

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Robert Erwin Dankner

October 19, 2012

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Karen Culbreth, National Court Reporters Association.

Robert Erwin Dankner

October 19, 2012

Question: Okay. So my name is Leslie Swift. I work at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and I am interviewing Mr. Erwin Dankner on October 3, 2012 over the telephone. Can you -- can we begin by having you state your birth name.

Answer: Yes.

Q: Your place of birth and your date of birth.

A: Yes. My birth name was Robert Erwin Dankner.

Q: Okay. And you --

A: It was December the 1st, 1928.

Q: Okay.

A: And the rest of the, the parents?

Q: Where were you born?

A: In Budapest, Hungary.

Q: Okay, and what were your parents' names and dates of birth, if you remember?

A: My parent -- my father was Henry Dankner, his birth, he was born in 1897.

Q: Where?

A: In Horadenka.

Q: Okay.

A: That's Poland at that time. And my mother's name was Catherina Dankner, with the same birth date, and she was born in Budapest, Hungary.

Q: Okay. And did you have any siblings?

A: Yes. I have a brother, George Anthony Dankner.

Q: And when was he born?

A: He was born in 1929, December the 18th.

Q: Also in Budapest?

A: Yes.

Q: Yes. And what -- when did your family move to Budapest? When did your father move?

A: When he was a baby.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't know, at age one, I think, or one and a half.

Q: Okay, so the family was firmly based in Budapest?

A: Yes, yes, yes. He served in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the first world war.

Q: Okay, and what language or languages were spoken in your home?

A: Hungarian.

Q: Just Hungarian?

A: Yes.

Q: And did all of your immediate family, meaning your brother and your parents and yourself, survive the Holocaust?

A: Yes.

Q: And did your extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, did they also live in Budapest?

A: Yes.

Q: And were they --

A: Well, there were some in the United States.

Q: Okay.

A: There were some in, we found out, in Switzerland. There was somebody in Romania. There were others. A couple of them were in England.

Q: Okay.

A: As a matter of fact, my grandfather's -- there were seven brothers, and two of the brothers went to Palestine in the 1800's.

Q: And did, so did grandparents and uncles, were they involved in your life in Budapest?

A: Well, only up to a point because they passed away when both my brother and I were quite young.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: As a matter of fact, I was named after one of my grandfathers.

Q: Okay. And what did your parents do for a living?

A: My father was the foremost jeweler in Budapest, was decorated at an international exhibition by Prince Joseph from the Habsburg Court, and he was given the equivalent at that time Master of the Gold, of the Golden Wreath. That would have been an equivalent to being knighted in England and being called "sir".

Q: Okay. And what kind of jewelry did he make?

A: He was making -- of course, in those days it was all fine handmade jewelry, and he designed them all, and he had all the, the nobility and the, and the stars from movie and theater as his customers.

Q: Okay, and so would you have considered your family pretty well off?

A: At the time we did not know. My parents did, never divulged what they were worth, for the right reasons, because later on it was proven that the Hungarian police and the Nazis were picking up children and giving them candy and chocolate and asking them a lot of questions about the parents.

Q: Okay. To try and find out where the money was?

A: Right, exactly.

Q: Right. And did you have, did you have household maids or servants?

A: Yes, we did; we did, yes.

Q: And was your family religious?

A: Conservative.

Q: Okay. And did you receive religious instruction?

A: Yes. We went to a Jewish elementary school and a Jewish gymnasium.

Q: Okay. And what do you recall about your relations with non-Jews? Obviously your father had customers who weren't Jewish. A: Yes, of course; but my relation was, and my brother's, only that when we were beaten up by other kids on the street because we were so identifiable because of the emblem of our school, gymnasium on our caps.

Q: Okay, so that --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- you definitely experienced.

A: It was never, it was not a amicable encounter.

Q: Okay, and was the neighborhood that you lived in, was it --

A: It was the central --

Q: -- a Jewish neighborhood?

A: No, it was the central part of Budapest.

Q: What street was it?

A: It was the H-A-J-O Street.

Q: Okay. And what synagogue did you go to?

A: We went to the -- well, it's what's called the Rumbach.

Q: Sure.

A: If you've heard about it.

Q: Um-hm.

A: Yes. And sometimes to the Dohany, the largest one in Budapest.

Q: Okay.

A: But mostly to the Rumbach, and that's where both my brother and I were bar mitzvahed.

Q: Okay, and did you, did you -- did your family attend services regularly?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. So, so obviously your, you know, you suffered at the hands of anti-Semitic school children?

A: Well, yes, I mean.

Q: And what about on a political level, were you old enough to be aware of --

A: No.

Q: Okay.

A: No. The only thing that I -- I mean, I knew that they were electing people to parliament, but I mean from what party or who they were, I really did not, no.

Q: And did you feel anything from your parents that they were worried as things got worse or --

A: Yes, yes, yes, yes. My father was quite -- well, he, he was cognizant of the fact what was going on starting in 1938, and later on there were refugees coming from Poland, and he was one of the places they came for funds to help them go to, to Italy or, you know, leave the country.

Q: Okay, so he helped.

A: Yeah.

Q: He helped, yeah.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: But he -- did you feel like your family felt that there was any imminent threat in Hungary?

A: When?

Q: Well, from -- you know, as Germany sort of expanded and started taking over other countries?

A: Well, only inasmuch that the Hungarian government, an ally of the Nazis, was bringing in laws that would curtail Jewish activities like attending college --

Q: Right.

A: -- becoming a doctor or engineer. They had a very, very small percentage that they accepted, only the top, top students, and later on that too was done away with.

Q: Right, right. And were you aware of the Arrow Cross?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Yeah. And, and --

A: As a matter of fact, they were marching many times under our windows.

Q: Okay, and so I assume you feared them and, and --

A: Well, I mean, you know, at that time that was the, way before the war, we didn't fear them because they were not, they did not have any real power --

Q: Right.

A: -- because just the demonstrations that they -- the same thing like the Ku Klux Klan has done here.

Q: Um-hm.

A: You know.

Q: Okay.

A: You didn't want to get in their way and you didn't want to face them; but, no, we were not particularly scared --

Q: Right.

A: -- at that time.

Q: And so how much did you know, how many details did you or your family know about the treatment that Jews were receiving -A: Oh, that we knew, that we knew.

Q: -- in Germany?

A: Yes.

Q: You knew about Kristallnacht?

A: Well, at that time we did not know about Kristallnacht, but we knew about what was going on in Germany because, you know, at the dinner table these things were discussed--

Q: Um-hm.

A: -- and mentioned, and so we were -- I mean, we didn't really -- my brother was 13, I was 14 at the time, so, you know, we did not, we were busy with our own activities --

Q: Concerns.

A: -- more or less; and, but, yes, we were aware because we belonged to the Boy Scouts, but we could not be called Boy Scouts.

Q: Okay. Okay, because --

A: Because there was no such thing as a Jewish Boy Scout Q: Okay, okay, and, but at that point your family didn't consider trying to immigrate or --

A: Yes, my father did. Oh, it was in 19 -- in 1934, I think if I'm correct, he did get an American visa, and he was one of -- let's see, my uncle and my aunt, one of five children, and one of the girls came to the United States, and the other, the rest of them were over there. One, one passed away, and my grandmother said to my dad, he was the supporter of the family, more or less, his parents, I meant --

Q: Um-hm.

A: -- and she said, If you're leaving, who will be left to be with me?

Q: Okay.

A: And he didn't leave.

Q: And did he feel like he wanted to try to leave because of the political situation?

A: Yes. He wanted my brother and I to have a better life.

Q: But it wasn't necessarily related to anti-Semitism or to what was happening in Germany?

A: Well, to be honest with you, that I do not know.

Q: Okay.

A: I do not -- I know he also tried to leave in 1938. Again, it was an American visa, and the unfortunate thing was that he had a choice of leaving from Genoa or Bremen --

Q: Okay

A: -- and he picked Bremen, and the Germans wouldn't give us transit visas.

Q: I see.

A: So he couldn't leave.

Q: Okay, okay, and so at, at what point -- I guess you were conscripted into a forced labor battalion?

A: Well, it was at that time not a forced labor battalion, it was a -- well, in Hungary they had the equivalent of the Hitler Youth.

Q: Right.

A: But Jews could not be, belong there and get their military training, et cetera, et cetera. What we had to do is wore a yellow arm band, and we were taken out to the shooting ranges and had to pick up the leads from the bullets that they were firing. Of course, not while they were firing, but clean up the place.

Q: Um-hm.

A: That was our job. And we had to have, I think if I recall properly, twice a week for two hours each day.

Q: And how old were you at that point?

A: At that point I was four -- in 1938 I was 10 years, 10 years old.

Q: Okay. And so -- but later on you were injured, I guess?

A: No. I mean, not injured, but, you know, just beaten up on the streets.

Q: But I have -- I'm just looking at my notes here --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and it says that you broke your collar bone or something or that was --

A: No, no, no.

Q: That was later?

A: No, that's the whole -- that's the miracle story of our being still alive today.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: That was my dad, and it was -- all right, you want me to tell my story now?

Q: Yes.

A: Okay. We have escaped death by being able to get into the Kasztner Group. I don't, I don't know if I have to elaborate what the Kasztner Group was.

Q: No -- if you want. I know what it is --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and I'll be asking you more questions about that later.

A: Okay. In 1938, I mentioned my father had customers from Germany, from Italy, from Hungary, Austria, who have heard of the quality and the, the design styling that he was known for; and this woman came up from Berlin, and she came to my father's jewelry salon to buy some jewelry, and she bought nice amount, and she came back every year to buy more jewelry. And in 1940 -- I'm not sure if it was '40 or '41, he brought up a little charm bracelet that she owned, and she asked my father to clean it up and bring it back into ?variable? shape. And my father, when working on the bracelet, he noticed that there was a tiny Star of David hidden among the, close to a hundred different tiny charms; and when she came back, my father put the bracelet down on the counter, and in a way that the Star of David was showing, telling her that he noticed that she had the Star of David; and she bought more jewelry, and she told my father that if things in the future will get really, really rough, and you would like to take your family to Palestine, I'll give you a name and a phone number whom to call, and you can tell him, if you come to that, who sent you. My father thanked her, put the paper away in his safe and more or less forgot about it.

Q: Do you remember what her name was?

A: No, I do not. I know one thing that -- well, I'm giving away the punch line, but her husband was also executed in Nuremberg.

Q: Ah, okay.

A: He was the, he wasn't, obviously a Jewish person from Romania who was the appraiser for the Nazis for all the stolen goods and valuables that they stole.

Q: Okay.

A: So then I think that progressed, and the 1944 march, the Germans entered Hungary and occupied it, and life has changed totally. And my father was also conscripted for forced labor, and he was -- I mean, they surmised that he'd, they'd be taken to the Russian front; and, of course, my mother and him had acquired warm winter clothing, and he had a pair of waterproof boots made for himself to go; and he told the shoemaker because in those days everything was custom made, there was no off-the-rack stuff, and that he doesn't want any hobnails on those boots.

Q: Um-hm.

A: I don't know if you know what a hobnail is.

Q: Vaguely, yes

A: It's a metal iron, like a cleat.

Q: Okay.

A: What you do, you hammer it into the sole and the heel of the boots so when you are in grass or in terrain, you will not slip.

Q: Um-hm.

A: And he had to go in on a Saturday, Friday evening everything was delivered; and to his greatest anger, the shoemaker forgot about it and studded the bottom of the boots with hobnails. There was nothing he could do any more to it because it was much too late; so he put the boots on, and carrying a heavy backpack, he went to the railroad station. And over there the platform is not in level with the steps, but he had to climb up on the three or four steps to the train; and as he was climbing up, he slipped on those iron steps and twisted out because of the weight of the backpack, and he was hanging on his one arm, and that's where he broke his collar bone.

Q: Oh, okay, okay.

A: But he went in about an hour's train ride away, and he went to the sergeant there and said to him what, told him what happened; and the sergeant asked him, You want to come in here to the military hospital or you want to go back to Budapest and have your own doctor treat you? And he said, Of course. I want to go back to Budapest and have my doctor treat me. And he came back, and to my mother's greatest amazement -- I mean, the poor thing was heartbroken when he left and couldn't stop sobbing and crying; and he came back, and, of course, he was put into a cast, and he got six week of furlough.

Q: Okay.

A: And when the cast was taken off after five weeks and he was flexing his arm and moving it and maybe two or three days before he had to go back, my mother told him, Do you remember that woman who gave you that phone number and that name? I mean, let's see what could happen, I mean, let's try it. Maybe the guy won't even be there. So my father -- they were looking in the safe, and my father found it; and he made the phone call, and he got an appointment for the following day. The only thing he was told that to cover up the star when you come to the building.

Q: Because he was already forced to wear a star at that point?

A: Oh, yes. What was it, maybe a month after the Germans came in we had, everybody had to wear stars, yellow stars.

Q: Right.

A: And he went there, and as he turned the corner, he stopped cold because it was Gestapo Headquarters. And he said, Well, for a minute, I was thinking, it's a trap. Finally he said, You know, what's the difference? If I'm going in here, I'm going back to the army, you know, the forced labor unit. So he went in, and they waited, made him wait an hour, and then he saw the man; and he told them he has a family and he has 11 people that he would like to bring into his group; and the guy gave him a name from the Jewish Committee to see and tell the person that he sent my father over and he should take care of him.

Q: What, what was the name?

A: I'll be honest with you, I don't know because there were several --

Q: Right.

A: -- that later came out. There were five or seven different people handling the group.

Q: Um-hm.

A: It was a woman, that's about the only thing I can recall. Q: Hansi Brand?

A: I don't know whether it was her or her assistant. I'll be honest with you, I don't know because my father was not giving out names.

Q: Right.

A: He was not speaking of names. He just mentioned that it was a woman or whatever.

Q: And do you know who at Gestapo Headquarters your father spoke to?

A: No, that's the same thing, I don't know. If you have a list of all those that were executed and convicted in Munich, his name will be there. It's not a German -- I mean, it's a German-Jewish sounding name.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: We used to have -- actually my father after the war got a manuscript from one of the members of the group of seven who were handling it, his name was Engineer Biss or Bliss (ph).

Q: Okay, okay.

A: He gave my father a typed copy of that, and they became very friendly in Switzerland and --

Q: Do you still have that?

A: No, I don't, I don't. I don't know what happened to it. We were moving around, and I don't really know what happened to it --

Q: Sure.

A: -- unfortunately.

Q: Sure.

A: It was actually, it was the history of the entire Kasztner Group.

Q: Oh, that would be so interesting.

A: I know, I know. It was written in German and -- but I think part of it, part of it was also included in the book *Jews for Sale*.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Okay. So, anyway, your father got the name of someone to go see.

A: Yes. And he went there, and there was a, thousands of people waiting outside the building; and when my father told him who sent him there, he went right in; and then when he talked to the people, they said, Well, whom do you have, you, your wife, your children? And he said, No, I have 11 people. They said, You're out of your mind, there's no such thing. And he said, Well, such and such told me that it's okay. So what they said, well, okay, you said the magic word, used the right name, and they did accept 11 people. And, of course, they told my father that he would have to pay, and it has to be

either in Persian rugs, known artists' paintings, jewelry, diamonds. No money, they didn't accept any money.

Q. Right.

A: So my father paid what they asked, and –

Q: In jewelry, I take it?

A: In diamonds, yes. And we were told four, three days later, I think, three days later, that everybody should pack a suitcase; and they didn't want to let us out, and in those days every building, Jewish building had -- well, what would you call it, like a ?kapo? --

Q: Um-hm

A: -- that he was, he was a Gentile man who was responsible for every pair of shorts or socks or handkerchiefs that the Jews owned, he had to make a inventory and turn in the entire list; and he didn't want to let us out from the building. So my father went to see him, and he said, Look, I have these papers here that we are ordered to be deported; and if you don't want to let us out, we'll thank you because we won't have to go and then the Germans will come. So that scared him, and he said, Go, go, go. so we went, and we were collected in a yard of a synagogue on the outer boroughs; and we stayed there for a day and a half, and then we were put on, on the cattle wagons; and we were traveling for, for I think it was six or seven days. The train was -- and the train actually stopped on the border of Austria for two days because the negotiations between, the group who was negotiating with the Nazis broke down, and they -- the leadership wanted to get assurances where we were going because at the border they didn't have a destination, and maybe two or three months before us there was another group also did the same thing. And at the border they stopped, and instead of Osterreich that is in Austria, they were shipped by mistake to Auschwitz, and they were all killed. So our leader, he knew about it, and they were -- he wanted to get a definite answer before he was willing to, you know, give any more of the loot, so to speak, to the Nazis. And then, then after two days, it was cleared, and we headed for Bergen-Belsen.

Q: So when you, when you left Budapest on the train –

A: Yeah.

Q: -- what month was that?

A: That was in June.

Q: In June, okay. And, and what were the conditions like on the train, was it crowded?

A: Yes, it was the same. Yes, of course it was crowded, yes. I think there were, if I remember, now this I cannot vouch for, we were either 80 or 90 people to the wagon.

Q: Okay.

A: And we had a bucket and, and, and that was it.

Q: And did you have adequate food or drink?

A: Well, everybody was bringing food with themselves, so, you know --

Q: Right.

A: -- you ate your own. You were not getting any from whoever was in charge of the train.

Q: And did you know the name Kasztner at that point? Did you know that he was one of the organizers of this?

A: I think, I think -- my parents definitely did --

Q: Okay.

A: -- but I don't know it for, my brother and I knew who Kasztner was.

Q: And when you left Budapest on the train, did you know where you were going?

A: No --

Q: Okay.

A: -- we did not. Oh, we thought we were going through Romania to, to Palestine.

Q: Okay.

A: That's what we were told.

Q: Okay. Okay.

A: We were not -- they did not talk about any concentration camp.

Q: Okay, and just to go back for a minute, so in general before March 1944 was life relatively normal?

A: Relatively, relatively. I mean, you know, as far as us children were concerned, besides beaten up once and a while on the street, we led a normal, we led a normal life. We went hiking with Jewish Boy Scouts and, and -- yes, more or less --

Q: Were you --

A: You know, go to the movies and --

Q: -- still able to go to school?

A: Well, the thing was that there was a curfew.

Q: Okay.

A: So, you know, we could go out I think from, if I recall, from 11:00 to 1:00.

Q: Okay.

A: Because there were no more schools left open any time.

Q: Okay, so you weren't in school any more at that point?

A: No, no.

Q: And so things changed pretty abruptly after the Germans came in?

A: Oh, very abruptly, very abruptly. I mean, you know, you had -- many times, not many times, a lot of times they closed down a street, and everybody on that street was taken under doorways and checked that they were Jewish or not. They were looking if they were circumcised or not.

Q: And did you have to move like to a new house?

A: No, we did not, that came later.

Q: Okay, that came later.

A: That came later.

Q: That came after you had already left --

A: Yes, right.

Q: -- and they started concentrating people?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: So -- and how were you, how was your father able to make a living at this point?

A: He was not. I mean, he couldn't -- he had to turn in most of his inventory to the Hungarian government.

Q: But he managed to save some things?

A: Well, they, they -- we found out that they were, they'd hidden some of the stuff.

Q: Right, which he then later used --

A: Yes.

Q: -- to pay for passage?

A: Yes, yes, right.

Q: Right, right. So did you know anything about the other people who were on the train?

A: No, we didn't know anybody.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: On the entire train there was one other guy that I later on found out once we were in Switzerland that he went to the same gymnasium a grade higher than I did.

Q: Okay.

A: That was the only thing that I --

Q: And after March 1944, were you aware of the stuff that was happening outside of Budapest, the concentration and deportation?

A: Yes, because, as I said, because of the people who were coming to my father for help--

Q: Okay.

A: -- to further enable them to, to, you know, travel out of -- they were all going to Italy--

Q: Right.

A: -- because things in Italy were not quite as bad.

Q: And did you know, do you remember at what point you realized what Auschwitz was and what it meant?

A: Well, no, not by name.

Q: Okay.

A: But my father told the story that those people who came from Poland, a couple of them who had escaped from Auschwitz, or anyhow some concentration camp, and they mentioned, they mentioned that they are killing the Jews and gassing them and, and --

Q: And so your father had heard of that?

A: We had heard of that, but somehow it was not given the full credit that, you know, it deserved because they said, That's impossible. I mean, how can people do this thing to children; and, and, and, you know, the stories were so horrific that some people doubted it that they were true, and then some of them said that, you know, these people are also embellishing on things so you give them more money to escape and all this and all that; but as it turned out later on, they did not embellish on it.

Q: That's right, yes. So did you or any of your family members at any point in time ever meet Kasztner or --

A: No.

Q: -- Joel or Hansi Brand or any of these people?

A: No. My father only met, I don't know who the people were at the Jewish Committee.

Q: Okay. Okay. Let me see here.

A: We have a -- he did meet, I mean we, Eichmann once.

Q: Oh, did you?

A: I mean, we didn't know who he was, but at the Bergen-Belsen. Because what they had done in Bergen-Belsen, when all, the first group of 370 people left, they kept back one member from each family to have as a hostage until the negotiations were complete.

Q: Okay.

A: And one of my aunts was held back, and the other aunt who was her sister said that she is staying with her, she would not leave her alone there. And, of course, when we got to the embarkation point, the train spur, the count did not jive --

Q: Right

A: -- because they were having -- they had a roll call, and her name came up, and nobody answered. So my father stepped out, and he told him that -- I don't know if it was Eichmann or not. In my mind's memory it couldn't have been, but it was of an equal rank -- that she stayed with her sister; and this guy pulled out his gun, pointed it at my father and started screaming at him that, you know, What do you think you're doing? Who do you think you are? You can't -- anyhow, after he berated him and screamed, I mean, we were afraid they were going to shoot him. At that time we didn't know that the Germans, there was no such thing, they had to account for everybody, so he wouldn't have shot; but they sent an SS guard back to the barracks, and he brought back my aunt pulling her by her hair, and then we loaded onto the trains.

Q: So were all of the 11 people family members?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: They were my father's brother and his wife and two daughters and my mother's two sisters.

Q: Okay. Okay. And do you, do you remember there was a point where they traveled, the train traveled through Linz?

A: Yes, we did, and we got disinfected there. And the word spread around that, you know, they were going to kill us because that's how they do it with the showers.

Q: Right. And, and that really, people were fearful.

A: Yeah, right, right. Some of them were really panicking; but, you know, they just made everybody take all their clothes off, and they went to inspection, and, and the long hairs were all sheared, and you were sprayed in the, wherever hair, under the arms and the pubic area with whatever kind of a —

Q: DDT?

A: Whatever it was, yes.

Q: Okay, and what did you think when you arrived in Bergen-Belsen?

A: Well, there was nothing much to think, but we knew that this was a camp. I mean, we saw the barbed wires, the watch towers and the other inmates, and -- but we were, we didn't have to do any work. As a matter of fact, we were, to one side of us they were Belgian Jews and the other side there were French Jews, and, and they were, they were not allowed to talk, of course, because the guards were walking the perimeter.

Q: So you were kind of set aside?

A: What?

Q: You were kind of isolated or set aside?

A: Yeah. I mean, we were in an enclosure with two barracks, and they tried to motion to us with their hands that, you know, this is the end; but we didn't have to wear a star there.

Q: Okay. And --

A: So we were not, we were not there like Jews.

Q: Could you wear your own clothes?

A: Yes, yes, we did. Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, we had the, we had Teitelbaum in our group, and he had, of course, a long beard and a peyos; and the group leader said, you know, do something with your beard. He would not cut it off, but he wore a scarf, you know, like when you have tooth ache, and he tied up his beard that way so it was not overly obvious.

Q: Okay, and did you feel like, I mean, because originally you had sort of thought you were going to Palestine —

A: Yeah, well.

Q: -- did you feel like you were betrayed in any way?

A: Well, we didn't know what to think, we didn't know what to think. I'll be honest with you, there were all kinds of rumors. As usual, in all these places there is rumors and rumors and rumors and --

Q: What kind of rumors?

A: I mean, you know, all kinds, that this is it, we're not going to go anywhere and the negotiations must have broken down and we're going to be just, we're handed over to them on a platter, and this kind of stuff

Q: But were you aware of sort of the overarching deal making that was going on?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No, that was in secret.

Q: That's something you learned later?

A: Yes. Once, you know, the whole thing came to light.

Q: But you were certainly aware that the war, that the Germans were losing the war?

A: Well, yes, because we saw the bombers flying over during the day; and every time that happened, we were told we had to move, get back into the barracks.

Q: Okay.

A: The same thing happened when a new transport came. I mean, you know, you saw looking out the window because you would not be able to stand outside, but diagonally looking to the main road, we saw these thousands of women, some, some of them in rags and dragging, and, you know, and I would not call it walking any more.

Q: Like a death march?

A: No, not death march but someone -- the people who were, who were extremely tired and exhausted, so they could have been in a transport that was on the way maybe for a week or 10 days or whatever. I mean, that's -- we only surmised, we didn't know.

Q: Right.

A: But from the shape that they were in, we saw that they didn't come from any party.

Q: Right, right. Bergen-Belsen ended up receiving thousands and thousands of --

A: Yes, yes.

Q: -- people from other --

A: Every three, four days there was a group walking by.

Q: And so what did you do, you weren't forced to work?

A: Well, most of the time, well, most of the time we were standing in line for roll call --

Q: Oh, okay.

A: -- sometimes for two, three, three and a half, four hours before they came, rain or shine, you know.

Q: And did your parents try to sort of comfort you or give you any schooling or did you-
-

A: No, no, no, they did not. I mean, there was, you know, no need for that, no time for that really.

Q: They were just trying to be kept alive.

A: Just about, just about, yes. I mean, you know, in the morning you stood in line for that black coffee that you got. Once a week they gave you a loaf of bread. At lunchtime you got some -- well, I would call it slop because potato peelings and, and the carrot peelings and actually, what you call it, poison ivy, that was cooked into the soup.

Q: Oh!

A: Well, I mean, you know; and but there was still, for the first two or three months everybody still had a little bit of their food left.

Q: Okay.

A: A little bit, I mean a little, you know, some extra crackers or something like that.

Q: And did you have any personal possessions with you, you know, photographs or --

A: Yes, sure.

Q: Okay.

A: Sure, sure.

Q: And do you still have those?

A: Yes, I do. That was another thing that I was able to save because when we left the camp to go to -- before they put us across the Swiss border, we were searched for all the papers. As a matter of fact, Dessi Dorant (ph) from the Metropolitan Opera was in our

group also, he was a bass baritone; and he had all of his photographs with him from the operas that he was in, I mean, it was his portfolio; and they wanted to take that, and he begged them and he begged them; and an officer came over, he says, All right, let him keep it. So he did. But what you had to do, you had to empty the wagons one by one. When we got to the Swiss border, there was maybe a table, I would say, I don't really know, maybe, maybe, maybe a hundred or 200 feet long tables one next to the other, and behind it soldiers; and you had to unload the wagon with all your belongings and put it in a row and then put it up on a table one by one, and they, they took whatever paper, prayer books, ?truins?, if somebody had a small Torah, they just took all that. And I said to my mom that put all the photographs in one bag. It was a, those were like, you know, like travel bags —

Q: Um-hm.

A: -- and she did; and I was putting up the stuff in two rows, they were in two rows, one checked, one to be checked; and I put up the bags in order to have it examined, and while I was doing that, I kicked the bag with the photographs over to the already checked bag.

Q: Oh, okay, okay.

A: And then I told my brother, You put up the stuff; and I started taking the stuff back into the wagon from the check point. That's how we saved the photographs.

Q: That's how you saved the photographs.

A: But I interestingly, I had a diary from our Stay in Bergen-Belsen written, I would say, microscopic size on a, I would say, four by three piece of papers; and in my attempt to save the pictures and being so busy, I put them in -- I had knee socks on, and I put them inside my socks; and I forgot about it, and one of the soldiers noticed it; and I remember he said, What does this young guy have here in his socks. And so they took it.

Q: So they took it. Oh, that's unfortunate.

A: Yeah. Oh, I felt heartbroken —

Q: I imagine, I imagine.

A: -- because it was a daily diary. So, anyhow, that's how we got to Switzerland.

Q: And so how long were you in Bergen-Belsen then?

A: If I recall, we were, we moved to Switzerland end of September.

Q: And did you know that's where you were going?

A: No, no, we did not.

Q: They just put you on a train and said --

A: Right. I mean, don't forgot the allies were advancing already, so they went in a little bit circumvent, circum -- circuitous way to reach Basel; but, you know, it was whenever, some time we were stalled on an open track.

Q: And how long did it take you to get to Switzerland?

A: I don't know, two days maybe.

Q: Okay.

A: Two and a half days.

Q: And it must have been a big relief.

A: Well, I can tell you this, when we pulled into Basel, and I

was standing in the doorway of the train, and there was a Red Cross woman on the platform, I remember many of them, but this one said to me, Please be careful, please be careful, because the train was still moving; and that struck me, the first person, stranger who really showed some concern. So -- but it was certainly a happy day, and then we were treated to a great meal. I mean, great meal, it was pasta and cheese, but to us it was, you know ____.

Q: Sounds good after carrot shavings and --

A: Yeah, yeah

Q: So, so where did you live, was it like a DP camp?

A: No, it was a refugee camp. We were taken to Montreaux to the hotel. Hmm, what's the name of the hotel? Sorry, escapes my mind. But it was a fantastic view from, on the Lake of Geneva, and that, that, that -- Bellevue, Bellevue, that was the name of the hotel.

Q: And how long did you stay there?

A: We were in quarantine for 30 days.

Q: And given medical care and --

A: Yeah, they had a doctor there; but, I mean, we had a doctor amongst our people also. So they, they opened a little office, and then if you had something was hurting you or something, you went to see them.

Q: Okay.

A: And in the door there was a Swiss soldier with a rifle guarding us; and it's a known fact that the Swiss rifles are very long. When, when -- I would say, well, five feet,

maybe. And my father, we went to one of the soldiers and said, Is this a good rifle? And he said, This is the best, it hasn't killed anybody, so.

Q: And so how long did you stay in Switzerland?

A: We stayed in Switzerland until 1948.

Q: And you were in a refugee camp that whole time or --

A: Not the whole time. My brother and I were in a school learning English and French for about a year and a half; and my parents were, were first sent to Randa, that's right under the Matterhorn in a tiny Alpine village; and that was a real miserable spot. It was cold, and, and there was no heating at night in those old hotels. What they did in the winter, they took these warm water bottles, and they slept with it.

Q: And did you, did your family want to immigrate to the U.S. from the beginning --

A: Sure.

Q: -- did they ever think of Palestine or --

A: Sure, sure, he was able to use his old visa number.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: That ____ + I don't know how many thousands.

Q: And he never thought about Palestine or --

A: No, he did not

Q: -- or going back to Hungary?

A: No, no. Well, he went back to Hungary in 1946 to see what was left, and he was able to bring out his tools and, and other things, and, and so he was able to work in Switzerland in a jewelry shop.

Q: And where has -- where had his tools been stored?

A: In his, in his shop.

Q: They were never looted or anything like that?

A: No, that was sealed and left intact.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: The only thing that later on by 1967 -- I'm sorry, 1947 they cut the apartment and the business in two, and they put in some other people in half of it.

Q: And did he ever try to get reparations for anything?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We did, and we got \$200 worth.

Q: You got how much?

A: \$200.

Q: Oh, geez. Well.

A: But he was, as I said, he was able to bring out his tool set, and he came with another lucky thing, he came and got out the last day of his permit.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: He was able to find a transport to, to go back to Switzerland.

Q: Okay.

A: And he brought his tools, he brought some winter clothing and stuff, whatever he thought. So, as I said, he had his tools, and he was able to work, and they were happy to have him. One of the companies that hired him he did work before the war, and, you know, they took him on as a jeweler, and he was able to -- but he didn't like it because he had to live off alone by himself.

Q: And so he didn't -- so you didn't think about staying in Switzerland?

A: No, I don't think we could have. They wouldn't let you.

Q: Okay.

A: As a matter of fact, by 1947 they were, they were pushing you to, you know, get out, get out.

Q: And what -- so you took a ship?

A: Yes.

Q: What was the name of the ship?

A: The ship was Queen Elizabeth the -- Queen Elizabeth.

Q: Okay, and when did you, when did you take, make the journey to the U.S.?

A: We arrived in New York in the 1948 blizzard. Yes. I mean, it, it -- all we had was just summer clothing because in Montreaux it was a very balmy climate, so we had to wait till our stuff arrived. And, interestingly, when we arrived, we did not know that under those snow mounds on the streets there were cars, and they were burning the garbage on the streets and everything.

Q: Okay.

A: My father wanted to go -- if he could have gone back the next day, he would have gone back.

Q: Right. Was it a hard adjustment?

A: For them it was because they didn't speak English.

Q: But you had been learning English, you and your brother?

A: Yes, yes, my brother and I were pretty fluent, and it was the King's English.

Q: Right, right. And where did the rest of the family go to, all to the U.S.?

A: They went back to Budapest, no.

Q: Oh, they went back to Budapest.

A: One daughter of one of my cousin's got married in Switzerland, and she stayed there.

Q: Okay.

A: The other one, the rest of them went back to Budapest.

Q: And stayed there?

A: Yes.

Q: It's always interesting to think why people would go back. A: Well, look, my uncle, he was a furrier, he did not have anything that he was out talking without knowing the language, he felt that he could survive. My two aunts, they said, What do we want to do there? I mean, you know, we don't have children, so why not go back, you know, where we are familiar with the place and the -- even after what has happened, we don't really have a choice.

Q: And do you know if they felt any resentment or repercussions because a lot of Jews that went back to -- well, especially to, you know, Poland and places like that --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- they weren't treated very well.

A: Well, that I do not know, I'll be honest with you. I know they, they, they had a lot of fighting with the people who were put in to the other half of the apartment at that time; but, finally, they, they moved out of there, and they got another apartment somewhere else. But other than that, no, I do not know.

Q: And have you ever been back to Budapest?

A: Yes, I have because, as I said, I visited my aunt a number of times because she was, you know, she was in her early 90's already, and she kept -- I talked to her more, maybe, of course, you know, we sent money every month for them to survive; and when her sister passed away, she sort of gave up, and she said, What the heck am I living for? I mean, what's the life? It's meaningless, et cetera, et cetera; and I said, Well, listen, you just hold it together, and next summer I'll come and visit you; but you have to, you know, make do. So she did, and every other year I talked to her, and I said, I'm coming, so hold it together, and, you know, just -- so I was hoping that I kept her alive for a while.

Q: That's great.

A: But after she passed away, I went only back once, and I took my children and grandchildren with me to show them the house I was born and, and to take -- we went to the cemetery, and, you know.

Q: Right, right.

A: And that was it, and I don't feel like going back any more.

Q: Again.

A: Unfortunately, I always told them that, you know, the place hasn't -- is beautiful and all that, but the faces haven't changed.

Q: Well, the political situation there is --

A: Right. I mean, this was also during the communist, and, you know --

Q: Yeah. So your family stayed in New York?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay, and never went to any place else?

A: No.

Q: Okay. And your father reestablished his business?

A: Yes, yes. Eventually, yes, right.

Q: And you became an artist?

A: No, I was, I was -- I only started -- well, I mean, I was designing jewelry.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: But my brother retired five years ago, he, he had it; and I -- you know, we closed the shop, and I just have now a small studio, and that's where I do my thing and, and enjoy what I'm doing.

Q: Good. And so I'm sure you know that the Kasztner rescue mission even to this day is somewhat controversial.

A: Yes, I understand.

Q: And what do you, what do you think of that, what do you think about it in retrospect?

A: Well, look, when the group was formed, we did not know the background of it. After the war, it came out that he actually picked a select few from that is today Cluj, Transylvania, and told the rest of the people in the ghetto that, you know, they'd be safe and they'd be just taken to work and all that and so that they should remain ?restive?. Now, having spoken to the younger guys who were from Cluj and in the group, they said that, you know, what they tried to do is save the cream of the crop, all the rabbis, the scientists, the, the writers and musicians, whatever, that that was the idea. And they were not -- if they would have picked more people, this thing would have never come to a, to be. So that's what we were told from them.

Q: Right.

A: You know, it's, it's, it's difficult to make, to find out what exactly, what is the true story.

Q: Right.

A: And, I mean, unfortunately, he had to pay for his life.

Q: Do you remember that? Do you remember when that happened --A: Oh, sure. Oh, absolutely.

Q: -- and made the connection with your experience?

A: Yes. One of the, one of the offsprings from the people from that ghetto who killed him in Israel.

Q: Right, right.

A: Safe revenge. I mean, did that bring his parents back? I don't think so.

Q: No.

A: But, look, there were, there were a number of people, there was someone like this in Holland also, who, who everybody thought that he was a Jewish renegade, and he saved children, hundreds of them, from the Nazis by smuggling them into Christian homes through an orphanage, so I'm sure you know about it also. It's -- I have the, I have a, a DVD on him.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: So.

Q: And did you, speaking of movies, have you seen there's a movie that came out a couple of years ago called "Killing Kasztner"?

A: No.

Q: A documentary?

A: No, I did not see that.

Q: It's very, very interesting and well done, I think, and I would be --

A: Where can you get that?

Q: I'm sure it's available on DVD, maybe even at a library or something. You can certainly order it. You have an e-mail; right?

A: No, I don't.

Q: Oh, you don't.

A: I mean I have, but I don't use it.

Q: Yeah. I'll send you the information --

A: Okay.

Q: -- through the mail or something, and --

A: Because I have the 11 DVD's from the, the, the Simon Wiesenthal Center where they give the entire history of the Holocaust.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: Starting with Churchill.

Q: Oh, okay. Well, this --

A: But it has no mention of that.

Q: Yeah. No. This film is very interesting and well done, so I would recommend --

A: Yes, I would definitely like to see it.

Q: And I will send it to you.

A: Thank you.

Q: But the -- let's see, my other question was -- okay, just to go back to one question that I thought was a little confusing.

A: Yes.

Q: The woman who came into your father's shop --

A: Yes.

Q: -- with the Star of David bracelet.

A: Right.

Q: Now, you said her husband was executed at Nuremberg?

A: Right. He was the appraiser for, for the SS Order of the Gestapo for all the artwork that they have stolen.

Q: So he was not a Jew?

A: He was a Jew, that's what we were told, his name was Jewish.

Q: But he was executed after the war?

A: Yes, yes, in Nuremberg.

Q: Okay, I'll have to look that up. That's interesting A: Yeah, yeah, he was a Romanian Jew.

Q: Romanian Jew, okay. And, let's see, and have you ever been -- you know, they do have these Kasztner train reunions of these survivors, have you ever been to anything like that?

A: No, I have not, no.

Q: No. And then the final question I have is --

A: Yes.

Q: -- do you, the photographs that you have that you -- do you still have them?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you be willing to loan them to the museum?

A: Sure. I mean, you know, they're photographs, old family photographs.

Q: That's okay.

A: My uncle in his uniform in the first world war, you know, that kind of stuff, and mostly family shots.

Q: Okay. So I might have someone get in touch with you about that --

A: Okay.

Q: -- from a different department. And then the note -- I don't suppose you still have the note from the safe that had the phone number?

A: No, no.

Q: That would be a very interesting artifact.

A: Wouldn't that be, yes, yes. I would bring that.

Q: And how about photographs or artifacts from your time in Switzerland?

A: Well, we didn't really have a camera. I have maybe one photograph of myself and -- well, I have, wait a second, I might have a few with my cousin and my brother and then another one with a friend.

Q: Okay.

A: I might have those.

Q: Okay, so I'll have someone get in touch with you about perhaps loaning that to us because we do collect that type of material.

A: Yeah, all right.

Q: So, I guess that's about it. I think --

A: Yes.

Q: -- we've covered everything. Thank you. You have a fantastic memory.

A: Thank you. Thank you. Well, I have to repeat a couple of times to my grandchildren because they made it a project in school to, to --

Q: Oh, okay.

A: It was a home movie that they did.

Q: Oh, that's great.

A: Right, right.

Q: Oh, that's great. And do you have any questions for me?

A: Not really.

Q: Okay.

A: The only question, you know, I still don't understand what, why this whole thing started out that, oh, about three or four years ago, even maybe more than that, I went to

the Holocaust Museum, and I had a piece of soap from Bergen-Belsen, and I gave it to them, and it was never displayed; and when we went back a year and a half ago, I asked them, why, you know, you're not displaying it; and they said, Well, you know, there are some things that it might not be what it's cracked up to be, that it might not be pure Jewish fat like it's stamped. And I'm also, that you have to look, that you have to realize that the museum has more non-Jewish visitors than Jewish visitors, and they -- it would be too gruesome. I said, How can it be more gruesome?

Q: Well, you know, the thing is too that we have, we have so many artifacts and very few of them actually end up being on display.

A: I understand that. Like I questioned them, why, why didn't you display any of the lamp shades that use a corpse, made out of the tattoos from the prisoners.

Q: Yeah, yeah. I think it's also partly a consideration of human remains, like actually showing human remains.

A: But they are showing them in Europe.

Q: Yeah. No, I know. I wasn't here when the museum opened.

A: Yeah.

Q: But it was a big, it was a big question whether to –

A: Obviously.

Q: You know, that they, and they decided against it in the end --

A: Well --

Q: -- because they didn't want to offend, I think especially the Orthodox people. So, I don't know. I mean, I can't answer that. I don't make the decisions –

A: Yeah.

Q: -- but those are just a couple of the things I heard.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well --

Q: But it's here, it's in the collection; right?

A: Pardon me?

Q: The bar of soap is in the collection?

A: No, it's not.

Q: I mean, it's in our --

A: Possession, yes.

Q: Yeah.

A: In your possession, yes, because at the time they said they had one from Auschwitz, they had one from Birkenau, but they didn't have one from Bergen-Belsen. I think they did have one from Dachau.

Q: Well, okay, okay.

A: Anyhow.

Q: Thank you very much for taking the time.

A: Well, my pleasure.

Q: And I guess they will -- this is the first actually one of these interviews I've ever done, but I assume they will send you, you know, a copy of it at some point.

A: I would appreciate that.

Q: Okay.

A: I would appreciate that.

Q: Okay. Well, it was great to talk to you.

A: Thank you very much.

Q: Okay. Bye-bye.

A: Bye.

Conclusion of Interview