ORAL HISTORY – QUEENSLAND COMMUNIST PARTY

TRANSCRIBED RECORD OF INTERVIEW WITH RENA MC CAWLEY

Date: 23rd April, 2014 Interviewer: Ross Gwyther

[*This transcript has been slightly modified to add explanatory notes when necessary, with the assistance of Rena's son to make the transcribed text more readable. These notes or words are in "italics"*]

RENA: I came to Australia when I was 10, having lived in *Russia*. My father had had a job in Latvia. He was a Londoner. He was an accountant. He had a job, I believe, with the Blue Funnel Line, or some company like that. This was in the 1920s, around 1925 or 1926. We were living in Riga, the capital of Latvia. Latvia had recently become independent. Earlier, it had been occupied. It had a history of being occupied. The Germans would come in, and then later the Russians would come in. *Latvia had been regularly invaded* all through its history. I am not sure of the details, but from what I remember my father had this job with the British shipping company that had a branch in Riga. They used to take passengers to America. I remember, as a little girl, going to the shipping office. There were always queues of people waiting to go to America at the office.

Anyhow, around 1927 – I'm not familiar with the actual history -- the Americans closed their doors to migrants. *At least, this is what I remember from what people said*. America either closed the doors to migrants or made it more difficult. *American no longer wanted migrants from Europe*. So the shipping company that my father worked for closed its branch in Riga.

So my father was without a job. We had a nice flat there but my father left the family in the flat in Riga and went to London looking for work.

ROSS: So your parents came from the UK originally?

RENA: My mother was Russian and my father was English. She had rather progressive parents. Her mother, my grandmother, was a communist in the early 1900s. She was in the early movement before the Revolution got going. My own mother was never very politically inclined, but her mother was, and her elder sister was as well. They used to distribute leaflets. From what I gather, their flat was raided. I don't think they were put into jail but my aunt's boyfriend was put in jail. They were all sort of – what do you call it? -- undercover communists.

ROSS: Underground.

RENA: Underground communists, that's what this family -- my mother's family – was. I suppose a whiff of it somehow rubbed off on me. I heard about how they had been in the shadow of the law. Anyway, my mother's mother was a very progressive woman. She had three children, two girls and a boy, and she decided that they would be properly educated. She sent her eldest daughter to Paris to do Medicine and her second daughter, my mother Nadya, went to England to learn commercial work. She wasn't inclined to be very academic.

The youngest child was a boy who ran away. It is family history that he ran away to sea. Evidently it wasn't unusual in those days for boys to join the navy or the army and finish up in some foreign country.

ROSS: So your mother was the one who was sent to England?

RENA: Yes, my mother Nadya was sent to England. She boarded with a family which was my father's family. The romance between my father Laurie and my mother Nadya started there. She was learning English so that's why he started learning Russian. After about a year, he had enough Russian, or he thought he did, to apply for a job which required some Russian in Russia.

The background is that the British Government sent a small contingent to Leningrad – it was called St Petersburg then -- of about six people who opened an office in the middle of the town. They were called a Trade Commission. That's what they were called but from what I can gather they were really spies. Their main job was to see what was happening in Leningrad and under the cover of being a trade commission they were allowed to open an office. My father was supposed to be the accountant.

ROSS: So what year would that have been?

RENA: This would have still been in the 1920s because I've got photographs on which my father has written '1921'. So he was there in the 1920s. I am not exactly sure of all these dates because I was still small. I was born in 1916.

ROSS:1921 would have been during the intervention after the Revolution when England and France sent troops to fight in the area.

RENA: I remember there was unrest. The people in this British office were notified by the local authorities that they had to leave. They were apparently given short notice to get out. Evidently the Russian government tumbled to what they were doing, and gave all the staff about two weeks to get out.

The trouble was that there were a lot of people getting out at the time. It was hard to get on the trains. The trains were packed. My mother's story is that they went to the terminus of the train, a long way away, down near the Caucasus. She said you could take a train to the terminus, and get on there to go the other way because the train was empty when it started from the terminus. They did that, I was told. We have a family picture, taken somewhere, of the family in a cattle truck with as a me as a baby, and with a crowd of other people, travelling out of Russia at short notice. This must have been in 1917 or early 1918, judging by my age in the photos.

ROSS: So you travelled from Russia, then to Australia?

RENA: We came to Australia a good deal later. We went to England first. My father tried to get work, and I presume that that's where we decided to come to Australia. We left England for Australia in September 1927 so presumably my father couldn't find work. The money was running out. He had relatives in London. I think we were staying with one of the relatives for some of this time. I think the Depression was already beginning in the late '20s and that's when they decided – I think my mother was the adventurous one – to travel to Australia and they decided leave Russia in '21. I think that's when my father must have gone to Riga. He

must have got his job in Riga because we were several years in Riga with a shipping company, with the Blue Funnel Line. We were there till '27 when we left. It was in 1927 – they closed that office in Riga.

Anyway, my parents decided to come out to Australia. I think there were very little requirements. You just got on a ship and you just got off the ship. There were no strict customs. I think we had to parade before a doctor and open our mouths and put out our tongues and show our hands. That was sort of the medical inspection when you came off the ship. As far as I can remember, that was the only requirement at the time.

We landed in Sydney. By this time I had twin brothers. They were born in Riga before we left. The twin brothers were only babies and we got a flat in Darlinghurst. Do you know, it's amazing. My parents had no arrangements. I can remember we went to a cafe and my father got a newspaper, and he saw a flat, and we walked to the flat in Darlinghurst and got a flat. It was so simple in those days, because the population must have been a fraction of what it was now.

What I remember is that we were quite close to Rushcutters Bay. Darlinghurst must be quite close to there. We went for a walk and we were able to go along the sea-front. We saw a big thing washed up, a stingray. It was very impressive to us because we'd never seen anything like that.

Well, my father still didn't get a job. Finally, after six months, he bought a country studio in Stanthorpe in Queensland, a photographic studio, because he had a bit of skill as a photographer. He was a keen amateur. There were people in those days that bought themselves a camera. I was only 10 then. I can remember going to school, a State School. I can remember on day – there are special things that are still in my mind – a man came into our class and he said, 'Hands up all those who would like to play a violin?'. I put my hand up, and he said, 'If you bring two shillings next week, I will bring the violins.' And he did – extraordinary.

Do you know, I can remember we stood l up in class, and we had a violin, and he showed us how to handle it and hold it, and we all went, 'Rrrrrr, rrrrr, rrrrr.' He put the musical notes on the board, and here he was giving a mass lesson in a State School, for two shillings. It's incredible, isn't it? He had a pile of violins. I remember walking home with this violin. I was very proud of myself, a little 10-year-old girl, and I was carrying a violin case. I was allowed to take it home. I thought that people were all looking at me, that I was a famous violinist, and I was walking very straight. It's funny the things that stick in your mind.

This must have been quite an important time in Australian history but of course at my age, I was completely ignorant of what was going on, except for things around me -- particularly things around me. There were incidents such as we had a furnished flat and I remember I'd never seen upholstered chairs before -- these sorts of lounge chairs. They had only just came in, in the '30s. People didn't have those things then. Somehow or other they became fashionable, and they became common after that, but at that time it was very unusual.

When we were in Sydney, before going to Stanthorpe, I once sat in this lounge chair in our flat, and I remember saying, 'Oh, Mother, look, they've got beetles in this place.' There was a little beetle going up the arm of this chair and my mother came over and said, 'Oh, it's a bed bug!' There were bed bugs in the flat we were in. We were on the first floor., and she made this 10-year-old daughter help her take the bed, undo the bed, unscrew the nuts and

bolts, and take it down into the yard, and pour boiling water on the wooden framework to kill the bugs. In those days – this is still the '20s, 1927, there was evidently no commercial----

ROSS: Insecticide?

RENA: Yes. That's a business that must have sprung up since then, for bed bugs – can you imagine? And the landlady came. She was very cross with my mother. She yelled at her and said, 'Mrs Collas, you're making an exhibition of me. The neighbours will all see. Anyhow,' she said, 'you can't get rid of them. They're in the walls.'

This is all vivid in my memory. So that was our episode in the furnished flat that we had in Darlinghurst. I can remember. So far as I know, the street's still there and the houses are still there. They're little, sort of joined together houses.

ROSS: Terraced houses?

RENA: Yes, they're still there.

ROSS: So after you moved, if we can move on then until you went up to Stanthorpe, can you tell me a little bit about your growing up years in Stanthorpe? Your father had a business ----

RENA: Yes.

ROSS: ---as a photographer there?

RENA: Yes.

ROSS: And you grew up and went to school?

RENA: We went to Stanthorpe. We had the experience, because we were migrants in this little country village, that you became conspicuous precisely because you were a migrant. You were conscious of it. I don't know how, but my mother had this Russian background. In pre-Communist Russia, it was part of the culture to expect charity from the Church. My mother was now in a difficult position. My parents had run out of most of their money, they had this small business that was bringing in very little money, and my mother had three children to educate.

There was a Church of England Girls School in Stanthorpe called St Catherine's. It was about a mile away. We walked. She walked with her little daughter – I think by this time I'm 12 – and she was interviewed by a couple of nuns. She put it to them that she expected that the Church to help people who needed help. She put it to them to take her daughter. It was a school where you had to pay. They agreed to take her little girl for half price. So I was installed as a boarder at this school because they had nowhere to live yet. They couldn't afford to take a house. They were sleeping in the back of the shop.

My parents had this studio. In the back of the studio, on the floor, were my parents. The boys went to Slade School, Warwick, which was also a Church of England boarding school for boys. She got them in there for half price. Now, you know, I don't know any woman in my circle here that would be game to do that. Who would barge up and say, 'Look, I need this. You can do it for me. You do it,' because this must have been the role that the Church played.

Much as we malign the Churches, they did this sort of thing for people in need. The Churches had money, and they could help you. If you could convince them that your need was legitimate, they helped.

Well, I went to St Catherine's for three years at half price. I have a lasting debt it owe to that school. I think the school has now closed down. They still exist in Warwick but in Stanthorpe they closed down. But I'm so grateful because at that school I learnt about Australian legends, culture, of Australian culture. I had no knowledge of all those things.

I was completely raw. I can remember that the children at school regarded me as a bit funny. I was different. Sometimes they used to say, 'How do you say, "a chook"?' and I would say, "A cock," and they'd all laugh. Now, I didn't know why they were laughing. You know, there were things like this -- the jokes. I learnt a lot of things about Australia in the three years that I was in this boarding school. But in all this time, politics was not in my life at all. I can't remember, or I can vaguely remember that father used to take the *Sydney Morning Herald,* or used to get the *Bulletin.* Occasionally at meal times he would mention something that was happening in the big, wide world. But we were very isolated. Children probably still are, you know, although with television these days kids know a whole lot more.

ROSS: So what about after you finished school? What did you do then?

RENA: Well, I got a job in a local bicycle business, doing their books. I'd come out of school with book-keeping experience and shorthand and typing, and so I got this job. I wasn't very happy there. I very soon arranged for my parents to let me go to the big city, Brisbane.

I think my mother knew somebody who had recently moved. She got me to stay with these people that she knew from Stanthorpe.

ROSS: So was this in Brisbane?

RENA: In Brisbane, Petrie Terrace. I went as a boarder in Petrie Terrace. There's a very big military barracks there, in Petrie Terrace in Brisbane – do you know it at all? I think it's still there.

ROSS: Yes.

RENA: Well, just near there, I was a boarder. Oh, I thought I was in the big life now. I had an attic in the city. Then, in my ignorance -- I think that we had trams then -- I got a tram into the city and just walked into a studio and told them what I could do. I got a job straightaway, in a photograph studio called Sidney Riley. I was in that studio – now, my first sniff of the Communist Party -- yes, there was a customer who came to have her photograph taken. I was a receptionist in this photographic studio. It was quite a big business. They employed about seven women and two men. Families used to come.

They took photos of sporting bodies, football. Giray (?) was the proprietor. He had connections with the Catholics – this is one of my first contacts with the Catholics – because he was a Catholic. He took photos at all the Catholic Schools. The Catholics were big in those days, in the '30s in Brisbane. They had that Archbishop Duhig, and the big cathedral on the hill, and schools everywhere, Catholic Schools.

This was my first contact. I knew that Mr Giray was a Catholic and that we did all this. We used to do every year at the end of the year. ,All the schools had their groups taken, and all the names put in underneath, and you had to check all the names. It was a big business. The customer said, 'Oh, you're new in Brisbane? I belong to a theatrical group. Would you like to come?'

That was my first contact with the Left Movement, although I had heard my father talking about the Communists in their own conversation. I didn't know what was happening, really, you know.

ROSS: So do you remember the name of the customer?

RENA: I probably could, because I became across her later on in life. But she didn't stay with the firm very long. She was in the theatricals. It was the New Theatre Movement, and I enjoyed that. I had a part in some of the plays. I think Connie has written it up in her book. Well, I was active in that period. I belonged to the New Theatre. That became an important part of my life because at that age I was probably in my early '20s.

Anyhow, Pat became my friend in the theatre group, Pat Lovegrove. You were not there?

ROSS: I know of her, though.

RENA:There were three sisters. There was Florence, the eldest; then there was Pat; and then there was Connie. I got to know Connie after a year or two because they lived at Chelmer. They had a tennis-court, and the Theatrical Group used to go there for tennis. That became a part of my life. I enjoyed very much, going to tennis at the Lovegrove's house.

The theatre was very important in my life.

ROSS: So did you get more involved with the Communist Party through the Theatre Group?

RENA: Yes, of course, but I can't remember where the actual step happened.

ROSS: So at some point you joined the Communist Party?

RENA: Evidently there was a sort of a blending, probably, you know, at this tennis party. We probably mixed with young Communists, because the Lovegroves were involved. It was their mother who was a Leftie, I think. I think it was the theatre that propelled us all into the Communist Party. I can't remember, you know.

ROSS: Can you tell me a bit about that early period when you were in the Communist Party?

RENA: Well, somehow or other, the Communist Party began to play a part in my life. I can remember the Lovegrove girls taking me to a meeting. The group from the tennis. It must have started from the tennis. Then we went to a few meetings. At the meetings I got friendly with a person called Roy Delgano. You know about him? He was very prominent in that group at that time, Roy Delgano. He was a young artist, and he'd got a job with the authorities, painting – not painting pictures, but painting roofs. From the air they would look -- this big water-tank as big as this house, in the suburbs of Brisbane, he would be on the roof, making it look like a tennis court. Camouflage – he was in the Camouflage

Department. We were all very pleased he got a good job. He had a well paid job, Roy Delgano. He was what we call a womaniser. Most of the girls slept with Roy Delgano at one stage or another.

ROSS: So this would have been during the first part of the war?

RENA: Yes, exactly, '39. I think I had an American boyfriend at some stage.

ROSS: And were you still working in the photographic studio?

RENA: Yes, I was working in the photographic studio until about the first part of the War was declared a capitalist War. My brothers joined but I didn't join, because it was a capitalist War.

ROSS: And you were already in the Communist Party then?

RENA: Yes, I was already. Roy Delgardo joined me up, actually. You had to join up officially and pay a fee, and become a member. That's when you started going to – then they started to put the discipline onto you. You were obliged to go to groups where you had Karl Marx and booklets distributed, Lenin's theories. I wasn't very interested in at all; they were much too theoretic.

Then that's where I met my husband. There used to be meetings at a house called, I think, were called "O'Hagan," or something like that. They had social meetings. We listened to music and we drank grog. I think that was part of getting in the young people. I think that's how they were gathered in. –Where's that piece of paper with the questions? You see, I don't agree – 'These interviews are aimed at gaining understanding of how the Communists organised in the period when the Party had considerable influence.' They didn't have considerable influence when I was in it. They were very minimal.

But the authorities were beginning to notice it. We began to be conscious of the fact that the police were watching us. When we went to meetings. There'd be a car pulled up. I remember somebody pointing it out, 'There's the cops there watching us.' We weren't too concerned about it. But the cops were already beginning to watch.

ROSS: So what period would that have been? Would have been during or before the War?

RENA: Before the War, the early part.

ROSS: So already at that period the Police and the authorities were concerned about the Communist Party?

RENA: Yes. And recently I went to the Archives. I've got the notes that they made on my life and my husband's life. Leo was more active in the Party. He was active more than I was, because he was a lawyer and he worked in the Public Service, and he was useful to the Party.

ROSS: What sort of thing did he do as a Party Member?

RENA: Well, he went to meetings where the Juliuses were there. You know about them. The names all escape me now. Eva Bacon, the Bacon brothers were in that group. They were in

a little governing body, you know. Us frivolous ones were not included. They ran our program. Leo was in that little group that ran the program, with the Bacon brothers and the Juliuses. There were three Juliuses; there was Sol, who had an influential job in Medicine – he ran the Brisbane hospital at that time, he was head Medical Superintendent of the General Hospital, Sol Julius. You know all about them?

ROSS: No, you can tell me a little bit more about them.

RENA: Well, they were the cultural influence in this little group that I was in. Then Sol, and then there was the other brother who was Max. Max was a friend of Leo's. They were both in Law. Max was a lawyer. Then there was somebody else, and they had two sisters, but the sisters were not around. They were in Sydney, or something.

I went to the Juliuses' house once. I remember I was quite shocked the way they behaved to their elderly parents. They swore at them and said, 'Mind your own business.' They were ugly to their parents, because their parents were deferring to them, you know, the parents were stuck in the old, Jewish routines. They very much disapproved of their young people being involved in – they knew what happens if you stick your neck out -- into political affairs. It's not wise. They tried to tell their young people.

Well, of course, Max ruined his chances in the Law. The Law fraternity margined him. He never got – I don't think he ever got any work at all. But this is the way they prevented him. I mean, in the Communist countries, people who were a nuisance were executed or shoved into jails. In Brisbane they just ignored you. It was very effective, because you need bread and butter to exist, and if they take away your bread and butter you can't exist. Well, this is what happened to the Communist Party Members who became a bit prevalent or active, or tried to influence the authorities. As soon as they started to stick their necks out, they were made to feel uncomfortable in society.

Where was I up to? 'The Party had considerable influence.' Well, in my opinion they didn't have considerable influence in Australian politics. Not until, well, I suppose as the War went on they became prominent. As the War became prominent in our lives, my brothers joined up. I went nursing because there was pressure on us to 'do something for your country.' I couldn't join up because my Communist Party friends didn't believe in the War, so I couldn't.

Lots of my girlfriends joined the Army. They became typists and drivers and all that sort of thing, but I just went nursing. So through the War I became a nurse. We became disorganised during that period because some of us joined up. We became dispersed.

ROSS: You mean the Communist Party Members dispersed?

RENA: Yes, our little group. I can remember Sol Julius. I joined as a Junior Nurse to the General Hospital in Brisbane. A very big establishment, it was. There were hundreds of nurses, and there was a huge building in which we had our rooms. Everybody had their own little room, and we had a refectory. We were supplied with clothes, with a roof and with food and our clothes. It was a very good thing to be a nurse. You got a pretty good deal there.

But I lost touch with the Communist Movement more or less during that time, except I knew that Sol Julius was one of us. He was the Head of the Hospital – but he had to be careful. We all knew that we had to be careful if we wanted to keep our jobs. Connie would have

told you about that. She lost her job or wasn't able to get a job or something, because she made it obvious that she belonged to the Communist Party.

At this stage you could say that the authorities were beginning to exert their influence against the group, the Communists. I think they had an idea that it was much more powerful than it really was. It was only a small influence, really.

ROSS: Now, can we come to the period, then, after the War? Can you tell me a bit about what you were doing as a Party Member after the War?

RENA: Well, during the War, as a nurse I– after being in the hospital for some time -- I had annual holidays. At this stage my boyfriend was Leo McCawley. He had a job. He had been enlisted into the Army – what did they call it, when he was called up?

ROSS: Conscripted?

RENA: Conscripted. He was not a volunteer. He was conscripted. He was in Sydney. So when I got my holidays, I went to Sydney. I got a room somewhere in Redfern, a cheap room, and I got married. We didn't seem to think about the consequences of our actions. We just got married. Actually, that action of getting married, in some sort of a little suburban office, we had a couple of friends with us. We just went to this little office and paid the ten dollars or whatever, and got a certificate that we were married.

Then he was shipped away. But I couldn't go back to my job in Brisbane because married nurses were no longer welcome.

ROSS: This is still during the War?

RENA: Yes, this must be around '43, exactly '43, when we got married.

ROSS: So you came back to Brisbane after he was shipped away?

RENA: No, I wasn't welcome. I couldn't get a job at the hospital. I stayed in Sydney and I lived in a group house with other Communists. I got a job as a typist in the Current Book Distributors. This was – do you know about them?

ROSS: Just tell us a little about them for the record.

RENA: Well, the Current Book Distributors was a nest of Communists. The boss of it was Steve Purdie. Steve Purdie sat at the desk and supervised this office. There were about five or six of us in this office. He was the boss and he sat there conducting our affairs. Talk about Communist Party Official! He was a garbage-man. He enjoyed this new – he now became upper class. It's funny! He could hardly spell, Steve Purdie. He was in charge of this office, Current Book Distributors.

We were receiving books from the Soviet Union in big trunks and distributing them all over wherever we could. They tried to sell them, but if you didn't have the money, you still got one. They were beautifully bound volumes of Karl Marx and Lenin, red, lovely bindings.

I remember Steve Purdie – see, I was the typist – he was opening something and laughing, saying, 'Look, they've sent us a bill! Ha, ha, ha. We're never going to pay them for these.' He thought it was a great joke that we got these books all free, you know.

Anyhow, then, yes, I enjoyed that period. There were several people that were influential in the local groups. I can't remember their names.

ROSS: So you were a member of the Party then? Were you going to Party meetings?

RENA: Yes, yes, we had Party meetings.

ROSS: And you'd had a sort of policy of mass work, where you had to go and work amongst ordinary people?

RENA: Well, do you know, I think they kept the little groups. We didn't know much about what other people were doing. I think the Party was bigger than I was conscious of. I was only conscious of a small suburban group that I belonged to. I lived in a group house with other Communists. We all went off to work every morning. We lived at Lindfield. It was a lovely life. We enjoyed some social functions. There'd be sort of hikes out to the Hawkesbury River or something from time to time. Do you know, I don't remember very much about Party influences at that time. I think we'd drifted off into an organisation called Aid for Russia.

At one stage we were trying to get sheepskins for Russia. That was quite a big movement. We were all contributing to some fund, which was sheepskins for Russia. I think the identity as a Communist in my memory became sort of a bit blurred with the sheepskins for Russia.

ROSS: This would have been towards the end of the War?

RENA: Yes, because in '44 I went back to Brisbane. My child was born in '44, so Leo must have got out of the Army. I came back to Brisbane in '44. I was still a member of the Communist Party. I think we tried to resume our previous sort of life. We were all encouraged to get new members. There was a feeling that the Communist Party was striving for power – but I don't think they ever really reached anywhere near it.

ROSS: So if you were encouraged to get new members, how did you go about that?

RENA: Well, you talked to people at work. You tried to get the people at work, or if you were in the sporting group you spoke to them there. That was the only influence that a person had.

ROSS: Were you encouraged to become active in the various organisations within the community?

RENA: Yes, you were. You were, and I seem to remember there was that sort of influence but, really, you didn't have a chance. While I was nursing there was no possibility of enlisting other nurses. My efforts there were quite frustrated because a lot of the girls were from middle-class families and they'd been told that anything to do with Communists was not acceptable. It was all a no-no, the Communist area. They ate babies – you know, that sort of thing.

Then the other influence that was very strong in the nursing profession were the girls from the country. For the girls from the country, nursing was one of the few things that was open to them, except to become teachers or typists, and nursing was an interesting profession. You could get into nursing without a Junior Certificate [Year 10 in current terms]. If you had a Scholarship, that was what they called Year 8 now, I think, you could get into nursing. Nursing was a field where if you had English. And if you had nursing qualifications you could to all the Dominions. The world was open to you. There was Canada, America, Africa, Europe, England. They were all yours to go to, because you had the English language. We were so privileged as nurses.

ROSS: So you kept nursing, then, after the War finished?

RENA: No, after the War I had to give it up because I was married. I don't know when they decided not to take married women, or when the decided not to take women who admitted they were married. When they became a bit short of nurses during the War, I think they had to probably drop that qualification because a lot of women preferred to go into the Army. They got better conditions in the Army, didn't they?

But the Party played a big part in my life. I was initially a young woman from the country and I didn't have any connections in Brisbane. After a customer took me to the theatre, I became involved with young people. This is what a young person needs -- lots of other young people. And this is what the Party gave me. I was also amazed at the theory. The Communist theory got through to me. I was amazed that, for instance, being told that the Police Force and the Army and the Government were all tools of 'the Capitalists, who are your enemy.'

Before that, these establishments, the Police and the Army and the Government, they were symbols of my orderly life. They were symbols of society, they were symbols of civilisation to me. And the fact that now the Communist Party was telling me that they were my enemy was a bit of a shock. I found it a bit hard. My father, who was a Conservative and British, and an enemy of the Communists, actually travelled from Stanthorpe to Brisbane on one occasion, which was quite a big thing for him to do, to try to prevent me from being in a play. I said, 'No, look, there's no chance at all. These are my friends. I couldn't possibly.' He said, 'You mustn't join it, because you'll become a marked person. You'll lose your job.' It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. The loyalty to the Party was very strong. Strange, that, isn't it? Very strange. You wouldn't think twice of letting down your mates. It was some play we were putting on in Elizabeth Street.

There was a bit of a theatre there at the time. One of the things that also happened later on, after the war, I think, was the play "Reedy River". That played a big part in my life. Did it touch you at all? Have you got the music of it?

ROSS: Yes.

RENA: Can you get it to me somehow?

ROSS: Yes, I can get it to you, yes.

RENA: Well, walking around Canberra, there are various centres. Civic is a centre, Woden is a centre, and Gangahlan is a centre. There are big shopping centres at these different places. This is how they're developing the ACT. There are different centres being

developing. Instead of having one big city, they're developing a group of smaller towns. In those towns, if you walk about, you don't see beggars, but you do see buskers.

I like to give the buskers support. I often ask them, 'Do you know any folk songs? Do you know any Australian songs?' 'No, no,' don't know any Australian songs. If I could get hold of the music of Reedy River, I would have a whole lot printed and I'd go round giving them out to the buskers.

ROSS: I can send it to you, yes.

RENA: Well, I'd love it. I can get the words on my computer, but not the music. I did have it once, and I gave it to somebody. There's a local amateur theatre here in Canberra – I wouldn't be surprised if they'd love to put it on, But they don't seem to be in touch with anything, traditional sort of bush stuff.

ROSS: Can we get back to – when did you have your child? You had just one child, did you?

RENA: Yes.

ROSS: When was that? That was during the War?

RENA: Well, towards the end, November '44. The soldiers were being discharged. My brother came back. He had been a prisoner of war. He came back in '44. I don't know when peace was being declared, but it must have been around that time. You don't know the dates, do you?

ROSS: '45, August '45, after the atomic bombs.

RENA: Well, I think we already felt it was the end of the War in '44.

ROSS: And so what's your child's name?

RENA: Peter McCawley.

ROSS: And so Peter was born in '44?

RENA: yes.

ROSS: So when you were raising Peter as a young child, how did being involved in the Communist Party, how did that influence your raising of Peter as a child? Did it have any influence on that?

RENA: Not really. I don't think so. At that time, I was a bit flat out because Leo came back from the War and went back into the Public Service. We didn't have any money, either of us. But we had a child, so we had to rent a house. We rented a house. We did belong to the Communist Party.

ROSS: So how often did you go to Communist Party meetings?

RENA: Well, I think we still went to meetings. They were probably once a month. I'm trying to remember where I worked at that time. I think I must have still been in the photographic

studios. But Leo wasn't getting very good money. I can remember most of it – we never had much money. That was one of the important parts of my life. We were usually scraping along, you know. The child was looked after. It was fed and clothed and loved, and it went to school.

ROSS: I'm just thinking if the Communist Party had a great emphasis on art and culture and so on. Would that have had any influence on your raising your child in terms of being interested in art and culture and---

RENA: No, I don't know why, but I think we must have been on the fringe. We didn't mix with other young people who had children at that time. You know, when you're short of money, it's difficult to be sociable and social. You haven't got money to travel. It costs money to dress better. I'd be conscious of the fact that I couldn't entertain because my place was shabby and other people had smarter houses. That was very important thing for me in my youth. I didn't mix very much because I felt I couldn't entertain. Nothing at my place was interesting enough to invite people to. We didn't go out a great deal.

I think it was Leo's influence. Leo was a restricted person, an introvert. That had that effect on me. I didn't want to go out by myself to functions so we didn't join very much into the life of the Party at that time. Connie's experience was that they went to functions with their children. But I wasn't involved in that sort of thing. It was mainly because my husband was introvert. I'm pretty sure of that. I'm attracted to people. I like being in things and having friends around But he was exactly the opposite. We sort of learnt to go our own way.

ROSS: Can we talk a little bit about after, say, 1949, when the big anti-Communist pressure was coming from the Australian Government?

RENA: Yes.

ROSS: How did that influence your life?

RENA: Well, it influenced my life because Leo was subjected to – what's the word?

ROSS: Discrimination?

RENA: Discrimination at work. He had a job in the Titles Office. He was the only person with a Bachelor of Arts Degree. Most of the other people were returned men with very minimal education. He was the only one who had a degree, and yet he was on the outer. They put him on the task of attending to the customers at the desk, which was the lowest job you could have.

So he was subjected to that sort of discrimination. There was antagonism. He got up and spoke in the Union and attracted a lot of antagonism there. He was on the outer in his office. Therefore we were on a lower income than other people. He could have a higher income. Even Mick Healey, who had not much of an education, earned much more money. They had lounge suites and lovely new government houses. But we lived in a shabby, rented place. You know, some of the members of the Communist Party had influence in the Housing Commission. They got these new brick houses. The Bacons did, and Connie and Healey did, but we didn't. We were on the outer. I don't quite know why, because for some reason we lost contact at that stage.

I remember we buried our books in the garden because Ted Bacon was being hounded by the Police. He had to move from house to house. He slept in different houses, different times of the week, to avoid being arrested. We knew about this. Leo buried all his leftie books in the back yard. He wrapped them up in plastic. I've still got some of them where the water gets through, you know.

We also had a friend who was from the country, from my days in the country. He'd look me up. He had left at our house a gun that he had for shooting rabbits. He didn't need it when he joined up, so he left it at our house. It was somewhere under the house. We buried that quickly. A gun – we had a gun – oh, boy, you know! And the books and anything that was Communist was hidden in case we got raided.

We didn't get raided but Leo was warned off. The Police went to visit him in his office. They took him to some Police Headquarters, and subjected him to interrogation because he had brothers. You see, he had a brother who was nominated for QC. Do you know what that is, a QC?

ROSS: Yes.

RENA: It's fairly high up in the Law. Well, when that came up, Leo was subjected to interview. The Police had to make clear to themselves that he was not part of this other McCawley mob that were being given Honours to.

Leo's father was a Judge. Now, this was a position of honour in capitalist society, to be a Judge, so they had to cut him off to make sure that he was not contaminating the rest of the family, you know. So he came home – he was a bit shaken by that, being interrogated by – it was a bit intimidating, you know.

The Police – I only had one experience. This was after the War, too. For some reason I was asked to pick up a printer. I was asked to bring up this printer from one suburb and bring it to another suburb.

I must have been advised to do it late in the evening. I didn't have a car. I was a pedestrian on foot. We all were. And I went and picked up this, which was sort of a – I think it had a handle, sort of a port thing. It was for printing pamphlets. I was in this suburb with this machine, waiting at a bus stop. The mosquitoes were getting at my legs. For that reason I crouched down against the fence and put my skirt over my legs. And do you know, a Police car pulled up in front of me. It was in the suburbs, nobody about, in the late evening. These two Policemen got out and walked over and stood either side of me and wanted to know who I was and where was I going. I was terrified, really. I thought this was it. I was being taken in. But they didn't ask me what was in that port. That would have put me in properly, wouldn't it? But they said, 'No, it's all right. We're looking for a lost child. We thought you might be the lost child', when I was crouching against the fence. But that was the only time that the Police intimidated me. I really felt quite frightened of these two men. They'd got an aura of evil about them. They did for me, anyhow.

ROSS: And did you take part in the campaign against the Referendum, you know, the Communist Party bill?

RENA: Yes, I did a fair bit of leafleting and giving out leaflets. For instance, I remember we used to find out where there were big meetings, say, something on at the Exhibition Ground or

something. You'd go to give people leaflets at the outlet when people were going home. And we used to do letter-boxing from time to time. But apart from that, I wasn't a very active person, really.

But I kept a lot of my friends. I was a good friend of Eva Bacon – you know her – and Connie Healey. Then Pat died, the other sister. When I came to Canberra in '82 I lost touch. I joined an organisation here that had a couple of ex-Communists women in. One was the ex-wife of Roy Delgano. She was here. I managed to link up with her through an organisation called The Older Women's Network. There was another one – Betty Searle. She was a Communist person, too. She was prominent in the Sheepskins for Russia, I think.

Do you know who organised that? That was a very big movement in Sydney. You haven't heard about that? Well, see, it wasn't actually a Communist Movement, But things changed for the Communists when the Russians came into the War. All of a sudden it was all right for us to be Communists. But we felt, at the same time, be careful – but, you know, we were now accepted. It was a funny situation, really.

There was a woman in Sydney who organised a big movement called Sheepskins for Russia. Betty Searle was her off-sider. They raised a lot of money because the Russians were feeling the pinch. The Russians had a pretty bad time when Hitler made a mess of some of their cities and there was great starvation.

ROSS: Tell me a little bit about the 1960s and----

RENA: Well, there came a stage in my life where I had no job. I think the studio that I was working with, H B Green, closed down. He died. There was a sort of a dead end in my life. Then I decided to run a little business of my own from the house. I had a dark room under the house. My father, who was an ex-photographer, enjoyed the dark room work. We were still using films. We were moving into colour at this stage and we'd had a little advertisement in the yellow pages which was called, "Cameo photos. We come to you. Family photographs, passport photographs,' and all that. I travelled on a Vespa with my cameras and took photographs for wedding albums, babies and families and that sort of thing, sporting events, conferences. My father did the darkroom work. We supplied prints in black and white and colour.

We never got rich, but we both enjoyed this period. I also joined – I was still on the fringe of the Left Movement---

ROSS: So what years would this have been, roughly?

RENA: Early '60s, late '50s and early '60s. It was called Cameo Photos. I also had a stand every evening when there were live shows at Her Majesty's Theatre. I got permission to work in the foyer. At that stage in Brisbane going to the theatre was considered a special social occasion. Young women wore their best clothes, had a hairdo. Young men brought buttonholes and dressed up to go to the theatre. As they walked into the large foyer, carpeted and flowers and palm trees, a lovely entrance in Her Majesty's Theatre, I would take their photograph as they walked in. That was part of our business.

At that time I became friendly with Alice Mackerras, who was involved in the feminist movement. That was very interesting. There was a small group of women who used to

meet weekly in the back of a shop somewhere in Red Hill. There was a good feeling of camaraderie in this group. They had persuaded the Government to give them a small grant to pay a woman who had some academic qualifications. She had some sort of a degree. She was going to make a submission to the Government for a special club for women. It was going to be a three-storey building with a Child Care Centre, with a library, with a Medical Centre. It was going to be a women's club in the city.

But we were told by the Government that if we wanted a thing like that, we had to submit a list of exactly what we needed and how we would spend the money. Every biro had to be identified. Therefore we employed this woman with the money that we had. We were given a small grant towards this project. We used the money to pay her to attend the monthly meetings, at which we decided how many biros. Oh! That's what we were doing, and we were very excited.

It reminds me of your movement today. You think you're going to make some mark on society. That's how we felt, only we were much smaller. We were a group of about a dozen women in the back of a shop. We had this big dream. Do you know what it finished up as? We submitted this project in great detail. We waited and waited and waited, and finally the Government -- the Local Government in Brisbane -- gave us some premises. It was a corrugated iron shed that had been part of the Fruit and Vegetable Markets, which was moved from Roma Street to Ipswich Road. They gave us that shed. That's what they gave us. Already it had been empty for some months. It was full of pigeons and pigeon-droppings. We went in there and cleaned it up. Somebody gave us a lounge suite. That was what we got. It was terrible. Even now, I feel like crying. A terrible disappointment to us. That's why I'm a cynic towards your movement. When I went there yesterday I saw this nice big hall and all these people all agog. You think you're going to move the world. You're not, you know. You'll finish up with an iron shed, with pigeon-droppings.

Well, at the same time I was left with, what it left me with was the friends that I had. It's terrible.

ROSS: So something positive came out of it?

RENA: Yes, well, that's right. That's the lesson you learn. Yes, that's what interesting. You begin to see life as a sort of a panorama at my age. It's like it's passing by -- how the things that you think are going to influence will have some influence on society – but not the way you thought. In some other way it will have an influence. There will be an influence, but maybe not the one that you meant it to have. That's what's come out of the Communist Movement. A whole bunch of people who are now influencing the Peace Movement. Interesting, isn't it?

(End of Recording)