

[INAUDIBLE] This is the Holocaust Oral History Project interview of Eva Slott taking place in San Francisco, California on November 15, 1993. My name is Sylvia [Personal name] Eva tell us when and where were you born.

I was born in Hungary. The name of the town is Szentes-- S-Z-E-N-T-E-S. And it's in the low land of Hungary between the Tisa and the Danube. And I was born on July 10, 1923.

What was your father's name?

My father's name was Dezso-- D-E-Z-S-O with an apostrophe on the top.

And where was he from?

He was born from a small town nearby Szentes called Mindszent-- M-I-N-D-S-Z-E-N-T.

Do you know his father's name?

For the moment, it escapes me.

And his last name?

Bergel-- B-E-R-G-E-L. They changed it. They Hungarianized it to Biro-- B-I-R-O.

When was it changed?

I really can't remember. It was quite a bit before I was born. And when, I was born my maiden name was Biro already-- B-I-R-O.

What did your father do for a living?

He had a yard goods store in Szentes. He was married to my mother, which was my mother's second marriage. My mother was married to someone from that town. During the First World War, he contracted tuberculosis and died, and left my mother with a little girl. And my mother remarried my father, and from this marriage, they had two children-- myself and my brother, in that succession.

What's your brother's name?

My brother's name was Laszlo in Hungarian, and later became Theodore, because he ended up in America.

When was he born?

He was born eight years later than I am.

1932?

Maybe I'm wrong on that.

'34-- excuse me.

I can't remember the year when he was born, but--

And you had an older sister?

I had an older sister from my mother's first marriage.

And her name?

Anna-- A-N-N-A--

Do you know how your mother and father met?

No, I don't. I'm afraid I don't.

When did they get married? What year?

I don't know that either.

What was your mother's name?

Regina-- R-E-G-I-N-A--

And where was she from?

She was from near outskirts of Budapest. And I have no idea how they met. The only thing I recall that-- since my mother was widowed, she remained in the town where they were living, and my father was not married, and somehow they got together.

What year did they get married?

I don't know.

Do you know the name of her first husband?

Oh, dear-- their last name was Engel-- Engelman. ] Can't remember-- might be Henry I don't know.

Perhaps not. did you know the name of your mother's parents?

Completely escape me-- I can't remember these names at all.

What did they do for a living, if you know?

Yes. My grandfather on my mother's side had a-- I had never seen it, but I understand-- the wholesale liquor business in [Place name] which is in outskirts of Budapest.

Did you ever meet your maternal--

I never met my grandfather, but I did meet my grandmother, my mother's mother. I did know her.

What was she like?

She was a very kind and very dear lady, and kind of short and warm. And I liked her very much, but I don't know her first name either.

Did you ever meet your father's--

I met my father's father, but not his mother. And his name was Lajos. I forgot it. I couldn't remember before-- L-A-J-O-S-- Lajos.

And what was he like?

He had a great big mustache, and at the time I remember him, he was always sitting by a potbelly stove, and warming himself, and smoking a cigarette. And he was very fond of me, and I treasured him very much. And he was rather old, in his 80s, when he passed away. He was a well-liked individual in the community. He lived in Mindszent, which is the town that I mentioned before.

Your mother's maiden name-- what was that?

Regina Schlesinger-- S-C-H-L-E-S-I-N-G-E-R I think it's spelled.

And where were the Schlessingers from originally, Hungary or elsewhere?

Well, I always knew they were from Hungary. I don't know where the roots came from, but the family lived-- cousins, and their sisters, and brothers-- they all lived in that area. Where they originally migrated from I have no idea. They were always very proud to be Hungarians.

Your mother had brothers and sisters?

My mother had several brothers and sisters. The only one I knew quite well was a sister, who lived in Budapest and whom I had contact with through my childhood and into the Holocaust, where she passed away after the Holocaust, actually, in Budapest.

And her name?

Janka, which spells J-A-N-K-A.

If you can remember the other brothers and sisters by name, if you could tell us-- if not, just tell us how many-- your mother's siblings.

There I think there were three girls-- my mother, my aunt, and another sister, whose name was Hermina. There was a brother whose name was Joseph, Alex, Arthur, and I believe one more, whose name I can't think of right now. The only brother I knew was Joseph.

When you say knew, does that mean that you grew up with him around visiting and--

No, it means that he became a physician and left Hungary in the very early '20s-- 1920s-- and came to New York. And he practiced as a physician in Flushing, New York. And my parents passed away when I was eight years old, and he was one of the brother who came back from New York. And that's when I met him, the year following after my death-- after my parents' deaths, when he came back from Hungary-- from New York to Hungary.

See, what happened-- there were three of us children in our family. My father died at the age of 41 of a cardiac arrest on Yom Kippur night, and my mother died two weeks later. And the three children were left, and my mother's last wish was to have the three children go to three uncles, who had been in a financial position to assume the responsibility of the three children.

My sister was, I believe, 16, I was eight, and my brother was two years younger. I couldn't recall the age he was born. So my sister was 16, I was eight, and he was six at the time my parents died. Then this small little family was divided. My sister was transferred to her father's brother-- member of my mother's first marriage. I was transferred to my father's brother, and my brother was taken to Budapest and stayed with my mother's sister, who had my brother in her home until my uncle from Flushing, New York returned to Hungary with the intention of adopting me. And then they decided to adopt my brother. So my brother was adopted and brought to the United States. I believe the year was in 1932.

Let me get this [INAUDIBLE] at the time of your parents' death, Anna was 16.

As I recall, she was 16--

You were eight.

--I was eight, and my brother was six.

So there's two years difference between [you and your brother.

Two years-- I couldn't recall it earlier.

So he was born in 1928?

Must have been-- and I can't remember his birthday.

What did your mother die of?

He took an overdose of seconal. My father died of-- Yom Kippur night, and in those days, after the temple, people-- my whole family congregated in one family's home, and after they walked home from there, my father went to sleep, and during the night he had a coronary arrest. And nobody travels on Yom Kippur day, and the family was short of help-- immediate support. And there was an aunt on my father's side, who was old, in her late 70s, and every year she would spend her holidays with us.

And she was the only lady around-- or the only person, I should say, who could stay was my mother. And they covered all the mirrors, as the custom is. And because of the holidays, the body of my father had to remain in the house. And it was a very depressing situation, and my mother was very despondent to lose her second husband, and was left with three children. In the middle of the night, she couldn't sleep.

And she went to the medicine cabinet, and found some seconal and took it. I have no idea how many she took, but in the morning, when this aunt-- who was sitting on the sofa sleeping while all this was taking place-- my mother was not feeling well, and they called the doctor. And then they took her with an ambulance to a town where there was a good hospital, and they tried to save her, but the time between the ingestion of the medication and the time they found her was too long, and all that seconal absorbed.

So they brought her back home so she should be able to see the children, and then she passed away at home. And that's when we were transferred to the family-- to the different parts of the family.

Must have been devastating--

Well, it was very difficult. Of course, we were lost, and then we were separated, the three children. So we didn't even have the support of each other. And my sister, being 16, shortly after the-- her uncle found a young man who was looking for a wife, and she got married to somebody who was considerably older. And she died in childbirth at the age of 18. And my brother was taken to America by my uncle, and I was left really the only one in Hungary. Now, my sister's daughter, who was born out of this marriage, survived and survived the concentration camp. And she is still in Hungary.

And her name?

Her name is Agnes. As a matter of fact, I'm hoping that she will come visit me this December, next month.

Anna died when you were--

When she was 18--

--when you were 10.

I must have been about 10, because my niece, Agnes-- the little girl who was born out of that marriage-- was born on July 6, and I was exactly 10 years old at that time. And my birthday's July 10, so it's just a few days apart.

Within the space of two years, you lost your mother, your father, your older sister to death.

And my brother was brought to America.

And you lost--

Yes.

--separated from your brother.

And then my grandmother, whom I was very fond of-- my mother's mother-- she also passed away in that short period of time. My uncle, who was my foster father-- they had never adopted me, but they were married for 14 years and they never had any children. And she did get pregnant shortly after I came into their home, and then she died due to cancer when her child was, I believe, four years old-- very young. So I was 14 when I lost her.

And her name?

Her name was Elizabeth.

And whose wife was-- her husband?

Her husband was Joseph, my uncle.

You lived with Elizabeth and Joseph?

Yes.

What is the name of the uncle who brought your brother?

His name is Joseph also.

[INAUDIBLE]

There were three Josephs, three uncles in the family. My sister went to an uncle, whose name is Joseph on her father's brother was Joseph. My father's brother was Joseph also. My mother's brother was also Joseph.

So you went to live with Elizabeth and Joseph?

And Joseph, in Mindszent-- and he had a business where he sold leather goods to make-- hand make in those days-- shoes, and boots, and work shoes. And he had a very good business, and financially very secure. And my mother felt that they had no children at that time, and financially secure that they would be able to take care of me properly, and love me, and I suppose educate me, because they had the financial means.

You said that it was your mother's last wish that the three [INAUDIBLE]

The three children should go to the three uncles--

Where did she make this last wish known?

She was at home after they brought her back from the hospital, when they realized that they could not save her life. And she was in our house at the time she passed away, and that is where she made her last wish.

Were you were when she died?

I wasn't at the bedside, but we were there to say goodbye to her before she passed.

[INAUDIBLE] that she was dying and that you had to--

Yes.

--say goodbye?

See, at the time my parents-- my father died, we had a very good family friend who lived not very far from us. They took us into their home to take us away from the house where this tragedy happened. People had to wait until the holiday was over before they could do anything, or even notify some of the family members who lived in other towns.

And so this friend came and took my brother and I. My sister, being older, she remained in our house. And also, my aunt I spoke about earlier, who was an elderly lady-- the two of them stayed. And then we had people-- servants who lived in house, and they were there. When my mother was brought back to our home, we were told that we're going to see our mother to say goodbye to her. We actually saw her being taken away with an ambulance. I remember looking out the window and seeing the ambulance go.

I'm sorry. And then, when they brought her back, and then before my uncle arrived to take me with him, I stayed with this family friend. And they had children-- two boys about the same age. well, then, when I was at Mindszent, and my uncle and his wife had this little girl, they found out that she had a lump in her breast, and they did a-- they took her into Szentes, where they had a specialist who was very highly thought of, and he did a lumpectomy.

And of course, he knew that it was malignant. And they did do a mastectomy, but it was too late. They did bring her home, and she actually passed away in our house. And then my uncle, who now had my niece and myself, had a housemother he hired from Budapest, who was a lady who lost her husband and came from a very good home. And she needed some income, and she was with us for quite a while. And I can't remember exactly how long.

And then somebody told my uncle that there was a lady who lost her husband due to typhus, and she was in the same business in another town. And they brought them together, and he ended up marrying her. She had no children so I ended up with another mother by this time. Fortunately, these people were very good to us.

But I think this early tragedy left all three of us with a very difficult life, I think. And then, when my brother came to America, of course, our only contact was through writing, and mainly between the adults, because we were too young. Then, after the elementary school and high school that I went through in Mindszent, which was a community-- approximately 10,000 people-- Hitler was already known and feared.

And the question was as to what to do with my schooling and where to go. I was hoping to go into nursing school, but that was quickly eliminated, because my uncle felt that, if I learned a trade, no matter what happens, that my survival would be easier. And so they considered hairdressing, shoemaking, or dressmaking.

And for different reasons, they eliminated-- the hairdressers in those days, unfortunately, were not very highly regarded tradesmen. And my uncle's words to me were that, no matter where people are where they have to go, they always have to wear clothes, so I think you should learn to sew. And he made the arrangement for me to go into Szeged-- S-Z-E-G-E-D-- Szeged, which is a larger town.

And he had a good friend who was in manufacturing shoes there, who had a daughter. They had a lovely home, and sufficient servants and room for me. And he made the arrangement with a salon for me to study there. Everything was handmade, and the customers were mainly well-to-do people. And so I went through the training there.

Then I was apprenticed there, and then I passed my examination and received my workbook. In those days, if you successfully completed your tradesmanship, you were given a book. And I have that book with me, if you would like-- so happens that I was able to save it.

And then, while I was in Szeged, I was in my mid teens by that time. Actually, we knew the situation with Hitler was getting more serious, but of course, it happened outside of Hungary, and it wasn't going to happen to us, of course. That was everybody's belief. And after I learned to sew and got my book, I moved to Budapest. And I was living there. And I was living in Budapest at the time Hitler marched into Hungary.

Do you remember the year?

Well, I was trying to recall. I know it was on a Sunday when Hitler-- when the Germans marched into Hungary. Excuse me. May I blow my nose?

How old were you when you graduated from high school?

Well, see, we have four year elementary school, four year in high school. So I was 14, somewhere-- let's see-- eight-- about 16, somewhere around there.

And then how long did your apprenticeship as a dressmaker take?

That was two years.

And then you moved to Budapest [INAUDIBLE]

Then I went to Budapest, yes.

When you were 18?

Somewhere around there, in my late teens-- I can't remember. I was trying to think about the age, but I couldn't recall the-- but it was somewhere toward my late teens.

So possibly, this might have been 1944?

For some reason, March of '44 seems to be the date, but I know it was on a Sunday.

What do you remember?

It was a terrible day. I was visiting a cousin of mine on my-- my aunt Elizabeth had a niece in Budapest, whom I was very close to. And I went to visit them on Sunday, and we could hear the tanks rolling down the main boulevard. But I cannot describe the fear that we had in our hearts, because we didn't know what was going to happen.

And I was visiting with-- her name is [Personal name] in Hungarian, but it's Susan in English. And we knew that this probably is the beginning of the unknown of what might happen to the Jews in Hungary. And it was like this-- life stood still for the time being-- the unknown, the fear, the uncertainty, the quandary whether I should go back to my family. Should I remain here?

Nobody really knew what advice to give. And it was actually a good thing I decided to stay in Budapest for-- from the point of view of staying alive, because as soon as the Germans came in, they occupied all the railroad stations. And there were a lot of people who were trying to get out of Budapest, go back to their families-- they were arrested and deported, and most of them never heard from.

And I remained there. I don't know how I made the decision, or what basis. Everybody said, why didn't you wait? And

so I did. And then, of course, we heard not to go near any railroad station to any direction, because they were picking people off. Of course, the Germans would close off streets and ask for identification, and that's how they started to gather the Jews.

I was working actually at that time in a salon in the center of Budapest, which was a very well-liked and regarded place in [Place name] which today houses all the fashionable stores. And I was living with my aunt-- my aunt who had my brother, who took care of my brother until my uncle came back from Hungary-- from America.

Her name was Janka, and she had a daughter, whose name is Elizabeth. And I was living with them. She was widowed, and lived with her daughter. I went back to work after the Germans came in, and there were a lot of people there who were working in Budapest from Yugoslavia, and they all worked underground.

And they advised me not to fear, that they would help me-- in case something happens, that they would help me to escape, or hide me, or protect me somehow. So I continued going to work. And then, of course, I was in contact with my family through mail.

One day I was asked to go downstairs, where the customers were seen, because the shop actually was on the second floor. The cutter who was my foreman, walked up to us, and he was ashen white. And he came over to me, said, there are two gendarmes here to see you. And the whole room just really came to a standstill. And I was frightened, but I had to go down to see them.

And they asked to owner to give us a private room. And when they closed the door, they told us that-- they told me that they are there to arrest me and take me back to my family, because the head of the gendarmes was-- had great respect for my uncle. My uncle asked him to come and bring me home, and the only way they could bring me home safely-- if they would arrest me officially, and under arrest, would escort me back to where my family was.

However, my uncle left message with them to tell me that, if I elect not to come, he will understand, because they already knew that, from the ghetto, they are going to have to be deported to a larger city. And if I elect not to go back, then he send me some money and food with these people. So these people would give me the choice whether to go back and join my family in the ghetto or whether to stay and remain in Budapest.

The people who came to rescue you told you this? Yes,

Yes. Yes. They were two trusted men from the-- I call them the gendarmes, but I-- they were not policemen and they were not military. There was another unit in Hungary that was really responsible to help to get the Jews into the ghetto. And my uncle lived in a corner house, and because of his standing in the community, they elected to put the ghetto starting with that house.

So I have never been there, but our house in Mindszent, where my uncle lived with his second wife and his child from the first marriage, was part of the ghetto. And there were communities-- smaller communities around them, where the people were brought in and housed there until the whole community was transferred to Szeged. And Szeged is the larger community where I actually spoke of where I learned to sew.

So I elected not to go back. I went upstairs and talk to my friends there, and I asked him some advice, some guidance. And they all felt that Budapest was a larger city. Possibly, the Germans might be defeated by the time this organization would succeed in Budapest. And as much as we had to live in yellow star homes, we were still not put into ghettos. So I elected not to go back. And this decision had caused me, I must admit, a lot of guilt feelings, because I felt that I was selfish.

Why?

Because they all died.

At the time, you felt it was selfish. At that point--



Well, at that time, I didn't. At that time, I really didn't know what to do, and I was scared, and it was the unknown. And I listened to one thing they said that possibly living in a large city might be easier, and I elected not to go.

And when did you start to feel that this was a selfish act?

Well, after I'd realized that the family and all the friends were deported. And of course, after the war, mainly because-- after the war, when I realized that they were not coming back. See, I didn't know where they were taken. I knew the city they were taken to, but I didn't know. They ended up in Auschwitz. Of course, I didn't find this out until after the war.

This was your uncle Joseph?

Yes. And then I had an aunt, whom I was very fond of, who lived in a nearby community. And she had her husband and her two daughters, whom I basically grew up with. And they were all there. And of course, all the people in the community I grew up with, all the people I knew--

Let's go back for just a little. Your father-- how many brothers and sisters did he have?

He had two sisters, and one of the sisters-- the one I just mentioned, who had two daughters and lived in a nearby community not far away from where I was brought up--

Right. And her name?

Her name was Gisella. We called her Giza-- G-I-Z-A-- but I believe her full name might have been Gisella. I'm not so sure of-- her two daughters-- one was Elona, Elonka, as we called it. And the other sister was Rozsa-- R-O-Z-S-A. As a matter of fact, she survived. They all were deported to Auschwitz. My aunt and the two daughters survived.

Do you know the name of the other sister?

Elona and Rozsa--

Those are your cousins?

These are my cousins.

Your father's other sister--

Oh, I'm sorry. I think in English it would be Maria-- [? Marishka ?] in Hungarian. She had one son. She was living with my grandfather, my father's father. And they had a grocery store in Mindszent, the same town where I was born.

Did your father had brothers?

My father had a brother who lived in Zagreb, whom I never met. He had two sons. I only knew one of them. His name was Otta-- O-T-T-A. And he had another brother who lived in the same town where I was born. His name was Matthew, or [Personal name] in Hungarian. He had one son, whose name I can't remember. That's all I can remember.

And Joseph?

And Joseph, yes-- and my aunt, who had their two daughters-- I said two sisters and the brothers. My father-- the brother who was in Zagreb, the brother who was in Szentes, who had that one son-- I think that's it. I didn't know these people, and we had no contact with them, so it's difficult for me to recall them.

Now, my aunt and the two daughters she had, they returned from Auschwitz. One daughter died in Hungary at a later age due to a stroke, and then the other daughter, Rosa, my-- they live in San Jose here in California, so she survived.

The name of the daughter of Elizabeth and Joseph--

Judith--

And the name of your elderly aunt who was staying with you when your mother died--

I don't know.

Or the name of a family friend with whom you stayed after your mother died--

I was trying to recall their name, and I may recall it, but at the moment, I can't.

Do you remember anything about when you stayed with them? Was it a few weeks, a few days?

The length of time is completely lost. It was between the time my mother passed away and my uncle came to get me. And it wasn't a very long time, because after the holidays were over with, they were able to travel, and then the decision was made to follow this course. And I really have no recollection as to how long I stayed with them.

When you said goodbye to --

Balazs, the last name was Balazs-- B-A-L-A-S-Z. It's really interesting how these names-- I thought about it so much before I came, and I couldn't think about [? it. ?] Suddenly it came.

Do you remember saying goodbye to Anna?

No, I don't remember any of that-- not at all, not at all. [INAUDIBLE] goodbye to your brother?

I have seen my brother several times after she-- he went to Budapest, because it wasn't until the following year that my uncle and his wife came back. I remember there was a family reunion in Szentes, in the town when-- where we were born and raised with my parents. I do have a picture of that reunion, when my uncle and his wife was there, and all the family who was living in that town.

And that was the last time. But the specific goodbye is completely lost. I only remember the family reunion and knowing that he was going to America. But going to America in those days was-- it was fantastic. It was the ultimate happiness for anyone. It represented a completely different life and. And somehow, I think, it represented hope in our particular predicament, since, in a sense, we all left-- we all felt that we were left behind, which we were.

I think, in those days, we were much too young to understand what really took place-- that my father couldn't help that his heart gave out. And the stigma of how my mother died, I'm sure, was lingering in the air, because for a long time, people didn't really talk about the fact that she took the medicine. I have never held it against her. I never felt it was something she shouldn't have done, because I cannot make that judgment.

She was despondent. She left three children behind. This was her second marriage. She was a woman who was in very delicate health. She had lots of health-- serious health problems. And from what I understand from the adults who-- I could still hear their conversations that basically was not for my ears in those days-- that it was very difficult for her to face life with the three children, and the uncertainty of what may happen, how she was going to continue the business to give us livelihood when she was in such bad health. So in my heart, I always understood her.

She did come and tell your aunt who was staying she wasn't feeling well.

Well, it was in the morning. I understand, from what I remember, that this was sometime during the night around 1 o'clock in the morning or so when she got up, and she couldn't sleep, and she took the medicine. The medicine was given to her because of her insomnia due to her illness. But I don't know how many tablets she took, but whatever she

did, she took too many.

I don't really know whether she took it intentionally or whether she took it because she wanted to sleep. The only thing I remember as a child was that, by the time they found out and got a physician to intervene, it was too late. And in order to get her to a better place, where they could possibly help her more, she had to be transported several miles away.

But somehow even the professors there at the hospital could not help her, because all that seconal absorbed and did so much damage to her organs that they didn't feel, in those days-- this was many years ago, where I'm sure medical knowledge wasn't what it is today. But anyway, when they told her obviously that she was not to survive, then she asked to be returned to see her children.

What illness did she have?

Well, to be specific, I don't know. I have a picture of her in my mind, an actual picture, where she was always sickly. And she was a very attractive woman, but as a young child, I always remember her as being sick. My father was this strong person who carried the burden of having the family, and making a livelihood, and keeping their household going.

And in those days, you had servants, and the expenses had to be covered, and I imagine there was a great pressure on him. And I don't know what the Hungarian financial situation was at that time, but having a yard goods store and providing a good living might have been too much for him.

So I don't know. I really can't remember what illnesses my mother. I don't even know if I really knew-- ever knew. I have a feeling that we were rather protected from any adult conversation. I remember several times as a child walking into a room where adults were talking in German. They would always say, not front of the children. It's like we were not supposed to understand German.

We had a Austrian nursemaid from the time I was two years old, so we all spoke German, so we understood it. But still, this was their signal to each other not to speak to children. So my ignorance partly is due to that, and partly probably memory.

10 seconds [INAUDIBLE]

I can't remember where we were.

You mentioned the stigma of your mother's death. Did you feel when she died --

As a child, I did feel that people talked about the fact that, quote, unquote "she committed suicide," but it wasn't an open discussion. And somehow I felt that, in those days, for anyone to commit suicide was a taboo, was not something that was admired. And I always felt that-- even as a child, I have never held it against her. I don't know. Maybe I didn't understand it, or maybe because I wanted to protect her, or maybe I just understood her desperation.

Being a young woman left without parents is not a very happy childhood, and I don't think that-- as much as I would like to be very fair, I can remember some of the things that my uncle and his second wife, or even his first wife would elect to have as a policy in their house that-- I held it against him that-- would they do this to their own child, or is it done because I'm not their only child-- not their own child?

And people are always very kind and feed children with negative thoughts, thinking they're helping them. When I would go and talk to people and complain to them, people would not get me straightened out. Maybe it's for my good, but because-- well, it's your stepfather, or it's your uncle. So it wasn't a very happy childhood-- with many happy things in between.

I was very secure financially. I lived in a beautiful home. We had always two servants. And I was, in the meantime, brought up very strictly. I had to learn how to do all the housework, even though there were somebody who was responsible for the cooking and cleaning. I had to partake in it, because being a woman, you should know and you

should learn.

In those days, we didn't have any entertainment in town. We had movies maybe once a week or once every so often, and it was a special treat. And if we did something that was punishable, then they grounded us and we couldn't even go to the movies. I remember my uncle being as strict as he was, we had school dances, and I was not allowed to go. It wasn't proper.

And so these are the things that would cause unhappiness, of course. And if I would complain to people, well, they would say, well, it's because it's your uncle, or because your stepfather. So maybe all this feeling or-- I don't know, but I never-- coming back to the original thought, I have never faulted my mother for doing it.

Do you remember what you said to her when you were brought in to say goodbye?

I remember this scene that she was in bed, and my brother was there, and my sister and I, and we all were crying. And I remember her telling me-- telling us, actually-- that we are going to go and live with our uncles. But the only thing I remember is that we were crying very hard.

What did she look like?

She was a petite woman with very delicate features. And I think she had sort of blondish hair, but it wasn't very blonde. It was sort of brunette. My father was very, very dark. And I think that my brother resembled more my mother's family and I resemble more of my father's family.

I had very dark hair, and my features were more how my father's family looked. And I remember my mother in a comfortable lounge chair and recovering from some kind of surgery. I remember her more as a person who was having medical problems. And I don't remember any specific things that we did together.

I remember our home. It was rather a large house-- and a garden with very formal arrangement, and had some grapes, and then a veranda at the edge of the house. And we had a room that was decorated in Hungarian motifs. And the furniture was painted blue and with Hungarian motifs. It was a room with all windows, so it was very bright and cheerful.

And we had the room next to it that had a piano in it, and-- where the guests would be welcomed or entertained. And this room faced-- had a window toward the street. Then the next room was a combination of a bedroom and sitting room-- the next one also a bedroom and sitting room, and then a dining area, and then a summer kitchen. And then we had pigeons, and we had a back area where the wood, and coal, and-- it was rather a large house.

And how many servants did you have?

We had two.

What did they do?

One was responsible for the cooking and the other one was mainly to keep the house clean, and I suppose to keep us cleaning-- clean. And then we had our nursemaid, who came from Austria. And she was with us until I was seven years old. And I think she learned Hungarian more than we learned German, but I did learn German, really.

And we'd never actually practiced a language, other than talking to her. And then she left, and I don't remember her leaving or why she left. But she was there until then. I understand, when my brother was born, she was already with us. And I don't remember that either. I don't remember anything. I was about two years old when my brother was born, but I don't remember anything. I remember vignettes in our lives, but--

Tell us the vignettes.

Well, I remember when my brother broke his leg. And he was running home, and the street that we lived down had a sharp corner to turn on, and he was running too fast, and he fell and hit his leg on the edge of the sidewalk. And he broke his leg. And I don't know why I remember that. That stayed with me. I had nothing to do with it, and I don't remember taking care of him or anything.

I remember our neighbors who lived next door. He was an attorney. They had a daughter. And as a matter of fact, after the war, when I returned to Hungary and my husband and I visited the town where I was born and raised in Szentes, I went back to look up their house to see if it was still there. And the people who lived next door to us-- the daughter who married the physician purchased our home, and they lived there. So I was able to go inside and see that.

Was it the same as you remembered it?

It was exactly the same I remembered it. They did not change any of the physical layout, as far as I could tell. Of course, I didn't remember everything about it, but-- that was just a brief visit, but she did lead me through the--

You mentioned a room where there was-- where the family entertained. What do you mean by entertaining?

Well, if people came-- visit us, then they would serve coffee, and cake, and-- like a sitting room more.

Who would come to visit?

The family where my sister finally went to-- they were living in the same town, and they had cousins. It was a rather large group of people who came from that part of the family, my mother's first marriage-- and they kept in touch with us and very close contact with-- and they would always get together for big holidays or for some family gathering. And if any of those people would come and visit us, or people who were just friends of the family-- but that room was reserved for special occasions.

Do you remember birthday parties?

No. No. I don't remember.

Did you and your parents take vacation trips, or traveling?

I don't remember anything.

What about the food that was served? The cooks did it all?

Yes, but my mother was rather active also in the actual cooking, and she always did the baking. It was sort of like she was doing it, but all these-- these two people would be helpful. She put all her winter fruits and-- conserve all the fruits, and vegetables, and tomatoes, and-- every year, because that's the only thing they used. There are no canned goods in those days.

And she did all the preserving. And I remember her pantry very well. She had a very big pantry. And the best I remember-- that she partook in all those activities. I remember the room and the shelves for all those wonderful apricots, and the rinds of watermelon, and the different preserves that she put away.

I can see her in the kitchen, but-- and I know that we she had the Hungarian kitchen, cooking like most Hungarians would, with a lot of paprika and a lot of fried wonderful food-- tasting good food. But I don't remember any specific things. I remember one thing in the dining area-- that there was a summer kitchen that we used when it was very hot.

And there was a sink that was attached to the wall, and we had to wash our hands, of course, before we sat down. And as children, we had a habit of leaning back on a chair and just having the chair and the-- and we would always be told that, if we fall, we're going to knock our front teeth against that faucet-- and little things like that which --

Did anybody fall?

No, nobody did. But that was the way to correct us for not doing it. And I do remember one thing, that we had to eat our vegetables first, and then we get the meat, and we never got our dessert until we finished our meal. Otherwise, we couldn't just eat what we wanted. What was put on our plates we had to finish. So it was straight from that point.

Did you finish?

Oh, yes. Even today it's difficult for me to leave anything. It's ingrained.

What was the dessert?

I can't remember any specific dessert, but they were-- must have been very much liked, because we all finished everything in order to eat dessert.

And what were the vegetables [INAUDIBLE]

You mean specifically? Well, chicken paprikash, which is a Hungarian dish-- it's made with a lot of onions and paprika. And the Hungarian paprika has a very bright color to it, and they put quite a bit in it. Some people put flour in it, but my family never did, and I learned to do it that way. And cucumbers salads or butter lettuce with just water, vinegar, and sugar, that they still do-- some of the meats were breaded and fried. And the desserts were torts or crepes suzette that type of dessert.

What kind of tort?

Well, some of the torts had several layers, or were [INAUDIBLE] that had jam in it, or some had some fruit flavors called puncstorta. I don't know where it got the name from, because it doesn't make sense in relationship. It's sort of like a sponge cake with fruit flavors in it. And I know they used a lot of butter, and the cream's chocolate with cocoa, with-- but a lot of butter.

I don't remember eating any pork, but we did not have a kosher household. And so it's possible that we did eat and I just don't remember. But as far as I remember, we did not have a kosher household.

Did you have a Sabbath dinner?

Yes, we had a Sabbath dinner, and then the family-- I don't remember going to the synagogue, but I'm sure I must have, because I had to go to study periods. But the family would go to the synagogue Friday night, and then usually, after dinner, people would gather in somebody's home and have dinner and conversation visit.

And when my father died, it was one of those occasions where, on the holy holiday, they would go to the temple, which was quite a distance away with some conveyance but then, coming back, I wasn't allowed to use any of the conveyances, so they had to walk. And I remember I was not included, but-- I mean the children were not-- but I remember them telling me-- telling us that, when they walked home, my father was well, and then he-- they went to sleep, and-- for some reason, I slept in the same room-- the same bedroom where they were.

Whether I was ill or not, I don't know why I was, at that time, in my bed in the main bedroom. And I remember my mother turning on the light and kind of screaming, in a sense. And my father was sitting up in the bed, and then my mother put her coat on-- had her nightgown and her slippers on-- and then she left the room. And then I heard that she ran next door, because next door to us there was a physician who lived there.

And she ran next door to ask him to come to help my father, because she heard the gurgling sounds from his throat. He was sitting up in the bed. And I remember when I finally woke up, and he was kind of sitting in bed, and his head slumped down. And that was the last picture I remember. So he probably was short of breath or in pain, and he probably sat up.

My mother woke up and turned to light on because she heard the gurgling sounds. And then I remember afterwards, they cover all the mirrors with black. And then they put the deceased down on the floor, and he-- they dismantled the beds. And I remember, for a long time, I could never walk through that area where he was lying down.

When the family would come back from the synagogue on Sabbath, what time of day would the Sabbath meal be held? We're talking about Friday night or Saturday?

Well, the Friday nights that I remember, when they had candles and a table was set specially with the challah on the table-- but of course, we would-- my father was in business, so I don't know what time it might have been, but it would have had to be after my father came back from the business. I don't have very much recollection of my childhood in detail. I don't ever think about it.

It seems like the memories that remained with me were more related to the tragedies, instead of to the happiness, because--

Is there any happy moments that you can recall from the childhood?

Well, the only thing I feel in my heart-- that I felt very secure and loved, but I cannot-- and I was very fond of both of my parents, and I felt that they loved me very much, but I don't remember. I felt very secure. I remember the house, I remember the people, but I don't remember any outstanding memory of birthdays or any special occasions.

What is the earliest memory you have of your father?

I remember him in about the period very close toward the end. I don't remember him in an early age, when I was younger. I don't remember our whole family upbringing. I can't recall anything.

What about earliest memories of your mother?

I can see them both just before they died. I don't remember them before.

Did you celebrate all the religious holidays?

We celebrated the religious holidays, but I don't think that my family was very religious. They observed Friday nights. They observed all the high holidays. But I really think that they were so assimilated. They didn't deny being Jewish. They didn't assimilate into another religion, but I don't remember any religious custom that would have remained with me that was other than around the holidays.

What about Passover?

I remember they observed all the major holidays, and that we wouldn't have any bread when matzoh was served or on Yom Kippur, they would go to temple and stay there all day, but I don't remember any ceremony or any family gathering in our house due to any of these holidays.

Did you have a Passover seder?

We must have had, but I don't remember --

[INAUDIBLE]

[INAUDIBLE]

Any of the Passover foods at all?

Well, not from home-- I have attended Passover since I came to America, and some of those things are in my mind because of what I have seen here. And I know that it must have existed, but as far-- it's all gone.

How old were you when you went to public school for the-- or when you went to elementary school?

Well, I believe we started school around the age of six. And then we went to elementary school. And I went to elementary school in Szentes. That was before my parents passed away. I remember the town scarcely. I remember where we lived. I remember where my father's business was. I remember where the cemetery is.

Do you remember their funerals?

We were not allowed to go to the funeral, but I remember seeing the cortege going by the house, where we were at the friend's house, because I was at the window. And the only thing I remember was that I was crying, and the person who was next to me was comforting me, and that's all I remember.

Can you remember yourself at the time when your parents were still alive?

I remember one dress I must have been very fond of. It was pink silk dress with blue scallops all around my neck and my sleeves. And I think the reason I remembered that-- because I was in a park, and I put some blueberries on the pink dress. And that's why I probably remember. And I was very afraid as to what was going to happen when I get home. I don't know what happened, but I remembered it. I had a pair of black patent leather shoes with ankle socks and pink-- I think I even have a picture of it somewhere.

Can you describe that little girl to me, before your father died? What did she look like? What did she walk like?

Well, I think they had a lot of trouble with me, I think. I was very energetic, I think. I remember being very active. And I have a feeling, as much as I can't remember the details, that I did something naughty within that dress with the berries, and that I was probably afraid of the consequences, where I knew I shouldn't have done what I did. But what actually happened I can't remember. I remember the park, where we used to go every day for our walks.

Oh, I remember one incident very well. And that is not very complimentary. The young lady who was with us from Austria had found another young woman from either Austria or Germany, from an attorney's home, where she was taking care of the little boy who was about our age. And the three children were walking in the front-- the little boy, my brother, and I-- and the two ladies were behind us.

And on our walk, we came to a store that was selling nuts. And this little boy said to me, why don't you go over there and take it you know the big sacks, front of the store. And I remember that I got a good coaching that I should and I said, no, why don't we all three go? And he said, no, you go. So all three of us went over to the window, but I was the one who went over to the sack and took one nut out.

And we continued with our walk. And I can't remember what happened with the nut, but I do remember, by the time we got back to my father's store, I was asked to come over to where he was sitting. And he asked me if anything-- how was our walk, and if I-- anything happened. And I said no. And he said, you know, there was a policeman here-- told me that you stole from the store.

And I said, I didn't do it. My friend did it. Well, it turned out to be that my father knew that I was the one who took it out. So I had to go over and apologize to the little boy, because I lied. And I had to go back and apologize to the people I took the one nut from. So I learned my lesson.

Which was--

First of all, not to steal, and then not lie-- but this was one incident I remember from my father. And this was-- must have been before I was seven years old because, my Austrian nanny left when I was seven. So somebody must have seen us from the store, and must have gone back. I don't know how that information got to my father, but it sure did.



That was the only incident I remember.

How large was this nut?

A nut, one nut--

Was it good?

I can't remember whether we ate it, or threw it away, or played with it, or what. It was the lesson of life.

What did your father's store look like?

Well, I remember his store-- beautiful materials. All these materials were very colorful and very neatly lined up on the shelf. And he had several-- couple of people, if I remember correctly, working. And one of the ladies who worked there with my father must have been very fond of him.

After the war, when I went back to Hungary and saw-- visited the house where-- that was ours, and the attorney's daughter with her husband-- who was a physician-- purchased it, she told me that there is a woman who used to work for my father, and that she always ask her if they ever heard what happened to us, who-- by that time, I came to America and my brother was in America.

And so she told me where this lady lived, and I went to visit her. And I kept in touch with her until last year. And she was very sick and elderly lady. And she told me that she was very fond of my father, because he was a very kind and good man.

What did he look like?

He had very dark hair, was very nice looking man with a black mustache, dark eyes. He was a very nice looking man. He wasn't very tall-- was, I would think, more on the stocky side. And I think he had a little bit of a bow legs, because I remember when my brother was very much built the way he was. Everybody used to say, you inherited your father's physique.

When your uncle came to take you to live with him, what did you bring with you from your home?

I don't remember anything bringing. I didn't have anything that-- I recall that was brought with me. I remember the room that I received as a private room-- my own room. But I had a doll. Maybe that came with me. I don't remember. I remember the doll as a child, but I don't remember whether it came with me or not.

Doll have a name?

Not in my memory-- it was a porcelain doll-- was really rather large doll. I think I have a picture of it. But I don't remember the name. I don't remember playing with it. I just remember the doll. And I had a little carriage that the doll was in. That's all I remember.

Did you take the dog for a walk?

Well, I suppose so, because I remember the carriage out in the pathway between the flower bed, so I presume I must have. But I don't have any recollection of my childhood. Even trying, I don't.

You mentioned a piano. Was the family very musical?

They enjoyed music. And I didn't play the piano. I didn't study piano until later on. And I don't remember my mother playing it. I don't know who played it. Now, I don't think my father did. I don't remember.

Do you remember what your bedroom looked like?

I remember it had large-- the closets in Europe in those days were not built in, and I don't know if they-- know what the name of it is it was a big piece of furniture, where you actually bring it into the room. So it's not built in. And it had several compartments with a mirror in the middle.

Just now something came to mind my memory that-- before the holy holidays, the two people who worked for us had gone through the whole house to clean everything from stem to stern. And this room had the two beds, and a chest of drawers between the two windows, and this big piece of furniture that had the mirror in the middle.

And I suppose, in those days, it was customary for women to have the clothes made that they were going to be buried in. And cleaning the house, my mother came across this garment. And she put it on. This was before Yom Kippur. I remember her having that dress.

You remember her putting on the garment.

I don't remember her putting it on. I remember her standing front of the mirror dressed in this black garment that she was going to wear, if she ever dies. I don't remember the faces of these two people who work for us, but I know they were there. That's all I remember.

This was just before your father--

And this was just before Yom Kippur. Yeah. I remember another thing about that room. I had scarlet fever, and they called a physician out from Szeged-- where I suppose all the better trained people came from-- to examine me, because I had scarlet fever. And they put up a table, and they put me on it.

I remember them examining me. That's all I remember. I think I was two years old, or three years, somewhere in early age when I had scarlet fever. But somehow I survived. I don't know what they did-- must have done the right thing. It seems like the only thing I remember is bad things.

Do you remember what you thought when your mother said, if she ever died, she would [? have ?] that dress?

Well, the only thing I feel-- and I don't know whether it's just what I think now or-- but I remember these two women saying, oh, take that thing off, urging her not to keep it on. But it was sort of done in a-- I don't know if you can say it-- in a fun way. It was not a very happy situation, but it was kind of making fun out of it, more than-- gee, I can't remember.

It was a fearful feeling, but in the same time, it was made in the vein of a joke, a bad joke, a poor joke. I suppose that's the only thing I can think of. Seeing the scene, sometimes these gruesome things people make fun out of to alleviate the seriousness behind it. I don't know. I don't know where she got it from.

I don't know how she came across it. I don't know why she even had any handling of the garment-- cleaning a room, where the garment might have been. But I just remembered the scene. The only thing I remember was these two women were saying, oh, take it off, urging her to get rid of it.

I have another vignette that came to my mind. My nanny had to take me to the dentist. And they gave me an injection, and then we had to go out to the waiting room. And I ran out. And I ran as hard as I could, and she ran after me. She caught me halfway home to take me back to the dentist. But I visited the dentist quite frequently, unfortunately, and I must have had bad memories of him. But in those days, they had the foot pedal to drill teeth, and I'm sure it must have not been very comfortable. But the only thing I remember is when she ran after me and brought me back.

Did you eat a lot of sweets?

Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure. Now, I don't know if people were aware of what caused cavities, or diet. I'm sure we used a lot of

butter and all the good things that are taboo today.

Was there much interaction between you and your sister? Did you play together, have any things you did together?

Well, I remember my sister, of course. She was quite a bit older-- at least the way I thought about her at that time. And she was quite heavy, obese. That's for her appearance, but her face-- she has a very pretty face. And I had a very good relationship with her. I remember she's the one who introduced cigarette to me.

She was smoking, and in order to keep quiet-- for me to keep quiet, she gave me a cigarette. I must have been pretty close to eight years old when that happened. I remember having my first cigarette when she wanted to smoke. There was somebody with her, and I can't remember whether it was her friend or our maid. I don't know who it was, but there was another person. They were smoking, and they were afraid that I was going to really get them into trouble, so I think they let me have a cigarette. I remember having the first cigarette. And then, later on, I did smoke.

What was that first cigarette like?

Awful, just awful-- I couldn't understand. I remember not liking it, but then later years, I did pick up the cigarette and I did smoke.

Do you still smoke?

No, I stopped quite a few years ago. But during the war, it was a very important part of my life. I had cigarettes, but I had no food-- foolishly. But then I stopped smoking.

Did your sister have a separate bedroom?

My sister and my brother had a separate bedroom, but I don't remember where they exactly situated. And that's why I don't quite know why my bed was in the master bedroom. It was rather a large room. I might have been ill or-- I don't know what the reason was, but that's how I remember. And it's possible that I don't remember it and my brother was in the same bedroom. It was a large room. That I remember. It was a good size house, and I remember. And there must have been a quarter where our-- the people who worked for us lived, but I don't remember that section of the house at all. I remember the front part, and kitchen, that's it.

What was your favorite place in the house?

Well, I liked the room-- the Hungarian room, because it was very sunny. The light was always in, and it was always cheerful. And somehow I liked the room where the piano was, but I don't know why.

Did you have any religious education?

Yes. Other than going to public school, we had to go to the synagogue-- next to the synagogue, where the cantor lived, and that's where we had our religious education, and had to learn to read Hebrew. And then, when my parents died, it continued, because the community that I went into was a smaller community, and my grandfather was very active in temple. And he would go to temple every Friday night.

And it was rather difficult to bring the minyan together because of the few Jewish families who lived there, but he was-- my grandfather was always there. And then we would always go and get our-- we had a cantor who had lived right next to the temple, and continued our education when I was living with my uncle. And of course, we learned about all the holidays, and learned to read, and took part in the religious holidays.

But even my uncle and aunt, who were-- they did not have a kosher house, but all the major holidays, and Friday, and Sabbath was observed. In our section of the country, most of the Jews were-- I think today would call them reformed Jews. And they were very much part of the community life, as much as they observed the religious holidays.

And making friends would be more with people whom they had something in common with. But I think they very much assimilated. As a matter of fact, when-- after the war, I escaped from Budapest and arrived in Vienna at the Rothschild Hospital. And you had to register as to what country you came from.

There were people from Poland there who were registering us, and they didn't look very favorable on the Hungarian Jews, because we did not speak Hebrew. We did not speak Yiddish. We were not very orthodox Jews. And I remember being sent to the end of the line, and somebody from Poland or Russia who spoke Yiddish was registered ahead of me, because I did not speak their language.

So in a sense, we were discriminated against, because we were so assimilated. Most of my friends were from school, and most of those people were Catholic or Lutheran, because the country was Hungarian-- I mean Catholic mainly. And religion played a part in our family, as far as the holy holidays were concerned. But we spoke Hungarian, and that was the only language they spoke. I spoke German, but that's it. My whole family that I recall were that way.

Did you feel any anti-Semitism?

Oh, yes. Actually, when I can say when I felt it was when I was in high school and we had to go to the Jewish synagogue. And we were not part of the rest of the people who went to church and observed the Christian holidays. We naturally had to stay home and observe our holidays on Jewish holidays, and may have not been on Saturday and Sunday, or whenever the Christian holidays were.

So we were kind of separated. And I did not feel, in the school where I went to high school, that I personally was discriminated against because of my religion. My uncle had a very good standing in the community. People who he did business with respected him and liked him, so that we didn't have any conflict with the people in the community.

His home was in the middle of town, very prominently placed, as a matter of fact. The schools were across the street from us and the square-- the town square was across the front of the house. And people looked up to him. He helped people who needed help. And people who needed credit, who came to purchase from his store-- he extended it. So there was no hard feelings between the community and the people.

When I actually became conscious of the fact that this will give me problem, I was in high school, and I met a young man who-- whose brother-in-law was in the-- involved with the county politics, and in a position and suddenly, it became important that our religion was different, that we could never really become more than just friends, or go together, or date.

And it really was kind of frowned on that our friendship developed to the point of an attraction, more than just going to the same school. So it became a problem. And so I was never allowed to go out on a date with him, as far as that is concerned. And the custom in those days was really that you took your bicycle and you went for a bicycle ride, and then you got together with several people so you were not alone. Or you went down to the Tisa River during the summer.

And then it was more of a group activity than individual dating or going to dinner. It was not customary. And my uncle and his wife played bridge, and if the bridge party was not in our home, then I was left home with a servant. And I was not allowed to go out of the home after they went out to visit with friends. And of course, there's always that.

We had this big windows, and my friend would come and stand outside the house, and then we would converse with one of the maids in the window with me. So there was communication, but it-- the social customs were so different. We would go out for a bicycle ride, but it became a problem, because his family objected to the fact that he would even see me. And I'm sure that, if I would have stayed-- remained there longer, if it would have really become serious, that my family would have not permitted it. But it never came to that point.

So my friends were all Catholics. The Jewish friends I had-- very few because of few families who had children. Of course, we did have friends-- some of them younger and some of them older. But I wasn't there at the time when the community had to go into the ghetto, so I don't really know how many of them were in the ghetto at that time I. Know that there were only very, very few people who returned.

I know one young man who returned and lived in Budapest at the time the war ended; and another one who returned, and he is now in Israel; and one young man, who was about my age, who returned. But his family didn't. And I don't know where he lives, but somewhere in Hungary he was saved. So there-- very few people returned there.

When did you first become aware of Hitler?

It was through the radio when the news-- when my family was listening to the news and heard that-- what actually was taking place in Austria and in Germany. And the fear that what would become-- or what would happen in Hungary-- would the same thing happen here? What would they do? What should they do?

And as I said earlier-- that, when it came to a decision as to what happened after I finished my high school-- that influenced their decision because of what happened. They were listening to the BBC. I think it was voice from England. There was a broadcast that came in, and they listened to it at night, because it was too dangerous, fearful to listen to these broadcast.

In what language was the BBC?

Well, it must have been in Hungarian. I never listened to it, but it must have been, because they didn't speak any other languages. So it was Hungarian, because they knew what was going on in other countries around us. At that time, there was still communication with America, because I remember my uncle telling me that he had corresponded with my uncle in Flushing, as to what course to take for my future education. And this is how they decided to steer me toward a trade. And this is how I learned to do sew and make garments.

You knew what was going on in the other countries then? You know what was going on in Poland ? Did you know about the camps?

We didn't know about Auschwitz and exterminated camps, and I don't know if, in those days, they existed or not. But I know that they were aware of the fact that, if-- the Jews were in danger for their lives, and that they were-- their belongings have been confiscated, and that they were killed and deported-- and then, of course, the Warsaw ghetto. But I remember the feeling that-- and I don't know whether it was because we were sheltered in our home or it was to believe, but it was happening over there, and it's not happening here. And of course, this was just sort of a false security.

When you went off to Budapest by yourself, you did stay with someone.

After I finished my studies and I received my certificate, I did remain Szeged for a little while, and then I went to Budapest. And I went there with one of my cousins. And we had a friend in Budapest who said that she was going to get us a job in the factory. And we stayed there, I think, one day. They were making buttons made out of cotton-- doesn't exist in this country.

But it had a wire circle and edge, and then there was a machine that was encompassing that when the button was finished. And it was a thread-- a cotton thread with a metal circle, and they used it for a button.