Interview with Robert Feher
Holocaust Oral History Project
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Q. GOOD AFTERNOON. AND IF YOU WOULD PLEASE GIVE US YOUR NAME, YOUR BIRTH NAME, THE PLACE YOU WERE BORN AND THE DATE OF YOUR BIRTH.

A. Well, my name is Robert J., stands for Joseph Feher, F-e-h-e-r, and I was born in Hungary. The town's name is Szekesfehervar, which is approximately 60 kilometers from Budapest. And my birth date is February 6th, 1931.

Q. CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE COMPOSITION OF YOUR FAMILY BEFORE THE WAR?

A. Immediate family?

Q. YES.

A. Immediate family, I had one brother by the name of George. And I had a father, who is deceased, name of Bala Feher and mother by the name of Sarah, also deceased with the maiden name of Mondel.

Q. AND CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY LIFE BEFORE THE WAR AND RELIGIOUS FAMILY AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND --

A. Family was sort of -- from background, my mother

came from Munkatch, which is called also Mukachevo, today is part of Russia. And it's by the Carpathian Mountains. It was a very religious community. So my mother was very, you could say ultra-kosher. Where my father came from the other part of Hungary where it is very assimilated and he was not kosher. It was the opposite.

And in those days they were called, not reform, but narrow, a term you may not be familiar with. But that was a forerunner of the reformed Jewish movement.

And we had a comfortable life. We lived in Budapest. I shouldn't say comfortable life, thinking back. I'm trying to remember because obviously it was a long time ago. I think that it was the -- when the war started in 1939, I was about eight years old and it didn't affect us that much. We read the newspapers and we heard some rumors about anti-Semitism and especially talking about the Polish Jews, I think, and some of the German Jews.

But the Hungarian Jews, especially in Budapest had -- we had a very false sense of security in those days. They said it doesn't matter what is happening. It's terrible what is happening, but it could never happen in Hungary.

I don't know if you ever heard this story before, but it was a very -- the Jews in Budapest, especially

talking about Budapest were quite assimilated. You had a small segment which were orthodox that came from the outlining areas, but Budapest itself was a major Jewish center. I would say it had probably a couple of hundred thousand Jews, Budapest had in those days.

And I don't know if I'm answering your question.

Q. TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL.

A. I went to elementary school, not Jewish, gentile, mixed. We were probably thirty kids to a class and maybe five or six Jewish people, pupils. And then after I started -- what they called -- in Germany it would be called burger shuller, which is not a gymnasium. It's someone who would start a trade or something where they have a few choices; either if you want to go to the university, go to a regular high school or you go through four years of -- I'm going to use the name burger shuller, b-u-r-g-e-r, where after that you plan to go into trade school or something and you become anywhere from a dental technician to a car mechanic or whatever. So they're more condensed to give you more a practical education probably.

And my schooling lasted -- well, I was with my parents another three years. And after that was the -- my parents got taken away. But I did finish the fourth year all by myself.

Q. WHAT DID YOU STUDY?

A. Studied like everybody else, history, algebra, math, what you study in school.

Q. YOU DIDN'T STUDY A TRADE IN SCHOOL?

A. No, no, I did not, no.

Q. HOW WERE THE JEWISH KIDS TREATED IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL?

A. Well, I didn't look Jewish when I was a kid and I was sort of a rebel. I was very tough. So I know the first day people didn't -- I mean I think it started -- I wasn't called a dirty Jew because people didn't know I was Jewish. It's not that I hid it.

I think it started when I was about ten or eleven years old, something like that, where I remember that we had the religious classes and then all the gentiles went -- most of the people in Hungary are Catholics.

And one day -- so once a week we would have a religious hour where the Jews would go separate and the Catholics went separate. And I remember the most shocking thing happened to me, that a very good friend of mine came back all angry and he says, "You killed our little Jesus." And I said, "What? What are you talking about?" And so he said, "Yes, we learned it, you know, that the Jews killed him and you are a Jew."

So it didn't totally sink in. I don't know if I got into a physical fight with him then or -- I used to get

into physical fights constantly at school. And most of my fights were because they called me that, started calling me a Jew.

And I was brought up very nationalistic. I was a Hungarian first and a Jew second. I mean Jewish was my religion, but I was a Hungarian.

And so it was bearable because I -- probably because at that time the Germans didn't -- Horthy was in charge of Hungary, he was the chancellor of Hungary.

So we didn't wear yellow stars. We didn't even get those. People made anti-Semitic remarks, so it was something that I was not restricted to the point where I was in school and somebody called me a dirty Jew, I would just hit him in the face. I mean I had fights almost every single day.

And I felt I had to stand up for my rights, but I didn't -- I don't think as a child I experienced totally this oppression. I just felt I'm rebellious and my family was always rebellious anyhow. So I think I got by pretty good.

But gradually things have changed in the family, the conversations where we started talking about -- my father started talking about the possibility of leaving Hungary and said, well, you can't say this in school. And I was starting to understand that certain things you can't say

outside and I was maybe only eleven. And I started to feel more and more different from the other kids.

Then I think in 1941, I was ten years old, I think. Either '41 or '42, my father was taken away and he was -- my father was a sergeant during the first world war. His brother, which we used to tease as a war hero because his brother was in the front line. He had the highest decoration any Hungarian can get, like the purple heart, several times.

And he came to liberate Hungary from the communists in '40, and so I mean my family-- I had an uncle who lost an arm during the first world war for Hungary. I mean they didn't cut it off, but it was totally immobile. He was considered disabled due because of the war.

So they all fought in the war and it was just incomprehensible that something could happen like this. He fought for -- it was our country, right? And I was brought up to the degree that -- as I think back when two stitch cars collided once in Budapest, I still remember it. And I heard the story, talking about they collided. And I said, who won? The Hungarian?

So I think that gives you just the feeling the way we're brought up, very proud of it and very loyal. So that reminds me, I'm going somewhere with the start. That I excelled in school. I was very good in poetry and in

Hungarian literature. I was probably the best in my class. Not probably, I was.

How do I know I was the best? Because I think when I was going into the -- let's see, the seventh or sixth grade. I don't know, sixth or seventh grade, you had at the end of the year a celebration. It was also a celebration of the 1848 revolution which was under Kossuth. I don't know if you remember, but I think he's got a statue in Washington, D.C.

And you were supposed to state this -- I mean there was this very famous Hungarian poet who has written the poem about liberty and how the Hungarians broke their chains down because to be ruled by the Austrian empire and very powerful poem and very nationalistic every year, they would appoint someone who would say this poem in front of the entire school. Not just one reading, but the entire school. So it was a competition under the Hungarian -- and I won.

And I was supposed to read the poem. And just a few days before, my teacher called me and said, you can't say it. And I say, why not? Because you're a Jew. You are Jewish. And my entire world collapsed. It was sort of, you know, up until then it was, well, you know, I talked with other kids, et cetera, but this has shaken everything I believed in. It was something I felt.

I don't know if I know how an outlaw feels, somebody -- I experienced it later when I went underground, but this was the feeling of injustice, a feeling of -- I mean I just couldn't comprehend it. I couldn't -- it was so wrong because I was the best and I am a Hungarian. And they told me, no, you're not, you're a Jew.

Q. HOW OLD WERE YOU?

A. I'm thinking. I must have been probably eleven years old. 1942, '31, eleven years old, yes. Maybe twelve, maybe twelve. I think I was twelve years old.

And I still remember it because it was very vivid. I mean you could say, what's the big deal, you don't say the poem. But it was like your whole world is collapsing, you know, your whole world. Your friend is not your friend, your country is -- you lost everything. I took it very hard, very hard.

Q. DID YOU DISCUSS IT WITH YOUR PARENTS?

A. Well, I did.

Q. AND WHAT DID THEY SAY ABOUT WHAT WAS GOING ON AROUND YOU THEN?

A. I don't think that I have told them how I felt. I said I was angry, et cetera, but I don't think I totally shared with them because it was very confusing. I was confused. It was very confusing for me.

But I really didn't know or understood what it meant

to be a Jew. I didn't. I talked, you know, I have a religion and I'm Jewish, but I'm Hungarian. I would say I was sort of -- in the process of trying to sort things out, I'm obviously a fifty-nine year old man thinking back now and trying to think back with the mind of a child, which I'm not, but trying to capture those feelings. I know that the feelings were very strong, very strong feelings. And I know that there was a contradiction, there was a paradox between the feeling and the intellect trying to understand. I was confused, I think.

Q. DID YOUR FRIENDS START TREATING YOU IMMEASURABLY DIFFERENT AFTER THAT DAY?

A. Yes, it started -- well, I had a lot of Christian friends and I was, you might say quite popular as a kid among the tough guys. I was considered a tough guy, so they were afraid of me. There was always a -- number one in fighting and number two. And I was in the top five, sometimes was three, sometimes four. Once I was number one.

So they didn't fool with me because they know that I would stand up for my rights. But I started feeling like I am a secondary citizen. There was no question about it. Because then came the next step where -- how do you call it when people go to the jamboree? The jamboree. You know, it was started in England for young boys.

Q. BOY SCOUTS.

A. Boy scouts, right. This is international. And I wanted to become a boy scout. And they said, no, you can't because you're Jewish.

And then they had this -- like a Hitler youth, but a different -- you know Hitler was called levente, l-e-v-e-n-t-e, which was sort of -- had training, ROTC, something like that. ROTC, right.

And so I thought, you know, you're going to ROTC. And they gave us a special yellow band to wear because we are Jewish. And so we had to act almost like servants to the other kids.

And I remembered that -- I mean my gymnast teacher was a real Nazi. He was. I mean he was a brutal ugly son of a bitch. He was a big man, fat, and he would -- not me, I wouldn't do it. But he used to come with boots. This was after and I'm going to 1943, '44, I think. I'm jumping. That was when the Nazi occupied Hungary and that was the same that Szalassy came to power and I was still going to school.

And this guy would come in and had put his boots up and then the Jewish could shine his boots. And we would go, for instance, after school for this kind of exercise. And they would make us lay in the dirt and sit right into the dirt on our bellies.

So they're trying to break our spirits, degrading us. And so my anger was mounting. And I no longer considered -- the confusion was gone. I was a Jew. And what it meant to be a Jew, I know nothing about those days, Palestine, Israel. It just meant that I was an outcast and I had to fight a whole fucking world because I always refused to lay down.

And I just felt very tremendous amount of anger and resentment and hatred against these people, what they have done to me.

I remember one day I came home from school and I had a fight with another kid who called me a dirty Jew. And I came home and I had blood -- all my shirt was gone and scraped, you know, all my skin off here and here because I was -- I got this kid and took his head under my arm and I started hitting him in the face because he was a son of some factory worker who was a Nazi.

He made some very anti-Semitic remarks and it happened every time after school, we came out. But I was bad, and so my mother -- my mother went over and she saw me. I would not say who do you fight with, she had to drag it out of me. So finally I said, well, so and so.

So she said, I have to -- this can't go on like this. So she went over to complain to the other mother, what her son has done to me. And she came back and she

said, well, you know, it's not so bad because the other mother told her, well, maybe your kid looks like -- but look at mine, his front two teeth are missing. So it made me feel good.

So this was sort of -- I know I talk about it a lot, but it was sort of my life, you know, going to school, fighting, coming home and being very -- I think I had my own little war going on. That's what it is, my own little war.

I remember that I never came home -- they had to drag it out of me because I wouldn't say that I got hurt or anything because I didn't want my parents to be upset because I knew that there was nothing they could do about it. The family got very close, much closer probably than a normal family.

And my father lost his business. He made a few deals. I don't know what kind of deals, something that has to do with export, import or something. He made a lot of money. And I remember that he put a tremendous emphasis on food, that we should eat very good because the day will come that there won't be any food around. So he wanted us to be strong, to build up our resistance, and made a conscious effort and we lived much better than we ever -- to save, everything was just to eat good and to live.

And I know that he was planning to take the family from Hungary just before the Germans occupied it. He had some plan, but then it was killed because he couldn't leave anymore.

Anyway, I'm not going in sequence, I'm going sideways.

Q. OKAY.

A. I many times thinking back, trying to create my childhood when I was a child, when I cried like a child. And I think that I stopped being a child by the time I was eleven or twelve. I can barely remember ever playing beyond that. I used to play with marbles.

But I remember now that I have -- when I said that I declared my own war, I remember that I would not -- I had a problem running, you know, when I was challenged.

And I remember one day I was coming home from school and it was -- we had some special somewhere. I don't know if it was school, but I was -- at that time I started to -- I didn't have any more gentile friends, only Jewish friends. And I think I was with two other Jewish boys, three of us going. And there was a gang of youths who held us up on the street. And the other two ran and I couldn't. And I stuck my foot in there and started fighting all of them.

All I remember is that they knocked me unconscious.

I woke up in blood and I was unconscious in the street and I came home.

So really, I think when I'm thinking back, I have started to develop a mentality like an outlaw, you know, somebody who just doesn't fit in right. You just don't, you know, you have to play by different rules because you are different.

Q. DID YOUR BROTHER FEEL THE SAME THING?

A. My brother and I are very different. My brother is not a fighter. My brother would avoid any kind of confrontation as possible, where I would not seek it out, but I would not -- I couldn't lay down.

I was sort of proud. I mean I had a very strong sense of justice and fairness, which I was indoctrinated with or it was part of my -- I don't know, I just had very strong feelings about that. And I felt that was not just, and it was just wrong and I just couldn't accept it. Obviously I couldn't accept it.

So I rebelled. I rebelled.

Q. (INAUDIBLE) -- SUCH A FIGHTER.

A. Yes, I was not like the other Jewish kids. Yes, this was also a very strong anti-Semitic remark when I heard -- somebody told me, he said, well, you are Jewish, but you're really not like the Jews. You know, it was --

Q. YOU MENTIONED THAT YOUR FATHER WAS ARRESTED IN '41

OR TWO.

A. No, he was not arrested, he was called in. He was called in Hungarian -- I'm trying to -- in a work camp. But they would call -- uniforms, they wear uniform, but he had to have a band. And they would build traps for the tanks, anti-tanks.

And so my mother was left alone with the two kids. And my brother is four years older than I am, so let's see, '43. It was in '43, then I was twelve years old. I think I was about twelve or eleven. And my brother was -- no, I must have been eleven. Eleven, that's right, eleven. And my brother was fifteen.

And we know that we helped my mother out. We would go after school and buy candy wholesale, candy. Actually from the manufacturer. Contact, I don't know through my mother or wherever. And we would go into stores and I was -- I was young and they felt, oh, poor kid, you know. So I went for my brother up in -- these things and candy and we would sell. Not eat any candy, though, just sell the candy to stores.

Q. DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOUR FATHER WAS -- DID HE HAVE TO GO TO LABOR CAMP?

A. Yes. A notice came. I remember a notice came, delivered by the postman and he had to sign for it and he was called and he had to go.

Q. AND WHERE WAS THE PLACE THAT HE WAS SENT, THE CAMP THAT HE WAS SENT TO?

A. I actually have a picture of it. I have to bring it. I have a picture of him. I have a picture, that's right. I think it was in the Carpathian Mountains, I think, where this took place.

But this wasn't a concentration camp. They were really, you know, after -- I don't know how much time they spend, a few months and they let him go home.

Q. WERE ALL THE WORKERS JEWISH AND DID HE EVER TALK ABOUT CONDITIONS IN THE LABOR CAMP?

A. Well, they got, you know, I don't remember -- I know they didn't have too much food, but enough to survive. And they had to work and do physical labor. And it was, I think, connected with the tank traps. I don't know how they call them, which didn't do any good anyhow.

Q. DID THIS HAPPEN -- DID HE START TALKING ABOUT LEAVING HUNGARY BEFORE OR AFTER HE WAS SENT TO THE LABOR CAMP? AND DID HE START TALKING ABOUT BEING CONCERNED ABOUT FOOD SHORTAGES BEFORE?

A. I think he started about the same time. I don't know if it was before he was taken or after he was taken. But I think when the Jews started to say, well, you know, the handwriting is really on the wall. But where to go, and by that time we didn't have much money.

And it was difficult. I mean we didn't have anybody. We didn't have anybody in the United States, we didn't have anybody in France, we didn't know anybody. So where would you go?

So I think he started organizing a group, my father did, to go to some unforsaken place. It was a British colony. I'm trying to remember. Was it British Guana probably? To immigrate there. And to get with a group of people and to talk.

And I was not present, but I know when they came home, they talked about it a lot. And it was all by talking, Nazis marched into Hungary, to occupy Hungary, which I think was in nineteen forty -- is it '43 or '44?

Q. (INAUDIBLE) THEY MARCHED IN IN LATE '43.

A. '43, yes, September, I think, '43.

Q. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT DAY WHEN THE WAR REALLY --

A. I don't remember them marching in because I didn't see them march in. I just remembered it. I remember one episode where the German soldiers were walking and my father was very gutsy. He was only five foot six, but a real fighter.

And my father and I -- my father spoke German, fluent German, walking on the sidewalk and there were three Germans walking on the sidewalk. And they were walking and my father refused to get out of the sidewalk

and he pushed them. And he looked at them and he said in German, that's the way the Hungarian Jew is, we don't get off. It is crazy. He was a very gutsy man.

Which I know how gutsy he was, staying with the subject. He was taken to Mauthausen, and this is a very unique story. But my brother was sixteen years old at the time. Sixteen? No. I was thirteen, fourteen. He was eighteen, yes.

And they were taken to the concentration camp of Mauthausen. And then they were transported from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen. And I think it was several days, five or six or seven days of march. It was a death march.

And I think they were marching five in a row, the way my brother told me the story. And for several days they had nothing to eat. They would drink the rain drops and they would pick up the grass or whatever.

And I don't know whether it was the third day or fourth day, I don't think it's relevant, and a piece of onion was laying on the road. And this old Jew, which was marching in front of my brother, grabbed the onion. And a young SS, young, sixteen, eighteen year old SS called him out of the row and blew his brains out, shot him on the spot.

And my brother turned white in his face. So the SS

called him to come out. And so my brother was called out to be shot also. And my father jumped in front of my brother. And he put his arms out like this and said, "Shoot me first. He is my son."

And he said, "You're an old Jew, you're a good worker." And they let him go. So he was gutsy.

My brother was a dental technician and took the gold crowns out of my father's mouth to exchange it for bread. So they are not going to kill him for his gold crowns.

He said it was very tragic because -- my brother kept a diary during this whole episode in the concentration camp. And after they were liberated, it was lost. He kept a day to day diary almost.

I'm drawing a blank.

Q. OKAY, I'LL ASK YOU ANOTHER QUESTION THEN. LET'S GO BACK A LITTLE, BACKTRACK A LITTLE BIT. YOUR FATHER CAME BACK FROM THE LABOR CAMP. AT WHAT POINT DID YOUR FAMILY STAY IN AN APARTMENT OR AT WHAT POINT WERE --

A. We were living in an apartment. And then, let's see, I think sometimes in nineteen -- let's see, '44, early part of 1944. Yes, it must have been maybe February or March we were -- there was no ghetto yet.

The next step was that we were taken in what we call a yellow star house ( ) yellow star house. And they were scattered all over the city and mostly in

Jewish neighborhoods. But there was no gate. We just had to live in that house, and when you went outside you had to wear a yellow star.

So we moved in there. We had to give up our place and move into that yellow star house where -- I'm trying to remember. I think we must have had a couple of rooms. Two rooms for four people, I think, or one room? No, I think it was two. It was two rooms.

And at this point all we could -- my father was thinking about eating good. And I remember -- oh, yes, what is happening in this house. The Americans started bombing at that time already, Budapest. And this was the most wonderful thing. The whole family was looking forward to every time the liberators came. They said there are our friends, see.

So it was sort of a crazy thing. We couldn't imagine a bomb would fall on us because, hey, these are our allies, right?

And I remember that one day there was a lot of bombs falling, a lot of bombs. And my father was celebrating. He opened up a bottle of cognac and had some cognac and said, hey, you know, because we are hoping that they're going to come, the ( ) are eventually going to come. We didn't know, no newspaper, we didn't know where things are, how close they are, how far they are. Just it

was a sign, it was our friend. We're going to be liberated.

And a bomb fell and we refused to go to the cellars. We wouldn't go into the cellar. And the house next door got a -- I mean it was flattened. And nothing happened to us. And this house next door was totally wiped out and nothing.

So then I had a picture of that too, I think. We had a shovel. We had to go and work on the debris to clear the grounds. And I had a picture there working with my father, I think. He has a yellow star. I have to find that picture.

See, things are coming back. So that was --

Q. DID YOU WEAR YOUR YELLOW STAR?

A. No.

Q. NEVER?

A. Never.

Q. WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF YOUR FAMILY?

A. My brother wore it, my father, my mother. Not me.

Q. DID IT SCARE THEM THAT YOU --

A. I think I was uncontrollable. I didn't want to be branded like a cow. I thought it was wrong. Don't forget, I was a teenager and I was a rebel to begin with. And I have pictures where I think my mother is wearing a yellow star. You'll see where I don't have one.

But I think this is what saved my life, for being the way I was that saved my life, for not giving in, not giving in.

Q. LET ME ASK YOU ANOTHER QUESTION. WHEN THEY STARTED PASSING ( ) LAWS ALMOST IMMEDIATELY IN ABOUT 1939, I THINK WERE THE FIRST ONES, AT WHAT POINT DID THE LAWS START AFFECTING YOUR LIFE AND AT WHAT POINT WERE (INAUDIBLE) --

A. Well, my father was a businessman. At one time the family was very rich, then they lost a lot of money in the stock market. It was sort of a yo-yo.

Money by speculation, for instance, they couldn't do anything. Yes, I remember that one summer my mother left to visit her family in Munkatch and my father and I were left alone. And he would buy -- when the apple season came, he would buy apples in the season. I don't know when the season was, December when they harvest apples, something.

Anyhow, and then he would put them in containers, into refrigerated houses. And in May he would sell it. And so I know it was in May because the price went up three or four times from when you harvest it. And we had a horse and a buggy and I would (schlep) the merchandise into the stores.

And nothing was required, so you always find a way

to make a dollar and make money despite the Germans. And I remember that, obviously, he didn't pay any taxes. And he was called in by the Hungarian authorities because they send him a questionnaire about his tax return. And what he did, he crossed it all out and he signed his name and he mailed it. And I wish I had it. I still remember because the whole family was laughing so hard. We had a good sense of humor.

He was called in by -- I mean the Nazis were really -- they said, how do you make a living? No, they said, well, how do you live? And he says, well, you know we Jews, we help each other sometimes, get a little money here, there, I eat here, I eat there.

But I think the classy question was, "Well, how do you make a living?" And he says, "You know what? I'm asking myself this question every single day." The guy threw up his hands and he said, "Okay, these Jews are impossible to deal with." And they let him go. Which is true. It was true. It was a juggling act, it was a juggling act.

Something very interesting also happened to my father. See, now I remember. He met a man in Budapest. He met a man in Budapest who somehow in a coffee house, wherever it was, he met my father. And my father had some business contacts. He was supposed to arrange some import

license from somewhere, from Switzerland maybe, and to get the broker to get a fee for it.

And this man sat down with my father and he said that he can save Jews. If you know that some Jews are in trouble -- make a long story short, he said he knew of two Viennese women which were in hiding. And they were from Vienna. And the Gestapo was after them for some reason. They were very rich or whatever, I don't know.

And my father gave this man the names of these two ladies. And a week or two weeks later, the original papers which were in the headquarters from Vienna, wherever it was, arrived and he gave it to my father and he says, "You don't have to worry about it because the records have been destroyed. Here are the records."

To make a long story short, my father became friends with this man. And he went over to his office to meet him. It was a very fancy house in Budapest. He had a huge picture of Hitler on his walls. And he was -- now, that was before the Nazis marched in, maybe a few months before. And he had a chauffer, he had a secretary, the whole thing.

I just remembered this story, and he liked my father very much. And through he, my father arranged to have a lot of people -- I remember the king of the gypsies came to our house and helped him to escape somewhere.

And this, my father couldn't put it together. He just knew that something wasn't kosher. The guy has this picture of Hitler and he is helping the Jews.

And he told my father one day, he says, he opened up his vault and said -- tell the story I heard at home when he came home at the kitchen table and he opened up this vault and he had money, British pounds, American dollars, everything right there. And he said to my father, all you have to do is you take a document, I'm going to -- and you're going to be dropped off with a parachute in no man's land. And people will be waiting for you and you give it to them and you take a train and come back home. And, I don't know, a tremendous amount of money, like (doshers) five thousand dollars, was huge in those days.

And my father was ready to go to do it. And my mother says, no way. She says, if you do it, I divorce you. I remember it was big fight at home. And so she wouldn't let him do it.

And about a week or two weeks or a month, I don't remember exactly, but I remember that -- I even remember that the chauffer showed up at our apartment knocking on the door. And he left a note, a message to my father that he should be at the rail station where I remember the Oriental Express going to Istanbul. He says his boss, you know, I don't know the name, was supposed to be -- meet my

father at the rail station because he wants to talk to him.

So my father went to the rail station. It sounds like fiction, but it's true. He went to the rail station and the man said to him that, now I can tell you that I'm on my way to Istanbul. He said the German army is marching into Budapest. They will be here in a few days. He said I am a British spy and I was posing as the representative like the headquarters of Gestapo. He said, I'm a British spy and I want you to leave this country if you can, move as soon as you can. Interesting story.

Q. DID HE OFFER TO HELP IN ANY WAY?

A. No, no. He just let him know. And then so I don't know, train took off. He just warned him, gave him a forty-eight hour notice or something like that.

Q. HOW SOON AFTER DID THE --

A. They were in, yes. Within a few days they were in. So he knew. He knew.

Q. WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE LIVING IN THE -- WHAT DID YOU CALL THAT YELLOW STAR HOUSE? HOW MANY FAMILIES WERE THERE?

A. Oh, God, I think it was a three or four story building. I don't think it had an elevator. I experienced the first time communal living which was -- oh, yes, I just remembered now.

I have a very vivid memory about community. I mean we all, you know, we shared. You had food, you shared with others. And so we had sort of sub groups, not that all four floors, but two or three families may eat together. Or you had something.

And I remember one day somebody got a goose, a live goose and there it was. But it was very common in Hungary, Europe that you don't have refrigerators. So they buy the goose or chicken live and then they take it to the (shacket). My mother, they could take it to the shacket. There is no shacket. Who is going to kill the goose?

So I said, me. No problem, I volunteer. I will do it. And even today I get goose pimples when I think about it because I just had to show that I can do it. And I held the goose and I held the neck, and the knife wasn't very sharp and I kept on going. And I was getting sick, but I wouldn't admit it.

So I killed the goose. I think this is the first time and last time I ever killed a goose. I don't think I could even look at a goose afterwards. It was terrible, but I did it because, see, all these people there, nobody would kill the goose and they all wanted to eat the goose.

Q. DID YOU EAT THE GOOSE?

A. I don't remember. I doubt it. I don't think so.

No, because as a child, I didn't like meat anyhow. Like a lot of children don't eat meat, I was one of those.

Q. WHAT WERE YOUR DAYS LIKE WHEN YOU WERE LIVING IN THE YELLOW STAR HOUSE? WHAT DID YOU HAVE TO DO?

A. Not much, not much. I had a girlfriend which kept me busy. I think I experienced my first love in that place. I think I was in love. I was fourteen years old or thirteen, very much in love with this girl. Her name was Katz. I remember the name, the last name. I don't remember the first name.

It was like totally separation from the rest of the world, you know. And we lived from day to day and we lived from news and trying to interpret the news. Like I remember bringing home the newspaper. And, of course, we had curfews. I think we could go off certain hours. After five we had to be -- I don't remember the exact hours, but I know that the hours were restricted. We couldn't just go any time.

And I remember the -- oh, and every Jew became a general. They were interpreting. But we already figured out because the Germans never retreated. See, we knew when the German army were pushed back because the newspaper would say that the Germans and the Hungarian army have adjusted their lines. This was the key word, adjusted. I said, they are not straight enough? They are

going back, right?

So I learned at a very young age to read between the lines. And then so everybody was coming up with invitation of the news, what is the truth.

But actually, come to think of it, my cousin, who was there also in that -- first cousin fell in love and actually he married the woman that he met there. He married the woman after the war. He was back in Belgium with my mother in the concentration camp and came back. He married her. They took him in and he was living with the family.

I have very fond memories of this house because we shared something. I think we were sharing hope. We lived between hope and the unknown that we can be taken any day. You know, that it can be over, taken to the camps.

Because then I remember one day when somebody got a letter, somebody got a letter from the train going to Auschwitz. What has happened is that somebody threw out the letter out of the little places, you know, where it was in these wagons with a stamp. Somebody picked it up and threw it in the mailbox. That's how it must have happened. And so they knew that there was an Auschwitz.

And we heard the rumors that people are being burned, but we couldn't believe it. It just was too scary to believe. But at one point, I think that the rumors got

stronger and stronger, I remember, and then, then we knew about the death camps and we knew that that is real.

But still until the last minute, I think the Hungarian Jews didn't believe that they'll be going there, the Jews from Budapest because the rural community was taken first. I don't know if you probably interviewed enough people, you know that. The rural community, that's where I lost almost all my family. It was a big family, maybe over seventy people. And we got together, four of us after the war was like a miracle, like one out of a hundred thousand or something, very unusual.

So going back to the house with the star, with the yellow -- the star of David. This was the house, the star of David house where finally one morning there was the bell ringing. It looked like a bell. And they asked for all the men over sixteen to come down, all the male.

Q. WHO WAS THEY?

A. Beg pardon?

Q. WHO WAS THEY?

A. The Hungarian (neilisch) the Hungarian Nazis, arrowheads, neilisch is arrowhead. And everybody was gathered, they said that they should take. They described a backpack and how many pounds you can take with you and they'll be going to work or whatever.

And that's the last time I saw my father and my

brother. So I was left with my mother. I was left with my mother.

And I'm trying to remember how long we stayed there because all was left is women and children. But we knew that the place was not safe. And we knew that we could be also taken. It was just a matter of time.

So I remember my mother was a very -- how can I say, very European wife who very much let her husband do the thinking and leadership. And I sort of took over the role of what we should do.

So we heard through the grapevine of the poppa protection houses which was Wallenberg. We did that. That was under the protection of the Pope, which was phony. We didn't know it was phony or not phony. And we heard about -- somebody told us, I don't remember the exact details. All I know is that there was such a house in Budapest. And if we could get there, we would be safe. But how can you get there?

At that time you are not allowed to get out. And I think they were working on the ghetto. Probably this was the transition because they couldn't close it in, the ghetto. It wasn't ready.

So I said to my mother, we are going to go there without the yellow star. I said, you just leave it up to me. And I'm not sure, but I think we packed our things

up, what we had because you live out of a suitcase anyhow. And some food we had.

And we first, I think, went to our old place because my mother had one particular friend there to get some additional food. I think we went there. It was an in and out kind of situation. Very quickly we may have picked up a piece of bread. I don't know what it was, but then we had to walk, which was a very long walk, maybe two or three hour walk from that place all the way to where this papal protection house was protected by the Pope, by Rome.

And I think the papal house was a creation of Wallenberg with the Swedish passports and this kind of thing. And I remember very vividly walking with my mother. And I was fourteen by the time, I'm fourteen years old, yes.

And I walked like a young man. She put her arm in arm and there was (ratzi) on the street, (rosea) which is a word I'm trying to translate. Since Jews were not allowed on the street, from time to time there was a blockade. How you call it, like you stop cars?

Q. A ROAD BLOCK.

A. Yes, a road block. They blocked the street, you know. And they would -- everybody has to identify himself, show his -- and if you're a gentile, you have to

have your identification card. And you have to have -- see, Jews just couldn't shop as a gentile. You had to have special stamps you could go and shop with the stamps, which you would have.

And there was two or three or four, I don't remember, a bunch of policemen, Hungarian policemen with the arrowhead standing on one side of the street. And like, say, the side of the street is here on the left side, sidewalk, road in the middle, other side, sidewalk, no cars, nothing. People would walk on the road, on the street, middle of the street.

And I was maybe a hundred yards or so walking in the middle of the street with my mother. And I saw that the people who were walking on the sidewalk, on the right side of the street, these people would call them over to this side of the street. They would not stand on that side, they would -- so I said to my mother, I said, "Mother, just don't worry, we will just go and just come with me."

And I grabbed her and we started walking very firmly right towards where the police were, very firm right towards the police. It's like walking the line -- and nobody would think that a normal person would do that so they didn't even question us. We just kept on walking by.

This is the first big bluff I pulled off and I felt

great. And so we got to that place and they took us in. And I remember we were moved up to the third floor. And we got in at that time in a room where there were maybe six or eight or ten people sleeping in one room. We were sleeping on the floor, no beds.

But we felt we are safe. I mean it was an incredible feeling. We are protected. We believed it. And the discussions were going, oh, they are not going to try to challenge the Pope of Rome and the Catholics and the Pope, and Catholics, the Pope. And why it happened because the Pope knows justice and it started, you know, optimism.

And I don't know how long we stayed, a month, two weeks, three weeks, a month. No, more, because I think my father and brother were taken in July of '44 and my mother was taken in September. August, July, August, September, yes. So we stayed there probably a month and a half or two months.

And one day the bell started ringing again. This I remember because that is like a bell, you know, like this. These apartment houses had courthouses, courtyard. And someone would stand in the middle of the courtyard and start -- this bell was very distinct, very loud. And it still rings in my ears.

And everybody looks out and they go around and say

everybody; male, female, child. Together we can take, I think, five kilograms. So by that time we knew. We knew quite a few details. We knew about Mengele, we knew that the people who were chosen to work, the people who are chosen to go to the crematoriums.

We knew that the children don't have a chance because they all -- they can't work. So they go to the crematorium. And I was a child. So I said to my mother, "I'm going to escape." She said, "Good, if you can do it, do it."

And they came to search from room to room. And I remember she gave me two hundred cigarettes in a box, which was valuable, and some money, all the money she had because she had no use for it. She gave me a few hundred (bengers). Each benger goes five to a dollar, so I don't know how much, thirty, forty, fifty dollars.

I remember that distinctly. That's it. No food, but the cigarettes and the money. And I kissed my mother good-bye and I went and hid in the toilet.

Now, the way I did that is that they were going from room to room. And say if you face -- we lived in a corner room. And as they were coming to the corner room, I left the corner room. There was a toilet and there were other rooms after that and continuation.

So when they finished the corner room and we were in

the last floor, they started knocking on the door. And I started screaming, ( ) you know, won't you let a little boy even do his biggie? And so they left. They left.

And from there, I hid in another room that they already checked and somehow they missed me. And my mother was taken. And the feeling I had, like being left alone in the entire world. Because there is this big building, everybody is gone. Only I am in this big building, three story apartment building. All those people, I'm just alone.

I remember I went around, found food still warm on the table. And I sat down by myself and I started smoking the cigarettes. It felt good to smoke a cigarette. What should I do? What should I do? I'm alone. I mean I get on the street, they're going to catch me, they kill me. What should I do?

And I came up with an idea. Why shouldn't I become a phony neilisch, arrowhead, Hitler youth? But how do you become a Hitler youth? Well, you need a uniform first. And second -- and this is so amazing, I haven't talked to a soul. This was all in my head. Second, I need papers.

So what comes first? Obviously you need a uniform first. So I made up my plan. So I went into a store. And I didn't look Jewish and I looked older than my age.

And I bought myself an arm band and I bought myself -- I don't think I bought myself a shirt. I bought myself a hat and I think I gave myself a rank. I don't remember if I gave myself a rank or not.

But I was a Hitler youth now. I had a uniform, I had the arm band, I had the hat. And now I need some papers.

So I went to the west -- the west train station in Budapest. And I figured out that people from the country are much -- there is a big difference. I mean there is a difference here also. You have to imagine like somebody who lives in New York, talk to someone who is a hillbilly from Arkansas. The person from New York is much more sophisticated.

So I think the difference between somebody from Budapest and somebody way out in the boondocks in the country is very huge. So I figured out that I'm going to pick up some kids about my age and they have to die.

So anyhow, the train is coming from -- I think it was coming from -- I forget where it came from. I just know that these are country boys fleeing from the Russians.

So I see a couple of kids about my age. So I say, ( ) hail Hitler. They come. I say, "Show me your identification." So I looked at it, both, and I still

remember today as if it was yesterday. I said, "The T two stamp is missing." They said, "We know, we are fleeing from the Russians, we didn't have a chance -- they didn't know what the hell I was talking about -- we didn't have a chance to go to headquarters." I said, you go immediately. No, tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, you're going to go to such and such headquarters. You're going to see such and such person, and you make sure that you are registered and you get away without any trouble. You can't walk around like this.

I took both identifications. I said, you shall find it there and then you get stamp there. ( ) They went left, I went right and I had now papers. I need to take a break.

Q. OKAY. WE'RE JUST ABOUT OUT OF TIME NOW.