

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **Archives**

### **Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center**

**Interview with Ernest Gottdiener  
October 27, 1992  
RG-50.002\*0005**

## **PREFACE**

On October 27, 1992, Ernest Gottdiener was interviewed on videotape by Joseph J. Preil on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

**Summary of the**  
**Interview with Ernest Gottdiener**  
**October 27, 1992**

Ernest Gottdiener was born on October 13, 1920 in Hajdúnánás, Hungary, a small town near Debretzin (Debrecen), Hungary. His father and grandfather were also born in the same town. Ernest was one of 12 children, two of whom died before 1920. His father died of cancer in 1935 and his mother survived the war. Throughout his testimony, Ernest describes several miraculous escapes which lead to his ultimate survival.

Ernest recalls that women and children were more likely to perish from Hungary than the men because the men were drafted into Jewish army units which were actually forced labor. Treatment depended on the individual commandants. Jewish livelihood in Hungary was not threatened until Germany became more dominant in Hungarian affairs after March 19, 1944. Ernest describes the chaos in Budapest, Hungary at the close of the war. He recalls seeing "mountains and mountains of dead bodies" in the Budapest ghetto.

After liberation, Ernest returned to Debretzin and Hajdúnánás where he made an effort, along with several surviving family members, to resume life and the family business. Ernest married in Budapest in 1948 and settled in Vienna, Austria with several other family members. They left Hungary in 1948 because the communists had become the dominant force in the country. Ernest moved to the United States in 1959 with his wife, son, and daughter. They then moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1961 and Ernest went to work in a construction business with his brother.

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**Time-coded notes of the  
Interview with Ernest Gottdiener  
October 27, 1992**

01:00:00

Born October 13, 1920 in Hajdúnánás, Hungary, a small town near Debretzin (Debrecen). Was one of 12 children. Father and grandfather also born in same town. Two children died before 1920. Father died in 1935 of cancer. Mother survived the war. Oldest brother, Leif. They were not affected, really, by outbreak of war in September 1939.

01:05:00

Leif at that time had five children. Called into army in 1940, in a Jewish unit. Their job was to clear mines. Their real work was in Ukraine, beginning in 1941. Died in Russia of typhus. Leif's family, wife and five children, were murdered in Auschwitz, a concentration camp in Poland. Alex was in army, taken as prisoner of war by Russia in 1944, and survived. Was in Russia as a prisoner of war until Fall 1947. His wife and three children were murdered in Auschwitz.

01:10:00

Joseph survived in Paris, France. His wife and three children perished in Auschwitz. Yechezkel (Geza) hid in monastery. His wife and two daughters survived. Had Wallenberg papers. Only Yechezkel (Geza) and his wife were in monastery. The daughters hid privately. Yechezkel did not survive.

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**2**

01:15:00

Eugene (Joseph), his wife and three children perished in Auschwitz. Armin survived in Swedish house. His sister Golda (Arlene), her baby and their mother hid in Budapest, Hungary with Gentile papers.

01:20:00

Mother, sister, brother-in-law, baby, and Gentile were discovered, imprisoned, and sent to Budapest. Miraculously, they were freed in Budapest. This was 1944. That's when they went to the monastery, then to Swedish House. They survived. Moshe went to Palestine in 1939.

01:25:00

In Hungary, many women and children perished as compared with the men who were dragged into the army and labor. Describes elementary secular and religious education. Then attended Yeshiva in nearby town, for several years after his Bar Mitzvah.

01:30:00

After father's death, he took general education courses, as opposed to Yeshiva only, business courses and went into business.

01:35:00

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Treatment in Jewish units in army, which were actually forced labor, depended on individual commandants. Some were decent, most were cruel. No problem for Jewish livelihood in Hungary until 1944. This situation changed after March 19, 1944, when Germany became more dominant in Hungarian affairs.

01:40:00

The Germans did not trust the Hungarian government at this time. They wanted to avoid the Romanian experience. Romania had "switched houses" and joined Russia. Eichmann entered scene at this time.

01:45:00

Analysis of who in family was shipped to Auschwitz, who was not shipped. Also, who survived in family and who did not survive. Was in Swedish House toward end of war. Went out for food one day, was captured by Nazis.

01:50:00

Pessimistic regarding dire situation. Volunteered to help with typewriter and this helped in a miraculous escape. Relates story of how a Jew, in guise of helping Nazis, warned him and others to disappear.

01:55:00

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Review of fate of siblings and their families. Apparently, 21 perished and 12 survived. Recounts a second incident of being picked up by Nazis.

02:00:00

During questioning, his Swedish papers were taken, torn and discarded. Struck up a conversation with a guard, used his few coins, walked with guard. American bombers came from Italy, guard returned Ernest, went home. He had duplicate copies of his Swedish papers at home!

02:05:00

Recounts other dangerous incident in final days of war in Budapest in his efforts to procure food.

02:10:00

After liberation, went in Budapest ghetto and "saw mountains and mountains of dead bodies." This was January-March 1945. War was ending, but all was chaos. Returned to Debretzin (Debrecen) and Hajdúnánás in March with mother, brother, sister, brother-in-law and baby. Made effort to resume their lives and business.

02:15:00

General population was not anxious to communicate because they had taken many Jewish belongings. Family remained in home town until 1948. Communists were becoming dominant force

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in the country. Gottdieners became especially dire after March 19, 1944, when Germany became dominant in Hungarian affairs and Eichmann arrived to deal with the Jews. Throughout this testimony, Gottdiener describes several miraculous escapes which were required to survive, including Wallenberg's Swedish House...even though the full brunt of the Holocaust arrived in Hungary in the final year of a long war. They left Hungary in 1948 because the communists had become the dominant force in the country. Ernest married in Budapest, Hungary in 1948 and settled in Vienna, Austria with several other family members. Some emigrated to the United States in 1957; Ernest, his wife, son and daughter moved to the United States in 1959. Ernest's family moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1961 because of the educational opportunities available in the Jewish educational center for his children to complement the New Jersey construction business that he joined with his brother.