**Isi Metzstein – Life Before The War**

Isi Metzstein recounts how he experienced the Kristallnacht attack as a schoolboy in Berlin in 1938

**Read the Transcript**

INT: Sunday the 13th of June and we’re here in the West End of Glasgow to interview Professor Isi Metzstein. Is it all right if I call you Isi?

IM: Absolutely

INT: Thanks

IM: So, can we start with your arrival here in Scotland? Could you tell us please when and where you were born and did you have a different name at birth or was this always your name?

IM: No. My name is Isi Israel Metzstein. People think Isi is a short but it’s actually a German name (or a German-ish name) and Israel was my second name and Metzstein obviously was the family name which isn’t…it’s hand made – my father made it up. I mean that. Because he was originally called Millstein. I think he wanted to be more German perhaps, I don’t know. They went to Germany from Poland. Well when Russia became Poland then they went to Germany in the early twenties and I suspect he was trying to be a bit more German.

INT: And whereabouts in Germany..?

IM: Berlin

INT: You were born in Germany?

IM: Uh huh, I was born in Berlin

INT: Berlin. And obviously you left to escape the, the Nazis

IM: Yeah

INT: And do you still remember the days in Germany? You were very young when you came here.

IM: I remember quite a lot. I don’t know where to start. I remember clearly the Kristallnacht and it was quite a curious experience because I’ve never heard anyone else talking about this in this way. I actually went to a school, it was a Jewish school,

you could walk to (it was about 10 minutes/8 minutes walk) and, as I was walking there some children of my class came towards me and said ‘Don’t go, the synagogue’. The synagogue and the school were attached to each other and the synagogue was on fire. So, I never worried about it, I didn’t know why it was on fire, I just thought ‘it’s on fire’. So I went to look.

Now I realise it was probably the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done in my life, but nobody paid any attention to me, and of course when I saw what was happening, I went home. But I saw the synagogue was burning, the fire had spread to the roof of the school, and the fire brigade standing by making sure that none of the non-Jewish property was on fire,

and everybody looking at it and enjoying themselves. The non-Jews I mean. And I just went back home. It wasn’t until later that I discovered that this had been part of a, a major attack on the Jewish…

There were some big synagogues in Berlin and they were all burnt out, most of them. But the synagogue was attached to the school. Literally physically attached to it.

INT: You spoke of people watching and enjoying it. Do you think it was a minority who felt like that or..? What do you feel?

IM: No I don’t think a minority felt like that. I think at that stage the vast majority of Germans went alongside.

Maybe not to the same degree of agreement with it but not enough to make any protest or stay away. No doubt about it. At that stage Hitler was very popular and the treatment of Jews was seen as either a very good thing or something that you wouldn’t want to have to worry about. But I would say that my only feeling about that is that the Germans as a whole were anti-Semitic, to different degrees obviously, and nothing I’ve discovered since has changed my mind.

**Isi Metzstein – Immigration**

This section deals with Isis Metzstein’s arrival in Scotland in 1939 and recounts where he was cared for and where ie went to school. It also describes how other members of his family managed to come to Britain.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: When did you arrive in Scotland?

IM: The 28th of June 1939

INT: And you remember it very well?

IM: No I don’t…I remember the arrival, I don’t remember the date. I just happened to have recently looked at the document which was stamped with the 28th of… Of course we arrived a day earlier in London but as far as arriving in Scotland – the 28th of June.

INT: And how old were you then?

IM: Just a few days short of eleven

INT: Oh you were very young. How and why did you come to Scotland?

IM: Because the people who were taking me into care were Scottish. There was somebody in Berlin. My older sister, it may have been her teacher (I’m not sure of their relationship) had connections in Scotland with groups of people, I think they were some Christians, they weren’t with the Brethren, but people like that.

INT: Right

IM: And they took up individual children into their home.

INT: And where exactly did you stay? Here in Glasgow was it?

IM: No, it was outside Clydebank. A place called Hardgate. Not a terribly well known place

INT: No, not a lot of Jews there I don’t suppose?

IM: In fact there was one, I think, somewhere up the road but no there weren’t any Jews really.

INT: So what was your impression of Scotland and the people? It must have been very strange for you.

IM: Well actually it wasn’t all that strange It wasn’t all that strange. The people were very friendly. The family I went to were very accommodating – they had a boy the same age as me and they were actually… I mean it must have been as strange for them as it was for me because they were very ordinary, nice ordinary, upper working class people. They worked in Singers and places like that, when Singers was still around.

And to have a strange child, Jewish child, who couldn’t speak English, arrive in their midst – they were very… I use the word ordinary, I don’t mean that negatively I just mean they had never explored the world, the way people do nowadays. I think their idea of adventure was to go to Edinburgh for a day, yes, and it must have been very strange for them.

INT: Of course. And did you find that you picked up the language very rapidly?

IM: Yes within about 6 weeks I think

INT: Really? That’s amazing

IM: That’s what happens. It’s not me, I’m not very good at languages, no. I went to a local school in Duntocher and within 6 weeks definitely I could speak to the other children and incidentally, just for the record, I had no problem there either. There was no bullying. They thought it was very strange and asked me funny questions but I was a kind of exciting newcomer. So, I found the transfer from Germany to Scotland fairly painless apart from, of course, missing my family and all the other things. But the reception and the welcome was very easy.

INT: That’s good. Did you meet or even mix with the local Jewish community or were you…

IM: There is no local Jewish community.

INT: Oh no, but with the wider Glasgow area?

IM: No

INT: No

IM: Well, I don’t know how to explain that. I stayed with these people till about May…May/June 1940 when the Germans finally got, got to invade France and Holland and all that and there was a certain doubt about German or strange children being around I think. Also, the Jewish community here set up a hostel in Skelmorlie for local evacuees and when that happened the community, whatever they were, they collected as many of the Jewish children that had been living with non-Jewish families and sent them to Skelmorlie.

So, in about middle of, near the middle of 1940 we lived in a hostel, in a Jewish hostel. But it wasn’t for refugees as such, it was for the local children from Glasgow – Jewish children.

INT: I see. So, I know I was going to ask you about the refugee centre – that’s not the refugee centre?

IM: No, no

INT: That was something separate?

IM: That’s not the refugee centre. We went to Skelmorlie. and then later in Castle Douglas. And of course, as the war progressed, the local children went back home and what was left, the residue, was all Kinder Transportees

INT: Yes, I see

IM: But it wasn’t originally set up for that.

INT: And you went to school there did you?

IM: I went to school in Castle Douglas. The rest of them went to Kirkcudbright, the older children. But I was back here in 1943 and then went to Hyndland.

INT: And who were you staying with then?

IM: My mother

INT: Oh she had come out by that time?

IM: Well she had come out before the war of course. But originally she was in Dorset in the south coast with my older sister, as a domestic cook and nursery maid.

And when the Germans finally got to the Channel ports the authorities here thought that people of German origin were possible spies and they might signal to the German submarines. So they had to leave Dorset and they came up to Glasgow.

INT: Right, and so you were all together then?

IM: Well, 1943, not right at the end but 1943, most of us were sent away from Castle Douglas and came back to Glasgow and those who had families were sent back to their families. That’s how I rejoined my mother and the other children, my brothers and sisters. Since I arrived in Britain, I never spoke German. At first I lived with a family who couldn’t speak German and then went to the hostel and by that time we could speak English and very rarely did somebody in the hostel speak German, or at least that I know of.

INT2: But you lived with your mother?

DM: Well, she spoke German to you and you answered in English.

IM: Yeah, I answered in English

DM: Which was the usual setup wasn’t it?

IM: She started speaking English and finally we only spoke in English.

INT: And was that a subconscious or a conscious decision? I know a lot of refugees who came at the same sort of time chose not to speak in the continental language that they had started with.

IM: No. Again, it’s circumstantial. If you look at my record, everything is virtually circumstantial. I didn’t plan these things. The fact remains that I came here, couldn’t speak to anybody in German, didn’t get together with my mother until, from ’39-’43, so by that time she was mostly speaking English. But she spoke a whole lot of languages – she spoke Polish, Russian, Yiddish, German and a bit, quite a lot of English. So she was an incredible English-speaker by 1948/47 and I never spoke German again. Or very rarely. My sister. She came over and she went to people in Clydebank. My younger brother went to people in Kilmarnock. They were separated. And then we came together in the hostel in Skelmorlie and my mother and my sister came back, came up from Dorset where they were, and then my sister went to London. I’d a brother already in London.

DM: And you were five siblings who got reunited.

IM: We weren’t reunited for very long. My sister went to London almost right away.

INT: And did you all come as part of the Kindertransport?

IM: No we didn’t. My mother went, came, entered as a cook in a stately home. It was quite an experience for her, poor soul, because she had to disembowel deer and cook venison and pork and things. I mean that’s something she wouldn’t have physically touched never mind been involved in cooking it. And my sister was there as a children’s nurse and I think they were there for something like, nearly a year…ten months I think and then the serious war broke out and they were told to leave and they came to Glasgow. But my sister, very early after that, she went to live in London.

INT: Your mother must have been very brave to allow her family to be displaced in all these directions.

IM: Well not quite as… Yes I wish I could agree but simply it’s not as simple as that. As so happens my mother had a visa for, to go to the stately home, to work in the stately home with all the children on the visa.

INT2: Right

IM: But she didn’t want to, I think it was really my sister, didn’t want to take that risk. So we were sent off but we could have all gone with my mother. But my mother only came and my sister only came to Britain just a few weeks, a month or something before the war broke out. And that being fortuitous timing.

If they hadn’t had that we all would have been trapped in Germany. You can imagine what would have happened then. So we were very lucky but my sister, I think, was the main operator in this thought. I think she thought it would be safer to send all the children away in case something untoward happened.

DM: She was about 17/18 wasn’t she? She took control of the situation then.

INT2: That’s very young.

IM: Well my mother was too busy earning a living.

INT2: Yeah

IM: She had 5 children and no husband.

INT: So, what risk? I’m not quite clear. What risk did she think would be run if you all went to Dorset with your mother?

IM: No, in case the war broke out.

INT: I see. So she wanted you out quicker, I see.

INT2: The older sister went down to London…

IM: I already had a brother who was in… near London. He came out under a different system. When young men became 17 and too old for the Kindertransport there was another arrangement to get him out of Germany and my brother [Joe] had that. And then there were, obviously as I say, the three young children [Isi, Jenny, Leo] and they all went to different people. Then in 1943 we got together with my mother again and I went to school in Glasgow, to Hyndland.

INT2: And so did your siblings (apart from the ones who were down in London), did they go to Hyndland as well?

IM: Well my sister did, my younger brother was too young for that. He went to a school somewhere… St George’s Cross? I don’t know. And that’s it, that’s how we became a family again. But my brother, my older brother and sister didn’t stay long. They shot off, they wanted their freedom.

**Isi Metzstein – Life During The War**

In this short section Isi Metzstein discusses how far he felt that he was (and was treated as) a foreigner when he lived in Britain during the war

**Read the Transcript**

INT: And did you feel foreign at that time? Because the war was going on, was it uncomfortable to be German?

IM: Actually not really. It was at the one stage but I was quite young of course. If I’d been older it would be probably quite uncomfortable because they found it difficult to distinguish between Germans and Germans if you know what I mean? But some of them were German. I never felt German.

My parents had only lived in Berlin maybe about 10 years when I was born and left… My father died of course in 1933; all the people we mixed with in Germany were Polish and immigrants. So we didn’t really have a German culture. I went to a Jewish school, you know, that sort of thing

INT: Once the war ended, you must have still been a schoolboy then?

IM: The war ended 1945 and I left school in 1945

**Isi Metzstein – Settling In**

This small section explains how Isi Metzstein’s mother was able to support him by working as a cook

**Read the Transcript**

INT: So how were you able to support yourself?

IM: I wasn’t. I stayed at home with my mother

INT: Right and she found work in Scotland?

IM: Oh yes

INT: When she came over

IM: Yes. For a long time she worked in Geneen’s as a cook

INT: So within the Jewish community?

IM: Oh she was more related to them. We always lived in the West End and I wouldn’t say that we had, we didn’t have any strong connection. My mother’s connection with the Jewish community would be in Geneen’s and of course when she went to synagogue but not on a social basis really. My mother was there quite a long time and quite well known for her cooking. So she had a certain reputation there. People came there to eat, not to stay in the hotel, but mostly to the restaurant. It was kosher of course and it was quite important to her.

**Isi Metzstein – Integration**

This section describes how Isi Metzstein chose to train as an architect and it goes on to give details of his architectural work and his teaching commitments. Isi talks of his pride in being Jewish but the importance of his secular oulook. He has never been thoroughly involved with Glasgow’s Jewish community.

**Read the Transcript**

INT: And did your family start interacting with the local Jewish community?

IM: Not very much. My mother was orthodox, quite religious, and we had big battles about that. She wanted me to do the right thing and by the time I was about 14, I must admit I had lost all interest in religion, or any belief in God. And we had quite a lot of difficulty there.

But we lived always in the West End so that she went to Garnethill Synagogue and I did a Bar Mitzvah there. But after the Bar Mitzvah…oh, I went to my children’s Bar Mitzvahs, but I never went to the synagogue so I didn’t have much contact with other Jewish people. But I had quite a lot of contact with the residual Kinder Transportees who came back to Glasgow – the Jewish children who had different situations. Some of them were living on their own, some living with other families. So, that was it, I think the only real contact I had with, with ongoing Jewishness.

INT: Did you go to university?

IM: I didn’t go to university. I went into an apprenticeship with an architectural firm.

INT: And was that chance? Or did you know that’s the direction you wanted your life to go in?

IM: It was chance that I went to that particular firm; although it was a very important chance it so happens. But I don’t know why, the day I left school, almost literally, I decided I wanted to be an architect. Not that I knew what architects do. I still don’t know what they do! But I just decided that I wanted to be an architect. So through a family friend of ours (I don’t think it’s necessary to tell the whole story but..). My best friend from the hostel, he had a connection through his aunt or his mother’s cousin or something, to an architect called Jack Coia and she, I said to him, ask her if he has room or wishes to take on an apprentice and he interviewed me and said ‘Come up on Monday and start’. That was it. The end and the beginning

INT: Right. That was, that was very lucky. But I’m sure he recognized that you were worth taking on.

IM: Presumably. People write regularly that he discovered me. Of course he didn’t. That’s not the way things were done. A 17 year old boy isn’t discovered but people like that romantic story.

INT: That is more romantic.

IM: Better that he discovered me than I discovered him

INT: Absolutely. And how did you meet your partner? When was that?

IM: The partnership?

INT: No, I think we are meaning your emotional partner.

IM: You mean my wife?

INT: Yes!

IM: My wife. We’re married although not in a Jewish sense. Not in a synagogue. Yeah we met…when was that? I’ve got to work it out, 44 years ago or something like that, whatever that date is…what is that?

DM: ’62

IM: 62

INT: Once you got the apprenticeship you were with that partnership thereafter?

IM: Forever, yes

INT: Is that right? So some of these questions about was it hard to get work…Did it make any difference that you were Jewish?

IM: None whatsoever

INT: Right, that’s interesting.

IM: In fact, it’s funny. My boss was a Catholic, or meant to be a Catholic – he was actually of Italian origin, he wasn’t much of a Catholic. He didn’t like employing Catholics because he thought they were being employed because they were Catholic. A complicated state of mind he was in but he quite liked the idea of employing Jewish people.

INT: And did he see that as a link to some of the architectural traditions of Europe?

IM: If he did then he didn’t tell me.

INT: That’s interesting.

INT2: So you stayed there for an apprenticeship for five years?

IM: Five years.

INT2: And so where did you go after that?

IM: I didn’t. I stayed on. It was unusual in those days. If you were an apprentice after 5 years you usually moved on to another but I stayed on. And by the middle of the fifties we had, that is me and my partner, future partner (my friend from the school, from the school of architecture) had more or less taken over the running of the office. Although we weren’t partners for quite a few years after that.

INT2: And so was that the norm then? For people going into architecture, that they would do an apprenticeship?

IM: No there were still quite a few apprentices then but they were disappearing and most, I would say by the time in 1955, everybody was going into universities, or schools of architecture. The schools of architecture went into universities. But that’s another story.

INT: Going on that theme do you think that the apprenticeship system produced a different sort of architect?

IM: Not a different sort, a better.

INT: Well that’s a different sort.

IM: No, well that depends; I don’t want to go into all that in great depth, it’s not really the topic. But those who then entered good offices, offices willing to teach their apprentices… Of course we went to day-release too.

We went to classes, afternoon and evening classes while we were doing the apprenticeship but those offices were interested in their apprentices and they produced good architects and those that just used them as cheap labor (and cheap labor it was) [did not]. When I started in 1945 it was twelve and ten pence I got and then the next year I got twenty-two and ten pence.

INT2: That’s quite a jump actually

IM: Yes and then thirty-two and ten pence.

INT: You couldn’t live on that could you?

IM: No

INT: Within your architectural career would you say that your European links made a difference to your vision? No?

IM: I had no European links

INT: You didn’t?

IM: I left Europe

INT: You were too young?

IM: I left Berlin when I was 11 and even I wouldn’t claim I had such a degree of prematurity.

INT: Well obviously, from what you’re saying, you really saw yourself as Scottish once you were here, was that right?

IM: Well that would be an exaggeration. I saw myself as Glaswegian and British.

INT: Right

IM: I still don’t claim myself as Scottish

INT: Right

IM: I think it’s a little bit arrogant to do so. But no, just let me say it now before you ask me. I’ve had no difficulties in my job or in my relationships with other students or in the professional level with my Jewishness or my foreignness. I’ve never had any problem there. In fact, I think my exotic strangeness would probably have helped but I’d no problem, that’s what I meant to say because many people have an idea that somehow there are terrific difficulties they may have had. I’ll just put it into perspective.

The firm I was in with did a lot of church work. I designed quite a few Roman-Catholic churches and I’ve had to deal with the bishops, the Archbishops, the local priests and there was never any problem.

INT: Well I suppose they saw you as not being one side or the other side. Was it easier in that respect?

IM: Well I think they saw me as being…the Catholic Church are a great believer in making use of everybody for the furtherance of their religious ambitions. So I was just another wheel in the system. But it never, I mean, I had no difficulty at all, I want to just emphasize that, and they had no doubt I was Jewish. They were well aware I was Jewish.

So just to say, while I am not religious at all and I didn’t mix (unfortunately) with Jewish people I always revealed I was Jewish. I mean, don’t get me wrong I didn’t say ‘I’m Jewish’ but there was never any effort to hide my Jewishness from anybody. In fact, I had a good drinking time with priests and things and it was always recognized that I was not only not Catholic, but not religious.

INT2: So career-wise, what would you say were the highlights in architectural commissions? Which ones stand out for you? Because you said you were involved in churches.

IM: When I first went there was no work that involved design because it was just, well, post-war. But once we started again (about 1950/51) we did churches and…but by 1950 Jack Coia was the church architect, by the way.

But it came to the middle of the 50s, Andy MacMillan and I took it over more or less and we designed a church which drew a lot of attention in Glenrothes. A very small, but by that time a very modern church, and that drew attention to the firm and we did a lot of churches. And we built a seminary at Cardross that’s quite famous.

INT2: Yes, that’s very famous

IM: Notorious now because it’s in ruins and we built…we built quite a few schools later, quite a few of them were Catholic schools. And I just want to emphasise – I’m not complacent or smug about it – other people may have had, difficulties– I had no difficulties.

If anything it was a positive thing that I was a bit exotic and a bit recognizable so that I stood out a little bit. But as far as my career is concerned and even my social life – I’ve had no problems.

INT: And within these various commissions, how much of a free hand did you have?

IM: Pretty well a free hand. Well you must understand how it happens. I mean people often ask me that question and people wouldn’t come to you if they didn’t want you. Architects are public. I mean, what they do is public. If somebody wants to go to look, know what kind of buildings I do or work we did – you can do that. It’s accessible.

Examples of your work are always available. So if a priest comes to you, or a bishop comes to you wanting a design he knows what kind of architecture. So they’re self-regulating in a way. So no, we had no problem. Occasionally, of course, you could argue with a client but it was always amicable and very interesting in fact.

INT: Do you see yourself as following a particular trend in Scottish architecture or?

IM: Take away the word Scottish

INT: In general, World? European?

IM: Modern architecture. Well, more or less European, modern architecture. I would call it modified modern.

I mean it’s not trying to get away from modern architecture, it’s to enrich it with some things that the early moderns had abandoned in the meantime I think, but that’s a long story. I taught in the School of Architecture.

INT2: Sorry, you mean in the School of Art?

IM: No, at the School of Art.

INT2: Right

IM: They were then connected at that time with the University because the University gave degrees because the Art School wasn’t able to give degrees. But I taught in the Art School on a part-time basis

DM: When did you start teaching?

IM: About 1970 – until about 3 years ago on a part-time basis. Design, teaching design, tutoring schools, lecturing…and that went on for…how many years? From ’70 to about ’97 or something,

INT2: And so what was the last commission that you were involved in? Can you remember?

IM: Depends what you mean by last commission. Last important commission was a college in Cambridge, a new College in Cambridge – Robinson College. That was our last important work. After that we collapsed the firm because work was difficult to get. It’s like now (though not quite as bad as now, but almost as bad). Almost all our work had something to do with the welfare state and the church so we did schools, hospitals, colleges…and when that stopped (which it did) our workload disappeared because we never had any real reputation in industrial or commercial work (which was the big thing after about 1980 or so).

So we couldn’t find any more clients. Andy MacMillan, who was my business partner, he went to run the school, the Glasgow Mackintosh School of Architecture. And, at one stage, I got a Chair in Edinburgh in 1984, the Chair of Architecture in the University. Edinburgh not Glasgow.

INT2: And does Edinburgh tend to have a different style would you say? Or does it just depend on who is teaching within the schools?

IM: Well that depends. It depends on the relationship in my view (it’s my favorite topic of conversation), the relationship between the school of architecture and its university.

INT2: Right

IM: Until…what was it? About… I’m not sure of the exact date but in the 60s sometime or in the late 50s, it was decided that all schools of architecture who had previously either been freestanding or been attached to art schools or to technical colleges (and some of them to universities) – should all go into universities.

INT: And do you think that’s limited them?

IM: Very much so. I think it’s the worst place in the world for schools of architecture to be in universities for all kinds of reasons. One of them because universities are not too interested in vocational subjects and also because in the university – architecture is also controlled by the RIBA and other bodies – and there’s a conflict there between the autonomy of the university [and these bodies].

Anyway, university is not a good place for architects, architecture I should say. Talking about it would take a couple of days to discuss this issue. So I moved to Edinburgh. Ideally I went to Edinburgh I think because, one – we didn’t have much work (or any work) and two, I really felt that I could make a contribution to a very poorly run school. Because in these universities, especially Edinburgh, nobody ever leaves – the staff stay on forever because nobody else will have them.

INT: Oh dear.

IM: And I thought I might make a difference. It didn’t work out that way. I was very unwelcomed by the staff so I left after seven years.

INT2: So why was that? Was that because you were from Glasgow?

IM: Partly from Glasgow and partly because they ran the school with a great autonomy of the staff. I don’t think anybody ever told them what to do or checked on their work. And I decided they did [should]look into what they were doing and I think that’s one of the areas of difficulty, because they just wouldn’t. But they didn’t want my leadership that’s for sure. They had been quite happy running their own classes in their own way and if somebody came in to try and get involved they were very less than happy about this.

INT: And was the whole idea of modernism part of the problem there?

IM: No, absolutely not. No I don’t think so. Obviously there were people who didn’t believe in modernism but by 1980, middle 80’s, that was a, shall we say, a debate that was more or less over. Still, there were still residual people who believed in, I’ll call it, neo-classicism, call it what you like, or what you call Scottish architecture…But it wasn’t – that wasn’t the issue. It wasn’t an issue about architectural design. It was an issue about the school of architecture and if you want to make changes… I mean the first, after I would say 3 weeks I knew I’d made a mistake. I stayed on for 7 years.

But the first thing I was told when I wanted to make some changes – ‘This is a democratic school so you’ve no…’ you know… secondly they said -I first realized I’d made a mistake – when I referred to it as a school of architecture (which we did in Glasgow, in most schools) they said ‘This is not a school of architecture – it’s a department of architecture, of the University of Edinburgh’. So the interest was more in relation to the university than teaching architecture. So this didn’t work for me. But in the mean time of course, I didn’t just teach. I was also on various visiting boards to other schools of architecture. I was also on the RIBA panel and I was an external examiner for other schools and things so I have quite a long experience and involvement in teaching. In fact, last year Andy MacMillan and myself got an award, a financial award (it was very nice) for the best teachers of that year.

INT: That’s great.

IM: However, it doesn’t matter. So, I’m not boastful about it. It’s not too difficult to be the best teacher but the point I’m making is that my involvement in teaching is not only extensive but over a long period of time. We built a significant number of churches; built a seminary in Cardross. We built quite a few schools and colleges, built the student residences in Hull. We built, as I said, a major new college in Cambridge and worked quite a lot for Wadham College in Oxford. So we had a certain national reputation and as I was saying …I worked out of Glasgow. But while I was doing all this, I had other fingers in pies.

I was, for eleven years I was on the Scottish Fine Art Commission and for five years I was with the Scottish Arts Council and various other things I did. So I’m just mentioning that because I was well integrated into the establishment we’ll call it.

INT: Yes I was thinking about that when you were speaking. You really moved completely away from the Jewish community didn’t you or is that..?

IM: And they moved away from me.

IM: They’re not interested in architecture. I mean in our office we had two or three Jewish apprentices or assistants. I don’t know what ever happened to most of them but almost most of them didn’t go on to be architects because their parents didn’t approve of being an architect. Jewish people don’t want architects.

INT: Why do you think that is?

IM: Because they don’t think it’s a safe enough job. I mean a lot of them want to be artists when they were children but the parents wouldn’t stand for it so they said ‘Well, be an architect’. Well, they just about got away with that. But there is no doubt we office trained two or three Jewish young people in our office and they were usually [there] against the approval of their parents because it’s not a secure job. You have to be a dentist or a doctor or a lawyer if you’re Jewish. So that’s part of why my disconnection is not a deliberate effort, it’s just there’s no common ground to be quite honest.

There was one Jewish architect in Glasgow, quite well known, called Baron Bercott but he was very commercial, a money-making architect. We weren’t money-making architects and, as I said, I didn’t move away from them, I was never with them. I mean my experience incidentally and my understanding is the Jewish community weren’t all that happy to have all these refugees coming to Glasgow. They wanted the sleeping dogs to keep lying.

INT: Well that seems to be traditional isn’t it?

IM: Yes

INT: A fear of too many foreign people

IM: Well not foreign people, it reminded the community that…you know what I mean. [of the existence of [anti-Semitism](https://gatheringthevoices.com/glossary/anti-semitism/)] – I don’t want to go into that, it’s not a pleasant subject.

INT: Yeah

IM: But definitely. I mean in terms of taking children overseas from as, as refugees I should say, the Jewish community didn’t make a great contribution to that. Almost all the people, you’ve met us, Kinder Transportees, went to non-Jewish families. I have no statistics but I don’t know many people went to Jewish families.

INT: I think a lot of them were just beginning to settle and didn’t want to disturb the equilibrium

IM: Precisely! Oh no, I don’t necessarily blame them but it’s a characteristic of the existing established community so… But with me it’s to do with my job. To be living in the West End, my non-interest in religious Jewishness. If somebody asked me ‘What are you?’ I’d say ‘Well, I’m a secular Jew’ or ‘I’m an ethnic Jew’ and I’d make no attempt to hide that, in fact I am rather quite pleased to be Jewish. But it doesn’t mean for me to go to synagogue and mix with the rest of them.

INT2: But it’s interesting that you said that your children still had a Bar Mitzvah.

IM: Yeah that’s my wife!

INT2: I think it does sort of depend quite often

IM: Yeah, there was no harm attached to it. I’m not blaming anybody. I mean I wanted them to feel Jewish but I had no demand of them from a religious point of view. I think that (to extend the discussion a little bit) a Jew needs to have some reason for being Jewish. I mean being treated as a Jew, whether negatively or positively. So you need to give them some backbone for that special relationship you have. While I have said I had no problem being Jewish, there was never any doubt that my Jewishness was a factor in my relationship with non-Jewish people. Not that I’m saying that as necessarily negative but you cannot be a Jew without being ‘outed’.

INT: Right.

IM: Even my best friends have always known that I’m Jewish, you know what I mean. They make remarks or give special attention to it. But it doesn’t bother me, I’m quite happy about that.

INT2: So how did you actually meet, now that we know, the wife? Rather than partner, we just thought we should be correct when we were talking.

IM: That’s all right, I don’t mind.

IM: According to my Rabbi, we’re not properly married so it doesn’t matter!

INT: That’s more exciting. So tell us anyway..

IM: It was a put-up job actually, I discovered later. I was introduced. I was invited to a cocktail party and Danni was invited to the party with the ulterior motive that we would meet – and we did.

INT: That’s very romantic

IM: Very romantic

INT: Very

DM: That was Gertrude Bentheim who died about a month, two months ago.

IM: You’ll know Gertrude.

DM: She was a friend of my mother’s.

INT: Right

DM: And she invited me to this cocktail party in order to meet Isi.

INT2: That’s very nice. So you’re not from Glasgow originally?

DM: No, I was born in France.

INT2: Right

DM: I came here in ’53 with my parents.

INT2: So where from France?

DM: My mother was from Vienna, my father was from Germany.

INT2: Right

DM: He had died, my mother remarried, also somebody from Germany.

IM: He got a job here after the war. She wasn’t a refugee

INT2: Right. So how did you end up in Glasgow?

DM: My stepfather got a job in Motherwell.

INT2: Ah, right

DM: By a French company who then collapsed and we stayed.

INT2: And obviously, I mean Motherwell is just like France really! Slightly different accent!

IM: Yeah, just like France.

INT2: That was interesting when you were saying about…with your children, did you decide to talk to them in English then?

IM: Always

**Isi Metzstein – Reflection On Life**

Isi talks about taking architecture students to Berlin and the importance of differing housing design. He is proud of the body of work done by firm of architects here in Glasgow. He reflects on the enigma of what may cause anti semistism

**Read the Transcript**

IM: If you go to Berlin (which I do, which I did every year with my students) they all bloody well speak English.

INT2: When you go to Berlin what aspects are you looking at in architecture?

IM: Mostly for the students?

INT2: Yes

IM: Housing. German housing has been a succession of contradictory ideas. In the Victorian equivalent or the late Georgian equivalent, they had a particular type of building and then, it was, they then built a housing block which is unusual. It’s a series of courtyards. It’s quite famous – the Berlin housing.

IM: They used to call it the ‘Barracks’ And it’s a pretty low standard but I think compared to what was previously there… Take Glasgow, tenements were great improvements on what happened in the 18th early 18th century. They did the very same in Berlin although the standards of the tenement housing were much better here than in Berlin housing, where the outside rim on the street was occupied by middle-class families, as you got deeper into the block it was working class and poverty-stricken people.

And that was a characteristic of that housing and then there was other housing. Germans have, Berliners have, a succession of experimental housing exhibitions. So every one of these was a reversal of the previous one. You know the next one was like sort of Siemensstadt really. Siemens, the big industrialist. He built housing which was more or less like tenements but un-urban in a way. Unlike Glasgow, where the tenements are in a very urban structure. And then they had various things and each one of them was a denial of the previous attempt and ideal housing. That makes good examples for students – to look at these different ways of attempting to, to deal with the housing problem.

INT: It’s interesting you say that they all aspired to the ideal tenement block. Did they?

IM: They always aspired. Well, not only the tenement block but as I say, ultimately, yes. I mean, my own view (for what it’s worth) is that when people look at all kinds of housing ideas (even inside the garden city and that sort of thing) in a city dwelling, a dense urban pattern, it always comes back to a tenement-like thing.

INT: You can get more in a smaller area, yes.

IM: So Berlin was a very good place to, to take students studying that kind of housing development.

INT: So we were wondering if looking back over your long life, from your experiences here both in career and in your personal life what would you say were the highs and lows of all these coincidences that have made up your life?

IM: Well obviously I have to say that the high of my life was my architectural career which had, shall we say, its high points. I mean, recently, a few years ago, couple of years ago, when the office stopped we gave our archive to the Glasgow School of Art and it’s a significant archive. Not because it’s good work, some of it’s good work, some of it isn’t. Well, most of it’s good-ish. But because our office was in practice, stopped practice just when practice changed drastically. When computers became important.

INT2: Right

IM: All our drawings are hand-made drawings and we gave them the whole office with all our files and whatnot to see that’s what an office in 1945 was like. I don’t know what they’ve done with it.

But anyway, as a result of that, they had an exhibition in the Lighthouse of our office work from 1956 onwards (when we took over the running of the office) and that was probably, I would say the high point, I mean it… it summed up for the first time our significant contribution. We won lots of awards – RIBA awards and Civic Trust awards but we were, Andy McMillan and I were (well, we still are) well known figures in the architectural profession. In the whole country not just in Scotland and recognized as such. So obviously my architectural career from onwards of ’56 until about, I would say, middle 80s were the time of my life – enjoyable times. Architecture is a great profession if you’ve got work and you’ve got understanding clients. And you don’t need or want to make a lot of money – that helps too. But yes, it was good. Very good.

INT2: And Danni you’re not, did you have a different profession? Because obviously you’re not, you weren’t in architecture?

DM: No, no, no. I’m, I ran a shop. I trade!

INT2: Which is very important.

INT: Which is very important

INT2: Without trade we don’t manage

INT: Yes. People like you pay for architects, I would think, in the end

DM: Yes

INT2: So you’re also meant to say another high of your life was obviously meeting Danni as well

IM: Well that was my social life. Yes it was and I’ve got a nice family

DM: But I suppose, I went to Glasgow University and I was in the Jewish Student’s Society so I actually know a lot more of the Scottish Jewish people than Isi does.

INT2: Right, right

DM: Through that connection.

INT: Do you think that living in the West End, it’s a different world anyway? There’s sort of two Jewish communities aren’t there?

DM: I think so

INT: Very few in the West End

DM: I think so. But I suppose, most of our friends were refugees as well but they’ve died off, you know. Quite a few.

INT: It’s interesting because even though you say that you integrated, there is something that brings people with similar experiences together, isn’t there?

IM: Oh yes, yes. As I say I’m not shying away from that, but limited interest. I’m not nostalgic about Berlin. When they hang a little label on to you at the Kindertransport, I object to that, a wee label saying Berlin. It doesn’t matter, it was just important to me that I was out of Berlin. Or for that matter, I don’t know any people here whom I knew in Germany.

DM: But culturally you feel very Jewish and you’re very comfortable.

IM: I’m comfortable

DM: With people who are like you.

IM I mean the people I know in Berlin, there’s quite a lot, they are young people (or young by me,) they were students. Because I got my students to live with them because it was cheaper. So I met quite a few young Germans and they’re very, shall we say, interested in what happened and very angry with their parents for either being involved or not talking about it because the Germans, the Germans don’t talk about it and these young people never stop questioning me about what happened and… So they’re very pro-Jews, pro-Semitic and I think that’s quite genuine and sincere but the parents would never talk about what happened to the Jews or what happened during the war.

So it was quite interesting for me the amount of interest they took in war time or the pre-war period.

INT: That is interesting. They, of course, didn’t experience the horrors of the war and Versailles and all the things that were blamed on Jews and I think

IM: Oh I know

INT: It must have been quite hard to, to rise above that at the time

IM: I’m not sure it was that hard. But I mean, I can’t, it’s… the phenomenon of [anti-Semitism](https://gatheringthevoices.com/glossary/anti-semitism/) is too baffling. Why the Jews were picked out to be blamed for something I have no idea but even here they’re blamed for it. I don’t mean, I mean every time there is a Jewish person involved they always tell you ‘he’s a Lithuanian Jew’ ‘he’s a German Jew’ ‘He’s a…’ And not necessarily hostile, it just trips off the tongue easily. So it’s difficult to understand this phenomenon. Don’t think I haven’t been thinking about it for my whole life. But I still don’t get it.

INT2: I know. Why are we of such interest?

IM: I don’t understand it

INT2: Yeah

IM: I mean, I say anybody who recognizes you as being Jewish in dealing with you is an anti-Semite. Even though he is a friend, there is always this feeling that being Jewish is something special and different and you know…. it’s very odd. Even my best friends – they aren’t anti-Semites I assure you, but they still have this feeling they are dealing with something very exotic, which they think they are very brave to take as equals, I think,. They don’t say that of course. While I say this, I want to emphasize that I’ve not had overt [anti-Semitism](https://gatheringthevoices.com/glossary/anti-semitism/) addressed to me.