

And so we were at the point where I wanted to know a little bit more about what kind of a person was your father?

Yes.

Because up till now, you talked about your mother being very hard working and your aunt being very devoted. So tell me a bit about your father.

Yes. I remember saying that he was a very gentle person. And he was. Very, very easy and loving his family. And he went to work every day on his bicycle to the other town. And he came home every night, and really did-- most devoted himself mostly to the children.

Although as the war went on and we had less help in the house, he had to do a lot of chores, also. So everybody worked hard. It's very strange as I look back. We definitely qualified to be called middle class, but the kind of work my mom-- my mother and he did sounds like a typical farmer, because we had-- we raised a lot of our food.

And so we had cows. And very often he had to tend to the cows at dawn before he went off to work, because-- I mean, it was a way of life. It had to be done. You couldn't hire somebody for everything. Earlier on, before things got a little-- well, certainly when he lost his-- they took his business away, he did all the farming that was necessary.

Did you have land? That is, did you have--

Yeah, we had some land. Not sufficient to live on. He did not work in the field. The kind of work he did was like what I'm saying, take care of the cows in the barn and chop wood for the stove and things like that. My mother grew a vegetable garden. So it was that kind of work. And we didn't have farm equipment, and we didn't live off of that, but there were just chores to be done in that setting. So--

You know what it sounds like? For us who are living in countries which are, let's say, post-industrial, why would you keep a cow? You can go to the store to get milk. But in those days, and in countries where there is no store to get milk, the only way you'll get it is if you keep a cow. And the only way you'll have eggs is if you keep-- if you have chickens.

Exactly. And if you had all those things, you could feed your family. You were never short of food. You just had to work hard to do with that, to change it to-- like cows, we had more than one cow. We had like four in the barn.

Wow.

And I know from history, that in very poor countries, if a family had one cow, they didn't starve.

Yes.

Because the milk product, you make so many-- I watched my mother make all the things. You know, made cream, and made butter, and made cottage cheese. And there was a residue that was left that was added to the feed to the chickens. In other words, it insured very, very wonderful food. But you had to make the butter, and you had to make the cottage cheese, and you had to work with--

And there was no refrigeration. But they knew how to do everything, except that. And my mother knew how to do everything. But you worked all the time. Now, she did have help regularly. But it was not enough. You know, with all the many chores.

In the war time, she even made soap.

Oh my goodness.

She cooked soap. I watched her, and they learned how to do everything. The soap needed somebody some large amount

of fat of some kind and the chemical that. And they boiled it, and out came a sort of a brown-colored soap. But it was legitimate soap, and they used it for everything, including washing laundry.

Oh, wow.

So really not just in retrospect, I followed my mother, and a little bit even my father into the barn. I was fascinated as a young girl in how people-- how they made things and created food and so on. I really loved watching it.

Well, taking it from its raw material and then doing something to transform it into something that is usable, either you ingest it as food or you have some other use for it, but it also speaks to a self-sufficiency.

Yes, yes. And those women, young women, who couldn't do what my mother did, had problems in just maintaining their food process. And most of the other Jewish women I would say-- well, I don't know most of them. There were quite a few who simply could not do that. Didn't come from a place where maybe their mother or father did those things.

You also had to own the cows. And you had to own the chickens and so on. But back to my father. So he worked hard, too. And as I say, he would-- at dawn the cows-- at the start at dawn, he went into the barn. He cleaned out what happened during the night. You know, there was a back door where that was dumped. And then he put out the straw or whatever to feed them before he went off. And then he would go off to work and leave the family OK in that regard.

And there was a neighbor woman my mother employed to milk the cows. She didn't do that. But after they brought in the buckets of milk, she had to get to work, too.

Your mother did.

To do with it what she had to do with it. So my father-- it's so hard to explain what a nice person he was, what a kind person. He was not a disciplinarian. You know, my mother couldn't say "wait till your father comes home, and then you'll get it."

[LAUGHTER]

No, no. She was. Because she was working so hard and probably very tired, she was often short with us. You know, the discipline was short and to the point. So she did not rely on him. But he did the gentle teaching and playing. And once my little brothers, as they got older, they went to a cheyder to learn to read Hebrew. You know what a cheyder is?

Well, tell us. I mean, because some people who will be listening to this will not know what is a cheyder.

Yes, so it's a afterschool religious school to teach boys how to pray in Hebrew. And so they usually hire a young man in town, who was well versed in Hebrew and teaching Hebrew and some prayers. And so they would go for a couple of hours a few times a week after regular school.

But the girls didn't go to cheyder. Girls didn't get any Hebrew education. That was the way. So my father did that with us the girls.

Wow.

And I have very fond memories that he took that on. And so we were very young when he started. And basically what he wanted to accomplish that we should be able to read the prayers. Not much else. You know, that was for girls. But that was important.

And it sounds very progressive for the time.

Oh, yes. Education, as I look back, was very important to my mother, also. All kinds of education. And they provided it under very difficult circumstances. I'll talk about it later. But my father would sit us down, little girls, and he would very

patiently do it, first the alphabet and then the words.

And he devised this game. So in our living room, we had the ceiling was like beams, wooden beams. And the wooden beams have knots in them. And so he devised a game that he took a broom, a broomstick, and he put what amounts to a coin, a penny on the tip of the broomstick.

OK. And if we answered correctly, if we were giving him the right answer that we were learning, he would lift the-- he would say that God is going to reward us.

Aww.

That was the idea. So we never caught on to this. He lifted up the broomstick with a coin on top of it, hit the knot in the ceiling, and the money fell to the ground.

Oh my goodness. And you didn't know that it had been on the top of the broomstick?

No. I mean, we were very young.

Yeah.

But God sent us a reward. That money was ours. And we ran across the street, where there was a little store that sold hard candy, and we'd get a handful of candy for the penny. And we were just delighted. And he never let on. But in other words, he had the patience and the imagination to stimulate us, to make it fun, and in fact, look forward to the lesson.

How wonderful. He knew how to motivate you.

Yes, yes. And he probably had a 6th grade education. And he also-- believe it or not-- he was in business, and when we started elementary school, he was actually tutoring us in math.

No kidding.

He just knew how. Because I guess in business-- basic. It must have been adding and subtracting or whatever. Although who knows? He kept the books for people who bought and paid him in installments. But basically, we could come to him to help us with our homework up to a point.

So then also, because he went into the neighboring much bigger town every day, he would-- in that big town, they had real stores. They had a shoe store that had these magical gorgeous shoes and rubber boots. And he would-- for the holidays, for Passover, let's say, we all got new clothes.

The house was spotless. We cleaned the linens, the curtains, the drawers, everything. But also new clothes. And when you get new clothes once a year or so, it's very special. You look forward to that. And not only that, we got new shoes. Our shoes were made by a shoemaker locally, a cobbler. And they were clunky, but they were great because we had muddy streets.

But for dress up and the holiday, the girls got these beautiful white shoes, lovely bought shoes. And so he would measure our feet with a piece of string, each one of us, and put the name to it. So each girl, our feet was measured that way. We didn't know our size.

He took these strings to the shoe store in the town, and they would help him decide what size to bring home.

And did the shoes fit?

Yes, absolutely. And it wasn't anything like now, but we little girls just looked at it, and smelled it, and just loved it.

Yeah.

I must say, the other Jewish children in town didn't get that. They were poor. They were poor. They didn't have all these avenues of things that kept us nicely fed and nicely dressed and so on.

So had your father-- I'm sorry to interrupt, but had your father inherited the business? Had he--

I wish I knew some more of that. But I would think-- and my sister and I talked about that later, even now-- that since my grandfather was a wealthy man and what was called nadn, or dowry, dowry was absolutely necessary if you had money. I mean, that's the way you married off your daughters.

Yes.

Without any doubt. So I think when my mother was married off to my father, she received this dowry without any doubt. Even if I don't know the specifics, that's how it went.

So the dowry could have been a business.

Well, it either could have been a business, could have been money. So because from the other side, my father's father, I don't think so. I don't think so. Because he lost his wife early. He had a second wife. He lived with his children. And I just don't think he could have given him a boost.

But my grandfather, my mother's father, yes. But somehow in addition to that, I'm sure it helped, he also had a partner in the business in that other town. And his partner was a first cousin, that their fathers were brothers. My father's father and this cousin's father, they were both [? Fogel, ?] and they were two brothers. And then the son of that brother and my father, they were partners. It was Meyer and Isidore [? Fogel. ?]

Ah.

So Meyer was my father, and Isidore was the son of the other uncle, the other brother. So I don't know how that came about, whether the other cousin, Isidore, whether he had enough money somehow to become a partner. These things I didn't know.

Well, you're a child, yes.

Yeah, except we have some letterhead for the business, which is very interesting that they had a letterhead. Which on the letterhead it said Isidore and Meyer [? Fogel. ?] And it was written in Czech and in Hungarian. And then it listed on the letterhead all the kind of things that they sold. Like all kinds of wood, and tiles, and construction material. And it listed what they were selling.

It sounds like a Home Depot.

Yes, a miniature Home Depot. Very important in a farming town or in any town. So the town was big enough to have actually two of these. Other family had a lumber business. And it had this mill that my grandfather owned. And it had a doctor. It had a doctor. It had a pharmacy. It had a shochat. You now?

A butcher, a kosher butcher.

Kosher butcher. Our town didn't. And this kosher butcher came to our town every Thursday. And he went to other small towns where there were Jews and didn't have this facility. And then it was a railroad crossing. So it had a lot of activity at the railroad, trains coming and going, crossing into different parts of the area.

And so the being there, there was a lot of activity, and I was saying, our children just loved being there. And my father's

business was thriving. But when he came home, and especially when the business was taken away, and really that's what I remember most, because I was old enough to remember, that he did the farm chores.

We stopped having help so much. Some help, but not-- my mother's work increased. And I know he was chopping wood, because we had a wood stove.

You know something? Let me turn now to a few other questions that are related. You mentioned that-- you mentioned that you didn't-- I think, earlier that you didn't have indoor plumbing.

That's right.

Did you have electricity?

Yes, we did. Amazing.

OK.

We had electricity, one bulb in each room.

Ah.

That's it. One fixture in the ceiling. But that was being rich.

Yeah.

And--

Yes, yes. We did have that. But in the bathroom there was a lantern that he carried with him with oil in it. But in the farm-- the farmers did not have any in their house. They used the lanterns in the house, too.

I see. And what about-- did you have a telephone?

No. We did not, and we didn't have a radio. But they had a newspaper, which was in the war time pretty useless. It was propaganda. But in the next town, as I described, where my father had his business, people have telephones, and people-- that's where he got his news about the war and the news about Jewish information.

And when he came home, he would tell us, and we would listen, listen. He brought the news with him. Because there, as I say, a lot more Jewish people, and they got together. And in fact, in my father's business office, always sat a group of men, Jewish men who sat there, talking about local politics. Not just local, world politics. But we didn't have a telephone.

Was there anybody in your hometown who had a car?

No, but this uncle Jossi, Joseph, who I told you left for Palestine, he rode a motorcycle. And sometimes he would come roaring in on this motorcycle. And like you see in movies sometimes, all the kids surrounded him outside. Regular kids. It was a novelty, and it was very, very interesting. So he did.

In this town, there was a cut above in civilization, you might say, than in our little town. But we benefited, because we were in both places.

But that also says that your maternal grandfather, who was wealthy, didn't have an automobile, which was a sign of wealth in those days.

See, I imagine it was-- there was at one point that my uncle Jossi had a car, too. And there was a point occasionally he

came to our town in a car. But I think he must not have had that for long, because I am mostly aware of the motorcycle. So there were no gas stations.

Yeah, yeah.

And besides, he was he was an orthodox, orthodox person. If anybody would have had a car, his sons would have had it. He would not have had anything to do with that.

I see. That's your grandfather. And what was his last name? I don't think we recorded it before.

Yeah, right. It was Mermelstein.

Mermelstein. That would be M-E-R-M-E-L-S-T-E-I-N?

Yes.

OK.

Hirsch.

Hirsch Mermelstein.

Hirsch Mermelstein. No, he would not-- I can't possibly see him in a car. These were orthodox men, who-- the fact that he was so good in business was amazing, but not any modern life.

OK. No new technology.

No, no, no, no. Not even what was available there. He did have a lawyer in the next big city. And if there was any kind of need for someone to talk to the lawyer because of business, he used his two daughters. They were the ones who would go to the city and do what he told them was necessary. And they were presentable in public. He came with his big beard, and probably I'm guessing that his Hungarian language must not have been very good. They spoke Yiddish.

I see.

So no, not him. But he managed to run his business very well. And I know my father had a lawyer, too, in Munkács. It was this next big city. Because occasionally they ran into some problem with the Hungarian government. I can't tell you what. But as a business, they needed that kind of help.

Well, I want to turn to a few things that we had spoken of before but that was not recorded. And you mentioned your Uncle Jossi as one of them, that of your mother's siblings and stepsiblings, who had left before, who survived, and you mentioned that he was somebody who in the '30s had already left your area for Palestine. So tell me about that and why that was something that was controversial.

Well, it had to do with the orthodox religion. My grandfather and all the orthodox religious people did not-- they hated Zionism. Zionism meant leaving the religion and not sticking to the rules, and mixing with women, and reading books, and all the rest. And that was all forbidden.

And once your young people did that, became Zionists, then that's the route they went. And they were losing them that way.

I see.

He was a complicated man. He was good in business, but very old fashioned in religion. But that's how all the old men and the religious men were. They were strictly orthodox and stuck to every single rule to observe. And as soon as you

let go of your children in that regard, they gave up a lot of that. And that was not what they wanted.

For example, there was a Hebrew gymnasium in this big city called Munkács. Munkács had all kinds of Jews. And they actually had a gymnasium, secondary school. They taught in Hebrew and in Hungarian or Czech, and they were all Zionists. They taught about Palestine, and they taught Zionist aims. It was a great school.

When my sister and I got to 6th grade and school ended in our town, my grandfather would not allow us to go to the Hebrew gymnasium, because that was Zionist. And that was what I'm saying, losing them to modern ways, which they were very much against.

So instead of sending me with my sister to secondary school, we were sent to Hungarian schools in that big city.

In Munkács.

In Munkács. And looking back, I feel what a pity, that I didn't go to the Hebrew gymnasium and really get a world class education, instead of going to Hungarian schools where I had to fight a little bit of anti-Semitism. It wasn't too evident, but we were the Jewish kids in this situation where the others were not. So they were very, very, very opposed to Zionism.

So and your Uncle Jossi was the person who wanted to go to Palestine and did. Is that the case?

And did, and caused a great deal of grief. They felt very, very unhappy about it. And as I said a little bit before that when some cards, postcards came first on the route and later, the postcards, I remember that he was on the beach in a bathing suit in Haifa, I believe. And there's women in bathing suits, looking very happy.

They, my aunts, his sisters, did not show that to the grandparents. To your grandparents, your mother's parents.

Yeah, to his parents. Yes, no. They did not. Because that's exactly what they feared. It's exactly what they didn't want to happen. They were very, very orthodox, very strict. You know, that was a compartment that you couldn't breach.

Of course in the cities, like in Munkács, there were modern Jews. There were those who even if they weren't Zionists, they lived a more open life. But not in these little towns. It's known what people say about that Carpathia-Ukraine area, which this was. It was a very orthodox community.

Well, yes. You know, that leads me to a whole host of other questions. And that is, I wanted to ask you about your own formal schooling. And this also ties into the shifting borders that were around your part of the world. And also when you mention that area of the Carpathian Mountains and part of-- today, your town is part of Ukraine. And when you were born, it was part of Czechoslovakia.

Yes, and later Hungary.

Yeah, so that when you look on a map-- and I did after we first spoke-- it's so far east, as far as what the borders of Czechoslovakia were, that I wondered whether it was closer to Lvov than it was to Prague.

Yeah. Yes, or at least equally.

Yeah.

We were right on the border, yes. And in that area, not only was our population mostly was Hungarian, but there were sections where the population was Ukrainian, and they spoke Ukrainian. In that mountain area where my grandfather had his property and lived there first, they were speaking a Ukrainian type of language.

Isn't that interesting.

[BOTH TALKING] area.

So let's turn a little bit to-- let's turn a little bit to your hometown. And that, again, I'm going to say is Bã³trÃ¡gy. Is that how I say it?

Yes, Bã³trÃ¡gy.

Bã³trÃ¡gy. Bã³trÃ¡gy had 1,000 people.

Yes.

And when you were born, it was-- and that's 1930. It was part of Czechoslovakia.

Yes.

When you started going to school, how old were you?

I was probably closer to seven, because I was born in November. School starts in September. I think-- and I was basically six. And I went to the Czech school. And then, as I said before, when the Czechs were thrown out in 1938, I transferred to Hungarian schools.

So what that is that you start school in 1936 or '37.

Yes.

And you are--

'38. '38, it was over, right?

So two years of Czech schools.

Yes, yes.

OK. And do you have any memories of having gone to school?

Oh, yes.

Under the Czech system?

I have absolutely. And for some strange coincidence, I have a class picture of that school, which is very interesting. And I don't know how it came about, a tiny little picture. And then when I went back there after the war, one of the neighbors gave me a class picture of a Hungarian school, where both my sister and I are in it as little girls with bows in our hair.

So you're in the-- so you have two years of Czech education.

Yes.

And you mentioned earlier, and this is part that we don't have on tape, but we had talked about of why were Jewish kids mostly going to a Czech school during those years?

Yes. Well, first of all, well, I don't know which came first. The Jewish kids--

In Bã³trÃ¡gy. So of the 10 families.



Well, the Hungarian school was filled with the children of the farmers. They were not too interested in education, because they took their kids out to help on the farm, even before they were old enough. The Hungarian school ended at 6th grade. And by 6th grade, most of the kids were dropping out, old enough to work on the farm.

And of course the Czech schools were much more interested in academics. And the other most interesting thing was that they closed on the Sabbath. And the Hungarian schools had school on Saturday also. And that probably made a huge difference.

But also the Czechs were, on the whole, not anti-Semitic. And because it's well known that when Czechoslovakia was created in the area, it was modeled after the Constitution of the United States. And it was a democratic government. And so that was enough for us, plus the Saturday closing.

Was there was there a large Czech population in Bã³trÃ¡jgy?

Well, I don't think so. But I was thinking of it the other day as you asked me questions, things I never talked about, but I do know about it. I believe that they either bought up or in some way, the Czechs, individuals, I suppose, acquired a lot of farmland. And it seems to me, from what I remember, that it must have been like tenant farming there.

So they would send representatives there to run the tenant farming. And there wouldn't be many needed for each area, one or two people. And the rest of the work was done by the local farmers. And the reason I think that it was tenant farming is my mother took me. I went with her to one of these places once, because she went to talk to the head, a woman who was in charge of this huge area.

She went to talk to her about buying some fruit. And I know we came home with some apples. And I remember seeing this row of houses, huge row of houses. And that's where the workers lived. And that's how the local farmers lived. This was like one huge, long house with doors, lots of doors. And now I interpret that as being the farmers that were controlled by this company that ran the farming.

And they also ran the government. The local government, the police.

That's the Czech kind of presence.

The Czechs, yes. And in a bigger town, they had bigger control of the government, local government.

But population-wise, of the 1,000 people, would there have been hundreds or 200 who were Czech?

In my little town, I doubt that there were even 100.

OK.

And they weren't visible somehow. And I don't know if it was a fair way of doing things or not. I never looked into it from that point of view. But they were sort of like-- because the population was Hungarian, they must have seemed to the Hungarians like occupiers.

So what happened to them, when the place became part of Hungary?

Well, they were all evicted. They were sent back to Czechoslovakia, to the real smaller area that was Czechoslovakia. Their properties either they confiscated. Maybe they got something paid. I don't know that history, but they all left. They all left in 1938, and they went back to what was really Czechoslovakia. The Czech-speaking Czech government. But they were occupied by-- invaded and occupied by Hitler.

Yes.

And so what happened to the Czechs in Hitler's time was not good, because they were over-- they became Germany.

They were occupied by the Nazis.

Well, yeah. There was that famous "peace in our time," I think it was from Neville Chamberlain. This is all-- it sounds like the results of the Munich Agreement in 1938, where the Sudetenland is taken away from Czechoslovakia. And then later a lot of other countries step up and have claims. And Hungary was one of them. And it was claims to your area, the area that you lived in. And so in late '38, that's when this switch happens.

Yes, exactly.

And you then-- after you no longer can go to Czech school, do you go to Hungarian school?

Right away, yes.

In the same town.

Yes. As soon as the Czech school left and we registered. I remember going to the-- there was a school, a Hungarian school on the other end of town. And we had no-- we had absolutely no trouble, the Jewish kids who switched. We spoke Hungarian.

It was easy. I remember reading. I remember learning sounding out the Hungarian words. But since somehow we knew the alphabet, I remember sort of thinking, "Oh, that's easy. It works." You just pronounce-- Hungarian is a very phonetic language, too.

But to those who don't speak it, it sounds like a very difficult language.

Yes, I hear that. The Czech-- the Jewish kids spoke-- in the two years that-- probably wasn't even complete two years that I was in the Czech school, I and my sister, we were fluent in Czech by then. It was no problem. And we already spoke Hungarian. So the switch was not traumatic at all.

Well, let's turn now to another aspect that we again spoke of earlier but was not recorded. And that is, I asked-- the part of the world that you lived in, in your description, sounds quite remote. I mean, not entirely remote, but not in the center of things.

And I wondered how much of that larger life that was going on in Europe in the '30s had an impact. How much of it was known? How much, let's say, what was going on in Germany was known in your town, and how much this was part of the conversation? Whether Hitler was something, was a person that people knew about, talked about? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Yes. Well, it really was known. Because it's true that our little village was really more backward in many ways. But as I was saying, my father lived in the bigger town. And there were many Jews there. And in addition to that, the city of Munkács had-- I don't know-- maybe thousands of Jewish families. And it was probably 3/4 Jewish. And it was a city that had everything, from movies, theaters, Jewish synagogues, rabbis, Businesses A really modern, bustling city.

Did you go to Munkács?

Well, absolutely. So not only did I go, my mother went regularly to do the bigger shopping. And in addition to that, one of her brothers, her four brothers, Benzion, my uncle Benzion, lived there with his wife and two children. And so everybody spent a lot of time at the Benzion, Benzion family.

And so when we kids were taken there-- and later I'll tell you, my sister and I ended up going to middle school there, to Hungarian middle school. That's where the Hungarian middle school was.

Also the Hebrew gymnasium was there. It was like a Jewish city with incredible activity of every kind. Lots of business, lots of culture. And there was all kinds of culture, not just the orthodox culture. It was a big city. A river flowed through

it, on one side of the river and the other side of the river, and a very large railroad station, which also-- a center that went all over to the Russian side or the Western side.

And it was a great place. And so the news came from there. People there did have radios and so on. And Munkács was again a much bigger place than Bártágy. And the traffic from that flowed over. And people were very well aware of what was going on with Hitler, with the war, with everything about politics was aware.

Give me a sense of distance. If you went with your mother to Munkács, would you go by train?

Yes. You had to go by train.

And how long would it take you?

Well, I think no more than 30 minutes.

Ah, so one could say that you were truly in the outskirts of Munkács.

We were. And just to mention before I get back to Munkács, going the other way East, there was another very large city called Beregszász. Beregszász was also a huge Jewish population and Jewish center. And they apparently, the Jews there from what I understand now, they thought they were more modern and more civilized, and not as old fashioned than even the Munkács people.

In other words, they felt that they were really advanced. But they all had-- these places, the cities, they had hospitals. They had doctors. We were not stuck in our village, because we had the means to get on a train and go. Now, the farmers didn't go far, and they went by horse and buggy. And they weren't interested in the culture there.

These were really Jewish cities, and very, very advanced and lively and had everything-- writers, and theater, and Jewish theater, and regular theater, and music. There was everything. And so although we didn't go to Beregszász that often, we did go there, too. But Munkács was a center. So how did we go there?

So after 6th grade in the local town, first my sister was sent to Munkács to live with Uncle Benzion and his family and go to school, middle school there. My sister stayed there and only came home occasionally for a weekend, for shabbos. But she lived with them. She loved it. She went to school there. And that was called higher education, believe it or not. Because it was beyond middle school, a little bit beyond middle school. But if you had that degree that far, you were way above the average in schooling.

So when my sister finished, I was ready to go to the higher level. So I was maybe 11 and 1/2 or something. And so I was sent there. I was registered in Munkács. But I told my mother that I do not want to stay there. I want to come home every day. So you get the feeling of how close it really was.

Yeah, yeah.

However, at that stage, that was probably 1941, '42, the trains were full of soldiers. And I think I was a little country girl. I got up to the station, railroad station in Bártágy. It was a one track station, tiny station. Very often the trains stopped only for me. Nobody else was going.

Wow.

I would get on the train, find all kinds of soldiers and whatnot. I would have to go one station to Bányás, to get off, and change stations, trains. I would have to run and find the train that I needed to go to Munkács already waiting for me after it was off the tracks. I would run and get on, continue to Munkács, get off of there, and go probably a mile even deeper into the city to that school, Hungarian school.

That's quite a trek for a young girl.

Unbelievable if I think about it. It's unbelievable that my mother was expecting someone my age and my sophistication to do that. At the end of school, I would run to the station, catch my train, go as far as Bã;tyã°, change trains, and go to Bã³trã;gy, the next one stop. In the winter time, by the time I got home, it was dark.

Yeah.

By the time I got-- and I know that my mother was plenty worried, although she didn't let on. But I know that she would be at the gate running. I would come up come up the road towards my house after I got out of the train, and I would see her little head bobbing up and down behind the fence. She was running back and forth to see if she could see me coming.

But I wasn't stopped. And I simply did not want to stay. My sister loved staying away from home and being in the big city, and she benefited from it. I, on looking back, I was just a little girl who didn't want to leave home.

Well, it's understandable. Because you're at a very tender age. And I know that for many children whose parents wanted them to have a higher education in those years, in those parts of Europe, it was really rough on the child when they had to, in order to get that education, they essentially had to leave their families.

Yes.

And it was tough on everybody.

I just was adamant. Now, I did stay there. Friday when I went to school, I stayed with my uncle's family on shabbos, because my parents didn't want me to travel then. But there was school on Saturday even at that level. So I would walk to school in Munkã;cs, but I wouldn't take the train home on shabbos. No way.

Yeah.

So I would be there. And I had a wonderful time with my uncle's and aunt's two little kids. They actually-- on a Sunday, I remember they sent us off to a movie. The first movie I ever saw.

Do you remember what it was?

Yes, I do.

What was it? What was it? What's the movie?

It was like a Mutt and Jeff type or something. But I was amazed. I was just mesmerized, because it had sound and it had movement. I never saw anything like it. And they sent their kids, two little kids. They were younger than I was, but I was sort of like the chaperone. They dropped us off, and we walked. I think we walked to the theater.

And so on Monday after school, I went home. And so this was my routine until the Hungarians took over and Jewish kids were thrown out of school.

But I thought you said it was already a Hungarian school. So in which way did they take over?

There was a Hungarian school even while the Czechs were in charge.

I see.

In our town, they had Hungarian. In that little town, they had Hungarian and Czech schools.

No, no, no. I'm talking now about Munkã;cs.

Munkács. Well, there, too, there was a Hungarian secondary school and there was the gymnasium.

I know, but you said you went there until the Hungarians took over.

Yes, yes. Right, OK. So I think it must have been '43. Well, actually the Hungarians took over earlier.

Yes. Yes, that's why I was confused.

I see. '41. Well, it went on for a while. It went on for a while. My father's business also wasn't confiscated immediately. They went on for a while. But when they finally took over completely, the Czech schools and the gymnasium eventually were eliminated.

OK. I'm going to step back a little bit.

OK.

Let's step back, and I want to find out-- I mean, we started talking about-- we started talking about how much politics was known, how were people discussing what was going on in Germany, what kind of news and knowledge was there? And I remember you had said something that you remembered where you were when you learned the war started.

Yes.

So bring me back to September 1, 1939. What it means is that's less than a year after Hungary has taken over your part of the world, your hometown. It's now part of Hungary. You are still going to your local Hungarian school.

Yes. I was nine years old.

Yeah, fill me in. What happened? Where were you?

Even then, as I said, my father came home every day with all the information that they discussed and heard in Bétyó. Every day, he discussed it with my mother. And everybody, the kids we heard, we knew everything. We were not-- actually, sometimes in the town hall, the Hungarians would put a radio outside in the building there. And it was blaring news. And the news was the propaganda of Hungary and the Nazis.

And there we could even hear Hitler ranting and raving against the Jews in the town from that public radio that they put out.

In German.

No. Well, yes, in German, right. But that wasn't a problem. But also Hungarians, they were very happy to be blaring out the anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish accusations and talking about how the war was being won, how they were winning, and how they were defeating the Allies, and a lot of lies. But we listened to it, and I know that it was from the grown-ups and it was normal.

Everything you heard in that propaganda was immediately translated to the opposite. If they said that the Allies lost so many thousand in a certain battle, we immediately turned it around and said, no, it was they themselves who lost all those. Most of the time we were right, because they exaggerated.

We were fully informed, but as to when I was when I heard about the war, sorry, I was saying that I was playing alongside my house. On the wall there, I was bouncing the ball against the wall and counting to see how many times I can bounce it before it fell to the ground. That was kind of the aim, not to drop the ball.

And as I was doing that, one of the Jewish young teenager came running into my yard and saying that Germany invaded

Poland, and the war started. I remember it vividly. And my mother heard it, and my father heard it. I don't know exactly where he was, but we all understood that that happened, and everybody was very upset and worried. Because they understood from the rantings of Hitler what was going on with the Jews in Germany and how they were being deported and all the laws against them and all the propaganda.

And we heard what was going on in Poland later on. You know what was going on with the Jews. And the Czechs were already thrown out and so on. We knew that this was very bad news. But we heard it. We knew it. I remember it. I was aware of it. And so were all the Jews, whether they had a radio or not.

How did your lives change in concrete ways after September 1, '39?

Yes. Well, some of these Nuremberg type laws that Hungary instituted didn't happen right away. My father's business continued, and the businesses in Beregszász and my grandfather's, it continued. Even the school continued a little bit. But very quickly these laws became effective.

And so after a very short time, I no longer commuted to Munkács. For a little while I did, because I know that the Hungarian-- the trains were full of Hungarian soldiers. And then very soon after that we were having to wear the yellow star.

Do you know about what year had to start wearing the star? How old you were when you started wearing it?

Well, I was already commuting on the train. I went a few times. So when did I go? Oh, gosh. It was maybe '40-- maybe '43, '42, '43. By '44 we were deported. So it's not clear to me exactly whether it was '43 or '42. Maybe '43. Yeah. So I remember that the law went out that we have to wear the yellow star.

And I remember that my mother and my aunt basically made those. She cut out from yellow cloth.

Yeah.

And I remember that they didn't-- my mother and aunt didn't sew it on, on our outer garment, especially for me. They pinned it on. And so I remember I didn't pin it on while I was walking to the train station. Or if I did pin it on walking to the train station, I took it off when the train arrived. I didn't want to get on the train with that, because I was afraid.

And when I got to the city, I didn't put it on because nobody knew me there that I was Jewish or not. So I was back and forth with the yellow star, pinning it on, taking it off, because it wasn't sewn on. So those were one of the things that they did. And then very soon after that, Jewish kids were not allowed to go to Hungarian schools. And so we sat at home. The kids didn't go to school.

But my father's business continued a little longer. And then that was confiscated, and then he sat at home.

And then did all the yard work and farm that you were talking about.

He took care of what needed to be taken care of. But in addition to that, he you know the talk of politics continued. Then instead of him meeting with many of the Jewish men in his office and business, there were a few Jewish men in town who came to our house, and they sat around and talked about politics. But everybody knew.

There was sort of an underground type of thing. And in Băty, I remember in those days, I would spend some time in Băty at my grandparents'. And I would hear from my young uncles and aunts. They had a lot of connections with other young people, and they actually listened-- it was very dangerous. They listened to BBC secretly in homes where people had a radio. And it was very much barred. I don't know what that word is.

Sure. Forbidden. It was forbidden.

But the sound, the sound was practically impossible. They were trying to not allow it to come through.

Oh, I know what you mean.

You know that? I think. So basically what you heard was noise.

It was jammed. The radio signals were jammed.

Jammed, right. It was heavily jammed. I once heard it for a few minutes with my aunt who was going to this house, and secretly they would meet in the homes where there were radios. And it was jammed in such a way that-- sort of a grinding noise.

Yeah.

But they managed. They managed to get important information, and they continued to do that, listen to the BBC. And some had better radios and so on. So people were informed.

But did they know? Did you know about-- did you know about the murders of Jews? Did you know about Auschwitz? Did you know about the concentration camps?

No, no, no, no. We didn't know about Auschwitz when we arrived in Auschwitz in 1944. We had no idea there was an Auschwitz. Never heard the name ever, ever.

So when you're saying they were informed, it was only up to a certain point.

Well you know it's amazing. Auschwitz was a secret to-- I would say, to a large non-Jewish population. I don't know how that was possible, but Auschwitz was a secret. Now, the Jewish leaders knew about it. I don't know when, how soon they knew about it, the Jewish leadership. But they didn't tell the Jewish population about it.

I see. You see, the reason I'm asking-- I'm trying to get a sense of what one did know, what one didn't know. And to quantify when you say when people were well-informed, what did that specifically mean? Like earlier you had said, again this was not on tape, but you were told me about a lady who escaped Poland and came to your village, and people hid her.

Yes. And yes, she did sell tell things. And first of all, they didn't believe all of it. They thought it was an exaggeration. Couldn't possibly be so bad. Couldn't possibly.

What was she saying? What was she telling people?

She was mainly talking about Poland. She came from Poland, that people were being shot in the forests and burning down synagogues, and that there were massacres of people, hundreds of people, families taken to the forest and shot into graves. And that's what we heard, and that they were being taken, deported somewhere, too.

But it wasn't-- our excuse was that we were not Germans, and we were not Polish. We were Hungarians. The Hungarian government. This is not the same country. We don't have the same regime. Hungarian government is not doing this to us. Yes, they are doing some things, taking away some of our rights, and property, and movement, but actually they're not going to do anything like that to us.

But you know, there was such a denial. If I think back, there were many ways that even the general public knew more than I'm telling you, because they began to-- the Hungarian government in 1941 already was looking and finding and deporting every Jewish person who lived there but wasn't a citizen.

There were a lot of Polish Jews who had settled in Hungary and lived there for years and even had businesses. And all of a sudden, they were thrown out, and they were searched and found and simply taken to the border, to the Polish border, and thrown across the border. And then we heard from these few who escaped that they were massacred, and

that they were killed, and that you had to--

So deportation meant death, in other words.

Yes, absolutely. And so we knew. And they were-- so we knew that thousands of Jews who lived in Hungary-- we could witness that. People disappeared. They weren't hiding, really. They were taken away. And because they weren't citizens. And one thing-- that's 1941-- that my father concluded, I suppose he knew that it was essential to be sure that we are citizens. Because even if you lived there many years and you weren't a citizen, they took you, too.

So was that a question for your family?

Yes, it was a big question. Because it seems that it wasn't like here. If you're born here, you're a citizen.

Yes.

It wasn't like that at all. You had to qualify to be a citizen and have a piece of paper, especially if you were a Jew. If you were a Hungarian farmer, they didn't request it. Of a Jew, yes. So my father decided he has to get his paper citizenship. And he began to lay the groundwork, go about getting that. And it took him about six months, and it was a very important part in our life.

It seems that he went from office to office, searching for proof. What did he have to prove? First, not that he was born there or his father was born there. That didn't qualify. He found evidence that his father paid taxes, and that qualified him as being eligible for citizenship. And he followed that trail.

Now, I don't know the details of how many taxes, when he paid taxes, but it must have been in Austro-Hungarian time way before.

Yes, yes.

And he found that evidence in some office, and he went with that. But here he was a Jewish man in 1941, where he had to go to Hungarian offices, from office to office. He ended up going to Budapest for it.

My goodness.

He really set out. And I wish I knew more details, but why he had to go all the way to Budapest is amazing to me, and that he actually went. And he spent a lot of money going from office to office. It must have been a terrible ordeal for him. He was Jewish. He had a beard. Nobody welcomed him in any of those offices, Hungarian offices.

But he came back with a paper citizenship. And when he came back with that, my parents said "we're safe. That's it. We are safe. We are not going to be evicted. We have what we need."

Oh my goodness. So that paper was not only good for him, but for your mother and for all of you children.

The whole family. Oh, yeah.

It covered you.

Yeah, the family had a citizenship. And I remember how relieved. And I remember as children, we heard it all how even-- I remember I heard my parents were relieved and happy, we kids were relieved and happy. We're safe.

Yeah, yeah.

And other Jews in the town who came from Poland some time before, they were worried. They were plenty worried. And then there were-- I'll tell you an incident that happened to my mother's sister, Rose, who ended up with us in



Auschwitz, who was living in Białystok. But half the year she spent in the other property in the mountains. And the other half the year her sister spent there, because they had to have someone to run all that property and workers.

So this is your maternal grandfather's initial holdings, before he comes to Białystok. This is what he had made his money on, this property.

Yes. Initially, he did. And so he didn't sell that when he moved to Białystok and took the mill. He sent one of his daughters, two alternating, to run that property. And somebody needed to be there. And so my aunt Rosie was there in 1942. And some local official in that very, very small town had some kind of a grudge against her. But in that town, there were these Jews who had lived there for years, but were not citizens.

So there this local official was getting those Jews together to deport them. I don't know how many. Not too many were there, but who was there they got them together, put them on a train. And because he had some kind of a grudge against Rosie, Rose, he nabbed her, too, and took her, put her in the train, and deported her with the others.

Wow.

That was in 1942. And that was the beginning of the biggest tragedy of my grandfather's life up to that point. Because he still had not lost the mill. His children were still young guys. I don't quite remember whether it coincided with the time where the young Jewish men were already taken into labor camps. But they were not concentration camps.

They were the labor brigade. And it might have coincided with that. Because later on, my father was taken also into this labor camp, and some of the older sons of my grandfather. So you see it began to affect us very badly. But to take Rosie, Rose, from that place for no reason, it was devastating.

What happened to her when she was taken?

Oh, what happened to her? That she was in this train with all the other Jews, being taken to the Polish border. Her train took her through Białystok. And she apparently dropped out a note in Białystok. The train stood in Białystok for some time on the tracks. And foolishly she didn't make a noise, and she didn't protest. I don't know what the circumstances were, but she dropped the note. And the note got to her parents.

And then they realized she was gone. And it was like, OK, they lost a child. And she was maybe 25 or something. I mean, horrible, absolutely horrible.

And you don't know what happened to her then?

Well, a long story, actually. My grandfather-- and I wish Rosie-- I forgot to tell you ahead of time. She survived. She ended up in Auschwitz. And he had a great influence on my survival and my sister's survival.

OK.

But in the meantime, how my grandfather managed to get her back is a story that my father would come home every day from Białystok and tell us the latest on how the search for her proceeded. He hired people. Again, he had money to hire people and even hire a lawyer. And they began a search in where these people were dropped off.

And apparently when she was dropped across the border, many others were dropped across the border. And the Jews in those towns would try their best to take them in before the Nazis got a hold of them. Often they didn't survive, you know, succeed. But they took in those people, gave them shelter.

And she was picked up by a family and taken in. Now, how then she managed to communicate with what my grandfather was doing from the other end, but they did. They found her. They contacted her. They sent people in who were able to go there in sort of an underground way.

The story goes that she and some others tried to go back the border, sneak back. And some made it, and some were caught in the fields. They went through the farmland. They dressed like peasants. They had farming tools in their hands, and they kept going closer to the border.

See, I don't know the geography, but she said that-- later on when she got back, she said that she went with a group of people in the fields towards the border. And some were shot, the very people she went with. She managed to get across the border, and somehow get on a train and ended up in Budapest. And she was able to communicate with her parents. But rescuing her came from home, from her parents. And how that worked, I don't know the details.

But that's an incredible story.

Yes, it is incredible, because some of the people that she was with trying to do this escape, she said didn't make it. And then after she came back, she did not come back to Bã;tyÃ°. Because they were afraid to show the government that she was back. She stayed in Budapest. There were some relatives there, too. She stayed there quite a while, and it was a secret that she was back.

After a while-- you see all this bureaucratic details I do not know. My father came home every night, and that was the story. Sat around, we listened, and hoped that every step of the way she was going to make it. So eventually, again through lawyers and help and money, she ended up back in Bã;tyÃ°. I don't know how long she was gone after she came to Budapest. And then the authorities there decided that she was a-- she was guilty. She was no longer as part of the family.

And so again with influence somehow, she remained in her home, but she had to register with the local government in Bã;tyÃ° once a week.

I see.

She had to go and show that she was there. And it was like a house arrest in her own home, in her own town.

As you were talking and telling me these various episodes, it sounds that-- I mean, I'm going to try and give an overview of the impression that I've got. And tell me if I'm mistaken in it. But from 1939, when the war begins, it doesn't sound like life changes much in essence for you or for your family. That's 1939. Until maybe 1942.

Yes.

And in '42 to '44, it really seems to escalate, one thing after another after another. I mean, you mentioned the yellow star. You mentioned pinning it and taking it off. You mentioned going to MunkÃ;cs to school and then no longer being able to go to MunkÃ;cs to school. Then you mentioned this incident with Rosie, where she's deported, and the deportation of others who are non-Hungarian citizens but are Jews who are then taken. And more or less it's not just being deported out of the country, it's a death sentence. And I take it they're all deported to Poland.

And you alluded to the point that your father loses his business at some point. And I assume that must be sometime around 1942. So it sounds like the noose is closing in between 1942 and 1944.

Yes, absolutely.

With all kinds of incidents.

Yes, you are absolutely right. And that actually the deportations started in '41 but overlapped. Yes. Definitely this is true. And because we were in a small town that everybody knew us, we felt a little less hostility. But you're right in your impression. And then of course by '42, the men, Jewish men were taken into labor brigade, and my father was called in. He was gone about six months.

And that was definitely a horrible thing, because they were brutalized, these men. And very few of them came back, as

you know. But they were immediately brutalized. And also under Hungarian rule, they were not treated like soldiers. Definitely not. They were treated like slaves. And they were put on the front line. The Hungarian soldiers were now in the war with Germany. And these Jewish young men were used on the front of the fighting without weapons, and doing the very dangerous work, minesweeping and other kind of brutality. And they didn't count. And they were dying already.

Towards the end, they were worn out, and starved. And I don't know very many people, young men who came back. In fact, most of them, if they survived at all, they first ended up in concentration camps. But my father was allowed to come back after six months. And it still the Hungarian government was playing with severe restrictions on freedom, Jewish freedom, and still having some leeway here and there.

So the reason the reason they let him go is because he had six children and that he was a little older than most of the people who were called in. And one day, he came home. But while he was gone, my mother-- when he was gone, his business was also confiscated. When he came back, he had no more business.

So in other words, when he's taken, he still has a business. When he comes back, it's gone.

It's gone, yes. Very soon or-- I don't know the exact dates, but I know that from then on he's at home, and all the other businesses were confiscated. But the constant communication with others about the war and its progress. And what was going on with Jews elsewhere was a very common topic. But never heard of Auschwitz, ever. And what is even more surprising to me and puzzling that Rosie came back, and she had this house arrest, and she had to go to the police in town every day to register with them.

She knew what was going on in Poland in a way we didn't. She actually knew. And she did not do anything about it. She sat there until two years later ended up in Auschwitz. And that absolutely puzzles me. Why didn't she agitate with this family, her family, I mean, to tell them?

Did she ever explain why? Did she ever--

You know, my sister and I are kicking ourselves. There were people who survived like Rosie after. We never asked permanent questions. There were other people who returned that were even in the same labor brigade as my father. Never asked any questions. Now--

Did your father live much--

Some years later--

OK, sorry. You wanted to say something. I had a question, but go ahead. What did you want to say?

Years later when she came out to Brooklyn, in Brooklyn, I asked her once. Why didn't you leave? Why didn't you do something about it? She says by then my father didn't have the money to take his family somewhere else or make this big leap of leaving everything behind and going there. He ran out of money. And that was the answer. That's all I ever got from her.

But it seems to me that there was some massive traumatic experience in such a way that it paralyzed her. Well, there was another thing, too, that might have been the problem. She had a very serious boyfriend in town. But very soon after, he was taken into the labor brigade, and he never came back. But when she came back, she had that.

I see.

And I think that's why she didn't really want to talk too much about it. It was serious, and it was going to be-- if things hadn't changed, would have been her husband. So anyhow, she sat there. Her brothers were taken into labor brigade, some of them. The mill was taken away, and she ended up in Auschwitz. Her entire family was killed, her parents.

So your grandfather, your maternal grandfather, survived until he was taken.

Yeah, Auschwitz.

It was Auschwitz.

He was 75 years old.

Your father, when he came back from labor brigade, did he look changed?

Well, there was one big change. His beard was gone. And we kids stared at him like he was a stranger. We never saw him without a beard. We would literally get up to his face and stared at him. But the beard grew in. He was very subdued after that. But he never talked about his experience, ever.

So when you tell me about these labor brigades being used to sweep mines, it wasn't from his stories to you. It was what you learned from other people.

Right, absolutely. But the story was that they were not soldiers. They were slaves, doing all kinds of very heavy work and without adequate food and no respect. And they were brutalized. The Hungarian soldiers and officers who were in charge used them as slave labor.

Do you know what part of the front they were sent to?

Well, that's another thing. I never asked him. I never asked him where were you. And now it's amazing.

Do you think it was the Soviet Front?

We knew he was somewhere in Poland. It was somewhere along the border.

So it must have been the Eastern border.

Yes, yes.

OK.

But the fact that he came back.

That's amazing.

Yes, it was. Because as I say, Rosie's boyfriend and all the other young men, nobody-- very few came back. And the stories, one of my uncles, he was in the labor brigade, and he wrote his memoir. I have it here. He was terribly brutalized. And in the end, when the Hungarian army got into trouble, they took these surviving Jewish young men and just put them in the nearest concentration camp, and they continue to die there. Because they were already [? brutalized. ?]

At this point, the next phase, the next set of questions that I have are about how life changes for you and your family. And we've been talking for an hour and a half now. Do you want to take a little break, and I'll call you in about five or 10 minutes?

Yes, that would be fine. Yes, OK.

I will do so. And then we'll continue.

OK, OK.

All right. Thank you.

OK.

Bye-bye. Bye.