

DONOR: JUDITH WEIZMAN
INTERVIEWER: EMILY SHANE
DATE: APRIL 28, 1988

approx. running time: 2 hours, 15 mins.

Restricted

Tape Footage: Background

1-872 Judith was born in Budapest in 1930 to a middle class family. Her father was in the import/export business. They had a house, a car, a summer cottage and a nanny, all of which were typical of the European middle class at that time.

Judith's family was very assimilated. It was not religious, and there was a lot of intermarriage in the family. As a child Judith did not feel very Jewish. When she was in grade one a classmate said something anti-semitic to her. Before that Judith did not know what anti-semitism was.

Judith's father's family was from Germany. They had moved to Hungary in the 17th century to work as tradesmen. Judith's grandfather moved to the old part of Budapest. Her grandmother was from Moravia (Czechoslovakia). Judith's great-grandfather had been a chemist who took over a refining factory in Buda in 1855.

Judith's maternal grandfather was from upper Hungary. He was in manufacturing and his family were well established in business. Judith's paternal grandfather had a lumber business and owned forestry in Yugoslavia.

Judith's father attended school in Budapest and Vienna. He took over his father's business when he was 26 and his father died. He owned several factories. He travelled a lot. He was an international expert on lumber and was recognized as such in Sweden and Switzerland. These connections later came in handy.

Judith's family celebrated the High Holidays. One aunt was a Jewish elementary school teacher and she gave Judith most of her Jewish education. Judith's parents did not practice Judaism.

Judith received a better Jewish education when she was 10 and the anti-Jewish laws did not permit Jewish children to attend public middle school. Judith was fortunate to be selected to attend an all girls Jewish middle school with limited enrollment. There was another Jewish middle school of lesser quality.

Life was easier for Judith in this school because there was no anti-semitism. Her cousins attending public school experienced extreme anti-semitism.

873-1795 Judith lived with her parents, aunt and grandmother. Judith learned a lot from her grandmother who was very cultured and knowledgeable in music, languages and literature. She came to Canada at age 90. Judith spent a lot of time with her. She told Judith interesting stories about her childhood and explained that so few Jews left Hungary because the anti-semitism was far less pronounced than it was elsewhere.

Hungary had the first law against Jews entering university. As early as the late 1920s the number of Jews was limited.

The anti-Jewish laws crept up on the Hungarian Jews slowly. They were introduced one after another.

WWII

In the summer of 1940 Judith's father was taken to a forced labor camp in Hungary. He was also forced to take a non-Jewish partner, because without him he could not get enough material for his factory. This partner was decent and did not cheat Judith's father, as many others did. He later helped the family financially and with food and other necessities for survival.

In 1939 Jewish children were very politically aware. At a young age they knew about the Anschluss. Austria and Hungary were very close. When Jews fled Austria it really affected the Hungarian Jews, because the countries were so close. Many Austrian refugees, most of them Jews, came to Hungary that summer, most of them just with the clothes on their backs.

Judith's father helped many find work and shelter. He was involved with a few organizations that helped refugees.

Before the war the Jews of Budapest were too well established to leave. They did not think that bad things would happen to them in Hungary.

Horthy was pro-fascist but he also managed to keep the German occupation away until 1944. If the Germans had come earlier there would have been no Jewish survivors.

In 1940 Judith was in school. When her father was drafted into the work camp his business suffered. All Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 60 were drafted by the government. Non-Jews were drafted for the military, but Jews were not trusted to be in the military.

Judith's' father was in a camp with a humanitarian commander who made things as easy as possible for the prisoners. They were building a railway. He was able to come home a few times a week. His sister took over the business. Many of the employees were drafted as well. One Count offered Judith's father double the amount of lumber he needed, when he heard he had been drafted. There were some decent people, but not many.

1796-2368 Judith's classmates' fathers and some of her teachers were also drafted. At school they could talk openly. Outside of school they had to be careful what they said. Judith does not know of any Hungarian Jew reporting on another Jew.

Judith began helping in the family business, checking the bills and sometimes filling orders at the warehouse. She also fetched food on the black market because children were not frisked, and she did not look Jewish. She travelled out of the city to get food. By 1940 there was food rationing for everyone. In 1944 the Jewish rations were diminished.

In 1942 many refugees from Slovakia and Poland came with horror stories, but the Hungarian Jews did not want to believe them.

Judith's father was in and out of camps from 1940 until the end of 1944, sometimes for as long as eight months.

Jews were not allowed to practice professions or sell anything requiring a government licence. In 1939 their voting rights were taken away unless they could prove full Aryan ancestors. Judith's maiden name was Kopstein. Because it was spelled differently on various documents her father had, his voting rights were denied.

There was less merchandise in Jewish stores.

The real hard times came in 1944. Before that Judith did not really suffer. In 1943 men were picked up off the street and sent to the Russian front. Judith's father did not go out after dark or to public places. Still they lived an almost normal life.

Those who were picked up were sent to labor camps on the Russian front where they were treated severely. They were not given winter uniforms and many died from the cold. But at this point the women and children were not suffering. There was still enough food.

German Occupation

2369-3457

The big change came on March 19, 1944 with the German occupation. Judith was in school. The school she had been attending had been taken over by the military, so at the time, girls and boys were taking turns at the boys' school. They attended school Sunday morning instead of Friday afternoon. There were skirmishes with children enroute to church, but the Jewish children could not fight back. Instead they would go early and not carry books, secretly attending school.

On March 19 the principal sent them home from school. They did not return. Everyday there were new anti-Jewish laws. Jews were not allowed to leave their houses and lists of Jewish people were made up.

Judith was now 14 and part of the family decisions. The Germans terrorized the population, telling them if they were not on the list they would be deported and if they were on the list nothing would happen to them.

Then everyone on the list had to take in their radios. Non-Jewish friends kept Judith's family informed of what was going on in the world.

At the beginning of April all Jews had to wear the yellow star. There were precise instructions of where on the body it went and what size and color it had to be. A millimeter difference was considered a violation. If a Jew was caught without a star he was deported.

The deportations began, frightening people into cooperation. These deportations were not organized, but they were reported in the newspaper.

In April Judith saw the Gestapo take many people from their homes. They usually did not take children at this time. No one knew where they were taken

until the end of the war. They were usually taken to a camp outside Budapest and then to Mauthausen or Dachau. The Germans did all this at first, then the Hungarians took part later on.

In June the Jews of Budapest began hearing about deportations in Eastern Hungary and about the ghettos and the beatings. Judith's relatives sent postcards saying they were being taken away. It was very tough.

Jewish Houses

Certain apartments were designated Jewish houses. This was not a ghetto, but individual buildings throughout the city that were marked with a yellow star. Judith heard on the BBC that the allies had warned that if the Jews were put in a ghetto they would bomb the city. So the Germans did not build a ghetto.

The new laws and a list of the designated houses were printed in the Budapest Gazette on June 21, 1944. There were a quarter million Jews living in Budapest and not enough designated houses. The Jewish Council arranged housing. If someone had relatives in a designated they moved in with them, otherwise the Council found them a room.

Judith lived with her aunt, grandmother and mother in one room with four beds and little room between them. They were forced to leave their home, which had been sealed. They had been allowed to take only necessary clothing and furniture.

Before they moved they had two visitors. First Judith's nanny came and smuggled out many of their belongings to keep for the family. She came after dark. It was very dangerous for her. Then a so-called friend came and helped herself to whatever she wanted, telling Judith's mother she wouldn't need them because the family was going to be taken away. She refused to save things for them, wanting everything for her own use only.

Judith's father was at a camp at this time 200 kilometers away. He and his wife corresponded without indicating where the letters came from. He could not visit. Jews could not leave Budapest, and would be deported for trying.

At the end of June Judith's family phoned relatives on the outskirts of town and told them to come to Budapest for safety. They refused, saying they would be taken anyway. They were sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Another aunt snuck into Budapest and was saved.

Schutzpass

Judith's father's business was taken away by the government. His partner ran it. They still had connections with Swedish business friends. In August Judith's family received a telegram from the Swedish Embassy telling them to report. When they did they were told a friend of Judith's father had sponsored them for repatriation to Switzerland. They were given tentative Swedish citizenship (a Schutzpass). The German and Hungarian authorities in the meantime were to accept them as Swedes.

The Shutzpass was the most valuable document one could have. It entitled one to all the rights of a Swedish citizen.

3458-4189 Eventually there were thousands of Shutzpasses in use. Originally there were only to be two thousand of them allowed by the Germans. Judith's family received theirs in the early stages. Judith's was number 145.

Before they got the pass they could only leave the house certain times of day. Inside it was hot and crowded. There was a food shortage. Jews were allowed out to buy food only after the Gentiles bought.

Judith did not go hungry until December, but food was very limited before that. There was no milk or butter, and nothing to buy with the rations.

There were extreme financial problems for many. Peoples' savings were confiscated from the bank. Judith's father's partner gave them money. People tried to help one another. Judith's family had money for food and rent, but not for anything else.

Jews could only ride at the back of the streetcar and had to stand. They were stripped completely of their civil rights. They had a very basic existence trying to stay alive.

Jews were allowed to buy newspapers. Every apartment block had one radio to alert residents of bomb attacks, so people could listen to the local news in secret. The government had interfered with all foreign radio stations, except the English one because so few people knew English. Judith's mother knew English though.

One day Judith ran out to buy a special edition of the newspaper that reported that the allies were in France. She ran out without her coat and star and bought the paper from a fascist newspaper seller. Realizing what she had done, she ran home as quickly as she could and for hours afterwards waited for the police to come for her. She felt like a hunted animal, and dreamt about this terrible experience for years afterwards.

Judith's family heard what happened to some of their relatives. One was a dentist in the country. As he boarded the train to be deported an officer came and told the dentist that he and 40 others the dentist chose should come with him. The dentist thought this was probably good but couldn't guarantee it, so he told his family members that they were to decide if they wanted to come with him or not. About 30 of them chose to. It turned out that a high official in the fascist government was a former patient of his. He couldn't openly save them, so he used this tactic. The 30 that left the train were taken to Budapest and survived the war. The others were taken to Auschwitz, and none of them returned.

Judith does not know exactly how many relatives she lost, but at least 50. Very few of those who were deported came back. Judith's family received postcards from some of them saying they had arrived and were well. Apparently they were given these as they went into the gas chambers.

Judith received her shutzpass in August, 1944 but stayed in the Jewish house. They could have moved out but chose not to because the population was generally hostile and it was risky. They thought that with the shutzpass they would at least be exempt from deportation.

In October they received a letter from the Ministry of the Interior confirming they were exempt from wearing the yellow star because they were now Swedish citizens. They hadn't worn it since they received the Swedish papers.

Judith's father was still in a work camp. The Swedish Embassy tried to get him out and was finally successful in mid October.

At the end of August, when Rumania signed a separate peace treaty, you could feel a change coming in Hungary. People realized the war was almost over and became friendlier.

For Judith's family it seemed things would get better. There was a new anti-fascist government that slowly lifted some of the anti-Jewish regulations. Budapest's Jews were the only Hungarian Jews who had not been deported, and now it looked like they would be safe. Then, on October 15th, a strong fascist government took over Hungary. Jews were killed on the streets. Many were tortured.

In Hiding

Judith's family decided it was time to leave the Jewish house. They tried to go back to their old house but couldn't because it was not safe. Judith and her mother went over to Buda from the Pest side and asked for refuge at the home of Judith's father's former secretary. Judith's grandmother and aunt went elsewhere for safety, and her father went on his own. They figured it was safer for them to all hide separately.

4190-4815 Someone found out that Judith and her mother were at this secretary's home and said they would report them. The secretary decided they could not stay. Judith begged her and cursed her and finally the woman changed her mind and let them stay one night. It was past curfew and would have been very dangerous for them to go back out on the streets.

In the morning Judith and her mother went to the villa where her grandmother had lived and where her nanny now lived. The caretaker hid them and said the nanny would get them Christian papers. Then Judith saw this woman leave on bicycle, and 15 minutes later the villa was surrounded by fascist police. The woman had reported them. She had a lot of Judith's grandmother's things, and must have thought if she got rid of Judith and her mother, it was more likely she could keep these things. The police looked very hostile. Judith asked if they planned to shoot them.

Jail

Judith and her mother were taken to a police station and put in a cell. No one told them anything. At midnight a police officer asked if they were hungry. When they didn't answer he told them not to be afraid, that he was not like the others. He

took them to the washroom and brought them food and gave them a rug to sit on. He was good to them. The other cells had been cleared out and the prisoners shot. Judith and her mother were in the last cell and were forgotten.

The next day they were taken to another police station. The police wanted to know who had helped them hide.

Judith and her mother spent 14 days at the Hungarian Gestapo. Their family did not know where they were, and heard all sorts of rumors. In the meantime Judith's father escaped from his camp and was in Budapest working with a Swedish group made up of former work camp prisoners. He worked at the Swedish Embassy in Department B, which was the save the Jews department. Because he spoke good German he was one of three men chosen by Wallenberg as an assistant and translator.

Judith and her mother were interrogated several times and kept saying they were Swedish citizens. They knew if the Swedes knew where they were they would get them out. But the question was how to let them know. One day Judith looked out the window and saw a Jewish neighbor of hers who was working as a Gestapo driver. She called out his name, and the others in the cell angrily pulled her from the window. Nothing happened to them as they feared.

This neighbor notified Judith's family, but the Hungarian Gestapo denied having Judith and her mother.

One night the prisoners were taken by truck to the railway station. But someone, probably the driver, had sabotaged the truck and on the way it got a flat tire. It took hours to fix the flat, and by then the train had left. The prisoners were returned to the Gestapo building and told they would leave again the next evening.

At noon the next day an officer came for Judith and her mother. They were very scared. He gave them back their purses and identification, and let them go.

Years later Judith met a girl who had been a cell mate at the Hungarian Gestapo. She told Judith that the others had been deported that evening and she was the only one to come back.. Many died in the winter from lack of proper clothing.

International Ghetto

4816-5360

Judith and her mother were afraid they would look suspicious to people on the street, but they made it back to the Jewish house and were reunited with their family. The family had decided to move to the international ghetto set up by the Swedes. It was safer there.

The Swedes fed them. Judith's father worked. Wallenberg had lists of all the lost and disappeared, and had people looking for them so he could give them Swedish papers. Sometimes he was successful and sometimes he was too late. He got back many, many of them by falsely adding made-out names to his list. He was a real hero who single-handedly saved tens of thousands of people. Judith feels very fortunate to have met him.

Wallenberg went to the Gestapo higher-ups and dared to threaten them with consequences after the war if they went ahead and detonated the ghetto as they planned. For safety he spent every night somewhere else.

Liberation

The Russians liberated Budapest but were not very friendly. They raped many and stole. But they didn't single out Jews for killing. Judith's family was free to go home and was overjoyed they had survived. They didn't know yet that so many relatives would not return. At the time of liberation, 35 of Judith's family and friends were gathered together.

One of Judith's cousin was deported and with all the other girl prisoners was forced by the Arrowcross to dig a mass grave and line up to be shot. She jumped in the pit and pretended to be dead, covering herself with dead bodies. In the morning she climbed out, cleaned herself and found a ride into Budapest with a German driver by claiming she was a refugee from the Russians. She arrived in Budapest safely but close to a nervous breakdown. Judith shared a straw mat with her in the cellar and often heard her nightmares and screaming. This cousin never talked about it after the war.

People were shot in the streets no questions asked. Life was cheap. No one knew one day to the next if they would survive. Judith was plain lucky.

Many Jews came out of hiding. Judith's mother's sister hid in the closet of her Gentile boyfriend's parents. An uncle hid under an enclosed table for months while all day people worked in the room. He came out only at night.

Judith's mother's brother escaped from a labor camp and returned to his non-Jewish wife. She would have nothing to do with him. She kicked him out, he was deported and died from typhoid after liberation.

Tape #2
1-879

No one knew the full truth of the deportations until after the war. When they heard of the horrors before, they chose not to believe them.

An uncle of Judith's was a driver in the Hungarian army. On his way to the Russian front he was invited for Shabbes to Jewish homes. On his way back there were no Jews left.

It was a type of self-preservation not to really ask questions. Everyone knew the deportations were not something good, and everyone tried to escape them either by hiding or obtaining false papers. Everyone felt it was better to stay in Hungary.

It is true that the Hungarian non-Jews also did not know what the deportations were, but they did know about the ghetto and beatings. They knew enough that they should have protested.

The Western world knew more about what was going on at the death camps than did the Hungarians, who had no idea of the magnitude of the killings. Wallenberg

came to Hungary when the truth was already known, so he could save as many as possible.

Towards the end of the war there was talk of the international ghetto being incorporated into the general ghetto. Wallenberg really protested against this. One Jewish leader in his division killed himself and his family when he heard this was going to happen. Judith's father believed one should never help death come any faster.

On January 18, 1944 Wallenberg visited the ghetto and reported conditions were terrible there. There was no food or hygiene. He told Judith's father that he had foreign currency and jewelry and would try to get a Russian officer to accompany him to the country to buy food for the ghetto. Judith saw him that day at a distance. His last words were "Is that Russian officer my bodyguard or my jailer?" It seems the Russians could not believe someone could do all that he did for purely humanitarian reasons, and not be a spy. Judith's father was one of the last to see Wallenberg.

880-1800

Judith's family picked up the pieces of their lives. Most of their belongings had been stolen from their house. An Arrowcross official was living there, and according to regulations they were to share the house. People were being picked up on the streets. The Russians took a long time to occupy Budapest.

The Swedish Embassy gave its employees identification so that the Russians would assist them and would not send them to camps. Judith's father had such i.d. Many were sent to camps because the Russians just didn't care who they were taking.

Judith's father was once caught by the Russians. He showed his identification and was let go. He spoke Serbian, similar to Russian, and so was able to speak to the Russians and keep them away from his family too.

Post 1945

Judith's father lost his factory. Her mother opened a boutique with a friend and did well until 1948 when the Communists took full power and nationalized banks, then land and small firms.

Judith's father's firm stayed under 100 employees so it would not be nationalized right away. He wanted to go west but wouldn't break the law and go illegally. In August, 1948 he was accused of doing something against the three year plan and was taken away for questioning. The family did not know where he was and spent a fortune trying to find him with a crooked lawyer. Every month the family received notification from different arms of the government saying that since he was refusing to take command of the company it would have to be nationalized. He was never charged with anything. After six months the company was nationalized. The family didn't receive anything. Then Judith's father was sent home. Others in similar circumstances spent years in jail.

For years he couldn't get a job because he was a jailbird and a former capitalist.

In 1952 the family was very concerned because the government started deporting

former capitalists, coming at night and giving them a few minutes to pack one piece of luggage. These deportees were sent to the country to live in gypsy houses and to work as farmers, although they were not given land and had no farm knowledge. Judith's family was afraid this would happen to them. Their neighbors on all sides were deported.

Years went by with them being afraid this would happen. Judith attended university after great difficulty. She was not accepted after high school because her father had been a company president. After she was refused a second time, she stuck together the two pages of personal data she had, so they could not be read by the admissions office. In her four years of university she constantly feared being found out and being kicked out. This didn't happen. She took part in official oustings of others who were there illegally and would sit there not knowing if her name would be called.

1801-2465 Judith's mother worked and Judith studied part-time and worked part-time. The family kept selling belongings. In 1953 her father got a job.

Judith met her husband in 1948 at a Jewish university student summer camp. He had just finished his studies and had his thesis to complete. He helped Judith's father find a job in one day after changing his c.v. so there was no mention of jail.

Judith and her husband were married in 1953. She was working part-time where he was working and also taking in piecework as a drafts woman and attending university.

The personnel office found out they planned to marry and threatened that if they had a religious ceremony Judith would not be allowed to graduate. Judith had only her thesis left to do. They agreed to be married by the Justice of the Peace and then secretly have a religious wedding, with her mother acting as a look-out. They invited only people they trusted and no children. There was a spy at the civil ceremony whom they managed to shake after going for coffee, pretending Judith and her husband were enroute to their honeymoon, and then going separately to the synagogue. This synagogue wedding was never entered in the central registry.

When Judith's daughter was married in Winnipeg 500 people attended.

Things became a little easier after 1953. Judith and her husband had decent jobs and they settled down. It did not look like they would ever be able to leave Hungary. They would not be given passports.

During the 1956 revolution Judith and her husband decided that if the chance came about they would leave. They snuck across to Austria. Austria was very good to them. They got jobs there and registered for Canada where Judith had an uncle living in Montreal.

Canada

They arrived in Canada in August, 1957. They spent less than three months in Montreal and then Judith's husband got a job in Winnipeg in November.

Their daughter now lives in Toronto, and their son is in Winnipeg.

Judith and her husband brought his mother here in 1959, as soon as they could afford to. Her husband had died. Judith's parents visited in 1967 but her father wouldn't stay here because he was still working in Hungary and he did not want to be a burden on his children. They returned to Winnipeg in 1970 and this time stayed. Judith and her husband went back for her 90-year-old grandmother who must have been the oldest dissident in the country. She only lived nine months in Canada but was very happy to know here great grandchildren.