

# HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

EVA BENTLEY

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher  
Date: March 18, 1985  
April 2, 1985

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EB - Eva Bentley [interviewee]  
JF - Josey Fisher [interviewer]  
Dates: March 18 and April 2, 1985

*Tape one, side one:*

JF: This is an interview with Eva Bentley on March 18, 1985 with Josey Fisher. Mrs. Bentley lives at [address]. Her telephone number is [phone number]. Mrs. Bentley, can you tell us where you were born and where you grew up and a little bit about your childhood?

EB: I was born in Budapest and I grew up in Budapest. We were very proud Hungarians. My father's family goes back to 500 years in Hungary. One of the first Chief Rabbis of Hungary—because at that time there were different rabbinate—and [unclear] in Budapest they established a main headquarters for the rabbinate, and one of my great-great-grandfathers was the first Chief Rabbi of Hungary.

JF: The name of your family, of your paternal family was what?

EB: Wahrmann.

JF: How do you spell that, please?

EB: W-A-H-R-M-A-N-N.

JF: Thank you.

EB: This family gave one Deputy Finance Minister<sup>1</sup>, the first Jew, to Austro-Hungary. My father served under Franz Joseph and the last King of Austro-Hungary, Charles V [Charles I] I guess, for eight years in the Navy, the Austro-Hungarian Navy. He was serving on the first submarine, in the Axis powers. He served on two submarines because both of them were destroyed. And for personal bravery—he saved lives; twice he got the silver medal and the third time he got the Iron Cross, and the last time for personal bravery—he became the personal courier of the last King, and he was stationed in the palace, the court palace in Vienna. According to the Nuremberg Laws, he wouldn't be considered a Jew because of those medals and his records in the Navy, but he died when I was five years old, and the German occupation in Hungary took place in 1944. He wasn't alive at that time, and those laws, even if they were applicable, I did not find, they didn't give the documentation out to Jews from the archives, so I couldn't prove it.

JF: In other words, the Nuremberg Laws that were applied in Hungary would have exempted him from Jewish status or identification because of his service to the Crown.

EB: Yes, because of his service to his country.

JF: Because of his service to the country, so that you, had that been documented, had you had those papers, your immediate family would not have been under any kind of persecution whatsoever?

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<sup>1</sup>Moritz Wahrmann (1831-1892), first Jewish member of Hungarian parliament, leader in Jewish community.

EB: He wouldn't be, his wife and his child, if he would be alive; but my mother remarried so it wouldn't be applicable to my mother. I was the only one who would be able to use that protection.

JF: This was a special protection that was issued by the King.

EB: This was a special protection issued by Hitler, by Hitler's law.<sup>2</sup> This is the Hitler Law, and I don't know if you call it "Nuremberg Law," if it was active in Nuremberg or not. I can not call it, I am not a historian. The only thing I can tell is that certain Jews were exempted, and they got the non-Jewish status. They were the Jews who were awarded for bravery during the First World War.

JF: Such as an Iron Cross.

EB: Such as an Iron Cross and such as two silver medals what he had. I have one in here, even. And the other one is, if you were crippled, amputated, or...those people were exempted as Jews. They were not considered Jews and...

JF: Did that hold even through the German occupation?

EB: Yes, even in Germany. Hitler had one of the generals who was Jewish<sup>3</sup> because of that.

JF: One of the Hungarian generals?

EB: No, German. In Hungary we didn't have Jewish generals. The highest rank I guess that the Jews had was a colonel.

JF: Your father died when you were quite young.

EB: My father died when I was five years old.

JF: Do you recall, or did your mother ever tell you any information about whether or not it was difficult for him to rise in the military system in Hungary because of his Jewish background?

EB: Yes. The stories that my mother and my father's sister told me was he was beaten by the...in 1919. It was a Communist uprising in Hungary. After that, Horthy, who after the King, he became our governor,<sup>4</sup> and my father served under him because he was an admiral and he was on the *Navarre*, that was the second submarine which my father served on. He was the admiral in the *Navarre*, and my father served under him. And my father finished at the naval academy on the ships and when he was in the Navy, because he had enlisted before the war, and Horthy was a very antisemitic person by himself. He had antisemitic ideas and he had the Guard, they called it the White Guard, who were killing off the Red Guard, the Communists. Now, in the meantime, they were cleaning out Jews, too, not only the Communist Jews but, if they find a Jew on the street or wherever, they took it to the Britannia Hotel in Budapest and some of them were skinned alive or shot, and my father was on a trip...that time it was in 1919, after the war and the King wasn't in

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<sup>2</sup>Not Nuremberg Laws as interpreted in Germany or most other Nazi-occupied countries. Hungary was sovereign until 1944.

<sup>3</sup>Not correct.

<sup>4</sup>Regent.

power anymore, and Horthy became the power and my father was on a trip in the country, and they pulled him up off his car and they beat him savagely. Because he was a Jew.

JF: This was the White Guard.

EB: Yes, this was the White Guard, and he was beaten savagely. He died of lymphosarcoma. At that time, the lymphosarcoma, they did not have the studies—they didn't know what. It could be because the submarines were not developed, and the caissons<sup>5</sup> were dangerous and he was serving on submarines for a long time. At that time they said that the beating had something to do with that, because he was savagely beaten and left on the field dead by the White Guards.

JF: You said that he had served under the admiral on the *Navarre*. At that time did he experience this antisemitism?

EB: I really don't know because, quote, unquote my father had red hair, very light complexion, very German looks. Everybody thought he was German. His second tongue was German; and he spoke Italian. He was stationed in Poland and in Italy. So nobody would know unless they knew that he was a Jew, so I don't know what he experienced, because, unfortunately, I missed that part of my life, to know about his personal experiences. I knew dramatic experiences about this beating.

JF: This you were aware of, or this was reported to you by your mother?

EB: My mother.

JF: Your mother told you?

EB: My mother told me.

JF: You said that your mother came from a different kind of background when we talked about this earlier.

EB: Yes, my mother was born in Transylvania and my grandparents in that city, it was Sighet, the city that Elie Wiesel is coming from. The same town! That town was populated 75% by Jews. Very Orthodox Jews, with caftans and *shtrimeles* and *paves*. My grandfather was not from that town. He came from a different part of the country, not that religious, but my grandmother was from that town, so my grandfather adjusted and he became a pious Jew, a very honest, very lovely, pious Jew. They were very Orthodox, and it was a golden time of my life to go to that city and see oh, everybody was Jewish. They had farmlands and they had lumber, even the maids were Jewish. The woodchoppers were Jewish.

JF: This was quite in contrast to your upbringing in Budapest.

EB: And my regular life, I spent my summer vacation there, and it was such a different background and a different culture, but I really loved it because everything was so warm, and the beggars were Jews, and I learned about being a Jew there, when my grandfather on my first *seder* there, I remember...It was after my father's death and I was five years old and my grandfather had a *seder* and all the doors were open, and at that table,

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<sup>5</sup>She may be referring to caisson disease, or bends, caused by too rapid decrease in air pressure after a stay in a compressed atmosphere. But would that cause such a cancer?

I don't know, we sat around 18 or 28 people—I don't know—I was little—and my grandmother made a wine out of raisins and I drank so much, I got drunk. I recited every prayer with my grandfather. My grandfather sat at the top of the table, with white pillows, wearing the *kittel*. The *kittel* is the white dress for when you are buried, that's what they are wearing and I said everything whatever he said. And then I got drunk, and I was put in bed, but the doors were open because Grandmother and Grandfather said that not only the prophet, but everybody that was hungry or didn't have a place to sleep—their door was always open for people to come in and be fed and have a shelter.

JF: Did that happen, did people come in?

EB: Yes, my grandmother brought up so many strange boys, because there were poor people and they sent them to Grandmother and Grandfather because they knew they will give their home and their food to them. And Grandmother was always the first one in the town. My grandmother was a very proud woman and very stern, a beautiful big lady who was very snobbish in her own way. And she was not very social with anybody whom she didn't know way back; and they had to have a certain standard. But when a poor girl wanted to get married and they didn't have a dowry, my grandmother was one of the first who gave and went around town to everybody who could afford it and collected for that girl's wedding and for the dowry.

JF: Your grandparents were of an upper class then in the town, or an upper middle class?

EB: No, middle class. They were very wealthy once, and then after the First World War they were robbed and they were not wealthy at all. They were good people, but not wealthy people, but they had a nice life. My grandmother every year went to Baden Baden or Marienbad...for the cure, to the spas. She always bought the best things for the children. She went to Vienna and she ordered the clothes, or she went to Budapest to the stores and ordered things, but there were much richer people there. They were not rich at all.

JF: So, your mother came from this observant background and this very intense Jewish identity.

EB: Except my grandfather's brother, who was the banker in the town...they had the first motorcar. The family was well-to-do. They came from...they had lumber... My great-grandparents, my grandfather's parents, owned flour mills, and my grandmother's parents they owned a canteen in the mining town, close to Sighet, had a salt mine, and a canteen and a tobacco shop. The license was given by the government, was given to my other great-grandfather on my mother's side.

JF: And your grandfather was in what kind of business, your mother's father, your grandfather?

EB: He was a farmer.

JF: He was a farmer and he was able to own land? That was not an issue?

EB: They didn't live in a ghetto. The city had certain areas where the Jewish people lived. My grandparents never lived in this area. They were mixed, mostly where they lived, there were mostly Christian, Gentile people.

JF: And was that difficult? Did that present any problems that you remember?

EB: No, they were very friendly with those people. My grandparents never liked to live in a ghetto, in an environment where there were just...My grandmother said, "You belong to a land," and they spoke several languages, and actually, my grandmother went to a cloister, to the nuns to school.

JF: This was a common way of Jewish girls becoming educated in those days?

EB: Yes, because in those days they had just parochial schools, and my grandmother went to the parochial school, and even when they had the play *Cinderella*, she was the Prince on the stage. That was her big experience. But she wasn't academically educated, and she liked to learn but she made a point that her children were educated. Her only son became a dentist. She had eight living children. The girls went to parochial schools. My mother graduated from the *Gymnasium*<sup>6</sup>, and she went to Budapest to study pharmacy.

JF: Is that how she met your father, when she went to Budapest?

EB: Yes, because her older sister was already married and living in Budapest, and she met my father in Budapest.

JF: Your grandparents' home was an observant home?

EB: Right.

JF: Kosher?

EB: Right.

JF: Your grandmother wore a *shaytl*.<sup>7</sup>

EB: Sure.

JF: And yet, she was a modern woman in many ways, in terms of her education and what she wanted for her children.

EB: She had a lot of common sense, and she had a born intellect, and she always wanted to learn. Even my aunt was telling me, that when they came home from school she was always sitting down with them. Her name was Rosie and she said, "Rosie wants to learn, too." She wanted to learn what she never did, because she just finished elementary school. In those days, you know, in the early 1800's, she went to the parochial school to the nuns and she finished that. But she had an urge to learn. Even when I was a little girl, she wanted to know what I learned. I had to teach her whatever I learned.

JF: She had a hunger for the outside world.

EB: She wanted to learn about poems and poets, and she had a, not a good voice, but a nice voice, and she liked to sing, and I have an awful voice, and she even tolerated that, and she was the one who built me up all the time.

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<sup>6</sup>A secondary school.

<sup>7</sup>The wig worn by married Orthodox women.

JF: Your father's background was obviously not as observant as your mother's.

EB: Yes, that was an interesting thing. My father was an agnostic. He ran away from home; that is why he joined the Navy because his father wanted to make a rabbi out of him, because of the background and he was very much against it.

JF: So, he was rebelling against his background of the rabbis in his family and he became an agnostic and was not personally observant. What happened to their marriage? Your mother had come from a very different...

EB: So, he had to observe what my mother wanted. They had a kosher home because my grandparents wouldn't eat in any other way when they came and my mother was very attached to her parents and my grandparents always came and visited us. So he said, "Whatever you do in the home, that's your business, that's your home. Whatever I eat outside and whatever I do outside, I do, but don't ask me to wear a hat at the table or go to the synagogue." So once in a while he did it for the sake of my mother. He went to the synagogue on the High Holidays.

JF: This is what your mother told you later?

EB: Yes.

JF: Do you have any early memories of what things were like before he died?

EB: Little things. He was an exceptionally brilliant man and he was disappointed that he didn't have a son, so he wanted to make a son out of me.

JF: You were the only child?

EB: I was the only child, yes, so he asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said that I wanted to be a ballerina or a star, a movie star. He said, "No, you can't be. You will be a politician and an attorney," and I insisted that I wanted to have some artistic things. Every little girls have this. He said, "If you are that artistic then you can become an author."

JF: He had definite ideas.

EB: Absolutely, not only that. He exercised me since I was born! Before I was born, he already put up the gym equipment in the house. He put me up on a big fence because we lived in our home at that time and we had a big fence and he put me up on the fence, which was a sloping fence, to walk on it and I said, "I am scared." And he said, "You cannot be scared. There is no such a word, there is no fear. You are building it into yourself. You cannot have fear." He got very angry, that's what I remember. He said, "You cannot have fear, you have to overcome." And I wasn't even five years old when he enrolled me in a private Jewish school, because he wanted to teach me to read and write and he started when I was three-and-a-half or four, and I didn't do well and he was very disappointed. He thought that I was a hopeless case. That's what I remember.

JF: This was a private Jewish school?

EB: Yes, I dropped out of that. After his death, my mother took me out because I was too young for that. And I was very playful and they advised my mother that it is not my time.



JF: This was a school that was connected with the Jewish community?

EB: Yes, a Jewish school. They had Jewish private schools at that time.

JF: And when you say reading and writing, are you talking about in Hungarian or in Hebrew?

EB: Hungarian, not in Hebrew. It was not a religious school, it was a parochial school, like Protestant, Catholic, Jewish. And it was privately owned by the Jewish community and you had to pay fees, because a public school you don't have to pay fees, or very little. But in the Jewish schools they measure up your financial status and according to your financial status, you pay your fees in the school because you are keeping up that school, and then the poor kid can come without paying anything.

JF: Was this a common thing in the social group in which your parents were, to send your children to a Jewish private school?

EB: We had private schools and we had tutors that were private besides that. So what happened...he knew he was dying, he diagnosed even himself. He was very fluent in Latin and he had the best professors who were taking care of him. In Hungary or in Europe at that time, the medical profession didn't believe to tell the patients. They diagnosed and they kept it as a secret. He had a feel that what he had...and so he called one professor up in the name of the other on the telephone to get the diagnosis and because he was so versed in Latin. The diagnoses are always [unclear] in the late '40s and early '50s in Hungary, in the Hungarian medical school you have to know Latin because everything was in Latin and not in Hungarian; now it's changed. So, if you were a doctor, your diagnosis was in Latin. So they didn't assume that anybody who was not in that field could diagnose in Latin and converse in Latin. So he called them up and he got his proper diagnosis.

JF: This must have been a while before he died.

EB: It was a year before he died, so he decided that I have to learn how to read and write and be aware of things, and I still was a little child who was very playful. And at school I did not behave like...They couldn't discipline me because I was playful and talking and chatting and enjoying myself and putting ink all over my dresses and doing lots of other things. When you are with the six and seven year olds and you are not even five, then you are doing things what are not... He learned to read and write when he was three because he went to school with his older sisters and he was from the country in Hungary in the mainland. And at that time they had different age groups in schools, in country schools, so he was taught with his sisters and he loved to learn. He was brilliant.

JF: So he thought you should do the same.

EB: He thought if he had one child, then the child has to do it and the child was not that brilliant [laughter] as he was.

JF: The community in which you lived in Budapest at this time was what? What kind of people lived there?

EB: I don't know what you mean.

JF: Was it grouped by religion? Was it grouped by socio-economics?

EB: Socio-economics.

JF: So that there was a mixture among your playmates and a mixture among your parents' friends.

EB: Sure. My parents' friends were mostly Gentiles.

JF: Why do you think that was? It was an observant home...

EB: It was not that observant. It was such a Mickey Mouse observant. They knew everything about the laws. My grandparents were strictly Orthodox and when I went there, we observed. In our home we had a kosher kitchen but if ham and other things of that kind were coming in from the outside, it was served in a different place. My mother wouldn't eat it.

JF: But she would serve it.

EB: She would serve it but she wouldn't eat it, but she wouldn't mix the plates. She observed a kosher home what she had seen her parents. She loved her parents and she respected them and respected the laws. We didn't go to temple on Fridays.

JF: Did you belong to a synagogue?

EB: Yes, we did belong to the synagogue.

JF: What kind of synagogue?

EB: Basically Neolog. Neolog means...this is a German movement, it started in Germany in the 1800's and swept across Austro-Hungary, because we were always with the Germans and this is the base of the Reform. It is like the Conservative here. It was in a way enlightened. I didn't have Christmas trees because I didn't want any. If I wanted one I would have one, but I didn't.

JF: Did you have friends who did have Christmas trees?

EB: Yes. At Christmas we got gifts for Christmas. Not for Chanukah.

JF: You did get gifts for Christmas?

EB: Yes, not for Chanukah. Chanukah, we knew it was Chanukah. We observed Chanukah, we observed Purim, we observed very strictly the Passover. We had Passover *seders*. We didn't have bread in the house. We changed the dishes; so I knew everything about the law, but that was semi-Reform. You could call it almost Reform.

JF: And the people, the other Jews that you knew, lived in a similar way?

EB: Yes, most of them.

JF: You said that your parents didn't go to synagogue on Friday. Did they only go on the High Holidays?

EB: Yes.

JF: Primarily?

EB: And we went to the *maskir* on High Holidays. We observed Succoth. We didn't have a *succah*, but my mother's oldest sister had it so we went out there. And my mother's other sister who was married to a Gentile man—coming from this background, it was a terrible shock to my grandparents—but she was married to a Gentile man who saved 29 Jewish people during 1944—I went out there and she had the Christmas tree and she

had different dishes because she wanted her mother to visit her, so she had the kosher dishes.

JF: At the same time?

EB: At the same time. But that was my first experience in antisemitism, in my aunt's home, whom I loved dearly. She was absolutely a lovely, lovely person, who was married to this Gentile man who converted to Judaism.

JF: Oh, he converted to Judaism.

EB: He converted. He was an aristocrat. He was coming from an aristocratic background. It was a big love. They went together for eight years, not because of his family was against marrying a Jew, but *my* grandparents were against to having a Gentile in the family, and he was coming from a much better background. And when my grandmother went over to his brother, who was a colonel in the Hungarian Army, a very high-ranking colonel, and his father was a general, and they said, "Well, if the two people love each other, it doesn't matter who is Jewish and who isn't. The main thing is that they love each other."

JF: Now, you said that this was the first time that you had experienced antisemitism.

EB: They had children where she lived. She never had children and she loved me very much and every Christmas, I spent there because it was so festive. And I had an aunt, my father's aunt, who went to visit Israel and came back and gave me a *Magen David*, a little trinket, and I was wearing it on my chain, as a child. And that was after my father died and I spent my Christmas with my aunt and there were children whom I played with and they weren't Jewish. And then my aunt said, "You don't have to tell them that you are Jewish. Please don't tell them." And I had this little *Magen David* on my neck and I ran to my friend's home to have to light the candles on the Christmas tree and they started to talk about how Jews killed Christ and...

*Tape one, side two:*

JF: This is tape one, side two of an interview with Eva Bentley. You were talking about the experience when you were visiting these Christian children's home to decorate their tree.

EB: It was already decorated because they said that Jesus is coming and the trees were decorated by them the children, I don't know, they made some [unclear] about that... To light the candles, and those were little sparkly things and it was beautiful. The room was dark, and the sparkles came up and it felt like in a fairyland. And in the fairyland came the tale about how the Jews killed Christ and all the Jews have big noses and all the Jews are bad and drinking children's blood and all kind of stories, and I had the *Magen David* in my breast and I thought what if they find out that I am one of them, what was going to happen? It's terrible. It's not true. And that was the first experience that I had and I took off my *Magen David*. And I hid it. I was ashamed of being a Jew.

JF: This was the first time?

EB: That was the first time and then I went back and I said to myself, "That is not true. Why are they telling that? It is not true. Those are lies." How can I find? I didn't want to be one of those people who are killers and bad. It was a stigma and it was burning. It was terrible burning and I still feel guilty about it that I took the *Magen David* off.

JF: You were about how old when that happened?

EB: Six, or so, and I didn't want to, I wanted to be one of *them* and not one of those Jews.

JF: That they were talking about?

EB: Yes, and at the same time I knew that it wasn't true and it was hurting. I was torn apart.

JF: Did you talk with your parents about it or your mother about it when you went home?

EB: I ran back to my aunt and then she explained that that is a stigma what we have to fight and it is not true. And I said, "Why can't I tell them that I'm Jewish?" Basically, she didn't express it. I couldn't talk to her about that. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Subconsciously, and being a child, you know so much when you are a child, especially when you lost your father. And this aunt of mine was an absolute angel, a lovely, lovely human being. So I just couldn't confront her with this because she put me in a situation, she wanted the best and she didn't want me to get hurt. Probably she wanted to protect me, and that is why she told me not to tell them that I am Jewish. Because in that community they didn't know that she was Jewish or that her husband had converted to Judaism.

JF: This was in...

EB: The '30s, mid '30s.

JF: The mid '30s, and the town was...

EB: Hungary, Budapest.

JF: This was in Budapest itself, but the section was...

EB: It was the suburbs of Budapest. They had different districts. Like you go in Philadelphia to Rydal, or to Huntingdon Valley from Center City. We lived in center city Budapest and they lived in the outskirts.

JF: Now, this kind of situation is very different from what you described where you lived, where you lived in a community where there were Christians and they knew you were Jewish.

EB: Probably, it wasn't different. I just wasn't aware of it because they know I was Jewish and in this part of the town they didn't know I was Jewish, so...

JF: They didn't know that the family was Jewish?

EB: No, they thought they were Christians; so they were open with me because they thought that I was one of them.

JF: But where you lived, your family let everybody know that they are Jewish.

EB: Yes, we had the *mezuzah* on the door.

JF: And you had Christian playmates at home?

EB: Yes, sure.

JF: And it was not a problem?

EB: No, because they know. At that time it was no problem. Later on, much later on, it became a problem.

JF: Do you think, in the group in which you lived, had they not known that you were Jews, would they have been more open with you?

EB: Yes, yes.

JF: In the same way. There would have been more antisemitism expressed. And, they were not saying these things out of politeness or regard for your background?

EB: Yes, they would because it happened later.

JF: Now, you said that you went to a public school after your father died.

EB: No, after my father died, I went to a private school, an English private school. I started my first elementary. They called it a Scotch school. It was a private school that taught English from the first elementary grade on, and they mingled with mostly Protestant and Jewish kids. Very few Catholics in that school. And we had different classes. We had religious classes, Jewish religion, even in public school, you were allowed to practice your religion and the rabbi or the teacher, the religious teacher, came in, would be Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. They came in and we had religious arts and religious studies. In this school I didn't experience any antisemitism because most of the class was well-to-do upper middle class Jewish kids or upper middle-class Protestants. And it was an environment, mostly a Jewish environment because the Jews were the ones who wanted to learn English and wanted to get this kind of education, so we did...I went there.

JF: Was there a great number of Jewish children in the school, or were they just more visible?

EB: No, they were not. Let's say, that the class was 65% Jewish.

JF: And what was your experience in the school with these other children in terms of your Judaism?

EB: At that time it was...

JF: Was it comfortable?

EB: Comfortable, because we were, most of us were Jewish, so I didn't even know, don't remember who was Protestant and who wasn't.

JF: The friends that you had...

EB: My friends were Jewish, my little friends were Jewish.

JF: Why do you think they were Jewish?

EB: I will tell you why, because my best friend at that time was our physician's daughter and she was my bosom buddy after my father's death, and then we had a falling out and then my next friend was also a Jewish girl, so it just happened.

F: It just happened. It wasn't that you couldn't have been friends with the non-Jewish kids.

EB: It's just that it happened. And then after that I went to another school because we moved, my mother got married and we moved and the circumstances changed. So I went to a special school, but it was a public school, but it was called... It was a school which was a teaching school, for the new methods. It was an experimental elementary school.

JF: Was this also in Budapest?

EB: Yes, but in a different district. We moved from this district to another district and then my best friend became also a Jewish girl who happened to be my husband's cousin who is a psychiatrist now, and that is the way I met my husband.

JF: So, you were about how old then when you moved to this other school?

EB: I was about eight or nine. I had a very hard time there not because being a Jew, because in that class also we had lots of Jewish children, but it was an experimental school and it was very advanced. We had cubes, all those kinds of things that they experimented with, a new reform technique. So most of the school and classes had very bright children and most of them were Jewish children again. After my mother got married—it was the depression in Hungary and my stepfather had a furniture factory and he went broke—so our financial status from up went down from one day to the other and that was a very hard experience. So I experienced hardship, not because I was Jewish, because I experienced it with my Jewish friends, but because I wasn't as rich any more and losing my father and losing that kind of background, I had a very hard experience. But it was a short time and my stepfather made it back and he started again, so everything was going up financially again.

What happened? I had a birthday party. I was in the first elementary grade and finally we were doing well again and my mother gave a birthday party for me and I invited the whole class and even the other class, 40 kids, and two Christian girls came and most of

the Jewish kids didn't. Five came—together we were five, three Jewish girls and three Christian. The Christian kids came. The Jewish children didn't come because their parents said we were new in the district and we were down when we came... They didn't know our background, because they didn't know my parents' background and they didn't allow their children to come to my party. Since then, I didn't let my mother give any more birthday parties for me.

JF: What a horrible disappointment!

EB: It was terrible, you can't even imagine. The cakes were ready and everything, and they didn't show up. And my husband's aunt who was my mother's friend—she came from Transylvania also, a different town—Koložvár—it's a very famous town. And my husband's grandfather was a school principal and his father was a school principal, Hungarian school principal, not Jewish, and his great-grandfather was a Jewish school principal, he is coming from this background. And my friend's mother came to Budapest at the same time as my mother, to the university to study medicine. And they found each other through us when we became friends. Her daughter and I became friends at school and we lived a block away from each other, and the mothers became friends and we became friends. So she came over and she was very embarrassed and she told my mother what happened because all of the parents, all of the mothers, told her why they didn't let the children come to my party.

JF: So this had to do with social status within the Jewish community.

EB: That's correct.

JF: When you...

EB: After that, I didn't talk to those kids. What happened [unclear] the poor kids, but I didn't realize that, I bore a grudge all my life. They approached me on the street later and everything and I didn't want to talk to them any more.

JF: Did you find other friends, though, in this community? You said that three Jewish girls came to your party. Were you as close to them as you had...?

EB: No, I was not close to them at all.

JF: You weren't close to them? You did not find the close friends after this...

EB: I had one close friend of mine that was my husband's cousin in that time in the elementary grade. And after that I went to the Jewish *Gymnasium* and I had lots of lovely friends, but these girls went sideways and I didn't even recognize them on the street.

JF: During this time...

EB: But I didn't have problems with the Christian girls in my class in the elementary. Later on I went to public school after elementary school, and there the antisemitism was rampant.

JF: Can you describe that to me?

EB: Yes, already the Arrow Cross... This was the late '30s and early '40s already.

JF: You're talking about...you were about?

EB: When I was 10, 11, 12, 13, already it was rampant. First I went to the public school and there the teachers were very antisemitic; the principal was very antisemitic.

JF: This was in the new community to which you moved.

EB: Yes. They always singled me out. They didn't associate with me. I went to a school where they only had in the classroom four Jewish girls. All the others were...we had 32 or 34 in the classroom and among that, there were just only four Jewish girls. [unclear]

JF: So this experience of antisemitism started for you when you were about nine or ten.

EB: No, it started at six at Christmas.

JF: But in school.

EB: In school it started when I was 10, I guess.

JF: You were 10 and this is when you moved to this other community when your mother remarried.

EB: About eight or nine. [unclear]

JF: That was about 1938 or so?

EB: '38, '39 and '40.

JF: That you were feeling it in the country. So, it was much different from when you were a younger child? It was much more overt?

EB: Not only overt, but it was a field day. You see what happened: we had art classes and the teacher who taught us art classes, she was a *Schwabe*. "*Schwabe*" means a part of Hungary where they had these old German communities. They lived in Hungary for 130 years, even longer, but they maintained their own identity. They considered themselves Germans. But you didn't have to be German; the Hungarians were antisemitic enough. But this teacher came from that background and she was not only an antisemite, she was out-and-out Fascist and a Nazi. I was the best student in the class, and she thwarted my effort of trying. I realized later that I could draw... She taught writing and drawing and she always ridiculed me in front of the class... When I went into this class, I froze. I could not draw a line. She was so mean to me. She was a sadist. She hit my hand. She ridiculed me. She said, "This is the bright one, the best student in the school; look how she draws a line," and everybody started to laugh. "Look at her books, how she writes." Even if I would be Picasso, I couldn't do anything there.

JF: Did she specifically say that you were Jewish?

EB: Oh, yes.

JF: She said this?

EB: Oh, yes. Sure.

JF: What did she say?

EB: She was always telling about the Jews how they killed Christ and the Jews are bad and the Jews are shylocks and the Jews are this and the Jews are that. She was indoctrinating the class and starting and instigating, brainwashing the children.



JF: Did you see a change in your classmates?

EB: After class always fights broke out because we were carrying the big boards, you know, when we draw. The art boards and they were heavy boards and we had to carry them in our portfolio cases. So we went out of the door and the Christian children were lining up and with their rulers and with their boards and they started to hit the Jewish girls, except me. They never touched me because I stood up and I stood in the door and I said, "Well, that's nice. You are brave Hungarians, hitting 30 against the four little girls! You have to be very proud! Now, you hit me!" They said, "We will not touch you because you are not Jewish." I said, "I am more Jewish than any of those. You just start with me."

JF: Why did they say that you were not Jewish?

EB: I don't know. You see, they needed me. If they needed a good... There were the tests, the written tests. They didn't know how to speak German and I was the best in German. If they needed a good composition they had to turn to me, to make their composition, to help them. But, maybe that wasn't the point, because there were other bright kids, Christian bright kids. Not everyone did that, not everyone.

JF: Not everyone stood up to them.

EB: They didn't hit us. Not everyone of the Christian children did that. There was a group.

JF: A certain group. What about the other kids that didn't do that, did they actively befriend you?

EB: Yes, they didn't protect us, but they were friends and they didn't turn away.

JF: Were you able to play in their homes, and were you invited to their houses?

EB: Yes, even the antisemitic ones. They had Jewish friends. One of the biggest ones, you know, the Arrow Cross—that's the equivalent of the German Brown Shirts and we had the Green Shirts and they were more sadistic. If anybody could be more sadistic than the Germans they were the Hungarian Arrow Cross. And these girls had the Arrow Cross emblems and they were sticking it on their tables and their work sheets and everywhere. And they were active. It was...

JF: Did they have a youth group?

EB: They had a youth group and they liked it, and they were part of it and what was important, one of the leaders of this group at this school had...her best friend was one of the Jewish girls. They always played together, they went together.

JF: How do you understand this dichotomy? Do you think that these girls who were part of this Nazi youth group actually believed what they were hearing in the group?

EB: Yes, they glamorized it. They thought...look, the formative years are very important and you can brainwash anybody. They said, "Look, the Jews are doing so well. They are parasites, they are eating up our lands. They have the lands. They took the land away from us. They are landowners." Why are they landowners? They were money lenders and lent money to the Hungarian aristocrats and the Hungarian people who owned the land before and they gambled their lives away and the Jews worked hard and they lent them the

money. They couldn't pay them back so they lost the land or they sold the land; the Jews worked all their lives and they didn't gamble away or drink away, or squander it away. They bought it. They couldn't stand it. The industrialists were Jews. There were certain professions that the Christians wouldn't touch because it was beneath them, like, having a bar or a tavern. Most of them were Jewish and they made money on liquor, but they worked hard. So later on they did something else. The Emancipation came in the 1800s—in the middle 1800s—1862, I guess, the Jews were emancipated so they went to the universities. They were studious and most of the doctors became Jews [perhaps she means “most of those becoming doctors were Jews.”] The universities were full of Jews until after the First War and then they had the *numerus clausus* and just 6% of the Jews could attend. Later on, we couldn't even go to medical school or other schools—my age group. Not mine, but older than me because after the war I could go. So, they thought that the Jews were eating up everything. We had a depression, like you had it in America, so you needed a scapegoat and Hitler felt that the Jews were the scapegoat.

JF: Do you think that these children believed this information?

EB: Absolutely, because it came from the teachers, the parents and their elders.

JF: How, then, were they then able to be friends with these Jews that you were describing? You said that they had them in their home. How did they fit that together?

EB: Human nature.

JF: And the parents were accepting of the Jewish kids coming home?

EB: Yes, to play. They were antisemitic, but they accepted; they had Jewish friends, too. Do you know what they always said to my parents, what I heard, and I don't buy it and I hate it? They said, “Oh, you are different, you are not like the other Jews.” Every Christian had their own Jews, their own home Jews. Even Horthy had a Jewish wife and his son married a Jewish girl. One of his sons. His best bridge partners and buddies were Jews who were exterminated in a concentration camp, but they were his buddies.

JF: These were the exceptions. Everyone had exceptions.

EB: And his granddaughter was working for Allied<sup>8</sup> [unclear] in Switzerland.

JF: His children were raised as Jews, then, by his wife?

EB: No, his wife was converted.

JF: She converted.

EB: Her parents, or her...I don't know, but everybody knows that she was of Jewish origin.

JF: But his grandchild...

EB: Nobody is Jewish in that family. His son, who is alive—one was killed by the Germans, that draw us into the war, and they said that the Russians killed him, but the Germans killed him—he was a prisoner of the Gestapo—his son was always very involved with the Jewish community. All of his friends were Jewish. One of my teachers was his

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<sup>8</sup>Possibly Joint Distribution Committee.

friend and he was the Ambassador of Hungary to Brazil and this teacher taught at the Jewish *Gymnasium*, was a poet and a translator of Portuguese and he took him out to Brazil and he escaped this fascism of the German occupation. But he was caught by the Germans, his son, and he was put in the concentration camp. He married a Jewish girl, whose father was one of the biggest textile industrialists, Goldberger, who died in the concentration camp in Dachau.

JF: What kind of information did you have at that point about what was going on in the rest of Europe?

EB: We had all of the information and you know, the Hungarian mind is that we know everything better than anybody. We read between the lines, and whenever they misinformed us we always read in between... By that time the press was very liberal, mostly in Jewish hands, and we got the information. We had the very bloody Nazi papers also, but the good information... And we had the radio, the BBC, and even later when it was not allowed to listen, but everybody did.

JF: And what did your mother and your stepfather discuss? Did they ever talk about leaving? Did they think that it would come to Hungary?

EB: My stepfather said I am a Hungarian first, foremost and always. It couldn't happen. I'm not a Galitsyaner, a Polish Jew, or Czechoslovakian or anybody—it couldn't happen in Hungary. My mother, who was coming from Transylvania and had more experience and more identity because my stepfather is coming from another kind of background—he was not religious at all and he did everything for mother, but that was it...

JF: Both times she had the same situation, sort of?

[Laughter]

EB: My mother said "I would like to leave", but they didn't make any move and even in the last minute when my stepfather was offered false papers, Gentile papers, he said, "Oh, I would not do that. I am Hungarian." And that what took him to Mauthausen and...

JF: He died.

EB: No, he came back from Mauthausen after typhoid fever and everything and the labor camp and beating. He was a Hungarian Jew all right. He didn't come to America because he was a Hungarian.

JF: Did you think that the family should have left at that time?

EB: Oh, sure.

JF: Your feeling at that time was that your family should be getting out?

EB: Sure.

JF: Was it the kind of situation where you could talk to your parents about it?

EB: Look, it was too late. We didn't have any place to go when the Germans took over. This was the last spot. It was 1944.

JF: Before 1944, did you feel that you should be leaving?

EB: I didn't know. I didn't have any feeling about that.

JF: Did you feel scared? Did you feel that the Germans were going to move in?

EB: I wasn't concerned with that. I was studying. I had my own life. I really...

JF: You saw it as something that was outside of you.

EB: Yes. We were in a situation we couldn't help. I didn't think about anything. I did what my parents did and my main aim was, by that time I was so involved in my school...I went to school at 7:00 in the morning and I came home at 6:00 in the evening. I had lots of homework besides private tutors, Saturdays and Sundays, my exercises and mountain climbing and everything to have a very rounded education. My mother was emphasizing always on languages and other extra-curricular things. So, I was so overrun and I was an avid reader. And we had our own group. And even everything was, we were chopped like, you know, the salami, that you slice, one and one and finally it goes out. That is what happened to Hungary. Hitler chopped us up and the fascism chopped us up. We were eased out of our businesses and we lost jobs. I was in a Jewish *Gymnasium*. Everybody was in a bad situation by that time, so...

JF: You are talking about 1944, or are you talking about earlier...?

EB: 1942, '43, or '44.

JF: So, you saw the families that you knew, their businesses were taken away...

EB: It got worse and worse, yes. You couldn't practice law by that time. The businesses had to have a Christian manager, like, my stepfather had to have a Christian "straw man"<sup>9</sup> for his business because you couldn't get furniture, you couldn't get supplies. It was getting worse and worse. You couldn't buy this... There was a food shortage. Everybody was in the same situation. We were just studying and preparing ourselves to be super human in our school because I attended a special class in a special school. This was after the public school...

JF: After the public school...

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<sup>9</sup>*Strohmann* - straw man is a business owner in name only, i.e. the business is owned by an Aryan.