

INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROBERT FISCH
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FEBRUARY 15, 1986

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Anti-Defamation League of
Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is Rhoda Lewin interviewing Dr. Robert Fisch for the Holocaust Oral History Project. Could you tell me first your complete name?

A: Robert O. Fisch.

Q: Do you have a Jewish name?

A: Moshe Bear ben Schlomo.

Q: When were you born?

A: June 12, 1925.

Q: In what town and country were you born?

A: Budapest, Hungary.

Q: Can you tell me your parents' names, your grandparents'...

A: My father's name is Zoltan and my mother's name is Irene Mannheim. My mother's family was from the southern part of Hungary and some of the family members from Germany, Mannheim. And my father came from Poland.

Q: When did they go to Hungary?

A: My grandfather went from Poland when he was six years old. He was very poor and he went to Budapest and he went to the amusement park as a young child six years of age and had to see how he could make some living so he got a bucket of water and he started to sell water to the people who went to the amusement park and later he became a very wealthy man.

Q: Not selling water. (Laughter) What was his occupation?

A: He was in the poultry business, and so was my parents, eventually. So they get the living goose, chicken, ducks, from the country and they sold it to market and for restaurants and things like that.

Q: I see, so they were poultry wholesalers.

A: Yeah, that's what they did and they worked so the living animals came and they caught them and cleaned them and so on. My father also was in, we called it in wild animals, which was actually forest animals, like deer and rabbits and bison, during the winter.

Q: What languages were spoken at home?

A: Hungarian. My parents spoke German as well, and Hebrew or Jewish, of course.

Q: Would you say that your family was religious in orientation?

A: Yes, they were. Quite religious.

Q: Very observant?

A: Yes, we were quite observant of the holidays. We didn't eat pork. We didn't have any kosher either. You know, I didn't eat sausage until I was sixteen (laughter) years old, so actually I missed a lot. (Laughter) I was raised quite religious.

Q: Did you go to religious school?

A: No.

Q: Were they Zionists?

A: No, they were not.

Q: What events, local, national, international, were you aware of from the mid '30s? You were quite small at the time.

A: Well, I think that when the World War broke out in 1938, I was 13 years old. I was keenly aware what happening in the world, at least in Europe, and was extremely interested in what was taking place. I had some concern about the outcome of the war. And I think historically speaking, that maybe it would be worth it to mention that the Hungarians were more or less on the side of the Germans, and they sent some troops to fight against the Russians when Germany invaded Russia. On the other hand, the Hungarians let the Polish army escape through Hungary. The Hungarian and Polish has very similar historical ties; they were feeling very close to each other, historically speaking, so they let the polish army to come through Hungary and go to Yugoslavia and to Africa. So it was a very peculiar arrangement. One of the Hungarian foreign secretaries at that time committed suicide because he was not willingly wanting to go with the

Germans, so it was already some evidence that the history was not necessarily already cut out for Hungary. But Hungarian leaders was not strong enough to be an independent, and I think it's very difficult for a small country to be independent in that kind of situation.

Q: Yeah, especially caught where Hungary is.

A: Yeah, the location. Through the centuries the Turks came through Hungary, the Tartars, the Russians, the Khans came through Russia, from Russia and Hungary, and then the Crusaders went through Hungary, so that it is a very important geophysical environment. History, unfortunately, never avoided Hungary.

Q: You said you were worried about what was happening. How much did you know about what was going on?

A: Well, it was very obvious that the Nazis had an anti-Semitic policy and, as such, we were very concerned. We did not know at that point, yet. I will come to that point when I will learn what the Germans is up to. But at that moment we didn't know too much more than they openly consider Jews as enemies. And so, as such, we were concerned. The Hungarians, because of the relation with the Germans, were able to reconquer some of the territory which were taken away after the first World War, and it was approximately 600,000 Jews in Hungary, which is a sizeable population, when the whole Hungarian population was about eight or ten million. So we're talking about eight percent of the population are Jewish.

Q: That's a lot. you say Hungary was at first, at least, siding with the Germans. Did you experience anti-Semitism in Hungary before that time?

A: Well, I don't think so. I was too young and I lived in my certain environment and I don't think I was exposed. Socially speaking, no. My parents were moderate-income people and I had my friends, Jewish and non-Jewish. Actually, one of the most dearest persons close to me was a Catholic woman who has been with us when I was eight months of age and she eventually great role in my life and in our life, because her parents were hiding my mother during the German occupation. And she has a very much personal influence on me. And through her I knew and I experienced this. But in school, yes, I did. Sometimes, if something didn't go well for someone, then they would say, "Rotten Jews," or something like that. This happened. Or demonstrations, especially when the war was already taking place. By university students there was open anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic statements, or certain placards or signs suggesting this anti-Semitism.

Q: The questionnaire says, "Did you have any relatives who lived outside your community?"

- A: Yes, I had many relatives, not too many, but I have some relatives in smaller communities in Hungary and they were eventually all killed.
- Q: Did any of your family or your relatives serve in the military?
- A: Not in that military. My brother lived in Switzerland during the second war studying engineering in Zurich, so he didn't have to go. My uncle served during the first war, was in the military and was an officer and actually, when the Jews were, in the war, recalled, and they were in a so-called working group because they were not actively involved and they were not able to be in the military, then he was still officer, but in that group.
- Q: So then when the war broke out, when did Hungary...
- A: When the Russians were invaded by the Germans. Actually, it is not known what happened, but an airplane came over Budapest and dropped some bombs. And some people felt they were German, and that was the way they tried to convince the Hungarians to go on their side against the Russians and some people said they were Russian airplanes. But anyhow, it was only two or three bombs exploded and was some very famous people died, interestingly enough, a very well-known writer's wife died, and then the Hungarians became actively engaged in the war against the Russians. But meanwhile the dictator was even against the United States, which did not go to any effect until March 19, 1944, and at that time the war already showed a change. The Germans lost their winning start and the Russians were coming and were somewhere on the Crimi Island, and Stalingrad took place at that time, and the Americans invaded Sicily a few months later or so, so that March 19, 1944, the Germans invaded Hungary, even though the Hungarians were their allies. They occupied Hungary officially, militarily.
- Q: How did the Jewish community react? You lived in a Jewish neighborhood?
- A: No, there was no such thing. There was some neighborhoods where more Jewish lived, but I was not living in a Jewish neighborhood.
- Q: So what was the reaction of the Jewish community? Did you know?
- A: Regarding what?
- Q: Let's backtrack. You jumped up to 1944. When did you actually get involved in the war?
- A: Well, I think that in 1944 I was eighteen years old, and because I was Jewish, I was not able to go to the university, so I was studying design, and languages, and some other skills. But when the Germans invaded Hungary, it became obvious that things are radically going to change. And what happened is that in

the established Jewish - it's called the Jewish "advisors" or something - and what it was, was for communications between the Germans and the Jewish community. And what they tried to do is to say that if certain things going to be met, then a certain dialogue is going to take place. Let's say they say they need a thousand typewriters, or they need this and that, and then the Jewish community should provide that for them. For special interest I would like to say that Eichmann, which I didn't know about him at that time, allowed 200 people to go to Switzerland - some well-known Jewish leaders - and then in addition to that he sent out two Jewish men to Turkey to make a contact with the Western Jewish community. This is a fascinating thing. The purpose of that was that with \$400 each from the West, in trucks, they would let the Jews get out from Hungary. These people were arrested in Turkey and they were not able to get anywhere. This is very interesting story. Now what happened is, I went to volunteer to this Jewish community and they give us some kind of German "passport" so that we are able to go freely in the city, some document that we can be a member, and so forth. One day I was in the building which was the center of the Jewish religious community - before that, I was in the so-called "country" division, just assigned to carry things - and a very upset person arrived. That was about a ten days after the Germans occupied Hungary. He had something very important to say. And he wanted to see this person that was the head of this country division. And I felt that this is something so important because of the behavior of this person, so I sneak in the room and I was listening. And he described, the first time, all the deportation of the country Jews was taking place. So they go, every Jewish people with a little bag of clothes or food, first to the outside of the village, where usually they had a "brick burner" for the village. There they kept the Jews, and I don't know exactly why, but the big burners has a very special shape, and very easily can be railroad station. They were put in freight trains, and each of these freight "wagons" was completely closed, and they packed the people in to the point that it's usually could be twenty people, let's say twenty soldier, would be in, but this time they put hundred people, old, young, without any water, and they locked it and the train eventually went to somewhere. When this was described, the circumstances, it became very obvious to me and to all of us that the future of those people is very gloomy, and this is something much more serious than a matter of taking away this, or taking away that, from certain people. It's a matter of life-threatening situation, and they, of course, were completely stripped of their whole property. From there on, then, I had personally no, whatsoever, expectation from the Germans except to be killed.

Q: Then until 1944, until the German invasion, you had mobilization, there was a Hungarian army, that was fighting...

A: Yeah, against the Russians. And then when the Germans actually occupied Hungary, then the American air force started to attack the central places, industrial places, oil refineries, and so on.

Q: I see, because of course by that time the Americans and the Russians had become allies.

A: Right, but I think that it's more than that. The Americans actually did not attack Hungary, even though Hungary declared the war, until the Germans really were there.

Q: Now you said you had prepared some things you wanted to talk about. Why don't you just go on, then, with your story.

A: Well, first of all I would just like to make an understanding that my thoughts, what happened with me, obviously, is not an isolated issue, but my conclusions and my thoughts about the whole thing, what we can learn, it's an individual thing, it has nothing to do with other people. After the Germans came, very soon we had to use a yellow star and this was ten centimeter in diameter, which is approximately four inches, a yellow star which we had to use on our coat, or any time we went out. On June 5, 1944, I had to go in a working camp, and I had to say goodbye to my parents, who that time still stayed in our home. Eventually the Jews had to leave their homes, too, and they were forced to live in a ghetto, or they were taken away from the city in different way. I just would like to refer to my own story now, and we can go back, if you're interested, to what happened with the rest. So I went to the working camp. Now we have to remember that June 5, 1944 was also a very interesting day because the next day was the invasion, which took place in Normandy. America at that time were already in Napoli and had a very hard fight there, and so I knew that time is going to work for us and that the war is going to be ending, and the Germans have no way to win that war at that point. The Russians were very much reaching, at that point, almost to the Polish border, and the Warsaw ghetto was in a fight. The Russians of course let them die out; they didn't support them at all. But I knew exactly what's going on. My parents brought a beautiful radio to me, a fantastic German radio, and so we heard every day the BBC and we were informed of what's going on very precisely, so with big maps. We followed very closely what's taking place. Even though the Germans tried to interfere with those broadcasting, we knew what's happening. So I went to this working camp which was assigned next to a military unit, which responsibility supposedly was to build bridges, and we had to work very hard. They were very cruel with us, but we were not in life-threatening situation. They were hungarians, and they were extremely inhumane. But we were comfortable, and reasonably well fed. We had to work very hard, but we were not threatened by any means. We were in the country, between Budapest and the Austrian border.

Q: Where did you live? Were you in an army barracks?

A: We were near to an army unit, not in a barracks, but in a building which was part of the army unit.

Q: In what ways were they inhumane?

A: Oh, for example, they took away photographs of people. I was eighteen years old but we were some 200 men from 18 to 48 years of age, and they all had families and they teared (sic) their pictures away and said, "You're never going to see your family," and things like that. We were called out to dig up unexploded bombs and of course we were not trained for that, but that's what we had to do. But in spite of everything I think that besides cruelty we were not in danger. When we saw the American air force flying we always had a real good time (laughter) because we know that every bomb they drop is actually our freedom. So I was very scared previously from air attacks, but from then on, I just had fun when they dropped every bomb because I know that it's for my freedom. And we were in such a circumstance until January, 1945. And interestingly enough, we tried to bribe some of our officers to stay in that place because the Russians were very close now - at that time, Budapest was surrounded - and we already met with some Russians who disguised themselves and came to our camp, but unfortunately, the Germans made a counter attack and pushed the Russians back, and they became keenly aware that we are close to the Russians. I would like just to say from a historical viewpoint that at that time - October 15, 1944 - the Hungarian government tried to jump off from the relation with the Germans and declare peace, and the Hungarian Nazis took over. So from October on, the Hungarian Nazi government took over, and sometime in the middle of January, 1945, they took us near to the Austrian border. I was very young. I thought I was in extremely good physical shape, so I really thought that nothing can happen with me, and people were not too pleased that I was already skeptical and cynical about everything. So, while we were going to a little village, next to the Austrian border, still in Hungary, I saw a coach and horses and at the end of this coach, a head was hanging. And it was very peculiar to me because it was not a dead person, but it was not a person who was able to control his body either, because the head was just hanging down off from the coach. And when we got to, again, a brick burner, this coach arrived there and they took down this body, and for my biggest surprise this body started to crawl, but was not able to do anything more. It was a very weak person who was extremely malnourished. And then they took everything away from us and someone said, "No, Fisch, if you are so brave, why don't you go inside this brick burner." So I went to the entrance - you have to go down in a dark area - and suddenly a smell hit me, which I never had anything like that. It was dying and defecations, and things like that, and it was, inside, hundreds of dead and dying people who were full of lice and they were bone and skin. Eventually we were forced to sleep there three nights among these people who were unable even to sit up. And we helped them, but meanwhile were invaded by thousands of lice. And then they took us by train to the Austrian border which at that time was German occupied territory and was considered Germany. And when we arrived the German SS came and got us out and were very due and then, interestingly enough, the first place we went they gave for every five of us a bread and then it turned out that for some they gave it to every third of us. It's a German military man who actually tried to help us and give us

more food than we're supposed to receive! And then eventually we went to another village, and we were in a little school house, and we're supposed to go and work, digging ditches against the Russians now, because the Germans prepared to defend Austria. And then one day a person just collapsed. They didn't know what's wrong and they started to kick him, and they eventually recognized that something's wrong. Well, we get the typhoid epidemic, which is by the lice, the infection, and we started to have temperatures, and I did, too. The Germans were very nice with us there. We had to work very hard and they gave us quite good food, and the doctor established a room for the sick people, and they wanted me to go there, but I just didn't think I wanted to go there.

Q: Why was that?

A: Because I was not trusting the Germans any more. And so one day a truck came, an SS truck, and they said the twenty sickest individuals can go to the hospital, the food was wonderful, comparatively speaking, and every indication was given, and so forth, so everyone was very confident that this will be a good place to go. The doctor called me because only nineteen persons was in the room which was considered sick room, and he said, "Fisch, you should go to the hospital." One of my friends went, because he thought that's going to be a good place to go, but as we learned later they were shot at the edge of the village in an hour of when they left that room. I went with that temperature elevation to work and I just would like to illustrate some of the things that happened, because I think people has to understand. One of them is that there was an SS who was extremely brutal to people. At that time we were also with women and children; we mixed when we got to Austria, not only men was there. And this guy was just hitting and kicking the people with rifle and boot, and so forth. And then one day I was assigned to him and I was so scared. When we got out to the forest he said, "Relax, sit down," and give us food. We didn't do anything except rest there all day. When we went back he started to scream again, hitting people. He was probably just involved in the military involuntarily as we were, but he had to act according to what his instructions were. Then we went from there to Graz, which is a big city in the middle part of Eastern Austria and then we were near to an industrial station, and we were kept in the center of an American air attack, so many of us died. I had people die next to me, because the bomb fell, and pieces from the explosions. And then from there we had to walk to the southern part of the Alps, to passes, and at that time if someone was not able to walk they shot them right there. Sometimes we didn't get food for three days, nothing to eat or drink. And one morning we were surrounded in an area, and an Austrian peasant threw us some apples. The German guard became very aware because of the noise we made in order to get some of those apples, and they shot the peasants right in front of us, who threw the apples to us. On the other hand, we went in lines and some SS gave us food, hiding behind their coats, and so it was a very mixed up situation. In the morning we threw out our things, and picked up from the dead people in the afternoon, because nobody was able to carry too many things, like blankets, and I had a high temperature, but we slept outside in the

snow and it probably helped me to bring my temperature down. One day we saw a lot of bodies, much more than usual. It turned out to be that under one of the "passes" one SS sergeant decided where five people were in line, he shot three of the five. And that was going on for hours and hours. Eventually he was arrested by another SS because he had no authority, but he killed the people. So from there we eventually got to Mauthausen. Mauthausen is one of the oldest concentration camps. It was much older than Auschwitz. It was first a political concentration, and eventually became a military camp. There were some Americans even there. But then we came. When I was there it was no such thing as gassing and so forth. They didn't do that. The second day we were led to be in a huge tent, like a circus or something, and it was the first time we were under a covered area. They gave us approximately ten decagrams, which is approximately one-fourth of a pound, less than half a pound, of bread, but there was already fungus on this bread, and one cup of coffee, and that was our food for the whole day. I slept very well there. By the way, in Germany, you couldn't light a cigarette on the street, it was against the law, but this camp's reflector lights were even on in the middle of the night, and an airplane came over and dropped a bomb in the tent where I was. So the tent started on fire and people were dying, and I just said, "Shit, I care less, I sleep well," and I went back to sleep. I didn't care. And next day we were taken from that camp to another camp and some people who couldn't walk, they tried to get on horse and buggies - they were available - it turned out to be that anyone who was on the horse or buggy, they were led to an open grave, and they were shot. So, we finally get to Gunskirchen, an Austrian village, and we were in a barrack. The barrack is like a long wooden building, and we were so tired. We had to squat in front of us on our knees and someone was sitting next to us and behind us. So during the night, when people started to sleep, or tried to lie down, they laid on other people, so many people died, just suffocated by the fact that we were so crowded. We had to be in line every day in the morning, noon and in the evening, to be counted. For six hours, we were in line. So twelve hours we were in the barracks, six hours we were in line, that's eighteen, and the rest we can go. They had two bathrooms - there were 30,000 people - for the men they had a bathroom for eighteen. If you did not go to the bathroom, which was an open lot, they would shoot you right on sight. So one day I had to go to urinate. It was raining, and I went out, and I thought in the rain I would just open my coat and I would just urinate there, because I cannot get my turn. The German saw me but fortunately didn't recognize that I was urinating, but he started to beat with his rifle and I didn't have to urinate for a long time! But you have to take into consideration when you have that many people and that little time to go to the bathroom, that the people either had constipation or diarrhea. This was now April. April 3rd was, I think, when Roosevelt died, and May first, Berlin was occupied. We knew everything. We were informed through the Germans what was happening. One day we received an international gift, little food packages. I got three lump of sugar, and it was something very extraordinary to have three lump of sugar. Our food was usually bitter coffee and the SS men was still standing in the hall there with the coffee, and they just give it out to us, and a little

bread and a little soup. May 2nd they just killed us like any other time, like nothing happened. Many SS were killed who tried to run away. They were told that we were supposed to be burned down in the middle of the forest and anyone who escapes would be machine gunned, but the Jewish leaders promised the SS that if they're not killing us, then they will get something, or they will be saved, or something. The American army came May 4th in the evening, and May 5th was the last part of Austrian/Russian men. Germany was already occupied. And when the Americans came in, I was so weak that I had to crawl up the stairway. It was the allied army, the invading armies, and these people knew the Germans very well. And yet, they asked us what happened with us, why are we here, because they could not believe their eyes, that this is possible, that they were doing this only because someone has a different religion. And I don't blame them. I think humanly this is absolutely "un-understandable," what happened, that this could be done just because you have a different religion. And eventually I went to a unit which was a German air pilot training center and became a hospital for the American army, and then we eventually went home.

Q: Now you said the SS were killing each other when they were trying to run away?

A: Right, the Germans soldiers or SS would be killed.

Q: One German would shoot another?

A: Well, I think because this idiotic thing was they have to fight to the last man. There was this idea that they have to destroy their own country, to the last bridge. Every bridge, you know, was mined, and so forth, and so although the war was over, Berlin was occupied, in that part of Austria it was like nothing happened. They tried to maintain the fight to the last minute.

Q: Now you said you were working for a while. You were in a work camp?

A: Yeah, the working camp it was for men. From 18 to 48 they had to go the military, but we couldn't go to the military, so we were assigned next to the military, to doing physical labor. To give you some illustration about what a short period of time we're talking about, from end of January, let's say from February, until May, which is February, March, April only three months, among the 240 men from 18 to 48, more than half were dead. So the time, although it doesn't seem to be significant, the circumstances were extraordinary.

Q: Now you were a very small group. Where were the rest of the Jews in Budapest? What happened to them?

A: Well, many things happened. First of all, the men were taken away in this military group. The older people and the younger people were eventually taken to different houses, which was marked with yellow stars, and eventually were taken

to a big ghetto in Budapest which had more than 100,000 people. This Swedish man, what was his name...

A: Raoul Wallenberg?

A: Wallenberg was there and was trying to save those people and then eventually with the help of Wallenberg, and with the help of some russians, the ghetto was occupied and the Germans did not kill the people in the ghetto, thanks to Wallenberg, who saved them. So out of 100,000 people probably 50,000 were saved by that circumstance. My mother was hiding in the country. My father was also taken away, and thought he could meet with me, but he couldn't and he was starved to death.

Q: How was your mother hiding?

A: Well, this Anna was with me as a - how should I say - nanny, and her parents took my mother and she was hiding in their home. You have to say that, not only to hide, but even to help people, was risking their lives. So you have to think about that, because it's one of the questions, "How come you didn't do something about it?" Anyone who would help you would risk their lives, and I just wonder how many people here would risk their life for anyone.

Q: You said your brother went to Switzerland.

A: Yes, he was studying engineering.

Q: So he left before the occupation.

A: Before, yes.

Q: After the war did you think about leaving Hungary?

A: No, after the war actually I went back to Hungary. I wanted to meet with my parents. I didn't know my father was killed. And my brother eventually came to Hungary and then he felt he should leave in order to take us out, and then he went to Israel and my mother immigrated eventually to Israel. And I came out only after the Hungarian revolution.

Q: Why didn't you go to Israel with them?

A: Well, first of all it was not possible to go to Israel except in '45 or '46, and I went back to Hungary. I didn't want to go to Israel.

Q: Well, now, in 1945-46 Israel was still Palestine. They were permitting immigration...from Hungary. So when did your mother and brother go?

- A: My brother went back to Switzerland and from there, he went to Israel. And my mother was immigrating in 1951. I couldn't even go at that time because the Communists took over. In the beginning they encouraged, but by that time nobody could go.
- Q: Under the Communist regime, you lived in Budapest, you went to medical school...
- A: I went to the medical school before they took over. There were four divisions - French, English, American, Russian - but eventually the Communists tricked out all the other parties. And it became just as bad as any of the Nazis were.
- Q: Would you be willing to talk about what happened when the Hungarian revolution occurred, and how you managed to escape?
- A: Well, I think maybe before we go there I would like to conclude this episode of the World War and my experience and then we can go to that. I think that first of all, when things ended, I had a lot of hatred in me and I thought that I would be able to be cruel with them. But then when I met with the Germans who were hungry, I had two choices to do. I do either the same thing they did with me or I will be somewhat different. And even in the worst situation there was always someone who expressed some humanity. So I think that "responsibility" is a very complicated issue. Who is responsible? Well, obviously Hitler was the Number One, but you cannot blame a Hitler when millions of people were taken by trains and assisted by the local guides and train engineers and so on. So the issue of responsibility has to be extended much further than to one single person. Eichmann originally was assigned to make emigration possible for the Jews, but there was no emigration possible for them. When these two Hungarians went to Turkey they were arrested, and actually one of them was killed in Palestine because the mob was very much against him, that he was trying to negotiate with the Germans, and so on. But it was for \$400 value of merchandise that these Jews could be saved, and if 500,000 people could be saved for \$400 each, I don't think that was unreasonable, but it was another situation: who is responsible? Who was the person who threw a bomb on the concentration camp which was lighted? Why was not bombed the trains, and many communications, during the war, stopping the concentration camp activities? Roosevelt did know exactly what was happening because the English people decoded the German secret things prior to the war and during the war, but it was not a major issue for him. So the responsibility cannot be simplified out by blaming a group of persons; I think it's much more complex than that. I saw some children in Israel that came out of the Museum of the Holocaust and I will never forget. There's a statue there of Job, a very sad person, from the Bible, and these little kids were laughing and had a good time and I felt so bad about it because for them this is a history and it's not a real thing. For them it's a memory maybe, but they don't really have the comprehension about it, and I think that we may have to remember that we cannot keep these open as wounds, where we have to open it

constantly to bleed. I think we maybe have to learn from this kind of episode so that using it as a reason to hate one group to the other - I think we have to admit that everywhere in the world a certain population will be willing to do something of this nature if they would have a choice for that, and I think that's the danger which we have to be aware of and try to eliminate. But on the other hand, I think that beside that, it's an incredible thing which happened with people, probably one of the most inhuman things. But it happened since. In Cambodia, nobody moved their finger because it happened in an area where we are not involved. It's not our business. And I think that it is important we should raise voices when one mass extermination taking place, regardless where, because they are human beings, and we are. I think that's really about what we can conclude from this. In Afghanistan the same thing is happening, the killing of mass peoples. No, there are very few people who do anything about it. And not even giving money, officially.

Q: Speaking of people being killed, did you have any encounter with gypsies, with Jehovah's Witnesses, with Soviet prisoners of war?

A: Oh, yeah. There were a few other people in these places beside Jews. And gypsies were one of those. But I didn't know about any Jehovah's Witness. I don't recall my encounter with any of those personally. But there were not only Jewish people. In other words, within the system, you had someone who was directing some of them. It was not limited to Jews, but mostly Jews. Their extermination was more.

Q: Well, then, in the camps you were in there was a mixture of people.

A: I would assume, but later on they were all Jewish.

Q: Did you have any chance to communicate with other people, other groups in the camp?

A: Very little. We were mostly all together, the same group of people. Some people who were able to, actually, arise above the situation, some very strong persons who gave lectures and talks and things like that on history. It was a very interesting thing that one person who was really a remarkable person who's a writer in Hungary, a very famous writer, he was with us and I just learned a great deal and one day I told him that this all can happen because of politicians and why the world is not directed by scientists - I was very much influenced at that time by H. G. Wells' idea about the future and the world and so forth - and he said, "What is your evidence that the scientists would not be just as prejudiced as the politicians." And since then I agree with him (laughter) there's no whatsoever any evidence that this couldn't happen, because the scientists is just as biased as anyone about other people. But it was interesting.

- Q: Had you wanted to be a research scientist, a research doctor before the war? Where were you headed before all these things happened?
- A: Well, I think that at that time I didn't have any direction because there was not too much looking forward, there was nothing really to look forward to; it was completely a dead-end street. There was no opportunity. I was always interested in art, actually. And then eventually after the war I became a doctor.
- Q: You mean you might have been an artist if...
- A: Well, or architect.
- Q: What steered you into medicine?
- A: Well, it was mostly personal influence by other people as well as my experience.
- Q: Through this period when you were in the camp, were you with friends?
- A: Yes, I was. Because of the military assignment, there were some areas, I entered with some people I knew very well, but some others I didn't know at all. So yes, we had some very close friends who were unfortunately together, because it was the same area geographically.
- Q: Do you feel this made a difference, this made it easier for you, you supported each other?
- A: I don't know that it made it easier. When things became critical then you are yourself. You are on your own. It was some situations when I saw some beautiful helping. One was, a Polish man was shot, and he became blind, and his friend carried him, and helped him, and led him, and so on. But when things are falling apart I think everybody is trying to run on their own. Helping, it was of course among other men down in the physical community, definitely, and it was even some spiritual helping, because this man mentioned, this writer, we would talk and try to get away from the surroundings and we tried to rise above the situation. Yes, it was such a thing, definitely. Everything was in a different dimension because, for example, a disease did not exist. People can not have insulin. They don't have the skin disease. They don't have no diet. So either you live or you die, but you don't have something between. Suicide was non-existent during this time, because people when you are trying to survive the situation, you don't think to die. Even if you say it doesn't matter any more, you're not going to promote your death. You try to survive. So you have a different outlook on things.
- Q: Can you remember how you felt when you were liberated? How it happened?

A: It was incredible. Everything was of course extremely chaotic. Every door was open, and we were trying to get some food, and people threw food around. The American Army, people just threw whatever to us, everything, from candies to whatever they had available. It was very difficult, actually, to pick it up. But it was not an unexpected thing. It was very much a wanted thing and it was a very expected thing. As a matter of fact, many times when we heard the good news like Berlin was occupied, people died, because they were just feeling that that's just where they can go, they cannot go any further. So a lot of people died after the occupation, because that's what they wanted to get, they wanted to be free, but they couldn't make anything further, and they were very, very far gone, physically speaking.

Q: Now, you say you knew these things were happening. Were the guards telling you? Or did rumors come through?

A: We were informed by our Jewish leaders of that camp who, by the way, they were very cruel with us, and they were using sticks and they were hitting others. They called it "Kapot." There were different Kapos and each barrack had their own leader, and these people had food and they eat well and we could kill them, actually. We hated them.

Q: Were these Hungarians, too?

A: I don't know who they were. I never talked with any of them. They could be Hungarian. Whoever they were, as a group they were very cruel. And so again it showed that with the opportunity, some people take advantage, and they are mean just like anyone else. I remember one day when we got these little packages, and fifty people had to be dividing some small package, and you can imagine how can you divide a can of sardines and six lumps of sugar, and things like that.

Q: Were these Red Cross packages?

A: Yes. And these people were eating a whole bar of chocolate. I could kill them if I would have an opportunity to get that away from them. Oh, absolutely. You know, when you are so hungry, especially for sweet things. And then here they are just eating, and we have nothing. We were hungry and starving to death. I was 19 years old and I couldn't get up on the stairway, I had to crawl.

Q: And so what happened on Liberation Day?

A: The Liberation Day, the following day, an interesting thing happened. I learned a great deal, actually. Most people started to go in the direction of home. And then people who went the opposite direction, went home much sooner; it was much less people there! (laughter) But we were just going, and eventually they took us to another camp which American military medical people tried to help us but they

were actually not all familiar with these kind of circumstances, how to handle, and I don't blame them. So many people died because of the treatments, actually. You know, they got dehydrated, and so on. We were very weak. Most of the people were supposed to be in the hospital. They took me in the hospital and I ran away, 'cause I know that's just not a good place to be. I think I just get home, and get back to normal nourishment.

Q: Did they give you the wrong kind of food?

A: I don't know. A lot of people were very terminal at that point. And to handle such a patient, it's impossible. I don't know what I should do with this kind of situation. it's absolutely unreal!

Q: So then how did you travel to get home?

A: The Americans eventually took us to the Russian zone, which was also a very interesting experience, because the Americans helped us, and the Russians immediately took everything away from us. They wanted to kill me, because when we arrived in the Russian zone, the Americans left us. We were in the middle of nowhere. And the Russians came and they didn't do anything for us. And so from there on it was still about 30 miles to the next railroad because there was no connection whatsoever, so I went to be with someone in a little ruined home, and was staying there overnight, and a Russian soldier came and said that he would like to buy something from me. I had many cigarettes that I get from Americans to take to my father. I had some booze, which I get from there, and he wants that. And I said, "Fine, I can give it to you if you give me some money, or you take me." No, he doesn't have anything. So an hour later, they come with machine gun, and if I don't give it to him they will shoot me. So it's very simple; I give it to them (laughter). And then next day, because of my cigarettes, I was able to get a ride to the next railroad station, and eventually I got back to home. And my mother was home and Anna was there. So that's the way I got home.

Q: Would you have been able to make it home if you hadn't had the cigarettes?

A: Oh, I think so, but it would have been a long walk!

Q: So how did you come to the United States then?

A: Well, my brother eventually came to the United States, and then the Hungarian Revolution came, and then I became involved in that, and from the Hungarian Revolution I came to the United States.

Q: Do you want to give me any details of that?

A: Well, I will be glad to if you are interested in that.

- Q: I think it would be interesting. Would you have left Hungary otherwise?
- A: I couldn't, because the Communists at that time were absolutely - we couldn't even get near to the border. So on the revolution it opened.
- Q: Had you wanted to leave?
- A: Oh, yes. I always wanted to. I actually even asked for emigration but they didn't give it to me. They wouldn't even consider that.
- Q: Why not?
- A: Because they didn't want anyone to leave the country, young or old, even.
- Q: You mean after the Russians had taken over?
- A: After the Communists.
- Q: And so did you work with any rescue organization when you were coming out?
- A: I think that when we came out from Hungary, the religion, as such, was absolutely eliminated practically, and then in Austria, people according to their religious orientation, they get the support to come to the United States. The different religious organizations were waiting for us. I think HIAS was. They helped us.
- Q: The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. And your brother, then, was here already. In New York. What brought you to Minneapolis?
- A: Well, that's an interesting thing (laughs). In New York was a lot of people who were very supportive and I met with some fine, very outstanding physicians there, and they told me that anything I want they could help me with, and eventually I asked them to find me a good place where I could get a good pediatric training, and that's when they helped me to come here. I didn't even know Minneapolis exists (laughs); I lived in New York City. So, they told me this was one of the best places to come, the department and the reputation.
- Q: Is there anything else now that I didn't ask or that you would like to talk about?
- A: Well, I don't know. I think that it was a considerable anti-Semitic atmosphere in the Communists, and the Russians in Hungary as well, especially during the Stalin years. I don't think that officially they are supporting this kind of thought now. But at that time it was very open. And I think they are using considerable anti-Israel kind of demagoguery in order to talk anti-Semitism. It's a way they can lie. I certainly don't feel I'm an expert on that.

Q: What happened to the rest of the Jews in Hungary? The 600,000?

A: Almost 80,000 were killed during that time. My father was, and all my relatives in the country, were killed. Among the country Jews, very few survived. And in the city, of course, then they tried to emigrate, as many as possible. I don't know right now what's happening. They have one school for rabbis, I know that, and they have one beautiful synagogue that is active, but most synagogues is not. My grandfather built a synagogue and it's closed, and there's not even a trace of it, and most of the synagogues are not functioning.

Q: Why were the country Jews less likely to survive?

A: Because they were taken away much sooner, and they had no way to live. What Wallenberg did was not affecting them.

Q: Can you tell me about your father?

A: Well, the thing is that he was a very simple man who was a very good person. And in this camp, he gave his food away, and he said he's always going to have food for himself. Was an old lady who survived and she told me this story. And he was so much liked that he was buried individually, not in a common grave. And there was a young girl that one of the guards fell in love with, and there was no future whatsoever in such a relationship, so she was killed by someone else, and was also buried individually. And this girl's sister came back, and my mother went to the hairdresser, and that was the sister of that girl, and when my mother asked about my father, and then she showed the picture, she recognized my father, and so we were able to go there and bring my father back. So my father is buried in Budapest in the memorial cemetery for the Jewish people. He was the very first who was buried there. And since then many other group were able to be buried there who were "disappeared," and they don't know where they are. But he's right there and to me to go back there is a very important thing, but it was emotionally very draining for me. And it has a wall of quotations from the Bible with the name and then the major part which looks like a big marble coffin, and it says, "They were killed by the hate, but their memories live by love." But I cannot go back any more. That is too hard on me. That was one of the reasons I went back, always, besides Anna, who died.

Q: Anna was the woman who hid your mother.

A: Yes. She lived in our home and when I went back, my desk was like when I was a child. Everything. So I opened and I know where the things are. So really you went back, in a sense. Most people like to travel, you know, to see how much change, and what you can eat, but that for me wasn't the purpose.

Q: Now when was this that you went back?

A: I went very often. Four years ago was the last time.

Q: Is Anna still living there?

A: No, she died.

Q: And her family has...

A: I keep contact with some members of her family.

Q: Could you tell me what you were doing during the Revolution?

A: Well, the thing is that in 1956, for the Hungarians is still a very severe suppression. Let me illustrate by a joke. "ABA" is the abbreviations for the Hungarian Secret Police. The joke is that five o'clock in the morning, at someone's home is knocking the door, and the guy's very scared to open it, and here it is death, the skeleton, death is coming. And he says, "Gee, I'm so glad to see you, I thought the ABA was coming." (Laughs) This just gives you an illustration about circumstances. In October - I was a physician - we had a meeting and it was very close to the Hungarian radio broadcasting, and supposedly the Prime Minister came back from Russia, and was supposed to give a talk. And the demonstrators went there and tried to stop him. So they blocked the whole street, so that he couldn't get there. The Hungarian Secret Police came and these students were cheering them, actually, because they didn't think about any kind of fight or anything like that. So the Hungarian secret police went to the Hungarian radio station and tried to protect the area even further. But you have to think about it, this is the middle of a block of a European street, and very narrow, and a lot of high buildings and so on. So I went there and I thought this was a very interesting thing and I told my friend just in case it would be better to stay inside on the block, so we would not be on the street if they start to shoot or something. And they did. They started to machine gun the whole student down there, from the inside of the building. And I said, "Well, that certainly shows the wonder system, how weak our system is, when against the students they have to use machine guns." And we took the injured people in and we took care of them and I thought so that's about the end of it. But what really happened is that the Secret Police, of course they didn't stop the speech of the person because he had a switch system in his home or in the office, and he gave the speech and the students then were surrounding the area and they didn't move. So they asked the Hungarian Army to help the secret police. When the army arrived they said, "What the hell is going on here?" And the students said, "We are shot by the Secret Police." They said, "Why don't you shoot back?" And the students said, "With what?" And the army began to shoot the police for the students. That's the way the Hungarian Revolution started. It was not started by the people who were mostly suppressed by the Communists. It started by Hungarian students who grew up under the Communist system. And so the whole thing became so unreal, you couldn't believe it really happened. For

example, in Hungary to get a camera was almost an unbelievable dream. And then the shop windows were broken because of the guns and what-not and there was a piece of paper put there: "We're not fighting for cameras, we're fighting for freedom." Then nobody touched the cameras! And if someone was killed and someone went there to take off the watch, they shot him. And there were open containers full of money for the relatives of those who were sick and died or needed support. And so it was really an incredible, sub-human historical moment in my life, of everyone. Little boys, twelve-year-old boys were chasing the Russian tanks. And it was absolutely unbelievable. Tanks in a big city like Budapest, an old city, and everything is shaking when came this heavy tank, and this twelve-year-old child is chasing this tank (laughter). Absolutely unreal. It's like a MAD magazine. And they jump on the top of the tanks and they put this so-called Molotov cocktail, which is a bottle filled with gasoline and on the end is a little material which is lighted, and it goes in the tank and they blow up the whole tank. And so the Russians were, actually, also absolutely unaware of what they were into. And I was seeing for example the Russian tank division is coming over from Buda to Pest, and the students from high school holding each other's hands and they're marching against the tank division. And the head of the tank division opened the tank and said, "What the hell are you doing here?" and the students said, "What the hell are you doing here?" "This is our city," they said. "I came to fight against the fascists," said the Russians. "Supposedly you come to fight against the fascists, we don't have fascists here." And they said, "Who do you fight?" And the students said, "We are fighting against the Secret Police." And the Russians said, "Let's fight against the Secret Police." (much laughter) The whole thing was unreal! And I could tell you of the other things, sad as well as beautiful stories, that took place, but eventually the story is that 10,000 or 12,000 children died, mostly high school kids, who fought against the Russians. And then the Russians actually pulled out. And then this, I think stupid, Eisenhower, made the comment that he is not going to be involved, because that was the time when the Suez Canal also had a problem. And then the Russians came back, and they started bombarding the city with airplanes, and eventually the whole thing fell apart. And I, meanwhile, I and another doctor who is an ENT specialist in Boston, we organized through medical students and prostitutes, as a matter of fact, an organization to transport things. So they opened one of the government garages and they stole all the cars, and so we had transportation where we worked in the hospital and we were able to provide food as well as medical assistance not only for the Hungarian revolutionaries but actually for the Russians we well. And we took some severely injured Russians also. So one day I hear that in the West they had a lot of packages and things at the Austrian border. So I thought, why don't we go down there and get these things (laughter). Medical supplies. So four trucks, we put red cross on it, and four drivers, four little cars, we started to go west to the border. We get to an area of Hungary which is a refinery for the Hungarian oil and so we fill up the tanks and everything, and meanwhile we see a caravan is coming from Budapest. What is this? thirty-seven French, English, American relatives of the Embassy, fleeing into Austria. So we told them, "Auf Wiedersehen." And when they were ready, I

went in the first car and we break the convoy in two parts and we went in the middle of it and they were very upset about it. (Laughs) So we were under the foreign Western diplomats. We went to the Hungarian border. At the Hungarian border the Russians were not there at that point, and we decided we go to Austria. So we went to Austria and the Austrians were very friendly and said, "Well, you have to leave your cars here, and if you want political asylum was one thing, but we cannot let you go any further." The rest of the cars went in the direction of Vienna. They stopped, so the Austrian soldiers were very surprised, and they looked around and we also took off. In the next village, again another Austrian group waited for us, but we ran through them and we went to Vienna. And outside of Vienna the Austrian police waited for us, and the police chief came and said, "Listen, you cannot go any further with your cars." (Laughs) "You better go back to Hungary or you ask for political asylum" We said, "We are not interested in political asylum, we came to visit Vienna." So the Austrian police brought out one of these volkswagen buses out, which was only for prisoners, and said, "Three of you can see the city in this." And I said, "I'm sorry, if all of us cannot see it, we're not interested." And then he had liquors and everything, and I had to drink, because I know it's the craziest thing to go pack to Hungary. We packed up the trucks and we went back to Hungary. With the medical supplies and food. We went back to the hospital. The hospital became the other center of the Revolution because it was the only place where communication was available. I distributed the food. We gave some oranges even for the Russians, and we said, "This is from your Western friends." (Laughter) And then before the Revolution was over I told these boys to get away, because the Revolution is over and there's no sense to stay here further. So they went in front of the hospital and there was a little area between two buildings, and they hide there. Next day the Russians come for their soldiers. There are twenty-seven who we operated on and saved. The Russian officer comes down with a machine gun and I say, "I'm sorry, but you cannot go in the hospital with a machine gun," so he put down his gun (laughter). Meanwhile the Russian tanks division people recognized there are fighting boys here, and so immediately they surrounded these boys, and they came out, hands up. Then learning that these boys were taking care of their soldiers, they let these boys go.

Q: So there you were, back in Budapest. How did you escape the next time?

A: I was completely out of my mind, you know, how stupid I was that I went back! Then I heard that doors are open to New Zealand, to Switzerland, to United States. The first refugees are arriving and I am going nowhere (laughter). So I am by the Russians. Furthermore, I was in the place where was the center of the Revolution, and many people were executed. And so I know that I'm better to go. Though I have no part of the Revolution, we were very much in the center. And so I lost some weight, I looked not too good, and they said maybe you need a rest, and a doctor friend recommended to go somewhere to rest. And when he said you can go anywhere, I said "United States." (laughter) They sent me to the border - there was some kind of sanatorium near to the Austrian border - and I

went there and the doctors saw me and said, "What do you want?" and I said, "I want to get out from here." And they brought me someone who led me to the border. So that's the way I came.