United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Charles Barber

August 9, 1996

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PREFACE

The following interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Transcribed by Heidi Archer, National Court Reporters Association.

CHARLES BARBER

August 9, 1996

Question: This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Charles Barber; Jason DeRose, interviewer. Today is August 9th, 1996, and we're in Washington, D.C. This is tape 1, side A. Could you please say for me your name at birth, your birthdate, and your place of birth.

Answer: Sure. My name is Charles Barber. I was born in Budapest in 1932.

Q: Could you tell me some of your earliest memories of childhood growing up in Budapest?

A: The time I was born, my father was running a liquor store and we were living in the back of the store, and when I was about 5 years old my parents sold the store, and they moved into a building which was originally owned by my grandparents. And they left one third of that building to me and two thirds to two of their sons. And we lived there when I was 5 years old on. My earliest memory, I would like to talk about that just before I was going to grade school, one of my friends in the building said, oh, I know someone who will go to the same class as you do, but he will never talk to you. I said, why not? Said his father is an officer in the army, and they wouldn't talk to a Jew. And this came really as a shock to me, you know. I didn't know that why anybody wouldn't want to talk to me. So this is my earliest recollection that it was something wrong to be a Jew in Hungary. And even when I went to school, I found that person, and he never, ever said a word to me. And somehow I had the feeling that when somebody is an army

officer, it might be a danger to me. Then I didn't really have too much trouble with my other classmates in school, but when we started to go to different to learn religion, which was everybody had to take religion in school.

Q: Was this a private school or a public school?

A: No. Public school. It was a public school, but it everybody had to take religion. So the Catholic kids went to a Catholic, you know, and we went to learn Judah to learn Judaism and learn the Hebrew alphabet. And from then on, my relationship with the non Jewish students started to get bad. They one of one of my classmates said that, you people killed Christ. I knew I didn't, you know, so ... But that's how it started, really, to be bad in school.

Q: Were there other Jewish students at the school with you?

A: There were several, yes. But there were not enough to have religious studies just for us, so we were meeting from other class, you know, and -- to make up enough students.

The only thing I can remember now, when the war broke out, it was 1939, and I remember when the first bomb, which was dropped in Budapest, it was seven odd blocks from our building. And I later heard that it was really dropped by the Germans, and they said it was the Serbians to bring in Hungary into the war against Yugoslavia. And my father then was called in for labour duty.

Q: How old were you at this time?

A: I was born in '32. I was about 7 or 8.

Q: How did that affect your family, your father being called into the war?

A: My mother originally was making was a tailor yeah, a tailor, and she was sewing at home to make a living for us. But I knew that, you know, my mother my father went in, and I knew that many other people were called in, so it was not discrimination, you know, I felt, although my father wasn't having a weapon, and he had a yellow arm band which showed, you know, that he's a Jewish labour camp, you know, member. The first bad thing what happened in the family, my father had a younger brother. He became I don't know a Catholic or Lutheran or something, and he felt that that way he can have it easier. And he volunteered to the labour camp. The only difference it was from my father that instead of a yellow arm band, they had a white arm band, but they did the same thing. And when they marched into Russia, the Hungarian and German troops, they sent him there. And in about two months we got a note that he died. So this was the first real shock, you know, what happened to us.

Q: And how old were you at that time?

A: I would say 10. 10 or 11.

Q: Do you have any early memories of your father at home, sort of family life?

A: He at that time he came home, you know, for a few days. And one time he was sick and he was home for a few months, but it was not a normal family life, no.

Now I am thinking. In about 1943, it had to be, my mother got a telegram from Gestapo that I don't know the exact time, 24 or 48 hours she must go to the headquarters at Hotel Majestic. I don't know why they did that. Maybe somebody in the building reported that maybe we were listening to BBC or I don't know. But she called up one of her sisters. She had two sisters living in Hungary. One married a Gentile, and she became a Gentile herself, you know. And after she left home to go to the Hotel Majestic, the sister's husband, who was a Gentile, picked me up and took me to a woman who used to do housework for them. And she left me there. And I have a feeling he left me there. I have a feeling that they probably gave her money to keep me.

Q: Was she Jewish?

A: No.

Q: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

A: No.

Q: No? So was that the last time you saw your mother?

A: No. I will come to it. Then later on I don't know how many months later, you know the Jews had to wear a star, a Jewish star, and that woman got scared to keep me. So my uncle by marriage came, picked me up, and took me to another relative who were Jewish.

And by that time the buildings had a Jewish star on it. Oh, one thing I wanted to mention what happened before I left our house. One of my friends came to me -- I had a collection of picture cards -- and said, why don't you give it to me? Whatever will happen to you, you will have no use to have those cards. You know, and this really got to my mind, you know. I didn't answer, you know, because I was afraid. So, anyway, I go back to it, that I -- I was taken to the relative of mine. And a few weeks later my mother was taken to a Hungarian camp which was called I I say it in the Hungarian pronunciation Kistarcsa. That was a camp for -- I don't know -- political prisoners or criminals. I really don't know. And they let her out after I don't know how many months. Maybe eight months. And she came to me, to this building, to live there with that relative. And I remember one day the leader of Hungary his name is Horthy made a radio speech that Hungary lost the war, so did Germany, and we stop every fighting. And, oh, we were so happy, you know. We thought that we will now survive. By the evening, the biggest Hungarian Nazi took over the government, and several days later my mother told me we are going to move to another house. We went to another house with a yellow star, which was very near to where her Christian sister lived. And her other sister was there too. I don't remember how many days we were there. One thing I remember which makes me feel very bad, that I told my mother that I am hungry, and she didn't answer, you know. No food. Anyway, one morning around 4 o'clock, a bunch of Nazis with arm bands came to the building and they made their gong, what they used when the the air raids came, you know, and they said, every Jew come downstairs to the courthouse. We went there, and we had to stand in one line, and they made two groups from that line. Before I was separated from my mother, she handed me whatever money she had, and she couldn't look at me. They took her away. That's the last I ever saw her. She was with her sister. About two days later, my Christian uncle came into the building, which was locked, and told me he would try to take me somewhere. At first, you know, we took a streetcar, and he tried to put me how you call it where the Catholic priests are living? I I

Q: A monastery?

A: Some kind of a monastery. And they wouldn't take me. So he took me back to the building. The next following day he came again, and he took me to a building which was I would say the Hungarian ring, you know, a main thoroughfare. It had a Swedish flag. And he deposited me there. That's where I stayed.

Q: In the building you were living at before you moved to the Swedish building, who were you living there with?

A: Whom I was living with? I was in that house alone till after they took my mother away. I have to acknowledge that one Christian family fed me one evening. They knew what happened, and they took me and fed me. But I was alone for about two, three days.

Q: And how old were you?

A: I was 12. 12 years old. This is already '44. It was about in November. We could hear the Russian artillery in the evening, they were so near. So later on I heard that that building had something to do with (?troulvonneberg?), and there was a man standing in front with a Nazi arm band, whom I hated, and later I found out he was Jewish, you know. So after I saw the first Russian, I came out, and I was so weak. We had no food.

Q: How long were you in the Swedish house?

A: From November, December, for the maybe the second week of January.

Q: Can you tell me about living in that house? Who was there with you?

A: Children. There was one person who I think was a rabbi, and I remember he tried to teach some children Judaism. But they were so hungry that the only thing was in their mind to eat. And we got a slice of bread every day, and sometimes we got a little beans. That's all. So by the time the Russians came in, I was really starved. And after I saw the first Russian, I went oh, one thing I forgot. I was very, very hungry, and one day I sneaked out from that building, and I had seen on the wall a warning: Any Jew found on the street outside the ghetto will be killed on the spot. And I am reading it, and I tried to sneak back to that house to find some food. And I went back. And, you know, it was so near to my aunt who was a Christian, you know, and her husband, and I wouldn't go there because I knew that I would bring danger to them. So I went back to that apartment, and I found one jar of marmalade, which I took. And I went back to the building, you know. And on the way back, another kid about my age stops me, looks at me and says, aren't you a Jew? How can you be on the street? My I thought my heart will jump out. I just kept walking without looking back. Nothing happened, you know, but

Q: How old was this other person?

A: Could have been the same age as me.

Q: 11?

A: About. 11, 12. And the at that time there were so many caricatures of Jewish profiles that I guess he just recognized my nose, that I must be Jewish. And I was lucky he didn't scream too, he is a Jew, because I don't know what you know, they would have killed me.

Q: Were there a lot of other people on the streets?

A: Not too many, because by that time Russian mortars were coming down, you know, on the city. But there were people. There were people. Not too many. And you could see bombed out buildings, and you could see into homes, that people didn't go down to

the basement and they were dead, you know. But that happened to everybody that time. Not only to us.

Q: Besides the rabbi in the Swedish house, do you remember any specific people? Did you talk to other people in the Swedish house?

A: I can't recall by name. There was, you know, two or three boys that I got, you know, talking to, but I really don't remember their name.

Q: What did you talk to them about?

A: About our parents, our family, about food. You know that after the war, for years when I saw people eating, I was drooling like I don't know you heard of Pavlov dog, you know? I just looked at somebody eating, and I was drooling.

So after the war, I went back to my aunt, who survived.

Q: The Gentile?

A: Yes. They were not that good to me.

Q: Can you tell me before you tell me about going back to your aunt, can you tell me about actually seeing the Russian troops come and liberate?

A: Sure. Sure. I not only the Russian troops. At one day, we were in the basement, and buildings, you know, were connected to each other; so if one collapsed, it can go to the next building. And a group of Nazi soldiers went through that building, and they were regular soldiers. And would you believe that one of them gave two or three candies out to Jewish children? I wasn't lucky to get one, but I saw him.

Q: Were these Russian soldiers?

A: These were Germans.

Q: Germans.

A: They were Germans. But you asked me about the Russians.

Q: Hold on one moment. [Tape turned over] This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Charles Barber. This is tape 1, side B. You were going to say about seeing the Russian troops for the first time.

A: Sure. Sure. The first wave of Russian troops were not Europeans. They were, most of them, Asiatic. It looked like that although they talked about equality, the first wave, which were in the biggest danger, they didn't send the Europeans, you know. But I loved them, you know. They they were really stealing, robbing, raping, but at least they didn't discriminate against us, you know. So they did that to everybody. But the second

wave which came in, they were Europeans. And when I went over to my aunt, about three of them came into the apartment, and one of them was Jewish, and believe it or not, my Christian aunt could speak a little Yiddish and was talking to the Jewish soldier. And he said, I don't care what happens, I am here now, I will not stop till I get to Berlin. You know? And I remember they set up antiaircraft batteries every corner because then the Germans started to come and bomb. But as I told you, no matter what they did, as far as I was concerned, they couldn't do anything bad. I don't know what else can I tell you. After the war, you know, my aunt first gave me out to the Red Cross.

Q: Your Christian aunt?

A: Yes. I was there for about three months. They sent me back. A few months later she sent me to an orphanage which was run by a Zionist organization in another city. And I remember in that city that I my mother had some cousins living, and would you believe it, I found them? They just came back from Theresienstadt, and about a month later they took me out from the orphanage, and about two months yeah, they took me out from the orphanage, and then I finished high school there. And then they decided to go to Israel. And I returned to Budapest, and I went to work in a big factory, which was in the news recently because General Motors bought that factory that I worked, Tungsram, and

Q: So where was it that you were when you were in high school?

A: It was called the town of Szeged. It's famous for paprika. Yes, that's where I was there maybe a year and a half, and then I went back to Budapest. And it looked like they thought I had too much more ability than to work in the factory, and they sent me back to school.

Q: Who sent you? The supervisors of the factory?

A: The factory. And then I went to law school. And came 1956, the revolution. I had guns, you know? We all had guns. And then a man comes in, an older man, and they said, boys, I think you need some pointers what we should do. He said, you know that who brought about the communists? The Jews. I had a gun in my pocket, and I had the urge, the shooting. I didn't. But I decided the first chance I get, I get out from there. And then I came to America.

Q: So did this happen while you were in law school or had you finished law school?

A: I was in law school. I was in my third year of law school when it happened. And I never finished that. Came the revolution, and the I took a train near to the border, and I just walked to Austria. And I had an uncle, my father's brother, who wanted to be a doctor back in Hungary. But because they had a law, which is called “numerus clausus,” they would take only a certain amount of Jews. He couldn't get in. So he could go to Vienna, but he had to sign that after he becomes a doctor he cannot practice in Austria.

So he couldn't practice in Austria, couldn't practice in Hungary. He came to America. So I went to him when I came out.

Q: So was he here for a while before you were here, before you came to America?

A: He came to out in '38.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: In 1938, just before the war. And

Q: So how did you go about leaving Hungary?

A: Believe it or not, I just walked through the border.

Q: Into Austria?

A: Into Austria.

Q: And then how did you get from Austria to America?

A: In Austria they already set up the Red Cross, you know, camps for fleeing Hungarians, and they allowed me to send a telegram anywhere in the world, and I sent it to my uncle. And he told me, come. And I came out in a it didn't cost me money, you know. America took in, I think, 20,000 Hungarians, and we came in a World War II not World War II Korean war troop carrier, ship. And we came to Camp Kilmer, and my uncle picked me up at Camp Kilmer. And

Q: What did you do when you got to the United States?

A: I went to work. And later on I went back to school, and I became an accountant.

Q: So you decided not to finish law school?

A: You see, there are two different type of law systems. In Europe, they use Napoleonic Code. In America, they have the British common law. So I couldn't get no credit for anything. So I -- it was easier to became [sic] an accountant. And I was working during the day and went to college at night.

Q: Where did you work during the day?

A: I worked at a transportation company, which since went out of business.

Q: And where did you go to school?

A: I went to first Queensborough Community College; then I went to Bernard Baruch in New York.

Q: And you studied accounting there?

A: Yes.

Q: Once you graduated from there, where -- what did you do?

A: I worked at the same company as an accountant.

Q: At what company?

A: It was called ABC Transnational Transport. We had a terminal out in Washington, D.C., too. And I worked about 30 years there, the same company. I the first time I got married was about seven years ago. I never got married before. You know, I never quite got over, you know, what happened. There were some people who could pick up their life, you know, like nothing happened. It was not the same with me. As of today, you know, I wake up at night and have nightmares. So I think I was about -- functioning about sometimes 70 percent, 80 percent, and I still made it, you know? But I don't think I ever was 100 percent, you know, my adult life. But I guess even the 70 percent I was able to finish my education and work. If they kept me for 30 years, I must have done something right.

Q: Where did you meet your wife?

A: I knew one of her relatives who got very sick, and I offered to take her radiation treatment, an old lady, and she knew that sometimes I liked to go out to the races. And my wife just lost about a year ago her first husband. And she introduced me to her. And I took her out to the racetrack, you know, and she had a somewhat similar background. She was born in Vienna, which is not too far from Budapest. And when the Germans, the Anschluss came, she escaped with her parents to Yugoslavia. And that's where she survived. So we had a lot a lot in common.

Q: Can I ask you a few questions about back during the war now?

A: Sure.

Q: Were you raised in a religious household?

A: My parents were not very religious. My father was somewhat religious. His family were kosher, but he wasn't. And my mother wasn't very religious, but, you know, I studied religion in school, and I remember lighting candles Friday night, and I prayed every night when I was a child till age 14. And when I lost my parents, I lost my faith.

Q: Were you bar mitzvah'd?

A: You know where I was when I was bar mitzvah'd? I mentioned before -- when I should have had my bar mitzvah. I told you that my aunt send to the Red Cross. They gave me out to peasants, and the day I would have had my bar mitzvah I was herding pigs in a field. How could I have had a bar mitzvah? Those people didn't even know what it

is. And my aunt certainly didn't care at that point. And I liked her husband much better, who was Christian. He was a good man, but unfortunately my aunt wore the pants and not him. I don't think he would have given me away. But she did. I have a feeling that there was a certain rivalry, sibling rivalry, between my mother and her, you know. But the only thing that my mother didn't go by herself. She had her youngest sister with her. And as of today, I don't know what happened to her. I knew what happened to my father. I was still at my aunt when someone came to the apartment and my aunt sent me out, and later she told me that this man is a survivor and was there when my father died in northern Hungary northwestern Hungary, and he brought a picture to prove it. And then my aunt told me that if I go to the Jewish cemetery, they brought back all the remains of the people who died in that camp, and they put up a memorial. And I went there, and I saw my father's name in the memorial. And she also claimed that someone saw my mother and her sister the day before Bergen Belsen was liberated. But she never came home. But I know that many people died even after the liberation. So that's my story.

Q: Have you been back to Europe at all since you left in the '50s?

A: One time.

Q: Where did you go?

A: We went first to Vienna, and we went to see my wife's old building where she used to live. Then we went to Budapest. And I went to see the building which I owned one third, you know, and they took away from me. They can keep it, you know. Then I went to see my Christian aunt's daughter, who is my first cousin, and when I knocked on the door, she acted like she didn't know me.

Q: Had you known her when you were young?

A: Sure. I lived with her for quite a while. I guess she they expected that when I came to America, the country of gold, I will make them rich. {Laughs}

And she just didn't want to talk to me. In fact, her husband said, you don't know them? And she said, oh, we met before. So I looked at her. I said, God bless you. And I walked away. So

Q: Did you go to see the -- where -- the site of the Swedish safe house that you were in?

A: We walked by it, yes. And I pointed out, my wife, that that's where I survived. And I showed all the places where I used to live in Budapest, yes. And we went to the building, and there was a store in the building, a tobacco store, and I went inside and I talked to the present owner, and I told her, the person who owned this store before you wasn't a very nice person. And I showed, right here she kept a big, big picture of Rommel till he was

winning in Africa. Then when he started to lose, she took it off, the picture {laughs}. And, you know, I she was a member of the Nazi party. And I am not sure if she didn't cause my mother's arrest, you know, because she was a big Nazi.

Q: So where else did you go when you were in Europe visiting again?

A: Really, I don't know anybody. I had a friend in law school, and I couldn't locate him. I had his name in the phone book, but when I called up, it was a lawyer's office, and he wasn't working there anymore. And my wife wanted to leave fast. So we just went for another week to Lake Balaton. We just took a week vacation at Lake Balaton, and we came back. We drove back to the Munich, where we rented the car originally, and came back. And we both decided after a while that that's all for us for Europe.

Q: Are you glad you went back?

A: Somehow I am, that before I die, you know, I went back to that building where they took my mother, with a camera to take a picture of that spot. And somebody walks by, and they says, that's not a tourist place to take a picture. And I said, but this place means something to me to make a picture, you know? It was an old building, and somebody sees obviously an American. To take a picture, it sounded you know? And oh, and I took my wife to a place. I said I want to go to a little place where they have excellent cake, because my mother took me there once, you know. It was still in business, and we went there. So for this little remembrance, I was glad I went back. But I wouldn't want to go back again.

Q: You said that your first cousin was not happy to see you. Did you get the feeling that there was a lot of anti Semitism still in Budapest and in Hungary in general?

A: Oh, yes. I have no question about it. In fact, it came to my mind that she married a man whose name sounded very aristocratic, and I wouldn't be surprised that she didn't want she doesn't -- he doesn't know that she's half Jewish, and, you know, it came to my mind that this is why she didn't want to acknowledge me, that she was afraid that her aristocratic husband will find out that she is half Jewish and will divorce her. And when I took a cab to the cemetery -- you know, the only cemetery I can go to to my grandparents, and so I went to see my grandparents. And when I told the cab driver that I want to go to the Jewish cemetery, he looked at me, you know you know what it is having an antenna? My antenna said that's an anti Semite too, you know. And one other thing I wanted to tell you, you know, this is with all those things happening to me, that being Jewish, you know, felt like being I don't know what. Do you know that for a long time, when somebody asked me, are you a Jew, the blood rushed up to my face like I was caught in -- my hand in, you know, the cookie jar, or being a criminal, you know? It took me a long time, you know, to look somebody in the eye and say, yes, I am. It took

me a long time. And it's so stupid. Even the God whom they pray was born a Jew. And I had to be ashamed, you know. It's ridiculous.

Q: Have you ever gone back to Israel?

A: I never been in Israel. And maybe I will try to talk into my wife. You know, she she's so much afraid of violence, you know. She's just the opposite of me. You know, with me, after what I went through, you know, I am not afraid of anything, you know. The bombing. Every moment, you know, you could be killed. If not by the bombs, but by the Nazis. But she's afraid, you know. But I I will try to talk her into it one of these days. I would like to go there to see Israel.

Q: How aware of you how aware were you of the creation of Israel around the time -- you were already in the United States?

A: No.

Q: No? You were in Hungary.

A: Sure. What was it? In '52.

Q: Yeah, in the early '50s. So -- and you came to the United States in the mid to late '50s. So how

A: Right.

Q: -- how aware were you of what was going on in Israel?

A: Very well. In fact, I was praying for Israel, and in the beginning the newspapers were sympathetic. But later on they were very anti Zionist, you know. But, you know, in the beginning --

[Recording ends]

End of File One

Beginning File Two

Q: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Charles Barber. This is tape two, side A.

A: You know, I wanted to believe them because they saved my life. But anybody who had any intelligence and was reading later on, you know, it was not a very logical ideology, and it didn't work, and it was cruel. In fact, would you believe that later, you know, in the '50s, I was afraid to go back to the building where we originally were living because I owned one third of it, and they would have called me a capitalist, you know? So I was actually afraid to go near to that building. And then they asked what my father

was. I I had to lie. I said he was employed in a liquor store as a bartender, because if I would have said he owned that liquor store, oh, forget it. So in order to be able to go to law school, I had to peddle what they wanted me to say, but I really wanted to get out of from there as fast as I could. And in '56, I could. I left my education and and came out. And now I think I even though I cannot forget, but my life is very much normal.

Q: You were showing me the picture that you have of your father. Do you have any pictures of your mother?

A: I do. And in fact, I mentioned that my mother was take the Gestapo arrested her and put her in a gave her to a Hungarian camp. I have a letter that she somehow was able to give to somebody and sent it to her sister, and I have that letter in my packet. It is written in toilet paper. I I can show it to you. Oh, you asked me about -- this was my mother and father, when they got married.

Q: This is their wedding picture?

A: That's their wedding picture. And look at this letter. This was sent from that -- Kistarcsa to her sister, and she writes about me, to take care of me. When I read, I -- it's in Hungarian, you know -- my heart is breaking.

Q: Do you still speak Hungarian?

A: Sure. Sure. I was 23 when I came out.

Q: What does the letter say?

A: She's thanking her sister a package, what she was sending to her, and she says that she feels very, very lonely without me and she's the one who gives me the strength to survive, and please take care of him and please take care of my me too. And sends her kisses to everybody, and again, in the next little piece of paper, again asked them to take care of me -- her sisters. And in one corner, she writes, please pray for this, her sister the same sister with whom she was taken away. And they died together. I don't know what to do with these, you know. I don't think that they could use these letter. What's when I die, what will happen to it, you know. I I would have given it to them, because how long will I live? Nobody has any use for it. I even have this is a picture of the sister with whom she was killed -- this is the Christian sister -- and this is her daughter who didn't recognize me. And you remember I mentioned the first casualty? That was him, my father's youngest brother, with the other brother who came to the United States.

Q: The one who helped you when you

A: Yes, when I came out. Yes. He died about ten years ago.

Q: Well, I'd like to thank you very much.

A: Oh, if anybody, 10 years from now or 50 years from now, learn learns something, then maybe it was worth [sic].

Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Charles Barber.

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview