**Rita McNeill – Life Before The War**

Rita describes her family background in Hannover, Germany and the night the Nazis arrested her and her mother. She explains how she was able to escape but that her mother did not.

INT: Good morning Rita. I’m here to interview Rita McNeill. Rita, could we begin by asking you where you were born? When you were born? And what was your name at birth?

RM: I was born in 1930 and my name was Strassmann, S-T-R-A-S-S-M-A-N-N. I was born in Hannover and I lived there until the Germans kicked me out.

INT: Right, So could you tell us a little about your early life? What do you remember? RM: I was 9 when I left. I remember clearly going to a Jewish school, going to synagogue, with my mother. My father, I don’t know what happened to him. They lived apart; they didn’t live together. They weren’t divorced, that wasn’t allowed in those days but I didn’t know my father.

INT: Right, at all?

RM: So I was with my mother and the …when the Germans came, and took us away.

INT: I see, I see and what was it like? Were you able to stay in school? In Jewish school were you…?

RM: I was in the Jewish school until I left and then, of course, they came during the night, took my mother and I in the back of a lorry to a camp. To Ahlem which is near Hannover.

INT: And this was in 1939?

RM: Yes

INT: But you managed to escape. What happened?

RM: I… My aunt, who looked very German, blonde hair up in a bun thing, and she came and took me out because I had a permit from the Kindertransport, they let me out. And I didn’t want to leave my mother; I kept saying, “No, no, I’ll stay”. “You go, and I’m coming right behind you”. I believed her, she never did. INT: She didn’t survive the war then?

RM: No.

INT: Goodness.

RM: Never saw her again.

INT: That must have been traumatic for you.

RM: It was, it was. It was awful.

INT: Awful. And your aunt did she escape with you? What happened then?

RM: She managed to go to Israel with her family. And the family all said, “Why didn’t you take Rita with you?” But I wanted to stay with my mother, She kept saying to me, “You go and I’ll be right behind you”. And I believed her. I believed her until I was married.

INT: Is that right? You were still waiting. Do you know why your mother particularly was taken to the camp? Was there a reason?

RM: Because she was Jewish.

INT: Just because she was Jewish, I see.

INT: And going back to Germany were you aware, because you were 9 when you left, were you aware how difficult things had become there?

RM: Yes as Jews we weren’t allowed out when the parades passed; we had to wear a Star of David on our arm. And the school was closed, the Jewish school, and I knew things weren’t good.

INT: But your mother, she wasn’t, hadn’t any way of getting out?

RM: No.

INT: No.

RM: No

INT: She was stuck. Trapped there.

**Rita McNeill – Immigration**

Rita describes her journey from Germany to Britain and her continuing belief that her mother would be arriving there too.

INT: You had escaped from the prisoner of…well the concentration camp, what happened then?

RM: I was taken by my aunt to her home and I stayed there a week or so with my cousin and then I was put on a train to come over here. And they kept saying, “Your mother will…” I said ‘No, I don’t want to go’. “Your mother will come straight behind you, you go”. So I left and I believed them, she never did.

INT: That is terrible.

RM: I never saw her again.

INT: What do you remember of the journey? Do you remember the journey?

RM: The journey? There were a lot of children; we had quite a lot of fun once we got going. I was all right but I kept wanting to see my mother.

INT: Of course you would. And then what happened, did you go via the Hook of Holland?

RM: Hook of Holland and then to London to the station there, Liverpool Station I think it was, and there my guardian, the person who said she would look after me, picked me up there up there and I went to her home then in Scotland.

**Rita McNeill – Settling In**

Rita describes her new life in Rutherglen, Scotland. She talks about the difficulties and challenges she faced and the impossibility of remaining Jewish in this new environment.

INT: And whereabouts in Scotland was that? [Where were you taken?]

RM: Rutherglen.

INT: Ah, and that’s why you ended up here?

RM: That’s it. But I couldn’t speak English and I was very unhappy because I kept saying I must wait and see my mother, but I didn’t.

INT: And that must have been difficult for your guardian as well?

RM: It was, very difficult. She said, “You cried morning, noon, and night”. And kept… she kept saying to her husband, “This child is going to be ill. We can’t keep her” and he said, “Just… just be patient, she’ll be all right”.

INT: They must have been very good people.

RM: They were, very kind. But the husband developed cancer and he was only there a year.

INT: Oh dear.

RM: I was only there a year when he passed away.

INT: And did she have other children of her own?

RM: She had a son, much older, who had epilepsy and that was terrible to see. I’d never seen anything like this before.

INT: And did you stay? Did you stay and grow up with this lady?

RM: I stayed there until I was married.

INT: I see. And where did you go to school?

RM: Rutherglen, Rutherglen Academy. First of all to a primary school – MacDonald School – and then Rutherglen Academy.

INT: And was it difficult for you to learn English or did you find that you picked that up very quickly?

RM: Very difficult, very difficult but I had to learn quickly because nobody spoke [German]… So I just had to get on with it.

INT: It’s interesting you have no accent at all.

RM: You think not?

INT: I think…I don’t notice an accent at all. So that’s quite impressive. And what did you think of Scotland when you first arrived? Did it seem strange or familiar?

RM: It seemed very strange. My uncle, who was also a refugee, at that point he was in London, he said “You’ll see tram cars that you can go upstairs; you’ll see fish and chips in a paper, newspaper; you’ll see all sorts of funny men with skirts”, kilts, I’d never seen before. So it was all very new to me. And it was just one of those funny things.

INT: And the other children at school were they nice to you? Did they think of you as a foreigner? How was that?

RM: A lot of them…it was just before the war, the 3rd of September the war started, and a lot of them were not nice at all. They said, “Oh you’re German, dirty dog” and it wasn’t pleasant. But one boy in particular who decided to look after me, he was the ruffian of the school, who looked after me very well and if anyone came near me he dealt with them.

INT: That’s always the safest to be the friend of the scary one.

RM: That’s right.

INT: That was something. And how long did you take before you stopped crying and began to cope with life here?

RM: I think when I went to school; I had to get on with it. And they kept saying “Your mother will come” and I believed them. She didn’t. She never did. Never saw her again.

INT: And once you were here did you mix with any other refugees? Did they make any effort to introduce you to any?

RM: Not really, no. Not really. I didn’t meet any until I met Dorrith Sim because of my paper to be naturalized. I went to her, so I found her, so that was nice.

INT: So Rita once you were here, you knew you had been Jewish, I assume you knew about your background. What happened to that aspect of your life?

RM: The first Sunday I was there, the lady I was staying with said, “We’ll get ready for church.” And I said “Oh no, I don’t go to church, I go to synagogue”. She said; “You’ll go where I tell you my lady”. So I had to go to church and I sat at the back and I thought, this isn’t right, but what could I do? So I sat there and had to listen to what was going on.

INT: And that was that?

RM: That was that.

INT: And did nobody from the Refugee Committee or anybody come and see you and see how you were getting on?

RM: No.

INT: No?

RM: No what happened at Pesach, a man came and he said I’m going to send you matzo and you eat that and I stupidly said, “How can I eat matzo at one side of the table and you eat bacon and egg at the other side? You’re unclean.” And she said “Don’t you dare call me unclean!”. But you know what I meant, she didn’t.

And I said, “Well, when you eat matzo you clean the house thoroughly, all the bread goes”. So that wasn’t very good. So this man left all the matzo for me and that was that.

INT: That was that. That was the last time.

RM: That was difficult.

INT: That would have been difficult. That would have been an added strain for you at the time, I’m sure.

RM: It was. It was.

INT: So once you got used to Scotland, did you forget about Germany or was that still very strongly in your head?

RM: Very strongly in my mind because I was waiting for my mother and the people I was with said, “Why don’t you let us adopt you and change your name?” Their name was McMichael and my name was Strassmann. I said “No, my mother would never find me if I changed my name, thank you I’ll just keep my own name” which I did until I was married.

**Rita McNeill – Integration**

Rita explains why she got a job in a bank despite her lack of knowledge of Scottish banking. She describes how she first met her dear husband through a Christian Youth Centre and their very romantic first encounter. She also explains how she finally discovered her mother’s fate.

INT: So tell me about your education. Did you stay on at school? Did you go to university? What happened?

RM: No I didn’t. No I wasn’t academic at all. I wasn’t very clever at all; I didn’t study, as I should have done.

INT: I’m sure the whole trauma of your experience would have made it more difficult to do that.

RM: It was very difficult, very difficult.

INT: So what did you do then when you left school?

RM: I worked in a bank. One of my friends said, “You should write a letter and ask if you can work in the bank” because the people I was staying with were not very wealthy and I felt I was there and they were looking after me. I wanted to go and get a job and they said, “Well why don’t you write to the bank?” because this friend of mine worked in the bank. So I wrote a letter and said, “Could I have a job with you?” So I had a letter back from them, from the manager, saying, “Why do you want to work? How old are you?” I told him and he said, “Why do you want to work?” I said, ‘I want, I need some money; I need to work and help this family that I’m living with.”

So I was asked to be interviewed and they sent me a letter to go to the bank. Well I thought there was one bank in Scotland; I didn’t know all the different banks. I went to the Clydesdale Bank on Buchanan Street with this letter and they said, “Oh no you’ll need to go…it’s the Bank of Scotland up in George Square”. So I went up there and the manager was very kind, and interviewed me and he said, “Why do you want the job?” “Because I need money. I am staying with these people and I feel that I want to pay them somehow. [The manager said] “It’s 17/6 a week.” So he said “Well, we’ll give you a job”. So I started there in the bank and I was there for…until I was married.

INT: And how did you meet your husband?

RM: Again that was through a Christian Youth Centre. The C.Y.C it was called, the Christian Youth Centre. And we went to Bothwell Castle, an outing, and I was ‘out’; we were playing rounders and I was ‘out’. And I was standing, short hair and ankle socks and my husband passed and he said to his friend, “See that girl? I’m going to marry her.”

INT: Really? Oh that’s…

RM: Didn’t know me, had never spoken to me.

INT: …that’s very romantic.

RM: So he did, he did, he married me and…. we had 61 happy years.

INT: Oh that was, that was…

INT: And did you know once you met him that you were going to marry him?

RM: No I didn’t, no.

INT: He was more certain.

RM: He didn’t tell me.

INT: That’s amazing. And did you stop working once you got married?

RM: Yes. Once I was married I had to stop because he was in practice then and he needed me to answer the telephone, so I was his receptionist for a while.

INT: And you had a family?

RM: I had a boy and a girl, girl first and then a boy.

INT: And what was your husband’s medical specialty?

RM: Ear, Nose, and Throat.

INT: Right, right. And by that time you said you discovered, you realised, that your mother wasn’t coming back. Was that because somebody told you or because you faced that reality?

RM: No I had a little booklet, which said that they were sent to Riga. They had to walk to Riga and she didn’t make it, and if they fell, I think they shot them. So she was buried in Riga in a mass grave.

INT: And who sent you the booklet? How did you find that out?

RM: It was a little booklet; I don’t know where it came from. It told me that my mother had gone.

INT: That must have been a terrible shock to you.

RM: It was awful.

INT: And your husband knew that you’d come from Germany and your background?

RM: He knew, he knew and his mother wasn’t very happy about him being interested in a refugee girl. That was difficult for a wee while but she soon got to know me and love me and she said, “I know…” – once we were married – “…”I know he’ll always have a clean shirt”.

INT: You can’t take the German out of a German can you?

RM: No.

**Rita McNeill – Reflection On Life**

Rita describes the high points in her life and her connection to her past.

INT: And once you were older you said you met Dorrith Sim. After that did you meet other people who came on the Kindertransport? What happened with that?

RM: Yes I used to go to meetings, Kindertransport meetings, which was nice because I met a lot of people on the same boat as I was. And Dorrith particularly was my friend.

INT: Yes and I think the people who came over all went in different directions didn’t they?

RM: They did, they did.

INT: I was going to ask you a little about your social life here. Was that primarily with your new friends through your husband?

RM: Yes.

INT: And now at this stage in your life, do you consider yourself Scottish or still a bit German or what?

RM: Scottish with German. Still German blood in my veins, Jewish German blood in my veins.

INT: Now asking you about your… Looking back on life, I’m sure that the worst experience of course must have been leaving Germany. What would you describe as the high points in your life?

RM: High points? Meeting my husband; getting married; having a wonderful life. 61 years we were married and life was very nice then. And then he took Parkinson’s, [he] was very unwell. I lost him too.

INT: But at least you had these years and he certainly seemed a man of decisiveness if he spotted you at this early stage.

RM: Yes, we were very happily married.

INT: And grandchildren?

RM: Five.

INT: Five.

INT: And do your grandchildren feel a connection to their Jewish background? This part of your life?

RM: Some of them do. Leah, who’s called after my mother, she went to Israel, I told you, and she just loves Israel and relatives there. She decided that she would go and she feels… She’s a sailor; she’s at sea in the Merchant Navy. And she’s a very independent girl. So she’s coming home at the end of the month. I look forward to seeing her. But she’s very interested in Israel at the moment.

INT: That’s interesting. It was very nice to speak to you Rita and thank you for coming to us this morning. Thank you very much.