

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Peter Gorog on June 25, 2020. And Mr. Gorog, I believe you are in Potomac, Maryland. Is that correct?

North Potomac, Maryland. Correct.

In North Potomac, Maryland. And I am in Falls Church, Virginia, so this interview is being conducted remotely by telephone. And with that said, I will say thank you, Mr Gorog, for agreeing to speak with us today, for sharing what your life story was, what your experiences were and that of your family.

And my first question is, could you tell me the date of your birth?

March 10, 1941.

OK. And where were you born?

I was born in Budapest, Hungary.

All right. What was your name at birth?

My name was Grunwald Peter. In Hungarian, the first name is the last name and the last name is the first name.

So Grunwald Peter, which is much more of a German-sounding last name.

Correct. Jewish people in Europe mostly had German-sounding name, unless they changed it, like I had changed it in 1962.

And why did you change your name in 1962?

I changed it because of my mom's request.

OK.

Jewish sounding names in Hungary meant that you were most likely Jewish, although after the Holocaust antisemitism wasn't visible in Hungary. Nevertheless, it existed, and after the Holocaust experience of my mom, she thought that it would be a good idea to change my name before I start my studies at the Technical University of Budapest. So the summer before I entered to the University, I changed my name from Grunwald to Gorog.

And why did you choose Gorog?

Well, in Hungarian it's a very pleasant sounding name. And I just liked the sound being-- Gorog was not typically chosen by Hungarian Jews as a Hungarian name when they changed their names. There were more commonly used ones, so I thought it was a good choice. Of course, that time I had no idea that one day I would end up in the United States where the pronunciation of my name will be a little bit difficult.

[CHUCKLES]

Have you ever thought of going back to Grunwald?

Yes, I did, and especially my wife wanted-- there are many reasons why I didn't, if you are interested [INAUDIBLE].

Yes, I am. Very much so.

Well, one reason is that I have five girls by the name of Gorog.

Five daughters?

Five daughters. And changing back my name before all of them are married, and they will take or they already took their husband's name, it would have been a little bit confusing having different names from my children's name. That was the major reason. Also, changing all the documents [INAUDIBLE] IDs and passports, it's a long process and [INAUDIBLE].

So you decided not to. You decided to keep--

Correct. However, there is something in the back of my mind when my last daughter gets married and there will be no one in the family by that name, I might just change it back to Grunwald.

Have you ever felt like a Gorog?

Sorry?

Have you ever felt your identity to be as a Mr. Gorog rather than Mr. Grunwald?

Well, I have [INAUDIBLE] long answer to the short question. I reclaimed my Jewish identity later in my life, and that's when I started thinking about to have the name of my father, who died during the Holocaust. And he died for one reason and one reason only, because he was Jewish and his name was Grunwald.

Well, let's turn to that now. I wanted to find out more about your parents, so let's start with your father and what his first name was, and I'll go from there.

His first name was Árpád.

Árpád.

No English equivalent. It's a very typical Hungarian name. Actually, that was the name of the leader of the Hungarian tribes who came to Hungary from somewhere, the Ural Mountain about 2,000 years ago.

Hmm. So it's truly an ancient name. And-

Correct.

--was your father's family from Budapest?

Yes. My father was born in Budapest, and his family, as far as I know, lived in Budapest.

For about how many generations would you think?

I cannot tell you that. Unfortunately, I don't know enough from my-- about my family from my father's side. Practically everybody died during the Holocaust and there was nobody who would tell me the story. And there are very few documents which I was able to require and find out as little as I have about my father's family.

So in other words, there was no living person. It would only been information that you could have gotten from some kind of official documents about himself or about his family.

Correct. My mother preserved as much as she could from the documents she had before the Holocaust. But, of course, during that time, preserving documents weren't easy. And because we moved quite a lot, not many documents were left.

Did you-- do you have a photograph of your father?

I have plenty of photographs. Yeah. That's what he gave to me that I have photographs, but only

photographs starting from his marriage to my mom, or a little bit before that.

So nothing of him as a young boy?

Nothing. I have a couple of documents of his report cards from school, and he went to a vocational school. And I have the certificate that he finished it. I have some documents from the work place he had worked before the war, and I have an important paper.

Unfortunately, it's not something which is pleasant. He applied for the Law school of Budapest. He wanted to be a lawyer, and he was rejected. So I have his application and the rejection stamped on it.

Do you know why he might have been rejected?

Nobody told me, and from the document it's very hard to figure it out. But I know that in Hungary from 1920 on, there was a law. It was called numerus clausus, which meant that they restricted the numbers of Jewish students in institutions of higher education.

Yeah.

And the quota was that they cannot have more Jewish students percentage wise than the Jewish population in Hungary was at that time, which was about 5%.

I see. So yeah, nothing on the documents, but a suspicion that it could have been for this reason?

No, because the stamp of rejection faded off, and I think they are referring to this document but I am not sure. It might be that he didn't have the qualification. In that time in Hungary, there were no entry exam to universities or colleges, and I don't know exactly what the criteria was that everybody was admitted who had a certain grade finishing high school.

I don't know. But, again, knowing that he was Jewish, knowing that there were-- this law in effect and law school was very popular. So there were, I don't know, maybe-- I know at the time when I wanted to be a lawyer, this year was one out of eight applicants were admitted.

I see. Do you know the year of your father's birth?

His birth? Yeah. I do know he was born on March 15, 1907.

1907. So he was quite a young man when-- when the war started. I don't mean when the Germans occupied Hungary, but he would have been just 32 years old in 1939.

Correct.

OK. Do you know if he had brothers and sisters?

Yes, he had two brothers.

OK, do you know their first names?

Lazlo and Imre.

Lazlo and Imre. Well, both of them sound like very-- it sounds like all three boys had very Hungarian names.

Correct. Whether it was because my father came from a Jewish family, which was-- in Hungary, it was called Neolog Jews.

OK.

And this was a branch of Judaism which is similar to conservative Judaism here in Hungary. So I believe that my father's family were assimilated in a way that-- [? actually, ?] I know that my father ate bacon, because he's referring in one of his cards he sent to my mother. So he didn't keep kosher dietary law.

OK. And now with the cards that he sent to your mother, these are not cards from when he was in forced labor? These are in other cards.

No, actually all the cards were sent from forced labor battalions.

OK. So it could have been that that was the only thing that there was to eat.

Not really, because I think he's referring to something from his earlier life with my mom when they went to camping, and they had a campfire and they had bacon-- bacon roasted over the fire.

Ah. OK. OK. So that's what tells you. I understand. So he's not in that card referring to what kind of food he is getting while he's on the battalion. He's referring to the past, before he was in that battalion.

Correct. That's true that he was that kind of yearning for--

Yeah.

--that [? bacon. ?] Because it meant-- not probably the bacon itself, but the company and the circumstances--

Yeah.

--for [INAUDIBLE] time.

And we'll come and talk about more detail in a little bit about this, but do you know the year of his death or the date of his death?

Here is what I know about his death. The Hungarian army-- his forced labor battalion was attached to the second Hungarian army, which invaded Ukraine. And in 1942, 1943 they went to Ukraine, invading it with the Nazis, the German [? troops, ?] and my father was taken through Ukraine.

And my mother got a notification from the defense-- Hungarian Ministry of Defense that my father disappeared on January 15, I believe, during war activities. And a month later, they declared him dead.

I see.

So for official reason because he didn't show up. They didn't know whether he was a POW as some of the forced-- the men in the forced labor battalions were captured by the Soviet Red Army.

Yeah.

The army declared him dead in February 1943.

Do you use a particular date yourself when you have-- if you have had to fill out his date of death on any documents?

I have a document somewhere that actually I know where it is. I can look it up if necessary. My mom applied for restitution in the 1960s, and she had to fill out a form to prove that my father was in the forced labor battalion and he died. So my mother got an official notification from an organization in Hungary which dealt with this kind of issues, who-- with the exact dates of his disappearance and his declaration of death. And that document was based from data from the archive of the Hungarian Minister of Defense.

OK. So whichever date it would have been, whether it's January '43 or February '43, you are not yet two

years old by the time he dies.

Correct.

So you have no memories of your father.

Absolutely no memories, other than a few pictures which were taken with me when he was released for a long weekend. And those few pictures were taken at that time, and the other memories, of course, are pictures of him which were taken before the Holocaust.

I see.

Even-- I have at least one picture of him being in the forced labor battalion.

Oh, really?

Yes. It's a group picture. It was taken for-- I don't know what occasion. And I use that picture actually in my presentations. He's in the picture on the top right corner.

Mm-hmm. And was that probably the last picture that was taken of him?

Correct.

OK. And he sent it to your mother while he was still in the battalion, or she got it in some other way?

I don't know. I do know that it was among my mom's papers and photos she gave me later on, very much later. It's possible-- they were in correspondence, so he could have sent it. He also could have given her when they had an opportunity.

They had an opportunity a couple of times to meet even before I was born, because they allowed-- and I just learned this one a couple of weeks ago from the papers and letters I have that my mother had an opportunity to visit him at the camp where he was at. And he could have passed the picture at that time.

So here is a question. Was he actually taken for forced labor before you were born on March 10 in 1941?

Correct. He was taken, I believe, around September 1940. So my father wasn't there when I was born.

Wow. Wow. How tough on all of you.

He was still in Hungary, and, again, I know that my mom visited him at least once, but maybe more. That's what I glean from the letters and postcards.

So is the correspondence that you have of your father, that is, the cards that he sent to your mother while he's in forced labor, is that the only kind of correspondence you have that he wrote? In other words, letters from that time but nothing from any other time of his life?

Actually, I have, I believe, one or two letters he sent to my mom, I think around 1929. They already were dating, but they weren't engaged or anything. So yeah, there are two letters from these times. Otherwise, that was no reason for them to correspond, because they got married and they lived together.

Sure. What year did they get married?

1937.

OK, so they had a very long courtship.

Yeah, I think it was typical at that time. And the reason for that, I don't know. Actually, there was a long

time between marriage and my being born.

Yeah. It is quite a few years. That's true, too. Your mother-- I will come back to the war experiences in a minute, but let's fill in the picture a little bit about your mother. When was she born?

She was born on October 25, 1907. Same year.

Oh, I see. So there's only a half year difference between them?

Correct.

OK.

And what is your mother's name and her maiden name?

Her maiden name was Olga Schönfeld.

Schönfeld?

Schönfeld.

OK. And her first name?

Olga.

Olga. Olga Schönfeld. And was she born in Budapest?

No. She was born in what was in 1907 Ungvar, which is in Northeastern Hungary during the Austrian Hungarian Empire. And after first World War, part of Hungary was attached to the surrounding countries, according to the Trianon peace treaty and Ungvar became part of Slovakia at that time.

OK.

And until Second World War when the Soviets recaptured that region and it became part of Ukraine. And now it's in Ukraine, and it's called Uzhhorod.

Uzhhorod. Yeah. Well, so many towns in that area of the world, I have often said somebody could have been born in that town, lived their entire life in that town, never moved out and have lived in four countries.

Well, actually I have a very close friend in the museum, a Holocaust survivor, Marty Weiss, lived about 40 miles away from the city that my mom was born, and it was Slovakia when he was born in 1929, I believe. Then Hungarians took over in 1940. And then the-- oh, that [INAUDIBLE] sorry-- was part of Czechoslovakia, which was established in 1918, and then it became part of Ukraine.

Yeah. Yeah. So it's these shifting borders brought so much, at the very least, confusion, but often much, much more than that into the lives of the people who lived in those areas.

Yeah definitely. There were all kinds of ethnic problems in those area, because those areas, even when they were part of Hungary, it [? had ?] mixed population. Some people spoke Russian. Other people spoke Polish.

Yeah.

Others spoke Hungarian.

Yeah. Your mother, did she have brothers and sisters?

Yes. She was one of nine siblings.

That's a lot. And was her family a very observant religious family?

Yeah. She came from an orthodox family, not ultra-orthodox but very observant. It grandfather on-- her grandfather. Sorry if I mix up my his and hers, because in Hungary we have only it.

[LAUGHS]

OK.

[INAUDIBLE]. Unfortunately, my brain is not wired to switch quickly.

This is fine. I'm not confused yet.

Thank you.

If I am confused, I'll let you know. I'll ask.

Yeah, please ask, because it could be confusing. Anyway, her grandfather was a rabbi in a small town. Today, it's called Prešov. And then my mom was born, and up until the First World War it was called Eperjes, which a part of Slovakia.

I see. And does this suggest that your mother's family was from this general area for several generations?

Correct. Some of her cousins lived in different cities. Actually, one of my mom's cousin, I came to know in the '60s. They lived in that very same town, Eperjes, Prešov where my great grandfather was a rabbi. Others lived in Bratislava. And yeah. My mom's family came from that region.

Of the nine siblings, did you know any of them? These would have been your aunts, your uncles.

Only those who survived the Holocaust. Those were-- I had an aunt who immigrated to the United States, I believe, in 1938, an uncle who emigrated in 1941.

Mm-hmm.

And I knew two of her sisters who lived in Budapest and survived the Holocaust.

Do you know their first names?

Yes. The surviving sisters was Ibolya Schönfeld.

How do I spell her first name?

I-B-O-L-Y-A as in Apple.

I've never heard that name before.

In Hungarian, it's the name of the flower, which we call in English violet.

Oh. I see. So she would have-- if she had translated her name if she had lived in the United States, it would have been Violet Schönfeld.

If she chose, yes.

If she chooses to. OK. All right, and the other sister who was in Budapest?

Her name, maiden name was Gabriela Schönfeld. And she was married by the time I was born, actually. One

of my cousins were born a couple of weeks earlier than I was born in February 1941. She was married to a gentleman called Leopold Winter.

OK. So she was Gabriela Schönfeld Winter.

Well, actually she didn't keep the Schönfeld. So once she got married her name was-- actually, in Hungary, you don't even keep your first name, maiden name. You take the full name of your husband and you put an N-E at the end. So the wife of Winter Leopold would be Winter Leopoldne.

Oh, so Leopold is his first name, right?

But in Hungarian that's the second name, so you attach the N-E.

To the first name. I mean, to the-- I know. So a person's first name is always said in the second position in Hungarian. Is that correct?

Correct.

So instead of having the ending of her married name be Winter N-E it is Leopold N-E.

Correct.

Whereas in many Slavic languages, it would be a change in the actual surname. You know--

Yeah, I think they put a V and an A.

Yeah. Or let's say

[INAUDIBLE].

Yeah. Like if somebody is named Ivan, Ivanov, Ivanova, or Ivanovna, or something like that.

[INAUDIBLE].

Yeah. So this is how she was known as her married name. What about the aunt who immigrated in 1938 to the United States?

Her name was Elona Schönfeld.

Elona. OK.

And she was married to somebody who is last name was Jacobs, the first name might have been David, but I am not sure.

OK. And your uncle?

And my uncle, his name was-- while he was in Hungary until 1941, was Lazlo Schönfeld.

Lazlo Schönfeld. And did it change when it came to the States?

Yes. He changed his first name to Lester.

OK.

And he changed his last name spelling, S-C-H-O-E-N-F-E-L-D.

Ah, he got rid of the umlaut.



Yeah. And put an extra E--

Yeah.

[? --after ?] the O, so it sounds like Schönfeld when you try to pronounce it.

Yeah. Now-- OK. So as you're growing up and you are-- and I'm talking now just a little bit in the post-war years. You-- do you know your two aunts in Budapest? Are they part of your early life?

Yes, they were.

OK. And the American aunt and uncle, is there-- did you have correspondence with them as you were growing up, or any knowledge of them?

Well, I didn't correspond with them until probably the late '70s. Actually, I'm not even sure that I directly corresponded with them, other than sending and receiving birthday cards.

Mm-hmm.

But my mother was constant communication with them, specifically around 1946 after the war when we wanted to immigrate to the United States. And my aunt and uncle were the sponsors, and so they had to figure out all kinds of things, how to get papers and proofs and certificates and tickets and everything else.

And why is it that you did not leave Hungary in 1946?

No, because we had a Hungarian passport which would have allowed us to leave the country, but we didn't have an American visa. As you know there was a quota system and just a certain number of people were allowed to come to the United States, even after the war. And, of course, those quotas filled up very quickly, especially survivors who lived in camps after the war was over, and they wanted to rejoin to family.

So we were waiting for our American visa when in 1949, the Hungarian Communist Party took over the government and closed the borders, so our immigration never happened.

I see. So it was really an American block. I won't say an American rejection, but it was not enough places for the demand. The supply did not meet the demand.

Yeah, correct. The same quota which prevented us from coming to the United States helped my uncle Lester, who came in 1941 when it was really hard to get out from Europe and get into the United States. But because his family were moving from Ungvár to other places when he was born, and I am not sure what city, but that city was Czechoslovakia.

So he came to the US under a Czech quota?

Exactly.

I see.

And, [? of course, ?] the Czech quota was not filled. At that time, the-- Czechoslovakia was a thriving country and Jews weren't discriminated against.

Yeah.

So he got on the top of the list very easily, and he was able to leave Europe just the last minute.

So when-- but he was not in-- the borders of Czechoslovakia in 1941?

Correct. He was living in Budapest, number one.

OK.

He was conscripted into forced labor battalion, just like my father. And one day when he was released for a visit back to Budapest to his family, he never went back. He used his passport and left the country.

Wow. What a smart man that he could have done that.

Not only smart, but he was very brave. Number one, he deserted the army.

Yeah.

Number two, he had to travel through Nazi-occupied Europe to get all the way to Portugal to catch a ship which left for New York. And he traveled through Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied France and Spain, but he got here.

That's actually quite amazing. I have interviewed many people who came to the United States, some as late as 1941, though that's rare, but of those people none of them had been in a forced labor battalion, you know? It was-- those people who came were successfully able to evade such things.

There might have been-- if they were from Germany, some experience after Kristallnacht in a concentration camp for a week or two, but generally there were fewer people who came to the US who had already felt on their own backs what these policies were. They knew of them. They suspected they're coming on the way, and that's what propelled them to leave. But this is highly unusual.

For clarification, the forced labor battalions, which were set up for Jews, were specifically a Hungarian institution. So-- in no other country used the Jews in that way. So the Jews who were persecuted, they were arrested and sent to camps immediately from where they could not leave. But those who had waited to be deported, they found their way out of the country, so that's just for clarification.

Well, I'm glad you clarified that. And this is a very unusual circumstance for Hungary in the sense that there is a common belief, and I've had people also who are from Hungary who survived who testified, Jewish survivors who say, we didn't know it was so bad until 1944. Sometimes, they would get word from Poland, or somebody who had escaped from Poland who comes into Hungary and tells them things and they don't know if they should believe it, if that person is making it up, or so on.

So there is this general feeling that Hungarian Jews were spared these types of horrific experiences. But at the same time, what you are talking about in the forced labor battalions was going on at the same time. So it was going on before 1944. However, not implemented directly through Germany but directly through the Hungarian authorities.

All these are facts. But a couple of more facts, if I may say.

Please. If I'm saying this in a wrong way, if I'm not getting context--

Everything you said was the right way.

OK.

But here are a couple of other facts, namely that antisemitism in Hungary was as bad as in Nazi-occupied Europe. Jews were kicked out from their job, like my father was. Jews were not able to marry non-Jews. Their things were confiscated.

Really, until 1944, March 19, when Nazi Germany occupied Hungary, Hungarian-- most of the Hungarian Jews survived. It wasn't an ideal situation. They were already discriminated against in many ways, but they survived until the Nazis came in. And in a matter of three months or four months, three fourths of the

Hungarian Jews were shipped to the concentration camps and died.

Yeah.

So that's, again, that's the other side of the coin.

Mm-hmm.

Even until 1944, March 19, 40,000 Jews died because they were in the forced labor battalions, because they were taken to the Soviet Union to fight against the Russians. And out of the 100-- approximately 100,000 Hungarians who served in those labor battalions, 40,000 never came back.

Well, that's a huge percentage. That's a very high percentage.

But, again, compared with the overall Jewish population, which included at that time by the occupied territories or reclaimed territories from the surrounding countries, there was approximately 800,000 Jews. So 40,000, it's a relatively small number until after 1944 when more than 600,000 Jews perished.

Yeah. So I want to go back to your father for a moment. What I'm trying to get a sense of is the quantity of documentation that you have. And so you have two letters that he wrote to your mother in the 19-- in 1929. And you have a number of cards that he wrote when he was in forced labor.

Do you know how many this was? was it very few? Was it a lot? Did you count it up?

I actually haven't counted, but I would say anywhere between 30 and 40.

Do you know whether he was limited to how many he could write?

Correct. From the dates-- sometimes he put the date on the card. Sometimes I got the date from the post stamp--

Yeah.

--the post office stamp.

Yeah.

He wrote maybe one a week, sometimes two. And actually the cards are going from 1940 to end of 1942.

OK.

And approximately one a week.

OK. So this builds up to my next question is, through the paper, through the documents, do you have any sense of what kind of a person your father was?

Yes. Number one, I have another written document from my father. He was an outdoor man, and from the pictures I know that they were-- they went camping. They went kayaking. They went skiing. One year, he took a ski trip to Austria.

Mm-hmm.

And he wrote a diary, typed it out, and he actually bonded it. And it has a hard cover, and it was illustrated with pictures and all the stories they had from the ski trip. He was part of a tourist club with my mom, and they had regular tours or trips during the year, summer or winter, it didn't really matter.

And most of the friends you knew about or mentioned in the documents I have, they were mostly Jewish

people. I don't know if they Jew-- the club was specifically for Jews.

Mm-hmm.

I think without exception I know about, they were Jewish.

I see. I see.

And at the time and place, it's probably Jews weren't allowed to join non-Jewish clubs and vice versa.

And were these trips within the borders of Hungary?

No. Austria was an independent country, and so they went there. They went, I believe, hiking to the Tatra Mountains, which at that time was part of Czechoslovakia. Now it's part of Slovakia.

Yeah. OK. But it was, one could say, within the borders of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Yeah. You may say that.

OK. Simply because, and I may be wrong here, but when I hear of tourism, of course I think of it as from the perspective that I have known, and that's an American perspective. And when I think of tourism, I think of international tourism and one that crosses continents. Because the world has grown smaller, and we have international trips much more. But in those days, it was different.

In a sense, yes and no, because Hungary is a small country. So you-- that time, you took the train and in three hours you were in Vienna, Austria.

True. True.

In five or six hours, you were in Prague, Czechoslovakia. And so people did travel. They weren't tourists, in a sense. They didn't go to cities and they didn't go to see museums and churches. They went hiking and skiing. So they--

They were more athletic.

Yeah.

OK. And that diary, which is quite a commemoration of such a trip, it meant that it was something that was important to him.

Yes. And going back to the original question, from the diary, from the pictures, from the cards, I know that he loved nature, and he loved everything outdoor. So that's one thing I know about him from the documents. And, of course, I know how much he loved his mom and father. I know how much he loved my mom, his wife, and how much he loved me.

Oh.

All of the cards he sent after I was born, are addressed to Grunwald Arpadne and Grunwald Petike, which is the diminutive for Peter in Hungarian.

Was-- was there a big hole in your life because he wasn't in it?

I heard this question in various forms in the past, and it's very hard to explain. If you don't have something-- I didn't lose my father. It didn't happen that I had a father one day and then I didn't have the next day. I never knew him. So the hole wasn't bad, as far as I can remember, because I didn't know that there should be a father in our apartment. Of course, I was three years old or 4 and 1/2 years old when we were liberated.

Mm-hmm.

So my mom tried to protect me as much as possible. And I don't know when she started to talk about my father, but obviously, number one, in general, people don't remember anything before age three. There are some exemptions, but in general.

Yes, that's true.

And also there was another fact that the families we were in touch with in various [? forms, ?] they were Jewish families and the fathers [? were ?] dead. So I didn't see fathers in other families.

So, again, the hole wasn't bad. It's really just with hindsight that I think about how I would have turned out had my father lived and came back from the forced labor battalion. It just-- imagination.

I think I am healthy, emotionally, spiritually so that's my answer to the quote unquote hole in my life. Again, knowing what I know about him, he [? would ?] have been a terrific father.

He would have been the one who would have taught me how to ski or swim or kayak. I got into all of those things on my own, with later on my stepfather. But-- so I don't think I'm missing out what I could have learned from my father, but definitely the emotional support wasn't bad. That's--

Well, that's what-- it is a-- thank you for that answer. Thank you for that answer. It is a tough question. I knew that it was a tough question, and I asked it because I kind of wanted to have a sense for myself, but also for all those who are going to be listening to our interview is, what does that mean?

How do we count up losses? And what kind of ramifications do they have in a person's life and how is that felt? How is that understood? How much does it last?

I mean, it's beautiful to know that he loved you and that you knew that. In some ways, that's the thing that we need to know about our parents the most is that we were loved by them. And that is, to me, that sounds like a gift that comes through, even if that-- if you never had the physical presence of the person. But I know it's personal, and I thank you for being so open and addressing that.

So how shall I go on now? Why don't we go towards some of the chronology. So you were born in March 1941. Your father by this time is in a forced labor battalion. And what does your mother do, and what did he do before he was taken? How did he support the family?

My father was an office manager at the publishing company in Budapest. Interestingly, it was called Franklin Publishing Company. He was a clerk.

At one point, he was the treasurer of that company, not necessarily at the top level, but I don't know how to translate into English what his position was. But he was kind of the person who was accountable to-- accountable. sorry. He was in charge of financial matters, especially cash flow.

Mm-hmm.

People needed the cash, they went to him. And they paid-- whenever they had to pay with cash, they paid to him. And he did all the financial recordings. That's [? what ?] I understand.

Again, he couldn't tell me about it. I didn't talk to my mom specifically. So just from the documents I have, I know that he worked for the company.

He was paid about 220 pengő, which was a kind of medium salary at that time. They were able to, on that money plus what my mom earned, to have a nice apartment in the inner part of the city, which was the good part at that time. And it's, again, the good part.

That's where my mom set up her shop. She was trained as a milliner, a female hat maker.

Oh, OK.

And in the 1930s, it was a very good job. Hats were in fashion, and she did a great job. So even after my father was fired from his job, she was able to support us from the money she made as a hat maker.

And actually, when my father was taken away, she was the breadwinner plus mother. She hired a nanny and [INAUDIBLE] could afford the nanny who took care of me while she was in the shop. And the shop was in our apartment, actually.

Mm-hmm.

One of the room was set aside, and that's where the customers came. That's where she made the hats. It's-- you don't need a lot of equipment for that. But--

What was the address? Do you remember the address of this apartment?

Yeah. I exactly remember. It was Budapest Petőfi Sándor Utca 10.

OK. How would I spell the street name?

The street name is P-E-T-O with umlaut, F-I.

OK.

The second word is Sándor, S--

OK, so--

--with an apostrophe over it--

Mm-hmm.

--N-D-O-R. Petőfi Sándor is the most famous Hungarian poet, and it was named after him. And we lived on that number 10.

OK. Was it an apartment building?

It's an apartment building. The apartment was built in 1898, I believe. Know it because there is a mosaic at the ground floor when you came in at the main entrance, so everybody knows when the building was built. And the building is still there. It's still in our family's possession.

Really?

Really.

Wow. That's so unusual.

It's a long story, but if we have time I can tell, or later on when we get to a later part of the story. But anyway, that's where my parents lived at the time when I was born.

Did they own the apartment, or did they own the whole building?

Oh, no. The building is a four story building with 15 feet high ceilings in the apartments. It was a good old fashioned European apartments are approximately-- I would say at every level there are about 40 to 50 apartments.

Mm-hmm.

And it's very hard to condemn, because originally they were one, two, three bedroom apartments. But after the war was over and many buildings were bombed out, the government forced families who had more than one bedroom to take in other families.

Yes.

And so sometimes strangers, sometimes who were lucky, family members occupied. But there was a quota for number per apartment. And also, the big apartments were broken up to two apartments, so approximately 40 to 50.

OK.

[INAUDIBLE] and rented by my parents. They didn't own.

So when you say they were rented by your parents, they didn't own it. It was their particular apartment. And when you're talking about it's still in your possession today, does that mean something as an apartment that is rented, or one that is now owned?

No. Here is what happened. In 1949, the Communists took over the government and the whole economy, they confiscated any and all properties. So the government became the landlord.

That's right. For all socialist governments, this is pretty much common.

Yes.

Eastern European communist socialist, I mean.

Yeah. So we paid the rent after it was taken. I think it was owned by a bank, usually a bank owned most of the apartment buildings. And so we paid the rent to the government, which was quite reasonable, according to communist or socialist standards.

Mm-hmm.

Then in 1989 when the communist system collapsed, the government didn't want to take care of all the apartment buildings, so they sold it to the people who actually rented those apartments.

Right.

And that was a good deal for those who were lucky enough to rent an apartment from the government. And my mom was able to buy it. And this is why I am saying now that it's in the family.

That's-- it's quite interesting. So your mother lived her entire life in that apartment?

Except when all the Jews were forced in 1944 to leave their homes and move into the government-appointed, so-called yellow-star houses or the Budapest Ghetto.

OK. So at this point-- I'll finish up my thread about 1989. But as your mother stayed in Hungary until-- I mean, did she finish your life in Hungary, or did she ever come to the United States, as well, to live?

She lived for the rest of her life in Hungary. She was a Hungarian citizen. She came to visit us very frequently. And she died when she was actually visiting us. She came to celebrate. We invited her to celebrate her 90th birthday here, in 1997.

And she died in January 1998-- January 2, 1998. She died here, and she's buried. She's here in a cemetery

in Olney.

I see. OK. Thank you. Thank you for filling that, or providing that piece of information. So this apartment-- I'm going back to it-- I would take it you wouldn't have many memories, or any memories of it before 1944.

No. Because again we actually moved the apartment in early 1944.

Well, the Germans march in in March. Was it March 9, or 11?

March 19.

It was March 19th? OK.

And it was, I think, around April when they forced the Jews out of their apartment and into these houses, which were marked with a Star of David. Those houses were all over Budapest. You can see a map of it if you Google it.

And the people who lived in those apartments and were not Jewish, they had to move out and Jews had to move in.

So it was like a concentration within the city, that the Jews are being gathered in several areas, but to concentrate them.

Correct.

OK. And so in April 1944, your mother has to leave her home-- her apartment-- with you and move there. And do you have any memories of that?

Yes. Actually, I have a little memory, because the apartment hasn't changed since my childhood. So I remember where the furniture were. Actually, the furniture, that's a long story. But furniture, my parents bought when they got married, it's still in the apartment.

No kidding?

Yeah, that's another miraculous story. Again, this building was among the very few which were not bombed out during the war to begin with. We're lucky enough that the people who moved into our apartment when we had to move out, they preserved everything. And not only they preserved it, but when we were liberated in January 1945 and moved back to the apartment, or went back to the apartment to reclaim it, the family agreed that, OK, it's your apartment, your furniture, we're going to move somewhere else.

But not many families-- Jewish families-- were this lucky, because some of the apartments weren't occupied by another family, and they were looted, or the owners couldn't find anything when they went back. Or it happened many times they went back and the people who moved in said, it's not your apartment, it's our apartment. And they didn't let the original owners to move in. Those were the rented apartment.

What happened when somebody owned it, that was a different issue, because you had a legal standing. But the rented apartment, that was nothing.

Well, do you still remember the name of that family?

Yes I do. I remember the family. Their name was [? Fryfogel. ?]

[? Fryfogel. ?]

It means free bird in German.

That's true. That's right. And they were a [? Slabisch ?] family-- a Jewish ethnic group from Southern



Germany-- Schwabs.

Yeah, that's right. It's from Baden-Wuerttemberg, I think, is Schwaben in Germany.

In Hungary-- they came to Hungary in the 17th, 18th century. They were mostly craftsmen and in all kinds of trades. And so Hungary had a significant German ethnic minority. And this family they happen to be one.

And the interesting thing is that some of these Schwabs, during the Nazi occupation, they joined the SS and they served the Germans [? as ?] [INAUDIBLE] [? war. ?] Not only those who personally attached to the Nazis, but the Schwabs as a whole group were evicted from Hungary, and they had to go back to Germany. They lived in Hungary for hundreds of years. It didn't matter. It was a kind of reverse discrimination.

And is that what happened to the [? Fryfogels, ?] who had been in your apartment?

I don't know. That part I don't know, because we went back right after we were liberated in the Budapest ghetto. And that time this sending them to exile, I think didn't happen until '46, '47-- so much later. So unless they had family in Germany and wanted to go back. But at that time, Germany was in much worse state than Hungary.

Of course, of course. Well, what you're talking about also happened in the Sudetenland, because that was the part of Czechoslovakia that had a large German minority. The Czechs after the war--

Evicted the Germans, yes.

Yeah, they evicted them. And I think there's some bitter feelings to this day, on both sides, because--

Oh yeah. I can understand it. And actually, interestingly enough, I had a college classmate-- a very good friend of mine-- he came from Schwabisch family. His name is Schon, which is pretty--

Means pretty, yeah.

--in German. Anyway, at one point, we got into a discussion. It wasn't argument. But somehow he brought up how much his family suffered, because they were Schwabisch, after the war. And then I had to tell him how much my family suffered, because during the war [INAUDIBLE] [? that ?] [? they ?] [? were-- ?] because we were Jewish.

But I told him that I have good memories of Schwabs, because this family. Actually, I don't know if my mom took all those pictures and [? memorabilias ?] with her, because she could only take a few things when we left-- a little suitcase-- because she had to carry me [INAUDIBLE].

That's right.

Everything was left in the apartment, and everything was preserved when we got back.

Well, I'm glad we're focusing on this aspect at this moment, because it is, A, rare that such a thing happened. B, it's beautiful that it did. And C, the thoughts that are going through my mind, they're going not an ABC order, but they're nevertheless there, is that this is yet one more proof of how the actions and decisions by individuals have such an impact-- that people think I'm just the only person, and what can I do against all of these horrible things that are happening around me?

And very often, by the time it comes to a dictatorship, the political actions that could have been taken can no longer be taken. It's too late for that. But for these types of steps, to take advantage of somebody's loss, to loot their possessions, to take over their home-- or not to do it, or to acknowledge that they have more rights to this living place than you do, and that you're a caretaker of their things rather than a usurper of their things.

Yeah, individual experiences during the Holocaust really different from one person to another, one family to

another. Because in one hand my father was unlucky that he was in the first group of people who were taken to the forced labor battalions.

From the letters I know that many of the people who were in the same sporting club, or [? tourist ?] club weren't taken at all-- not that it was delayed. But for whatever reason, the army needed a certain number of slave laborers. Hence, they only recruited that many who were conscripted-- that many.

And whether it was because where you lived or how old you were or what was the first letter of your family name, I don't know, but sometimes it was just sheer luck.

And let's go back, then, to this house-- these Star houses. Do you have any memory of living in that place?

No. And the reason for that, that Mom had a very strong determination that she's going to, or we are going to survive no matter what. So when we were forced out from our apartment, we had two choices-- either go to ghetto, which was not formally established, if I remember correctly, in April. But it might have been. I have to still research that one. But my aunt and uncle and my mother and our grandparents lived [INAUDIBLE] what became the ghetto.

And had we moved Dad, then we would have been by default in the ghetto when the wall was built-- and all the rules and regulations. Anyway, my mom, she told me that she knew that wouldn't be a good idea to move to the ghetto. When all the Jews are in one place, it's very easy to get rid of them.

That's true. Yeah.

And we didn't go to the houses, either, which were marked with yellow star, because that was just one step from the ghetto. So she had a good childhood friend, who allowed us to go to their apartment. And that was very rare.

We weren't hiding. We just lived in the apartment, and we pretended that we weren't Jews. That time the yellow star, I believe, wasn't mandatory yet, to have on your outer clothes. But nevertheless the government orders or laws said that anybody who hides you will be as severely punished as the Jew who is in hiding, him or herself. So [INAUDIBLE] took a risk taking us in.

And we didn't stay too long in that apartment. And I don't know the address of it, if [INAUDIBLE] you would ask me.

[LAUGHS] How do you anticipate my questions?

Because you are very meticulous. And I like it, because people want to trace the geographical aspects of this interview. They could follow us.

Exactly.

I might be able to tell it later. I told you about that videotape.

That's right.

Made an interview with my mom.

Again, for this interview, it's a videotape-- an interview with your mother. And we now have it in our possession at the Museum. It's a donation you have made to us. And thank you for that. But it is in the process of digitization.

And the digitization process is in its middle. That is, there's no way to retrieve it, particularly since we're in the coronavirus situation, where we haven't been at our offices for several months. And we don't know when we will get back. But eventually we will.

And if you then have a chance to listen to this and augment this interview with some of this factual information, we can make that happen very easily. And that will be terrific.

Great. So hopefully that will fill in some of the holes. I just have no information right now. I don't remember if my mom even mentioned it.

Sure, sure.

So we went to this family's apartment. It was the husband and wife. They didn't have children. And we lived there for a few weeks, if I remember. My mom mentioned three weeks. But again, this number might be different after we have a chance to watch the videotape. What happened was that one of our neighbors denounced us to the police.

And one day the Hungarian police-- actually, the Hungarian gendarme, which was different in function from the Hungarian police. But nevertheless, they were in charge to arrest people who are in hiding. And they arrested my mom and took her away.

And this is in the second place where you are living?

That was the first place after our original apartment. Correct.

OK. So it is at the friend's apartment, where you stayed three weeks? Or was it the place after that?

No, that's the place. That's the place. The first place we went from our apartment to this family's apartment. And so that was the second place I ever lived.

OK. And what happened to those friends-- the family that had taken you in?

No, this was 1944. Although there was a law to arrest and prosecute them, but the Germans and the Hungarian police and the Hungarian justice system-- if you can use that word-- were too busy to finish the Final Solution. So they were not arrested, and they survived the war. That's why no [INAUDIBLE].

My mom was taken away, and she was taken to a jail in Budapest, which was kind of infamous for holding people who committed high crimes. And that's where she was taken.

Do you have memories of her being taken away?

Yes. I think it is one of the few memories I remember vividly-- and probably because the uniform of the gendarme, which came for her, they had a fancy uniform. They had a high top, or whatever [INAUDIBLE] hat-- Mr. Lincoln, I believe.

Oh yes, that kind of stovepipe hat, almost. That's what his was.

With a visor. So it wasn't that high, but it wasn't a regular police hat. And actually they had cock feather attached to this hat. They were easily recognizable. And they had their uniform, and they came in. If I remember, we were at the dining-room table. They didn't have child seat at that time. Probably, it wasn't even invented. I mean, they didn't have a child.

So I was sitting on phone books-- two or three thick phone books, so I could reach the table. And they came in, and they asked my mom's papers. And that time, your identification paper had your religion in it, so it was very easy.

The people who denounced us, we don't know who they were. But because we-- as far as I know, my mom hardly left the apartment building, because the host couple did the shopping-- whatever food was at that time available, and it wasn't much. So I don't know how the suspicion came about, but probably noticed that there were extra people in that hall. So some, quote unquote, "good neighbor" reported us.

And this is how my mom was taken away. They left me behind. Obviously, they didn't have facilities for children. And because those gendarme, they didn't know what's going to happen with my mom. I was left behind.

And what happened with her? What happened in that prison?

Here is what my mom told me. Once he got to the jail-- she was very strong woman. I mean, she was determined to survive no matter what. So she took with herself all the identification papers-- so papers she thought would be useful if necessary.

One of the papers she had was an official notification from the Hungarian Ministry of Defense that my father had died. [INAUDIBLE] because this death certificate was issued by the army, they didn't have a specific designation that the person was in the forced labor battalion or a regular battalion, or whatever maybe rank he had. But the paper just said that my father died as part of the Hungarian army.

And so it did not state that he was Jewish to begin with. Although his name was Grunwald it didn't state that he died not as a regular soldier but as a forced laborer [INAUDIBLE].

That time women or wives whose husband died during the war as soldiers, they had a special designation. They were the so-called war widows.

I see.

Those war widows had some privileges. They might or might not get some extra money from the government. Probably, they did. But because my mom wasn't a war widow-- so my mom didn't know if that was one privilege. And there were other privileges. Like, food was rationed, and war widows got double portion of whatever.

Anyway, what my mom did was that as soon as she got to the jail, she started yelling at the warden, or just telling the warden that, hey, I am a war widow, and you had no right to arrest me. Maybe she said to gendarme, I don't know specifically. But anyway, they took her.

So she complained. The warden got scared that they might have arrested somebody who was a war widow, and he can get into trouble. So he went to the chief or the commandant of the jail to tell that here is a lady who's war widow-- what should I do with her?

And so my mom was taken to the commandant office. And the guy, the warden-- probably, in Hungary at that time, those people took that job weren't very literate. So he probably couldn't even read that paper.

But the commandant what that paper was. And my mom could not tell me whether he really knew it and had pity on my mom or the commandant thought, oh, it looks like she's a war widow, I better get her out. But anyway, the result was that they left my mom out.

I see. OK.

And so she came back. If I remember correctly-- but again, the tape might give us more details-- let out during the night, when there was a curfew. By this time, the Allied bombed Budapest day and night. But [INAUDIBLE] despite the curfew, she managed to get back to the apartment alive.

Amazing, amazing. And so this would have been sometime in the spring of '44. Because if she had to leave her own apartment in April, and you were with this friend of hers for three weeks and then she's denounced, it kind of brings us up to May, June. And did you stay there? Did they know who had denounced them, or denounced her? And what happened next?

Well, we never knew, or my mom never knew who denounced her-- obviously, somebody from the apartment building. But what happened was that next day we left the apartment-- I believe the next day, or a couple of days after, because we were afraid not only that somebody else is going to report us and my

mom won't be as lucky as the first time. Also, we endanger the life of the host couple, also.

So we moved out. And we still did not go to the apartment, or the Budapest ghetto, to be reunited with my aunts and my grandparents. My mom [? did ?] [? that ?] she went to visit a friend of hers, who happened to live at that time in the so-called protected houses.

The protected houses were about 31, 32 apartment building in Budapest, which were bought out by Raoul Wallenberg, who was a Swedish diplomat who came to Budapest-- sent to Budapest by the American War Refugee Board, which was set up-- unfortunately, too late, but nevertheless it was successful saving some Jewish lives-- in early 1944, I believe, by President Roosevelt. And they gave money to people who-- diplomatic disguise-- went to Budapest and maybe other European capitals, to try to save the remaining Jews. Because in early 1944, there was still lots of remaining Jews. Raoul Wallenberg-- oh sorry, do you have a question?

No, no, no. I was just following what you were saying.

So Raoul Wallenberg came to Budapest as a Swedish diplomat. He was an aristocrat, if I remember correctly. He came from a very rich family. He had no connection to Hungary whatsoever, and he wasn't Jewish.

And he took his job very seriously, and he saved thousands, or maybe tens of thousands of Jews, by doing two things. One, he gave false papers to Jewish people-- claiming that they were Swedish citizen. I think they were called Schutz-Pass.

Schutz-Pass, yeah.

And that helped many people-- although not everybody accepted papers. And some who even had those papers were still deported and killed.

And the other thing he did was he bought up these apartment buildings and jammed as many people as possible in these buildings. Because these buildings were protected by diplomatic immunity-- or that is some kind of official name in international law-- namely, that any building in any country which belongs to an embassy is like the territory of that embassy, and local authorities have no control over it. Nobody can enter into those buildings with specific permission-- of the Swedish embassy, in our case. So the people who were inside those buildings, they were protected from deportation.

And so we went to visit this friend who I believe-- I can't recall the building. I remember we got there. And there was a ground level. And between the ground level and the first level, there was an intermediate level. I don't know what's the name.

Like a mezzanine, or something like that?

I don't know exactly what mezzanine is. But anyway, it was what would be in the United States actually the second floor. So it wasn't a ground floor. It was one floor above the ground.

OK, OK. And so you have memories of that-- a safe house.

And I have memories. I don't know the exact address. I just have the picture of the house in my memory-- again, just the entrance and the apartment itself. It was a three-bedroom apartment and two families already lived there.

And my mom's friend, who lived in one of these apartments, got the idea that my mom can occupy the third bedroom. Because that was the norm, I believe. Not the rule or regulation, but the norm that one family per room.

And that time, families was mostly just mothers and children-- I mean Jewish families, the men were already taken, and sometimes grandparents.

And so do you have memories of the room and of the apartment and of being in there?

Yes. I do have memories-- not much. I know that there were four or five other children in an apartment. Some were a little bit older than I was, but one or two were my age. So because I never had a brother and sister, this was the first time that I [INAUDIBLE] a playmate.

OK. At this point, we are now up to 10 minutes before your next meeting. And I think we should stop right here. And we'll pick this up the next time we meet-- the next time we talk. And I will now stop the recording.