

ROBERT ERWIN DANKNER
RG-50.030.0674 (recorded 2012)

Erwin Dankner was born in 1928 in Budapest, Hungary, to Henry and Catherina. He had one brother born in 1929. His father was a very successful jeweler in Budapest and the family was wealthy with several servants. They were conservative and usually went to the Rombach synagogue. His father considered emigrating several times, but was stopped once because of his mother and again because the family couldn't get transit visas out of Bremen.

The family escaped death by being able to get into the Kasztner Group, which was assembled to enable to "cream of the crop" of Jews to leave Hungary. Erwin believes that it started with a German Jewish woman who bought a lot of jewelry from his father and told him if he was ever in trouble with the Nazis to contact her.

Before March 1944 Erwin said life was normal. He did get beaten up by kids coming home from school. In 1944 his father was sent to a forced labor camp but broke his collar bone getting on the train to the camp so got a 6-week reprieve. He called the German woman and she sent him to a person in the Gestapo who sent him to the Jewish Committee. Erwin and 10 other family members were then sent to Bergen Belsen after the father paid in many diamonds. They spent several months there but were not treated like other Jews and were fed adequately. In late 1944, after 6 months in the camp, they were sent in a group to Switzerland. Dessi Dorant, from the Metropolitan Opera, was in this group. Erwin also said there was someone in the Kastner group who also helped them named Hansi Brand.

The family stayed in Montreux, Switzerland until 1948. Henry Dankner was able to retrieve his jewelry instruments from Hungary and worked in Switzerland. The family took the Queen Elizabeth ship to New York. Some of the family returned to Budapest after the war and Erwin's father sent money to help them.

Erwin later found out that the German Jewish woman's husband was a Rumanian Jew who worked for the Gestapo and was later executed at Nuremberg.