

7th of September, retired or sick. Everybody got sick by the end, a whole delegation with coughing, sneezing, running to the bathroom-- bit sad.

Sounds like a tour from hell.

It was. Actually, it was very cold-- very cold.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, that's one thing, you know.

OK, any time.

All right. Today is October 23, 1990. I'm Anne Feibelman with the Holocaust Oral History Project of San Francisco, California. Today, we're talking with George Sarlo. Assisting are Beatrice Netter and Marian Barnett.

OK, George, we'll start from the beginning. And as we go along, if at any point you want to stop tape, we can stop tape. If you want to rephrase anything or you've thought of something you forgot and want to go back, consider this rough footage. It will be edited together later. So there's no pressure to have everything come out chronologically or beautifully the first time. What we're looking for is more natural and spontaneous, your memories.

OK.

OK. So we'll start at the beginning with the hard part, where you were born and what your name is now and what it was then.

I was born in Hungary, Budapest. And my name is George Sarlo now. My name then was Briar Gyorg.

And what was the date of your birth?

January 31, 1938.

Can you tell me a little bit about your family, siblings, the name of your parents, where they were from?

Well, I should go back one step further because my grandfather was American. He came to this country around the turn of the century, and then he went back to marry his sweetheart. And he got stuck, and then he had seven children.

My father was about the middle of the range. My father married my mother about 1930, and my sister was born in 1931. So she is seven years older than I am, and it was just the two of us.

What were your parents' names, and what is your sister's name?

My father's name was Nicholas Briar. My mother's name is Cecilia Briar, now Cecilia Sarlo. And my sister's name is Agi, Agnes Lenhart. That's her married name.

And she was born Agnes Briar?

Briar.

Tell me a little bit about family life and Jewish life. What did your father do? What kind of community did you live in? Did you go to a shul? What kind? What was daily life, the quality of life?

Of course, I'm too young to know very much about it because the war came when I was five years old. But what I

remember is that we were religious. We had a kosher house. We went to the temple regularly, although I don't think necessarily every Friday.

When I stayed with my grandparents, which was often, who lived in a small village in Hungary, I remember going to a temple just about every night. I remember mostly the religious holidays, celebrations, the meals, some of the decorations, some of the singing. That's about all I can remember before the war.

Did you have relatives that came for holidays? Or did you have an extended [NON-ENGLISH], or was it pretty contained?

No, it was a large family. My father had six brothers and sisters who regularly visited us. On my mother's side, there was-- my mother had two or three brothers and sisters from her mother's side. And then her father remarried, so there was about three or four additional step-brothers and sisters. They lived very close to us. And they were often visitors in our house, and we were often visitors in their houses.

And tell me what happened or what your memories are when things began to change because of the war.

Well, the earliest memory I have, which referred to the war, was that my father was at home a lot. He was a clerk in a factory. And when the second wave of discriminatory laws were passed, he lost his job because he was a Jew. So all of a sudden, instead of going to work in the morning, he was at home. And that must have been about 1942, so I was quite young. I was four years old.

And then the next thing I remember, which I think was 1943, and I remember quite clearly him reading a telegram in the living room and everybody being very surprised and scared. And what the telegram was is notification that he had to go into the forced labor unit. In Hungary, Jews were not allowed to serve in the Army proper. But there were units made up of Jews who were forced laborers to help the Army.

So they would dig the ditches, and they would build the roads. But they were not allowed to carry guns. And I remember him getting the notice he had to leave, and everybody was crying.

And then what happened?

I guess he left. This is a story, which I heard from my mother, that he was a very clever fellow. And he thought he'll be back next day or in a week. He thought for sure he could get out of it.

So when he left, he had to leave very early in the morning. And he didn't want to wake me up to say goodbye, because he thought he would be back right away. And then my mother tells me that, in his letters, he often said from Russia, I wish I had woken Yuri up-- Yuri was my name-- and that he really regretted that he never said goodbye. And that's the last time I saw him.

What happened to him?

We don't know. He was taken to Russia. And we have no documentation as to what happened. He disappeared. We got a letter from some officials that he disappeared.

It was cold. It was winter in Russia. He wrote us a number of letters. My mother sent him lots of packages. There was a package from him, which had a birthday present from me in it. But I don't think it came from him. I think my mother made it up to appear like it came from him.

And the last thing we heard, one of his colleagues from the labor unit came back. And he said that my father was very sad. He had a wonderful leather coat, and somebody stole his leather coat.

And it was very cold. And he was sad not because the coat was stolen, because in the pocket were pictures of me and my sister. And that's the last we heard, so I assume he froze to death.

When?

The last we heard from him was in 1943.

Can you tell me what the present was that--

I don't remember. My mother probably would. I'll ask her, but I don't remember.

What happened to your family after your father left?

Well, things were rough. The restrictions on Jews were more and more harsh. It's an interesting sort of ironic story that, because my father lost his job, my mother had to start the business. And she became very successful. So for a while, we were pretty well-off.

But the bombing started mostly from our American Air Force. And it wasn't safe to be in Budapest, which was a big city suffering most of the bombings. So my mother sent me down to live with my grandparents, who lived in a small village, which was supposed to be safe. So I lived there from, I would guess, early 1944 to mid-1944.

What was the name of the village? And what was the business that your mother started?

The name of the village is *Ášjfeh*. And my mother was making ladies lingerie.

And what happened while you were living with your grandparents? What was life like?

I felt safe there. Life was very much like I remembered from previous vacations-- small village, very modest home, lots of animals. It was fun until the Germans came into Hungary, which was in March of 1944. And shortly thereafter, the deportation started. And there were very serious restrictions on Jews.

I remember when my grandmother made up the first stars that we had to wear on our clothes, and I thought it was great fun. I felt very special. I guess I was. I remember looking at some yellow tablecloth she had. And I was thinking, oh my, we could make lots of stars out of this one.

But then it became scary. I could see that my grandparents were quite concerned. And it was very close. I was rescued from the village the day before all the Jews were taken to Auschwitz. And very few came back, maybe one or two.

When was this?

About the middle of 1944.

And tell me about the rescue.

Well, it's a good story because it has a recent continuation to it. My mother had an employee whose name I don't remember. It was a lady who worked for her whose sister was married to a very nice gentleman, a Christian man called Laszlo Bornamissa. And my mother asked Mr. Bornamissa to try to get me back because she heard about the rumors of deportations.

So he came down to *Ášjfeh*, the village, on the train. And he pretended that I was his son, and he smuggled me out of the village into the train. And he hid me under some coats. It was a long train ride.

And I remember the soldiers coming through the train looking for Jews. One of them poked the bayonet right through the coat and I remember seeing the knife going right front of my eyes. So it was exciting. And he got me back to Budapest.

And the reason it's interesting because I lost touch with him. I know that he died many years ago. But recently, through some of the Jewish agencies, I was able to locate his widow and his daughter. And we started corresponding again. And I'm hoping to help them because they are in pretty bad shape. And also, I have written recently to Yad Vashem suggesting his name as one of the righteous Gentiles.

What is his widow's name and the daughter?

The widow's name is Mario Bornamissa. And she had two daughters, one of whom lives in England, I think. The other one recently wrote to me. Her name is [PERSONAL NAME]. And I know her from her nickname Dodie. She's about my age, and we were friends. So it's going to be interesting to perhaps meet with her again.

Fantastic. Yeah. Now, when you got back to Budapest, what happened?

I don't remember very much of the next few months. However, I know that most of the Jews were taken from their homes and put into the ghetto. Where we lived, the apartment building was right at the edge of the ghetto. It was just outside. And I remember that they were very afraid that they would take us also.

The custodian of the building was a member of the Arrow Cross, which was the Hungarian fascist organization. And my mother kept paying her off with jewelry and things not to report us, that we were not in a ghetto where we were supposed to be. But I know that things were getting more and more scary.

There were certain exempted people in Hungary who are protected by a friendly government, or a neutral government, such as the Wallenberg passport that you know about. Those were Swedish protected people who are put into certain apartment buildings, which were designated as Swedish protected houses.

There were also Swiss protected houses, and there were Spanish protected houses. Since we had relatives in Spain, which was a very friendly country to the Axis, we requested emigration to Spain. And we received passports, which enabled us to get into a Spanish protected house.

Now, these protected houses were protected up to a point. As things got rougher and rougher, as more and more Jews were killed, they were entering the protected houses also, the fascists. And there was sort of a hierarchy to them. First, they took the Swiss, and then they took the Swedes. And then they started to take the Spanish also.

But we moved into a Spanish protected house, where we lived with a bunch of other people. I mean, there were 20 people to a room under very poor conditions. We had very little to eat and no heat and no privacy. But we were relatively safe. We, of course, knew that the Jews were regularly taken and executed. A lot of my family were killed during that time.

What happened to your family, the people who were killed?

Most of them were taken to concentration camps. Most of them were taken to Auschwitz, some to Dachau, a few to Theresienstadt, a few to Bergen-Belsen. I'd say maybe 30 members of my family were taken, and maybe three returned.

As a child, did you know what was going on?

I knew some of the things that were going on. I mean, I knew that I was in grave danger. I knew that I was in grave danger because I was a Jew. I knew that people were getting killed all around me. I mean, I saw bodies piled up. That's about all I knew.

When you say you saw bodies piled up, was that inside the ghetto? Or--

Inside, outside, both. I remember the main synagogue building in Budapest in the courtyard. They had the bodies piled up like railroad ties-- five this way, and then five this way, and then up again. And I remember the smell more than anything else.

Were these people who had been starved to death, who have been executed?

I don't know.

Now, what happened, to go back a little bit, to your grandparents? You left their house in the village, and what happened to them?

Well, they were taken to Auschwitz I think next day.

And was your sister with you, or was she with your mother?

No, she was with my mother. She was sort of the hero of the family because she was at the time, what, maybe 10 years old. But she was the one who got us the Spanish papers. And she was the one who would go outside the house when it was very dangerous to go and would get us food and-- and things. She was a tough little girl. She still is.

How did she get the papers?

Well, there was some correspondence between us and our relatives in Spain and I know there were official papers going back and forth. But I don't know what was involved in getting the papers.

Now, tell me a little bit about the Spanish house because I don't know anything about it, what specifically you remember, what a day was like there, what happened, and what a raid was like, who would come, Germans, the Hungarians--

Mostly Hungarians, Hungarian fascists, the Arrow Cross, who were the real scum of the Earth, the lowest classes who were in it basically because they hated Jews and because they robbed their victims. It was very scary.

I remember, for example, one day, I was playing in the backyard of the protected house with some of my friends. And in the next building, which was a Swiss-protected house, where some of our friends, who we would play together normally. And that particular day, they came and took them.

And I remember waving to my friends who were being pushed by these Arrow Cross with their guns. And one of them threw me a note, and I remember the paper was wrapped around the battery for weight. I remember picking it up and reading it, and I don't remember what it said on the note.

Another thing I remember that across the street from us lived a friend of ours also, I think, in a protected house. And one day, I wanted to go and visit her. But it was illegal for me to go out on the street, but I sneaked out anyway. I figured, just run across. And as I got to her house and I tried to open it, it was locked. And I was terribly frightened somebody might see me.

And I was beating on it and trying to open it, and along came a little boy my age, maybe six. And he was looking at me and saw how frightened I was. And he started pointing at me and hollering, here, here's a Jew, here is a Jew. And I never forget how frightening that was, another little boy trying to get me killed.

What happened?

I guess I got away. I don't remember. I just remember the fright. What I remember most is that there wasn't much food, that we were always surrounded by lots of people, and there was bombs falling all the time. We spent a lot of time underground in the basement, which was protection from the bombs. That's about all I can remember.

What was it like? Did they ever raid your house?

Not in the protected house. There were raids in the original apartment buildings, and I remember them taking people

away. And I don't know why they didn't take us.

What else do you remember from the period, either in the Spanish house or before the Spanish house, about restrictions or incidences that left a memory?

I remember the day of liberation.

When was that?

It must have been about January of 1945. The Russians had been firing at the city for a long time. They surrounded Budapest for several months, and that was a period when most of the killings took place.

They would take the Jews down to the Danube, and they would shoot them so they would fall into the Danube. The bodies would be carried by the river. Anyway, I remember--

Excuse me. How did you know that?

I think my mother told me. I think my mother's stepsister was taken, my aunt. And I think she was shot into the river, and she survived. She swam with a bullet in her and became a professor of nuclear engineering. [CHUCKLES]

Anyway, the day of liberation-- what I remember is that my mother was giving me a bath. And of course, we had not enough water for a proper bath. What she had is a little pot of hot water, a little pail. And I would stand in the pail, and she would wash me with the soap, with a cloth.

And I remember standing in that cold room, and my body was giving off the steam because she was washing me. And all of a sudden, my sister, who was at the window, screamed, they are here, they are here. And I remember running to the window, steaming all the way, and seeing the first Russian soldier with a big fur hat. And that was--

How did you feel?

Wonderful. Yeah. That's when we thought all of our troubles were over.

And then what happened?

Well, we were liberated, and we were allowed to go back to our original apartment. I remember pulling a little cart with all of our belongings, going back and seeing lots of dead bodies on the street. I remember the insides of people.

And that's when the real hunger started. There was very little food at that point. And I remember begging the Russian soldiers, khleba, khleba, bread, and being wonderfully rewarded when I got a piece. And I could take it home to my mother and show I was finally the breadwinner, truly the breadwinner of the family, [INAUDIBLE] six.

I remember one gory part when I found a horse that was killed, and there were people carving up the horse. And I got a piece, and I took it home. And my mother cooked it, and it didn't taste very good. And I remember waiting for my father to come home. He never did.

And then a few months later, one of my mother's cousins came back from a concentration camp. And he lost his wife and his two children. And then they got together and got married. That's my stepfather.

What's his name?

Frank. He's a nice old guy. He's going to be 90.

What's his last name, his--

Sarlo.

Oh, Sarlo. This is your--

Originally was Szwarc. But that was too Jewish-sounding. So after the war, it was fashionable to change your name to be more Hungarian sounding. Sarlo properly pronounced is sarlo. It means sickle, which seems like the right name in a communist regime. [COUGHS]

Can I give you some water?

I'm OK.

Yeah? Now, what happened after you returned home and you were hungry? What was life like for the Jews, for you, for your family?

Well, I felt still very intimidated. I felt-- and that feeling lasted most of my life-- different. When people tried to kill you and you're a little boy, you probably feel there's something wrong with you.

I remember my mother taking me to my first school class right after the war. I missed a year because of the war, so I was seven years old when I entered in a class of six-year-olds. And this particular school, like most schools in Hungary, was run by a church, just happened to be a Lutheran Church.

And I felt very strange there. How can I be among those people who, up till now, have been trying to kill me? Was this really safe?

And I felt, as I still feel sometimes, that I had to do extra, extra well because I was a Jew in order to justify my existence. So I suppose, in a way, it was a driving force in my life, maybe responsible to some of my achievements. It's a hell of a way to get ambition, but it worked.

I suspect you would have had ambition anyway, right?

Possibly.

Now, what about other children in the class? Were there other Jews? Did you have friends? I mean--

Not many. There were one or two Jews in the class. You must understand that 90% of Hungarian Jews were killed during the war. They were very efficient. They were probably as efficient as any country.

Hungarian are, by tradition, are very anti-Semitic. So they not only cooperated, but they led the charge. I think maybe I would like--

Have some water.

[COUGHS]

[INAUDIBLE].

If, by chance, anybody has an aspirin, that would be great.

Let me see--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Oh, how nice.

Are you feeling OK? [INAUDIBLE]. I have two Excedrin. How's that sound?

One will do. Thank you.

--Leading the charge. We're ready whenever-- give me a sign when you speed.

OK.

Are you picking up the traffic on the audio?

Somewhat.

Yes.

It hasn't overshadowed it yet.

OK.

I can close it if you like?

I think maybe, yeah. And there are a lot of buses now. And is there anything that I'm not asking you that you think of? The more specific or detailed, I think, the more interesting.

As you say, there weren't many survivors from Hungary. And it's an unusual story from that perspective. Tell me when you're ready.

[INAUDIBLE] you are.

When I have my sister or my mother visit, then you might get more out of it. They will remember a lot more.

Where are they now?

In Southern California, but they both visit here from time to time.

That would be good, particularly your mother. It's incredible, really, that she's here to tell the tale.

Yeah. My mother remembers a lot, probably too much. It's interesting that my stepfather completely blocked it out. When I ask him questions about the war or the concentration camp, he says he doesn't know what I'm talking about. So it works either way.

Yeah. It's like my father, who had no life before 1940. Now, where were we? We were talking about life at school and friends. What was life like at school? You started a year later, and there weren't many Jews.

I remember only being very shy, very intimidated, never participated in games or sports, being quite withdrawn. Some of it's maybe my personality, a lot of it probably due to the events of the war. All of my friends were Jewish. There weren't that many, but I had no Christian friends.

I felt very distant and very alienated from Hungarian society, and that persisted today. Hungary was never my home. And that's probably the reason that, as soon as I had a chance in 1956, I left.

Were there any incidences where people were calling you Jew or being anti-Semitic to you?

Yes, lots of them.

Like what?

It was a fairly common epithet to use-- dirty Jew, equivalent of the Kike if somebody didn't like you. I guess with the advent of the Communist rule, it had diminished a great deal. Most of the Communist leaders in Hungary were Jewish. So the innate anti-Semitism of the Hungarian population was suppressed during those years.

But I thought it was always there. During the revolution, it came out. There were quite a few ex-Nazi types who participated in the revolution in 1956. A lot of Austrian and Germans came across the border.

And when I escaped Hungary and was in a refugee camp in Austria among Hungarians, there were very strong anti-Semitic tempers. In fact, at one point, I was threatened by a Hungarian with a knife for the only reason that I was a Jew. So I ran. I got out of the camp, and I went on my own.

Let's backtrack a little bit. When you were still in school and growing up still in Hungary, was there a Jewish life? And what was home life like?

It was very different. My mother, who was religious before the war, became anti-religious after the war. Her attitude was, now, how could there be a god when these things were allowed? She would no longer keep the Sabbath. She would no longer cook kosher.

Plus, because the Communist system was so much against religion, it became very fashionable to be anti-religious. My sister became part of the Communist youth because that was the way to survive. She would go to the point of calling my mother an exploiter of the masses and capitalist pig because she had a few employees.

Interestingly, my stepfather's reaction to the Holocaust was exactly the opposite of my mother. He became very religious, that he continued to go to the synagogue, although not terribly often and in a hidden way. I tried to deny all aspects of Jewishness. To me, it was shameful. It was dangerous.

My parents, my mother and my stepfather, wanted me to have a bar mitzvah. And I did it but did it very, very reluctantly. I thought it was something very dangerous. So no, there wasn't much Jewish life after the war.

Now, tell me about communism. And how did that change life in Hungary? What happened?

Well, the communists, that is the Russians, were our liberators. They saved our lives. To survive after 1948, you had to be part of the communist system. That is, if you wanted a good job, or if you wanted to go to school, or if you wanted any privileges, you better conform. And we conformed.

My father, who, before the war, had a store, became a machinist. My mother had this little lingerie business, which was successful after the war. But it was taken away by the state, so she became a seamstress.

I was a very good student. But for me, in order to go on to university, I had to be a member and a distinguished member of the Communist Youth, which I became. But I have to say, I believed in it too, completely.

What did you believe in? And how do you become a distinguished member?

What I believed is that that was the way to live, that communism was the answer to all the troubles of the past for humanity, that it was a new humanity. The way you became a distinguished member was that, first of all, you became a member of the Communist Youth. And you worked to become a functionary in the movement.

And you spoke the right words, and you read the right books. And you went to the right meetings, and you had good grades. And eventually you became the leader, and then you got the goodies.

What were they?

The goodies? Oh, I became-- one of the great rewards was for me to become a member of the railroad, which was built for the Pioneers. Pioneers were the equivalent of the Scouts, but they were the Communist Boy Scouts.

And there was a railroad built for the Scouts, where distinguished functionaries, such as myself, could play railroad people. And we were running the railroad. And it was fun, and it was uniform. And you got to take off a day from school every other week. And you had your papers, and that was very honorable thing.

Did it make you feel any more comfortable in Hungary?

Being a communist? Yes, it certainly did because communists rescued the Jews from the Nazis, and the communists suppressed the innate anti-Semitism of the Hungarians.

And then what happened?

Why I turned against communism? Oh, I think it's just the process of growing and learning and reading and having some ideas of your own. I mean, it's an old saying that anyone under 20 who is not a communist should have his heart examined. Anyone over 30 who is still a communist should have his head examined.

I read. I read a lot. And when you read, you begin to understand that there are other ways and that the so-called inconsistencies and contradictions of capitalism perhaps were not so contradictory after all. And you begin to feel that you live a lie. Those demonstrations every May Day and the placards and the flags and-- you can only repeat those slogans so many times.

Now, when we were in the Soviet Union last month, our guide, who was a pretty outspoken young man, tells us funny story about the communist school, little kids, in the Soviet Union. And the teacher comes, and the teacher trains them to say the right things.

And the teacher asks the group, what's the best country in the world? The Soviet Union, everybody. Where do the kids have the best food in the world? Soviet Union. Where do they have the most wonderful toys in the world? The Soviet Union. Little Tonya in the corner starts crying. What's the matter, Tonya? I want to go to the Soviet Union.

[LAUGHTER]

You can only live a lie up to a point. And then either you completely lose your personal integrity or you start thinking, well, maybe I was wrong. Maybe there's another way.

What were some of the lies? And what were some of the things that you read? What was the process?

Well, the basic concept of communist theory, whereby everybody works according to his abilities and everybody gets rewarded according to his needs, is a wonderful myth. We know it. I didn't. I thought it was possible. I truly believed that it was possible to create a new human being, a new human being who is essentially fearless and selfless and who will do all the right things.

When I looked around me, I couldn't see any. People were essentially greedy and fearful and acted out of their own impulses, just like any other place in the world. So how long can you say that this is the worker's paradise when you find out, by reading, that there are other countries with higher standard of living?

And how long can you say that this is a wonderful freedom when you cannot say what you think and when you see people disappearing and when you see that the functionaries get the rewards and the workers don't? I mean, if you're willing to look in the mirror, the contradictions come out pretty quickly. It's only when you're not willing to look in the mirror that you can fool yourself.

So you looked in the mirror. And then what happened?

Well, I can't say there was this great transformation. It was a gradual process. But by the time I entered the university at age 18, I knew pretty well that this was an act, that we were living a lie. And when the revolution came, I participated. And there was an opportunity at that point to get out, and I did.

Tell me about the revolution. What exactly happened, and how did you participate?

Well, the revolution started in 1956 as a result of a speech that Khrushchev made at the party Congress, which revealed all the awful things that Stalin did, or at least some part of it, which was the first crack in the mirror, the first time that you could look in the mirror and know that this god was really a criminal.

And once you start looking in the mirror, all the other shades fall away. So beginning with the Khrushchev speech, there was an increasingly agitated intellectual layer of the population who wanted more truth. Newspapers, unauthorized newspapers appeared out of nowhere. Bills were posted on the walls with demands for more freedom.

And I was at the University of Budapest, freshman. And at the university, we started to have meetings and demonstrations, asking for the right to organize ourselves outside of the traditional Communist Youth movement.

I entered the University about mid-September. And on October 23, we planned a demonstration. And the demonstration started out. We were very good-natured, laughing, singing songs. And it grew in size.

We marched to the parliament building, towards the center of Hungary. By that time, a lot of the workers from the factories came also. And we demanded freedoms, and we demanded that a new government be put in.

But everything was peaceful. The last thing anybody expected is fighting, or shootings, or revolution. And then all of a sudden, there were some-- later, we found out there were secret police shooting from the rooftops on the demonstrators. A few people got killed.

And then a lot of the demonstrators went to the Army barracks, and the Hungarian Army essentially joined the demonstrators and opened up the weapons. And people started shooting at each other. And after a day or two, we won. We took over all of Budapest.

I had a nice little Tommy gun, and I was guarding the Minister of Interior, including some of the secret police that we locked up. And it was very romantic and very exciting. And we won for three days. And after the third day, the Russians came in with tanks. And Tommy guns don't work against tanks.

So I felt like I'd better take off. And I ran. And then, a few days later, it became obvious that those of us who were in the Revolution could end up in Siberia. And we heard that things were very chaotic at the border.

So my sister and myself and her husband and her little son took off together. And we first got on a streetcar, and then we got on the train. And then we got on the bus, and then we got on a horse-drawn carriage. And then we walked, and then we crawled. And we got across.

To--

To Austria. We crossed at the bridge at and out that was written up and destroyed a few hours after we got across.

And then what?

And then I ended up in this camp that I told you about with a bunch of other refugees, where there were some threats made by some of the other Hungarians for whatever reason, because we were Jewish.

And then we escaped from there into Vienna, where I used my only treasure. I had a \$5 bill, which my mother saved during the war when it was illegal to have currency. And she sewed it into my sleeve as I was leaving.

That's all I had, just \$5. And I had a German dictionary in this pocket and a English dictionary in this pocket. And I used that \$5 to call my uncle in the United States, who wasn't really my uncle. But he was my stepfather's brother, who didn't really know who I was.

But he was a nice guy. And next day, he was in Vienna. And he wasn't a rich man. But he and his wife came over and found us and bought me an overcoat and got me a hotel room and a good meal and my first Coca-Cola.

And then we decided that, unless we get my parents out, I will never see them again. So we hired a person who made a living out of bringing people out. And the way it worked-- you pay him so much down, and then the rest is COD.

So he went into Hungary, and it was very dangerous by then. And we waited and waited, and he didn't show up. And we thought maybe he got killed, or maybe they all got killed, or maybe just took off with the money.

But no, three or four days after the date he was supposed to be back, he finally showed up. And everybody was kissing and hugging and crying, and my parents were there. And then he was to collect his remaining fee. He had, I think, \$700 due on delivery.

But then he saw in my uncle's hotel room that he had a little transistor radio, on the bed and he'd never seen a transistor radio. So it's like the old story about getting Manhattan for \$200 in beads. He took the transistor radio from my parents. That's the story.

Yeah. How did you find him?

I don't know. My uncle did.

And when was this?

1956.

When?

I would guess this was in December. When this happened, I was already in the States. My uncle stayed there, and he got them out.

Now, you went to the States when?

I came to the States on December 10, 1956.

How did you get there?

I came via HIAS, a Jewish organization. HIAS got us some sort of a charter flight. It was a plane that had to stop every five hours to refuel.

It was a long-- I think it took 30 hours from Vienna to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. And that was a little scary. But I had a bottle of rum, so it kept me company. And my sister and her family had already left a week before, so they were waiting for me in New York.

And who was in New York or when in New York, where did you live?

HIAS took us there. And then, next day, we came to California because that's where my uncle was.

And he joined you later with your mother?

Yes.

And I wanted to go back a little bit to the revolution because I know that was-- I mean, for you, you were, what, 18--

Yes.

--at the time? Can you tell me a little bit more what it was like to be 18 and in the middle of the revolution with a Tommy gun?

It was exciting. It was very much an adventure. It was scary. It brought back a lot of the memories of the war. But this time, I had a gun. And I wasn't a little boy anymore.

It felt very confusing. There were people shooting at each other, and nobody could really figure out who was who and why. I had very ambivalent feelings about it because, after all, the Russians were our liberators. And some of these revolutionary characters reminded me very much of the Germans.

So it was very confusing. It was a good time to get the hell out of there. I never looked back. I mean, that was a very easy decision.

And then, when you get to America-- I'm crossing continents now, so if there's anything that you would like to add about the first 18 years that I'm not asking you that you feel is important to have down--

I think it's important to understand that America to us was always the land of dreams, the land of freedom, a land of wealth. It was almost a family myth. After all, my grandfather came here and supposedly got rich. Well, he should have gotten rich, except he went back there, damn romantic fool that he was.

So to come here was the fulfillment of a mission, of a providence. It was almost a natural thing to do. Even though I was alone and I was 18, and I didn't know anyone, I didn't have any money, it made sense to do.

So it wasn't a terribly scary experience compared to all the prior scary years. It was more of an exhilarating coming-of-age type of an experience. It was very different than what I expected. I expected the America of the Sinclair Lewis years or the Chicago days of stockyards and the gangsters and the bullets flying around.

I found the country very much to my liking immediately. I didn't have any of the regrets that a lot of emigrants have, and the doubts. I hit the place running. I thought this was a candy store from day one. It was very easy for me to become an American. I think I was an American when I was born, just I was born in the wrong place.

What were the early days like? What did you do?

In America? Well, HIAS, the Jewish agency, got us a little apartment in Hollywood. And we went shopping at the supermarket first night, and we bought some intriguing things. And we took it home, and we ate them.

And next morning, the lady from the HIAS came to visit us. And he looked at the can that we used, and he said, oh, you already have a cat, huh?

[LAUGHTER]

Tasted all right. I mean, there was a fish on the can. The usual stories. I had a Murphy bed, and I actually ended up in the wall, you know, with-- I thought, what a strange country.

[LAUGHTER]

HIAS arranged the job interviews for us second day. I was working on the third day. I worked for an engineering firm in Los Angeles that specialized in hiring immigrants who didn't know any better, paid me \$1 an hour, which was a federal

minimum wage. And I thought it was wonderful.

I got my first paycheck at the end of the week. It was \$36, and I'd never seen so much money in my life. So I went to the movies, and I saw Elvis and Love Me Tender. And I thought that was very strange. It was great. It was great.

And I never forget. We arrived into Hollywood and-- well, we arrived in Los Angeles, and we took a taxi into Hollywood. And it was December, and it was the sun shining. And the Christmas decorations were on.

And the driver, when he heard we were from Hungary, would stop. And he bought ice cream for everybody and wouldn't take money from us. I mean, everything that I heard was true. It was neat. It was neat.

What else?

It's been neat ever since. It's been a great life.

What happened after the ice cream and Elvis?

I was brought up in the tradition that the way to escape poverty was education. So there was absolutely no question as to what I should be doing. I should be going to school. After all, I was 18. So I enrolled the first week Los Angeles City College.

I ended up living in Venice, which is a long ways from Los Angeles. Didn't have a car. I would get up at 5:00 in the morning, take the bus to LA City College, go to school for four hours, take the bus downtown, where I worked for eight hours, take the bus back to college for night classes, and take the bus back home, arrive around 11, 12.

So I didn't sleep very much. Whenever I slept was on the bus, but it was OK. I was going to school, and I was in America. I remember my first exam, where I spent at least 80% of the time translating the question with my first dictionary and then 20% of the time answering it.

And I applied for scholarships, and I got one after six months. And I was off to Arizona, University of Arizona. They wanted a real life Hungarian, and I was it. And I arrived in Tucson, again, without any money, without knowing a soul. And had scholarships, worked part time. And in two years, I graduated from college.

What did you study?

Electrical engineering. That was the thing to do. Sputnik, you remember? If you want to make money, George, you've got to become an engineer. Wrong. [LAUGHS] But I worked in engineering for a couple of years.

Where? Doing what?

Semiconductor business in a huge aircraft in Newport Beach. And then, strictly by chance, I came across my boss's paycheck stub. It was lying on the desk. I wasn't looking for it. But I discovered that he was only making \$2,000 a year more than I was, and he'd been there for 26 years. And I'll be damned if I'm going to do it.

So that day, I quit. And then I asked, OK, now, what do you have to do in this country make some money? And everybody said, well, you got to go to Harvard Business School. So off I went. And I did that for a couple of years. That was tough.

Why?

Well, at Harvard Business School, they sort of tear you apart and put you back together the way they think you should be. And that's very hard. I got through college in two and a half years without studying. I never studied, and I had very good grades. And at Harvard Business School, I worked very hard on my first term paper. And it came back with great big letters on the front saying, imbecile.

[CHUCKLING]

That gets your attention. 60-some percentage of the class is Phi Beta Kappa, so I had to work. But it's OK.

When was this?

'61 through '63. And then I've been in the investment business ever since.

What happened after Harvard Business School?

I joined an investment management company in New York. And then I moved with them to Los Angeles. I worked there for four years, then back to New York. I started my own firm. And then I moved out here 20 years ago. And it's been wonderful.

What's been wonderful?

Well, nobody's trying to kill me. I can generally say what's on my mind. I generally get to keep most of the rewards of my work.

I made and brought up a couple of lovely girls, who seem to like me. I like them. I have essentially all the comforts that I want. I'm doing work, which I think is important.

And I'm beginning to pay back some of the things I owe to a society that took me in and allowed me to become free. And I think that's wonderful. I mean, both the adoption and the ability to pay it back.

You mentioned that you're doing work that you think is important. What are you doing? What is satisfying for you?

Well, my business is venture capital. I back talented people who have a vision. I give them money. I give them my experience and advice. If we're successful, we create lots of jobs and value, products and services that people seem to want. I think that's very satisfying.

I'm quite active in community affairs. And I'm chairman of KQED, which I think is a wonderful organization that I think needs my kind of help at this point in it's history. I give away a lot of money I make a lot of money. That's very satisfying.

What are your daughters names, and how old are they? Where are they?

Gabrielle Stephanie is 23, and she's here looking for a job. She graduated last year and spent a year with a large advertising company and quit one year to that date saying, I want my freedom now. I put in my time. And the younger one is Suzanna Georgette, who just graduated from college and in the process of applying to law school.

Where is she?

She's living here with her mother, my ex-wife.

George, when you look back, what was your motivation for your life?

No question about the search for freedom. If anyone ever asked to define myself, I think I am, above all, a free man, as free as I can be.

And I think, without any question, the motivation for everything has been search for additional freedom, first for physical freedom, and then freedom from poverty and restrictions. And lately it's freedom from myself, from physical limits, emotional limits, trying to change myself. But that's the one thing.

Do you think the war had any influence on you?

The war, or specifically the Holocaust, is, without any question, the single most important event of my life. And that's not just my opinion, but it's almost universally agreed by those people who know me well, know my friends, my family, my people who've been close to me.

Can I ask a question?

Yeah.

You said that the key motivation for your life was search for freedom, and then you said that included freedom from myself. And one, would you describe that as physical limits? Could you elaborate?

If you're not healthy, you're restricted. One of the great dreams that I had was, many years ago, childhood dream, is to climb Mount Everest. Well, I tried it, and I got up halfway. But I couldn't make it all the way up, because I wasn't in good enough physical shape.

Today, I spend a lot of time trying to become in better physical shape, or at least retain my physical abilities to do things. It's the fight for retaining freedom. That's one aspect of freedom.

And similarly, we all have lots of inhibitions, mental, emotional restrictions that we place on ourselves. And I spend a great deal of time trying to free myself from that-- psychoanalysis, reading, meditation, music, some of the tools for that.

What are some of the issues [INAUDIBLE]?

Currently, or in the past?

Right now.

Well, in the past, being Jewish was certainly a big issue. Very ambivalent about it. On one hand, very, very proud of the achievements of the Jewish culture. On the other hand, very much ashamed because it was beaten into me that it was bad to be a Jew. Jews are, by definition, under mange.

There were lots of sexual issues. There were lots of marital problems, issues between me and my daughters. Most of that have been resolved, or partially resolved, to my satisfaction.

Can you elaborate on this?

Which one?

Where you mentioned three, sexual, marriage, and issues [INAUDIBLE].

I don't know if I want to go into that.

Is there one area that you would be willing to talk about?

No, these are pretty personal stuff.

OK.

I don't feel the necessity for that. I am willing to say that they were probably related to Holocaust experiences and that it took many years of struggling and psychotherapy to get to the point where I'm comfortable with them, and were the

cause of tremendous conflict between myself and my ex-wife, who was not a Jew.

Incidentally, I have never dated a Jewish woman. And I can tell you this much, that it was a great revelation to me when I discovered a few years ago that I never dated a Jewish woman. And I think that I understand the reason for it now.

I'm willing to tell you the reason for that. I think it was an unconscious desire on my part to protect my children, children to be. I did not want my children to be Jews because of the danger of being a Jew. And the best way to assure that is not to have anything to do with Jewish women, right?

Looking back at it now, I think it was a mistake. I wish not so much that I married a Jewish woman. Although, I have thought about that. But I do wish that I had brought up my children in the Jewish faith and the Jewish tradition, and I regret that I didn't. And I think I understand why. But nevertheless, it's one of the few regrets in my life.

And you didn't because of your wanting to protect them?

That was one of the motivations. There were some others also. I mean, obviously when you're married to a Catholic girl who wants to bring them up Catholic, there is an issue there.

I also had some ideas about-- some ideas, which, looking back, were probably mistaken ideas, that I wanted them to have the freedom to choose. Looking back at it, I don't think you can have the freedom to choose unless you know something about it. So next time.

OK. Going back to the Holocaust, how did it influence you? What it changes to the man?

Well, we'll never know because we don't have a George who was brought up without the Holocaust for comparison purposes. But those people who knew me, who know me well, think that it was a very significant influence on my personality. We've already talked about some of the motivations of doing well because you had to prove you were good enough.

I was painfully shy for a long, long time. I was full of inferiority complexes, which often manifest themselves in rather unfriendly demeanors. There was a lot of guilt. You've heard of survivor's guilt. Boy, is that ever real.

In what way?

It overshadows all your life. It's very difficult to have fun when you're feeling guilty for living. My daughters, for years, told me, Dad, you don't know how to have fun. And they were right. [CHUCKLES] How can you have fun when you remember the smell?

I think I was pretty tough on my daughters. I think that I somehow expected them to continue the warfare. And of course, I didn't give them the reasons or the tools for it. There were a lot of things going on then.

Yeah.

But I've had some exposure to other survivors and children of survivors, and I happen to be both. And I know how difficult it is to have a close, loving family life when you're either. Now I imagine if you're both.

It took me a long time to learn how to love or even accept the possibility of love. And I don't think that's innate. I think that was something that I learned between the ages of four and six. Those are impressionable years, you know?

I wanted to ask you-- you had, several times, very near death, the bayonet and the Tommy gun, and then in the camp in Austria.

And two more times.

What were they?

They were both in Budapest. One was an airplane that flew over me, and it was shooting its machine gun. And I remember seeing the impact in a row right above my head, passing. I was walking with my mother on the street.

And the other one was a bomb, which fell next to me, about as far as you are. Made a hole in the cement, obviously didn't go off. I remember standing there, and I remember reading USA on it.

No wonder you wanted to come. To what-- I'm sure you thought about it. What do you think the big plan is?

I don't know. I don't spend a lot of time wondering about that. I won't be the first one to come up with the answer to that one, and I don't think it's an important issue. What is important, however, is to do the best I can with what I have because that's the reason I survived.

I'm not a very religious person, although much more so today than I ever thought I would be. But the purpose of life is very clear. It's very obvious to me. The purpose is to do the best you can with what you got.

So don't worry about why you're alive. It works. Believe me. Just do the best you can with what you got, and it all makes sense.

Yeah--

At least, so far it makes sense.

I think that's about it. I just wanted to ask briefly about-- and you really touched on it-- God or a higher power. Or do you think there is such a thing? Or--

I am tempted to answer with a quote from Jung. I don't think I know.

What do you know?

That there is such a thing. I know there is. And I don't know what he was doing in 1943 or 1944. Maybe he was too busy with other things.

And I cannot answer the question, how could he allow it? And I've asked the question many times. And the wisest person I ask generally answers, that's the wrong question. So I have given up on that. But when I hug my daughters, or when I am sailing a boat, or when I'm at the top of a mountain, I know.

If somebody were to say to you, like me for instance, who is George Sarlo?

I already answered the question. He's a free man.

I think that's all I have to ask.

OK. Thank you.

Thank you. Unless there's anything else you'd like, that you were thinking?

No, it's been a thorough examination.

A++.

[CHUCKLING]

Thank you. It was good for me. Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah. It sort of summarized things. Yeah. Wish my daughters were here.

You know, you get a copy to give-- I mean, to show them if you want.

Maybe they'll be ready for it soon. I'm not sure they are yet, but it's getting closer.

Having come from your genes, I assume that they will, one day, ask you to go through this examination with them.

I hope so. At this point, they very scared. It's something that I try to understand, but I have difficulty understanding how little interest they have, there is in the past. But I think it's basically, they are scared.

Could you elaborate, what do you mean by that?

When I try to talk to them about subjects like we discussed today, they don't really want to hear, which is very disappointing, obviously.

Just from my experience, a lot of times children of survivors say that to me. The survivors will say, the kids don't want to hear. And the kids will say, my parents never talk.

And I think a lot of it is one protecting the other, that the kids, when they were very small, got the sense that they shouldn't ask. And now that they're 23 and 24, they're afraid to hurt you. I think there's a lot of fear just out of ignorance.

Well, maybe the tape will do it.

I think it might. It would definitely open it for discussion, and it takes the fear out of asking because you hear some concrete things.

Unfortunately, there's so much that went on. The divorce was difficult on them. They feel a certain loyalty to the other side. But the last word has not been written on it.

And time heals. I think one of the things that you're really gifted with probably is patience and a long view. And you're so young. You are so young. Those kids will have you for another 40 years.

I'll take that. That's a nice long life. I'm 52.

Yeah, so at least 40.

52 is beyond the average life expectancy of Hungarians at the time I was born. I think it's, like, 48. But I guess that doesn't count, right?

No, obviously not.

I'm American.

[LAUGHTER]

You're American. If the USA bomb didn't get you, and [INAUDIBLE], the 48 age bracket won't do it.

That's a good one.

I just feel you have a lot to look forward to with them a lot to look forward to. The healing's just beginning for you.

I think you're right. I think it will be OK. I just spent a couple of days last week with Suzy. We went to Yosemite, and we hiked. And we rode horses, and we told some tall tales. I haven't spent much time with her for three or four years. And I think we'll be OK.

We talked about this problem of me wanting them to have more of a sense of their history and tradition. And she said, well, you always made me feel guilty that I don't have it, but you didn't bring me up to have it. And I think that was point well taken, and I explained to them about why I didn't do it.

The first time, I told them this revelations about never dating a Jewish woman and why it was. And she was really surprised. And I told her, well, I regret I didn't bring you up that way. Don't feel guilty about it. I just wish I had. And she was very understanding at that point. She said, well, you didn't. Maybe it's not too late.

Yeah. I think the more you trust her with your fears about why you did certain things or why you didn't do certain things-- those are gems to children because, as a kid, I never knew why my parents were so crazy.

[CHUCKLES]

It scared me to death. And now it's taken that long, 34 years, really, to approach them a little bit. And when they tell me why they were so crazy, I'm very grateful, actually. They're still crazy, but it's nice to know that.

But It's OK to be crazy now?

Yeah.

OK. Well, maybe someday they'll spend a little time with you, and you can tell them.

Oh, I'd love to meet them. I would.

They're great girls.

Yes, I'm sure they are. I'm sure they are. I'm sure they have a lot of your genes in them. So emotionally, they may be a little late to blossom also.

Good point. Hope it doesn't take them till 50. [LAUGHS]

I doubt it. Now you have less in your way.

Yeah. OK, I'm pretty tired.

Yeah.

Thank you.

George, thanks.

You've been kind.

Thank you very much.

Thank you so much. It's really an honor.