

## Oral history interview with Sophie Cook RG-50.106.0269

### Summary

Sophie Cook (née Zsofi Katherine Koch), born on November 10, 1937 in Budapest, Hungary, discusses her childhood with her father Emery Koch who was in the heating equipment business selling tiled stoves with iron doors, her mother Maria, a secretary for a trading company, her grandmother and aunt living with her along with a nanny and a maid, not being a religious family but secular, her brother Michael who was 3 years younger, in the summer of 1943 her parents renting a castle in the countryside as they weren't allowed to go to a resort, Gentiles taking over her mother's job in late 1943, parents turning on water faucets to drown out their conversation, being taught that it is all right to lie to save your life, learning the Lord's Prayer and how to cross herself, given the name Sofika Mueller, her parents' friends taking her and her brother to the villa of the Secretary of the Swedish Embassy, going into hiding with another Jewish family, being unhappy as the maid and the cook were very unpleasant, in late fall going to the Convent of the Sacred Heart where there were 8 Jewish children, having no connection to her parents, not believing in the Virgin Mary but liking the smell of incense, not being urged to convert, the convent being raided by the Arrow Cross in November 1944 who warned the nuns not to shelter Jews, so she pretended to be sick while they were there, leaving the convent with the other Jewish children and walking in the dark at night to the ghetto while being led by a 9 year old boy, her brother staying behind living in the convent kitchen, though only 7 years old knowing about death as she had read about a child being shot, identifying with a girl with a bleeding arm holding a doll in a Nazi propaganda poster, many adults in the ghetto, the apartment building having a yellow star on the roof to warn the Allies not to bomb it, her mother having false papers and her father being in a slave labor camp, then he and two friends escaping to Budapest, her mother finding a family willing to shelter her and her brother and leaving the message in the laundry, going to the friends' house, the bombing getting heavier, going into the shelter, the Russians coming in 1945, finding that her grandmother, great-aunt and grandfather had been murdered, moving into an apartment in the spring of 1945, going to a Jewish girls' school, moving into Pest in the center of the city when the communists took over, her mother not talking about her aunt and grandmother and not going down to the Danube, going to a boarding school in the Swiss Alps with her brother, the school closing in January 1946, her parents not getting any work so the family went to Paris for 2 years in 1949, getting visas after waiting 6 years and arriving in the US in May 1951 on the steamship *Île de France*, going to high school and studying the violin, living in Manhattan and not talking about her background, father set up a welding company with a man from Budapest who had been in Auschwitz, her mother and aunt working for the Justice Department, going to Radcliffe and Columbia Law School, her brother going to Yale and becoming a teacher, her getting married and having two children, feeling that Germany has paid its dues, having bitterness towards the Hungarians as they didn't have to collaborate, going back several times to see her paternal grandmother, not going back now as she did a reading there of her novel and memoir about her mother and grandmother in Hungary and felt uncomfortable, her mother being a determined woman who filed an affidavit accusing Janos Traum of being responsible for many deaths,

feeling sensitive to civil rights, working for the Civil Rights Division and being the director for the Committee for Concerned Scientists advocating for Russian scientists, hearing classical music which brings back memories of her childhood, feeling she is American, and that Communism is corrupt and corruptible.