

Australian War Memorial

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is side one, tape one of an interview with Dorothy Laing, formerly Dorothy Loft about child evacueés. This was recorded on 15 October 1990.

Dorothy Laing, where and when were you born?

I was born in Essendon, 8th May 1925.

Tell us something about your family, what sort of people your mother and father were.

My mother was a singer, very talented woman, who could tell stories, a very versatile woman. My father was very quiet. He was a civil engineer and a rather reserved sort of gentleman. They came out here after the first world war because my mother's sister married an Australian Army man. And they stayed here for about five years and then returned to England because she was very homesick and she wanted to go home.

What did the family do for a living?

My father was an engineer. My mother didn't go to work, no, it was just Dad.

So what sort of childhood was it? Was it times that were hard? Do you recall your childhood as being one of ...?

Oh yes. We went back to England and very shortly after we returned - we went back to England when I was three so none of my early life here I remember - and very shortly after that the depression hit and my father was unemployed for two years. And we lived in Battersea which is now a very depressed area of London. And we had, I seem to sort of have memories of surviving on bread and milk for breakfast and bread and dripping for lunch and vegetables for tea. And we lived like that for a couple of years. If we had anything over and above that it was in a charity situation to survive those times. But I don't remember ever being unhappy because I had a talented mother that managed to sort of overcome those sort of difficulties that they didn't present a problem, so nothing was sort of a problem.

Was there just one brother or were other ...?

Oh no, there's just us two.

Was it a religious family as church? Was church ...?

Not in those days, no. We used to be sent to the Baptist church on Sundays up on the corner, probably to get rid of us. And I can remember we were given a penny. This was to go in the plate, this is in depression times, and we worked out that you could put a halfpenny in the plate and you could buy a halfpenny worth of lollies on the way there. And one Sunday we were greeted when we got home by my mother telling us that we'd taken two shillings out of the purse and not a penny, and we had to go back to the church to say that we had to go back and get this money because this money was needed for food. And we got a fairly right belting because we had to then say, well, we'd spent it in the lolly shop and we had to go back and get

the one and elevenpence-halfpenny change. So the times in those days were very hard, where they knew right down to the cent how much they had in a purse. In depression times she knew exactly what she had in that purse.

Two shillings probably would have bought you quite a lot of lollies, I suppose.

Well, I remember the man wanting to give me one and elevenpence-halfpenny change and I can remember saying, 'Oh no, I only gave you a halfpenny'. I was only six or seven but I've never forgotten it because of the belting I suppose.

So it wasn't a matter of taking two shillings and deliberately ...?

Oh no. I was only a child. I didn't even realise that I'd done it.

Did you start going to school?

Yes, we went to a school in Battersea. Ironically all of my life in Battersea, although they were like you see on the Steptoe series here was very similar to that, very hard ...

Little terraced houses.

And rough and all houses on top of one another. But there was a very close - it was a very happy period of my life even though we had nothing, very happy. I went to Wicks's Lane School. My brother, he went to the same school. And I can remember I sat next to Eric Crushank who had all the back of his pants hanging out. We all used to go to the convent for second-hand clothes to wear. We never had holidays or, I don't remember much about birthdays or Christmas but they weren't unhappy times, they were incredibly happy times. And we didn't leave there until I was about nine or ten and then we went to .... The story is, we went to Bromley because we had endless bronchial trouble with living so close to the Thames.

That's you as children?

(5.00) Yes, both of us. Endless bronchial trouble, and my father was told to get us out of the London area so we went to Bromley to live. And I went to a school called Burnt Ash Lane School which I've got no memories of at all, but I passed a full scholarship there and went into a girls' public school which was a problem for me to move from working class school into upper class, you know, élite English school. And I had a lot of difficulties coping with very stuck-up little girls.

What sort of difficulties?

Well, you'd be left out of form parties and you'd be left out of - they're very cliquey. You become very much aware that you're different to them. But you see, we weren't different in Battersea because there was no television, there was no awareness there was something on the other side of the fence because all the children were the same.

Would you have by then have developed what you might call a working class accent that also made you stick out at the school?

I had to have elocution lessons when I went to Bromley because I had a south London, 'ain't ya' and all that type of thing, so I had to have extensive elocutionists to turn me into a lady - and walking and all these kind of things to groom you to be a lady. And then of course you go home to an environment - well, you don't put on stuck-up airs here. You don't eat an orange that way here, you eat it this way here. You don't put your butter on the side of the plate. So you already have this double standards of one things goes on at school and something else is quite different at home.

> Was it the sort of circumstance that could lead you to feeling inferior at school and inferior at home?

No, I didn't feel inferior at home. I felt a bit mixed up at home. They breed - I've learnt enough now - that they can breed your problems right into adult life if you move with a child who can't cope. If you've got a very sensitive, which I was, and my mother was an extremely strict woman, so we grew up in that era of both at home and both at school, never to ask questions. You just sat and had everything fed into you like a ticker-tape. The teacher would stand and give you a lecture. Your mother would say, you do this, you do that, you do the other. So I grew up never sort of really thinking for myself, when you think about it now. I just sort of did exactly what I was told, sit down, stand up, and all the rest of it. But it was very hurtful at school. It wasn't at home, it didn't bother me at home, I don't remember.

> What about the teachers? Did they tend also to single you out and give you a bad time?

Oh yes. We had, as I said, my father had little money. He was beginning to get on his feet, and we had school uniform and England was very cold and with a bronchial chest I'd come home and told Mum that we could wear a special type of sports jumper I'd seen these other girls wearing, so she had this made which would have cost money. She says now what it cost then to send me to that school. And this jumper was made and I can remember in front of 750 girls being pulled out and taken up on the stage because this wasn't school uniform. And yet those other young girls were wearing exactly the same thing as me. So that's the sort of tripe that you sort of had to cope with in those days which a tough child - I know people that that wouldn't bother but it did bother me.

> Were there occasions where you might try and reach out and make friendship with a group of girls and be put back in your place, as it were?

Yes, I was popular enough. Again, because I could play the piano. I've sung solo today. I can't play in front of anybody today but in those days, yes, I could play dance music and they could dance to that, so you'd be popular at school because you had that. And I seem to feel that I was reasonably popular but the standard of my education began to drop because of a feeling of not being prepared to move from one class into another class, which is still prevalent in those days. And as I say, when school parties, I had one of them come - her name was Elizabeth Jones - and she said to me, 'I'm very sorry, I'm having a birthday party but I can't invite you to my party because you're a scholarship girl'. But you're not, until you have psychology like we do today, you're not sort of aware of those things. As it was explained to me many years later, of a gradual stackpile of things that are sort of, I suppose, grinding that confidence down.

> What about the piano? When did that begin?

My father, besides being a civil engineer, he was a classical banjo player. He used to play on the ABC here. My mother was a small and very pretty woman and very jealous because he used to have a professional lady to accompany him. So she made him teach her to play the piano, and she in turn taught me to play the piano but only from a general playing. I didn't have very much theory. I could play but not like a professional person could play but sufficient enough to play, well enough to play at parties. I could play for singsongs and things like that - with music. I was never much good without sheet music.

(10.00) You were playing a lot of popular songs, not just the classical music.

Oh yes, there were some .... No, I didn't play classical. I used to play classical for personal amusement but not for .... I've never played classical music to anybody but I always played for children singing, I could accompany them, I could accompany a violinist or somebody who was a player, those sorts of things. I apparently did have a gift there, that you could put anything in front of me and I could follow to accompany somebody.

> Was your sense of confusion and so on added to by - you mentioning your mother was a jealous person - were there scenes then? Do you have any recollection?

No, they didn't become noticeable to me until - I seemed to sort of have funny feelings about that when I was about fifteen and I met and fell in love with my first boy. And I seem to think then, which I believe does happen, that some mothers try to move in a little bit to sort of take the scene with that. I can remember sensing that slightly.

> By the time you'd got to public school did you have particular ideas about where you might go in life, or what would become of you?

No.

> Was there just a vague expectation some day you'd marry and have children, have a family, that sort of thing?

Well, we were reared like that, yes. That generation were reared .... I had no aspirations to *be* someone, no.

> It seems before the second world war began there was a growing feeling in Europe that there was trouble looming. Did you have any sense of that as a child?

No. My father .... I can't remember when but my father was very close friends with a German engineer and they lived on the same housing estate as us, and they were a German family ...

> Was that at Bromley, or the ...?

Yes, that was at Bromley. And they became friends and the men, I don't know much about their meetings. I know when I was confirmed that Trudy Emerick had a special German celebration for me, apparently in Germany it's a big thing, you know, for a child to be confirmed. And we were all away on holiday when war was declared. But prior to that I

seemed to know something about Jewish troubles in Germany and I seemed to know - whether my father .... My father was in the War Office so therefore anything he did was, what do you call it?

Confidential.

Confidential, yes. And he was the gentleman that was amongst the team that designed the guns of Singapore that went out the wrong way. They faced towards the sea instead of inland. But a lot of his work he couldn't talk about. But whether I heard him and my mother talking about this I don't know. I can't remember.

So do you have a recollection of hearing that war had begun?

Oh yes, I knew war had begun all right. We were on holidays at Hastings with this German family. They were all sharing a house. And this is where I met Alan, the first boyfriend. And very shortly, within hours after that, the air raid sirens went, straight after that. We were all laughing together saying, 'My God, here we are on holiday with a German family', and there's an air raid directly. Oh yes, I knew that.

Do you know what became of the German family? Were they interned?

Mum said that they were all interned. He used to make toys and he had a factory at Bermondsey. And they interned him. They tried to turn the factory over to make small arms but couldn't work it so they had to get him out again apparently, with his German machinery. These stories I'm telling you are all not factual, they're only things that I can sort of remember. And she had two beautiful little boys and they were all interned. I think Mum said they were all interned on the Isle of Wight, I think.

What was the social context of this first childhood romance? What was understood by you as to what was acceptable in terms of having a boyfriend as such, or an interest in a boyfriend?

I had mixed with boys because my brother had boys. Boys weren't strange to me. I met Alan on the foreshore at Hastings and I think probably, looking back now, he might have been possibly a first and possibly an only sexual attraction I ever had. He was the only person I ever knew that I couldn't stand up when he walked into a room, he was just so handsome and so glorious and I thought, imagine him kissing me. And I used to think you had babies if you kissed boys, so I didn't kiss him very much because I was scared stiff I might have a baby. But there wasn't the ball-game that I've seen with my own children in those days, it was a very different lifestyle to what we have now.

Did your mother and father pick up that you had an interest?

(15.00) Oh yes, because he'd .... We discovered when we went back to Bromley he lived at Lewisham which was a couple of suburbs away from us. He played the piano accordion and he joined our dance band. We used to play in dance bands to raise money already for air raid. These were, they were called ARP dances and they stood for Air Raid Precautionary men, that were working already to prepare us for the air raids that were to come. And Alan was amongst that band group, so he was still very much with our family when I was sent to Australia.

When did you first hear about the idea of going to Australia?

Now, that's a bit muddled. You get one story - I don't really know - there's two stories floating around. One was that it was read in the paper and my brother's, I seemed to think, was announced at school. I don't quite know from the sources. But he was the one that wanted to come to Australia. He was thirteen and he wanted to come here to see the place of his birth. I was caught because I still loved Alan although he had found another girlfriend at this stage. I was still mooning around for him. And also at fifteen, quite an old, mature person, I really wanted to stay in England to fight for England with the rest of England, which sounds probably stupid to you, but that's how I felt.

What did you suppose that fighting for England might have meant on your part?

I didn't have a clue, I was too much of a child. But I wanted to be - like your mother dying of cancer - I didn't want to be sent away from that.

Did you have fantasies of somehow doing something heroic that in a way people would recognise your value, or ...?

No. Probably still playing in a dance band, raising money for people who could do something about it.

What sort of notions at that age then did you have about Australia, if you had no clear recollection of it, what did you suppose Australia was like?

A very hot, dusty country. My mother had described to us, as children. We had been caught up in the black 'flu which had nearly killed both of us. We'd both been in hospital. Reg was six months and I was two, there's eighteen months' difference between us. And Mum had talked about how terribly dusty and hot and flies, there were lots of flies here. But I didn't come out with the illusions that a lot of other English children did that there were kangaroos bouncing around here. I knew there were houses and shops.

Do you have a recollection of the issue being discussed, or how you were first told as far as the family was concerned that, yes, you were going to Australia?

No. I can remember the reasons I was being sent were because I was fifteen and I could be harmed by the Germans. And the other thing I can remember was that because my father was attached to the War Office that there were plans at that time that the British government was going to be sent to Canada, and therefore they wanted us out of the country because of these two reasons. Now, the most frightening thing that's happened to me in the last two days is that, for some reason or other, I didn't believe my parents, and this weekend I've heard those two things from two other people which has slightly thrown me.

What was implicit then in that sense that you didn't believe what they said? What did that mean to you? Was there a sense of betrayal or something that you felt?

I don't quite know. I had psychology treatment after my marriage broke up and the gentleman there said that it may have come across as a rejection to me and for my husband to reject me, these things had created a massive depression for me. But I really couldn't form an opinion of what I felt. I just have grown old with a resentment that I was sent and I just felt that resentment.

Did you have a feeling of hurt at the time? Was there a feeling that your parents were actually rejecting you?

No, because I think even in my generation at fifteen you're still beginning to cut that umbilical cord to be perhaps looking at some sort of a life for yourself. But I had no career .... I would have been at your, what do you call, your Merit level I suppose at fourteen. I still had two years of schooling to go but - I've lost the track of what I'm talking about.

I was asking you whether you'd felt a sense of hurt and you'd said no, not really.

No, I just think probably life was just becoming into full bloom for me and I didn't want that disturbed, I suppose.

Were you able to express your unhappiness at the idea?

No. As I said to you earlier, I would never have said to my parents. I just came away, did what I was told.

Did you have friends that you could turn to and talk about it?

I can't remember. No, I've got no recollection.

Do you have any recollection of at school then, it being discussed around that you were going to Australia? Any sense of novelty about that.

No. That's the interesting part, that seems to be of nothingness. There must have been discussions. There must have been people that must have said, 'Oh, aren't you lucky?' or whatever, but I've got no recollection. So either I was too angry about it, I just don't know. I really don't know.

Did you have a sense of dread, or just emptiness, just immediately before going?

No, I just plain didn't want to go. I just didn't want to go.

(20.00) Do you have a recollection of the day of preparation of getting things together and so on?

No.

So what are your very first memories then of the process of going aboard?

I can remember being on the train and we had school uniform on, and for some reason I couldn't wear my school hat which was part of the school uniform. And my mother made me wear the most atrocious black straw hat which I hated and once we got on the train that went straight out through the window.

You actually threw it away?

I can't remember anything else. It just went whhhht, straight out.

Well, what about the ship, do you have a recollection of seeing the ship and of being impressed by a large liner?

No. I can remember sleeping on the school floors in Liverpool and I can remember the first night with kids running around all night long. They just had no control over those kids. Hopeless. Kids out of control and the teachers up on the stage trying to get some sleep with children that were just hopelessly out of control. I can vaguely remember we had air raids but they're not vivid in my mind at all. Others of that group can remember those air raids.

Do you have any recollection of air raids before you left your home?

No, we didn't have any air raids in Bromley. We had an air raid practice. We had air raid meetings because I lived in ten miles' radius from London where the barrage balloons were directly above our house, and we were also within miles of Biggin Hill so we were in a bombing area where the first Spitfires went from Biggin Hill which, as I say, was very close to our home, so we were in a bombing situation. But no, there were no air raids before I left Bromley. There were plenty after and I don't remember the Liverpool ones, so I must have slept well.

Do you recall going up the gangplank, boarding the ship?

Yeah, I can remember going up the ship. I don't remember, Meta Maclean writes about us standing for hours on the wharfside. So with blocks like that, all I can think of was, I was a very angry little girl or very unhappy little girl, but I've got no memories, none.

What of your escort?

Oh, she was beautiful, yes, she was beautiful. Mine was one of the ones that was killed. I can remember the cabin on the ship. I can remember being very impressed. It was solid mahogany and beautiful, carved mahogany furniture.

Did you share it with somebody else?

Yes, I think I was with six girls from memory. I think there were six of us in the cabin.

How did you get on with the other girls?

Oh, I'm one of those sort of peculiar people that can get on with anyone but there were two there, I saw two girls fight there. I've never seen anything like it. They were like tigers.

What happened?

I don't know. They were sisters and they really scratched and pulled hair and I'd never seen anything like that, never.

Was it broken up, or did they resolve it themselves?

No, I don't remember.

What do you recall of your escort? You say she was a lovely person but what was her manner?

Her name was Elizabeth Jones and she was a Welsh woman and very beautiful. Apparently when they went back to England they were sunk and she was interned and, I think, killed in a concentration camp, or died in a concentration camp. She wasn't killed, she died. But I can't tell you very much more than that.

Do you have any recollection of her manner in terms of looking after you?

Oh yes, we were well taken care of. Yes, she was very nice, very nice person.

Friendly? Firm? Or both?

I can't remember anything, just friendly.

There apparently were British troops on the ship. Were you briefed about, you know, you must stay away from the soldiers, or you mustn't fraternise with the crew, or that sort of thing?

We were told - because I was fifteen apparently my father and mother were told to tell me all about sex. Do I have to tell you all this?

Well, for an historian looking back, it will help.

Alright. Well, she was told - all I can remember was that a man must never touch you down there and that's all, there wasn't anything else, that's all. And this is how I went across the world three times, this is all I knew.

What about peer group information? Usually there's ...

It was never talked about, never talked about. And I think probably because we didn't have babies until we were married
it was not interesting. I led a very full life. I played tennis. I loved dancing. I loved going to, we used to do a lot of debates at school. I had a lot of confidence in those days and my life was very full up. I wasn't interested in sex as it is today, I suppose. It wasn't interesting to me.

Do you recall being briefed though particularly about you mustn't fraternise either with the soldiers or the crew?

No, we weren't allowed to mix with them. I've just finished reading Meta Maclean's *Singing Ship* and in that she says which now I have a war diary. I kept a diary on that ship. And in her book she says that the younger children went to bed at seven and the older children were put to bed at eight. I can now understand for the first time, that at fifteen eight o'clock was damned early for me to be put to bed and somehow we used - we somehow, I don't know who started it, but we worked it out that we would wait until the escorts were quiet and then we got out and we used to climb up, not the usual stairways. We went up ladder ways to the top decks and we met these fellows at night-time and we'd kiss them and talk to them.

(25.00) Were you worried that you were going to get pregnant?

I didn't know anything about it. It was just closed mouth kissing. No breast touching or anything like that. I mean they must have known more than we did but they must have had ...

Were these other boys, or ...?

No, army fellows. These were fellows in the army. And the one that I was friends with was a pianist you see, and he played the piano. She mentions Corporal Bryan in her book and he was the one. I played the violin in those days and I used to play with him in the dance band to the first class passengers that were on that ship. So consequently he was my boyfriend for the trip. But as I say, it was a different ball-game in those days. Men, I suppose, respected the girl's purity or whatever you might call it and they didn't break that down or do anything like that. I know there were girls that played in those days - I've since learned - those girls were very popular but it never crossed our mind. We used to think there was something wrong with us when you saw girls with lots of boyfriends. We didn't know what that was all about.

Given the constraints that you'd had on you earlier, did this feel like some sort of reckless abandon? Did it give you a certain satisfaction?

It made that trip exciting. You see, in my diary I don't write very much about Bryan because I was afraid somebody would read it. I lent my book to the man that's written this big book in England, Michael Fethney. I also lent it to a university girl who was doing her thesis on it. And they've picked up a lot of things from that diary that I hadn't picked up. But what I was curious about was, what the hell did we do all day, but obviously all I thought about was Corporal Bryan because the whole ball-game of the rest of that ship was quite different to my lifestyle.

Do you have recollections of playing the piano and singsongs?

Yes, but not very much. I can remember little bits of playing the piano when they were stuck for someone to play.

What sort of melodies, can you recall?

Oh no, not off the top of my head. 'Wish me Luck as They Wave Me Goodbye' and 'There'll Always be an England' of course was always, always sung. But they also sang old Welsh songs. They also were later on taught Polish songs because there was a great deal of interplay between the Polish crew and the children. And then they brought out ships' concert parties where kids all had to take part in those, and then they were started to write poetry and those sorts of things came into play there. But the ship was kept very busy. We always had to go to

boat drill, there was always boat drill and always penalties if you were ever caught without lifebelts and there was always very strict rules about those sorts of things. You weren't allowed down the stairs when the ship's inspections were on and you weren't allowed in the dining room, so there was that sort of control. But as a parent looking back now, I wonder how the hell did they control 480 children, how?

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview recorded with Dorothy Laing about child evacueés on 15 October 1990.

What were the sort of penalties that were involved if you didn't wear a life jacket?

I don't know. They must have had some privilege - they would be privileges that would be - I suppose - I know I read in the book that they would deny the pictures if they were naughty, they didn't go to the pictures. They might have been denied those sorts of things, or perhaps attending a singsong.

What sort of pictures?

They had proper adult, they were adult pictures. What I was amazed to read in one of these other books - which is something, as I say in adult life now this is all coming to the fore now, that I was curious about - was that there was no school. There seemed to be no organised education and since I've retired I've gone back to school so I've become interested in this sort of thing now. And I read in another book, which I've forgotten the title of, that apparently they forgot to put the books and the toys on the ship in England. Now, I would have thought, as an adult, they would have been the most important thing next to lifebelts for children to have had books or games or toys. What on earth were you going to do with 480 - that's a schoolful of children - on a ship? And apparently these were all, somehow it was notified ahead and apparently they were loaded on the ship at Capetown.

Do you have an image of being in a convoy and that element of being at sea and so on?

Oh yes, I was very much aware we were surrounded by ships, yes.

Where there any alarms that you recall, other than the drill?

No, but because I was a naughty girl up on that deck at night-time I can remember, I think they're called semaphore lights, aren't they, between the ships.

What about arriving in South Africa? Do you have a recollection of that?

Well, arriving in South Africa was quite different to me to how they've written in that book. I understood that the mine cable had broken down on the outside of the *Batory*. The *Batory* was a passenger ship and the children were down in the bowels of the ship and then on the promenade decks were all these makeshift beds for the three battalions of troops that were

going to Singapore. The paying passengers had the best of the ship on the top. And I remember that we all had to have lifebelts on because we were now going to go through a minefield at Capetown, and all the children seemed to be on the decks. And I can remember them hanging over the side hoping to see a mine. The mere fact the thing could blow us to smithereens was irrelevant, and all we could see was pink jellyfish, but it was a very slow .... But it doesn't seem to be written up in those books. Now, I don't know why.

(5.00) What about your arrival ashore? Can you recall how you spent the time there?

Oh yes. We were saying last night we didn't want to ever see another zoo as long as we live. Every port we went to, we were taken to a zoo. In most places to the Governor-General's place. We were treated as these poor little children coming from England and we didn't feel, at least I didn't feel like a poor little, pathetic little child coming from England even though I was fretting and had lost a lot of weight from homesickness.

How did that affect you? When you say you had homesickness, what do you recall of that?

Oh, you'd be a fair bit of fretting but with feelings that were screwed down. You never let anybody else see you do that. There was a fair bit of tears. There would be that sort of thing. You'd get off and wish you were going home. And then you'd have a cross-section of children that were terribly excited. You'd have every emotion imaginable with kids under those conditions.

John Hare's recollection of arriving in South Africa is that they were treated like celebrities, or you were treated like ...

Oh yes. And food .... We had very good food on the *Batory* but they treated us as if we hadn't had a meal, you know, we'd been starved coming out of a concentration camp or some sort of environment like that. But they brought on the books and they brought on the toys and I can remember going to the top of the mountain at Capetown and the whole sweet shop was cleaned out because these kids were given pocket money and the whole place was bought out. The man didn't have a lolly left with all this lot. As I say, 480 children is a lot of kids.

Was there a patronising feeling about it all? I mean, you said you'd ...

Yes, I think, yes, there would have been. As I say it was sort of a pity. I don't think really they would look for that. I don't think any child looked for that.

What about the next leg of the journey? You stopped at Colombo?

Yeah. We stopped first at Freetown. They ran out of water so they stopped at Freetown for water but we didn't go ashore there, then we went to Capetown. And all of us had had everything stripped off us but for some reason my brother had kept a pencil that had a compass on the top of it.

You weren't allowed personal possessions, you mean?

I think cameras and gas masks, some certain things were taken away, kept for the voyage, they weren't confiscated, they were just kept. Anyway, Reg had this compass and he said to

me one day, 'I can't understand this, we're going north'. And then we crossed the equator - we crossed the equator three times on that trip - and then we went to Bombay and then from there we went to Colombo.

What do you recall of Bombay? Did you go ashore? I think you were on the ship again.

Yes, we went ashore. I think we were ten days in Capetown when they were sewing up that .... We had negroes on the deck sewing that thing up - it was like a great big hose thing that had to be sewn up - the mine detector. I think it was at Capetown they were going to take the children off. There was a big row at Capetown because the kids didn't want to go off. They were going to transfer them away from the *Batory*, and ....

When you say a big row? What happened?

I don't know, they're not very clear in these books either. But they were going to take these children off the *Batory*. I knew we were trailed by submarines in the Atlantic and whether that ship couldn't zigzag enough or whether the engine problems there were too much at risk or what it was, I don't know. There's nothing divulged very much in all these books. It might be in the new book that's coming out now. But anyway, they changed their mind and put us all back. We were all packed to leave and they put us all back on the *Batory* again. And then we went to Bombay.

Bombay I remember because they had monkeys running all over the place. I'd never seen monkeys, little ones, small ones running like the squirrels do in England. We had raspberry cordial I think at every port and we had those cream buns, those plain buns with cream and that dreadful red jam. Everywhere we went we had those.

You went ashore at Bombay?

Mm.

What do you recall doing there?

Nothing, except your interest in Indians and different people. I was fascinated in the differences between those and England, but not enough really to remember.

(10.00) Did you have any underlying sense of fear regarding the submarines? Did you think maybe the ship might be hit and you might drown, or that sort of thing?

No. But you see because I was fifteen and coming into womanhood my life and descriptions would be very different to my brother and to John Hare, because they would be into the ship and into the things they saw and that. All probably I was mooning about was hoping to go ashore with Corporal Bryan and of course being roped up with a whole lot of kids, do my reactions ...

Were you able to go ashore with him?

No. So my reactions would be very different to the younger children.

What about Colombo? What did you do there?

I think Colombo was the place where we had to go on boats to go ashore and that was fun. They had people coming all round the ship trying to get kids to sell - that's where she writes in the book where they got hold of one kid that was trying to knock off the ship's cutlery to get things that were coming, coming ashore.

And Singapore of course, the love of your life then at that time would be leaving you.

Oh yes, that was pretty traumatic, yes. They piped them off and there was a big military and band very much like you see on English television now, in those old stories now, with all those port .... Bryan was eighteen, he was only three years' older than me, and they're all lined up all going ashore and all piped ashore with the formalities and everything; exactly like you see on a movie. I remember that very well.

Did you cry?

I don't remember, I can't remember.

Do you have any sense of your feelings?

Big girls don't cry. We were reared ....

Did you have some hopes that you might have been able to carry on some correspondence with your lost corporal?

No, I never heard from him again, nothing. I don't think we really .... I don't think we even had addresses in Australia where we were going to. I think this is why there's such a disintegrated, why we're such a broken-up mass of people because I don't think anyone really knew where they were going.

Were you writing letters while you were aboard ship?

Yes, you had to have a letter written to go off at every port, and they were read by the escorts. Every letter that went home was read.

Was that for supposed security reasons?

Yes.

Well, conversely, were there letters waiting for you at any of the ports?

No.

And Singapore, did you spend time ashore there?

Yes. And coming back to the letters, that seems to be a bit of a mystery as well because my mother says that for three months she didn't know whether we were dead or alive. Now,

whether that's romancing rubbish, whether the letters were held up, I don't know. That seems to be a bit of a mystery as well because there were letters taken off from Freetown on.

What did you do in Singapore then?

The same thing. Off to the Governor's house and I can remember we went to a terrible concert there with that dreadful Chinesey singing, 'Oooooh'. It went on for .... I can remember us all being bored out of our brains listening to that damned thing, with their funny instruments. But I don't recollect where it was. I can't remember. You see, with a large volume of children like that - they said in one of the books that we went to General Smuts's house and General Smuts, but General Smuts wasn't there. Izzie Smuts was there, his wife was there but he wasn't there. So coping with a lot of kids like that they had to have fairly big places. So you even got taken to showgrounds or the zoo, or a place like Government House that was big enough to take it. And then as an adult you can sort of look back over it now and you can think to yourself, well, what sort of stupid people were they that thought little kiddies, right down to - they say five - well, I'm quite certain that Samson was four and a bit, and you expect little ones like that to sit and listen to the mayor's speech and the governor's speech, and God knows who else's speech. It was really geared for adults, not for little kiddies of four. But as I say, any venues that they had had to be a large area to cope with the large amount of children.

Did it lead to a little bit of cynicism amongst the older children regarding the authorities?

Here we go again, another bus, another cream bun, and another zoo. Yeah, we were saying this at the weekend.

So how long did you spend in Singapore?

I don't think we'd would have been there - a day. I think we were there a full day and that was it.

What about seasickness? Had you been seasick?

I was seasick going down the Mersey. We hadn't even left England and I was sick. But I can't, without a doctor's examination, I can't say whether that was just a psychological problem or just me because I was sick on any form of transport, right from a little child.

So did it plague you right through the journey?

Yeah, right the whole journey..

Did you get any other maladies? Scarlet fever or chicken pox or any of those things?

(15.00)No. There were children - we've learnt a lot more this weekend - but apparently, I know at Liverpool we were all given full medical examinations and they screened them enough that apparently one child was sent back that only had a cold sore in its ear but was sent back home and rejected, not allowed to come here. But on the ship we had impetigo which became prevalent. We had measles. We had mumps. There were the usual cuts and

abrasions but they had to rail the infectious diseases ones off in sections, because if you could imagine really now that we were right down in the bottom of the ship with no air. We had no portholes were allowed to be open. We had no air conditioning because the rattle of the motors at night-time was dangerous. So we were really in a pretty lousy, specially in the tropics it was pretty difficult to get any sort of comfort down there. So consequently those kinds of things would have bred like mad in that - particularly impetigo which is our Australian cold sore. And there were no medicines in those days to dry that sort of thing out.

> Did you have any impression as to how the escorts were getting on with each other? Was there any sense of tension or falling out over responsibilities of who was looking after what? Who was causing the trouble, all that kind of thing?

No, but again after having read the book, those women must have been very tired. They must have been on twenty-four hour .... Meta Maclean writes in one stage where they were having more friction between them and the Polish people who made no attempt to give them a hand with vomiting and bedwetting youngsters. And apparently there was a bit of flak there, between the Poles where they finally must have spoken to somebody that had some smattering of English - they couldn't speak English - and it then was a complete turnaround then, where the Poles, the stewards - we had stewards like you have on ships today - where they finally turned around and started to help. I can tell you one little funny story there, two funny stories there - or not very nice stories, I suppose. We used to bath in sea water because there wasn't water and we weren't allowed to lock anything, there were no doors locked or anything in case the ship was hit. So, as I say, at fifteen I was developed and not a bad looking person and a Polish man came into the bathroom there which frightened the hell out of me. Also came once into the toilet which frightened the hell out of me. So after that we used to go in twos, the girls in twos. I don't think ...

> Did you tell the escort, or would that have maybe caused trouble for you that you'd feel worried ...?

No, the whole of my life seems to have been governed by fear. I don't remember telling an escort, but I can remember after that we girls went into the toilet in twos and we went into the bathroom in twos. As I say, it could have been absolutely harmless but they were just a couple of brief things that were in the early days there.

> Were you spending any time with your brother at all?

No, I don't remember, because the boys were in a different section to us. He would remember more than I would.

> Had you been close to your brother?

Very. Very close.

> Did that sort of help a bit the fact that at least there was somebody aboard that you knew? Did that maybe make it a bit easier to ...?

No, I don't remember mixing with him much during the day. The first real sting of that I think came when we were split in Australia. I wasn't expecting that to happen. He went to one home and I went to another.

Did you have any sense at all that in a way you were going home, even if you didn't have recollections? Did Australia seem to have some particular kind of hold for you in a way?

No. He is quite different. He was quite excited at the thought of going there.

So what was your first sighting of Australia?

That was at Fremantle. We pulled up at Fremantle. But I have a daughter living in Perth now and I went to Fremantle and couldn't remember anything, nothing.

Do you have any recollection of the arrival, the bus or the ship pulling in and that sort of thing, people coming aboard and going off?

No, we had the press came on the ship for the first time. I don't remember if any press came on in any other ports but they certainly came here. We had people that boarded the ship in various jobs, what do you call it, between Perth and Melbourne. There were interviews and things like this that were done. So they obviously came aboard then and started to take over from Fremantle. The official arrangements I suppose began to be made from that point.

Did you go ashore at Fremantle, do you recall?

Mm. We couldn't go to Perth, we weren't there long enough.

What did you do, do you remember?

No. Probably another showground. I can't remember.

Evidently there were some children who were taken off the ship in Fremantle.

Yes, there were kids that stayed there.

(20.00) Had you, by this stage, formed any important friendships to you with other girls?

Yeah, there was a girl called Joan that went to Perth but I never heard from her again.

Did you have a chance to say goodbye? Did you know when you arrived that ...?

Oh yes, we knew they'd be all going ashore there, yes.

Was that upsetting?

I don't think so. I think I was so screwed down that I was more ...

Resigned to whatever happened.

Yeah.

And what about the journey across the Bight?

That was terrible. That was terrible. Unbelievable. I can remember that very well because it rolled and they had the sides of the tables were all put up because the crockery was crashing and the breakfast was - everything was going in all directions at that stage. Yeah, it was rough. They don't write about that in the book and yet I can remember that.

And you were sick.

Yes, God yes.

Was there anything offered to you that you recall, or any tips as to how to cope with it?

No, they didn't have any medication really. You just had to get on with it.

You stopped at Adelaide, or straight to ...?

No, went straight to Melbourne.

What was your first sighting of Melbourne? Do you have a memory of this?

Stuck on the sandbank at Rosebud. They don't write about that much in the books, either. There's a very narrow channel through Melbourne and it came off the McCrae Lighthouse and they must have gone a bit too far over and we were all stuck there. Of course the children all run to one side of the boat and the damned thing was very much in danger of wobbling over, and the captain's yelling and everybody's yelling to spread these kids out because this thing was in danger of toppling. We had to wait, I suppose, for the tide then.

Did you know you'd be stopping at Melbourne? You'd be getting off there?

Yes. My father, I don't know how the arrangements were made, but my father had arranged with a gentleman that he used to work with, I was to go and stay with him. They'd remained writing to another man that had .... There was another man that my father wrote to, that's right, and he in turn got hold of these people to take care of me. But the government arranged for my brother.

Were you excited then that now you'd be going ashore?

Oh no, I don't think so. I think I was very apprehensive of what I was going to.

What do you recall of the process, of getting off and being met and so on?

You have a sort of a slight curiosity. I just remember being very curious. In the diaries I write a bit more about what I thought about the house.

Which house? Where you're going to you mean?

Yes, I went to live in Hawthorn and he went to Auburn.

That's your brother. Well, when did you first know that your brother was going to be separated from you?

I don't know. In all that travelling, we always had to line up in twos. It's still the same in England now where there're queues. And he would have been lined up with me in front of a representative there and we would have been told, you know, 'You go here. You go here.' It would be like dividing sheep to be killed, sheep to be shorn.

Was that a tearful thing at all? Do you recall ...?

No, I think probably Reg and I survived with that early background of having an acceptance of life. We are still today both survivors. We've had some terrible bangs and wallops. And my mother is alive and she's still the same, that if life shuts this door, another door opens and if that's how it's going to be, well, that's how it is. We seem to be people that have grown up that whatever gets dished up to us, that's how it is.

With that sense of apprehension you have, what do you recall of your first glimpse of the people who were going to be looking after you?

I would have been fairly reserved, I think, fairly reserved. Just sort of wondering what they were like, what they were going to be like. My aunty was an extremely quiet, very reserved sort of person. I don't remember ever seeing her cry. There was never any arm putting round you or a kiss or warmth like that, extremely reserved woman. And she was very pregnant. She had a little boy of three and the other baby - we arrived in the October - and the baby was born in the January, I think. I shared a room throughout the war with the boy.

What about the uncle? How did he strike you?

He was friendlier. He was really quite a fine man, very fine sort of person. He was an engineer. A jovial sort of man, more outgoing than she was. You often see that in marriages where one's quiet and one's friendly. Well, he was the chatty one.

(25.00) How did you get to Hawthorn, do you recall? Car? Train?

No. He had a car so I imagine we would have gone by car.

What was the house like that you went to then?

Posh. I can remember writing and saying, 'I'm in a posh house', but it was a half-maisonette with two bedrooms - brick, two-bedroomed house. I think probably I was relieved that it was a reasonably decent house. You sort of don't know what on earth you're going to.

You had your own room?

No, I shared it with the boy throughout the war.

What about food and so on? Was there a noticeable difference in the sorts of things that you were eating? Did it seem different in that respect?

No, not really, because you see we left England in August so we would have left roughly a year after war had been declared, and although restrictions had started to begin in England they hadn't really bitten. They bit later but they hadn't really bitten. And when we got on the boat the ship food was so, you couldn't fault the ship food, it was beautiful. And in Australia, I don't think the rationing really came in until after we got here, so there was no noticeable - I don't remember any bite in food at all.

For older English children, there was the notion that when war ended they'd be going back to England. Did you have any expectations there?

By the time the war ended I'd resigned myself that I was going to stay here because five years ...

I mean, when you first arrived, did you understand that it was just a temporary arrangement, that you would be going back? Or were your parents ...

Yes.

Coming later, or what?

No. We all knew that we would go back. I find that incredible. I've met two people who never went back. They didn't know that they could go back.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: [this is side one of] tape two of the interview with Dorothy Laing about the child evacueés recorded on 15 October 1990.

So how did you find the introduction to school here?

I didn't last very long at school here. My voice is croaky and broken now due to a major operation years ago which has mucked up my vocal cords but in those days I had an accent almost as bad as the Queen and I was ...

Was this your elocution lessons?

Yes, and of course I came out .... I went to, I think it was Camberwell Girls' High School and given a rough time with this plum - frightfully, frightfully plummy English accent.

But even some State schools at that time used to have elocution teachers. Was there not somebody who was delighted at the way you spoke?

No. It's almost as bad as a French person or somebody, a Vietnamese, or anyone coming into the country now. It's not so bad now but you can remember when the first immigrants used to

come in, they gave them a pretty hard time with their funny accents. Well, I had just as tough a time with my English one.

What sorts of things happened?

They take you off, mimic you.

The other children?

Mm.

Did it lead to any fights? Did you ever get actually caught up in a fight or such?

No, it hit the same scars as the Bromley schooldays, of not fitting in, the same sort of thing of not fitting in.

Well, what about the teachers, how did you find the Australian teachers?

I wasn't there long enough to have memories of that. I doubt very much if I even put a year in at school. I was very much aware that I was staying, I felt, in a charity situation in a household under charity and I didn't like that.

Was that conveyed to you in some ways?

No, I don't think so. No, it would have been my personal feeling.

How was the relationship in the house? Was it ...?

I was treated well. Yes, I was treated well.

But not warmly.

They were just not demonstrative people. He bought a piano for me when I stayed there, and I was treated well. But it's difficult to fit into a family with nobody of your own age group. It must have been very hard for them to have a fifteen year old.

Were there small things where things were offered to their own children in ways that reminded you, well, you weren't one of their children?

No, not really. They were the people of the times. There weren't great bags of Christmas presents or anything like there is today with children, and presents and birthday presents were usually handmade gifts and small things that were .... You know, there wasn't the great giving like there is today - different.

What about neighbours? Were there no neighbourhood children?

Yes, I became very close friends with the people opposite and I spent a lot of happy time with the people opposite. They were of Scottish origin and they had two girls and two boys that lived there. And the youngest girl was the same age as me. I became very friendly with them

and that was the only possible upheaval we had, that Mrs Irving knew that I was terribly homesick, and the people I stayed with, I kept that from them.

How would that have been apparent, do you think? You told them that you were missing home.

I probably was more comfortable with her because she probably was a woman that was more my mother's age, and I may have been lulled into that feeling of security that you could open up and talk to her, where I couldn't in the household where I was staying. And she told my aunty that I was terribly homesick and my aunty was very annoyed about that. It was an insult to her hospitality.

Can you recall how that happened?

No, I just remember she had a great deal of formalities with her and she said to me, it would have been something like, 'I wish to speak to you in private in the other room' and then I would have copped it then that it was an affront to her, that she had done everything possible to make me comfortable and it was, I suppose, a rejection to her efforts to make me comfortable. She didn't seem to me to be able to understand how it felt.

(5.00) What about correspondence? Do you recall getting your first letter?

No, the letters used to come .... You see, with a five-year gap like that, the letters very often could have been anything up to three months' old. There was no telephone communication, there was no television in those days, so therefore I suppose after a while you just learnt to live without parents. What's the point of worrying about parents?

Had you previously had nights where you could remember crying yourself to sleep, with the sense of loss of your parents? Had it touched you like that?

Yeah, but my sense of loss wasn't just parents. Mine was of England as a whole, of my whole life, the whole of myself had been left in England. It wasn't just parents.

And what about your childhood love, was there still pining there?

No, he died. He was killed.

When did you find that out?

It must have come in a letter from Mum at one stage. He was shot down over Germany. And I carried his photograph in a locket all that time.

Did that hit you very hard?

Very hard, yeah, very hard.

How did you deal with that?

I seem to be saying 'I don't remember' throughout this interview but I was never interested in boys. I don't think I started to take an interest in boys until I was about seventeen or eighteen,

and then I wasn't allowed out with boys because I'd bloomed into quite a reasonable-looking young woman and I suppose I was a great deal of responsibility to those people that had me, so I was under a fair bit of supervision.

Would you have been able to have confided in the Scottish lady about this blow, or whether that had seemed a bit improper?

I don't know. I think I told her all my secrets until the homesickness and then I clammed down.

When you knew it had got back and your confidence had been betrayed.

Yeah.

Now, you said you left school fairly soon after arriving, what did you then do?

I went to Stott's Business College for twelve months.

So you went to Stott's.

Yes, I did quite well there.

What were you doing?

A full business, secretarial business course. And then I went from there ....

That was an independent college, wasn't it? You had to pay for admittance to Stotts.

Yes.

Who paid for that?

I'm not sure who paid for that. He just died quite recently and they gave me a 1942 diary in amongst his effects that ...

Sorry, who died?

My guardian, just recently. And they found a diary of mine written in 1942. I've just read that just recently and it says in that that I was then attending night-school and I was desperately waiting for a money order to come from my father to pay the night-school fees. I was doing extra English, I think, at those days, and probably shorthand.

Had it been an issue at all about leaving school? What was the sense as to whether that was good or bad to do?

I didn't fit in very well because I was advanced in some subjects and very much behind in others. And now you've just jogged my memory. My father had already started to teach me, before I left England, to be a lady tracer.

Which meant what?

That they used to trace the drawings in the draughtsmen's office. And he had already started training me to do that. That's right, I'd forgotten that. And when I came here they said that that wasn't a job for a lady and they wouldn't let me pursue it. And I can remember there was a bit of an argument about that because my father wanted me to do this. So I again seemed to have been pretty spineless. I just did what everybody told me. But anyway, I went into the Colonial Mutual and was very happy there. I had a happy life there.

You began working then? So how long then did you spend at Stott's?

A year. There'd be a year's course. I think I started at the Colonial Mutual about November or December.

Was it a different sort of feeling? I mean, it wouldn't have been quite like school. Was there a sense of freedom and an enjoyable period?

Where, at Stott's? Oh yes, Stott's was a different ball-game to school, yeah. I can remember at Stott's that I first became a novelty. This kid's come out from England, and then there was a turn around there of people becoming interested in me as a person.

Was that because of perceived sort of cultural advantages of coming from England? What was that?

Different, yeah. In the Colonial Mutual it spiralled even more and I had a staff superintendent and my own supervisor who started to mother me. I had people there who invited me to their house for a weekend away. And I don't know whether they were sorry for me or whether they wanted to talk to me because I came from England. It's too long ago for me to assess that. But these again are in this 1942 diary. They're things I've forgotten about.

(10.00) Did there seem to be some supposition, well, probably your training, your background had been superior, that the English background would somehow be better?

No, I don't think so. I think it was more lifestyle. And you see, I again don't know why but everybody that came to Australia came to see me. I had the Governor-General [sic] from Tasmania who came to see me. I had various other dignitaries who came to see me. I had the *Women's Weekly* who wanted to meet me. Members of the press. And I suppose because I became a little peanut public figure other people climbed on the bandwagon, 'Oh, we must have her out for the weekend'. I don't know why. I've no idea why.

Did it retrieve for you some sense of self-importance?

I don't think it went to my head but I think it was definitely of benefit to confidence. I, for the first time, became more confident I think.

What about your brother through this period? Did you occasionally meet him or have some means of ...?

Oh yes, very much involved with him at the beginning of the early years because I didn't like being parted from him and I still am a very mothery woman, so I still wanted to keep an eye on him, that he was being looked after properly.

> And what was your impression as to how well he was, or wasn't, being looked after?

Oh, it was a different ball-game in his household because he had .... One of the boys was a bit older and one was a bit younger. So he had a mother that would have been about the same age as his own and therefore he was .... My mother had been a stickler for good manners and good eating habits and sit down and stand up so we were reared like the military. So where he went to he was held up to the other two boys, 'Now why can't you two be like him?'. So behind the scenes he'd get belted like mad, but it probably was, possibly I would say - oh, I don't say happier, perhaps might be the word - but he probably had a lot more fun than I did.

> Were your English manners seen as snobbish at all? Did you have that impression early on?

English what?

> Your English manners. Were you more mannered than ...?

Yes. Manners were terribly important.

> Did at first that help at your new home, that you were very well-mannered at the table and ...?

Oh yes, there was a great emphasis on that: beautifully mannered children, beautifully spoken children, but not much else.

> Where were you then when the war ended?

The same place. I was still in the Colonial Mutual and still with them, yes.

> Did the idea ...? Was it then raised that you might return immediately to England?

I have terrible gaps. I don't know whether my father and mother ...? You see, you'd have to dig into .... I would say this again is coming out in Michael Fethney's book. But once the Japanese war was over, either the parents approached the government or somebody did. But somebody somewhere notified us that we were to go home to England. There was .... [interruption]. By then I'd met up with a young man and was going out with him, and not a military man, he was a young man. I don't where I met him or how but we used to go for Sunday afternoon walks in Wattle Park.

> How old were you then?

I was twenty. And I think then ...

> Still living in the same house at Hawthorn.

And I think my uncle then was .... There seemed to be sort of discussions then about - my parents had already been writing then about wanting to come to Australia and he seemed to want to keep me here to get married to this chap, but I don't know enough of the interplay between the adults. But we were told that we were to go back to England, Reg and I.

What was the feeling by that time in the house where you were staying? Was it just an acceptance and an accommodation ...?

No, it hadn't altered very much. No, it was much the same.

So having been told you could go back to England, did you go back to England?

Oh yes, I was very excited to go back to England. I was going home. We got on the *Aquitania* ....

But what about the young man that you'd started to go out with?

Well, I obviously didn't love him the same as the one I'd left in England. I don't remember any regrets at leaving him. I was told I was going home and nothing else mattered. So evidently it couldn't have been that deep an attachment. And he was the only attachment I had here. I had resentment here because I wanted to go into the forces here and I wasn't allowed to join up.

(15.00) Why was that? Who wouldn't allow you?

Because I was under twenty-one. I don't know what the - the guardian and I at that stage had a fairly ripe argument because the girl opposite had gone and I wanted to go as well. So the nearest thing I could get to .... You see, in England in our day you were .... We must have been brought up with a fairly ripe feeling of patriotism. I grew up loving England. England was my country and I loved England. So the nearest I could get to help in some sick sort of way, I suppose, was to work at an air force canteen in the city. And there's always a way round these things. I could meet men there. I could meet servicemen there, at least talk to them even if I couldn't go out with them, I could at least talk to them. And the irony of some of these things with growing up was I had a girlfriend that lived around the corner in the next street to me who entertained English airmen. And I can remember meeting a George, I can't remember his surname, and kissing him at her place. And ironically when I went back to London I got on a double-decker bus and here he was on the top of the bus with his wife. And I was a pretty vivacious young woman then, and I can remember running down that bus and saying, 'My God, George, how are you?'.

And do you recall how the wife reacted? (Laughs).

A very embarrassed George. (Laughs).

But anyway, you were saying you got aboard the *Aquitania*.

Well, on the *Aquitania* there was only a hundred children, or we weren't children then, and weren't again, not allowed then to talk to - there were 4,000 troops going back and I really

was in full bloom at twenty. And there were 4,000 men all going back from the South Pacific zone, all going home. There were prisoners of war of the Japanese, there were some very sick people, and that was a very happy four weeks, immensely happy four weeks because everyone was going home except my reluctant brother, he wasn't too happy. There were so many of us that we had to have four sittings for breakfast and four sittings for dinner and there was no lunch. They couldn't possibly cope with that. But it was a fantastic trip.

Who was looking after you?

We had escorts again, and again there was rebellion. I didn't do these things on my own, there were always other girls besides me. And we started to talk to some naval officers in the lounge. We'd sit and talk - we'd play cards with them and we got hauled up about that. We were not allowed to speak ...

When you say hauled up, before whom?

There was a Mr Ekins is the only one I can recollect going back and I don't remember who else there were amongst the escorts. But we were called into his cabin, given one hell of a dressing down and I think by then I must have picked up sufficient confidence to say, 'Good God, I'm twenty years old. Aren't I old enough to be able to sit and talk?'

How did they respond to that argument?

They backed down. We were allowed to talk to them after that. I think we got put to bed at nine o'clock but I think we got round that one as well, from memory.

Did you then find there were other young people that you could recall from the voyage out here?

Say that again.

Were there young people who were returning home who'd you come out with on the same ship and you recognised them?

Yes, I went back with the Humber brothers and I went back with John Hare and his sisters, with Peggy and the other girls. I can't think of the others off the top of my head. Yes, there were, as I say, a hundred is very different to nearly 500.

How had the parting been from your aunt and uncle? Did they come and wave you off, or ...?

No, we were all put on a train. The only thing I can remember was the terrible train journey between Melbourne and Sydney. It was terrible. We sat up all the time and I can remember that nearly killed me. It was dreadful.

Change at Albury?

Yeah, all that.

Were you pleased, was there a sense of relish to sort of get out of the situation? I mean, if there'd been this rather stand-offish relationship.

Yes. I'd had a very emotional farewell at the Colonial Mutual so I must have been liked. Everybody was crying there because I was leaving and going home. I can remember being given a rope of pearls as a farewell .... There were a lot of tearful people but I don't remember crying, myself. I may have, but I don't remember.

What were your expectations as you got close and began to, I suppose, wonder what you were going to do on returning? Do you recall what you thought you might do then? Become a tracer, or ...?

(20.00) No, I could never go back to being that, I was too old then. I had done very well in the Colonial Mutual, unlike children coming out of school today, we started at the bottom of the ladder even though I had done fairly well with business skills of those days. I had started off as a junior and I can remember my first job was sorting .... They used to have like a fine tissue paper thing that was stuck to every policy that went out of there, and my job was to sort those thousands of them into thousands. They had to be put in numerical order. There was no typing, no shorthand.

You were sort of a primitive computer in a way.

Just sorting it all out, that was my first job, yeah. And from there I went into their legal department and then they must have discovered then that I was a fairly responsible person, and from there I started to climb.

What had you got to by the time you left?

I think I was fairly high up in charge of a section. But we had a very happy time there. We were on a floor there, with all girls, there were only a couple of old men there and we made our own fun and I was with twelve or thirteen of those girls. We used to get dressed up and we used to go to Menzies - I think Menzies was the only place where you could have a dinner that was edible, and that was five shillings. That was a set meal. We'd get our best clothes on and put flowers in your hair and we'd all go off and in those days you could walk to the train and you were quite safe coming home at night-time. And this was a big deal. These were big festivities to go to a birthday party. They'd take up a collection and you might get a couple of handkerchieves, or something like that would be the birthday gift.

Incidentally, had Melbourne Cup been an event that you recall then? Were there office sweeps, or that sort of thing?

No. I've got no recollection, no.

How had you spent your Christmases and New Years in Australia? Would you have a Christmas tree at your aunt and uncle's?

I don't remember. Isn't that dreadful! A lot of my 'don't remembers' I think are from a breakdown. I can't remember.

Had the beach become part of your way of life?

Yes, we used to go .... He had an old 1928 Whippet and I can remember my father sending a friend of theirs to visit me. He was in the navy and I can remember him sitting in the back seat of this car saying to me, 'My God, is this thing safe?', because it creaked and groaned. We used to go blackberry hunting to Ferntree Gully which was a long way in those days. We used to come from Hawthorn down to St Kilda, and I can remember them screaming to me to stand still because I was out to sea a bit and there was a shark between me and the shore. I was standing on a sand thing there and they told me to stand still there.

Could you see its fin go past?

No, but that would be where they would bring us to swim, but you see, again I wasn't a very strong swimmer because we didn't go to the beach. I must have learnt the breaststroke at swimming at school but I wasn't a strong enough swimmer.

Was there at all a sense that as an English person your skin might be more sensitive and you'd have to take special ...?

We had terrible sunburn, shocking sunburn, dreadful sunburn.

So here you are on the *Aquitania* and you're about to arrive in England, can you recall your first glimpse of home again?

In England we had tearful farewells because I had had formed quite a close friendship with a fellow there but unfortunately he was married.

This is on board the ship?

Yes, I had shipboard romances all the time, so I must have been looking for love a great deal, I think, to have differed from other children with this. And we were stuck out in the channel because it was too rough, they couldn't dock it. The *Aquitania* was a fairly big ship. So we were stuck out there which meant that we were twenty-four hours later to get into London. We went to Tilbury and then we went by train and I can remember getting off the train - and my father was six foot four so you could pick my father out above other people and I knew him so I had to wait until Mum turned up in the rear - and that was very awkward. It was a very awkward meeting.

Did they seem different people, or strangers almost?

Yes, everyone was awkward.

Incidentally, aboard ship, while it was a big ship, people would gossip a lot, I suppose. Did you get any sense that people sort of frowned the fact that you had friendships with some of the service people?

No. Coming out to Australia there was a lot of trouble between the passengers complaining all the time about the noisiness of children. They seemed to apparently be completely intolerant that these kids were without their Mum and were in a very uprooted situation. They'd all been uprooted and half of them didn't know why they had been uprooted. So you had passengers grizzling and complaining about them.

You said they were Polish passengers?

No, they were English people that had paid full fare to get out ...

Oh, Polish crew of course, wasn't it?

Yes, that's right. On the *Aquitania* .... No, on a ship people are not that interested that really.

(25.00) Was there a sense then of disappointment for you if these people that you'd - your parents - were strangers? Had you hoped maybe that things, a lot of the emotional things, may have been resolved in getting back?

No. I can still see them walking along the platform and I can remember sort of nothing. But my mother turns it round the other way. She looked at us and thought, 'My God, what am I going to do with these two?'. Because you've got children that have gone and you've now got two adults.

What about when you were reunited with your brother? When did you first get to meet him again? You said you were keeping contact with him.

Oh, I saw him all the time. He only lived a few streets away from me.

So were you close on the ship?

Oh yeah, we all stayed together as a group. Yeah, we stayed together as a group.

So having got back then and your mother wondering what she was going to do with you, what happened then?

Well, this was, looking back now, another major change because apparently the house had had a fair bit of damage throughout the war and there was a - different types of bombs that were dropped there - and there was a bomb that was called a V2, I think, and that one .... My father had been through the first world war so he didn't exactly enjoy the second world war. Apparently the V2 ...

When you say been through the first world war, had he been a serviceman?

Yes, he was in the trenches, yes, in France. The V2 apparently really sort of rattled his nerves apparently, according to Mum anyway. I don't know, but apparently at that stage he panicked and decided to sell the house. And when we went back to England it wasn't until I sort of - as I say, I had a breakdown and when all these things started to come out in these discussions ...

You had the breakdown in England? Sorry.

No, I had the breakdown here. And in these discussions there was also a fair bit of emphasis there that we didn't go back to our house and I never saw my school children friends again. Never saw anyone again that I had grown up with as a kid. The only one I ...

Had there been a hope to find some sort of continuity, even if unexpressed? A sense that there'd be familiar things and you'd feel at home?

Yes. There was nothing familiar. We went back to Battersea where my mother's brother-in-law .... By this time he'd offered them a few rooms above a shop and we went back to stay there, so there was a lot of trouble when we went back - but not from me, as I say, I'm a peacemaker - but there was trouble between my brother. He said he didn't know Mum and so there was a lot of trouble.

How did that trouble develop? What do you mean by trouble?

Fights. There were verbal fights and he wanted to go back to Australia, wouldn't get up, wouldn't go to work. So there was a lot of unhappiness and a lot of upheavals and of course they'd been through a war and they expected us to understand they'd been through a terrible war. We'd been through a separation. We hadn't had any bombings so therefore why would we be unhappy. See, out of all these complicated - which are nothing in our family to what I've listened that's what gone on with other families.

Did people comment that you'd got a funny accent while you'd been away?

No, I had nothing. You don't have that in England, no, nothing. I went back to the Colonial Mutual in London. I was transferred from here to there and I worked in London. And then I palled up there with a youngster that I'd grown up with - see, we'd gone back to Battersea to where I'd grown up as a child but it was nothing like what it was when I had grown up as a kiddie.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Dorothy Laing about child evacueés recorded on 15 October 1990.

So you'd gone back to Battersea.

But by then it was nothing like what it was when I was a kid.

With that, did you nonetheless, was there any joyousness about being back in England? Were there things that you could still identify and relate to that gave you satisfaction?

There must have been some sort of a crisis. I must have been in some sort of a crisis because when I went in 1980 I was much more severely affected than I was then because I wanted to go and see it. I worked opposite St Paul's for two years and never walked in the damn place. I had no interest in it. They took us to Wells, which was a big deal as far as my mother and father were concerned, to take us for a holiday, and we were the most un...

To where?

To Wells, Wells Cathedral, a big historical part of England. We couldn't have cared less. So there must have been fairly severe problems there. There must have been fairly severe problems.

Had you then begun to wonder what you were going to do?

What it was all about? I didn't know what anything was about.

Was it affecting your work at all?

No, nothing right throughout my life ever affected my work, no. I wouldn't allow it.

How long then before you came back to Australia?

I think the *Orion* would have been amongst the very first immigration ships to go out of England and Reg and I both came out as immigrants. My parents had to pay. They paid full fare and we came out ....

Did it bring you closer together, the fact that you'd gone back, you'd both found somehow you couldn't relate to your parents as maybe you'd hoped? Did it draw you closer together?

No.

Were you bosom mates? Were you soulmates, you and your brother?

No, we never regained that closeness that there was there before the war, no. Even now I think I care much more about him than he does about me.

So while there was a sense of understanding, it wasn't that you could share all the things ...?

We could hang together as one in a crisis situation? No. It's been a very, very divided family.

So how did you jointly then come to decide, well, you'd both come back to Australia?

I didn't want to come back here, I would have liked to have stayed there but, you see, in that generation of time you didn't have that. Perhaps a more highly-spirited girl than me would have perhaps stayed there. But you didn't earn enough. You couldn't be independent.

So what made the decision? Was there a sense that your parents wanted you ...?

My father and mother were coming out here so we came, yeah.

Oh, I see, so you did come out on the same ship with your parents?

Oh yeah.

How did the voyage out here go then? Were you able to live as an independent young woman? Or was there a sense your parents wanted to control your life?

Oh yeah, parental control there even though they were in a cabin. Yeah, you had parental control. I didn't have any shipboard romances on that one.

So did you continue living as a family in Australia?

Yeah. The people I lived with sponsored my father and mother and they brought my father out. We went to live in a few rooms in Caulfield.

(5.00) Did you meet the aunt and uncle again?

Yeah, they came to meet us at the ship. I think we stayed with them for the first - God knows where we slept - for the first couple of days - and then we went to this place in Caulfield. He had a job for my father at the Melbourne Harbour Trust.

Was there any sense that the aunt and uncle felt a bit bitter with you, that here they'd provided a home and you hadn't been appreciative and that sort of thing?

I never showed that I wasn't appreciative of their care of me but ...

But you'd argued with them, you'd clearly not accepted their direction in some areas. Do you think they felt ...?

I think they were the sort of people that it didn't matter, it would blow over. I'm a peacemaker, so there would never been any friction or any animosity there. I would have seen to that.

So how long then before you broke free from your parents and began to live your own life?

I didn't. My brother announced that he was going to get married very shortly after we got here, which was a major shock. I think the trouble with a lot of parents who sent children out here, that they thought that children are things. You can send them away for five years and then you can bring them back again: 'You're my child and you're just going to be as you were'. And I don't think very many of those people have any idea that you can't do that with a kid. It would take a great deal of understanding and a very - I don't know what you'd call it - to bridge a five years in a, especially a kiddie of five, five years is a hell of a long time in a child's life. And you can't turn the clock back, you can't pretend it's never happened. Those five years are gone. I think my mother thought she was just going to pick up where she left off. You didn't have a fifteen year old now, you had a twenty year old.

Was there a sense of sort of loss and pain, do you think, on both sides in those terms?

Oh yes, I think so. I think my mother enjoyed my children in those teenage years, because she came to live with me for a short period when she shared my sixteen year old and eighteen

year old for a little while. She might have perhaps bridged those little bits that she didn't have with us.

So how long was it then before finally you moved away from your parents?

I got married in 1950 and I think we came here in 1947, so I would have been here two to three years I suppose before I got married.

I suppose ultimately, in a sense, life is a mysterious and religion flourishes because there seems to be within most of us some vague feeling of alienation. Is it possible that this episode has in a way become the identifiable feature that is at the source of alienation, that feeling that seems to beset people? Do you wonder about what it meant in those sort of terms, or do you feel that it was a significant part that somehow made your whole life unglued and never quite got back together properly?

I don't exactly know what you mean by that. Do you mean that it's irreparable damage?

Well, I had the impression, say, talking to John Hare who feels that he's been left feeling very insecure and never really quite felt that he belonged anywhere. Well, for you that it had that effect?

No, I think because I was already - as I say, at fifteen you're already beginning, I suppose, to pull away. I can remember laying the table one day and I can remember saying, 'I hate my mother', while banging the knives and forks down and looked up terrified because she could see me and was obviously listening to me through the door. So obviously there was still that beginning to break away. And I had had my first .... I never experienced that again, that feeling towards a man. In my studies last year, we studied *Romeo and Juliet* and we studied in depth and they dealt with it there, that probably in your lifetime you only ever have that once, that *Romeo and Juliet*, and he was my Romeo. So I must have already begun, but no, my God, no, John's only seven. You're only a baby. I've got a grandchild of seven and I look at him and I think how could you send a kid that 12,000 miles. And to send a child to Australia in those days would be comparable to sending a child to the moon. Australia was a hell of a long way from England, a hell of a long way.

Does it leave you with a sense that there was a life that might have been, that was taken away, and a vague sense of loss?

Yes.

But with all that, when you add up the totality of it, it is possible to weigh it and see it as a plus or a loss, or on balance it comes out as a kind of loss?

I think your genes and your roots and all those come into play. My brother said to me recently - and he had a go at me recently - and he said to me, 'Don't you appreciate that you've had three free trips? You've had an experience. You've come to a country. You've seen the world.' And I said, 'I might have been a person who might never have wanted to move. I might have been a person who for no other reason that I can think of, I like my roots down and I like a roof over my head, and I like to know where I am. I don't like to live life in a state

of confusion. And I could have been somebody that would have been quite happy to have lived and died in Bromley.'

END OF INTERVIEW