TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Sarah Esther ‘Essie’ Gordon (née Glass), a British evacuee under the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) Scheme, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification. This is Edward Stokes recording with Essie Gordon, [CORB] evacuee children, tape one, side one.

Essie, could we begin please with when and where you were born.

I was born in Hackney in London in June 1927.

Right and I understand besides moving a little bit within that area, that's really where you grew up.

Yes, yes it was.

And I think you had one other brother.

Yes, I have one brother. He is four and a half years younger than me.

And of course we are going to speak to him later. He was one of the evacuee children too. Your father's background – you were telling an interesting story about his coming to Australia.

Yes, in the end of the nineteenth century in around 1890–1900, my father and his brothers and sisters and parents and aunts and uncles all migrated to Australia, and they all settled in Sydney. My father did for a while and then he went to New Zealand but he didn't stay there permanently. He went back to London, married my mother and as a result my brother and I were born there –.and he's the only member of the family that went back to London. The rest of them are all still here in Australia.

Right and I think you were saying partly because of that your father was a little older than average when he came to have a family.

That's right, yeah he was – both of them were.

I know you family was Jewish. What did your father do?

He was in the tailoring business.

And did your mother work or was she um...

Yes, she um made button holes.

So they were working together.

In similar trades anyway, yes.

That's interesting. You went to school in the Hackney area, I think, and that was... How was that? How was school?

It was a necessity. I wasn't unhappy at school and I wasn't overjoyed. I just went there, you know.

Right. No other particular memories of those school days? The school days in England, that is.

Ah, no I don't think so. They were pretty um pretty ordinary.

Essie, you were saying, I think, that before war was declared you had already been evacuated.

Yes, we were evacuated to a village in Hertfordshire called Huntingford. And I remember we were in Sunday School on the 3rd of September 1939 when war was declared.

Right. That's interesting. Was the radio on or did somebody come in and make some announcement?

Yes, we were in one particular classroom, I think, and one of teachers, or the vicar, or whoever he was, came in and said there's some important news coming up on the radio and everybody listen to it. We were all a bit stunned. We didn't quite know what it would involve, being so young, but we knew it was pretty bad.

Yes. I was going to say that. Of course you were only twelve at the time but you did have that awareness did you, of what it might involve?

Oh yes, we didn't know what but we knew it was pretty bad.

You were saying of course about your Jewish background, Essie. Had you been at all aware through your parents' conversation of events that had been happening prior to this in Germany? I mean of the persecution of the Jews by the Nazi regime.

No I wasn't really aware of anything, to a great extent anyway. I think I was a bit young.

Yes, sure. During this first evacuation, I think you were staying with foster parents. Do you remember that at all?

Yes, I remember their names – Mr and Mrs Masters – and they had a big dog and Mr masters had a big white moustache that he used to sort of suck his tea through

(5.00) (Laughing) That's an interesting ... Yes, I can just imagine how a child would remember that. Was that a happy experience or not?

Not terribly, no not terribly. I don't think she took to, I don't think they took to us and I don't think we took to them. The life was so different but we weren't there for too long, then we went back to London, back home. I don't know how long we were there but I think the fact the war broke out and there was this government scheme for evacuating children to other parts of the world, that the local kids sort of went back home.

Had you many friends there amongst the children who lived in the country or did you just keep the friends children who were evacuated the same time as you from the city? (Pause)

That's right, no memory there.

Well, let's move on a bit. You did go home. Before the decision came for you and your brother to come to Australia, do you have any memory of how life in England was affected by the war? How perhaps your family life changed a bit? Do you remember anything about that?

No I don't think it did, because it was too early in the war for anything to have altered.

Yes, well of course there was that period of the phoney war. So your father continued with his work?

Yes, I believe so. And then there was talk of evacuating children to other parts of the world and the uh, that was when my parents asked would we like to go to Australia.

Do you remember the first time that was brought up with your brother and yourself?

I think it just before we went, because I think what happened was they announced the government scheme to evacuate children to America, Canada and Australia and my parents must have gone into it themselves, between each other, and then when they decided that they thought it was the best thing for my brother and I, they broached the subject to us.

Was it done in such a way, do you think, that left you the real option of saying no, or was that a...?

Oh yes. Yes, I think we had the opportunity of saying no if we hadn't wanted to come here because they did ask us 'Are you sure you want to go?' and we seemed to think it was going to be a great adventure, not knowing how long of course, nobody knew how long the war was going to last then. But we thought it would be an adventure.

Right. So your perception of it was one of a new country, a kind of excitement rather than the thing of leaving home.

Oh yes. First off, anyway.

We were just talking about the family in Australia. Of course, you did know that, unlike other children, you were not going to a strange situation.

That's right, yes. I have quite a large family of relations here, cousins and aunts and uncles and we knew we would be going to one of my aunties, you know, if we had come. We knew which aunty we were coming to and it wasn't strangers, we knew it was family. So I think that coloured our decision.

Yes. You were saying though, I think, that you think perhaps your father was a little keener on the idea perhaps than your mother.

Yes it might have been so, because he lived here for so many years and my mother hadn't, and I think she was relying on him for her, for him to make the decision. Then I assume he made the suggestion and the decision and she went along with it, or... I don't know about that part of it really.

Right, Can we pause for a moment.

Perhaps, just for the record, Essie is saying there that of course nobody could really know the issue between her parents unless they were spoken to directly.

You were saying I think, Essie, that you do remember clearly, I think, the night before you left – packing up. It seemed difficult.

It was traumatic because my parents realised it was the night before we were leaving. We were going a long way away and my father, who had a very short fuse of a temper was very uptight, my mother was uptight and we were packing I remember, and we put, we had the suitcase in the living room rather than in another room so that we could see what we were taking. And the suitcase was balanced on a chair and I think one of must have gone past and knocked it and the whole lot fell off. And everything we packed in the suitcase fell on the floor and I think my father blew up then. I think he exploded. Because I realise what a traumatic time it was for them.

(10.00) Yes, it must have been terrible saying goodbye with the uncertainty of when you would return. Do you remember going to sleep that night?

Not really. I think it must have been, I must have been giving it a lot of thought, you know, whether we were doing the right thing but I don't think that ... It doesn't stand out in my mind as being particularly worrisome – the night before. I'm sure my parents didn't sleep much the night before.

Did you either then or perhaps later on the ship to Australia, or when you were in Australia, ever have dreams or nightmares about having left home?

Not really, no. I was um, I was quite happy about it. I was looking forward to it. It was only when we were actually got to Australia and we were there for a while, I missed my parents and missed my mother but not overwhelmingly so, because the life we lived in Australia was totally different from the life we led in London, it was much more exciting –.an open-air life and swimming and Bondi Beach – and it was so different that it took my mind off the fact that my parents were 12,000 miles away.

Yes, well I think I could relate to that. The farewell, I think you went into the city – into London – and it was there that your parents farewelled you. Do you remember that?

I think we went to a place called Tavistock Square – I think it was Tavistock Square. I'm not sure whether when we first evacuated to the country, or whether that was the time we went to Australia, but it was a place called Tavistock Square and there were ... I think we had labels on.

I imagine you were collected by some of the escorts and they went with you on the train, did they?

Yes, I think so. We had to get organised into groups and I would imagine that our escort, whose name was Mrs Clothier, was allocated to us – the group we were all...

That's right.

That she sort of, the escorts were sorted out at the beginning of the journey, because to let all those children loose on a train from London to Liverpool, we had to be fairly well looked after and organised.

Sure, of course you were with your brother who was about four years younger than yourself. Was that a pleasant responsibility or not?

Well, it was just something I took for granted. I was in ... I looked after him and I just kept an eye on him, generally. He was a bit of a pain in the neck. You know, we didn't ... He was a younger brother and seemed to get in the way and my friends were well out of his league you know, four and a half years make a big difference when you are little. But I kept a motherly eye on him.

Mm that's interesting. Well of course you all had a short time in Liverpool I think staying in a school. What's your recollection of that period in Liverpool, all coming together. Do you remember where you slept, for instance?

Well, I vaguely remember the school we slept in. We slept on palliasses – they're sort of straw filled mattresses – on the floor. I think we were just there overnight. Then I seem to think that we got some sort of a food parcel – or that might have been on the train to Liverpool – a packet of biscuits and fruit, things like that.

Somebody else I spoke to did seem to remember that there had been a bombing attack on Liverpool just before you left, do you remember that?

No I don't.

That's alright. Was there any time to make friends amongst the children at the school or was it all too short really for that to happen?

The local children?

No, I mean the children who were being evacuated.

I think we were all... By that time we were all in groups with our escort and we sort of stuck together I think. My brother was in a different group. I think the boys were in separate groups. The boys had men escorts and the girls had lady escorts so we weren't close, we weren't together, we were split up. But the groups that we were allocated, we just sort of stuck together then.

Right. Actually boarding the ship the *Batory* – for children it must have been a very novel experience, perhaps a bit daunting too. Do you remember that? Do you remember seeing the ship, going up the gangplank?

Yes, it was a bit daunting, everything was strange, very strange, um I think there must have been five or six in our cabin. It was pretty crowded and it wasn't terribly comfortable and by the end of the journey, of course the food was pretty low and the water was a bit on the rusty side but it was all an experience. We weren't terribly happy. We weren't seasick at all. My brother and I seemed to be good sailors but uh...

(15.00) Once you actually got up onto the ship – I can imagine perhaps going up the gangplank and the docks below you and you are looking off the ship – did you have thoughts then about leaving England?

No, I don't recall anything that sticks in my mind. I think it was all pretty exciting. I think we had lots of photographers and that sort of thing and it was pretty exciting, I think.

Sure. Actually leaving Liverpool, pulling out – do you remember that? Do you remember going down the Mersey or was that perhaps at night and you were not awake?

No, I don't remember that bit. No.

Well, let's get onto some other things. You were saying about not being seasick but I think you did have some trouble with quinine.

Oh yes! We had to take quinine when we got to Colombo, I think. That was a preventative so that we didn't catch – what would that be – malaria or something like that and we had to drink neat quinine which is the bitterest liquid that was ever invented and I can remember four or five [of] us little girls sitting on the cabin floor with these glasses of quinine that the nurse had brought into us earlier, and she told us that anyone who brought up has to take another dose. But some of the girls were crying and we just couldn't get the filthy stuff down but I think we managed it in the end.

It does sound rather unpleasant. Another incident was the case of the boy who had his head out the porthole. That was quite a lesson to you all.

Yes, he was practically scalped by one of those big hook things that pulls luggage up or something. We were all warned to keep our heads in and not look out of the porthole but we all did, of course but this kid was unlucky and the thing swung above and hit him on the head. But he recovered. He had stitches and things but it gave us all a fright.

The journey to Australia was about eleven weeks. It was quite a long time to be on a ship. Do you remember much of the typical daily routine; when you would have got up, did you dress first, have breakfast first? Could you talk us through a day as you'd remember it?

Um I can't remember the exact details. I remember the... In the dining room our waiter, our particular waiter's name was Henrick. It was a Polish ship and he was a Polish young fellow, very nice and friendly chap who couldn't speak too many words of English but we tried to educate him and he told us one or two Polish words for 'butter' and 'thank you' and that sort of thing. And then we had dancing classes with Mrs Aherne who was one of the escorts and we learnt a particular dance called 'Little Mister Baggy Britches'. And the dancing classes were held in the gymnasium – I think it was somewhere down the bottom of the ship.

That was 'Little Mrs...

'Little Mister Baggy Britches, I love you'.

Could you sing that?

Oh.

Go on, give it a go.

[Singing] Little Mister Baggy Britches, I love you. If you'll be my Sund'y fellow I'll patch 'em up with purple and pink and with yellow [laughing/ singing] and folks will say, when I sit on the old sea wall, 'Nina's been patching poor [Yokit], 'til he's got no britches al all.'

Then we proceeded to do a clog dance.

That's lovely. The other thing I have heard about the ship, Essie, was you had another escort, I think – a Miss MacLean or McLain – who did a lot of group singing with you.

Yes. I think she played the piano and she played the piano beautifully and I remember one particular piece of music she played that we all loved was ‘To Spring’ by Grieg and whenever I hear it now, I think of her. But she wrote a song. I think she and another escort wrote a song between them called ‘The Call’ which I’m not going to sing.

[Laughing] You’re saying that with a very definite look in your eye.

Yes.

Could you tell us what ‘The Call’ was about, perhaps.

I could say the words just to give you a rough idea. We heard your... ‘ It was what the evacuee children were singing to Australia really. ‘We heard your voices across the sea and we’re proud to answer the call. With head held high ‘neath a friendly sky, for I know you will welcome us all. From the old land to the new land come Britons young and free...’ Uh I can’t remember the rest of it but that’s just a rough idea of what it was like.

Kind of stirring, patriotic stuff.

That’s right. Yes. Yes.

(20.00) Interesting. The singing and the dancing, did that ever involve the crew and the British soldiers listening in and looking on?

Oh no, no. Another thing I remember about singing and dancing, there were two sisters in our – that had the same – in our group who used to sing duets and they used to sing ‘J’attendrai.’ and another song as well. We did a lot of singing, that’s why it was nicknamed the ‘Singing Ship’ for that reason that we were lucky enough to have a couple of escorts who were musically inclined and we did lots of singing and dancing and I think that was lovely.

It must have been. And that does sound lovely. But what about other things to pass the time of day. Did you have any lessons, or play shipboard games, that sort of thing?

We must have done but I don’t remember that bit. I only remember... I don’t remember the working bits, just the fun bits.

How easy was it for you to make friends on the ship with new children?

Well, I think we were all joined by a common bond. We were all in the same boat – if you pardon – no pun intended. I didn't realise what I was saying.

[Laughing] That was lovely.

And we became very close from the very first on the train to Liverpool and we were in the same group with the same escort, and so we sort of stuck together and we were very closely bonded, I think.

Did the older children keep a general eye on the younger children or...?

Yes, I think so. We had two... The babies of the whole ship really were brother and sister – one was five years old and one was six years old – and they were very closely guarded by the escort and the older children watched them all the time and really looked after them.

That's most interesting. You were saying that your own escort, I think a Mrs Clothier, was a rather charming woman.

Yes, she was. She was a very nice woman and I believe after we got to Australia and she was on her way back to Australia because I believe her husband was back in England, the ship she was on was torpedoed, but I don't remember too many details about what ship it was and I think she did recover. I think they were picked up but she only had – she and another escort, Margaret. What did I say her name was?

Mrs Clothier.

No, the other escort, Margaret.

We had Mrs Aherne and Miss MacLean.

No, there was another one. But it doesn't matter. Her and another escort were picked up and all they had with them were the clothes they had on – just shorts and a blouse or something. But I don't know where they are today or whether they got saved or anything.

They'd have to be old ladies now.

I would say very old, if they are still alive.

What sort of things did you do with your escort, Mrs Clothier? Were the escorts involved much in general activities, or was it more the chaperoning of getting kids up, getting them to bed and so on.

Yes, I think it was that, and the specialised things like the dancing and that sort of thing were done by one particular escort, not necessarily your own.

Of course you were away from your parents and that must have been very hard for any child, I guess, even if you were fairly independent. Were the escorts – yours say particularly – were they able to give you some of the affection and love, the real closeness that you would have had at home or not?

I don't remember any particularly overwhelming feeling of closeness with the escorts. The children more stuck together and I think the children were busy looking after the young... The children of my age about twelve were busy looking after the younger children, mothering them and keeping an eye on them. We were just like a big family I would say, but I don't particularly remember my escort as being terribly close.

Just continuing on.

Yes. As I said I don't particularly remember the escort, my particular escort, being terribly close or mothering. It might have been because I didn't really need it. Some of the children got upset and tearful and missed their parents, and I would imagine that the escorts were busy looking after the ones that really needed her affection, but the ones that could look after themselves just got on with it, you know.

That's very interesting. A few other shipboard things, Essie, – the equator – do you remember going across the equator? Did you have a traditional ceremony?

Yes, I can remember that but the thing is I don't...

(25.00) Just continuing on, Essie was saying that this recollection of the crossing the line might, in fact, have been made from the return journey. How was it, anyway?

Oh, it was fun. We were just onlookers. We weren't involved in it. It was the crew that was... Father Neptune came on and shaved ah... They were sat in a chair, the victims, shaved with shaving soap and lots of lather and big, huge wooden razors and then tossed backwards into the swimming pool but I think we were just viewers rather than participated.

Well, those great days have gone now with jumbo jets, haven't they?

Yes, that's true.

> The crew and the soldiers, you were saying they didn't actually come down to the singing and below decks but did you at all mix in with the Polish crew and the British soldiers going to Singapore?

No I don't think, I think that was strictly taboo.

> Right, not at all, not even occasional 'Hellos'?

Oh, we used to chat to them I think but we didn't get involved. Actually, I can remember one of the escorts and – I can only remember her first name as Beryl – that was a shipboard romance. She fell in love with one of the soldiers that was in one of the regiments that was on the *Batory*. He wore the kilt, I don't know what part of the army he was in but it was love at first sight apparently and they got married on the ship. And the captain married them and the wedding ring was made. Nobody had a ring so they cut a piece of metal out of the engine and fashioned it into a wedding ring. And when we had the reunion at the North Head Quarantine Station a few weeks ago this lady, this escort was there. And she told us that her husband was killed in the army but not for a year or two after that. He fathered a son and she married again and had three other children. So it was a bit of a romance.

> That's most interesting. In fact we are in touch with Beryl and will be talking to her later. I had heard this general story of a shipboard love affair. Love affairs – that brings sunsets to mind. You were steaming slowly across the ocean to quite a different world, a quite different climate – do you remember the sunsets, the great tropical sunsets?

I think I do more on the other ship, on the *Stirling Castle* because I was older and I was more interested in that, but that sort of thing I don't think attracted me too much.

> Sure. Just finally on the journey, Essie, that's very interesting. I know you did stop in a few places at Capetown you disembarked, Singapore. Do you remember those days?

Yes, we stopped off at Capetown and I think we were interviewed by – um entertained by General Smuts...

> Or his wife perhaps?

His wife. And I think we've...we were all given a book that was signed by either General Smuts or his wife. I remember a white-haired man with a little white goatee beard. Would that be him, I wonder? But anyway we went to , we saw Table Mountain that's right in Capetown, and we were all given a book as a gift, and I've still got mine, it's called *Up with the Falcon*.

Mm interesting. Well then of course you steamed across the Indian Ocean and the troops did disembark in Singapore, of course, mostly destined sadly for prisoner of war camps. Did anybody, did any of you children have any inkling of what might have been going on in Singapore? [Pause] Probably not. And did you disembark there? Did you get another chance to get off the ship?

To Singapore? Uh I don't recall whether we got of there or not. I don't think... If we did I don't remember it.

Well, moving on a bit. You did, I know stop I think at Fremantle, and some children at least did get off there for a – some to leave – some for just a day off the ship. Do you remember that first sight of Australia?

[Pause] Um

No, OK. As you getting closer to Sydney – I'm just thinking back to ships how you sort of count down the days of a voyage, Sydney's five days away, four days away, two dinners away. Do you remember how you felt as you approached your what was to be home for some time.

I think it was exciting. I don't actually recall it. But it must have been exciting at the time, but some of the children went to the North Head Quarantine Station, they were the children who...

END TAPE 1 SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE B

Continuing, Ed Stokes with Essie Gordon on [CORB] evacuees Tape One Side Two. Yes, you were saying about arriving in Sydney, Essie.

Yes, as I was saying, some of the children went to the North Head Quarantine Station. They were the children who either had infectious diseases such as impetigo or dermatitis, or children that didn't have anyone to go to, that weren't going to families, that had to be, had to have.... Waiting for strangers to go to. We went to family, so we went straight to Newtown School and were picked up by my uncle and aunty.

Do you remember getting off the ship and driving through this new city with different sorts of buildings? I mean Newtown would have been very different to London, where you lived.

Yes, but I remember sunshine. I remember it was a beautiful sunny day. But that's about the most, the thing that stands out in my mind that it was a sunny day.

Of course you were coming to a lovely spring, I guess.

Yes, that's right. Yes, it was October and it was lovely. And then we met my uncle and aunty, as I said. It was my uncle and he's a – the aunty was – they were sister and brother. They weren't husband and wife and the first thing I ever remember saying to my Uncle Joe was 'Gee, you look like my father', because they are brothers.

Did that bring back memories?

Yes, I think I felt a little bit sad then when I saw my uncle 'cause he looked so much like his brother, my father.

Your father's sister, your aunty, I think you said had been widowed but she had three adult children and one of them was a daughter living at home whose own husband had gone to the war. I think they lived at Bondi.

Yes, Wellington Street. I lived at the bottom of Wellington Street and went to school – Bondi Public School – at the top of Wellington Street.

What was it like settling in? Was it easy or not?

Um no, it wasn't easy but I took to it. I liked the life. We were about a ten minute walk from Bondi Beach. We used to go to the beach a lot and used to go into the surf and we loved it. It was lovely. And i went to, as I said, I went to Bondi Public School at the top of the of the street, so it was just walking up the hill to go to school and walking back down to come home. And I was quite a novelty at the school because I was a little evacuee from London and at that time there weren't any non-Australians. I remember there was one coloured girl, one black girl, who was from Noumea – French-speaking little girl – and as soon as I came on the scene they.... She was the novelty of the school because she was so different, but when I came on the scene nobody bothered with her and they all took an interest in me. I was the little evacuee from London.

So it sounds as if it was fairly easy making new friends.

Yes it was. I seemed to develop a large circle of friends. We used to have... It was... The Bondi Public School was a domestic science school. We used to learn what they laughingly call 'housewifery'. We had cooking classes. And I remember one day we had a cookery lesson and they had... We made scones and the teacher said 'Now the one that makes the best scones will win a prize', and I think they all conspired and they said 'Let's pick little Essie Glass, the evacuee from London, and say that she won the prize', because I can't believe it was my skill as a cook. I got six little blancmange dishes wrapped in yellow tissue paper, and I was so proud. I carried them home; walked down the hill; and halfway down I dropped them and smashed three of them. And when I got home to my Aunty Annie I said, 'Guess what I did, Aunty. I won a cookery prize.' And she said, 'Oh, what did you win?' I said 'Three blancmange dishes.' I was being cunning and it worked. She never knew I won six and smashed three of 'em.

(5.00) [Laughing] Oh, that's a lovely story. I can just imagine the childhood manipulation going on there, trying to scrape through. The other lessons that you did, the more sort of academic things, maths, English and so on. Was it easy to fit into the school curriculum? I mean, did you find the work difficult, or not?

Yes, I think it was difficult. I wasn't terribly happy and I left as soon as I could. In fact I think I left when I was about fifteen and I got a job in Metters in Elizabeth Street. That used to be, used to sell baths and gas stoves and things. It was a huge business. It was opposite, no, it was next door to Mark Foy's and I was working in the invoice department and I used to run errands and things.

That's most interesting. How long did you stay working there?

Two or three years, I think. I remember what my first wages were – twenty-seven and sixpence.

Did you stay there until you left to return home?

No, I think I got one other job, but I can't remember where that... Oh, I remember where that was. That was in a cigarette packing place in the... Answering the phone I think it was. Craven A! Do you remember Craven A cigarettes? That's where I worked and then I think I had just those two jobs. I can't remember any others.

That's most interesting. And when you had jobs was it easy making, mixing in again with Australian people, Australian women, I guess?

Um, the people at work, you mean? Yeah, I seemed to make friends. I remember one girl at Metters, two girls that were close friends of mine – one was called Kath and one was called

Aileen. I remember those two and then in the cigarette place I had a girl called Nancy and one called Elaine. Isn't it amazing how it all comes back to you?

We might come back to the work in a minute. Just going back to the home-life, though. You were saying that it was initially a little hard to settle in. How relaxed was the family atmosphere?

Well, my aunty was a bit of a disciplinarian because things were tough. She'd brought three children up without a husband because he died very young, and she was scraping you know, it was a bit difficult and when I went out to work I had to give her board as most people did and still do of course, but the daughter that lived at home wasn't too bad, but the other married daughter that lived away from home was very, very strict and she gave us more than once the rules of the house – what time you had to set the table and what time you had to wash up. And one day I was there too late to set the table for tea and she had to set the table and I got a good hiding when I got in. But somehow or other I used to rise above it and I had a large circle of friends and I seemed to be happy despite all that.

And what about your brother?

Um, I don't think he was quite so happy as I was. I think he was more at an awkward age. He was eight when we got to Australia and about thirteen, fourteen or something like that when we came back and that was a sort of an in-between stage.

You were saying before, Essie, about swimming and Bondi must have been just so different from London or even [a lovely?] beach on the south coast of England, for that matter. What were the really good points about Australian life as you remember it then? And perhaps, what were the drawbacks?

Well, the way of life was pretty good, and as I said we used to walk down to the beach and go swimming a lot and in fact whenever I got my annual holidays from my work, I didn't have enough money to go anywhere, but I didn't consider it necessary to go anywhere because we lived in Bondi, and that was as far as I was concerned, you were on holiday there – all the time. So I used to spend every day of two weeks' holiday lying on the beach, and swimming and it was a wonderful life. But the austerity of it all and not having much money to spare somehow or other didn't seem to worry me.

(10.00) Yes, I'm sure if you don't have a lot of money you're better off in a good climate. Did you go to the pictures sometimes? Do you remember listening to the wireless?

Yeah, we used to go to the pictures; we used to live near Hoyts Six-ways Cinema, and I used to go Saturday afternoons – and I have a confession. I used to bunk-in in the interval for

nothing because I didn't have any money to go to the pictures, so we used to find out what time the interval was, because at the interval the kids used to stream out and cross the road to Wall's milk bar at Six-ways and get sweets and lollies and milkshakes and things. They were the rich kids. And we used to stand outside Walls and watch when the kids used to come rushing out for the interval. When they went back to the cinema, we'd go back with them – and I don't think they had pass-outs then. We used to get in for nothing and see the second half. Because if you sat in somebody else's seat, you just moved along and sat in an empty seat. But that's what we used to do. We used to go to the pictures and we used to listen to the radio.

That sounds a good ploy for getting to the pictures. The wireless or radio, do you remember news coming through of the war? [Pause]

I'd...

Did you listen avidly to war news or not?

No, no, not particularly, but I do remember that on the ship, on the *Batory,* on the way to Australia we heard the news that a ship going to America carrying evacuees had been sunk and everyone was lost, and that frightened us a bit then.

Yes, that must have been awful to hear that news. How tense were you after that? Did you for instance spend your time looking for periscopes and so on?

Not really. No. I must have been a heartless sort of a person. I was just intent on enjoying myself.

I don't know about heartless. Perhaps it was the sane thing to do. What about boat drill? I meant to ask you that before. Was that part of your routine?

Yes, I can only vaguely remember it. I don't remember too many details, but I know we had it. We seemed to have it very often. Fortunately we didn't need it.

Well, going back to Australia, Essie, the war of course did drag on probably much longer than people perhaps thought when you left England. How much contact did you have with your parents during that time, both in terms of your letters and theirs?

Well we used to – I think we broadcast to them. We spoke to them on the telephone – on the radio telephone I think it was – just once, and also we could send a free telegram every month

I think it was, and we were give a list of telegrams. The text of telegram like number one was: 'Have not heard from you. Have not had any letters from you. Hope all is well. 'Number two um: 'We are all well here – all well and happy. Hope you are too.' 'Happy Christmas' was number three. So we'd fill in a form and we'd say what number telegram we wanted to send, so my parents used to get regular telegrams with the usual wording 'We are both well and happy. Hope you are too.'

That's most interesting. You were not allowed to write telegrams with your own original messages?

Oh no! We had a choice of which ones to send – number one, two, three, four, five and six or something like that. But then we used to write letters in between, and my mother used to send me remnants of material that a friend of mine used to make up into dresses for me. But we used to correspond with ordinary letters, you know, but this was the telegram.

Were letter days, when letters came from England, were they really special days or not?

Oh yes! I used to enjoy getting their letters and of course, they loved getting our letters. We wrote regularly.

The wider circle of the family in Australia, of course you were living with your aunt and these daughters, but there were quite a lot other people around too – did you get to know them much?

What, relations? Yes we saw them now and again, not too often, but, because we had our own circle of friends. But my Uncle Joe, who was, as I mentioned, sort of an official guardian, my father's brother, you know. He used to take us out every now and again to Whale Beach, I think. He had two sons and they had a beach house at Whale Beach – that's right – and they used to take my brother on holiday to the beach house and not me, because I think they were all boys together and I didn't fit in, but we used to go around there for the odd meal or.... They live locally you know. But I never got taken to the beach house 'cause I was a girl.

(15.00) That's interesting. The war of course did create great destruction in Europe generally but of course in Britain in particular and of course, London. Were you aware of the news of the bombing of London and how did it affect you if you were?

Yes, i remember going to the pictures once and seeing a film, or part of a newsreel called *London Can Take It* about the blitz in London and it distressed me considerably. I remember that. It was graphic pictures of the blitz in London and it was pretty bad.

Were you distressed because of the destruction of this beautiful historic city, or because of concern for your parents?

The latter. Concern. I was worried about... Well, I knew they OK because I had heard from them. But it just upset me generally, you know.

The other children who had been evacuated – did you have any contact with them at all?

Um, yes. The girls in my group. Yes. I used to see them now and again. One of them in particular was called June Randall, she used to live in, she lived in Rockdale with her aunty, and I used to go and visit her and she used to come and visit me.

Right but it was at that informal level of individuals, not groups being got together?

Yes. It was the... I don't think there were any group getting together. I don't think so.

Right. Well moving on a bit, Essie. [Break]

I was going to talk about the aspects of returning home after the war. But is there anything else that you feel you would like to add about your period in Australia?

Well, it's just that if we hadn't been evacuated to Australia, to here, we wouldn't be here now, but I don't think. But when we decided to go back to England after the war, I think they gave us the choice whether we wanted our parents to be brought out to Australia – I presume it would be free of charge – or whether we wanted to go back to them in England. And I seem to recall that the decision was placed firmly on my shoulders, which was a bit daunting. But I think I decided that we – my brother and I – should go back to England, because as I mentioned, my parents weren't as young as the average parent and I thought it would be too much of an upheaval for them. So I decided, or it might have been both of us decided, I'm not sure, to return to England; which I did and I regretted it because everything was so grey and life was so different that I wished I hadn't made that decision.

Just stepping back for a moment, Essie – do you actually remember the announcement that the war in the pacific was finally over?

No, I don't have any great memories of that.

Well, going on then. I think that after the decision that you were to return to England was made, things moved fairly speedily. Did you have any lingering regrets when you left the family in Australia?

Well, when I got back to England or as I left?

I meant as you were preparing to leave.

Well, I remember saying to Aunty Annie when we got taken to the docks, wherever we got the ship, the *Stirling Castle,* wherever that was – Circular Quay or somewhere like that. I remember saying to Aunty Annie, 'Now when we go, you won't cry, will you?' and she said, 'Why should I cry? You're healthy; you're well; there's nothing to cry about.' She was probably quite relieved to see the back of us. But that was her answer – that we're well. So she's got nothing to cry about.

Did that... was that...?

Well that was in keeping to what she was like. She was a very stern disciplinarian, as I've mentioned and she was a very strong person, a very unyielding sort of a person. She had a soft centre but she was hard on the outside. You know, she'd been toughened by the years of struggle and she was good-hearted though, I mean to have two kids hoisted on you after bringing up your own kids...

But she wasn't going to let go and say how much you mattered?

No, that's it.

Well the actual voyage back then, Essie – do you have any particularly strong recollections of that? Perhaps how did it compare with the voyage out?

Um [Pause]

(20.00) Going back to England – how do you remember the mood of the ship, yourself and the other passengers?

Um. I know it was very crowded with soldiers and marines. And there was one marine there that used to chat to me and we were very friendly in a very innocent sort of way and he gave me his hat badge and I felt very flattered. One of those Royal Marine badges that they wore

on their berets. I think his name was something Rafferty. Some Irish – no, he was a Scotsman, that's right, he was a Scotsman with an Irish name – and we had a sort of shipboard romance – a very, very innocent shipboard romance – but that must have taken up all my time and interest because I don't remember anything else.

And did you and Rafferty ever keep in touch, later?

I think he tried to get in touch with me when we got back to London, but I don't think it sort of panned out somehow. You know what these shipboard romances are like, they never work out.

Yes. Well you saying that vis-à-vis the first one that the.... You had been less aware of the sunsets, but I think you were suggesting that on the way back you were more aware of those things. What were the highlights of the voyage in that way? Do you remember the places you went to, for example?

No, I don't. Do you know it is practically a complete blank.

Well, that's OK. Of course you were going, or you'd come out as a girl and you were really I guess returning a young woman. Had that changed the way you thought you'd see the family, do you think?

Um. Yes. I think it was pretty traumatic meeting with my parents again. I remember coming into Waterloo Station when we arrived back. It was night-time and it was dark and there were a few tears on my behalf then because they were like two strangers and when we got back to the flat where we lived it was a strange flat because they had to move to get a bigger when we were, came back and it was December, and cold and grey and miserable and I thought... I remember thinking to myself as probably hundreds of other evacuees did that came back, went back to England, 'I think I have made a big mistake. What have I done?' But it took me ages and ages, months and years to get back in the swing of things, but I managed it.

How struck were you by the effects of the war – the physical effects such as the bombing and rations?

Well, we were sort of what they laughingly called 'rationed' in Sydney during the war. I think things, peculiar things like bread and potatoes were rationed in Sydney during the war, but when we got back to England things were really rationed because it was just a couple of months after, into peace and everything was rationed and it was really shook us to think that we couldn't buy whatever we wanted when we wanted.

That's interesting. And what about the actual destruction, the bombing of London?

Oh, there were ruins everywhere. I got a job in the city, I remember, and at the back of it, in Goswell Road at the back of me was a mountain-high pile of rubble that they hadn't cleared yet and there were piles of rubble like that everywhere all over the city, which was absolutely shattered me because I'd never seen anything like that, and it really was terrible.

That's most interesting. After a while, Essie, you'd got a job and you'd been back for some time, say a year or two, were things easier then, or did they continue being strange?

Well, I gradually got used to my family here – sorry, wrong country – back in England, my cousins and my aunties. I got back in the swing of things. It didn't take me too long. I suppose a year or two and then I met my husband and we got married, raised a family, then we all decided to come back again. So after nineteen years here we are back in Australia again. We've been back here now for twenty-six years and I'm glad we came back. It took me long enough – nineteen years.

What prompted that decision in the end – to come back?

Well. My brother decided... told me that as soon as he got back to England he realised he wasn't going to stay. He was definitely going to come back to Australia. It doesn't matter how long it took him, but things gradually deteriorated and one of my children, my youngest daughter suffered with her chest, and one year... She used to get bronchitis every winter and one year she got pneumonia, and when she got pneumonia I realised it was time to get the heck out of that country with the terrible climate. We lived near Epping Forest anyway which was very beautiful, but a lot of fog lingered around in the forest and that played havoc with her chest so we decided to get together and come back here again.

(25.00) Well, of course England is very beautiful. But perhaps not... Well, the winter's very, quite severe. Just a couple of questions finally about your family. Was it ever an issue with you, worrying over the reasons why your parents decided to have you evacuated? In other words, questioning their love for you?

No, I don't think so. I think we just took it for granted, but one thing that a lot of people said at this reunion the other week was that if the situation ever arose where they had to make the decision, they would never ever send their children away, halfway across the world on their own. But I don't think I would either, but on the other hand until you're faced with a problem like that, you don't know how you are going to react, because it's all very well being wise after the event, but you just don't know what decision you would have made.

Yes and of course, in 1940 things did look pretty black for Britain.

Absolutely, yes. But I didn't bear my parents any grudge for sending us, in fact I was grateful that, because we had such a wonderful time. We loved it so much that I was very sad, the fact that my parents and I never got close again.

Were they alive when you made the decision to come back?

My father wasn't. My mother was. She came back with us. Stayed for about... She was here. She came with my brother a year, in '63 and we followed on in '64. And she only lived about five or six years after that because she wasn't terribly happy here. It was a bit of an upheaval for her in her seventies to come here. She left all her friends behind and she never really settled down. So in 1969 she died.

In Australia?

In Australia, yes.

That's most interesting of how one decision leads much further down the track to something else.

Mm.

Well, Essie, thank you very much for making this tape for the War Memorial. Just a last thing I like to put to anybody. Is there anything that you feel you would like to add to the record about this whole issue – your story that we haven't touched on? [Break]

OK, Essie would like to leave it at that. Essie, thank you very much.

My pleasure.

END TAPE 1 SIDE B