

The following is an interview of Ivan Becker. It is taking place on January 18, 1995. It is being conducted in Washington, DC on behalf of The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Could you please give us your full name?

Becker, Ivan.

And your middle name?

Endre.

And where were you born?

In Budapest on June 14, 1929.

Let's begin talking about your childhood. Who made up your family?

My family was made up from my mother and father, Kato and Dezso Becker. My father was an accountant in a factory manufacturing cigarette paper called Modino, M-O-D-I-N-O. My mother was a homemaker. We were pretty much middle class people. We didn't have a car, but we did have a maid who lived with us.

And my father, as was normal in the '30s and '40s, worked and came home for lunch in the afternoon, went back to work, and came home quite late. So the family was really together mostly in the middle of the day and in the evenings. As I say, we were not well-to-do at all. But we had a nice life, basically, enjoying music and theatre, movies.

From the early '30s on, I went to school in Budapest. And elementary school for four years--

Was this a public school?

Public school. It was a public school. I was also a Boy Scout. My reason for bringing that one out, that it became a segregated, in spite of all of the Boy Scout vows, it was a segregated troop, only Jews. And after 1938 or so, even the elementary school was segregated, Jews in one class, Christians in the other classes.

Yeah. We'll get to 1938 in a moment. Let's move back a little bit.

Did you live right in town?

Yes. We lived-- well, up to about maybe four or five years old, we were in the suburbs. What would be termed in a garden apartment today. And then we moved into town when, I guess, it came time to go to school.

Did you live in a private house or an apartment--

We were in a large, large apartment house.

What kind of neighborhood was it? Was it mixed with Jews and non-Jews?

It was primarily a Jewish neighborhood. It was a newer part of town. But it was totally integrated, basically.

So you had non-Jewish friends and neighbors to play with?

I had--

As well as Jews?

Yes. Because of classmates lived all over town, not just in the district, my friends came mostly from the apartment house. And they were both Jews and Christian.

Was there any problem when you were very young about treatment of your friends?

The only problem that--

I'm talking about when you were younger.

All right, I mean, we're talking about the first--

Few years.

--Jewish laws coming in in 1938, when I was nine years old.

OK.

And so until then, there was no discrimination. And even after that, at least amongst friends, we had no problems.

So you moved into town, you said, because of the school.

I'm assuming that's why my father changed.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And how religious was your family.

The family was not religious at all. I think we were Hungarian-- I know we were Hungarians first and Jews second.

Did you observe any holidays, Jewish holidays?

The only high holidays-- we observed the high holidays primarily because my uncle, my mother's brother was more religiously oriented. He was in Israel in the '20s, came back to Hungary in '29, and then stayed there. And so we used to go to their house for the high holidays.

But within your own home?

Within our own home, we were not religious, although it was mandatory to have religion in school. And once a week, we had to go to the synagogue. And so learning Hebrew was part of it. Bar mitzvah was a other part of it, which was orthodox.

Because it was the only thing, the only Jewish religion that was available. In those days, there was no reformed temples. So I remember being bar mitzvahed in an orthodox one, which later on in our story comes out, I found, much later.

We'll talk about that. Did you have any hobbies? I know you mentioned that your family was interested in music?

Well, yes. Other interests besides school?

I loved to play soccer. I was beginning to be a pretty good photographer when I was about 12. I loved to read. I was a lousy student. But basically, I liked certain subjects and I excelled in those. And what I didn't like, I didn't excel in at all, which really was the way the rest of my life turned out. I enjoyed certain things and I was good at it. But other than that, I didn't work very hard--

When you played soccer, were you playing with non-Jewish children also?

Yes, soccer, hockey, water polo. There was a total integration in the area. So there was really no-- I don't remember any even latent discrimination.

Do you remember your father talking about any of that--

No.

--workwise?

I remember my father talking about politics. I remember that when German troops took over Hungary, my father was throwing out all his Social Democratic newspapers, so that if there is a search, they wouldn't find it. Because this was unacceptable.

But other than that, I don't think that he was aware of any. And I know that he had co-workers that we have seen socially that were Christian.

Did you have a large extended family, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents?

I had about, probably, four, five family members who were really family. There was an extended acquaintanceship, friends of the family. But the aforementioned uncle, his wife, and two children were really the only relatives that we had in Budapest.

Because that was on my mother's side. On my father's side, everybody was in Transylvania in two towns, actually, maybe three. But one is [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], which is [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] today. Cluj, which was [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], and [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] was the third town where my father's family was traced, basically.

They kind of moved around. There was a substantial-- there was an uncle, my father's brother, my father's mother and father.

Did you go to visit these relatives?

I did go to visit them on school holidays, usually, in summertime. One of the family members had a vineyard in [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. And I stayed there in a vineyard most of the summer.

I remember visiting there even in the wintertime, because I'm remembering trying to kill myself on a sled, some ridiculous places, with a bunch of my cousins and other kids. And that probably goes back to around 1938, '39, 1937.

What language did you speak at home?

Only Hungarian.

That's the only language?

Only language spoken, we did not speak Yiddish. We were not very-- because of their religious orientation, we also didn't know anybody who was religious. And so the assimilated ones would not speak Yiddish, even if they could. And I don't think my parents could. My uncle did and could.

All right, let's now start to talk about when you noticed a change in your life. What was the first memory or experience that you can recall? 1938?

1938, when the first Jewish restriction or restrictive laws came in. And that was--

You were only 9-years-old.

I was 9-years-old.

What do you remember from that?

I was aware of the fact that the proclamation that Jews can now not do certain things. And they can only do certain things in terms of jobs.

How did you know that at 9-years-old?

I guess reading it and listening to my parents talking about it. Radio.

Were you frightened on hearing this?

No. We were not frightened. And strangely enough, in 1938, my grandmother, my father's mother from Transylvania, went out to her two daughters in America, supposedly for the World's Fair in 1938. And she stayed behind. And in 1938--

Stayed in the United States?

Stayed in the United States. Never went back. My grandfather was dead by that time. And so she stayed with her two daughters in New York.

The husband of one of the daughters sent us an affidavit that would have enabled us, my father, my mother, and I, to immigrate to America. But I remember my father worrying about the fact that he, at that time, was 40-- '38? 41, 41, 42-years-old, the fact that he didn't speak any English. He felt that he could not get a job.

And he was not worried too much about the restrictions. Because they were fairly light. It didn't touch him. His job was not of that level.

And he felt that because he was in the army during the First World War, he was an officer, and he was decorated, that they're not going to touch him. And so he decided not to take advantage of this affidavit.

As I mentioned, he was in the First World War. He fought on the Italian front and also on the Russian front. He was in the infantry in Italy. And he was an aerial observer on the Russian front. I'm bringing this up, because I his pictures from those times, which is the few things that were left.

And so the decision was made, essentially, [INAUDIBLE] to stay behind. And as things got worse and worse in terms of the restrictions--

Well, let's talk about how these restrictions applied to you and your family.

The first, if I remember correctly, the first thing that I personally felt was the segregation in school. If I remember the first two years of elementary school, we were integrated.

How old were you when you started school?

I was seven.

Seven.

It was 1936. And '38 and '39 got more and more restrictive.

Separating Jews from Nazis.

Separated the Jews from non-Jews in the class.

Were you angry?

I don't remember being angry. I remember being--

Puzzled?

Authority was always paramount in Hungary. And government authority was. So essentially, the government could do most anything that they wanted you to be or wanted you to do. And so on the acceptance was there. And I think that there was maybe a relief that, well, it's not so bad. We can live with this.

Some people stayed behind because of that kind of a belief. And some tried to emigrate at that point, because they believed that things are going to get worse and worse. My family wouldn't believe how bad things would be later on.

So there was no anger. There was acceptance. It was the law. So we got segregated.

Did you still see these children outside of school or was there segregation in playing also?

No. The segregation was really in school and even in the Boy Scout troop, which was split up into families, so-called, of four or five children. The Jewish kids had one or two of the families. And the rest of them were the Christian. And we played together. And we were Boy Scouts together.

And I believe I remember, as a Boy Scout, marching when Lord Baden Powell came to Budapest. And it will be interesting to find out whether if he did and did I remember it correctly. But I seem to remember a story that he told us over the megaphone that he had, I believe, scarlet fever as an adult.

The reason for that was that God looked down and saw this person in short pants and said he did not have scarlet fever yet. So give it to him. And the story is basically that we did not have long pants as Boy Scouts.

I mean, as children, we had short pants. Nobody had long pants. Winter or summer, we had short pants. And this was the gist of that story. Whether I read it or it's memory, it's hard to tell. But I remember parading with all the scouts from all over Hungary in one of the soccer stadiums.

You would have been how old then?

Probably 8, 9, 10, thereabouts.

OK. The first you said was segregation within schools.

In class.

In class. And then next?

Second one, the Boy Scouts. Then subsequent laws mandated that the men go into service, into the labor brigades. That must've been around 1940. I'm not clear on it.

My father was drafted into this. But because he had a bronze medal for heroism during the First World War, he went in as a company commander and was in for-- my guess is for a couple of years.

OK. He was taken away to another location?

He was taken away to another location where we could visit him on occasion.

What was your feelings when he left? Was that hard?

I think there was anxiety. But then, there was acceptance. Again, there was worry, I remember.

There was fear. There was no anger that I was aware of. Acquiescence, really what came into being at that point.

Did he say anything special to you when he left? Do you remember anything specific.

No. It was very matter of fact. I knew he was going to be an officer. And I guess it was expected. He did not really talk to me about it.

My communication with him was loving, but not formal, necessarily. But except for the weekends, I didn't see much of him. My mother and I were always together. But I basically remember of a good relationship [INAUDIBLE] with my father, a loving relationship with a very nice person.

So you knew where he was being sent?

Well, I knew that he went in, but not where he was going to be sent. But then he came-- then he was communicating with us and told us where he was.

How did he communicate with you, by letters?

Letters and telephone call, and so we knew where he was. And we went visiting. There was visiting privileges.

What kind of conditions was he living under?

I think that, as an officer, he had quite good conditions. And even in those days, the labor brigade itself was fairly well-treated. It was early on.

That evolved into, as further laws came in, he was discharged for a period of time and then drafted back, but into the brigade itself. By that time, you had to have a high rank or many more medals to remain an officer. And so he went back into-- and essentially, this is a period of two or three years, he would be traveled around. And we heard from him some time. But he never came home, and we never could visit, to the best of my recollection.

When your father left, it was you and your mother. How did you manage? How did your mother manage financially?

I am not sure. I know we had help. We had help from some people, money help. She eventually discharged the maid. And just mother and I were in the same apartment, where we'd always been.

But she picked up and started making small jewelry from pearls and was selling it. At the same time, I was also going to-- well, we're talking about now, we skipped a couple of years where nothing much happened except things got tighter. And the loss came in other--

What other ways?

Further restrictions.

On you, what ways?

On us, in terms of--

The curfew?

--curfew, when we could go out, when we had to be home. I was not able to go to school anymore. I went to gymnasium. And I was no longer able to go to gymnasium because of the curfews.

What were the time curfews? You couldn't get home in time, was that the problem?

No. I think that the restriction was from 10:00 AM morning till 4:00 in the afternoon we were able to get out. But then, eventually, that got tighter, like, only in the afternoon that we were able to get out of the house.

How did you feel, as a young boy, being restricted to your house like that?

I think that was a great deal of resentment. It was troubling. Because we knew that there were certain actions taken against Jews. We heard of beating, et cetera, because we had to wear the yellow star.

When did you start wearing a yellow star?

I can't remember the date. It was-- I am only guessing that it was kind of 1940, 1941 thereabouts, and was part of the restrictions. How did you like wearing a yellow star?

I remember being very upset about it. First of all, I did not like to be labeled and stand out from a group, from the rest of the world. I do not like to be picked on, as it were. Because it was too easy to pick us off the street when the Nazis wanted to do it. Although I think that I'm skipping a little bit ahead.

Because up to March of 1944, and so I am skipping about two years of mounting difficulties, of getting food, of getting money. I was also going to gymnasium at that time. And I was in the fourth year of gymnasium.

As I mentioned, I was a rather poor student. And I made a deal with the professor, who was the class supervisor, I guess, that because of my mathematical inability, I would not come back to the fifth year and he would let me graduate on the fourth year.

Before graduation, however, which would have been in May or June, March 19 the Germans marched in. And so that effectively ended school career completely. From that point on, I did some smuggling to go into the provinces. Well, going out of town, that they called it the suburbs, by bus and train, and trade for some meat and cold cuts. Bring it back into town and trade it for food and other staples.

How did you know how to do this?

I [? do ?] remember. I remember that I had the little backpack. And I went out and picked up some sausages and salami and such. And I brought it back. And I believe my mother was able to either sell it or trade it.

You did this by yourself?

I did it by myself with the knowledge that if I get caught for smuggling then I would be killed.

Were you wearing your star while you were doing it?

I believe so.

While you were doing it?

I believe so.

Mhm.

I pretty much had to at that point. As I say, it's a little bit fuzzy. But I remember that, for some reason, one of the bagful of sausages smelled terribly. And how anybody could miss me, that I was smuggling yet-- I never could understand. So my smuggling days came to an end at that point because it was becoming too dangerous.

And I also was able to get a job in a printing plant as an apprentice. My uncle, who was still living in Budapest at that time, was a graphic artist, quite well-known, specialty of the placards for display purposes and advertising. And he had connections with a rather large printing company called Globus, which is still in existence as of 1994.

And I went there as an apprentice in the photo engraving section of the printing shop. And this happened after March of 1944. So this must have been in later part of March, April, May, June, July. Go ahead.

Yeah, I just wanted to back up a little before spring of '44.

Tell me about your bar mitzvah. You said you did have one. And that would have been in 1942.

OK.

June of '42.

My bar mitzvah was in the neighborhood nearby where I lived. It was in an Orthodox temple. It was an Orthodox bar mitzvah to the point where men and women were separated.

As usual, I was not a very good Hebrew student. So everything was written out for me phonetically in Hungarian, which later on will have a connection to something else that went on many years later.

It was a family affair. I remember my mother serving little cakes called [?minion?] from [?Gerbeuad?], which was one of the best bakery sweet shops still in existence. The family was-- and friends, we didn't have too many people that came over.

But it was largely a family affair, mostly grown ups. I only remember my cousins being there, and no other child. And it certainly was not a fancy deal at all. It was just we went to the temple, had the bar mitzvah, came home.

Was everybody wearing--

Had people in.

Was everybody wearing their stars at the time?

I don't think so. I don't think so. The only picture that I have of myself with a star was taken in 1944.

So I am not sure. It's something I ought to find out. I believe that the stars had to be put on after the Germans took over in March of 1944.

Oh, OK.

I am pretty sure of that. So until then, there was no major identification problem. Although, I said it before, I don't know if we actually had curfews before that. I suspect it was in 1944 that the curfew started at the insistence of the Germans. Because Hungary was--

An ally of Germany.

--it was an ally of Germany, but was not occupied, and was a reluctant ally, if you will. They tried to survive



[INAUDIBLE] Germans were fighting in Russia.

You were explaining about the Hungarian situation being an ally of Germany.

Right. And in March thereabouts of 1944, the Hungarians tried to make a pull out of the alliance and wanted to make a separate peace with the West, which was very impractical. Because certainly, the Germans were West of us and the Germans were all over us, all around us. But they clearly felt that to have Hungary as an independent hostile country would threaten their efforts in Russia and threaten their supply line. So they were compelled to occupy the country.

And did you ever see Admiral Horthy --

I have seen him--

--at that time?

I have seen him, certainly in magazines, but not in person.

How did you and your mother hear about what was happening in the rest of Europe at that time, in 1942, 1943? Or did you know?

We knew what was happening. We had a radio. And it was capable of listening to the BBC, which was against-- I mean, punishable by death if they catch you do it.

So that was another restriction?

That was another restriction that you actually had to hand in any fancy radio which was capable of shortwave reception. But we had a radio which was a simple one. And my father didn't hand it in. And so we listened to it at night, with the windows closed and the shades drawn.

You and your mother?

My mother, and he, when he was home. We did listen to it. So we were aware of the war in general.

Did your family have to turn in any jewelry, any valuables?

I believe they had to turn in jewelry. I believe along with the radios. And I'm not sure of anything else that had to be at that point given up by us. We had no car, so there was no problem.

But in reminiscing, [INAUDIBLE] back into the '38 kind of interesting memories that the future Pope came to Hungary in 1938, which was the thousandth year of the Catholic conversion of Hungary. And his name was Pacelli at that time. I saw him because we had friends on the Danube. And he came by boat.

And I saw him, within 100 yards of him coming. He, ultimately, of course, didn't help the Jews all that much. He was rather working with the Germans, as we found out much later.

But childhood was fairly normal going to summertime, into swimming pools, to playing soccer, bicycling all over the town.

This is even in '42, '43?

This is even then, even then.

So up till--

Growing up without any restrictions of that type. And I don't believe that I had to give up my bicycle, because I had it in 1944. So I'm assuming--

Before spring of '44, did you yourself have any anti-Semitic incidents happen personally, on the street to you by other people?

Once in a while, we were called a dirty Jew, something like that.

And how did you respond? Or did you?

With shock, but no response, no fighting back. I guess we knew it was-- I mean, it was widespread enough, because of the laws and because of the shops being sized that this is a Jewish shop and only Jews go in here in some cases. So there was no real fighting spirit left in us.

Did you talk among your friends, the other boys your age about what was happening?

Not that I remember. Remember, some of them were Christian. And so we did not talk about religion. My little girlfriend was Christian. That family will come up later.

So it was really expected by our parents that we probably were going to go end up married one day. But so I'm not aware of any discrimination. One of my friends who I have pictures with became a conductor, world-renowned, that we played with.

He was half-Christian. But his father's mother-- so somewhere along in their background, there was one family that was Jewish. But he was basically Christian. And he survived as a Christian.

So there was nothing-- there was no Kristallnacht. And there was no beatings that I have seen on the street, although we heard, clearly.

So you, yourself never witnessed?

I had not witnessed anything like that until the end of '44, when things got real sticky. So the normalcy for my normal childhood into a more restricted one was gradual. It was not cataclysmic. It was difficult only from a financial point of view and the fact that my father was not there.

OK. Now it's spring of '44.

Spring of 1944, I remember that the school class, I was still in the fourth gymnasium. The name of the gymnasium was [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] gymnasium, which is a state gymnasium, or high school where I spent four years. And then spring of '44, in March of '44, we went on a class outing.

And it was on March 19. And the day-- and we were coming back from the outskirts of Budapest. Our bus broke down. And so we walked. We had to walk the rest of the way.

And we saw, over the town, over Budapest, the German dive bombers diving, going up, diving, not dropping bombs, just scaring people. And we didn't know what was going on. And when we get back to Budapest, the German army was marching in.

You saw them.

That scared us. Yes.

OK.

That was the first time that I really felt fear.

When you saw--

When I saw the Germans, yeah.

You went back to school right away? Or did you all go home?

No. I went back to school, wearing the star.

What did your teachers say?

They said nothing. Mostly, except one, who was our Latin professor, most of them were old people. Old being in there 50s and 60s and, in some cases, I would guess, the 70s. They did not discriminate against us. They were teaching our class much like any other class. I don't remember any of them making any anti-Semitic statements.

But sometime in the spring of '44, we were no longer allowed to go to school, allowed to go out. So that's when I went to the printing factory.

What do you mean not allowed to go out?

There were restrictive times, going out except certain periods in time in a day. And certainly not at night, I think after 4:00 we had to be in the houses. And the houses, eventually, had Jewish stars on them.

And some of them were mixed. Our house was mixed because it was a double-sized apartment house. And the first half was Christian and the second half was Jewish. Then the Jews moved from the first half into the second half of the house.

But you stayed in yours?

We stayed in our apartment. And we had a boarder at that time, a woman. And so we did not had to take in anybody else.

A Jewish woman?

A Jewish woman. Because I went to work in this printing house--

This was at the age of 15?

--at the age of 15. And we were printing German army magazines, as well as the equivalent of Life magazine, for instance. What was it like to work for an organization that printed German army magazines? Bother you?

It didn't bother me. It gave me the opportunity to wear an armband that let me move freely around outside of the times, the restrictions.

What did the armband look like? What did the armband look like?

It was the Hungarian flag. And at a certain point, again, within a few weeks of the Germans coming in, we were no longer allowed to go home at night. So I slept in a printing place and worked at my job-- I got some money for it-- all day long.

And then I took another job, packing the magazines and loading cars, trucks with it, which was extra money. My mother, at that time, was by herself in the apartment and was able to bring me food once a day. So I saw her.

And that system went on. And I was able to go home once in a while because of the armband that allowed me to move

outside of curfew.

Was this a very frightening time for you?

It was. Because we were not only restricted in movement and feared, really, for our lives when we were out, or even in a home. But we were also being bombed by the Americans as well as the British. So that was really the beginning of the really tough times. Because by that time, food shortage, also death was easy to come by because of the bombings, which were quite heavy.

What did you do in bombing raids?

Usually, the sirens went off and we went down into the cellars, which were reinforced. And on May 2, there was a particularly heavy bombing raid where I was in a printing plant. And that neighborhood was hit fairly heavily. So we felt the earth shake and dust. And it was rather scary.

And after the raid was over, I went home and found that one half of the house was also bombed. And our apartment was basically blown out. The walls and the doors and windows were blown out so that we couldn't stay up in the apartment, but had to move down a few floors and moved in with a family, including our furniture.

And so we lived there basically until we were finally taken away. But shortly after that May bombing, it became quite unsafe to be in the printing place. So I essentially moved back home.

What was happening to your father during this time?

My father-- we didn't know. We didn't know where he was or what was happening to him. There was no communication at that point that I can recall, not until much later.

So it was strictly my mother and I trying to make a go of it.

So what did you do during the day? What was the day like when you move back?

During the curfew I was out and I visited friends. And I remember one particular time that-- again, my recollection is that we had curfew in the morning and then we had to be home. And then curfew opened in the afternoon again.

And I went off to a friend's house. And I didn't call my mother that I am not coming home until late in the afternoon. And when I showed up, of course, she was out of her mind. And I had a real severe spanking for scaring her, which I could understand.

But at that time, I guess I was not frightened of what could be happening to me. So I did not think that I should call her. But that was quite clear in my mind of what happened then.

But we have played with friends in the house. And so except for the curfew, when we went out and had to stand in line for food. We had ration stamps. We had to go out to try to find some bread, which was by that time made from rice flour because wheat was no longer available.

And there were shortages of food. Meat, only once in a great while, very little sugar, very little staple food available. And certainly, during the curfew times, of course, older Jews were out and trying to find the shops that had something.

And sometimes the lines were long. And the curfew came. So you had to go home empty-handed. It was difficult.

What was your health like at that time?

I was not aware of being underfed, particularly. I remember that bananas and oranges were something that I remembered from early childhood. And I really would have loved to have some. And I think that bananas, to this day,

has a significance. Because I remember eating it as a child.

But your health was OK.

But my health was OK. So was my mother's. We were in reasonably good shape. As the summer wore on, things got tighter and the bombing got worse.

Did you see any deportations during the summer?

I believe that I was aware of the fact that my father's family was deported, was taken away from Transylvania. I don't think it was called deportation. I was not aware of it.

I remember hearing people receiving postcards from various places in Germany, I believe, or Poland with stamps, saying that we're OK. We're working, et cetera. And of course, that was a sham, we find out many, many years later.

So the awareness that they were killing the people, we did not have the awareness.

Did you see people in Budapest being taken away? Did you ever witness that?

No, because Budapest was not really-- in summer of '44 was still reasonably safe. No one was deported. Because the Germans concentrated on the 400-odd thousand in the provinces.

In the provinces, right.

And so we did not see any of it. What we did see, of course, later on, when they started deporting people from Budapest. But that's not until September, October.

OK. So the summer went on.

The summer went on. Again, staying alive because of bombings was paramount. We spent an awful lot of time down in the cellars.

What did you do when you were down in the cellars?

Kind of sit around in the dark and hope that the bomb is not going to hit us. We were across the street from the Western railroad station. And so we were in a prime target area.

And when, in May, the bombing finally got to our house, it was a fluke. Because the Americans were fairly accurate. Their system was to send in an aircraft and to circle the target area with smoke in the sky. And the bomber stream unloaded into that circle. This [? was called ?] saturation bombing.

The May that we got hit, but the railroad station didn't, the wind took that circle. And we got clobbered. So the raids were pretty regular. Around 10:00 at night they started. So by 20 of 10, we were down in the cellars, expecting it.

And I was working as a-- well, my doctor, my pediatrician, was the head of the volunteer ambulance corps in Budapest. And after my stint in the printing place, I asked him-- I suppose I had to ask him to see if I can get trained as a first aid person. And I went through a course with adults, being the youngest to graduate from that course.

And so I was a full-fledged, first aid type. And as such, I did not go down to the cellar until the bombs came awfully close. We were also fire guards. We were 15.

So we didn't like the basement. It was a horrible place to be. And so my poor mother, scared out of her wits for me.

But I was all over the house and watching for the aircraft to come. And the anti-aircraft tried to shoot them down. And

when a bomb started whistling too close, then we ran down. So I really did not spend that much time in those cellars, ever really. I felt that it was better to die up there than not.

One of the things that also happened in the after we had to wear the yellow star, that the Vatican curia I guess, made an arrangement with the Nazis, the Hungarian Nazi government, that if a Jew converted, then they would wear a different color. I think it was either white or yellow, or just white armband. And they would be basically exempt from the curfew or from the deportation, from the taking them to labor camps or labor brigades.

And our superintendent's son, who was a priest in Rome, came back to the apartment house and was trying to convert the Jews. His name was Kuhn, K-U-H-N, I believe. And my mother and I went, took a few lessons, learned the catechism.

And after a while, I refused to go back. And I remember I had the sense of abandoning one's religion under duress. And that that was not right, at age 15, not being a Jew. I don't know where that came from.

But that was my feeling. It's interesting. It also led to another, during the Korean War, that kind of a feeling surfaced once again, when I was drafted.

But the priest ultimately became known as the hanging priest of Budapest. I think that the museum has a picture of him with a pistol on his cassock. And he went around the streets shooting Jews. And he was hung shortly after the liberation. But it was kind of a dichotomy that he is trying to convert, but his hatred was such that he would shoot those who didn't.

Did your mother willingly leave the conversion lessons also with you?

I don't remember that. It seems that, in some cases, I took the lead. And she deferred to me in making some decisions.

One of them was a life and death decision. There was a suicide in the house once. Somebody jumped off the floor above us and died. And I kind of remember that. And it surfaced later on.

But the time period between this conversion attempt, which had to be maybe August, September, October, things were really getting hairy. And I remember being out on the streets as usual and getting caught in a bombing raid, away from home, and coming home after the curfew because the bombing raid didn't end. And dodging through and hoping not to get stopped by the Nazis.

And I'm trying to remember at what point, but it may be, again, when we're talking about that 90-day period into September, October, November, things really get a little bit hazy. But I remember, in one of the bombing raids, I got caught under an arch in an apartment house. And we were cowering, lying on the floor.

And the raid was over. And there was a bomb, an unexploded bomb within 20 feet of us, right in the open arch area. And we had to step over it to go home. And of course, by that time, we begin to see an awful lot of death and injured people. And bombings were three, four times a day, really.

And of course, the Nazis were getting worse. And so the paranoia set in, quite naturally, that everybody was after me, whether it was on foot or in the air. And so things were going downhill fairly fast at that point.

Were you ever stopped by any of the Nazis?

No. I was not. I looked very much like a German kid. I was blond, very light blonde. I also wore the school uniform coat, which was an old Hungarian-type uniform.

But you had the star on?

But I had the star on. The period I'm referring to, really, I took the star off and was on the street without the star, moving around, without any papers. Of course--

This is September, October you're talking about?

I would say October, November. And I don't know how I had the guts to do it or why. I just did it. And I moved because I didn't like restriction.

And it pretty much had to be that period. Although, I was doing that out of the Swedish house, also, for a few days. But at any rate, I moved around.

The danger, of course, was is that if you were stopped, you had no papers. Pulled your pants down. And if you were circumcised, they killed you.

When you said you had no papers, it's because you left them at home?

Well, all my papers were Jewish. Other words, all the papers that we had, the documents we had--

So you purposefully let them at home?

Said Judo, Jewish. And so we just left it. And I could claim that it was lost. And I had my apprenticeship papers, which said who I was. And I tore it in such a way that the Jewish religion was torn off.

But it would have kidded no one. And they still would have had my pants off, but didn't. I was never stopped, luckily. I got caught up in a round up once, and I was able to run away.

How did that happen?

I saw the Hungarian Nazis blocking off the street. And there were some bombed out houses. And I just scrambled over the ruins and ran home at that point. So we were coming to the December time period, because things were, in this October, November period, very much the same.

Mhm.