standard…

INT2: Avrom Greenberg Players

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BK: Avrom Greenbaum Players, where my wife was one of the leading ladies. But because I have no talent I went on the management side. I was the chairman quite a while in it. That was a fantastic time. For Glasgow, young people all together, I think the Avrom Greenbaum Players did wonders to drawing the community together both in terms of spectators and workers. It really was, you are all too young to know about it. But it was quite fantastic

INT1: It is, It’s a shame that the community is not big enough really now I think to sustain that is it?

BK: It wasn’t big enough and television became… a serious competitor.

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And kids didn’t want to go out in dark in the winter to rehearse when they could sit at home watching the old fashioned television box

INT: Mm

INT1: Would you say that that Judaism has been significant in your life?

BK: Totally. Totally. Um, now anyways, to me it’s all about being Jewish, but it’s always been… the persecution, the running away, the persecution, the running away, and then coming to this lovely Jewish community. Which was and is a lovely Jewish community. And very supportive of me. Not in the sense of charity, but in the sense of being supportive and kind and helpful, yes

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INT1: Remind me what your books called Bob, because I’m sure…

INT2: Over My Shoulder

BK and INT1: Over My Shoulder

INT1: And why is it called Over My Shoulder?

BK: Looking back…

BK: … what I’m doing with you just now