Les Aigner

Interview with: Leslie Aigner in Portland, OR
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Harper: I'd like you to begin by you telling me your name, date, and place of birth, and if you can spell the place of birth.

AIGNER: My name is Leslie Aigner, born in 1929 June 3rd. And the place I born in Czechoslovakia is Nové Zámky [Les spells it]. That's the Czechish name of the town. And my family, and the whole family basically, lived on one street. My cousins, my uncles, aunts and my grandmother [unclear few words]. And we were, they were orthodox Jews and we were very close family. When it came to Passover dinner there were 25-30 of us, especially if we had out of town guests at the Passover table.

I went to school in Nové Zámky. Later it turned to Hungarian town, because the territory was attached in 1939 to Hungary. And it was Ersekujvar [same town as Nové Zámky]. Anyway I was going to school and going to Talmud Torah too. ...My mother and grandmother was very religious orthodox and we kept a kosher house.

And first time I really encountered antisemitism, it was in Ersekujvar, in Nové Zámky when I was going to school. Going to and coming home from school, I was chased and beaten many, many times, especially as the anti Jewish sentiment rose by the Nazi's advancement.

Harper: Can I back up for a moment?

AIGNER: Sure.

Harper: Can you tell me who, again, who lived in your house?

AIGNER: In my house we were five of us. Actually it was a rented duplex where we lived by a farmhouse. We were my father, my mother, and my older sister – she was a year older. And my younger sister and myself. My younger sister was nine years old. Excuse me, I have to back track too. She was born in 1935, so in 1939 she was only four years old. But when we were taken to Auschwitz she was nine.

Harper: And did your grandparents and other family live in this town too?

AIGNER: Yes, they all lived on the same street at that time. My grandmother lived only. I never knew any of my other grandparents, only one grandmother, because I was too little when they died already. And so my grandmother lived with her oldest son on the same street as I said.

Harper: Were your parents born in this town?

AIGNER: No. My father was born in another little town, a very small town. And my mother was born in another town. They, somehow they got married and you know my grandmother lived

most of the time in Nové Zámky. She wasn't born in there either. So she was born in Czechoslovakia sometime, I don't know the town. But somehow the family, well most of the family, not the whole family, got together in this town and we lived in one particular street. Then later on we moved around in the town but, but as I was growing up in my childhood we were living in the one street.

Harper: Do you remember the name of the street?
AIGNER: Hospital Street [gives the Czechish name of the street as well].

Harper: Do you remember what your grandparents did for a living?
AIGNER: As I say, I just knew my grandmother. I don't know what my grandfather did. But my uncle, who lived with her, he was an agricultural expert and he worked in an office of a sort. A grange in the town, yes.

Harper: What was your family's means of support?
AIGNER: My father was a low-middle income self-employed man. He had two pairs of horses and a couple of flatbed wagons, and he was the transfer man of the town. He was transferring from the railroad station to merchants their merchandize. Or people who moved from one apartment to another. He was the man who they called on. With the flatbed wagon, and he had one driver and himself.

Harper: So it was like a small business?
AIGNER: A very small business, yes. But he supported our family well.

Harper: And you said, did you say you were low middle class?
AIGNER: Low middle income, I would say, yes. Not class, just middle income [chuckles].

Harper: Were your parents active in the Jewish community?
AIGNER: To a certain degree. We had been going to synagogue at that time every Friday night and Saturday. Except when my father was out of town. But not particular activity as such. But, for example, I went to the mikvah every Friday before shul. We were counted as orthodox Jews.

Harper: Can you tell you in more detail the full scope of your religious life, on a day-to-day basis?
AIGNER: Well, as I was growing up, many times, not every morning, we went to shul, and used the, well at that time after I was bar mitzvah, I used the teffilin. And my father was a little bit more … not as religious. But my mother kept a kosher house all the way to the end.

Harper: Was your family involved in any secular communal activities? Like politics or sports?
AIGNER: No, not really. It was just within the family if they talked about politics. Actually one of my uncles went to rabbinical school and moved to Israel before I knew him. I don't remember him, but he disappeared in Israel in one of the fights. So we never heard of him after the war. Until then my grandmother was getting letters from him.

Harper: Were you involved in any youth groups or anything?
AIGNER: I was involved after 1945 when I came back from the concentration camp with the Zionist movement in Budapest.

Harper: But not before that?
AIGNER: No. Well, when Czechoslovakia was gave back the territory where I was born, Nové Zámky, to Hungary, the atrocities started already against the Jews. And it was 1939 I was 10 years old. I was not involved in any Zionist movement. But in the synagogue they had groups who came together learning Hebrew, learning the Torah. That was my involvement as a Jewish boy.

Then in 1939, I [was] still finishing my school, living with my grandmother. In 1944 I moved to Budapest because my father's license in 1939 was taken away. The Hungarian Nazi party, the Cross Arrow, was getting stronger. And as soon as they re-occupied that part of Czechoslovakia that was attached to Hungary, his license was revoked. And so it being a small town, he couldn't get employment. And he did the same thing like my wife's folks and he moved to Budapest. And we settled in outskirts of Budapest in 1944; they had settled in 1943 – in Csepel in outskirts of Budapest. And he got employment over there in a paper mill.

Harper: Could I come back to your neighborhood a little bit?
AIGNER: Sure.

Harper: What would you say the population was of the town you grew up in?
AIGNER: Nové Zámky had about 28,000 population.

Harper: And do you have any idea what the Jewish to non-Jewish mix was?
AIGNER: Not really. I just can guess. We had two synagogues, one orthodox, and one the more modern [word unclear]. Probably 1500 to 2000. Just a wild guess. I can't remember really.

Harper: And your neighborhood, was it a Jewish neighborhood?
AIGNER: No. There was no such thing in Nové Zámky as Jewish, really Jewish neighborhood. We were scattered around the town. And, there were Jewish get-togethers, naturally. Holidays and all that. And presentations sometimes, speeches, and stuff like that. And we went to those. My folks went, to many of them, not all of them, but many of them.

Harper: Were you friendly with your non-Jewish neighbors?
AIGNER: Well, with most of them, yes. But there always were some who resented being friendly with Jews. As I say, when I first experienced really antisemitism when I started to go to school. And on the streets; it was a Jewish school where I was going. And for the first three years I was leaning Czechish, even though that most of the town was Hungarian. So when we went to school and when we left the school we were talking Hungarian, on the next corner. But in the school we had to speak Czechish at that time. Then 1939 it turned around. And still my folks wanted me to finish school there so I stayed until 1943. Even though they moved in 1939 to Budapest.

Harper: So you started school in a Jewish school?
AIGNER: Yes. All my elementary education was in Jewish school.

Harper: Was it a private school?
AIGNER: No no, it was a public. Well, it was public school but the state – it was a state school but it was a Jewish school. Probably, I don't know how it was set up, I tell you honestly. It was

supported by the Jewish community but it mainly supported by the state.

Harper: Did you learn religious subjects?
AIGNER: That too. But mainly the regular subjects. In the school, after school, afternoon, I went to the Talmud Torah and that was totally just religious subject.

Harper: And where was that? After school, where was that held?
AIGNER: That was by the synagogue. The synagogue had the schoolrooms.

Harper: All of your schooling, your early schooling, was conducted in Czech? Is that right?
AIGNER: The first three years. See, I'm born in '29. In '36 I start schooling, until '39. Then it was again Hungarian because the borders changed. So three elementary was in Czechish, and I learned, I was pretty fluent. I was fluent in Czechish, but I totally foget it by now.

Harper: Overall, would you say the relations between Jews and gentiles in your town was good?
AIGNER: Was good until 1939. Very sparsely were anti Jewish happenings in town. But after that, the Hungarian Nazi party, Cross Arrow, took over and, and intimidated us.

Harper: Before that, do you remember ever hearing of Adolf Hitler?
AIGNER: I did because my folks were talking about it. When Adolf Hitler came to rule. It was in 1937-38 when I was able to grasp. And I think they were talking, but many times they set me aside to, to, because after 1939 even that was dangerous, to talk about politics. And so they didn't want me to blabber something outside the house.

Harper: Do you think your family was concerned? I'm talking before 1939, now.
AIGNER: Not in, before 1939, it was, we were I think my family was pretty settled, and they were content with their situation. After 1939 things started changing rapidly. Actually my father looked into leaving the country. But he didn't have the means to take the whole family.

Harper: Do you remember ever meeting any refugees from Germany or Austria?
AIGNER: No, not really, not really. The only refugees we saw, its, after 1939, was Polish refugees. And I don't know; it was some kind of conflict between the Polish and Hungarian Nazis. I don't know. It's, it's, there were some refugees showing up, or, or prisoners showing up in Hungary, as I recall, vaguely.

Harper: Why don't you tell me when things started changing and how exactly things started changing?
AIGNER: Well in 1939 my life started to change because my fathers business license was taken away and he, in order to make a living, he moved his family, actually my mother, my older sister, my younger sister to, to the outskirts of Budapest. And I stayed behind because I said well you better finish your schooling and they just took my sisters along.

Harper: So where did you stay?
AIGNER: I stayed with my grandmother until 1943. Then I finish my 8th grade elementary education, then I moved on to Budapest. And then, you know things started changing rapidly. At the end of 1943 we had to start wearing the yellow star. Jews couldn't go, with the yellow star, to higher education, and many, many public places were out for us, closed for us. And so when I moved out to Budapest my father took me to learn a trade. So in the morning hours I

was going to trade school and in the afternoon I was doing the shop work.

Harper: Between 1939 and your move to Budapest, what was life like for you? Was there any anti-Jewish legislation at this time? Because the war was going on?

AIGNER: Not until 1939. Czechoslovakia was a republic, and, and it was fair. It was; we weren't discriminated as much. There were antisemitism, but its not, very vaguely until 1939. But when the Hungarians took over, then it really started changing. There was a lot of talk, and I remember my uncle and my grandma talking about Hitler and the Nazi advancement of Hitler and Nazism advancing in Germany. And you know they heard about atrocities. I wasn't supposed to hear these things at the time.

Harper: Were you afraid for your personal safety in those years?

AIGNER: Not as much until 1939, no, no. We were fairly, treated basically, most people were OK. But still it was some antisemitism always around us.

Harper: Now, I am interested in understanding in the years between 1939 and 1943, when you stayed back to go to school.

AIGNER: Now that time, it increased. The intensity of antisemitism, that's when I really were, as I said, chased and beaten many times, going to school or going anyplace, if I was alone. So we grouped up many times, and we walked each other home. And it was some atrocity during that time against the synagogue. Broken windows and stuff like that. So it started to intensify, definitely. Because of the Hungarian Nazi party was getting stronger, and were getting a helping hand from the German Nazis.

Harper: Did you hear anything about what was going on in Poland?

AIGNER: As I say, I was very young, and just very vaguely here and there there was… Between 1943 and 1944, it was nothing major going on. Basically, we didn't hear about Auschwitz and things like that in Poland, no.

Harper: So you had no idea what was happening to the Jews in other parts of Europe.

AIGNER: No. No. That's my know-how. But I don't know how much my folks know because I know my father, in 1939, was deliberating on leaving the country.

Harper: Where did he want to go?

AIGNER: Just out of Hungary, someplace more peaceful. He even considered Israel, but we couldn't make it. They did not give visas out and, as I say, he didn't have the funds for taking the whole family, and he didn't want to leave alone.

Harper: So you decided to join your parents then?

AIGNER: Yes, in 1943. And that's when I started trade school.

Harper: Was it a state school?

AIGNER: The trade school was a state school, and in a private small factory I worked as a machinist, learning the machinist trade. And, then it really started, the antisemitism, and all that because of all that we had to start wearing. I went home to Budapest after school in June of 1943, and at the end of 1943 we were ordered to start wearing the yellow star. My father was ordered into the forced labor camp. And so my sister went to work for the paper mill. She was at that time 15, almost 16 years old. So she started supporting…beside, the state

called in my father for forced labor camp, and there was some kind of a relief for the family. So I have letters my mother wrote to my father to the work camp that you should talk to the commandant that you have three children…So the, the relief money would be according to how many children you have. It is written in Hungarian so I don't know what good it will be for you actually, but…

Harper: When your family had moved to the outskirts of Budapest, were you involved in a synagogue then?

AIGNER: Yes, in Csepel, yes. I was. We were going to synagogue; there was a small synagogue or small community. But not as often anymore. Because you know you didn't want to be out in the evening hours. And if we went, we went in the earlier services, but not as often anymore. Especially not after my father was taken to the forced labor camp, because my mother and the three children didn't want to be out alone. And you know, starting wearing the yellow star, and early 1944 they were talking about the ghetto so my father wasn't home and with the help of some friends, we moved to the ghetto in 1943, I don't know, May or, or early June. Something like that.

Harper: Your father was arrested?

AIGNER: No he was not arrested. He was called in. It was just like someone being called into the army. But he wasn't in the army; he was taken to the forced labor camp. You know, building roads and bridges and digging for the Nazi war machine. By then the Nazis were marching against the Russians. And so Hungary did not put up any resistance when the Nazis came in. Czechoslovakia, Poland, it put up some resistance - very little against the Nazi machinery. But Hungary they opened the borders and they just marched in, marched through Hungary.

Harper: Do you know if that work camp had a name?

AIGNER: Oh yes, I have it. It was Ratosnya. And, depending on where he was, I have five letters that are readable. The others…I have a dozen of them, or a couple of dozen. But I brought five of them, which were written with ink, and so it's pretty legible. But the others are hard to read, very hard to read. And I have the letters actually my sister wrote to my father, I think the last letters I have. And she wrote it from the paper mill where she worked because, when we were supposed to go to the ghetto in Csepel, she was working for the paper mill and she had to move into the paper mill. Because they kept the Jewish workers - evidently they knew what was coming - and they wanted to keep the Jewish workers and they made, arrangements, I mean barrack arrangements for them, and she had to live in the barracks of the paper mill, within the compound. And so just three of us moved into the ghetto. And my sister had a chance to come out to visit on the weekends. But she had to go back by Monday morning to the paper mill and live there all week.

Harper: Did you have to go to the ghetto before the Germans invaded Hungary, or after?

AIGNER: After.

Harper: Can you describe the German invasion, what happened? Do you remember?

AIGNER: I just heard my mother saying that the Germans are here, they are marching through the street. They were in mainly Budapest actually. The little town did not have any details from the Germans, but they were in Budapest and they were all around. The German, they have some headquarters someplace, and so they were visible all over the town, basically.

Harper: You saw them?
AIGNER: I saw them too, yes. I was going to school and work, with the yellow star on my chest, and I was, you know, kind of turning around and away from them and I was walking. And being on the streetcar, for example. It was just a bad experience, walking.

Harper: This may sound like a strange question, but wearing the star, what was your reaction to having to wear the star?
AIGNER: Like marked, and you know, everybody just looked at you and you were known. But the thing is I don't know if you heard about it. It was in Czechoslovakia or in Hungary that you were born and your birth certificate says you Jew. And if you moved from one apartment to the next one, next street or next town or change house address anyway, within 48 hours you have to report in the police station, filling up a form and the third or fourth question was what is your religion. So they knew all the time, where you are and who you are. And so, not wearing the yellow star, especially if you look Jewish, they said many, many times, they just pulled into the doorways people and wanted documents. If they were suspicious.

Harper: Did you see Jews or did this happen to you? Were you beaten up by the Germans or harassed on the street or humiliated?
AIGNER: It's been many, many times it happened. Even the Hungarians, they were such a big antisemitism, they kind of laughed at you wearing the yellow star, even if they didn't do any atrocities. They pointed at you.

Harper: So can you just tell me what happened next?
AIGNER: Well we moved into the ghetto early June of 1944.

Harper: I'm sorry. Were you forced to go into the ghetto or did they say…
AIGNER: We [were] ordered to move. And the ghetto was set up like in a small town on outskirt of Budapest by the biggest manufacturing plant. That was the biggest manufacturing plant of Hungary. They made from sewing machine to trucks to ammunition to everything in that factory. And they set it up, I don't know what was their thought, maybe they figured maybe the allies will not bomb or, or you know…but they bombed plant, and there was a lot of casualties. But we weren't there that long anymore. As I say, I was in the ghetto probably less than a month, or maybe a month, I don't know exactly.

Harper: I am sorry to interrupt you, but I want as much detail as possible from the minute you heard you had to go to the ghetto, how you got there, what it looked like, and everything. Tell me everything.
AIGNER: Well, we got the order that all Jews have to move to the ghetto area. And they emptied a certain area of housing, a couple of blocks. And Csepel did not have a big Jewish population. I don't know, maybe a couple a hundred, if even that much. And so we had to move into that couple of blocks right around the factory. And my mother wrote to my father. I have that letter, too, that we have to move and she will let him know the new address. Actually she wrote down the address. These are the letters what my father brought home, because he survived. He escaped to the Russian side, and as the Nazis were retreating, he came home that way. And so we had to move and we had a friend who my father worked, a gentile friend, who my father worked with in the paper mill and he was working delivering, distributing paper goods for the businesses with a flat bed wagon. In

that time not that many trucks were rolling and so he helped us move into the ghetto. And we settled in, as I say, our settling in, we didn't even unpack. When in the ghetto came Nazi…it was called a special guard or the swastika or actually the cross arrow on his armband, with authority and order that we have to pack and be ready in 48 hours. My sister was in the paper mill so she stayed there and we just… my mother, my nine year old sister, and myself, we packed what we were able to carry easily and sure enough two days later they picked us up with the truck and took us to outskirt of Budapest in other town, other outskirt, other side of Budapest to an abandoned brick factory. Barbed wire around it, and they getthoed all the Jews from the neighboring towns and they had transport for something like 4000 people. They put us in the cattle cars in that brick factory. And we were transported from the brick factory, to at that time I didn't know where, but we ended up in Auschwitz. Took us three days to get there.

Harper: Ok, before we get to that, I want to know even more detail about the first ghetto. Was there…you had to move to a special section of the town?
AIGNER: Csepel, yes.

Harper: And now, how long were you there for?
AIGNER: As I say, less than a month. Maybe a month, I don't know.

Harper: Were there walls, was there barbed wire?
AIGNER: There was no walls, no barbed wires. But you couldn't go after dark out with the yellow star on your chest. So if somebody wanted to go out would have to take the chance without the star. And you were able to go about at that time, but you had to, had to be in, inside at night. I mean it was that after dark you couldn't move around. And we didn't. My mother was scared, and we were just two of us, I was not quite 15 at the time. Actually I celebrated (there was no celebration) my birthday in the ghetto. June 3rd of 1944.

Harper: What did you do during the day? Did you mother work, or did you work?
AIGNER: I was going, even from the ghetto I was going to, but it was getting so that it was, the atrocities was, so that I maybe, when I moved into the ghetto I don't think I went to school and actually the school ended, but the shop. School ended early June. And then I quit at the shop too, I just didn't, wasn't worth it to go in. It was too dangerous. So my mother just kept us home.

Harper: And how about food? Could you get food?
AIGNER: Well at that time already started rationing. And we got our ration of food stamps and stuff like that. Not the food stamp like here. But you could buy just so much of everything - flour, or whatever. And so we were able to sustain ourselves. It was not really a big problem at June 1944. But then, you know, they picked us up and we left everything over there and that's the last time I saw things what we left there. It was, as we heard later, most of these Jewish homes were emptied and put on the train and went to Germany, most of them, the better stuff went to Germany, as a gift from Hungary to the German bombed out population. So most of our stuff vanished.

Harper: And in the ghettoized section of Csepel, were you living, it was an apartment?
AIGNER: It was something like a duplex. Type of a small houses. There was not too many big, big apartments there so the population of that part of town had to leave their homes. So they

were sort of inconvenienced, but this was an order and there was nothing what they could do against it. And so this few blocks was emptied and all the Jews had to move into that area.

Harper: Did you have to share the apartment with another family?
AIGNER: Not at this time, no. We just had a two-room apartment. A bedroom, and a small living room and kitchen area.

Harper: And can you tell me again, in as much detail as you can, your transport to this next ghetto, or the next deportation camp?
AIGNER: Well, we were put on the cattle cars, 75-80 people. A half-barrel for necessities. They locked the door on us. It was early July, and the train started rolling. Three days before we arrived to Auschwitz they opened to the door twice. We emptied the barrel, they threw in some food. Half of the cattle car, the people were able to squat down at night, and the other half was standing. There was no room for all of us to squat down. And then we changed. And in the daytime the heat was so that we were changing space by the four little window in the cattle car, in the four corners of the cattle car, so we were just kind of moving around and let other people have some fresh air. And this is the condition we arrived, I don't know, but a lot of them didn't make it.

Harper: I'm sorry; I want to interrupt you here. Before even your transport to Auschwitz, you said you went to another…
AIGNER: That was the brick factory, the abandoned brick factory where we were put up for less than a week.

Harper: Ok, do you know the name of that place?
AIGNER: Budakalász. It is on the outskirts of Budapest. Budakalász is a small town and outside of the town they had this brick factory, which wasn't in use anymore. I don't know what was the reason, wasn't in use. The only thing it had the A-frame covers, and the oven area. And there were people scattered all over, just with a few blankets. Families huddled together, waiting for … they were distributing some food, naturally.

Harper: Were you allowed to bring anything to that camp?
AIGNER: Yes, very minimal, whatever we were able to carry. And we were allowed to take some change of clothes, and I don't know what my mom packed, really I can't recall.

Harper: Did they tell you what this place was?
AIGNER: No, they didn't. They just ordered us and I just…I don't know…we just went. We just were ordered to go, if we didn't go you were hunted down.

Harper: And so you just sat around for about a week?
AIGNER: Yes. Walked around, sat around. Guarding our little belongings. Because they brought in, actually over there they brought in the gypsies. And this town where I was living there was a big gypsy population. And where I was born. But around Budapest they brought in the gypsies too, at that time.

Harper: So you saw gypsies in the brick factory?
AIGNER: Yes.

Harper: Were they treated differently by the guards?
AIGNER: No, no. Not whatsoever.

Harper: There were guards at the brick factory?
AIGNER: Yes, yes.

Harper: Were they German or Hungarian?
AIGNER: Hungarian militia. With the swastika on their arm, yes. They had weapons and they were guarding the entrances and the compound, yes.

Harper: Next I want you to tell me about your transport to Auschwitz. But before we start that, is there anything about your life before the war that you want to talk about or mention?
AIGNER: What I can say, it was, the family unit was starting to falling apart in a way because my father was taken away, and my mother was holding the family together and we were apart from our old… most of my uncles and aunts stayed in the, in the Nové Zámky, the town where I was born. And my grandma stayed there. So we were kind of new in this whole town. And we made some Jewish friends and that's all we had really.

Harper: Were you in contact with your grandmother?
AIGNER: Yes. By letters, writing letters, yes, all the time.

Harper: And do you know what their situation was like?
AIGNER: I can't recall anything about it. I know my mother was writing that they had to move into a certain area of the town. They were going through the same thing like we did. But I didn't know, didn't hear any specifics.

Harper: Do you recall while this was going on, being scared?
AIGNER: Oh definitely. Wearing the yellow star made me, you know, different. Marked. And being forced into going to the brick factory, with the truck they moved us. They stopped at every house, and they counted the people, they knew everybody, how many people had to be there, they put us on the truck and transferred us to the brick factory. And then the waiting over there, the yelling of the guards, and you couldn't go close to the fence naturally. And just distributing the meal it was dehumanizing; it was a condition that we were lining up for meals for hours to get something. My mother was so cautious, she took a bottle of oil and some bread and that's what she was eating until we got to Auschwitz. She didn't want to eat any of the stuff what they give us.

Harper: What sort of religious observance was there in the ghetto and was there any in the brick factory?
AIGNER: In the ghetto the shul was still open and we were able to, would have been able to go. There was a lot, every week as it was passing, it was less and less people going to the shul. And so it was so that going to the shul it was dangerous because some antisemite groups were checking us out. They were actually around there to harass us constantly.

Harper: Did you celebrate Shabbat in your house?
AIGNER: Yes. My mother had a candle lit every Friday night.

Harper: Were there Shabbats in the brick factory?
AIGNER: No. Nothing like that. Some of the people I saw, they were praying, they had their prayer book and their teffilin. And they doing it but not organized, no.

Harper: Do you want to take a break now?
AIGNER: It's fine. Not necessarily. I'll have a sip of water.

Harper: So, I'd like you to describe for me in as much detail, your deportation to Auschwitz.
AIGNER: As I said, we were put into – 75-80 people – to a cattle car, and I described already how we were transported. Arriving to Auschwitz, it was first part of July. I don't know probably close to ninth or tenth of July, I don't know the exact date. We were ordered out of the cattle cars and there were these kapos, which some were in the striped suit already, and they were ordering us and separating the older people, woman and children to a group, and the man in one group. I was put into the mans' group. And we had to line up front of the Dr. Mengele – the chief medical officer in Auschwitz. And he was selecting us right or left and whoever went to the right went to the gas chamber right away. That's where I saw my mother and my little sister for the last time. My mother turned away and didn't want to see me going. My little sister wailed for me.

I was led into the camp where we had the sign for the camp probably you heard about it already, "Arbeit macht Frei" your labor will free you. Which was not true. And we were led into this camp. This camp, as I learned later, was a Polish military camp and a barracks was built for horses, for stalls. And in the stalls were put up bunks, four high, bunk beds, four high, and we were eight to 10 of us sleeping on a bit of blanket on the bunks. When we were led in, we were ordered to, they cut our hair off and gave us a striped uniform – grey and blue cotton uniform.

And from Auschwitz they were always transporting people out. I stayed in Auschwitz for five months because I got into different work details. And I worked in Auschwitz, and one of them was working in the kitchen. And so that's why I stayed for five months. Most people didn't stay five or more months in Auschwitz. And what I saw is the crematoriums, which we did not want to believe its what it is. At first I thought it was the bakery. The chimneys were burning day and night and the burning human bodies stench was always around us. Well, we were constantly ordered around. We had to stand up for counting in the morning for a couple of hours. There were head counts, and that was going on till the winter months, too. The head counts, early morning, standing out. And you were backing against the barrack and we were changing, in the winter months, we were changing the first man off always so he can warm up against each other, their body, before the commandant, the SS guard/officer came around for the counting.

And when, for example, it was so dehumanizing the conditions, that for example when we were lining up for food, the first man got a pot in his hand and then they counted down five or eight or ten ladles of soup, and they counted down so many person. And we were sitting around that pot, each of us his spoon in our hand, and we were eating, one spoon at a time, until it lasted. Pretty fast we discovered that food meant life and we were watching each other as hawks so that food would be dispersed evenly.

Other thing I saw in Auschwitz, and then next encampment to us, was the Russian prisoners

of war. The Nazis didn't believe in the Geneva Conference of handling POWs, so they were sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. These were – many of them were flyers and they were working out in the field somewhere, I saw them marching out every day, to dismantle damaged planes for the Nazi air force. And one of these days, five of them escaped. They shot two of them; they brought all of them back within a day and a half. And the other three was hanged in the place, visible from both sides of the encampment, with a board on their chest "I escaped, here I am again." It was in German, this is what I was told the translation is.

On the other side of my encampment were the twins encampment. They were from child to adults, all the twins Mengele selected out, and they were doing experiment on them. And we were talking through the border of the barbed wire. They told us horrible things what kind of experiments they are doing on them. Was just vaguely, because we couldn't even approach the barbed wire too close. I just saw them everyday going down in their physical condition. And then disappearing, the people who I talked to. Because you approach the barbed wire too close, the guards were shooting. It was like open season on us.

And then the other episode. This is the thing which stuck in my mind because it was extreme. The daily beating by the kapos who were, who were wearing the blue and grey striped uniforms like us, but they were kapos. The kapos were put up from the ranks of the criminals. The Nazis did not have prisons at that time already. So the criminals were put in the concentration camp and they had this black triangle marking them, and they were put up to kapos, and the got a little bit of a better treatment for that. And so they did their job as, as brutally as they were ordered to.

And in Auschwitz, as I say, I was there five months and I saw a lot of things there. One of them was, another one was that one of the crematorium [*unclear…that was under the comando, the so called…which was selected from (for) the* ….]. This other commando was the group who pulled people from the gas chamber and took them to the crematorium for burning. Some of these people saw their own relations. They took some of their own relations in, finding their own relations in the gas chamber. So most of this [words unclear] commando wasn't in work more than two months and then they eliminated them. They saw and knew too much and their nerves started to give up. And one time of the [words unclear] commando for a belt, got a hold of some weapon, probably they knew that their end was coming; they didn't care. And they destroyed one of the crematorium. But none of them escaped, as I heard. As I say, this was in the distance from our encampment. But we heard the shootings and the explosion. I don't know what they use, grenade or whatnot, but they destroyed one of the crematorium.

After this, on one occasion I was in the wall detail taking all of the barrels from the barrack – at night we couldn't leave the barracks. We put it in a small bag and these barrels, and had to take it out to the field. Which was about half a mile away from the encampment. They were digging big ditches, several of them. They were carrying in layer of wood, layer of bodies. The Nazis were missing the one crematorium. I think there were four crematorium working in Auschwitz. And they were not enough, the remaining three. They were carrying bodies into these ditches what they dug and they did open pit burning. Dose it with gasoline until its, I saw this what they were doing one time, as I say, as I was taking all, all these barrels. And then after I, ahem, thought I was the luckiest man I was ordered to

work on the kitchen.

Working in the kitchen I thought maybe, "I am closer to food; I can sustain myself." The hunger was always around us. I worked there for almost three months in the kitchen. Every morning I had to report in after we were counted, into the kitchen, and that's where I was, cutting potatoes, and slicing cabbage for sauerkraut. So I was able to eat all the raw potato and cabbage I can muster down. And on one occasion I was working in the kitchen, and a German SS guard yelled, "Shut up!" And I didn't hear it; I was talking to the next fellow. And he threw a pitchfork at me. It went through my ankle. It got infected. I couldn't walk.

It was dangerous if somebody was disabled, you know. The next inspection comes around you will not survive. So they put me into the hospital barracks. There was a hospital barracks in the encampment. There was thousands of people in there. So they had a hospital barracks but there were minimal medications available. So I got bandaged and I stayed in the hospital for a week or 10 days. And I remembered the name of the chief doctor in hospital. He was Jew from Prague, a Professor Epstein. And he came around one night and he pointed to several of us, "You, you, and you, you go out back to your barrack." I didn't want to go because I still limping, my feet wasn't still well. I pleaded with him that I am not well, I can't go out and go back to work. He was very adamant about it. He sent me back. "You go back to your barrack." The same night, trucks rolled up to the hospital barrack and they emptied it. They took everybody who couldn't walk out of the hospital to the gas chamber. So he saved my life.

So I went back to the barrack and I couldn't go still to work because I was limping. And I was just horrified for the next inspection because from Auschwitz if someone didn't have a job inside the encampment, they had to go out with a transport to, to deep into Germany to man the factories, as we later learned. I couldn't go in front of Mengele for inspection because I still was limping, and they were selecting the transport. They said we are selecting transport every so often. When the camp was full then they selected the transport and it went out. It was couple of times a week, as I say. If you didn't have a job then you went into the transport. So I decided that with my limping I can't stay around, that was my idea, I saved up a couple of portions of my bread, and when the transport was selected, I approached one of the young men, if he would want to change with me. The only difference between us in Auschwitz and the outgoing transport was that they got a flannel uniform, blue and grey striped. It must have been end of November or so, so they were getting flannel uniform, warmer uniform. They had their numbers sewed on their chest and they were tattooed. And so I approached this young man, with my two portions of bread, if he wanted to change suits with me because of my condition I cannot go into inspection and I have to get away from here. He agreed. He took the bread, and he said, "I would have changed with you anyway but the bread is better yet. My father is here and I want to stay here in Auschwitz." So this is how I got into the transport and I was transferred again with the cattle cars out of Auschwitz to Landsberg.

Harper: I'd like to interrupt you here. I want to go back and get some more detail on what you just told me. Do you remember your first impressions when you arrived at Auschwitz?

AIGNER: Well, it was barbed wire all around us, even when we were going into the encampment, the road, both sides, were all these encampments and it was dismal. It was, it was, we saw the towers with their machine gun guards on the corners of the encampments. It was just – we

were horrified. Maybe, I don't know, I probably didn't grasp the intensity of the situation. Being just 15 years old, I was between older people – I call older people 35 and maybe 40ish, 45. And so, it's, I don't know; it's just terrifying but you were herded. You couldn't stop, you couldn't go no place. You were trapped, felt trapped. Matter of fact in Auschwitz I saw many, many times, people we not supposed to get out of barrack in night, in the dark. In morning we go out, and countless times, people against the barbed wire holding the electric barbed wire. Because at night it was electricity turned on. I don't think it was electricity during the daytime. But at night it was electrified. And countless times I saw people hanging on to the electric barbed wire killing themselves. So this is how it was the condition. It was inhuman, and, and terrible.

Harper: Were you with your mother and sister in the transport to Auschwitz, in the cattle car?
AIGNER: Yes, always we huddled together. We didn't let each other go. Even for a few meters.

Harper: And your arrival, you were immediately separated?
AIGNER: Immediately, yes. Men have to go separate, and woman and children. And as we find out the oldsters were separated right away.

Harper: And do you know what happened to them? Did they go to the gas chamber?
AIGNER: I'm quite sure that's what happened. I don't know. I mean, I didn't see it. It was – well I just told – that first time I just didn't want to believe that those were crematoriums in the camp. It sunk in later.

Harper: When you were separated that was the last time you saw…
AIGNER: That's when I saw them last time.

Harper: Do you remember – what did Mengele look like?
AIGNER: I don't remember the face.

Harper: Was he wearing a uniform?
AIGNER: He was in uniform, yes. He was in a white coat, a open coat, with a uniform and a belt on him. And a sidearm. It was so scary you didn't look up. You didn't look up and, and beside it was 50 years ago. I don't remember the face. Even if I see it on a picture, I don't recall the face.

Harper: I want to know the exact order of things. Were you put into lines?
AIGNER: Right away we were out, and then these people were selecting out right away, these kapos, they had a stick in their hand, and my mother spoke German and when they yelled out that the woman and children [were to go to] one side and the man on the other side; my mother sent me right away in the mans line. "You have to go there because the woman and children has to stay here." And I know, you know, she could not survive it because there was some woman who selected out for work too, but she wouldn't leave my sister by herself. So I know she was taken to the gas chamber at that time, at that point.

Harper: About how long were you standing out there in the first selection process?
AIGNER: It was very fast. Must have been 4000 people who arrived or something like that, I don't know. It was a long cattle car. I was in the line, I don't know, less than an hour.

Harper: Were the gypsies with you at all?
AIGNER: They were all around us, yes. In the encampment too, yes.

Harper: So were you standing at this time with just Hungarians?
AIGNER: Yes.

Harper: And where did they take you to right away?
AIGNER: Right away into this encampment where there was I don't know exactly how many barracks facing each other. It was a main street. And then a couple of barracks was for the latrine. Only one barrack for the latrine and one for the bathhouse, running water, and kind of cement tub. So that's where we were able to go to wash off in the morning. And when, you know they, they took all our clothing right away before we got into this encampment. They took us to a place; we had to un-robe. And they gave us the striped uniform.

Harper: When they gave you the uniform, did they shave you?
AIGNER: They cut my hair, yes.

Harper: Did they give you a tattoo?
AIGNER: No, no. The outgoing transport from Auschwitz were getting the tattoo. We who were inside Auschwitz, and stayed there, until we stayed there, we didn't have a tattoo. We had a number on our clothes. I don't remember the number. 100-some thousand. I don't know the number.

Harper: Do you know if your encampment or your section or your barrack that you were in had a name?
AIGNER: No. I think they had a number on it, that's how we recognized the barracks.

Harper: And it was in the camp of Auschwitz. It wasn't in a satellite camp or…
AIGNER: It was in Auschwitz. You are talking about Birkenau, the satellite beside us. It was very close.

Harper: But you were in Auschwitz?
AIGNER: In Auschwitz, yes.

Harper: And how many people would you say were in your barrack group?
AIGNER: Hundreds. It's... I can't even get a number. 600 or so or something like that.

Harper: It's a lot?
AIGNER: It was a lot. It was a long barrack; it was I don't know 70-80 feet long, and bunk beds facing each other with a little alley in between, and a walkway in the middle. And actually was a chimney, a laying down chimney along the barrack, and they used to heat with that laying down chimney. It was built from brick. They used to heat the horse stalls with that chimney. Smoke traveled through, heated up the brick, and that was the heat. But we didn't use it. We didn't have wood. And so both side of this brick was a narrow walkway and you were able to sit on the brick chimney when you weren't in your bed. But see if we would have, if we all stood up we had to come out of the little walkway from the bunk beds, because there was four high, it was 40, 50, 60 people in one of these little…between the bank…I mean between the bunk beds. And so there would have to be 40, 50 people coming

down, or 60 people I don't know exactly – eight to 10 people on a level, four times on each side, that's eight times – that's 60, 70, 80 people.

Harper: In your barrack, who were the people? Were they all Hungarians? Were they all your age?
AIGNER: At first, but then as transport were going out, it were getting mixed. They were bringing in Polish, Romanians, from all over Europe, as the Nazis advanced and they started brining in – so later it was mixed. As I say, I stayed too long in Auschwitz. From July until November or so. And maybe early December, I don't know. And its ironic I don't know what it would have been but Auschwitz was I think liberated in '45 January, so I just left Auschwitz few months before liberation by the Russians. But I don't know what happened who stayed there or what would have happened with me if I stayed there.

Harper: When you say it was mixed, were they Jews from other countries, or …
AIGNER: Mainly Jews. But then as I said it was the criminals, it was the gays from Germany, and political prisoners from all over France. So it was, later on it was, that I hardly was able to talk to. Just a few people who I knew. And even though I don't know them by name anymore, I don't remember.

Harper: Would you say they were friends, were you friends?
AIGNER: We were, well we were friends, but everybody we were looking out for themselves, especially when it come to food.

Harper: Did you have a circle of friends or like a support group that maybe helped each other look out for each other?
AIGNER: We all looked out for each other in a way. Like for example if a kapo or a guard came around we warned each other – you know, "He's coming! Watch out." But no, I didn't have a group of friends. As I say, after the first month, all of the people, beside being taken from Csepel, even the Jews who were around me were strangers most of them. And not all of them came from the same transport, for example, from Csepel. They were picked up different times.

Harper: On the bunks in the barracks, did you have an assigned place every night, did you have to go back to the same…
AIGNER: Yes, yes it was assigned place. And we were sleeping side by side, everybody having a blanket.

Harper: Did you know the men next to, or above you, or below you?
AIGNER: Yes, yes vaguely. As I say, it was just temporary. I did not have my personal friends there and so I become really a loner. Actually it was that we, we kept friendship without names. Like one of the older fellow when one time I was washing gave me his shaver and said "you better shave off your fuzz from your face so you look older." Because I was, you know, 15 years old. "You have a better chance," and I used his shaver so I have some whiskers growing. That's when I shaved first. There was some camaraderie, but it was such a horrible situation that we just didn't build friendship there. At least I didn't. As I say, I was a loner. It was too horrible from day to day.

Harper: Did you notice – was there a difference in how different prisoners were treated? For example were you treated the same way as the political prisoners? Or did you notice a

difference in the…

AIGNER: In Auschwitz it really didn't matter. You were in concentration camp and you were ordered, you were ordered to move, you were ordered to stop or stand. It did not make any difference of any. The triangle what we wear, mine was yellow. And I, you know, I tried to blend in. Not to be there when they start beating on the edge or wherever. And I just tried to survive for another day.

Harper: Did you see people being beaten in front of you?

AIGNER: Yes. Many times. Many times. Scared me, that I would be the next one. And I had been beaten many times, but survived it. It wasn't a true beating. I got hit several times by a guard on a work detail, didn't move the way he liked it. And so it's…I got hit many times, yes. But never got beaten up so to leave me maimed or something, no.

Harper: Do you remember when you first heard about the gas chambers, the crematorium? Was it immediately, or did it take a while?

AIGNER: Shortly after, few weeks after…it was a disbelief first. It's, it's, "No its not happening, it's not true." And kind of hushed it behind our thoughts that its not happening. And we were hoping even then that it's not true. But it sunk in later that…by then we were, at least I was…no feeling. No, no…there was no place to start crying.

Harper: How about religious observance. Was there any?

AIGNER: I didn't notice any. There might have been, but no, I did not myself, no.

Harper: Did you ever have a discussion about religion with anyone?

AIGNER: Not that I recall. We just, if we were talking we were questioning, "Why us"?

Harper: What was your first work assignment?

AIGNER: It was the work detail I was taking all the barrels every morning, pushing the flat wagon. And then cleaning the camp area. And then actually I was in Auschwitz probably less than a month. I got into the kitchen or so, yes. And then I worked three months in the kitchen then what happened with my foot, I couldn't, and then a month, a month and a half later I was gone from Auschwitz.

Harper: How did you get the kitchen job?

AIGNER: They came around and asked people for work. And the this kapo came around and he says, "I need 10 people for kitchen work." And I happened to be by him. I put up my hand.

Harper: Would you say the kitchen job was a good job?

AIGNER: Well, it was OK until I got hit with the pitchfork. We were able to sit down and cut potatoes, and even talk between us. It was ok, yes. But as I say, the only food I got was raw potato and cabbage, so it was, and the regular meals.

Harper: Can you describe a typical day – what time you woke up, when you ate?

AIGNER: I really don't know what time. Early morning we were woken up; it was still cold. Later it was still dark outside. And we were lined up in front of the barrack. Until the counting came, they didn't bring anything. And then after the counting we had breakfast.

Harper: Which was?

AIGNER: Which was some kind of a tea and a piece of bread, maybe cheese. And then the afternoon was the next meal I recall, after work.

Harper: And you worked all day?
AIGNER: We don't work. Probably wasn't more than six hours we worked in the kitchen. And there was big cement bins, oh, a yard wide, and two-three yards long all around the kitchen wall and we were slicing cabbage and salting it down for sauerkraut. Or cutting potatoes for the daily soup. The sauerkraut was used, as it ripened, as it become sauerkraut, it was used for the soup. Evidently the Nazis didn't wasn't us to totally deteriorate. And so that was sauerkraut, some vitamin C in it. And the tea was made out of some kind of pine needles. It was bitter; it was tasteless. But again they said you had better drink it because it has some minerals and vitamins in it.

Harper: Do you know where the food went that you prepared?
AIGNER: It went into the same encampment. As I said there were thousands of people who were in that encampment. And so they were doing…I wasn't in in the morning; that was a different detail who made the breakfast stuff and cut the bread up to portions. And they took it out… Each, each barrack had a detail who went for the food and carried it back to the barrack and dispersed it and the kapo supervising it. And uh, I went in after we were counted and worked until afternoon. Then it was just routine, staying around the barrack and maybe you could walk across the latrine or the wash, or the barrack where we had the water, wash basins, to clean. And so, that's, that's Auschwitz was the only camp I had a shower once. The rest of the camps, until I was liberated in Dachau, I never took a shower. We were using in the smaller camps just a bucket or something, a little water, just washed off ourselves. And we used the remaining water for washing our shirt or our pants. That's the only cleaning possibility there was.

Harper: Did you ever steal any food from the kitchen?
AIGNER: Just what I could eat. You didn't dare to go out with your pocket full. I saw that several times if somebody packed himself or put something under his shirt, he was beaten. You don't do that; it was dangerous. No I didn't steal any food. As I say, I ate as much as I could, even that secretly, but that was the extent of it. It wasn't much. And I was losing rapidly weight in Auschwitz, too.

Harper: Were you aware of any resistance or sabotage activities?
AIGNER: The only sabotage activity I saw – I heard, I didn't see – was the [unclear words] commando rebelling (the crematorium destruction). If somebody did something it was beaten or shot on the spot. So I was scared to do anything. At least I wasn't in any organization there. I don't know, maybe I was too young; they didn't trust me or something? There must have been something going on because I know 25, 35, 45 year-old people they were doing something. But I did not know myself.

Harper: Now your encampment was next to an encampment of twins?
AIGNER: Yes.

Harper: Do you remember specifically what they told you was…
AIGNER: What they told me they were getting blood drawn daily almost. They were losing blood so much that they were hardly able to walk later on. And the experiments… Just a horrible

experience they went through. All kinds of different tests. But nothing specific I can recall. I just saw them losing weight, getting paler and paler day-by-day or week-by-week. Then the new [ones, maybe? unclear] came, and then we didn't understand each other because they talk different languages.

Harper: There were some Hungarian ones?
AIGNER: In the first transport that I was, there were some Hungarians, yes.

Harper: And what were the sanitary conditions like in the barrack?
AIGNER: We had to keep it clean, yes. But nothing specific. We had brooms to clean up the dirt but, and every individual were responsible for their own cleanness. But they were not checking. So it was dependent totally on the individual.

Harper: Was there a toilet in the barrack?
AIGNER: There was a barrack which was the latrine, I said. The toilet, which was a row of 50 or more on one line. And there was probably six of those lines in the barrack. It's a cement pad about, oh, back to back, it holds 50 of them in a row. Several rows, as I say, must have been six rows of those. So it was enough for 300 or more people at one time. So you can imagine it's just – we were like no humans. Animal-like conditions. [We were] handled like animals, herded like animals.

Harper: Why don't we take a break?
AIGNER: Ok, thank you.

[End of first part of interview]

Harper: So if you can begin by telling me how you left Auschwitz, what happened?
AIGNER: Because of my injured foot, I couldn't go in front of Dr. Mengele's inspection. And there were transports going out of Auschwitz all the time. I don't know exactly, every week or several, couple of times a week, usually coming in from all over the world, all over Europe, they were transporting people out to man the German factories. And so because of my injury, I couldn't go in front of the inspection. It was my thought that if I save up a couple of portions of my bread and I change with somebody who was already in the transport – because the only difference between the outgoing transport was that they were getting flannel uniform being already November or December. The flannel uniform, blue and grey striped uniform, and the only different they had the number sewed on and they had tattoos. They got the tattoo number on their arm too. And so I decided I have to get away from Auschwitz. I saved up a couple of portions of my bread, and approach one of the young men who were already selected in the transport. If he would take the bread in exchange of the uniform, being the flannel, and that would mean that I would be in the transport. And he accepted it.

Harper: Was he a Hungarian?
AIGNER: No. I don't know what language he was speaking, but I think I spoke a little German by then. And, no it wasn't Hungarian. And he said, "Well, I would have changed anyway without the bread, but this is better yet, because my father is here and I don't want to leave Auschwitz." So we change uniform and I was in the transport. And the transport, we were mixing. After you were selected, they were able to mix with us. They went back to their

barracks, and when they called up, "The transport is marching out," we were called out, and we were marching out, and the next day to the railroad tracks, and they put us into railroad cars. So I was going out of Auschwitz, hoping to survive.

Harper: Did you know where you were going?

AIGNER: No. We were put into cattle cars and we went to southern Germany as we later learned. Landsberg, maybe was the name of the little town where the railroad cars stopped. And we were ordered out of the railroad cars, cattle cars, and we were marching through this town between the SS guards at gunpoint.

As we were marching through this town this older gentleman, well "older." (35 or so was old for me; I was 15) says, "This is the prison." We walked in front of a big building, "This is the prison where Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. This is where he was imprisoned." We weren't allowed to talk too much so I couldn't ask too much question, "What is *Mein Kampf*?" At that time I didn't know about *Mein Kampf*. And as we were going through this town a remarkable thing happened with us. I can't forget it because it was so…touching to some degree. People from behind the fences, and from windows, were throwing food into the line. It was in middle of Germany. And we were not accustomed to any…humanitarian gesture. And they would have been shot or, or…if they would have been seen. But luckily at least they didn't caught none of us as we were going through. The German people who had maybe some feeling toward us.

Harper: Was this as you were marching from the…

AIGNER: As we were marching, the bags of food, pieces of bread, were flying in from behind the fences and from windows. And we were grabbing it and, and, you know, the guards were looking at us instead of where it come from, wherever it came, because we were disturbing the line. I mean, this is just the episode; it still stuck with me all these years.

Reich: Did you see the people that were throwing the bread?

AIGNER: From the window I saw some faces but they disappeared very fast. But from behind the fences I didn't see faces. And so some people were actually looking toward the windows and grabbing in air if they were able to. But they always were very cautious to throw it behind the guard view.

Anyway, we arrived to this camp in Landsberg, outskirts somewhere in Landsberg, I really don't know places. This name stuck with me because I remember railroad station arriving and everybody repeated the name so we know we were in Landsberg. And so we were placed into a barrack situation with barbed wire, and electric barbed wire around us, with the guard towers around us. We were told that we were going to build some building. As we know, learned later, we were building some hangars for the Nazi air force. Hangars made out of steel re-enforced concrete. It was two, three [word unclear] reinforced concrete, 100 feet wide. And probably couple of hundred feet long. I really don't know sizes; it was just big. And so that's where we were pushing these little mini-railroad cars with material toward building sites, and on up to the building sites at different ramps.

On one occasion, we were actually more man pushing these cars than it would have needed in normal condition but we were so weakened by then. Not at the first months I was working here, but two or three months. You got so weakened that they needed twice as

many men around it, the little railroad car, to be pushed. We were leaning against it but with meager weight, and we were pushing it ahead. On one occasion, one of my fellows fell into this steel re-enforcement, and this SA guard, which was the German engineering unit, wouldn't let the pouring of the cement stop. I still have bad dreams on hearing his screaming.

My foot vaguely healed by this time. Wasn't good, but my condition was getting worse and worse day-by-day. I was down on my strength. I was very weak. And by this time the war was coming to the end. We were hearing the ally's heavy artillery in the distance. And so they stopped the work in Landsberg and we were ordered to march to another encampment. They called it the hospital camp because of our condition. They put us into this hospital camp. I don't know if they wanted to save face or what. We were marched to, I don't know the distance exactly, five or 10 kilometer to the next town. Outskirts of this town was a camp, put up. And that's what they called hospital camp. This town was Kaufering. I never saw the town, but it was around Kaufering, because I heard the name. Actually I learned it when we were put on the railroad cars again later.

In this hospital, so-called hospital camp, I contacted typhus. Everybody has lice. In Landsberg and Kaufering we had just no cleaning. Running water was very scarce, very little, and you didn't get to it or if you get, got a bucket of water. We cleaned ourselves as much as we can with that. But everybody had lice. So I contracted typhus and we were put into these barracks, which, you know, they named, "OK, anybody who has fever or typhus goes into this barrack." And we were placed into this A-frame barrack, on the ground A-frame. And a little roadway dug out in the middle, and on the two sides, on the dirt, we were sleeping with our blankets. And we were side by side. You know, just enough room for one person. So tight in there. And in the ten days, or a week or ten days, I was laying there half, half almost out with high fever. Very minimal food, and the fellows were bringing in some water. When I came to, I was able to sit up and get going. The barrack was half empty. The rest of them were carried out. Then we had plenty of room around us. I was able to scramble out of the barrack, and so I didn't have no more fever anymore. When I push down my trousers, on my shin it was so covered with lice, like anthill. When I swiped the lice out from my shin, the skin was going with it. So I had another open sore which took a long time to heal.

One good nice thing happened with us in Kaufering. I don't know why the Nazi let in the American Red Cross for inspection. I don't even know if it was American Red Cross but that's what it must have been. Well, they didn't have too much to inspect. They saw our conditions. But the nice thing was, the blessing was, that they were able to bring in blankets and food. I got hold of a little can of Borden's milk, and I cherished it for several days. In many ways, it helped me survive. We were probably not more than three maybe four weeks in this camp. As I say the war was coming to an end. Day and night we heard distance and bombing and heavy artillery. We were hoping they come soon enough. They had another, they didn't; they had another surprise for us. We were marched out to the railroad station and on to the cattle cars again, from this camp, whoever was able to walk out of this camp.

Harper: Were you able to walk?
AIGNER: I was able to walk with hanging to each other.

Harper: So, did you recuperate a little bit?

AIGNER: Just barely. By then I was down to skin and bone. We were put into these cattle cars. Helping each other, pulling each other up because they were ordering us to move. But this time the Nazis were retreating and both of the railroad tracks were going back into Germany. Again, I don't know, the thought was maybe being the concentration camp inmate on one track, and their retreating army with the artillery, heavy equipment and ammunition on the other track. They were retreating into Germany. Again, they hoped maybe they won't be bombed. But allied bombers came down and hit the whole train very hard.

They machine-gunned the whole train, and the first pass over my cattle car both of the fellow beside me died, at the first pass. At the second pass, it was daylight in the cattle car. And whoever was alive we scrambled out. By then it was no guards around. We went into the woods and tried to hide. Our freedom lasted maybe two days. In the meanwhile we ran out to the fields, nearby fields and dug up some raw potato. That's what we ate. They came around with dogs, they chased us back to the cattle cars and then we removed the bodies. And we traveled, I don't know it was a day or two, I don't recall. I was in a daze. And this is how we arrived to Dachau. And that was close to the end of April of 1945.

Harper: So was, do you know, were they American planes or Russian planes, do you know?

AIGNER: It must have American, or French, or whoever fought on that front, I don't know.

Harper: And they were shooting at your cattle car?

AIGNER: Well shooting both…

Harper: Oh because there was a military train?

AIGNER: Military train, side by side. They were going back inside Germany on both tracks. And we were on this side. They either didn't know, and, I don't know, I don't know what happened. It just came through and were shooting. As I say by the time we scrambled out of the cattle car there was no guards around. So they were probably shooting at the Germans as they were running, but hitting the cattle cars too.

This is how we arrived to Dachau. And as I later learned, this train was called the death train. More dead bodies arrived than living on that train to Dachau. And that was about one week or 10 days before we were liberated in Dachau. I went into the barrack, and by then it was so disorganized, everything, evidently the high command already left the camp, and then only the guards was left who were ordered to stay around. We hardly got any food in the last days. And when May 2nd the 7th army liberated us, I was not able to go out to greet. [Crying]. But it was a happy day. Excuse me.

I was just a walking skeleton. I couldn't walk by myself; I had to lean on to something always. But things started to change; we got plenty of food by then. And I got a can of corned beef. I was eating just a spoonful at a time for days. It finally spoiled on me I had to throw it away. Many of our fellows who couldn't hold back; they ate the whole thing and their weakened condition couldn't take the rich food. They perished then. Things got organized. We got all the DDT in our shirts and our pants and so got rid of the lice. And better food. Within a week or less I was put into the American Field Hospital.

Harper: So, this week or so you were in Dachau, did you just lie around?

AIGNER: Yes. We didn't do nothing. There was nothing going on. The guns were coming closer and closer. And we just were huddling together and not…Well it was, Dachau. It was different because we arrived in the condition which is unimaginable. And there were in Dachau very healthy-looking good-condition people comparing to us. Because they were working in some factories and they were fed better, so much better. But my condition was such that, and I don't think I would have lasted another week if I lived that long. Anyway I was put into the field hospital in Dachau, or around Dachau, I don't know exactly where it was. And I stayed in the field hospital for almost two weeks. Then everybody was itching to go home, and they were transporting people all over Europe. Different transport trucks, transporting with trucks people back home. To France to Holland, to whatever nationality there was.

In the meanwhile, as I say, I stayed in the hospital for two weeks, and we overheard a couple American doctors talking about us. I didn't speak English; somebody translated what he was talking about. He says these concentration camp inmates who survived in this condition, they don't give us more than 15 years to live. I don't know, maybe I was too young, I beat the odds.

Anyway, I was put on one of these transport back to Czechoslovakia. Went to go back to my hometown. And I have disinfection from Prague and Bratislava where I went through Czechoslovakia they were giving over to authorities and they were handling our case and, and the train was, after the war, right after the war, was going here and there now and then, and so whenever a train went out, we were scrambling to get on the train. Going home any which way we can. And I was traveling on the top of the train or on the steps of the train. I got back to Nové Zámky, by then it was again Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovakians right after the war reclaimed the territory. I tried to find somebody in this town. None of my relations are found, or I didn't find nobody. Then I went on the train again, and headed toward Budapest. By then we had some papers that we can travel. As this place [unclear words] and got to Budapest, went to Csepel. And front of the paper mill, as they were coming out of work, I found a friend who I recognized. I asked him about, if he knows about my sister. And he said, "Yes I know your sister lives in Budapest. She survived. And your father survived too."

It was three of us from our little family. It's a miracle. Beside this, I have two cousins who live. From all these people who were at the Seder table at my grandmas place, just five of us survived. It was a happy reunion, for sure. My sister survived. She left, she escaped from this barrack situation from the paper mill and went into Budapest and put herself up as bombed out from the countryside. It was still under Nazi occupation. And she put herself as bombed out from the countryside with no papers and she was working as a maid for three months, three or four months, during the rest of the war years. By January of 1945 they were liberated by the Russians in Budapest. And my father, as I said, he hid as the Germans were retreating, and he came home behind the Russian lines as they advanced to Budapest.

Harper: Can I interrupt you for a second? Do you remember…Did you see the American soldiers who liberated you in Dachau?

AIGNER: Oh yes, oh yes I saw them. It was a welcome site. Actually in Dachau I noticed I had some interesting happening. The German guards who stayed guarding us hid into the big garbage bins which was in the ground. It's big so that a tractor can go in and push the garbage in

and out. They hid in there and I saw a concentration camp inmates chasing them and throwing rocks and beating them. And here American detail came and held a gun against us because they didn't want them to beat them. They wanted to capture them and take them hostage as they came out of the garbage dumps. I just saw that from a distance as they were chasing and holding back the concentration camp inmates preventing them to killing the Nazis.

Harper: And you said you remembered what unit it was?
AIGNER: 7th Army, I heard.

Harper: And did you notice, were there any Japanese-Americans or African-Americans or was it all….
AIGNER: Yes, African-Americans were between them. But no, I don't know if I took that close look. And it was the main thing it were Americans.

Harper: And so then you were in the hospital, and when you got out of the hospital, were you still unhealthy, or..
AIGNER: Oh, I have pictures when I came home six months later I was looked like a picture of [word unclear]. My face was blown up. My body, my system couldn't process the water. So I was just swollen all over. My legs were swollen for years. Yes, I had edema or so called, and a vitamin deficiency for years. But then when I get back to Hungary, I was put into a sanatorium, a kind of youth camp by the American Joint helping organization from here. They set up these campsites, which was in schools, in outskirts, in outside of, in towns down in Hungary. And I stayed there for two to four weeks to get my strength back. And then I went back to work, learn my trade, slowly. Probably two months later, two or three months later. And my health wasn't good but I was going to school half a day and worked half a day.

Harper: OK, now, I want to know, your life after the war. But first I want to ask you some questions about survival. What do you attribute to your survival? Or what factors?
AIGNER: I really don't have no single, I even can't say that I decided I am going to survive. It was just a day-to-day hanging on to life. It was instinct of wanting to live another day. It's not like I decided, "I'm going to beat this wrap and get out of this camp." It wasn't so. It was just I tried to survive day by day. I didn't know, I didn't have anything in my thoughts that I can contribute to survival of mine.

Harper: But obviously you wanted to survive.
AIGNER: Well as I say, it was an instinct; it was just an animal instinct I say. Because of the conditions it was such that as you tried to duck the beating and tried to eat your food before somebody grabs it out of your hand, and such that, that you save your energy as much as I can, but that was just about that. I cannot contribute that I decided, "I will survive." No.

Harper: Did you try at all to observe any religious holidays or prayer?
AIGNER: Not really, honestly. I arrived to Auschwitz and I saw and I heard that my mother and my little sister was gone. And not just only me, but many of us had the question why? Why can it happen, if, you know, we just were broken. And no I, no I. I prayed Shema Yisrael many, many times yes, but it wasn't a religious observance; it was just a hope, a prayer.

Harper: Did you ever have to make a difficult moral decision in order to survive?
AIGNER: Hmm, no. No, I, I tried to get away from everybody's way and, and no I never, never had to do, you know, that I would hurt somebody else, no. I was, I was just unable to do things like that. We were all in the same shoes. We were all there, put there, and forced to do whatever it had to be done there.

Harper: Whom did you meet that you will never forget? Is there a person who stands out?
AIGNER: Mengele was one of them I can't forget. And the American army liberators, can't forget.

Harper: The doctor in the hospital in Auschwitz, what was his…?
AIGNER: Dr. Epstein, that's another person I never can forget. And I don't know if he survived.

Harper: You don't know what happened?
AIGNER: No. I know the name, that's all. That he was a professor in Prague. I don't know why I didn't pursue to look. But he was, as I say again, an older man, and I don't know if he survived. And if he survived he is not living now.

Harper: What do you think is the most difficult thing to talk about now? About your experience?
AIGNER: It's all these experiences. It's all difficult. And difficult to talk about my mother and my little sister who vanished. And its still, as I said, you know, the brutality we went through, seeing the man in the cement, his hand out, it still…. The brutality, is always there, it's been there for many, many years. It's hard to forget it. And the scraping my memory to bring it back again. It's not easy.

Harper: This is a strange question…
AIGNER: No, no strange questions…[chuckles]

Harper: …but it's one that I am very curious about – When you were back in Hungary, after the war, was it sort of strange to be there when so many of your fellow Jewish countrymen have been murdered?
AIGNER: Yes it was, and it was difficult to be there because antisemitism still lingered around after the war. And some of these antisemite people openly were talking about. You know when Communism came to Hungary they could not do any atrocity against it because the Communism is another sort of dictatorship and they forced us, forced them to, to live together. But when it came to talking, in Budapest, someone said, "There's more Jews came back than was taken away." And some of these people were standing out and laughing at us when we were taken away from the ghetto, waving us goodbye, and things like that. No, it was strange; it was a strange land for me.

And I don't feel, you know, I didn't have nothing good except my own family to remember. My cousins and we played in that same street. My little childhood is the only thing I can remember. But growing up after age ten it was a constant exposure to antisemitism and that we are different and it stuck with us, even, it, it's now, you know. I'm not as freely opening up with people because of this antisemitism. I feel it all around us. It's not as tremendously here anymore. But still it is here. But now that I went out and told what happened with me many times, its really helping me to come back because there's a lot of compassionate people out there who has feeling and they didn't know about it. So it's changing me around a little bit, it helps me.

When I came back, as I said, I started working, and Communism came in 1948, totalitarian Communism in Hungary. They took over the government and you know when we went to vote it was like 99% - 9/10ths victory. It was so that you went into the booth and there was no pencil there, and if you asked for a pencil you were marked and things like that. So you know that's how it was voting in Hungary for years. That's how they had the high rating of 99% winning. It's only two million Communists was in Hungary, and the rest of the eight million wasn't communist. So I started working and you know lived the way the rest of the people lived and we were only saved by the rulers. That there was no antisemitism or anything else allowed. Like church-going people were marked, and so on.

So in 1956 I met my wife; we got married. It's total coincidence that we coming from the total same background, actually the same countryside, we were born 150 miles apart and we met up in Budapest after the war. We got married in fall of 1956, October 23rd, the Hungarian revolution broke out. And…

Harper: Ok, lets…I want to backtrack. Before you get to this you were living in Budapest, after the war, is that right?

AIGNER: First I lived in Csepel for a while. Which is 10-15 kilometers from Budapest and an electric streetcar was going between it. It's like Gresham here. Basically Budapest, greater Budapest they called it.

Harper: And how did your life change now that the Communists were in power? How did your working life or your secular life [change]? And number two: how did your Jewish life change under the Communists?

AIGNER: I started working so as long as you work… because they had a slogan, "If you don't work you don't eat." So as long as you worked you are OK from the Communist standpoint. Jewish life, it's Budapest; they had great Jewish life. I wasn't too religious anymore. Some people turned religious after the concentration camp. I went the opposite direction. I don't know if it was because, I don't say… No, I have to retract - I feel more Jewish now than I've ever felt. I suffered for it. But I am not religious.

Harper: How about your father, did it change his…?

AIGNER: No, he, he's about the same. He mourned my mother and my sister to the end. He died here in Portland aged 91. Beautiful life.

Harper: So your experiences changed your outlook on religion?

AIGNER: On religion, yes. It's just changed me. I cannot, could not, comprehend that my mother who never hurt nobody, and all of my relatives, all of my cousins, my grandmother, she was a 60-some year old lady, had to perish like this. My little sister, 9 years old. And so did millions more.

Harper: So you didn't go to the synagogue anymore?

AIGNER: No, I can't say I didn't go to synagogue. High Holidays we go. It's a tradition still, see. I don't go every Friday night; I go on the High Holidays. I brought up my children, they were going to Sunday school till they finished 8th grade, then I told them, "It's your decision." And so, you know, we came to Portland in '57, after the revolution we escaped. My daughter born in 1960, my son in '64. We have a couple of grandchildren we cherish, and

so sort of building a little new family.

Harper: So were you in-between, after the war, between 1956, were you involved at all in politics or anything. Or not involved in politics, but were you a member of the Communist party or did have ties with the Communists?

AIGNER: No, I was forced to go in as a youth, into the Communist youth group. And I used that to the hilt. I mean when they had the chance, when I had the chance, I went to a youth camp for two weeks. It was a nice vacation. I enjoyed that, but other than that I was orienting. I was in the Zionist movement. And many of my friends went to Israel. And I didn't want to leave my father and I didn't go. I don't know if I regret it or not. Later looking back I don't mind I didn't go because I had nothing good in my life until that, and I didn't want to leave the States. I was building a new life, and I liked it here.

Harper: Was there a big difference in the way day-to-day life worked from before the war than compared to when the Communists were in power?

AIGNER: To some degree we were protected. There was no open antisemitism, but still it was always around us. And as long as you obliged and you did not talk against the government, it was such situation that you couldn't, you didn't want to talk to your neighbors about politics because if you talked against the government or something anti, you disappeared. A lot of people, lot of families disappeared in Hungary like that. They were not trusted anymore; they were just taken away. And many of them, I don't even know where they took them.

Harper: What I am trying to understand is, did you just not care about what was going on in the government or did you like the government or dislike the government?

AIGNER: I disliked the government, yes, definitely. It was not a free government. It wasn't as free as we were in Czechoslovakia as I grow up. As a ten-year-old boy it was a republic; it was fairly democratic. Somewhat democratic, it wasn't total democratic. And so the difference, I still was able to compare as remembering it as a ten-year-old, that I wasn't afraid of the police, and I was, you know, it was sort of free. But under Communism it was such that anytime you moved you had to report where you are, what you do and so on, and you weren't free to change the job. You were working in the factory, you wanted to go someplace else, you had to go so many red tape, why and what reason you want to change. You were kind of stuck with your job. And so I lucked out because I was able to get into a, a commune type of an industry. All the people who had their own business, small businesses. They had to combine into a commune business. And the government had better control that way. And it was a better work situation over there if I was able. I was able to get into one of these. And that's where I worked until 1956. Then I left the country.

Harper: Where did you meet your wife?

AIGNER: Actually my uncle was working with her. A distant uncle, he was a furrier in Budapest. And uh, uh he told her, you know I want to introduce my nephew. And we got introduced, and we had a long engagement – 59 days. [both men laugh]. We met, and married. And then five months later we left the country. We decided when, in 1959 October [he says 1959, but he means 1956] the revolution [Hungarian Revolution] broke out, and by Christmas Eve…Christmas rolled around and the Russians came back with tanks and just broke down the revolution. Started to restore their communistic way. We were hoping that we going to be a free country when the revolution broke out, but it didn't [turn out] so. Then we decided, actually we talked about it before if anytime a chance comes to leave the country,

we will. And the chance came. And we left the country with my father and my step-mother. My father remarried ten years after the war. Actually he remarried 1950. I was in the service and I got a leave for her wedding, for his wedding.

Harper: So you were in the Hungarian army then?
AIGNER: Yes, I served in the Hungarian army for two years.

Harper: Was that difficult to serve a country that treated you so badly?
AIGNER: It was difficult, but again, you didn't have no way out. You were inducted and called in and that's it. You served your country. Even if you don't have the feeling for it, you didn't try to express it because if you did, you suffered for it. The oppression was all around us all of the time.

Harper: When did you learn the extent of the destruction of the European Jews?
AIGNER: After the war we started coming back, and beside we saw it around us. All the families in Budapest the synagogues were destroyed and very little number of synagogue was rebuilt because there was no, nobody to, to fill it. The numbers I just heard – you know I have been to Yad Vashem and I saw that 400,000 Hungarian, over 400,000 Hungarian perished. And so, numbers I don't know, what I learned after the war, yes.

Harper: Tell me about the revolution. What happened?
AIGNER: I was working and the college, the colleges, the young people from the colleges started marching front of the radio station with plaques, boards, signs to, to wanted to put a declaration in. And wanted to get into the radio station to put their declaration on air. And naturally they weren't allowed. And they broke into one of the radio station and they did the proclamation anyway. But then the AVH, the Hungarian equivalent of Gestapo or the Russian equivalent of whatever it was, I don't even know the name of now…

Harper: KGB?
AIGNER: KGB, thank you. So the AVH they came and they chase them out and shoot as many as they can, as they are running out. Anyway, from this came that some units of the Hungarian army stood over the revolution side, and some of the government officials came on top of it and there was just a small detail of Russian soldiers, I don't know how many thousands, but they beat them.

Harper: Did you see this happen, or are you telling me generally what happened?
AIGNER: This was generally. What I saw for example one time, which is cruelly. We were not far from my wife's home in a place where five streets run into the, the intersection. A Hungarian tank battalion battled with a Russian troop. And the next morning when we went out – actually one tank, tank battalion, one Hungarian tank was hidden in the side street and there came a truck load of Russian soldiers and they just blew up the truck and run over them. I saw the bodies, the blood and the tank, all over there. This is what I saw. While crossing Budapest, I saw dead people caused by the revolution put into piles. It was bringing back what I saw in Auschwitz and all the concentration camps. We walked by these, these piles of dead people crossing the city because I had a bicycle and I was taking my wife. In places we couldn't use the bike because we had to walk, things was debris all over. And it was just, just like war.

We were in our apartment in one occasion and the, the anti-revolutionaries were looking for some Communists and someone told them that in this building there are Communists hiding and so they machine gun the whole, all the windows up. And we were laying. It was early morning; we were laying in our bed. I told my wife, "Roll off the bed. Don't get up." But they never came in. They weren't strong enough to, to chase down everybody. But they had guns and by then it was so that they were sporadic, they were just groups of revolutionaries fighting here and there. So, you know, these things stick with you.

Harper: How were you able to leave the country? Did you escape or did you do it legally?
AIGNER: No, nobody left legally. There's 135,000 Hungarian left at that time, as I learned later. I didn't know the number. But we were 15 of us, five children in our group. And we paid off a Hungarian border guard. We went to the border and we had a name. And we met the Hungarian border guard, closed to the border town. And he, we paid him off.

Harper: And who were you with, I'm sorry?
AIGNER: People from all walks. I don't know how it got organized, but we went down to this town and we, just four of us went down. And what it was is over there this man waited for us at the railroad station and took us to a farmhouse. And over there he collected 15 people, we were four of us.

Harper: You and your wife and your father…?
AIGNER: And my step-mother, yes.

Harper: Your sister stayed?
AIGNER: Yes. I learned later that she tried to escape; she was captured. That's why she stayed. Anyway, we paid off this guard and he took us to this farmhouse close to the border line. And then around midnight, or close to midnight, I don't know what time it was – 10 or 11. They took us out and walked to the border and the border was marked with… like if it was a woodsy area, it was 200 feet, 200 feet of woods were cut out on the border line. And they used to have mines there, but because the Austrian got back their, how you call it, the sovereignty? Like Switzerland, the country was off, off limits.

Harper: Neutrality?
AIGNER: Neutrality, yes. Neutrality, sovereignty, I don't know the word…Anyway, the Russians had to move out from Austria. And when they moved out from Austria, later they demanded to pick up their mines on the borderline with Hungary. And they did it just a couple of months before the revolution broke out. So this soldier, this border guard told us, "You cross this." (Here it was knee-deep snow), "You cross this and you are in Austria." But over there the border was zig-zagging. You never know you crossed the border. You don't walk back if you make a wrong turn. Because it was zig-zagging, the border line.

So we got over, actually when we were advised to take some sheets along. And believe it or not these children, the five children were so quiet they like knew that they are in danger. Not one cried. And when the Russian border guard shot up flares, we were hiding down under the sheets. Waited 'til the flare goes down, then we continued. This how we approached the border and crossed it. Then we went to the cornfield and hoped that we are in Austria. And in the distance we saw a little house, probably a mile away or so, with lights on. And my father and one more man, he was 57 at that time, walked down to this

house and knocked on the window hoping it will be German people speaking, and it was. And they woke up the town, the rung the bell, and they came out for the rest of us with a Snow Cat, took us into the schoolhouse and fed us, and it was freedom.

And so from, from Austria, from there it was [town name?] we arrived to in Germany – in Austria. Then we went into Vienna, to the consulate, and by then my step-brother, who lived in Portland, placed a affidavit of acceptance on the consulate. And so we were put into a transport to the United States. And we were put on a ship, which was dismantled here in Portland. General Leroy Altridge [company name unclear], the scrap company here in Portland. [word unclear] dismantled it. And we were put on, 1500 of us on the ship, and we came over in February, in January - we arrived to Portland in February, what was it, February 4th or something like that. And so we settled here and started working.

Harper: What did you do?

AIGNER: Worked as a machinist. About 18 years at the Cascade Corporation by Gresham. Before that I worked four years in a smaller company. Then I went to work for Techtronics, for 13 years as a model maker. And that's where I retired from almost three years ago.

Harper: And you said you raised your children to be Jewish?

AIGNER: Yes, my son and my daughter, yes. As I say, until 8th grade from elementary they were going to Sunday school.

Harper: So tell me, your children, how old they are, their names.

AIGNER: My daughter, Suzanne, she is 34, and my son is going to be 30. There is four years between them.

Harper: Do they live in Portland?

AIGNER: My son lives in San Francisco, works in advertisement. And my daughter lives in Tualatin, with my grandchildren. Married, and she become a nurse. She works at [unclear word] hospital as a nurse. And she married, and she married a young man; he's a gentile. And they are very happy, and I can't ask anything more really.

Harper: Are you involved now in the Jewish community?

AIGNER: Mmm, not much really. I just go to synagogue on the high holidays, but not other than that really involvement. This is my most involvement what I have now, with the Anne Frank exhibits.

Harper: Have you been back to Hungary?

AIGNER: Yes, we went back under Communism. My sister and his son and my wife had a sister and nieces and nephews there and their families. Then we went back again now the free Hungary. Since '89 it's a little bit different but still very hard. It's hard to change over to the free economy now that it's still very much of a hardship. My sister retired and, and her retirement is a meager retirement really. We have to help her all the time.

Harper: Do you identify with, I mean do you consider yourself Hungarian, or Jewish, or Jewish-Hungarian?

AIGNER: Definitely not Hungarian. More Jewish than Hungarian. Not Hungarian whatsoever. I didn't have no good life in Hungary. No good thing to remember. And so I'm more of an

American Jew now. And I enjoyed myself when I went to Israel, to visit. I felt really home, felt really good. It was a good feeling to be there. But I don't know. I have to tell you honestly, I'm selfish. I like to live here. After all I went through, I can be a little bit selfish.

Harper: [Chuckles] I don't have any more questions. Do you have any questions Lanie?
Reich: Actually I was wondering if you could tell me what happened to your sister after she was caught trying to escape?
AIGNER: There was so many people who were caught in the border that there would have been thousands and thousands of them. They were just sent back, taken back and they were looked after for a while. But nothing, she was at that time 57 years old, so close to retirement. I have to retract, my father was 57 at the time when we left. My sister was a year older than I was, 28 years, I'm sorry. No my father was 57 when we left the country, and my sister was a year older, 28. I was 27 when I left Hungary. She stayed there and worked, had a good job at that time comparingly. But retirement is very meager. It's worse than here in the United States. Social security is not enough over there to live.

Reich: Also, do you feel that antisemitism in this area, for example, can be easily inflamed?
AIGNER: I think, I think people can be enticed to be antisemites. Or any, because it is, I don't know, people are, their mind can be changed easily if they get into a mass. It's like happened in Germany. It's a mass hysteria. They needed a scape goat. So there were the Jews. But, I sincerely hope that it cannot happen here.

Reich: Do you have any explanations for yourself about why this happened in Germany or why does hysteria occur…?
AIGNER: Well why did this happen? Why does it happen that in thousands of years the Jews were chased around the world? No special explanation I have really. I didn't study it deeply, but…. Rulers needed a scape goat, and this was it for Hitler. And people needed to belittle something or somebody always, and it was the Jews. That's how I interpret it, I don't know.

Harper: Do you have a message for people who may be watching this tape?
AIGNER: To learn about it. That we are all equal, there is only one God up there, no matter what religion we pray to that God. But unfortunately people don't learn. I hope they will from this message, or from other messages. Because it's going on. Genocide is going all around the world. I don't have to tell you. Bosnia Herzegovinian, Iran, Iraq, or even in Ireland. The religious war in the 20th century, in the modern country is unimaginable – should be unimaginable. And so I just hope people learn and they will not, uh, they will look at each other as human beings, as equal. As long as I can only see two sides. Either a bad person or criminal, or a good person, which most people are. And they should be treated like that. We should respect each other.

Harper: Well thank you very much.
AIGNER: Thank you for listening to me.

[recording pauses and resumes]

AIGNER: [describing a picture] – My mother myself wearing the yellow star. This was taken two weeks before we were taken from the ghetto. And we put it in for development and we never retrieved it, just after the war.

Harper: How lucky!
AIGNER: And my father got it back, and on this side. There's again a picture of my mother and all of us. I don't know if it's good enough; that's not sharp enough. And here just the three of us kids. My older sister, myself, and my nine year old little sister.

AIGNER: [shuffling papers] – This is a document from Czechoslovakia – this is in Czechish. Disinfection paper, actually this is a repatriation paper I got when I arrived in Czechoslovakia in May 30th 1945 from Dachau.

Harper: What's your name? Ladislav?
AIGNER: Ladislav, that is Czechoslovakian. Laslo in Hungarian. Now I am Leslie. So I have three names. Leslie is my name now.

AIGNER: This picture was taken of me five months, actually November '95, no '45 I am sorry, November '45. I was, I looked like very happy (healthy?) but I was all puffed up. And uh, and this is a picture a year later of myself. A year after that…

AIGNER: Shuffling papers…. I don't know, I don't have it in sequence but…I am sorry, I am missing something…I didn't, I forgot to mention, I wrote a post card from Auschwitz. And I have copies for you from this.

Harper: So you sent this from Auschwitz?
AIGNER: And this is what the reason. You can read this one and you see what was the meaning of it. It was written in German by another concentration camp inmate. They asked us, actually they told us to write a letter home, kind of disguising that we are OK. Even we were taken away from our homeland, and this is the thing what we had to write on. That we are OK. So I kind of candidly wrote about that I am with my friends and I sent this letter to a gentile friend who I know the address. And he saved it and gave it to my father back when he came home. See he came home 1945 January already.

Harper: This is, you wrote it in German?
AIGNER: No, I didn't, as I say one of my friends, who wrote German in the camp. It had to be written in German because otherwise they couldn't check. But we were forced basically, we were told to write home.

Harper: I never heard that, that you were able to send something…
AIGNER: Yes, this is the…[Reich – mumbles "Auschwitz stamp…] Well I don't know if it's an Auschwitz stamp or another, but you have the copy that's actually better than this. It just, at the time I didn't thought I want to save these things. And its in poor condition because, you know, you had to go around and it just stashed it in the pocket and it just got….this is in Czechish too. It's another disinfection station I had to go through. I don't understand too much anymore in Czechish. Disinfection station in [town name unclear]. Because when we passed through a town and we went to the next place, they did it again. We had to go through putting our clothes into steam to kill…if there was still any lice or something. I don't know, this is again in…June 2nd, still in Czechoslovakia. Someone who can speak Czechish can tell you…[chuckles]. These are post cards what my mother wrote to my father and he got it back. On this postcards in Hungarian she wrote about that we were going to have to move into the ghetto and stuff like that.

END OF INTERVIEW