

All right. Welcome. I am Joseph Preil, co-director of the Holocaust Resource Center here at Kean College of New Jersey. Today, Tuesday, October 27, 1992, we are privileged to have our guest, Mr. Ernest Gottdiener who will share with us some of his experiences during the Holocaust. Mr. Gottdiener to begin with, could you tell us, please, your birth date and where you were born.

I was born on October 13, 1920 Hajdunanas, Hungary, a small town near Debrecen.

Now I understand that you come from a very nice family. There were, I believe, altogether 12 children in the family. Is that correct?

Correct.

And right at the beginning of the interview, we'd like to know what happened to each member of the family. Firstly, your parents.

My father who was a Hasidic guy. He was born in the same town, and his father was born in the same town, whom I didn't know, since I'm the youngest in the family. And they were married. I don't know exactly when, but they had 12 children. Two of them are had two girls, whom I didn't really apparently -- And they died before I was born.

Before 1920?

Yeah. And then we had left 10, eight brothers, including myself, and two sisters. Which one sister got some cold and developed some kind of a lung problem, and she died when I was a young boy.

Let's review each member of the family, what transpired, and did they live or did they not live during the war and after the war. Your father?

Father, he was a very pious man. But unfortunately, I lost him when I was 14, 14 and a 1/2 years old.

That would have been 1934--

1935.

'35?

5. And then, I lost him. He was operated, he had cancer. He was operated in Vienna, and I was called back. From I was in the yeshiva at that time. I was called back from the yeshiva, and I was able to talk to him. And then end of August, he passed away in 1935.

Your mother?

My mother, actually she was very active. And she was not only bringing up the children, but also, she was very active in the business. We had a big business in wholesale winery and liquor and beer distribution, and delivering for the whole of the county practically, each bar and each tavern.

But your mother survived the war?

My mother survived the war.

All right. Your oldest brother, Leb. Did I say it correctly?

Yes, my oldest brother [Personal name] Leb, whatever you call him.

He was born in what year?

He was born in 1901. And when the transfer was in Hungary, the antisemitic laws came in being. The first one was, as I understand it, was when I was born on. And Horthy was the head of the state.

Horthy?

Horthy, Nicholas Horthy, who was called the White Terror. And he was claiming that all the Jews are communists, and his whole gang were killing Jews in wholesale, in the 1920s. And he put he put up a law to the parliament that Jews cannot attend university unless the percentage of the population. It's called Numerus Clausus. So to circumvent this law, Jews who wanted to go in this academic field, like being lawyers or doctors, they had to go out of the country and to western universities.

I'm now emphasizing just what happened to the people in the family during the war, and did they survive. Now, what did Leb do during the war?

He was, during the war, when you are calling during the war to 1939, at that time, the Jews have been taken away practically all their rights. Because it didn't go overnight. There was laws against the Jews in 1938. There was laws against the Jews in 1939. What makes the Jewish law came, against the Jews in 1940. Every year was a different law against the Jews. And more and more had been taken away, chipped away.

So in other words, it was legalized antisemitism--

Yeah.

--was taking place, and becoming worse year by year, you're saying. As far as the war is concerned, would you say that there were several stages, as far as the Jewish experience in Hungary was concerned? Was there a difference between 1939 till 1941, as opposed to 1941 to 1944, as compared with 1944 till the end of the war?

It was a tremendous difference. At the beginning 1938, 1939, only livelihood had been taken, was affected.

What's that?

Livelihood was affected.

Yes.

By late

You said 1938, '39?

'38, '39, the livelihood has been taken away.

Now the war officially started on September 1, 1939?

Yes, this was the war Germany against Poland.

Yeah.

At that time--

Did that mean anything to you in Hungary?

It didn't mean too much. As a matter of fact, the Hungarian government is such sympathize a lot with the Poles. But

since they are more German oriented, little by little they were going with the Germans. This was a condition of the Hungarian policy to go with the Germans.

But life, every day life--

My life was going on, and meantime, they took away all the Jewish, because the influence. Since 1933, Hitler would take over Germany. Since there were the proximity, the closeness of Hungary to Germany, so close, that the influence was affected the Gentile population against all of the Jews.

Now in 1939, Leb was 38 years old.

Yeah.

What did he do at that time?

He was at that time already, he had like four or five children at that time. I guess he had five children. And he had his own business, not too far from us, about, I would say 50 miles. And he was always in the wholesale business.

Did he have to go into the Hungarian army?

And then he was called around 1940. And at that time, in '40, '41, then the Hungarian and the German army, they went against Russia. And the Hungarian army was also sending some units in and supporting the Germans. And they took along some Jewish units. And of course, the Russians, as I understand, put down a lot of mines, minefields, to protect themselves against the Germans. And the Hungarians were using the Jews to pick up, picking up the mines.

So Leb was drafted into the Hungarian army, and in the Hungarian army, he was in a Jewish unit.

Correct

And the job of the Jewish unit was not to fight, but to clear the mines for the Hungarian army.

Correct. Labor work, and it's kind of a sense.

Yeah, and the real work came starting in 1941, when the war between Germany and Russia broke out.

I mean, this was actually after that war broke out, and the Hungarians went together with the Germans. They went into Poland and they went into Ukraine.

Yeah. So the Hungarians joined the Germans in the war, and the Jewish unit had this job to do.

Yeah.

And what happened to him in the Ukraine?

As I understand, they were doing all kinds of dirty works, and I was told, I wasn't in this unit. And it was 1939. I was 19, barely 19 years old when the war started, not even 19 years old. And I was told later on that he was alive, and suddenly, he got ill. And he got this sickness, Typhus, and he died.

So he died in Russia?

In the Ukraine. Yeah.

What happened to his family?

His family was left. Their city's called [Place name] but it's in another country. And deportations took place in the spring of 1944. His five children and his wife were then sent to Auschwitz.

They went to Auschwitz?

Yeah.

And you never heard from them again?

No. His oldest son was four year younger than me.

The next brother in age, I think, is Alexander.

Yes, probably is Alexander, who came to America. He passed away 6 and 1/2 years ago, in 1986, March of 1986.

What did he do during the war?

During the war, he was also taken into the Jewish unit, into the army. And he was in different places. And we were partners here in America.

Which places was he in?

He was in different places. I can't-- it's very numerous to mention all of these places where they were transferred back and forth. But finally, when 1944, toward the end of '44, now the Russia, the Soviet Union occupied the eastern part of Hungary. And they were in his Jewish unit, eight Jewish fellows, who were taken by the Russians as a war of prisoner, POWs, into Russia, and to Romania. And he was the few of them who survived.

He was taken as a POW?

Yeah, correct.

And what happened to his-- so he was a prisoner of war in Russia from when? From 1944?

From end of '44.

Until?

Until the end, late fall of '47.

'47. So he was there about three years.

Close to three years.

Did he have a family?

He had a family. He has his wife and three children lived in Debrecen.

What happened?

They were taken to Auschwitz, through their home in the ghetto in Debrecen, and taken to Auschwitz, and we never heard of them.

They lived in Debrecen?

Yes.

Which was the big community near your--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

This was actually the county seat of Hajdunanas--

The county seat of your small town?

Yeah.

All right. The next brother, I think, is Joseph.

Joseph. Joseph was taken-- had some business in Paris. And in France, he got stuck there. And his wife and three children stayed in the small town where I was born. And he couldn't unite anymore. And so his wife, and the three children was taken to Auschwitz, in the ghetto first and then to Auschwitz. First in our small ghetto, and then into the big ghetto of Debrecen, and then they went to Auschwitz.

So Joseph survived, but his wife and three children went to Auschwitz?

Correct. And you never heard from them again?

I never heard.

Joseph was born 1905. And then we have the next brother is Yechezkel, or [? Geza, ?] who was born in 1907.

Yeah. I'm not sure if he went to the army or to the forced labor unit or not. He said he and his wife were hiding their children-- they had two girls-- by Gentiles. And they were successful there.

Successful in that they survived?

In that respect. Then finally, he got papers from the Swiss, from the Swedish people, the Wallenberg papers. And everybody in the family who was at that time alive got papers from Wallenberg, from the Swedish consul. And he was hiding in a monastery, a Catholic monastery, where roughly approximately 40 or 50 Jews were hiding. At that time, my unit was first out of outskirts of Budapest. Budapest consists of two cities, Buda and Pest. I went, we were about 20 Jewish fellows together, went to Buda. And we were in a Jewish home. It was a rather larger home, where we performed different kind of works. We got orders. I don't know who the orders came, but our unit has been ordered to perform different kind of cleaning works, and that's kind of work.

You're talking about yourself now?

Yeah.

Not about Yechezkel?

No.

So Yechezkel was in a monastery? He was --

Then he went to the Swedish house?

No, he never came to the Swedish house.

But he had Wallenberg papers?

He had Wallenberg papers. But he went out for kosher food, he and his wife. And suddenly, his wife came back, crying that he was thrown out from these Nazis who captured them from the car while the car was moving.

Which car?

In a car, from a car.

A private car?

The Nazi's car. And he was, she was thrown out. And we never saw him since.

Oh, that was Yechezkel's wife?

Yechezkel's wife was still alive.

I want to make sure I understand what happened. They hid in a monastery, Yechezkel, and his wife, and two daughters?

No, the two daughters were with someone else.

With the Gentile?

Other Gentiles.

All right. But they were reunited after the war?

Yeah

All right. Now--

I mean, Yechezkel didn't make it.

Yechezkel's wife, one day, went out to buy some food?

Yechezkel and his wife--

--went out to buy food? And that's the day that the incident with the Nazi car came up?

And then they came. They were picked up in the Nazi's.

The two of them?

The two of them. And she was thrown from the car. And Yechezkel never made it. Yechezkel disappeared.

Oh, so Yechezkel did not survive the war?

No.

But his wife did?

His wife did.

And the two daughters. Where did his wife go after the war?

She remarried here, came to America. Now she lives in Jerusalem.

Now she lives in Jerusalem?

She's an older lady and she lives in Jerusalem.

All right. The next name I have is Eugene, born in 1909, or Yosef.

Yeah, correct.

What happened to them?

He was, his family was taken, with the three children and his wife was taken to the ghetto of Debrecen, because he was living in Debrecen. And he was trying to get them out. In the meantime, he was captured and taken into the ghetto, and from the ghetto, the whole ghetto has been taken to Auschwitz. And the people who were with him together were telling me that he was, he didn't make it. He was practically selling his little piece of food, that he got the bread. He was addicted to cigarettes or something--

In Auschwitz?

In Auschwitz.

So he, his wife, and three children, all six, were--

Taken to Auschwitz and we never heard them.

And we never heard from them again. The next person that we have here is Armin, [Personal name] I believe, born in 1912. What happened to him?

He was also taken to the Hungarian forced labor camp into different places. I cannot-- They're too numerous to mention. He told me a few places, but -- And then, finally, he made it to Budapest. And Budapest went under siege for months. I would say months and months. And he was able to find out where we are. Because at that time, I left my unit. And I joined my mother, my sister, and my late brother-in-law, and the baby.

When you say your late brother-in-law, which one are you talking about?

I'm talking about David Katz.

Oh, your sister's husband.

Husband, yeah, David Katz. And we were hiding. And we got there from the Swedish consul, there was different called international ghetto, and the Swedish ghetto, and not the regular ghetto. And we were hiding there in the cellar there.

So you were with your sister?

I was with my sister, and my mother, and the baby who was born under the Gentile name.

I will get to them shortly. I think, is that-- well, the first sister that I see here is Ruchela who was born in 1914.

Yeah, she died. She got a cold, and it turned against her. She passed away when I was a small boy, I would say.

Yeah, I think you told me that that was about 1930.

In 1930 or before.

Al right. The other sister is Golda or Arlene.

Yeah.

What happened to her?

She was also taken to the ghetto, in this small town, Hajdunanas, and with my mother together. She was pregnant. And she was telling them that she is in the ninth month. Then they took her to the hospital. And my mother got visitation nights to visit her. And my brother, Geza and his wife arranged with the Hungarian army officer. It was about 260 kilometers from Budapest, I would say, 180 miles. They went on. And when my mother was visiting my sister in the hospital, just picked her up, and they went up to Budapest. And we were waiting for them to forge Gentile papers. And they were--

Those papers had been prepared for them?

They had been prepared for them. And they were both some place. I don't know where. My big brother was active on that. And with these papers, the name was Morna. And with these papers, finally she gave birth. And these papers had to be corrected after the war. I remember that.

So they were in, how do you say it? Hajdunanas?

Hajdunanas.

Hajdunanas. And they escaped from there and Debrecen, which was the county seat.

She went up to Budapest.

Yeah, but the hospital was where?

The hospital was in Hajdunanas.

It's also in Hajdunanas?

And that was the escape to Budapest, and that's how they managed to survive the war?

Many times they were captured. Because my brother-in-law, David Katz, who was hiding by a neighbor outside the city, outside Hajdunanas, it's called the city. And there was a farm. And he was putting him up in the attic. And somehow, the headquarters connected with each other in Budapest. My brother-in-law, and his wife, my sister, was corresponding.

And somehow the authorities discovered it. So one day, Hungary was such a thing that in the cities like Hajdunanas, there was police. Out in their farms it was called gendarmes. They were the authorities. One day, about 20 gendarmes surrounded their farm. And they took in custody my brother-in-law, and took in custody the owner of the farm, Mr. [Personal name] who was a very fine gentleman. And they took him and they brought him in to the jail to Hajdunanas.

At the same time, police came up to Budapest and took in custody my mother, and Mrs. Katz, my sister, and the small baby. Took them all back where they committed the crime and escaped from the ghetto, and there is the first time in this order. The father saw the baby, and my mother, and my sister, and my brother-in-law and the baby were in jail, and also this Gentile--

They were in jail?

Jailed, and also this Gentile was also in the jail.



Because they discovered that he was protecting them?

[? He was a criminal. ?] He was hiding them.

So what happened after they were in jail?

After they had been jailed, they did not know what to do with them, because the ghetto was gone.

The authorities didn't know what to do?

They didn't know what to do. So, the ghetto was gone, and taking to Auschwitz a long time. Well first, you go into Debrecen. And from Debrecen, you went to Kassa. From Kassa, you went to Auschwitz. And then, they decided they are going to send up this whole family to Budapest to the authorities, and let them handle this case. So in a way, Budapest, it was lucky that the Jews of Budapest. Because the deportation centers are still going to Auschwitz, slowed down. The Germans didn't dare to move so fast that they had moved in the provinces, because there was all the embassies. So consequently, we had an [INAUDIBLE] Horthy, who was the head of the state, but was also giving orders they should, practically they should cease it, and stopped. So the Budapest Jews were, in a way, saved.

Not all of them, though.

Not all of them, but because later on Horthy had been taken away. And this was later on in October, the 15th or the 16th of October. And he made the proclamation that he's giving up the war.

In other words, what you're describing is that the Germans were determined to get the Jews out to Auschwitz, but Horthy, antisemitic as he was, was concerned for world opinion. And when the world could see, as in Budapest, then he slowed it down.

I mean, at that time, everybody knows that the war is lost for the Germans are concerned.

But they were still sending the Jews to Auschwitz?

For the Germans, it was the priority always to get rid of the Jews. But Horthy was concerned about his country, about his own life, and about his family life. There was rumors that he survived in some kind of a Jewish plot, and his children were almost killed by the Germans, who also were very friendly to the Jews.

Right. Now. Arlene, then, was in prison with her husband and children? Was your mother there too?

They are, with my mother and the baby.

And how did they get out?

They got-- they were transferred to Budapest. In Budapest, there was a new government at that time. It was more friendly toward the Jews, and they let them go.

It was just that short period of time?

That short of time.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And miraculously, were allowed out.

It was unbelievable.

And where did they go when they left the prison?

They went to the Swedish embassy, and they got the papers. And then it is decided they're going to have to make connections with some kind of-- I don't know how they made the connections, but they went to this monastery that was outside of, outskirts of Budapest.

A monastery.

And I was still in my unit in my labor camp, right. But I got my Swedish papers, sent to me from them. And I had the nerve to tell those, my superiors, I'm not under your jurisdiction. I have my Swedish papers, so I really am a Swedish citizen now. And some of them accepted that, some of them not. But I didn't know where to go, so I was still staying with my unit.

That's Arlene. And I believe we have one more sibling, a brother, Moshe. 1918 was his year of birth.

Moshe is decided in 1939. He made contact there. The family made contact with the aliyah movement. And they had illegal ships going in from Budapest to the Danube, to the Black Sea, to Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria, and the Black Sea. And they then go to the Mediterranean, and then came into Palestine.

And, in essence, he remained in Palestine once it became Israel.

Yeah, he was fighting when the independence. I think he was a soldier in the Israeli army. And then, he came. When we escaped from Vienna, after the war, he joined us in Vienna.

We've now, I think we've covered your entire family. What strikes me as interesting over here, is that those people in, we're talking about late 1944. The war is lost already, as far as the Germans are concerned. That those Hungarian Jews who didn't break the law, supposedly-- the regulations that were being promulgated-- went to the ghetto and went to Auschwitz. The only ones who were saved, evidently, were the ones who managed not to be in the ghetto for whatever reason. Some of your siblings managed to avoid being in the ghetto. And it seems that the men in the family, your brothers, a number of them, were in the Jewish unit, or the Jewish army, whatever you call it, the Jewish section of the Hungarian army. And therefore, they were able to move around, somewhat, and avoid some of these collections into the ghettos.

No question about it. A larger percentage of these forced labor units had been saved, and the civilian population, women and children, and the older persons still are taken to Auschwitz. And there's less of a chance to survive.

Is that, generally speaking, the Hungarian story, that more of the women and the children were sacrificed than the men?

This is correct.

Because there wasn't much time to function.

It was going very fast.

To get a lot, you had to work with the ones who were there in town, in the towns?

Correct.

Can you tell us something about your education in Hajdunanas?

It was a very, very [INAUDIBLE] family. And my family's, myself, my family, and the whole town was practically-- everybody was-- there's not too many people, but practically non-existent. It didn't keep the religious laws. And my father was especially a pious man. And he didn't make it. But apparently, I got this yeshiva education. I attended

different yeshivas. Of course, then I [? went to-- ?]

When did you start attending yeshivas? At what age?

I was entering when I was 12 years old, already. It's called the Yeshiva Ketay. It was a smaller yeshiva, so it's not too far from our town.

Before? Before that, how were you educated during the first 12 years of your life?

First, we went to cheder.

Yeah.

And then when we got to six years old, I had to go. This was a compulsory, mandatory to go, to the regular elementary school. In Hungary, each religion had their own schools.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Supported by the Hungarian government?

By the government. I'm not sure where the teachers got. We got three teachers in our town, two men and one for the girls. There was even a difference too for the girls, this school. And we were in the same yard where the temple was, the shul, and also the cheders were. And also the mikvah and everything was in the same--

When you say the temple, you mean the shul?

Yeah. The shul, and the mikvah, and everything was in the same yard. And in the morning, between eight and twelve, from 6 years to 12 years, it was compulsory to have six grades. This was the requirement that the government required. And then, after that, my father was sending me over to the next town for one year, I was attending a small yeshiva. Then I became bar mitzvah. And then, I went to another yeshiva. It was a higher level. Waitzen for example, in Budapest.

So where were you-- at age 12, you were sent away to yeshiva?

Age 12, I was called to Yeshiva Ketay.

Where was that?

This was near Szentmihaly, it's called. This was a very-- although the same type of Jews that we had, about 14 kilometers, I would say about less than 10 miles, from my town.

And the name of the town?

Was Szentmihaly.

How do you spell that?

S-Z-E-N-T-M-I-H-A-L-Y.

And you were there for how long?

Almost a year.

Almost a year. So that was till about 13, or your bar mitzvah?

Just before my mitzvah.

And then where did you go?

Then I became bar mitzvahed, and I went to a different yeshiva. It was called, first I went to Verpelet. That was about, I would say, 80 or 90 miles from my town. There was a rabbi Pollack, who was--

80 or 90 miles? That was quite a distance.

Yeah.

And what's the name of the town?

The name of the town was V-E-R-P-E-L-E-T, Verpelet.

Verpelet. All right. And you were there for how long?

I spent there about two years. But I think, prior to that, when my brother, Eugene, or Josef, got married in 1933, the wedding was in Budapest, on the Buda side. And he was marrying off from the Buda's rabbi's, their daughter. And there, I was taken by his-- he was a rabbi from Waitzen. They call it in Jewish Waitzen. In Hungarian, it's VÃ¡c. V-A-C. We were taken first for a while I was taken there. Prior, I was attending the yeshiva called VÃ¡c. So --

For how long?

I would say I was there a year.

Uh huh. So you were--

First went --

One year before your bar mitzvah, right? And you-

Oh no. For one year I was in Szentimhaly and then I go to--

Two years.

And I've got and then I went to Waitz-- to Waitzen, or VÃ¡c in Hungarian. And for one a year and then I went to Verpelet.

Oh, how do you spell Waitzen? The Hungarian is V-A-C.

V-A-C.

VÃ¡c.

That's all? V-A-C?

V-A-C. VÃ¡c. It's north of Budapest, about 25 miles. 20 miles.

All right. So we've got you four years in different yeshivas.

Yeah.

When-- Let's see. When you were 15 years old. Now, that was about 1944.

19-- enough when I was 19-- 34. 1935.

Uh, right. You're 19. Let's see. Let me get this straight. You were the youngest in the family and-- All right.

[PAGES TURNING]

Yes, you were born in 1920.

So I was 13 to 19.

This is 1935.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

So in the meantime, I--

So what happened to you from 1935 on?

1935, and I was-- I lost my father. I was taken from the yeshiva home. And after that-- after the funeral, there was my brother Josef's brother-in-law, who was also a rabbi in a small town. He just felt sorry for me and he felt he was taking under his custody, under his supervision, took me along. He took me near to the Romanian border called-- the city is called, the small town is called Sarkad. S-A-R-K-A-D.

Let's get that slowly. Again, what's the name of the town?

It's S, like Sam. A- R, like a rose. K-A-D. Sarkad.

Sarkad.

Sarkad.

Yeah, Sarkad. And you went there? They had a yeshiva?

They had a small yeshiva and he was-- he was practically taking me, since he felt he was attending my father's funeral. He felt, you know, I was a young fellow. He felt he has to take me under his wings.

Right. And how long were you there?

I was there I would say a year.

And then?

And then I went also on Moshe's -- My brother who lives in Borough Park now. His idea it was that we should go Hasidic yeshiva called [? Jarmot. ?] And he took me. also there for a year.

So you kept moving from one yeshiva to another?

Yeah.

All right, we have you until about 1937 now.

That time I started to join little by little the business. We had the wholesale business. And I was active-- I started to be active in the business.

All right.

In the meantime, since my father was very restrictive in terms of secular education, I was trying to make up all the schools that I couldn't attend because my father was just sticking to his belief that we need more Jewish education and less secular education. And I attended more private schools in terms of secular things, and I made my examinations private.

And so I attended this-- it's called, in German it's called Berger Schule, or Hungarian, it's [INAUDIBLE]. And then I was also attending this business school. So everything went in private.

So when the war started, you were in the business.

I was in the business.

And you were doing, what, like, evening classes?

I was-- No, I was doing, you know, I went visiting customers and that kind of stuff.

No, no. What I mean is, you also were taking classes?

I was taking classes, but this was going on as well. As I said, I had a tutor.

Oh, you did that at home and you took examinations?

Tutor, private tutor and everything was going in private. And I took examinations. In the meantime, I was helping my mother with the business and my sister.

Now we are into the war. And you want to tell us about the experiences-- your experience and your family's experience during the war?

During the war, as I said before, that Hungary was closely allied with Germany. And the German influence was tremendous things in Hungary. So the Jews were losing their respect, weren't so respected as before.

They weren't as--

Then, they're less and less respected, because the German influence was-- made themselves felt. And, little by little, it had been taken away from 1938, their license has been taken away for the wholesale for the winery. Or the other way around. I don't know what they're called exactly. First, the liquor was more monopoly. And then the winery and then the beer. As the time passed by, that's been taken away.

And we were more worried what's going to happen. But unfortunately, we saw the Germans moving ahead in 1940. They were-- the west front was going on. They were going against France and Belgium and other states they were occupying. Then, in 1941, they turned against Russia. And of course, no Jew were in the Hungarian army any more.

No Jew was in the Hungarian army.

No Jew. The Jews has been taken the latest 1940. There were taken and they were put in this-- in this Jewish unit.

So this Jewish unit was something new?

This has been just done for the Jews to-- to use them as a labor force. And support the--

The segregation of a labor force.

Yeah. I don't know who invented it but certainly, the Jews have been taken away from the army. They were an integral part of the Hungarian army. But in 1940, there was no left. There were no Jews left.

How were they members of the Jewish units treated?

They were treated-- It depends from the dependent from the independent commandants. Some commandants were decent, some of them-- Most of them are Nazi-sent. Of course, these were influencing those-- the lower ranks. And they had a tremendous influence, because everything came from the head. If the fellow who was the commandant on this unit, Jewish unit was a decent, man the men had to behave decent.

What did the decent commandant do? And what did the--

I mean--

--cruel commandants do?

A decent commandant was behaving normal.

For instance?

Like a-- You know, like, more human. [INAUDIBLE].

How did you feel? Did you feel it in terms of the food you received, the work you did?

First of all, they let us bring in food, kosher food, or they let us access-- We had a correspondence with the family. If the families were still home, they were able to visit us. And they give us all kind of concessions. I mean, normally, under normal conditions, any army would do that. While the not decent-- not so decent units-- I happen to have all kind of-- Because we were given back and forth to different entities.

And an example, my mother used to come and go. Bring us kosher food. I had any problem-- I didn't have any problem to get it. Later on, we were sent out to different places, like Transylvania. We were cut off from the families anymore. Transylvania became-- At that time, northern Transylvania became Hungary at that time.

Prior to, it was Romania. Prior to that, it was Hungary again. And there was-- we were completely cut off. But I was able to manage to also to get home for a weekend or something like that.

All right. And at what point-- What was the routine of regulations that took place, one by one, in terms of the Jewish Hungarian experience? In other words, the first few years of the war, it was getting more and more difficult, but it was possible to live.

Yeah, there was no-- In terms of livelihood, there was never a problem as such.

Until?

Until 1944, when Germany finally didn't tolerate the Hungarians who were not willing to give up the Jews. But as I understand, Germany were pushing the Hungarians. They wanted the Jews. And finally, it came to a point, to be exact March 19, 1944, where Hungary didn't-- Germany didn't trust the Hungarians because Romania, who was also an ally of Germany, was, of course--

Romania was sandwiched-- is sandwiched between Hungary and the Soviet Union. The Romanian government was able to switch horses I would call it to be allied with Germany. He just pulled themselves out and he was successful to join the Russians. And then to Romania. The Germans got very suspicious of the Hungarians, that they were going to do the same thing. And when the Romanian and the Russian army reached the Romania-Hungarian border, the head of the

state in Hungary tried to do the same but wasn't successful.

Wanted to join the Russians?

Wanted to join-- pullout from the Germans. And he-- I know--

Are you talking about Horthy?

Horthy.

And he was not successful?

He wasn't.

Why was he not successful?

Because his helpers and his [INAUDIBLE] or his people around him weren't helping him properly.

You knew that? At the time.

The only things I knew that our unit. Or a small unit at that time. Because from Transylvania, I was transferred to the so-called auto mechanic since I was a driver. And the driver license for Hungary had to have also knowledge of how the machines were coded. How did the cars operate. You know. So consequently, I had some knowledge about the cars.

And they took us as a drivers into Budapest. And there was tremendous bombing because, at that time, already the English and the Americans were occupying part of Italy. From there, there was tremendous bombing going on in the barracks where we were housed. The Jewish units with the gentiles. Because the Jewish units were separate. A separate room and a separate barrack. I would say the same barrack rather and a separate room or the big rooms.

And we were, as mechanics, handled and we had relatively decent treatment. But one day, March 19, 1944, when the war was going bad for Germany, they didn't trust the Hungarians anymore. They were afraid, the Germans, that they are going to do the same-- thing is going to happen with Hungary like it happened with Romania.

And one day, all the airfields, all the railroad stations, everything was occupied by the Germans. Of course, this meant the deportations followed a month or two later. And, from the provinces, nothing in the city in their capital city. But the ghettos-- I'm not sure when the ghettos has been made, but we were able to, until the occupation of Hungary from the German side, we were able to go out and visit.

We got permission to go out from these barracks and we had to go back. But after that, the visitation stopped.

Right. Now in 1944, starting in the spring, I guess, deportations began.

1944 when the Germans came in. Eichmann and his gang came in, and they had the plans ready to go, as I understand. And we weren't aware of that, of course, at that time. We just found out later.

And I think they were sending something like 10,000 a day, weren't they?

They were sending to camp 12,000 people a day.

Now, it would appear that they really wanted to send everybody.

They wanted to send anybody, but he was assisting, as I understand, Horthy from the capital. First of all, there was two kinds of police force, the regular police force and the gendarmes. And the gendarmes-- the commandant of the gendarmes for the whole country was very helpful for the Germans and cooperated with the Germans against Horthy's



will and misled Horthy.

And the Jewish population in the provinces were practically-- Judenreine, free of Jews in-- a couple of months later.

Now, when you think that the Germans, who were very thorough or trying to get everybody deported to Auschwitz, we take a look at your numerous family. Quite a few of the members of the family were deported but a number were not. About what would you say the breakdown was? Was it more like 50/50 in your family?

I mean, some of them-- Most of the people, the men especially, who was in the forced labor camp or the units, they were able to survive.

The middle [INAUDIBLE].

Yes, my mother and my sister was who were escaping the ghetto survived. The rest of the family didn't make it.

So it was the men and that one unit of the family that somehow-- Would you say that was because she was pregnant? And-- [INAUDIBLE] be in the hospital?

My sister was pregnant and she went to the hospital. And the hospital--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

My mother was visiting her, right. And they said they saved her, yes.

They wouldn't have known what to do otherwise?

No, they wouldn't right, yes.

So, miraculously, she was pregnant and that saved the life not only of herself--

Well, to be a part of--

Maybe other members of-- Your mother, for instance.

She wouldn't have made it. Altogether, a part of the German-- of the Debrecen ghetto survived. Coincidentally because they made some kind of a deal, as I understand-- Eichmann with another ghetto they deprived them of something. And coincidentally, sent them away. So they took a part of the German-- the Debrecen ghetto and sent them to Austria. And they survived.

But there's something else that I see that's interesting over here. I'm wondering if there's something that we've learned from this. It seems that no member of your family who was shipped to Auschwitz survived.

No member of my family was surviving. Whoever was shipped to Auschwitz, nobody survived.

Have you spoken to Hungarian Jews who were shipped to Auschwitz who did survive, and try to understand who did survive and who did not survive?

The only persons who survived in Auschwitz were some men and women who had will power not to reserve a little strength. And it was, I would say, God will to survive because I still believe God played a big role. He's ruling the world. And anytime I was in trouble, for example, I was just thinking about my father whom we buried here when I was 14 1/2 years old. That he's watching over me.

And somehow, yes, he was interceding on my behalf. And this is somehow-- this is my feeling to save me. I cannot pinpoint these things. But this feeling, this is what I feel.

There's something else that I'm thinking as I'm talking to you. When they came to Auschwitz, they were separated. Some were sent directly to be murdered, and some they wanted to get--

Some labor.

--a few months of labor out of them. Women and children--

Small children and the women--

Small children, for sure. They wouldn't use for labor.

Some women also made it.

And some of the women, like if they were mothers, even if they were separated from the children, insisted on being with the children.

Yes, but--

In other words, to survive they'd have to desert their children.

Because when they did come, as I understand-- when they came to Auschwitz, there was Dr. Mengele who made the selections.

Or somebody like that.

Made the selections. No, the Mengele was the one who made the selections in Auschwitz in '44. And everybody know they lost the war, but they had the priority to get rid of the Jewish. And Doctor Mengele was one of them

And when he saw a family unit, he probably shipped them all--

He put them right and left and--

He didn't send anybody to work. In other words, if you had somebody coming with, like-- The men were with the Jewish units, the women and the children went to Auschwitz. So he shipped them all to be murdered.

No, Sometimes you took out the woman who were strong, and took them away by force from the families. And they were able to work, and some of them survived.

Like this, you don't know now, what happened. Did some of those young mothers-- Were they put on a different line and they refused. They might have said they want to go with the children.

I've spoken to Hungarian Jewish women after the war here in America who survived. And some of them had children, some [of them were single and survived.

Single people, I think, had a better chance to survive.

Correct.

All right, where were you at the end of the war?

The end of the war, we were liberated. I was deserted my unit and then we went in a monastery. And in the monastery, they were asking us if we should leave, and of course, Russian troops approached Budapest. And we were afraid something was going to happen to us. So we went into the Swedish houses, the so-called international ghetto. And in the

basement, we were able to survive. Very, very hungry. No food whatsoever. And I was-- I couldn't see my sister who had the baby there. She didn't have the milk to give the baby. My mother was there.

Budapest, you can imagine, was a city where it was practically not only under siege, but was practically bypassed by the Russians. Even Pest-- Budapest was consisting of two cities, Buda and Pest. Even on the Pest side, near the Danube River, which divides Buda and Pest.

We were-- I was going out for food. And I was captured. In order to, of course, in a city--

Captured by?

By Nazis.

Germans?

No, Hungarian Nazis. And this was a garage. Whoever was captured they have to go inside. In order words, like, it was a trap. And whenever somebody passed by, they asked the first question, Jew or not Jew. So I had to tell him I'm Jewish because [INAUDIBLE] anyway.

And they had a bunch of Jews together. I would say about 50, 60 Jews just went to this Nazi-- not the headquarters, but one of the main stations. And there was in front of it a guard, a Hungarian Nazi guard, who-- Nobody could get out from there.

They were asking questions, silly questions. But we knew this was the end of the line. It's the end of the line. You're either-- you're going to be shot in the Danube, or they're going to take us to somewhere. We're not going to make it.

So we were left alone there for a while in this yard, because out we couldn't go. There was a guard. So suddenly, a German Sergeant came in carrying it typewriter.

A what?

Carrying a typewriter--

Yeah.

--in his hands. Suddenly, I had an idea. I went over to the Germans. I think it was visible I'm Jewish. I told them I spoke good German. I told them, comrades, I would like to help you. This German soldier didn't know that I'm Jewish. He gave me this typewriter. He went out a gate. The Hungarian Nazi was seeing the German who was superior to the Hungarians was saluting him, and let me go also through with him. He knew that I belonged to this German.

He went to a few houses. The German thanked me for helping him bring this typewriter. He gave me a few cigarettes, which was a big deal at the time, then I walked home.

And that's how you were freed?

I was freed.

Next day, I went out again. The following days. But I couldn't see my--

Next day, what?

I had to do the same thing because we had to go and bring some food. It was-- we couldn't--

With whom were you at the time?

How old?

With whom were you?

I was with my mother in the cellar, my sister and the baby, and my brother-in-law was also there. Maybe also Arie was with me. So I was telling them-- I went to the bakery, for example, and got the bread. Don't eat it in one shot. Because we are so hungry, we could eat in one bread or two breads. Everybody [INAUDIBLE] by himself. We didn't eat for months and months.

And next day I was going out again, after something, to get some food or something. And suddenly came-- Of course, you have to imagine a deserted city. There was nobody in the street. Suddenly this car stops. High office Nazi uniform. Hungarian Nazi uniform. And they took out a whip. And they started to curse on the Jews. [INAUDIBLE].

And while he was doing that, the Nazis begged him, don't. We will work all day to catch those Jews. No, we have them now. No, they are running around because we are hitting them.

And he was just keep telling them. I don't want to see them. I don't want to see any Jews. Later we found out those Jews who are doing that. He was pretending he's a Nazi and he has, of course, stolen this Nazi clothes. And he was actually a Jewish fellow.

Why was he doing this?

He was doing this to save us.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Was that-- so that's the way he was telling you to disappear.

Yeah. He was this to save us.

I think we'll continue as soon as we turn the tape over.