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The date is June 16, 1992, and we're speaking with Dr. Robert Gruber in Potomac, Maryland. Dr. Gruber, could you please tell me your name, your date of birth, your place of birth, and anything you possibly can about your childhood?

My name is Robert Gruber, and my date of birth is December 6, 1933. Place of birth, Kosice, Czechoslovakia. I remember very little from before my age of about five when one of my first vivid memories is, in fact, connected with the events of the persecutions.

I was born in a relatively large, for that area of the world, city in Eastern Czechoslovakia, Kosice. And in 1938, when Hitler took over Czechoslovakia, Kosice was given over to the Hungarians. And within a very short time, the Hungarians came.

And one of my first memories is, in fact, being in the main street in Kosice, and watching the Hungarian victory parade with the leader of the Hungarians, Admiral Horthy, on a white horse, leading a column of Hungarian soldiers down the main street. This all looked pretty glamorous to me, but within a couple of days, the rule came down that all Jews who were not Hungarian citizens, which our family was not, had to leave that area. The Hungarians took over within 48 hours.

So that's one of my first memories. Now, one interesting thing in terms of the background might be that this entire section of Czechoslovakia did have a fair number of Jews. And they were pretty much all orthodox, although not-- Hasidism was not very much-- very popular in that area. It was more, I guess, the sort of intellectually orthodox scholastic type of orthodoxy, rather than the more emotional Hasidic orthodoxy.

But things were very much different than they are here now. And during that time, arranged marriages were still very much in practice, so that my parents were actually married as a result of a get together that was arranged and paid for by a professional matchmaker. And my mother-- my father received a dowry, which was still traditional in those days.

But of course, I wasn't alive then, so I didn't know much about it. But it's part of the lore that I have learned.

Were both of your parents from that area?

Not too far from that area, probably about-- actually, my mother was from a town, somewhat smaller city town, called Michalovce-- and I'll refer to it again later on in the story-- which was probably about 40, 50, 60 miles from Kosice. My father has a much more complicated history. He was born in Ruthenia-- actually, eastern Ruthenia, and became orphaned when he was 14 years old during the time of the First World War, spent some very difficult years in Budapest, and then eventually drifted over to Czechoslovakia as a result of one of his older brothers having established himself in that area. And he opened up a jewelry shop really in Kosice.

But the-- my mother did not live in Kosice then, but this matchmaker knew of this person in Kosice looking for a prospective bride, and he hooked them up together that way. And so then they-- after they married, they did settle in Kosice at that time. But as I say, I remember very little of the years in Kosice.

The-- I guess I didn't say that my initial language that I learned was Hungarian. That was my mother tongue, even though I was born in Czechoslovakia, because I was a part of Czechoslovakia, which was ethnically very Hungarian. Also, this area, not too long before, had been part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

And I think Jews, in particular, tended to identify more with the Hungarian people than with the Slovakian people. And so that my mother, who had gone to, of course, school still under the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. But that's what she spoke fluently and perfectly.

So actually, as far as I know, I didn't learn to speak Slovakian until I began school at the age of six. But I don't remember having any particular difficulty learning it. So let me kind of pick up the story a little bit.

After we got to Michalovce, because when we were asked to leave within 48 hours, the place that my parents chose to

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go was to my mother's hometown, which was Michalovce, which was still part of Czechoslovakia that was on its last legs at that point. And--

Can I stop you for one second?

Let's see.

You got to Michalovce.

We got to-- yeah, we got to Michalovce, and that's where I began to have my first memories that are fairly vivid and fairly clear. For-- initially for, I guess, the first year or so, we couldn't find a place to live, so we lived with my mother's family, with her sister and brother-in-law in fairly crowded circumstances. As I remember, and only very vaguely, I began to-- even before I started regular school, I had already started theater, which one usually began at the age of four or five.

Let's see, what else can I remember about that time?

Had your father found work there?

Well, that's part of the story. And then one thing that will become clear as I tell this story is that the way we survived was because of a great deal of luck, really, and circumstances that kind of came together in just the right way. For example, my father, who was a jeweler, the man-- jewelry manufacturer, rather than a store owner, he-- when we moved to Slovakia, he could not-- he wanted to open a shop there, but he couldn't because by that time, Czechoslovakia had broken up. Slovakia had become an independent fascist Republic.

And because he was not a citizen-- in fact, he had always been stateless. My father had never had citizenship in any country. Because he was not a citizen, he was not able to get a license to open a shop.

So after a while, after struggling around for a while, he came up with the idea of getting a partner who was a citizen with whom he would jointly open a shop. And he happened to find a jeweler who was a Christian person, who was alcoholic and not really that interested in running the shop as long as he was fairly adequately provided for. So the shop that my father opened was really under his name, legally belonged to him.

And what makes that important is that because of that when later on all Jewish businesses and stores were taken over, were aryanized, as it was called at that time. And a very good depiction of that is in the movie, The Shop on Main Street, the Aryanization. When all the stores were aryanized, this did not apply to my father's shop, because it was not a shop officially owned by a Jewish person.

So my father was able during some of these difficult years to continue to make money, which as the story will unfold, became also very important for our survival. But this was a totally sort of combination of circumstances that he had not planned on. He planned-- he wanted to be able to open his own shop. But because of these circumstances, he wasn't able to do so.

So then gradually, I guess, he established himself with this new partner. And we started-- let's see, '39, '40-- by that time, as soon as I think Slovakia became-- very shortly after they became an independent fascist Republic, they started passing some laws and-- against the Jews. And I don't know exactly the order of them, but it was laws like one day, the law would be that no Jews could go into parks.

So as a kid, there were parks around. I wasn't able to go and play in the parks. No Jews would be allowed to go to the movies. This town wasn't that big, and we had one movie. But still, it seemed like a very exciting, glamorous place to go to, but there was no way that I could go to a movie during that time.

The other rule was something like no Jews in restaurants. And that didn't-- we hadn't gone out in a restaurant, didn't seem like a depriva-- they didn't have any McDonald's that I would have been deprived of. But gives you some sense of

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the gradually kind of eating away at your freedoms that took place during that time.

And I guess what I remember, and then somewhat-- somewhat vaguely, but still pretty much so is the growing sense of fear and anxiety and tension that all of my family, and all the people around us about what was going to happen. I mean, clearly, no one expected anything good to happen. But perhaps at this point, no one quite anticipated how bad things would be, either.

And then, I think by the time I started first grade, no Jews were allowed in regular public schools, so that essentially under the sponsorship of the Jewish community, there was a Jewish school with exclusively Jewish kids. And they-- I think it only went up to sixth grade. And one-- after a while, that's as far as the person could go in-- the Jewish person could go in their education was sixth grade.

So did you originally attend the public school?

I don't-- I think by the time I was-- I think-- let's see, I was-- 1940 I was six years old. By the time I would have started first grade. I think by that time already, there, the Jews were not allowed to go to public school.

And in fact, this picture-- because this is the second grade-- I suppose I started in '39, '40. Now, I don't-- I may have started in public school, but I really don't have any recollection of the first grade. But by the second grade, as you can see, in the year in 1942, '41, I was in an all Jew-- this is my picture-- I was in all Jewish school.

In fact, at that point, they were segregated into boys and girls in different classes. You see that comment on the picture?

Yeah, yeah.

As a matter-- I mean, this obviously is-- this picture is of some interest, because it does have-- shows at least the teacher and the principal who are pictured along with the students. They wore yellow bands, which were at that time required for Jews to wear to identify themselves. I don't really remember most of the children here in this picture.

But-- and I-- so I can't tell you who survived and who didn't, for sure. But I would guess that since about 60% to 70% of Slovakian Jews were killed in the Holocaust, it-- probably the same percentage is true here that about 60% or 70% of these boys that were killed in the Holocaust. Interesting-- ironically enough were the teacher and the principal both survived, actually.

While I'm on the pictures, I might just mention the earliest picture here is one taken at my aunt's wedding. And this is my father. This is my mother. This is me, and this is my sister.

This is my mother's sister, who was getting married. This is her husband, [PERSONAL NAME] husband. And these are two other aunts, sisters of my mother. All of these people were killed-- all except our immediate family were killed in the Holocaust.

Do you know what-- so you would have been around four years old there?

In there, I'm probably a little younger than that. I think I'm probably about three years old, and my sister is about four years old. And I think the wedding, which took place in Kosice, although, my aunt was from Michalovce.

It's interesting.

Yeah. So-- and it was with this aunt and uncle that we lived for some period of time when we first moved to Michalovce. Now, maybe you can ask me some questions specifically about life there before I get into the-- more directly into this story.

OK. Did-- well, after you moved out from living with your aunt and uncle, did you-- you got your own place, is that how--

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Yeah, we got an apartment, a reasonable one by the standards of that place. In many ways, this whole area was really fairly primitive, certainly by-- even by today's standards there. But certainly by American standards, it would have been very primitive.

There were very few cars in that area. There was lots of horse drawn traffic-- wagons and so on. There was even a vestige from the past in that there was a castle at the edge of town where the count-- the local count lived.

And when they would go by in the street, they would be in a horse drawn coach with their emblem, their insignia on the side of the coach. So there was-- it's a very agricultural area-- there was-- at least at that time. Now, I've been on a return trip there a couple of years ago, and many of these small towns during the Communist era, they built a lot of polluting industries and terrible looking modern cinder block housing projects. But in those days, it was very agricultural.

Do you remember what the town looked like at all?

Yeah. There was really mostly consisted of one very long main street that stretched from the railroad station on one end, probably two or three miles long, to the other end where there was a creek. And beside the creek was the count's castle. And then there were a couple of streets parallel to this main street, but none nearly as big or prominent as the main street. Really, all the stores, essentially, were on that main street.

On that main street, you also had the Jewish synagogue, which for a town of that size, which is about 15,000 population, was a fairly magnificent synagogue both inside and outside. But on that main street were-- it was a town hall, the post office-- main post office, and all the streets, and a number of the street.

And then all the stores, a number of the stores, probably a majority of the stores, were owned by Jews. That was typical in that area. Because with the exception of very few Jews, most Jews were not part of the landed type of work, so that owning businesses and professions were what they were engaged in.

You mentioned, also, that the Jews from that area were prominently observant. Was your family-- did you observe the sabbath and--

Yes. I think with very few exceptions, with the exception of some rebels who didn't no longer observed, most people did observe. I mean, there was certainly we had kosher food and everything that was to be-- that was standard expectation, even though my parents by the standards of some were actually fairly modern. Because in that area, many women still wore wigs.

Whereas, that was not true for my mother. In many households, the only language spoken within the household was Yiddish. That was not true in our household. Generally, we spoke Hungarian. Although, my parents did speak Yiddish to each other when they wanted to keep something secret from us.

And we never-- my sister and I never quite learned that-- learned it that well, although, we picked it up some. But-- so by the standards of some part of the Jewish community, our family would have been called fairly modern, rather than traditional. But it certainly was expected that we would keep kosher, and go to Shul on Saturday morning, my father and I as I became older, and observe, essentially, all the holidays.

Now, some of the more religious people would go to-- every morning would go in at 6:00 and do two or three hours of studying the Torah or the Talmud before going and starting their ordinary day.

Was there yeshiva in the town?

No, there was no yeshiva in town. But in Slovakia-- so one of the-- I forget exactly the name of it, but in the capital of Slovakia, Bratislava or Pressburg, I think there was a very famous center, yeshiva center.

What about Zionist activity?

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Now, that's an interesting question, because again, the community was so traditional at that point that they really, for the most part, had very little use for Zionist activity. The belief was that the day the Messiah came is when one would go back to Palestine and not before, and that there was almost something sacrilegious--

Right.

--about becoming a Zionist and trying to re-establish the State of Israel before the return-- before the coming of the Messiah. And so-- but some of the younger people did become Zionists, and they were looked at somewhat askance by--

Really?

--by the more traditional people. My cousin-- actually, two of-- both my cousins who lived in Michalovce who were somewhat-- about five or six years or-- actually, more like eight and 10 years older than I, they had both become involved in Zionism. And not only that, but to the consternation of their parents, they became involved in Hashomer Hatzair, which was not only Zionistic, but leftist and atheistic in those days. But that was a source of great distress and embarrassment to their parents that they were. But pretty generally, as I say, the opinion was that Zionism was not consonant with good Judaism in those days.

I actually worked with a woman who now lives in Australia who is from [HEBREW].

Oh, really?

Was very involved, I know, in the Zionist. Her name was Magda Hellinger.

For all I know, my mother probably knows her.

I know she's very-- and her father taught in the school, in fact.

My cousin taught in the Jewish school.

I believe so, yeah.

The name seems familiar to me. I mean-- although, these teachers, this one is Bernstein, and that's Brown. But it sounds like a familiar name to me.

She would be quite a bit older than you.

But she would probably be about-- well, probably younger than my mother. But my mother would probably have known her pretty well.

[INAUDIBLE] just wondering.

It sounds like a familiar name.

Yeah. I mean, I-- I haven't met anyone else from that town so--

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

OK. Well, do you remember any of the-- what it was like to go to school?

Yeah. I mean, it was-- I suppose I remember this-- even though it was a Jewish school, rather than a part of the regular school, my memory of it didn't have so much to do, at least initially, with the fact of its being a Jewish school. I mean, the usual stuff of looking forward to recess and playing soccer, doing other games during recess. Struggling with it to be

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a good boy or a bad boy in class.

And in those days-- and certainly, corporal punishment was still very much part of education in those days. So the teachers would have a bamboo stick, and if you misbehaved in class, then you had to go and take your punishment and extend out your hand and wait for it to be switched and struck by the teacher with a bamboo stick. And it stung. It stung pretty badly.

So you experienced it.

I experienced that, yeah. And when he really got mad, then you'd have to bend over and then get a few lashes on your behind. And that was perfectly acceptable practice. There were no complaints from parents about it in those days. And I suppose most of them did think they were doing the right thing. But it didn't feel like it.

I imagine. Was there a sense of it-- that you knew you had to be in this school?

Well, some, but again, I mean, it was part of the whole picture of gradually being deprived of privileges and freedoms. And in the first two or three years, my memory of it isn't clear enough to really be able to answer that kind of question. But certainly, I mean, one might say in some ways things were getting worse and worse.

There was-- being in an all Jewish environment in school probably had its good side, too, in terms of being in a community with other people going through the same thing. And so there was some sense, I think, of mutual support from that, as well.

But interestingly enough, and this has always astounded me, that through all the times during the war, even after there had been transports and so on, and a fair number of people were deported, that those who still remain as much as they both worried about their friends and relatives who had been taken, and as much as we all worried about what would happen to all of us, eventually, that we all-- I think there was a tendency to try and maintain a semblance of normality as much as possible.

And so that whether it-- whether it involved people getting together socially, having card parties, kids worrying in school about whether they got their homework right, whether the teacher is going to get mad at them or not, whether their parents are going to get upset with their grades, I mean, to some extent that still remained part of life. And probably that was a helpful part of life in creating some balance for all the other worrisome things.

So I remember particularly as I, myself, I was sort of an average, indifferent student the first three or four-- the first three grades. And then suddenly, I became a very, very outstanding student in the fourth grade and got a lot of praise for it. And so I remember that that meant a lot to me.

And as-- at the same time, vaguely remembering also worrying about other kids being jealous of me and trying to put me down by mocking me and so on. So these were all part of life, even during those very difficult times.

Well, would you like to discuss the course of events then of how--

Yeah, right, and I'll be glad to. Well, I suppose I already mentioned these laws that were being gradually passed. And then in the beginning of 1942, the first transport began. And initially, the people who were subject to being transported were young people, really, late adolescence, and kids in their early 20s, both male and female, unattached, single, and so on. These were the first population that were subject to deportation.

And so that didn't personally affect us. Although, one of my cousins was in that category. And she for-- well, not so fortunately, because eventually, she was killed. But at least during that period of time, she hid out and so was not caught in that room.

But-- and as I understand, maybe my historical knowledge isn't totally accurate, but this group that they got from Slovakia were really used, these young people, to build some of the camps. And I think some of them really were

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involved in building Auschwitz during that time. So a few of that group actually survived on to the end of the war, having become Kapos, and so on. But most of them were killed.

In fact, probably about 95%, 98% of the kids that were caught at that time were. Now, the next law that came out did affect us. The next group that was subject to deportation were men-- single or married-- within a certain age range. And my father was in that age range.

And so there was-- this was all on the up and up at that time, so to speak. So the announcements were made publicly that at such and such a time, these people would be expected to report for relocation or deportation to labor camps in the eastern territories. And this was all done by the Slovakian authorities. This was not done by Germans.

Was there any type of a Jewish council in this community?

Yes, there was a Jewish council, and throughout this period of time, there was a Jewish council, I think, both locally and statewide in Slovakia that tried to intervene on behalf of the community. And there will be a couple of instances where I'll mention they actually were effective in securing something. But I don't know whether at that point they were particularly effective. I'm not sure. I just don't know enough about that.

So then, I mean, again, an excellent example of how chance played a tremendous role in survival. The way my father was going to avoid this particular deportation was that he and the Jewish journeymen of his were going to hide out in his shop. And presumably, since this shop was legally a Christian establishment, they would not come and look for him there.

This shop actually happened to be practically adjoining the apartment where we lived. There was just a wall that separated our apartment from the shop. And this I have a memory-- not a very vivid one, but a memory for it is that my father and this journeyman of his were going to spend the evening in our apartment playing cards.

And with the plan that later on for some reason or other, they didn't expect the raid to begin until late at night. That later on they would then move to the shop and hide out there. But my mother had a headache, and after they played there for about half an hour, she said, I want to go bed. Why don't you go to the shop now?

And so they did. And within about 15 minutes, the police, the gendarmes, were at the door looking for my father. And they looked all around the apartment, under the beds, in the closets, and anywhere. And of course, they didn't find him because he was already in the shop.

But had my mother not had a headache, he would have been taken. And if he had been taken, I doubt very much that any of the rest of us would have survived. So there was a whole series of things like that.

They didn't assault the rest of the family because he was--

No, because they, themselves, they grilled my mother, well, where is he? And my mother said, I don't know. He just went off somewhere. And so I think it's a little humid here. Can I-- I'm going to--

The next thing, and this was, I guess, around April, May. I guess, April, early May of 1942, came the new law that all families, unless exempted, would be subject to deportation. And the law was very specific about-- and it was presented this for our own good to teach us the virtues of labor.

And the law was very specific about luggage, how much per person, and so on and so forth. And this was to be-- everybody was to report some time in advance. I think two weeks from the time that the law was announced.

And so that was a big thing about what people-- how were going to people-- how were people going to react to this. And most of them, I would say, really saw no option but to comply. And you have to remember that this was the time in the war when an Allied victory seemed very far away.

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Right.

So that there seemed little prospect of finding any hiding place that would last for years. So most people resigned themselves to just complying with the law, including a number of my immediate relatives in the same town, including the aunt and uncle that I mentioned before. And they had a little daughter at that point that was about three years old.

Can I ask you, what did you have any knowledge of the camps?

At that point, we didn't have any knowledge at all of the camps. But-- and I suppose people's reactions to this challenge vary to some extent according to their ideas and attitudes about people, life, and their own character, really. So that for example, in the case of my parents, my mother, in particular, she tended to be mistrustful, which turned out to be a very good thing-- very, very good way to be.

So that although she had no idea, certainly, at that point about any kind of systematic extermination, but she was very clear that these camps would at the very least pose a tremendous danger to my sister and me. That at the very least, we would be subject to either dying of disease or of starvation. And she was determined, therefore, that no matter what, no matter how, she wasn't going to go along with this law.

And that had something to do with her character, with her ideas about things. Whereas, her sister reacted different. There was, what else can one do except to go along with it.

Now, at that point, there were a fair number of people who did have exemptions, official exemptions, who were not subject to deportation at that time. And the whole history of this thing, you have to remember, again, that we-- this area was not under direct German control. And the areas that were under direct German control, there were never any exemptions with regard to Jews.

But in this case, there were, and there continued to be over time. Not necessarily-- I don't know what dictated. Certainly, the more influential you were, the wealthier you were, the more likely you were to have an exemption. I'm sure bribing played a role in that, and so on.

Now, during this time, my parents did not have any way to secure an exemption. And there were different orders of exemptions. There was a yellow exemption, because it was on yellow paper, which is kind of the plebeian exemption. That wasn't so great. And it went all the way on to the presidential exemption, which only a relatively few people had. And they were most secure during that time.

And so the only option that my parents had at that time was to try and cross into Hungary illegally. And this became one avenue that other people also tried to take advantage of. And very soon, there was a traffic in illegal parties crossing the border into Hungary.

Because during that time, even though the Hungarians when they had come in, kicked us out officially, Jews were not being-- Hungarian Jews were not being deported in 1942. And they were not really even that directly threatened during that time. So my parents arranged to join a group that had its guide as leader, and it was a business proposition.

This person got paid so much per person in the party. And like our group, I think, consisted of about 13 people, two or three different families. And the actual way we went across was during the night, through open fields and swamps, and so on.

During the day after the first night, we hid out and rested. And then the second night, we completed our journey across the border to the outskirts of a nearest Hungarian city or town, which was UngvÃ¡r. Now, it's part of Ukraine. It's called Uzhhorod.

But at any rate-- and by prearrangement, we were-- when we got to the outskirts of this town around 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning after, really, a long-- and I certainly remember very vividly that crossing into Hungary and going-- the dark, through the fields. At one point, we ran into a band of gypsies. And they-- we heard them saying, there go the Jews

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running. And then there was a panic that these gypsies would go into the next town and tell on the group. But apparently, that didn't happen.

So as I say, I remember-- I mean, I remember, for example, you walked on these fields on what seemed like only long grass. And suddenly, you were knee deep in water, because it was apparently swampy ground underneath. And it was getting cold and it seemed to go on forever.

We finally got to this place, which was a sort of farmhouse at the edge of town with a barn. And by prearrangement with the owner of this farm house and barn, we were put up for the rest of the night in the barn, sort of on the straw in the barn and we fell asleep because we were all very tired at that point. And the next thing we know is we hear a Hungarian policeman saying, good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Will you please accompany me to the police station?

And so he, in fact, herded us through the streets of UngvÃ¡r. The men were all handcuffed. And took us into prison. And for the next week, we remained there in jail in UngvÃ¡r. I personally was in a jail cell with my father and another man. My sister was with my mother and one or two other women.

Now, during that week-- apparently--

I have to flip the tape over.

During the week-- and the reason, apparently, they kept us there for a week rather than returning us immediately to Slovakia was-- we learned later on-- that they were actually thinking seriously of shooting the whole party as an example to others, because so many people were making this illegal crossing during that time. And again, another example of how chance worked in our favor, really, not immediately apparent.

But what happened was that during the time we were there, my father got the idea that since Ruthenia, where he had been born, had also become part of Hungary by then, that he decided to come forward to the police captain and show him his birth certificate and claim the fact that he is Hungarian and he should be allowed to remain in Hungary. Well, the police captain took his birth certificate, tore it into pieces, slapped him on the face, and pushed him back into the jail cell. Where were we?

So that-- and I'll pick up that thread of the story a little later on. Honey, can you take-- And so-- and they-- and the other thing that we learned, and I don't know how true this is, that obviously, somebody had turned us in, because the policemen knew exactly where to come. And the best guess was that we were actually turned in by the owner of the farmhouse and barn, and that his motivation probably was that he expected that everybody would have valuables with them.

Because you didn't undertake that kind of a journey into a new life without trying to convert all that you had into negotiable valuables, like gold, diamonds, dollars, and stuff like that. And that the minute the policeman showed up, it would all be stashed in the hay, which is exactly what, say for example, my father did, who did have several pounds of gold and diamonds, and so on, being a jeweler.

And this man had the gall to come and visit us in jail. And when my father said, well, can you find that stuff and put it away somewhere for safekeeping? He said he had looked, he didn't see anything. And yet later on, he was seen by others to be selling off their stuff to jewelry stores.

So at any rate, they finally did decide to send us back to [INAUDIBLE].

Can I-- do you remember what it was like to be in this jail?

Yeah, I remember. It was very, very scary and strange. But one thing I think that's important to remember that the fact that-- and that's true for the entire story. The fact that I was always with my parents, that gave me a feeling of security and some kind of having some kind of blind faith that somehow they'll find a way to protect me or save me, probably kept me from being as frightened and as overwhelmed as being in these kinds of situations where I might have been.

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With a couple of exceptions where I suddenly would sense that maybe they don't know what the hell to do. What's going to happen with us. So anyway, interestingly, we were given a choice-- the party was given the choice whether to go back on foot, or be taken back by bus.

And I remember as a kid, I wanted a bus ride. I was a little kid in those days and one didn't get to travel much, and I had all these adventurous ideas about travel. And I felt very disappointed, but the adults, without exception, chose to walk back, rather than to take the bus.

Because their thinking was, the longer we take to get back to the hell that is waiting for us, the better off we are. So we were kind of walk back to the border, handed over to the Slovakian police, who then shepherded us back, finally, to the town where we started out from. And there, we were immediately, of course, put in jail again.

And this time, I was put in a larger cell, but this time with about a dozen women and their children, and all lying on a plank alongside one end of the cell so that it was practically-- we were practically piled up on top of each other.

Were these Jewish women?

They were all Jewish women and children. And those who perhaps had also been caught, but most of them just part of the continuing processing of the Jews who were going to be deported to the camps. And the other thing I remember is that the only toilet facility was-- it was a room next to this so that you have to ask the guard to let you go to. And essentially, you urinated on the floor, which is where everything was all piled up.

Now, a couple of days-- and I guess the way these things went, and I'm not sure who was jailed before being taken. I think some people were directly taken, and I think most people who were in the jail were people who either had been hiding and were caught and put in jail before they were going to be transported. Because I remember we were there for a few days.

And the first day we were visited by my aunt and her three-year-old daughter. And they were about to go directly, I guess, into the transports maybe that day or the next day. And that I remember very well, and I remember how, I guess, to reassure their child, who was a very cute little girl, they told her that they were all going to Palestine. And she was talking very enthusiastically about how they were going to go to Palestine.

Anyway, after a few days in that jail, our turn came to be taken to the trains. And once again, we were part of, essentially, a herd of people that were shepherded by the gendarmes, or the sort of local Slovakian SS guard. And we were taken-- and this was one of the times where I-- yeah, one thing again from a child's point of view, as that morning came when this whole party in that cell were all to go on to the trains, my mother went into hysterics and kept yelling and screaming about how she can't stand the idea of having her children starve or so, and she doesn't want to go.

And I remember as a child feeling mostly very self-conscious and embarrassed that my mother was making such a big scene during that. And I was wishing like she would be quiet. And the other women said, it's all right, it will be all right. The first place they took us was actually to a school. You want to shut that off?

And it was a very busy place as new parties and Jews were being brought in. And this was the final act before going on to the railroad station to get on the trains. You got your number, and from that point on, you were no longer a person with a name. You were a person with a number and a tag that you had around your neck.

And just before our turn came to get our numbers, an official came in and said, anybody who can prove that they're a foreign extraction, or foreign citizens, please come and see me. And at that point, of course, the issue came up again that my father was born in Ruthenia, which was at that point part of Hungary. Of course, he had had such a bad experience the last time he tried to take advantage of that fact that he was somewhat hesitant to approach this official about it.

But my mother said, what do you have to lose now? And here is, again, where chance comes into play. The reason he had a-- he had the original was torn up by the police captain in Hungary, but the reason he had a duplicate was because

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he-- they had actually tried to get out of Czechoslovakia as early as 1936 when the time started to get bad.

It was very hard to get out of Czechoslovakia, much harder than it was to get out of Germany, particularly, to the United States, which is where he wanted to go because his brother had-- was here. But even though he got an affidavit in 1936, the quota was so discriminatory against Slavic countries because of the great emigration from the Slavic areas, so that it was practically virtually impossible to come to America for someone from Czechoslovakia, where it was not discriminatory against Germans. That's why so many Germans who elected to come to America. German Jews actually did come as late as '38 or '39.

So at any rate-- but in order to go through the process, he had to get-- have two copies of his birth certificate. So he made a trip to his hometown sometime in 1937 or '38, and he did have two copies of his birth certificate at his disposal. And if he hadn't, I wouldn't be here.

And so anyway, he showed this man his copy of the birth certificate. And the man said, all right, why don't you and your family wait along with maybe one or two other people. And so we were waiting there for, I think, an hour or two hours.

In the meantime, people were being just shepherded through. And looked out the window and there was a whole convoy of people being led in the direction of the railroad station. And then a couple of hours later, he comes back and he says, all those people that I had asked to stay inside and wait, please come and follow me. And he went to the front door and he said, you're free to go home.

Now-- and here again, the combination of chance and circumstance, because apparently, that was the first day when people who had-- were not citizens of foreign countries were exempt. Prior to that time, only people who were citizens with a valid passport from another country were exempt from deportation. So that probably the fact that we did go to-- try to go to Hungary, that we did go there, the fact, even, that they kept us for a week in the jail there rather than returning us immediately, and delayed the whole process, saved our lives during that. Even, perhaps, if it was true that they were thinking of shooting us in Hungary, that helped to save us during that moment.

So then we had to get-- we went back to our apartment, which had all been officially sealed, and then my father had to go to the police station to have an official come and unseal the apartment, and so on. And so we got back, and for the next few weeks, I started going back to school. And of course, that was-- many fewer kids were in that school at that point, and had only been there a few weeks before.

Because in this first wave of deportation, a great many of the Jews were deported during that time, and probably a very small percentage survived. Because most of them were taken to the extermination camps directly-- Sobibor, Treblinka, I think, and Majdanek. And we did get postcards.

And as I say, most of my relatives were taken during those transports. And in fact, between relatives both in Slovakia, an uncle in Germany, an uncle in Poland, and their respective families, of about 25 relatives-- uncles, aunts, cousins-- there was only one person that survived besides our immediate family. So for a few weeks, as far as we knew, things were OK.

Then one Saturday morning, there is a knock on our door, and the police are there. And they name each of our names. I don't know-- remember The Garden of the Finzi-Continis [INAUDIBLE] remember at the end where the police comes in and calls out everybody's name? Yeah, that's exactly the way it was.

The police called each of our names, including my sister's and mine, and said, please pack up and get ready to come to [INAUDIBLE]. And then what followed was almost a comedy routine. These were Slovakian fascist Gardas, not very sophisticated.

My mother said she can't go, she's sick. She can't get out of bed. My father says to them, look, I'm a manager of this shop, of this Christian shop right next door. If you take me, are you willing to be responsible for all the contents in that shop?

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And besides which, my father-- this is all a mistake. And I can go to the officials right now and have it fixed up right away. So these policemen decided the following-- they had other business to transact, other Jews to pick up.

They were going to-- if my father gave them his word of honor, they would let him-- that he wouldn't try to escape, they would let him go and see whether he could get some official intervention on his behalf. But they would keep coming back during the day to make sure that my mother and my sister and I were not trying to escape. And so the minute they walk out, my mother turns to my father and says, we've got to run.

And my father, I say with a bit of shame, but I gave my word of honor. How can I escape? And so he went off to see what he could do, whether he could get some intervention from the officials that he knew.

But my mother, regardless of what he had said, kept trying to see if we could escape. And-- but every time-- and she was still in bed. She was officially sick, you see, too sick to move. Every time she tried to get dressed so that he and the two of us, the two of us children could take off together, the police would be back and so she immediately had to take her-- all of her clothes off and put her nightgown back on and get under the covers.

And so that was the kind of comedy routine aspect of this day. And in the meantime, my father found that he couldn't get any help from any officials. But he talked to some other people and other Jewish people on the street, told them his situation, and they all talk-- told him he was crazy to worry about word of honor. And by then, he got word back to us that we should run if we can.

And then he was going to meet us at some designated place at the end of the day. Eventually, what happened was my mother simply put a raincoat on and ran across the street to Jewish people who were at that point exempt where she stayed for the rest of the day. And one of, again, my father's journeyman, took my sister and me across town to the place where everybody was supposed to converge at the end of the day, which was the home of the parents of one of my father's apprentices.

And these are--

The journeyman was Jewish but the apprentice was a Christian friend, Gentile friend. So there were some further adventures, but I won't go into detail. But we all finally did get together that evening in that place, in that home.

And as a little Jewish kid, first time really I was in a Christian home, there were crosses all over the walls and I didn't know quite what to make of that. But we were there for a day, two days and pretty soon, these people whose house it was were getting all nervous and uneasy. And clearly, that wasn't a place where we could-- there was no hiding place, really. There was no-- there wasn't a place we could stay for very long.

Then what happened was the-- my parents got word through the apprentice whose parents' house we were at that the chief of police had come to my father's shop and told my father's partner that he would like to speak to Gruber and him. And that if my father's partner knew where Gruber was to let him know that he really wants to talk to my father.

So my parents got that message, and they had to make a decision whether to accept this invitation or ignore it. And I imagine they had a pretty hard time making a decision. But the alternative-- I mean, there was an implied promise that there may be a deal in the making.

But-- and the alternative, namely of trying to stay there, was really impossible for any length of time. So then my parents decided, yes, that my father would go with his partner and see the chief of police. And I do remember that day when my father left early in the morning, and it was hours and hours and we heard nothing about him or from him.

And obviously, we were scared stiff about what happened to him. Finally, he showed up. And what had happened was this-- that he got there with his-- with his partner.

He was made to wait a couple of hours. Finally, the chief of police saw both of them. And he asked my father's partner, do you need this Jew, Gruber, for your shop?

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And my father's partner said, yes, it's important to have somebody who can manage these things, and so on and so forth. And then the police-- the police said, but of course, you can't have any objection if I can find a Gentile who can do the same job. And my father's partner said, I guess not.

And so, OK, let me call the Ministry of Labor in Bratislava to see if I can find you a Gentile person to take over the management of this shop. And so while my father was there, he called up the Ministry of Labor, asked ask them question. Took a while for the answer to come back, and finally, the answer was no, that there was no qualified Gentile jeweler to come and take over the shop.

So he-- the chief of police gave my father a temporary exemption. And on the strength of this, we came-- we all came out of our hiding and went back to our apartment. And the-- but apparently, that wasn't a final chapter on this.

A few weeks later, there was-- apparently, the town council, or whatever it was that had both the-- the town functionaries decided case by case, made the final decision about whether this or that person would be exempt. And apparently, when-- what we heard later on was that when our case came up, actually, most of them wanted to send us off. But it was the president of the Chamber of Commerce said that if they send my father off, he would resign as president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Now, the reason for that was this-- as you may or may not know, in time of the Czechoslovakian Republic, really most of the industry was in the Czech part, not the Slovakian parts. So the Slovakian's very underdeveloped in terms of industry and even trades, very skilled trades. So that there were not very many master jewelers.

And I talked to him [INAUDIBLE] This all goes all the way back to the Guild system. To become a jeweler, you had to be an apprentice for a few years, and then a journeyman for another couple of years until you became a master jeweler.

My father's shop had four Gentile apprentices. So that these were four future Gentile Slovak master jewelers who this president of the Chamber of Commerce felt were sorely needed because there were so few. And the-- his idea was that if my father were sent, the shop would collapse, because he knew that really my father, even though officially belonged to his partner, that it was he who was making it run. And so his opinion prevailed and we did get a more firm kind of exemption.

Now, one never knew during that time how long an exemption like this would last. Just as after the first time when we were let go, six weeks later, we were-- they were ready to send us off again. And there were different groups of people who had been exempt for a period of time, and suddenly, the rules changed.

For example, for some period of time, American citizens were exempt. And there were some American citizens, people who had immigrated before the war, who then returned home after securing an American citizenship. And suddenly, the grapevine had it that, true-- and with-- they were correct that the Americans said that exemption was going to drop.

And word got out enough in advance that most of the people involved were able to hide. So the next day, the announcement came, this is all a mistake. American citizens are still exempt and continue to forever be exempt.

And a couple of days later when everybody had come out of hiding, they were able to get most of them and deport them. And so various groups-- so you never knew what was going to happen next. At some point, a new law came into effect that the families in which at least one member had converted to Christianity prior to 1938 would be exempt.

And the idea of making it prior to 1938 was with the idea that this would be opportunistic and it had to be sincere. And of course, who converted prior to 1938? Very few, if any people. But necessity is the mother of invention, and pretty soon that whole trade developed around false conversion papers.

Now, these were real in the sense that priests were involved in giving them-- actually selling them to Jews. And they would make these out where one person in the family had supposedly converted prior to 1938. And they-- as witnesses, they would put down names of people who had died in the meantime so they could never be challenged.

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And as I say, a whole trade developed and-- but the funny thing is, this is in terms of the kind of community it was, that a lot of-- and we still had a lot of trouble about making that decision, even though it was a fake conversion. But the tradition that one thing you do not do is deny the name of the Lord was so strong in many of these families that a lot of families had trouble with it.

And strangely enough, a child would be picked to be the one who had converted because the parents would refuse to have that blemish on their record. In our case, my father didn't have any problem about that. He volunteered to be the one.

But somehow, I remember, even though it was only my father, my family still felt that we all should act like we meant it. And so for a while, my sister and I were taught the catechism by somebody. Now-- but then after a certain period of time, the transports stopped.

And I don't-- again, I don't know how much you know that history, but this was one of the few instances where, in fact, the papacy did intervene on behalf of the Jews. What happened was, this was after the two, actually Slovakian Jews, escape from Auschwitz. I forget their names.

But-- and they brought back very detailed information about just exactly what was going-- what was going on in Auschwitz. And they were actually then smuggled-- they came back to Czechoslovakia, was smuggled by the Jewish officials to Switzerland, and gave that information to the United States officials, actually, at that point. But also, to the papal delegates so that by that point, everything was known because of that particular report.

And as a result of that knowledge, the papal nuncio did put a lot of pressure on the Slovakian government to stop the transport. And this was within the power of the Slovakian government, just as it had been a Slovakian government initiative to get the transports going in the first place. And this was a very Catholic area.

And in fact, the Slovakian FÃ¼hrer was a priest when Signor Tiso was the Slovakian FÃ¼hrer. So because of that pressure, the transports did-- were stopped for some period of time. But of course, one never knew when they would resume.

And you asked before, did people know and when did people know? We did get postcards from that first wave of people, including our relatives, who either from Majdanek or Sobibor, I forget, with messages like, everything is wonderful. And so-- and they were made to write these postcards just after arrival.

And the usual communication did get transmitted to the community there, namely a coded message that at least let people know things are really bad. And it might have been something like, Uncle Al went to visit Aunt Ethel yesterday and we expect to visit her very soon ourselves. And she is dead. So that knowledge-- but the details, I think, in terms of gas chambers and so on were not known.

So the next chapter was this-- even though at that point things were relatively calm, and because there was a cessation of the transports. And here again, for some period of time, those people who were left tried as much as possible to restore a normal type of life, as much normal as possible. But the big question mark was, things are just bound to get worse, particularly, as the war winds down, comes to its final stages.

And how will one get through that? So for a while, a new idea sort of became popular in the remaining Jewish community there. Namely, that at the very least, what you need to do is to get your children to a boarding school in Hungary, to Jewish boarding schools in Hungary, so if things start being bad here, it'd be much easier for parents that are not encumbered by their children to make a quick escape themselves out of Slovakia and join their children in Hungary.

And by that time, it was possible for money to obtain very good papers that gave you a legal Hungarian passport so that one could make that trip legally. And at some point, my parents got caught up in the same idea. And so at one point, my mother took my sister and me to a town-- a city in Hungary, Miskolc, where there was a Jewish boarding school in

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which there already were a number of the kids from Michalovce that had been placed there.

And what I remember is that, again, initially, I found the whole idea very exciting. And I had read in books about boys in boarding school, and so on and so forth. And so when we got there, my mother did put me in this boarding school.

What month and year is this, do you know?

This is about February of 1944. So she put me in the board-- in this boarding school. And what I remember is that immediately I felt tremendous homesick and I was very unhappy and very sad about looking ahead to having to stay there.

And because of all this, I do remember trying to put a lot of pressure on my mother to change her mind. And I was a precocious maturity, I talked to her about how we're going to be separated by a border, and this is wartime, and one never knows what's going to happen, and so on. And so she ended up really feeling very conflicted about the decision that she had made to place me in that school.

And she decided to delay, really, the whole thing of my sister. My sister needed a tonsillectomy so what she decided to do was to go to Budapest and have my sister have her tonsillectomy there. While my sister was recuperating in Budapest, she still was very troubled about her decision.

Although, one of her principal worries was whether I might be subject to bombing attacks, because there were some important industries in Miskolc, and people were talking about possible bombing there. But she also-- she was staying at a hotel where there was a Jewish concierge. And she got to talking to him, and he gave her another source of anxiety, because he said, you think it's going to be all that safe here.

And my mother asked, what do you mean? And he said, well, I've seen a lot of German officers lately come here. And I don't know what's happening, or what's going to happen. So there was another source of concern for her.

She got so worried about it, she wrote my father in some coded way that she was thinking about changing the plans. And my father sent her a telegram saying, act according to our original decision. And she was unwilling to take it upon herself to change that.

But she was looking for someone who she knew was in Budapest from our hometown who was planning to go back very soon to Michalovce, and wanted personally to let him know about all her concerns and-- so that he could talk to my father. She looked all over Budapest for him, couldn't find him. On the last afternoon of this man staying in Budapest, she happened to run into him at a restaurant.

Again, pure chance. So she told him all about that and how she worried-- would be terribly worried, et cetera, et cetera. And he got back, talked to my father, and my father at that point, I guess, got so worried that if something did happen, he would have to bear the brunt of that. So he wired my mother to bring me home.

And I remember that day very well, one of the happiest days of my life at that point when-- totally when I had sort of begun to resign myself to staying where I really still very much didn't want to stay, that the director of the school came to me one day and said, you're going to Budapest to join your mother, and arranged to have someone accompany me, take me to Budapest, and join my mother and came home.

When he brought us home, people in Michalovce said-- thought my mother was crazy. She was a totally pathologically, overprotective mother. And how could she have done this?

I remember running into the father of one of the boys who was there in that school who, when I was there, told me how very unhappy he was there and how very much he wanted to go home. And I talked to-- his father asked me about his son, and I told him that he really was very unhappy and very much wanted to come back. And the father said, well, he doesn't know what's best for him.

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Well, as everyone knows, really, within two or three weeks, the big turn around in Hungary took place. Germans did come in much more directly controlling the situation, and the deportation of the Jews from Hungary began. You out of tape?

And you're-- actually, we're running out, yeah. Maybe I should switch it now.

OK.

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