**Sonja Hancox – Life Before The War**

Sonja talks about her family and the changes that she noticed once the Nazis came to power. She describes life in Germany before they became refugees.

INT: Today is the 24th of July 2013 and I’m here to interview Sonja Hancox. Sonja, could you tell me first when and where you were born and what was your name at birth? When were you born? And what was your name at birth?

M (Sonja’s daughter): Sonja Regina…

SH: My name is Sonja Regina Hancox.

SH: At birth…

M: Sonja Regina Goldman.

SH: Yes, I suppose so.

INT: What year were you born?

SH: 1925, 12th of November.

INT: Could you tell us a little of what you remember of your early years? Where were you? Where were you living?

SH: Not very beautiful surroundings. My mother married somebody in Czechoslovakia whom she met and they fell in love and I was conceived, at least, there. They soon found out they were most unsuitable. They went to Germany and wanted to divorce but the German government wouldn’t give them a divorce. By German law they weren’t married. So by German law they had to get married again before they could get a divorce. So I’m telling you that this is not a sort of ‘clean living’.

INT: No, not a simple story.

SH: No. Now my father had a cigar works in Westphalia, and cigarettes and tobacco and so forth, and he sent to my mother in Berlin to sell because she didn’t want to go back to the country. She wanted to stay in Berlin where she had been a nurse in her uncle’s hospital. So I was born, somewhere not very beautiful, in Berlin among tobacco etc… So I remember nothing at all about this but I know that they got divorced because I’ve got their divorce papers. And my mother went into business in a bigger way and even set up my father because he wasn’t very business like.

INT: Even after he was divorced from her?

SH: Oh yes, oh yes, I mean they had a child…

INT: Of course.

SH: And they might not have liked each other but they both fought over me. Now, what else can I tell you about that time? I used to visit him, go away with him at the weekend, and my mother worked very hard. That’s full stop at the moment, I don’t know where you want to go.

INT: Were her parents still alive? Were they in Berlin as well?

SH: Her parents?

INT: Yes.

SH: No. My grandfather was alive and my grandmother died and he married again. She was a second wife.

INT: So in the 1930s you were living with your mother in Berlin?

SH: Well in the 1930s, I was at boarding school.

SH: Just outside Berlin, can’t think of the name of it.

INT: It doesn’t matter. And when did you…? Because you must have been aware you were about 10…

SH: Oh sure

INT: When the Nazis came to power, did that affect you?

SH: Oh yes.

INT: Did you notice changes?

SH: Oh yes indeed.

INT: In what way?

SH: Well first of all we heard. We were on… my mother and I were on a rowing boat and we heard the announcement that Hitler was now our leader and that we should all be very pleased about that.

INT: And was you mother aware that things were going to be difficult?

SH: My mother was…my mother was politically active in Berlin. She was, I don’t know quite, but she certainly didn’t welcome Hitler in. And one of her cousins, who I was named after;

SH: Regina Rubin was a friend of the political…who was the political leader? [Rosa Luxemburg]

SH: in the late ‘20s.

SH: Yes, and my mother was neither religious nor politically correct, nor anything else. She, she was a sort of merry widow, and they had, what would have been called, ‘the salon’ with her cousin. [Her cousin was Else Kohbieter]. And they had a very good time. They knew all the actors and writers in Berlin…and life for her was very good.

INT: What was she doing?

SH: She had started a dry cleaning and… Aren’t you allowed your elbows up there? Dry cleaning, remaking old clothes, because the people were quite poor, but in the 30s they got richer.

INT: Right.

SH: And she was making quite a lot of money. In this, by this time she had three shops.

INT: I see.

SH: And things looked up for her. And their lifestyle was very nice.

SH: Something that happened, that I found most, most interesting, was that all the people who had been the pukka lawyers, teachers, professors and everything else lost their jobs immediately and lost their income immediately.

INT: Back in Germany?

SH: Yes. Yes, so on Saturday and Sunday we used to have open house and they all came in, either with their shoe cleaning stuff or their cookery, or they did my mother’s hair or feet or something or other. And it was a totally open day and they exchanged things and they sold things and my mother bought what she could because she had money you see. This was still in Berlin.

INT: But her business, I assume that her business was taken over by the Nazis in the end?

SH: Yes but none of this was terribly obvious. You know the shops were open. You see, when you have a dry cleaning and remaking thing, it goes on. And people were asked not to go into the shops but they got coats and hats and everything in there so I have no idea of how it just went on.

INT: So she, she must have managed.

SH: Yes she had managers in the shops.

INT: That’s prior to ’39?

SH: And that was quite a fascinating bit – that they all came to the house and…

M: You said Mutti used to feed them?

SH: Oh yes, oh yes. I mean there was food all day and all night.

INT: Was there? That is very interesting and she must have been quite unusual that she was still making money when they had lost their, their livelihoods.

SH: Oh she was, and you see she had, she earned money while they earned nothing. And it was unusual.

INT: It must have been.

SH: Very unusual.

INT: But then everything, I assume, changed once Hitler did become Chancellor?

SH: No.

INT: No?

SH: She had been married to a Pole and that… She always had a Polish flag in the back of her car and a Jewish car number on the back of her car, you see.

INT: Were there Jewish car numbers?

SH: Oh yes. Everything over 350, I think, then the number, was a Jewish car number but she also had a Polish flag in her car.

INT: That was quite provocative then at the time?

SH: Oh yes she was very provocative. And she got into trouble with the police quite often. And, the one time when she really fell out with me, the police had picked her up in the night and I never woke up. And she thought that was…

INT: Selfish?

SH: Really not, not the thing to do. Anyway, we got along very well and I got into the theatre and the cinema late at night, you know sort of, she took me along everywhere. And we enjoyed life and she didn’t want to leave Germany because she thought somebody would kill him [Hitler], but nobody did, you know.

INT: So, what happened? What, what forced you out of Germany? And when did you leave?

SH: Well our passports were coming to an end. I think it was the end of June, 1939, our Polish passports came up. And just before then was Kristallnacht, and they made rather a mess of the synagogues and they picked up my father and put him on a train. And they put them [Polish Jews who were expelled from Germany] between two stations, one German station and one Polish station and left the train there.

And if you had money you could make your own decisions, [i.e. the family had to pay to get him back] and if you had none, heaven help you.

INT: And was he able to escape? Was he left in no man’s land or…?

SH: He was left in no man’s land but he was quite an attractive looking man and he had met some woman who worked for the Thai embassy and she got him a passport or a visa or something and he was allowed back to Berlin for two days, or one day, two days but no longer. And he chartered a plane, I’ve got a photograph of it, he chartered a plane and took her, this woman; I don’t know whether she was Jewish or what she was, to take her, her mother, her son and somebody else… and they all flew off to Thailand. I don’t know where they changed petrol or whatever, I have no idea. I saw them off and it was a tiny little plane with about four seats or something. And it took all his money.

INT: I’m sure it did.

SH: You know, especially when, when everybody wanted to grab a bit of it. But they flew off and I went to the aerodrome and saw them off. My mother didn’t go.

INT: What were you on your birth certificate? Polish or…?

SH: I was Polish. I was never German. I was Polish till the last day there but it was going to be all gone. We made good use of it but it was no use after that.

INT: Sorry what was no use?

SH: My Polish passport.

INT: Oh your passport. So how did you get out, what happened?

SH: Now let me see… Eat some more raspberries, go on…

INT: Thank you

SH: If we’re not allowed tea yet, we must have raspberries. Now I’ll tell you we had to leave by the day the passport was up and we arrived in our car with our Polish flag in the back, at Hamburg, to get on a boat and unfortunately my mother, who was a bit skittish about facts, had packed her passport and her travel documents in one of these big trunks, you know. And we had the most delightful captain on this boat – a little, not a very big one, from Hamburg to London. And he let us just tip them up on deck and he said he would take us to Hull, where he was going, but if we couldn’t find them he’d have to bring us back to Germany.

INT: Oh.

SH: So we made good use of the time to look for the passports and of course they were wrapped with the writing paper and so forth.

INT: That must have been terrifying?

SH: Oh I mean I was terrified of my mother, and for my mother, because I felt so responsible for her. She was, she was a delightful woman, and everybody loved her, but she was totally irresponsible.

INT: Dear me.

SH: Did you have a good mother?

INT: Yes she was very responsible but luckily we were never tested as you were. Did your mother know where she was going in London? Once you arrived did you have somewhere to go?

SH: Yes we did know. It started… She was in a private school in Germany and there was an English woman, I can’t remember her name, and she worked for some refugee organisation and… Have a raspberry…

SH: And she said she would find my mother a job and my mother found a job in a big house, an enormous house, ‘behind the kitchen door’, you know.

INT: As a maid?

**Sonja Hancox – Life During the War**

Sonja describes her experiences after arriving in Britain.

SH: And so we arrived, we went to London first where we had rich relations but they only took us to see the sights. You know what it was like?

INT: Yes. I think that was common.

SH: Yes. We saw the Bank of England and everything else. Anyway we arrived in this big place and they weren’t at all pleased with us when they found out I had to go to school, that I wasn’t old enough; they wanted us out as soon as possible. So I went into an orphanage and my mother went in to cook for somebody else. But jobs were ten a penny, you know what I mean. If you could cook, and my mother had done, before we came away, she’d done two courses, one was a mega, mega cookery course because she never cooked at home, you know. But she did this mega cookery course, and then she did one on make up, and shoe polish, and other things.

INT: To have a skill to sell?

SH: To have skills because, you know, to have any skill was better than nothing.

INT: You must have been by that time, what, about 14?

SH: Yes.

INT: And…

SH: No, 13 just coming up for 14.

INT: 14. So you would have had to go to school? And…

SH: Yes the school was a sort of intermediate thing; the teachers were absent more than the children.They came out of camps and they had had really a rather harder time than we had. [Sonja was in a Jewish hostel where some of the children and some of the teachers were also refugees]

INT: It must have been a terrible shock for her to end up here in Britain as a, as a cook?

SH: No.

INT: No, she coped with that well, did she?

SH: Oh she coped with that very well. We were on the way to America you see. We got visas for America, and we were only having a stop off here.

INT: Is that right?

SH: Yes.

INT: So what made her stay?

SH: The boat was sunk.

INT: Oh.

SH: That was a good enough reason.

INT: A very good reason.

SH: Yes, so we never went to America. I’ve still got the visas.

INT: Have you?

SH: Oh yes, oh yes.

INT: That’s interesting.

SH: And it never worried her. She thought everything would, would be all right.

INT: Did she?

**Sonja Hancox – Settling In**

Sonja tells the interviewer why she ended up in Scotland and about her life here.

INT: And…So what, after all these apprenticeships, what job did you end up doing?

SH: I became a milliner.

INT: Oh.

SH: Because that was part of my mother’s – what she did in the shops.

INT: Right, and yet you ended up here in Scotland. How was that? Because you were down in the south of England?

SH: I don’t know.

M: You do. You met dad.

SH: Oh yes, I met my husband in Birmingham

INT: Right.

SH: And though I didn’t want to get married, I did. Yes he was, he was a civil servant. [Sonja’s husband, Hank, was head of the Ministry of Fuel and Power in Scotland].

M: An engineer.

SH: Engineer, and he was moved up to Scotland and so I came along. They wanted a married couple.

INT: I see, and what was your first impression of Scotland and the people?

SH: I had been to Scotland before. I had come up for the Edinburgh Festival and enjoyed it thoroughly and I thought it would all be like the Edinburgh Festival, and it wasn’t.

INT: Ah so you were disappointed then?

SH: Yes, yes,

INT: OK, so tell me more about Scotland. When you came here did you meet or mix with any of the, the other refugees or Jewish community?

SH: Oh immediately. .

INT: How did you do that?

SH: In Birmingham before we came up we met a journalist and he was coming back the next day so he arranged to meet my husband and he arranged to…Did you know Isi Metzstein?

INT: Oh yes.

SH: He brought him along.

INT: I see.

SH: And he had two brothers and two sisters and we, we knew half of Glasgow by that time, you know. And he brought other people. So we knew a lot of people.

INT: Did you tend to mix with other people who had come escaping Nazi Germany or local people?

SH: Both. Both because some of the German people went to school with others whom they brought.No, I mixed with a mixture.

INT: A mixture of people. And did you find Scotland a welcoming place?

SH: Oh definitely because we’d already got so many friends.

INT: Well that’s very nice. Were you involved in any sort of voluntary work here or were you working always as a milliner when you were here?

SH: Ah I did miserable Oxfam work and…

M: No, no that was latterly, when you first, when you first arrived you didn’t work.

SH: No, no not when I first arrived.

INT: You had a family?

SH: Oh yes, oh yes.

INT: How many children did you have?

SH: Well, by the time we came to Scotland I had three children and two step- daughters.

INT: That’s a significant number.

SH: Yes.

M: Eventually you had three children.

SH: When we came to Scotland.

M: No, I was born in Scotland. Andy was born in Scotland. When you arrived in Scotland you had no children apart from two step-daughters, just, it doesn’t matter, but I mean just for….

SH: Ok I was…

INT: Then you took, then you…They’ve probably been in your mind the whole time.

M: Absolutely.

SH: Absolutely.

M: Weighing heavily.

INT: I’m sure that’s the case. Is your Judaism significant in your life? The fact you came from a Jewish background?

SH: Yes and no. Yes because whatever we argued about it was nothing you could ever forget or put aside. But religious I’ve never been. Is that right?

M: I’m not quite sure what you’re saying actually.

INT: You mean whatever you argued about back in Germany…?

M: And who are you talking about arguing with? Are you talking about…?

SH: With anybody.

M: No, but you didn’t …Religion never played a part. I mean I’ve never been to a synagogue with you.

INT: But I suppose the reason you had to leave was because of religion.

M: Well exactly, well exactly. And so I’ve never, you know, and that is quite a sort of good reason for not getting involved in religion when this is what, you know. But…

SH: Ok.

M: You’ve never been religious.

SH: No I’ve never been religious but on the other hand I would never have…

INT: Denied that you have…

SH: No, no never. No it’s a difference of approach.

INT: Right.

SH: But I don’t know how you feel, do you feel very religious?

INT: No, not really.

**Sonja Hancox – Reflection on Life**

Sonja explains how she feels in relation to Scotland.

INT: Tell me if you look back on your time here in Scotland what would you say were the high points for you?

SH: Probably acceptance. Nobody ever asked me…….they thought I was just foreign, you know. But I could have been Italian or Spanish or…

INT: That makes sense.

SH: …or whatever. Is that right?

M: Well, what, when you’re being asked about high points, what significant events, anything…?

SH: I don’t know. You were born.

M: I mean you used to have good fun.

SH: Yes. And we knew a wide selection of intelligent people; you know sort of, that we dealt with. It’s difficult to…

M: Well we used to have things like a bonfire party every year.

SH: Yes, every year and every year the same people came.

M: But it was good fun, you know.

SH: Yes. And they were all sort of intellectually there.

INT: Well that’s….

INT: Well the West End of Glasgow is a good place…

SH: Oh absolutely, absolutely. That we never came across you was sort of…

INT: I was in the West End.

SH: You weren’t in the West End.

INT: I was, oh yes.

M: Well mum didn’t live in the West End; they lived in Gartocharn for a while.

SH: We lived in…

M: …And also in Helensburgh.

INT: Oh yes.

SH: And then we came back to Glasgow. It didn’t, it didn’t suit anymore when everybody left to go to university and so forth. It didn’t suit anymore to live in the sticks.

INT: When did you come to this house?

SH: Oh about fifty years ago.

INT: As long as that?

INT: And do you feel Scottish now? Or…?

SH: Am I Scottish now?

INT: Are you Scottish now?

SH: No.

INT: No. What are you would you say?

SH: No. I couldn’t tell you what I am, but I certainly am not Scottish and I’m not in favour of what they’re going to do in Scotland. But I am on my own in this opinion.

INT: Well I don’t think you’re on your own in this opinion but you’re probably on your own in your unique number of nationalities. So you must be partly…

INT: You’re a mixture.

INT: Partly Czech, partly German, partly Polish.

SH: Yes.

INT: It’s quite a big mixture.

SH: Yes. Are you in favour of Scotland becoming Scotland?

INT: Certainly not.

SH: Oh good.

INT: Certainly not.

SH: Thank you.

M: You can come back again.

INT: Certainly not. I think maybe I’ll ask you one more question if I may? Were there…? What would you say were the low points? I asked you about high points in your life, what would you say were low points? Or, fortunately, have you avoided them after 1939?

M: Bad things that happened or difficult times…

SH: No, no I really can’t think of any low points.

INT: Well that’s excellent.

INT: Being on that boat looking for the passport – that must have been a low point?

SH: But no I can’t think of any terribly high points or terribly low points. The high points are easier to find but the low points, I just can’t think of any. I mean you quarrel with your family but that’s…

INT: That’s normal.

SH: That’s normal. Let’s eat these.

INT: Thank you very much for speaking to us.

SH: Then we might be able to get a cup of tea.

INT: Yes I think we’re in time for a cup of tea. Thank you very much for speaking to us.

SH: It was a pleasure.

**Sonja Hancox – Afterthoughts**

Sonja talks more about her family and describes the fate of her grandparents.

INT: And Marion, you’re Sonja’s daughter, would you like to add anything?

M: Well one thing mum didn’t mention was when my grandfather flew off in this jet with the woman from the Thai embassy somehow or another they ended up in Shanghai and they spent the war in Shanghai and came back.

SH: Oh came back.

M: Oh yes.

SH: To us.

M: By this time with… you had a half brother.

SH: Oh yes he had, no he had a German half brother, not a Thai half brother.

M: No, no, no, no, the woman from the Thai embassy, yes, he had married this woman and you had a half brother, Robert.

SH: Yes.

M: Who came and lived with us in Newcastle for, for a while.

SH: Yes.

M: And, and then he ended up emigrating to…

SH: America.

M: Yes, was it New York? Can’t remember?

SH: Can’t remember.

M: Ok. But…

SH: But my father stayed with us and went back to Germany. He couldn’t stand family life. But… Is that right?

M: Yes, I can’t think what else you may…that was just one point because it was just the fact that my grandfather ended up in Shanghai and I’ve always wanted to go and see Shanghai just because of, you know.

SH: Oh well, you probably will.

M: I might. But we went back to Bünde which is north of…

SH: Where my mother came from.

M: Yes and it’s where your mother had been a nurse for your grandfather’s…

SH: No!

M: No?

SH: Never.

M: No where did she, where did she work as a nurse? Because he…

SH: My grandfather’s half brother [Simon Fogel] had a sanatorium in Berlin.[The Bismarck Sanatorium] A great big place where soldiers went to get better.

M: From the First World War?

SH: Yes. And she had no training but the head of this place was my aunt and took her in as, especially as she wanted to get away from the country.

INT: And that’s why she ended up in Berlin?

SH: Yes and then she didn’t want to go back again.

INT: And didn’t you tell me, all those years ago when I visited with my father, that your mother kept a special kind of diary showing all the people who visited the house?

SH: I’ve got it here. Marion will show you in a minute.

INT: And they, they wrote little comments to your mother?

SH: Oh yes. Germans are very keen on little comments. Have you got a book like that?

INT: No, no.

SH: We actually offered it to the Berlin Museum but the fellow wasn’t keen enough. You know he was keen at first and then when you tried to contact him you couldn’t contact him. So I’ve got the book.

INT: Right. Well I’d like to see it after, which would be excellent.

SH: Oh yes.

M: But the other thing was that we went to Bünde.

SH: Yes.

M: And to see what the place looked like.

SH: Yes

M: Where your…what relation was it? Your grandparents?

SH: Yes.

M: Alright, and we went and found your grandparents’ family house.

SH: Oh yes. No difficulty at all.

M: And we couldn’t find the cigar factory.

SH: Well it’s burned, it’s been knocked down.

M: Yes. But we found another cigar factory still in the area.

SH: It’s a centre of tobacco. How the middle of Germany became the centre of tobacco I…don’t ask me.

M: But, we went and knocked on the door of this factory.

SH: Yes. Yes, and they were very nice to us.

M: They were charming.

SH: Yes.

M: And took us in and talked to us, and all sorts.

SH: Oh yes, highly polished everything.

M: Yes.

SH: You know and my grandfather’s workshops had been used for the museum. There’s a tobacco museum in Bünde and that is largely my grandfather’s workshops.

INT: Oh how interesting.

INT: That’s interesting.

M: And the other thing is, on the streets they’ve got a project.

SH: Oh yes.

M: And a ‘Stein’? What are they called, the stones?

SH: Yes they build in…

M: To the pavements…

SH: Yes but what are they? What stones? [Stolperstein]

M: They’re memorials to people who died from Bünde. I’ve actually got a couple of photographs of those and one of them is from, for, your grandfather. [Emil Ruben]

SH: Yes.

M: And also for his second wife. [Ella Ruben]

INT: And did they perish in the camps then?

SH: Say that again?

INT: Did they perish in the camps?

SH: No. My grandfather… My mother had taken something up from the hospital.

M: Some tablets.

SH: Some tablets. And when we came away, we came to Britain and we said goodbye to them, and on a certain date [24/7/42], I’ve got it in the book, he was called to the police station and they were going to ship him off to wherever, but he’d got this thing in his pocket [poison] so he died in the police station.

INT: I see.

M: But your grandmother…

SH: Didn’t…

M: No she didn’t and she ended up in Theresienstadt.

SH: Yes, yes.

INT: And she perished there? [6/3/43]

SH: Well she, in the meantime, they had got a lot of old ladies staying there [Sonja’s grandmother had a guest house in Bünde] and she really couldn’t just abandon them, you know, so she went back home and, so she went back home and she ended up in a camp with the other ladies. And you hear the date and you see the… 1942 they were all sent to the camp.

INT: Right.

SH: But he was eighty whatever and he thought he’d take the easy way out.

INT: Yes, as did many others.

SH: Yes, yes so he was very lucky; he’d had a charmed life. Like my mother.

INT: Ok thank you Sonja. That was great.

INT: Thank you very much.