

## Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

**Name of interviewee:** Erdos, Stephen

**Date of interview:** 11/20/1991

**Summary:** Stephen was born in Oradea (Nagyvárad), Romania on Aug. 20th, 1919. His father was head of the Romanian Alcohol Syndicate, and as an only child his childhood was happy and comfortable. His family relocated several times in the 1920s and 30s between Bucharest, Romania and Budapest, Hungary. He attended schools in both countries, and because of this he became fluent in Romanian and Hungarian, and proficient in German, Latin, and English. In 1937 Stephen's father died of a heart attack, leaving Stephen to care for his mother.

From 1937 to 1938 Stephen attended the Academy of Commerce, and though the Academy was free of anti-Semitism, he recalls students at the larger University beating up passers-by who were not wearing swastikas. In April of 1938 he went to visit a family friend in Vienna, where he witnessed many anti-Semitic acts, which he was spared from because of the Romanian flag he wore on his lapel. He was in Vienna for the April 20th celebration of Hitler's birthday, and young Nazis confronted him for not saluting the Swastika. He feigned ignorance of the German language, and was eventually left alone.

He was in Romania for the start of the war in 1938, and in early 1939 he was able to get a British visa to go stay with an Austrian Jewish girl and her family that he had met on vacation a year before, who had relocated to London. He stayed in London with the family for two weeks, but when the girl's father started pushing for marriage he decided to return to Romania.

Back in Romania he got a job in Bucharest, but when he turned 21 in 1940 he was drafted into the Romanian Army. His mother had moved back to his hometown of Oradea, and in 1941 Hitler granted Oradea, along with the rest of Northern Transylvania, to Hungary, in order to entice Hungary to fight with Germany against the Russians. Since Stephen was stationed in Oradea at the time, he was released from the Romanian Army, and immediately drafted into the Hungarian Army. Jews were not allowed to serve as regular soldiers in the Hungarian Army, so Stephen was put into service as a laborer.

After a year and a half of service with the Hungarian Army a law was passed requiring all Jewish soldiers to wear yellow armbands, and soon after another law was passed that forced Jewish soldiers to wear civilian clothes. Many of the Jewish soldiers were sent into Russia, where the vast majority of them were killed. Stephen escaped this fate because he was given the task of training new Jewish soldiers in Hungary. In November of 1943 he was released from service after completing his required time, and moved back to Oradea to live with his mother.

On March 19, 1944 the Germans moved into Hungary, and by April of 1944 the Germans ordered all Hungarian Jews to wear identifying badges. In May of 1944 the Jews of Oradea were forced to give up their property, and were moved into a ghetto, where they were held for 25 days. On May 29th all of the Jews in

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the ghetto were put onto trains for deportation. Before leaving the ghetto, Stephen and his mother obtained some morphine, in the event that suicide might be their best option. From the ghetto Stephen was taken by train to Auschwitz along with the rest of the ghetto's inhabitants.

They arrived in Auschwitz on June 1st, and Stephen's mother was sent to the gas chamber upon arrival. Stephen was moved into a Gypsy camp, where he witnessed many people committing suicide. Stephen decided that he would survive no matter what, and got rid of his morphine. Stephen's knowledge of German allowed him to get a job as a forestry laborer, and on June 4th he was put on a train from Auschwitz to the city of Bunzlau, where he was put into a Polish Jewish work camp.

At the work camp he worked alongside Polish Jews and free French workers, who gave him news of the war, including news of D-Day, which took place on June 6th, the day he arrived at the camp. He recalls tensions between Polish Jews and Hungarian Jews in the camp, and also that the Germans treated them fairly well there. He worked at the camp through February of 1945, and when the Russian forces drew near in early February he was taken from the camp and forced to march for four days to the Goerlitz camp.

Stephen and the other prisoners were forced on a death march through February and March, with the sound of Russian gunfire always just behind them. Prisoners who fell behind or tried to hide were immediately shot, and everyone became physically and mentally drained. He was marching right outside of Dresden on February 25th, and witnessed the famous Dresden air raid that night. On March 25th he arrived at Dora, where he stayed for ten days until the American forces bombed the German barracks there, and all of the prisoners were moved to the camp at Bergen-Belsen.

Five days after his arrival in Bergen-Belsen the British liberated the camp, and Stephen along with it. After regaining his strength, because he spoke both German and English, he got a job with the British War Crimes Commission. He worked as a translator during interrogations of German officers, and also eavesdropped on conversations between German POW-s.

Stephen spent three months working for the British at Bergen-Belsen, and during this time he got married. He and his wife decided to move to the American zone in Frankfurt rather than returning to Romania, so that they could obtain U.S. visas. On June 22nd, 1947 they arrived in New York City. Once there, Stephen found a job as a clerk in a hotel, and he continued to work in various capacities in the hotel industry for the next 35 years.