

Ivan Becker
RG-50.106*0016
January 18, 1995

Abstract

Ivan Becker was born June 14, 1929 in Budapest, Hungary. His father, Dezso, was an accountant. The family was financially comfortable and enjoyed music, theater, and movies. They were not religious but observed High Holy Days, and Ivan was bar mitzvahed. Ivan describes increased restrictions on Jews. When Nazis invaded Hungary in spring 1944, father was sent to Buchenwald. Ivan and mother were arrested and joined a death march to the Austria-Hungarian border. Ivan and mother were separated, and Ivan never saw her again. Ivan came to New York in December 1945. He was married in 1962, and in 1967 started his own company that ultimately was listed on the Stock Exchange. He and wife moved to Princeton with their two children. Ivan died September 17, 2009.

: 48:

Ivan Endre Becker was born June 14, 1929 in Budapest, Hungary. His father, Dezso, was an accountant in a factory that manufactured cigarette wrappers. His mother, Kato, was a homemaker.

“We had a nice life. We enjoyed music, theater, and movies. Father came home for lunch everyday. We had a live-in maid, but no car.”

The Beckers lived in a suburban garden apartment until Ivan was ready for school. Then they moved into a large apartment house in Budapest. The neighborhood was primarily Jewish, but Ivan played with Jews and non-Jews. He went to a public school but was in a segregated boy scout troop.

4:30

In 1938 the first restrictive laws were put into effect, but Ivan’s family had no immediate problems.

His family was not religious but did observe the High Holy Days, because his mother’s brother was more religious.

“We thought of ourselves as Hungarians first and Jews second.”

It was mandatory to have religion in school, so we had to go to a synagogue one day each week. The only synagogue was Orthodox.”

6:42

Ivan loved to play soccer and read. He also was a good photographer. All sports were integrated.

“I was a lousy student but excelled in subjects I liked.”

Ivan remembers his father talking about German troops invading Europe. When the Nazis invaded Hungary, his father threw out all his socialist newspapers.

8:25

An uncle and wife and other relatives on his father’s side lived in Transylvania, and Ivan’s family visited them in the summer time and on school holidays.

Ivan’s family spoke Hungarian, not Yiddish.

10:21

In 1938, father’s mother left Transylvania to go to New York to see the World’s Fair. She then stayed with her two daughters who were living there.

The husband of one of the daughters sent an affidavit for Ivan’s family to come to America.

Ivan’s father decided not to apply for an affidavit. He was 42 years old and concerned about how he would make a living, especially since he could not speak English. His father also felt secure because he had been an officer in the Austro-Hungarian infantry and had fought in Italy and Russia.

14:40

Ivan remembers that in 1938, Jews and Christians were separated in schools and in the boy scouts. Remembers government authority being important, so he and family felt safe. The family could not imagine anything bad happening. "We were accepting."

16:44

Ivan said that he always wore short pants, even in parades.

18:29

In 1940, laws mandated that men had to go into labor brigades. His father went into a brigade as a commander for a couple of years. Because he was an officer, he lived in good conditions. Ivan and mother could visit him occasionally. Father was discharged but then had to go back into the brigade. Only this time he was not an officer, and Ivan and mother could never visit him.

Ivan's mother had some financial help. She also made small jewelry from pearls, which she then sold.

Ivan describes his father as a loving person.

23:00

In 1941, restrictions became more intense. Even before that year, Ivan remembers when the future Pope came to Hungary in 1938 to observe the thousand-year anniversary of Hungary's conversion. Later Ivan learned that the Pope had helped the Germans. But not until March 19, 1944 did major changes take place. Because Hungary had tried to pull out of alliance with Germany and make separate peace with the West, Germans marched into Hungary.

28:20

Ivan talks about his Bar Mitzvah in June 1942. It was a small family affair in an Orthodox synagogue.

36:00

Before spring of 1944, Ivan was not aware of discrimination. He had a Christian girlfriend, and one of his friends was half-Christian.

“We never witnessed any anti-Semitism until end of 1944.”

Although he experienced no discrimination from teachers, he had to stop going to school. He did graduate from the gymnasium.

Ivan got a job in a printing plant as an apprentice. The owner knew his uncle, a well-known artist. The printing house made material for German army. He slept in the publishing house, His mother brought food to him everyday.

“We longed for bananas and oranges.”

44:20

In May 1944, bombing raids were very heavy.

“It was a frightening time. We feared for our lives.”

46:42

“We had no communication with my father. “

There was a shortage of food, and everyone had to use food stamps.

Both Ivan and mother were healthy.

48:14

During the summer of 1944, Ivan’s father’s family in Transylvania was taken away. So far no one in Budapest was deported, because the Germans concentrated in the provinces.

People received postcards from relatives in Germany and Poland telling them that everything was fine.

55:32

The bombing in Budapest continued to be very heavy. Ivan was trained as a first aide assistant and a fireguard, so he did not have to spend each night in the cellar.

A Vatican courier arranged with Hungarian Nazis that Jews who converted would be exempt from deportation and could wear different armbands. Ivan and his mother went to a few catechism classes, but he did not continue.

“I realized that I was committed to Judaism.”

The priest was called “the hanging priest” of Budapest and shot Jews who did not convert.

The summer and fall of 1944 were very “hairy.” Ivan saw a lot of deaths from bombing raids.

DISC 2 of 3

:02

In December 1944 some Jews found out about availability of passports.

Germans allowed approximately 1200 Zionists to pay way out of Hungary. Ivan’s uncle, wife, and two children left. Ivan resented this because he could not afford to pay for passage.

3:28

Ivan found out that his father's brother, Lesa, was in labor brigade in Russia. He came to station across from Ivan's house, and Ivan and his mother saw him for several weeks. Then he was gone.

5:48

On December 13 in the morning, Ivan's father called from another railroad station in Bucharest and asked for food and clothing.

"But we couldn't find him, so we brought food and clothing back to the apartment"

When they returned from the station, Hungarian gendarmes came into Ivan's apartment house and rounded up all Jews. Mother suggested suicide by jumping from their 6th floor apartment, but decided not too. They joined seven or eight people and were taken to a brickyard. It was very cold and rainy. Ivan only had knickers, a pair of boots, a coat with fur on it, and a short waterproof jacket with a hood. He also took blankets.

Mother took father's watch and a wedding ring. No one knew what was going to happen. Everyone felt powerless.

They walked across a pontoon bridge over the Danube to an old part of Buda.

"The brickyard was a pretty horrible place. There were no lights, and everyone was jammed so tightly that there was no place to lie down."

When Ivan went to an outdoor toilet he panicked because for a while on his way back he was unable to find his mother. After 50 years, he still panics if his wife goes ahead of him in a museum. He gets anxious and very angry.

14:39

From the brickyard, they started to walk to the Austrian-Hungarian border. They stopped at night. Anyone who was at the head of the line could pick a spot to sleep in the market place. There was practically no food to eat. His mother gave his father's watch away for some bread. Then they had no more money.

16:24

Anyone who couldn't walk was shot or hung himself or herself.

Thirty years later, Ivan was watching a movie with his wife and sons that depicted the death march. He broke down for the first time since 1944 and cried.

18:22

His mother had a very hard time, but they always walked together.

There were thousands of people on the march. Most were old and young women. There were very few men.

They ended at Hagshal. Children under 16 were separated from adults. Ivan's mother gave him the wedding ring.

"We kissed goodbye, and I never saw her again. She disappeared in thin air, and I never knew what happened to her."

26:51

Ivan stayed with other children in a barn. A skinny, well-dressed, spiffy German officer told them to come back to Budapest with him. (This might have been Eichmann). Then shortly later another man in a black coat and hat told them not to go with the German officer but to come back to Budapest with him. Ivan thinks this man was Wallenberg. Five or six children stayed with him, including Ivan.

They were packed into open cattle cars and returned to Budapest three days later. The train was Swedish.

32:16

They arrived in Budapest on Christmas Eve and were taken to Swedish houses. Ivan scribbled a message to his Christian girlfriend telling her where he was. Then he realized how alone he was. He broke down and cried but never cried again until he saw the Wallenberg movie many years later.

35:07

Ivan went to an apartment house, and the next day a Hungarian soldier banged on the door and asked to see Ivan. The soldier then told him that he was a friend of Ivan's girlfriend and took him to his girlfriend's family's apartment. Her family fed him and asked him to stay and hide with them. He refused and went back to the Swedish Wallenberg house. The family's youngest daughter went with him to show him the way in the dark.

He ended up in a Red Cross shelter where he took care of babies and young children.

53:30

Ivan did not think about his parents. He just thought about surviving. Bombs were going off all around Budapest. There was very little food.

At least once he had to make a trip to the morgue with a woven laundry bag filled with dead babies. Hundreds of bodies were stacked up in the morgue..

"These memories have stayed with me for the rest of my life."

He stayed in Red Cross shelter until liberation. He did not go down to the cellar during the bombing.

“We went through so much hell, that I didn’t think anything could touch me.”

On the last day, a Russian soldier came through the shelter and tried to hug him. Soldier was very illiterate and didn’t know where he was.

Ivan then took off and headed for his old home. He was still wearing same clothes, but his nails were always manicured. He sat in front of a big window that had been blown out.

DISC 3 of 3

2:05

The only thing he found in the apartment was one pair of shoes. He stayed in the apartment by himself.

April 29, 1945, Ivan went to an organization that was helping Jews. He got some food, then joined the young Communist League so he could get a little more food.

3:54

One of his uncle’s friends came back looking for the family. Then Ivan kept thinking of his parents.

Ivan looked around every corner for his parents and left messages all over the place.

5:15

Ivan went to Transylvania on top of a train to see if any of his relatives were alive.

6:45

Russians were just shooting everyone, including other Russians. A kid was playing with a grenade on the train. It exploded, and Ivan lost part of his hearing.

8:01

Ivan went to a displaced persons camp in Bad Gastein, Austria, where he worked as a storekeeper for the camp. He also tried to gather Jews who wanted to go to Israel.

10:40

Ivan arrived in New York Dec. 1945 and was taken to an orphanage in New York.

13:18

“I never felt young. I did not have an adolescence. I was always working. I made my own identification because I had no papers.”

He went to aunt and uncle in Bronx in Sept. 1946 for two weeks, but they could not afford to keep him. He went from place to place and found jobs in New York in two photo shops. He was drafted in 1951 but never went overseas.

Got his citizenship and was put in army intelligence.

He was married in 1962 and had two children.

In 1967 he started his own company and was chief and president. The company was on the New York stock exchange.

20:36

After coming back from ghetto, he was never a practicing Jew. When he married, his father-in-law was observant.

He spoke English beautifully

23:31

Ivan's father died in Buchenwald.

Ivan did not receive reparations because he was not in concentration camp.

31:09

Ivan took his children back to Hungary and showed them his house and schools that he went to.

He talks about his mother and how she taught him to be independent and take care of himself. He learned to sew, cook, and bake. He still uses her recipe book, which someone found and sent to him.

He did not want his children to think of themselves as children of survivors.

He has started talking when people ask him about his experiences, and he is a member of the HMM council.

