

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

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

Interview with Ernest Bokor
September 17, 1987
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PREFACE

On September 17, 1987, Ernest Bokor was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein 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 Bokor
September 17, 1987

Ernest Bokor was born on August 21, 1920 in Debrad, Czechoslovakia (Slovak Republic). His family moved to Dubovec, Czechoslovakia (Slovak Republic) when he was three years old. Ernest's father was a merchant and a butcher. When his father died, Ernest went to live with his grandmother for a time. While in high school, he went to Hebrew school twice a week.

After the Hungarian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Ernest's family moved to Rimsobota (Rimskavá Sobota, Slovak Republic). When Czechoslovakia's democratic tolerance was replaced by Hungarian Antisemitism, Ernest moved to Budapest, Hungary in 1939.

In 1943, Ernest was called up for forced labor and became a weaver. Using two green-dyed shirts, he posed as a Hungarian Nazi (the "Arrow Cross" or Nyilaskereszets Párt). He had his papers altered to make him a Catholic. Ernest's false identity allowed him to save Jewish children. A Nazi friend got him more papers. Ernest met up with a friend from a Zionist organization who was also posing as a Nazi. His friend worked with the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg to save Jews. Ernest joined their efforts.

Ernest and his brother were captured by Nazis soon after the two met in a synagogue. The brothers were sent to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. When they arrived, the American Army was already shelling nearby. The prisoners were quickly

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liberated by the Americans, but Ernest's brother died soon after. Upon returning home, Ernest met his sister. He married soon after. He emigrated with his wife to Israel in 1949.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Ernest Bokor
September 17, 1987**

01:00:00

Ernest Bokor was born on August 21, 1920 in Debrad, Czechoslovakia (Slovak Republic). When he was three years old his family moved to Dubovec, Czechoslovakia (Slovak Republic) 80 miles away. The town was largely Catholic. Ernest was one of only two Jewish children in the town. He was frequently beaten by other children. Ernest's father was a merchant and butcher, and very strong. Once after a fight, Ernest came home crying and his father spanked him in order to toughen him. From then on Ernest fought back. Ernest had to travel by train to get to high school. One time another boy deliberately took his assigned seat on the train.

01:04:00

Ernest got into a fight when the other boy wouldn't give him back his seat. Both boys were punished in school. Ernest realized that you have to fight, or else you give up. He went to a Roman Catholic school, but a priest there taught him the Hebrew alphabet. At the time of his bar-mitzvah, Ernest's father died and he went to live for a time with his grandmother who taught him

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a good deal about Judaism. When Ernest was in high school, he went to a Hebrew school twice a week.

01:07:00

Ernest's sister was sent to live in the city because there was no future in the town for a Jewish girl. Ernest learned well in high school, where there were very strict standards. He was a pretty good student, but he enjoyed the outdoors more. Danger came with the Hungarian occupation in 1938. His family moved to Rimsobota (Rimavská Sobota, Slovak Republic). Before 1938, Czechoslovakia had been democratic and tolerant. Now the Jews were driven out of occupations and professions by the Hungarians. Ernest decided to go to Budapest, Hungary in 1939.

01:10:00

He became a milk-delivery man in Budapest, delivering on foot and using side entrances. In winter he had to push a cart in the snow. Ernest had to stop doing this work. He got a printing job by disguising the fact that he was a Jew. He began to feel that he was no longer free. A co-worker tried to recruit him for the Hungarian Nazi Party (the "Arrow Cross" or Nyilaskereszets Párt). Ernest made excuses in order to delay doing anything.

01:13:00

He sent a knitting machine home so his brother could earn a living. Ernest was starting to make money himself. In 1943, he was called up for forced labor. He had been called up the

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previous year, but as the sole support of his family he was given a one year deferment. The Hungarians wanted metal and textile workers, but Ernest knew neither trade. He followed his mother's advice and declared himself a cook. Despite this, he was placed on the textile workers' list.

01:16:00

Ernest became a weaver. He was sent to a military factory to weave uniforms and worked from six p.m. to six a.m. His superior was a functionary in the Nazi Party who knew in 1944 that "something very big" would happen soon. The Germans then occupied Hungary. The Nazi superior, (who did not know he was Jewish), said that things would be "good" now. Ernest knew that false papers would be too expensive. Those who were identified as Jews were forced to wear the Jewish Star. Ernest's mother was sent to the ghetto in the spring of 1944. She sent him two shirts dyed the green color of the Hungarian Nazi Party uniform.

01:19:00

Ernest became a "Nazi." He realized that he might have to go into hiding. On his papers was the word "Israelite." Ernest knew someone who was a textile and chemical engineer. The engineer took out "Israelite" and substituted "Roman Catholic." Ernest's papers indicated his whole family was Roman Catholic.

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01:22:00

The Allied Air Forces were now bombing Hungary. The Russians were getting closer. The Nazis imposed more and more restrictions and there was less and less food. Ernest went to his Nazi friend for help and promised to help him when the Russians came because he spoke Russian. He told the Nazi friend that he had Jewish papers but that they had been made Roman Catholic. He asked his friend to keep the secret. His friend brought him papers. Ernest thus became a "Nazi."

01:25:00

Ernest lived a double life. He worked in a factory at night and would sneak out occasionally. He hid his uniform and armband. During the day, he would go out in his uniform.

01:28:00

One rainy day in November of 1944, Ernest heard that a church was hiding five Slovakian-Jewish children. They were supposed to be taken to the Danube river to be shot. He ran there pretending to be a Nazi and demanded the five Jews, knowing that the real Nazis would soon be arriving. He pretended to be cursing and abusing the Jews.

01:31:00

Ernest crossed the bridge between Buda and Pest with the children. He met a Nazi "colleague" and told the Nazi he had to

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take the children to the Nazi Central Committee. Ernest took the children to the house where he thought the Jewish Committee was and let them go.

01:34:00

Ernest came back over the Danube river. He saw some teenagers being tied together so they could be shot with one bullet. He was torn over whether he should kill the killers or not. If he had killed them he would not have been able to do any good for anyone else.

01:37:00

In October, Ernest ran away from forced labor and went out on the street. One day he saw his commander and braced himself for the worst. Ernest was carrying two grenades and a machine gun with 48 bullets. It was a tense minute. As they saluted, the commander must have realized Ernest's intention. They passed one another and the episode was over.

01:40:00

He met a friend from the Zionist organization, also dressed in a Nazi uniform. The friend told him about Wallenberg (Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg). Wallenberg had given him the uniform. Ernest joined the group. Wallenberg's group pretended to have

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orders to "arrest" Jews who were in danger from real Nazis. They helped these people escape.

01:43:00

One time Wallenberg told them to go to a concentration center for elderly, women, and children. The center was in a cinder-block factory. Ernest and others loaded them on to trucks and took them to a part of Budapest where they could be let loose. The Jews thought they were Nazis and thought they were being taken to the Danube river. They started to jump out of the trucks and force had to be used to get them back on the trucks.

01:46:00

When they were far enough away, they gave the people passes and let them go. If a real Nazi had gotten on the truck they would have had to dispose of him. One day Ernest was walking on one of the main streets of Budapest where there was a mass grave for Jews. Suddenly he saw three SS men. One of them came over and embraced him.

01:49:00

It was Ernest's "friend" who had wanted to indoctrinate him into the Nazi Party. Ernest got some information from him as to where the Jews were and where they were being rounded up.

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01:52:00

Ernest saw a scared young girl who looked Jewish. She went into a Christian house. He knew she was safe. Ernest recently told this story to woman friend of his wife. After she questioned Ernest a bit about the details, the name of the street, whether he was the Nazi who was following her, they both realized that she was the girl he had seen.

01:55:00

Ernest talks about his brother who had been called up for forced labor. Ernest had always had a feeling he would find his brother. He always asked people about the company to which Ladislav Bokor might have been attached. Someone pointed out that Ladislav was hiding in a particular synagogue. Ernest took off the armband and went inside the synagogue and found his brother.

01:58:00

One night Ernest threw away his arms so he could stay with his younger brother. He knew his mother was no longer alive and surmised that she had died in Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

02:01:00

Ernest and his brother were picked up and taken to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. There were people there in striped uniforms. He realized that they were all the "living dead." Ernest saw a Nazi kill a prisoner. In the afternoon the prisoners were ordered to walk. He could hear the shelling going on.

02:04:00

Ernest sensed that the war was over. As they went through a town, they met some Slovak prisoners who told them to hide. The Americans were already nearby.

02:07:00

They ran and hid inside a house. A policeman found them and said that he would take them to a concentration camp. He told them it was all over. The shelling came closer and closer and they found a shelter.

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02:10:00

The next day the Germans disappeared and the Americans arrived. The Americans gave out too much food and his brother got sick and did not want to eat. Ernest tried to get him to a hospital. He went over a bumpy road to a hospital in a school.

02:13:00

In the morning, Ernest's brother could no longer see him. Five days later, his brother died. Ernest tried for several years to find out where he was buried. He finally made a marker for him near his father's grave.

02:16:00

When Ernest came home he found his sister. She had been in an ammunition factory. He learned not to give up. At least when you fight back, he reasoned, you have a chance. For Ernest, Wallenberg was "an angel." If Wallenberg could be rescued today, he says, he would take part in his rescue. He hopes that Wallenberg is still alive.

02:19:00

Ernest came home after the war. He met a woman in the Carpathian mountains and they were married. His cousin went to Israel in 1946 and married Ernest's wife's sister. Ernest and his

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wife went to Israel in 1949. Their first daughter was born in Israel.

02:22:00

Ernest's children were protected and given everything their parents could give them. He told his children to fight back. The Nazis always knew how to exploit vulnerability and fear.

02:25:00

Ernest did not always believe that he'd survive. Sometimes he even did not trust his friends. He always feared someone would recognize him. On the subject of fighting back, he feels that "you have to have the guts to do it and the luck to survive it."