

**HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT**

Name of Interviewee	<b>ERVIN HEKSH</b>		
Name of Interviewer	Lyn Silberman	Date	1/7/85
Name of Abstractor	Michelle Heyer	Date	2/15/89

**NARRATIVE SUMMARY**

Ervin Heksh was born in a village northwest of Budapest, Hungary. Of the 3,600 inhabitants, there were approximately 60 Jewish families. Most considered themselves "modern" orthodox, and were patriotic Hungarians. There was no serious anti-Semitism.

Ervin's father was in the grain business. Ervin remembers his childhood as happy and active. Because of Jewish quotas, he could not attend a university, so he went to the yeshiva instead. Eventually, he reluctantly entered his father's business.

Jews began to notice changes in 1935. It became an insult to call someone a Jew, and by 1938 Jews could not own businesses. Ervin's father had to take on a partner who did no work and collected half the profits.

Many Jews were also being deported. Ervin was nearly deported because he bought a house which a Hungarian gendarme wanted to buy. However his father paid a bribe, and Ervin was sentenced to probation.

In 1942 he was sent to a forced labor camp in Crimea. Ervin saw many instances of brutality, but for the most part, he was treated well.

In October 1942 his unit was transferred to Belopolye. They worked through one of the worst winters in Russian history. Of 24 men only 15 survived. Moreover, the commander was a brutal man, often choosing men at random for torture.

A group of Italian prisoners joined Ervin's unit in Belopolye. They were very kind to the Jewish prisoners, sharing food and interceding with the commander to try to stop the torture.

Ervin returned home that summer. His family was still there, and his son had been born while he was in Russia. Ervin worked for a while as a traveling salesman.

In 1945 the Jews of Budapest were ghettoized. Ervin's parents and wife and son were confined there, but Ervin stayed out to work in a mine. However, he and some friends were arrested and placed in the ghetto when they were caught sneaking

Ervin had been listed as a mechanic simply because he had a driver's license. He was one of 60 or 70 tradesmen who were taken out of the ghetto to work.

They worked in a manganese mine, and conditions were good until the Arrow Cross came to power. At that point, Ervin decided to run away. He escaped from the labor camp, but was arrested in Budapest with other escapees. He managed to get away again, and found his wife and son, who were living in a camp sponsored by the Red Cross.

The 3,000 to 4,000 Jews in the camp were told they'd be protected, but in December they were rounded up and transported to Bergen-Belsen.

At Bergen-Belsen they were placed in a special camp and it was rumored that they would be sent to Switzerland as part of a special exchange. But they remained at Bergen-Belsen until April 1945, when they were evacuated to Theresienstadt.

Before they arrived at Theresienstadt, the war ended. Their transport train stopped between stations, and the SS guards left them. They were liberated the next day.

Ervin spent time in Hildenheim, Germany, but eventually he returned to Budapest. He discovered later that his parents had died at Auschwitz and his wife had died at Bergen-Belsen after liberation. He found his son in Budapest, living with his wife's parents, but his son became sick and died. He was two years old.

Ervin no longer wanted to remain in Budapest, so he secretly crossed the border into Germany. He lived in several refugee camps, and eventually remarried. He came to the U.S. in 1948.

Ervin currently works as the manager of a plumbing supply company. He has a 31-year-old son and a daughter, 35.

## ABSTRACT

### VIDEO 1 OF 3

#### PRESENT LIFE

70 years old. Born in Hungary. Works as manager of a plumbing supply company. Has a son, 31, and daughter, 35.

#### LIFE BEFORE WAR

Lived 60 kilometers northwest of Budapest in a village of 3,600.

#### JEWISH POPULATION

60 Jewish families. Most were businessmen or landowners. There was a synagogue and a yeshiva. Most were "modern" orthodox.

#### FATHER'S BACKGROUND

Was originally a tenant farmer. Got married. Fought in WW I. After war, communists took over, took father's farm equipment, so he went into grain business.

#### MOTHER'S FAMILY

Grew up 15 kilometers from Ervin's hometown. Was one of seven children.

WHEN ERVIN TURNS 16, HE GOES TO YESHIVA IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA FOR THREE AND A HALF YEARS.

Mother's family lived there.

#### ERVIN HAS ONE SISTER

#### ERVIN'S EDUCATION

Went to private, Catholic school, then to gymnasium in county seat.

#### ANTI-SEMITISM

Most of Ervin's friends were gentile. No serious, organized anti-Semitism in his village. Good relations between Jews and gentiles, but Jews definitely had different life style.

## ZIONISM

Hungarian Jews were very patriotic, and Zionism was contradiction to this. There was a chapter of Betar - Ervin was a member - but organized Zionism was generally not accepted.

## FAMILY LANGUAGES

Spoke Hungarian at home. Ervin's first language was German, because he spent first years of his life in German-speaking Czechoslovakia.

## THERE ARE MANY BOOKS IN THE HEKSH HOME

## ERVIN'S CHILDHOOD ACTIVITIES

Very athletic - played soccer, swam. Collected stamps, did photography.

## MORE ON ANTI-SEMITISM

At Catholic school, Jewish children went out to Jewish school during religion class. Sometimes Jews were told that Christ was killed by Jews. But no active anti-Semitism.

## ERVIN CANNOT GO TO COLLEGE BECAUSE OF QUOTAS

Hungarian population was 6% Jewish, so only 6% of Jews could go to college. This is why he went to yeshiva. He didn't want to become a rabbi, but he did want an education.

## ERVIN PLANS TO GO INTO FATHER'S BUSINESS

He was not happy, but accepted it.

## ERVIN FINISHES AT THE YESHIVA IN 1930

## THEY FIRST NOTICE CHANGES FOR JEWS IN 1935

Tone of newspapers and radio changed. It became an insult to call someone a Jew. Jews couldn't own businesses - had to take on a gentile partner.

## ERVIN AND FATHER KEEP THEIR BUSINESS UNTIL 1938

Then they had to take on a gentile partner. He owned the business, did no work and got half the profits.

## LIFE AT HOME IS STILL COMFORTABLE

## JEWS CONDUCT RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES WITHOUT FEAR UNTIL 1941

#### GENTILES DO NOT PROTEST ANTI-SEMITIC LAWS

Some were aware that they would be affected economically, but politically there was no interest.

#### SITUATION FOR JEWS WORSENS IN 1939

They couldn't go to school, couldn't be employed in a company unless a certain percentage of workers were gentiles.

#### JEWS ARE THROWN OUT OF THE ARMY, SENT TO FORCED LABOR CAMPS INSTEAD

#### SOME JEWS ARE DEPORTED OR KILLED

Some sent away based on false accusations. All Jews had to prove three generations of Hungarian citizenship. Those who couldn't were deported. A large group of Polish deportees were killed in the Ukraine.

#### ERVIN IS THREATENED WITH DEPORTATION

He bought a house which head of Hungarian gendarmerie wanted to buy. Ervin's father heard that Ervin may be deported, so he paid a bribe. Instead Ervin was put on probation until 1942.

#### HE IS CALLED UP FOR FORCED LABOR IN 1942

Was sent to Crimea. Kept in touch with family once a month via preprinted postcards. Ervin had gotten married.

#### ERVIN IS ADVISED TO BRING MONEY TO LABOR CAMP, BUT HUNGARIAN GENDARMES STEAL IT. THEY ALSO TAKE AWAY HIS NEW BOOTS

ERVIN MEETS AN OLD FRIEND (GENTILE) WHO IS IN CHARGE OF A UNIT. HE BEATS JEWS IN FRONT OF ERVIN, THEN CALLS HIM INTO HIS OFFICE TO EXPLAIN THAT WAR REQUIRES DIFFERENT BEHAVIOR

#### JEWISH LABORERS ARE TREATED AS ANY OTHER MEMBERS OF HUNGARIAN ARMY

#### ERVIN'S UNIT WORKS BUILDING A ROAD

At 6 a.m. they walked 20 kilometers to work, returned to camp at 11 p.m.

#### ERVIN WITNESSES FIRST NAZI BRUTALITY

There were German guards for the road crew. One day during a rest break a German shot three or four men for no reason.

#### THEY WORK ON A BRIDGE ACROSS THE SYM RIVER

Cut wood for the bridge. Slept in the forest. Another group worked on the bridge - they were beaten and overworked, but Ervin's group was not mistreated.

#### SOME MEN MANAGE TO KEEP KOSHER

A kosher cook made special food for them. Ervin knew it was impractical and dangerous, so he did not keep kosher.

#### MORE ON THEIR WORK

They didn't mind forced labor - only the beatings. But Ervin was lucky - the man in charge of his unit was humane.

#### SIX DAYS AFTER THEY FINISH BRIDGE THEY HEAR THAT RUSSIANS DESTROYED IT

#### IN OCTOBER 1942 THEY ARE TRANSFERRED TO BELOPOLYE IN THE UKRAINE

Worked chopping wood to heat a hospital. Stayed until February 1945.

#### EVERY TWO WEEKS 24 MEN ARE SELECTED TO DIG GRAVES

Had to dig in below-zero weather. Men were punished at random every few days - hung by their arms until they fainted. Many died or were crippled. It was one of Ervin's worst experiences.

### VIDEO 2 OF 3

#### OF THE 24 MEN ON THIS WORK DETAIL, AN AVERAGE OF 15 SURVIVED CONDITIONS ARE VERY BAD

Winter of 1942 was one of the worst in Russian history. Every day the commander chose four or five men for punishment.

#### ERVIN VOLUNTEERS FOR A CARPENTRY JOB, EVEN THOUGH HE KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT CARPENTRY

He found five other prisoners who knew carpentry. They lowered the roof of a horse barn for ten days, then helped Hungarian bricklayer build a tool shed for another ten days.

AS THE RUSSIAN FRONT ADVANCES, ERVIN AND THE OTHER CARPENTERS BUILD STOVES FOR THE HOSPITAL. WHEN THE FRONT ARRIVES, HUNGARIANS LEAVE ERVIN AND OTHERS BEHIND

They planned to wait for Russian troops, but they were caught by German soldiers. Told to rejoin their unit or be shot.

THEY CATCH UP TO A HOSPITAL UNIT, ARE PUT TO WORK HAULING THE PORTABLE KITCHEN

They fell far behind the unit. One man ran away, but Ervin and others stayed - had no food, nowhere to go. Finally caught up to unit and were given food - two slices of bread.

ERVIN TELLS OF BEING CAUGHT BY HUNGARIANS BEFORE THEY CAUGHT UP TO THE UNIT

Put together with other deserters. Had one-half hour every night to beg or steal food. Two days later they found their own unit.

SPRING 1943 - ERVIN'S UNIT IS WORKING AT A HOSPITAL IN BRYANSK FOREST

ERVIN BECOMES SICK

A friend from home was a doctor, got him into infirmary. But it was full; he had to leave. Later an epidemic of typhus swept the infirmary, killing many patients.

THERE ARE 12 DOCTORS IN ERVIN'S UNIT. THEY ROTATE MEDICAL DUTIES WITH MANUAL LABOR

ERVIN TELLS TWO STORIES ABOUT MEDICAL TREATMENT

Ervin had a rotten tooth. The dentist had to chisel it out without novocaine, because prisoners couldn't have anesthetic.

A man accidentally nearly cut off his finger. Surgeon told commander to give him seven days off work, but the commander replied that there was a limit of seven sick men per unit, and there were 20 ahead of him on the waiting list.

THERE ARE MANY PARTISANS IN THE FOREST

IT IS BETTER TO WORK UNDER GERMAN COMMANDERS THAN HUNGARIANS

Germans were business-like, but Hungarians were often sadistic.

A UNIT OF ITALIANS JOINS ERVIN'S LABOR UNIT. THE JEWISH DOCTORS SERVE AS TRANSLATORS

Because of quotas on Jews at Hungarian medical schools, many had studied in Bologna. Italian soldiers insisted that only Jewish doctors treat them.

OLDER POLITICAL PRISONERS ARE DISCHARGED FROM ERVIN'S UNIT. THOSE WHO REPLACE THEM RECEIVE WORSE TREATMENT

THE COMMANDER OF ERVIN'S UNIT AND A JEWISH COLLABORATOR STEAL THE UNIT'S FOOD, START A "RESTAURANT" WHERE THE MEN MUST BUY IT BACK

THE COMMANDER ASKS ERVIN FOR BRIBE MONEY IN ORDER TO KEEP HIS JOB

Ervin refused. All good jobs had to be bought.

THIS COMMANDER IS REPLACED

He was a thief, but not anti-Semitic. New man was anti-Semitic.

EVERY DAY THE NEW COMMANDER SELECTS A MAN TO TORTURE

THE ITALIANS STEP IN TO STOP THE TORTURE

Italians were very good to the Jews. Shared food with them. When they learned of torture, they told the commander to stop or they would kill him. He didn't stop - simply moved inside where they couldn't see him.

A NEW HEAD COMMANDER ARRIVES. ERVIN RECOGNIZES HIM FROM HOME - KNOWS HIM AS VERY ANTI-SEMITIC. HOWEVER HE FINALLY ENDS THE TORTURE

OF 240 MEN IN ERVIN'S UNIT, APPROXIMATELY 110 SURVIVE

ERVIN GOES HOME, SUMMER 1942

A new head of Hungarian military decided that Jews should serve only one year, as normal soldiers did. Ervin's was one of the oldest units. They were fourth to be discharged. Fifth unit and all others were intercepted at the border by Germans and forced back to work.

ERVIN'S FAMILY IS STILL AT HOME

ERVIN TELLS A RABBI THAT ALL JEWS IN GERMAN-OCCUPIED RUSSIA HAVE BEEN KILLED, BUT RABBI REFUSES TO BELIEVE IT

Life for Jews in Hungary was still fairly good.



ERVIN'S SON IS BORN WHILE HE IS IN RUSSIA

ERVIN IS GIVEN A JOB AS A TRAVELING SALESMAN

Worked for a friend who was a printer. This friend was exempted from anti-Jewish laws because he was a WW I hero. Ervin sold forms for registration of Jews. Worked from November 1943 until March 1945.

WHILE ON TRAIN TO PRAGUE, ERVIN LEARNS THAT THE GERMANS HAVE ROUNDED UP ALL JEWS FROM THE TRAIN STATION THERE

Knew he couldn't get off train, so he waited to see what would happen. At station, an Announcement was made: all passengers must show ID papers. Ervin had a train pass and an army discharge card - the only forms of ID without religion printed on them. He was able to pass the inspection. He also bought tickets for Jews trapped in Prague. On the train home he saw a neighbor; when someone commented, "Now we have a Jew-free train," she winked at him.

ERVIN TELLS THE STORY OF CONFRONTING THE MAN IN CHARGE OF DEPORTING HUNGARIAN JEWS

The man denied that he was cruel. In order to prove it, he offered to allow Ervin and some friends to work in a mine and to live there instead of the ghetto. Ervin accepted. His wife was in Budapest with their child.

ERVIN AND HIS FRIENDS ARE ARRESTED WHEN THEY GO TO VISIT THEIR FAMILIES IN THE GHETTO

### VIDEO 3 OF 3

IN THE GHETTO, A LIST HAS BEEN COMPILED OF ALL JEWS BY PROFESSION. ERVIN IS LISTED AS A MECHANIC

He knew nothing about cars, but had a driver's license and a car. A friend had listed him as a mechanic.

ALL TRADESMEN ARE SENT OUT TO WORK

60 to 70 men were taken to train station, put in freight cars. Guards were friendly. Took prisoners to restroom at stops, let them buy food.

WHEN THEY STOP IN BUDAPEST, GUARDS ALLOW ERVIN TO VISIT HIS WIFE AND SON

He promised to return before the train left again. Wife was living with her parents.

HUNGARIAN MINISTERS OF DEFENSE AND INTERIOR CANNOT DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH ERVIN'S GROUP. FINALLY THEY ARE ASSIGNED TO A LABOR COMPANY WORKING ON TRAIN LINES, THEN THEY WORK IN A MANGANESE MINE

Commander was a decent man. Told them he'd protect them if they didn't try anything foolish. Nazis were paid for the prisoners' labor by owner of mine. Conditions were good.

ARROW CROSS COMES TO POWER, OCTOBER 1944. TERROR BEGINS

Hungary made peace with Russian, All labor companies were to be disbanded. But Germany took over, installed the Arrow Cross.

COMMUNISTS IN ERVIN'S COMPANY ARE ARRANGING ESCAPES. THEY HELP ERVIN GET AWAY

Gave Ervin and three other men train tickets to Russian-held Budapest. Told him about a rendezvous point.

THEY ARE ARRESTED IN BUDAPEST. ERVIN SENT TO FORCED LABOR

Meeting place had been bombed. Nazis were waiting for them.

ERVIN RUNS AWAY, FINDS WIFE AND SON. THEY ARE LIVING IN A RED CROSS-SPONSORED COMMUNITY FOR JEWS

3,000 to 4,000 people lived there, under Red Cross protection. Some Hungarian soldiers said they were stupid to think they were safe.

DECEMBER - NAZIS ROUND UP THE JEWS IN THE RED CROSS COMMUNITY, TAKE THEM TO RAILROAD STATION

ERVIN RECALLS A TRANSPORT HE ENCOUNTERED EARLIER, WHILE WORKING AT THE MINE

Train was different - had passenger cars, special SS guards. As he always did, Ervin approached the prisoners to offer them water. They told him to get away before there was big trouble.

THE BUDAPEST TRANSPORT IS TOLD THEY ARE GOING TO BERGEN-BELSEN, THEN TO SWITZERLAND

Ervin did not believe this.

THEY ARE TAKEN TO BERGEN-BELSEN, PLACED IN SPECIAL CAMP. THEY ARE APPARENTLY PARTY OF A SPECIAL DEAL BETWEEN EICHMANN AND KASSNER

At Bergen-Belsen, took showers, got their own clothes back. Put in Sonderkamp, or special camp. Ervin learned of a deal between Eichmann and Kassner, a Hungarian leader, for 10,000 trucks. As a good-faith gesture, Eichmann allowed Kassner to select Jews for transport to Switzerland.

ERVIN REALIZES THE SPECIAL TRANSPORT HE SAW EARLIER WAS A GROUP ON ITS WAY TO SWITZERLAND

ERVIN'S GROUP NEVER GOES TO SWITZERLAND. THEY REMAIN AT BERGEN-BELSEN

Camp director was a man named Fischer - Kassner's father-in-law. They were not mistreated, but got only one bowl of soup per day, at irregular hours. Many died of hunger edema.

HIMMLER VISITS CAMP, PROMISES THEY ARE GOING TO SWITZERLAND SOON

They did not go.

ERVIN GETS NEWS FROM FELLOW PRISONERS

Belgian and French prisoners worked in pharmacy, overhears BBC reports. They shared news with entire camp.

BERGEN-BELSEN IS EVACUATED - APRIL 7, 1945

Prisoners were told to pack, get ready to leave. Walked to railroad siding in Bergen, loaded onto a train.

THEY ARE TOLD THAT THEY ARE GOING TO THERESIENSTADT

AS THEY ARE LEAVING BERGEN-BELSEN, FREIGHT CARS OF FROZEN BODIES ARE ARRIVING

THE TRAIN STOPS PERMANENTLY BETWEEN STATIONS

At previous station they heard gunshots, saw fires.

THEY HOLD THEIR SS GUARDS PRISONER IN ORDER TO PROTECT THEMSELVES

German Luftwaffe members had been traveling with them, ran away. Greek prisoners thought SS guards would join them, leaving prisoners at mercy of any Germans who passed by. Took Luftwaffe guns, distributed them to prisoners. SS guards did not know they had no bullets. Prisoners forced SS to pretend they were still guarding the transport.

#### LIBERATORS ARRIVE THE NEXT DAY

First Ervin saw white flags in windows of every home in a nearby town. Shortly, American tanks entered. It was the 9th Army, 30th Infantry - a medical unit.

#### AMERICANS TAKE THEM TO HILDENHEIM

It was a German military research institute. American gave Germans one hour to leave their homes, moved refugees in.

#### ERVIN'S PARENTS ARE KILLED AT AUSCHWITZ JUNE 13, 1944

He point out that many important events in his life occurred on the 13th of the month.

#### AT HILDENHEIM, ERVIN ACQUIRES A CAR, BECOMES SUPPLY OFFICER

He found a Mercedes in a garage, hot-wired. Did not apply for position as supply officer, because Americans would not hire refugees who had worked for SS. Ervin had been a translator, thought he was ineligible, but Americans hired him anyway.

#### ERVIN'S WIFE DIES AFTER LIBERATION OF BERGEN-BELSEN

Many died there of overeating. Ervin weighed 110 lbs. at liberation, but medical unit would not let him and fellow refugees overeat. Ervin traveled to Bergen-Belsen to find his wife; friends told him about her death.

#### ERVIN RETURNS TO BUDAPEST WHEN HILDENHEIM BECOMES RUSSIAN TERRITORY. HE BRIBES HIS WAY OVER BORDER

Border guard asked for papers, Ervin had none. So Ervin traded his car for cigarette papers and passage over the border.

#### ERVIN FEELS LOST, CONFUSED BY NEW-FOUND FREEDOM

After years of forced labor, army, he didn't know how to cope with independence.

#### HE FINDS HIS SON AND HIS WIFE'S PARENTS, BUT SON SOON DIED

They were living in Budapest. Son became ill, died. He was two years old.

ERVIN WANTS TO RETURN TO GERMANY, BUT HE AND MANY OTHERS HELD UP AT BORDER. ERVIN SMUGGLES HUNDREDS ACROSS

One border guard was known to let refugees cross, but he was sick when Ervin arrived. Ervin and hundred of Jews trapped, unable to enter Germany. Ervin set up kosher kitchen for everyone. Each night he smuggled 70-80 people over border. Next day they were replaced by other refugees, so size of group remained constant.

AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS, ERVIN CROSSES THE GERMAN BORDER

The lenient guard returned, allowed all refugees to cross.

ERVIN LIVES IN REFUGEE CAMP AT KULM, ON GERMAN-CZECH BORDER. HE STAYS THROUGH 1946, THEN LIVES AT SEVERAL OTHER CAMPS, WORKS FOR UNRRA

HE COMES TO U.S. IN 1948

ERVIN MARRIES AGAIN

Met his wife while waiting to enter Germany.

UNRRA SPONSORS ERVIN TO EMIGRATE; WIFE HAS RELATIVES IN N.Y.

ERVIN TELLS THE STORY OF TWO JEWS WHO ESCAPE, JOIN PARTISANS

When to Partisans were surrounded by the Germans, told Jews that Partisans could blend into local population, but Jews would be spotted. Gave them two choices: commit suicide or be shot by Partisans. This story deterred others from joining Partisan groups.

ERVIN IS TELLING HIS STORY BECAUSE HE WANTS TO LEAVE A RECORD OF WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE IN FORCED LABOR

A few months before interview, he visited a friend in Detroit. Friend had also been in labor camps. Pointed out that many Jews suffered and died in forced labor, but there is little knowledge of this.