

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Volunteer Collection Interview

**Magdalena Berkovics**  
RG

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Interviewer - Gail Schwartz

**Disc # 1**

Magdalena Farkas Berkovics was born on July 15, 1919 in Cluj, Romania. Her father Mendel Farkas came from Hungary and her mother Berta Landesman was born in Cluj. Magdalena's brother Tibor who was 6 years older was killed in 1944. Mendel was in the clothing business and was religious. The family belonged to a synagogue and observed Shabbat. They lived in a large house in the center of town in a Jewish neighborhood. Some of her extended family also lived in the house. Magdalena went to a German private school and then to a Romanian Gymnasium until she was 18 years old. She also loved swimming and ice skating. She went to a music conservatory in 1937 where she played the piano and also taught. At the time her brother Tibor was a doctor and a violinist. She received 2 university diplomas in music. There was a low level of anti-semitism that led her to feel a difference between her colleagues and herself. In 1939 she married a young singer whom she had accompanied on the piano. When the Cluj ghetto was formed, she stayed in the family house with her mother and mother-in-law. The men were taken away for forced labor so only women were left. It was crowded, food was scarce, but she was still able to teach piano, even to Christian children who came into the ghetto. With the money she made from teaching she got food on the black market. She seldom got mail and the radios were taken away. In June 1944 a Hungarian colonel told the Jews they would be going away. She took winter clothes, some food including a jar of jelly but put everything down because it was too heavy. They left from the railroad station, were in a train car with 70 others who were asking for water. Many people died over the 3-4 day journey. When the train arrived in Auschwitz, which she had not heard of before, Mengele told people not to worry. Magdalena was then separated from her family except for her 25 year old cousin. She was not able to say goodbye to the other relatives, none of whom survived. She was taken to the baths, had her clothes taken away and her hair removed. She wore others' clothes and was given only soup to eat. There was no work to do so she was taken to Stutthof in August 1944 and from there to different camps - Steinort, Elbing and Groudentz where she dug ditches and worked from 2 AM to 5 PM. She always had stomach problems and would eat raw potatoes. She spoke about freedom with the other women, and also what they liked to cook and they sang Hungarian songs. One day the guards disappeared and people shouted "We are free". She and her cousin ran away from the group and hid for a few days, asking for shelter in Polish houses, even staying in a Burgermeister's home. When she got to Satu Mare Jewish volunteers came and took her back to Cluj. She went to her house and found out that Christians were living in it. She met her second cousin, H. Zoltan Berkovics who had been in a labor camp in the Ukraine. They got married in 1946. They stayed in Cluj, and had a son. Zoltan was a specialist in candies and sweets and Magdalena taught in the university. She always talked about the war with other Romanian Jews.

**Disc # 2**

Their son, Tiberius Berkovics, was born in 1946 in Cluj. (Later in life he changed his name to John Sylvanis because of experiences in Romania.) After 3 years the Communists nationalized her house and she had to pay rent to live in it. Her husband, a Communist Party member, was the manager of a sweets factory. She was not a member because she had been a capitalist who had owned her own house. She first taught piano without pay in the conservatory, but later got paid. Her son went to a Romanian day care center. She was the only survivor in her family, and was very angry that Hitler had sent her to Auschwitz. Though there was no anti-semitism in the conservatory, there were some people in the neighborhood, including those who had lived in her house, who said that the Holocaust never happened. She never felt under threat as there were other neighbors who felt guilty about what had happened. Her

son had his Bar Mitzvah in 1959, a small ceremony with friends, most of whom were Jewish. Magdalena taught for 30 years and then received a pension. The government, under Stalinist rule, was not positive towards Israel and there were many speeches that were against it. Her son, a musician and a conductor, left Romania in 1976 because he couldn't succeed due to his Jewish name. He was not allowed to change it, but did so, to John Sylvanis, when he came to the U.S. He lived with a cousin in Cleveland who was a journalist for a Hungarian newspaper. Magdalena and her husband came to visit their son 6 years after he had arrived, and they came back to the U.S. in the 1980's to live. She had told her son while he was growing up all about the Holocaust. He was always upset that he had no grandparents. She now feels she talked too much and it was a mistake because he was so young. She herself is more sensitive and nervous because of her wartime experiences. She still dreams of them, but not often. Certain sounds, like airplanes, weapons and everything strange reminds her of the Holocaust. She is Jewish, first of all, and feels very attached to the U.S. to whom she is very grateful as it has done more good for her in a short time than Romania ever did. She has never gone back there. Her son is totally American. She gets reparations from Germany. She was not religious before the war and also not after. She "feels the liberty" in America, and feels guilty that she never worked here. Her husband, who was 79 when they settled here and was too old to work then, was devoted to American democracy. They were astonished at the fall of communism and the Soviet Union as they never thought it would happen. She feels that the US is the most advanced country in the world and it is everything she dreamt for. Her life in Romania was always very stressful. She still remembers that she received much praise for her answers on her U.S. citizenship questionnaire.