



Arek's Story, Chapter 1

I'm Arek Hersh, I was born in Poland and I came to Britain when I was nearly 16 with a transport from Czechoslovakia that came. 300 children. 40 girls and 260 boys. We came actually from Theresienstadt and that was an encampment in Czechoslovakia. And we came to England on the 14th of August 1945.

Please can you tell me about your early years with your very tight very loving family?

We were 5 children, 2 boys and 3 girls, and I used to do all different things as a small boy does. I was very mischievous and used to go the summer, we used to go swimming and we used to go to the park and used to do a lot of different things and winter time I used to go ice skating on the river because the ice was so thick, a metre thick and we used to clear the ice and then we used to ice skate. I had a very good life, I was a normal boy, I did everything what most children do.

And can you tell me about your faith and the part that faith played within your family?

I'm Jewish and we used to go twice a week to the synagogue and faith also, we were middle of the road, we weren't too religious but we were middle of the road with religion. We kept everything up which was necessary.

So that would have extended to your diet in the house as well?

Yes, kosher food and so on, and that was part of my upbringing.

And what did your father do Arek?

He used to make officers' boots. Boots for officers, Army officers. He had three people working for him and yeah we had a normal life and we were very happy children. And then my sister went to work with my aunt outside Lodz in Pabianice and she worked there in the office, my uncle had a textile mill and then life was very happy for me. I went to school and I was the main singer in the choir and it was, I was solo singer in the choir and life went on as normal as it could be.

What sort of school was it you went to?

I went to a Jewish school. It was an elementary school and up to the age of 11 it was a Jewish school and then after that we went to a mixed school. And when I was two years old my family moved to Konin where my mother was born and she had a mother there, an elderly mother and she thought she'd look after her mother and so we went, we moved to Konin and in Konin that's where I started my school at the age of 6. It was a new school about 3 years old and it was a wonderful time I had. Go to the park, go to the river and swimming and do loads of things and life went very good. And then when I was 7, about 7 ½ we moved back to Sieradz and there I had to make new friends again and I had some cousins living in the town and so on and slowly slowly I made friends again and life went on and then in 1938 many Jews came from Germany after Kristallnacht, they were of Polish descent and they put them on the border, between the Polish and the German border and they sent them into Poland. And then Poland didn't want to accept them. My father and the committee they took these people in with the families and so on and it was a difficult time.

During your childhood did you encounter anti-Semitism in Poland?

Yes. Yes. I was coming out from the school and a few Polish children shouted me "Go back to Palestine", my parents were born, my grandparents were born in Poland and I was born in Poland, a Polish subject but according to them we weren't Polish. And that was a terrible situation. There were 3 ½ million Jews in Poland and a quarter of a million survived after the war.