**Sidney Mayer – Life Before The War**

Sidney describes his early life in Germany and the huge changes that occurred once the Nazis came to power.

INT: Good morning. We’re here to interview Mr Sidney Mayer and today is the 10th of December 2013. Good morning Sidney.

SM: Morning.

INT: Could you tell us first please when you were born?

SM: On the 20th of October nineteen hundred and twenty five.

INT: And where were you born?

SM: In a town called Landau in the Palatinate in Germany. It’s known as the Pfalz p-f-a-l-z [region] and it’s near the French border. It’s about 30, exactly 31 kilometres from the French frontier.

INT: So you spoke German though?

SM: I spoke German yes, yes.

INT: And what was your name at birth?

SM: My name?

INT: Yes.

SM: I was, my first name was Siegfried.

INT: And you were always Mayer? Siegfried Mayer?

SM: Yes.

INT: So can you tell us anything about your early family life? Do you remember much?

SM: Yes we lived in the village with 700 inhabitants. There’s still 700 to this day. And my father was a cattle dealer and we owned vineyards. It was a wine growing area, the whole area is vineyards. And the vineyards were owned by my grandmother which would have gone to my father and eventually to me. And I went to school in the village until nineteen hundred and thirty seven.

INT: So you must have remembered your life changing?

SM: Oh yes. When I grew up, we were part of the village and after Hitler came to power within 3 or 4 years after that we noticed a big difference. The children didn’t want to play with me anymore and we had to leave the local school, in 1937 I think it was, and we went to a school in – Landau that’s 5 kilometres[away], a town, and we were in one classroom, children from the age of 6 to 16 in one classroom with one teacher until 1939, ’38, late ’38.

INT: And did your father have to give up the business before that?

SM: Well it was taken away from him. Well he had to give it up because nobody would buy anything from him.

INT: I didn’t ask you but you were 8 by the time the Nazis came to power.

SM: I was…?

INT: You were 8…

SM: 8, yes.

INT: …by the time the Nazis came to power. Had you been aware of any trouble before that?

SM: No, not at the beginning, not at all. I mean I heard my parents talk but when you’re an 8 year old it doesn’t sink in. It was only when, I would say about 1935/36, I started to notice that I was no longer accepted in school with my school friends etc… We couldn’t play together anymore. They wouldn’t play with me and I was like an outcast, you know. That was it.

INT: That was it.

SM: So we… There were three Jewish boys in the village, a cousin of mine and my friend who died last year, two years ago; he went to America. We then just held together the three of us.

**Sidney Mayer – Life During The War**

In this section, Sidney describes how he arrived in England and explains why he came to Scotland. He talks about the fate of his family and mentions what happened to their property in Germany.

And on Crystal Night in 1938, November, we had to leave. My father was arrested. He was taken to Dachau Concentration Camp and my mother and myself and my grandmother had to leave the village and we went to a town called Mannheim, which was across the Rhine, which was in a different county of Germany. Because the Palatinate where we lived, the local Gauleiter, he wanted to have the whole area free of Jews and that’s why we had to leave. We eventually went back in December when my father came back out of the concentration camp in the middle of December and that’s when my mother actually put my name down for the Kindertransport to Great Britain. And then on the 5th of January 1939 I left. My parents took me to the railway station at Ludwigshafen and the train from there went to Holland, the Hook of Holland, and we went by boat to Harwich. And from there we were transported to a place called Dovercourt, Camp Dovercourt. This was a holiday camp, which was empty during the wintertime, and the owners lent it to the people to house the refugee children until April, when it opened again. But I was only there for four days. I got there on a Friday and on the Sunday people came from various parts of Britain to pick children up, to adopt them, well not legally adopt them but to offer them a home. And I was taken by a family called Goldwater… Ben Goldwater. And they wanted to take me to Scotland and asked me if I wanted to go to Scotland and I said yes.

INT: Were they a Scottish family then, who had come down?

SM: It was a Scottish family yes. And they lived in Glasgow and on the Tuesday morning we were taken to the local railway station at Harwich and a train went to Liverpool Street in London. And I was met there by Mr Goldwater and later in the day we got the train to Glasgow. And it arrived in Glasgow on the 10th of January 1939 and I’ve lived in Glasgow ever since.

INT: And did your parents escape or did they perish?

SM: I never ever saw my parents again. They were deported in 1940 to France to a place called Gurs. It was also a camp. And in 1942 they were taken to Auschwitz and that was the end.

INT: That’s terrible. And did you know that when you were here in Britain? When did you find that out?

SM: Well I was in correspondence with my parents until 1942 then it stopped. I did not know what happened, no. But I was later informed what had happened, that they finished up in Auschwitz.

INT: Dear me. Once you came to Scotland what were your first impressions when you came here? You wouldn’t have had any English, did you?

SM: I had no English but I learned English very quick. Within about a week or two I was able to speak a little and I improved constantly. I never ever spoke German again.

INT: I see. Yes you don’t have an accent and you were quite… you were 14 when you came?

SM: Well that’s because I didn’t mix with German people. I didn’t speak German. In 1942 I stopped writing. I had virtually forgotten German. Because in 1949, I went to Buenos Aires to my uncles and grandmother and when I got there I couldn’t speak.

INT: Is that right? And your grandmother managed to get out of Germany?

SM: They got out, yes. They got out.

INT: What happened to the vineyards and the land?

SM: They were taken away; they were taken. There was a bank in Germany; it was a Nazi bank, and they took all the properties; houses, land, whatever the Jewish people owned they took and sold it. They paid nothing for it. It was just one-way traffic. They took it and sold it and kept the money, and that was that. Then after the war tried…my uncle in South America, when I went there in 1949, he told me about the, what they called the Wiedergutmachung [reparations]

INT: What’s that?

SM: That’s is ‘make up for the loss’. The Germans had that. So I went over to Germany and I had. It was a friend, a family, well she survived in Germany and I knew her from before I left.

And she helped me a lot with that part of it and I got the house back on condition that I found accommodation for the man who lived in it, the family who lived in it. Well I had no way of doing that so I couldn’t get the house back. Eventually, somebody in the village, who knew me, wrote to me and said that she knew someone who would buy the house and the people that lived in the house could have their accommodation. So I sold the house but I got very little for it – I got the equivalent of £400 for the house.

INT: Goodness, and nothing for the vineyards?

SM: No, nothing for the vineyards. They were all, they were split up between several people, you know, they didn’t all go to one. There were different vineyards and different people bought them.

**Sidney Mayer – Immigration**

Sidney describes the kindness of his new family – the Goldwaters. He talks about his early working life and his views on the Nazis.

INT: They were lucky. So tell me about Scotland. What were your first impressions when you arrived?

SM: When I came to Glasgow? Well, I was never in a big city before and it impressed me very much. I noticed there were a lot of picture houses which I’d never…I’d been to the cinema once in my life in Germany. And when I came here, after about two days, I got homesick. And Mr Goldwater took me to the pictures every day. He was a bookmaker and he worked mostly in the evenings so he was free during the day and we used to go to the cinema and that’s where I learned quite a lot of my English, at the cinema. And then I went to school in February.

I went to Langside Primary School in Tantallon Road and I was there until the holiday time and then the barrage balloons were put in the playground and we got schooling in different houses… every day in a different house. And when it came to August I asked the headmaster if I could leave because I was almost 14 and he said ‘yes’, I could leave. I then left and got a job in Gerber Brothers as a message boy. And I worked there until Mr Goldwater opened up, he had a tool shop in Saltmarket, and he opened up another one, a bigger one in Saltmarket and I went and worked and ran that shop until after the war. And he had a son and a daughter. The son..when, he came back from the army, he then came into the shop and we didn’t, agree with each other. And I then got a van and started selling tools all round Scotland and the north of England [which continued] until I got married and then I went into the clothing industry. I opened up a factory with my brother-in-law then and we manufactured raincoats.

INT: Did you have any previous training in making things?

SM: Well I did the selling. And I learned the trade slowly while I was there.

INT: Right.

SM: I was never a qualified machinist or a cutter but I could do it. And eventually that business was bought over by a public company called Edward MacBean and Company Limited. It was one of the biggest waterproof manufacturers in Britain. And I carried on working for them for a little while and then started on my own again. And I got premises in a place called Muirkirk in Ayrshire and I ran a factory there for 31 years.

INT: Also making raincoats or something?

SM: Making waterproofs, yes. Yes.

INT: And you did that until you retired did you?

SM: Yes, until I was 70 years of age.

INT: Really? Does it still exist, this factory?

SM: No it doesn’t exist any longer no.

INT: Oh that’s a shame.

INT: Excuse me Sydney, you said you started up a factory with your brother in law…

SM: Yes.

INT: …was that the husband of Mr Goldwater’s daughter?

SM: No

INT: No?

SM: No that was the husband of my wife’s sister.

INT: Ah your wife’s sister, I see.

INT: Did you ever find out why the Goldwaters took you in? Were they keen to…? Why did the Goldwaters decide to take a Kinder, a Kind?

SM: Well they had one son and the daughter was also adopted, it was the daughter of Mrs Goldwater’s sister who died when she was born.

So Mrs Goldwater brought her up and I think they were just fond of children and I got on very well with them. It was like being at home. And there was no difference between me and the other two children, we were level, in fact, I think I was… I got more privileges than the other two.

INT: Why, because you were the youngest or because of what you had gone through do you think?

SM: No, I blended in very well with the family, you know.

INT: That’s very good.

SM: In other words I assimilated.

INT: Yes. And talking of assimilation did you feel that you assimilated with the wider Jewish community in Glasgow or the wider…?

SM: Yes, yes of course. But I was always ashamed of being German at that time. I didn’t want people to know that I was German. And that’s probably one of the reasons why I don’t speak with an accent.

INT: Even though you knew you weren’t a Nazi and had suffered under the Germans you still felt that it was…

SM: I was ashamed of being German, yes.

INT: Yes, that’s interesting.

SM: Well I mean the war started and Germany was an enemy country. And, oh yes, during the war I joined the A.R.P, the Air Raid Precaution. I was an ambulance driver during the war. When I was…from 1942 when I became 17 I was a… I drove an ambulance, until the end of the war.

INT: And what about mixing with the wider Scottish community, did you find that easy to do?

SM: No problems. No problems whatsoever.

INT: And was that partly because you blended in?

SM: Yes.

INT: And did people know you were Jewish? That didn’t matter?

SM: Oh yes, I had a friend, a non-Jewish friend. We were very, very close. His name was Gordon Gunn. He died last year at 90. And through him I learned a lot of English, you know.

INT: That’s good.

INT: You spoke before about being unfortunate and fortunate. What would you say were the most fortunate aspects of your life?

SM: The fortunate aspect was that I was taken up by a family, Goldwater, which helped me a lot. And I grew up like one of them and, as I say, I couldn’t have wished for a better home. The fact that I didn’t have one; I lost my own parents and they made up for it.

SM: I never called them ‘mother’ or ‘father’, they didn’t adopt me legally. I still kept my own name and I called them ‘uncle’ and ‘aunt’.

INT: And when they originally found you did they actually come and see you at Dovercourt or they just asked for a young man of a certain age?

SM: No, no, they came, they came to Dovercourt on a Sunday and it was quite funny how it happened. I was very small for my age, I still am small, but when I was 13 I looked a lot younger. And on the Sunday the boys played football and I wanted to play football but in January, near the seaside, the weather, it was raining; it was muddy and they wouldn’t let me play because I was too small and they thought I would get lost in the mud. And they sent me back home, back to the hall, and I ran back and I accidentally bumped into a lady, I apologised, and then went away. I didn’t know whether I hurt her or not. And I sat at the very end of the hall. It was a huge hall with three stoves in the middle, and I went to the furthest away and sat behind the stove and they spoke to an attendant of the camp, a lady, and then they pointed to me and I said; ‘I must have done something wrong, I’m in trouble’.

And then they called me and that was Mrs Goldwater and then Mr Goldwater said would I like to go to Scotland? I said ‘yes’ and the girl then said ‘no you can’t have him, because he’s only been in here two days. There are other boys here who are here for a month or two’. And he turned round and said ‘Well if I can’t have him, we don’t want anybody’. So that was it, that’s how I came to Glasgow.

INT: That is very fortunate. She must really have liked you. That is very fortunate.

SM: As a matter of fact, a funny thing, in 1949 when I went to South America to see my uncles and grandmother I was stateless, you know, when I left Germany the condition was when I left I became stateless. And I became a British resident, not a British subject. And the passport I had was green, it wasn’t dark blue the way they should have been and on the ship I shared a cabin with three other men, well boys and they called me ‘Jock’. And they did not know that I was German and I didn’t let them know that I was German and anytime we went ashore, you know, you had to hand your passport in to the purser. And I never did that – I used to make an excuse when we got there, ‘I must go back I’ve forgot something’ and I handed in my green document and that was it.

But they never knew that I was German. So…because as I say I was ashamed of being German, about what they did during the war and the countries they occupied. I mean they were, the Nazis were a horrible people. They weren’t normal. And this friend of mine in Germany he…if he would have been alive then he would have certainly been in the concentration camp because he maintains that to be a good Nazi you had to be stupid, and the more stupid you were the better a Nazi you were, that was his definition of the Nazis.

INT: And do you agree with him?

SM: Absolutely, absolutely. They believed lies, propaganda. And all of a sudden from being good people we were bad people, overnight virtually. And I don’t think that sort of thing ever happened in the world before, the way the Germans, the Nazis, behaved towards not only Jewish people, anyone they felt was an enemy of theirs. They treated them the same. There were gypsies, communists, certain political people who didn’t…Well, there was only one set of politics in Germany and that was it. Anybody that belonged to another party they were locked up in concentration camps and done away with.

**Sidney Mayer – Settling In**

Sidney describes his family life and the tragic deaths of his two wives.

INT: When did you get married Sidney?

SM: I got married for the first time in 1952.

INT: And where did you meet your partner? Where did you meet your partner?

SM: Well, in cafes, you know. In those days we used to go to the Jewish Institute and cafes and that’s how we met.

INT: And she was a local Jewish, Glasgow girl?

SM: Yes. Cohen her name was. And unfortunately she was, she took ill quite a lot and she had a load of surgery, operations and she was alone in the house, wanted to take a bath and unfortunately fainted and drowned in the bath.

INT: Oh that was…

INT: Terrible.

INT: …terrible.

SM: That was in 1970.

INT: Right, that’s terrible.

INT: Did you have any children with her?

SM: Two children, I’ve a daughter and a son.

INT: I see.

INT: And I think you married again did you?

SM: And then I married again in 1972. And I married a divorcee with a daughter and unfortunately nine years ago she also had an accident. She was run over with a lorry on the Ayr road.

INT: You’ve been very unfortunate. You’ve been very unfortunate.

SM: Yes. I’ve been unfortunate and fortunate, some of each.

INT: Yes, I suppose that’s the human condition. I suppose that’s the human condition.

SM: Yes.

INT: A bit of both.

INT: And what are your children doing now Sydney?

SM: My daughter is married and my son, he is a taxi driver. He has a black ‘hack’. Alan Meyer, he’s quite well known and he’s a good golfer.

INT: Oh yes, yes.

INT: When you first came to Glasgow were you involved with other refugees?

SM: Not really. Only one, one boy, he lived in Newton Mearns and I was friendly with him. He was the only… but we always spoke English. And he emigrated to Australia not long after the war. So that was that. I never associated with German people at all while I was here.

INT: And do you, did you regret that? Had you any wish to mix with other people who had come from similar backgrounds to you?

SM: I didn’t then, no. I do now but I didn’t then. I didn’t then, no.

**Sidney Mayer – Reflection On Life**

Sidney describes his love of Scotland and talks warmly about his family.

INT: So tell me now do you think of yourself as Scottish through and through?

SM: Oh yes, definitely, definitely.

INT: And your attitude to Scotland?

SM: I beg your pardon?

INT: And how do you feel about Scotland?

SM: What do I feel about Scotland? I feel it’s my home.

SM: I go to Germany quite a lot now. I went there with a school friend from Germany who went to America and we got in touch with each other and he visited me and I visited him in New York and he had a house in Florida as well. And he came here and we went to Germany, to the village, the four of us, him and his wife and my wife, my late wife.

And someone heard – the people that lived next door to our house had heard that I was there, and they somehow or other found out the hotel I was staying in, quite a distance away, and he phoned up and asked to speak to me and he asked me to come and see him and I didn’t know whether I could, or not, as I was going home the following day. I said ‘If I can I will’. We were going to the cemetery and we couldn’t go in because it was raining and the grass was higher than I was. So we went to the village and met these people and ever since we’ve become very good friends. I go there now an average of once or twice a year and I stay with them and two years ago they put down memorial stones for my family. And through that they have now put memorial stones up for every Jewish house in the village, that lived there in 1939 and had to leave because of the Nazis. They’ve put down memorial stones for each and every, outside each Jewish home.

INT: And were there a lot of Jewish people in your village out of the 700?

SM: When I left there were 16 families. There was a synagogue as well which was torn down. They couldn’t burn it because I think it would have set the whole village alight, so they tore it down. And there’s now a memorial plaque where it was and well there’s not a lot of people alive now that I knew. There are a few but not too many, you know.

INT: And how do you feel about Germans today?

SM: Well I’m very friendly with these people; they couldn’t be nicer. My whole family have been there. My children, my grandchildren, we’ve all been visiting there and all like the place. And, but we don’t have much to do with anyone other than these people and, of course, there are some Jewish people who are still there and we’re friendly with them as well. You know the sons of the woman that helped me after the war to get… with my properties. She’s got two sons and they live there and we’re very friendly with them.

INT: And your German? Has it come back then?

SM: Yes, my German came back. I speak German like a local.

INT: That shows you. So Sydney to finish off now, what would you say were the high points of your life here in Scotland?

SM: My high points? Well, my whole life in Scotland was high I think; I love the place. I’ve always loved it and I got on very well with the people and it’s just… I just don’t know any other place anymore, you know, it’s my home.

INT: And the low points I think…

INT: Is Judaism significant still in your life? Is being Jewish a significant part of your life?

SM: Oh yes. I’m not an orthodox Jew but I’m a Jew. I was born one and I will die one.

INT: Well Sydney it’s been really interesting speaking to you and thank you so much.

SM: Thank you.

INT: Sydney, I haven’t asked you about your children, they also will be part of the highlights of your life I’m sure.

SM: Oh yes. As I say I have my daughter Lorraine who was born in 1952 and my son was born in 1954. His name is Alan. Both went to, well my son went to a private school in Newton Mearns.

INT: Belmont?

SM: Yes Belmont and my daughter she went to a school, a private school also in Newton Mearns, which was two houses.

INT: Broomlea?

SM: Broomlea, yes. And as I say they grew up, my daughter got married to Victor Coates and they had two children; Michelle and Richard. Michelle lives in London. She’s got two children – that’s my great grandchildren; Mia and Ethan. And Richard he got married in April last year and, of course they haven’t got any children yet. Yes that’s it so I’m blessed with great grandchildren and five grandchildren.

INT: That’s great. And I believe Alan’s very good at golf?

SM: He is, he’s a 5 handicap.

INT: And is Alan married?

SM: He’s been married and divorced.

INT: I see. Does he have any children?

SM: He’s got two children and one adopted.

INT: I see.

INT: And Alan I believe is a keen golfer as you were, you were…

SM: He’s more keen than I was.

INT: Were you involved in Bonnyton, the Jewish golf club from early on?

SM: Yes.

INT: Have you been involved for a long time with Bonnyton?

SM: Yes. I’ve been in Bonnyton quite a long time; I’m now a life member. I was for several years on the Committee as House Convener and yes I was quite involved with it, yes.

INT: I suppose you’ve given up golf now?

SM: 90% yes.

INT: You do a bit of bowling is that right?

SM: I do bowling yes.

INT: Yes, good.

SM: In the Thistle club, you know, Jewish Care.

INT: Yes, yes.

INT: Good, thank you.