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Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo. This evening, our guest is Dr. Gabor Markus, who was born in Budapest, Hungary. Gabby, could you tell us a little bit about your childhood growing up in Budapest?

Yes, well, as you know, I come from a Jewish family. And it was a peculiar kind of a Jewish family because we were not religious at all, but extremely proud Jews. We would never deny that we were Jews. We were taught by our parents and grandparents. We very proud of that. And in fact, my grandfather would hand out $0.50 for a fight if anyone called us a dirty Jew in school.

This was, I would say, quite characteristic of middle class Jews at that time in Hungary. They would assimilate to the Hungarian culture, would lose most of their religious background, but would never lose their Jewish identity. In fact, they were rather militant Jews.

Of course, you were constantly reminded. As you told me, you went to religious school every Saturday afternoon.

Yes, that was demanded by the school we went to. We had religious instruction several times a week and in school and went to synagogue Saturday afternoons at 3 o'clock. So I was quite familiar with the Jewish religion, even though I didn't really participate in it. As a matter of fact--

Did you have a bar mitzvah?

--I had a bar mitzvah. I even preached twice in the school-- in the synagogue. Some of us were offered this opportunity. And my bar mitzvah was a big thing in the main-- this huge synagogue in Budapest. And there was a big event, with several months of preparation that led into it.

Well, all this went on reasonably peacefully until Hitler started to encroach on the neighboring countries. So by the time Hitler entered Hungary, he already had occupied Czechoslovakia. He was in Yugoslavia. And of course, it was after the Anschluss, so Austria. So there were three of the surrounding countries were already under Hitler's domination. And the Jews had already been deported from these countries. So we knew what was coming.

You heard in the news and got newspaper readings?

These news were never printed, yet everybody knew them. And the news-- because people had relatives and friends in Czechoslovakia, Poland, everywhere. And we knew what happened to these people.

So in 1939--

And we knew it's going to happen.

--when you were 17, I suppose you were just graduating from high school, did you have any fears? Or did you think this would all pass you by?

In 1939, as you remember, World War II started. And we were sure that the Western alliance will beat the Germans. Well, of course, we didn't know how soon. And that was the crucial question.

That was the question. But you went on with your life. We have a picture of you in 1939. And we have a picture of your family that we can see now. At this point, you're entering medical school?

No, at this point, I just graduated from high school. That came when it was-- here, would be a yearbook. We didn't have a yearbook, just a year photograph. And this is what would be probably hanging in the corridors of the old school still if you go there.

What did they predict for Gabor Markus for the future in your senior class?

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They didn't have any predictions.

No predictions?

Predictions wouldn't have been very rosy at that time. So yes, this is my mother. This picture was taken during the worst times, when the Germans were already in Hungary. And we had to have a picture for some kind of an official document.

For identification, probably.

And I can see, perhaps you can't, there's an anxiety in her face that I can see. And this is my father-- that was taken earlier-- lighting his pipe in the country house.

What did your father do, and your mother?

My father was director of the British Hungarian Bank in Budapest. My mother had no occupation.

So your father had a very responsible job.

He did. He did. And he was very thoroughly Western-oriented because he spoke very good English. Because of this position of being in the British Hungarian Bank.

I think we have a picture of your sister too.

Yes, now, my sister at that time was 16 years old or even less, maybe 15. And she was just a young kid, full of life. It was taken at the same picture. You would never think of what a horrible time we already had. And you see that smiling face.

Yeah, she looks spirited. OK. So it's 1939. And you're graduating from high school. What happens to you then?

Yes, well, I tried to get into medical school then. But I didn't make it due to what was called the numerus clausus-- only a certain number of Jewish students were allowed to university. And I spent that year working in the Jewish hospital in Budapest in the pathology department. I spent a very interesting year then.

But I got in next year to the University of Szeged, which Szeged is the second largest city in Budapest, and this old medical school there. And I got in there and moved down to Szeged. And everything went fine-- I mean, relatively fine. There were incidents. One evening, a few of us Jewish students were beaten up by a gang of Gentile medical students after some beers in the ratskeller.

But otherwise, it was not-- if it hadn't been for the complete certainty of what was happening at the same time in Yugoslavia-- Hitler had moved in earlier-- you see, the Hungarians had promised not to help Hitler. They had a non-aggression pact with the Yugoslavs. When Hitler moved in, Hitler tried to force the Count Teleki, who was the prime minister of Hungary, to help with the Hungarian Armies. And Teleki shot himself rather than help. But his successor--

Helped.

--helped. So we knew all this. See, all the refugee students from the Yugoslav medical schools came. And they were our fellow students.

Were they admitted to your medical school?

Yeah, they did, to our medical school. And this went on until March 15, 1944, which was the day when the Germans entered Hungary. And you always knew when such a thing happened in those days because the radio stopped broadcasting for a while. And then it would broadcast military marches. And then you know something is very wrong.

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And you knew in your small city that this had happened in Budapest?

Yes, because you listen to radio. And then of course, pretty soon,

They came to you.

--came the announcements. And things changed radically then. Immediately, all the leaders of Jewish cultural and religious life were arrested.

Was your father among those?

No. No, my father was not among them. And my grandfather would have been among them, but he had been dead already for a year and a half or two at that time. He was a prominent person in Jewish Hungarian cultural life.

My uncle, who was also a fairly prominent civic leader, commercial, he was president of some commercial society of merchants, and he was arrested immediately. So in our town, in the little town where I studied, we knew very fast what was happening because within a few days, we were kicked out of the university. And then the ordinances came-- we couldn't go out after 9:00 on the streets.

Did you have to wear a star?

That came, as I remember, perhaps a month later that Jews had to wear stars.

And nobody protested among your medical faculty or student body?

Whom would you have protested to? I mean, the whole country was in the iron grip of the Germans. There was no possibility for anything there. I mean, the German soldiers were all over. The town-- anywhere you went, there were German soldiers-- the SS, the Gestapo. The Gestapo was taking, picking prominent people, not just Jews. All the socialists, socialist representatives in the Hungarian parliament, were immediately arrested. All the liberal newspaper people, everybody. Everybody who had-- the Germans had complete dossiers of who did what.

They were very thorough.

They were extremely thorough about this.

So you left. You had to leave medical school. What did you do then?

Well, all I did at that point was I was trying to get out of that town, back to Budapest, where everybody felt it was a little safer. But anyway, you see, I wanted to get there because my parents were there. My sister was there. And I wanted to be with them. And also, see, there are many more Jews. There were many more people. There was over a million-- more places to hide.

You felt safer in numbers.

Yes. You see, Szeged was just a little, almost a peasant town with a little downtown section. There was nowhere to hide there. Everybody knew everybody. I couldn't get up to Budapest very easily because we were not allowed to travel anymore. Moreover, Jews were taken away all their means of transportation, including bicycles, which I had one. I had one of which. But that was taken away. I had to hand it in.

And so the only way I could go up was if somebody took me up kind of officially. And there was a friend in that town whom my family knew was a lawyer. And he was willing to take me up to Budapest. But it had to be legal, which meant that I had to go to city hall with him. And he had to get a permit for me.

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The permit, it's hard to translate this. The permit said-- it was yellow. And it said, traveling permit for Jews, for a Jew. But you see, in Hungarian, that word for the permit was not [HUNGARIAN], which is the official word for permit, but the word [HUNGARIAN].

What does that mean?

Now, [HUNGARIAN] means the same thing, a permit. But the only other people who had a [HUNGARIAN] as a permit were the prostitutes.

Oh, so it certainly had a negative term.

Well, you know where we were classed at that point. And then we could go up with this. And it was a very unpleasant trip, even though it took only about three or four hours on the train.

Were you stopped a bit?

No. We weren't stopped, but the people all around, they were making nasty remarks about-- and I was sitting there with the yellow star. And I had to pretend that I don't hear it. This because you couldn't do anything about it, you tried to stay out of trouble at that point because the atmosphere was so belligerent.

People vented their emotions very freely. And this was preceded by years of the worst Nazi propaganda about Jews, which was echoed by the corresponding Hungarian propaganda. Like almost all Central European and East European countries, antisemitism was a regular feature. Just everybody was antisemitic, all of them.

So you never really felt free or safe, I presume.

You never-- I felt safe, all right. But no Jew ever felt completely at home in that country, even though you may have been one of the foremost experts in Hungarian literature, or Hungarian history, or poetry, you may have been a professor of university. You were never really one of the boys, so to speak. And so I told you that when I came to this country, this was the big change because here, I felt perfectly at home because here, everybody--

Everybody's an immigrant.

Everybody's an immigrant or their parents were immigrants.

It's hard to recognize unless you've experienced it.

So I made my way up to Budapest.

To Budapest.

And it was a pretty tough time then. Going out on the streets was dangerous because the Hungarian Nazis-- for them, this was new. The Germans, many of them, were already a little bit tired of the whole thing. I have, myself, talked to an SS soldier in a concentration camp when I was-- which I will tell you. We had to be playing guards at night.

And there was, of course, an SS there too. And that was the biggest surprise I ever had in my life. I was sitting there. And this SS suddenly said to me-- he said to me in German, [GERMAN]. Said, it will not last very long anymore. And I didn't know what to answer to this. I just looked at him. And he knew there was nothing I can say to this.

It might have been wishful thinking on his part as well.

Well, he was telling me that.

What did you do in the city? You're a medical student, well advanced, and you're not in school.

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Yes, well, you see, there wasn't that much time left because things got worse and worse. And at that time, there was a concentration camp near Budapest. And the rumors were that people who got in there would be taken to Israel. And there was, indeed, some kind of a negotiation between the leaders of the Jewish community and the Germans. But I knew nothing about that at that time. It just said that the Germans were supposed to have said that this will go. But it never went to Israel.

And about August, things suddenly got better. It was thought that the Germans will give up Budapest and will just move out. And the Russians will just peacefully come in. And in fact, everybody who wanted to leave this concentration camp could leave. We left.

You went back home?

We went back-- not home, because our house was taken away. I mean, the apartment where we lived. But where my uncle lived was declared one of these Jewish houses with big yellow star. The Jews were concentrated. But in October, when the regime changed again, as I will tell you in a moment, the SS went into that concentration camp. And they shot a number of people, just without any rhyme or reason, just lined up the people, they just shot some of them, shot a couple of physicians whom I knew very well from the country.

They also joined from there. They were "saved," quote-unquote, in this camp. Well, things were going pretty well. And I was coming home from a walk in the hills around Budapest with my girlfriend. And all of a sudden, we heard from a house a radio, which said, there's an announcement that the leader of the Hungarian nation was Admiral Horthy. He was--

Horthy.

--governor of Hungary. He went on the radio and declared that the Germans were a fraud, that we should resist. Now that the Russians are so close already, the Germans betrayed us. Well, he was immediately arrested after this. And just after he made this announcement, the Germans decided to scrap this regime that only half-heartedly served the German government and put in the Hungarian Nazi Party. Now, these people were really the lowest, intellectually, morally. These were strictly a street gang. This was their time. They knew, it's not going to last very long. So then came the real terror. This was 15 of October, 1944 that this happened.

Oh, you remember the dates they so affected you, the 15th of October.

Yeah, well, these were dates that you never will forget.

You never will forget.

Incidentally, I just realized that I'm wrong about the first one because first one was March 19th. And this was October 15th. So the terrible times came now, because now, all the Jews, men and women, were put into camps. The Nazis came. They lined up one morning. They gave us five minutes to pack a rucksack. And the men were lined up in front of the house and the women in another house.

My sister, my mother, my aunt, and some of her daughters, who were still in Hungary there, lived in that house, plus some old aunts, real old people in their 80s, all these women lined up. They were marched out. We all were marched out, as I recall, to a large camp ground very far from Budapest, which was-- I believe that was the campground where the jamboree took place with Sir Baden Powell visiting Hungary when I was a child. It was a big thing, the campgrounds there.

We were milling around there. It was getting dark, pouring rain, October. And my father and I were together with this unit. And nobody knew anything. Nazis were running around shouting, kicking.

And all of a sudden, I heard a whistle of a few bars that was kind of a secret signal between my sister, and myself, and a

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few of our friends. It was from a song by Maurice Ravel. And whenever somebody whistled that, we knew it was them, very characterous. I can no longer whistle, so I can't reproduce it. And I heard this. And we is thousands of people. In that, I found my sister there. And we just touched each other for a moment. And then she disappeared.

And then they were taken somewhere else. From then on, I didn't know what happened to them, my mother or my sister. My father and I stayed together. And this was made into an army unit. Of course, we didn't have any weapons. We had shovels. And we were attached to the Hungarian Army and taken to the eastern front. Well, eastern front was at the outskirts of Budapest at that time because the Russians were there already.

And our task was to dig a huge tank trap around the perimeter of the city, but leave out the main thoroughfares. It was really very stupid because we left all the thoroughfares open. And the Russians came so fast that they just walked in. The tanks came right in. Nobody fell into the tank traps. Well, at that time, we were shot at already. The Russians were practicing the cannons. They were measuring the distance. And they started a regular cannonade. But we were in these ditches. So we were doing fine.

Were you separated because you were Jewish?

Yeah, we were the Jewish--

The Jewish battalion.

--labor units, labor battalions attached to the Hungarian Army. But we were in front of them because we had to dig the--

So you could easily be the fodder.

Sure. So we kept on being moved all the time then. And it was getting awfully cold, late October. And there was very little to eat. And there was only a loaf of bread in the morning, very poor quality bread plus a slice of what looked like a jam, but it really was made of some artificial material with some sugar, and a piece of bacon. But you see, Hungarian bacon is almost pure fat with a little meat. Well, in this, there was no meat at all. It was just fat. Well, it's just as well because at least you chewed on this--

It sustained you.

--you got some calories. But that was the diet-- that bread, that sweet thing, and the fat. And we picked up from the fields whatever we could-- onions. That was a great treasure, to find an onion, or a potato, or something like that.

Did you have a barracks or a camp?

We slept usually in barns wherever we arrived at night. And one thing I never forget was an extremely moving scene. In the barracks, Friday night, we were in the loft-- not barracks, this was a barn. We were in the hay on the loft. That's where we were sleeping. And we had with us a rabbi, a young man. And he made a service, a Friday night service. And as I told you, I never was a religious person.

That moved you?

Oh, that really was unforgettable. I think at that point, everyone was religious. There was a new consciousness in just about everybody at that time. However, pretty soon, many of us became ill because a dysentery epidemic broke out. And I became ill. And my father, he was wonderful, very resourceful man.

And he went and he got from a peasant, he bought-- he had a little money saved, a few bucks. And he bought a boiled chicken for me. And I ate that instead of this other thing. And I remember, we had no medicine, really. But there was a doctor. There happened to be a doctor in our battalion-- not as a doctor, but he was a doctor. And he had his little doctor's kit with some medicines. And he gave me some opium to stop diarrhea.

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To stop the nausea.

And I was going. We were then marching. And with this opium, I was in kind of a trance, marching, marching, marching, my mind completely elsewhere. In fact, I was dreaming. I remember, also, what I was dreaming. I was dreaming that I had a big loaf of bread. And I was putting some cheese on this bread and eating it. Typical dream of somebody who is starving.

But the starvation became worse and worse. And people started to die. And one of the really awful things was one day, these bastards lined us up and gave us-- and told us, everybody empty their pockets, everything. Nobody keep anything. So everybody emptied their pockets. And one of them came out from the bushes and said, here. He was holding a $10 bill. Somebody was trying to hide it. It was an obvious--

Ploy.

--yeah. It was a plant. And who did it? And nobody did it. So nobody said. And he says, all right. I give you five minutes to say it. If nobody is responsible for it, we're going to shoot every 10th person in the line.

Oh, dear. So the doctor stood up and said, I did it. But he didn't do it. But for some reason, these guys didn't believe that. They wanted something better. And they said, you didn't do it. You were standing here all the time. And I don't know how, but somehow, it just the courage left them. And they didn't do it. But the trauma was awful of that day, being in that-- so close to--

Tremendous shot.

--being shot. So this went on for roughly a month.

Well, you're deep in wintertime now.

No, not-- November. November, not deep in wintertime, cold and rainy, not yet snow. Well, we got to know that next day, we are going to march through Budapest. And as it turned out, on the way to the railroad station to be deported to Germany, and my father sneaked out that evening and got hold of a telephone, public telephone.

And he called a friend of his who was a friend of ours, professor of pediatrics and our physician from childhood on, was a Gentile, a man of tremendous courage. He hid in his house I don't know how many Jews by himself. And my father told him, we'll be there. He said, I will be there. Look out for me.

So next day, we marched in. And we came to this large, broad avenue with an equally broad crossroad and a traffic light in the middle. And the Hungarian Army was crossing in the opposite direction. So we had to stop. It was a long stop. People put down their rucksacks. And we were just standing there. And I was looking around. And all of a sudden, I see on the sidewalk there our friend--

The pediatrician?

--the pediatrician, standing, looking around very intensely. And I said to my father, look, he's there. So I told my father, just put down your rucksack. He didn't have it down yet. And I said, and just very nonchalantly, let's walk over there. There was such a crowd there. Nobody really noticed it. Soldiers were marching, trucks, military trucks were going.

So we were going. When we reached him, he didn't look at us and just mumbled, go to the corner. There's a taxi waiting. And so we went to the corner. There was a taxicab waiting there. And he came too. I went. He told me to duck down in the bottom of the taxicab because a person of my age would have had to be in the army. Civilian young men would have been something unusual. So I should not be seen.

And he and my father sat back. And he gave an address to the cab. He must have paid the cab off. Or someone must have made sure that the driver was reliable. This was on the Pest side of Budapest. We crossed over to the Buda side.

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And we stopped in a small street in front of a little mimeographing machine. And we went in there, mimeographing store, where you could go and have a copy made, a photostatic copy. We had no Xeroxes yes.

Yes.

But now, it turned out that this was run by one of the closest friends of my mother, a woman married to a very famous Hungarian violinist. They were Gentiles. And she was-- she made this little outfit there. They were mimeographing things on the first floor. And on the second floor, they were making the false papers, the false identity papers for refugees, for Jews, and whoever needed it.

Very dangerous.

Very dangerous. So I got in there. And she said, go up. And so we went up. My papers were ready very shortly. I got a new name.

What was your new name?

My name was Arnold Hollander. Hollander. Now, that's a Jewish name.

I have relatives by that name.

But I already ran under this name in the concentration camp, where I had to take on another name so that the army won't--

Conscript you.

--recognize me because I fled from where I was supposed to be. And they felt, well, this is a fairly good name, Arnold Hollander. Arnold wasn't all that Jewish. Hollander could have been of German origin, of which there were many in Hungary. In a few minutes, there arrived a distant relative of mine, who was a divorced husband of one of my first cousins, who was a Jew, like all of us. But he was walking around with the papers of a newspaper correspondent of a Nazi daily newspaper in Hungary. And he was completely public. He walked around with this thing. He went everywhere without the slightest fear. And in fact, he had a nice Nazi--

Insignia?

--emblem here, which identified him as a correspondent of--

He was rather gutsy.

--Nazi newspapers. He was-- oh, was he gutsy, tremendous guy. And he took me. And we got-- I got regular clothes instead of these army things. And we went. It was getting dark by then. We waited till it was getting dark. We got on the streetcar. And he took me out to the outskirts of Buda, woodsy area, beautiful, where was the convent of the Sisters of Social Service. We call them the gray nuns.

Was your father with you?

No. My father, he took to his house, which he rented, where he was hiding Jews with false papers. You see, it wasn't so difficult because as the Russians were going westward, a lot of Hungarians, not Jews, were fleeing. They were afraid of the Russians. So Budapest was full of Gentile Hungarian refugees. Most of them didn't have any papers or anything. So my father became a--

Hungarian is it?

--a Hungarian refugee from Transylvania. It turned out, my mother, he already got my mother out. And my mother was

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there in that place already. My sister was hidden by the family of that same person who took me up from Szeged to Budapest, that lawyer, in one of the neighboring towns to Budapest. And she survived there.

You had your own personal network.

Yes. And I went-- and he left me there in this convent.

Gray nuns.

And I discovered that in this convent, there were two cousins of mine, plus an aunt and uncle. Now, these convents were run by one of the most remarkable women in history, Margit Slachta. This woman was the first female member of the Hungarian parliament. She was a feminist. She was a-- her thinking, in terms of women's equality, in terms of free voting rights, not just for women, but for peasants, which we didn't have in Hungary, in Austria, she was way ahead of her time. She was a remarkable woman.

And she founded this order, Sisters for Social Service. And they did a lot of what we would-- today, we would call them social workers. Here, it was a new thing in Hungary. She was violently opposed to anything like this and fought so courageously.

Previous to this, she went to the Pope, Pius XII, to try to get him to do something to prevent the deportation of the Slovakian Jews, which she did not achieve, but at least delayed it, and perhaps saved some. So she and the other sisters, all heroic women, they saved-- it is estimated that they saved between 900 and 1,000 Jews.

Not at one time, people in transit.

At one time.

You mean you had 900 in the convent?

No, not there. There were several convents. And they placed Jews in a reliable house, which they hid them.

And the Nazis never caught on, never suspected?

Yes, they did catch on sometimes. For instance, they-- this led to the martyr death of one of the sisters. They were denounced. And this young woman was arrested. And together with the-- and she was taken away. And that same evening, she and this group of Jews, who were, I believe, taken from the ghetto, were marched out to the Danube and shot into the river.

And was already in the winter. I had one of my mother's cousins shot into the river. And she survived. They took these women from the ghetto. And they took them out, marched them out to the river. You know, river's elevated. And they lined them up. And they shot them so they would fall into the river. And my mother's cousin, she fell before she was hit.

Oh, that's how she survived.

She fell into the Danube. And she swam. And she swam about a mile. And she swam out, and cold, and getting, imagine, completely wet. She made her way to a place she knew there was a Jewish hospital, a small hospital, which was somehow under the protection, I believe, of one of the embassies, or the Swedes and the--

I was just going to ask you. Did Raoul Wallenberg, was that a name that you knew at that time, or the Swedish safe houses?

Raoul Wallenberg's name, I only got to know after the war. But everybody knew that the Swedes were saving Jews. There were, essentially, three countries-- Sweden, Switzerland, and the Vatican gave out passports. You see, these embassies gave out passports. And the Germans respected this, up to a point, anyway. If you had a Swedish passport,

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they knew you were not a Swede, but they did not touch you. I think one of the South American countries also.

Costa Rica.

Yes, maybe.

It was Costa Rica.

Maybe Costa Rica.

Let's get back to you and the convent.

Yeah.

How long did you stay there?

Well, I stayed there from November until February. The sisters fed us. And they really were remarkable because, I mean, there were a bunch of people there who were, really, in terrible shape psychologically, many of them physically. Many of us have escaped from these camps. And they offered Christian consolation without ever trying to convert people. Some were converted.

But there was a little chapel. It was always open to go in and sit there. And if you wanted to go and pray, you could go and pray to whomever you wanted to. And many of us there, just out of sheer gratitude, were drawn to the Catholic--

I understand. Sure.

--religion. Now, what they did then was they offered the religion, but they did not persuade anyone. I did not convert. Now, Christmastime came. And on Christmas Eve, we started to hear machine gun fire coming. On one side were the woods. And through the woods-- these are pine forest. We heard the advance. And we knew, well, this is it. The Russians are coming. And that means either that we are free or that we'll all die because if the Germans are going to defend this place from house to house, then they will come in, and they will discover us.

So the sisters took everybody into the chapel. And they were singing and praying. And we were sitting there till late at night. And the machine gun came closer, and closer, and closer. And then it went further, and further, and further. And you didn't hear anything anymore. And we didn't know what happened.

6 o'clock in the morning, somebody rang the doorbell. The sisters opened it. And it was a young Russian soldier. So we were liberated. I'm sorry to have to put this in quotes again because of the events that followed. It was a liberation from the Germans. But the Russians were no great joy, either.

In fact, I was captured by the Russians because then, I started to go out after this. I couldn't stay anymore there. I still had some medicine. And my aunt sewed a Red Cross on a white background here for me to indicate that I'm a doctor, which I wasn't quite yet. But I went around, behaved like a doctor. And the people loved it. They haven't seen a doctor for so many months. And even just to tell me--

Minor aches.

--what the problem was. And as I was walking one day, this Russian soldier arrested me and got me into a house, where there were already some other men captured. And I got out of there by donating my watch to this guy. They were after watches. Some of them had a whole row of watches. I gave him my aunt's watch. I lost my watch in a concentration camp. My aunt lent me her watch. I gave my watch to him.

And I didn't, I don't speak Russian. But he understood it. And when the commandant came, he put in a word for me. And not only did the commandant let me go, but I was able to talk with him, with the commandant through an

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interpreter. And I asked him for a piece of paper with a stamp that I could go free as a doctor, which I got. And that was terrific. If you had a triangular stamp from the Russians, you were OK. Had a triangular stamp.

But I have to make this long story short. In February, I couldn't stand it anymore not knowing what happened to anybody in my family. And I went out of the house. I said goodbye to everybody. And I was going to make my way back to where I thought the last time my parents were. And I met up with a former medical school classmate of mine. In fact, this girl, you said, she was so beautiful.

Oh, this one.

This girl. And she was also just coming out from somewhere. And so we went to look for our families together. We walked for a day together. We were shot at. It was pretty cold winter, with snow everywhere. And I said goodbye to her at one point because she went elsewhere.

I found this house where my parents were last. But they were no longer there. In fact, the house was pretty well shot up by then. But they said that my parents were-- they left. And they went over to Pest. This was in Buda now. So I slept there at night, for that night. When you say slept there, don't imagine beds.

You slept on the floor? Floor, actually, in the cellar, on some usually hay or something, whatever was there. And I walked over to Budapest by the evening or so. I got to where my parents-- where somebody told me where my parents were. It was dark by the time I got there. They were in what used to be a hospital. My parents were there, my grandmother was there, and my sister made it on that same--

On the same day?

--on that same day.

Oh, what a miracle.

Yeah, so imagine--

What a reunion.

--how my parents felt.

What a reunion.

What a reunion.

Oh, to find the children. What happened to your medical school colleagues? I think we have a picture of two of them.

Oh, yes. Well, you see, this boy was one of my closest friends in medical school. He was a Jewish boy from the country. And he was definitely the leader of his class, of our class, is a terrific guy. And she was also a medical student in our class. And they were deported together.

The same time that you left?

Well, you all had to leave the medical school.

Yeah, but after I went up to Budapest. And they were in a concentration camp in Austria. And the way I understood, from someone who brought this back, that it was known that they are going to move the camp the next day. And they didn't know what was going to happen. They got married there in the camp. And the next day, the camp was not moved. But they were murdered, the whole camp. So these two.

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How about your other medical student friends?

Some never made it. Some made it. Some, I have seen since then. There were not many Jewish, but I think there were only about six of us. A girl who was a classmate of mine, she never made it, neither did this lovely girl.

Gabby, why did you just decide in recent years or this year to make Sister Slachta a Righteous Gentile? Why did you wait so long?

Oh, you know, Toby, this is something I feel so bad about, I can't tell you. I lived here--

You mean, it was circumstantial.

No. I lived here all these years. This is the 29th year I live in Buffalo. And it was three or four years ago that I found out that the Sisters of Social Service exist here in Buffalo. And not only that, but that Margit Slachta came to Buffalo. And she lived here for 10 years and died here at the age of 90.

And you never knew. And you could have seen her.

I never knew that she was here. And I would have gone.

Oh, how sad that is.

I found out that they were here when Judy Lehotai lay dying at Roswell Park, former Erie County coroner. You remember her, the Hungarian lady, wonderful woman.

Yes, yes, yes.

She died of cancer at Roswell Park. And one of her sisters was a gray nun in Hungary. So she was very close to them. And at her bedside, I met the sisters.

But not Sister Margit.

Sister Margit was dead already. Sister Margit died 12 years ago. And this was only about five years ago, four years ago. And then from then on, I was in contact with the sisters. Now, and to propose Margit for this was not my idea. In fact, I didn't know anything about this Righteous Gentile distinction. But it was Mrs. Bridget Murphy--

Oh, Dr. Murphy's wife.

--Dr. Murphy, former director of Roswell Park, who is one of the-- I think, as a matter of fact, she is chairman of the board or something like this, of the sisters here. It was her idea to do this. And then I wrote this. I did some research on it. And sisters very kindly helped me. And I wrote up this thing and sent it to. But she already had been, you see. I was late for that too.

Oh, someone else made her?

Someone long ago made her a Righteous Gentile.

I see.

There was already a tree planted in her memory.

So this was for the Buffalo-- recognition for the Buffalo community.

But it somehow stirred the whole thing up again.

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But it was beautiful. It was fine.

It was beautiful. And it was beautiful, you see, that Sister Margit's sister, Sister Alice, who was still alive and a nun, that she could receive this recognition. Some of the sisters, like Sister Natalie, who is in charge of the house here, she was very active with Sister Margit in saving.

So someone should make her a Righteous Gentile if they have not already.

No, they did not make her a Righteous Gentile. And I don't know how this would go. I know very well, she is such a modest person, you can't get very much out of what she did. In fact, they are all characterized by this. They are extremely self-effacing. They never brag with this.

Gabby, we have to wind up. And we would like to know if you have some sort of message, or some remembrance, or something that you want to conclude with.

Well, I can say one thing. I really have a kind of a magic belief that Jews are here to stay.

Jews are here to stay.

Jews are here to stay for probably many good reasons. Biologically, we may not be all that closely related to the original Jews anymore.

No, far removed.

But there is something about this race and there is something about this tradition which lives on. That's what history shows, that it was impossible to eradicate--

Invincible.

--it. And I don't subscribe to the idea of God's chosen people. I don't think God has any chosen people. But there is some very good reason, historical reason, why we are still around. I think will continue to be around.

I think that's a good way to close, and also, with the last picture that we have of you, immediately after the war. You look rather gaunt here and bewildered. I'm glad we have another picture of you that, when we flashback to the screen, in your healthy state.

Thank you very much.

Do you tell this story to your children and to your wife?

Oh, yes. They always wanted me to write it down. I never got to write it down. Now, maybe I'll have--

Now, you'll have it in pictures.

--a transcript of this.

And you can continue on.

Yes, yes.

I know it's hard to bring back some of the negative and gruesome memories. And I wanted to thank you very much for permitting us to interview you.

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It's my pleasure. And I appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk about it. I have no bitterness about this time. I remember the people who helped more than I remember the people who didn't.

So that's a very positive way of looking at a sad period of history.

I think there were many, many more people who helped then, generally.

Of course, you were lucky. You were very fortunate.

I was also lucky. You know, I was often wondering about our family, how it is that our whole family, everybody survived. And I really will not believe it that--

And there have been so many people sitting in that very seat that you're sitting in that can't say that.

Whose family was wiped out.

There must be a reason for that--

That may be so.

--some reason that we--

I don't know what it is. But we were spared.

Thankfully. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Toby.

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