

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

PEARL HERLING

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher  
Date: March 16, 1981

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PH - Pearl Herling [interviewee]

JF - Josey Fisher [interviewer]

Date: March 16, 1981

*Tape one, side one:*

JF: This is an interview with Ms. Pearl Herling, done on March 16, 1981 by Josey Fisher. Could you tell us when you were born and where and a little bit about your family background?

PH: Okay. I was born in Budapest in 1924, August 24. My father was in the wholesale textile business and we were what you would call upper middle class. I went to elementary school and, since I was a good student, I went to a special school which they call *gymnasium*. But in the fourth year the Nazis, Hungarian Nazis, discontinued all the Jewish schools. So I was raised and educated by private tutors, except I was for a half year in Switzerland in a finishing school.

JF: What year was this that the Hungarian Nazis discontinued the school?

PH: The schooling was stopped, the special Jewish schools, in the 1930's. They were gradually discontinued. So you understand what it was to be a Jew in Hungary. You would say it was just about the situation like you have with the black people now. They were not discriminated openly but there were parts of the city where Jews could not get an apartment. Banking was closed for Jews.

JF: You mean the field of banking?

PH: The field of banking was closed for Jews. The merchants, the doctors, and the lawyers were mostly Jewish. But to go to the university was a very difficult thing because it was what we call *numerus clausus*, which means that there are six percent Jews in Hungary and only six percent of the Jews could go to the universities, which meant that women absolutely had to give up their places. I don't know of any woman who could get into the university because of the six percent, that was the law, that had to be given to the talented young men.

JF: When did this social discrimination start? In the early '30's or earlier than that?

PH: Early '30's, but it came to the surface when it was not disguised any more in 1938. This is when the hard lines started. The newspapers would say six percent Jews to the university. Before that, it was more or less practiced but not talked about. But in 1938 the newspaper came out with a big, black headline. It was in front of my eyes because we just came out from the theater and they were selling the next morning's papers. In the biggest possible print, it was "Six percent for Jews."

JF: Can you tell me, before that time, whether your family or you personally felt antisemitism and in what way?

PH: Always, always.

JF: In what way?

PH: There was absolutely no intermingling with gentile people. There were always Jewish jokes. Jews were always pictured as money grabbers. There were not actual ghettos but there were parts of Budapest, especially Buda, which was more aristocratic, where you could not get an apartment. There were resorts that you could not get a hotel room. And there was always one Jew in a high position for show. Every time they talked about antisemitism, they would say, "Oh, it isn't, because Mr. so-and-so is in the cabinet." In a minor job, not a major job. We had a summer place in the country where there were mostly Germans. The farmers were Germans. And their children were told that they cannot make antisemitic remarks, only in the winter. In the summer when the Jews were around, they cannot make antisemitic remarks. We always knew who we were--second class citizens.

JF: Was there any kind of positive interchange with the Christian population?

PH: I had only Jewish friends. But it might be we were just as anti-gentile as they were antisemitic. My father who was in the First World War was very proud that he was able to send high-ranking soldiers who were antisemitic to the fronts where it was very unlikely that they came back, because he was in transportation. And after the First World War, when we had a short Communist era under Bela Kun, who was Jewish, Hungary has the distinction that they were the first one who were beating up Jewish students on the front of the university. That was the distinction of the Hungarians who were way ahead of the Germans or the Italians.

JF: What was your Jewish experience like, your religious experience?

PH: I come from an Orthodox Jewish family. My grandfather on my mother's side was from Poland. They came to Hungary to escape the pogroms and they were very Orthodox. My grandfather on my mother's side was a very learned man. He did not do anything in his life, only study the *Torah*. And my grandmother and the children worked. My grandparents, from my father's side were Hungarian, so way back that we really don't know. There is a story that the Hungarian Jews came before the Magyars came. So they were strictly Hungarian and there was a great deal of animosity between my Polish and Hungarian grandparents because my Hungarian grandfather was extremely wealthy and looked down at my Polish grandfather who was very poor. My Polish grandfather was very learned and looked down at my Hungarian grandfather who didn't study the *Torah*. So I was exposed to both families and we were a very close-knit family. I was very close to my Polish grandparents, much more than to my Hungarian. My Hungarian grandfather was a high officeholder, something like you would call an alderman, but only because he owned a part of the city, streets and streets and houses. And he owned that part of the city where he was an alderman. My father grew up very rich, really. It was a great tragedy that he married that Polish girl. So I was exposed to a very religious--but underneath it all, we were always a little bit ashamed of being Jews. In fact, Hungarian Jews changed their religion very easily. They turned. In fact, when the Nuremberg law came to Hungary

where you had to have four sets of Aryan grandparents, there was a great wave of suicide because antisemites found out that they don't qualify under the Nuremberg law. They did have Jewish grandparents. And there was no way for them--they were half-Jewish. They would have to wear actually a white armband, and they just couldn't face it, so they killed themselves. But we were very conscientious Jews and proud Jews. I was a Zionist ever since I was a small child. In fact, I had to be a Zionist in secret because my father thought that Zionists were communists. I could not go to Zionist meetings openly, but I did go anyway.

JF: This is as a young child, you say?

PH: Yes. So my background is like upper middle class. I went to good schools. We were exposed to all sports. In fact, I was very athletic. But I was an excellent swimmer and I trained with the group which actually went to the Olympics. But from the beginning on, I was told I was not going to make the Olympic team. I trained with them, but as a Jew I could not go on the Olympic team. And then I started learning to fence. I was good at that. Now that definitely was not for Jews. And once I said I would like to learn to ride a horse and my family practically disinherited me because it was just not to be done by Jewish children. There were just certain limits what a Jew could do. But education was pressed very hard. When I couldn't go to the public school any more, my parents went to every kinds of pain to have private tutors. They were pressing that just because I am not going to graduate from the gymnasium, I had to read books and I will have the same kind of education only I won't have--in fact, I'm carrying a chip in my shoulder ever since. But I never really graduated from high school. So I am going to every kind of school now. I am studying everything I can. And that's why, I imagine, my children went to college. Against all odds, they graduated from college with every kind of honor. I'm a good Jewish mother--I have to put that in.

JF: Can you go back to 1933 and recall if you had, or your family had, a reaction to Hitler being made chancellor of Germany, and what changes this might have brought to you in Hungary?

PH: Well, we didn't feel the changes until, really, 1938. 1933 it was just the news. In fact, we had relatives in Germany and they didn't take it seriously. They thought it is a fad from the beer halls and it's going to go away. We never knew that Hindenberg was going to cave in. And we absolutely could not believe that the German people are going to fall for that. But I must tell you I was really too young to know. It was much more important what kind of dress I'm going to wear for this or that ball. We didn't take it seriously. In '38 when the *numerus clausus* came, when it was impossible to go to a university, when we really realized that Hungary is going to be an antisemitic state. And that was when Jewish people who were merchants had to take in gentile people and put the businesses on their names. Eventually, naturally, they were robbed of everything. But at that time it was just a front, that the Jews gave over their businesses and their property to gentiles as co-owners.

JF: This was a front, you say, at this time?

PH: It was a front at that time.

JF: And what experience did your father have where this was concerned?

PH: Well, my father actually just disappeared. I don't know. He went out one day to the street and he never came back.

JF: When was this?

PH: That was in 1941, 42.

JF: He went down to the street and he never came back.

PH: Never came back. He might have been taken to some of the concentration camps. Or he might have been shot in the Danube, which was a very popular execution. We really don't know.

JF: You never heard anything at any later point about this?

PH: No, no. That was the time when my brother, who was about 14, my younger brother, never came back from the school. Not until after the war when he showed up did we find out that he was taken to work in Yugoslavia to a salt mine. He was just 14 years old. He's still an emotional cripple who never could forget it or forgive it.

JF: This was the same time, around 1941?

PH: Between 1940-44, things started to disintegrate. Very often I was asked why didn't we do anything against the Nazi era. And it came lawfully--one day that posters and in the newspaper that young men born between, let's say, 1918 or 1916 and 1924 to go for--it is like military service, but they are not going to carry any guns. Anybody who is Jewish wears a yellow band. Anybody whose parents or grandparents were converted will wear a white band and they're going to be work forces. They are going to be in the armed forces without a gun and they are going to work in fields, in hospitals, or in workshops. So young people, young men, certain aged young men, had a military service. There was nothing to be done about it. Then a month or two later another age group went. So by the time we realized what's happening, there were nothing but old people and women and children. All the young men went, and since we were the allies of the Germans, they had to be in military service. In fact, some of them were in the Ukraine in workshops and they did come back. But after they came back, they were taken to concentration camps, never to hear from them. But in the beginning it was just a war effort. That the Jews had to pull the same kind of military service, only without their guns, but they had to work. We didn't realize until 1944 when the Hungarian Nazis took over. There was nobody to defend us. Everybody was in the labor camp or in the concentration camp.

JF: How did you see the antisemitism in Hungary during this time? Did you see it as part of the Hungarian antisemitism or did you see it as a part of the greater Nazi plan?

PH: The Hungarian Nazis grossly outdid the Germans. They accomplished in a very short time because we didn't have Nazis. The Hungarian Nazis took over in 1944, June 6, 1944. By the time the Russians occupied which was in January-February, they

demolished 85 percent of the Jewish population. They did a wonderful job and they enjoyed every minute of it. They were cruel, they were greedy. They killed, raped, robbed, and enjoyed it. The only place where Jews stayed alive was Budapest, Hungary, and just because of the effort of Waldheim<sup>1</sup> with the Swedish consulate and the Swiss consulate who saved us. But there was a time--well, first of all, they started ghettos. They established houses with the yellow stars and ....

JF: This was in Budapest?

PH: In Budapest. That was in 1944. That's how they started. By then we had no men around. By then the men were already in workshops or concentration camps.

JF: Can you tell me about your experience and the other members of your family who were left during the early '40's after your father disappeared and your brother was taken?

PH: Both of our houses where my sister lived and my house where I lived--by that time I was married and my husband was already taken. That was 1944.

JF: You got married in what year, then?

PH: In 1940.

JF: And you were not living...?

PH: I did not live with my parents. We had a fur shop connected with our apartment. It was on the first floor. We occupied the first floor of a house. Part was a fur shop and part was our living quarters. And I lived there. And my husband was taken. In fact, he was the very first one in our family.

JF: He was taken where?

PH: He was taken. He went first to the Ukraine in a fur shop.

JF: In what year was that?

PH: That was in 1942.

JF: Did you have any kind of contact with him during that time?

PH: When he was in the Ukraine, yes. He would send soldiers to visit. I would give them some furs and for that I would take food and warm clothes. In fact, my husband was very religious Jew. He never ate non-kosher food. I was able to send him food. Then he came home for exactly one week. Then they took him down to Yugoslavia. There was a salt mine,<sup>1</sup> Bor. My brother who was also there met him.

JF: How did you find that out?

PH: My brother came home. My brother is here in America.

JF: He told you this after the war?

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<sup>1</sup>Raoul Wallenberg arrived in Budapest, Hungary on July 9, 1944 with the purpose of saving Jews as Secretary to the Swedish Legation. His primary task was to establish a special department in the embassy devoted to the rescue of Hungarian Jews. (*The Holocaust* by Nora Levin. NY: Schocken Books, 1973.)

<sup>2</sup>Bor actually had copper mines and was the site of one of the infamous death marches towards the end of the war. *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. I & III.

PH: He met him there. If you want to hear a really miracle story, I don't know how far you want to go in. Jews believe in fate. My husband was put in a group which supposedly was to come home to Budapest. That was when Horthy, the head of the Hungarian regent, the head of the Hungarian government, declared that he's out of the war. He's breaking with the Germans. And for about a week we were out of the war. The yellow stars came down. Everything was to be--we will have peace. So they took that group of men in Bor, Yugoslavia, and they were about to come home. My husband was in the group that's supposed to come home but my brother was not. They said he would be in a week or ten days--the second group will return. So my husband went up to one of his comrades and said, "Look, here is my brother-in-law. He's only a kid. He's only 16. Why don't you change dog-tags with him and the minute I go home, I'll give a substantial amount of money to your family. I know that they are in need," which that man did. About half an hour before they started marching, the man goes up to my husband and says, "Listen, I might need that money but I want to go home. I'm not giving my place to your brother-in-law." So they changed dog-tags. Nobody came home from that group, not a soul, including my husband. And my brother escaped. My brother came home.

JF: What happened to that group? Do you know?

PH: We know that one night they were in a brick burning factory by 20's. Twenty people in each brick factory where they made bricks.

JF: Yes. In where?

PH: On their way home from Yugoslavia to Hungary. They were marching home. And I know he was there because we got a letter. I got a letter where they said they are starving, if I could send somebody down. I did that. They could not be found. So as we later find out, they were taken out by 20's and they were machine gunned. That was the night in June, 1944, when the Nazis took over, the Hungarian Nazis.<sup>3</sup> Now I am hoping that he was in that group because, as I understand, those who stayed alive, they went to Bergen Belsen so they suffered some more. But nobody came home. We know about this night. Just after the war we sent out investigators and I heard that from the farmers around.

JF: And where was this place that it happened, do you know?

PH: We don't know exactly. In one of the little villages between Yugoslavia and Hungary. It was on the way home.

JF: Did you know that your husband might be home?

PH: On the way home. I knew that he was in that group because my brother was almost in that group. My brother saw him leaving.

JF: You found this out after the war?

PH: After the war.

JF: Your husband was in that group.

PH: But it was written up in the newspapers. The whole incident was written up in the newspapers because it was reported by the farmers, whoever saw it and heard it. But

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<sup>3</sup>The "Hungarian Naiz" were the Arrow Cross movement that came to power in October 1944.



I actually don't know where my husband when and how. I'm just hoping that he was shot, that he didn't have to walk because that's quite a walk from there to Bergen Belsen.

JF: You said that you had a fur shop during those years. You were permitted to run it until 1944?

PH: No. In 1942 they stamped it. They put stamps on it and we could not use it. It was then full and then one day it was carted away. The merchandise was carted away.

JF: And then how were you able to support yourself at that point?

PH: How do you support yourself? Maybe I stole a little fur out of that store and sold it. Well, anyway there was nothing to buy because when these houses with the yellow stars were established, we only could leave between two and four o'clock to do our shopping. And the merchants, the gentile merchants, made very sure that that was the time when they had their lunch hour, and all the stores were closed between two and four.

JF: This was in 1942?

PH: This was in 1944, 1942-1944.

JF: And you had to move into one of these houses?

PH: Yes. It happened that my house was a--so I took in my friends.

JF: And where was your mother at this point?

PH: My mother's house--my sister's house also was a yellow star house. So the rest of my family, we moved in there. You've got to hang on to your apartment because you knew it will be over and once it will be over--for some strange reason it never, ever occurred to me that I'm not going to survive. I just, not in my wildest dreams did I think that anybody would be able to kill me. I was a very cocky young 19-year old. You can do everything when you are that young. So I hung on to my apartment and my sister hung on to her apartment. Then eventually we went back to it after the war.

JF: Do you have any idea why you felt that way? Was any kind of religious thought with you? Was any kind of...

PH: No, no. We knew that the people were being put in cattle cars and taken to Germany. And there was one fixed idea--don't get into the cattle cars. Do everything possible--don't get into the cattle car. Until up till then, I could do anything I wanted. I accomplished everything what I wanted. Why shouldn't I accomplish that? The worst thing--I knew if even they shot me, it will be in Budapest, it wouldn't be in the cattle car. I was once on my way to the cattle car.

JF: Where was that and how did that happen?

PH: Well, my number came up. People born between 1918 and 1926 or so had to go to a work camp. So I packed my things and we were marched. But we knew the work camps were in Germany. So I just stepped out. I dropped my packages. I stepped out and went into an entrance of a house. And I said, if they see me, they shot me. If they don't see me, the rest will march on and I will stay behind. So nobody saw me. I stood there in the stairway of a strange house and that's what I was. With nothing but what I had it on my back.

JF: When was this?

PH: This was in 1943.

JF: You said you dropped packages.

PH: We had our rucksack but you couldn't walk in Budapest with a rucksack, only if you went to the concentration camp. And I very boldly went back to my apartment and I was just left alone.

JF: They never checked to see if you were there?

PH: There were thousands. Budapest was a big city. And then we made our own gentile papers. We typed it up in our typewriter and we became gentiles. But at that time it was already confusion. The Russians were pushing. The Germans were retreating. There were a lot of Hungarian refugees. As the Russians were coming, the Hungarians were escaping. The Hungarian Nazis were escaping. Budapest was a very good place to be.

JF: When was it that you made these papers? And how did you find out what they looked like?

PH: You could get for money everything. You just needed a form for a birth certificate. As long as we had--I had furs. We had some gold. So you got a birth certificate and you made it out. Hungarians can't read. A lot of the Nazis were really very low class people who could hardly--and it's your attitude. It's your attitude. I walked up to 14-year old Nazi boys who were carrying a gun bigger than they and I took the whole apartment building I lived in to a *Schutzpässe* building and hardly anyone of us had a *Schutzpässe*. But I just said, "You take my Jews. I am Swiss," I said. "I have my *Schutzpässe*. You take my Jews in this building and you see to it that they have a roof over their head." And they did. They did. It was your attitude.

JF: This was the 14-year old Nazi?

PH: And I was 19. As I said, we went in that Swiss house, all of us, everybody from my building, just because the power was in people's hands who could only do one thing--kill. They couldn't read. They couldn't write. They couldn't think. So there was absolutely no reason for me, who come in from a educated Jewish family, that I should let them kill me. Now would you like to know regarding the Swiss house or did I go too quick?

JF: No. Go ahead.

PH: Well, my whole house, including my friends, we were in that Swiss house. We were about 30 to 40 people to a small apartment but we thought we were safe. And one night, I just had a feeling that we are not as safe as we thought...

*Tape one, side two:*

JF: This is tape 1, side 2 of an interview with Ms. Pearl Herling. We were talking about the Swiss houses.

PH: For you to understand, Buda is the old part of the city and Pest is very modern. Now in about the late '20's, early '30's a brand new part of the city sprung up, very much like your Society Hill here. They were six or eight story buildings which was about the highest which was allowed to build. It's called New [unclear], that was the name of it. And they were mostly Jewish people. It was a very elegant ghetto. Jewish people who were merchants and doctors and lawyers, lots of doctors' offices on the main floor. Now these people were already in concentration camps so these apartments were empty. These were the houses that the Swiss and Swedes took over and they were given to the people who had the *Schutzpässe*.

JF: How did you get your *Schutzpässe*?

PH: I had a friend who worked in the Swiss Embassy. The Swiss started it after the Swedes--Wallenberg started it--the *Schutzpässe* business. After that the Swiss Embassy copied it. And they had some Jewish people working there. A friend of mine worked there, and she gave it. My whole family had it.

JF: This was a Hungarian friend who worked there?

PH: Yes, who was helping the Swiss. They were all volunteers. They all stayed alive. The Swiss took very good care of them, and they were very well protected.

JF: And at what point did you get your *Schutzpässe*?

PH: Oh, right away, right away when it started.

JF: I mean in what year?

PH: It was in '44 when the Nazis already occupied it. But after a while the Nazis just couldn't leave us alone. They came in and with no reason at all they would say, "This is false. This is a good *Schutzpässe*. This is false." One night I'm saying to my friends that I have a feeling that they're going to come in this building. So my girlfriend said, "You're crazy. You have a roof over your head. You can get food with your *Schutzpässe*. You go out and buy food." I said, "I just have a very bad feeling that this house is not safe." She said, "Where are you going to go?" I never wore the yellow star. I refused. That was the law. You had to have a yellow star. I just refused. I felt that it was below my dignity.

JF: Were you ever stopped?

PH: Ummm.

JF: Or questioned?

PH: If you want to hear a fantastic story, I'll go back to that.

JF: Okay.

PH: I think--I'm not religious at all but I think there is fate which says this one is going to live. I'll go back to that because it's a very fascinating--just like my brother escaped by the skin of his teeth. I escaped by the skin of my teeth. At 4 o'clock I go down

and we had again a little Nazi boy guarding the house. I had a pack of cigarettes and I said, "You take me to Kelenföld," which was an outskirt of Budapest and there was a workshop, a work camp which I knew about because my sister worked there.

JF: The name of this again was...

PH: Kelenföld.

JF: Do you know how that was spelled?

PH: K-E-L-E-N-F-Ö with two little dots L-D, Kelenföld. This was a suburb but it was mostly factories. So I knew my sister is hiding out there. It was said as long as you worked, they let you stay alive. So he took me there.

JF: Who said this to you?

PH: That was the theory of those workshops. As long as you were able to work, they let you live. But that was not true either because we were taken from there too. We escaped from there too. So that night they took the whole house. Luckily they couldn't take them any more to Germany because Budapest was surrounded at that time. Those people were taken to a very concentrated ghetto. Some of them were shot in the Danube.

JF: Now you went alone?

PH: Alone. But this Nazi boy took me for a pack of cigarettes to that work room.

JF: What was your experience when you were there?

PH: In the work room? We were there a very short time because the Nazis came and took everybody but my sister and my sister's two small children. We locked ourselves in the toilet. A policeman came and broke open the toilet and wanted to take us. My sister took out golden cufflinks what she had from her husband who was also in the concentration camp. She handed it to him and she said, "Leave us here. Look at those--Sarah Bernhardt would be envious today." She carried on. "Look at those two innocent children." One was three, the other four or five. "Why do you take us and shoot us in the Danube? You have a mother. Your mother wouldn't want you to be killed." The policeman left us. He said, "I am going to come later at night and I'll take you to a safe place." But we didn't trust him. Late that night we were walking on the street with no place to go.

JF: How long then were you in this work camp before this happened?

PH: Only maybe three, four weeks.

JF: This was in what month then of 1944?

PH: Oh, that was very close. It must have been November, December. It was very close already to the end. The bombs were falling. It was total blackout. The city was bombed. And I know that we wondered with those two children from the suburbs--we must have walked three hours. Bitter cold. Those two children didn't have anything to eat. We were sitting in the bathroom, in the toilet. Those children had nothing to eat. They could hardly walk. They never cried. They never complained. And bless their hearts, they are two married people in Israel with children of their own, and they're just the most wonderful, well-adjusted kids.

JF: Can you tell me what the work camp itself was like?

PH: Well, we were just mending. It was for the Germans actually. I was a furrier so I could work on furs. We were mending mittens and torn socks--just on a machine we were sewing up rips. Generally, repairing all the worn things to be worn again.

JF: Whose clothes were these that you were repairing?

PH: I think it was German soldiers' because the jackets had the insignia.

JF: And who was in charge of you at this camp?

PH: Hungarians, Nazis.

JF: And what kind of treatment did you receive?

PH: We had food. We had food and they let the mothers keep their children. So anybody who could work--at that time there were very few people who were able to work because the gentiles were in the camps. They were soldiers. The Jews were taken, so there were very few able-bodied people.

JF: Were these both men and women in these camps?

PH: No, only women.

JF: About how many?

PH: There were no men. There must have been about 100 and maybe 10-15 children. But lots of them at this time were shot in the Danube. We never met anybody who was there. So after that next morning--we slept in a stairway that night. After that we went to an office where they were handling refugees from the part of Hungary which was by then occupied by the Russians. We were very lucky because that's the part where we had our summer home, so we were very familiar with it. So we got papers that we are refugees.

JF: How did you get those papers?

PH: There was an office set up for refugees. And they also were put in the very houses which was originally Jewish and then it was Swiss and Swedish, and that's where they were--where these people were put. I will tell you then what happened, but you probably will never believe it.

JF: Please tell me.

PH: We were picking an apartment. You had to go what apartment you want. We were picking an apartment. It was my sister at that time and also my mother and the two children because we decided that if we lived we wanted to live together, if we died we wanted to die together. This is what was left from our family.

JF: Where had your mother been during this time?

PH: My mother was a--very strange [unclear] in that German occupation. The Germans were protecting part of my family because my uncle, who's also a furrier, but a real furrier, was working on fur coats. Don't forget, the Germans are fighting the Russians. They needed fur hats, fur mittens. My uncle was working in a German work camp in Budapest. And the whole family including my very Orthodox Jewish grandfather, grandmother, my mother, and my uncle's wife--they were under German--and when the Hungarian Nazis came and said, "Give me your Jews," the head of the German camp said,

"If I want to kill my Jews, I'm going to kill them myself. I don't need your help." And he said, "Stick with me. You're going to live." And everyone stayed alive. In fact, after the war when he was arrested, in droves they went and they testified that he was very human.

JF: The German?

PH: The German, very human. He saw to it that my grandfather and my grandmother had kosher--not kosher but enough milk and cheese that they never had to eat non-kosher meat. But at that time my mother said she wants to be with us. So we all went and chose this apartment. And we went and waited and a couple went in ahead of us. When we went back and we showed the paper which apartment we wanted, the clerk said, "I'm sorry, I can't give it to you. This couple took it, just the very same apartment. But I have one a block away, this and that. Would you like this?" And we took it. That apartment building which we wanted was totally demolished, totally by an air raid. Not a person stayed alive. We would have not been around. Now, in this building where we lived, up on the sixth floor, it was Christmas Day and everybody had to go down to the shelter because there were no more windows, were broken. It was ice cold. We had really air raids. If you want to read about that, I had an article in the *Inquirer*; it was printed, how we escaped. So my mother said, "We must go down to the shelter." The shelter was nothing, just an old coal--where they kept coal. So, my sister goes down. Remember, there's a little Jewish boy who is circumcised. There is no bathroom. We have to have a place somewhere in the corner where we can put that kid on the potty and nobody can see that this is a Jewish child, because in Hungary only a Jewish child is circumcised.

JF: You were at this point using papers that said what?

PH: We are refugees from Neimorosh [phonetic] from the place where we spent our summers, and we are all non-Jews. We are all refugees. In fact, we might be Nazis because we are running away from the Russians, so if we run away from the Russians we probably have something to hide. And we are surrounded with people who are Nazis. At that time we already had a lot of men who were escaping from the army, lots of deserters. There were men around who were deserters, every kind of false papers. So my sister goes down and looks for a place which is not in the center of the room, somewhere in the corner. She sees a little corner where there is an emergency exit and she wants to occupy that. The superintendent of the house comes in and says, "You cannot have this because this is for me and my family because this is the closest to the exit." So my sister took what she could. Naturally the space was very limited. we had a mattress. Four of us slept on this mattress, my sister with the two children and me. And my mother who's a very heavy-set woman had a mattress of her own. And that was it. That was our home. One night, as we later found out, we were next to a school which had a big red cross painted on the top that it was a Red Cross building. But it was none of that sort. It was a place where they stored TNT, explosives. This school was--got a full blast on top of it. And we were next door to it. The six-floor building went up like a card and collapsed on top of the shelter where we were. In that shelter must have been 150 people. Sixteen people stayed alive--us, five of

us. That part where we wanted to be--it was bulldozed. They were never even able ever to get the bodies out. Because a fire started, and the only way they had to flood then the whole neighborhood. That blast was so strong that a friend of mine, who was a doctor with a wife, he was converted and he was working in an emergency hospital about six or seven blocks away. By this--I was looking for him after the war. He was killed by this blast because he was thrown against the wall and he crushed his skull. That's how powerful that blast was. Everything was destroyed around it. Sixteen people stayed alive.

JF: How did that happen? Were you in a certain section of the...

PH: We were in a certain section. Another who stayed alive was another escaped Jew also with false papers, and I married him later. That's where I met him.

JF: This is where you met him?

PH: That's where I met him. And his wife was killed, presumably, in Bergen-Belsen where, presumably, my husband was also killed. I don't know whether I expect that anybody would believe me, but that's all the truth. I have my whole family to vouch for me. You'd have to go to Israel to talk to them.

JF: And did you stay together at that point?

PH: We stayed together. We went over to another house.

JF: And your future husband went with you?

PH: My future husband went in another house, no, we met afterwards. And these houses we were only a few days and somebody came up and said, "You'd better go from here because we know you're Jewish. Everybody knows you're Jewish. You are going to be taken the next day." And by that time there was no more ghetto. It was just shooting into the Danube. There was no way to go anywhere because on one side were the Russians, the other side were Germans. They were house-to-house fighting, door-to-door fighting. There was absolutely nowhere to go. So I sat with my children and we were talking. You read the article--it's all in there. We were just kind of saying good-bye and talking to my mother and we talked about old times. My mother said how much joy she had from us, how good children we were, and we said how good parents they were. We kissed and we just--this is it.

JF: You had children of your own at this point?

PH: No, no.

JF: These were your sister's children?

PH: My sister's children. And then in the middle of all this sappy "B" movie experience, we hear that the doors are being pushed open and the Russians came. That was the night the Russians came.

JF: When was this?

PH: January, the end of January.

JF: And what happened when the Russians liberated you?

PH: The Russians were just a tiny bit better. They raped, they stole. We were very, very lucky because we heard what's happening and part of my family--my sister's in-

laws were Czechoslovakian, they spoke Czech which is very close to Russian. And she taught us how to say that we have venereal disease. So when the Russian soldiers wanted to try something, which they did, we just said that we have syphilis. So we really never had any bad experiences.

JF: And they immediately left you alone?

PH: Yes. My sister's mother-in-law is from Pressburg, Czechoslovakia.

JF: From Pressburg?

PH: Yes. So she taught us how to say that.

JF: Where did you go then?

PH: We went back to my sister's apartment house which was in ghetto.

JF: This was in Budapest?

PH: In Budapest. We went back there. By that time I understand there were 38 people to a room in that ghetto. I only knew that never in my life saw that many bedbugs in my life. In fact, I slept in the same bed with my sister. There was no electricity but we had some candles. So when I slept, my sister picked the bedbugs and put them into the candle. And a half an hour later she went to sleep and I picked the bedbugs. The most horrible thing what happened is that my little niece, who's now a happy mother in Israel, she had gorgeous, gorgeous long hair and it was full of lice. We tried to save it. We just cut off little pieces and put some petroleum on it to kill the lice, but it was a losing battle. We had to shave her head to get rid of it. The filth was unbelievable. The hunger was not to believe--how hungry we were. And let me tell you something, I don't care how intelligent you are, I don't care how educated you are, I don't care how humanitarian you are, if you are hungry, you are nothing but a wild animal. We got, by some miracle, two slices--a hunk of bread which would have been like two or three big slices. So we decided right then this is for the children. I went to sleep and I just could not think of anything else but that bread in the cupboard. It was probably half sawdust because it was very dark and very heavy. I said, "I don't care about what happens to the children. I have to have a piece of bread. I didn't have bread for a month." So I go out in the kitchen. There is my sister, the mother of the children, standing over the bread with a knife in her hand. She said, "If it's the last thing I do, I have to have a taste of the bread." I said, "Muncie, bless your heart. You are just absorbing me because that's why I came." So we cut a hair of the bread and we ate it. That's what food will do for you. We went into totally demolished houses. We climbed the steps which were falling apart underneath us to search. And it was a great day--we found a jar of pickles, rotten pickles. And we ate them. We got diarrhea but it was all right because for a while our stomach was full. It's unbelievable. You have no idea how good horse meat tastes. There were dead horses on the street and we cut big chunks of horse meat. Except that it's a little bit sweet, it's very good. My mother only would eat it because we said it's a cow or a beef or she wouldn't eat it. And that's the first time I ate non-kosher meat. But we ate it and we survived.

JF: How long did that period of time go on?



PH: Well, just about a week after, I went down to the provinces which were much better off. It was a funny adventure. The trains were absolutely loaded with people. Everybody wanted to go down to the provinces.

JF: When you say the provinces, what do you mean?

PH: Debrecen and Szeged, you know the farms. Budapest didn't grow anything. It was only houses. But Budapest is an agricultural city, so there is food being grown except the Russians took most of it. But the Hungarian peasants would hide food and we still had some jewelry left or something left to exchange. So I was going down to Debrecen on the front of the engine. I sat on the front of the engine.

JF: On a train?

PH: On the train. The little engine in the very front, I was like a mermaid on a boat. And it was terrible because it would stop and we wouldn't know when it would start and they pushed us in the side. And we didn't know when it would start, and it was cold. This was February, March, and it's very, very cold in Hungary. Finally, I arrived in Debrecen and I ate and ate and ate and I was so sick, terribly, terribly sick from all that food. But I took a lot of food with me and I brought it back to Budapest.

JF: How did you get food when you were there.

PH: You exchange whatever you could. I had--we had some friends, non-Jewish friends--people who hid our things. You would give, let's say, two bracelets. And I said, "If I survive, you keep one bracelet and you give me back one." Or from my fur shop, I took fur coats and I said, "If I come back, you keep one of them and you give me back one."

JF: Who were these non-Jewish friends?

PH: The workers who worked in my store, workers who worked in my family. They were no friends. They were hoping that I'll never come back and they'll never have to give back. The only one who gave back everything and didn't keep anything was one of the furriers I worked with, a non-Jew. He kept everything for me and he gave back everything and he would not take anything from me. So we either sold it for dollars--the Russians were buying furs--or we would exchange it. So then a miracle happened. I walked in with my packages and everybody was eating when my brother showed up, the very same day. We didn't know if he was dead or alive. He also came with a big package of food.

JF: And how did he come back? He was liberated?

PH: He was liberated, yes, in Bor, in Yugoslavia.

JF: Did he tell you much about his experience there?

PH: My brother is an emotional cripple, a physical cripple who will never talk about anything. He came to America. He carved a good life out for himself. This is a person who never enjoys life. He just carries these horrible experiences with him. He's an absolute genius. He talks seven languages, self-taught. He got his degree here, self-taught by the mail. He got his college education plus he was working. He's down in California

and he's about, I would say, 450 pounds, a compulsive eater. He never once looked at television in his life. He must have two or three thousand records. He just listens to music. A hard-worker, never married--married a short time and divorced. He's just a very, very warped person.

JF: You said before that there was another story about the star. Could you tell me about it?

PH: Well, I lived in that part of Hungary which, in Budapest, which I mentioned where quite well-to-do Jews lived. That's where my first fur shop was. But my mother lived in an older part of the city, also very Jewish, not quite ghetto but not quite as elegant where I lived. But I went and visited her often, but you could not walk on the street without the yellow star and I would never wear the yellow star. Now, the way I could get in and out of my building--we only could get out between two and four. I could go out of my building because on the first floor there were stores and there was a beauty parlor that I could go through in and out any time of the day. I could walk through and I could go in like I was customer. So I went and visited my mother whenever I could. One day I'm coming home and the street where I lived led to one of the most famous bridges, the Cattle Bridge. Budapest is famous for their bridges. I am on the subway and we hear a tremendous explosion. I hear that the Germans blew up the Cattle Bridge. That's a very famous bridge. I wanted to get off from the subway in front of my house. Everything is surrounded. The Germans are there, the Nazis are there, and they won't let anybody without identification getting off from the subway. The whole area was surrounded because of the tremendous explosion. I have no identification. I have no papers, and I have to get into my apartment. Right next to me is a man whom I never saw, I never knew and I said, "You could save my life if you want to. I am a Jew and I don't have any papers." He said, "Where do you live?" "I live in [unclear] 24, I had my fur shop there." He said, "Fur shop? Are you the wife of Raul Phillips?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I know him very well." He took my hand, he took out his papers, he took my hand and led me into the beauty parlor, and from there I went to my apartment.

*Tape two, side one:*

JF: Tape 2, side 1 of an interview with Ms. Pearl Herling, done on March 16, 1981 by Josey Fisher. Could you finish the story please.

PH: After the war, the man who saved my life, his family--he was under indictment--his family approached me if I would testify that he actually saved my life. But when I found out that he was responsible for many, many lives, that he was a very prominent Nazi, I refused because I don't think that saving one life justifies it. He was indicted and he was in prison for a long time.

JF: Could you tell me how much knowledge you had during the war years of what was going on in the death camps and how you might have gotten that knowledge?

PH: Well, we listened to the "Voice of America" but they didn't tell a lot. We only knew that there were cattle--cattle cars leaving from Budapest. We knew that there were eighty people put into the cattle car, and we knew that if you want to live, you don't get into the cattle car. That was burned in our heart, in our brain. That was a way of life: don't get into the cattle car.

JF: Did you know specifically what was happening?

PH: We knew very little. There were rumors that people are being killed, but we really thought that it's more a work detail. We did not know about Auschwitz until after the war. Cause we also--whatever happened to the outside world, we got it from the "Voice of America," which was forbidden to listen to. So we just could huddle together around the radio and catch whatever we could get. We had very little knowledge, what goes on in the outside world. We were practically sealed off. But we knew that we could have saved. That we knew. That 600--6,000 trucks would save us.

JF: How did you know this?

PH: From the Swiss consulate.

JF: And what did you understand about that?

PH: Well, we hoped that we are going to be saved, the Hungarian Jews. It was that council which was appointed, a council which was working with the Germans and with the Nazis. It was made up of very prominent Jews.

JF: You're talking about the Jewish Council now?

PH: The Jewish Council. One of my nieces married to my nephew went to Switzerland with her two children to the consul, got into Switzerland. She lives now in Canada. Her daughter lives in Israel. And they did go out through Switzerland. Some prominent Jews did get out from the country.

JF: This is the sister that you were with during the...

PH: No, no. This is a nephew. He was killed in the concentration camp. He never came back. But his wife with her two children did get to Switzerland through this rescue mission. We actually, will never forgive her because she never talked about the rest

of the family. We just knew that she was not around any more and we found out after the war that she went to Switzerland with the rescue mission.<sup>4</sup>

JF: The 6,000 tanks that you're talking about, was this ....

PH: It was trucks.

JF: Trucks, I'm sorry. Was this deal completed?

PH: No, no. This was an offer.

JF: This was the offer?

PH: The Germans offered the Hungarian Jews for 6,000 tanks.<sup>5</sup> But Mr. Roosevelt, the god of the American Jews, felt that he has to be re-elected. He couldn't get a question like this through the Congress to save the Jews. He was angling for his third term. So it was never, never--he could have saved a million Jews.

JF: How was the rescue mission organized, then, that saved the family member that you're talking about?

PH: Well, I imagine that there was bribes. That was the liaison between the Germans and the Jewish community. I imagine that they paid heavily for every person. I can't imagine any--certainly not for humanitarian reasons they didn't, because only very rich Jews managed to escape and very few.

JF: Did you know anything about forced marches to Austria?

PH: I saw them. I saw them. When I got some Swiss *Schutzpässe*, I had one which I wanted to give to my nephew who was taken. I went with a boat across the Danube because there were no more bridges. The bridges were blown at that time. With a boat I went over to Buda, because that's the part where the death marches were, looking for him because I had that *Schutzpässe* for him. And I saw people marching. At that time they were already around me if I have any food on me. And I'll never forgive myself. I didn't have a thing. I had a *Schutzpässe*. I never found that nephew of mine; never came back. But I gave it to a total stranger who came back with me on the boat. I don't know what happened to him, but hopefully he was rescued. But those people were walking, and at that time they were already hungry. So they must have been in a detention camp for a while because that was just in Buda. It was not around the outskirts. And I just can't believe it. Again I took a Nazi with me and I said I was from the Swiss consulate and I am looking for a certain person. And he took me and he brought me back. That was in the dead winter. I just hope that the man used the *Schutzpässe* and stayed alive. I don't even know who he was. I just gave it to him and brought him back and he just disappeared. I know that there were two women, two sisters, Umster sisters, two tiny, tiny, little sisters.

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<sup>4</sup>This is apparently a reference to a special transport of 1709 Hungarian Jews who were shipped to Bergen-Belsen and then Bregenz, Switzerland, each of whom paid \$1000. The negotiations were conducted by Rezsó Kaszner, a Hungarian Zionist leader and Eichmann in April-May, 1944. All persons in this transport had certificates for Palestine.

<sup>5</sup>Trucks--this is a reference to the Joel Brand-Eichmann negotiations of "blood for goods"--one million Jews to be saved in exchange for 10,000 trucks--carried on in April-May, 1944, but which collapsed when the British seized Brand and arrested him.

They had a jewelry shop. They were in that death march. They came up to me and they said would I have something to eat. They were very hungry. They never came back, neither did their brother. I used to dance with their brother in happier times at Jewish balls. Nobody came back from that family.

JF: Did you know anything of any resistance groups?

PH: Never.

JF: In Budapest?

PH: Hungary was the only country where they didn't have *Maquis*. We had that distinction. Every non-Jew in Hungary was just very happy to see the Jews leave. They took their apartments. They took their jewelry. They took their furs. They took their land, their stores. They didn't want the Jews to live. Hungarians are sucking antisemitism in their mother's milk. They're born antisemitic, they grow up antisemitic, and they die antisemitic.

JF: Did you have any feelings about the comparison of the Hungarians that you're talking about with the German Nazis that you had any experiences with?

PH: I only can tell you that the Hungarians did a better job faster than the Germans. My uncle and my grandfather with the *peyos* and the beard, which he had to shave off, and my grandmother with the *sheitel* was saved by Germans. My only experience was with that one German, that he did not give up his Jews, that none of them were killed. And he was out of that jail very quickly because the Jews spoke up. I don't know any Hungarian who did this.

JF: Can you tell me anything about your knowledge of Raoul Wallenberg during this time?

PH: Well, he was a legend. We knew that he showed up and he took off people from the cattle cars. Or he took out people marching to the death camps. We knew it. And when the Swiss consulate opened up their doors and gave the *Schutzpässes*, they were second to the Swedish. Wallenberg started the whole thing. And whoever was saved in Hungary, in Budapest, can thank his or her life because it gave us at least two months. There was no way that we could keep out from the cattle car if it was not for that *Schutzpässe*. It gave us a lot of time. And we lived like human beings in very elegant apartment houses. We were cramped and there was hardly enough food to eat, but they were sending food for us. We were thirty to a room, but we lived. It was heat. And it gave us time. It was just a matter of time that the Nazis declared those *Schutzpässes* void. Some of them were good, they said, some of them were not. They said there were a lot of false ones, which might be. Much later they started taking the Jews and that gave us time because then Budapest was surrounded. They could not take us to the death camp. If they wanted to get rid of us, they had to shoot us in the Danube, which they did. But still quite a few thousand people escaped. I am one of them.

JF: And you don't feel that you would have escaped had it not been for Raoul Wallenberg?

PH: I don't think so. How long can you hide? How long can you fool people? After all, that gave me at least four to five weeks. Every day was--you were like an alcoholic. You lived from one day to another. The next day would take care of itself. No, I am sure that we couldn't have lived, not that many.

JF: Do you know of any other stories about him, any other people that might have met him or come in contact with him?

PH: Well, I only know his reputation. I don't know anybody who was actually saved by him. But we knew that--he was like a god, a tall blond man just appeared and plucked out people, helter-skelter whoever. And the Nazis couldn't do anything. He had such a personality.

JF: You think it was his personality?

PH: His sureness of himself, his sureness in believing what he is doing is right. I'm sure that helped because it helped me that I knew I didn't want to die. I knew that I overwhelmed them because I knew that my purpose is right because I wanted to survive. So he wanted to save people. That's an even much better prospect that he had in mind.

JF: You mentioned before that the man that you met in the basement of the building that you were in became your future husband. Can you tell me any more about that?

PH: Well, my papers as a refugee I had made out with a very typical gentile name, Daniel, which is a very typical gentile name. And when we went down to the basement, next to us was another gentile man whose name was Horvath. These are very typical Hungarian names. And the second day my sister comes to me and says, "I have a feeling that that Horvath is Jewish." I said, "How do you know? He looks very non-Jewish, blond and blue eyes, very non-Jewish." She said, "I just have a feeling." I said, "If we have to put Peter on the potty try to turn him towards"--he was there with his brother-in-law and his sister-in-law. I said, "Try to turn him that way, because I think they are Jewish." They didn't look Jewish. Then, there were a lot of escaped soldiers in that building and one day a patrol came looking for AWOL soldiers and this one disappeared too. And my sister said, "Now why did he disappear?" Is he AWOL from the army or is he from a concentration camp? And after that he reappeared. And we knew that he was not kosher or kosher. [Laughing.] So after the war he comes up to me and said, "You know, my name is not Horvath. My name is Herling." And I said, "My name is not Daniel. My name is Phillips. I am a Jewish furrier." He said, "Oh, my God. I am a Jewish furrier." So we went together for two years and there was no news from his wife. After two years you can marry because they were declared that anybody who didn't come home from the concentration for two years was declared dead.

JF: There was a regulation that you had to wait for two years to see if any spouses would reappear?

PH: If they would come back.

JF: And he had been married?

PH: Yes. He had been married and had a child. So we opened up a store. After the war we opened up, much later, a fur shop and we got married.

JF: And his child survived?

PH: Yes.

JF: With him?

PH: No. He was taken care of by one of his workers.

JF: In a Christian home?

PH: In a Christian home. They wanted to convert him. He had quite a hard time to get him back because they thought that maybe they would convert him.

JF: The family was reluctant to give him back?

PH: They didn't save him because they wanted to save a Jewish boy. They saved him because they wanted a convert, a Catholic child. They wanted to bring him up as a Catholic.

JF: And they never did convert him?

PH: No. But they thought if the parents don't come back--you see, a gentile never does anything for humanitarian reasons. For the church, yes.

JF: How did he get the child back? Did he need to use legal pressure?

PH: No. When he showed up--when he showed up they said, "Why don't you wait until your wife comes back. Maybe it will be easier for you if we had him, and we'll give him a good--but we knew, we knew. We heard from friends, what happened with friends when Jewish children were converted. So we got married. Then one Sunday morning the telephone starts ringing like crazy. They said, "Did you see this and this magazine?" We had a magazine which was very much copied from *Life Magazine*. We said, "No, what is it?" They said, "Go and get one and look at the picture." So my husband goes down, he buys the magazine and he come home white as a sheet. He said--"This picture-'Who knows this woman?'" "This picture, this is my wife. This is a picture of my wife." They found a woman in Bergen-Belsen who just recovered from some sickness, who could not talk, could not remember anything what she was. Babbling, they thought it was in Hungarian, had amnesia, didn't know anything. So they put her picture on this magazine with the caption, "Who knows this woman?" And we had fifteen telephone calls that this is Clara, my husband's first wife. So here I am already married and pregnant. "So, what is there to do?" I said, "You'll have to go and see if it's her. And then we'll have to divorce and this child will have no father." But he didn't have a passport and it was impossible to get a passport from the Russians. It was under the Russian occupation. So by some miracle my brother-in-law, the first wife's brother, had a passport. He went out to Bergen-Belsen to look for his sister who died the day before he arrived. But there was a moment, and my husband said, "Who am I going to choose? Which is my wife?" I said, "Well, there is no question that she's your wife. You don't think you'd let her come home from that hell--and this child has not been born, mine, but that one is already seven years old. It is just not possible for her to come home and not to have a husband and a home."

Besides, we were living in their apartment. When I married, I moved in the apartment where they lived. So there I was being pregnant and probably having an illegal child, with an illegal marriage. We didn't even know if it would be annulled or we will have to divorce or how it's going to be handled. And what's going to go on my child's birth certificate? This is not 1970 America. This is 1940 Hungary, where a child has to have a mother and a father in the birth certificate. So we really don't know who she was because I understand that people by the droves showed up, [saying] that "This is my wife," "This is my daughter." Even though it resembled very strongly my husband's first wife, lots of people felt that it's their relative. They wanted to find somebody, so they felt--but there must have been something because acquaintances and relatives called up: "This is her." So we never knew.

JF: You never knew for sure and she was never definitely identified?

PH: Never was identified. She had died [unclear]. She lost her hair. She lost a lot of her ability to speak, but I understand whenever she spoke, she spoke Hungarian. So she could have been anybody. That was one of those little rare things which is thrown in to make it more interesting.

JF: Can you tell me, then, what your experience was under the Russian Occupation?

PH: Well, let me tell you some about the Russians. The first troops which came by were Mongolians. The first ones, the Mongolians...

JF: Mongolian soldiers?

PH: Soldiers, yes.

JF: And what were they like?

PH: Well, they are like yellow and slit eyes and just one step away from a wild animal. I definitely know a young sixteen-year-old girl who was raped several times and died. Once they came in our apartment. They never saw a flush toilet. And they flushed and we showed them how to use the toilet. He took out his gun and shot the toilet. They never saw a flush toilet in their life.

JF: They came into your apartment?

PH: In the apartment.

JF: When was this?

PH: After we went back in my sister's apartment. By then we were fluent in Russian. We could tell that we had venereal diseases. They came in to rape us, looking for women or for gold or whatever. And the ones that went in the toilet and we showed them how to use the flush toilet. And he heard the noise. He never saw a flush toilet in his life. He got so aggravated by the toilet that he shot into the toilet, thought maybe it's a bomb there or something. Then they had that craze for watches. They never saw wristwatches in their lives. So they robbed everybody from their wristwatches and they wore watches from their knuckles to their elbow. They had six, eight, ten wristwatches on their arms.

JF: This is the Mongolian group?



PH: That's the Mongolian groups. They walked into a man's apartment with a great big grandfather clock. And he said, "Take that clock apart and make us 10 or 15 watches." So the man said, "That cannot be done." So they shot the grandfather clock and the man, because they just couldn't believe it. Unbelievable. And then came the regular army. And the Jewish fellows asked us in Yiddish if we are Jewish. They want to go to Israel.

JF: The Russian Jewish soldiers?

PH: Soldiers asked us if we knew how to get in touch with people. They want to go to Israel. Now this is 1944. They were that desperate to go.

JF: Did they tell you anything about their experience in the Russian army?

PH: We couldn't talk to them. You see, we Hungarian Jews, unfortunately, don't talk much Yiddish. We learned German. I don't think that they would dare. But I know scores of them that were asking us if we could help them. Well actually, you know, when they went back to Russia they were shipped right away to Siberia and they'd never been in contact with the Russian people. They just could not tell too much about the western civilization. As it was, from Budapest they couldn't tell much civilization because there was not a house which was not damaged. Budapest looked horrible. We had no bridges. There was no communication between Buda and Pest. The houses were absolutely burned out, bombed out. My first business was in a [unclear] of a house. I sold perfume for the Russians, who took it, hit the head off the bottle, and they drank it. They drank the perfume. And then later I got very smart and showed them how to unscrew it. I said, "Don't hit the head. Give me back the bottle." So from one bottle of perfume, we made two and filled up with water and sold two. But they were absolutely very uncivilized. They really didn't know anything. They loved fur. And they thought they were buying seal or it's real seal. We had rabbit fur, dyed rabbit fur which looked like seal, black seal. They bought that rabbit fur which would fall apart in two years. They shipped it back to Russia and they thought they had real seal cloth.

JF: You had a fur business still in addition to the perfume?

PH: The perfume was just the beginning. Actually, first we started with blintzes because I brought home some flour. We were making blintzes and sold it on the street. Then I graduated to perfume. And then I had a miracle, miracle ring, a diamond ring, which was made to a button and it was sewn to my coat. And wherever I went that ring went with me. So I wound up with a diamond ring. So that diamond ring was put in deposit in a million places where they gave me some merchandise which we sold on the street. And then...

JF: This was the furs that you were able to buy with it?

PH: Yes, I bought furs with it. And we started it in a burned out place. We sold furs. But the Russians liked it. The Russians bought it.

JF: Now you said that most of your family was able to survive. Because of the Germans who protected them.

PH: Right.

JF: How many in your family then...

PH: Stayed alive?

JF: No, perished during the war?

PH: It's my father, it's my husband, and two of my nephews--only four.

JF: Everyone else was able to survive?

PH: Yes, we were very lucky.

JF: How long, then, did you live in Hungary under the Russian occupation?

PH: Under the Russians--well, they occupied that in '44. I left in '48. Four years. But that was not without any adventure because it seems my life is nothing without adventure. My baby was born on October 31st and I was home with him.

JF: This is 1945?

PH: That's '47. This is '47. We were married in '46. He was born in '47. And I am home with the baby still in bed. And my mother helped out my husband in the--we had a very beautiful fur shop at that time. My mother comes up and says, "Very quickly in a very small bag, pack a few shirts, toothbrush. Your husband has to leave. The Communists took the store over. They are looking for him." At that very same day, with a Russian truck, because they made a good business with smuggling out people, he was the same night in Vienna--in Vienna.

JF: Who...

PH: The Russians--he had to leave Hungary because he would have been arrested because they wanted the store.

JF: Who was smuggling him out?

PH: The Russians.

JF: The Russians themselves were smuggling him out?

PH: With trucks they were commuting between Vienna and Budapest. That's when Vienna was occupied, all four--you know, Vienna was occupied by the English, by the French, by the Americans, and the Russians. The Russians had a very big business smuggling out Hungarians from Hungary.

JF: So the Communists were looking for him and the Russians smuggled him out?

PH: The Russians smuggled him out. There were also some very enterprising Rumanian boys who stole or manufactured Russian uniforms and did the smuggling, like they were Russians. Actually, I don't know if it was a Rumanian or Russian. There is another miracle what happened. My husband arrives in Vienna, has no idea where he is. They drop him off in front of a hotel. He goes into the hotel and asks for a room. They said, "There is none, we are all occupied but go two or three blocks, there is a Hotel Windsor. They have empty rooms." So he goes over to the Hotel Windsor, exhausted, and goes fast asleep. It took him about two or three days until he discovered that he's in the American sector. And if he would have gotten a room, he would have been in the Russian

sector and we would never, ever get to America because that was November. And if you were in the Russian occupied place November 31, the Truman doctrine, which said if you are a political refugee November 31, you can come to America. If he stays in that hotel, we are not refugees. But he was in the Hotel Windsor. I remember Hotel Windsor because it took me eight months to get out there. Eight months because you had to go through--you had to walk through barbed wires and booby traps to get to Vienna.

JF: Were you allowed to leave Budapest?

PH: No, no. I left three times and twice I was arrested with the children.

JF: You had then both your own baby and your husband's son?

PH: My husband's older son. We wanted to go across to Vienna, to Austria. They wouldn't take us, only one child so I had to--every group could have just one child. I carried mu little one but, George, the oldest one, went with another group.

*Tape two, side two:*

JF: Side 2 of Tape 2 an interview with Ms. Pearl Herling. Please continue.

PH: So my husband was out in Vienna and we wanted to go and join him. But there is no passport. You cannot leave. So we paid \$500 for a smuggler who would smuggle us through because they knew where the mines are and how to cut the barbed wire. But the only way they would take me, with one child. So I entrusted my older son with them and I walked with my little one. He had a sleeping pill, his mouth was taped so he couldn't cry. All I could hear was the child was breathing like this: [breathing sounds]. Mostly, I remember that I was listening if he was breathing. At one point they stopped us and took us back to Budapest. We couldn't get through. I am looking for my step-son. My step-son is nowhere to find. So I got in touch with my husband. I said, "Has George arrived to Vienna?" "No." He started looking all over Europe, in Czechoslovakia, in Rumania, all over. The child is seven years old. I lost my husband's son. For seven weeks we didn't know anything. I tried to find a lawyer. Maybe he was arrested. Nobody would take it. I asked his mother's family to look for the child. They wouldn't do it. After all, we are criminals, we tried to escape. I couldn't look for him because where was I? I also was escaping. Seven weeks later they call us up from the common jail, "Come and get this child." He was in jail for seven weeks with hardened criminals. We put him in the bathtub and that bathtub came alive. That child was eaten by lice. We had to shave his hair. It was boils. Would you believe it--he never once said my name. He just said I am an aunt and I did not know that he wants to escape. He wants to join his father. He did it all on his father's instructions. That child never told that I also wanted to escape.

JF: He identified you as his aunt?

PH: As an aunt. He never said that I was married to his father. He never said that I wanted to escape. He said it was all his father's manipulation. Now this is a seven-year old child.

JF: He decided to do this on his own?

PH: On his own. His father wanted to bring him out. Otherwise I would be in great trouble. He said he was very sick and he had a fever and I forced him to eat beans because that was the only food I had. I gave him [unclear]. Well, he's happily married. He has two children. He's a wonderful teacher and he's a very well adjusted young man.

JF: He's here in the States?

PH: He's in the States. The only thing is--only a psychiatrist should listen to that. This child is an absolute genius. I can say that because I had nothing to do with his mental capacity. His IQ is 176. We lived in Vienna for two years before we came here and he spoke fluent German, was a very good student. When he came here, and he needed--he went to the university. He needed another language. I said, "George, you spoke so well German. Why don't you take German?" He said, "Oh, it's a good idea." A week later he comes home and says, "Mama, I cannot speak German. I have an absolute mental and

emotional block. I have to take Spanish or French or something. I cannot speak the language." And he never did.

JF: This was the first time you had tried to leave Budapest?

PH: Yes. The second time is an absolute and complete miracle. There was a truck which we were supposed to take with my uncle. This is the very uncle who escaped from the Germans--with the Germans. The Germans protected him, that furrier-uncle. I was supposed to go with him, with my baby, with the two children in that truck to take us over to Vienna. We were supposed to meet at nine o'clock in a certain place. I understand that at 8:30 there's a big flurry that they have to leave right away; they cannot wait until nine o'clock. So my uncle says, "My niece with the two children are not here." They are sorry, they cannot wait. There is some confusion. This was all very hush-hush, very dangerous. The truck leaves without us. The truck is being shot at before they left the outskirts of Budapest. The woman next to my uncle is being shot in the shoulder. With a stretch of imagination, I would say that with my baby in my hand that's where I would have been shot, maybe the baby through the head. So everybody ran helter-skelter. They caught some. My uncle was caught and they put my Uncle Voldak in the mental institute so they couldn't reach him. His daughter went to the doctor who worked in a mental institute. So they locked him in so they couldn't reach him. They couldn't find him; he was there for a week. I arrived at 9 o'clock to that meeting place and I took [unclear] and I was coming with the two children. We were arrested. So I gave the baby, the children, to my mother and they took me to 60 *undrashut* [phonetic]. Now this is a very famous place because that was the headquarters of the Nazis and and the G.P.U. [Russian Secret Police]. They both used the same building. So they really didn't do anything to me. They just stood me in front of a white wall and they let me stand there. It's hard to believe that after ten minutes looking at the white wall, you start to get dizzy and you start to sway and you just get disoriented. They didn't hit me, they didn't curse at me, they didn't do anything to me. So I decided, for God's sake, they are not going to beat me. So I started to paint pictures on that wall, like a seder night when my grandfather and my grandmother stood there. And the gefilte fish came and the matzo was there and we were singing. And all of a sudden I was just with my family.

JF: You drew these pictures?

PH: I drew that picture on the wall and I was part of it. And I was standing there for two hours and I didn't fall apart. I felt after 15 minutes I would confess that I killed my mother, just let me look at something which is not white. But it wasn't white because the only white thing was the white tablecloth on the seder table. We had all the fun and I looked at the *haggadah*. I remember we were very, very Victorian. We looked at the *haggadah* at the number nine, that it takes nine months that a baby should be born. That was pornographic for us. I remembered all those things.

JF: With this kind of..

PH: And then a miracle happened. They took me in front of an interrogator and he said, "Why did you stand there? Why did you wait for that bus? We know that that bus went to--that truck went to Vienna." And I said, "Look, I lost my first husband in the war. My second husband escaped from me with a blonde to Vienna, left me with two children and one of the child is his. I just wanted to take his child down to him and I would have come back. I didn't want to join the decadent West. I just wanted to get rid of that kid who's not mine." From all of this he heard that my first husband died in the war. He said, "How did your husband die in the war? Was he a soldier?" I said, "No, he was killed in the concentration camp." So he says in Yiddish to me "*Bist du a yid?* Are you Jewish?" I said, "Of course." He takes a piece of paper, stamps on it "Released," and said, "Go." My mother is standing there. Now this is about four hours, four or five hours, was standing there in front of *undrashut* 60, with the two small children and she's crying. She's ready to accept that she'll never see me anymore, that I will be shipped to Siberia or something. And here I come out because the interrogator himself probably escaped from a concentration camp. I had to come to Philadelphia because [unclear].

JF: So at that point you were able to get to Vienna then?

PH: Yes, we bought--an Israeli--an Israeli couple was visiting and they sold their passport. The next day they went then, after I called up that I arrived to Vienna, they went to the police and reported that their passport was stolen. So I went out as an Israeli citizen. I tell you, when they looked at that passport and they gave it back to me before we reached Austria, that was a wonderful feeling.

JF: When they returned...

PH: When they returned the passport and they let us go. It took me eight months to get away from Hungary.

JF: Did your mother leave?

PH: Yes, they went to Israel. They emigrated legal to Israel.

JF: Around the same time or did it take them...?

PH: Almost the same time. A little after me they emigrated legally. My sister with her two children, with her husband and my mother.

JF: You mentioned that the drawing you made in the police station was of a religious holiday.

PH: In my mind. Yes.

JF: And you had been raised as an Orthodox Jew?

PH: Yes.

JF: During those years of the Nazi occupation and the Russian occupation and the anti--severe antisemitism, how did your religion affect your life?

PH: Well, I'll tell you honestly, they almost succeeded to make me feel a second grade citizen. Because if you walk by a restaurant and it says, "No gypsies, no dogs, and no Jews allowed," and the Jew comes after the gypsy and the dog, it's very hard not to have some complex. But I also realized that we had a five thousand year tradition and that we

gave the Ten Commandments. So it was pretty much balanced. And I said I was a Zionist. It was a conflict between being a proud Jew and being a second-grade citizen. They did their very best to do it. I never denied my Jewishness. In fact there was a time, if you converted, they promised that you are not going to the concentration camp. It was not true, but an awful lot of Jews, my own uncle and aunt went to the priest and they converted. And my very religious grandfather said that it's in the Torah that if you can save your life--they did it during the Inquisition. I did not convert, not converted because I didn't want to give up my Jewishness, I didn't want to join the non-Jews who were out to kill me. I went as far as I had my coat on. I had my appointment with the priest. I never got there. I could not. I would not.

JF: Did you feel that the church was able to help Jews in any other way other than by these conversions?

PH: I don't know if they could, but I knew that they would not. They wanted to convert. Their function is to convert Jews. Their function is not to save Jews. What did the Pope do? But I can tell you when I gave up my Jewishness. In fact, I don't know if I am an atheist, and that would make me a nonbeliever. I gave up my Jewishness when I heard the story of what happened to my husband who was a very religious Jew and a very good person.

JF: You're talking now about your first husband?

PH: Yes. The story came out in the newspapers and I read it. I went down the street and I headed straight to the basilica where I never was allowed to go. I went to a Catholic church and I finished with God. And I ate my non-kosher meat on purpose. I was not hungry anymore. But I went to my girlfriend's house who was married to a non-Jew and I had pork and I ate my first pork in my life. I threw it up, but I ate it. And after I threw it up, I ate another portion. That was the end of my religion. I never ever--I haven't been to a synagogue except when my two children were *bar mitzvah*. I got married to Mr. Elfant. He's a very good Jew and we went to the synagogue. I had such a strange experience when I made my peace with God. I said, "I forgive You, God; I wonder if You forgive me?" But I really didn't, because I saw people put in the concentration camp in Budapest before they were put in the cattle car. They were interned in Budapest waiting their turn. I saw many with *peyos* and beard, little children with their side locks, with their hat, and they were killed. Why? I don't think that any, any super being who would let that happen. We just happened to be here.

JF: When you were living in Vienna for the two years, what was your experience there as a Jew?

PH: Oh, my God. You couldn't find a Nazi if your life depended on it. They are charming. I hate the Austrians and I hate the Germans because at least the Germans stood up and said, "I hate the Jews. I want to kill them." Those Austrians, they loved the Jews! They hate the Germans! And I saw them in the movie standing in Gardnerstrasse, waving a Nazi flag and being hysterical when the *Anschluss* came. They couldn't tell me that they

were not antisemitic. It was just a horror and they wouldn't let us work. We were refugees. We worked on the black market. And of all people, we made our money making fur coats for the Russian soldiers. That was just--we just lived in one room. I washed the diapers for my kid in that room. We cooked on an kerosene oven one meal. It was always soup meat with the soup, always. And then I was working on the black market. I sold the textile, handkerchiefs. I delivered to the Russian soldiers their fur coats to the Russian headquarters because my husband is a man who can be more liable not to come out. It was horrible.

JF: Did you experience any direct antisemitism?

PH: No, it was against the refugees, not against the Jews.

JF: Refugees in general?

PH: Because there were also Nazi refugees there who escaped from there. No, you couldn't find an antisemite. They never were antisemitic. They were just very hateful people.

JF: Did you have difficulty, then, leaving Vienna?

PH: No, no. We were just waiting for our papers, our clearance, because after the war we had to work for the Russians and that was a bad mark on our--we really didn't have to tell them but we did. So there was a point when we were almost ready to go to Australia. Then we had a hearing and we cleared ourselves. Because we did live under the Russians for two years and they wanted to be very sure. I wished they would have been that thorough to screen the Nazis because on the boat we came over, there were plenty of Nazis.

JF: You don't feel that they screened the Nazis?

PH: They absolutely did not because I knew by their names, prominent Nazis, they were on the boat, and they made antisemitic remarks. In fact, I was reporting them to our--I spoke English a little--I reported it to the captain that those two *kapos*, they were prominent Nazis.

JF: Who was doing the screening that you're talking about?

PH: American consulate. But they were much more worried at that time about Communists than they were about--maybe those Nazis knew how to make an atom bomb. I don't know. Or a candy store or bankers. I don't know who they were but I knew by their names that they were actively with the Nazis. But, generally, all Hungarians were Nazis.

JF: Is there anything else that you can think of that you would like to add to your story?

PH: Well, the only thing I would like to tell you that it should not be forgotten. If you interview me, interview anybody who has anything to do with it. And I don't know how late it is to get those Nazis out of here. I know it's a great deal of struggle. People are pressing that those Nazis should get out of here and nothing is really being done. I think that it should be taught, that the Holocaust should be taught in the school, just like in Germany and in Israel. They should teach the Holocaust. There never should be a



university professor at Drexel to say that there is no Holocaust. And they should do it until the survivors are alive, because at least we are witnesses to it. And that is it.

JF: Thank you very much.

PH: Thank you.