HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

EPHRAIM GLASER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Sylvia Brockmon
Dates: August 10, 1988

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EG - Ephraim Glaser [interviewee]
SB - Sylvia Brockmon [interviewer]
Date: August 10, 1988

Tape one, side one:

SB: Where you were born and when and a little about your family.

EG: As mentioned before, I was born in the end of 1922. I was born in Cluj, [Kolozsvár] which was the capital of Transylvania. My father was employed by the Jewish community and sort of what they call today a reverend. We were a family of seven. Cluj, was a universally cultured town with a Jewish center of about ten to twelve thousand people. There was a very active and striving Jewish life in that town. We had three communities. One was, the largest one was the Orthodox community that we belonged to; then there was an extremely religious community, the Hassidic community, which was called Sephardic for some reason. There was a sort of type of Reform community called the Neolog[1] community, the smaller community. We had a very strong Zionist movement; actually this was the only town in the world, I think, that there was a daily newspaper written Hungarian on Jewish problems, a Jewish newspaper, which exists today in Israel, weekends. It came over to Israel and appears again every day. I think it was one of the very few daily newspapers, which was a Zionist paper and a Jewish paper written in the Hungarian language. There was also very cultured town and we had very, actually we had a very nice communal life. People fitted very well into the new system, the new system was called the Romanian system. Actually this was a part of Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was occupied in 1918 by the Romanians, and older Jews still had the Austro-Hungarian culture, but they fitted in, and my youth was a good life, because we had a very nice, very pretty town, very active, very Jewish; very strong antisemitic movements, well, starting with the Romanians. My recollections go back as a child for a pogrom they made actually in our courtyard, and I have recollections of this time when I was about four or five. All the time, we had strong antisemitic persecutions, mainly by the intellectual students at that time. This of course, the whole world changed, our life changed when the Hungarians reoccupied this part of Transylvania in 1940. The Hungarians moved in; this is under the ruling of Hitler. Hitler divided Romania and gave part back to the Hungarians and Russia with the Ribbentrop and Molotov agreement, have taken off another part of Romania and annexed this part to the Russian empire. So life started out to be quite entirely different under the Hungarian rule; antisemitism became now official, Jewish laws against the Jews became official, and, of course, this started on to deteriorate. Until--Did I say too much?

SB: No, go ahead, go ahead.

EG: You have some more questions?

[1]Neology or Neologism, unofficial name of communities in Hungary belonging to the Reform movement.

SB: Yes, I have more questions.

EG: Started to deteriorate until it reached the final deportation and the Holocaust in 1944. Go ahead with the questions.

SB: So consequently, from what you say, your parents and your family did not feel comfortable and secure in their life in Hungary?

EG: No, as a matter of fact, no Jewish person has felt secure and comfortable under the Hungarian government.

SB: How would you describe then, your relationship with non-Jews?

EG: Well, see, before the Hungarian entered, the Hungarians were regarded as a minority. There was an understanding, because the Jews had Hungarian culture. There was some understanding, some friendship, but as soon as the Hungarians re-occupied our town, they all changed. We all felt they don't know us anymore, and they don't want to know us anymore, and they started on to fit into the new system the new strong extreme antisemitic laws.

SB: And what school did you attend in Hungary at that time? Do you remember then?

EG: In Hungary? In Hungary at that time I still had the high school, I still was going to high school. Previously I went for a few years in a *yeshiva*, I studied in a *yeshiva*, and various parts of the country, including my own hometown, which was a Wizhnitz *Yeshiva* [in Siret, 50 km from Czernowitz], under the management of the Orthodox Rabbi.

SB: Now, in the public school that you went to and to high school, was there any discrimination against you?

EG: I didn't go to public school; I went to Jewish school, and the Hungarians' times they had made the Jewish high school as well--not only Jewish elementary school, Jewish high school as well, because the Jews were not accepted, actually, into the public schools.

SB: So there was definite discrimination?

EG: Oh yes. They sure didn't allow…

SB: So culturally, your family, really felt close to Romanians?

EG: No, no, to Hungarians culturally.

SB: What language did you speak at home?

EG: We spoke Yiddish, Hungarian, and sometimes German.

SB: What was your father's occupation?

EG: As I said, he was a reverend in the community.

SB: Is that the equivalent of a rabbi?

EG: It's a bit lower than a rabbi, because he was a *shochet* and a *mohel* and a *chazan*.

SB: I see. Did your family ever experience pogroms in Hungary, your own family?

EG: Yes, of course, I mean pogroms, you talk about the pogroms in, I don't know what sense, but a pogrom is a name that came up from the Russians Jewish history. It was not a pogrom like the Cossacks did, but it was a lot of attacks on Jews, always beating ups, we were always beaten up, and the Jewish people had to fight. We had to do, etc…

SB: A pogrom would have been a special attack against the Jewish community by a whole group of the Hungarians, especially planned ones.

EG: We experienced that from, in the Romanian times. But, of course, when the Ghetto came, when the situation, when the Jewish people are taken in the ghettos in 1944, all the Jews were surrounded and taken out of their homes into a ghetto. Then the situation was terribly bad. Unfortunately, I wasn't at home, I was away from home at that time.

SB: Now, did you hear any discussions about the territory that Hungary lost after World War I, and do you remember the feeling in your town when this territory was returned in 1938 and 1941?

EG: First of all, correction. It wasn't it in 1938. Yes, 1938 was returned another territory that belonged to Czechoslovakia.

SB: Right.

EG: But in our territory was returned in 1940, and, of course, the Jews, they were great Hungarian patriots, and they didn't know what was going to happen. They thought that the Hungarians from the old times would come back, and they looked very enthusiastically to receive the Hungarians, because everybody was close to them, but as soon as Hungarian soldiers entered in and they were immediately beating up Jews, and they saw that these are even worse than Romanians.

SB: Was your family affected by the anti-Jewish laws of 1938 and 1939?

EG: Not 1938, 1939, this doesn't refer to our Transylvania; it started in 1940. Surely they are very much affected because me and my brother, we had a big woods, wood, and deposits, and very soon a Jew was not allowed to have a business of his own. He had to take in a Christian and give him the business and to be only a minor partner in it. Of course, we were very much affected. All over the war, very much affected.

SB: When did you first become aware of the anti-Jewish persecutions in Western and Central Europe?

EG: What do you call Western and Central Europe?

SB: Well, that would have been in...

EG: Of course we were, when I was a child in 1933.

SB: No, this would have been after 1938, 1939. In '33 you say you became aware?

EG: We became aware, we knew what was going on, when Hitler came up and what he did, and we all knew that.

SB: You were aware then of specific anti-Jewish laws and persecution?

EG: Sure, of course, not only that, it has reflected very much to our own country. They immediately, lots of Romanian antisemitic groups have organized themselves, become Hitlerites.

SB: To the Iron Guard?

EG: Sure, to Iron Guard and the whole lot, and we immediately felt that, you know, the inference was very strong.

SB: Did you hear of any anti-Jewish killing actions in Hungary before 1944?

EG: Yes, we knew that when they entered into the occupied part of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, they killed a lot of Jews. In our area they didn't know about mass-killings, strong antisemitism, beating ups and all sorts of things, perhaps killings here and there, yes, but what they did in mass killings in Yugoslavia and other places which we knew about, that didn't happen.

SB: That didn't happen in Hungary. Now you mentioned that your brother's business was no longer possible unless he took in a Christian, that was after June 1941?

EG: Yes, that's correct.

SB: What was happening to other members of your father's and mother's families, parents, cousins and so on, and your own extended family, did they also have to give up their businesses and were they beaten, what was the situation with them?

EG: I believe it was the same situation as with us. Whoever had a business had to give it up; who wasn't in business was also facing a lot of hardship and difficulties. A Jew couldn't get neither studying nor graduating, or very limited work. It was a strong antisemitism which was very suffocating for the Jewish people.

SB: Did any member serve in the Hungarian labor units? Please describe.

EG: Sure, my brother and myself, and I told you. You have some more questions in this particular line? O.K. Do you want some more explanations?

SB: No, go ahead, tell me about the Hungarian labor units.

EG: Yes, I was recruited to the Hungarian labor units in 1943, and my brother was older than me, my oldest brother he was recruited not much later than that, but I was recruited instead of my national service. The Jews were taken not to the army but to the forced labor camps. These forced labor camps in the beginning they were starting to be as using young people to work, hard work, building trenches, digging mountains, great hardships, strong antisemitic rules, beating ups, but gradually turned into a liquidation or extermination camp in a way, because they were trying to treat us in a way that people should not survive. As a matter of fact, from 300 boys from our town who were recruited only thirty came back, 270 perished. I have a very special story if this is the place to tell you or somewhere else.

SB: Let's talk about that a little bit later. Did you have any idea in early 1944 that Germany was exerting pressure on the Hungarian government, and do you recall any pro-Nazi activity at that time early in 1944?

EG: I could not say that exactly because I was out or in the end of the Carpathian Mountains or in Poland. We felt very great pressure because we felt that the Hungarian crew who was handling us became very cruel and very bad to us. This is the way that we felt, it's a very hard hand being put on us, and we knew that something new was coming in. But, unfortunately, we were away from the town, we were away from our families. We didn't know what happened to them.

SB: Would you finish describing your experiences in the forced labor camp? You said you had a very unusual situation.

EG: Well, I would to say this. In the middle of 1944 the situation became very unbearable in the forced labor camps. We were retreating from the mountains, from Poland, Czechoslovakia, back into Hungary, because the Russians were advancing their troops in this area, and I had a personal bad experience with one of the crew there, and I decided I am going to run away. This was very rare, because people didn't dare, because it was very hard to run away, and if they caught you, they immediately shot you. I decided to run away with a friend of mine, and I have been some way, had mixed myself into a group of sort of Carpathian Russians, some were Carpathian Ukrainians. I knew a bit of the language, and I threw away my yellow star and my yellow band, which would regard me as Jew, and due to my non - to my Aryan looks I mixed in there, and I was not recognized as a Jew. So one day we had been running out of food, and there was a German unit, a German military unit from the Wehrmacht station in the place, and as I spoke good German, I spoke very good German, I went into the German unit, and I asked for some food. The man there, I think was a sergeant-major, sat down and had with me a nice talk, and gave me something which was a fortune at the time, he gave me two full, two loaves of bread, which was something which is beyond your imagination, having two loaves of bread and other little items, and asked me what I am, and I said I am a Hungarian Christian, and I work here and I described, and he invited me to come and join the army, the German army, and I said, “What shall I do?” He said, “Perhaps we’ll give you some jobs to do; come and join us!” I came back and I saw the situation, what a horror it was, and I was discussing it with some Jewish friends, who I met there, and they said to me, “If you go, I go with you.” So I’ve taken myself and two other boys who looked also very German, and I came back to this person and I said, “Yes, we’re prepared to join the army.” It was a whole history, there was a lot of very lucky coincidences, how I was able to come over all the Hungarian authorities, to come over to the Germans. Not enough time to discuss it, to tell this, but I somehow made it, and within an hour I was dressed up in German clothing, and I went out with a swastika and the whole lot. I went out immediately, and I had to greet everybody “*Heil Hitler*”. At this time it was an unusual life for me for several months, living with, living as a Jew, known as a non-Jew. Amazingly these were not the rough SS, they were Germans and Austrians. The Austrians themselves were anti-Hitlerites, at that time, but still I had to oblige them, and I had the job as a translator for the captain.

SB: From Hungarian to German?

EG: From Hungarian to German, and I only have to mention a few things. I had a set of pictures of my family, my two brothers lived in Israel, and my father, as you see him, and my mother, we got two of those pictures. From those I made, I kept this in my pocket under the swastika. I didn't want to part with them. It was there. It was there with me all the time and I escaped with that from the Germans as well. I had my brother send me once from Palestine for my *bar mitzvah* a *tefillin beitel* [a phylacteries bag] especially embroidered, and I had these *tefillin* with me in the Hungarian working labor. One day they were making a big search in all our belongings, and they said we have to throw this away. It had to be taken away because they may have some secret inscriptions inside. So, but I left my *Tefillin beitel*, and I took it to the German army, but this was stolen from me. My colleagues, my German colleagues, comrades, I mean, if you can call them like that, of course, I had a very unusual time, and a difficult time, and an interesting time. I have helped, at this time I helped to escape some Russians prisoners. I was, after a few months, they told me that I'm a suspect of a Bolshevik, because I spoke to the Russian, to the Russian prisoners. And one said to me that, one Austrian said, "Do you know that the Gestapo is after you?" As soon as I heard this, next morning I escaped, ran away from the Germans. The whole story how I ran away, I convinced another man who was a baron and had a big factory, and he was willing to hide me in a big bottle factory, which had an oven which wasn't used at that time, and he put me into the oven flat and put some bricks around me there, and there I survived until the Russians came in. And I had another story. So, I have lived this through, and, of course, it's not enough time to tell all the ways and means and deeds and happenings which happened to me whilst I was in the German unit and so on.

SB: We'll talk about that. We'll have some time to talk about it.

EG: This is a different story.

SB: What happened to you and your family when Eichman's unit marched into Hungary in March of 1944? And were you being guided in any way by Jewish leaders or community bodies?

EG: Well, I made a lot of investigations of this, what happened. It's very unfortunate they came out of a town which became very famous, or infamous, for what they called the Kasztner affair.[2] Everybody who knows the history of Hungary knows the Kasztner affair. I was belonging to the Zionist movements, and I knew and Zionist people who ran away from, we had friends and *chaverim* [comrades] from the movements who were in Budapest who came down to Cluj and tried to bring, to bring to escape the Jewish

[2]The Relief and Rescue Committee headed by Ottó Komoly and Reszö Kasztner negotiated with the SS to organize a transport of 1,684 Hungarian Jews in exchange for money. In June 1944, these Jews were taken by train to Bergen-Belsen labor camp. Not long after, these Jews were brought to Switzerland and survived the war. Among those in the transport were many relatives and friends of Kasztner. However, in the main the group consisted of all political and religious factions, as well as wealthy people who paid large sums subsidizing the others. Kasztner's idea was that this exodus would serve as a precedent for undoing the murder program, and that more trains would follow. However, none did. (*Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* 787-790, 1253)

people over the Romanian border into Romania, which was still a haven for Jews at that time. But the Jewish community, unfortunately, which I heard only, because some of this were chosen to escape through the Kasztner's, Kasztner, group, three hundred people, to escape into a safe place, and not to be sent to Auschwitz. Unfortunately, it was said, that those were the leaders of the Jewish community, and they were doing all their very utmost to keep the people quiet. Do you follow what I'm saying? Keep the people quiet and to mislead them, that they should--so nothing should happen to them, because they were only being sent to work to labor camps. All of our people have got a card from the last day that we all go to labor camp. I should mention, I should characterize the Hungarian Jewry that this is a tragedy within a tragedy, and what is the tragedy within a tragedy? We did not, we were living on the border of Poland. And I heard some, that in 1943 Polish Jews escaped over to Hungary, some very few are telling some very terrible stories. Nobody believed them, and everybody said what happened to the Polish Jews cannot happen to the Hungarian Jews. They are different Jews, they are better Jews. So we had this terrible situation of not knowing what is happening just immediately around us, and again, even in the very, very last day of the war with the Germans were retreating from everywhere, and they are still able to mislead over half a million of Jews, and tell them stories which they believed, not to worry, we are only going to labor camps, and then everybody would go there, and then after that we come back home and go safely. Some Jews knew, and here is the tragedy of this. Some Jews knew, and, unfortunately, because they were promised that they, very few, were going to escape. They were promised that they were going to escape, and because of that, that is what is said, they were keeping peace and quiet amongst other Jews. It would have been very easy to do anything, to revolt, to do something, to run away, to escape to make the job of the Germans a lot harder, but it wasn't done. Nothing was done. Sorry I was too long on that.

SB: So that by this time you already had information about Auschwitz or you didn't believe it, the people wouldn't believe it?

EG: No, they didn't believe it, they didn't know it. Nobody knew about Auschwitz, nobody, very few knew about Auschwitz.

SB: In 1944 they still didn't know about Auschwitz?

EG: They didn't know in 1944, in May they didn't know about Auschwitz.

SB: Were you or other Jews sent to a ghetto in 1944?

EG: All my family was in a ghetto.

SB: Where?

EG: In Cluj, they built a big ghetto. It was a brick factory, and they built a huge ghetto and very, very terrible conditions. They crammed in all the Jews there. It was the most inhuman conditions there.

SB: And when did the first deportations start from your town?

EG: In 1944 in May.

SB: But you were not in Budapest at that time?

EG: I was not in Budapest, no, I wasn't in Budapest. I was out in the labor camp.

SB: Did you hear, or have any contact with, Reszö Kasztner, Joel Brand?

EG: Reszö Kasztner, Joel Brand. No. No.

SB: Otto Komoly or Raoul Wallenberg?

EG: No, Reszö Kasztner is a person from our town. I knew him well. When he was a child, I knew him quite well. But he went over to Budapest, and he only gave some names from our town who should be on the list to be escaped to this very special train. This is his gift, which he got from Eichmann. Eichmann gave him a present. He says, okay, I'll give you the few hundred Jews.

SB: Did any Jews that you knew try to escape, and did your family try to escape?

EG: Well, not from the ghetto, unfortunately, and I have a very sad story. See, my sister was married to a singer who became an opera singer, and because he was a religious man, he was chosen to be the chief cantor in a big town in Czechoslovakia, Bratislava, and then the Germans entered there a bit earlier than Hungary, but my sister and my brother-in-law and their two children, they were hiding in a monastery. They were hiding all the time, and the Germans did not touch them. This was quite late, it was August 1944. Then for some reason the Germans could not enter into the monastery to drag them out, but then by some reason, they sent people telling everybody can go home because it was safe. The Germans would do nothing. As soon as they came home, after a few hours they caught them and surrounded them, put them into a wagon and off to Auschwitz. It was the very last transport to Auschwitz. It was not bombed or something. It was the very last transport, where they were exterminated, my sister and her children, in Auschwitz. My brother-in-law was a very excellent opera singer, and the Germans had taken him to sing them operas.

Tape one, side two:

EG: They shot him while he was singing, and it was very near to the end of the war actually, a few days before the war, and they said, "You will not be singing anymore; that's the end of you." That's the way I was told. That was the end of him, so I don't know what else was said to him.

SB: What I wanted to ask you, after that, did you hear or have any contact with Reszö Kasztner, Joel Brand, Otto Komoly or Raoul Wallenberg?

EG: No, as I said, Kasztner was from our town, and he lived in Budapest, and all of them you mentioned in this were in Budapest, and we had no contact with these people.

SB: What do you think helped you to survive?

EG: What did I say? Remember? Well, it's difficult to answer exactly what helped someone to survive. I believe the major contribution to my survival was my optimism, and also that I dared to do things, in a way to escape. Of course, not to forget the element of luck. Any little mishap or bad luck would have finished me at any time, so it's a combination of many, many elements.

SB: When and where were you liberated, and did you find any members of your family after liberation?

EG: I was liberated escaping from the Germans into the Russian zone in the very end of '44 in a town in Hungary called Miskolc or near this particular town. And I moved back; I came by train; it was a long journey back to my hometown. At that time it was already Romania back, and I found my brother there, who just escaped a very short time before I did. And nobody else.

SB: And what did you do after your liberation, you remained in Hungary for a while?

EG: After my liberation I was not in Hungary, because this particular town was re-occupied by the Romanians again. So the Hungarians were Hitler's allies. The Romanians were actually the Russians' allies, and so the Romanians came back and occupied the town there, and I stayed there for about over a year, at this place.

SB: Did you have any contact with the Russian army?

EG: Not official ones. Yes, we always met Russian army, and the Russian army was always there, and, of course, they plundered the population, and robbed them whenever they could, which every way they could. And otherwise I had no other contact with the Russian Army.

SB: And you decided then not to stay in Romania or Hungary?

EG: No, not to stay. I wasn't interested to stay. My aspirations were always coming to Palestine, where my two brothers lived, and also because I was a Zionist. I was very active in the Zionist movement. I was active in the illegal *beriha*, [Heb. flight, escape] which means to bring to escape the Jews from Romania into the West and from there to

Palestine, and I never had the idea, it never occurred to me that it should be different. My line was always straight towards Palestine. So, I didn't want to stay.

SB: You mentioned that some of the people in the town began to call you a nationalist and a fascist.

EG: Yes, because I was organizing all sorts of demonstrations and became known as active in the Zionist movement. My other colleagues and friends, who became big Communists, were also Zionists, but now with the Communist leader, they told me, "Why don't you come and work with us and take a position, and you'll have a good time here," so I said, "No." "I know why you don't because you are a fascist. I will give you a lesson for that because you are a fascist. I have seen you demonstrate in the street with the Zionist movement." That was the time when I had to leave Romania as soon as I can.

SB: And you came here then illegally?

EG: I came here illegally, yes.

SB: And we asked you the question whether you told your children about your experiences, and you said that the attitude in Israel at that time was very negative toward survivors. Could you tell us about that?

EG: The attitude when we arrived in the kibbutz, they told us that in their view only the bad people survived, number 1. And what kind of people are those who were just going like sheep to be slaughtered? It didn't help anything. So in effect they have put a stigma for all those survivors, who had their own problems, because coming for a survivor, coming in a to Israel was another traumatic experience, from all points of view. First of all he had nothing: He came to a bare country. He came to a very hard country. The people were hard, so the only thing that a person like me who was 22, 23, could do is just to neglect all my past, my Holocaust stigma, and try to be, to look like any other people here without even mentioning this. And this went on for many years actually, and so my third daughter, I never talked to her about it. She only knew that from other people, and she has even a lot of psychological problems from that, because she was always [unclear] frightened, and she would ask what happened to my grandparents and so on, but only later, later did I start on to tell bit by bit to my children what really happened. I wasn't very keen on telling stories about it. Actually I was very much reserved.

SB: But now they are fully aware of your background?

EG: Yes. They are very much interested actually. My daughter, who was studying, here, she was also listening to a great deal of lectures about the Holocaust. My son wouldn't buy a German car for nothing. He wouldn't have anything to do with Germans, because they know what happened. Yes, I think they are more or less aware. Actually one of the nicest is my daughter-in-law, she wants to collect, like you, all the details. She wants to help me write about it.

SB: Very good.