United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ivan Becker

January 18, 1995

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PREFACE

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IVAN BECKER

January 18, 1995

Beginning of File 1

Question: The following is an interview of Ivan Becker. It is taking place on January 18th, 1995. It is being conducted in Washington, D.C. on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Could you please give us your full name.

Answer: Becker, Ivan.

Q: And your middle name?

A: Endre.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In Budapest on June 14, 1929.

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

A: My family was made up from my mother and father, Coto and Desha (phonetic) 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 Thirties and Forties, 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 said, we were not well to do at all, but we had a nice life, basically enjoying music and theater, movies.

From the early Thirties on, I went to school in Budapest and was elementary school for four years and --

Q: Was this a public school or private?

A: It was a public school. It was a public school. I was also a boy scout. Reason for bringing that one out, that it became a segregated -- in spite of all 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.

Q: Yeah, we'll get to 1938 in a moment. Let's move back a little bit. Did you live right in town?

A: Yes. We lived -- well, up to about maybe 4 or 5 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 to -- time to go to school.

Q: Did you live in a private house or an apartment in town?

A: We were in a large, large apartment house.

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

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

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

A: I had --

Q: -- as well as Jews?

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

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

A: The only problem that we --

Q: I'm talking about when you were younger.

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

Q: Few years or so.

A: -- Jewish laws coming in in 1938 when I was 9 years old.

Q: Okay.

A: And so until then there was no discrimination.

Q: Okay.

A: And even after that, at least amongst friends, we had no problems.

Q: Yeah. So you moved into town you said because of the school.

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

Q: Yeah. How religious was your family?

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

Q: Did you observe any holidays at home, Jewish holidays at home?

A: 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 Twenties, came back to Hungary in '29, and then stayed there. And so we used to go to their house for the high holidays.

Q: But within your own home?

A: 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 synagogue, and so learning Hebrew was part of it. Bar mitzvah was another part of it, which was orthodox because that was the only thing -- only religion, Jewish religion that was available. There was no -- 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 --

Q: Right.

A: -- I found much later.

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

A: Well, yes.

Q: Any other interests besides school?

A: 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 excelled in those. And what I didn't like I didn't excel in at all, which really was the way I've -- the rest of my life turned out. I enjoy certain things and I was good at it, but other than that I didn't work very hard.

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

A: Yes. Soccer, hockey, water polo.

Q: Right. And no -- and --

A: There was a total integration in the area, so there was really no -- I don't remember any even latent discrimination.

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

A: No.

Q: -- work wise?

A: I remember my father talking about politics. I remember that when the German troops took over Hungary, my father was throwing out social democratic newspapers and so that if there was a search they wouldn't find it because it was unacceptable. But other than that, I don't think that he was aware of any -- and I know that he had coworkers that we have seen socially that were Christian.

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

A: I had about probably four or 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. 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 Nagyvarad, which is Oradea today, Cluj, which was Kolozsvar, and Otog (phonetic) was the third town where my father's family was traced basically. They kind of moved around. There was a substantial -- there was a -- an uncle, my father's brother, my father's mother and father.

Q: Did you go to visit these relatives?

A: I did go to visit them on school holidays usually in the summertime. One of the family members had a vineyard in Nagyvarad, 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 19 -- 1938, '39, 1937.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: Only Hungarian.

Q: So that's the only language you --

A: Only language spoken. We did not speak Yiddish. We were not -- we were not very -- because of the 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.

Q: 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?

A: 1938 when the first Jewish restriction -- restrictive laws came in. And that was --

Q: You were only 9 years old.

A: I was 9 years old.

Q: What do you remember from that?

A: 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.

Q: How did you know that at 9 years old?

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

Q: Were you frightened on hearing this?

A: No. We were not frightened. And strangely enough, in 1938 -- well, 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 --

Q: Stayed in the United States?

A: 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 -- 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 is -- at that time was 40 -- '38 -- 41, 41, 42 years old, the fact that he didn't speak any English. He did not want to -- he found 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 -- in the Army during the first world war and 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 have the -- I have his pictures from those times, which is the few things that were left. And so the decision was made essentially to stay behind. And as things got worse and worse in terms of the restrictions --

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

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

Q: How old were you when you started school?

A: I was 7.

Q: 7. Okay.

A: It was 1936.

Q: '36.

A: And '38 and '39 got more and more restrictive.

Q: Separating Jews from non-Jews?

A: Separated the Jews from non-Jews in a class. Also --

Q: Were you angry?

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

Q: Puzzled?

A: Not -- 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 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 immigrate 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.

Q: Did you still see these children outside of school, or was it segregation in playing also?

A: No, the segregation was really in school and in -- in the -- even in the boy scout troop which was split up into families so-called of four or five children. The -- 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 it, whether he in fact 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.

Now, the story is basically that we did not have long pants as boy scouts. I mean, we were -- 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 stadium, soccer stadiums.

Q: You would have been how old then?

A: Probably 8, 9, 10, thereabouts.

Q: Okay. The first you said was segregation within school.

A: In class.

Q: In class. And then next?

A: Second one, the boy scouts.

Q: Boy scouts.

A: Then subsequent laws mandated that the men go into service, into the labor brigades. That must have been around 1940. I'm not clear on it. My father was drafted into this, but because he had a medal for -- 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.

Q: Okay. He was taken away to another location?

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

Q: What was your feelings when he left? Was that --

A: I think there was anxiety, but then there was acceptance. Again, it was not -- 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.

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

A: 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 didn't see much of him.

My mother and I were always together. But I basically remember the good relationship with my father, a loving relationship. He was a very nice person. So --

Q: So you knew where he was being sent?

A: I was -- I knew where he was -- 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.

Q: How did he communicate with you, by letter?

A: Letters and telephone call, uh-huh. And so we knew where he was and we went visiting. There was visiting privileges.

Q: What kind of conditions was he living under?

A: I think as an officer he had quite good conditions. And even in those days the labor brigade itself was fairly well treated. It was early, 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, they traveled around and we heard from him sometime but he never came home and we never could visit, to the best of my recollection.

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

A: I am not sure. I know we have help. We had help from some people, money help. She eventually had to discharge the maid, and just mother and I were in the same apartment where we had 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 laws came in.

Q: What other ways?

A: Further restrictions.

Q: On you what were they?

A: On us in terms of --

Q: Was it curfew?

A: Curfew, when we could go out, when we had to be home.

Q: What were you --

A: 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.

Q: What were the time curfews? You couldn't get home in time? Was that the problem?

A: No, I think that the restriction was from 10:00 in the 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, out of the house.

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

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

Q: When did you start wearing your yellow star?

A: I can't remember the date. It was -- I am only guessing that it was kind of 1940, 1941, thereabouts.

Q: Right.

A: It was part of the restrictions.

Q: How did you like wearing a yellow star?

A: I was -- I remember being very upset about it. First of all, I didn't like -- I didn't like to be labeled and stand out from a group, from the rest of the world. I did 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, so I'm 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. And 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, they call it the suburbs, by bus and train and trade for some meats and cold cuts, bring it back into town and trade it for food --

Q: How did you know --

A: -- or other staples.

Q: How did you know how to do this?

A: I don't remember. I remember that I had a 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.

Q: You did this by yourself?

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

Q: Were you wearing your star while you were doing this?

A: I believe so.

Q: While you were doing it?

A: I believe so. I pretty much had to at that point. It's a little bit fuzzy, but I remember that for some reason one of the pack full of sausages smelled terribly, and how anybody could miss me that I was smuggling it, 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 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 to there as an apprentice in the photo engraving section of the printing shop. And this happened after 19 -- March of 1944, so this must have been in later part of March, April, May, June, July. I would -- go ahead.

Q: Yeah, I just wanted to back up a little bit before spring of '44. Tell me about your bar mitzvah. You said you did have one, and that would have been in 1942.

A: Okay.

Q: June of '42.

A: The -- my bar mitzvah was in the neighborhood nearby where I lived. The -- it was in an orthodox temple. It was an orthodox bar mitzvah to the point where men, 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 be -- 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 Gerbeaud, which was one of the best --

Q: Bakery?

A: -- bakeries, sweetshops, 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 and mostly grownups. I only remember my cousins being there, no other child. And it certainly was not a fancy deal at all. It's just we went to the temple, had the bar mitzvah, came home, and --

Q: Was everybody wearing --

A: -- had people in.

Q: Was everybody wearing their stars at the time?

A: I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't -- I have -- 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 were put -- had to be put on after the Germans took over in March of 1944.

Q: Oh, okay.

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

Q: Was an ally of Germany.

A: It was an ally of Germany but was not occupied and was a reluctant ally, if you will. They tried to survive. The Germans were fighting in Russia.

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

A: Right. And the -- after -- in March or thereabouts of 1944, the Hungarians tried to make -- pull out of the alliance and wanted to make a separate peace with the west. It was very impractical because we were -- certainly the Germans were west of us, and the Germans were -- well, 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 their -- threaten their supply lines, so they were compelled to occupy the country.

Q: Did you ever see Admiral Horthy --

A: I have seen him.

Q: -- at that time?

A: I have seen him certainly in magazines and -- but not in person.

Q: Did you or your -- 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?

A: 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. But the --

Q: So that was another restriction.

A: That was another restriction that you -- you actually had to hand in any fancy radio which was capable of short wave 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.

Q: You and your mother?

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

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

A: 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 back into the '38, kind of interesting memories that the -- the future Pope came to Hungary in 1938, which was the thousandth year of -- of the Catholic conversion of Hungary. And his name was Pacelli at that time. I saw him because we had friends on the -- on the Danube and he came by boat and I saw him within a hundred 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 the swimming pools to playing soccer, bicycling all over the town.

Q: This is even in '42, '43?

A: This is even then, even then.

Q: So up till spring of --

A: 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 that I --

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

A: Once in awhile we were called a dirty Jew, something like that --

Q: And how did you respond --

A: -- in the street.

Q: -- or did you?

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

Q: Did you talk among your friends, your -- other boys your age about what was happening?

A: Not that I remember. I remember some of them were Christian, and so we did not talk about religion. I had a -- my little girlfriend was Christian. That family will come up later. So the -- and it was a -- it was really expected by our parents that we probably going to end up married at one day. But -- so I'm not aware of any discrimination.

One of them -- 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 the 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.

Q: So you yourself never witnessed?

A: We were never -- I have not witnessed anything like that until the end of '44 --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- when things got real sticky. So the normalcy, from a 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.

Q: Okay. Now it's spring of '44.

A: Spring of 1944, I remember that the school class, I was still in the fourth gymnasium. The name of the gymnasium was Berzsenyi Daniel Gimnazium, which is a state gymnasium or high school where I spent four years. And in spring of '44, in March of '44 we went on a class outing, and it was on March 19th. 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 in the -- 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 got back to Budapest, the German army was marching in. And --

Q: You saw them?

A: -- that scared us, yes. That was the first time that I really felt fear.

Q: When you saw the uniforms?

A: When I saw the Germans, yeah.

Q: You went back to school right away, or did you all go home? Do you remember?

A: No, I went back to school --

Q: What did you --

A: -- wearing the star.

Q: What did your teachers say?

A: They said nothing. They were mostly -- except one, who was our Latin professor, most of them were old people, old being their 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.

Q: What do you mean not allowed to go out?

A: The restrictive times.

Q: You had special --

A: Going out except certain periods in time --

Q: Except for curfew, right.

A: -- 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. And the Jews moved from the first half into the second half of the house.

Q: But you stayed in your --

A: We stayed in our apartment, and we did not have -- we had a boarder at that time, a woman, and so we did not have to take in anybody else.

Q: A Jewish woman?

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

Q: This is at the age of 15?

A: At the age of 15. And we were printing German army magazines as well as the equivalent of Life magazine, for instance.

Q: What was it like to work for an organization that printed German army magazines? Bother you?

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

Q: What did the armband look like?

A: 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 the -- in the 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 with -- trucks with it, which was extra money.

My mother -- 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 awhile because of the armband that allowed me to move outside of curfew.

Q: Was this a very frightening time for you?

A: It was, because we were not only restricted in movement and feared really for our lives when we were out or even in the 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.

Q: What did you do when bombing raids came?

A: Usually the sirens went off and went down into the cellars, which were reinforced.

And on May 2nd there was a particularly heavy bombing raid where -- where I was in a printing plant, was -- and that neighborhood was hit fairly heavily, so we felt the earth shake and the dust and it was rather scary.

And after the raid was over, I went home and found that the one half of the house was also bombed. And our apartment was basically blown out. The walls and the doors and the 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 -- so that -- and shortly after that May bombing, it became quite unsafe to be in the printing place, so I essentially moved back home. And --

Q: What was happening to your father during this time?

A: 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.

Q: So what did you do during the day? What was the day like when you moved back with your mother?

A: During the -- 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 later in the afternoon. And when I showed up, of course, she was out of her mind and got 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 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 find -- try to find some bread and -- 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, all the 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, which was difficult.

Q: What was your health like at that time?

A: I was not aware of being underfed, particularly. I remember that bananas and oranges were something that I remembered from early childhood and I was really -- would have loved to have some. I think that bananas to this day has a significance because I remember eating it as a child.

Q: But your health was okay?

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

Q: Did you -- did you see any deportations during the summer?

A: I believe that I was aware of the fact that the -- 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 okay, we're working, et cetera. And of course that was a sham we found out many, many years later. So the awareness that they were killing the people, we did not have the awareness.

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

A: No, because Budapest was not really --

Q: The summer.

A: Summer of '44 was still reasonably safe. No one was deported because the Germans concentrated on the 400,000 in the provinces.

Q: In the provinces, right.

A: 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.

Q: Okay. So the summer went on.

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

Q: What did you do when you were down in the cellar?

A: Kind of sat around in the dark and hoped 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 our house, it was a fluke because the Americans were fairly accurate. Their system was -- is to send in an aircraft and to circle the target area with smoke in the sky. And the bomber stream unloaded into that circle, saturation bombing. The May that we got it 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 10:00 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 antiaircraft trying 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 the cellars, ever really. I felt 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, 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 a catechism, and after awhile 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. He was -- and 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's trying to convert but his hatred was such that he would shoot those who didn't.

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

A: 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 remembered that. That surfaced later on. But the time period between this conversion attempt and -- 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 to -- 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 of 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 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 I began to see an awful lot of death and injured people and things were -- 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.

Q: Were you ever stopped by any of the Nazis?

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

Q: But you had the star on?

A: -- with braids. 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. And of course --

Q: This is September-October you're talking about?

A: 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.

Q: When you say you had no papers, it's because you left them at home?

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

Q: So you purposely left --

A: -- the documents we had --

Q: You purposely left them at home.

A: -- said Judo, Jewish. And so we had to -- we just left it. And I could claim that it was lost, and I had a -- 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. They still would have had my pants off and -- but didn't. I was never stopped, luckily. I got caught up in a roundup once, and I was able to run away.

Q: How did that happen?

A: I saw the -- 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.

End of File 1

Beginning of File 2

Part 2 of interview with Ivan Becker

Conducted by Gail Schwartz on August 29, 1989.

Question: What were you aware of about the general Jewish situation in Budapest?

Answer: I'm guessing at about September, October, November, we found out about the availability of Schutz-Passes issued by the Portuguese, the Vatican, the Swiss, the Swedish government.

Q: You had not heard of Raoul Wallenberg at that point?

A: At that time, I had not heard of Wallenberg at all. We were fairly well isolated and therefore, it's very difficult to -- to have had news of that type coming in to the -- in to the house. If you had no -- no one that was visiting you, you didn't find out very much. We were aware of that one of our neighbors had the access to the Swiss Schutz-Pass. He was selling it to those who were able to pay for it.

Q: Did your mother try to get one?

A: We didn't have the money, so we could not get it. And at the same time, in the same time period, the Germans allowed, I believe, 1,200 Zionists to pay their way out of Hungary. The -- I don't remember the -- I thought it was – it was either 1,200 people or it was $1,200 per person that they let go. But one family that did go was my uncle with his wife and two children.

Q: Did you come in contact with any Jewish refugees from other countries who fled to Hungary?

A: We heard of people coming in from Poland.

Q: But did you --

A: But not from any -- I had not met any of them or I remember --

Q: You yourself did not --

A: No.

Q: -- talk to them?

A: -- but evidently we heard that there was other countries that -- and this was, I think, in early '44, they were coming in continually --

Q: Right.

A: -- even before the Germans actually came in. So we're talking about '42, '43.

Q: Right. But you, yourself, did not have any contact with these refugees?

A: We did not, no, primarily because we were Hungarians. We go back to the assimilation. And they were foreigners, and we're as prejudiced as they were toward us later on.

Q: Even though --

A: Which I experienced.

Q: Even though you both were Jewish?

A: Yes. But we're not -- we had a Jewish religion and not the Jewish -- we had the faith but not the -- I guess the ethnic grouping, which is fairly typical of the German and Hungarian Jews of the middle class. Not very proud of it, actually. But it was that way, nevertheless.

Q: Well now it's December, 1944.

A: My uncle left –

Q: Um-hum.

A: -- which I resented. I resented bitterly that we had to buy our way in to a Swiss Schutz-Pass because by that time, I knew we should have -- that things are going to get real bad. And came the time, specifically, December 13th. Let me go back.

In this September, October, November period, my uncle from Transylvania, my father's brother.

Q: His name?

A: His name was Leslie Lutzy (ph). We found out that he was not deported or he did not disappear. He was in a labor brigades. He was in Russia. They took him to Russia. He was digging his way back in to Hungary and ended up on a freight train, not like the deportations, an open freight train. That's where they -- they were being transported and lived in. They were – they were pulled in to -- across the street from our house in the western railroad station. And he got in touch with us. He sent us a message. And during the curfew, I was taking over food to the people and soup and such that my mother made. And they were there for several weeks and were pulled out at some point. We didn't know when they were going. They just disappeared, just left. So that was a relative out of nowhere showing up, relatives, my uncle going to -- supposedly to -- I guess the Germans were promising to take him to Switzerland. We have found out, after the war, that they ended up in Bergen-Belsen in a transit logger about the same time, I guess, that the Dutch girl was there, Anna Frank.

Q: Anna Frank.

A: Um-hum. Subsequent to their stay in Bergen-Belsen , the Germans indeed took them out and they did end up in Switzerland. But they had – it was a fairly close call.

Going to December 13th, in the morning, we got a phone call from my father from nowhere, from all of a sudden, that he is in a railroad station, another railroad station in Budapest and asking us to bring him food. I talked to him, and he asked us to bring him food and clothing and told us where he's going to meet us. This was December 13. We went to see him. We couldn't find him, so we brought the food and the clothing back. And we made it back before the curfew when the gendarmes came in to the house and wanted all Jews, and there were only men, women, and children, to come downstairs and be taken out.

Q: These were the Hungarians?

A: These were the Hungarians. The Hungarian gendarmes actually were worse than the Germans, by far to us, anyway, because they were the ones who were in charge of rounding up -- they rounded them up -- they rounded the Jews up in the provinces because these were the provincial. It's like the State Police, if you will. But it was really federal police. It was the government employees that oversaw the provinces. And they were doing the deportations from the provinces, and then in October, November, when the Jews of Budapest were being rounded up, they bring – they brought all of them back in to Budapest, and they were the ones who guarded us and took us in. But in -- when the -- when the gendarmes came in to the house and my mother suggested that remember the men who jumped off from the sixth floor, whether do I want to commit suicide with her or not.

And again, I made a decision, which was no, because things could be better, may be better. And so we went downstairs and joined a group of I think no more than seven or eight people. I was the only child in that group. Some of them hid and got away with it because it was so late in the game. Even the -- even in the Holocaust Museum, in one of their publications, mentions the fact that the last death March transport left November 17, which is not correct. There were some groups even after us. But I was certainly -- we were taken away December 13th and ended up in the brick factory that night, the brickyard in the old part of Buda.

Q: You're down in the courtyard with the other people.

A: Okay. It's raining. Miserably cold. Middle European winter. We had some food with us because I took it -- we took it to our father -- to my father.

Q: What were you wearing?

A: I was wearing a pair of boots, knickers, which were my first grownup pants that I had got that year. I wore a coat with a fur on it which is the one that looked so very Hungarian, typically Hungarian, which later on helped, and I had a short waterproof jacket with a hood over it because it was raining. We also had blankets. We were told to take blankets with us, if I remember.

Q: Did you take anything personal to you, anything special?

A: My father left us a silver Omega pocket watch, which I think he got from his grandfather. And my mother took that. Took her wedding ring.

Q: And you, yourself, did you take anything?

A: I took nothing. I took nothing with me.

Q: What was it like to stand there with the other people in the courtyard?

A: Well, by that time, it was – it was becoming very scary. We didn't believe that we were going to get killed. But we did not know what was going on or what is going to happen to us. So it was kind of a fatalistic attitude set in at that point. Felt rather powerless. And, in fact, you were.

Q: Were people calm?

A: Yes. They were unnaturally calm. And we were -- walked through the street under guard, taken to -- across the Danube on a pontoon bridge because the main bridge was accidentally blown by the Germans, supposedly. The Hungarians claim that they blew it, with people on it, including German buses in the summer. So the army put a pontoon bridge across to an island, and from the island, we walked across the remaining part of the bridge to the old part of Buda in to the brickyards which was the first stop on the cavalry that we went through. The brickyard was a pretty horrible place. It was

open on three sides. It had a roof over it. We got there. It was fairly dark. There was no lights. It was raining. And we were jammed in there so that nobody really had any room to even lie down in the mud. And one of the recurring things that still haunt -- after 50 years -- there are a lot of things that came out later on where some of my fears and concerns came from. But I remember even today, my wife is a very independent person. And when we go to a museum, for instance, she will disappear. She'll go ahead of me or behind me. And I get terribly anxious and very angry.

Well, of late, I decided the reason for that is -- is the first night in the brickyard because I had to go to the bathroom real bad. And of course there were no latrines. There were some open areas where everybody squatted and did what they have to do, but then you had to find your way back in the pitch black. And I believe my mother had a flashlight. And so eventually, I remember getting -- well, I caught up with her. I found where she was. But I remember the anxiety of -- of being in the pitch dark with hundreds, if not thousands of people milling about. And by that time, people were crying. They were -- certainly knew that something that -- things are going to get real dicey, and there was no food, no water. And that was the beginning of the death marches where we were driven on day after day on the roads.

Q: Okay. You were in this brickyard for how long?

A: I think overnight.

Q: You stayed overnight.

A: Stayed overnight. And every day you moved --

Q: Oh.

A: -- on foot. These were groups of thousand, maybe more people, strung out, moving from one of these Stations of the Cross -- of my cross, if you will.

Q: On foot.

A: On -- onward to what turned out to be the Austrian border. The --

Q: Do you remember the kind of places you stayed at? You stopped at night?

A: We stopped at night, which also had an effect on me for all my life. If you were ahead of the group leaving, you were the first one to get to a marketplace where animals were sold in the day time or the marketplace where the food was sold, so these were open areas with the junk and with the animal droppings where you could pick a spot where you can sleep. These were all open. And we're talking about mid-December in Europe, which is pretty harsh. Food was minimal. Once in a while, we got a piece of bread. I remember one bit of soup. And on one of these, before stopping for the night, my mother gave that silver Omega watch away to get a loaf of bread. And we had no money. We had nothing left after that.

The march, itself, was pretty hairy. The idea was, of course, to drive us as fast as we can move so those who can't move can be shot and those were old and could move, they committed suicide. There were people hanging from the -- from the trees and went on and on and on.

Q: And you saw this?

A: Yes.

Q: As a teenager?

A: Yes. That particular period is important for me because it became the catharsis, maybe 30 years later, seeing the depiction of that march in a mini-series, Wallenberg – on Wallenberg that Chamberlain did for television. It was a two-part series. And was the first one that depicted this particular death march. And until that point, I was in total denial. Memories where I could see pictures of Auschwitz didn't mean anything to me. There was no emotion whatsoever. And my sons and my wife, we watched it in a bedroom on a bed, and I broke up for

the first time, and I broke down, and it was the first time I cried since Christmas of 1944. There were never any tears no matter what happened.

So that march was really cataclysmic for me in terms of memories. Memory in a group that we went with --let me just say again importance of being first was because you could sleep longer; you could pick your spot. If there was food, the stragglers would get nothing, as they were not able to. So all my life, I have to be at the airports hours early. I have to -- I have to know exactly where I'm going, when I'm going to be there, and I'm always early.

Those are just one of the few things that affected the rest of my life.

Q: Were you and your mother able to get to the front --

A: No.

Q: -- a lot?

A: No. She had a hard time keeping up, but we walked together all the way. We were strafed by Russian aircraft. On one occasion, because we had fire engines and soldiers in between the Jews being taken, and so the Russians saw the fire engines and the soldiers and they came strafing, but they did it -- the line was going on the road. They came across. So when they shot at the engines and the soldiers, they were not strafing down the road. So they didn't kill anybody. They did not kill, except people who were around those engines. And they were some of -- some of us, of course. But I remember carrying the blanket and putting it over our heads because I think it was a pink blanket. And clearly to show the -- if the pilots even saw it or cared, that these were not soldiers that were going.

In one case, we ended up in the hull of a ship on the Danube where people were supposed to have been pushed in to the water, those who couldn't walk. We saw some dead bodies. But we

were in the ship. It was damp, and the clanging noise I remember still. It was just one of the six or seven stopover places before we got to the border.

It was roughly six or seven days, six or seven stops before we got to the border town of Hegyeshalom to the railroad station.

Q: Were -- did either you or your mother have the strength to talk to each other during this time?

A: I think we have talked some. I remember, although not talking to her, but I remember that German troops, like newsreels people took newsreels of us. And I told my mother to look in to the camera or at least went with my mother, and I pushed my hood back so if people see the movie, they would see that my mother and I have been taken away. And I was -- I guess I was basically targeting that if relatives or friends would know what happened to us because nobody would know. We just -- contact was dropped. Nobody would know what happened to us.

Q: Were there other people in the march that you knew? Did you stay with the people in your apartment house --

A No.

Q -- they were all strangers?

A: No. No. It was all strangers. And I don't know what happened to the -- you know, clearly there were so many thousands moving on that the people that we left the house with, they disappeared as soon as we got to the brickyard, the first stop really.

Q: What were some of the other places that you stopped at?

A: Mostly marketplaces in the day time.

Q: Marketplaces.

A: The bottom of the freight boat. It's not a tug -- or it's not a -- it's one of those -- that ply the Danube still today. It's essentially freighters.

Q: What do the -- what did the soldiers say to you? Did they talk to you?

A: They did not talk to us. They were beating some of the stragglers. I heard shots, knew what that was about. So -- and during this strafing, they disappeared. And we still went on. Understand the circumstances that these were the old and the young, the women. I don't think there were men in there. There had been. I have seen the suicides. They were men. But mostly women and children because the men have already been taken away. All the old ones really didn't make it too far and they were killed. The idea was that it was no longer any rolling stock to deport the Jews of Budapest. Eichman wanted to finish the job. So this was a way of getting only the strong ones to the Austrian border and getting rid of the rest.

Q: What about young children?

A: Young children.

Q: What –

A: But I don't remember that I've seen too many much younger than I was, which was 15, 14. I don't know what happened to the younger ones, whether they were left behind or just what happened, I don't know. But we were going on, and it was hard to trace where we've been. I remember the brickyard. I went back many years later to Hungary and tried to identify some of the places and had a hard time doing it. When I took my sons back to Budapest with me, the younger one wanted to walk with me the route that I took, which was very interesting. And we were looking for and driving around trying to find the brickyard because that was probably -- that was more significant than anything else. It was the first stop. It was also, I think, unusually cruel being there with so many thousands, and it was

raised and apartment houses stood in its place. So that was kind of a disappointment. I really wanted to show that to them. It would have given them a little bit more of a feeling. But the -- the trip of the six or seven days ended at Hegyeshalom, where the children under 16 were separated from the adults. My mother gave me her wedding ring. We kissed goodbye and never saw her again. Never found out what happened to her. I guess one of the people came back from the group that was taken away from the -- from the house, and she ended up in Bergen-Belsen but didn't know anything what happened to my mother. Just -- my mother disappeared in to thin air. Gone.

We were put in to a barn with perhaps 10, maybe a dozen children about the same age or a little younger than I was.

Q: Boys and girls?

A: Boys and girls. And we stayed there hours overnight, and one day -- and this is what I told Per Anger last night -- that a German officer came, skinny, well-dressed, spit-polished German officer came into a barn and told us children come
with me. We have a train going back to Budapest. And shortly after that, a civilian in a black coat and hat came in and said don't believe the German. Stay here for a little while longer, and I guarantee to take you back to Budapest.

Now, Per Anger was there; Wallenberg was there; and Eichman was there. We'll never know which one, but it -- certainly the black coat and the hat Wallenberg wore. Certainly the spiffy German uniform that Eichman wore, but at any rate, some of us -- and I think it happened that I decided that the civilian makes more sense, and some of the kids remained with me. The others went with the German. I believe there was a classmate that went with the German. And I have never heard from him, which doesn't necessarily mean that -- in

my mind, it meant that he was dead. And the likelihood was very good that they were killed off shortly after that.

The effect was --

Q: How many stayed with you?

A: I remember five or six, perhaps. Small group.

Q: About half went with one and half went --

A: I think so. It's -- it would be interesting to meet some of them that stayed with me, whether we recall the same things or not -- but the effect was such that for many years after that, when somebody asks me for an advice of anything, what to eat, what to wear, what to do, and I gave it and they did not follow it, I was unreasonably furious. And through therapy, it came out that probably the reason was that if you don't listen me, then you will die. And when I was bringing up my children, who knew nothing of this, my reaction to some of these things were rather vociferous. But we were packed in to open cattle cars. Not really packed. It wasn't the usual 80 or 100 people in there. But our doors were open because I remember I had to go to the bathroom. The train was moving, and I had to go, and so they were holding me up and I went. And it took us about three days, I think -- that's a recollection -- to get back to Budapest.

Q: Who were the other people in the car besides your six?

A: People -- there were some adults. I am now assuming that they were people that Wallenberg saved from the trains.

Q: Um-hum.

A: The children. And we were -- we were not locked in. I think that the doors were closed at night. But we closed it. And then we opened it again. So it was not -- it was clearly under the Sweedish people that were organizing it and essentially manned the trains.

Q: And you're on the train, which you said was Sweedish?

A: And at night, we could see the muzzle flashes of the Russian artillery that was then circling Budapest. And we made it back to Budapest on a train without getting bombed, arriving, I believe, Christmas Eve. We arrived at the railroad station, not close to my house, but as I looked at it just last November, to the eastern station, and we walked off and were taken to the Sweedish houses.

Now, did I know that we were going to be taken to the Sweedish houses? I am not sure.

Q: How much information did you have --

A: Very little. Very little information, which surprises me, unless I'm walking it. But I remember some -- walking by a food store and somebody gave me an apple. I remember that. I also remember scribbling a message to the little Christian girl that was my friend. Her family, by that time, moved from the house because only Jews were remaining behind, in to a new apartment house. And I am guessing that -- because it makes sense, and I – you know, you're recreating history as to what's logical. So I'm not sure that it's true. But I was able to send a message to them because I knew where they were, where they lived, and must have indicated to them where I'm going to be going, where I'm going to be taken. That's the reason I'm guessing that we must have known something.

Q: When you were on the train, were other people talking about what was going to happen?

A: I don't remember.

Q: You don't remember.

A: The only thing that I can recall on that train trip, that I had a piece of bread, which I horded and ate. And that was about the only thing that I remember eating. But I remember that I cried on that train because I realized that I'm alone. I had no one to go to. I cried, and I did not cry again until my family and I saw the Wallenberg movie.

Q: Did the older people on the train comfort the younger people?

A: I don't remember that. I am guessing no. By that time -- and even on the -- on the death march, there was really no connection with anybody. We were all foreign to one another. We were all strangers. And we were all kind of in our own microcosm. There was no heroism between people. There was no -- that I remember. There was no help being given because if you're helping somebody, you both could be shot. And so the isolation, I believe, which is what made me break down and cry, that I was really totally alone. But having sent all that message, after having got off that train, we were taken in to one of the Sweedish houses on the Danube. And we were fed something. I can't remember what. There were thousands of people, or at least hundreds of people in an apartment house. And I had to find a place to sleep, which I did. We were upstairs, probably fifth or sixth floor. And -- well, we did not go down to the cellar. There was too many people in the house for that. So we never -- raids or really the artillery shells were coming in by that time. As a matter of fact, the first artillery shell that I saw was Christmas Day -- jumping ahead. Sent a message to this little friend's family. Next day, which I believe was Christmas Day, it was a holiday, and there was a banging on the apartment houses door, a Hungarian soldier was banging with his rifle, demanding to see and to take Becker Ivan, and people told me that he's down there.

And I went out, went through the gate, the door, and here was the soldier pointing a gun at me and said that he was sent to take me away. After we went a few steps, he said don't worry. I am a friend of your acquaintances, and they have asked to fetch you and to bring you to their home. And so with a pointed gun, he marched me to their apartment house. And I met them, of course. This is a father, the mother and two daughters, young one, which was my friend, 12 year old. She was, by the way, the first girl that I went to the theater with. My parents took us to the theater. So we were dropping back a few years. But just because she is going to surface for several years after that.

But the first theater piece we saw was Our Town in Hungarian in Bačka. But at any rate, Christmas time, her sister, who was what, four or five years older than we were, or that she was. So she had to be about 16, and they fed me. We had dinner together. And --

Q: What were your feelings when you saw this German soldier telling you --

A: Hungarian soldier.

Q: Excuse me. Hungarian soldier telling you --

A: Scared. Didn't know what was going on, of course, and didn't quite know what to do. I mean I -- clearly I couldn't run because it would have been too easy to shoot. And so I went with the flow.

Q: Um-hum.

A: And of course finding out that he was a friend, that was quite a load off my mind at that point. The friend's -- their name is Kadar. They had another person there, a woman

there. And they have suggested, I believe, the daughter many years later told me that they asked me to stay with them, and that they will hide me because they have another woman that they were hiding. And I refused to do so.

Q: Why?

A: I am not sure whether I was afraid that if they find me, they are going to kill them, as well. I think that would be very nice. But I'm not sure that was my driving point. I think, perhaps, that the authority said that I should be in another house and that's where I should go back to. But -- and here it becomes fuzzy. I do go back to the Wallenberg house, the Sweedish houses. I remember that. I remember also that during the bombing raid, one of the impacts was fairly close. I was eating a plate of food. And a door came out and cracked me across the face and my tooth chipped. And that is the only injury that I have from the war, other than psychological and physical, just well-being, stomach problems, etc. But that was the only thing where I bled. And my hearing got affected. But that was not an injury. It was an explosion.

But nevertheless, in this period of time, I was back in the Sweedish houses and this is between Christmas and New Years. And I am assuming that our friends, the Kadars, took me out once more because the rumors were heard that the Sweedish houses will be evacuated. There were military -- German military transports, horse drawn transports around the block where the Sweedish houses were full of ammunition, and it was -- the Danube and the Russians were coming closer, and the assumption was that they were going to -- they need to fuel the fire, and they're going to evacuate the Jews, whether they were Sweedish passports or not, taking them in to the ghetto that was established in Budapest.

Q: Did you have any newspapers at this point?

A: No.

Q: Nothing?

A: I did not get my Schutz-Pass until much later, and I went to the -- the Sweedish office not far from where the Sweedish houses were to get it. It was not handed to me. And I never used it as a -- as a saving grace. It was really used as establishing an identity more than anything else because I had no papers. I have no birth certificate. I have no -- I have my father's passport, and that's about the only thing that I have.

But in that period, being in the Sweedish house and getting out, going back to the Kadars, the constant bombings, the artillery shells coming in, I mean we were, at that time, completely encircled, I think the Russians were already in Vienna. They were still fighting in Budapest. And hearing rumors that the houses will be moved in to the ghetto, I came out again, and without wearing the star, went back to the Kadars, and the Kadars heard, I believe, of a Red Cross shelter for children. And I think it was just before New Years, end of December, beginning of January -- very beginning of January. One late afternoon, I was going in to that Red Cross shelter. And they sent the youngest daughter, who was 12 at that time; I was 15, to go with me.

So these two gentile-looking children went across this dark abandoned bombed and shelled part of town, pitch dark, and went hand-in-hand to the address where I was to go. We did not lose our way but were not sure where we were exactly. I saw a -- somebody in the dark, and I walked up; we walked up actually. And I asked him where the Red Cross shelter was. And he flicked on his light and shined it on our faces. And I saw that he was one of the Arrow Cross people. And of course I paled. And the girl didn't know what I was scared of. And the guy looked at us and told us where the shelter was. Never asked us for papers. And she asked me why I was so scared. And I told her,

very reluctantly, she recalls later, that I told her that I was afraid that they were going to take my pants off. And I didn't tell her why, that circumcision was something. And of course she was young. She didn't know it. But I would say 30 years later, she told me that she did not understand what I was worried about until she married her husband, who was Jewish. And then she realized what could have happened.

But she left me and walked back through that dark town by herself, and again, 30 years later, more than that, 40 years later, when I saw her in Switzerland, I asked her what made her do it, to walk with me, and what made her parents suggesting that she did. And her reaction was that she felt all her life, that she was not as important to her parents as her sister was. And she and her sister have not talked since the war days. Whether that's the reason they sent her and she just came with me because we were friends.

But I ended up in this Red Cross shelter for a few days. We were taking care of babies, young children.

Q: Do you know the address of it?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Do you know the address of it?

A: No, I don't. Never could find the building. I remember the layout. I remember that we broke into -- because the houses were already -- people were taken away. I think they were Jewish houses to begin with. And so the houses were empty or the people ran away. And we broke in to houses trying to find some leftover food to feed ourselves and to give it to children. Very hazy on that. But I remember very well that another guy, probably a little bit older than I, we were sleeping on cots, and he was singing and I was singing. We were singing “It's a long way to Tipperary.” Who knows where the song

came from. But the pronunciation was it's a long vay because we spoke no English. Didn't know what we were singing. But it was kind of a defiant thing. I mean we could have again -- it was stupid to do it. But we did it nevertheless.

Q: You said you were taking care of babies at the Red Cross?

A: Yes. And I don't remember any of them. I remember some little ones, some young ones walking about. But we were not the only ones taking care of them. There had to be some adults there. We were just forging -- we were just forging around for food. Didn't last long because we also heard a rumor that anybody over 10 or 12 years old will be taken away by the gendarmes or the Arrow Cross.

And so at that point, I went back to the Sweedish house, and shortly after that, the Sweedish house was evacuated and taken in to the ghetto.

Q: The people in the Sweedish house?

A: The people in the house. We were marched through Budapest. I remember stepping over somebody just got killed, taken in to the ghetto.

Q: When you would see people who were killed and were dead on the street, did have you any emotional reaction?

A: No. Not by that time. By that time, there was really no fear. It was not catatonic, but certainly --

Q: Numbness?

A: -- a total numbness of going with it. Now -- and making decisions that essentially going right instead of going left. It was the right decision. Running away. It was the right decision. Hiding, trying to make a go of it. It just happened. Probably not, but probably it was the kind of a primeval survival syndrome, the fight -- fear and flight

survival. But we were taken in to the ghetto. I remember being very upset about it. It didn't look good. It was tremendous numbers of people. And went in to a house with a courtyard. And I was essentially taken in to one of the apartments and given a place to flop. I took a down blanket -- not blanket, but -- what is this called?

Q: Comforter?

A: Comforter. -- from the Sweedish house. I carried that with me. That's the only thing that I had.

Q: Did you still have that blanket of your families, the pink blanket?

A: No. No, I don't. I really have no souvenirs that I brought along with me.

Q: You were still wearing the same clothes?

A: Same clothing. I was full of lice, but beautifully manicured because that was one thing that I was fastidious about. Trimmed my toenails and my hand nails because my -- when I lived at home, my mother used to have a manicurist coming in, who manicured her and just as a lark, did it for me, as well.

She was also a woman who brought us some milk and some food. Her husband was a German Nazi and had pictures of her with her of him in a Nazi uniform. But she was a manicurist for a long time for us. And so she was trying to help us. But when I was getting in to -- when I got in to the ghetto, got this space in front of a huge double French window, and one early morning -- I don't know what made me pull the comforter over my head, but within split second, there was an explosion with an incoming shell, blew the window out, all the glass came tumbling down on me. And essentially, people had to get the glass off me before I could get up.

But then I had to move in to another house with pregnant women and young babies. And I always worked, did something, somewhere, trying to pass the time really more than anything else.

Q: Did you think about your mother and father a lot at that time?

A: No. No, I did not. It was really hard to stay alive and dodging bullets, although did some stupid things like watching people shooting at me, Russians, or Russian airplanes strafing me. Bullets hitting the wall, missing me but pulling -- bullets were slamming in to five feet above my head before I jumped.

And in this particular Red Cross shelter, there was some food. Very little. I remember that we were given some split peas that were originally, I understood, not for food, but for sewing from the fields, and I remember at that time, my first real big bad stomach pain because we crushed it, crushed the -- those hard peas, made flour out of it, mixed it with a little water and then tried to make kind of a -- pancakes out of it and had terrible heartburn, which was the beginning of all my stomach problems.

But in this Red Cross shelter for the women, I was helping getting some food, getting provisions.

Q: Is this in the ghetto --

A: In the ghetto. There was some food, and they were trying to keep the women and the children alive. And so I was asked to go and get some basket of bread. And in bringing it back, at that point, I had not really have any food for days, if not weeks at that point. I took some of the -- of the outside of the bread and I ate it on the way back. The resulting guilt trip lasted for 100 years after that. When my children were taking pennies out of my pocket, well the younger one, I was terrible upset about stealing, and again, traced it back to

when I stole bread to survive. But the other aspect of that, working there, was that at least once I had to make a trip to the morgue with a -- like a laundry basket on my back, a woven basket with dead babies, and I remembered a feeling of movement as I walked to the morgue. And they gave me a plate of beans, the first warm food in weeks. And they gave me a -- what is it called -- a stretcher, blood-soaked – frozen, blood-soaked stretcher to take back somewhere. That -- those dead babies were -- that stayed with me forever. When my children were young in their crib, I used to go in there at night to see whether they were breathing or not because that part of it was extremely tough.

And so I was not that blocked that I felt something at that – although, I did not feel that when I did it. I mean I walked in to the morgue, which I tried to find and couldn't, where because it was so cold, the ground was frozen, the -- I think it was Amegra (ph), and the dead bodies were piled up like wood, and hundreds of them that eventually, of course, were buried in a mass grave in the temple, the central temple garden, where when I was in school, I used to sing during our holidays. And I stayed in that Red Cross shelter until liberation, which was 50 years ago today, this morning at 8:30, roughly.

And during the period of time I was in a ghetto, again, I stayed upstairs, never went down to the cellars, walked around with bullets whizzing around. I'm not sure I felt that I could not be hit because I went through so much shit before, or I just didn't want to go down in to the shelters because I didn't want to be buried, I think. Maybe that -- it could be that. I can't really guess at what the feeling was. But by that time, really went through such hell that nothing seemed to touch me, that I felt that I could just stand up and watch the Russians taking pot shots at me. Because it was the latter stages of the siege of Budapest -- of Pest. And

they were coming close to the ghetto and in to the ghetto. And you could see them fighting house to house.

The last day I went down in to the shelter, maybe the last couple of days, and the Russian soldier came through the wall of the shelter. In a shelter, there's inter-connecting shelters, which mean apartment houses for emergency purposes. There was always a lightly-bricked over doorway. And they just broke through and came right through laying telephone lines.

Q: Was this your first --

A: It was the first Russian. And --

Q: When you saw him, what -- what did you feel?

A: I -- I hugged him. I tried to hug him. He didn't know where the hell he was or what was going on. I mean the Russian shock troops were absolutely illiterate, from the Far East, looking very much like Mongols. They -- they were illiterate, and they didn't know where they were.

Q: But you --

A: They lived off the land.

Q: And you realized what this meant?

A: I realized that it meant that the Germans were out. I took my -- took the star off and was heading for where I used to live, and just before I got to the western railroad station, which was maybe a mile away from the ghetto, there was a group of long, long line of soldiers, policemen, postmen, anybody with uniform, was rounded about by the Russians and they looked at me and they looked at my coat and they pushed me in to the line of prisoners. I tried to tell them that I was Jewish. They couldn't understand me and couldn't care less. And went – well, several blocks with them.

End of File 2

Beginning of File 3

Part 3 of interview with Ivan Becker

Conducted by Gail Schwartz on January 18, 1995.

Q. We were talking about liberation and you had left the ghetto and was trying to get back to your apartment.

A. And got pushed into the line of uniformed people guarded by just a few very young looking Russian soldiers. And I went into the line with them, hung back to the end of the line, and when we got to a bridge that was going across the railroad yard, it had a Russian anti aircraft gun and placement right there on the bridge, I ran. Just cut out of the line, ran like hell, ran past this post with the Russians, didn't shoot after me, and I managed to get home to where I lived for the first time since the 13th of December. So we're talking about months and three days. So the enormity of what happened during that time a month and a half affects you for the rest of your life. You think about it every day, you dream about it, nightmares never leave you, reactions remain the same. I hate to be stopped by policemen for speeding because I get scared stiff. I had trouble when I was in the Army with officers because of the same fear of what I saw and what I went through.

But I did get home, found no one, found nothing of what we had except the furniture, even my toys were stolen, no clothing. I found a pair of shoes which I took and that's about the only thing that was found at that time. I stayed there for a period of time by myself, staying in a house and evidently, going to in April 24th to a some organization that were that was helping Jews, the stamp is on here but not the year. So I have to assume that this was April 29th where I got some

food. I mean, I was forging. I was getting some food here and there. I remember I joined a young Communist league because they give you a pound of beans if you did. So I did that. That was rather scary when I had to sign all sorts of affidavits that I never was a Communist, which I never was, but I was very hungry. But before this period of time, one of my uncle, who remember I took to his troop food because they were across, one of my uncle's comrades came back looking for me. He was liberated, he was the only one. My uncle died typhus, typhoid, but he wanted to see if we were alive or not. Now, that was the time when I started thinking of my parents again and looking every corner that they are going to come around the corner and they're going to find me.

There was a movie a few years back called the Empire of the Sun where it was playing in either Singapore or Shanghai where a British family when the Japanese were occupying or coming into Shanghai, their son got separated and looked for his parents and reunited with his parents and I was hysterical in the movie and that feeling was always there from decades after the liberation waiting that maybe the next ring in the apartment that I have was going to be my parents because I left messages all over the place. But clearly, they didn't come back and I didn't wait for them to come back.

I went with this man to Transylvania. We traveled well, we first traveled on top of a freight train and we left from the western radio station across the street, stole some nails, he had some needles and thread, and we were going to try to make our way to see if any of my relatives in Transylvania came back or was there more food less Russians. We had a rather nasty situation where the Russians had a free month of looting and raping in Budapest because of some things that happened somebody told me wasn't true but we heard that the Germans killed the Russian delegation that came to ask for their surrender. And what I was just recently told that it was the

Russians who killed their own to use as an excuse. Who knows what the truth is but it was a point where the Russians were just shooting people on the street, do anything they wanted to for 30 days. The 31st day, the Russian officers were shooting their men if they did something wrong, that was the atmosphere. So I clearly wanted to get away with this guy.

We got on top of the train, a freight car, and I was there was, I don't know, 10 15 people on top of the car, it was filled with people down below. And I watched a kid kicking a hand grenade around, playing football with it, and it exploded. So my left ear is pretty bad, went deaf for a while. People were hurt by shrapnel around me, never scratched, absolutely never scratched. And we few days in the winter this is January, maybe before February 1st even, but certainly after January 18th, a couple weeks after I think, we arrived to Oradea Nagyvárad which is where my father's family lived. And I didn't know, at what point do we cut off

Q. Well the

A. the reminiscence because it goes on and on and on.

Q. Just generally what happened in those months?

A. Winding up.

Q. Where you went and

A. Okay. We ended up in Nagyvárad and I was in Nagyvárad until August of 1945. I fell in love and the girl decided to go to Israel. I was 16, she was 17, beautiful girl. And at that time, the Jewish brigade of the British Army was operating in the occupied area, Russian occupied area, trying to get Jews who are returning out into Israel. And I got caught up in the exodus, the Alley of Beth (sic), put me into a kibbutza and went to Hungary, back to Hungary, and then was forced papers and ended up in Austria DP camp.

Q. Where in Austria were you? Well, any way, you stayed

A. I remember

Q. so you stayed with her, she was doing this also?

A. I stayed with her until I got we had a jealous tiff and I went on but we were first in Vienna transit camp. Vienna was under four party occupation but in the middle of the Russian zone so we had to be evacuated. We had to be taken out. I left with her there and I went out to Linz. Linz Donau is where I walked across the Russian border from the Russian zone to the American zone and ended up in an old SS camp in town called Wels, W E L S, in Austria and that was the end of the odyssey as it were. But of course after that, I didn't get to the United States until a year later.

Q. So you stayed in Austria for that year?

A. In Austria I stayed in Wels and then I was transferred, I guess in about December of 1945, to a show displaced persons camp and by gosh darn in Austria. And in September of 1946, as a war orphan, was taken to the United States to an orphanage in New York.

Q. You came by boat?

A. Yes, very small boat for a very long time

Q. What was the name?

A. it was miserable weather. Marine Marlin.

Q. And landed in New York?

A. Landed in a lower bay New York. Of course, there was a strike so we had to unload our boat. I had a suitcase with I think I must have had a shirt in it. I know I had made in one of the DP camps in the Wels camp an American blanket, pair of pants, and an Eisenhower jacket. And then in the other camp, my route is from here sent me a pair of pants I think and a shirt, I think, unless I got it from the Onra (sic).

Q. When you were in the DP camp, did you do anything activity wise?

A. Yes, always, always.

Q. What did you do?

A. I became a storekeeper for the camp. I had a bodyguard because I looked too Germanic and the Polish Jews who are coming back from Auschwitz and was coming through being repatriated looked at me and I didn't speak Hebrew and I didn't speak Yiddish and so they assumed that I was German. And so there were life threats. So I had a body guard that came with me all the time, six feet tall. I was 16.

Q. Did you feel very old?

A. Well, I never felt young after that. I mean, really after being taken away, I was totally formed although misformed, if you will, and I never felt like a child, really. I never felt like I felt like a child but not as an adolescent, adolescence didn't happen. I used to joke about that I had a midlife crisis at 20 and probably true. But I was always working in the camps, I always did something to get paid or food or clothing for and I got recommendations. I still have from the Onra that I worked if I remember such a job and have looked at it for a while but I did work. Made up my own identification card, which happens to be true. Young as I look, I was still born in 1929 because I have a telegram that my mother sent in my name the day I was born saying to my grandmother that I arrived June 14, 1929. I was also told that I believe Kersler was the first person out of the family that saw me. The child Artie Kersler, I believe it was Kersler, or one of the other German. This is 1929.

Q. Yeah. And he saw you?

A. Yes. He saw me after I was born. He was the first outside of the family to see me I'm told.

Q. Because he was a friend of the family?

A. Family told me.

Q. He was a friend of the family?

A. He was a friend of my uncle's evidently of the artist so but I had no papers except this which didn't have my birthday but it had my year on it.

Q. Then you okay. So you came to the United States you stayed in the orphanage

A. For a few days.

Q. for a few days and then where did you go?

A. I went to my aunt and uncle and slept in the living room. They were living up in the Bronx. Poor people basically.

Q. When did you arrive in the United States?

A. September 16, 1946. I stayed with them for two weeks. After two weeks, they told me they wanted me to go to school but they showed me an accounting, a ledger, of how much I cost them in the two weeks and told me they really can't afford it. So I decided to I took the subway and went downtown and happened to be on 7th Avenue, which at that time, was where most of the photo studios were and photo labs and I went from place to place, not speaking English very well very little because I studied it in the DP camp actually. The teacher was a Nazi Baron, Hungarian Baron, who spoke BBC English. So I came here with speaking not very many words but old British English. I did get a job in a photo lab. And because of my background in gravure and photo engraving, which is what I did in the printing plant in '45, somehow I found a job as an apprentice on 23rd on 22nd Street in New York. And I started working, hoping, trying to get into the union to establish a trade. And I was good enough that I did my boss's job. I closed

the doors and I did always work. Generally, cleaned photographic glass plates in nitric acid with bare hands, washing my hands with cyanide.

Q. So you adjusted

A. I adjusted

Q. to the new country?

A. to the new routine.

Q. And then just again the pattern your life took.

A. The pattern

Q. You stayed in New York?

A. I stayed in New York. I was always working either in the graphic arts or in silkscreen printing. Lived in the Bronx with a friend of mine who I knew from Transylvania who came here much later skipping the displaced persons camp, and being drafted during the Korean War in 1951. Went to military intelligence school became core photographer, never went overseas but went through military intelligence training.

Q. When did you become a citizen?

A. After I got discharged. They didn't have I didn't have the time to get my citizenship until '53 so it was seven years instead of five years without being a citizen. But I went through intelligence school without having a birth certificate which was absolutely no sense to anybody. And people are looking at me I was crazy. First of all, you don't speak English, which not very well, certainly still after six years or five years initially, didn't have a birth certificate, and they put me through intelligence school. It's the usual Army routine. But came out in '53, joined this friend of mine that I used to room with in starting to work in the plastics business making plastic bags which were very new in 1953 and really worked in that area until now.

Q. Then you got married?

A. I got married in 1962. My children were born in '64 and '67. In '67, I started a plastics business for a company on the American Stock Exchange, became their Division Manager, and ended up as Chief Executive and President of the company in 1988. Went through hell in between but different kinds of hell.

Q. Can we now talk, which you have alluded to so far, about some of your feelings and thoughts about what you went through though you have expressed some. How do you feel about being Jewish now considering what you did go through in the war?

A. Well, I think there's two periods of time; one, certainly after after coming back or after going through the ghetto, I did not deny it but I did not practice. I did not go to synagogue or a temple until I got until I met my wife. Her father was came out to the States from Russia but he was about the same age as I was, became a pharmacist. And was while not very religious, came out of orthodox home and kept the high holidays. They were the first who invited me to go to synagogue with them and it was the first time I went after 1944. So 1964, in 20 years, no Jewishness whatsoever. Didn't deny it but didn't identify it because I was afraid of what's going to happen here, that it could happen here. And the fact I remember when I came to the States and found out that most everybody every man is circumcised, and that you didn't have to have an identification card, and you didn't have to report to the police, that was the first time I remember relaxing.

But nevertheless, I tried to assimilate again and spoke no Hungarian, practiced no Judaism for certainly 20 years and Hungarian even beyond. And I managed to learn quite well to speak without an accent on me. I was surprised that Tom Lantos, yesterday, very strong Hungarian accent, the Ambassador to the U.S. who spoke beautiful English and Lantos couldn't. And

Lantos and his wife and I were at the same time, I'm assuming or within days of one another of the Wallenberg Houses in Budapest. I met him yesterday, cold fish, didn't even try to be nice. He's a politician on the one hand, which I understand. On the other hand, he was not very human, stuffed shirt like.

Q. What about your father, how did you

A. My father died in Bonneval (sic) in the 10th of January

Q. How did you find that?

A. My uncle, who ended up in Israel, found his name in one of the rolls. So he died a month after I took

Q. When did you find that out?

A. I don't remember, probably somewhere in '47 -'48, pretty soon after when the war started coming out and when the logs were starting to be available.

Q. Had you was that devastating?

A. It was pretty devastating because it was a closure which never happened with my mother. So my mother would be now in her '90s this is '95 she was born in '99 so it'll be impossible for her to have lived.

Q. Do you receive war reparations?

A. No because I was not in a concentration camp and I was not long enough in dire straits, if you will, so I never would qualify for it. And I didn't want to lie. I could have. There was nobody I didn't want to lie about the fact that I was in a concentration camp and came back to Hungary and then I took the Alley of Beth (sic) out. There was nobody to tell me.

I wanted it behind me essentially to the point where I always wanted a lacquer that was a photographer when I was 12 and I always wanted and I did get myself a Rolex and love to have a

Mercedes. I went back to Germany and I went back to Hungary and I really didn't have too many problems with it, again, blocking it. It's the Hungarians who were the worst to me but of course the German were the cause and so I couldn't hate so much of Europe not to ever travel or be there again.

I did business with Germans. I did business with Hungarians. Just recently, I was in a house where in Munich where my host, who was a businessman, told me about the house that there was an actress who lived up on the top floor, mistress of a famous surgeon, and had Hitler. He said Hitler came here very often, you know, and

Q. Did you say anything?

A. No, no, no. I was an American as far as he was concerned. There was no point in saying anything. But I was there with a British heir and my boss was Christian and he was appalled. He would not want to do business with him for all the tea in China and I was just going to smile. The only other things that which may or may not be of any interest that the two women, the two girls that I knew as a young man and was essentially in love with both, different times, they have surfaced. A Christmas card just this past month from the 12 year old whom I met twice in Europe, 25, maybe 40 years after the things. And I have met the girl that I was in love with that I left Hungary with. She still haven't heard from her lately but she lived in Munich and in Berlin and the story was very specific to our generation but equally interesting. So the past shows up. And I was in Budapest twice in November. I was in Slovakia helping some Slovaks and this is a reflection. During the Death March went through the town called Dure in Komárno on the Danube. I was in Bratislava in Slovakia helping Slovak Hungarians evaluate some business as a volunteer executive. And I saw a Hungarian broadcast of the premier of the Fiddler on the Roof in Hungarian from this town that was ethnically cleansed and it was a tremendous success

according to the narrator. And here on the stage where the did you see it? Did you see the show? This typical Orthodox Jews with the tolus and the pius dancing and singing in Hungarian. And I couldn't imagine the people of those towns going to see it because they saw us being deported, all the Jews were deported. So how come this is such a success? Can't understand it. But I mean again, it takes you back. Everything continues to take you back and there's always some revelation.

So it's a life that was so affected and I guess what I try to do, rightly or wrongly, not to have my children grow up as children of survivors which has its own bad psychological syndrome. They are affected by more than even a survivors. But we went through family therapy together with my wife and so that she could understand it a little bit more, so the children can understand it, and they seem to have grown up to be the two boys really normal American kids with some affinity towards Judaism, Hungary. We took them back to and took them through where I went to school and the affect was not bad on them which is good.

The children and I went back with my wife in the '80s, took them back to the house where I was living, the schools that I went to, and as a matter of fact, interestingly enough, Cartie, who I met at lunch, her brother went to the same elementary school as I did. He's evidently the same age as I am. So I promised to I did get, by the way, people found and sent to me some geography pictures and my mother's cook book. And amongst the childhood pictures are some of the class pictures from the elementary school and a lot more including the one that's in there. But I guess what was curious my mother taught me to be independent and take care of myself and this is the late '30s, early '40s when that was not in vogue. She certainly came from a traditional middle European homemaker background, not professional person. But she taught me how to sew and how to cook and how to bake, in case, in case what, you know, I ask now. They never told me to

expect something that will happen and I don't know if they were aware of it. But to this day, I bake from her book that she and I used to bake Saturdays cakes for Sunday.

I still made just yesterday I finished up a Zahar Tort that is given to my sons and now to be a wife for birthdays. It gets frozen and air shipped wherever they are. They also cook. They don't bake they don't have to be competitive. They also take pictures which I did when I was 12 and I have my first picture still. So I feel that I imparted some good things and it wasn't that bad that they didn't know early on what was happening to their father and to their family, their grandfather, their grandmother, and all their relatives. They never had nightmares about it so I think that it worked well that they find out about it under professional guidance. I think that was the big thing. It may have been very difficult for them at that time but it did not affect them because the explanations were there and so there is no guilt.

One of them just married a French Canadian Catholic girl. He's trying to wrestle with the fact that how should they bring their children up, if any. His wife told him that she's elapsed Catholic. His wife told him that if he really believes in Judaism and Jews and a Jewish religion and the fact he's wrestling with where I came from and what I went through, that she'll be happy to bring their kids up as Jewish and he's wrestling with it whether he should or should not. It'll be interesting to see what happens. Their older son married a Jewish girl and we have a grand dog at this point.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to share about what you went through?

A. I don't know.

Q. Any messages you'd like to leave your children?

A. I think they got the messages and that was, unfortunately, in a way pessimism I call it realism that it certainly can happen again. During McCarthy times I remember that it could have

easily happened again. With some of the far right coming into vogue around the world, it could happen again. It's certainly happening again in Yugoslavia to Africa. They should be aware of it. They should perhaps look at people and evaluate them before they make commitments, before they entrust their lives with it with some people.

Just to go back on the Swiss passport, the Swiss papers that were being sold which we couldn't afford to buy, I testified at the guy's trial because I was not the only one who was terribly angry but there were others and I testified that we probably could have been saved.

Q. Which trial was this?

A. There was a trial in Hungary, in Budapest, bringing some of the people, the collaborators, or some of the people who did not help when they hindered rather than helped. The neighbor was a Jew and he would not give us. He wanted to sell us the Swiss Schutz Passes and so I went to Court and I made a deposition that I was aware of that fact that he did this.

Q. When was the trial?

A. It was in Budapest somewhere. It never came to be because he died of a heart attack before the trial. But I had a certain feeling of satisfaction at that point that I did something.

Q. What year was that?

A. 1945, early '45.

Q. Early '45?

A. Early '45.

Q. Could you just again go into a little bit of detail about how you got your Schutz Pass?

A. It's hazy but I remember that the not the embassy but it had to be an office that, guessing, Wallenberg had set up. He satellite offices as I understood it. And somehow I found out about it. Being in a Swedish house but not having been handed the document, I went to get it

and I remember hundreds of people outside clamoring to get in and I got in and somebody typed this up and got it. But, it was really a fullback position. It never was used, would not have by that time and this would have to be in January, by that time, these things were not worth very much, only occasionally would they help and I just didn't need it but it was something good to have in case.

So really my closest meeting was in the barn with the children that I have come close to a Sweed or a Swedish delegate or somebody who worked for Wallenberg. I was pretty much on my own other than that. It was very hectic and I had to make decisions whether to stay or move on or and went and then went back and still got back into the ghetto, which may have been the best thing that happened to me at that point. Certainly, my belief in God nose dived after that and certainly couldn't understand, which is what everybody asks, how can God let this happen and there was never any answer.

The affect is ever lasting and I started talking about this to young people what I went through only very recently and I guess the reason for it is perhaps because people started asking. My own family in America did not have any idea what I went through. They never asked me. To them, it's 40 years later it's a total surprise. My in laws never knew about it. They knew I came out but not what came before it. It was very touching.

I went Nancy's uncle was dying of cancer just recently and we have been close to them because I liked him and I liked his wife and not so much the rest of the family but he and I never talked about this and we knew that he's not going to live much longer. So we went really to say good bye to him up in Vermont and Massachusetts where they retired and we talked about it then. And they were flabbergasted that they never asked and they don't know why they didn't ask but they

found out and they were they felt better for it. But there's no asking. I mean, when the little girl, the 12 year old 40 years later or I asked why she came with me, she couldn't answer it.

I was I escorted Miskia (sic) and her husband to receive the award from one of the Wallenberg organizations in New York. I asked them what made them try to save the family, the front family, and they couldn't tell me. So I'm not the only one who has no answers. It happens. It's a reaction to an occurrence and it's kind of instantaneous. It's not premeditated very often. In some cases, of course it was. Giorgio Perlasca and the Japanese envoy that was premeditated. The front family saving was not premeditated. It was do it quickly because it has to be done, they're friends. Therefore, we have to save them.

I often ask how sympathetic I would be, what would do, I don't have the answer. I don't believe I'm brave enough to do it but then you don't know until you get there. And hopefully it'll never be tested. Hopefully never will people be faced with decisions of life and death ever again but that's too optimistic to believe. I guess that's really basically it.

Q. Well, thank you very much for doing the interview.

This concludes the interview of Ivan Becker. It took place on January 18th, 1995, in Washington D.C. It was conducted by Gail Schwartz on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

End of File Three

Conclusion of Interview