

So all of these more than troubling things are happening. I want to bring us up to the point that-- in some ways, to me it's similar to September 1st, '39. You know exactly where you were when the war started. Do you remember where you were when Germany marched into Hungary in March 1944?

Oh yes. Yes, yes, I do. There was a lot of excitement in the town. And people began to-- the local people began to line up along the one main road where they were coming. And people began to go up into the church steeple, where you could see the highway and how far away they were.

There was a lot of excitement. The whole town was engaged. Everything stopped. You know, people moving towards the highway. I remember that my father and brother-- I remember the discussion. If he goes out and joins the happy time, it would be ridiculous. If he doesn't go, he felt that that would be noticed too.

Your father was saying this? Or your brother was saying this?

The discussion was between my father and brother whether they should go. It was a discussion in the family that I heard out loud.

I see.

I don't know-- it wasn't exactly to the children. They didn't know what to do about it. Because the whole town was out lining the highway.

Lining the highway in a celebratory mood?

Yes. Yes, and welcoming. Welcoming. Well, he went up to-- they decided to go up to the church steeple. I remember that. And they came back and they said they could see them up some miles.

And what did they see? What was it that they were seeing?

They saw soldiers marching, a large contingent of soldiers marching towards the town. They had to go through the town. They didn't stay in the town. I know that when the soldiers came, they cheered and they marched out and left and went on to the next-- probably to Baču or whatever. There was only one road, one highway.

Did you see them?

I didn't go up. I saw them from my house. We were not far from-- we were able to see the highway-- and there were a lot of people lining the highway. I saw people. But we children didn't go out. But my father had some kind of a dilemma about it, whether he should or shouldn't. And I don't exactly know. I remember the time when it happened.

So you didn't actually-- one of my questions at this point is, was this the first time you see a German soldier? And you actually didn't see them because there were people lining the streets.

Yes. Yes, I didn't.

And you were seeing the people.

Right, I didn't see them. No. And so as I'm speaking, I may have to correct this.

OK.

If I have to. I'm wondering if I am mistaken and it was when the Hungarians came in. Not the Germans. I think so. I think I'm not remembering this, because as you were telling me that, we would not have been cheering or wanting to see the Germans come. I believe this was when the Hungarians-- the Czechs left and the Hungarians occupied.

So we're talking 1938.

Yes, yes. So if you want to erase that or change that.

No, no, we leave it as it is. It's fine, because we have both. We have both what the discussion is and also--

The discussion was even for that, whether they should-- I bet it was the Hungarians-- whether he should go up. I can't imagine that he would have even wanted to be anywhere near that other occupation. I am almost sure as I speak that it was the Hungarian one. And they came in marching. And of course, since it was a Hungarian population, they welcomed them. That's what it is. I'm correcting myself.

OK, that's fine. That's fine. So to go back to March 1944--

Yes.

Is there a distinct memory, then, of--

Yes, that was not a visible invasion by soldiers. That was sort of a done deal on another level that the Germans took over the government in Budapest.

So you didn't see any action or any movement locally when that happened.

No. No, that was already deep into the war. And the Germans were already losing. And the mood in Hungary was already-- actually, I do remember now the details more clearly that the Germans invaded the central government in Budapest and took over.

And that was because Hungary attempted to pull out of the alliance, because the Germans were already retreating. So that's what it was. And that was not a celebration for the Hungarians, because they thought they were on the losing side and attempted to withdraw from the alliance with the Germans. So that was not a visible soldier things. I'm sorry I missed that [INAUDIBLE].

Not to worry, not to worry. But my question is, after you learn that the Germans have come in and that this is taking over the government in Budapest, how does-- this is March 1944.

Yes.

How soon do things start happening in your world with your family, both in your hometown and where your maternal grandfather lives? And what happens after this?

Well, I do remember that after this happened that the Germans took over the government, three weeks later, we were in a Munkacs ghetto. Three weeks later.

That's no time at all.

No time at all. It was the last day of Passover. And the calendar date is available, although I don't exactly know it. But from the day the Germans took over the country, three weeks later, we were in Munkacs in the ghetto. And three or four weeks in the ghetto, after that, we were in Auschwitz. And everybody was gone and killed.

My god, that's lightning. That's lightning speed.

Yeah, we had absolutely no warning. We knew, of course, that-- by that time, by 1944, we knew a lot about the plight of the Jews. And that being now not under the Hungarian government but the German government, we saw trouble. But we had absolutely no idea how much trouble. And we never heard of Auschwitz till-- but we were in the ghetto. And taken out of our home.

Tell me about that. How did it happen-- from your home to Munkacs, describe to me the sequence.

Well, there was a Queen's Announcement. You know, we had a town crier, believe it or not. I feel like I'm 200 years old. But that was the way. There was no internet. So there was a guy whose job it was-- he came with a drum up and down the street. Every other few feet, he would stop beating the drum. He would beat the drum and people would come out to the street, because there was going to be a public announcement.

And that was for everything, small and big. So we heard the beating of the drum and we'd go to the front of the house to the street to hear. And the announcement was that all the Jews of Bótrágy should leave their home tomorrow morning and gather at the building, which was the town hall, and bring a suitcase each. And went up and down the one road that was going through the streets of the town. And we heard it. And everybody else heard it. That was it. That was the last day of Passover, 1944. And a lot of Jews in that part of Hungary know that, the date of the day after Passover in 1944.

Yeah.

So as I told you, that was the [INAUDIBLE]--

Can we pause just for a second?

Yes.

There is some audio sound. Are--

You know what, I got it too close to me again.

OK.

I don't need to hold it like an ordinary phone, because it's so loud. OK, so I'm going to take it away from me and see if that's better.

That's better. That's better.

OK, I'll have to remember. That's the problem.

How did you spend that last day of Passover? What did you do?

Well, a lot happened in my household. First of all, terror set in, for sure. And one thing that happened almost immediately is some neighbor-- a Gentile neighbor-- came to our house. And I don't remember-- I wasn't aware of the incident-- but I know that they told my mother that in [? Bacsó ?], the Jews had been collected already. And that they're in trains and they're being deported. And that her parents are already on the train. That was the day before the announcement was for us.

Wow.

My mother became terribly agitated. First of all, her old parents. But in addition to that, our older brother, Moshe, he was sent-- my mother sent the older kids to various cities to continue their education. So we went to Munkacs, the girls. My 16-year-old brother went to yeshiva in a city called Khust, where one of my mother's sisters lived.

And he was to live with her and her family and go to yeshiva where there was a rabbi. He could not go to a regular school. He had to get a yeshiva education. And so for Passover, he came back from there to [? Bacsó ?] to be with the grandfather and his family. And to exhibit how much he learned and how well he knew all that a yeshiva student should know. My parents were showing off with him.

So he didn't come home for the seder, not the first seder. He stayed there. He was actually still there. And so when this announcement-- when my mother heard that the Jews in [? Bacsó ?] were already in the trains being deported, she needed to know what happened to her son Moshe.

Yeah.

So she took off-- now this wasn't far. Like two and a half kilometers. She took off on foot to go to [? Bacsó ?] to see what was going on. She just ran. And in a very short time, she was coming back with our brother. So what I remember she said-- and I [INAUDIBLE] some of it-- that he had been let go. And he was on his way to Batrad' and they didn't let her into [? Bacsó ?].

The entrance was guarded. But they let him out. It seems that he took off to go home, whether there was a question of you don't belong here. Or he said he doesn't belong here. I'm guessing. But he headed home. She met him at the border and both of them were coming home. And there was a huge relief. But it still was-- her parents are in the train and all the [? Bacsó ?] Jews.

Next thing we heard is they unloaded all the [? Bacsó ?] Jews from the train and sent them back again to their home. And that was another astonishing thing. Then to end up this little scene, the next day they reloaded them into the train and they left. And then it was our turn.

So why did they not leave the first day when they put them in the trains? I can only guess that it was war time. [? Bacsó ?] was a railroad crossing. There were only so many tracks and so many ways to use the tracks. And I imagine that they didn't have the track. And probably, soldiers needed the track. Or the war needed the track. So they unloaded them and made room on the tracks and then they reloaded them.

That's what happened. There is no other reason, because they always have to have the line open. And you know, Eichmann-- the German Nazi who was in charge of deporting the Hungarian Jews-- he made sure that these things went smoothly. He needed to deal with the railroads. So anyhow, they were gone. And so now, Moshe was home. So what did we do?

As soon as we heard the announcement in the street at the last day of Passover-- we didn't have bread yet. Still Passover. Not eating anything but matzas. There was now a shortage of food. And my mother abandoned the rules and she immediately started baking bread. Just immediately, because she did that once a week anyway. And she [INAUDIBLE] she was going to do it the next day. So she was totally occupied with baking all day and cooking all day. And what she had in mind is that they were being taken away with six kids. She needed to take food.

Yeah, she needs to feed them. You don't know where you're going. You don't know what you'll find.

No. But the fact that we're being taken out of our home was evident.

What about your father's sister? Was she still with you?

Oh, yes, she was with us. And it was pitiful to see. She was more or less in charge of packing suitcases, because my mother was so busy. And I remember she did closet doors-- and oh my god, what to take? And I mean, it was-- we kids just sort of followed the grown-ups around and watched what they were doing. And we saw the confusion and the worry. And what do kids do? I remember the tension. I remember the fear. But you know, we were going with our parents, right?

Yeah, it makes it different. For children, that's the key thing. They want to be with their parents.

They were in charge. And it was chaos. And there was a lot of talk what to take. They had a hard time. One suitcase each. My aunt, who lived in that house and had-- they had a closet in one of the bedrooms, where it was linens, hand-embroidered and damasks and things that were never used. It was something beautiful to look at.

It was either my mother's dowry or whatever. It was a showplace. It was never used. Just gorgeous stuff. And my aunt was in that closet looking to see-- soon abandoned it, because obviously that was the wrong thing. So they ended up taking bedding, clothing, and the food, when it was ready. And I don't-- things, children's clothing. They were talking about taking valuables to exchange for food along the way. They were

thinking of that.

So my father was attempting to hide some things. We had a cellar. But they also were sewing some money into some clothes. They did, for exchange for food for children. And we didn't have gold and diamonds. But there was my mother's engagement ring, wedding ring. There were little diamond earrings. My father had a gold pocket watch from his father. Stuff like that.

And I remember he, with my brother, went down into the cellar, which was deep and dark. And I followed them back and forth. The cellar was lined with big stones. It was a stone wall. They took out a stone and put in some of these-- my mother's earrings and what I just said. They took some that they sewed into clothes. They did that. Probably my aunt did that, because my mother was so busy. But they did put my father's pocket watch and a couple of earrings and a ring. And put the stone back.

So they hid it in the wall of the house?

It was a deep cellar where if you took one-- it was all stone, you know. But they removed it and upset the area, it didn't seem to. Nobody would know that that stone had been moved. To just jump ahead, the miracle is that, of course, my parents didn't come back. I had no way of telling anyone. By the time we came back, one of my-- excuse me. I'm looking to see-- I have a phone call. Could I stop here? It might be important.

OK, sure. Not a problem.

Thank you.