

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Tibor Borsos, conducted by Gail Schwartz on July 29, 1996 in Chevy Chase, Maryland. This is tape number one, side A. Could you please give us your full name?

My full name is Tibor Borsos.

Is that the name you were born with?

Yes.

And where were you born?

I was born in Budapest, Hungary.

When were you born?

March 12, 1927.

Let's talk a little bit about your family. Who were the members of your family?

My father, who was a physician. My mother, who was a housewife without any profession, otherwise. At that time, it was customary in Hungary.

I have an older sister who was born in 1920 whose name is Ann. And I have a brother who was born in 1923 whose name is [? "Bee-luh." ?] He is also a physician.

Could you be a little more specific about your father and his position?

Yes. My father was born in Transylvania. So was my whole family, actually, except us children. I'll explain it later. He was a physician, a pathologist, who was well known in scientific circles.

He became chairman of the department of pathology in Debrecen, eastern Hungary, in 1936. He spent one year in the United States in 1931-- '30, '31-- at Rochester University with Dr. Whipple, the famous Nobel Prize winner. And that is what made it possible for us to come to America, ultimately, because of his American connections.

Where was he prior to your move to Debrecen?

In Budapest.

At the University?

At the University. That's correct. And he was named professor and chairman in 1936, the chair in Debrecen.

Let's now talk a little bit about your life and growing up. What about your education? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

I come from a upper middle-class Hungarian family of intelligentsia, as they call it. My grandparents were already physicians and architects. My great grandparents were also intellectual people. And therefore, our whole family life was highly intellectual.

As a child, I grew up in a family that was full of literature, music, art, concerts, opera, ballet, typical middle midwestern-- I'm sorry-- middle European family life of the upper middle classes. But it's not upper class, because in Hungary, distinctions are very important. And so my family was the typical bourgeois family, as typical you can make it, with servants, with every possible comfort a family can have.

I was educated in public schools. This was customary-- elementary school in Budapest first. And later in Debrecen, after 1936, I was sent first to a Catholic high school, because Debrecen was 90% or 80% Protestant, which was a very unusual city in Hungary.

It was called Protestant Rome because of the preponderance of Protestant Hungarians. And my family was Catholic in background. This led to some terrible problems, because I had rejected Christianity as early as age 10, because I could not stand the false sainthood, which was preached by the Catholic Church.

Was this a conclusion you came to on your own?

Very early on, my own. And it caused a lot of trouble, as you can imagine-- the family, and in my friends, and so forth-- because I was a renegade. Also, I made a Jewish friend, which I'll come to later.

My mother had many Jewish friends. She was also anti-clerical, very strongly. So possibly, I got something from her. My father, on the other hand, was conventional.

And he will not buck the middle-class conventionality of religiosity. He was not religious in that way. But it was proper to be religious, somewhat similar to somebody who goes only to high holidays to a synagogue, otherwise doesn't. That's kind of a religiosity.

So your family life was not one of very strong observance then.

No observance whatsoever. None. There was nothing in the family ever in which there was any kind of observance, except as children we had to pray, of course. That's the standard.

Every night, you had to say your prayers. That is a very standard midwest-- I said midwestern, I don't know why-- middle European convention. And you will see pictures of children praying at night. I lay me down to sleep, that kind of thing.

What about holidays like Christmas and Easter?

Christmas was very important. That was very important all of middle Europe. The Christmas tree, the presents, the excitement, the lights, the-- all this kind of thing was very important. But it was not very religious.

It was somewhat like the Japanese having Santa Claus. It is a-- well, they do. And in America, too, a lot of people have Christmas trees and all kind of thing. But it doesn't connect to religiosity in a deeper sense.

Easter was not celebrated at all, except for one thing, which was very important. We could get-- since it was Passover time, we would get Jewish food. And we always had fresh--

Matzo?

--matzo. Thank you. For some reason, I couldn't bring it up. Fresh matzo was always important in our household. But this has nothing to do with Judaism. It was just simply available, and we loved it.

Did you know this was typical Jewish food?

Oh, absolutely. Oh, yeah. Sure, because my Jewish friends, we went to their house. And we always had it there. So there was no question it was Jewish.

But it was not connected to religious observance. But that was very important that we could have matzo. We loved matzo.

What kind of relationship did you have with your parents? Was your father a strict disciplinarian?

My father was a more distant figure, as-- again, standard European problem. He worked a lot as a physician and a professor. He worked from 7:00 till lunchtime-- we had a big meal at lunchtime, of course-- then a short rest period.

He went back to work, came back for dinner at 7:00, 8 O'clock, and went to work again. So many times, I haven't seen him until the weekends, except for dinner time-- lunchtime, I mean. Lunchtime.

Did he have a medical practice besides his teaching position?

No, he did not. He was a pathologist. He was consulting, obviously, in autopsies and this kind of thing. But his primary purpose was teaching, performing autopsies, and consulting with various agencies on forensic problems. Not like the airplane crash, but that sort of thing-- like murders, or what have you.

Did he have colleagues who were Jewish?

In Hungary, after the 1919 Communist Revolution, many of the universities had numerus clausus, and numerus nullus, mostly numerus clauses, as you might-- you know what those terms mean. And the answer is, yes, but it was limited. And it was not easy for a non-schmatta Jew-- you know what the term means, obviously-- who did not convert to Christianity. It was not easy to become full professor.

Did he have personal friends who were Jews?

Yes. The answer is, yes. Yes.

And did these people come to your house? Did the families socialize together?

There was absolute distinction in socialization and where people lived. The kind of separation by living areas like the United States, which shocked me enormously when I came to this country, didn't exist in Hungary. There was no restriction where people could live, where they could go, or where they could stay, or-- none, except under the last Nazi types, of course. That's a different problem.

But under normal conditions, even though there was anti-Semitism in Hungary, even though there was numerus clausus and numerus nullus, let's say, there was absolutely no restriction on where people lived or where people would buy a house, or they could-- apartment, or anything like that. I was deeply shocked when I came to this country and, first time, I have seen restrictions on the neighborhoods written in the contract.

When we bought a house in 1965 here, we still had a clause in it-- not valid anymore. I refused to sign it, of course. And it didn't make any difference at that time. But I have been-- my wife and I have been-- never was as much shocked as at that one.

Let's talk about your very early life in Budapest. I know you moved in 1936. And that meant you were only nine years old.

Nine, yes. [BOTH TALKING].

Yeah, something like that. Right. But let's just talk about that. Did you live in a mixed neighborhood also in Budapest?

Absolutely. There were no non-mixed neighborhoods.

And you had Jewish friends as a youngster.

I can't remember any friends as all, basically. It's funny. I went to elementary school around the corner. And I know there were Jewish kids there. But there was no distinction.

There was no way of knowing, except by name, or something like that. So in the school, there was no distinction. Personal friends, we had very few, because we had lost of relatives. And most of my childhood was around our relations-- my cousins, my second cousins, and so forth, and a very large number of family.

And so primary friends we have, if you can call them friends, were children from my family. I cannot recall outsiders at all. I just have no memory of it. We must have had. But I have no recollection.

And again, you were young before you moved. But up to that point, did you notice any incidences of anti-Semitism before you moved to Debrecen, in Budapest?

Not personally, no. No, I never had seen any. Later, of course, is a different question. But until-- I never seen anything like that at all.

So your childhood in Budapest was a relatively calm time.

It was a wonderful childhood. That's all I can say. There was no problems.

Now, why is it that your father moved to Debrecen?

He was named chairman of the department. In Budapest, there was no chairmanship available. And therefore, he was asked whether he would accept one in one of the provincial universities, as one would call it. And that's why he was then stationed in Debrecen.

All universities in Hungary were state universities. There were no private universities, none. There were five medical schools, and that was it.

So you're nine years old. And you moved to a new town. Was that a hard adjustment for you?

I have no recollection of having a hard adjustment. The excitement was that, from the apartment house, we moved to a house with a big yard, which was a wonderful thing. And I have no recollection of having difficulties.

The only thing I can say is that the life became totally different, because this was a smaller town. Instead of 1 and 1/2 million people, it was 120,000. It's a provincial town. It lacks a lot of culture, which Budapest had.

There's no opera house. There's only one theater, which was pretty bad. Concerts were in a hotel room. There was no concert hall. So that's the kind of problems we had.

And my mother was absolutely the most unhappy person I ever met in my life. She just hated life in Debrecen, absolutely, completely hated it. And one of the things I recollect, which was very important for her-- she had three or four very lovely ladies whom she became very friendly with.

And they're all Jewish, every single one of them. And because of this, she was ostracized actually by my father's colleagues wives. I don't mean necessarily they don't talk to her. But she was always looked upon, there's something wrong with her.

Was this even in the late '30s?

This is all '36, '37, '38, '39, '40. We talk about a time after '36. And I don't recollect their names anymore. But I remember these ladies who came to our house.

My mother had coffee with them. And they went out to their house, and so forth. And there were at least two or three of those who were Jewish. There's no question about it. I remember very distinctly who they were.

Did your parents talk about their friendship with you, and the fact that these people were Jewish, and that they were--

It did not come up. This was not an important point. For instance, our [? mental ?] life outside of school was ice skating. The skating rink-- which was a natural pond, not artificial-- was absolutely our center of life. And there was no distinction of who it was.

Jews, non-Jews, we were all mixed together. And we played ice hockey together. There was simply no distinction.

How did you know the other young people were Jewish?

In Hungary, everybody knows it, because the names, first of all, give it away. Either they had names coming from Eastern Europe-- that is, Galitziana names like Greenberg, or whatever-- or they translated to Hungarian.

So the best friends we had, their name was [? Fajnyisz. ?] [? Fajnyisz ?] was our lawyer, actually, and a good friend of-- the children were a very good friend of ours, Janos and Pisti, John and Stephen. And [? Fajnyisz ?] means Glenz.

Means what?

Glenz, G-L-E-N-Z, which is a typical Jewish name. But that, translated to Hungarian, became [? Fajnyisz. ?] Now, everybody knew that the person called [? Fajnyisz ?] must be Jewish. There was no argument.

Did you spend time in these Jewish children's homes?

Oh, yeah. Oh, this is a complete free of back and forth. We went over there. They came to us. We played, whatever children do.

Did you experience any negative aspects from your non-Jewish friends when you would play with your Jewish friends?

None. No. Not in my memory. Not in this particular time. There was absolutely no problem in our circle of who was Jewish, who was not Jewish. That is not true of other circles. But certainly, in our circle-- my friends, my family-- there's no problem whatsoever.

You were quite young, obviously, at the time. But when the first law came in, in May of 1938, was that something you were aware of? Granted, you were--

Yes.

-- years old.

Yes, we were aware of it. We were aware of it. And we knew about it. And my parents were appalled by it. But there was nothing we could do about it.

What do you do about it? You don't go out in the street and demonstrate, not in Hungary, not the middle class. So it was a fact of life.

Now, the laws did not-- nobody wore yellow stars. The law simply specified certain things, which couldn't be done. But it did not affect the public life. Whether you run a streetcar, a restaurant-- nothing in Germany where there are signs, Juden [GERMAN]. That did not exist in Hungary.

There was no restriction of freedom of movement, no restriction of freedom of living, or even doing your job. A lawyer was still a lawyer. And he could still have Christian clients or friends. There was no restriction.

So the laws did not affect us and them in terms of our personal relationship. It effected the Jews, obviously, for other reasons, which are restrictive reasons. But it did not affect our daily life.

Again, was this something that you talked over with your parents when the laws came into effect?

It was discussed. And they were appalled by it. But that was it. There was no further argument. There was none of the kind of thing like my wife had, that the children were told, don't play with Jewish children anymore.

One of the things she remembers is that problem of '33 came about, and the Jewish, non-Jewish friendship was finished. This was not true in Hungary. You still play in the same swimming pool. We have the same skating rinks.

There was no argument, no discussion. There was no question that this was how it was. How the laws affected otherwise their lives was not really affecting our relationship, which was a very curious problem. But it's true.

And so you still felt comfortable going to their house.

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Did you belong to any youth groups?

Boy Scouts. The only thing I belonged to-- Boy Scouts.

Was that mixed Jewish and non-Jewish?

I don't remember. But the Hungarian Boy Scouts were not run from churches, not like here, which most are run by synagogues and churches. In Hungary, they were run strictly from schools or from private organizations. There was no affiliation with any church at all.

But I have no recollection that, in my troupe, there were Jewish boys. I don't remember. There may or may not have been. I can't tell you.

So in '38, '39, what did you know about a man named Hitler? Again, you were young.

Oh, we knew a great deal. As a matter of fact, something very important happened in 1930-- the date may be off a little bit. I have documentation-- 1934. My family's name was not Borsos, originally. My father--

What was it?

My father's name was [? Dockstaber, ?] a German name. And when Hitler came to power, the *ausland Deutsche*, the Germans not living in Germany, were approached by the Nazis, especially those with German names. And they were asked to join some kind of-- like the Bund in America, the Nazi organization. Many of the people who had German names changed their name to Hungarian names. My father changed his name to a Hungarian because of this, not to be associated with a German background.

Did the rest of his family do the same? Or was he the only one?

There was nobody else except the brother, who lived in Transylvania, Romania. So as I mentioned, all my family comes from Transylvania, which then became Romania in 1918. So there was a separation in terms of countries also. But there were only two brothers, my father and his brother. That's all. There was nobody else in the family.

So again, to get back to Adolf Hitler, what did you as a 10, 11-year-old-- what was your perception of this man?

The perception was a raving maniac, literally. We heard his speeches on the radio. And there was no television, obviously. But there were newsreels. And we saw him raving like a maniac. And all of Hungary-- the people who are not Nazis-- were afraid of him, really afraid of him.

What language did you speak at home?

Hungarian, of course.

Did you understand German, though?

Quite well. We always had nannies who were from Austria. We had nannies who were brought for that purpose, so that they bring us up in another language. Hungary, being a strange country, strange in terms of not being in the European but an Asiatic country-- and language had nothing to do with any European languages. And we had to learn European languages to survive.

So first was German always, because the sphere of European powers-- Hungary belonged to the German sphere through Austria, Hungary, and so forth. As opposed to Romania, they belonged to the French sphere, and Poland the French and Russian sphere. We belonged to the German sphere.

So everybody talked second language as German language. Franz Kafka in Czechoslovakia, the famous Jewish writer, wrote in German, not in Czech. That's because the main second language is German.

Were you aware of Kristallnacht?

Oh, yes, absolutely. We saw the newsreels.

Can you describe what you thought?

We saw the newsreels. We saw the newsreels, and was appalled. We were appalled. My family was appalled by it, completely appalled by it, such a thing can happen, especially because the German culture was so much admired because of the great German music, literature, contribution to science. My father was a member of the German pathological society, for example. We were appalled that this nation of such culture can do such awful things.

Did you talk this over with your Jewish friends, what happened on Kristallnacht?

I have no recollection of that at all. If I did, I don't remember. I don't know.

And then, when Germany invaded Poland in September of '39, what is your recollection of that?

Horror. Well we were all terrified that the war is come, and that now the World War is coming. And we knew that Hungary is going to get into it somewhere along the line.

Since the government was pro-German and irridenta-- this is the Italian word for reclaiming territories lost in the First World War-- the sentiments of the government was for German, not to say pro-Nazi, but certainly pro-German, which meant pro-Nazi at this point, no matter what you did. And in order to get back some of the territories-- which we did, ultimately. Part of Slovakia came back to Hungary. Ruthenia came back to Hungary. Part of Romania came back to Hungary.

This gave the Hungarians, including our family, a very good feeling, because we came from Transylvania. And the territory where my family lived for hundreds and hundreds of years was under Romania. And so there's a good feeling about it.

So there's a very-- the feeling was dichotomous. On the one hand-- fear and revulsion of the Nazis doing this. On the other hand, regaining the lost territories as good patriots, we felt very good about it.

So it's a very difficult feeling, this torn feeling, the Nazis helping you out to regain lost territories. Right or wrong, it doesn't matter. But that's how the feeling was.

And again, do you have any specific recollections of Germany invading Poland in September?

Yes, very much. Oh, we listened to the radio all the time, constantly. And we had maps with flags on it. We had National Geographic.

We subscribed to National Geographic, and we had all the maps. And my parents had every map mounted on-- not them, but had them mounted on canvas. And our room was lined with world maps all over the rooms. And my brother and I put flags on his where the front was, and where they were marching through, and so forth.

So this was very much-- we knew exactly what was going on. And we were very much afraid the Germans will win. This was until 1941, until they attacked Russia. We were all convinced that Germany will win the war. There was no question in our mind, none, N-O-N-E, that Germany will win the war.

Was that a frightening thought?

Very much so. Very much so.

Why?

Because we knew that, once Germany wins the war, they're going to come to Hungary. And they're going to Germanify everybody. And nobody wanted to be German. There was no desire to become German. And we knew that the Germans will exploit Hungary like they exploited Poland and the rest of the world.

What was your parents' feelings about Admiral Horthy?

Admiral Horthy was a strange person. And I have no recollection that they were either for or against him. It was a fact, a fact of life. Horthy was a very strange person. I don't know if you know much about him, but a contradictory person.

I have to backtrack, if I may, to 1919. Hungary was the first country in the world that became a Soviet communist country, before Russia, because Russia was still in a Civil War at that time. But Hungary was-- well, let's say Russia was earlier a little bit, because 1917 revolution, and '18, and so forth.

But this is 1919. Hungary becomes the second Soviet country in the world. That was one of the most traumatic things that happened in Hungary ever, outside of Turkish occupation, which was 300 years before. It was a time of total chaos. It was a time of what they call the Red Terror.

Are we switching? Red Terror-- it's a time of absolute and complete fear on 90% of the Hungarians' part who were not communist leaning. Especially the middle class was afraid, obviously.

And the story goes-- my father was always well dressed, being conservative. Most of the time, he wore a black jacket with striped colors, as a typical professor. And he always had a white handkerchief in his upper pocket.

And he was walking down the street in Budapest during the communist revolution. And the Red Guards came up to him, tore his handkerchief out of his pocket, and slapped him in his face. You dirty bourgeois. So that's the kind of stories we heard. And they were true stories.

The other was that Szamuelys, the two famous Szamuelys-- I can spell the name later. They were the commissars for safety. And they had a train, which was clad in armor. And they raced through Hungary, and got people out of their houses, and shot them, and killed them. This is the famous Red Terror.

And Horthy came back with the White Terror. The middle class liked the White Terror very much, and did not like the Red Terror. This was a fact of life. Whether right or wrong, looking back now-- this is 70 years later-- this is how it was. The Red Terror was feared much more than the White Terror.



The other thing, which was very bad, and that has a great deal to do with anti-Semitism-- that virtually everybody in the Red Terror was Jewish who run it, whether it was Rkoczi, Bla Kun, the Szamuelys. And I cannot tell you other names right now, because they don't come back to me. Every single one of them were Jewish.

And that had an enormous anti-Semitic backlash in Hungary when Horthy came in. And as you know, Bla Kun and Rkoczi fled to Russia. And Rkoczi came back in 1947 and took revenge on the Hungarians again, which is another story, which I wasn't there anymore.

But I'm sorry. I just wanted to interrupt you. That's a very important part of the anti-Semitic-- not violent, but nasty Anti-Semitic in Hungary. It had a great deal to do with the 1919 Soviet Revolution.

When you were a young boy, and you heard anti-Semitic comments, did you respond?

Not usually, because it was not wise to do so.

What were you afraid of?

Well, they're beaten up. People on the street-- let's say, a gang of youth come run and start yelling, you're a dirty Jew. You're not going to say, shut up, because they're going to beat the hell out of you.

So I've been called many times Jewish. My appearance in Hungary is Jewish. I had black, curly hair. I had a very large nose. And I have been very often accosted in the street and told, you dirty Jew.

And you keep your mouth shut. You don't say anything. It's wiser not to say it. I'm sorry to say that. Whether you call it cowardice or not, it doesn't matter. It's survival.

How did you feel when you were called a dirty Jew?

Not very well. Not very well, I must tell you. But I knew exactly what they meant, because I had friends. And we talked about.

You did talk about this with your Jewish friends.

Oh, of course.

And what were some of the things that they said?

Oh, it's a little bit like, it can't happen here. We are not like the Germans. We are Hungarians. We all go with Hungarians. They were as good Hungarians as anybody else.

For hundreds of years, they lived in Hungary, most of them. And so they just took it in stride, sort of. They're just gangsters. Forget about it. That was basically the attitude, at least from my recollection.

Are there any other--

[AUDIO OUT]

This is tape one, side B in the interview of Tibor Boros. And you were talking--

Boros.

Boros. And you were talking about the anti-Semitic incidents in the late '30s. I was going to ask you--

More early '40s.

OK. I was going to ask you, any more other specific ones that you could describe to us?

We lived in a upper middle-class neighborhood, a mixed neighborhood, obviously. And there were very few of any incidents there. However, we knew that the more poor Jewish neighborhoods suffered a great deal more, especially those who maintained the Eastern European Jewish garb-- the long black caftans, the payots, the shtreimels.

They were much more subjected to attacks of hate or abuse, because they're obviously identifiable. They didn't need a yellow star. You knew they were Jewish. There's no question about it.

Moreover-- and this is, again, a digression-- even among the upper middle class of Jews, there was a fair amount of self anti-Semitism present in which they did not like to see the East European Jews, because they were uneducated. They were not nice. They were loud. They're looked upon as somebody who was hurting them, much the same in Germany, as you know.

And since Hungary had a very large population of intellectual Jews, like in Germany, an enormous number-- it was doctors, lawyers, writers, actors, conductors, you name it. There was a very large middle class. They were not happy about the appearance of the lower classes, especially the more orthodox type lower classes. This was a problem.

When you were in school, did the teachers treat the Jewish students any differently?

This is a very funny question. I went first for three years to a Catholic high school. We start with wait a minute. You won't believe what I'm going to tell you. The first three years, from 10 to 13, are at a Catholic high school. There were Jewish students that were treated better than we were.

How is it that the Jewish students were in the Catholic high school?

Oh, because it was a good high school. And at least 10% to 15% of the student body was Jewish in that Catholic high school. As a matter of fact, I have a colleague who lives in Indiana who was in the same school I was, in the same class. And he looked me up. And we talked to each other. I have a picture of me and him in the same class, which is an interesting sight, again.

I was kicked out of the school, ultimately, because of my anti-Catholic sentiments. Now, in Hungary, you don't kick out a professor's son. You're asked to leave. And I was asked to leave because of my behavior against the Catholic Church.

How did you express this publicly?

Nastily. I called--

Can you give us an example?

Well, I called them such things like, dirty priests who are beating up children all the time. You are not Christians, because Christians are supposed to love people, and you hate everybody, and that kind of thing. So there was nothing but terrible trouble. I was beaten up many times by the priests and the-- you know how they did it?

They'd take your finger, and take a ruler. And they beat your fingers like this, until you're practically bloody. And so you have no idea. I can't express my disdain, even today after so many years, of the revulsion I had against the behavior of the Catholic Church, the Christians in Hungary.

What was their treatment of the Jewish students?

Better than us. Better me, for certain, partly because of course they did not dare to buck the system, because their parents sent them there, of course. And they were told to keep your mouth shut proudly, I suppose, and behave properly. And so they were treated much better.

Also, they didn't have to go to religious services. They were exempted from going to the religious education. The rabbi came.

In Hungary, all religions were treated equally, in spite of the 1930s laws. In the upper chamber of Hungary, the chief rabbi was ex officio in the upper chamber. So was the Catholic primate. So was the head of the Lutheran Church and the Presbyterian Church.

The chief rabbi was part of the Hungarian government. Every priest in Hungary, or rabbi, got a pay from the state, because we had to pay taxes to the state, because local church tax. And pro-rata, if 6% Jew, 6% of the money goes to the Jews.

That's what I'm saying. It's a strange country. Here are the anti-Semitic laws. At the same time, the state supports the synagogues. This is only in Hungary.

What was your parents' feeling when you had to leave school at 13?

My father was OK. I'm sorry. My mother was OK. My father, we had lots of fights about it, enormous amount of fights, because he wanted to be a nice boy, proper behavior. But my mother understood it. And then I went a non-Catholic school, to a state school, which was paradise.

And at that time, your father's colleagues-- were many of them Jewish at the medical school?

As I said before, no. There were very few Jews. Because of numerus clausus, there were very few Jews.

Even in Debrecen.

Even at Debrecen.

OK. Hungary declared war on the United States in December, 1941.

That's correct. The mosquito to the elephant.

What was your reaction or your family's reaction?

In our household, there was always an American flag on display.

How is that?

Because my father was an American. He was a very poor American. And he loved America. And he had lots of friends that corresponded with him.

The National Geographic comes to us. Time magazine came to us all the time. The Time magazine was our major source of information.

So were you fluent in English?

No, my father was. And he translated this, all this information. Time magazine came. By the time the war broke out, of course, it stopped.

But even before that, there were blacked out areas. The censors blacked out certain areas in the Time magazine. I remember so distinctly the little black squares, like a funeral thing in there, censored, blacked out things.

You had mentioned previously that your father had spent, I think, a year in the United States. Under what auspices?

He was a Rockefeller fellow. The Rockefeller Foundation supported scientists to come to-- even today they do this-- to come to America to study, and work, and exchange information. So he was at Rochester University in Rochester, New York.

But he came by himself, not with the family.

That's correct. The money was not sufficient to support the family, the three children and wife over there-- over here, at that time, over there.

What about the Arrow Cross? Was that--

Yes.

--a very obvious presence in your life?

Not until 1943, '44. Not until then, no. The answer is, no. As a matter of fact, Horthy didn't like them at all. And many Arrow Cross people were in jail, because Horthy was afraid of the Arrow Cross, that they're going to depose him, which they did ultimately. So the Arrow Cross was no power.

We're now up to 1942. And life went on in your school. And was there any further restrictions that you can speak about?

None whatsoever. As a matter of fact, because of an agricultural country, the food was plentiful. And we always laugh about it that we complain that all we can eat is nothing but beefsteak, and sour cream, and wonderful food. We had no problem whatsoever with food.

Sugar was rationed, funny enough, because when they rationed sugar, the sugar consumption went up because the poor people couldn't afford it. And they sold the coupons to rich people. And so they used more sugar than before, which is another typical Hungarian idiocy. It's a crazy country. I'm telling you.

What kind of activities did you do with your Jewish friends around 1942?

Ice skating on the pond, swimming in a pool, summer-- and otherwise, just get together and play games, what kids did. We played with cards, read books, looked at girls.

Did you socialize with any Jewish girls?

Yes. Yes. Yes. I had, what, I would say five or six good friends. Out of those, two were Jewish, or three were Jewish. So half or half, I would say.

I didn't have many friends. But those were very good friends. The best Jewish friends we had was the lawyer's son. Pisti was my age. John was my brother's age.

Now, the Hungarian army, when it became involved with Russia in 1941, drafted a lot of people, including the Jews. They wore Hungarian uniforms with a yellow band. And they were work battalions.

They were sent to the front. And their job was to dig the trenches, and tend the kitchens, and scut work. And they died like flies, like all the Hungarians. The estimates are, at the present time, that about half the Hungarians and about 25,000 Jews died on the Russian front for nothing, just as a fodder for Hitler.

So the Jews were caught in it, but not as fighting units, as service units. The Jews were the Blacks of the army, like the American Blacks who did nothing, mostly service in the American army. The same way, the Hungarian Jews did the scut work for the Hungarian non-Jews.

Were these serious topics ones that you discussed with your brother?

I have to ask him. I don't remember. We had friends. That's all I can tell you. But I don't remember.

Now, John was drafted, because he was three years older than I was. So by the time I was 15, he was 18. So he was sent to the Russian front. He came back, but ultimately died at Auschwitz.

And so that that's a fact. We know that all my Jewish friends except one were killed. They never came back.

All right, 1942 is over. 1943, anything--

Nothing changed.

--changing--

Nothing was.

--then?

Nothing.

OK. Now when did you notice the next big change?

Well, the big change occurred, of course, when the Nazis occupied Hungary in March, 1944. I think it's 21st of March.

March 19.

19th. But they came 21st of December. It took some time to go across the country. Started on the 19th, the occupation. And that's been a big change occurs.

What is your first impression of that?

We burned the American flag. That's the first thing we did. We were afraid that they come into the house, they see the American flag, and that's the end of the story. So the first thing the family did-- the American flag went.

Whose idea was that?

I don't remember. My father probably, or my mother. I can't tell you. But I remember distinctly what happened. It was burned immediately.

It was not wise to have an American flag in the-- see, during the war, although we were at war with America, the flag was-- there was no problem. Nobody-- you understood. Hungary is Hungary. But when the Germans come, you don't play games. You don't play games with the Germans.

How did you know that?

Well, we knew it from the-- we knew there were concentration camps. We knew that the Nazis were not the nicest people. We knew all of this. It was well known.

How did you know they were concentration camps?

I have no idea. But this was also known. This was known all over Hungary. There was concentration camps. There was no question about it.

What we knew, for example-- that the Germans demanded from Hungary, even before they occupied, that the Jews should be handed over to Germany. Not a single Jew, as far as I know, was ever handed over to Germany until the occupation occurred. Horthy refused to deliver the Jews. They are my Jews, he said.

That's my recollection. I think it's correct. One can check this more as a fact. But as far as I know, not a single Hungarian Jew for Hungary was ever handed over to the Germans during the 1940s until the occupation occurred.

Was that because of economic reasons--

No.

--that Horthy wanted them in careers and professions?

No. It was very much like Franco. As you know, Franco never delivered back a single Jew back to Germany either. It's not the law. It's just that it was not done.

A decent person doesn't kill somebody like this. It's just not done, even if you don't like them, even if it's-- like the Italians, the same way. Even if you don't like, it's not done.

A certain noblesse oblige is involved here. It may sound strange to you, but it's certainly that. Even if one talked about these Eastern European Jews as disdainful-- you know, those Jews-- this does not mean that you'd hate all the Jews. It did not mean that you were anti-Semitic.

In many ways, it's just that it's not done. You don't do such things. You don't spit on a person. You don't. It's a human being.

Now, that doesn't apply to the Arrow Cross leaders. That's different. I'm talking about the average middle class Hungary who was not a party member of some Nazi party or something. It's just not done.

What was it like for you to see members of the Arrow Cross? When you would see them--

I'd never seen one, not until '44. I'd never seen a single Arrow Cross in my life, not once.

All right, the Germans have invaded Hungary. And again, you're 17 years old. What was your impression--

Well--

--in the very beginning?

The very beginning, we had no problems. The units that occupied Debrecen were not very visible. They were not-- I don't know how to put it. They didn't bother anybody. If you didn't resist them, they didn't bother you.

Even the Jews were left alone for a moment, for a short time, for a very short time. I'm saying, a very short time. And long enough-- and this is a curious story coming up now.

Our lawyer and our friend [? Fajnsz ?] came to us and said, you know what's coming. And we said, yes, we know what's coming. And so he said, can you save something from our property? And so at night, we went to where-- he lived about, in American terms, one and a half blocks away from us.

And at night, we went over there, and brought over carpets, silver, some jewelry, but not that much, all kinds of stuff into our house, which we then later took over again at night to the institute of my father in the university, and hid some of this stuff at the university. My brother and I, my mother carried at night these things. And the carpets, the expensive carpets, were put behind the library stacks in the library of university, and slid behind the walls.

And they were recovered after the war, because he came back. The lawyer came back. And we told him where they were. And we fished them out again. All this stuff was saved.

Somebody must have seen it, because my mother was arrested. One morning at 6 O'clock-- you can't say, a knock on the door, because there was no knock. It was a bell outside. We had a garden with a fence around it. And there's a garden gate, which was locked.

So there was-- a bell rings. And there were soldiers out there, Hungarian soldiers, not German. And they said, is the lady of the house at home? They said, servants, that she's still sleeping. Well, would you please wake her up? And they did.

And they came in. And they said, would you dress, please? Come with us. And so we were all scared. It's not very nice to see your mother being, not dragged, but taken away.

And she came back at about 10 O'clock at night. And she told us that she was accused of hiding Jewish property. And she said, go ahead, search my house. There was nothing there anymore. This was all in the institute.

And they never came. And she kept on saying, you can come to our house if you want to. There's no problem. You can look everything you want to. There's nothing in the house. If you find something, it's a miracle, because we haven't got anything. We never helped anybody.

And she was let go. But not the Germans-- the Hungarians did it, which was important. Had the Germans done it, it would have a very different story.

In what way?

I'm quite sure that the Germans would have either taken her further away, or locked her up overnight, and made her very uncomfortable. The Hungarian army still respected her, the wife of a professor. In Hungary, to be a professor's wife, it's a very big deal. It's not like here. It's the upper, upper class, even not money wise.

But certainly, intellectuals are very respected. Somebody who's a writer, or somebody who's an artist-- it's a very respected thing. A professor, chairman of a department-- this was a big thing.

So I think that the Hungarian army at that time-- because the army came, not any kind of police organization. Obviously, there was officers who knew my family, probably. And then they said, well, let her go, for heaven's sake. So what can you do?

Did your mother say anything special to you when she was taken away?

I didn't know about it until-- because it was 6 O'clock in the morning. I was still asleep. We knew about it, that she was taken away, but only after. I didn't see her being taken away.

But I saw her coming back when they brought her back. She was a tough lady, very tough lady. And I can imagine what she told them.

Anyway, the property was recovered-- not everything. Some was lost. We don't know where and how. But a lot of the property was recovered, and he got it back.

He was the only one who survived from the family, the lawyer. His wife, his two children, both were killed. And then he died of leukemia. It was a tragedy.

What was it like for you to see German soldiers in German uniforms at the age of--

To me, it didn't make a difference. I was not Jewish. Again, you live. You have to live. If you're not Jewish, and you are not resisting them, nothing happens to you.

Life goes on. The streetcars are running. The schools are open. You do what you do. You go to the swimming pool. Nothing stops.

But your Jewish friends were under restrictions.

No. The Jewish friends were essentially taken away. Within a month's time, they're gone-- a concentration camp. They were all rounded up and taken away. The roundups started on the countryside in Hungary, not in Budapest.

And very soon, after they came in-- I don't know when. The months, again-- how can I remember April, or whatever? I can't remember that. But very soon thereafter, they all disappeared. And the houses were occupied by Germans, the officers who used it for living, and so forth.

What is it like to have your friends taken away?

But at this point, so many other things happened, which really took care of the problem, because the Russians were coming. By 1944, around May or June, they broke across the Carpathian Mountains. And they were swooping down the big Pusta. And the choice had to be made what to do. And so we left Debrecen, the whole family.

In what month of 1944?

Again, it's May, June. I can't tell you exactly. Maybe a little earlier, a little later. I cannot tell you exactly, but sometime late spring or early summer.

And my family was very strongly anti-communist. There's no question about it that there was no sympathy for either Stalin or for Hitler. For us, the two were identical.

And since we were not Jewish-- and this is a very funny thing. Well, I was saying, Hitler was the lesser of the two evil. You have to understand that-- the lesser of the two evil. It's hard to say how you measure that. Whether it's the 100th person, the 99th person, I cannot tell you.

But for us, in terms of cultural death, the Russian occupation was worse than the German occupation. And it turned out to be correct, ultimately. Not for the Jews-- again, this is a very important distinction. And of course, the Jews ultimately didn't fare well under Russia either.

So I don't know if you know the book by Buber-Neumann, Margarete Buber-Neumann. She was the wife of the Russian communist leader Neumann. She wrote a book about her experiences, *Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler*, Prisoner Under Stalin and Hitler. She was in both concentration camps. And you should read that book. I have the book.

So for us, to come into the communist Russian sphere was a frightful possibility. And at this point, a decision made to try to go west, as far west as America, if possible. And the only way you can do it-- by going through Germany. There's no other way of getting at that point. Somehow, get to western Europe, get out.

Before we get onto that--

Yes.

--in Debrecen--

Yes.

--were the Jews wearing yellow stars?

I don't remember that. It's very strange. In Budapest, yes. I know that. But I don't remember in Debrecen wearing yellow



stars. They may or may not have. I cannot remember. Budapest, no question about it.

And what about any kind of ghettoization in Debrecen?

They were concentrated and taken away. There was no ghettoization. Maybe for a few weeks, but that's a very short duration. It was come and go. Take them away and go. And we knew where they went.

How did you know?

Again, we knew there were concentration camps. We did not know the extent of Auschwitz, and such things. But we knew there were concentration camps. We knew there were deportations. We knew that they were taken away. And we knew that nothing good will happen to them.

Did you see any deportations?

Yes. Yes, we saw them rounding them up. Absolutely. Absolutely. I saw them rounded up. I very distinctly remember a few incidents. There's not many, but a few.

Again, remember, where we lived, it's a mixed neighborhood of the suburb. And there was not many people, in general. It's like living in Potomac.

So that is a much smaller scale, in a tiny area of Potomac. So if there are 150 families, then 25 are Jewish. There's not much thing going on. They're taken away at night, and that's the end of it.

And though it was at night, you were still there.

Most of the time, at night. But I have seen also, in the daytime, people are being picked up and taken away, but not in large quantities, no mass. I didn't see mass deportations, personally.

And again, was that something that you spoke about with your father and mother?

Yes. And we were very much afraid, very much afraid of what happens.

What were you afraid of?

We were afraid what happens to them would happen to us possibly because of our possible connections. We were known to be Jewish sympathizers.

Were you ever confronted yourself?

No, never. Never, no.

Were you able to say goodbye to any of your friends?

No, never. No, they just disappeared.

What about your teachers in school? Did they acknowledge this?

School was out in June, 1944. So there was no more. By the time the Nazis came in, the school was finished, practically. May, we finished it. That's the end of it.

There was no real discussion of anything of the sort. They were afraid to. There was no anti-Semitism in this school, no discussion of Hitler being great or stuff like that, never.

Had there been Jewish teachers in the high school?

Not in my high school, no. There was a Jewish gymnasium in Debrecen, too, a very good one. There was a Catholic gymnasium, a Jewish gymnasium, and a Presbyterian gymnasium, meaning Calvinist Presbyterian, and Calvinist strictly speaking. There were three main non-state supported gymnasia. But I went to a state supported one, a very small one, which was part of the university, actually.

And as you said, the faculty did not do any kind of indoctrination.

Oh, no. Indoctrination-- we had never been. We had never been indoctrinated ever. There was never, ever, in any one of my experiences personally, in which we had been indoctrinated in any kind of political thing, never. Other people may have had this experience. I was lucky, because I would have been in big trouble.

Were you aware of any resistance movements?

No, not at all. There may have been, but I was not aware of it. I am aware of one person, a colleague of my father's, Professor [? Shonta, ?] who was the professor of neurology and psychiatry who was an old communist, a very good friend of my father's, a very decent person, a very good friend of the family. He was not married and came often to our house.

And he told my father-- that's one of the thing I remember personally. Another tape is gone. My goodness, time is flying.

My recollection is that he came to our house several times at that time. And he said to my-- don't go away. I protect you when the communists come in. You are a good man. You are not a Nazi. And you are a decent person.

I'll be on top. And I'll protect you. I'll make sure that you are staying as a professor. In 1947, he is executed. The communists killed their own. So that's how much protection could they give to my father.

So the decision to leave Debrecen-- was that your father's decision?

It was a family decision-- mother, father. I have no decision in it whatsoever. My sister lived in Budapest by that time. A long time ago, she was married, had a child.

It was '44. My brother went to university in Budapest, medical school. So I was the only child, which is a wonderful thing to be, by the way.

And what was the reasoning that your parents gave you about--

The reason was we went west. The Russians are coming. We went west, period. It was a very deliberate decision. Go as far west as we can.

So the next west was Budapest. We just closed up the house and left everything in there. We walked away, and went to Budapest, and stayed there until the summer.

Was the journey from Debrecen to Budapest a difficult journey during this time--

No, the trains were running.

--with the Germans?

The trains were running. Just another train, and bought a ticket, and went to Budapest. There was no problem. The trains were running all over Europe all the time. I'll tell you about that later, which is as crazy a thing in the world.

So now you're in Budapest.

Yes.

And what did you find there with the situation with the--

Chaos.

--Jews in Budapest.

Oh, chaos. First of all-- that is Budapest, OK. My sister lived in a house overlooking the Danube. And next to it was a house that was later declared to be one of the protected houses.

So we were right next to a Jewish house, versus a non-Jewish house. The houses which were protected were mixed in the neighborhoods. They were not separated in the ghetto. And I remember, on the door, under the protection of the Swedish government. And it was protected.

But the ghetto area-- and there was not a ghetto in Budapest. There was an area, which is heavily Jewish, which was around the synagogue, the great synagogue, the Dohány Synagogue. And that area was, at that time, already blocked off with a gate. Or they started to block them off with a gate.

It was a wooden gate, so that the street was not open anymore to the main street, [PLACE NAME]. I remember that. But I don't remember anything else otherwise, except that that's how it was. The ghettoization started.

What was your reaction seeing an enclosed area?

At that time, it was primarily a matter of our survival, too. It was becoming to the point that you were worried about yourself more than anybody else. It sounds cruel. But that's what happened.

We were all under constant bombardment from the Allied Air Force, and also by the Russian artillery. So you walked in the street. And one of the rounds came in, and exploded. And you were thrown away. And then you picked up yourself and walked again.

It was just constantly. There was never a quiet moment. Then the big bridge blew up. I don't know if you know about that. The Margaret Bridge, in the middle day, suddenly blew up. The charge is either they were sabotaged--