

**NATIONAL**

# Life stories

**LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH  
COMMUNITY**

**EUGENE HEIMLER**

Interviewed by Wingate, Jennifer

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



## **IMPORTANT**

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F254- Side A

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Well, I was born in, in Hungary, in a small Hungarian town, which now is a big Hungarian town, and in 1922, and my father was a lawyer, and very active in Jewish politics, and also in national politics. He was a Socialist, which in Hungary wasn't exactly what it is here. The Jew here, felt very unhappy about the social injustices, and so he joined the Social Democratic Party of Hungary, and he became a leading person in it, a Councillor, well, later on. And my mother came from a different background, she had no interest in politics, she wanted to be an actress, but she didn't succeed in that, or, in those days, I suppose, it wasn't the done thing, but they loved each other very much, and I, as an outcome, have felt, in my very early years, that there was, the sun was shining all around me. I had a very, exceptionally happy childhood.

What were their names?

My father's name was Ernest, and my mother's name was Maria. Anyway, and ...

And the family name was Heimler?

Heimler, yes. My, it's a very old Hungarian family name. I just received some documentation going back into the 17th Century.

Where is that from, that documentation?

The documentation came from various people who recorded it from the Local Authorities, in Hungary. Not just any, in this area of the country, not just in that town.

And this has just come to light?

It didn't come to light just, I always knew it. Bits and pieces came to light, but somebody in America, a relative, undertook to study the ancestry of this family, and went painstakingly into various connections of this, that and the other, and came out with a family tree.

They're not original documents?

No. No. The original documents I have got one, I think, somewhere, which shows back into the 18th Century, but it's a very old Hungarian family.

That's very unusual.

Not in Hungary, no.

What was the name of the town you were born in?

Szombathely, I have to spell that. So my grandparents, and great grandparents lived near this town where I lived, all were born there, in a place called Vat, which is a small village, and, so the whole family, as far as I can see from various bits and pieces which have kind of emerged, come from Western Hungary, this part, not necessarily the same town or the same village. So there they were, a fairly settled community. The story of that, of that family is also very interesting. That came to light very clearly, apart from my grandmother's memory sometimes, at times about some Christian connections, the Jews went from Spain, across Europe, and ended up, these people ended up in Germany, where they had German names, Heimler's, there was a King, I think Joseph II, who, who insisted the Jews are going to have German names, that's why Jews actually have German names, and one part of the family, under pressure at that time, and I don't know where it was, it was somewhere in the late 1700s, converted into Christianity, so there is a Heimler family, a branch, which is Roman Catholic, in Bavaria, and all kind of, and the other one, my ancestors, left as a Isadorka (ph), and they're not anything to do with this family, but the, a descendant of that family, a Dr. Josef Heimler, has written to me, because apparently somewhere they wrote my name in some publication, and he traced me, and told me that it is in fact the same family, and there was even a Nazi among the Heimlers, on that side, which has given me fantastic, some ideas, and, but that is the story.

So your family originally came from Spain, then?

Well, all of them came from Spain. My grandmother, for example, claimed, and she made herself very popular with her children, that she was a direct descendant of the Abarbonels, and that she had blue blood in her, to which we, my cousin and I pierced, to my mother's horror, our veins, to find that this blue blood very disappointingly wasn't! Anyway, that is the background story, and so I discovered after the War, that what my grandmother was saying, in fact, was true, that there was a branch of the family, which converted, and they throw their clothes in, and all that usual stuff, and came into Hungary, and the documentation, whatever there is, starts with this gentleman, and perhaps his brother, from the 1700s onwards, that's when they came into Hungary.

Do you have those documents?

I have some photostat of something, of another branch of this family, not a direct descendant of my father, grandfather, great-grandfather and cousins and so on, and there are several brothers and there are several children, and one of them has some documentation, which I have got somewhere. Because the Local Authorities kept records in Hungary, very careful records about things, and it shows, you know, even statement of how honest, decent person this was, and you know.

A good citizen?

A good Jew, yeh, a good citizen, yeh.

So you remember your grandparents well?

I remember my grandmother well, I don't remember my grandfather.

This is your father's?

My father's mother.

What was her name?

Oh, that is difficult. The family was Fischer, but I honestly can't tell you, that's the thing, what her name was.

What did you call her?

Granny. Who knows a Grandmother's name as such?

You called her "Granny"?

Grandmother, in Hungarian, Nagymama.

What is it in Hungarian?

Nagymama. Mama is Mummy.

Do you remember where they lived, do you remember their house?

Oh I remember the house. The first time, after 42 years, and I'm going to go back to my home town now, and have a look.

You haven't been back for 42 years?

It's really a very great event.

When are you going?

In September sometime, probably second week in September.

Do you know people there?

Yeh, I think that there are people still around who knows the family, will probably remember me too.

So you're going to see people when you go back?

I want to see, first of all, the places, if people come my way I won't say no to them, but first of all I am in search of my memories.

Are you going alone?

No, with my wife. And later on, not on this occasion, the next occasion, my son also will come.

Can I ask you why you've decided now, to go?

Because the political situation in Hungary has changed, because it's safe now, I think, to go. Because there was always the danger that there could be some difficulty, although there's a street named after my father in my home time, because of his political activities, and because he fought for the underdog, and the street is still there. I am sure I know a lot of people there. We were so much part of the community, and this strangeness and alieness, that many British Jews of that generations, who came from Poland or Russia, that we didn't have.

It was a good community?

Yeh.

So you remember it very well.

Of course I remember it. I left only when I was 21.

To go back to your early days, you say you remember your grandmother very well,

Yeh.

Can you remember incidents with her? Can you remember her home and what,

I remember exactly where it was, I could find blindfolded that place. They were, she had a number of children, and these brothers and sisters of my father, and she lived with two of these daughters, sorry, sisters, and I know where she lived, I know the feel of the Shabbat afternoon, when we used to go over there, and used to tell us stories, and she, we imagined her be so good, that in her presence we weren't even naughty, which is quite something! And she was a blessed little creature, very small, and she, we know, my grandfather was a very religious Jew, so she didn't have her own hair, but a wig.

A sheitel?

A sheitel, yes, and well, that's the background. Of course, I remember, she used to tell us stories about the coming of the Messiah, or what he will be like, what the world would be like beforehand.

Was your family religious, your mother and father?

Mother not, father yes, really.

So they kept Shabbat?

Oh yes.

And a kosher household?

Yes.

And you went to Cheder?

I went to Cheder, and later on to Talmud Torah, and even later, Yeshiva, only in my free time.

That was your choice then, or was it something that was expected of you?

It was expected of me, and I did it, without much murmur.

It was something that was a natural follow on from your early childhood?

Yes, a natural follow on, and later on, I had private coaching by a Rabbi, who was, of course, he was a very Orthodox man, with a very modern outlook, and he caught my imagination, he could explain to me Talmudic pieces like no-one else could, and at that particular point, I liked to go, although I had to go to the School, and, ordinary school, but I spent several afternoons, or part of the afternoon there with him.

Was it a particularly religious sect, Hassidic...

It was not, it wasn't very far from it. The Hassidic Movement didn't do the Eastern part of the country, from Russia, Poland. These were very very Orthodox Jews, without the Hassidic manifestations, you know. I didn't wear the, the Russian type of clothing, or the Polish type of things.

Did they have Peyers?

Oh yes, oh yes. The Peyers and beard, and everything else, but not, not that, and not the kaftan either.

What about your father, did he have Peyers?

No. He was the only son of this family, who, who became an educated man, and it wasn't easy still, for a Jew, to get a Scholarship straight through, and he became a lawyer, and he, he was supported by the Hungarian State, which is very unusual, which was very unusual.

Why was that? Was that, was he the youngest in his family?

He was one of the youngest. There was still one younger brother.

How many brothers and sisters were there?

God in Heaven! How many? There were one, two, three, four brothers, and three sisters.

Were you all living in the same area?

Originally yes, and then, most of them lived in the same area, and some of them lived in the same town all their lives.

And you were a close family, with your aunts and uncles?

Yeh.

You met on Shabbat?

We met on Shabbat, we met, I had a cousin that is my brother's son, who was my best friend, so, so there were links forged.

And you had Passover together?

No. Those we had all the family units, they did them themselves. The only time when I remember that my grandmother came into the picture, was Pesach once, and also once at Succoth, but otherwise they kept their own thing, and one of the brothers went there the first and second day, you know, to do it, but the whole family couldn't be together, there were too many.

Too many?

Yeh.

You all used to go to Synagogue on the High Holy Days?

Oh my God, yes!

For Shabbat too?

Yes. I went, I went to Shachris, then came back to have breakfast, Moussaf, I had to go back on Moussaf, and then we came back for lunch, and then went back Mincha in the afternoon, and afterwards, Ma'ariv. It wasn't an easy life, I'll tell you.

And this was from before Bar Mitzvah, presumably?

Straight through. Bar Mitzvah didn't come into it, it wasn't like now, after Bar Mitzvah you, you forget all about it.

That was just part of your,

Just part of my life, yeh.

You mentioned a sister?

Yes, I had a sister.

Yes. Susan. Yes, she was eight years older, and so I had only one sister, and, and she was an English teacher, teacher of English, very gifted with languages.

Did you get on well with your sister?

Not when we were children. I must have been a nuisance, because, at least everybody said I was a horror, and I must have upset her. I certainly remember having broken some of her dolls, and, but later, after my mother died, she just died before the War, and just exactly before the War, actually it was the anniversary of her birthday, July 6th, or 9, I'm not sure which one, 1939 she died. She was the only member of my family who was not deported, and she's still in the Jewish Cemetery in my home town. And she was very ill for a very long time.

What was she ill with?

Well, originally I thought, we thought that she had what was known, pernicious anaemia, but it was really cancer, for a period of years. Then in that July she died. She was not that religious, but she did everything for my father's sake, you know.

Had her family been religious? Where did they come from, you haven't mentioned that.

I don't know much about that family. I know that they came, they were in Hungary also for a long long time. But somehow or other, there is much less documentation of that family. They may have come from some place like Poland or Russia earlier, I don't know. But they certainly, they belonged to the Reform Synagogue, which was a sin for my father, and, but she was accepted after some difficulties in the family. But it couldn't have been very easy for her. But as she played the game, if I may say that, absolutely, totally, with conviction, it was all right, and they accepted her, but it was not easy for her to start with. She was a very beautiful woman, and my father fell for her, straight through.

They were married quite young, were they?

Well, they must have been quite young. My mother died in 1939, she was 53 years old, so probably she was quite young.

You were telling me about your father's activities. What did he do?

He was a lawyer, and

He had clients?

Yes, he was a very idealistic person, he defended the peasants against the landlords, which not many lawyers did in those days, because these landlords, being a feudal country, had immense power. But he did that. Financially he never did as well as he could have done, but because of that, and because they brought chickens eggs and things like that. It was all right to eat, but not to pay the rent! He had one or two

remarkable cases where he showed real courage, where he kind of stood up against the landlord on murder, where a young land was, I can't remember details, accused of having killed his sweetheart, when it turned out that it was the landlord who pushed this girl into the well, because he had some sexual relationship with her, and my father defended the, the young man. Now, whether this is accurate or not, I can't tell you in detail, but I know that this was a big case, which I heard about for a long time. And it was a big case because of the circumstances, and where it was, in a feudal country, and they have sentenced this man, I don't know to death or life imprisonment, the baron, or whoever he was. He was a Hungarian called (INAUDIBLE)

Is that a (INAUDIBLE)

I think so. Now whether he was actually executed or not, I don't know. This was a ... so not only did my father help this man, this young man to get free, but he was then accused of murder.

Who?

The baron, the landlord.

He was accused of murder, that's remarkable.

Yes. That's the kind of thing he did.

Presumably that wasn't very good for his career?

No.

Among the landed gentry?

No, it wasn't good in his career, altogether, because they considered him dangerous. But nothing happened, yes, he was.

What about among the Jewish Community?

Enormous respect. As I said, we were part of the Orthodox community, he was Chairman of the Educational Committee, and they came to him, like brothers or children come with their Tsauras, you know? And he was extraordinarily influential believe it or not. If somebody hadn't had certain rights and they came to my father, or they broke the windows in the Synagogue, they came to him, and he had all kind of connections that he could put it always right. He had connections locally, and he had connections nationally.

He did?

Oh yes.

How did that come about, do you know?

He was enormously respected, even by his adversaries. He was straight, straight like an arrow. And nobody had any doubt where he stood.

He started his education, his adult education, as a lawyer? Did he go to University?

Of course.

And then he became an advocate?

Yes, he became what would be now, in this country, a barrister.

But, in this town where you were brought up, or

No, he had to go to University in Budapest, yes, yes.

And you grew up respecting him, obviously and looking up to him.

Enormously, I, I think that I was the only one. I remember several occasions when I went to some places, and they asked me if I was his son, and immediately, I could feel that we were dealing with somebody who really had a very very deep impression, he made a very deep impression on people, and he was a Zionist. Now, how do you make that work? Imagine, he was a Socialist, as a Zionist, he was a Mizrachi, which is on the Right? In him this all, there was no contradiction, you know? But everybody respected him enormously. And if I tell somebody of my generation, still they remember him, but the older ones, while they were still alive, they felt it was extraordinary what, what he could do for the Jewish Community.

Did you talk much about politics with him at home?

Towards the end, yes. Don't forget, I was 17 years old when the War broke out, so beforehand I was a child, really, and I didn't quite understand, but I do remember a very important episode, which had a lasting impression on me. In 1938 the Germans invaded Austria, and the Hungarian anti-Semites, the Nazis, began to feel now is their chance, and there was a Council Meeting, and you know what an Erev is, don't you? Do you know what an Erev is?

Erev, when you surround a town with wire, so that you can carry within, so that it's almost like your home. Well, check this, because there was a big argument whether there should be an Erev in Golders Green or not, it's a very kind of Orthodox thing. The Erev represents a a wall, so otherwise you can't carry anything, but with an Erev you can carry your books and everything.

On Shabbat?

On Shabbat, yes. Well, in the area,

A kind of ghetto within a ghetto?

That's exactly what the Nazis said! You know, that they are creating a ghetto out of the town, and he stood up and defended it. Now, the Rabbi, who was, not Orthodox, but the Reform Rabbi, who was ex-officio part of the Council, County Council, went out when these attacks started, but he remained, and he defended it, and there was a paper, I don't know where it was, in Germany, or in Austria, in German language, or even Switzerland ....

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... defend this area, which was a remarkable thing to do.

What was his reason? What were his grounds for defending it?

Because the area was very important for the Jews, to be able to carry to the Synagogue the Talmud, for example, or Prayer Books, or whatever, and there's a big argument here in Golders Green about this.

But the Talmud is held on Shabbat.

Any book, darling. We men could carry the purses if there was no money in it, a man could carry the Tallis, they didn't have to leave it there, all kinds of things.

But many Orthodox people won't do it without an Erev.

No. No. Really Orthodox people won't do it without an Erev, and he stood up for that.

Because he felt it was their freedom to choose whether they had it or not?

That's right, yes.

What was the outcome?

The outcome was, that it was, it was okay. And the outcome was that the, that is a strange story, but from that story you will see how remarkable some of the things were. The man's name, I remember, who attacked him, his name was Markus, Markus, and he was a Nazi, but later on, well, at least, extremely Right Wing, at the very end of the War he was executed, but for different reasons. The, this man became the Commanding Officer of the Jewish Work Brigade, which, which was there first in 1941, '42 onwards, to, what they called, what is ...? Work camps. And it was still under the military, and I was called up, and he was my Commanding Officer, and my father was very very frightened, because of the clash years back, it will rebound on me. And in those days, they selected people, young people, to go to the Russian Front, and any young man who went to the Russian Front died there. Anyway, my father met him, came to this, this place, this barrack where I was kept, met him, and asked him not to make any kind of distinction, because of what has happened. And the following day, this man, who was very powerful, said to me, "You have a remarkable father." And nothing happened to me.

That's very impressive.

Very. This is the kind of thing that he did. He was exceptional courage. When the, you know, Hungary was a strange country, the longer the War went on, the more freedom there was in the country. In 1943, Parliament, and the Social Democratic Member of Parliament, Peyer, was saying in Parliament, "This is not our War. Our

friends are enemies, and our enemies are our friends." Because Hungary was in War with Great Britain and United States, and Russia. Well, anyway, in 1943, there were some atrocities against some Jewish batallions, by some younger officers, and some of these people, if not killed, they were seriously injured, and I remember, because I stood there, my father ringing up this man Peyer, who was Member of Parliamement for the Social Democratic Party, to speak to Minister and tell him what is going on and it should be stopped, it was stopped. As I told you, he had extraordinary influence on what was going on. And, of course, he was loved by the Jewish Community, that he could do things like that. No other Jew could do anything like that.

He obviously had a very unusual position in the Community. Would you say that the Jewish Community, in general, was very much within itself, or was it spread out and accepted among the non-Jewish Community?

The Orthodox Community was very much within itself. The Reform Community not so much.

And you were part of the Orthodox?

I was part of the Orthodox. But he was an exceptional person who broke out of Orthodoxy, in a sense, because, I mean, it wasn't from that kind of background, you don't become a lawyer and a Socialist politician.

It is unusual.

Very.

But that high profile, did that attract anti-Semitic comments towards him, or towards you?

Towards me, more so, because when I was in school, some of the anti-Semitic teachers, in the Grammar School, didn't say directly, but I felt it, that they were making remarks about some political views my father held and so on and so forth. Much more against me.

Tell me about your schooling. Where did you go?

I went to the Orthodox Elementary School, that was run by the Orthodox Community, for four years, and from there, if your marks were good enough, then you could go to the Gymnasium, which, at the age of, wait a minute, yes I think you entered it in your 11th year.

So until you were 11, you were at school, in a Jewish ...

Yes, Jewish school.

Boys and girls?

Boys and girls? Yes, boys and girls, yeh.

And then at II, that was stopped, then Gymnasium.

Yes. Gymnasium, yes, and I was there until the Sixth Class, which was 1938, when I was 16. And then I had to leave, because the anti-Semitism against me, was beginning to be unbearable.

Were there not many other Jewish boys?

There were, but they were not as pointed as it became then against me, you know?

Because of your father?

I think so.

What sort of things would they say, or do?

I don't think that they said anything much, although the attitude was, but what they did was, I was a Hungarian, a young Hungarian poet, I had regular columns in the paper, for poetry, every second week or third week, and I was well-known in Hungary, even today, if you made enquiries in that part of Hungary, they remember it, as a young poet. And my Professors failed me in, in Hungarian literature and poetry, you know? And that was obvious that, that I won't get anywhere then, in that school, you know. So I left it, I went to Budapest to learn a trade. These events are very important events, photography, and I was a private student at the Jewish Gymnasium, which still functioned, and everything functioned until 1944. In Hungary we were relatively lucky. 1943 I matriculated, much later than I should have done, but I did it at the Jewish Gymnasium, and so my education was that.

You never thought of going into the law, like your father?

No. No. Look, the clouds were gathering on the sky, I knew that we were not, I knew then that I am not going to stay in Hungary.

When did you know? When did you start to feel ....

Well, that began around the 1937/38.

Is this something you discussed at home?

Oh yes. And my father and my mother did not want me to stay in Hungary. I mean, a lot of young people illegally went to Israel, Palestine. I could have gone, but my mother was so desperately ill, I didn't want to. So there was no question about it, that I would, I would stay in Hungary.

They didn't think of leaving as well, did they?

Well, my father couldn't leave because of my mother.

She couldn't travel?

And she couldn't travel, I mean, she was desperately ill. But it's easy to say "leaving", but it's not that simple to leave legally. And at that age, to leave illegally was not fun. I mean, for somebody of 18, or 17, or 18 or 20, it's okay, it's risky, but not for somebody who is 55 or whatever.

So you studied photography in Budapest?

In Szombathely, and in Budapest, yeh. I didn't like it very much, I must say.

How did you make the choice in the first place?

That was the nearest which had any kind of artistic expression, so I thought, well, what I had to be in the end, developing prints and the pictures so far from art, anyway, but that's what I did. I was never very good at it, and I never liked it very much. The only good thing remained from it was that, possibly, I see colours and shades clearer and better when it comes to taking a picture, than perhaps most people, or other people, because I was taught.

Did you continue writing poetry?

Mmmm. And, on the day when the War broke out, my first book of poems were published. I still have got that, and in 1941, in the middle of the, of the grip of the Nazis around Hungary, not in Hungary, my second book of poetry was published, and that was published by the Jewish Literary Institute, is IMIT, Israel, the one you hear of, Ashava (ph). And these poems all had something to say about the current situation at that time. Now, some of these poems would have real interest, I mean, historical interest, because there is a young Jew, talking about the current situation, how he feels.

Have you got that volume as well?

I have got that, yes.

Is it translated?

Some of them have been translated, some, yeh.

And published here?

No, I don't think that many have been published here, or many have been published of these things. I found these poems very personal at that time. As time goes on, I don't find them, but it really expresses how a young Jew felt in 1940/41/42/43.

Did you have close friends at that time?

Yeh.

Jewish friends, or non-Jewish friends?

Both.

What did you talk about with them?

Politics.

Did you all feel that something, a War was going to happen?

Yeh. There was no question about it, that, that we smelled a War around us, and Hungary was freer than most countries, as you may know, as I said, the Party still existed, newspapers still existed, there was a, a man with a column in one of the evening papers, night after night attacking the Nazis, and it was possible, in the paper. What it was not allowed, is to attack directly the Germans. Hungarian Nazis you could attack, right, left and centre.

Among your non-Jewish friends, was there any feeling of really strong solidarity against the Nazi element? Did you feel they were very much on your side?

They, I can say no. There were a few, and the relationship between myself and non-Jews, became rarer and rarer as the time went on, as time went on, because, I think that they did not feel also safe, in time, to, to befriend the Jew. Although there were some who, without any side influence, became Socialists or, or Liberals, from schooldays, but meeting them became more and more difficult. Also, it was not encouraged by the Jewish people either. We were not sure whether they were not spies for the police, and all these suspicions began to come about.

Your teachers, in the Gymnasium, you said that some of those were anti-Semitic.

The younger ones who came from, from, fresh from the Universities, they were. The older ones weren't.

Were they all strongly politically active, or were these just attitudes that they had?

The older ones were not politically active. The younger ones, I'm sure, were. Prior to coming into the teaching profession, they must have been, they were.

So you were quite sure, at an early age, that something terrible was going to happen, and you talked about it with your friends, and you talked about it with your parents.

Yeh.

Did you ever feel that it could possibly be as strongly anti-Semitic as it turned out to be? Did you ever feel that at all?

As it turned out, in the very end, no. Anti-Semitic in the sense of some Jews being beaten up, which happened. Some Army groups had beaten up Jews when they came from the Synagogue and it was in 1943, I think, and again, they came to my father, and again, my father stopped it, and the Army Officer, I think, was removed from his position, because there were new winds blowings in Hungary, you see, 1943, the Hungarian Government were always bait, moving this way, moving that way, began to see that this War is lost for the, for the Nazis, and they were not Nazis themselves, but very Right-wing, so they began to be more careful, and to my father's protestation, this was very successful. He was extraordinarily successful in stopping any kind of bits and pieces against the Jews.

And he carried on in practice till?

No, his practice was taken away from him. After the, and even during the Hungarian Jewish Laws, because there were such, so he couldn't practice is law.

When?

I don't know the year, but I think it would be 1942 onwards. He was not allowed to practice.

The first two, two and a half years or so, of the War, he continued in his practice?

Yes, yes. There were Jewish Laws, the first one came in 1939, that was quite mild, but the second one was really a Nuremburg Law, was, I think, in 1941, and after that, I think, but check these dates, I'm not sure whether that's, my recollection is, after that he couldn't.

How did he live?

My sister supported him very much.

Was she married?

She was married to a very rich man, and she did whatever support she could give him, and I don't know how he managed, it was terrible. He just sat by the window, looking out. This very powerful man was broken, this was before the Nazis came, yeh.

This was '42?

'42 onwards, yes.

And at that stage, you were still in Budapest?

I was in, part of the time I was in Budapest, part of the time I was back, and when I was back, then I was teaching children, helping them, you know, to, to their lessons, at school, for some money, and whatever I could give him, I gave him too. But those were, to me, not to me, but for him, the worst years, I think, when everything was taken away from him, and he just couldn't do anything.

Because your mother had died.

My mother died in '39.

And his practice,

And he didn't have anything. He only had one thing, and that was his religion. He believed absolutely, without reservation.

But he had you,

Yeh, and my sister.

His daughter.

Yes. Yes. My sister had a child, Groby, he was killed in Auschwitz, the little one.

So what happened then?

When?

When the Nazis and the Germans did ...

When the Germans came in, on 19th March, 1944, then, within weeks, he was arrested by the Gestapo. But, again, you can work it out, what the situation must have been. He was in the Gestapo building for a couple of hours, when the Hungarian Police insisted that they take him over, so he wasn't hurt, and there was an actual argument about it. They respected it so much. So he was in a Hungarian prison, with open doors, the prison cell opened on a yard, or a court, and this was open, and we could go and take him food and so on and so forth. He had to be there, but he wasn't hurt, and nobody could touch him there. And then they took him away, separate from us, to Auschwitz.

You weren't arrested then, by the Gestapo, at the same time?

No. I, I, I escaped from, I went away from home.

What, just before your father was arrested?

I was not at home at the time when he was arrested, and I didn't go home for a few days.

Had arrests already been going on a lot?

1944, after the Germans came, anything happened, anything could happen.

(QUESTION INAUDIBLE)

Yes, sure. But mainly, what you heard about were the politicals, Socialists, Liberals, even Conservatives, who didn't see eye-to-eye with the Nazis, this one knew, or heard about.

So it was based on individuals who they did not want in the community?

Yeh, yeh, so my father was not arrested because he was a Jew, he was arrested because he was a Socialist. Because at that time, I heard a number of, and they deported them, and they were sent to Auschwitz.

When was that?

1944, in April, but you know, he went in May, I think, he was deported.

Before we go on to talk about your father's deportation, I wonder if you'd tell me a little bit more about your, your very early life. A description of your parents' house, your grandparents' house?

Well, the house in, it was a flat, quite a large flat, that I was born, and stayed there until my mother's death in 1939, very comfortable, extremely comfortable. I had my room. Life was very nice, except one thing, that my mother was ill. She was ill since I was a little boy, I think, 9. I don't know whether I mentioned that, but that had, had put a stamp on my life, and on our, my father's life, my sister too, because she was really in, in, in constant pain, and there was a cousin of mine, who was, still is, a brilliant doctor, and he came and time to time, gave her some injections, which really helped her enormously. So he discovered that we're in cosy life, there came this tragedy long before the Germans came into Hungary, and what life was like: it was a small town, I understand now it's quite big, the tallest house was two floors up, I think, and life had a kind of a very slow rhythm. My father's life is amazing. I mean, until then what a slow rhythm he had, in his life, and everything went in a rather comfortable and cosy way. We got up in the morning, he had breakfast with us.

What did you have for breakfast?

That's difficult, I do know that we had a lot of eggs, and which we used to (INAUDIBLE), but I don't know that we had eggs in the morning, even in those days, my mother kind of rationed a bit. I suppose the usual Continental type of things that one eats on the Continent, rolls and jam, and things like that.

Did your mother prepare breakfast, or did you have servants?

W had, we had a maid, and more often than not, probably she did, and yes, I think that it was always there.

Did you have a cook?

We didn't have a cook, we had this maid and my mother, and my father had a secretary in his office.

Was it a large house?

It was quite a big flat, I don't know whether it, it seemed big because I was so small, but I think, in, in, if I looked back it would be, there were several rooms. How many? One, two, three, six, six or seven rooms in the house, in the flat, and

And your father worked from home?

Well, most lawyers, in those days, worked from home, and he had his own office there.

So you didn't have a garden?

Oh yes.

You did.

We had a lovely little garden actually, we had a court, and behind the court there was a little garden, not so little either, and we used to play football there, and to the great horror of anyone, because of the windows. I was very keen on, on, on football, in my younger days. And generally speaking, it was a paradise, that little world, because, most of the time, in the summer, and whenever the weather allowed, I was out in that garden, and in that little court. Again, it may not have been that little either. So many children could play football there, then it couldn't have been that small. Yes, we played there, and ....

Who did you play with?

Well, there were sections who were in the house, there were also children who came in regularly, from the neighbourhood, and there was my cousin, who involved, who always came in, and, and we played together.

What was his name?

Mickey. We were always, he was always there, and if I think back, it was a very warm atmosphere. My mother used to look down from the verandah what we were up to. When tea was, or whatever in the afternoon, coffee, tea, we were called up, it was like a little Army, moving up! You know, we had two staircases, one in the front, which was rather posh and one in the back, where we went up and down, and it was a pleasure to enter into this, and I can't think back with anything except pleasure of the early years, really.

Did your father ever play football with you?

No, he, he didn't. Neither did my mother. You have to place yourself back, and such a long time ago, when fathers

did not actually play with their children in this way, you know, he was very interested

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F255 - Side A

19th July, 1989, for the National Life Story Collection, the interviewer is Jennifer Wingate.

... a member of the County Council, elected, and also, also an elected Member of the Council for the City, so if he was not doing his work in his office, he was always drafting speeches and doing this, and doing that. He was also Chairman of the Educational Committee of our Synagogue, and so, one thing and another, he was always at it, with something.

Did you play any other games?

Well, I had my poets, you know? And I remember that in the house, not remember, I know this man still very very well, he was a non-Jewish boy, his name was Gyusi, and he, he was very mechanically orientated, amazing at this young age, and he was allowed to play with all kind of mechanical devices, which were fed with benzine, or petrol, you know? And I was admiring him because he knew what to do and his father trusted that he knew what to do, and he did. The engines were going with petrol, you know, and all kind of, I was not allowed to play with those things.

Do you mean train engines?

Train engines, yes.

He had a train set.

Yes. I had one too, but mine was not so elaborate. Also he had various mechanical devices, which I can't even remember exactly what they were, but I remember that all the wheels went, and the, and the put the light under this, and then the heat moved these things, and I wasn't, this was very nice, except on one occasion, this was when we were really very young, I remember this very clearly, although I couldn't have been more than four or five, four perhaps, and there was a sand pit there, especially imported in, so that we could play in the sand, and why and why not, I don't know, but he came with a himmer and hit me on the head, and that was, of course, a disaster. It was a terrible hiding, and I came up in a bump, and then I didn't want to talk to him for three whole days, and afterwards everything went back to normal. He's my best friend now, he was here from Hungary, and his mother, who was a Roman Catholic, is very nice to us always, and to me, particularly, when the persecution time came, when I was out in the hospital, I had no access to any money, and she brought me some, because I thought that perhaps I escape to Yugoslavia. So they were very very nice people, she risked, risked a lot. And he was also brought up in the same spirit.

Did you, did you tend to get a lot of toys? Did your parents buy you a lot of things?

Yes. I had, I don't think that I had more than most children of my generation in time, but when I wanted something, it was there eventually. It didn't arrive out of the blue, it always a kind of a birthday, or Pesach, or whatever, but I did, yes.

But can you remember anything you wanted very much that your parents did not approve of?

Well, these mechanical things they didn't approve of. But, I can't remember. I remember I wanted a real football, we only played with this round ball, and I got that. Train sets, God only knows what!

Did you play tennis?

No, tennis I didn't play. Table tennis, at one stage or another, we did. Not in our house, but in somebody else's, yes.

When you started your interest in poetry, did you share that with your friends, did you read poetry together?

Well, yes and no. Not so much with my friends, as those poems were published every second week, I think, in one of the local papers, and they were a bit envious, they didn't understand very much poetry. They didn't understand that somebody who plays around with them also writes poetry. So I don't think that my contemporaries, at that stage, understood very much. When I was in school, in Gymnasium, which is the Grammar School, then yes, then, then, then my contemporaries became very interested, and I was also reciting my poems at the Jewish Literary Society, which we had locally, and very successful. On one occasion, we had a literary evening, where a very well-known Jewish journalist from Budapest came down. That was 1941, just not here a year, when the Germans were all over the place, and Auschwitz was already in operation, and the other camps, and still we had a Literary Evening, then my poems were recited, hundreds of people, lots of people. I also had my poems recited by one of the country's greatest actors, Oskar Beregi, in Budapest, in the Goldmark Hall, which was the place where all kind of theatre pieces and other cultural activities went on, in, in the capital, yeh.

How old were you when that happened?

Well, I started to write poetry from the age of nine, and my first book was published at 17, now, between 9 and 17, increasingly, a lot of things were, were published, I made myself quite a reputation in that part of the County, as Heimler the Poet, you know, so, you know, for example, when I said, somebody said, "Heimler!" and they said, "Which? The lawyer or the poet?" Now, that's how it was, and I was very proud of that. I wasn't just my father's son, you know, that's very important to me.

Wasn't music also important to you and your family?

No. To my sister, yes, she played the piano beautifully she was very musical. You know, there is a one-sidedness with people who are gifted. If you are very gifted, say, in one direction, you are not often, except in mathematics, when the musical ability goes with it. If you write poems, you will find very few real poets are also musicians, it's the music or the words, it's, it's taking over, but not music as such. I appreciate music, but I never went for it.

Nobody ever set your poems to music?

There was a stage when, when somebody, somebody tried, but I wasn't very happy with it myself.

So you didn't sing songs at home?

Oh yes, songs we sang, sure, all kinds of songs, Jewish songs as well, the ones which became a kind of repertoire of Israel today, and, "Ha macabi" (??) you know that? All kinds of Zionist songs, as well as Hungarian songs, a lot. And ...

Do you remember them?

Oh yes, I remember them. I remember them, some of them I remember, sometimes the words go, but the, the melody is still with me, sure.

Patriotic songs, maybe?

Patriotic songs were not much in favour, Hungarian patriotic songs. Jewish patriotic songs more so.

The Jewish patriotic songs, what language would they be sung in?

Hebrew.

In Hebrew.

Yes, sure.

Did any of the people you knew, speak Yiddish?

There were a few people in the Synagogue who spoke Yiddish. The Hungarian Jews from this part of Hungary were so much rooted in the Hungarian world, the Hungarian soul, they didn't speak Yiddish, no.

So you didn't understand it, or did you?

German yes, Yiddish no. But believe it or not, when we went to Jeder, we didn't translate the Hebrew text into Hungarian, but into German, "So braiche zum Anfang", so it went, you know.

Always?

That was the pattern there.

You've told me a bit about your home, can you remember about your grandparents' homes?

Well, I only remember one room of my grandmother's house, where we usually sat. This was a house rather than a flat, I think, looking, overlooking a little river, and there was a big table in the middle, and chairs around it, and the family gathered together on Shabbat afternoon, sitting around, and talking with her, to her, and she was a very wise woman, and you know, also, my father, for example, when he had some very complicated legal cases, told her about it, she always had the Nazis (ph) you know, very clear and sharp. It was very well noted that my grandmother was very very sharp, even in her eighties. She died when she was 83.

And did she have servants?

No. My grandparents, grandmother, was a typical Hungarian countrywoman, with a typical Hungarian accent, which only that part of the world has. If you met her and her daughters, you wouldn't have been able to say that they were not countryfolk from out of the country, so they wouldn't have even thought of the idea of servants, even if they had the money. And there were so many daughters my grandmother had, that there were none. They were doing the work there. And she did it as long as she could. And we're not a rich family, you know, born in, in that part of the country where they come from, they were identified very much with that world, and lived accordingly. They were not necessarily poor, but these things were luxuries for them, and they wouldn't have accepted it.

Did they have the basic conveniences? A bathroom, a kitchen, running water?

Oh yes, yes, yes.

Hot and cold.

Yes, that yes. And excellent food, because they all were excellent cooks.

And what about the other grandparents, do you remember theirs?

My mother's side?

Yes.

No, because both of them died when I was very small. In fact, I think that my grandfather probably died before I was born. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, I must have known, because I have a just vague image of her, but not much more. So I can't say anything about them.

How did the grandmother you remember, how did she dress? What did she wear?

The Heimler Granny, looked very much like a picture from the last century, you know? Always. And she had a sheitel as well, so, I only remember however she was dressed, she was dressed like a Hungarian peasant, I suppose, the reds, kind of shawl around her, winter and summer alike, always that same kind of red shawl, or may have been several, but that's what she had covering herself.

And her skirt?

Oh yes.

Long skirt?

Long skirt, yes. Long skirt.

Coloured?

No, no, no, no. It was like the colour you have.

Black?

Yes, yeh.

And a scarf over the sheitel?

I don't think that she had a scarf over the sheitel, no.

And her, her home, was that also very much what we think of, as the Hungarian style?  
Very colourful, a lot of patterns?

Yes. I think it was a, if you, if you went in those days, say, out in the Hungarian  
villages, that' what it would have been like, yeh.

Rugs on the floor?

Yeh, I think so.

Rugs on the wall?

I don't remember that. I really don't. But I wouldn't be surprised if there would be.

What about food, can you remember the sort of food?

Oh yes, that was excellent. The food was never a problem in Hungary, in any case.  
And, yes, of course, kosher kitchen in all of our Heimler's houses, and these were  
very strictly separated. Food was excellent. Both in my grandmother's house, and  
also in our own.

What sort of food? A typical Friday night dish, please?

Friday night, we had fish, but that was a typical Hungarian carp, you know, I think it's  
called, and sometimes it was cold, and with potatoes and what you have. On  
Shabbat, more often than not, there were cholent, that you had to go and take the stuff  
to a baker, who put it into the oven, and then next day, the girl, the maid collected it,  
Saturday, so that it was hot. I remember we had veal and chicken, and

Dumplings?

Yes.

Cabbage?

That's right, whatever Hungarians eat, sure.

Did you have wine?

Oh yes, we had wine, naturally. Only for, for Friday evening and Saturday, yeh. It was not just wine, but also, what they call it? Very strong spirit.

Kvass?

I forget now the name of it, but there was a particular name for it, which my father drank, I couldn't stand it, when they put some of the stuff with a little sugar in it, I had it, I'm not quite certain that was the same thing.

What about pets, did you ever have any pets at home?

No, we haven't had any pets, and there were not any in the house either, no. None. I don't remember any of my friends who had any. Maybe this Gyuszi, this Christian boy, had some guinea pigs or something like that, but beyond that, none, no.

(QUESTION INAUDIBLE)

... difficult, going to have a haircut, you know, everything was in walking distance, and people greeting him wherever he went. I can't, you see, my life took a somewhat different turn from his, because he was enmeshed in the Orthodox world, and later on, because of, many of my friends were, they were over from the Reform, I got involved with them. At first he didn't like the idea that I went sometimes on Friday evenings to the Reform Shul, with my friends, you know. Later on, he reluctantly accepted the idea. Beyond that, I can't, I was much more involved with the, the Literary Society, which was very very active, and flourishing.

Was your father pleased with that association of yours?

That one yes, my association with the Reform, he was frightened that I will leave the old ways, which actually, I didn't, but it concerned him.

You went to the Reform Movement because you had friends?

Only that.

And that's the reason?

That's the reason, yeh. Yeh. ... Well, before my father was deported, I went with my young beloved, Eva, who became my wife, in the ghetto, and he were, and we asked

for blessing, and in the courtyard of the prison, he blessed us, you know, with the vorechocha and all that, his hands on our heads, and afterwards, we went and had the, we had to have a Registry marriage, we still could have, and then we had the Orthodox marriage. He, in the meantime, was deported, afterwards he had to come, and the wedding took place in the courtyard of the Synagogue, under the chupah. I think we were the only one, I'm not sure of that, but probably the only one who had married under these extraordinary circumstances in the ghetto, and Dayan Gestetner, who was an extraordinary man, almost Hassidic, but very wise re. the modern world as well, he married us. And so the story then goes on that when my father was arrested, and before we went into the ghetto, we had beautiful furniture, when I say beautiful, really, hand carved and everything, you know. And I went home before we had to leave, with Eva, my fiancée, and wife-to-be, and I ruined everything. I destroyed everything, I destroyed the furniture, I destroyed the paintings, I destroyed the lot. I didn't want these to get in to anybody else's hands. This may have been one of the most painful episodes of my young life, you know, because we knew that other people are going to take it, and I didn't want Nazis to have that.

How did you destroy it?

With hammer, and whatever you can think of, actually destroyed it, so the carvings I destroyed so nobody could benefit by it. It's terrible.

And did your mother know,

My mother was dead, since '39, so there was nobody else there, except me, and Eva, and my sister, who didn't live there. By that time, she was married to a very rich man, and, but everybody seemed to have agreed that what I did at that time was right, because I would have hated all that. In any case, I found the carpet in some Nazis house, some of them, you know, later on, but can you imagine the kind of things that you treasure all around you, you have got to destroy? It's terrible. And then, we had to go to the ghetto, and I went to the Superintendent of the local hospital, mental hospital, who's name was Dr. Tanka, and he took us, he took me in, he knew my father and respected him. My father always told me, "There is going to be some calamity, go to him." Which I did. And I was in that hospital, and the second floor, the light, not so seriously ill people were, the first floor more serious, and the downstairs were very seriously mentally ill people, and there was a Polish Prisoner of War, who was allowed to work in Hungary. I think that he was Jewish, he never said so. And he came up to me from time to time, and talked to me. I was in a room with about three or four other people, and I think my interest in psychotherapy starts from that point, because he said something very important. He said, "Imagine that one day, our problem, vis-a-vis the Nazis, will be over. But these people will still be here, they are persecuted by some other force, and they will never be free, unless, you know, they are helped." And that went in, and from then onwards I decided that if I ever come out of this, I will do something for those who are constantly persecuted. So I was in that hospital for, for some weeks, naively believing that I could get away somehow, and it was there, while I was in that hospital, that Eva, that is my girlfriend's father, came out, to discuss the details of the marriage, and he went back to the ghetto. I was outside, I was the only Jew, I think, outside the ghetto. And then a point came when the Physician Superintendent had orders from the Gestapo that all

Jews have got to be taken to a certain point, which wasn't even in our home town, all Jewish mentally ill persons, and then he said to me, "Look, there is, it is between the devil and the deep blue sea, but I don't want to deport you into a place which I don't know what will happen to these people, and you must go back to the ghetto", and on my own free will, I did. And so, from there, it is now history. We were taken on a certain day, to a factory just outside town, which was desolate, and on the 4th July, in the morning, this is 1944, deported, in cattle trucks, and I was in the same cattle truck with Eva, her grandmother and some other members of her family. Poor thing, Granny couldn't understand why we are not giving her water, and then we tried, with Eva, to say that she's not a good girl, because she's not giving her anything to drink. She was totally disorientated. She was partly blind, also deaf. She was a sweet old soul, it was terrible to see her in that condition. The journey lasted three days, so 4th July, 7th July we arrived in Auschwitz, but on the night when we crossed the Hungarian Border, into Slovakia, a terror had gone through the cattle truck, and all the people were singing the Hungarian National Anthem, it was most strange experience, a country throws out it's citizens, and they are singing the National Anthem, and we went on from there. No water, straight through the line. I started a conversation with one of the SS, by that time we needed some water because, in that heat, can you imagine, it was hotter than it is now, I think it was 34 or 35 Celsius, in the 90s, closed in, in a cattle truck, which was not enough even for 30 people, they pushed in there, almost 90, and to be precise, I think there were 83 people in that cattle ferry who died. And no water at all, and no facilities to go to toilet or anything like that. While we were in Hungarian soil they let us out to do our business, the Hungarians, when we went over the Border and entirely in German hands, and that was gone, finished, from then onwards up to Auschwitz, we have not seen any water at all. I began a conversation with an SS man, which was not without danger. I told him that there are a lot of mad people now, in the wagon, they can't stop it to go real crazy, and those with knives started to hit around with knives. They were not people, criminals, or anything like that, it just ordinary people who went crazy, and I felt that everybody seemed to be in danger. I told this SS man that we need torches, and we need some strings. We have got to stop these people doing whatever they are doing. And he said, "They don't get water, they have got to be quiet." Which a number of us young people did that. The situation became totally impossible in that, in that ....

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... that was it. It was the most horrible nightmare that I can imagine, the three days and nights, and do you know, it was worse because, they were sadistic, they just said, "Oh, the water is coming next time." I remember at one station somewhere in, in, I don't know whether it was already Poland or Slovakia, in another truck, was a military train, with a number of Wehrmacht soldiers, and of course, we were screaming for water, and one of the officers of this Wehrmacht got a can, and filled it with water, and begin to walk towards us, you know, to hand it over, and, but the SS with a machine gun stopped him, and it was terribly cruel. I mean, you know, I can't say that every German was a bastard, because that man at least, he knew it, but against a machine gun, he couldn't do very much. And so we arrived in Auschwitz. But in the meantime, Eva was totally gone too, she was very dizzy, couldn't breathe properly, and she didn't know where she was when we arrived. Of course, they separated us immediately at the station, she went one way, I went the other, and this famous Mengele directed the traffic. I went among the living, now I know, I didn't know at that time, that anyone went to their death. And there they gave us water, and there we went in, which could easily have been the gas chambers, because, but it wasn't, it was a shower room, but I am told that the gas chambers also looked like a shower room. And we were shaved, we had a shower, we got our prison uniform, and out we went. Now, I must have been also out of my mind, and I know I was, because I begin to feel very comfortable, you know, this big, this prison uniform looked like pyjamas, I never seen a prison uniform, ever, in my life before, and when, at least I was left to my own devices, and just standing there, I heard music. There was an orchestra in Auschwitz, and somewhere, from somewhere, music came in, most bizarre. And the music, the pyjamas, the sunshine, gave me the impression that something was okay, you know? I went over to a Kapo, who is also dangerous, these Kapos were prisoners and I asked him where one can shave. Can you imagine? And he said to me, "In the crematorium." And I didn't even know what a crematorium was! It did not dawn on me for a whole day and night, where we were, what kind of place it was. During the night, I must tell you a horrible thing, if you can stand it. I stepped outside the barracks, which was open, for people to pass water, and I saw the crematorium for the first time, with the flames coming out, and smoke, but at night you could see the flames, and believe it or not, my first impression was a nice cosy feeling, because I thought it was a bakery, and they were baking bread. Afterwards, a horror took over me. What other association does a young man, who were brought up in an ordinary normal civilised life.

What about the smell?

I noticed, my darling. I know the smell.

But it couldn't have smelled like a bakery.

I, that night, with that mental paralysis which I have had still, I mean, look, you are three days in a cattle truck, no food, no drink, out into another world, do you, do you act together?

You couldn't.

It took a few days before I really begin to realise.

Did you talk among yourselves, among the other,

Yes, but they didn't know more than I did. I mean, we all came from the same place.

When you were put in one line by Mengele, Eva was taken into the other line?

Yes. No, she was not taken in the other line. She, she, she went among the living, still, but I understand that very soon, within a day or two, she had what appears to be dysentery, and other, from that she died. But she died there, in the barrack. And some people who, who came from the town, later told me.

And her mother?

Her grandmother, I am sure that she, she must have already died in the cattle truck.

Had you brought anything with you, from the ghetto, in the train?

I'm going to tell you something again, which is my intuition. Now, I described this in my book, but I will tell you. I had a horrible dream on the night, when the Germans invaded Hungary, this is the 18th/19th March, 1944. I dreamt that on lorries, we were taken to the shooting ground of my home town. We, apparently, as I looked round, they're all Jews, and that's where I learned target shooting, which I was very good at. I mean, so good, that later, later in years, here in England, in Alexandra Palace there used to be always some place where you could shoot, and I never had to buy any toothpaste, or any, any toothbrush, because I always shot them. My boy, who now is a barrister, he gets a toothbrush, but said to me, "Aren't you going to go and shoot for one?" So that is only relevant, because I was used to that place. So we were taken, in my dream, to that, to that place, and the lorries arrived, and the drivers of the lorries were German soldiers, with the swastika on their arms, and I knew then, suddenly, in the dream, that we are going to die, but I didn't want to, and this Gestapo man, which what he was, came nearer and nearer in the dream, this is a real nightmare, and tried to hypnotise people, and all those who were hypnotised went towards the grave which was already dug. To the end of the grave there was a guillotine, which with a thud, came down. And against that was the sun. I knew that this is death, really, in the dream, and he couldn't hypnotise me, in actual fact, what in the dream I did was, to pick up a shovel or something, and run towards him, in order to kill him. And as my hand was up, my movement was unfinished and I woke up with a scream. I believe it was 3.30 in the morning, on the 19th March, my father woke up, and I told him immediately what I dreamt, and even then he, he didn't enter, the idea didn't enter his head that this is a possibility. And we heard in the morning, then it entered his head, that the Germans were already in the town. Now, so when I was in this cattle truck, from home town, I took good shoes with me, because I remember from my dream that people had to dig their graves, and I said, "If I have to dig any grave, I will have a good shoe on." And that shoe saved my life. They didn't take it away from me, and I had it until practically the very end. So that was a horrible journey and arrival, and I

didn't realise, fully, I didn't realise it till the end. You see, when the Polish prisoners and the gypsies were there, told us that people are burned there, and gassed there, I said to myself, "They are perverted. They have a perverted fantasy. Nobody does things like that." I couldn't imagine that. So it took a long time before the idea of this mass execution had sank in into my head. I was dulled, I couldn't take it in. I was in Auschwitz, in Birkenau, I was in the actual place from where very few people came out, because it was what is known in German, "Vernichtungslager", it's a place where people were finished off. And then one day, they came, and wanted to, not wanted to, but they tattooed numbers in. Now, don't think that I am very courageous, but at times in my life, I did certain things which were extremely dangerous, but saved my life. Those, apparently, who were tattooed, stayed there. They tattooed them, because they got an Auschwitz number, Birkenau number. I dodged it, I don't know how, I went to the latrine, I came back, I went, I have no number. In consequence, they looked up all the people who have no number, because there was a reason why some people that were not given numbers, I didn't know that, but my reason was simply because I ran away from it, and they were taken to Buchenwald, and it was, anywhere was better than to be there. Buchenwald, as far as I know, didn't have a gas chamber and a crematorium, and so, again, a few days journey from Poland to Thuringia, and I arrived there some time in the, well, I know that in some time in July/August, I was already in Buchenwald, and well, from there we went into other camps, and I went to a camp called Tröglitz. There was the I.G. Farben industries factory, one of them, and yes,

Can I ask you, do you know what were the reason that other people weren't tattooed?

No. If you were to, if, if you looked sometimes, the logic of the Nazis, retrospective yes, there was absolutely none. There were no reasons at all. I got my number in Buchenwald, but that was not tattooed, and my number 84,720, 24 I think, and that's just stuck on, and 25, and that was it, and

Was it because they were political detainees?

I don't know. I mean, there was a bunch of Jews there, how did they know they was political or non-political. Some were done, but some didn't. But I felt I'd be much better off without a number, right? That's where I started, and I was right. Now, Tröglitz we were in, and the work was,

I'd just like to ask you one or two other things, before we pass on to the town. You said the orchestra was playing music, and it was well-known, do you remember anything, do you remember anything that they played?

I can't be absolutely sure, but I think the "J'attendrais", which we used to have at home when we went to dance.

"I will wait for you."

Yes.

The other thing I really would like to ask is, your life in the ghetto. You were there, when you went to the ghetto from the mental hospital, you were there for how long?

Couldn't have been that long, maybe a week or two, if that.

And did you live with Eva?

Well, originally, I, I, I didn't have the same room, but then we had been given a room in a, in her sister's house which was in the ghetto.

And what was life like there?

Totally chaotic. Can you imagine people thrown at the mercy of each other, when they don't want to be. Food was scarce. People were beaten up in the, in the Jewish Community Centre. The counter-espionage agent came from Budapest to beat the rich Jews to pulps to tell them where they hid their money, or whatever, and my sister also got her share, and

You mean she was beaten?

Mmmm, her feet. The atmosphere was horror. Now, I didn't feel it that much, I must say. I don't know whether to be young is also to be somewhat irresponsible or what, I don't know. I felt the tension, I felt the anxiety, but I didn't feel the terrible desperation which I would feel now, at my age. Say if I would have been 40, 50, whatever, then I would have had a greater concern than at 20, 21.

Did people in the ghetto know about the Camps? They believed some of the rumours that they must of heard?

There were no rumours about extermination, whether they believed it or not, I ... I heard that the Germans asked people to dug their graves, which is a fact, in Poland somewhere, and that's why I prepared myself with the shoes, you know. Well, I didn't hear any kind of extermination camp as such. The Germans were lying, saying that "We are going to take, we take you to a work camp, where they will, families will be together, and there will be plenty of food, and if you work, nothing will happen to us", that was the story.

And when the time came, that they rounded you up for deportation, how did that happen?

Well, I told you, they emptied the ghetto and took us out into this factory.

Was that the whole ghetto?

The whole ghetto.

All in the one group?

One block, yeh.

How many people was that?

6,000, 7,000. I don't want to say figures, because I don't know the figures, but several thousand.

The whole ghetto?

The whole ghetto, en bloc.

Did they say, "Pack what you need"? did they say, "Bring nothing", what did they say to you?

"Bring with you food for the journey", or something like that, or whatever you need for the journey, and everything else had to be left there.

Did people bring suitcases?

Some. Some did.

Were they allowed to take them on the train with them?

I think the Germans allowed everything, in my home town, because they knew anyway, that they are going to be taken away at the other end, rather than, the Hungarians, I mean, they should have it.

Did some people take food and drink with them?

Everybody tried to take something. Food certainly, some bread or something, whatever we could get our hands on, there was not that much anyway.

And was the feeling one of very deep distress, or did you believe what they told you, that you were going to a work camp?

Yes, I think that if you didn't, there would have been some kind of upheaval, yeh.

So people were reasonably calm?

Calm they weren't. How can you be calm? But they did not realise that those people who left on 4th July, I don't know, majority of them, won't see the 7th, that not.

So you were saying that you were taken from Auschwitz, to Tröglitz.

Buchenwald first, and from Buchenwald, I was taken to that camp, Tröglitz, which was a factory, which was bombed in May, and the prisoners' job was to clear up the rubble, which was left by the Allied bombing, and, which we did, it's a horrible place. The, early morning until late night, we worked in that horrible factory, which always, I sit in front of, it's like an open mouth, the rotten teeth, that's how it looked like, with all those bits and pieces hanging around, and that's where we were. And again now,

in September I have, I had an intuition. Now, I am sure that these intuitions saved my life several times. Not logic, but something in me told me not to stay there, if there is one opportunity to get away. Now, they collected people in September to go back to Buchenwald, the hospital, so-called hospital, everybody knew, the Polish prisoners knew that going back means death, 100% death, and they tried to prevent the younger people going, children, I mean, they were 16, 17 year olds, by force sometimes, they pushed them into another row, lined up, and despite their protestations, I went into what was the death row, fully conscious of what I was doing, at the same time, fully realising that this is not going to happen to me. Whatever the intentions are, I'm not going to be killed, and taken back to Auschwitz.

You put yourself in the,

You see, those who were ill had to line up, and these poor bastards thought if they fake illness, then they go to hospital. I knew, the Polish prisoners said "No way", but I went into that line, they wanted to prevent it, some of these Polish prisoners who were there for a long time, Polish Jews, but I insisted and when they threw me out, I went back, and what happened in Buchenwald was that there was another selection, that is, medical selection, in the Buchenwald cinema, because there was such a thing there too, a cinema, and when we went off to selection, these people, you know, that convinced the SS how ill they were, they said to wear clothes, or this or that, some terrible things, and, of course, they put their numbers in a heap, and one heap begin to grow quite big, they were all people eventually, who were killed. There was another heap, a little one, of people who, who didn't have serious illnesses, and now the question was, what am I going to do? Now when I was in my teens, on one occasion, I had a bladder infection, and instead of saying some horrible illnesses, I said to the SS doctor, "Bladder infection", or "inflamed bladder", and my number was dropped into this little heap, and that was life, and so I am alive, because of the bladder, that's how life went.

Why did you go into that hospital queue? Why didn't you stay where the Polish prisoners ....

Because it was, it was impossible, and I'll tell you something. I went back to Buchenwald, none of those people who stayed in Tröglitz are alive, they all were killed in the autumn months there. I don't know how and when. I escaped death, by, by moving towards it, seemingly, but avoiding it.

Because you had this strong feeling?

Always, I had a very strong feeling. Once we were, we were with my wife and two children in Ostend, in a fish and chip shop, of all places, and I suddenly had a terrible feeling that something is going to happen. I packed them up and said, "Let's go out." And we heard, that night, that several people were knifed and killed soon after we'd gone, and these things, in grave danger, sometimes happen to me, or happen with me. And I don't, I have no explanation for it.

Could you tell me a bit more about your first stay in Buchenwald, after you went there from Auschwitz? How did you travel there, by train?

No, cattle truck, yes. But that, that journey was far from the first one, because there were only, probably 40 people in that cattle truck, and bread and drink. Yes, it was, we were in the so-called "Zeltlager", the tent lager, in Buchenwald.

Pardon?

In Buchenwald, the "Zeltlager", tents, they were tents, and so stayed there, and

How many people in a tent?

I think it must have been several thousand, several hundred, I don't know, they were huge, these tents, they were like these marquees that we set up here sometimes.

Did they feed you?

Yeh.

And what did you have to eat?

Well, they have given soup, and bread and margarine, things like that.

Was it any different from Auschwitz, the food?

Oh yes, in Auschwitz, four or five of us were eating from one plate, like animals. In Buchenwald it was very different. You see, Buchenwald was in the hands of political prisoners, the management of the Camp, not in the hands of the SS, and therefore, in Buchenwald, the treatment of prisoners, at least, inside the camp, was far superior to anything that I had known until then. They were willing to share. I think we got our, our ration but on top of it, the Norwegian students were also deported there, not necessarily Jewish, have given up their soup ....

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F256 - Side A

19th July, 1989, for the National Life Story Collection, the interviewer is Jennifer Wingate.

... yes, they did what they could to, to supply some food. So there we were, and then from there, taken again by train, to Tröglitz.

What were the sanitary conditions like in Buchenwald?

Well, you see, Buchenwald consisted of two parts, and again in both parts this was a Zeltlager, there the sanitary conditions were not as, as, as, as good as once you got out of the zeltlager. And when I got back to Buchenwal from Tröglitz, then I found myself in Block 23, which was "Jewish block" they called it, but all the blocks had bathrooms, or shower rooms, and toilets and things like that, but the zeltlager didn't.

That didn't have showers.

No.

How did you wash, or did you wash?

We didn't.

You didn't. And how did you sleep in in the zeltlager?

Wait a minute, didn't. On arrival, I think, everybody went through the shower, but not in the zeltlager there wasn't.

Did they have constant de-lousings?

That was a problem. And from then, that arising from there, there was typhus of course, which killed a lot of people. But the Germans were very, very frightened of typhus, because it could have, of course, affected them as well, so we got injections. But I never knew with these injections what kind of injections they really were. I was always suspicious. However, I think that that was against typhus. I did not, I couldn't avoid entirely some calamity, because one day, I'm trying to think, that was on my return, that's right, on my return from Tröglitz, when, again, I was in, we were in the zeltlager, to start with, I had a very high temperature, and then when I went to the latrine, I was, just blood came out of me, and I knew that that was again terribly dangerous, because if they get to know that you are ill, that's the end, and I burnt my ration of bread, can't say it was toast, but almost coal, and I eaten that, and believe it or not, two or three days later, it was gone.

That, you felt, would cure you of your haemorrhaging?

Yes. And then, that was, that was tricky, that few days. Then the rest were taken back, to what I now know, Auschwitz. But some of the French prisoners in Buchenwald said that they never reached Auschwitz, because they just left the trucks, cattle trucks and wagons, standing in the forest, and were already dead, and that was the majority of people who came from Tröglitz. The rest had disappeared. I never met anyone from them, who were left in Tröglitz, so I must be a handful who survived that. Then I was taken to this Block 23, and now came another, one great luck in my life. While I was in the zeltlager, as they called it, next to us, but approachable, were the Danish Police, in their military Danish uniform. They were deported because they were unwilling to deport the Jews, to the Gestapo. So en bloc, they'd given themselves up, marched into the Gestapo Headquarters, and from there they were taken to, to Buchenwald. Proud, decent people. One policeman by the name of Niels Ahlmark, got very friendly with me. By that time, the winter was coming, and he gave me his, one of the spare military uniforms, and there were trousers what you have, and military cap, so, as we were allowed, in the main Camp, to wear, we don't have, we didn't have to wear prison clothing, I looked somebody awfully important. Everybody greeted me. But that was not the important thing, the important thing was, that that uniform carried me through the Camp life, because Germans love uniforms, and somehow or other, they associated me as somebody important in the Camp, although I wasn't. And, and also he gave me from his Red Cross parcels, rations, so that helped, and again, in Buchenwald, I realised that if I will be taken into the stone quarry, then I will be a dead duck, so in my uniform, I thought, I could risk stepping through the lines, and very gently and slowly, moving from one line into another, and from there into another, nobody ever stopped me, and I walked into the line which I knew will go into the Camp back, and will have light work. And the work was not even mentioned, it was laughable, it wasn't work, I picked up a few stone pieces and get it from here to there, and sit down in the warm hut, have coffee. I haven't worked from then onwards. But again, I had to do something, because in the stone quarry, a lot of people died. And this peaceful existence, if I can call it that, went on until December, when, with a transport, called "Transport Schwalbe", that was official name, I was taken to Berger-Ester, that's nt Bergen Belsen, that's a small little town in Turingia.

Berger,

Berger, the place, Elster was a river, and then I did something again. I did again something, which I was very proud of. With the greatest confidence, I collected all the young people in the, who arrived with us, 16 of them, to be precise, who were between the ages of 12 and 16, and although the risk was enormous, I lined them up separately from the main Appel, when the Lager Kommandant came, the SS Officer, asked me what I am doing. I said, "They are young people, and I was asked in Buchenwald to look after them." I didn't tell him who asked me! He didn't ask. And he was very kind, very nice. I have never seen an SS Officer so nice to children. I don't know who he was, I don't know his name, I don't know what he did or what he didn't do, but he sent these 16 children, me included, into the kitchen, to peel potatoes, and that was our job while we were there. And it was the worst part of the winter of

1944, or was it already 45? Yes, '44/45. And all these children survived. We had plenty to eat in the kitchen, and I can't say a glorious life, but ...

When you say children, what, what age?

I told you, between 11 and 16.

11 and 16.

Yes. And they were not all Jewish, there were all kinds. And I looked after them, and when we left, because we had to march, by foot, towards Mauthausen, which we never reached. In 1945, in April, end of March, beginning of April, I think, it was just about the time when the United Nations/San Francisco Conference sat for the first time. Ten days beforehand we heard the first guns at night, the earth was slightly shaking, and we knew that this is it, these were the Allies. And of course, the evacuation of the Camp became urgent for the, for the SS, and we had to walk, walked towards Czechoslovakia. And they hadn't had that much choice now, because they were in a pincer movement by the Allies, and they were terrible, on the way, half of the way, because anyone who couldn't walk, they shot them, so that as we walked on, the road was full of dead corpses, and, but again, I was fit and healthy, I could stand it, and arrived at the Czech Border, there was a big Bata shoe sign, "Manjatin", now, as we entered Czechoslovakia, everything became different, but everything. The attitude of the population was different. They really kind of greeted us as if we were long lost brothers, women came with bread, food, what you have, and the Gendarme, the Czech Gendarme also, were very very nice. Now, however nice they were, and the population, however welcoming they were, and they were, I had my last intuition, and I said to myself, "No, I'm not staying here with them. The first opportunity, I'm going to escape." So you, most people were happy, that now at last they have got bread, food, whatever, and a welcoming community. I felt a sense of danger, and with five others, I told the Hungarian, they were Hungarian SS there, surrounding there, I said to him, "I want your names. If you let us through the fence," there was a forest there, "I have your name, I will testify afterwards that you saved five lives. I don't know what you did before." And they were willing to play this game. Again, it was risky, even to approach them, but by that time, they knew what fate was waiting for them. I gave him my home address in my home town, and that was that. And we went across this fence, and, of course, we didn't know which way to go, and we found ourselves back in Germany, because the Border, of course, is not a straight line. We went into a house, where a man was sitting and reading the paper, he looked at us, he knew, of course, at once, who we were, and outside the house there was this German soldier, standing with a girl, could see through the windows, and this man, said, "That's no good", in German, and I speak German, and I spoke fluent German, "You had better go back. You have got to go to Czechoslovakia, that way." That was in German again. And we went, and then I don't even know if it was a priest, yes, I think it was a, some kind of clergyman, priest, found us, and within hours we were in the hands of the partisans, the Czech partisans, and from then onwards, the danger lifted, and he took us to hospital, and then out of the hospital, but from then on there was no danger. And then a farmer, by the name of Voyteck Jaeger, I never forget him, took us in, all of us, and we stayed there until the War officially was declared finished. However, what we didn't know,

after so much starvation, we were not supposed to eat rich food, and we all got ill. I got my illness, jaundice, on my way home.

[SHORT GAP IN RECORDING]

Yes, we have been, I have been talking earlier about how I got freed, and meeting this man, Voytech Jaeger, or probably I hadn't even met him, I was taken to him, and he has a very nice, comfortable home there, and we, when I say "We", we were four or five of us, stayed there until we heard on the radio that the War was over, which was on 8th May, 1945. Now, on that particular day, when I heard that, I went alone out onto a field, because I had to digest what was happening to me, and that the danger was really over. But there were other dangers ahead, I didn't realise, and I laid down on the warm earth and began to cry, and it was the first time that I, I think I kind of, if not buried, but I had a terrible sadness about the people I lost, and came a young girl, a young girl, I don't know, anything between 15 and 18, and she saw that, I still had my uniform on, and I left the red triangle of the prison thing on, as a memento, also as an identification in this chaotic situation, so that people would know who I am, that I am not a Nazi, or anyone like that. And she knelt down, and embraced me, kissed me like a sister, she was very sweet, and these were the first normal, human words that I have heard from outside my immediate friends, or comrades, in the outside world, anyway.

What nationality was ...

Czech, she couldn't speak to me, and, my Hungarian name was Janeci, if she asked me what my name was, and she called me the Czech version, Janisku, and as she came, she left, and so a few days later, we went on whichever way we could, but some episodes happened in between, which might be important. When the Russians, or just before the Russians came in, and they behaved exemplary. Czechoslovakia was an ally, so they didn't behave exactly the same way as they did in Hungary or other occupied countries, and, but a number of people from the Camps, suddenly emerge on the street of this small place, you know, so we were not the only ones hidden there with other people, and they heard that in the forest nearby, there were some SS men, who took part, only a day or two before, in some executions, were hiding, and they went to hunt them, with guns and things, and they invited me to go as well. Well, I think two of my comrades out of the five went. I could not do that. I could not hunt people in that situation, and at the time, I thought, "Is it a weakness? Is this a strength? Am I soft-headed, because these murderers deserve anything." I couldn't do it, and later on, I thought about it, and I haven't regretted. Even to this very day, I feel that I cannot, or couldn't, adopt the same approach to them, as they have to us. So on top of trains, between two wagons on the trains, we travelled towards Hungary. Now, then came, perhaps, one of the most dangerous episodes of my life after the Camps, or even perhaps including the Camps. Next to me, on a plank, between two moving wagons, sat a young man, who, when he went to get some water, he left his knapsack behind, and in it was his name, an SS number, and he was Hungarian, the Hungarian SS, so I was travelling on the train when he just went to do this, and nobody would have known, they would have been dead, with that SS man. Now, there I saw to it that this man is removed from the whole transport, you know, and he was, I think, arrested, but I couldn't, I couldn't chance it for myself, and I

couldn't chance it for anyone else, but that was a close shave. Had I not had this coincidence of seeing what was written in his things, I would have not known, but of course, he was too frightened. He wouldn't have wanted to do anything.

Tell me in more detail what you did. He went to, he left his bag, with his SS number,

He left his bag, and they gave us some water, and he said he is going to get water for us, including me.

He was looking after you?

He was not looking after me, but on this particular occasion he just went for some water, and left me with his things.

But he was guarding you?

No, no, no, no, no.

So he didn't know who you were?

He knew that I was, because I had this, he knew that I was a prisoner from a camp. I didn't know who he was. He gave me some fairytale stories of who he was. He was Hungarian, and well, he went to fetch his water, there was a knapsack, half open, and it was very very similar to the kind of things that I saw in the Camp, the SS wearing, you know? So I opened it, and there was the SS insignia inside, and his name.

And his clothes, and his belongings?

Well, well, there was some, some, not many.

Why do you think he left the bag for you to see?

He trusted me.

Was he very young?

He was about the same age as I was. And he trusted me, because I appeared to trust him, and I didn't know who he was, and then he got back, in between I talked to some people who were sitting on the top, and they called, I don't know who was this official, whether it was Czech Police or who they were, but they, they took him away, they arrested him.

The Czech Police took him away.

I think so, yes. And, and then came the next thing. By that time I was rather yellow, or yellowish, and there was a young girl, who's name I don't remember now, and I moved from where I was, off the top,

The top bunk?

No, not bunk, we are talking about the train, moving train, you know, this was on the way,

To the top of the train?

The top of the train, sitting on the top of the train.

Above?

On the roof. On the roof.

In the open?

Sure, sure. Hundreds and thousands travelled like that, and this was a young girl, perhaps a year or two younger than myself, and we kind of got very fond of each other. And the sexual attraction was dead in the Camp, for women as well as for men. But apart from sexual attraction, we were very fond of each other there, and helped each other, you know, and warmed each other at night when it was really very very cold, on the top of that train, and we arrived in Brno, which is one of the big cities in Czechoslovakia, and I looked so awful by then, that she said that I couldn't possibly go on. And she said, "Come with me into town, and we find a doctor." And, which we did. Now, she had some trouble with her foot, and she could hardly walk, so she needed some attention too. So we walked into town, and immediately we became the centre of attention. Now, the difference between a country, a Democracy, and a Dictatorship, could be illustrated by what happened there, because the people in the street have been extraordinarily kind and nice. We just said, "Doctor", and the next thing was that we were in a building, and this doctor was there, had a lot of patients there, sitting around, but he stopped the proceeding with them, and saw us immediately. He told me that I had jaundice, and he told the, gave the girl some ointment, but she said that the both of us have got to go to hospital. And I said, "Well, I would like to go as near the Hungarian Border as possible, would it matter if I travelled another half a day?" He said, "If somebody's around to look after me, that if I get very high temperature that I don't fall, it's fine." We arrived in Bratislava, and, of course, Bratislava, near Bratislava is the border. I mean, across the river, there's the Danube, and then eventually, and then you can, and at the, as we left the train, we went towards the town, and believe it or not, at the outskirts, there were Russian soldiers with machine guns, standing and waiting. They were waiting for SS and Nazis, particularly Hungarian ones. Well, although I had this paraphernalia on, which probably saved my life, and this girl, who wasn't very safe from them, really threatening, pushed a machine gun in my rib, and called me "Hungarian Fascist", and now, at that point of time, I have had enough. But I said, "All right, if I'm going to die now, I die." I started to scream at the top of my voice, saying that he was a Fascist swine, and he ....

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F256 - Side B

So, I shouted and screamed at him in German, at this Russian soldier. He still had this machine gun against my chest, and then came a Russian Officer from nowhere, he asked me in Yiddish, whether I was a Yid, I told him that I was a Yid, and I knew that he was a Yid, and with that, my problem had been resolved, but I was already ordered, pushed, in actual fact, among real Hungarian Fascists who were standing there, who, I understood, later on, were deported into Russia. So, can you imagine, I would have come out of this hell and gone into another one, but then I really acted the way I should, and it was very dangerous though. We walked into town, we soon found out where the Jewish Welfare Agency, or whatever it was, Joint Distribution Committee was, they had a close look at me, and they took me to hospital, and the girl also went to hospital, but another branch of it.

She was a Jewish girl?

Oh yes. And from Budapest, and we, I was there for something like three or four weeks, very ill, but I recovered, and then I went, I don't know whether I went or was taken, to the Danube, where there was a big bridge across to Komaron which was the Hungarian city. On the bridge there were the representatives of the Hungarian Jewish Committee who checked every single individual who claimed he was a Jew. They asked you where you were from, who your parents were, some things about Jewish things, which only a Jew would know, and only after this checking, they let people through.

What sort of questions did they ask you?

Well, the first question was where I came from, when I was deported, and where to. And where was my last Camp, and where was I in the intermediary period, and who my father was. Where did you live, address. Did I go to Cheder, did I go to a Talmud Torah school, can I read Hebrew, and they checked it with a little Prayer Book, and they were very proper about that, and so I, I was on the other side, and the girl too, and then we travelled inside, this time, on a train, to Budapest.

You were better by then?

I was all right, all right, not weak, lost a lot of weight, I was already very weak, but, and but, in Budapest I had an aunt, and I had a cousin who is still alive, he is much older than me, he is 85 now, he's more like an uncle, and I wanted to find my way to them, and I did, and they lived in the same place, at least my aunt did, and I had a very strange reception, because she was very angry with me. She was angry with me because she heard the rumour that I was in Budapest throughout the whole time, and I never contacted her, so "When there is real danger, you have not contacted me, when I needed you most." So it took me a little time to convince her that I, the place where I came from, wasn't entirely out of danger! And then she accepted that. And my, her son, my cousin, arrived, and they were very very nice then.

What were their names?

Dr. Winkler, was a child specialist, but it is a man who also attended to my mother, and several times saved her life when she was so very ill. I felt, and still feel very close to him. Anyway, that was then, and then came a reaction, both physical and psychological. I was lying at night, with a pool of sweat, absolutely, you know, as if water was poured over me, and he again, there was another check in hospital that didn't find anything wrong, but it was a severe anxiety state. Now, it's very very interesting that the anxiety state did not appear in the concentration camps, but afterwards. And I, I had very disturbed nights. Anyway, my aim from Budapest was, after I recovered from the second, the second episode of illness, is to go to my home town, Szombathely, and see if anyone would come back, and I stayed in a flat, and, in one room in a flat the first night.

In your home town?

In my home town, yes.

How long did it take you to get there?

Well, by that time the railways were working, and so I don't know, within a day, I suppose, from Budapest, I was there, and so there I was, back again where I came from.

With your friend?

Which one, the girl? No, we lost contact. She got off the train earlier in Budapest than I did. We met, we met each other once or twice at the Jewish, there was a soup kitchen type of thing where us, who came back, were given food, at least lunchtime, and on, and also on, on Shabbat. But we lost contact. I think, if I remember correctly, that because she hasn't got a penny, she began to earn her living by selling herself to men, and once I heard that, then the feeling was totally gone, and I think this is right, this is what she did, and poor little bitch, I am really sorry for her. And then I, I was back, and there were a few people, of course, who knew me, and knew my father, who struggled. I wanted to become a journalist, I wanted to carry on my interest in writing, and there was this local paper which was the largest newspaper in Western Hungary. And eventually, for no money, and then for money, I became a journalist there, and the Sub-Editor, and I started to write articles about what has happened, and also what was happening. And one, which was in Hungary, not just in Szombathely, but in Hungary, became, at that time, quite well-known. I wrote an article after the British General Election, which was, I don't know when it was, 1946, in the summer, I think, or autumn, but the title was, "England Answered". It was the time when the Labour Party won, and at that time, the newspapers were absolutely free, I mean, you could write anything you liked, although the Russians occupied the country, and I said that "History's eyes will not be blinded by slogans wrapped in National colours", you know? Now, believe it or not, but one reactionary Attorney General gave the order for the Police to arrest me. Can you imagine that? These were the forces still in operation in Hungary. Now, the detective who came for this,

was a joke. I was by that time, quite well, no regain, and I had to go to the Police Station, I had to sit around in a nice comfortable room, they gave me beer or whatever, and they knew that it won't be long before I will be released. So this arrest of mine, made Communists, Socialists, all the others wild, so they started demonstrations outside the Police Station, and I became very nearly a central figure.

On whose orders were you arrested, did you find out?

On this Attorney.

You know the specific ....

His name was Simon, Mihaily. Mihaily Simon. And this Mihaily Simon, as it happens, was, on the other hand, a man who, when my first book of poems was published, on the day when the War broke out, we went to him with my father, to ask him to let it go, because suddenly, you see, censorship descended on the country and he allowed this book to be published, and, and, and several years later, it's the same man who ordered my arrest. But eventually, of course, he was removed from his position, but that was a very strange, bizarre, I wasn't frightened or anything, I knew that this was, it was a scandal.

Do you think it's possible he had you arrested because he was forced to by others?  
Do you think it was ...

I don't know, but certainly there were, in Hungary, in those days, a lot of Right-wingers, you know, and I don't say that he was a Fascist, but he was extremely Right.

What was the name of the newspaper?

Szabad Vasmegye. And, so I kept writing these articles, but I felt that I was quite fair. On one hand I did not tolerate any kind of Nazi revival. On the other hand when I heard that some soldiers and officers of the Hungarian Army, who fought against us, that they're starving them, in some barracks outside town, they didn't get food, that again, I wasn't going to tolerate, and I wrote an article, and then I was accused that I am supporting the former Nazis, but that wasn't the point. The point was that I put myself in my father's place, and he said, "We are creating a new world. In this new world is not an aim, without trial, to destroy people slowly by starvation." There was a Russian military Commander in our town, by the name of Lvov, the same as the name of the city in Russia, and this Commander, a very very educated and smooth chap, asked me to see him, and he was there on behalf of the Allies Control Commission, or whatever they called themselves, and he had a very nice conversation with me about how, what happened, my father, myself, the Camps, and then he said, "Don't you think that you are a little bit unwise? Having gone through what you have gone through, to write articles which are not in line with the principles of the Soviet Union and the occupying forces?" They were the occupying forces, there were no other. And I felt, then, that this isn't a too safe situation to be in, you know, either, because, in a small town, anything can happen. Now one day, this I wrote, I wrote in my book, Night of the Mist, one day I walked home, I had a lovely little flat in the same block, house, my sister had a flat, and, used to have a flat, and there was a shot,

and I heard the bullet whizzing by my ear, twice, and I don't know who shot at me, who tried to shoot me. Lvov said to protest, that Russian soldiers would not go on the street and shoot people like that, so there must be some Hungarian Nazis. Whoever it was, I felt it was too hot. I saved my life, so that's that. In the meantime, my second wife-to-be was getting in touch with me from Budapest, by letter. She was a relative, and she was saying to me, if I come to Budapest, I should come to see them, which I did, almost immediately, because I didn't have any other relatives apart from my uncle, and I remembered her. So I went, and eventually settled down in Budapest, and I became again, first a journalist in the Social Democratic Party Headquarters, where the people, some of the people, have known my father by name, so I had a bona fida entry there, and I had access to Ministers and the President of the Republic, to be, I began to move very much in the high echelon of our political life.

Were you very politically minded?

No.

So you weren't really motivated by

Not politics, not politics, not at all. No, I was, I was motivated by a mixture of Jewish and, and Socialist idealism, you know? Almost as if what was repressed began to pour out, almost as if I was acting on my father's behalf, who died a martyr's death, this kind of idealism. I wasn't so, you know, at all interested in that very much.

There were two questions, going back. Before we carry on the next section, there are two questions I want to ask you, going back quite a way. First of all, you have talked quite a bit about your mother's illness, you haven't specified what was wrong with her.

Well, I didn't know it for a very long time, I only found out a few years ago, when this cousin/uncle, who came down from Budapest to treat her occasionally, told me that she had leukaemia. At first, the house, the flat had been redecorated, and a nail, a dirty nail hurt her, and I don't know, it became septic afterwards, it internalised. I don't know the medical situation, but she was ill since I was the age of 9, I was 9, until 17. She died just before the War, in July 1939, so she was very very lucky. But when I went to Budapest, these were relatives of hers. Her mother, really, was my second wife's name, mother, was a first cousin, and while I had my cousin, the man, I was craving for the female part of the family, you know, almost to resurrect her. This was a period, as I look back, of resurrection, you know? I needed to resurrect in other people, the people that I loved, and build bridges, between the past and the present, which was terribly difficult. But she became, she was engaged to be married, and I, she lost a brother during the War, the latter part of the War, and she was still mourning his death, and her mother too. So I was taken in as, as a relative, but it became very clear in a very short space of time that we were much more than relatives. And then, because I had all my things, whatever I have re-obtained after the Concentration Camp, in Szombathely, I had to go back in order to get these things, and she came with me, and then we became lovers, and later on, it was obvious that we are going to get married, and when I was beginning to kind of rise in the hierarchy of the Social Democratic Party, not so very important, but I had access to all these

people, there was a moment when they wanted me to become, nominated to become a Member of Parliament, you know, for the Elections, which there was supposed to be another Election, or was it the first Election, I think? No, probably the second one. And Lily begged me not to get involved with politics, she had a very bad feeling about it.

This was for the Social Democratic Party?

I would have, then, yes. And the Social Democratic Party were in a very powerful position, but the Communists had been undermining the Social Democratic Party practically all the time, with not too strong to say, they had built into very powerful positions into the Party, themselves Communists, who were supposed to be Socialists, but they weren't, and they were spying on them, and the information went on to, directly to, to the Dictator of Hungary, who, unfortunately, was a Jew, Rakosi, he was the Secretary of the Communist Party of Hungary. Now, I didn't live too long with them, with my cousin and mother and father. I obtained a flat through the Social Democratic Party, a villa in one of the most beautiful parts of Budapest, it's called "The Hill of Roses", it really looked like it too. And next door to me, lived the daughter of the President of the Republic to be, who was very fond of me, and her husband too, and her husband worked in the Social Democratic Party, so I begin to rise there, and all kinds of possibilities were offered. But I wanted only one possibility, to get away from that. I knew that it is going to be a hard slog, because in Hungary, seemingly everything was mapped out, you know.

When you say, "wanted to get away", you wanted to leave Hungary, because felt it was dangerous?

I begin to feel very much, more than feel, I had evidence that it was dangerous, and so cutting a really complicated long story short, I wanted to bail out of this chaotic political life, and declared myself having a nervous breakdown. This was, as I found out later, one of the most important and clever steps I could take at that time, because it was genuine, I mean, they could not question it, it had some basis, but, you know, no doctor, psychiatrist in that sanatorium where I went to, questioned it, after what I went through, why I couldn't have this. And I was going to wait then until my visa to Britain came through. Now, the British Ambassador to Hungary, I believe his name was Gascoine, and I went to see him, and I explained to him that I wanted to go out of Hungary, I don't like the atmosphere, but if I had any role as a young writer, it was to be a bridge between the East and the West, rather than just one or the other. For some peculiar reason, I must have said the right thing, because he liked that very much. So I got my visa to England.

Did your political colleagues know that you were applying for a visa?

The Social Democrats knew it. The Communists had to know it, because they had to give me the permission to leave. You had to have an Exit Visa, you know.

And they assumed you wanted to leave because you had a nervous breakdown, and that you wanted to get away,

Partly that, and partly because I had relatives in England and all that kind of thing. So I really resolved somewhat, the problems, by, what the, in a letter from the British Embassy, "your mountain retreat" they called it, they said you've got "your mountain retreat", that wasn't a retreat all right.

You knew them, the people in the Embassy?

I knew the important people, in the Embassy, yes.

It sounds as though you were friendly with them.

Well, I had very good introductions from, from the Social Democratic Party. And there was a very famous woman in Hungary, whose name should be written in gold, Anna Kethly. Anna Kethly was a veteran Hungarian Member of Parliament, Social Democrat, who, even when I was a child, I remember her fighting for the right of the oppressed, including the Jews, and she was the one who opened the doors. Later on, she herself had to go into exile, and she died in Brussels a few years ago, perhaps six, seven years ago. So my journey into a different kind of life was beginning to be very clear. I married Lilian, the 30th November, in a Registry Office.

1946?

1946, and the witnesses were the son-in-law of the President, and one of our famous poets, George Faludy, who was also in exile, later on was arrested and was in Communist prison, then he was again in exile, and as I will tell you later on, wrote here in again, met again. But he was the, the witness, and then Lily and I decided to have a Jewish wedding, but in those days, that was not looked upon very favourably, by the Communists, you know. You couldn't have a big Jewish wedding in Budapest. So we went to the place where my mother was born, where there were some relatives of hers, with some relatives living.

Where was that?

Jonzcoc, and we had the Jewish ceremony there, under the chupah, and whoever there was in the Jewish community turned up, and so we were ...

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